22.06.16 Rojas/Thompson (eds.), Queering the Medieval Mediterranean


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In this volume, the result of a conference panel held at the 2014 International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, ten established academics explore queer readings of a wide corpus of medieval literary and prescriptive texts produced on both sides of the Mediterranean. Although the editors, Felipe E. Rojas and Peter E. Thompson, acknowledge that the medieval Mediterranean was a region frequented by a great number of peoples with varying cultural backgrounds, they chose to focus on Christian and Muslim societies in particular. In fact, this scope is narrowed even further as half of the contributions take the Iberian Peninsula as the starting point for their analysis. The general aim of this volume is to question the widespread assumption that different cultures each had distinct ways of labelling “the other” by means of sexual and moral codes. By looking at the Mediterranean as a transcultural region, the authors suggest that proximate civilizations in fact shared knowledge and had common experiences concerning topics that could be labeled as queer. The volume has the ambition to focus on the Mediterranean as an “impetus that puts into dialogue queerness and sexuality within the bordering lands that make the Mediterranean a unique aquatic space” (6).

In the introduction, the editors acknowledge that the term “queer” is notoriously difficult to define, as its meaning has been evolving ever since the term was reclaimed in the 1980s as a means to overcome the binary opposition between heterosexual and homosexual. The editors rely on Robert Mills (Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages, 2015) and David Halperin (Saint Foucault, 1995) to outline this ongoing evolution. The
term queer is described as an umbrella term that more recently is also used to denote a series of non-normative identities with regards to sexuality and gender, but also as regards to race, nation, class, etc. Queer has become synonymous with the “other,” without the “other” having a negative connotation. According to the editors: “queer is a signifier for something that is different from the norm, \textit{whatever that may be}” (3, emphasis mine). In all likelihood, this sentence meant to say: different from the norm, whatever that norm may be. But after reading the volume, “whatever that may be” could just as easily indicate that the authors have refrained from developing an overly strict interpretation of the term queer so as to avoid that certain chapters no longer fitted in the volume they had in mind. It seems to me that the methodological framing of “queerness” is more valuable for some contributions than for others that seem to have some difficulties in justifying their presence in the current volume. It appears that, in the eye of the beholder, everything can be queer, \textit{whatever that may be}. For instance, Sahar Amer has written a beautiful and intriguing chapter about the political influence of Muslim women in the medieval Mediterranean, by focusing on Shajarat al-Durr, a thirteenth-century sultaness of Egypt. The fact that her reign, during tumultuous times no less, has been omitted from history by later scholars is noteworthy, and this sultaness definitely deserves more scholarly attention. But does it suffice to say that ruling Muslim women “queered” political, social, and gender norms during their reign in order to define this chapter as a “queer study”? Similar reservations can be made with regards to other chapters, and a stricter definition of the term “queer” might have resulted in a more cohesive volume.

More care was taken by the editors to outline that other key concept on which this volume is based, namely transculturality, which refers “in the simplest of terms, to phenomena that involve, encompass, or extend across two or more cultures, whether within or transcending political boundaries” (3). Yet Rojas and Thompson rightly refer to Jeff Lewis’s interpretation of transculturality as a phenomenon fraught with struggle and tension as it “emphasizes the transitory nature of culture as well as its power to transform” (4). Here too, some authors were less successful than others in implementing this concept in their narrative, as they focus not so much on the dynamic interaction between Christian and Islamic societies, but provide us with a rather monocultural account. This is for instance the case in the chapter by Elle Lorraine Friedrich. Fascinating as her queer reading of the thirteenth-century French novel \textit{Le Roman de la Rose} is, it cannot hide the fact that there is little evidence of direct transcultural influence on the sexual or homoerotic associations the author discerns between certain types of birds and the names of several characters in the novel. Other chapters then again succeed wonderfully in portraying these transcultural exchanges and reflections on the sexual “other” from a queer perspective. For instance, Robert L. A. Clark offers a convincing queer reading of a bathhouse incident in which a Frankish knight has his and his wife’s pubic hair shaved by a Muslim attendant. This incident is reported in the \textit{Book of Contemplation} by the twelfth-century Arab-Syrian author Usama ibn Munqidh and opens up “a kind of erotic free-play zone where the rules, or customary practices, no longer seem to apply” (228).

