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Judith Bennett's Contribution to Doing a History of and for Lesbians and Gays.

Panel 1298: "*Lesbian Like*" and its Theoretical and Historical Implications for the Study of the History of Women's Sexuality: A Roundtable Discussion with Judith Bennett. 35th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo MI., May 5, 2000).

I: Introduction

I liked Judith Bennett's presentation of her ideas when I first heard them, and equally when I read her reconsideration of them in the recent issue of *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. For me what stood out was her concern with the "emancipatory possibilities of history. I was equally attracted by her concern with reality/actuality rather than any mere effort at "queering" rarefied literary texts. This paper tries to go beyond what I "liked" to an evaluation of her theoretical contribution.

II. What Bennett Argues

At the 1998 *Queer Middle Ages Conference* in New York a number of long-simmering issues came up -- such as the meaning of "queer", the political implications of scholars' work, and search for a "usable past." One central dispute was the contrast between the approach of literature scholars and historians. It would be crude, but not entirely inaccurate, to say that the historians found the fact that you could "read" a medieval text in a "queer" way uninteresting, whereas, as far as I could make out, this was the primary approach of literature scholars.

Although the conference had adopted the title "queer," the word seemed to collapse rapidly. On the one hand many paper-givers took a positivistic approach: "queer" registered as a synonym for "homosexuality" or for "homosexuality and other non-normative sexual practices"; on the other hand, with those who adopted a "queer studies" approach to texts, it was often hard to distinguish between "queering" and "deconstruction" - or rather "queering" a text seemed often to involve deconstructing it with a sexual edge. Nobody seemed to be able to "queer" past *actuality* with quite the same élan as past *literature*.

Bennett presented her seminal paper on "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Medieval Lesbianism" in full at the second plenary session of the QMA conference, and it was acme of the historical approach at the conference. She is well known for her statistically-secured scholarship on the lives of medieval women, but here her contribution was more theoretical.

Bennett began by emphasizing her concern as a social historian with the *actual*, the *real*, and the *plausible*. She also noted that she was primarily interested in exploring the experience of the "mass of the people" in the medieval past. From this perspective she criticized the heavy literary stress of many scholars studying medieval "queerness": literary texts, she argued, were produced largely for and by an elite. When they have been "queered," Bennett expressed severe reservations about the plausibility of the "queer readings" offered. She was prepared to name names (even when the possessors of the names were in the audience): so, for instance, she addressed Karma Lochrie's article in which Lochrie had "queered" the practice of some medieval nuns in kissing the wounds of an image of Jesus by arguing that such wounds resemble vaginas, and hence the

practice took on an aspect of Lesbian oral sex. Bennett next challenged the recent emphasis on the queerness of women's mystical literature by noting that the texts involved were obscure both at the time and today, and told us precisely nothing about the existence of Lesbianism in wider society.

Following this direct statement of the problematic of "literary queering" as an approach to the medieval Lesbian, Bennett addressed the historians' problem - the almost complete absence of *actual* Lesbians, that is women about whom one can assert that the historical evidence unambiguously presents them as having sex with each other. In fact, she point out, there seemed when she began her research to be only two such women in the entire medieval millenium -- and these were two women who were punished in the fifteenth century. Bennett mentioned that she had found another ten such women, but they all come from a small number of fifteenth-century court archives.

Equally problematic to Bennett, has been the erasure of Lesbian existence in the works of modern historians caused by the lack of *actual Lesbians*: she specifically noted Gerda Lerner's heterocentrist dismissal of single women as "lacking children"; and commented on Jo Ann McNamara's survey of medieval religious women, as well as Ruth Mazo Karras' account of medieval prostitutes. These were books, Bennett proposed, which could have taken a "Lesbian" angle, but did not.

The crux then was this: using current approaches there is no evidence for a social history of Lesbian identity in the middle ages, but literary "queering" of texts both fails to convince the historically-minded, and in any case is only relevant to the elite.

Bennett's sword to cut through the knot was her deployment of the category of "Lesbian-like"; a category she specified is connected with *behaviors* rather than *identities*.

