

History is Gay Podcast
Episode 2: Cloistered Queers

Introduction

Leigh: Hey folks. Before we get started, we just want to let you know that we have a section of this episode that comes with some content warnings. So if that's a concern for you, please check out our show notes for time codes where you can skip particularly sensitive subjects. Now, on with the show!

♪ Short clip from Intro Music plays ♪

Leigh: Hello, and welcome to *History is Gay!* A podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-embies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ Intro Music ♪

Leigh: Hey, folks! I'm Leigh.

Gretchen: And I'm Gretchen.

Leigh: And in this episode of *History is Gay*, we're talking about lesbian nuns—

Gretchen: — [sing-song] and gay monks!

Leigh: Yes! [Laughs] I'm so excited. Everybody was so wonderful and generous with all of their comments and responses to our first episode and we're pleased as punch, and now we're really really excited to tell you about some more super queer people from the annals of history.

Gretchen: I know. We got our first fan email. Thank you so much, Alex, shout out. We loved it, it was awesome to hear from you.

Leigh: This episode is going to be a little bit of a different format than the last one, just cause this is gonna be one of our episodes where we're talking more about a concept throughout history or a specific time period and we'll be talking about some folks who are examples of them, but we'll have kinda different episodes where we focus on people or a group of people and others where we focus on certain concepts or phenomenon.

Word of the Week: *Adelphopoiesis* and *Affrèment*

Gretchen: We're also gonna- we're gonna start this podcast with something a little bit different. We are going to start with a fun segment and it's going to be a word of the week! And this episode's word of the week is... actually two. But they're closely related so we're gonna fudge it a little bit. And the words are *adelphopoiesis* and *affrèment*, both of which mean 'brother-making'.

So, *adelphopoiesis*, it's a Greek word. And it refers to a ritual in pre-reformation Christian and Orthodox traditions that joins same-gender individuals, usually men, in a bond of what they called 'spiritual brotherhood'. We have texts mentioning such unions from the 8th to the 16th centuries, and many of these unions took place between clerics and laity. So, a member of the church authority structure and then someone from the general populace. Or even between two lay members, such as Saints Bacchus and Sergius, who will eventually get their own episode, who were soldiers in the Roman era.

We also have evidence of a few that took place between two clerics, such as Saint Theodore and Thomas, the Patriarch of Constantinople, from the 7th century.

Now, much has been debated about whether this is a purely spiritual or may also have had a romantic or even sexual component to it. And what's intriguing to me is that some of the wording of the vows in this ceremony would not have been out of place in a straight marriage of the time, and there's actually evidence that they were almost word-for-word copies of vows that would have been used in a heterosexual marriage.

For example:

*Send down most kind Lord,
The grace of your Holy spirit.
Upon these your servants,
Whom you have found worthy to be united, not by nature,
But by faith and a Holy spirit.
Grant unto them your grace,
To love each other in joy,
Without injury or hatred,
All the days of their lives.*

Other similar elements between religious brother-making unions and heterosexual marriages at the time include the clasping of hands, the binding of hands with a stole, an exchange of kisses, and the receiving of holy communion, as well as a feast after the ceremony.

Now, *affrèment* is, as you can tell, French. And this is a similar practice that was in use in Europe and Mediterranean cultures, at the same time period. But, it was unrelated to the Eastern Christian tradition of brother-making that I just mentioned. Now, *affrèment* allowed two people to enter into an agreement to form one household and share:

"One bread, one wine, and one purse."

So, it was basically a legal contract for binding people into a single inheritance tradition. There is evidence that in France, such unions were treated with the same legal and social customs as a marriage between a man and a woman, and such an agreement could take place between relatives, like otherwise married brothers or cousins, who didn't want to divide their land. Say they wanted to maintain, like a single inheritance rather than split it up between them. Or even between like, a straight couple if a husband and wife wanted to share an inheritance tradition. But, they did also occur between single, young, unmarried men. Who claimed the bonds of affection and love for each other and were otherwise unrelated by blood. So, [emphasizes] probably gay men.

In short, all that to say gay men weren't the only ones to enter into this kind of union, or what we would call gay men. But, them doing so would've raised no eyebrows because it was common for people in other situations to use the same kind of ceremony. So if two men who loved each other romantically wanted to have a legal contract kinda solidifying that, then they could use *affrèment* and no one would really look askance at them.

So, in his book *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* by John Boswell, he mentions a similar union in use among the Irish during the 12th and 13th centuries. So, this wasn't even limited to the religious tradition or even to like, the Mediterranean, you know, Southern France area. It seemed to be fairly common in Europe. But, I mean, the one caution I would say is that even if these practices were some kind of a marriage, like we could think of it that way, between two men, medieval views of sex prevent us from making a direct one-to-one correlation with modern notions of gay marriage. Specifically because, within the church context, especially within monastic communities, so the original brother-making that I mentioned, the *adelphopoiesis*, sex would have been frowned upon, and was even frowned upon for heterosexual unions outside of procreation.

So, that leads us very nicely into our main topic, starting with the discussion of the medieval views of sex.

Social Context: Medieval Views of Sex & Sodomy

So, without further ado, cloistered queers.

[Both hosts cheer]

We're pretty proud of that consonance [laughs].

Leigh: I think you came up with that one?

Gretchen: Yeah, I think I did- I love puns! Like, I can't help it if I can-

Leigh: This is gonna be a very punny podcast-

Gretchen: Oh yeah. If we can find a pun, you can bet we will use it.

Leigh: We will.

Gretchen: Yeah, cause I love them. Anyway, back to [laughter] less fun topics, like the views of sex in the Middle Ages, [exasperates] which was definitely not fun!

Leigh: Now, main thesis. You know, the social context in the Middle Ages for sex was sex is for baby-making. Not for fun.

Gretchen: Nope, no fun.

Leigh: Don't have sex for fun. Dats...dats a no-no. A lot of what was believed around this time period came from Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Came up with the idea of 'natural law' and 'sodomy'. So, basically anything but penis in vagina sex for procreational purposes, make more babies, was contrary to that natural law. Basically, God designed sex to make babies, so anything that couldn't result in a potential pregnancy, only done for that purpose, was considered unnatural. He specifically categorized four different categories of vice under... against nature under lust, which were masturbation, bestiality, coitus in an unnatural position, and,

"...Copulation with an undo sex; Male with male, and female with female."

Prior to this, sex was primarily viewed in a dominant, or penetrator, and submissive, penetrated, terms. And the only restriction in the Roman empire was that free-born male citizens couldn't be submissive.

Gretchen: Yeah, that like, Aquinas represents a shift in the thinking about sex. And for Christians prior to and after Aquinas, sex was generally perceived of as something that was dirty. Especially due to its ties to the body and what they would've considered base desires. And often frequently associated with women who were considered to be more bodily, as opposed to males who would've been considered more like intellectual or spiritual and had of had like, a higher plane of thought and closer to God. So, women at the time would've been considered like, 'filled with lust' and like, just like existing as a woman was a temptation for men.

Leigh: Mhmm. And they were considered way more susceptible to

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: Persuasion, a lot of ideas of like if even the thought of sex was mentioned next to a woman then she would [yells] go crazy! She would have all the sex! And that-

Gretchen: Which is like, super funny to think about because that's like the opposite.

Leigh: The opposite now, right?

