

Short Essay:

Sodomy as a synonym for heresy

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Sexual deviance was universally condemned in the Middle Ages, yet societal attitudes toward men and women differed due to the prevalent misogyny of the time. While male promiscuity also received punishment under the right circumstances, men often engaged in adultery and unmarried sex without severe consequences. Sodomy, a sexual act that does not have the ability of reproduction, however, was deemed reprehensible for both sexes. Initially tolerated in line with other male sexual behaviours, it later faced vehement opposition from the Church, culminating in its outright prohibition in the twelfth century onwards (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 210).

Although the act of sodomy was not gender restrictive, the association of sodomy with men stemmed from societal perceptions influenced by works like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which delineated the 'woman's crime', thus dividing the social categorization of sexual deviances (Broedel 2003:182). This association may have been strategically reinforced by its writers, Institoris and Sprenger, to express misogyny more freely. Karras and Pierpont argue that men's roles, rather than their sexual attractions, defined them, with the passive role often associated with femininity (2023: 200). "It was considered especially degrading for someone to remain a passive sodomite once he was a grown man", so degrading in fact that there is the account of a death penalty being commuted to a fine and life on bread and water because a public execution might be too embarrassing for the city (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 214). Regarding the ideals around the passive or active partner, it was deemed okay to be in *a man's role* but no other. The subjective nature of a man's status only further solidifies that condemnation of sodomy as a majority male-specific crime was due to the passive nature of a male partner and its feminine perception.

The Church's response to sexual transgressions varied, with punishments for fornication often amounting to little more than minor shame. Rather than by their 'sinfulness', a man's sex crimes were judged by more subtle categories of 'disrupting the patriarchy' vs. 'disrupting the divine'. While offences deemed to disrupt the patriarchy were met with leniency, those challenging divine order could face severe repercussions, including death (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 193). Due to said repercussions, sodomy was politically weaponized, often linked to heresy to defame enemies (Ferzoco 2004: 81). The association between sodomy and heresy intensified in the thirteenth century, targeting demographics such as Cathars and Islamic peoples. The associated word use of heresy "may reflect the fact that sodomy was not just seen as a secular offence but was deeply connected with sin and was considered ... to be an act against God" (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 204). Individuals deemed deviant from societal norms were then victims of accusations of sodomy, as they were a convenient tool for alienation. The Knights Templar provide a notable example of this, as their alleged involvement in sodomy was used to justify their persecution and torture (Barber 2006: 71). Bernardino and others praised the punishment of sodomites, further reflecting societal understandings of sodomy as heresy (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 212).

Karras and Pierpont's assertion that "the 'sin against nature' did not always mean sodomy but was often used synonymously with it" was reinforced within Christian morality (2003: 206). According to the relationship between sexuality and religion, any sexual activity devoid of procreative intent was viewed as sinful and contrary to divine order. The *Massa Marittima Mural*, for example, depicts a selection of moral grievances below a phallic tree that bore "fruit counter to nature", which itself was responsible for bringing "discord and sodomy as well as natural, social and political infertility." (Ferzoco 2004: 76-77). Writings from the *Malleus*

Maleficarum reinforce an understanding of the mural, further establishing the political perception of sodomy as *contra natura*. With poignant relations to witchcraft and sterility, the mural depicts actions “against the common and natural good of the city republic.” (Ferzoco 2004: 81).

Regarded as “the unmentionable sin”, sodomy was understood as something that could encourage temptation and tarnish one's thoughts if only spoken of outwardly. “Sodomy might be the worst possible sin, the sin that could not be named, but it was at the same time a very attractive sin, one that could tempt any and all” (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 211). Such sin was so attractive that under some circumstances there were men who could be labelled with a sexual identity *as a sodomite* (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 212). Its potency was not to be downplayed. Under the exemplifying circumstances of being held in contrast to women's crimes and furthermore used for political defacement, sodomy is wholly described as a ‘sin against nature’ and thus condemnation under God; heresy.

Bibliography

Primary Source: Image: Massa Marittima Mural

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