She admitted forthrightly that the term "Lesbian-like" related to the modern range of behaviors associated with "Lesbian", and noted her concern to preserve the past from anachronistic interpretations. However, she insisted, the word "Lesbian" with roughly its modern meaning was indeed a word found in medieval sources (a reference to its use by the Byzantine scholiast Arethas). She noted that scholars have no problem with using other words with distinctly modern meanings about the medieval past - for instance, "capitalist," "Catholic," "feminist." Finally, she contended that too much stress has been put (presumably by Foucauldians) on the very real discontinuities with the past rather than the equally real similarities: specifically she claimed that historians interested in the "emancipatory possibilities of history" need to see the parallels between minorities in the past and minorities today.

How then does the category of "Lesbian-like" apply to the middle ages? Bennett agreed that "Lesbian", defined as a sexual identity based on object-choice is "more modern than medieval". Indeed, she noted, probably the only clearly defined medieval sexual identities in the modern sense were "celibacy", and "virginity". "Lesbian-like" in contrast looks at the social history of Lesbian-like *behaviors*, behaviors which are quite documentable: for instance gender rebels (transvestites, etc.); women who resisted child birth; women who lived in single-sex communities; women whose primary emotional concerns were with other women; single women; prostitute women. Since "Lesbian-like" applies to behaviors rather than identities, and to *similarities* rather than *sameness*, Bennett suggested that some medieval women would be more "Lesbian-like" than others.

II. Bennett's Theoretical Breakthrough

Although Bennett' specifically limits her discussion to Lesbians and "Lesbian-like" it is immediately clear that her arguments have powerful implications for the history of gay and "gay-like" men.¹ Indeed two articles by David Halperin,² perhaps the most forceful advocate of "social constructionism," seem to indicate that Bennett's ideas are having an impact -- his *GLQ* article on "How to Write a History of Male Homosexuality" can be read as an effort to write a history of "gay-like" behaviors in the past.

What then is Bennett's breakthrough?

A New Way to Think

A great deal of energy has been devoted to pointing out the truism that people in the past who had same-sex sex or performed transgendered deeds were not like the "modern homosexual." This imagined unitary social construct of the "modern homosexual" has long been suspect; what Bennett's deployment of "Lesbian-like" makes possible is to conceive modern lesbian and gay people not as conforming to some rigid subjectivity, but as more or less "lesbian-like" and "gay-like" in different areas of their lives. Once it is acknowledged, for instance, that for many modern gay men the most

¹ This is not the place, nor do I have the time to discuss criticisms of Bennett's ideas. The main criticism is that "lesbian-like" can be so loose as to include almost anything. The main argument goes something like this: if modern Lesbians adopt some new patten of behavior, does that then mean that the new behavior can be projected into the past as "Lesbian-like." For example, are open-toed sandal-wearers in the past "lesbian like"? I think a stand has to be taken on this issue if "lesbian-like" is to be more useful. I think it is necessary to argue that certain behaviors are *inherently* Lesbian-like, while others, even if common among modern Lesbians are not Lesbian-like. Lesbians, for instance, may cook for groups (the infamous "pot-luck"), but cooking for groups is no more Lesbian-like behavior than it is "Southern Baptist-like" behavior. Similarly, there may be a trend among modern Lesbians to have children, but I do not think deliberate conception can be considered "Lesbian-like". It is not really up to me to specify what is "Lesbian-like", but I think *gender deviant* behavior - refusing male control/cross-dressing/etc. - may be inherently Lesbian-like, as is woman-oriented emotional investment. Defining some limits to "Lesbian-like," I think, even at the risk of accusations of "essentialism," would strengthen Bennett's argument against the counter arguments that have been advanced.

important part of being gay is the non-sexual close friendships they have with other men, it is not problematic to examine historical information about figures such as Montaigne, or the love letters of medieval monks as "gay-like." Bennett was not specifically trying to enter the constructionist/essentialist debate, but her proposals radically displace its importance.

