THE BOSWELL THESIS

Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality

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40. I think of several moments in his text, for example, his lengthy, even pedantic explication of the concept of "intensionality" in definitions (49–59).

CHAPTER 3

Touching on the Past

Carolyn Dinshaw

"Tell me, Daddy. What is the use of history?" Marc Bloch began his book, The Historian's Craft, with this question put to him by his son. The book was begun in 1941, and as he wrote, it seemed that the very purpose of historical understanding itself was collapsing. (The book was never finished; Bloch was shot by the Nazis in 1944.) Yet a basic structure still holds in the book's initial interrogatory moment: the relationship of father to son, along with the expectation that that familial relation should be the conduit of a sense of historical purpose. A terrifying aspect of genocide—and the poignancy of these opening lines derives from this—is the eradication of generations, and thus of history, both personal and collective, such as gets structured and handed down by father to son.

But there are other kinds of affiliations, generations that are not traced via such traditional family relations. What is history for those of us whose lives are not oriented around generational reproduction of the traditional family, and what is the use of it? Whom can we ask? And who will ask us, in turn, to explain? In this essay I shall explore some interrelations of the concepts of history and community, taking the latter to denote a social grouping that is not a conventional kinship group. My exploration will take us back to 1980, an inaugural moment, the year John Boswell's *CSTH* was published. This book brought the academic study of the history of homosexuality to widespread attention.
and opened considerable—and seemingly interminable—debate, not only about how to do "gay history" but also about this history's relationship to the constitution and political aims of "gay community," that social unit that might in fact be seen in such debates to take the place of the traditional family

as presumptive ground, repository, and conduit of historical knowledge and purpose.

John Boswell's own papers, in the care of his literary executor, Ralph Hexter, are a rich resource of information about not only the scholarly but also the popular reception of CSTH. I looked in this archive to see how people talked about making use of this history and to understand the relationship between Boswell's approach to this history and his concerns about gay community. In this essay I consider a range of responses to CSTH, both by those whose desire was integration into the cultural mainstream and by those who used it as a foundation for a separate gay community. I shall then analyze how Boswell's own concept of community shaped his history, and how that history has been taken up by the current national gay agenda; but I shall argue as well that it has resonated perhaps surprisingly with a more radical vision of social organization. Finally I shall consider what brought me to this archive, and what the experience suggests to me about history and community—about bodies touching, even across time.

In CSTH John Boswell undertook to tell a different narrative about the Roman Catholic church from the one that had theretofore been told. He wrote a story of relative tolerance among Christians toward homosexuality until about the mid-thirteenth century, providing new translations and interpretations of key scriptural passages to support this radically new scholarly view and developing a discussion of a vibrant, self-consciously gay urban subculture in the twelfth century in Western Europe. Boswell himself was "deeply religious," as Ralph Hexter wrote in his obituary, and his work has indeed proved immensely important not only to scholars ready to enrich the sparse histories of homosexuality but also to gay Christians seeking a place in the institution that other gays blamed for virtually causing "the anti-homosexuality taboo." (That phrase is John Lauritsen's, in an article in the Gay Atheist League of America Review.) The book was immediately scrutinized and vigorously opposed in a collection of essays published by the Gay Academic Union entitled Homosexuality, Intolerance, and Christianity: A Critical Examination of John Boswell's Work; Lauritsen there indicts Boswell for trying "to whitewash the crimes of the Christian Church."4 There was immediate gay resistance to the project of recuperating Christianity.

But the desire for a place within the institution dominated the popular reception of CSTH, which was enormously positive. The book was an instant mainstream success upon its publication in July 1980, achieving a level of attention in the United States that was staggering—literally so to the book's publisher, the University of Chicago Press, which was immediately overwhelmed and could not keep the book available. To read the Press's correspondence with the author is to witness a growing sense of excitement in the relatively quiet world of academic publishing. The hardcover volume went into five printings in less than a year—even at its steep price, which took it out of the range of many. In September Newsweek ran a review and article on the author (with a photo of the young professor, which proved crucial: he is pictured in his office, with three buttons of his shirt undone) (fig. 1), and responses to this widely circulated coverage swelled a virtual flood of mail: Boswell claimed to have gotten between three and five hundred letters a week ("fan mail," he called it) at the beginning of this media moment.5 This may have been an exaggeration; the current archive of letters contains far fewer than that, but he may not have kept all of them; at any rate, I acknowledge that I am working with a body of letters that was retained (perhaps selected) by the author, and so its representativeness is certainly not guaranteed. That having been said, the letters do seem to have come from all over: Estonia, Ecuador, Belgium, Montana. They came from mostly male, but some female, correspondents. Within a year the book had won a major prize and high profile recognition. It was eventually translated into French (a process Foucault facilitated), Italian, Spanish, and Japanese.

Boswell's name became a gay household word, as The Advocate put it in 1981. But with its emphasis on "social tolerance" the book penetrated various mainstream institutions in the United States as well. The correspondence files are peppered with requests for interviews and articles in mainstream print media (while an energetic fan tried to get Boswell on talk shows with Phil Donahue and the like); a sympathetic reporter wrote, "[Your book is such a public act and America adores turning authors into media events."

The times were indeed right for this book to be perceived not only as a scholarly venture but also as "a public act." True, an atmosphere of intolerance sat heavily on gays and lesbians: letters to Boswell mention Anita Bryant, Jerry Falwell, Reag

anism, and "Moral Majorities" on the national scene as well as persecutions in schools on the local level. But at the same time there was considerable optimism, post-Stonewall and pre-AIDS: the letters witness an expanding gay public discourse and institutional presence in the United States. Letters from gay clergy (Catholic and Protestant) poured forth. One gay clergyman in the mental health professions, for example, wrote that he had gotten a copy of CSTH placed in the permanent library of a federal mental hospital. A Christian counselor in the Army wrote to say that he was shaken by the hypothesis
argument that there was a distinct gay subculture in the High Middle Ages but that gayness was accepted in dominant ancient and medieval institutions that are still authoritative today. The book’s historical analysis legitimated gayness for readers now. In fact, the very existence of the book appears to have conferred legitimacy: a large number of people wrote before they had even read it (they had only seen the *Newsweek* review; a chunky university press history book—read or unread—whose author taught at Yale was enough in their view to strengthen gay claims to cultural legitimacy. (The footnotes alone became something of a “fetish,” as one correspondent put it, standing in for or at least signifying such legitimacy.). In the eyes of many letter writers, the assertion of a history—some kind of history—seemed fundamental to the mainstream acceptance of gay people now in the United States.

Just how that history would secure acceptance was a further question. Boswell was in fact contacted by two television production companies in 1982 about turning *CSTH* into a TV miniseries—basing a PBS documentary on the book (and on further, modern materials)—and his discussions about the development of such a series reveal something about the function of history in a medium of cultural legitimation such as the Public Broadcasting System. The starting assumption behind development of such a series went something like this: if we gays can be proven to have a legitimate past, if some of the people we take as our gay forefathers were in fact leaders of their societies and profound contributors to Western culture, then we have every right to be part of the culture of the present. “Our story is the story of Western civilization,” Boswell stated in a conversation with one of the producers. He went on:

> It is better not to think of gay people as either artistic or military or this or that... but to see that at the same time Aristotle is writing... there are gay generals and artists and people in other fields and that homosexuality, rather than being some strange thing, was the predominant influence on the leaders of Athenian society.

