

Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England.

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Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies

Duke University Press

Volume 27, Number 1, Winter 1997

pp. 17-46

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Thinking about sex

Anglo-Saxon England is not a promising place to think about sex. Students and teachers are famously aware of this, regularly trotting out the so-called pornographic Old English riddles as our only evidence. Critical literature on these riddles suggests discomfort—or embarrassment—with the thought that a culture dominated by monasticism might have had sex, pleasurable and violent, on its mind once in a while.¹

Embarrassment aside, critical attitudes toward sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England contain a half-truth worth developing. Few indeed are the representations of sexual behavior in the corpus of vernacular materials, but the association of sex with knowledge is not unique to the riddles. Nor is Anglo-Saxon culture bereft of a language of love. In addition to the homosocial bonds of the heroic literature and the estranged heterosexual relations of the female-voiced elegies, there is also the complex relation between man and God, woman and God. Allen J. Frantzen has recently assessed the regulation of homosexual acts in the Anglo-Saxon penitentials and highlights the heterosexual social codes operative in them.² I complement his study by beginning an exploration of the parameters of sexual representation in vernacular culture. One stumbling block to such an exploration has been the assumption that medieval religious desire is necessarily distinct from an erotics of pleasure and/or pain.³ I argue here, however, that Anglo-Saxon religious desire can use sensual knowledge in the service of worship. Knowledge of the senses is linked to Christian knowledge of, and desire for, God.

As I discuss later, the accounts of creation in *Genesis A* and *B* indicate that worship is the occasion for a sensuous poetry that renders sexuality immaterial.⁴ Religious desire for knowledge of self and God finds sensuous [End Page 17] expression in Christian philosophy in Alfred's translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*.⁵ Similarly, *Christ I* explores systematically the relation between divine and human desire in a poem which worships the maternal body of Mary, the Annunciation, and

Incarnation.⁶ The spiritual, gendered, and sometimes erotic relations between the human and the divine in *Christ I* are also found in the prose female saints' lives included in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. The genre of the prose female saints' lives is, in fact, central to our understanding of the cultural significance of sex in religious discourse.⁷ Finally, the late-tenth-, early-eleventh-century translation of the prose *Apollonius of Tyre* is the first heterosexual love narrative in English, in spite of the conventional wisdom that Western love is a post-Conquest phenomenon.⁸ Complete with the first Anglo-Saxon blushing hero, the first Anglo-Saxon heroine to fall in love, and the incestuous behavior of King Antiochus, no account of Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward sex and desire can afford to ignore this apparently anomalous work.

As these examples suggest, however, there is no unified discourse of the sexual in Anglo-Saxon England. Sexual representation in an age before the formation of modern notions of sexuality is a product of other more culturally dominant discourses, whether literary or social.⁹ Evidence for sexual representation accordingly crosses generic boundaries in the writing of the period, notably between secular and spiritual works. That such representations are found in genres like hagiography, riddles, poetry, and philosophy indicates a more general cultural attitude toward sexuality and its representation. Negative evidence also helps define the cultural boundaries of sexual representation. Heroic literature, for example, is well known for its restrained disinterest in sexual matters. For Freud, beyond the always regressive pleasure principle lies reality and death.¹⁰ In heroic literature, too, pleasure appears antithetical to the great issue of heroism's encounter with death.

Anglo-Saxon representations of sexuality can thus be seen as governed by Freud's reality principle, which restrains pleasure and operates at the level of culture, although many contemporary historians of sexuality would disagree. Influenced by Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, such historians argue that repression produces that which is repressed, namely discourses of sexuality. Foucault's hypothesis, located

at the moment (or rather moments...



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