Touching and Acting, *or* The Closet of Abjection

MARK D. JORDAN

Emory University

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL IMAGE in Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval,* a book with many beauties, is the image of the touch across time. It refers, of course, to the touches that pass between the queer historian and the medieval bodies of her concern, but also to the touches that pass between the historian and her queer readers, who are linked to the past and to the author and—this is the hope—to each other. Dinshaw writes: "I follow what I call a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now. Such an impulse extends the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past" (p. 1).[1] I admire how deftly Dinshaw reaches out both hands when responding to this impulse. But here, if only because it is the task of a designated respondent, I would like to talk about what may slip past our touch, what may lie beyond our reach, in lives, texts, and cultural phenomena "back then." I want then to wonder how these slips repeat themselves in our fumbling toward community now.

Let me begin in reverse order, with the Coda and Foucault. Dinshaw rightly identifies "a powerful and continuous use of the Middle Ages in volume 1 [of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*] as the site of the beginnings of modern sexual subject formation" (p. 198). She explains the effect of this use: "The utopian, the elegiac, . . . functions as part of a serious ethical and aesthetic vision of the present and the future: a view of political reality informs Foucault's historical pronouncement about the sodomite and the homosexual, and, in turn, the historical pronouncement allows Foucault to fiction a future of politics" (p. 200). Yes, and indeed. *History of Sexuality* 1 is not social history. It is a genealogy of the power in discourses—that is, a history of rhetorics. Since it is a cunning history of

[1]Parenthetical citations refer to the page numbers of Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities: Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

rhetorics, it is also rhetorically cunning. Its most provocative historical claims—say, about epochal breaks or origins—are persuasive provocations to future action.

One of Foucault's provocations, which I cannot find repeated in Dinshaw, is the claim that we can discern the birth of the modern notion of sexuality in the kinds of surveillance practiced within seminaries, religious colleges, and convents since the Counter-Reformation.[2] Modern sexuality is churched *before* it is born. Foucault himself describes a series of extensions by which the monastic discipline of chastity was applied to larger and larger groups—to the clergy as a whole; then to all religious, male and female; then to pious laypeople; then to laypeople simply.[3] The sexualities of nineteenth-century psychiatry can seem pastoral theology by other means.

This is a provocation, especially insofar as it reminds us that claims for transhistorical touch are by no means the invention or property of queer historians. When a medieval Christian woman touches Jesus, speaks to his mother Mary, or is counseled or scolded by his Apostles, she moves within that transhistorical system of identities that is called the assembly, *ecclesia,* church—the body of Christ. If she herself were later "raised to the altars," canonized, she would become a point of touch for all later believers, a declared member of the communion of saints. When I am called a "gay Catholic"—or so call myself—I am placed within at least two communities that make claims for touch across time. Indeed, the Catholic claims are much stronger than the claims of the queer historian. Not a Catholic touch, but a Catholic grip. One traditional Catholic claim is that I can not only touch, but eat the body of Jesus. Another is that there is only one time for God—and that we anticipate our entry into this eternal moment by liturgy and vision. So the touch of the queer medievalist must be protected not from the skepticism of positivist historians and philologists, but from assertions of much stronger transhistorical continuity within church communities.

Those who deny the claims for continuity of modern church bodies ought still to be interested by the continuing power of Christian rhetorics to project identities built around sex. Foucault hints at this in *History of Sexuality* 1 and lays it out programmatically elsewhere. In a 1978 lecture at the University of Tokyo, for example, Foucault presented the "state" of some of the "hypotheses" that structured the project for the history of sexuality as he was then revising it.[4] One of these hypotheses is that Western

[2]Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité,* vol. 1: *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: NRF/ Gallimard, 1976), 142.

[3]Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité,* 1:29.

[4]Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir," in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988,* ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, vol. 3 (Paris: NRF/Gallimard, 1994), 553: "Je voudrais vous exposer aujourd'hui un état, pas même de mon travail, mais des hypothèses de mon travail." He had just spoken of submitting his hypotheses to the listeners (3:552).

society, since Augustine at least, has overproduced discourse about sex. Another is that this discourse "very quickly and very early took what can be called a scientific form."[5] A third hypothesis holds that what is distinctive about Christian sexual science is not the content of its prohibitions, but the form of its imposition. "It is then along the way of the mechanisms of power much more than along that of moral ideals or ethical interdicts—it is along the way of the mechanisms of power that one must do the history of sexuality in the Western world after Christianity."[6] The name for this power is the pastoral, and the origin of this "science of sex" is distinctly Christian. Thus Foucault. Let me add a few glosses.

What makes up Christian pastoral care? We begin to answer that pastoral ministry consists at least of words, and these words are arranged in scripts. By "scripts" I mean the ways in which the words impose not just terms for self-description or self-evaluation, but the role for a personage, the stage directions for an identity. Pastoral scripts can be found in all the Christian genres—in sermons and scriptural interpretations, treatises and compendia of cases, confessional interrogatories, and inquisitorial trials. What runs through these genres—and what runs through Foucault's four characteristics or implications of pastoral power—is the power of words to elicit and enforce the performance of certain identities, which identities are the necessary objects of pastoral ministry.