The series, in Boswell’s mind, would show an integrated, holistic approach to gay lives past, not separating out homosexuality from other parts of Western culture but demonstrating the ways in which gays have participated in, have indeed shaped that culture. And thus a TV series, showing the “sweep” (as he put it) of the gay cultural presence, would not only transmit foundational cultural values to people in the United States now but would defamiliarize and thus extend our notion of the mainstream. The fall PBS season in 1981 broadcast various programs transmitting Western cultural values (*Live from...*).
letters also reveal the intense, personally enabling effects of CSTH, suggesting the importance of a gay community whose values include not only art and war and philosophy but also gay sex. Letters came from people who felt deeply isolated—one, indeed, writes from a sex-offender program because of his involvement with a boy. Married men, some over fifty years of age, wrote narratives of long-hidden desires or of encounters in foreign countries (Spain before the Civil War, for example, or Lebanon); some of these letters, nominally concerning the book, provided the occasions of brief, private, supportive contact with another gay man, creating a tiny and temporary community of two. Other letters were the medium of acting out fantasies or newfound sexual boldness: several Newsweek readers were entranced by Boswell’s picture and thus driven to write, “Do you have a boyfriend?” Inquired one. “If so, do you see any immediate possibility of dumping him?” Wrote another. “I see from the . . . photo that you are also very hot. Most academics aren’t.”

A cartoon from Christopher Street made a related point about the way this gay history book fostered a separate gay culture: it featured two guys at a bar, one saying to the other: “How about coming back to my place for a little Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality?” Occasionally there was the self-projection characteristic of fandom: “I’m. . . also 33,” beamed one man; “I, too, have studied many languages,” reflected another, while another remarked hopefully, “You will doubtlessly [have] noted by now a certain similarity in our names.” If fairly bald identification with Boswell might be seen to animate such phrases, another correspondent, a young woman studying medieval history and literature, is less forthright, musing, “The reason I am writing to you is mysterious even to myself.” Her letter, which attempts to explain her interest in the book (she had read the Newsweek review), nervously repeats this protest of incomprehension—“I don’t know why I am bothering you with this letter”—and further offers, “Perhaps a partial explanation stems from the fact that I am. . . taking a class in medieval literature.” The letter is bursting with the unspoken; the mystery, in this context, seems very possibly to be the mystery of being gay, and the letter an extremely indirect coming out. In yet another deeply felt response based this time on a close engagement with the book’s argument, a philosophy professor reflects on the book’s effect on him of creating something like a gay community across time:

Whereas I have often felt intellectual “friendships” across the centuries—historical thinkers with whom I have felt such strong affinities that I feel I know them and that we speak for one another, I had never felt—until I read your book—that I had gay friends across the centuries.
For this reader, history becomes a source—directly, itself—of gay community, a community of affinities, of friends, even perhaps (given this letter's impassioned tone) of lovers. 20

This reader was not only impassioned but astute. Gay history and gay community are indeed tightly linked in Boswell's work. And this is what the issue of Boswell's apparent "essentialism" comes in. I want to turn now to consider how Boswell's concept of "the gay community" is related to his approach to history and how it shaped his findings. The subtitle Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century is important, for Boswell suggested in a 1982 essay that the very possibility of "gay community" now might in fact depend on whether or not we can say there were indeed "gay people" back then. In an argument that reframed the essentialism/social constructionism debate on homosexuality in the terms of the realist/nominalist philosophical debate on universals in the High Middle Ages, Boswell hypothesized in this article that the existence of a "real" phenomenon of homosexuality may be necessary to ground and justify homosexual community. He thus implies that if historically speaking one cannot say that there were people who "really" were "gay" or "homosexual" back then, the very concept of gay community now may be incoherent or unfounded:

Whether or not there are "homosexual" and "heterosexual" persons, as opposed to persons called "homosexual" or "heterosexual" by society, is obviously a matter of substantial import to the gay community, since it brings into question the nature and even the existence of such a community. ... If the categories "homosexual/heterosexual" and "gay/straight" are the inventions of particular societies rather than real aspects of the human psyche, there is no gay history. 21

So a "real" category of homosexuality or gayness (the two mean the same thing here, I believe) is needed for both gay history and gay community.

To Boswell, a gay history is a history of gay persons throughout temporal and cultural locations—people whom we would now call "gay," whether or not they called themselves that. His choice of the term was controversial—to his manuscript editor at the University of Chicago Press; to historians reviewing the book; to sympathetic readers who wrote fan letters to him. 22 Simon Watney, in a review, noted that its "over-simplifying" was inconsistent with Boswell's own findings of historical variation. 23 But Boswell never swerved from his commitment to the term in premodern contexts. In a letter to his editor at Gallimard about the French translation of CSTH in 1984 he stated unequivocally, "[A]lthough it is not ideal, the word 'gay' is the only available term, in any language, for what I wish to convey." 24 Gay history, based on this "real" category of homosexual, may in fact be a necessity for gay community, for it may serve not just as a community resource but as proof of the community's conceptual justification, proof of its capacity to cohere at all. A current Internet website, "An Online Guide to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans* History," maintained by Paul Halsall, is telling—polemically—entitled "People with a History": it enters vigorously into this field of contestation over gay history and community. 25 For Boswell, who is featured prominently in this online resource, being a people—a community—without a history is not just a phobic threat or horror but might be simply impossible.

Boswell maintained that referring to a continuous phenomenon such as same-sex eroticism is not clearly "an 'essentialist' position." 26 Even if societies formulate or create 'sexualities' that are highly particular in some ways, he wrote, "it might happen that different societies would construct similar ones, as they often construct political or class structures similar enough to be subsumed under the same rubric (democracy, oligarchy, proletariat, aristocracy, etc.—all of which are both particular and general)." 27 There is merit to this position, and one of the important challenges to historians stressing the rupture between past and present is to acknowledge and account for such similarities. But Boswell does seem to associate same-sex eroticism with something essential in human beings, 28 and the troublesome potential distortions in the phrase "gay people" when used in premodern contexts are not avoided merely by explicit statements about the analytical primacy of historical evidence, which seem to have been Boswell's mode of dismissing the problems.

As I view Boswell's work, a specific gay essence grounds both community and history, and that essence looks very post-Stonewall. The gay relationships in Boswell's gay history resemble those of urban gay males in the United States (like that implied by the two guys, both about the same age, in the Christopher Street cartoon): scholars have commented on the problematic lack of differentiation in CSTH between "institutionalized pederasty" and "what we nowadays call homosexuality," and made a similar criticism of Same-Sex Unions—a book published fourteen years later whose historical approach was effectively the same. 29 Turning to Same-Sex Unions for a moment: addressing the relation between premodern and current conventions of marriage, Boswell writes in the epilogue to Same-Sex Unions that the answer to the pressing question of "whether the Christian ceremony of same-sex union functioned in the past as a 'gay marriage ceremony'" is clearly yes, adding immediately that "the nature and purposes of every sort of marriage have varied widely over
values than to clarify them." Certainly we should resist the implication that a particular politics inheres in each of these approaches to history and hold, rather, that each can be deployed in particular political causes. But one might suggest that the fact that Larry Kramer cited Boswell as an authority on homosexuality in his Reports from the Holocaust, Kramer's controversial 1989 rallying cry to gay men to cultivate "stable, responsible, mutually gratifying relationships" (which do not, therefore, differ much from heterosexual marriages in their ideal form), does indicate the usefulness of Boswell's approach to an argument that takes homosexuality as a transhistorical constant and would impose a single model on relationships, gay or non-gay. 17

But I want to complicate this somewhat predictable assessment by turning to yet another sharp and appreciative reader of Boswell: Michel Foucault, whose "fan letter" about CSTH was among the letters Boswell preserved. Addressed to Douglas Mitchell, Boswell's editor at the University of Chicago Press, and eventually smoothed out into a blurb on the book's jacket, Foucault's brief letter was written in rough English:

I receive John Boswell's work with thankfulness. I found through these proofs a very interesting matter: "un vrai travail de pionnier" as we say over here.
It makes appear unexplored phenomena and this because of an erudition which seems infallible. 18

