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Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures, Volume 36, Number 1, 2010, pp.
1-27 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrc.0.0001>

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GENDER, SODOMY, FRIENDSHIP, AND THE MIEVEAL ANCHORHOLD

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that, in comparison with the apparent verbosity of medieval discourses on friendship between males, representations of female amity do not loom large in medieval literature.¹ One of the rare instances in which relations between women *are* subjected to the sort of public scrutiny more usually directed at male friendship is an Ovidian narrative widely retold in the Middle Ages, which concludes its representation of intense interfemale passion with a miracle of divinely inspired sex transformation. The story of Iphis and Ianthe, from book 9 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, tells how Iphis's mother saves her daughter from death at the hands of her father—who has issued an decree stating that any girl child born to his wife will be slain—by raising her from infancy as a male. During her adolescence, however, the girl's father (who still thinks she is a boy) betroths Iphis to the maiden Ianthe; the two girls fall passionately in love; and finally, after Iphis has been magically granted a sex change by the gods, they marry and live happily ever after. The story has been dubbed “the most influential depiction of lesbian love in Western literary tradition,”² but in keeping with the sex change device's attempt ultimately to erase the same-sex component of the coupling, medieval redactors were more likely to go into denial about the episode's homoerotic potential. Thus Caxton's 1480 translation of the *Ovide moralisé*, a moralized version of *Metamorphoses*, places the trope of impossibility in the mouth of Iphis herself, who declares categorically: “Ther is no femele that desireth to acowple her to another femele.”³

This concerted effort to render the erotic potential of relations between women invisible and impossible presents a marked contrast to discourses of male love and friendship in the Middle Ages, which at least acknowledge

the potential for an erotic component in certain partnerships, albeit via the “utterly confused” category of sodomy. Alan Bray’s work on premodern friendship has done much to highlight the extent to which, in certain discursive contexts, the sodomite and the friend occupied analogous terrain, by virtue of their mutually defining characteristics. His argument in *The Friend*, which complements his earlier research on homosexuality in Renaissance England, is that conventions of friendship were public facts in premodern culture, expressing order, civility, and peace; sodomy, in contrast, was characterized by disorder, scandal, and violence, and the two poles were normally kept firmly apart. But from time to time one finds a text mapping sodomitical meanings onto friendship, lumping the two together into what he calls a “surprising affinity”—a perception of symmetry that undermines friendship’s capacity to connote order.⁴ Although Bray’s argument here is directed mainly at the early modern period (his analysis of friendship prior to 1500 focuses predominantly on fictional narratives of sworn brotherhood and examples from material culture such as shared tombs, where sodomy is not ostensibly at issue), other scholars have shown the relevance of the sodomy–friendship dyad for certain milieus in the Middle Ages. Mathew Kuefler, for instance, has drawn attention to a veritable explosion of narratives casting suspicion on male friendships as breeding grounds for sodomitical liaisons in twelfth-century French romances and Anglo-Norman chronicles. As Kuefler sees it, this new desire to foreground a potential sexual component in male–male bonds, especially among the noble military elite, was part of an effort to transform the secular nobility into subjects of royal and ecclesiastical power, as well as deflecting sodomy accusations away from the clergy and the monastic orders.⁵

This article will draw attention to another body of literature where the sodomy–friendship opposition arguably emerges as a relevant interpretive prism. Significantly, however, the texts under consideration—devotional writings designed to regulate the lives of medieval recluses and to inspire them to lives of chastity and spiritual perfection—were in many instances directed at audiences of women. As scholars researching female friendship have been quick to point out, simply importing the terms of Bray’s analysis wholesale into research on medieval women brings with it certain risks.⁶ Bray himself has difficulty accommodating female modes of fellowship to the model he develops in *The Friend*: the bonds of friendship in which he is especially interested are those cemented by rituals of voluntary, oath-bound kinship, a mode of sworn brotherhood, ritually sanctioned by the Church, that he argues “subsisted from at least the beginning of

the eleventh century until the end of the seventeenth, when it appears to be succeeded by the friendship of civil society.”⁷ But since it was precisely the publicly sanctioned, socially significant nature of these relationships that laid them open to allegations of sodomy, and since, according to Bray, “traditional society” above all privileged the *male* body of the friend in its capacity to confer cultural capital, women’s entry into the history of same-sex friendships comes somewhat later. (Bray’s analysis of amatory unions between women is confined to an exploration of the correspondence of the nineteenth-century diarist Anne Lister.)⁸ Additionally, as Laura Gowing has pointed out, Bray’s stated aim in *The Friend* is to topple “King Sex” from the throne that he has occupied in historical studies in recent decades, and yet this gesture cannot have the same impact in the field of women’s history, where the critical lens through which female same-sex relations are viewed has always tended to be “defensively asexual.” Although, as Gowing suggests, this results in a situation in which “intimacies between men seem to hover dangerously close to the boundary between safety and sodomy, women’s friendships often seem to happen in the silences between the lines of the story of male friendship, in a space where such dangers are barely imaginable and rarely articulated.”⁹ It follows that the border separating eroticism from friendship may be affected by gender differentials that determine the relevance of particular interpretive models, differentials that allowed practices of female friendship to blend in more silently with expressions of female sexuality than male friendship was able to do with sodomy. Women’s relationships with one another may simply not have been politically resonant enough in the Middle Ages to warrant the erection of a full-fledged regulatory divide separating female fellowship from female homoeroticism.¹⁰

In what follows, however, I want to draw attention to a context where women had a role that was culturally and socially significant and where consequently some effort was made to police the relations that they formed with one another in terms that implicated the erotic. Anchorites were men or women who attempted to mimic the eremitic lifestyle of the desert fathers by dedicating themselves to a life of solitary confinement in a cell or “anchorhold,” usually under the spiritual direction of a bishop. While the reclusive life was adopted by individuals from the early Middle Ages until well into the sixteenth century, statistical surveys have shown that in England anchoritism reached its apogee in the thirteenth century and that, in this period, women adopting the lifestyle outnumbered men by a ratio of roughly four to one.¹¹ Although, on the surface, the solitary nature of

the anchorite's vocation seems to preclude the kinds of socially valued and politically potent relationships that characterize premodern discourses of male friendship, in England at least the centrality of anchorites to medieval communities is apparent. English anchoritism was a fundamentally social phenomenon, sustained by networks of patronage, material support, and verbal and textual interaction; the relationships forged among recluses, and with others beyond the confines of the cell, potentially possessed an importance beyond mere practical necessity.¹² If, as Robert Hasenfratz has recently put it, "many anchorites withdrew from the world only to find themselves in the center of village life," the anchorhold is best understood not simply as a space of physical isolation but also as a transactive site, a location within which bonds could be formed and networks sustained.¹³ Contemporary discourses of friendship may thus have exerted an influence on the lives of individuals who, on another level, remained dead to the world.

SAFETY AND SUSPICION: *ANCRENE WISSE*'S POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP

The main focus of my discussion here will be the early Middle English handbook, now called *Ancrene Wisse*, originally written circa 1221–50 for an audience of three female recluses.¹⁴ This text endeavors to mold the identity of the anchoritic subject with reference to that great master narrative of Christian devotion, the story of the soul's longing for, and journey toward, spiritual union with God. To achieve this aim, *Ancrene Wisse* not only sets out to regulate the outer forms of the recluse's existence—the practical measures designed to control the anchorite's daily life and interactions, termed by the author the Outer Rule—but also intervenes in the anchorite's inner life via a complex series of prayers, exegetical readings, and narrative exempla that ultimately have more in common with works of biblical commentary, hagiography, and preaching than with the conventions of a monastic rule book. *Ancrene Wisse*'s Inner Rule encourages its readers to approach the spiritual by way of exegesis and allegory, famously in a lengthy narrative sequence representing Christ as a lover-knight spurned by his coldhearted Lady, and the text is celebrated for its powerful use of imagery and rhetorical effects.¹⁵

That versions of *Ancrene Wisse* are extant in at least seventeen manuscripts, in English, French, and Latin, also testifies to its status as a living entity, which, like the medieval saint's life, was subject to a process of

constant adaptation and reworking to meet the needs of different audiences and patrons.¹⁶ Revisions to the original text make it clear that in the course of a few years the original trio of anchoritic “sisters” had expanded to twenty or more recluses, geographically dispersed but united under this single rule. It is this revised and expanded version, the most complete text of which appears in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402 (siglum “A”), that forms the basis of the argument that follows.¹⁷ As well as being the best-known rendition (it is the basis for most recent editions and translations), Corpus 402 uniquely contains the address to the enlarged audience of “twenti nuðe oðer ma” [now twenty or more] (96) anchorites. Although parts of the text also incorporate material that could be applied more generally, this reference suggests that the immediate audience of the Corpus revision was composed of women religious.¹⁸ Since this article asks questions about the role that discourses of friendship play in writings for and about women, the Corpus text is therefore of particular interest.

