PROJECT MUSE®

Uncovering Difference: Encoded Homoerotic Anxiety within the Christian Eremitic Tradition in Medieval England

Michelle M. Sauer

Journal of the History of Sexuality, Volume 19, Number 1, January 2010, pp. 133-152 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.0.0075>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/369569>

Uncovering Difference: Encoded Homoerotic Anxiety within the Christian Eremitic Tradition in Medieval England

MICHELLE M. SAUER

University of North Dakota

WITHIN THE BRANCH OF MEDIEVAL monastic literature for both men and women written for hermits and anchorites, there is a consistent undercurrent of concern regarding “deviant” sexuality, particularly same-sex desire but also varied “problems” such as masturbation and nocturnal emissions. The concerns regarding same-sex desire take a number of forms, from the overt to the covert, but become clearest in three areas: the dangers of enclosure, of overindulgence, and of idleness. These themes appear in texts composed for both sexes. For instance, Ælred of Rievaulx’s (1109–67) *Rule for a Recluse*, a text supposedly written for his sister, an anchoress, specifically warned against progressive lesbian activities (simple teaching between women transformed into kisses and desire), while Richard Rolle’s (1300–1349) *Form of Living*, written for the anchoress Margaret Kirkby, approached bodily desires in a more restrained and general manner, warning more generally against fleshly temptation. Similarly, the anonymous *Rule of Saint Columba* (supposedly formulated in the sixth century) for men hinted at same-sex possibilities, whereas the fifteenth-century *Rule of Saint Celestine*, attributed to Pope Celestine V, specifically warned against homosexual desire caused by looking lustfully at a servant. Though the degrees of directness and the method of delivery varied in each, the shadow of homoerotic desire loomed in the background.

Besides communal monastic living (called cenobitic), the Middle Ages offered other options for living a consecrated religious life withdrawn from the world, including the life of an anchorite (remaining in one place, called anchoritic) and the life of a hermit (mostly wandering from a central location, called eremitic), though both overlapped each other in numerous ways. Nevertheless, according to late medieval understanding, if not by strict definition, anchorites and hermits were two separate vocations.¹ A hermit usually

¹ Not all scholars agree that a clear distinction existed between the two, and, indeed, the evidence of medieval canon law is also somewhat unclear. For the argument that they were

referred to someone who lived withdrawn from general society under ascetic conditions and who was therefore sometimes also called a recluse, whereas the meaning of anchorite became more restricted.² And while some hermits remained in a single location, others moved around remote areas as they saw fit. The majority, however, tended to reside primarily in small cells scattered about the countryside, often near bridges and crossroads, though they often had standard itineraries. For the most part, hermits followed no rule unless they were associated with a particular religious order that had an eremitical branch. In those cases they followed the same rule as the cenobitic brothers (as, for example, the *Rule of Saint Albert* for Carmelites). However, in the late Middle Ages this changed. Specific offices for creating and overseeing hermits were developed, incorporating them formally into the church's infrastructure. The fifteenth century witnessed the development of a number of hermit rules, including the *Rule of Saint Linus*, the *Rule of Saint Celestine*, and the *Rule of Saint Paul*, which will be discussed here.³

The majority of extant rules demonstrate varying regulations based not only on the stability or mobility of the individual but also in accordance with the sex of the practitioner. Female anchorites (called anchoresses) vastly outnumbered male anchorites, while more men than women chose the life of a hermit. The few passing references to female hermits in England place most of them in Norfolk.⁴ In this way they escaped the censure of and contact with the external world. More often than not, however, women who desired vocational withdrawal chose the life of an anchoress, which provided both stability of abode and social support while allowing them a certain measure of freedom.

synonymous terms see Jean Leclercq, "'Eremus' et 'eremita': Pour l'histoire du vocabulaire de la vie solitaire," *Collectanea Ordinis Cistercensium Reformatorem* 25 (1963): 8–30. Elsewhere, medieval canonists distinguished four species of hermits: (1) those who had taken the traditional monastic vows within a church-sanctioned order and with a formal monastic rule, such as the Hermits of Saint Jerome, (2) those who lived in common without a formal rule but with a lifestyle approved by their bishop, (3) those who lived without vows and singly with a lifestyle approved by the bishop and designated to the service of a church by him, and (4) those who lived without the sanction of ecclesiastical authority. For information on these species as well as on the legislation on hermits (particularly against abuses of the fourth class) see Benedict XIV, *Sanctissimi domini nostri Benedicti papae XIV de synodo dioecesana libri tredecim*, 6.3.6 (1775; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1842).

² Medieval popular texts, however, often associated the two lifestyles. For instance, the doctrinal treatise *Vices and Virtues* (ca. 1200) read: "This customary life, hermit and recluse, that we now call anchorite" (ed. F. Holthausen [London: Early English Text Society, 1888], 73). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Middle English are mine.

³ See Francis D. S. Darwin, *The English Mediaeval Recluse* (London: SPCK, 1944), esp. 1–5; Paul Livarius Oligier, "Regulae tres reclusorum et eremitarum Angliae saec. XIII–XIV," *Antonianum* 3 (1928): 151–90, 299–320; and Louis Gougaud, *Ermîtes et réclus: Études sur d'anciennes formes de vie religieuse* (Paris: Abbaye Saint-Martin de Ligugé, 1928).

⁴ Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia* (Norwich, U.K.: University of East Anglia, 2000), 18.

The reasons for this gendered difference in eremitic lifestyle vary to some degree, but the overriding cause, at least initially, was sexual regulation. Women could not be watched if they were allowed to wander free. Both secular and ecclesiastical authorities agreed on this point, and by 1298 enclosure was mandated for religious women in the papal bull *Periculoso*, issued by Boniface VIII: all nuns must “remain perpetually cloistered in their monasteries . . . and, occasions for lasciviousness having been removed, may most diligently safeguard their hearts and bodies in complete chastity.”⁵ Clearly, the fear regarding unenclosed women concerned sexual temptation, and unless these women were protected from themselves by being removed from the world, they would fall into sin.

Though mandated for women, enclosure was also encouraged for men. In either case it was a dangerous way to prove one’s fortitude. V. A. Kolve points out—quite accurately, in fact—that the medieval “monastic milieu” may be seen as “an early form of what Aaron Betsky calls ‘queer space’ in at least two senses of the word”: because it sought to be unusual and separate and because it created a same-sex society built upon love and interdependence.⁶ In modern terms monastic culture was “inevitably productive of what sociologists call ‘situational homosexuality,’ as evidenced still within prisons, boarding schools, reformatories, the armed forces, the merchant navy, the celibate priesthood.”⁷ This interpretation, however, presumes a standard of heterosexuality that may not have existed. The term *heterosexuality*—like *homosexuality*—did not exist prior to the end of the nineteenth century, and the concept of what it means to be heterosexual did not come under widespread scrutiny until the twentieth century.⁸ Sex in antiquity and the Middle Ages may simply have fallen into categories of acts, not identities.