Foucault wrote that in late 1979—well beyond publishing volume 1 of the History of Sexuality and as he was working on early Christianity: his course at the Collège de France for 1979–80 was "devoted to the procedures of soul-seekers and confession in early Christianity," according to the résumé. 19 In analyzing Christianity he found he needed to shift his assumptions and re-conceptualize the entire project of his History, as he says in the beginning of volume 2. 20 In an interview in 1982, Foucault in fact stated that he took CSTH as a "guide" for his work on the Greeks: in CSTH Boswell had drawn a distinction between "homosexual" persons ("of predominantly homosexual erotic interest" regardless of conscious preference) and "gay" persons ("who are conscious of erotic inclination toward their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic"), and it was precisely that sense of self-consciousness that had such a powerful influence on Foucault. 21 He understood that such self-consciousness would imply a historically contingent sexual category, as he put it in another interview, a "cultural phenomenon that changes in time while maintaining itself in its general formulation: a relation between individuals of the same sex that entails a mode of life in which the consciousness of being singular among others is present." 22

But the premodern ceremony he is interested in is, as he presents it, gay marriage in the image of male gay marriages in the West today, between loving adult men; he elides consideration of the age dissonance in some of the documents he analyzes, as Randolph Trumbach contends, and with the title of the book and the gender-neutral style of presentation, Bernadette J. Brooten points out, "Boswell masked the overwhelmingly masculine character of his material." And earlier, in CSTH, as E. Ann Matter argued in 1982, Boswell oversimplified "the history of lesbian love" when he did not address "the differences that must have existed between the experiences of medieval lesbians and homosexual men." (Thus we might read the comment of that young woman correspondent in her fan letter much more harshly than she appeared to mean it: "The reason I am writing to you is mysterious even to myself," because the place of the female in Boswell's work is hard to locate.) Despite his admirable desire that "gay" be understood as a broad category allowing for much historical and cultural variation, then, Boswell's actual historical work was constrained by an essentialism and a relatively narrow conceptualization of gay relationships (the dominant form of urban gay male relations in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s) from which that essence was derived.

This narrowness has had its consequences. True, the book was (in the words of the Gay Academic Union collection, Homosexuality, Intolerance, and Christianity) "a starting point for further scholarly investigation," which has proceeded apace. 22 The book opened up a whole field, lesbian/gay history; some works of lesbian/gay history had existed earlier, as Trumbach points out (by Jonathan Ned Katz, Jeffrey Weeks, and Trumbach himself), but the field was not well known or even really established. In the late 1990s the book was still selling about 2,000 copies a year in the United States, and not only had proved enabling to individuals but also had helped move oppressive institutions toward reform: as Trumbach notes, it did not "have much of an impact on either the moral theologians or the church hierarchy," 24 but, as I have suggested, it infiltrated churches, the military, courts, and schools on a more fundamental level—on the ground level. At the same time, it must be said that the book's popular reputation has lent legitimacy to a national gay agenda that, as Michael Warner argues, has abandoned the goals of a more radical gay activism to focus on re-forming institutions such as marriage. 23 Boswell himself noted that "realism," with its transhistorical tendency, has been viewed by nominalists "as conservative, if not reactionary, in its implicit recognition of the value and/or immutability of the status quo"—even as "nominalism," related to constructivism, has been viewed by realists as "an obscurantist radical ideology designed more to undercut and subvert human
Later, however, in 1988 Boswell stated that he had shifted his position, eliminating that consciousness of same-sex inclination as a distinguishing characteristic of gayness and retaining same-sex eroticism only—and thus, it seems to me, increasing the problematic essentializing and anachronizing hazards of the term "gay." But it is important, in those days in which there has been some movement beyond the polemical binaries of transhistorical identification or blanket alteritism in the historiography of homosexuality, to attend to what Foucault got out of Boswell's CTH. We need to reckon with the influence Boswell's work exerted on the direction of Foucault's late work: "Boswell's book has provided me with a guide for what to look for in the meaning people attached to their sexual behavior." A long statement by Foucault highlights what he sees as the methodological advance of the book:

[Boswell's] introduction of the concept of "gay" (in the way he defines it) provides us both with a useful instrument of research and at the same time a better comprehension of how people actually conceive of themselves and their sexual behavior. . . . Sexual behavior is not, as is too often assumed, a superimposition of, on the one hand, desires which derive from natural instincts, and, on the other, of permissive or restrictive laws which tell us what we should or shouldn't do. Sexual behavior is more than that. It is also the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience, and the value one attaches to it. 45

You can hear the Foucault of The Use of Pleasure—volume 2 of the History of Sexuality—in these lines even as he describes CTH. He is not concerned with the elisions in Boswell's work (which do bother me, and which have importantly been taken up by others, as I have intimated) but with that notion of self-consciousness. And as Didier Eribon has observed, Foucault shifted emphasis in his final works—from the end of the 1970s to his death in 1984—toward not only this concept of self-fashioning but also, and especially, the concept of collective self-fashioning, particularly as he found it in the context of gay communities in the U.S. 46 That is, Foucault was interested in self-fashioning outside the bounds of identity but nonetheless in a collectivity—in what could be called "queer community" today. A reckoning with the traces of Boswell in Foucault will expand our understanding of each historian as well as of the various possible social and political uses of their work. It will extend and complicate the relations that we trace as we head down a history of scholarship on sex in premodern times. In tracing those relations, scholars are not only doing history but are also, as I'll suggest, constructing a community across time. 47

What brought me to the Boswell archive in the first place? What was I seeking, sifting through boxes and boxes of John Boswell's papers? Did I know, or was it "mysterious even to myself"? Certainly, I was drawn by memories of the times documented in those files, the late 1970s and early 1980s in the U.S.: that period was the crucible of lesbian/gay studies. Some of the religious concerns, too, were ones that I had grappled with, having been raised in a Christian household. But along with some sense of identification with the professor, there was some strong distidentification as well: I'm a dyke, after all, happily distanced now from religious institutions, and interested in developing an antifoundational historiography. What was I doing there?

What did I see, picking up that 1980 Newsweek photograph of the man I never met? It was neither a sexual lure (as it was for others) nor a mirror for me. But another book published in 1980—this one in France—helps me think about this experience. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes writes, "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here." A photograph, he maintains, can convey a core knowledge (a name)—the certainty that that has been:

[The name "That has been" was possible only on the day when a scientific circumstance (the discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light) made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object. . . .] The thing of the past . . . has really touched the surface which in its turn my gaze will touch.

Barthes reads the photograph as a proof of a "somehow experiential order"; it is not inductive but rather is "the proof—according-to-St.-Thomas-seeking-to-touch-the-resurrected-Christ." 48 Barthes's deep desire physically to cross or span temporal divides, a desire that itself crosses into mourning for a lost body, drives this last work published in his own lifetime. In the photographic archive of his own family, he sought something of a resurrection, and he insists that the certainty, the experience of proof, cannot be conveyed by the shifty linguistic signifier, empty and wayward, that he had earlier in his career described and tracked with such gusto.

In the Boswell archive I was not driven by such a desire for proof, a desire to reconstitute a body. But the concept of a touch across time, in Barthes's other works, does not necessarily involve a recomposition or resurrection, or even require the rejection of the signifier; it can be the happy result of a corporeal dispersion, a fragmentation of the author's life seen as a jubilant semiotic dissemination. Barthes wrote earlier in Sade, Fourier, Loyola:
A desire for some kind of contact with the past, for a touch across time, across death, turns out to have been a constant preoccupation, variously formulated, in the long and varied career of Barthes—whose first book was *Michel de Certeau*, on that singularly somatic historian who himself (according to Barthes) manages to “touch” bodies across time, and whose last book was *Camera Lucida*.

This emphasis on the tactile, and away from the mirror or the essence, helps explain what I was doing in the archive. I was working out an answer to the question with which I began this essay: “What is the use of history?” Barthes certainly doesn’t provide a historical method; neither does Foucault submit to historical analysis the “vibration” he feels from documents, as he recalls in a 1977 article. But just to imagine bodies extending across boundaries of space and time, as both Barthes and Foucault do (explicitly or implicitly here), is to imagine bodies that undo conventional or ordinary historical conceptions. To imagine such bodies making contact is to put a new spin on the notion of contingent history: think of the etymology of “contingent,” from the Latin to touch.

