

# Saints and Sodomites: Theological and Literary Depictions of Rape and Sexual Aggression in the Middle Ages.

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The word ‘Sodomite’ is offensive. It is one which seeks to identify homosexual behaviour with the sin of Sodom—something which provokes God to such anger that he destroys an entire city and almost all of its inhabitants. However, ‘Sodomite’ is a term which will have to be employed in this paper for the sake of brevity, to denote an inhabitant of the city of Sodom.

The connection between homosexual acts and the sin of Sodom is one which certainly existed in the minds of medieval writers and audiences. But there is considerable vagueness about what terms such as ‘sodomite’ actually meant, with possibilities ranging from any same-sex contact involving desire to full intercourse.<sup>1</sup> To complicate matters further, homosexual behaviour was frequently seen in the middle ages as exactly that—a method of behaviour which could be indulged in or repented of, rather than as a lifelong orientation.<sup>2</sup> So ‘Sodomite’ could mean a variety of things even to a medieval audience, but certainly implied more than a person who happened to live in Sodom.

The connection between saints and Sodomites is not obvious, so some sort of background to it needs to be traced.

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<sup>1</sup>For further details, see Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>As John Boswell states, ‘Patristic and medieval writers on the subject rarely speculated on the provenance of homosexual feelings. Most limited themselves to phenomenological observations or moral commentary.’ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University Press, 1980), 53.

The definition of rape used in this discussion will be forced sexual intercourse of any kind. This is to provide continuity: legal definitions changed fairly frequently and sometimes quite drastically over time; so to include or exclude texts on the basis of the law at the time of writing would become unnecessarily complicated, and would produce a distorted picture of how sexual violence was perceived during the Middle Ages. In order to refer to instances of intended sexual violence which do not actually take place, the phrase 'sexual aggression' will be used.

Rape in literature, no longer a taboo subject, has become the object of increasing study during the last fifteen years, with studies by Gravdal<sup>3</sup> and Saunders<sup>4</sup>

making valuable and widely read contributions. However, these and similar studies focus on women as the victims of male perpetrators; and the possibility of male victimisation, either by women or by other men, is usually overlooked.<sup>5</sup> Saunders does show an awareness of male victims, pointing out that 'medieval laws addressing ravishment of ward apply to both male and female children; men as well as women could be abducted or sexually violated,' but she adds that legally, sexual crimes against men were regarded as assault rather than ravishment. She goes on to acknowledge that, 'There is undoubtedly more work to be done on the ravishment of men and on male sexuality, but it is beyond the scope of this book ...'.<sup>6</sup>

Evelyn Birge Vitz raises the possibility that men are not the only ones complicit in sexual aggression towards women: she suggests that female audiences may have enjoyed hearing stories about the sexual subjugation of women.<sup>7</sup> By positioning women as sexual aggressors, even at one

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<sup>3</sup>Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>The topic of the victimisation of women by other women is also neglected, but this is partly due to a lack of relevant material from the middle ages. However, there are some sociological and psychological studies on the sexual assault of men by other men during the twentieth century, such as Richie J. McMullen, *Male Rape: Breaking the Silence on the Last Taboo* (London: GMP, 1990) and Michael Scarce, *Male on Male Rape: the Hidden Toll of Stigma and Shame* (New York: Insight Books, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 20-21.

<sup>7</sup>Evelyn Birge Vitz, 'Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical

remove, she opens up the possibility of both genders being attackers and victims.

Although writers such as Boswell and Jordan have worked on some of the texts being examined in this paper, there is within the context of queer studies a conspicuous lack of research concerning the victimisation of men by other men. This may well be due to a desire to be rid of the negative stereotype of the homosexual as a predator who corrupts others, particularly the young. But to ignore depictions of male on male sexual aggression is to do a disservice to victims, and to overlook the central feature of many texts.

However, it is important that the topic of rape—of men or of women—is not addressed only by those working within a feminist or queer studies framework, not least because researchers with these backgrounds may come to texts with a very specific remit.<sup>8</sup> For rape, sexual aggression and victimisation to be understood more fully, both men and women need to be studied as both attackers and as victims.

More important than the critical background to this paper is the fact that both literary and theological texts written or known during the Middle Ages provide ample material for a study of the sexual subjugation of men as well as women. The best-known biblical narrative is the account of the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18.16-19.29), which is reworked in the anonymous late-fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Cleanness*.<sup>9</sup> Judges 19 - 20 has striking similarities to Genesis 18.16-19.29, and tells the story of the attempted rape of a traveller by a group of Benjaminites, who instead rape and kill his concubine. The Bible also provides an example of female sexual aggression towards a male, in the description of Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39.1-20), which in turn provides the thematic basis for Guenevere's unjust accusation of the protagonist in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*<sup>10</sup> and Marie de France's

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and Theoretical Reflections' in *Romantic Review*, 88 (1997), 1-26.