⁵ Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: “Periculoso” and Its Commentators, 1298–1545* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 135.

⁶ V. A. Kolve, “Ganymede/Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire,” *Speculum* 73, no. 4 (1998): 1014–67, at 1041. See also Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997). Betsky points out that “the disciplining of the body turned into its reverse, i.e. the satisfaction of desire, and public space was where the queer man had to hide his desire” (9). This sounds remarkably like a monastic environment, where asceticism, that is, the desire for God, quenched desire for earthly goods and all personal bodily desires had to be hidden from the community.

⁷ Kolve, “Ganymede,” 1037. Situational homosexuality typically involves men who are preferentially heterosexual and who either practice heterosexuality along with homosexuality or experience a brief period of homosexual relations followed by a much longer period of heterosexuality, including often marriage. The concept is sometimes referred to as “behavioral bisexuality,” implying that the participants might be bisexual if it were a socially acceptable choice. Many societies that frown upon homosexual lifestyles are tolerant of situational homosexuality. See John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago: Aldine, 1973); Joseph Harry and William B. DeVall, *The Social Organization of Gay Males* (New York: Praeger, 1978); and Paula C. R. Rust, *Bisexuality in the United States: A Social Science Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁸ See Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), esp. 83–112.

Some scholars, such as Karma Lochrie and James A. Schultz, are challenging us to look at the Middle Ages in ways that are beyond “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality.”⁹ I am not so much concerned with whether or not individuals should be considered “homosexuals” during the Middle Ages. Rather, I am interested in exploring same-sex desire—or, more specifically, fears about indulging in same-sex desires—within the medieval eremitic culture, and enclosure provided one of the main avenues for the expression of such desires, whether generated through proclivity and preference or stimulated by isolation.

Enclosure, though it provided safety from the world, also introduced a new realm of sexual temptations: same-sex desire and masturbation. Women were considered especially vulnerable to such failings. As Saint Jerome noted already in the fourth century: “Now if this [the excesses of hermits caused by extended solitude] is true of men, how much more does it apply to women whose fickle and vacillating minds, if left to their own devices, soon degenerate.”¹⁰ Under pressure, sexual desire might be directed toward any convenient object, including members of the same sex. There is a conundrum here, however, because if the church recognized that allowing women to wander off on their own without a rule was too dangerous to modesty and chastity, the company they kept with other women might prove as perilous. Some association between anchoresses was always deemed necessary. For instance, the early church fathers suggested that to retain the female characteristics of meekness and restraint, a virgin should submit herself to older women. In a similar fashion Roberta Gilchrist reports that prioresses were always “admonished to keep common dormitory with their nuns,” while Joyce E. Salisbury writes: “The perfect virgin was not to enclose herself completely with Christ and her prayers.”¹¹ Some communal restraint was a necessary weapon against temptation, then, but it also proved vital to the defense of a woman’s reputation. *Ancrene Wisse* (Guide for Anchoresses) advised an anchoress to have two women with her, one to go out and do chores and the other to remain with her at all times. Even if disaster struck, the anchoress had to keep her reputation foremost in mind: “If great emergency furthermore forces your house to

⁹ See James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); James A. Schultz, “Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 1 (2006): 14–29; and Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Jerome, Epistula 103, “To Demetrius,” 17, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 6: *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans. W. H. Fremantle (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1892); also available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CXXX.html>.

¹¹ Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994), 125; Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London: Verso, 1991), 34.

be broken open, while it is broken, have in it with you a woman of pure life day and night."¹² Similarly, Ælred's *Rule for a Recluse* also suggested that an anchoress should have a female companion: "Choose for yourself some elderly woman, not someone who is quarrelsome or unsettled or given to idle gossip; a good woman with a well-established reputation for virtue."¹³ Saint Bernard of Clairvaux discouraged a nun of the convent of Saint Mary of Troyes who was contemplating becoming an anchoress from doing so because of her reputation. Bernard warned: "For anyone wishing to lead a bad life the desert supplies ample opportunity. The woods afford cover, and solitude assures silence. No one can censure the evil no one sees."¹⁴ Sight is important here not only as a provoker of lust but also as an enforcer of chastity. Chastity required constant vigilance both from the religious woman and from others. Women were presumably too weak to withstand temptation on their own and required assistance in regulating desire.

One of the most obvious ways to regulate women's bodies and to control women's desires, especially any unnatural desires, was through architecture. This was true on both sacred and secular levels. Young women were rarely, if ever, left alone. As Georges Duby notes: "Women, being the weaker sex and more prone to sin, had to be held in check. . . . They were kept under lock and key in the most isolated part of the house: the *chambre des dames* [ladies' chamber]."¹⁵ At the same time, however, this isolation carried with it a sense of fear. The commonly held belief was that women, if left by themselves, would indulge their natural weaknesses and give in to the various temptations of the flesh, including lust, greed, and discord—in short, unnaturalness. Duby continues: "What, men asked, do women do together when they are alone, locked up in the chamber? The answer was: Nothing good. . . . Women, particularly young women, are constantly vulnerable to the pricks of desire, against which there is no defense, and they usually satisfy these desires through homosexuality."¹⁶ Since women could not control themselves sexually, and since they were guarded from the company of men, they were assumed to take advantage of the only available outlets for sex, that is, homoerotic and autoerotic activities.

¹² *Ancrene Wisse* 8, lines 93–99, ed. and trans. Robert Hasenfrantz (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000); also available online at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/awintro.htm>.

¹³ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," trans. Mary Paul Macpherson, in *Ælred of Rievaulx: Treatises and Pastoral Prayer* (1971; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 49.

¹⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Letter 118: To a Nun of the Convent of St. Mary of Troyes," in *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James (1953; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 179–80.