Such deep imagining is crucial for thinking sex and sexuality differently. It suggests a use of history for unraveling assumptions about the ways bodies exist in place and time, assumptions about how they are produced and constrained. And it may help us to conceptualize communities that extend beyond bodies in the here and now. This is similar to the insight of the philosophy professor reading Boswell, but without his implication of personal identification with the historical figures (he claimed that he and they speak for one another).

I am imagining a community across time constituted by partial connections—since, as Donna Haraway puts it, “the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another.” My discussion of John Boswell here just gestures in this direction: I have sought only to analyze the various uses to which his book has been put, and to extend our understanding of the discursive field and political ramifications of the study of sex in history, but I have sought also to open the question, via that photograph, of how we can make contact, how we can make partial connections with bodies and lives, and in so doing, how we can make history.

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**Notes**

A version of this essay was presented as a lecture at The Queer Middle Ages conference in New York, November 1998. Materials from this lecture were subsequently used in the Introduction to my *Getting Medieval: Sexuality and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 22–34 et passim. I am grateful to Duke University Press for permitting reuse of these materials here. I am grateful as well to Ralph Hexter for permission to quote from the Boswell archive and for his guidance through the papers. The papers in the archive have not been catalogued; I wish to protect the privacy of the correspondents, so I use only dates to identify individual letters.

12. Letter, 8 October 1993, for the plaintiffs in Colorado’s District Court; the anti-anti-discrimination amendment was eventually struck down by the United States Supreme Court in 1996.

15. Letter, no date. "Books like yours," the correspondent writes, "will help educate the public."


17. Letters, 28 September 1983; no date.


24. Letter from John Boswell to Louis Evrard, 10 July 1984: the French were balking at the non-Frenchness and apparent militancy of the word "gay."


33. Noted by Trumbach in his review of Same-Sex Unions, at 112.

34. Trumbach, review of Same-Sex Unions, at 112.


44. See, for example, David M. Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," in his recent volume, How to Do the History of Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 104–37. In another essay in this collection, "Forgetting Foucault," Halperin reopens the question of the "construction of sexual identities before the emergence of sexual orientations," reevaluating Foucault's History of Sexuality, volume 1; he maintains that this reevaluation does not, however, represent a "posthumous rapprochement with John Boswell." (43).


OXFORD
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

Middle English

Edited by
PAUL STROHM

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
What does it feel like to be an anachronism? In an episode of her Book that has fascinated me since I first read it, fifteenth-century English mystic Margery Kempe visits the grave of her loyal supporter and sometime confessor, Richard Caister of Norwich. She makes such a ruckus in the churchyard and then in front of the high altar—weeping, screaming, throwing herself to the ground, and writhing in the extreme devotional practice that is her trademark—that people around her are completely annoyed. Suspecting her of 'sum fleschly er erdly [earthly] affeccyon', these onlookers snarl, 'What eylith the [you] woman? Why faryst thus wyth thi-self? We knew hym as wel as thu.' Among the backbiters Margery finds a sympathetic local woman and proceeds with her to her church. There Margery gets into yet another face-off with a believer less zealous than she: Margery sees an image of the blessed Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ—a pietà—and is absolutely overcome by this sight:

And thorw [through] the beholdyng of that pete [pietà] hir mende was al holy occupied in the Passyng of our Lord Ihesu Crist & in the compassyon of owr Lady, Seynt Mary, be [by] whech sche was compellyd to cryyn ful lowde [loud] & wepyn [weep] ful sor, as thei [though] sche xulde a [would have] deyd. (p. 148)

The good lady’s priest holds a more distanced perspective, however: ‘Damsel’, he says to the convulsed Margery, ‘Ihesu is ded long sithyn [Jesus is long since dead]’

I thank the many colleagues who have heard or read this material in various stages and made suggestions, comments, and queries; the imprints of these many contributions are clear and deep. Limitations of space prevent me from acknowledging each one, but I must mention particular debts to Kathleen Davis and to Heather Love for crucial references, formulations, and insights in the early stages of writing, and to John Hirsh for his invaluable work on Hope Emily Allen and his collegial generosity. Thanks to Wilber Allen for permission to quote from Hope Allen’s papers. I gratefully acknowledge permission to draw on my essay ‘Margery Kempe’ in Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (eds.), The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 222–39.

Provoked by this dismissal, Margery responds to his cool detachment with a scorching rebuke:

Sir, his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so me thynkyth it awt [ought] to be to yow & to alle Cristen pepil. We awt euyr [ever] to han mende of hys kendnes [kindness] & euyr thynkyn of the doful deth that he deyd for vs. (p. 148)

In this striking confrontation, we hear a clash of temperaments, of estates, of spiritual commitments: the moist, restless, righteously angry laywoman versus the dry, satisfied, and complacent clergyman. This contrast is structured by Margery’s point of view, of course, which produces the narration of this episode: it is all part of what has been called her ‘active propaganda’, her angling for sainthood via her Book. But can a priest really have said that—‘Lady, Jesus died a long time ago’? How can Margery have even imagined such a confrontation?

Radically different experiences of time divide Margery from this cleric and inform the narrative construction of this episode. His words sound secular, almost incredibly so, but they are not necessarily as disenchanted as they might at first seem. Perhaps he is making the implicitly reassuring point, in the face of Margery’s grief, that the Church (and he himself as the embodiment of that Church) has been able to conserve access to the body of Christ over the centuries. In the priest’s world, time passes but the Church reclaims it; his words separate the past from the present and brandish it in an affirmation of institutional power. Margery, in his view, is a pathetic anachronism—a creature stuck in the past and not availing herself of the comforts that the Church can provide in a present defined by time’s inexorable loss.

For Margery, however, the point is immediate access to Christ now. The conflict with the priest in front of the pietà goes to her core and tests the immediate reality of her being. Her response is ethical and moral, focused in the now and distanced neither by institutional structures nor by the chronological time they seek to control. Her time, her present, her now, is defined by its being invaded or infused by the other: the pietà out there becomes the pity in her. That’s what it feels like to be an anachronism; she is a creature in another time altogether—with another time in her, as it were. We can read this episode as a historical allegory of theological conflict, or place it in a historical narrative about the institution of Catholicism and the challenge of emergent Protestantism. But still, there’s something about Margery that will not be assimilated into these historical paradigms; there’s something out of joint. Even a historical narrative that links her with holy women of the European continent such as Catherine of Siena marks Margery as living in the wrong country and a generation late.2

2 Hope Emily Allen, in the Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library; quoted by Marea Mitchell, “‘The Ever-Growing Army of Serious Girl Students’: The Legacy of Hope Emily Allen’, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 31 (spring 2001), 17–29, at 20. Mitchell’s superb work with the minimally processed Bryn Mawr papers supplements my own here.

This clash of temporalities—the priest’s pragmatic observation of a progressive everyday chronology, Margery’s absorption in the everlasting now of the mystic—is what piques my interest here. The serial chronology of this chapter is in fact more disrupted than I have yet mentioned. By the end of the scene the prophecy that prompted Margery’s visit to Norwich in the first place proves on her return home to Lynn to be true. That is, Margery has foreseen her current priest’s recovery and goes to the grave of Richard Caister, her (past) priest confessor, in a gesture of thanks to God for that (future) recovery. In Margery’s narrative world, past-present-future times are collapsed into a very capacious now. And she seems in this very episode to inhabit a different time zone, a more extensive now, from the other people whom she encounters in Norwich. Roaring and weeping when that priest approaches her, she does not stop her conniption just because of his remark that may well be an attempt at consolation. She takes her time, as it were: and ‘Whan hir crying was cesyd [ceased]’, when she stops crying, when the pressure of Christ’s presence subsides, then she rebukes the priest for his apparent indifference. It is as if she is in another temporal dimension even from the people who take her under their wings; others insist that Margery eat, others speak for her (the good lady ‘was hir auoket-advocate] and answeryd for hir’, as if Margery is elsewhere), others take her as an ‘exampyl’ (p. 148). They put her into, or connect her to, the stream of mundane, everyday life, out of which she has precipitated.