<sup>8</sup>For Vitz's reservations concerning many feminist approaches to depictions of rape, see 'Rereading Rape', 1-3.

<sup>9</sup>*The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Malcolm Andrews and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University Press, 1987), 111-184.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Chestre, 'Sir Launfal', in *Medieval Literature: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition*, ed. by Boris Ford (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 440-472.

*Lanval*.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of sexual assault on men is occasionally considered by the writers of penitentials.<sup>12</sup> Most theological writers deal more with the supposed sin of homosexuality than with male rape; but the idea that homosexual contact is sinful implies that there must be those who do not wish to sin in such a way, and that any such contact will be unwanted by them. This establishes a context in which the possibility of sexual aggression can be assumed, even if rape itself is rarely mentioned.

The theme of men sexually victimising other men is not frequently found in romance, though it would be possible to make a case for the feudal system operating as a method by which an overlord controls the sexuality of all his social inferiors, male or female. However, sexual aggression from one male towards another is central to the *vita* of St Pelagius, as written by the tenth-century German nun Hrotsvit of Gandersheim.<sup>13</sup> It is the thematic connection between the story of Sodom and this *vita*, and narrative features shared by these two texts and several *vitae* of female saints, which form the basis for the argument of this paper.

The account of male sexual victimisation best known to a medieval audience would almost certainly have been the Biblical description of the destruction of Sodom. The story can be summarised as follows: God reveals to Abraham that He has heard about serious sins being committed in Sodom. He intends to go to Sodom and investigate, and to destroy the city if it really is sinful. Abraham pleads on behalf of any righteous people who may be left in the city, and manages to strike a bargain with God that if even ten good people are found there, the city will not be destroyed. Abraham may be motivated by the fact that his nephew, Lot, is living in Sodom.

God sends two angels, described as being men, down to Sodom, and Lot invites them into his house. But all the men of Sodom surround the house and demand that Lot sends the angels out to them so that they can 'know' them, which is possibly an expression for having sex with

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<sup>11</sup>Marie de France, 'Lanval' in *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (London: Penguin, 1986), 73-81.

<sup>12</sup>See Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (Toronto, 1984), 42.

<sup>13</sup>Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, *Hrotsvit: Opera Omnia*, ed. by Walter Berschin (Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag GmbH & Co. K.G., 2001), 63-77.

them. Lot's rather dubious reaction is to go outside and tell them that it is sinful to want the angels, but they can have his two virgin daughters instead. The men refuse the offer, and try to break the door down. But the angels manage to drag Lot back inside, and they dazzle everyone at the doorway with a blinding light, so that the Sodomites cannot see to get in. The angels warn Lot to escape with his family, because God is about to destroy the city. Lot's future sons-in-law refuse to take him seriously, but the angels let Lot escape with his wife and daughters. They are warned not to look back, but Lot's wife famously disobeys and is turned into a pillar of salt. The city of Sodom is destroyed by fire and brimstone, but Lot and his daughters escape.

The story of Sodom is well-known for being used to justify the anti-homosexual stance of the Church, and *Cleanness* uses the story in this way. The poem provides examples of 'clannesse', which can be roughly translated as 'morally pure behaviour', and also by using counter-examples describing immorality and God's resulting anger at the sinners. The Sodomites appear as an example of filth (line 711), and their uncleanness is very specifically related to their homosexual practices and the threat which they make against the angels. God spells out the reason for his anger:

[693] ʒay han lerned a lyst þat lykez me ille,  
 [694] ʒat ʒay han founden in her flesch of fautez he werst:  
 [695] Vch a male matz his mach a man as hymselfen,  
 [696] And fylter foyly in fere on femmalez wyse.<sup>14</sup>

[693] They have learned a lust which displeases me,  
 [694] That they have found the worst of faults in their flesh:  
 [695] Every man makes a man like himself his mate,  
 [696] And they get tangled together foully in a female way.

Interestingly, the poem does not condemn sex outright, but condemns the misuse of it by contrasting the behaviour of the men of Sodom with the God-given gift of heterosexual union. The poet depicts God Himself praising the sexual joy which he has created for humans.

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<sup>14</sup>Andrew op. cit.

[702] When two true togeder had tyȝed hemseluē,  
[703] Bytwene a male and his make such merȝe schulde come,  
[704] Welnyȝe pure paradys moȝt preue no better...