¹⁵ Georges Duby, "The Aristocratic Households of France, Communal Living," in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 2: *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1988), 77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

This same concern extended to religious women, and the architecture of nunneries and anchorholds reflected a similar cautious ambivalence. Indeed, Gilchrist suggests: "The strict, perpetual enclosure of medieval nuns may be seen as an extension of the segregation of aristocratic and gentry women within a domestic domain."¹⁷ Like the *chambre des dames*, the anchorhold was one of the most private locations in medieval society, as only a very few individuals had access to it. With privacy, however, came the ability to keep secrets.¹⁸ Elsewhere I have discussed more thoroughly the possibilities of lesbian desire within the anchorhold, based primarily upon architectural evidence coupled with the medieval confessional literature known as the penitentials and *Ancrene Wisse*.¹⁹ *Ancrene Wisse* describes a cell that had more than one room: a parlor, a maid's chamber, and the anchoress's bedroom.²⁰ Within this cell the anchoress was enclosed with her servants. She had a window in her room that looked into the servants' room. She controlled the curtains and controlled access to viewing the women's bodies. Moreover, the women engaged in intimate bodily activities, such as shared bloodletting, and even potentially homoerotic activities, like kisses, gossiping, and storytelling, and, of course, the avoidance of men. It was the architectural design of the cell that encouraged these behaviors, through the windows, their coverings, the positions of the beds, and the design of the rooms. Mostly, however, the complete privacy—their removal from prying eyes in the manner suggested by Saint Bernard in his letter to the nun of Saint Mary of Troyes—allowed the women the possibility of indulging in secret desires.

The issue of women's enclosure continued to be one fraught with difficulties throughout the Middle Ages, especially as religious asceticism developed two distinct categories, contemplative and active. There had always been tension of sorts between these two lifestyles, but this division became more pronounced in the late Middle Ages with the growth of mendicant orders like Franciscans and Dominicans, which argued that monks should go out and do good in the world rather than remaining enclosed and apart from the world, as well as of heretical sects such as Lollards, who also preferred working within the community. Even the most contemplative vocation, anchoritism, experienced these changes. Late medieval anchoritic rules insisted that the anchorite run toward something (by which they meant God) and not away from something (by which they meant the world). For

¹⁷ Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, 169.

¹⁸ For a more extensive discussion regarding privacy in the anchorhold see Michelle M. Sauer, "Privacy, Exile, and the Rhetoric of Solitude in the Middle English Anchoritic Tradition," in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Elizabeth Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 96–110.

¹⁹ See Michelle M. Sauer, "Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void and Medieval English Anchoritism," *thirdspace* 3, no. 2 (2004): 70–88; also available online at http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/3_2_sauer.htm.

²⁰ Architectural evidence, which I have spent the last several years collecting, suggests that this was not the most common cell configuration.

instance, *Myroure of Recluses*, a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of a fourteenth-century Latin treatise, condemned those who chose the reclusive life as an escape. The first “cause or intention” when choosing the reclusive life includes those who “lie around on their own without doing any labor.” This is the intention of the “wrathful and slothful.”²¹ Proper anchorites chose the life in order to please God, not themselves.

Lollard texts of the fourteenth century picked up on this theme, condemning “private religion,” meaning anything connected to monasticism, including the life of anchorites and hermits, as promoting lewd behavior. The discouragement of celibacy was one of the main points of reform of the Lollard movement, and marriage was almost uniformly promoted. Lollard preachers claimed that celibacy promoted unnatural desires, as Carolyn Dinshaw points out, and, among priests, it led merely to misogyny and sodomy.²² Women were not immune to the detrimental effects of enforced chastity either, especially when enclosed. Karma Lochrie explores this concern in her recent book *Heterosyncrasies*, particularly in regard to a text called the Twelve Conclusions.²³ As she explains: “The Lollard text sees in vows of continence a descent into unnatural female sexual acts—a wallowing in female *kynde*, or nature, that devolves into the ‘most horrible sin possible.’”²⁴ The eleventh of these conclusions clearly connected enclosure with sexual deviance: “The eleventh conclusion is shameful to speak, that a vow of continence made in our church by women, who are fickle and imperfect by nature, is the cause of bringing the most horrible sin to mankind. . . . Yet having sex with themselves or with irrational beast or inanimate object surpasses those sins in worthiness to be punished by the pains of hell.”²⁵ Woman-woman eroticism is only one of the many deviances imagined within the cloister—bestiality, using devices such as dildos, and other “private sins [*prive synnis*]” (probably masturbation, mentioned later in the passage) were also likely possibilities, and while the Lollard assumptions might have been unfounded, the underlying anxiety regarding unregulated female desire was palpable.

Solitary enclosure was considered just as dangerous for men as it was for women. For instance, in his letter to Demetrius Saint Jerome wrote: “Men often discuss the comparative merits of life in solitude and life in a community; and the preference is usually given to the first over the second. Still

²¹ *Myroure of Recluses*, lines 25–26, ed. Marta Powell Hartley (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1995), 4.

²² Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 68–87.

²³ The Twelve Conclusions were an anonymous list of Lollard charges brought against the church posted on the doors of Westminster Abbey in London sometime in late January or early February 1395. See *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (1978; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 24–29.

²⁴ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 49.

²⁵ Quoted and translated in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 88.

even for men there is always the risk that, being withdrawn from the society of their fellows, they may become exposed to unclean and godless imaginations.”²⁶ In particular, Jerome was concerned that the fevered imagination would conjure lustful thoughts and perhaps provide suggestions for further lewd acts. The *Rule of Saint Columba*, supposedly formulated in the sixth century though probably written down much later, also demonstrated this conflicting pattern. Along with various directives on working (avoiding idleness), the injunctions include a suggestion to “be always naked in imitation of Christ and the Evangelists”; a directive to keep company with “a few religious men to converse with thee of God and his Testament; to visit thee on days of solemnity; to strengthen thee in the Testaments of God, and the narratives of the Scriptures”; and a warning to keep a servant who is “a discreet, religious, not tale-telling man, who is to attend continually on thee, with moderate labour of course, but always ready.”²⁷

Though same-sex desire was not mentioned directly, reading between the lines allows us to see where it might have existed—a naked hermit in his cell is visited by other men and served diligently by a single servant. Though not overt in this passage, like many of the other hermit rules that demanded enclosure, the distinct possibility was present. As Cary Howie notes: “Homoeroticism is intensified by enclosure.”²⁸ Whether it is through proximity or overwhelming emotion, the concern is clearly that base human instincts would be acted upon in the privacy of an enclosed cell. Even rules where presumptive heterosexuality dominated still recognized the sexual dangers of enclosure, such as Richard Methley’s *The Hew Heremyte: A Pystyl of Solytary Lyfe Nowadayes*, written at the end of the fifteenth century, which offers this advice on how to keep “complete chastity [*clene chastyte*]”: “Flee all women’s company, as well as the thought of them—put it out of your mind as soon as it arrives.”²⁹ Enclosure could protect the hermit and his chastity by removing him from the physical presence of women, though he was obliged to guard against lecherous thoughts diligently. Though at first this rule seems to assume that removal from women (or thoughts about them) should be enough to guard the hermit’s chastity, Methley seemed to have realized that there were other avenues of sexual temptation possible. He further warned the hermit: “And I allow there is no manner of living that is lawful [*leful*] to you that allows the lust of your flesh.”³⁰

²⁶ Jerome, Epistula 103, “To Demetrius,” 17.

