



Lesbian Possibilities

Desire in Premodern England, France, & Italy c. 1300-1700

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Abstract

Throughout history there is evidence of a steady, though fragmented, presence of women-loving-women, and, as Bennett reminds us, the term “lesbian” has been in use for over 1,000 years.

My MA research firstly documents lesbian possibilities in the history of cultural representation through case studies drawn from the French courtly love tradition, Italian images of Paradise, and an English Memorial Brass.

Using the lenses of performativity, gender, and scopic economy, my project will set out precise cultural parameters for premodern lesbian possibilities in Europe. In response to a history of silences, I will analyze concrete examples of lesbian desire and constructed identity in visual cultures of the past.

Research Questions

1. What were the spaces and categories of lesbian possibility within the gendered scopic economy in premodern England, France, and Italy?
2. How did audiences understand representations of female and lesbian desire in the context of European courtly love?
3. How can these visual histories be made “usable” (Faderman) and accessible for contemporary lesbian-identifying women and femmes looking to build collective memory for their contemporary communities?

Key Words

Lesbian, Lesbian Desire, Premodern, Visual Culture, Visibility and Invisibility, Gender, Scopic Economy, Embodiment, Performativity



Contribution to Knowledge

1. This visual history of premodern lesbian identity is an essential contribution to the fields of Art History and Gender Studies.
2. Lesbian histories are growing (Bennett, Watt, Kłosowska), but premodern histories are still scarce and a premodern lesbian-specific art history has yet to be undertaken.
3. Understanding how lesbian identities were conceptualized in the past creates a greater sense of identity and resilience in the present.

Methodology

This project is structured to (1) narrow the search for the lesbian to “traces of affectional or sexual interest between women,” (2) “theorize about a complexity of responses” to premodern conceptions of lesbian [social and erotic] behaviours, and (3) challenge the heteronormative defaults of premodern art history.

I analyze my case studies as: (1) Context-specific conceptions of sexuality, which destabilizes cisheteronormative presumptions (Lochrie and Whittington), and (2) part of “scopic economies” operating as part of context-specific power structures which are built and maintained by the gendered gaze (Caviness).

I will visit each case study *in situ* to produce high quality images and descriptions. This will facilitate the visual analysis portion of my research, and I will then contextualize my case studies using contemporaneous texts and artworks.

Case Studies

1. Giovanni di Paolo, *Paradise*, 1445, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Tempera and gold on canvas, transferred from wood. 18 1/2 x 16”.

3. Brass of Agnes Oxenbridge and Elizabeth Etchingham, c. 1480, Etchingham Parish, Sussex. Less than 2’ tall.

2. *Turin MS. L. II. 14. f. 394v*, c. 1311, University Library in Turin (the romance of *Yde et Olive*). Pigment and gold leaf on parchment.

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