So what exactly does *Ancrene Wisse* say about friendship? At a basic level the text’s lively manuscript tradition underscores its reliance on a very concrete world of textual circulation, interaction, and collaboration. Notwithstanding the conditions of production and distribution, however, its goals were ultimately otherworldly: earthly friendships were only of concern to the extent that they furthered or endangered these spiritual ends. This is a paradox that structures anchoritic life more generally. High value might be placed on recluses within medieval communities on a social level, but psychologically they aspired to become “no-bodies”—dead in all but a spiritual sense. Enclosure ceremonies emphasized this aspect explicitly, by drawing on medieval funeral rites, and anchoritic literature regularly made reference to the anchorhold’s tomb-like qualities, as seen, for example, in *Ancrene Wisse*’s rhetorical question, “For hwet is ancre-hus bute hire buri-nesse?” [For what is the anchor-house but her grave?] (43).¹⁹ Just as anchorites underwent their own social deaths, moreover, they were engaged in a constant effort to understand the world they had left behind as itself a dead entity, thereby freeing up their minds for a life of devotion focused entirely on matters of the spirit. By definition, then, earthly friendship is on one level irrelevant to anchoritic experience.

Moving beyond these ideals, however, it is clear that on a day-to-day basis the anchorite continued to have need of friends. This is evident first and foremost in *Ancrene Wisse*’s allusions to an expanding audience of female recluses. On one level, this anchoritic network may have been textual and virtual: a band of spiritual sisters, physically separated from one another by

the distance between their anchorholds (or by the walls separating their cells), yet following one rule under the supervision of a single spiritual director. But on another level the maintenance of some kind of earthly community—textual or otherwise—clearly mattered. The fact that the ideals of absolute solitude espoused by the desert fathers were occasionally tempered with more practical arrangements, in which anchorites were able to live in close proximity with one another in double cells, bears witness to this communal ethic. Rather like the joint graves that pepper Bray's analyses of male friendship, there is evidence of some recluses literally pairing up in same-sex or cross-sex spiritual partnerships, occupying the same premises for years on end and thus experiencing in tandem the social deaths to which they were meant continually to aspire. The twelfth-century *Life of Christina of Markyate* describes how the protagonist holed up for a time with a female recluse called Alfwen and later remained with Roger the Hermit for many years until his death, in a relationship of "holy affection" likened by Christina's biographer to "a large flame springing from two burning brands joined together."²⁰ In the first half of the thirteenth century, moreover, two women are recorded sharing an anchorhold in Worcester priory. And we know that a priest and a layman dwelt together in the churchyard of St. Laurence, Jewry, in London in the second half of the fourteenth century. These reclusive partnerships were by no means the norm—archaeological evidence confirms that most cells were designed for a lone recluse—but they do indicate that in certain cases an ethics of friendship continued to persist beyond the anchorite's figurative grave.²¹

When we turn to *Ancrene Wisse* itself, though, it is clear that some kinds of friendship are more desirable than others and that the recluse is being persuaded to assume a distinction between fellowships that help sustain her life of enclosure on a day-to-day basis and excessive, "fleshly" friendships that have no value beyond their worldly roots. The text does refer explicitly to the help bestowed on anchorites by their friends and supporters: the Corpus manuscript includes a unique addition to part 4 on temptations, which warns the recluse not to grumble about her needs "bute to sum treowe freond þet hit mei amendin" [except to some loyal friend who can amend it] (99), which conceivably refers to a trusted patron. But there are also a number of occasions when the recluse's behavior resembles too closely the relations of earthly friends. In the concluding section of the Outer Rule in part 8, for example, the narrator reports that sometimes recluses have meals with guests outside their quarters but states categorically: "Þet

is to muche freondschiþe; for of alle ordres, þenne is hit uncundelukest ant meast azein ancre ordre þe is al dead to þe world" [That is too much friendship; for in all orders then it is unnatural, and most of all against the order of the recluse, who is utterly dead to the world] (156). Although in context the word *uncundelukest* refers to unnaturalness as a general mode of perversion, it also hints at a possible sexual frame of reference—the idea that what goes “against nature” is a perverted, fleshly commingling, a necrophilial transaction that transpires between living and dead.²²

The sexual was of particular concern for those charged with regulating recluses on a day-to-day basis, and *Ancrene Wisse*'s censuring of anchoritic hospitality is in keeping with these anxieties. From the twelfth century onward bishops increasingly took responsibility for the spiritual direction of recluses, and in England a number of diocesan statutes referred specifically to the sexual incontinence of anchorites—behavior presented as the logical outgrowth of more “innocent” displays of friendship. The bishop of Chichester, Richard Wich, drew up legislation in the mid-thirteenth century ruling that anchorites should never “receive or have any person in their houses concerning whom sinister suspicion may arise [*de qua sinistra suspicio oriatur*]. . . . We permit them to have private conversations with only such persons as whose gravity and honesty admit of no suspicion.”²³ Given the public significance of anchorites in their communities, the scandal aroused by disruptions of the line separating living from dead was clearly uppermost in legislators' minds; for this reason *all* cross-sex encounters were to be avoided wherever possible, even if, in the eyes of those who knew better, the two parties were indeed “just” friends. Christina of Markyate and Roger the Hermit were themselves careful to keep their spiritual friendship from being made public, “for they feared scandal to their inferiors and the fury of the adversaries of the handmaid of Christ.”²⁴

Ancrene Wisse follows the logic of episcopal rulings on the subject to the letter, repeatedly sexualizing interactions between recluses and prospective male visitors, even in instances where contact is occasioned by acts of hospitality or by ties of friendship or blood. The only admissible interactions are those exercised in public—“ahen þe gode habben eauer witnesse” [the good ought always to have a witness] (28)—and the narrator finds physical contact between men and recluses so reprehensible that the prohibition against such behavior almost goes without saying:

Godd hit wat as me were muche deale leouere þet Ich isehe ow alle preo, mine leoue sustren, wummen me leouest, hongin on a gibet

forte wiðbuhe sunne, þen Ich sehe an of ow zeouen anlepi cos eoni mon on eorðe swa as Ich meane—Ich am stille of þet mare.

[God knows! It would be preferable to me that I see all three of you, my dear sisters, women dearest to me, hanging on a gibbet to avoid sin, than that I might see one of you give a single kiss to any man on earth in the way I mean—I am silent about any more.] (46)

A similar tone characterizes the guidelines in part 8 for the recluses' maidservants, who are directed not to adopt the gestures of intimacy commonly exchanged within male, publicly sanctioned friendships in their own interactions with men: "Heo ne schulen cussen na mon, ne cuð mon ne cunnesmon, ne for na cuððe cluppen ... ne toggin wið ne pleien" [They must not kiss any man, either friend or relation, or embrace him out of friendship ... or tug with or play with him] (162). The only legitimate cross-sex friendship is that cultivated with Christ himself, whose body was sacrificed to save humankind. "Neauer fere ne dude swuch fordede for his fere" [Never did a friend do such a favor for his friend] (148), the narrator declares, a motif that echoes the sentiments expressed in an earlier passage, that it is with Christ that the anchorite shares her symbolic grave: "3e habbeð þe world iflohen, familiarite (muche cu[ð]redden), forte beo priue wið ure Lauerd.... [F]or 3e beoð wið Iesu Crist bitund as i sepulcre" [You have fled the world, fellowship (great intimacy), to be intimate with our Lord.... [F]or you are enclosed with Christ as if in a tomb] (65).