²⁷ *Rule of Saint Columba*, in *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 2, pt. 1, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1873), 119–21.

²⁸ Cary Howie, *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 71.

²⁹ Richard Methley, *To Hew Heremyte: A Pystyl of Solytary Lyfe Nowadayes* 5.267, in *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 265–71.

³⁰ Ibid. 6.268, ed. Windeatt, 267.

Concerns like those of Methley had their roots in a longstanding fear about the effects of enclosure on men's sexuality. Influential early medieval monastic writers discussed the detrimental effect enclosure could have, especially if enclosure meant isolation within a small group of men. In the first part of his sixth-century rule Saint Benedict of Nursia described the various types of monks, including two undesirable types he called the Gyrovagi (meaning "wandering monks") and the Sarabites. Of the latter he wrote:

The third and worst kind of Monks are the Sarabites, who have never been tried under any Rule, nor by the experience of a master, as gold is tried in the furnace, but being soft as lead, and by their works still cleaving to the world, are known by their tonsure to lie to God. These in twos or threes, or perhaps singly, and without a shepherd, are shut up, not in our Lord's sheepfolds, but in their own: the pleasure of their desires is to them a law; and whatever they like or make choice of, they will have to be holy, but what they like not, that they consider unlawful.³¹

It is possible that at least some of the "pleasure of their desires" were the same-sex erotic encounters between inhabitants of the cell. While Howie sees the group as "difficult to define," he adds that Benedict clearly saw them as "fundamentally disordered."³² Moreover, he notes: "Like the sodomite, the Sarabite is a slave to '*voluptas*' and '*mollities*': [meaning] pleasure for its own sake and, still more tellingly, that 'softness' which has been associated with [homo]sexuality."³³ Almost a century earlier Saint John Cassian had denounced the Sarabites, too: "But these others, as I have said, run from monastic austerity. They live two or three to a cell. . . . Their special concern is to be free of the yoke of elders, to be free to do what they themselves wish, . . . [and] to do what takes their fancy."³⁴ Similarly, back in the fourth century Saint Jerome had referred to the Sarabites as "inferior" and criticized them not only for "liv[ing] together in twos and threes" but also for being "bound by no rule; but do[ing] exactly as they choose."³⁵ The Sarabites were thus dangerous men not because they were enclosed but because they were enclosed without a rule. By avoiding church discipline, they opened themselves up to the temptations of the world, especially the lusts of the flesh.

³¹ Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict*, trans. unknown (1638; London: Thomas Baker, 1898); also available online at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/gregory/life_rule.iv.ii.html.

³² Howie, *Claustrophilia*, 78.

³³ *Ibid.*, 78–79. The term *mollities* refers to 1 Corinthians 6:9, where "the soft" and "those who lie with men" are among those banned from heaven.

³⁴ John Cassian, "Conferences," trans. Colm Luibheid, in *The Works of John Cassian* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 189.

³⁵ Jerome, Epistula 22, "To Eustochium," 34, in Fremantle, *The Principal Works*, also available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XXII.html>. Jerome referred to this class of monks as the Remoboth and not the Sarabites, but he seems to have meant the same group.

Since the eremitic life was still considered a beneficial one, however, its dangers presented a quandary. Some eremitic rules addressed these risks more directly than others. One such rule is the so-called *Rule of Saint Celestine* found in a single manuscript located at the British Library in London. It is a late-fifteenth- or early-sixteenth-century manuscript copied by John Gysborn, an Augustinian canon of Coverham Priory in Yorkshire. The text contains an eclectic assortment of materials, mostly devotional, including this rule for hermits written in Middle English that occupies the final six folios and was ascribed to “the pope in Rome called Celestine.”³⁶ The most likely candidate for this person is Pope Celestine V (born Pietro da Morrone, or Peter of the Morrone), who ruled for less than half a year in 1294. Intriguingly, he had been a hermit himself before being elected as pope and had founded his own monastic order, which became known as the Celestines after he was elected pope.³⁷ The Celestines were an exceptionally austere order, known especially for practicing severe fasts, which Celestine sets out in meticulous detail in his rule.

Both the rule attributed to Saint Celestine and the one he actually wrote shared characteristics related to same-sex desire. In neither rule, for instance, was the hermit’s life meant explicitly to be solitary. In his autobiography Celestine V claimed that as a young man he “did not know that a hermit could live with a companion, and indeed he thought that a hermit had to remain always alone.”³⁸ After he was plagued by “night phantasms” to such an extent that he almost succumbed to unspecified temptation, however, he realized that a companion would assist him not only in resisting temptation but also in daily life. As his reputation for sanctity grew, Peter assisted other hermits in various ways, including sexual cures. One such cure occurred within his cell. A young man who “suffered from a spiritual weakness, such that each night he would have at least two nocturnal emissions,” spent the night in Peter’s cell and afterward was “freed from that vice.”³⁹ The hermit’s cell was clearly a space for sexuality or its “cure,” and its small confines did not allow for much privacy.

³⁶ *The Rule of Saint Celestine* is found in British Library, Manuscript Sloane 1584, fols. 92r–96v. Its contents also include a portion of the Premonstratensian rule, prayers invoking the Virgin Mary, angels, and patriarchs, a detailed version of Saint Bernard’s fast, an account of a mystical vision received by Pope Innocent IV, a number of texts relating to confession, and directions on how to pray properly, among other religious odds and ends. There are secular materials as well, such as medical receipts, letter forms, and a poem written about the cruelty of being abandoned by one’s lover.

³⁷ Originally organized as Hermits of Saint Damiano, or Moronites.

³⁸ Peter of the Morrone (Pope Celestine V), “Autobiography,” trans. George Ferzoco, in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Garland, 2001), 733–43, at 735.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 740. This incident differed from Peter’s own experiences with nocturnal emissions. Concerned about his ability to say mass the day after having one, Peter sought divine counsel and learned that human failings did not preclude him from the sacrament (738–39).