Gretchen: Women don't want sex [laughs]. So before we talk a little bit more we wanna have an aside, and we mentioned the term 'sodomy' before. And we thought it was important to kinda define what that means because as Inigo Montoya says, [vocal impression]

It does not mean what you think it means.

[laughs] At least not for this period in church history. So according to certain traditions like Aquinas, it seems like any kind of sex act that could not lead to pregnancy was considered sodomy. As Leigh pointed out, you have things like masturbation, oral sex, even sex for pleasure like, was all kinda... while it was categorized as separately, this was all lumped under kind of unnatural... unnatural sex. Sex against nature, which has... in some places been described using the term 'sodomy', and when we typically think of the term sodomy we think of anal sex between men, but at this time period in history that wasn't entirely the case.

Leigh: Yeah, there- it was changing a lot depending on what authorities you were talking to at the time. It was all generally under the umbrella of, "This is bad", but there was a lot of back and forth as you go through the centuries, with what was actually 'sodomy' versus a lesser sin against nature under lust versus, you know, "What is fornication?", versus a whole bunch of other things.

Social Context: Sex Between Women in the Middle Ages

Gretchen: Right, but like if you're reading like an ancient text, like a text from this time period and you see 'sodomy', but the people listed are female, like don't- don't be too freaked out.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Because they just used that term differently than we did. Which brings up the point that like exactly where women loving women sex fits into this is, like, super complicated.

Leigh: Super complicated. We actually kinda went our separate ways in our- in our research for this episode. It was like, "Okay, I'll take on the nuns, you take on the monks, and we'll come back to each other and we'll kinda present to each other what we found out." We came to a point where we were like, "Wait, hold on. Your definition of 'sodomy' is different than my definition of 'sodomy'. Let's talk about this."

And what I found, when I was researching things about these nuns is that, in this time period [emphasizes] nobody knew what to do with two people with vaginas having sex because they just couldn't conceptualize it. They just couldn't conceptualize it happening.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: At all. So, sometimes it's listed with sodomy, sometimes it's not, depending on what kind of sex acts are happening, changes the definition of it, changes the punishment of it, which we'll get into it. But a really really great book that y'all should check out- and we'll link in our sources on our website is a book called *Sapphistries* by Leila Rupp, and she has a really great comment in there, she says,

"In the eyes of the male authorities, female same-sex sexuality was, at times, inconsequential, at times, unimaginable, and at times, threatening."

So there are different things going on depending on what these women were doing with one another that would cause them to be all, "Oh yeah, sure! Everything is fine!", or like, "Wait, no. Uh, we gotta put a stop to that right now."

Gretchen's gonna go into a bunch of stuff with some monks, but I really wanted to preface everything with what most of the sources that I read prefaced all of their research with, which is the fact that there isn't much of a record at all in European Christian history of female sex sexuality, mostly because, like I said before, they had difficulty believing it could happen or how. How- what were they doing? [laughter] Although you know, 'lesbian', and I say 'lesbian' in quotes, you know, 'lesbian' did not exist at this point in time as an identity, as you know as anything- it was what two women are doing with one another. But lesbian sexuality was recognized as a sin and a crime, but it didn't receive nearly the attention that was given to male homosexuality in legal codes and theological treatises. Judith Brown, in her book, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, mentions,

"... In a period of roughly 1,500 years, they amount to no more than a dozen or so scattered references."

So we don't have a lot to go on, but there's also a lot of talk about how the fact that there isn't a lot in these documents that goes to show that there was a lot of ignorance where it came to. Like we were talking about before, there's not just a huge gap in history for no reason.

Gretchen: Right, right. Yeah, I mean, you have to remember that the people writing these histories are men.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: And speaking of [laughter] so they're probably not going to like, know much, if anything about what women do together in bed, nor would they be even really particularly interested because they're men. They wanna write about other men. Honestly.

Leigh: Speaking of history being written by men...

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Yeah, so the view of human sexuality was pretty phallocentric. Nowadays, you know– we understand that, you know, there are lots of men whose lives do not revolve around having a phallus, but in the Middle Ages, that was pretty much... pretty much what was going on. So there were a lot of thoughts that kind of, any sex that happened between women couldn't actually happen because a man, and thus a penis, was not involved and so it just– it wasn't sex.

Women were more easily– were thought to be more easily given to debauchery, but it was believed that all of their sexual desires were toward men. So there was a lot of conversation about there being nothing a woman could do to long satisfy another woman, despite capability for attraction. There were a couple of people who were like, [imitating] “Ah, let them– let them have their fun. Let them do their rubbing or whatever they do.” And I say ‘rubbing’ not as like me, Leigh, the podcaster in 2017, I say this as like–

Gretchen: That's the language they use.

Leigh: Like folks in the 12th century were using ‘rubbing’. There's– what I was talking about before about the fact that there's not really a lot in historical documents is very telling. I have a quote again by Judith Brown that,

“Their neglect of the subject in law, theology, and literature suggests an almost active willingness to [emphasizes] disbelieve.”

And in a lot of, you know, penitentials and court documents the things that women were doing with each other were often referred to as,

“The sin which cannot be named.”

Or,

“The silent sin, peccatum mutum.”

Which was referred to by Gregorio Lopez in the 16th century. There was also a lot of discussion about the fact that because women had weaker natures and were so, you know, easily drawn towards debauchery that, better leave it unmentioned.

Gretchen: So you're saying that like, lesbian sex in the Middle Ages was Voldemort.

Leigh: Yeah, basically [laughter]. Yeah. You heard it here, folks. Medieval lesbian sex is Voldemort.

Gretchen: Is Voldemort.

Leigh: Is Voldemort. What is it, 'The Do That Shall Not Be Named'.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh, I love that! Oh, what was that other thing that we were talking about earlier, there's that quote about where someone called it 'thigh fencing'?

Leigh: Oh yeah, yeah there's- we'll do a whole episode on courtly poetry later, but there's a medieval text by this French guy who tried- who describes sex between two women very condescendingly and very confusedly at the lack of penis,

*They bang coffin against coffin without a poker to stir up their fire,
They join shield to shield without a lance,
They don't bother with a pestle in their mortar,
They play the game of thigh fencing.*

Gretchen: So we've decided that 'thigh fencing' and also 'shield banging' should be the new euphemisms?

Leigh: These are my- I mean 'thigh fencing' is now my new favorite thing.

Gretchen: I mean, right? That sounds fucking amazing! [sarcastic] Ha, ha, ha.

Leigh: We've got– we have– Guys, we have almost a thirty-page outline so we're gonna try to figure out how to do this in not too much longer than probably an hour. But–

Gretchen: There's so much good stuff!

Leigh: We have– we have so much that we're going to be linking to for you guys to continue looking into, 'cause there's so much material we could talk about. This could actually legitimately be a three hour podcast.

Gretchen: Totally.

Leigh: But, moving on from that, there was also a belief that women were having sex with each other in order to actually emulate men. Since women were thought to be inferior, the idea of them having sex with each other could only be like, [sarcastic] "Oh! Well, obviously they're trying to elevate themselves to the status of perfect men!" Which you would think would be really counterproductive, but Judith Brown, again, I'm gonna be referencing her, a lot. She's basically one of the foremost authorities on medieval women's sexuality. But, she says,

"While such reasoning didn't condone sex between women, it placed it within a long Western tradition in which women, like all other creatures, tried to ascend to a more perfect state of nature. Paradoxically, it tended to reaffirm, rather than subvert, the assumed biological hierarchy in which "the body of the man is as superior to that of a woman as the soul is to the body."