Interactions between women, on the other hand, are habitually legitimized, implicitly to the extent that they are assumed to be devoid of erotic potential. This has the effect of constructing a binary division between cross-sex relations (which potentially always run the risk of sexual corruption, except when the friend is Christ) and same-sex relations (which are assumed to be free of sexual connotations), so that the only earthly friendships deemed "safe" are those cultivated with other women. The recluses' reliance on the fellowship of other female associates, especially their maidservants, is highlighted throughout the Outer Rule. While, as we have already seen, meals with guests outside an anchorite's private quarters signify "to muche freondschipe," the narrator directs recluses to allow "wummen ant children, ant nomeliche ancre meidnes, þe cumeð iswenchet for ow ... makieth ham to eotene wið chearitable chere ant leaðieð to herbarhin" [women and children, and especially the recluses' maidservants, who visit having taken trouble for you ... have them eat with loving hospitality and invite them to stay over] (157). Moreover the

narrator warns the anchorite not to allow any man to sleep within her cell, yet “ȝef muchel neod mid alle makeð breoken ower hus, hwil hit eauer is ibroken habbeð þrinne wið ow a wummon of cleane lif deies ant nihtes” [if at the same time some great emergency causes your house to be broken open, while it is damaged have there with you, day and night, a woman of pure life] (158). In addition, whereas the anchorite’s maidservants are ordered to “cussen na mon” [kiss no man] (162), in the event of a quarrel between the maidservants, the recluse is told to make sure that each woman acknowledges her formally through the performance of the *Venia* (a formalized gesture of apology), and the narrator orders that each of them, after kneeling on the ground, should raise the other up and “cussen on ende” [finally kiss] (162). Predictably, in this context, the gesture of kissing between the maidservants is explicitly juxtaposed not with the modes of horseplay that typically characterize their interactions with males (as seen in the ruling that they “ne toggin wið ne pleien”) but with mystical union—female–female companionship is viewed as a model for divine love itself:

Luue is Iesu Cristes fur, þet he wule þet bleasie aa i þin heorte; ant te deouel blaweð forte puffen hit ut. . . . For-þi halden ham i luue feaste togederes, ant ne beo ham nawt of hwen þe feond blawe, nomeliche ȝef monie beon iueiet somet ant wel wið luue ontende.

[Love is Jesus Christ’s fire, which he wishes would blaze at all times in your heart; and the Devil blows in order to puff it out. . . . Thus they should hold fast together in love, and it should be nothing to them when the Devil blows, especially if many are joined together and well-kindled with love.] (162–63)

“SODOM THY SISTER”: ANCRENE WISSE AND FEMALE SODOMY

Passages such as the one just quoted, which explicitly idealize relations between women while denigrating comparable gestures of intimacy with men, clearly echo the traits of same-sex friendship that Bray and others find in pre-modern contexts: publicly sanctioned, cemented through ritualized gestures, and compared explicitly with love of/for Christ, these bonds were the very stuff of a medieval anchorite’s day-to-day existence. Yet these relations were themselves potentially susceptible to the kinds of anxiety that more regularly characterized male friendship in the period. Whereas women’s relationships

did not always have the political resonances that warranted public scrutiny (in the way that, say, Edward II's relationships with his favorites were subject to suspicion in the fourteenth-century English court), we have already seen how the anchorhold was a site of particular concern for bishops at the time, on account of the "scandal" that might arise from the anchorite's interpersonal relations. We have also seen how recluses who ate with guests outside their quarters showed excessive friendship—an excess described by the narrator as *uncundelukest* or unnatural. But this rhetoric of disorderly desire also plays out in explicit allusions in the text to Sodom and its crimes.

Sodom rears its head directly on several occasions in *Ancrene Wisse*. In part 7, for instance, God's warning to Lot to flee the city before it falls is interpreted by the narrator as an act of divine love:

þet is, þa ure Lauerd walde bisenchen Sodome, þer Lot, his freond, wes inne, "Hihe þe," quoð he, "utward, for hwil þu art bimong ham, ne mei Ich nawt don ham." Nes þis wið luue ibunden? Hwet wult tu mare? Luue is his chamberleng, his conseiler, his spuse.

[That is, when our Lord wanted to sink Sodom, where Lot, his friend, was, he said, "Get yourself out of there, because while you are among them, I can do nothing to them." Was he not bound by love? What more do you want? Love is his chamberlain, his counselor, his spouse.] (154)

Another reference to the Genesis account of Sodom appears in the section on confession in part 5, which describes how God sank Sodom and Gomorrah to the bottom of hell (337). Here the vices in question are ambiguous, and homoerotic interactions are not specifically at issue. But a passage in the Outer Rule, concerned with the dangers of boredom to recluses, merits particular attention in the context of the text's simultaneous endorsement of female fellowship. In part 8 the narrator quotes a verse from Ezekiel 16, which attributes the crimes of the inhabitants of Sodom to pride, gluttony, and sloth, and goes on to declare: "Of idelnesse awakeneð muchel flesches fondunge. *Iniquitas Sodome: saturitas panis et ocium*—þet is, Sodomes cwedschipe com of idelnesse ant of ful wombe" [Much temptation of the flesh stems from idleness. "The crime of Sodom was a surfeit of bread and idleness"—that is, Sodom's wickedness came from idleness and from a full belly] (160). The reference to Ezekiel is peculiarly appropriate to a commentary on women's interactions with

each other and the world: the context for the verse is a chapter in Ezekiel's prophecies, about the disloyalty of Jerusalem toward God, which is framed in terms of a husband upbraiding his unfaithful wife. Ezekiel casts Sodom in the role of Jerusalem's "younger sister," accusing Jerusalem of doing "more wicked things" than her sister: "Ecce haec fuit iniquitas Sodoma sororis tuae superbia saturitas panis et abundantia et otium ipsius et filiarum eius.... [E]t elevatae sunt et fecerunt abominationes coram me" [Behold this was the iniquity of Sodom thy sister, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance, and the idleness of her, and of her daughters.... And they were lifted up, and committed abominations before me] (Ez. 16:49–50).

There were condemnations of sodomy roughly contemporary with *Ancrene Wisse* that clearly appropriated these verses from Ezekiel as a means of invoking the medieval concept of *luxuria*, defined as the disordered desire that generates self-indulgence and bodily excess. For instance, French theologian Peter Cantor (d. 1197) opens his polemical text *De vitio sodomitico* (*On Sodomitic Vice*) with a reference to precisely the same verse from Ezekiel. For Cantor the *luxuria* of Sodom is directly linked with the propagation of same-sex desire, and we know that *Ancrene Wisse*'s author was influenced by French scholars at the University of Paris, including Cantor.²⁵ Moreover Cantor's tract significantly expands the category of sodomitic vice to include female same-sex interactions as well as male. Referring to Genesis, he argues that God's creation of male and female should be taken to mean that "there will not be intercourse of men with men or women with women, but only of men with women and vice versa," before going on to cite a number of biblical texts that support his argument, including Romans 1:26–27, which likewise contains verses condemning female as well as male homoeroticism.²⁶

Against the backdrop of this appropriation of Ezekiel, in a treatise designed to condemn sodomitic vice specifically as a manifestation of homoerotic passion, it is possible that *Ancrene Wisse*'s allusions to temptations of the flesh encompass modes of interfemale interaction that overstep the mark. In part 2, after all, in the context of a discussion of the importance of concealment from male looks, the narrator remarks: "To wummon þe wilneð hit, openið ow o Godes half; 3ef ha ne spekð nawt þrof, leoteð swa iwurðen, bute 3ef 3e dreden þet heo þrefter beo iscandlet. Of hire ahne suster haueð sum ibeon itemptet" [To a woman who desires it, open yourself for God's sake; if she does not speak about it, let it be, unless you fear that afterward she is scandalized. By her own sister some (anchorites) have been tempted] (26). This passage is part of a lengthy addition to the "A" text

in the Corpus manuscript, which describes the ideal measurements and appearance of the anchorhold's window openings. Its meaning is ambiguous but seems to refer to the possibility that, while revealing oneself to other women is generally acceptable, occasionally female visitors will not ask the anchorite to open up. In such circumstances, the anchorite should continue to keep herself concealed; it is only if the visitor is likely to be shocked (*iscandlet*), presumably by the fact that the recluse has refused to open the window, that the matter should be raised. The reason why such a refusal might scandalize a female visitor is alluded to in the sentence that follows: even the recluse's "ahne suster" can be a source of nameless temptations. Of course, this somewhat vague reference could simply point to nonsexual modes of sinfulness, but we cannot know for sure: the erotic is not a self-evident category in medieval literature, and it is precisely this semantic ambiguity that *Ancrene Wisse* harnesses in order to blur the lines between different varieties of fleshly transgression.²⁷ What this passage hints at, in a typically indirect way, is the possibility that even the gaze of other women presents a threat to the anchorite's purity.