There is a connection here between Celestine's autobiography and the so-called *Rule of Saint Celestine*. This rule states that a hermit "ought not to live alone if he can get another hermit with him or else any other orphaned child."⁴⁰ The need for companionship was apparently so great that the author of the rule was willing to risk suggesting the presence of a young boy in the cell rather than allow the hermit to dwell alone. The severity of this temptation was revealed immediately: "It is not seemly to consider the personal area [*to compas the contre*] of his child or servant-made-herald, for fear of falling into temptation of fleshly lust through vanities of the world and the desire of sight."⁴¹ There are several interpretive possibilities for the odd phrase. *Compas* may mean "consider/ponder" or "surround/encircle." *Contre* is an even more unusual choice. Generally, the word refers to a particular geographic region; however, it probably refers here to the child's own space within the cell. This is a complicated rendering of a singular line, but the idea behind it, no matter which interpretation one chooses, has a lecherous hermit ogling—or, worse, circling around—his orphaned child's space, where the boy's bed is most likely located. Even on a metaphorical level the image comes through clearly enough: the hermit's presence encloses (surrounds) the boy's. This scene is reminiscent of one described four centuries earlier by Ælred of Rievaulx: "It is in fact a great consolation in this life to have someone . . . whom you draw by fetters of love into that inner room of your soul so that . . . you can confer all alone, the more secretly, the more delightfully."⁴² Erotic enclosure within the hermit's cell was obviously a definite possibility, and a distinct pattern emerges: even while the church encouraged enclosure for both men and women interested in a strict Christian life, the specter of sexual deviance remained present.⁴³ This passage also makes clear that pederastic desire might have been another serious temptation for the hermit. This fear had been part of the monastic culture for centuries. Already in the fourth century Saint Basil had warned specifically against desires spurred on by attractive youths: "It is frequently

⁴⁰ *The Rule of Saint Celestine*, lines 11–13.

⁴¹ Ibid., lines 14–19: "yt is not full comly to compas the contre yf his chyld ore seruand mayde his heraudis & for dred of fallyng in temptacion of fleschly luste thorow vanities of the world and lykyng of syzte."

⁴² Ælred of Rievaulx, *Mirror of Charity* 3.110.11, quoted and translated in 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 of Chicago Press, 1980), 225. For the sexual exploitation of young boys by bishops and the overall tolerance of the higher clergy toward pederasty see Megan McLaughlin, "The Bishop in the Bedroom: Witnessing Episcopal Sexuality in an Age of Reform," in this issue.

⁴³ See Aaron W. Godfrey, "Rules and Regulations: Monasticism and Chastity," in *Homo Carnalis: The Carnal Aspects of Medieval Human Life*, ed. Helen Rodnite Lemay (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 1990), 45–57. Godfrey examines a number of provisions against same-sex desire in various rules, the majority of which forbade certain activities (for example, oiling one another) or proximity (for example, sleeping with one another).

the case with young men that even when rigorous self-restraint is exercised, the glowing complexion of youth still blooms forth and becomes a source of desire to those around them. . . . Sit in a chair far from such youth . . . [and] do not by gazing at his face take the seed of desire from the enemy sower and bring forth harvests of corruption and loss."⁴⁴ In both of these instances this unnatural desire is brought about by sight, a sense construed as particularly dangerous, particularly in the anchoritic rules.

Indulgence in secret sexual desires—homoerotic or pederastic acts or masturbation—were not the only dangers of the enclosed life. Another fear expressed by various religious writers, and one connected to deviant sexuality, was gluttony. Overindulgence in food carried with it connotations of sexual perversions, and excess food—gluttony and its related sin, sloth—also raised the specter of same-sex desire. As Michel Foucault has discussed, medical experts in classical antiquity agreed that there was a close connection between eating and sex.⁴⁵ Medieval writers were greatly influenced by these ancient notions. *The Secrets of Women*, also known as the *Pseudo-Albertus Magnus*, a popular and widely disseminated twelfth-century text, related appetite for food with women's appetite for intercourse. Eating creates a residue or build-up that in turn produces blood and heat within the vulva. Moreover, "according to prevailing views in the twelfth century, humors originating in all parts of the body generate sperm in both sexes. Chief among these is blood, which the liver produces from the nutrition of food and drink transmitted by the stomach."⁴⁶ Once sperm was produced (and it was believed to have been produced in both men and women), it had to be expelled in some way or the person would become ill—and the only way to release sperm was to have an orgasm. Some medieval medical experts also held that food stimulated the humors necessary for sex, so that eating and sexual pleasure were connected, although neither was absolutely necessary for the other.⁴⁷

Whether or not food and sex were directly connected in the medieval popular imagination, overindulgence in eating created concern for some. As Caroline Walker Bynum suggests: "Among early Christian writers, both Jerome and Cassian had taught that meat and wine excited sexual lust and that gluttony was the basic source from which flowed other sins."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Quoted and translated in Patricia A. Quinn, *Better than the Sons of Kings: Boys and Monks in the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 173.

⁴⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (1984; New York: Vintage, 1986), esp. chap. 2, "The Diet of Pleasures," 109–16.

⁴⁶ John W. Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 179.

⁴⁷ This position was based on the ideas of Constantine the African. See Paul Delany, "Constantinus Africanus, *De Coitu*: A Translation," *Chaucer Review* 4 (1969): 55–65; and Monica H. Green, "The *De genecia* Attributed to Constantine the African," *Speculum* 62 (1987): 312–23.

⁴⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 82.

Albert the Great, for instance, while attempting to define temperance, “establishe[d] a parallel between two forms of enjoyment linked to the sense of touch: food . . . and the pleasures of love.”⁴⁹ Once an individual began to indulge in sensual experiences, he or she was less likely to stop. Kolve notes: “Medieval confessional teaching, for instance, knew perfectly well that habitual acts of gluttony define a glutton, habitual acts of fornication a lecher, habitual acts of sodomy a sodomite.”⁵⁰ The parallels are clear: overindulgence of one kind (food) is linked to overindulgence of another kind (sex), which in turn is connected to the depravity of unnatural sex. Saint Jerome succinctly summarized the dilatory effects of gluttony in his letter to Eustochium: “First the belly is crammed; then the other members are roused.”⁵¹