Gretchen: Yay, patriarchy!

Leigh: [Sarcastic cheering] Yay! Yeah, oh I skimmed over this also, but basically... in addition to the idea that women were doing this to emulate men there was also the thought that sex between two women could only have one purpose which was to enhance and glorify "real sex." Sex with a man. So, again some of the contemporaries of the period were saying that it was okay to ignore lesbian sexuality.

Gretchen: Right, so as is, you know, we see nowadays the idea that lesbianism or any kind of you know, woman-loving-woman relationship is clearly just secretly all about men. So apparently men have been saying that for hundreds of years.

Leigh: Yeah, it's so pervasive.

Gretchen: [Sarcastically] Who knew.

Leigh: God. Yeah. But the main thesis to get at here, right, is that there's a lot of disagreements over what punishments and what treatment to give various female sex- sexual acts called for due to the fact that there was so much ignorance about what they did. So, early penance manuals that included sex between women as a sin, didn't call for severe penalties. They were given more leniency than male-male sex acts, often because they considered it a lesser offense. Even going so far as the literal punishment for unmarried or widowed women who "practices vice with a woman" was the same as if she "practices solitary vice" AKA masturbation. So that would have been three-years penance. It tended to be more if she was married, and in contrast, "fornication between males was to be atoned through a penance of ten years." And that's from *The Penitential of Theodore of Tarsus*...

Gretchen: Wow!

Leigh: Who was in the 7th century. And then even a century later, in *The Penitential of Bede*, it looks specifically at transgressions between nuns, it's saying:

"If nuns with a nun, using an instrument, seven years."

And there's a question there of whether it was a greater penalty because of their vows or because there was a dildo involved.

Gretchen: Hm... now you're actually trying to imitate a man, I guess, according to them.

Leigh: [drawn out] Exactly. Yeah.

Gretchen: This is where it gets into the realm of threatening.

Leigh: Oh, super threatening! Yeah, once a dildo comes into the picture, things got really serious. Because, at that point you're— crossing gender lines. There's the introduction of this false phallus, and suddenly it becomes a way more serious deal. But, even among that, there's still lots of disagreements over how to handle it! You have this Italian jurist, Prospero Faranacci, who was circa 1554 to 1618. He gives clarifications and distinctions about what different things are happening and what punishments there are. So, he says,

"If a woman simply made overtures to another woman, she should only be denounced publicly. If she behaves corruptly with another woman only by rubbing, she is to be subject to an unspecified punishment. And if she "introduces some wooden or glass instrument into the belly of another," she should be put to death."

It was definitely more harsh if one party was attempting to dress and live as a man, trying to "usurp the functions of men".

Gretchen: Which is like— not, funny is the wrong word, but I guess ironic that they're like, [sarcastically imitating] "Oh, they're just trying to imitate men!" but as soon as they perceive women as actually trying to imitate men they're like, "Oh no! Kill the witch!", which we will talk about witches.

Leigh: Oh yeah, we're super duper gonna talk about witches. [Sings] Let me tell you. [Laughs] But, I just wanted to— I can't not quote something here, and even though this woman is not a nun, which we're gonna get to our nuns very quickly, but there was a woman in 1477, Katherina Hetzeldorfer, who was tried for "a crime without a name" in Speyer, Germany. And drowned in the Rhine because she seduced some other women. And she called herself a husband and she fashioned a dildo. Which, according to one of the women she seduced was "*an instrument with a red piece of leather at the front filled with cotton, and a wooden stick into it*". It is a tool she described as "*a huge thing. Big as half an arm.*"

Gretchen: That's a pretty big dildo.

Leigh: That's a very large dildo.

Gretchen: I mean, that's impressive. No wonder the dudes felt threatened.
[laughs]

Leigh: Yeah, super much. Yeah. So that's what I've got as my precursor to a lot of the things that you're gonna hear about.

Gretchen: Right, which is interesting because a lot more of the relationships that I read about had a very clear non-sexual component to it, so it's really interesting to see the flip side of that, where the relationships between women seemed to have a very strong, or at least stronger sexual component to them. Whereas my research into what we would call gay monks seemed to have a much more ascetic- component to them. So, it brings up the question, when you have these two side by side, just how sexual were these relationships?

A life of asceticism would have been very highly prized. What we today describe as 'asexual' probably would have been the medieval Christian ideal, if they had that terminology. The ideal of the lack of sexual desire for someone else. They probably would've been like, "Yeah, cool! Yeah, that's perfect! Better to devote your life to God."

And thus, if we read of same gender relationships in this time period, it behooves us to think that they may not have quite been as sexual as maybe we tend to think of them. Now, some of them clearly were, because I mean, you just gave us several examples [laughs] of like, women being clearly punished for having- for performing sexual acts with other women. And there are equally records of men being punished for sexual acts with other men. Clearly sex is still happening, but it is important to think about. They would not have understood our understanding of sexual orientation or identity in the same way that we do today. And I think it should caution us to jumping into the assumption that these relationships were the same as, like, we might think of, especially in the brother-making or the spiritual bonds. Or even, as we'll talk later, we'll read several love letters or love poems that these people would have written to each other, and those things

can take place without any kind of like sexual component because they would have understood sex very differently back in that time.

So actually there's this adorable little comic that both of us have seen on Tumblr that we'll link in the resources section because it, like I can't even describe it here but it so perfectly summarizes the medieval and Middle Age views of sex. Especially in like, cloistered communities like monasteries and nunneries. That the vast majority of them would've had this idea that like, avoiding sex was something that was very positive, so like, yeah, like, form really strong emotional, even romantic bonds. At least what I have found with the monks was like, "Yeah! That's highly valued. To have very strong emotional and spiritual bonds with your fellow monks, just like, don't have sex with them."

Leigh: Would you, perhaps, consider these "special friendships"?

Gretchen: Yes! Yeah, oh, they're special friends. [Sing-song] Special friends!

Leigh: But for real, I mean that's— that's a term that actually came up a lot in my research, specifically this 'special friendships' or 'particular friendships' among women specifically in these cloistered communities, in these convents.

Social Context: Escaping Heteronormativity through Monasticism

Gretchen: Right, in what seems to be in a lot of the like, monastic circles, so the male monastic circles, they would have used the term 'brotherhood'. Like, they would've been brothers. [agreeing noises] Like you would talk about, "My dearest brother." If you were— cause like it has to do with— I think it specifically has to do with the understanding of their relationship to each other— like the use of familiar language is very common in monasteries. Like, your brother was your fellow monk and your father was like the abbot, or any male and higher authority in these situations would have been father. And we have evidence of relationships in both of those configurations, between like [air quotes]"brothers", you guys can't see me I'm making quotes, [laughter] "brothers" .

Or, if it was a relationship between like someone who had higher authority in the church and therefore their, you know, partner you would call them, I'd guess you'd call them father. But, that's where it comes from, so it's interesting that like, there seems to be a very distinct terminology for women in this situation that I did not see specifically used of monks, [agreeing noises] so this kind of like, particular friendship was not- I didn't see this terminology used as much. Interesting.