Similarly the later declaration in the Outer Rule that the recluse and her maid "ne plohien worldliche gomenes ed te þurle, ne ne ticki togederes" [should not play worldly games at the window, nor romp together/play games of touch] (164), does not preclude the possibility that the *Ancrene Wisse* author has eroticism in the back of his mind. The phrase "ticki togederes" is certainly ambiguous. It could be the earliest written reference to a tag game that involves touching someone and saying "it" or "tick" (the latter still subsists in certain regions in Britain, including the West Midlands where *Ancrene Wisse* probably originated).²⁸ Significantly, this game may itself be associated with a medieval game called "salt posts," a version of freeze tag where those who are touched "turn to salt" until they are touched by another player: the name "salt posts" recalls the transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt when she looks back at the destruction of Sodom.²⁹ But *ticki* can also have a wider semantic range, referring to more wanton modes of dallying, stroking, or caressing as well as being related to the modern English "tickle."³⁰ Although some modern editors and translators have expressed a preference for definitions on the "more innocent" end of the scale, it could be that the author is concerned precisely with activities—childish or otherwise—that look dangerously fleshly to the outside world.³¹ It is the physicality of these games that is at issue, after all, and anchorites who "ticki togederes" in public risk generating the same kinds of suspicion that other fleshly activities provoke.³²

In any case, another passage in the text seems to make explicit reference to the dangers of unnatural sex. Part 4, in a discussion of lechery, issues a stark warning against manifestations of lust that the author nonetheless refuses to name and even to teach to his readers, lest they themselves be tempted:

Ich ne dear nempnin þe uncundeliche cundles of þis deoffles scorpiun, attri itelet; ah sari mei ha beon þe, bute fere oðer wið, haueð swa ifed cundel of hire galnesse, þet Ich ne mei spoken of for sche-ome, ne ne dear for drede, leste sum leorni mare uuel þen ha con ant beo þrof itemptet. Ah þenche on hire ahne aweariede fundles in hire galnesse.... I zuheðe me deð wundes.

[I dare not name the unnatural offspring of this devil's scorpion (lechery), venomously tailed. But sorry she may be who, without a friend or with, has fed the offspring of her lustfulness thus, which I may not speak about for shame, nor dare not for fear, lest someone learns more evil than she knows and is tempted by it. But let her consider her own accursed inventions in her lustfulness.... In youth people do wonders.] (79)

This passage may be read as being directed against acts performed both homoerotically with the body of a friend and autoerotically with the body of the self; in an outpouring of clerical misogyny, women are characterized by the author as the epitome of disordered desire, pregnant with the spiraling *fundles* (inventions) of female lust. Significantly the scorpion is explicitly feminized in the text—described as a snake with a face “sum-deal ilich wummon” [rather like a woman’s] (79), which seems designed to link lechery with the Fall. Art in this period often presented the serpent in the Garden of Eden as a snake with a woman’s head, hair, and even torso (sometimes with identical features to Eve), and this reference to the female face of the scorpion in *Ancrene Wisse* thus serves to reinforce the recluse’s own identification as the source of this unmentionable vice.³³ But the suggestion that the vice in question can be performed “bute fere oðer wið” [without a friend or with] also draws attention to the sin’s status as a practice in which more than one person can participate—a manifestly feminine vice, brokered by a female scorpion. Typically, the author’s circumspection regarding the precise nature of the sin calls sodomy into being in the context of a refusal to incite it: the sin’s unmentionable quality echoes the

rhetoric of the unspeakable deployed in the earlier passage in part 2, where, expressing horror at the thought of a recluse kissing a man, the narrator declares, “Ich am stille of þet mare” [I am silent about any more] (46).³⁴

Thus a careful reading of references to the bodies of friends in *Ancrene Wisse* suggests that the structure Bray uncovers in discourses of early modern male friendship may also provide a relevant framework for the analysis of medieval anchoritic literature. Generally speaking, the ancho-rhold is a space in which relations between women are regarded as legitimate, desexualized relations; nonetheless *Ancrene Wisse* is also peppered with references designed cryptically to rein in the erotic, occasionally even in the context of relations between female companions. A fundamental problem remains, however. If, according to early modernists such as Bray, the sodomy–friendship dyad was less strongly present in discourses of female amity in the Middle Ages, why did it exert an influence on this particular body of texts? In conclusion, I wish to present some provisional answers to this question.

PRECEDENTS AND PARALLELS

The first thing to note is that the censuring of sodomy—and sometimes implicitly female homoeroticism—may also be a feature of other anchoritic guidance literature circulating in England between the twelfth century and the fifteenth. For instance, around the time that Aelred of Rievaulx composed his *De spirituali amici* (*On Spiritual Friendship*), the first sustained exploration of friendship in the monastic tradition, he also wrote a treatise designed to regulate the inner and outer life of a recluse, *De institutione inclusarum*, which was styled as a letter to his sister. This work was probably written circa 1160–62, half a century or so before the earliest version of *Ancrene Wisse*, and we know that *Ancrene Wisse*’s author studied Aelred’s treatise closely (for instance, borrowing his distinction between Inner and Outer Rules); two Middle English translations of sections of the work circulated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³⁵ The text, like *Ancrene Wisse*, makes clear reference to the dangers of interaction with males but also contains occasional allusions to erotic relations between women. The opening section, translated in the fifteenth-century Middle English manuscript, conjures up the image of a recluse being fed tales by an old woman at the window of her cell and being filled with lust, slander, and unclean thoughts as a consequence. Lusty tales generate lusty fantasy, Aelred argues, and

turn the anchorhold into a brothel. Women's gossip is presented here as a dangerously (homo)erotic activity, in which the participants are aroused by one another's "leccherous ymaginatyf thoughtes."³⁶ What is more, the fourteenth-century version contains a chapter referring to despicable sex acts performed outside the company of men, which seem to parallel directly the "unspeakable" vices mentioned in *Ancrene Wisse*. The relevant passage is rendered as follows: "Bote I say not this that thu shuldest wene [think] that a man may not be defoyled [polluted] wit-owte a wymman, ne a wumman wit-oute a man; for in other wyse, moor cursed and abhominable, which schal not be sayd now ne ynemned [named], bothe in man and womman ofte chastete is lost."³⁷ As in *Ancrene Wisse*, this unspeakable vice could be autoerotic or homoerotic, though in Aelred's case the ruling is more circumspect: the passage does not allude explicitly to a variety of lust that transpires between "friends" and could simply refer to masturbation (which could itself be conveyed via motifs of unmentionability). But the rhetoric of the unspeakable, and the emphasis on the origins of the sin in a mode of lust performed "wit-oute a man," may also contain sodomitic undertones.

A reference to a species of lechery *contra naturam* (against nature) also occurs in the fourteenth-century Latin *Speculum inclusorum*, translated into Middle English in the fifteenth-century *Myrour of Recluses*. The Latin version, apparently directed at a male audience in a monastic setting, refers to the sin of "mollicies," or self-touching, an abominable activity that potentially leads to the practices of "masculorum concubitores" (those who lie with males). This is a reference to 1 Corinthians 6:10, which rules that "neque molles, neque masculorum concubitores" will inherit God's kingdom. However, the Middle English translation, which may have been modified for a female audience, simply glosses "lecherie agayn kynde" by quoting the word *molles* in the Corinthians passage but omitting the reference to "masculorum concubitores," so in context the sin in question may be masturbation rather than homoeroticism; in both Latin and Middle English, the reference is followed by an anecdote about a solitary hermit who is deeply troubled by this sin of "mollicies." If women readers were being targeted in the *Myrour*, it is possible that the Middle English redactor thought no purpose would be served by retaining the second part of the Corinthians passage, which could be interpreted as referring to male same-sex practices alone. At the same time, that the Latin *Speculum* does allude to sodomitical practices in the context of anchoritism adds weight to the idea that enclosure was not simply viewed as a breeding ground for solitary sinful activity.³⁸

Given these wider references, it is possible to posit a couple of general answers to the question of why interfemale fellowship occasionally aroused suspicion in anchoritic literature. The first is a suggestion that has already been implicit in the analysis thus far: that it was precisely the public significance of the recluse in medieval communities that made anchoritic intimacies potentially susceptible to the kinds of scandal and suspicion that more regularly characterized male friendship in the period. Anchoritic enclosure embodied the paradox that the cell was a private space, ostensibly operating outside the conventions of friendship and intimacy that characterize earthly social relations, and yet it was also simultaneously a public space, subject to communal scrutiny and episcopal control. By physically bracketing off the transactions of the anchorhold—closeting them, as it were—relations between women were spatialized and subjected to a level of visibility not encountered in other spheres. Perhaps it was this very process of spatialization that ultimately brought female intimacies into contact with sodomitical frameworks.