Authors of anchoritic rules were well aware of these dangers, and while most counseled moderation in ascetic deprivation, the majority also acknowledged the risks of overindulgence. Food and drink muddled the senses, lowered the vigilance against desire, and tempted chastity. Although food and drink (and sleep) were necessary for survival, too much of any of them was dangerous for a recluse and made him or her vulnerable to sin. Ælred wrote: “From all manner of food and drink that it seems should enflame your bodily composition and make you prone to and ready for sin, abstain. . . . Flee them as venom and poison, and contrary to your pure and chaste purpose.”⁵² He notably feared that overindulgence in food, especially epicurean delights, would inflame sexual desire and thus challenge the anchoress’s chastity. This anxiety was more clearly connected to same-sex desire in a later passage. Ælred warned his sister that she “cannot believe that you may not lose your virginity except through fellowship with a man.”⁵³ Moreover, he added: “Do not think this means that a man cannot be defiled without a woman or a woman without a man, since that abominable sin which inflames a man with passion for a man or a woman with passion for a woman meets with more relentless condemnation than any other crime.”⁵⁴ Intriguingly, Ælred acknowledged that lesbian activity could result in the loss of virginity. He then quickly noted that chastity was particularly challenged while the anchoress is eating or drinking: “When you sit down at your meal, then you should ruminate about chastity and purity.”⁵⁵ Sin

⁴⁹ Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 80.

⁵⁰ Kolve, “Ganymede,” 1018.

⁵¹ Jerome, Epistula 22, “To Eustochium,” 8.

⁵² Ælred, *De institutione inclusarum*, lines 305–7, 313–14, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, Manuscript Bodley 423, fol. 182r.

⁵³ Ibid., lines 380–82, fol. 183r.

⁵⁴ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Rule of Life for a Recluse,” trans. Macpherson, 64.

⁵⁵ Ælred, *De institutione inclusarum*, lines 390–91, fol. 183r: “Whan thou sittist at thy mete, than shuldest thou chewe vpon chastite and clennes.” Ælred made a lovely pun here

comes from within and without the body, and so it was dangerous for the anchoress to allow anything inside of her. *Ancrene Wisse* shared a similar perspective. After naming the anchoress “God’s room [*Godes chambre*],” the author reminded her: “Noise does not come into the heart except from something which one has either seen or heard, tasted or smelled, and felt from the outside.”⁵⁶ As pointed out by Kari Kalve, this suggests that the regulations for the senses were intended to “protect the inner, spiritual self from contamination by the outside world, much as the anchoress protects herself by hanging a black cloth in her window, or by the act of enclosing herself within a cell.”⁵⁷ Kalve’s point is an excellent one—the anchoress’s body should be sealed within itself just as it was sealed within the cell; thus, anything that entered was potentially disruptive to her continence. This was especially true if the anchoress was eating with others, as sometimes happened, as then she was exposed thereby not only to “rousing” food and drink but also to potentially stimulating conversation.

Karma Lochrie notes an episode within the life of Héloïse that highlights this idea of dangerous feasting. In the course of requesting a monastic rule for her convent from Abelard, Héloïse remarked that the *Rule of Saint Benedict* was written clearly only for men, as evidenced in the regulations regarding hospitality at the abbot’s table, among other considerations. The rule allowed visitors, both men and women, to dine with the abbot. This regulation concerned Héloïse as unnecessarily dangerous to the monks, and, in the words of Lochrie, she “quotes Jerome on the difficulty of preserving modesty at the table, and she remarks on the ease with which the souls of women and men alone are destroyed by gluttony, drunkenness, and sheer enjoyment (*dulcedo*).”⁵⁸ Héloïse cited the Roman writer Ovid regarding drunken lasciviousness at the dinner table to support her cause. Héloïse then made a surprising statement: if men might be dangerous guests at a convent, how much more dangerous were women? She wrote: “Even if they [the nuns] admit to their table only women to whom they have given hospitality, is there no lurking danger there? Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman’s seduction as woman’s flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily to any but another woman.”⁵⁹ The dangers of sharing a table, then, were clearly linked to lesbian possibilities.

on “chewe vpon,” which meant both to masticate, which the anchoress is doing while eating, and to ruminate, which the anchoress should be doing while eating.

⁵⁶ *Ancrene Wisse* 2, lines 510–11, trans. Hasenfrantz.

⁵⁷ Kari Kalve, “‘The muthes wit’: Reading, Speaking, and Eating in *Ancrene Wisse*,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 14 (1997), available online at <http://www.illinoismedieval.org/EMS/VOL14/kalve.html>.

⁵⁸ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 30.

⁵⁹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin, 1974), 161.

Earlier anchoritic rules also included comments on monastic hospitality as occasions for possible sexual temptation. Ælred warned against extending hospitality within the cell to all: "Furthermore, I wish you were wary of receiving visits under the guise of hospitality even from devout women, religious or otherwise, for frequently the good will be muddled with the bad."⁶⁰ This warning was more explicitly connected to sexual temptation in a later passage: "It is difficult to be at an event and not be tempted either by eating delicious foods or drinking delicious drinks, or by the conversation of children."⁶¹ Much in the manner of the *Rule of Saint Celestine*, Ælred was concerned with pederastic desire as well as the dangers of feasting. *Sturen*, which I have here translated as "temptation," carries with it a sense of sexual arousal and a tendency toward lasciviousness. First, he warned his sister against receiving any visitors, including women, at the table, and then he reminded her that feasting prompted lust. The entanglement of lust and gluttony was clear even in late anchoritic texts such as Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, written in the late fourteenth century. In discussing moderation in sustenance, Hilton warned: "But when it [the desire to eat] passes into lust and the wish for pleasure, then it is sin. And so it is there that all the difficulty lies, in knowing how to distinguish wisely the need from the lust and from the will for pleasure. They are so knitted together, and the one comes so much with the other, that it is hard to receive one as the need and reject the other as willful lust, which often comes disguised as need."⁶² Hilton's warning appropriately sums up the concerns most authors of rules had regarding gluttony—that lust for food (and drink) would spill over into uncontrollable lust for other delights of the flesh, especially sexual ones. The two types of desire became so "knitted together" that they became inseparable, and some even assumed a causal relationship.

Though the general concerns about gluttony leading into fornication held true for male eremitic discipline, too, the rules for men seem to have had fewer restrictions against eating with outsiders than the ones for women. A more unique concern for men, however, was flatulence. As unlikely as it may seem to a modern audience, flatulence was considered to be sexually

⁶⁰ Ælred, *De institutione inclusarum*, lines 92–94, fol. 179r.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, lines 437–39, fol. 184r: "It is ful harde to be amonge occasyon and not be stured either by etynge of deliciouse metes, or drinkyng of deliciouse drinkes, or amongst conuersacion of children." Ælred's use of "occasyon" is intriguing, as the most common definition, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, is "an opportunity for an action, sin, virtue, debate, etc.; an opportunity for trouble" (ed. Frances McSparran, available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. "occasy[n]"). The event was clearly an occasion for sin.