\textit{Queering the Medieval Mediterranean} is divided into five sections to set the essays in dialogue with one another. The first section is labelled “Conquests” and contains an essay by Denise K. Filios in which she explores the portrayal of Mūsâ b. Nusayr, the
seventh-century conqueror of al-Andalus, by both an Andalusī and an Egyptian
historian to reflect on the appropriation of al-Andalus as a queer space. The masculinity
of the conqueror is confronted with historiographical theories on Andalusian
exceptionalist discourse and, less convincing, with present-day queerness in the Arab
world. Next, Vicente Lledó-Guillem splendidly compares several early modern epic
poems written in Spanish and Catalan to discuss the political implications of the
representation of the masculine body: the physical attributes of Castilian knights, and
their ability to reject same-sex male desire from their Muslim opponents explains the
supposed “natural” superiority of Castile in the Mediterranean.

The second section, labelled “Femininities,” contains the aforementioned essay by
Sahar Amer, and a chapter by Leyla Rouhi. She analyses the figure of the alcahueta,
a character in medieval and early modern literature. The alcahueta is the so-called
“queer third party,” an old go-between who uses her knowledge of sexual attraction to
facilitate illicit sexual encounters. The notion that the alcahueta renders illicit sexuality
negotiable in medieval Iberian literature is fascinating. But the fact that Rouhi seems
to analyze the actions of the alcahueta in novels by Fernando de Rojas and others
through the lens of female agency, as if these specific characters were existing women
when they are actually fictional creations of male authors, does not do justice to this
literary representation of non-conformism.

The third section, “Literatures,” tackles similar subjects. Edmund Hayes also studies a
go-between: the explicit characters in Ibn Dāniyāl’s Vision of the Beloved. This
intriguing shadow play, produced in thirteenth/fourteenth-century Mamluk Cairo,
contains male and female anti-heroes and -heroines who eschew marriage and
procreation and interact with the audience. His essay is followed by the already
mentioned text by Ellen Lorraine Friedrich.

In the section “Captivities,” Robert S. Sturges skillfully presents the Mediterranean as
an invented region by northern French authors during the Crusades. In so-called chantefables they channeled their cultural phantasies and anxieties about the
Islamic other by presenting that other as queer, heretical, gender transgressive, and
sodomitical. Israel Burshatin provides us with a persuasive queer reading of the Segunda Partida, a thirteenth-century Castilian law code by King Alfonso of Castile
and León, which illustrates that same-sex couples might have been legally recognized
in the sense that friendship was considered a civic virtue with legal consequences at
times when one or both parties were held hostage or were enslaved during the many
hostilities between Castile and its Muslim neighbors.

The final section “Encounters” continues with the Segunda Partida, as Gregory S.
Hutcheson compellingly delineates the cross-confessional and multicultural textuality
present in this law code when sodomy is discussed. The text is indebted to both Roman
imperial law and Aristotelianism, but also to Judeo-Christian scripture and to passages
of the Qur’an dealing with the Sodom narrative and the prophethood of Lot. According
to Hutcheson, the inclusion of these references insured the “mutual intelligibility” of the
sodomy legislation among Christians, Muslims, and Jews (201). In doing so, this essay
perhaps comes closest to the original aims of the editors as outlined in the introduction,
along with the mentioned chapter by Robert Clark on bathhouse encounters in the Levant.

This volume has ambitious objectives. It wants to argue that “through both queerness and sexuality, neighboring civilizations had access to, and knowledge of common shared experiences” (10). As a whole, this volume does not fully realize these ambitions. But all in all, the separate chapters are likely to incite further debate in the field of gender studies and inspire new research on the Mediterranean as a site of interaction and dialogue.

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