A New Way to Read

One of the problems for historians who have stressed the dissimilarities between the "modern homosexual" and behaviors in the past has been that they have still known which men and women to look at in the past. Halperin may have argued that "homosexuality" is only a hundred years old, but he knew exactly which Greek men and behaviors he was writing about; similarly Mark Jordan argued that "sodomy" was invented in the eleventh century, but had no difficulty in locating pre-11th century behaviors and people who were significant to his study. Time and again, in fact, those same historians who have argued there were no homosexuals in the past have had no difficulty locating the right individuals to write about. In other words, openly or covertly, such historians have been working with a category of "lesbian-like" and "gay-like."

On the other hand, there was an entire earlier generation of historians -- A.L. Rowse, John Boswell, and so forth -- whose work has been in some disrepute among the more theoretically inclined, simply because this earlier generation assumed (or in Boswell's case, argued for directly) the existence of a unitary transcultural cross-ages homosexual identity. Despite his enthusiastic approval by Foucault, Boswell in particular

² One in *Representations*, the other in *GLQ*.

has been the whipping boy of later theory-driven historians. The problem for Boswell and others, however, was that rather too often, especially in the case of clergy, it really was impossible to be sure that a given historical person ever had sex with another of the same gender.

Bennett's arguments solve much of the conflict: they allow historians in both camps to admit that what they have been doing is recognizing those elements, phenomena, and people in the past that are "gay-like" or "Lesbian-like" without committing to any limiting ontological theory of the self. She allows historians to keep on what they have been doing -- excavating what has been "hidden from history -- but to be open about what they are doing.

III The Audience for "Lesbian-Like" History

Returning now to Bennett's "emancipatory" possibilities of history. Her call is for an open *and* scholarly effort to create a "usable" past for Lesbians. There is nothing improper about such a call -- historians in other areas have been quite willing to work on usable pasts for national groups, African-Americans, women, and so forth. The possibility of distortion in such approaches is ever present, but a great deal of interesting history has come about, especially within the most relevant areas of history to Lesbians and gays, that is the much wider effort to create subaltern histories.

But it might reasonably be asked whether a history focused on "Lesbian like" or "gay-like" will have much of an audience? If the audience were to be mainly lesbian and gay people, I am not sure that there would be anything wrong with that. I doubt, however, that the audience is so limited.

This past semester I assigned (perhaps the first person to do so?) the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* version of Bennett's paper to my students at UNF in a seminar on the history and historiography of *Sex and Gender in Pre-modern Europe*. As far as I know, none of the students in the class was lesbian or gay (although I conducted no survey!). The article was assigned primarily for its interest as an article about historiography, but I was curious about my students' wider reactions to Bennett's arguments. These were interesting. Some rejected the article's arguments precisely because they could see no limits to its application: if anything could be "lesbian-like," especially singleness in general, the students held that the approach was meaningless. One, generally very pro-gay student, wrote:

I do understand the method in which B(ennett) attempts to dig deeper into women's history and yet her approach opens the door for mass confusion. A very precise, cautious scholar as herself may know when and when not to apply the lesbian-like approach but, most may not, thus creating a history of lesbians riddled with heterosexual women or a history of heterosexual women as lesbians.

Another student, in general much more conservative, had a different take:

I think that this article is very interesting and introduces a new way of looking at the history of women and lesbianism that I never would have thought could work but seems to.

When I first read the article it did seem like she was saying that all women who were single or lived in a lesbian-like way were lesbians or at least seemed to imply that many of them could have been. This does not seem to be what she is arguing, however. B(ennett) is simply trying to show that the conditions necessary to maintain a lesbian subculture were present in medieval society, unlike in Greek or Roman societies, and because these "lesbian-like" behaviors would have allowed a lesbian subculture to exist than there is a good chance that there were more lesbians than the records indicate.

What is striking here is that the second student read Bennett's argument not as a effort to claim all past single women as "lesbians," but precisely as offering a new way of looking at the past, of opening up its possibilities.

While I would expect the primary audience of the history of (and for) lesbians and gays to remain, as it is know, largely educated gay men and women, I propose my students' reactions suggest a wide audience for any history which opens up the past to new ways of thinking.