⁶² Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. and trans. John P. H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 145.

stimulating, and foods causing flatulence were often considered aphrodisiacs. Even more oddly, it was related to the condition known as “green-sickness” in women. The causes were believed to be “many and varied: an excess of wind due to the absorption of flatulent food, the habit of sleeping on one’s back, and prolonged abstinence.”⁶³ The problem could be resolved through sexual activity, it was also held, but in a same-sex monastic environment the options were limited—or dangerous. Many authors of rules and handbooks sought to avoid this problem by advocating simple, calming foods such as bread, lettuce, and herbs.

Just as enclosed women were advised to avoid feasts with either men or women, male eremitic rules also counseled the avoidance of too much social interaction; however, some interaction seems to have been expected. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* gave advice on guests eating at the abbot’s table, as noted above, and even the *Rule of Saint Celestine* provided directions on how a hermit should recover his fast after eating meat with a patron. Yet for most, “speech and social contact are strictly circumscribed,” as proscribed in *The Myrour of Recluses*, written for both men and women.⁶⁴ For instance, when visitors were allowed in, they should not be permitted to dazzle the recluse with “tales and adventures that have befallen in various places [*tydynyes & auentures flat fallen in diuerse contrees*],”⁶⁵ or else, after they leave, the recluse would be disturbed by “diuerse fantasies.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Methley recommended “sylyence” as the key to maintaining chastity and obedience, as it kept the hermit’s thoughts from straying to idle lusts.⁶⁷ Even the Lollards, too, decried the connection between overindulgences, especially for cloistered men. The third of their Twelve Conclusions reads: “Lecherous sexual activity is the result of bodily processes; delicious foods eaten by men of holy church will necessarily need purgation, and sexual activity may be one avenue of such release.”⁶⁸

A further danger was that eating and drinking would bring on a lassitude that inhibited both prayer and good works. To lust and gluttony was added a third dimension of idleness. Indeed, the third homoerotic peril prevalent in eremitic literature involves the connection between idleness and sodomy. Belief in the relationship between idleness and sin, specifically

⁶³ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 147. They cite an excerpt from the *Breviarium practica*, written in the thirteenth century, which notes: “Numerous men . . . sworn to chastity, are often tempted by the Devil; the principal cause is that every day they eat food that leads to flatulence. This increases their desire for coitus and stiffens their member” (147). Though she does not discuss this connection, the most comprehensive history of flatulence in the Middle Ages is Valerie Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

⁶⁴ Marta Powell Hartley, introduction to *The Myrour of Recluses*, ed. Hartley, xi–xxxiii, xix.

⁶⁵ *Myrour of Recluses*, lines 110–11, ed. Hartley, 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, line 115, ed. Hartley, 6.

⁶⁷ Methley, *To Hew Heremyte* 10, ed. Windeatt, 270–71.

⁶⁸ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 71.

sexualized sin, was common in the Middle Ages and became a regular part of medieval theology. Both Jerome and Benedict, for example, noted the connection.⁶⁹ Sometimes idleness was linked to *acedia*, the sin of excessive sorrow or despair, which some medieval writers considered among the deadliest of sins,⁷⁰ but mostly idleness was more often associated in the minds of medieval writers with sexual sin.

Numerous anchoritic rules for women pointed out this connection. Some only hinted at the impropriety that might result from idleness, such as in the *Liber confortatorius*, written in the twelfth century by Goscelin of Saint Bertin for the recluse Eve: "Now shun idleness: for idleness breeds disgust, and as St. Benedict witnesses, 'idleness is the enemy of the soul' and 'the idle man has desires.'" ⁷¹ Though these desires were not specifically outlined, it seems likely that they were desires of the flesh and perhaps—given Eve's seclusion—unnatural ones. *Ancrene Wisse* initially denounced idle behavior in a similar manner but then linked it more specifically with unnatural desire. The anchoress was admonished: "For herself to behold her own white hands does harm to many an anchoress, who has them too fair, as those which are ruined by idleness."⁷² The anchoress's white hands were troubling not only because she did not use them in any beneficial manner but also because she was beguiled by the sight of them, perhaps to the point of using them on herself. Later the connection was made clearer: "Idleness awakens a great many fleshly temptations. *Iniquitas Sodome saturitas panis et ocium*—that is, 'Sodom's wickedness comes from idleness and a full belly.'"⁷³ Here idleness was not simply the gateway to sin or even just to sexual sin—it was specifically the forerunner of sodomy. Ælred's rule also explicitly connected idleness and sexual sins of all kinds: "For as much as idleness is a deadly enemy to human souls it may be named the mother of all vices, the creator of all lusts, the nurturer of vain thoughts, the instigator of unchaste affections, the provoker of impure desires, maker of sin, I wish you were not unoccupied, but [undertaking] various honest occupations to avoid this foul vice of idleness."⁷⁴ Fruitful occupation would correct improper desire, though Ælred also carefully regulated what constituted honest work. Teaching was not allowed, as

⁶⁹ See Jerome, Epistula 125.2, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. Jean-Paul Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1844–64), 22:1978; and *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 48.1.

⁷⁰ See S. W. Jackson, "Acedia the Sin and Its Relationship to Sorrow and Melancholia in Medieval Times," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 55 (1981): 172–85.

⁷¹ Goscelin of Saint Bertin, *Liber confortatorius*, trans. W. R. Barnes and Rebecca Hayward, in *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and Liber confortatorius*, ed. Stephanie Hollis et al. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 97–212, at 162. For a discussion of this text see H. M. Canatella, "Long-Distance Love: The Ideology of Male-Female Spiritual Friendship in Goscelin of Saint Bertin's *Liber confortatorius*," in this issue.

⁷² *Ancrene Wisse* 2, lines 813–15, trans. Hasenfrantz. Hasenfrantz includes a number of parenthetical remarks that I have removed for the sake of clarity.

⁷³ *Ancrene Wisse* 8, lines 159–60.

⁷⁴ Ælred, *De institutione inclusarum*, lines 209–14, fol. 180v.

it, too, might instigate improper desires. Farming and sewing were also troubling. Ælred preferred his anchoress to live by charity, spending her time in contemplation—which, in Ælred's scheme, was still an active occupation, as it required constant vigilance and proper direction.