My reasoning here derives from an analogy between the anchorhold and the premodern closet. By the latter, I do not necessarily have in mind the figurative closet that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests has been so “inexhaustibly productive of modern Western culture and history at large” and that is identified, for the most part, with solitary experience.³⁹ Rather, I refer to Alan Stewart’s argument in his book *Close Readers* about the physical closets and private chapels of early modern households, which, designated as rooms for private devotion and study, nonetheless fostered transactions between different classes in socially resonant ways, demarcating the relations forged behind closed doors spatially as well as politically. Moreover, as a space beyond the household, the locked closet could itself sometimes be susceptible to the accusation that it was a site for unsavory or even sexually suspect relations (for instance, between a servant and master or mistress): closet transactions were deemed to take place beyond the codes of social determination such as friendship that commonly regulated the relations forged in other spheres.⁴⁰

The argument here is that unsavory acts—even those transpiring between two women—also emerge into visibility in anchoritic literature as a result of this spatializing logic: bracketed off from worldly systems of social interaction, the anchorhold nonetheless paradoxically draws attention to the relationships formed within. Clearly there are major differences between the private studies and chapels of early modern houses to which male masters and secretaries temporarily withdrew and the cells at the

sides of medieval churches in which female recluses permanently holed up. Each space differed with respect to the amount of time that a person was expected to remain there: in the anchorite's case it was until death. But the spatialization of anchoritic relations does create the circumstances for an analogous structure: it provides the setting for one of the rare moments in medieval culture when interfemale bonds were potentially brought into contact with sodomitical frameworks.⁴¹

This does not, of course, give us direct insights into what might be termed the "sexuality" of the anchoritic sinner. Exploring the rare moments when women's intimate relations were subjected to categorization and control nonetheless opens up the possibility that relationships between women *did* find expression within the anchorhold, on a continuum from the affective to the erotic. From one perspective, this might be deemed wishful thinking. If, as Michelle Sauer has recently speculated, female enclosure created the conditions for a "lesbian void" in medieval anchoritism—a space in which anchorites could explore woman–woman erotic possibilities without fear of censure—then it cannot always have been such a queer utopia, for *Ancrene Wisse's* allusions to specifically female modes of sodomy and (homo)eroticism also imply a more tightly regulated regime.⁴² To capture both the possibilities and the restrictions that characterized female bonding, it may be necessary to make room for expressions of intimacy situated somewhere between utopia and censorship. The fact that the text alludes to modes of eroticism not simply directed toward men implies that occasionally celibate women *were* known to succumb to one another in religious spaces, as well as experiencing more solitary modes of desire. The analogy with a "void," however, risks overlooking the regulatory structures within which those experiences were sometimes situated. Precedents for this climate of legislation are not hard to find. As early as the seventh century, Donatus of Besançon warned in *Regula ad virginea* against "particular friendships" among enclosed women and especially relationships between young girls and older women; comparable concerns are expressed in early medieval penitentials.⁴³ There are also rare occasions in the historical record when female solitaries were accused of improper same-sex sexual behavior. In 1444 the vicar-general of Rottweil, a town in southwest Germany, ordered the deacon to investigate the recluse Katharina Guldin, who had according to city officials practiced the "vice against nature which is called sodomy" with a nameless laywoman. So *Ancrene Wisse's* attempts to regulate relations among religious women are not without parallels.

Additionally, if, as Bella Millett has persuasively argued, *Ancrene Wisse* was originally authored by a Dominican cleric (albeit possibly with the input, over the many years in which the text was revised, of the anchoritic readers themselves), the anxieties expressed in male monastic settings about so-called special friendships may also have influenced their treatment in anchoritic guidance texts.⁴⁴ While in the early Middle Ages monastic communities had sometimes openly acknowledged the erotic potential of friendship between males in texts, visual images, and drama, Peter Damian's twelfth-century *Liber Gomorrhianus* (*Book of Gomorrah*) signals a shift toward the reconfiguration of these relations as unambiguously sodomitical; confessional literature produced in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 extended these concerns to the wider, lay population.⁴⁵ Significantly, Dominican moralist Paul of Hungary wrote a manual of confession circa 1219–21, possibly at the behest of Dominic himself, that is positively obsessed with the sin *contra naturam*. Urging confessors to treat sodomy more seriously, Paul devotes ten whole sections of his *Summa penitentia* to this one sexual transgression. The *Summa* seems especially concerned with male practitioners and attributes unnatural vice to two groups in particular: courtiers who do not have access to women and clerics and cloistered monks who refrain from disciplining the flesh. But it is notable that Paul views the principal cause of “sodomitic sin” as an excess of material comfort—too much food, wine, oil, leisure, foreign fare, and pride of life—and supports his argument with a reference to the very passage from Ezekiel quoted in *Ancrene Wisse*.⁴⁶

So *Ancrene Wisse*'s resemblance to works of pastoral care (the text contains a lengthy treatment of confession in part 5), its likely Dominican origins, and its connections with a wider, monastic tradition of discourse on sodomy and friendship may help explain why this work has a particular investment in regulating female same-sex intimacy along these lines. Nonetheless, this hypothesis also needs to be balanced with an acknowledgment of the extent to which *Ancrene Wisse* was part of a wider trend oriented toward fostering and controlling male as well as female piety. There are various points in the text where the narrator seems to have in mind both the original audience of anchorites (who are explicitly gendered female) and a potential lay readership (which may have included males), and some manuscripts containing the work were probably adapted specifically for male readers, signaled, for instance, by the modification of gendered pronouns or the inclusion of direct addresses to “men of religiun” or “brethren” rather than the usual “ancres.”⁴⁷ This attention to a variable audience may have caused the author or subsequent redactors to reflect on the kinds

of intimacy that structured relations among men as well as women and may signal another reason why the sodomy–friendship dyad resonates in this particular context.

Nonetheless, the textual tradition itself suggests otherwise. After all, those manuscripts of *Ancrene Wisse* that appear to have been directed toward a mixed or male audience are *less* likely, for the most part, to include references to the kinds of discourse that have been outlined in this survey. Either these other versions omit or seriously abbreviate the Outer Rule in part 8, a revision that excludes precisely the section in the original text where most references to friendship and the dangers of worldly interaction are contained, or the manuscripts in question appear to be directed to different ends than anchoritic enclosure, abridging the text radically so that it only includes extracts with general applicability.⁴⁸ Especially instructive in this context is the revision of the passage about the scorpion of lechery found in version “P” (Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2498), which makes no reference to the scorpion’s “unnatural offspring” or to unmentionable activities performed with or without a friend; instead, it is the sex organ itself, the “entrance” that lets lechery enter the body, that becomes unspeakable—unless, the narrator announces, the sin is performed within marriage:

þat ingonge þat leteð in synne I ne dar nouȝth, for drede, speke þere of ne writen, lest oþer ben ytempted þere of. . . . For hou so it euer is yqueynt it is dedlich synne ȝif it be wakeand and willes wiþ fleshlich likyng, bot ȝif it be in wedlok.

[I dare not, for fear, speak or write about that entrance that lets in sin, lest others be tempted by it. . . . For however it is satisfied it is a deadly sin if it is stirred up and consented to with fleshly desire, except if it is in wedlock.]⁴⁹

Version “P” is addressed to a mixed audience (it makes reference to “my leve breþeren and sustren”); at one time it was thought that Pepys 2498, refashioned as a biblical commentary, in which each section of the text is appropriated as a response to a citation from the Latin Vulgate, was a Lollard-inspired compilation, though recent attempts to date the manuscript to circa 1365–75 now make this seem unlikely.⁵⁰ What is important about this particular revision is that it produces a major shift in emphasis, from nameless sex acts performed within the anchoritic cell to nameless orifices deployed outside the marital bed; the shift from an anchoritic female audience to an audience that included a

mixed, even lay readership causes the redactor to discard the allusions to the kinds of erotic activity that characterize some of the other versions.