Leigh: Well, and it's funny too, because I see kind of the opposite in that there's a lot of discussion of 'friend', these bonds of special friendship, but sister was still very much just like, my sister and my mother in the monastic community as these are my- my kind of compatriots.

Gretchen: Oh, it didn't have that added layer. Interesting. Yeah, another thing to think about in this general topic is why someone might choose to become a monk or a nun. Why don't you kick us off, Leigh? Why would a woman choose to become a nun?

Leigh: There are a lot of different reasons. I mean, as you can probably imagine, in the Middle Ages, it was required for a woman to [yells] belong to a man, and pretty much at that time the only option was, marriage. And so, going into a religious life oftentimes allowed that "marriage" to be of a divine nature, surrounded by a female community. All of these- if you've never kind of looked into the tradition of being a nun and being in a convent, it's all kind of couched into this devotion to God as like being a sort of bride of Christ kind of thing, or bride of God kind of thing. Not to the certain extent that some of these mystics and some of these religious women go to, [sarcastic laughter] but it's all kind of couched in this marriage iconography and ideology.

But yeah, so going into religious life allowed women to be released from the burden of marriage. And another big thing is that women often joined religious life in pursuit of being able to study. Women did not have access to education. Many women were illiterate- in this time period, and so if you were a woman who wanted to learn to read, to learn to write, to learn to be able, to pursue any sort of secular study, nevermind even religious study, your only option was to go to a convent.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Furthermore, they were often a place for women who had zero actual religious vocation, and instead were places for women who were kind of discarded from society. Brown, again, says,

Convents were notorious for their loose moral standards and for their sexual license. Which is not surprising because they were less often the homes of women with a strong religious vocation than warehouses for the discarded women of middle-class and patrician families.

Gretchen: Right, if you had like an unwanted daughter or a daughter that you couldn't get married off by a particular age, I mean you'd- you'd send her to a convent because-

Leigh: Send her to the nunnery.

Gretchen: Yep, yep get thee to a nunnery.

Leigh: Which I guess, I guess, you- you found some similarities there-

Gretchen: Yeah! It is interesting. There are some very similar threads there for monastic communities-

Leigh: At least in the idea that there's- it comes down to a, "Ah...I don't want to get married!" kind of thing.

Gretchen: Right, yeah! One of the articles that I read, the article that I was reading, his name is Toby Johnson, he argues that,

"Medieval monks experienced homosexuality as the formation of deep personal friendships and deep community with other monks."

So he's talking specifically about male homosexuality in the Middle Ages. Such 'monastic homosexuality' as he calls it, was centered on service. So, the monks lived lives of simplicity and service to others in exchange for not having to be heterosexual. Now, the sex wasn't the point, the point was that they were given an opportunity to serve with other same-sex friends,

without having to get married or have children. So it may have been, as for many women, an escape for men-loving-men in the medieval period for a life outside of a heterosexual marriage.

But this was a life that was still highly prized and respected by society. So you could have like, a vocation. Like, if you wanted to join a monastery no one would judge you for that. In fact, many would say you were being called to a higher form of life. So whether you actually perceived of yourself as having a religious vocation, it was still very well respected in the community. Unlike what we saw last time in our last episode with piracy, which seems to have kind of the same function, in that it exists outside of traditional societal standards, but piracy was pretty heavily like judged and stereotyped by mainstream society. It was considered kind of outside, but in a negative way. Whereas monastic communities, and it sounds like nunneries were, would have been outside societies but in a positive way. There still would've been a level of respect for— at least, for men who joined a monastic order. The only tradeoff was a vow of chastity. And again, how— to what degree they kept that— I mean, you never know. But, that was like the trade off. You don't have to have sex with a woman, just don't, don't have sex.

Leigh: Don't have sex.

Gretchen: And probably for a lot of men that would've been a pretty good tradeoff. [Laughs] Because we also know that some of the monks were having sex with one another. So, clearly they didn't take their vows of chastity quite as seriously as I'm sure the higher church authority would've liked them to. And then there's always a question of if they weren't having sex, why did — you know, tracts like the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, and I think that there are similar, like, rule books for nunneries, have very specific rules about when and how men could be sleeping in the same room? They had to have separate bed rolls, there were rules about, you know, how often they needed to be checked on, when they had individual cells. There were like— you know... they had to keep the door unlocked [laughs] so someone could check on them.

Leigh: The exact same thing was happening in the nunneries. Yeah, nuns were also prohibited from sleeping together. They also required a lamp to burn all night in the dormitories, and they were told that nuns should sleep

with their clothes... on. And that, 13th century onward right, monastic rules dictated that nuns had to stay out of each other's cells and leave their doors unlocked so they could be [emphasizes] "checked in on" by the abbess. So there's a lot of consistency here, right? And why are those rules even there if it's not a problem? And that brings us back to St. Augustine, right? Like 423, his sister just had taken holy vows, and he just goes to her and he says: [imitating]

"The love which you bear one another ought not to be carnal, but spiritual. For those things which are practiced by immodest women, even with other females, in shameful jesting and playing, ought not be done even by married women or by girls who are about to marry, much less by widows or chaste virgins dedicated by a holy vow to be handmaidens of Christ."

Gretchen: Right, like if this were not a thing that was happening on the reg, why would Augustine be like, "Okay, now I know you're going to a nunnery but like, please, don't have sex with the other ladies"?

Leigh: Don't don't don't boink other nuns.

Gretchen: Please don't. Doesn't matter who you are, please don't boink the nuns.

[Both hosts begin laughing]

Leigh: That's like please don't feed the like please don't feed the birds. Please don't boink the nuns. [Both hosts continue laughing] Oh, no.

Homoeroticism Among Female Mystics

Gretchen: So, speaking of boinking nuns, you wanna talk about the prevalence of—

Leigh: Yeah! [laughs] You know, we talked a little bit about, just now, about there was enough of an awareness happening...

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: That they were, you know, trying to make rules in these convents to stop it. But, homoeroticism— you have to understand was, absolutely, inseparable from these concepts of divine marriage to Christ. Going so far as to say that a lot of this concentration of Christ suffering— brought up a lot of erotic in general and homoerotic imagery when talking about Christ. And when I say 'erotic,' it's really tied to that idea of like, these base connections with the body. And a lot of times in these texts, Christ's wound in his side is often referred to very erotically in place of like, vaginal imagery. Especially among— mystic women who experience visions.

There's a 14th century mystic and scholar and playwright and musician and everything else, Catherine of Siena—

Gretchen: She's a, she's very well known mystic. Most people, if they have heard of any of the medieval mystic women, they've heard of Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Ávila. Both of whom, [whisper shouts] very gay!

Leigh: Yeah, like super gay.

Gretchen: Super gay.

Leigh: Listen to this, okay, so she describes her— so the scribe that she's talking to right, this is written down from the scribe, when she describes her vision of Jesus.

"Drink daughter, from my side,' he said. 'And by that draught your soul shall become enraptured with such delight that your very body, which for my sake you have denied, shall be inundated with its overflowing goodness.' Drawn close in this way to the outlet of a fountain of life, she fastened her lips upon that sacred wound, and still more eagerly the mouth of her soul, and there she slaked her thirst."

So, a lot of scholars dispute whether this could be understood as a metaphor for maternal nursing or cunnilingus. Or, as you know, I said earlier in our discussion, "Hey baby, get that sweet side pussy."

Gretchen: Get that sweet side pussy, oh yeah.