These complex temporal reckonings, and especially an expanded understanding of contemporaneity, the now, begin my rumination here on history and time, past and present. Such thinking leads me to a concept of queer history, for in my view a history that reckons in the most expansive way possible with how people exist in time, with what it feels like to be a body in time, or in multiple times, or out of time, is a queer history—whatever else it might be. Historicism is queer when it grasps that temporality itself raises the question of embodiment and subjectivity. Michel de Certeau has written in The Mystic Fable that ‘time is . . . the question of the subject seized by his or her other, in a present that is the ongoing surprise of a birth and a death’.4 In its emphasis on the endlessness of the present, oriented around the Incarnation and Crucifixion, this definition of time perfectly describes Margery’s experience before the pietà.

It is not just a coincidence that Margery Kempe would lead me to queer history, Margery, who, whatever else she was, was a mystic.5 For all their differences, including profound disagreement on the status of truth and the relationship of

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5 Here I differ from John C. Hirsh in Revelations of Margery Kempe: Paramystical Practices in Late Medieval England (Leiden: Brill, 1989), who develops a concept of the ‘paramystical’ to explain Margery’s experiences. As I suggest below, I want to extend the category of the mystical itself to make
subjectivity to it, both mysticism and queer historicism intensely problematize the
body in time and reject the protocols of any historicism grounded in coherent
temporal progress. Mysticism and queer historicism thus bear a similarity to one
another (at least with regard to corporeality) that might help us expand each
concept. Understanding mysticism helps us open up the potentials of multiple
temporalities of queerness. Such problematizations may allow us to broaden the
category of mysticism, in turn, as we tune in to the multiplicities and irrationalities
of bodily life in the present. The expansion of the realm of queer history is my
specific goal in this essay, and to that end, I find it specifically useful to see a mystic
like Margery Kempe as a subject of queer history. As it is useful to see Margery’s first
modern editor, Hope Emily Allen, as such a subject—Hope Allen, who mused, ‘I
seem to have always a craving to touch the great human mystery of Time.’6 There is
something corporeal—queer—about an extended now, a shared contemporaneity,
as Margery feels the body of Christ now, as Hope Allen tries to touch time itself.

I will return to Hope Emily Allen shortly, but I want to stay for the moment
with the very fact of multiple temporalities operating in the same moment—the
priest’s, for example, and Margery’s, working simultaneously. I am not uncovering
anything new, I’ll be the first to admit, when I talk about multiple temporalities,
and neither are the post-colonial historians whose work on non-Western, non-
Enlightenment historiography has inspired my thinking here.7 Moreover, for all the
uniqueness of the Book of Margery Kempe, its multiple temporalities are not unusual
in its medieval context. In fact, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has seen, medievalists can
usefully guide queers and other historians in search of ways of talking about
expanded temporalities. Aron Gurevich, the Russian medievalist, has remarked
that all medieval people in fact felt themselves ‘on two temporal planes at once: on
the plane of local transient life, and on the plane of those universal-historical events
which are of decisive importance for the destinies of the world—the Creation,
the birth and the Passion of Christ’.8 Thus, as do her neighbours and fellow
community members, Margery participates in pilgrimages, retracing the steps of
Christ and his family and disciples in the Holy Land, and in Easter pageants, bringing
biblical time into the present. Indeed, her imaginative participation in Christ’s life
derives from the tradition of that immensely popular treatise on affective devotion,
Meditations on the Life of Christ. Gurevich analyses the different and sometimes
it more inclusive and thus to expand our sensitivity to the heterogeneity of times in what we know as
the present.

6 Hope Emily Allen, ‘Relics’, in John C. Hirsh, Past and Present in Hope Emily Allen’s Essay
7 Primary among these is Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and
Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. ‘Minority Histories and
Subaltern Past’, 97–113.
8 A. J. Gurevich, ‘What is Time?’, in Categories of Medieval Culture, trans. G. L. Campbell (London:
contradictory kinds of time perception operating at once in the Middle Ages: agrarian, genealogical, cyclical, sacral/biblical, and historical. These are all other ‘attitudes to time’ than what Gurevich identifies as modern ‘awareness of its swift and irreversible onward flow and... the identification of only one present’ (p. 102).

When I read, then, in Gurevich that among the ancestors of the medieval world model, ‘time was not so much apprehended as experienced’ (p. 102), I am moved to explore experiences of time falling outside the apprehension of time that constitutes modern historical consciousness. Thus my emphasis on experiencing temporal heterogeneities in my opening question: ‘What does it feel like to be an anachronism?’ To begin to answer, we must disobey Fredric Jameson’s famous imperative, ‘Always historicize!’—not only because of the importance of causal sequences in the Marxism that informs his historicizing, as Christopher Lane has argued, but also because we understand that the ‘always’ in that command, as Chakrabarty puts it, presumes ‘a continuous, homogeneous, infinitely stretched out time’ that is belied by such plural temporalities as we find in Margery’s Book.

What are other ways of experiencing time besides objectifying it, segmenting and claiming it, deploying it in an exercise of power or defence of some institution? If this is what the priest in Margery’s Book does, as he would control time past and access to it, what else is there?

Foucault helps us pose the question, though his answer to it, while provocative, is quite indirect. Nietzschean genealogy should be a help, for it is anti-foundational and anti-institutional, emphasizing the fragmentary and contingent: genealogy theoretically accounts for the heterogeneities of times. Foucault declares it, in fact, to be the ‘transformation of history into a totally different form of time’. The genealogical project is an ‘ontology of the present’, which is what Foucault calls the enquiry into the ‘“now” in which all of us find ourselves’. Such a formulation clearly expands the conventional modern historical consciousness of fleeting time and a singular, ever-vanishing present. But in practice, as various critiques have suggested, Foucault’s commitment to periodization in The History of Sexuality, volume i, the introduction to what he had planned as his largest genealogical project, tends to cut off the past from the present, and selectivity of sources isolates temporalities. Nevertheless, Foucault conveys something of...
the feeling of an expanded present, a temporally multiple now, in his remarkable 1977 essay 'The Life of Infamous Men'. In this introduction to an anthology that never actually appeared in the form in which he projected it, Foucault recalls his physical reaction to stories found years earlier while researching *Madness and Civilization*. He experienced the terrifying, austere, lyrical beauty of *lettres de cachet* and other documents consigning atheistic monks, obscure usurers, and other wretches to confinement: this is the ‘intensity’ (p. 77), he says in this essay, that motivated his analysis in *Madness and Civilization* but that his discourse in that book was ‘incapable’ of bearing. He wants now, he writes, to present an anthology of documents that provoked that feeling, that ‘vibration’ (p. 77), that sensory experience of being-made-an-outsider which these unfortunate men lived.

Such a moment in the archive introduces temporal multiplicity, an expanded now in which past touches present, making a ‘physical’ impression (p. 77). In a genealogical framework that seeks to overcome the denial of the body in traditional historicism, we could attempt an analysis of the experience of such times. But Foucault acknowledges that ‘the primary intensities which had motivated me... might not pass into the order of reasons’. In insisting on the importance of these feelings occurring outside rational analysis, Foucault thus opens up other kinds of questions for us to ponder, questions that are queerly historical: What are these feelings, when a past rises up in the present? What does it feel like to experience ‘a totally different form of time’? To live asynchronously? To be out of time? And what will allow us to analyse these feelings, these experiences?