Unsurprisingly, male rules warned against the dangers of idleness as well. The *Rule of Saint Celestine* noted that "idleness is the enemy of Christian men's souls . . . [and it is] the devil that through fear draws humans into idleness and so guides the way to falling into sin."⁷⁵ Though the sin mentioned is not specifically sodomy, there is a connection to lust, which earlier in the same rule had been directly connected to desire for the hermit's child or servant.⁷⁶ In the *Rule of Saint Celestine* the hermit was likened to a crusading warrior of Christ, guarding against wickedness and infidels. In turn, he is likely warding off unnatural lust, since "the Crusades whipped up prejudice against Muslims, believed to be given over to homosexual vices, and against Jews, assumed to be lustful."⁷⁷ In *The Myrour of Recluses* the recluse was also described as Christ's warrior and a spiritual knight. Here, according to the modern editor of the text, "sloth's kinship with lust is evident."⁷⁸ The sections in the rule detailing the seven deadly sins connected the two: "voluptuous sloth or slothly fleshly lust [*voluptuus sleuthe or sleuthi fleschly lust*]" is a startlingly direct connection.⁷⁹ Sloth is *voluptuus*, or given to sensual gratification, while lust is slothful.⁸⁰ Moreover, the treatise assured its audience that "gluttony [*glotyne*]" provoked "idleness and sloth [*dulnesse and sleuthe*]."⁸¹ In other words, gluttony initiated sloth, which would then, in turn, bring about lust. It was a vicious cycle that the hermit needed to avoid. The easiest way to escape this trap was through worthy occupation, and it was precisely that which defined late medieval hermit life. For instance, the *Rule of Saint Paul*, a fifteenth-century rule, provided a general warning against idleness but also gave specific advice on how to avoid it: "Because idleness is an enemy of the soul and to prevent the devil's discovering him without an occupation, the hermit is to provide himself with manual work to fill the time when he is not at prayer. This may involve the production of food or the maintenance and repair of roads and bridges."⁸²

⁷⁵ *The Rule of Saint Celestine*, lines 8–9, 15–17, fol. 93v.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, line 12, fol. 91r.

⁷⁷ Warren Johansson and William A. Percy, "Homosexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 172.

⁷⁸ Hartley, introduction to *The Myrour of Recluses*, xxii.

⁷⁹ *Myrour of Recluses*, line 48, ed. Hartley, 4.

⁸⁰ See *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "voluptuus."

⁸¹ *Myrour of Recluses*, lines 438–39, ed. Hartley, 14.

⁸² "Office for the Benediction of Hermits (and Widows) (According to the Rule of St. Paul)," trans. Frank Bottomley, available online at <http://www.zurgy.org/medieval/appendix.pdf>, as an appendix to his unpublished manuscript, "Yorkshire's Spiritual Athletes: Hermits and Other Solitaries," available online at <http://www.zurgy.org/medieval/hermits.pdf>.

Early texts by Jerome and Benedict had long ago introduced the idea of homosexual acts as a special concern in eremitic literature. Later texts both reinforced and reinterpreted these worries, some more openly than others. The early anchoritic rules written for women seem to have been more direct than those written for men. Alongside a number of implied fears, Ælred's *Rule for a Recluse* contained a number of specific warnings against lesbian activity, even warnings that sexual acts between women could damage an anchoress's virginal status. *Ancrene Wisse* contained more coded warnings regarding potentially homoerotic situations as well as direct ones, such as that noted above linking idleness and sodomy. In other literature for women, such as Richard Rolle's *The Form of Perfect Living*, written in the early fourteenth century, the warnings to anchoresses about preserving chastity were less directly concerned with same-sex activities, though the warnings against idleness and guarding their reputations remained. Rules for men dating to the same time period were not so overt. As we have seen, only the *Rule of Saint Celestine* contained specific warnings against same-sex desires. This is an intriguing reversal.

Ann K. Warren has argued for a shift of emphasis from the anchorite as a penitential ascetic, that is, from one atoning for personal sin, to the anchorite as a contemplative, living a life of prayer for the benefit of the local community, a shift that she dates to the mid-fourteenth century.⁸³ I believe this shift indicates a larger change in eremitic purpose. Using German evidence, Gábor Klaniczay has pointed out that the fifteenth century was a time of increasing suspicion regarding religious phenomena such as mysticism and that most wanted tangible evidence of the good that religion and religious people could work in the world.⁸⁴ The same suspicion existed in late medieval England. Fulfilling public functions allowed hermits and recluses to overcome their communities' natural suspicions regarding them. Rules for anchorites and hermits emphasized the good that these individuals might do for those around them, from symbolic and supernatural benefits (battling against spiritual assaults), to the practical support of religious counsel to those who visited them, and even to the repairing of bridges and roads; all provided opportunities for hermits to support the community in a visible manner. Rotha Mary Clay notes that even into the sixteenth century "road and bridge hermits were still doing useful work, and were popular objects of charity."⁸⁵ She adds that hermits were generally held to be "men

⁸³ Ann K. Warren, "Old Forms with New Meanings: Changing Perceptions of Medieval English Anchorites," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 5 (1982): 209–21.

⁸⁴ Gábor Klaniczay, "The Process of Trance, Heavenly and Diabolic Apparitions in Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*," Discussion Paper Series, no. 65 (June 2003), Collegium Budapest, Institute for Advanced Study, 35; available online at http://www.colbud.hu/main_old/PubArchive/DP/DP65-Klaniczay.pdf.

⁸⁵ Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 185. For an overview of northern hermits' contributions to roads and bridges see Bottomley, "Yorkshire's Spiritual Athletes," 115–24.

and women of strong and saintly character who commanded respect and won gratitude from their fellow-men, who recognized them as *workers*.”⁸⁶ It was the recognition as workers and public benefactors that separated later medieval hermits from earlier ones.

During the period right before the Reformation, moreover, the eremitic life was increasingly subjected to scrutiny in a variety of ways. Hermits doing good in the world at least avoided some of the pitfalls of sexual suspicion: they were solitary without being too enclosed and not prone to the idleness that might give way to sexual sin. To be sure, hermits still needed to be vigilant of their chastity, and rule writers became more stringent in their reminders to guard against sexual impropriety. At the same time, however, new suspicions attracted the attention of critics of the eremitic life: the increase in mystical experiences created new worries about fraud, heresy, and even witchcraft. And while these also carried a sexual taint, women enclosed in a cell were less likely to fall under suspicion than ones loose in the world. In a changing religious world, the dangers of same-sex temptation for hermits, anchorites, and anchoresses gave way to broader anxieties about the lifestyle.

⁸⁶ Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, 191–92.