Leigh: But this is not like a– this is not like a one time thing. There’s a whole bunch of like, close up illustrations in the 14th century of Christ’s wound that just look like a vulva. And devotional texts that went along with it just instruct women to touch and kiss and suck and enter the wound–

Gretchen: [whispers] That’s so gay!

Leigh: Anyway, Christianity is gay. Not to mention, you know, the– huge canon of really homoerotic devotions to the Virgin Mary. Which we didn’t– we don’t get a lot of time to talk about it here, but there’s some other mystic women who really, really, really heavily get into that. There’s a whole– I mean we could get through an entire episode just talking about gay Virgin Mary shit.

Gretchen: Right. I’m down for it. We can talk about that at another point. Something else to look forward to. [Cheers] Yay for Mary.

Leigh: Exactly. Yay for Mary. And there’s a lot of examples of religious women writing and professing love to ‘special friends’ which I mentioned before. Hadewijch, Hildegard of Bingen, a lot of times they were encouraged to avoid these ‘special friendships’. In the 17th century Donatus of Besançon, look I– Gretchen does all the French.

Gretchen: That’s one I don’t know. [Attempts pronunciation multiple times]

Leigh: But he said,

"It is forbidden lest any take the hand of another for delight or stand or walk or sit together."

So um, don’t do it.

Gretchen: Yeah. Interestingly, strangely, well– actually not. Monks were not forbidden from expressing a ‘special friendship’ for each other. Gee, it’s almost like double standards have existed for a really long time, too. In fact, one of the best sources of evidence for love between monks and other members of the church order are love letters and poems typically from prior

to the 13th century. Because, one thing to note is that, in the 1200's, the Byzantine Catholic church— so this is prior to the Reformation, so when I say— when you say Catholic church in this context, this is prior to the split with Protestantism. So in the 1200's, the Byzantine Catholic church in places like France and England began like, a pretty far reaching campaign to end practices that they perceived of as condoning homosexuality.

There's a great book, another book by John Boswell, called *Christianity and the Homosexual Community*, I believe? [Book referenced is titled *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*] Something along those lines. That will also be in our notes. Excellent book. John Boswell is kind of the authority for male homosexuality in the same way that, yeah, Judith Brown is for nuns. So yeah, there was this like wide sweeping attempt to end practices that they perceived as condoning homosexuality. The very— but what's interesting is, as we were mentioning earlier, with like the existence of these laws that seemed to curb these sexual acts, the virulence with which these laws were enacted should tell us that prior to this period in time, love between men and even sanctioned unions akin to marriage, like *adelphopoiesis*, were acceptable within the Christian tradition. Because if this isn't something that's common, why would you crack down so heavily on it?

The Lives and Love Letters/Poems of Gay Monks and Lesbian Nuns

Because erotica was fairly taboo, many of these love poems and letters used spiritual language, especially languages, I mean, of spiritual friendship or brotherhood, as a code for more intimate desire. They would frequently adapt language from Patristic— so Patristic means early, like thinkers and theologians in the Christian tradition are called the 'Patristics' or the 'church fathers'. So they would adapt language from Patristic and even classical writers like Cicero and Virgil and Saint Jerome, when sending these poems to each other.

But, these weren't neutral choices. According to Rictor Norton, another fairly well-known scholar on gay men in history,

"Critics are slowly adopting the view that the medieval gay sensibility is not an accident of literary imitation. But that the literary artifice,

such as the allusion to both pagan and biblical sources, was a vehicle for legitimizing such love."

In other words, they chose the sources and the words that they used expressly to hide in plain sight and legitimize their desire for each other with language from what would've been considered authoritative literary sources.

So it's like quoting Shakespeare. Cause like, Shakespeare is fine, everyone loves Shakespeare. So I can quote, like, Shakespeare, but hide, like, my, like, gay sensibility in the words of like a well-respected author. And that is what a lot of these like gay monks who were writing letters– love letters and love poems to each other were doing. A good example of this kind of, you know, literary artifice, would be the monk Alcuin who lived circa 735 to 804. He was born in England and was the abbot of a monastery at Tours from 796 to his death, and the following letter is believed to have been addressed to Arno, the Bishop of Salzburg, who was attached to one Paulinus of Aquileia, and Alcuin wrote a joint epitaph for both men. He expressed the wish to be commemorated as the third sharer in their relationship. So not just a gay monk, but a poly gay monk [laughs].

So he writes, and I'm just gonna quote a bit of it. We will put the full text of poems and links to where you can find them in our show notes because these are pretty amazing. So, Alcuin writes,

Love has penetrated my heart with its flame, and is ever rekindled with new warmth...

From always licking at your inmost parts, good father, or from bathing your heart my beloved, with tears...

Therefore father, abduct me with your prayers, I beg you.

Then, our love will never be estranged.

Look with joy and with a gladdening heart, I pray,

At these little offerings which great love sends you...

Sacred love is better than any gift,

And so is steadfast faithfulness which flourishes and endures.

So, one thing to note is that the line, "...abduct me with your prayers", is actually a reference to a classical poem about Zeus and Ganymede. And if you don't know anything about Greek mythology, Ganymede was one of the

male lovers of Zeus. So quoting something about a Greek god, who had a gay affair with a young guy named Ganymede is not neutral. You don't just say that to your friends, guys.

Leigh: Well... I mean I say that to my friends [laughs]. All the time. You don't know my life.

Gretchen: "Abduct me with your prayers." I mean, like, yeah... I mean there's- I feel like it's really hard to read this as anything other than like, you know... "Licking at your inmost parts." Yep!

Leigh: I love that.

Gretchen: I know. It's fabulous. It's fabulous!

Leigh: [Sighs] Everything's so good.

Gretchen: I know. Is there anything comparable to this in the nun tradition?

Leigh: Yeah! Actually it's another thing that- that John Boswell has gifted us.

Gretchen: He's a gift.

Leigh: He's a gift. So, I mean there's, you know, like, you know I mentioned before there's not a lot that you can find in history of same-sex affection and love and sexuality in the Christian tradition. But, there are these- this pair of nuns, that we don't know their names, as is the case with a lot of women in history. But, there's this 12th century nun in the Bavarian monastery of Tegernsee who wrote to another nun in two, "*distinctly erotic verse letters*", and she talks of the intimacy and exclusiveness of their relationship.

So the first letter,

*I am weighed down with grief,
For I find nothing
I would compare to your love,
Which was sweeter than milk and honey,*

*And by comparison to which the gleam of gold and silver seems
tawdry....it is you alone I have chosen for my heart...
I love you above all else,
You alone are my love and desire...
Like a turtledove who has lost her mate
And stands forever on the barren branch,
So I grieve ceaselessly
Until I enjoy your love again*

Gretchen: That is super gay.

Leigh: It's super gay, and it's super sweet guys!

Gretchen: It is...

Leigh: Yeah...Aw... I mean I know that I certainly don't write this kind of love letter to just like, my platonic friends.

The second letter, which is probably the most outstanding example of medieval "lesbian literature", is much longer and I'm only going to read an excerpt. But, we're going to post the entire thing in our blog post because you can't- not see the entirety of this. So, these are addressed- we don't know their names, but we do know that there are some initials, so:

*To G., her singular rose, from A.
The bonds of precious love, what is my strength that I should bear it?
That I should have patience in your absence?
It is my strength, the strength of stones
That I should await your return...
When I recall the kisses you gave me,
And how with tender words you caressed my little breasts,
I want to die
Because I cannot see you.
As long as the world stands,
You shall never be removed from the core of my being.
What more can I say?
Come home sweet love!
Prolong your trip no longer.*

*Know that I can bear your absence no longer.
Farewell.
Remember me.*

[Stretches out pronunciation of word] Gay!