The following remarks don’t provide an exhaustive answer to such questions, I hasten to note before my claims get ahead of me. Or maybe that’s exactly what I should be promoting, claims that race out ahead, arguments that disrespect the temporal and causal demands of conventional historicism or even of some versions of genealogy. I don’t intend to do a full reading of the *Book of Margery Kempe* in these few pages. I offer, rather, a description of temporal experiences of being out of joint, using the examples of Margery Kempe, and her first editor, Hope Emily Allen, and, finally, me. My meditation here is prompted by the juxtaposition of three temporally unruly phenomena: first, Margery’s expansive now, her own resistance to institutional, church time as recorded in the temporal jumble that is her *Book*, juxtaposed with, second, an exploration of the struggles of Hope Allen trying to manage an ever-expanding history of Margery, juxtaposed with, third, my research into Hope Allen’s archive which is also, you could say, my own.


For I read Allen’s papers on the Bryn Mawr College campus where both she and I were undergraduates, both of us earnest students in the process of becoming medievalists. We were both touching a past that would become for each of us—as the past was for Margery—part of an absorbing now.

**How Soon Is Now?**

‘[T]he mystic is seized by time as by that which erupts and transforms’, writes de Certeau of the mystic’s temporality. Few people give a better account of this physical experience than Margery Kempe. Time erupts in Margery’s body, and the ensuing temporal struggle turns her, in the memorable phrasing of her Book, ‘blue as lead’. Used at least three times in the Book, this phrase describes Margery’s livid, mottled skin, her blotchy, pent-up complexion as she weeps, sobs, and screams. ‘Sche with the crying wrestyd [wrested] hir body turnyng fro the o [one] syde in-to the other & wex [turned] al blew & al blo as it had ben colowr of leed’ (p. 105). ‘Blue as lead’ is a common simile in Middle English, indeed a cliché, as you can sense from the syntax of this line: ‘turned blue … blue as lead’. Because of the rhyme word ‘dead’, which appears in numerous other works alongside this simile, and because of lead’s associations with heaviness as well as its pale, ashen, bruised—‘my heart is heavy as lead’, as one medieval romance character moans (in *Sir Amadace*, c.1475)—the image carries a feeling of sadness, desperation; being weighed down, as the *Middle English Dictionary* puts it, by sin, by grief; even a feeling of death.

In her desperate agonies of devotion, it seems that Margery will indeed die. Her extraordinary bouts of crying originated at the scene of Christ’s death, on Calvary, while she made her pilgrimage to Jerusalem: the actual place triggers her bodily act of compassion, her suffering together with Christ. Chapter 28 tells us that she locates that place in her soul—it becomes ‘the cite [city] of hir sowle’ (p. 68), where she sees ‘freschly’ how the Lord was crucified. Her body is thus transfixed by the time and the place—in fact it becomes the space, physical image of the time—of Christ’s death. Christ’s death should always be fresh to us, she admonished the priest in the passage with which I began; that event in Norwich occurred chronologically later than this trip to Jerusalem, but no matter: Margery is in the everlasting now of the fresh prince of heaven.

Margery tries to resist these intense eruptions of crying, chapter 28 tells us, because she knows that they irritate people.
sche wex as blo as any leed, & euyr it xuld labowryn in hir mende mor and mor into the tyme that it broke owte.

It' boils in Margery's 'mende'—her mind, her memory, where images are stored where past, present, and future interact—while Margery's body, stuck in historical/chronological time, pushes back. I am fascinated by this use of 'it' for her emotions, her compassion, but 'it' is not a thing, despite the apparent reification. 'It' will not be withstood or 'put away'; to do so would turn 'it' into an object or event in chronological time, something that can be made part of the past or deferred into the future. 'It' is now. The seething, leaden body, overwhelmed, blue, yields to the now that is so powerful that 'it' bursts forth, overtaking any other temporality or causality. This is what it feels like to experience a totally different form of time Margery is overtaken by an eternal now. Her crying becomes a performative with no separable content, the meaning in the movement, enacted in an all-inclusive present. Such weeping is not subject to historical comparisons: even the Blessed Virgin didn't cry this much, her companions observe wryly, but that matters not. Rather, her crying absorbs the historical past, present, and future into a panoramic now where all God's creatures can, and should, live.

Margery's wearing of white clothes, her other very controversial bodily practice that is marked by colour, may in fact be performing a similar temporal disjunction: from people around her. I have written previously that her clothes—which cause her such trouble that in Leicester she is put under house arrest virtually for wearing them—mark her sexual queerness; they are the colour worn by virgins, and as such they mark the impossible virginity of the mother of fourteen children. But now I add that they also mark her temporal singularity, which is a major aspect of Margery's queer life. Margery may in fact claim by wearing her white garb on earth that she is in heaven already. How arrogant, think her companions, or at the very least, how annoying: 'Why speke ye so of the myrth that is in Heuyn' (p. 11) they snap at her. 'ye know it not & ye haue not be ther no mor than we.' But aren't they in some fundamental way wrong? Margery's narrative, of course, intimates that they are. Perhaps she has been to heaven, the Book suggests; perhaps she is there now. As the late twelfth or early thirteenth-century prose treatise on virginity, Hali Meidhad, repeatedly asserts, virginity on earth in itself foreshadows the angelic life in heaven: it is itself an angelic and heavenly life. Julian of Norwich, whose spiritual authorization Margery solicits, further explains in her own Showings: 'we be more verely in hevyn than in erth.' That is, when our lives are fulfilling the mystical promise, we are in heaven.

When we experience the *Book of Margery Kempe* by engaging the heterogeneity of its temporal modalities, we not only begin to appreciate the immensely productive instability of the world of the *Book*, but also allow the *Book* to reveal the heterogeneity of our times. Margery’s is not the only world in which various disparate chronologies operate: the medieval inheres in our modernity (that is, our postmodernity), as many people have observed. And further, Margery’s times can touch ours as well. An experience of contemporaneity, Chakrabarty argues, in fact makes historical understanding possible: if we did not already in some sense connect with Margery, we could not even begin to understand or historicize her. Some connection must exist (at the least, in the very fact of a mutually intelligible language, which links past and present, creates a simultaneity) before any connection can be made (information shared, understanding reached). This hermeneutic circle is inevitable: in all acts of interpretation, as James Simpson has demonstrated for the medieval context, some such crossing the gap between beings is a necessary condition of intelligibility. Hermeneutics, then, is the beginning of one answer to the question I posed earlier about what might allow us to analyse the experience of ‘noncontemporaneous contemporaneity’. Jan Davidse tries to explain this hermeneutic condition by suggesting that our ‘understanding’ or hermeneutic connection with the past includes—in fact is based on—distance: the fact that we attribute meaning to something in the past already links it to us in the present and ‘turns the people inhabiting the past into contemporaries on the basis of the awareness that this is something that is really past and will stay past’. I cannot claim to understand this formulation completely, but I recognize in it a valiant attempt (in the context of scholarship on medieval historiography) to insist on contemporaneity and difference, to analyse a complex sense of simultaneously belonging to one’s own time as well as to other times, and to reckon with ambivalence in our experience of time and history, including the past’s own intransigence.

What we do with such knowledge of these unavoidably complex hermeneutic conditions, what we do with the awareness of our expanded and heterogeneous present, riven with the time of the other, punctuated with the drastically unfamiliar, and edged by the unknown, is what I care about here. The *Book of Margery Kempe*, with its various temporalities, allows us to see that modern historical consciousness—with its singular timelines—is, as Chakrabarty puts it, but a limited good. This is knowledge that Hope Emily Allen had, and it attended an ambivalent experience indeed: while it was a source for her, I will argue, of considerable joy, it may as well underlie conditions that eventually prevented her great work from appearing.
The Time of Hope

The story of editing the *Book of Margery Kempe* is the stuff of legend, at least for medievalists. Scholarship on the English Middle Ages is deeply indebted to Hope Emily Allen, whose well-regarded work on early English spirituality—as well as familial ties and a bit of good luck—situated her in just the place to get the call about the manuscript of the *Book of Margery Kempe*. In the summer of 1934, as John Hirsh notes, when others had left London on holiday, this American medievalist was in the city and able to make what would be one of the biggest medieval literary identifications of the century. The famous English scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill had been contacted by the Victoria and Albert Museum, and sensing she was out of her depth, she recommended her distant American relation. Hope Allen’s career from this point onward changed utterly: an independent scholar, she was invited to produce the scholarly edition of the *Book* for the Early English Text Society (EETS), and ‘an element of haste’ entered her research life which had earlier been temporally unfettered. ‘It is so exciting it needs speed’, she wrote to her chosen collaborator, Sanford Brown Meech, shortly after the identification.