Understanding the ways in which gender affects *Ancrene Wisse*'s revisions contributes to a more nuanced perspective on the work's politics of friendship. It is the revised text directed at female recluses (the most complete copy of which is contained in Corpus 402) that contains the most sustained analysis of worldly friendship and its consequences. Consequently it bears witness to a specific context in medieval culture where concerns about women's friendships assumed a degree of prominence. Moreover, while other surviving copies of the text were probably addressed to female readers, the "A" text found in the Corpus manuscript also contains its own unique revisions, some of which appear to respond to experiences in the years between the production of the original text and its revision.⁵¹ One of these additions (a version of which also appears in the Latin translation) refers to the amount of time anchorites should spend with friends and family and states categorically, "Tendre of cun ne limpeð nawt ancre beonne" [Family feeling is not appropriate for a recluse] (160). The reviser also adds an anecdote about a religious man whose natural brother comes to him for help and who turns him away with the line "Na fleshlich freond ne easki me fleshlich froure" [Let no fleshly friend ask me for fleshly solace] (160).⁵² This insertion reinforces the overall policy on earthly friendship: patrons and supporters can be helpful to the recluse, but when she remains too attached to kith and kin, or helps them out in their hour of need, she once again breaches the line dividing living from dead. Significantly, another addition found exclusively in the Corpus manuscript is the sentence added to the end of the discussion of unspeakable acts of lechery in part 4, performed "bute fere oðer wið" [without a friend or with] (79). After urging the anchorite to vomit out the relevant sins in confession, the reviser inserts the following statement: "3e þe of swucches nute nawt, neþurue 3e nawt wundrin ow ne þenchen hwet Ich meane, ah zeldeth graces Godd thet 3e swuch uncleannesse nabbeð ifondet, ant habbeð reowðe of ham þe i swuch beoð ifallen" [You who know nothing about such things, you need not wonder at or ponder what I mean, but give thanks to God that you have never come across such uncleanness, and have pity on them that have fallen into such things] (79). It is as if some of the anchorites have indeed been asking questions about the precise nature of these accursed sins that can be performed without a friend or with, and the individual behind the Corpus revisions has decided to intervene directly in an effort to close the issue down. The original text's deployment of the rhetoric of the unspeakable in

order to condemn both masturbation and sex with other women is thus supplemented by a policy of “don’t ask” as well as “don’t tell.”

Such textual developments clearly matter: they hint at the possibility that medieval religious authors did sometimes take women’s friendships very seriously indeed, even the friendships they had with one another. In part this conforms to a misogynistic logic: it assumes that celibate women endangered one another in ways that celibate men did not, precisely because women were already, at base, polymorphously perverse. *Ancrene Wisse’s* account of the devil’s scorpion and the recluse’s “ahne awareiede fundles in hire galnesse” [own accursed inventions in her lustfulness] (79) explicitly acknowledges this capacity for female perversion and hints at the possibility of relationships between women that do not simply imagine chastity as the opposite of sexuality. But misogyny is not the only script at work: female bonding may also be marked by a brand of sodomy-phobia deemed especially relevant to religious women.⁵³ While Bray’s thesis about “traditional,” premodern friendship is structured by the recognition that the body that emerges most consistently in sodomy polemic is a male body, and while this may well have created the conditions for an epistemological void in certain practices of female fellowship, *Ancrene Wisse’s* allusions specifically to female modes of sodomy also imply the existence of an analytic tension between eroticism and friendship in certain texts addressed to women. Gender may well play a decisive role in the attribution of erotic significance to same-sex friendships, but we should not assume in advance that female friendship is inevitably protected from erotic meanings. The body that structures medieval discourses of friendship—a body variously socially sanctioned, through public ritual and narrative, and rendered incomprehensible, through aspersions of sodomy—also exerts a spectral presence in medieval anchoritic writings. It is in this sense that the anchorite may be said to be haunted by the body of the friend.

NOTES

Research for this article was made possible by a Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust. Papers based on aspects of the research were presented at the Universities of Cambridge, Cyprus, Manchester, and Swansea in 2006–7 and at the London Old and Middle English Research Seminar in 2008. I am grateful to the audiences on each of these occasions for valuable questions and feedback.

1. Recent attempts to discern possibilities for female–female love, friendship, and eroticism beyond this apparent discursive silence include Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1 (2000): 1–24; Karma Lochrie, “Between Women,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70–88; Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (1986): 81–93; Ulrike Wiethaus, "In Search of Medieval Women's Friendships: Hildegard of Bingen's Letters to Her Female Contemporaries," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 93–111; and Ulrike Wiethaus, "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 288–321. See also essays in Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, eds., *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

2. Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 283.

3. Quoted in *ibid.*, 283. The challenges that Ovid's original text presents to scholars wishing to recuperate "lesbian" desire are outlined in Jonathan Walker, "Before the Name: Ovid's Reformulated Lesbianism," *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 205–22. Ovid's story was retold in book 4 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (ca. 1390), though arguably with the twist that Gower allows for the possibility of a female–female desire that is natural: see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 10–11; Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 213–16; Lochrie, "Between Women," 81–82. A comparable tale of female–female desire and miraculous sex transformation appears in the Old French text *Yde et Olive*, translated into English in the early sixteenth century, which is discussed in Diane Watt, "Behaving Like a Man? Incest, Lesbian Desire, and Gender Play in *Yde et Olive* and Its Adaptations," *Comparative Literature* 50, no. 4 (1998): 265–85.

4. Alan Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," *History Workshop Journal* 29 (Autumn 1990): 1–19, at 4; Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 183–204.

5. Mathew S. Kuefler, "Male Friendship and the Suspicion of Sodomy in Twelfth-Century France," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Brown Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 145–81. See also William E. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

6. See especially Valerie Traub, "Friendship's Loss: Alan Bray's Making of History," *GLQ* 10, no. 3 (2004): 339–65.

7. Bray, *The Friend*, 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 239–46, 260–88.

9. Laura Gowing, "The Politics of Women's Friendship in Early Modern England," in *Love, Friendship, and Faith in Europe, 1300–1800*, ed. Laura Gowing, Michael Hunter, and Miri Rubin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 131–49, at 136.

10. Traub, "Friendship's Loss," 350. See also Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, 320–25, which suggests that before the seventeenth century female intimacy was rarely at risk of social censure and that the signs of increasing crossover between discourses of tribadism and chaste female friendship in this period may be connected to a growing interest in the concepts of normal and abnormal. When women were condemned for sodomy in medieval culture, in either penitential contexts or criminal justice, it was usually because they had usurped the male role sexually, for example, by using dildo-like "instruments." See Edith Benkov, "The Erased Lesbian: Sodomy and the Legal Tradition in Medieval Europe," in *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 101–22; Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 89–91; Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 191–222, at 198–205.

11. Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 19–20, drawing on the catalog of sites and solitaires in Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 203–63. Clay's survey has not been systematically updated, but research by Jones confirms the thirteenth-century peak in English anchoritism and the prominence of women: see E. A. Jones, "The Hermits and Anchorites of Oxfordshire," *Oxoniensia* 63 (1998): 51–77; and E. A. Jones, "Hermits and

Anchorites in Historical Context," in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden, and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), 3–18.

12. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, 15–17, 40–52, 127, 186, 265, 286.

13. Robert Hasenfratz, "Introduction," in *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Robert Hasenfratz (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, for TEAMS in association with the University of Rochester, 2000), 6.

14. For a summary of evidence for dating, see Yoko Wada, "What Is *Ancrene Wisse*?" in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), 1–28, at 19.

15. Important literary treatments of *Ancrene Wisse* and related texts include Linda Georgianna, *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the "Ancrene Wisse"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Janet Grayson, *Structure and Imagery in "Ancrene Wisse"* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1974); and Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990). Specifically on the lover-knight motif, see Catherine Innes-Parker, "*Ancrene Wisse* and *De Wohnung of Ure Lauerd*: The Thirteenth-Century Female Reader and the Lover-Knight," in *Women, the Book, and the Godly*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), 137–47.