This is a surprisingly positive attitude towards sex, especially when placed into the mouth of God.<sup>15</sup> A similar technique is used by Alain de Lille, who depicts homosexuality as a perversion to be contrasted with the joys of heterosexual union, as represented by a personification of Nature as a beautiful young maiden.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most frequent condemnations of homosexuality was that it was non-reproductive. However, although a medieval audience would normally assume the reproductive function of heterosexual sex, the poet does not emphasise this aspect. His condemnation of homosexual behaviour seems to be about perversion rather than about reproduction.<sup>17</sup>

God not only requires sexual intercourse to be heterosexual: it is to be done discreetly (697, 706). Instead of following this instruction, the men of Sodom openly threaten the angels amongst 'grete flokkez of folk (837)' in 'a schrylle scharpe schout (839)'. They also bang on the walls of Lot's house with clubs (838). Not only are they represented as violent perverts, they are shameless, and presumably have no fear of retribution.

Despite the interpretation of the biblical passage given by the *Cleanness* poet, the story of Sodom does not have to be interpreted simply as a condemnation of homosexuality; and Boswell suggests other possibilities.<sup>18</sup> God does not specify to Abraham exactly what he has heard about the inhabitants of the city: it could be that it was a more general problem of sexual immorality. One theory which has been favoured by a number of scholars is that the city is punished because of being inhospitable to strangers. Boswell also puts forward a more complicated argument that when the Sodomites ask to 'know' the angels, they mean exactly that, and their anger is directed at Lot, who is not originally from Sodom, for entertaining guests without asking the elders of the city. It is a

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<sup>15</sup>For more on the positive depiction of heterosexual sex in *Cleanness*, see Elizabeth B. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: the Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in 'Cleanness' and its Contexts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>16</sup>Alan of Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. by James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980).

<sup>17</sup>See Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia*, 3.

<sup>18</sup>Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 93-97.

plausible explanation, but it sometimes seems that Boswell becomes so preoccupied with proving that Christianity is not anti-homosexual that he tries to write homosexuality out of texts.

What is more relevant to this study, and what Boswell himself admits is the most plausible argument, is that the sin of Sodom is rape rather than homosexuality *per se*. Admittedly, this paper is concerned with the presence of rape in a text, and so this aspect of the story is being prioritised. But the story of the destruction of Sodom is convincing as an account of rape and threatened rape in which both victims and perpetrators happen to be male, rather than as an account about the sin of homosexuality in which the men of Sodom are particularly immoral by trying to involve angels.

The violence of the behaviour of the Sodomites is very clear in the Bible and in *Cleanness*: they are shouting and trying to break Lot's door down. And although *Cleanness* focuses on homosexuality as the cause of God's anger, the fact that the Sodomites are rapists is inescapable even in this text. The Sodomites present themselves as repeat offenders, since they claim that this is what they normally do to men who pass through (844). It seems unlikely that every visitor would be both attracted to other men and so indiscriminating as to be willing for sexual contact as soon as it is suggested. So the Sodomites must be using force. The poem's emphasis on the wrongness of the Sodomites' behaviour confirms the context for threatened rape: the angels could never become involved willingly in something which God has declared unclean, because it would be incompatible with their innate holiness.

The anomaly in a reading of the story of Sodom as a condemnation of rape is Lot's offering of his daughters to the Sodomites. In *Cleanness*, Lot states that heterosexuality is always better than homosexuality (865), and seems to be concerned to protect the angels at all costs. But Lot's intended disposal of his daughters' virginity outside of marriage and without their consent cannot have been well-received by the medieval Church, with its veneration of virgin martyrs who died rather than endure violation. It may be worth remembering, though, that Lot's still unmarried daughters later sexually violated him (and themselves) by having intercourse with him whilst he was drunk, in order to become pregnant (Genesis 19.30-38). It would be possible to interpret these two accounts together as a representation of a society in which sexual violence is widespread and contagious, or to see the actions of Lot's daughters as

revenge on their father.

As mentioned above, a popular theme in medieval *vitae* is virgin saints who endure martyrdom, either simply for upholding their faith or because they refuse to give up the chastity which they have dedicated to Christ. Saints being threatened with rape or enforced marriage are usually female, but Saint Pelagius is described by Hrotsvit as being martyred for similar reasons. Pelagius is the son of a Christian nobleman who is taken to the court of a pagan king when the Christian armies are overthrown.<sup>19</sup> The king, who is described as *perversus*, 'perverted' (43, 127), and, more significantly, corrupted by *viciis... Sodomitis*, 'Sodomitic vices', turns his attentions to Pelagius. Pelagius resists this, and when the king persists, he hits him and draws blood (268-275). The king then has him thrown down onto the rocks by the river below, where he dies (276-312).