Allen became so ‘immersed’ in Margery’s *Book* that her other researches virtually ceased. In compiling the volume, she struggled with Meech over the scope of their individual responsibilities, particularly what should be covered in her introduction and notes. After tense exchanges and much anxiety, a compromise was found: the edition was completed and published in 1940, with signed notes, a brief prefatory note, and two appendices by Allen, but Allen would be allowed to issue a second volume (entirely her own) for what she really wanted to produce, a general introduction synthesizing the mystical elements with social history. For the 1940 edition she worked on her notes until the very last minute before publication, extending the present moment until she could no longer, until her temporality had to give way to the press’s and the present had at last to be declared finished, closed, past. Peppered throughout the 1940 edition, though, are promises of the large work to come; already, in the 1940 addenda section, the past was proliferating: ‘My research on these topics became too complicated to be summarized now’, she wrote, in her characteristically harried style. But the time of the second volume never came.

21 John C. Hirsh, *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1988), and *passion*, has substantially informed my work on Allen here.
22 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter to Revd Paul Grosjean, SJ, 30 Mar. 1938.
24 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter to Revd Paul Grosjean, SJ, 4 Apr. 1938.
BMK II, as she referred to it in her voluminous correspondence, was to be a ‘synthesis of Margery, the mystic and the woman’ (BMK, p. lvii). Her approach to Margery was multiple, engaging both the time of the mystic and the temporalities of everyday life. Allen always, to echo Jameson, historicized—in fact, one of her sharpest scholarly debates about Margery was with a theologian who, she thought, misunderstood her position towards Margery because of his ahistorical disciplinary disposition. But her work on Margery drew on her literary as well as her scholarly impulses, as she reflected in a letter; Allen, I want to show you, felt a lively contemporaneity with Margery.25 Such a contemporaneity does not just create a counter to that rigorous chronological historicizing, but provides its lifeblood, makes it possible in the first place.

Thus we hear the affectionate familiarity with which Allen and her scholarly correspondents refer to their subjects of research: theirs is the intimacy born of ‘living with’ their authors (as Roland Barthes would say). ‘Dear Miss Allen’, wrote Mabel Day, retired secretary of the EETS, ‘Here is St. Elizabeth, with many thanks for the parcel, which is most delicious. I like her very much indeed, and I like the way the B. V. M. talks to her.’26 A correspondent at Ohio State wrote a few years earlier about the vita of a German saint: ‘Dear Hope, Many thanks for Dorothea—I bound her and sent her back to you (registered) on Friday.’27 A professor wrote from Mount Holyoke College: ‘Elizabeth of Schönau has come to life again: I am just sending back my revised article …’28 In a long letter replying to a graduate student, Allen writes, ‘I have such an even personal interest in Margery Kempe that I was very pleased to have your kind words about her.’ The student had written not about Margery, per se, but about the Book of Margery Kempe.29 Yet the distinction is too fine; Allen in fact (and not insignificantly) often conflated reference to the manuscript with reference to the woman. Moreover, she expressed a sense of being almost corporeally coextensive with Margery: in her projected ‘magnum opus’, BMK II, she wrote, ‘all the absorptions of my various incarnations coalesce’.30 Tracing a curious time-knot (a term Chakrabarty uses), Allen wrote in another letter, ‘I hope Margery comes to her own in our life-time.’31 And in a resonant

26 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter from Mabel Day, 11 July 1952.
27 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter from ‘Bud’ (H. N. Milnes) at Ohio State, 20 Jan. 1948.
28 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter from Ruth J. Dean, 23 July 1939.
29 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter to Hester R. Gehring, 19 Apr. 1947.
31 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, note perhaps to E. I. Watkins(?), n.d. ‘Time-knot’ is from Ranajit Guha, via Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 111–13.
phrase, alluding to the horrors of the Second World War but with an intersubjective twist: ‘Margery gives me hope.’\textsuperscript{32} (I am tempted to capitalize that last word.)

Such may be the common passion of many a historian, this feeling of familiarity, inspiration, even identification with one’s subject. When another correspondent of Allen’s refers to a friend of his, asserting, ‘She knows Margery Kempe,’ we feel that more than textual comprehension is at stake for her, too.\textsuperscript{33} But the pull of the past was at once thrilling, complicated, and problematic for Allen, as witnessed in much of her writing over the years, literary and scholarly.\textsuperscript{34} In an early essay, ‘Relics’, whose publication Allen (finally unsuccessfully) pursued for over a decade, she wrote that she experienced the past every day in ‘relics’, the word she used for material things ‘surcharged with the personalities of the past’ (p. 58). An ‘antiquary bred in the bone’ (p. 54), as she described herself, Allen felt connectedness through such ‘antiquities developed in indigenous America’ (p. 53) in her upstate New York home. She wished to communicate with others beyond her own mortal being, wanting ‘to transcend the narrow limitations of the individual’ by connecting with the past—even while acknowledging the ‘vital impulse of life’ to be ‘placed in the real immediate present’ (pp. 55, 58). But she felt that this approach to antiquities and the past isolated her from her fellow citizens. ‘My inclination for “relics” is something inscrutable and inevitable in my composition,’ Allen wrote. ‘[T]his is a civilization that makes no provision for my own type … I said to [a woman in a nearby hill village], “I am very fond of all old things”, and she replied in a puzzled way, “How very queer that is!”’ (pp. 54–6). At the very end of this essay, Allen finds, after all, in this village woman’s attitude a shared interest in continuities with the past, stressing not the dead but the living. But this resolution in the article comes quickly, too quickly; I have a feeling that Allen’s sense of her own singularity, her queerness, her bodily absorption in the past, may indeed have persisted beyond that perfunctory essayistic ending.

Allen concedes in ‘Relics’ that ‘life in an environment solidly filled in with memorials from the past might in certain moods and circumstances, be a torment haunted by incessant ghosts’ (p. 58). Was Margery Kempe one such ghost? Perhaps; Allen writes—in the informal context of a letter to another medievalist—of being ‘buried alive’ by the Book of Margery Kempe, ‘almost, as it were’.\textsuperscript{35} BMK II finally overwhelmed her, though she remained hopeful throughout the experience: an old

\textsuperscript{32} Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Letters d. 217, fo. 113\textsuperscript{v}, letter to Dorothy Ellis, 18 Apr. 1941.

\textsuperscript{33} Hope Allen was born, raised, lived, and died in the Oneida community, about whose controversial past she expressed a careful ambivalence, simultaneously celebrating the community’s controversial history and distancing herself from it. See especially Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. c. 484, fos. 97b–q. For further literary reflections on relations to the past, see also ‘A Glut of Fruit’, Atlantic Monthly, 131 (Sept. 1923), 343–52, and ‘Ancient Grief’, Atlantic Monthly, 131 (Feb. 1923), 177–87.