16. For discussions of *Ancrene Wisse* as a collaborative enterprise—a work of revision, expansion, and adaptation in which the anchorites may themselves have played a creative role—see Anne Savage, "The Communal Authorship of *Ancrene Wisse*," in Wada, *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, 45–56, at 45–49; Hasenfratz, "Introduction," 15–17.

17. For a discussion of *Ancrene Wisse*'s "dynamic" textual development and its "multi-layered functionality," see *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts*, vol. 1 [text], ed. Bella Millett, EETS o.s. 325 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), xxxvii–xiv. All quotations from the Corpus version of *Ancrene Wisse* (ca. 1225–40) are from this edition, cited by page number in the text; translations are my own but make extensive use of the glosses in Hasenfratz's TEAMS edition.

18. For a review of the evidence for a primary and secondary audience of anchorites (the former comprising the immediate group referred to repeatedly in Corpus 402 as "mine leoue sustren"), as well as signs that the author may also have envisaged the text's potential application in nonanchoritic circles, see *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts*, vol. 2 [commentary and glossary], ed. Bella Millett, EETS o.s. 326 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xix–xxiv; and Bella Millett, "'He Speaks to Me as if I Was a Public Meeting': Rhetoric and Audience in the Works of the *Ancrene Wisse* Group," in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place, and Body Within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 50–65.

19. There is even evidence that some anchorites were enclosed in cells containing the pits that would eventually become their graves, showing just how literally this call to bypass earthly time and the conventional human life cycle could be taken. See Roberta Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 190–92. For further references to tomb imagery in anchoritic literature, see Alexandra Barratt, "Context: Some Reflections on Wombs and Tombs and Inclusive Language," in *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 27–38.

20. *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, trans. C. H. Talbot, rev. with introduction and notes by Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40. "Porro convivendo sicut ex duabus facibus coniunctis flamma consurgit amplior: sic illorum sese mutuo incitancium ad alciora cotidie sanctus excrevit amor" (*The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth Century Recluse*, ed. and trans. C. H. Talbot [Oxford: Clarendon, 1959], 102). See also Fanous and Leyser's discussion of Christina's friendships in their introduction at xvii–xix.

21. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, 130; Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, 33–36; Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action*, 185.

22. Admittedly, sodomy itself may not be strongly identified with the word *uncundeluke*st in this particular context. Although by the thirteenth century the phrase "against nature" certainly did possess sodomitical connotations in theological circles—Aquinas famously defined "sodomitic vice" as a subspecies of the sin *contra naturam*, a vice performed with a "person of the same sex, male with male and female with female"—in Middle English it also conveyed a much wider range of transgressions than same-sex desire alone, and

homeroetic meanings should not be assumed in advance. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. Dominican Fathers, 61 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964–80), 43:244–45; *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), sv. *kinde*, *unkinde*, and *unkindel*. At the same time, there are enough instances of the category of the unnatural being yoked to the sodomitical in Middle English literature to warrant a reading that assumes some degree of semantic fluidity. Literally translated as “un-nature-like,” *uncundelukest* is a term that also appears, in variant forms, elsewhere in *Ancrene Wisse*: for instance, part 2 rails against *totilde ancras* (peeping recluses), who entice worldly onlookers by staring out dangerously from their cells, and make enticing expressions *uncundeliche* (unnaturally). The word *uncundeliche* is glossed as follows: “For aȝein cunde hit is, ant unmeað sulli wonder, þet te deade dotie ant wið cwiķe worlþmen wede þurh sunne” [For it is against nature and an incredibly strange wonder that the dead behave foolishly and go mad with men of the world through sin] (21). What goes against nature, then, is a perverted mix of species—the quick and the dead—rather than sodomy per se, though this does not preclude a sexual dimension. The implication is that fleshly congress with worldly associates of any kind should be avoided by those dedicated to the anchoritic lifestyle.

23. “Synodal Statutes of Bishop Richard de Wich for the Diocese of Chichester” (1245 x 1252), chap. 69, in *Councils and Synods, With Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. 2: AD 1205–1313, ed. F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pt. 1, 465. In addition, Bishop Richard Poore of Salisbury made a ruling in the early thirteenth century that male recluses should not admit women into the household by night and similarly that female recluses should refrain from accommodating men. See “Synodal Statutes of Bishop Richard Poore for the Diocese of Salisbury” (1217 x 1219), statute 80, in Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, vol. 2, pt. 1, 86. For a detailed discussion of episcopal legislation, see Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, 58–61.

24. Fanous and Leyser, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 40. “[Ca]ute tamen egerunt ne hoc fieret [notum] tam propter scandala inferiorum [quam propter] rabiem querencium ancillam Christi” (Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 102).

25. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, ed. and trans., *Anchoritic Spirituality: “Ancrene Wisse” and Associated Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 9.

26. Peter Cantor, *De vitio sodomitico*, 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), 375–76. For further discussion of Cantor’s citation of Ezekiel, see Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox, 2004), 180–81.

27. Here I concur with Valerie Traub’s observation that if we do not know the extent to which relations discussed in particular texts are erotic, “it is as mistaken to assume that they were not as it is to assume that they were” (“Friendship’s Loss,” 350). See also Sarah Salih, “When Is a Bosom Not a Bosom? Problems With ‘Erotic Mysticism,’” in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 14–32.

28. Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 63–66.

29. Sally Wilkins, *Sports and Games of Medieval Cultures* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 130.

30. In *Selections from Early Middle English, 1130–1250*, *ticki togederes* is glossed as “pat, caress each other, or possibly, romp, play child’s game of ‘ticky’” (2 vols., ed. Joseph Hall [Oxford: Clarendon, 1920], 2:405). G. C. Macaulay translates the phrase as “touch one another” or “tickle one another” (“The *Ancrene Riwe*,” *Modern Languages Review* 9 [1914]: 14–60, 63–78, 324–31, 463–74, at 464) and notes that the verb is not recorded elsewhere in English earlier than the sixteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records definitions for the verb *tick* (v1) as “to touch or tap person or thing lightly; esp. to bestow light touches or pats by way of caressing; to dally” (1.a.); *ticking* (vbl. n.1) is a mode of “touching lightly or wantonly; dallying” (1). But the dictionary’s earliest witnesses to these definitions are also fifteenth or sixteenth century. MED defines the verb *tiken* as “to touch or pat a person as part of a game, dally frivolously.” See also the note in Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, vol. 2, 301.

31. See, for example, the brief discussion in Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., *Medieval English Prose for Women: From the Katherine Group and “Ancrene Wisse”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 163.

32. Sauer argues that such references hint at “the possibility of lesbian desire”; see Michelle M. Sauer, “Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void in Medieval English

Anchoritism," *thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 3, no. 2 (March 2004), available at <http://www.thirdspace.ca>, accessed December 12, 2006.

33. Lucinda Rumsey, "The Scorpion of Lechery and *Ancrene Wisse*," *Medium Aevum* 61 (1992), 48–57, at 52–54.

34. The unspeakable nature of some of the scorpion's offspring is also emphasized in the opening statement that "in a welitohē muð hare summes nome ne sit nawt forte nempnin, for þe nome ane mahte hurten alle welitohene earen, ant sulen cleane heorten" [in a well-trained mouth the name of some of them is not proper to name, for the name alone could harm all well-trained ears, and sully pure hearts] (78). For readings that likewise identify echoes of sodomy polemic in the passage on lechery, see Lochrie, "Between Women," 79; Anke Bernau, "Virginal Effects: Text and Identity in *Ancrene Wisse*," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2002), 36–48, at 41; and Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 88–89. Vern L. Bullough identifies the sin in question as masturbation alone in "The Sin Against Nature and Homosexuality," in Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage, *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1982), 55–71, at 68–69.

35. For the impact of *De institutione inclusarum* on *Ancrene Wisse*, see Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 17, 23, 29. For the original Latin text, see C. H. Talbot, "The 'De Institutis Inclusarum' of Ailred of Rievaulx," *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* 7 (1951): 167–217; and for the translation see Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for Recluses*, trans. Mary Paul Macpherson, in *Treatises and Pastoral Prayer*, ed. David Knowles (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 42–102.

36. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 423 (fifteenth century), in Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Institutione Inclusarum: Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS o.s. 287 (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 2. On women's gossip as a kind of homoerotic tale swapping, see Lochrie, "Between Women," 73.

37. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley Eng. poet.a.1 (Vernon MS), in Aelred, *De Institutione Inclusarum*, 27.

38. For the Latin *Speculum*, see P. Livario Oliger, ed., "*Speculum Inclusorum* auctore anonymo anglico saeculi XIV," *Laternanum* n.s. 4 (1938): 1–148, at 79–80; for the Middle English, see *The Myroure of Recluses: A Middle English Translation of "Speculum Inclusorum"*, ed. Marta Powell Harley (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), xvi, 14. The difference gender makes to this warning against unnatural vice is discussed in Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Gender, Rhetoric, and Space in the *Speculum Inclusorum*, Letter to a Bury Recluse, and the Strange Case of Christina Carpenter," in McAvoy, *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold*, 111–26, at 118–19; for evidence that the *Myroure* has women readers in mind, see E. A. Jones, "A New Look Into the *Speculum Inclusorum*," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland and Wales*, Exeter Symposium VI, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), 123–45. Sodom also gets a mention in the brief, early fourteenth-century Latin *Dublin Rule*, but it is in the context of Lot's drunken debauchery with his daughters after his flight from the city. See the "Regula Recluserum Dubliniensis" in P. Livario Oliger, "Regulae tres reclusorum et eremitarum Angliae saec. XIII–XIV," *Antonianum* 3 (1928): 170–83, at 174. Richard Rolle's fourteenth-century *Form of Living*, written for the recluse Margaret Kirkby, is concerned in general with sins of "fleshly affection to thi frendes," and warns about the punishments endured by those who "fileth [defile] har body and har soul in luste and lechurie of this life," but does not make specific mention of sodomitical encounters. See Richard Rolle, *Prose and Verse: Edited From MS. Longleat 29 and Related Manuscripts*, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS o.s. 293 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10–11. Same-sex desire was also a concern in convents: Heloise makes reference, in her third letter to Abelard, to the dangers of female desire in the monastery, as discussed in Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 26–46.

39. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 68.

40. Alan Stewart, *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 160–87.

41. The trope of the closet seems especially relevant to the moment in part 3 when the author compares the anchorhold with the "hole" in which Saul did his *fulðe* (filth) (51) in 1 Kings 24: we are told that "false" anchorites exploit the privacy of the space in order to "bifule þet stude, ant don dearnluker þrin fleshliche fulðen" [befoul that place, and to perform fleshly filths there more secretly] (52) than if she remained in the world. But sexual transgressions are not specifically identified here: the point is that the "good" anchorite's hole allows her to hide from

worldly vice (represented by Saul), not from God, and we can only guess at the specific sins that her false counterpart wishes secretly to pursue. For a discussion of the text's rhetoric of solitude, which makes reference to this passage, see Michelle M. Sauer, "Privacy, Exile, and the Rhetoric of Solitude in the Medieval English Anchoritic Tradition," in McAvoy, *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold*, 96–110.

42. Sauer, "Representing the Negative," drawing on Theodora A. Jonkowski, "... In the Lesbian Void: Woman–Woman Eroticism in Shakespeare's Plays," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 299–319.

43. Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 196–97; Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 138; Judith C. Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martha Vicinus, George Chauncey, and Martin B. Duberman (New York: Meridian, 1990), 67–75, at 69.

44. Bella Millett, "The Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*: New Answers, New Questions," *Medium Aevum* 61 (1992): 206–28; Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, vol. 2, xvi–xix. The Corpus manuscript includes two explicit references to Dominicans and Franciscans and singles them out for admiration. In part 2, the narrator characterizes "Vre Freres Prechurs ant ure Freres Meonurs" as being especially suitable as confessors, since they are "of swuch ordre þet al folc mahte wundrin zef ei of ham wende ehe 'towart te wide-lehe'" [of such order that all people might be amazed if any of them turned an eye "toward the woody grove"] (28); in part 8, the anchorite is told to obtain her director's permission before allowing men to eat in her presence, but in the case of Dominicans and Franciscans she only needs to obtain "general" leave.

45. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature*, 33–40; V. A. Kolve, "Ganymede/Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 1014–67; Patricia A. Quinn, *Better Than the Sons of Kings: Boys and Monks in the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 178–82.

46. Paul of Hungary, *Summa penitentia, Bibliotheca Casinensis* 4 (1880): 191–215. The discussion of the sin against nature is at 207–10, and the reference to Ezekiel's passage on sodomy is at 209. The text's references to sodomy are discussed in more detail in Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 92–103.

47. Robert Hasenfratz, "'Efter hire euene': Lay Audiences and the Variable Asceticism of *Ancrene Wisse*," in McAvoy and Hughes-Edwards, *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs*, 145–60; Cate Gunn, "Beyond the Tomb: *Ancrene Wisse* and Lay Piety," in McAvoy and Hughes-Edwards, *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs*, 161–71. For a complete list of manuscript sigla and a summary of the contents of each version, see Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, vol. 1, ix–xxvii. Manuscripts containing the Latin translation of the text (siglum "L") show evidence of adaptation for an audience of male as well as female religious; manuscripts of the Middle English text revealing evidence of adaptation for male religious or for audiences of both sexes include Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 234/120 (siglum "G"), which appears to have been reworked for a mendicant community; and London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus D. xviii (siglum "T"). See *The Latin Text of the "Ancrene Riwele," Edited From Merton College MS. 44 and British Museum MS. Cotton Vitellius E.vii*, ed. Charlotte d'Evelyn, EETS o.s. 216 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944); *The English Text of the "Ancrene Riwele," Edited From Gonville and Caius College MS. 234/120*, ed. R. M. Wilson, EETS o.s. 229 (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); *The English Text of the "Ancrene Riwele," Edited From Cotton MS. Titus D.xviii and Bodleian MS. Eng.th.c.70*, ed. Frances M. Mack, EETS o.s. 252 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

48. Manuscripts of the Latin translation ("L") omit or radically abridge part 8: see d'Evelyn, *Latin Text of "Ancrene Riwele."* The fifteenth-century English version in London, British Library, MS Royal 8 C. i (siglum "R"), thought to be directed at a general lay audience, only includes the discussion of inner and outer senses contained in parts 2 and 3: see *The English Text of "Ancrene Riwele," Edited From British Museum MS. Royal 8 c.1*, ed. A. C. Baugh, EETS o.s. 232 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956). Although the manuscript containing the early French translation (siglum "F") was owned by a woman in the fifteenth century, the later French translation (siglum "S"), addressed to both male and female religious, rearranges the text in such a way that it becomes part of a penitential focusing on sin, confession, and penance, and consequently only the concluding parts of part 8 are retained. See *The French Text of the "Ancrene Riwele," Edited From British Museum MS. Cotton Vitellius F.vii*, ed. J. A. Herbert, EETS o.s. 219 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944); *The French Text of the "Ancrene Riwele," Edited*

From Trinity College Cambridge MS. R.14.7, ed. W. H. Trethewey, EETS o.s. 240 (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

49. *The English Text of the "Ancrene Riwe," Edited From Magdalene College, Cambridge MS. Pepys 2498*, ed. Arne Zettersten, EETS o.s. 274 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 94–95.

50. Ralph Hanna, "English Biblical Texts Before Lollardy and Their Fate," in *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England*, ed. Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), 141–53, at 143; Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, vol. 1, xx–xxi.

51. The two other manuscripts that are the most likely candidates for a specifically female audience are London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra C. vi (siglum "C"); and London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A. xiv (siglum "N"); the latter is the only version to include the reference to the original three sisters. See *The English Text of the "Ancrene Riwe," Edited From British Museum Cotton MS. Cleopatra C.vi*, ed. E. J. Dobson, EETS o.s. 267 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); and *The English Text of the "Ancrene Riwe," Edited From British Museum Cotton MS. Nero A.xiv*, ed. Mabel Day, EETS o.s. 225 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

52. A similar story appears in Cassian's *Conferences* 24.9, Jacques de Vitry's exempla, and Odo of Cheriton's fables. See Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 404n20; Hall, *Selections from Early Middle English*, 2:396n73.

53. Lochrie presents an account of female intimacy that resists the trap of "granting medieval misogyny hegemonic status in shaping and representing women's lives" ("Between Women," 70); Lochrie (*Heterosyncrasies*) also brings such a perspective to bear on a Middle Ages without sexual normativity.