Hrotsvit writes another story in a similar vein, in which three virgins are threatened with rape by a Roman governor.<sup>20</sup> But when he tries to catch them in the kitchen, he becomes deluded and tries to embrace the pots and pans. The women end their days as virgin martyrs.

Better known is the *Legend of Holy Women* by Osbern Bokenham, which contains the *vitae* of many virgin martyrs.<sup>21</sup> Saint Agnes is sent to a brothel by a judge who is infuriated by her refusal to abandon

Christianity. But when she is stripped naked, her hair miraculously grows long and covers her body. A young man who pursues her to the brothel and interrupts her prayers is strangled by the devil. Agnes later raises him from the dead, but is herself martyred. Saint Lucy is also threatened with being sent to the brothel; but no amount of men or oxen can move her, because the holy spirit makes her too heavy. Like Agnes, she becomes a virgin martyr.

The *vitae* of Agnes and Lucy, of Hrotsvit's virgins and of Pelagius seem to fit into a pattern which they share with the story of Sodom.

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<sup>19</sup>The court is supposedly Muslim, but the details of the king's behaviour correspond to general prejudice about the unknown rather than to anything actually connected to Islam.

<sup>20</sup>Hrotsvit, 'Dulcitus' in *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 1995), 231-234.

<sup>21</sup>Osbern Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women*. Osbern Bokenham, *Legends of Holy Women*, trans. Sheila Delany (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).



Like the angels, saints may be threatened with rape, but God always steps in to prevent their violation. Theologians, including Augustine, entered into lengthy and complex debates about the extent to which rape victims were defiled by being raped: could even unwilling sexual contact cause pleasure and therefore taint the victim with sin?<sup>22</sup> There was some confusion over this issue, and there seems to have been a widespread notion amongst both clerics and the laity that the truly holy will always escape with their virginity intact.

A central concept used by those studying rape both in literary and sociological contexts is that of the 'rape myth', which states that victims want or enjoy rape, therefore it is not really rape. This allows blame to be attached to victims, and removes any impetus for society to attempt to deal with the problem of rape—if the problem does not exist, then all that needs to be addressed is the sinfulness of the victims (usually women) for having illicit intercourse. Such a perspective has a part to play in the generation of a canon of stories in which the sacred cannot be sexually violated. It also prevents the stories of those who are actually raped from being heard.

Although it seems that the Sodomites must have had other victims before trying to rape the angels, their fates are never revealed. Similarly, *vitae* of women who were forced into marriages and were not able to stay virgins are extremely rare. This is almost certainly linked to the possibility of sexual pleasure even during rape which was so feared by many medieval theologians: to uphold as holy those who had been sexually assaulted would be to raise too many questions about their spiritual, as well as their sexual, integrity.

But the veneration of virgins and the general suspicion of sexual activity which led to misogyny and to celibacy for the clergy may have its roots elsewhere, as implied by one of the penitentials. Payer cites a section within the Penitential of Cummean referring to the sexual abuse of a young boy by another male; but it is the victim who is to do the penance: 'A small boy misused by an older one, if he is ten years of age, shall fast for a week; if he consents, for twenty days.'<sup>23</sup> The assumption is that the boy may or may not agree to his own 'misuse': this could be

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<sup>22</sup>See Saint Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans: Books I-III*, trans. George E. McCracken (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Heinemann, 1952), 75-91.

<sup>23</sup>Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 42.

a sin knowingly committed or a sexual assault. But the younger boy's intentions only alter the amount of penance which he must do, not his need for repentance. This could be connected to the idea of sexual contact automatically leading to sinful pleasure, whether or not that contact is consensual. But it is likely that a concept of ritual defilement is being invoked: the boy, whether deliberately sinful or not, has become ritually impure. This type of thought seems to owe more to Jewish purity laws than to Christian preoccupation with sin. It seems also to be linked to the horror of defilement which runs through *Cleanness* and which was evoked in the minds of medieval writers and audiences by the story of Sodom.

Notions of purity create serious problems for those involved in rape, either as victims or as writers and theologians. Although laws can be created to provide redress for victims, they cannot cater for a perception that sexual violation irrevocably taints the one who has been violated. So it is easier for writers to deal with those who are threatened with such assaults but are miraculously saved from them, than to address the issue of the spiritual state of a holy person whose body is penetrated against their will.

Medieval literary texts, and especially saints' lives, are typically full of bad things happening to good people. The tortures of martyrs are often described in graphic—sometimes pornographic—detail. Romances too frequently depict acts of extreme violence against the innocent which demand vengeance. But rape, with its complexities concerning blame and ritual defilement, is something from which the truly good are sure to be saved.