\textsuperscript{34} Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter (to Kenneth Sisam?), n.d.
friend had 'sent word that she expected me somehow to “ooze through” what I set out to do and I am optimist enough to agree with her', she wrote, late in the 1950s. Those researches on the past kept proliferating in the present; even Allen’s own scholarly past—her earlier unpublished work on recluses and on the Ancrene Riwle, set aside because of the ‘advent of MK’—became engulfed in the vast BMK II now. If this fact of the expansive now was not the failure, but rather the very condition, as Chakrabarty would say, of Allen’s historicizing work on Margery Kempe, nonetheless the form of the book could not accommodate it. As we have seen, in trying to understand a sense of simultaneous belonging to one’s own time as well as to other times, the balance between contemporaneity and difference, connection and distance, is a very delicate one. ‘I am sorry not to be self-controlled in libraries’, she confesses—Harvard’s library in particular ‘sends me into spasms of excited research’—and that physical reaction might signal a deeper psychic refusal to draw boundaries, set limits, exercise final interpretative power over the material. If, as de Certeau suggests, history (Chakrabarty would say disciplinary history, Enlightenment history) requires a lost object, a death that it then is said mystically to ‘resuscitate’, the endlessness of Allen’s book project, never finally killing Margery off by sending her to press, may in fact be the necessary condition for Allen to inhabit multiple temporalities.

Allen’s felt experience of temporality was in great part fatigue: her past work on the Book of Margery Kempe and earlier projects had fundamentally worn her out. ‘Over-stimulation’, as she put it, left her drained and exhausted as she worked on...
BMK II; that had always, in fact, been both the condition of and the impediment to her working, and it may indeed both re-enact and result from Margery’s own *modus operandi*. From her letters—with their rushes of words at all angles on every inch of the page and their excited admixtures of scholarly business with domestic news—one gets the feeling of her entire awareness of the past and all its particularities rising up at once in the present. There was pleasure in this, alongside guilt and bewilderment: unpublished work burdened and embarrassed her, and she rued her lack of ‘self-control’, but listen to the nervously gleeful figures of speech she used to describe her non-progress and non-method—language that Marea Mitchell notes in making the same point: in a letter to Mabel Day, who was helping her try to finish, Allen declared: ‘I sent you yesterday a fearful budget—to demonstrate my difficulties in composition thro my mind sprouting like a potato brot [sic] from the cellar, when anything comes up that interests me.’ Another letter to Mabel Day: ‘I realize that if I were dealing with money instead of research, I would be a defaulter who didn’t balance my books, I am so much behind.’ Moreover, shame-facedly but cheerfully: ‘I am as irresponsible as a child at times in giving way to enthusiasms which only time will dispel.’ In fact, that forward-moving aspect of time, time as discipline, is what—with Margery, that other woman queerly connected to a past that is all—Hope was pleased finally to refuse. She gratefully quoted an old friend’s adage: ‘Forecast is as good as work.’

**Time Is on my Side**

Nothing could have fitted me out better to do research on the *Book of Margery Kempe* than the *Book* itself. Its robust depiction of ‘asynchronous temporalities’ (the term is Ernst Bloch’s) has demonstrated to me vividly—helped me feel—the reality of multiple temporalities operant and lived in the world every moment. The research took me to Bryn Mawr College, where Hope Allen was an undergraduate, Class of 1905, and in whose library’s ‘feminist collection’, as she put it, she wanted


42 All three passages quoted by Mitchell, ‘ “The Ever-Growing Army”’, 21; the latter two (including the letter to Mabel Day, 12 Apr. [no year]) are in the Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library.

43 Hope Emily Allen Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, letter to Helen [Cam?], 21 Aug. 1956.

at least some of her papers deposited. I was an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, too, Class of 1978, and going back there, I found, was inevitably as much about my own past as it was about Allen’s. The journey to Bryn Mawr from New York City, my current, hectic home, felt like a journey back in time: the serenity of the campus, in relation to the intense post-9/11 world of New York, seemed to be itself part of another chronology. But the hush I perceived at Bryn Mawr was the sound of my own timeline, as I stepped back into the formative locus of my young adulthood, rather than anything anyone else was hearing there now. Time present and time past collapsed as I made my way to the archive.

And time future: for when I sat in the archive (in Canaday Library, a modern building on that Collegiate Gothic campus), doing the work of a professional medievalist, I was sitting in the very building where I had started training a quarter-century ago to become a literary historian and critic. And I was sitting on the grounds where Hope Allen, her papers now archived there, had herself received her training as a medievalist. Our pasts touched in my reading her pages, an experience of bodily absorption into a moment in which time seemed indeed to stop its forward motion. Allen’s papers were even more ‘non-organised’ than her notes in her edition, full of fits and starts, beginnings and dead ends, wormholes of optimism in the face of a task threatening to bury her. The multiplicity of times in the archive that day was composed of temporalities that went back to Margery through Hope Allen and up to me (both in my 1970s incarnation and my early twenty-first-century one), meeting in my now that if not divine, as was Margery’s, nonetheless shared with Margery’s and Hope Allen’s a refusal of the evanescence of chronological time in favour of an expanded present. The intricacy of this experience is matched, in my mind, by its queer intimacy.

Foucault wondered if his infamous men should not after all have been left alone in ‘the darkness of night’, the obscurity in which they lived, away from the glare of power—not only seventeenth- and eighteenth-century monarchical power, but also his own twentieth-century discursive power. He imagined that these wretches might get their revenge in the mere chance that would allow them once again (in his planned volume) to ‘manifest their rage, their affliction, or their invincible obstinacy of divagation’ (p. 81). What of any obstinacy of Margery or Hope Allen, their rage against institutional or discursive power? My experience in the archive was certainly structured by ambivalence, not only an ambivalence between hermeneutic connectedness and historical distance, such as I’ve been
describing, but also the ambivalence generated by the different temperaments of the historical subjects themselves. On the one hand, there was the desiring call of the medieval figure—Margery, who was evidently eager for a cult to follow her death and proceed with her canonization—and, on the other, there was the unknowability of a person as nervous, prickly, and radically centripetal as Hope Allen apparently was. Not to mention, moreover, the disoriented and scared undergraduate that I was in the 1970s. My experience of shared contemporaneity on that day in the archive—its queer intimacy—necessarily included the ambivalences, awkwardnesses, abrasions that accrued to those bodies so temporally out of joint in the world: as the now invades Margery, there is the resistance of her own body, 'blue', as well as the constant irritation of onlookers; as the Book of Margery Kempe buries Hope Allen, there is her own outrage at her co-editor for the 1940 edition as well as the frustration of her colleagues about BMK II; as I opened boxes in the archive, there was all of that plus my own guarded defensiveness as a displaced kid from San Jose at Bryn Mawr College, frustrating the touch of my friends then, and perhaps even my own touch now.

What does it feel like to be an anachronism? It can have its downside: Margery Kempe, pierced by an eternal now, remained an outsider, albeit an outsider with social usefulness and a righteous sense of salvation. Hope Emily Allen never finished her work, absorbed as she was in an uncontrolled, if not uncontrollable, past. Michel Foucault never produced that book of The Life of Infamous Men in which his feelings would form a principle of selection and would be subject to critical scrutiny. So there is nothing intrinsically positive about the experience, or indeed the condition, of multiple temporalities—which condition, I would argue, defines life on this earth. Nonetheless, the recognition of multiplicity and the break with discipline are themselves exhilarating. At the least, we can use a queer historical awareness of multiplicity to expand our apprehension and experience of bodies in time—their pleasures, their agonies, their limits, their potentials—to contest and enlarge singular narratives of development; and to begin to imagine collective possibilities for a post-disenchanted—that is to say, queer—future.

FURTHER READING

For explorations of non-synchronous temporality from varying disciplinary perspectives, see Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object, new edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Ernst Bloch, Heritage of our Times, trans.

There are many answers to my question about the felt experience of asynchrony: I haven't even touched on sexualization and racialization here. Elsewhere I have written that I experience my own queerness as an anachronism, complexly related to my father's dark foreignness, his Indianness, his 'backwardness'. For sexuality, after all, is chronic—as are, moreover, race and ethnicity. See my 'Pale Faces: Race, Religion, and Affect in Chaucer's Texts and their Readers', The 2000 Biennial Chaucer Lecture, Studies in the Age of Chaucer, 13 (2001), 19-41. For analysis of race and temporality see José Esteban Muñoz, 'Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions and Queer Futurity', QIQ (forthcoming).