Gretchen: That's so gay.

Leigh: "...and how with tender words you caressed my little breasts."

Gretchen: I know, right?

Leigh: Super duper just gals being pals!

Gretchen: Okay, but also like, "*When I recall the kisses you gave me, and how with tender words you caressed my little breasts, I want to die...*" If that is not like, the gayest shit you've ever heard-

Leigh: Big mood.

Gretchen: Big mood. I want to die.

Leigh: The biggest mood. I want to die.

Gretchen: Yup, yup. [stretches out word] Big damn mood.

Leigh: That's like the 12th century equivalent of like, like, "Punch me in the face you're so hot!"

Gretchen: Right? Totally! That's exactly what that is. Oh my gosh, I love it. Ah! It's so good.

So, moving on from the opposite end of the spectrum of unknown overlooked women to one of the most famous-

Leigh: [Laughs] Nice transition.

Gretchen: Literally one of the most famous Christian theologians ever– and look, I have a degree in church history. Like, and I studied this guy and not once ever, [emphasizes] ever, was it ever mentioned that he wrote gay love letters. Alright? Alright? Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm of Canterbury.

He lived from 1033 to 1109. If you don't know who he is, he is a monk and theologian, joined a monastery in Normandy, and became prior and then abbot, and was then made Archbishop of Canterbury. He is most well known for his theological and philosophical treatises, like the *Ontological Argument*, which is one of his defenses for God as "that which none greater can be thought." He's typically credited as the founder of the movement called 'Scholasticism', which is a form of highly logical and intricate critical thought used by academics and scholars of the Middle Ages, and well into the Renaissance. That he had a highly theological view of spiritual friendship and was celibate is– pretty much a given from what we know of his life. But, some of his early letters in Normandy have strong erotic undertones and a sense of frustrated desire and even jealousy that we can't ignore.

His letters include those to Gundulf, the Bishop of Rochester, Gilbert Crispin, the Abbot of Westminster, and Brother William, a monk of *La Chaise-Dieu*. He frequently addressed his letters to these other men as to his 'beloved lover'. So, just– just brothers. Just brothers.

So, to Gundulf,

For whatever I know about you is sweet and joyous to my spirit, but ever I desire for you is the best which my mind can conceive. For I saw you, such that I love you, as you know. I hear you are such a person that I yearn after you. God knows how much. Thus it comes to be that wherever you go, my love follows you. And wherever I remain, my longing embraces you. For since your spirit and mind can never bear to be absent from each other, but unceasingly are intertwined, we mutually need nothing from each other, save that we are not together in bodily presence. But why should I depict to you on paper my affection? Since you do carefully keep its exact image in the cell of your heart. For what is your love for me, but the image of mine for you?

Leigh: I know that's so sweet!

Gretchen: I know right?

Leigh: Somebody write me love letters like this?

Gretchen: Seriously.

Leigh: What the hell! Let's bring this back! Dang!

Gretchen: Yeah!

Leigh: Everybody, 2018 is the year of writing super gay love letters to your super gay fam.

Gretchen: Yes! Totally. To Gilbert;

Sweet to me, sweetest friend, are the gifts of your sweetness. But they cannot begin to console my desolate heart for its want of your love. Even if you sent every scent of perfume, every glitter of metal, every precious gem, every texture of cloth, still it could not make up to my soul for the separation unless it returned the separated other half.

Leigh: [sighs] Oh!

Gretchen: Come on! Like, pining love letters. What's interesting also, is Anselm's response to the increased religious intolerance of homosexual relationships. Because he— right around the time that he died is the time period when the Byzantine Catholic church was cracking down on homosexuality. So, in 1102 the council of London wanted to enact legislation which declared, for the first time in English history, that homosexual behavior was a sin, and they recommended that offending laymen be imprisoned and clergymen be anathematized.

But Anselm, totally straight, not at all gay, Anselm who wrote pining love letters— the Archbishop of Canterbury—, prohibited the publication of that decree, advising the council that homosexuality was widespread and few

men were embarrassed by it or had even been aware that it was a serious matter. He felt that although— sodomites, by which he means people enactively practicing sex for anything other than the purpose of procreation, should not be admitted to the priesthood, confessors should take into account mitigating factors such as age, marital status, before prescribing penance and he advised counseling rather than active punishment.

His letters also appeared during the flowering of homosexual love before fanatical anti-gay prejudice swept across Europe in the 12th century, which again, you can read about in Boswell's, oh here it is, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Another excellent book.

But it's just one of those, like, when you hear someone's like, [imitating] "I'm—I'm a gay ally!" Like that's exactly the kind of vibe I get from Anselm. He's like, [imitating, drawn out] "I— I believe that, that gay men are— should be counseled instead of punished... for totally unrelated reasons to the fact that I wrote pining love letters... to my fellow monks." [sniggering]

Leigh: Totally different.

Gretchen: Not at all related. I don't know what you're talking about.

Leigh: [drawn out] Totally... Oh man. It seems like these— yeah these love letters are kind of all over the place. Cause I found some more— as well.

Gretchen: Yes, tell us.

Leigh: In a really really cool lady, who is my new favorite person ever in the history of history. And, I... is it just going to be like the practice that every single episode of this podcast I say to you, like "Can I go back in time and marry a pirate? Ann Bonny. Or marry a 17th century Mexican nun." Is that— Like that's gonna be a thing isn't it?

Gretchen: Totally gonna be a thing.

Leigh: Because I want to marry Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who is a nun born in 1651 and died in 1695. And she was born in New Spain, AKA colonial Mexico. She's actually considered one of the greatest Latin American poets

and an early feminist, and a defender of women's rights. She was a self-taught scholar, philosopher, composer, poet. She was known as the 'The Tenth Muse' and 'The Phoenix of America'. I can't believe that I'd never heard of this woman, and I now want to consume every piece of media about her.

She was born out of wedlock in Mexico City. She learned to read in her grandfather's house, which was something that was obviously forbidden to girls. At sixteen, she asked her parents permission to disguise herself as a boy to attend university and they refused. And so instead, she entered the convent in 1667, which, like we've said before, was the only place she figured she could pursue an education.

She as- in kind of her own words, writes, she wanted to,

"Have no fixed occupation which might curtail my freedom to study."

She was a really really smart cookie, y'all. She-This lady was a genius. She learned how to read and write Latin at age five. She composed a poem on the Eucharist at age eight. She mastered Greek logic by her teens, and she was teaching kids Latin by age 13. She was a lady-in-waiting to the colonial viceroy's court and under tutelage of Vicereine Eleonora del Carretto, who was the wife of the viceroy where she was lauded for her intellect and her scientific and literary acumen. She had, like, discussions with Isaac Newton. Like they just kinda sat down and had physics conversations.

Gretchen: I-I now declare her the patron saint of all queer lady Ravensclaws. [sniggers]

Leigh: Well it's funny because you say that jokingly, but she actually is considered- so she was never like actually canonized by the male authorities of the church.

Gretchen: Of course not.