Christian pastoral care is not just words—and certainly not just didactic words. We may think of ritual actions (the sacraments or sacramentals, liturgical and para-liturgical rites) or places (the confessional, the pulpit, the churchyard, the town square) or punishments (fasting, flogging, exile, execution). Dinshaw shows us many of these places, but perhaps not all the conceptual and performative transfers by which they are linked. Medieval words and practices about being a sodomite enacted distinctive notions about what identities were and how they could be assumed, repented, or exchanged. In medieval Latin liturgy, for example, there are multiple substitutions of identity: at the Mass, a priest becomes Christ, but also Christ's spouse; a nun at her veiling becomes the virgin martyr Agnes, but also Christ's bride. In baptism, the new believer puts on Christ; in the Eucharist, she or he consumes Christ as bread and wine in order to be united with Christ—but is perhaps united with the sodomitic prelate consecrating it (pp. 84–85); and so on. In Christian doctrine, the central claim of vicarious atonement requires multiple exchanges of identity. The very successful projection of sexual identities in Catholic pastoral practice has depended on the substitution of gendered roles performed in Catholic liturgy, the sacraments, and dogmatic theology.

The *scientia sexualis* of Christian pastoral practice is in reality not a science, but an art, a series of rhetorical or theatrical programs that elaborate

[5]Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir," 3:556.
[6]Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir," 3:560.

and impose scripts for the performance of moral identities—most powerfully and consequentially, identities of sexual grace or sexual sin. I have been speaking of the sodomite, but we should remember as well the Lascivious Widow, the Witch, and the Self-Abuser—who was a figure of theological imagination before he (less often, she) was an object of clinical attention. Against such sin-identities, we can place the Angelic Monk, the Virgin Martyr, the Chaste Wife, and the Priest with Pure Hands. When I reach out to touch the bodies of these figures, I touch theological artifacts.

I touch them still when I touch the body of a modern "Homosexual." This is true in two ways. First, quite obviously, the rhetoric of sodomy is hardly extinct. It survives literally in any number of Christian communities. It survives concealed in others; where the term "sodomy" has recently been abandoned in favor of "homosexuality," as in Vatican statements, the rhetorical logic of the older term persists. The category of "homosexuality" brings some of its own ideas, some of its particular legal and medical logic, but it has to fit these within a logic of definition and condemnation set in place long before it was coined. Second, I touch a theological artifact in the "Homosexual" also because Christian rhetorics of identity enforcement were infused into the category from the very beginning—in ways that Foucault does and does not admit. It may be that the identity of the "pervert" really is just a variation on the much older category of the sexualized sin-identity. The same may be true for our categories of queer community. For example, contemporary descriptions of one or another gay male subculture often sound uncannily like the oldest sodomitic fantasies of Christianized Europe. Many twentieth-century models of queer community speak after and in unexpected fulfillment of old theological depictions of sodomitic community.

With these remarks, I'm not sure how far I am reading Dinshaw, how far thinking alongside or against her book. I do see Dinshaw's eloquence in describing the power of the rhetorics arrayed against us. She is candid about our impotence even in something so academic as the National Endowment for the Humanities debates. I also see that Dinshaw moves beyond description to a proposal: "[W]e can attempt to take up, occupy, and use the central—centrally abjected—position that has already been so fully appointed for us" (p. 181). Let me end by suggesting how this proposal presents us with the merits and the difficulties of Dinshaw's beautiful book.

Merits, first. One great merit, captured in the proposal for a coalition of the abject, is the judgment of how we are still divided—and not least in our disciplines. There is, of course, no single project of lesbigay history writing. Indeed, the debates among lesbigay historians replay many of the epistemological disputes that divide modern history or philosophy or "cultural studies" generally. Lesbigay historians hold and practice competing disciplinary ideals, including contradictory methods and mutually exclusive vocabularies. We should be clear about what this means. It means, for

example, that we are often not talking about the same "actual facts," about the same things. Social historians who attack Foucault do not understand what sorts of things he is talking about. Dinshaw does, and she responds with "queer history"—in which the discipline is being queered as well as the subject matter, by the subject matter. "Queer history" is a proposal and not a fact. It seems to me an important proposal. It talks back to the divisive, the greedy hope that if only we market ourselves properly we'll get nice seating at the faculty club. "Queer history" also reminds us that medieval ways of talking about sex are queer not least because they criss-cross our neat disciplinary boxes—just as Dinshaw herself does.

We may need more than talking back. I don't mean just now to advocate street demonstrations. I do mean to advocate deeper suspicion about what we use to fashion our selves and communities. Talking back is useful: it serves Margery Kempe (or her hearers) very well in certain moments. I have tried to put it into service myself when retorting to official Catholic theology on sodomy in its own terms—with its own incoherencies. But talking back may be no more than inhabiting a "position of abjection" prepared for us long before. The position of queer abjection seems to me still to exist within theological theater. A sodomitic sin-identity, medicalized or camped, turned therapeutic or ironic, is still in many ways a sin-identity. So, too, abjection made into the solicitation to community may also solicit us for damaging roles.

Here I am not worrying that we will somehow trivialize abjection—though it might be worth worrying about that. Metaphor erodes into the literal; conceptually challenging para-identities or anti-identities may, with wear, become just identities. It is an inevitably long way down from Kristeva to the U.S. Congress. Still, my worry goes in another direction. I worry that no understanding of abjection, however challenging, can remove from its performance, its inhabitation, the scripts of older roles in which queer desire played always as suffering. I worry, in short, that a coalition of the abject will be just a newer version of the empire of closets—which is the most familiar form of queerness in many Christian communities.

If we are to refashion our selves and cities, we ought to try something other than *bricolage* in the basements and attics of defunct or devouring theologies. I too believe that "doing queer history becomes a profound act (and future source) of subject formation" (p. 170)—but only when it provokes us to write around the roles offered us by our persecutors or stage managers.