Leigh: But she's actually considered like a... kind of an informal saint to the LGBTQ community, especially among Latino feminists. So you say that, as like, "Oh yes, I officially declare..." but for serious-

Gretchen: She is.

Leigh: Really, really cool. So she received— during this time right, when she was in this tutelage, she received several proposals of marriage, of course which she declined—

Gretchen: [Laughs] She...

Leigh: Do you wonder why? Yeah, so she joined one convent really early and then she moved to another one. And in this convent, her nun's quarters were more like an apartment or salon instead of like a bare, ascetic room. She had a 4,000 book library, which was the largest collection of books in Mexico at the time—

Gretchen: Dude, I want to marry her just for her library.

Leigh: And she had—She's so cool! [Laugh] I love her! We haven't even gotten into the really cool shit. She's just super smart. Like Intellectual elite would just come and visit her constantly and she actually— so the viceroy and vicereine of New Spain actually ended up becoming her patrons and they supported her both financially and... you know, just having like a relationship with her, and they actually published her writings in Spain. And she would receive frequent visits from the vicereine, so the viceroy's wife, who is María Luisa de Paredes, and they became passionate, fast friends and there's a lot of question about whether or not they had possible romantic ties between them. I'm gonna say, they hella did.

Gretchen: Were they special friends?

Leigh: They were special friends. She— Juana sent this woman portraits and letters, and she wrote many love poems addressed to her. I have like, three in our outline, and I couldn't decide which one to leave out, so we're gonna put 'em all in here. But I mean, we just have some of these things, so like you'll, you'll see María Luisa referred to sometimes as 'Phyllis'. I couldn't figure out why, we're talking about María Luisa here, so just go with it. But, here's one,

But Phyllis, why go on? For yourself alone, I love you. Considering your merits, what more is there to say? That you're a woman far away is no hindrance to my love, for the soul, as you well know, distance and sex don't count. Can you wonder my love sought you out? Why need I stress that I'm true when every one of your features betokens my enslavement.

Gretchen: That's so good!

Leigh: [clears throat] Gay! Gay! Or another poem titled, *My Lady*,

*I love you with so much passion,
neither rudeness nor neglect
can explain why I tied my tongue,
yet left my heart unchecked.*

*The matter for me was simple;
love for you was so strong,
I could see you in my soul
and talk to you all day long.*

*How unwisely my ardent love,
which your glorious sun inflamed,
sought to feed upon your brightness,
though the risk of your fire was plain!*

*Let my love be ever doomed
if guilty in its intent,
for loving you is a crime
of which I will never repent.*

Gretchen: Holy fuck.

Leigh: Ah, shit. This is so good! I'm not gonna put the third one here, but it's like the classic break up poem. It's pretty great. She says something in here that says, "Go ahead, reject these arms," which I don't know, if I ever break up with somebody again I'm definitely using that. Or if somebody breaks up with me I'm gonna be like, "Uh huh. Go ahead, reject these arms!" But even beyond, like, these love letters to this woman, I want to talk about her role as a women's rights champion, like before a whole bunch of other people. She constantly challenged the clerical authorities' treatment and expectations for women and her place in secular studies. In response to critics of her writing, especially, this, this guy, Father Antônio Vieira, who wrote under the pseudonym, 'Sor Filotea', telling her to focus on prayer and give up her writings. Like, [imitates Father Antônio Vieira's voice] "You shouldn't do that! Women need to just kinda sit and pray, they shouldn't be writing."

She writes this huge response letter which defended women's right to education, and there are some savage attacks on male leadership. She says this,

"Oh how much harm would be avoided in our country..."

And then it's paraphrased, if women were basically able to teach women, in order to avoid the danger of male teachers in intimate settings with young female students. Hm, relevant.

She says,

"We need learned women to avoid the perils of young girls being taught by men."

Gretchen: Preach.

Leigh: And she also, like, later on in this quotes an Arogonese poet saying,

"One can perfectly well philosophize while cooking supper."

Gretchen: Write that on my tomb! Man...

Leigh: Right? She just– she just goes for it! And so, in response, like by 1693 the Inquisition basically threatens her, it's like "Er.. no." The Archbishop of Mexico is like, "This is– you can't talk like that." So she unfortunately ended up being silenced. She decided to stop writing rather than risk censor. But, it's funny, like she– there's a document in 1694 where she "agrees", you know, like "agrees" in quotations to undergo penance but she's like, really sassy about it. She signs it *'Yo, la peor de todas'*; 'I, the worst of all women.' She either sold or had all of her books and musical and scientific instruments confiscated and unfortunately most of her writing was destroyed. But, what I love about this is that, those that survived were saved by the vicereine, by María Luisa, so you know this may not have even just been a one-sided thing. It's fantastic.

Gretchen: That's amazing.

Leigh: Yeah, she died at the age of 46 in April 1695 after taking care of other nuns stricken by the plague.

Gretchen: What a good–

Leigh: So yeah. So I love her. She's the best.

Gretchen: She sounds like the best. So, much, much less of a badass but equally awesome is Abbot Baudri of Bourgueil, I– this is a french word I'm not that great with. Sorry! I even get them wrong, who lived from 1046 to 1130. He lost his chance at a bishopric to one of the lovers of the Archbishop of Tours, in 1097, but eventually became the Archbishop of Dol near Mont Saint-Michel in 1107, and he wrote literally hundreds of love letters and poems. Now, I'm not exaggerating when I say literally, I mean actually literally. We have literally hundreds of love letters– that this guy wrote. That include snippets like the following that was written to his friend, Walter,

"And I pray that you cherish me with your love. If you wish to take up lodging with me, I will divide my heart and breast with you. I will

share with you anything of mine that can be divided. If you command it, I will share my very soul. You will be lodged completely within my breast and will continue as the greatest part of my soul. The name of monk would make such conversation endure forever, so that you could long enjoy our true love. "

Being made a monk would allow for Walter and Baudri to enjoy such conversation forever. Clearly implying that the monastic life allowed for men joined by love to be together. One can even infer that Baudri may have been implying that they could even make their love officially sanctioned by the bonds of brother-making.

In another letter to a friend, Baudri wrote,

"Oh, that I had been my own messenger. Or been that letter which your hand softly touched. And that I had had then the same power to feel I have now and that you could not recognize me until I wanted you to. Then, I would have explored your face and spirit as you read. That is, if I could have restrained myself long enough. The rest, we would have left to nature and the gracious gods."

Umm...I don't know what the rest is, but uh... sounds pretty... sounds pretty gay. And in yet another letter Baudri writes,

"You were always friend and companion of my labor, and it seemed to me that you shared in my journey. Never did my soul forget you. Neither while traveling, nor while taking care of other things. If I could do nothing else, I would daydream of you. Many dreams created for me images of you."

Aw... Baudri has such good friends.

Leigh: Such good friends.

Gretchen: Such good friends.

Leigh: God, what's the equivalent of 'gals being pals' for dudes? Just—Oh, wait. My brain just went to 'just bros being 'mos'. [Gretchen sniggers] Which

is the opposite affectation. But I mean, I guess gals being pals has just become synonymous with queerness so, we've got gals being pals and bros being 'mos.

Gretchen: Right! So before we dive into Benedetta, who is Leigh's next person, we're gonna talk about Aelred of Rievaulx, who... I really like Aelred. Aelred seems really delightful and I like– he's a very just like pleasant, happy man, who like, seemed to be friends with everybody. Just wonderful– he's really lovely to read about. He lived from 1110 to 1167, and he refers to the relationship between Jesus and John as a 'marriage' and as an example of spiritual friendship between clerics and monks. Interesting. So Jesus and John were married, according to Aelred.

One of the things that he writes on, the need for what he called 'intimate companionship',

"It is no small consolation in this life to have someone you can unite with you in intimate affection in the embrace of a holy love. Someone in whom your spirit can rest, to whom you can pour out your soul, to whose pleasant exchanges as to soothing songs you can fly in sorrow. With whose spiritual kisses, as with remedial salves, you may draw out all the weariness of your restless anxieties. A man who can shed tears with you in your worries, be happy with you when things go well, search out with you the answers to your problems. Whom with the ties of charity you can lead into the depths of your heart where the sweetness of the Spirit flows between you, where you so join yourselves and cleave to him that soul mingles with soul and two become one."

I mean...

Leigh: That just reminds me of the Spice Girls song... [Sings] Two become one. Aw, man. So beautiful.

Gretchen: And there's so many layers to that because the idea of two becoming one is, I mean, that's marriage language! Even in the– like the sacred texts of scripture. Like to these people, Adam and Eve, like the language around Adam and Eve in Genesis is like, two become one, you

know, a man shall leave his father and mother and join with his wife and the two shall become one flesh. They're not talking about one flesh, but they're clearly talking about one soul.

Leigh: Mhmm. Yeah.

Gretchen: And he specifically says a man. I mean, like he specifically is talking about these kinds of intimate bonds with other men. And if you were to have read this, totally contextless, I guarantee people would interpret this as romantic. Like, it's very romantic!

Leigh: Oh absolutely!

Gretchen: Yeah! You're talking about mingling your souls together. Becoming one, like, that's you know, entirely romantic. That's not platonic. And this is a man talking about, you know, the desire to have this kind of romantic relationship with another man. I mean, it's just pretty damn gay.

Leigh: So taking a kind of divergent turn is another lady that I found, Abbess Benedetta Carlini of Pescia, Italy. She was born in 1590, died 1661, and this is— if you wanna read more about this, I highly recommend Judith Brown's *Immodest Acts* which is where her introduction, you know, that I got most of the things about kinda lesbian sexuality in the Middle Ages came from. I cannot go through the entire thing. It's an entire book. I highly recommend you go pick it up if you want to hear more about this. But, this is probably one of the most well known examples of female sex acts in the Middle Ages because of the sheer extent of the documentation that was discovered.

So, she was born in a remote mountain village in Italy, and her father actually committed her to the service of God when she was born after a difficult childbirth that almost killed her and her mother. She started having divine visions when she was a child. She joined a new religious community called the Theatines in 1599 at the age of 9. And at that time, it wasn't like an established convent. It was a loose group of religious women who had come together and were trying to create this community, but it didn't actually become a full enclosure until 1620, and Pope Paul V issued the bull that made them that.

And they were established under the Convent of the Mother of God, and under the protection of St. Catherine of Siena. There's our friend again! And they, at the age of 30, appointed Benedetta as their abbess. But, in her early years in the convent she started having these mystic visions which were accompanied by physical ailments, and these things attracted attention at the convent. She— There's a whole bunch of information in this book, but some of the highlights are that she received the stigmata, so the wounds of Christ, specifically on her hands, which was a really important distinction, and the entire religious community of that area was kind of preoccupied with her visions and her authority.

I thought it was really, really interesting that— during these altered states of her visions, she often didn't admit to knowing what was going on, when she was in these visions. She would have Christ and these various angels speak through her, and that actually allowed her a level of agency to speak and to give sermons, which were not usually afforded to women. So she very, very quickly became a very, very powerful figure. Her visions often featured, like, men trying to kill her, and a lot of times the nuns as well as her, were really afraid that she was not in fact like, receiving holy visions but was beset by demons. Her visions later changed to Jesus speaking to or through her, asking for her hand in marriage and praising her as the "*empress of all nuns*" and all the other nuns in the convent should basically aim to get on her level. [agreeing noises] She was a big deal.

And so according to Benedetta, one night Christ actually came to her and removed her heart from her chest and then three days later, replaced it with his own and assigned her a guardian angel named Splenditello. And Splenditello is really important. And basically through Splenditello, Jesus tells her that he's going to guard her purity and that Christ wants to marry her in a very public ceremony at the convent. And the fact that this was like, so public, the fact that he wanted it to be so publicized, rang a lot of alarm bells for people. [agreeing noises]

Benedetta often spoke in the guise of Splenditello and a lot of the nuns in the convent actually claimed that when she did, her features and her voice even changed to that of like, [imitating] a young handsome boy. And all of these things were witnessed by a young woman named Bartolomea Crivelli,

who was assigned to Benedetta by the mother superior and their– the local priests and convents confessor had appointed to her.

As all of this is going on and these visions and like, kind of mystical events are getting larger and larger, she like– you know she talked about the marriage and like a mystical ring like, appeared on her finger and, you know, all of this crazy stuff.

Gretchen: So they basically verified that her visions were true?

Leigh: Exactly. Right, so, so- and these things were all pinging in the local religious community so, in 1619 there was an investigation but a man came and did all these different tests and examinations to prove the legitimacy of her visions. They examined her stigmata, they did a bunch of interviews around the convent, it lasted 9 different visits, over several months. And this first investigation found that her claims were real and they continued with having her be the abbess.

Fast forward to like, 4 years later, right, she has continued to be the abbess, and she's getting more and more powerful. She's consistently talking to these nuns as like, [imitating] "If you don't behave, I will tell God to send you to hell!" And all of these [agreeing noises] women in the convent are starting to get really frustrated and terrified, right? It's like, oh we– you know she was also frequently known to be meting out beatings of other nuns and, you know, whippings, and a whole bunch of really intense stuff. And so, there's a lot of thought of like, "Hey, at this point these nuns are starting to get so frustrated and resentful", that that's what led to the second investigation and that it was different this time.

So they– as Brown says, she says:

While it was useful to have someone like Benedetta in the convent–

Right, because it got them a lot of funding, it got– 'cause the abbess is also in charge of all the monetary and business transactions of a convent,

–it was also desirable to curb her power.

[agreeing noises] So this second investigation happens in 1622, and it was actually prompted by Benedetta's mystical death and return to life. And at this point, it's uncovered that Benedetta had actually engaged in "immodest acts" with Bartolomea, the woman who had been assigned to share her cell and watch over her when she was being tormented by these visions. These visions that she was constantly having were like actually physically ailing her. So this new investigation actually revealed she had faked her stigmata. There's these really great quotes about these— about women in the convent admitting that they like, saw her like, rushing to a room, and like poking herself and you know, giving herself stigmata in the head and a whole bunch of things.

So she had faked her stigmata, the other miracles, and so that in itself was like, enough to kind of shake people, but what really, really shook these people who were coming in with these investigations, was Bartolomea's confession and testimony that Benedetta had forced several acts on her in the guise of Splenditello.

Content Warning: Discussion of Sexual Violence - 1:10:00 to 1:19:32

So just, content warning here. I'm gonna get into some quotes of some pretty harsh language of some not quite consensual acts. So if that's something you want to skip over, here's the time to do it.

Brown says that, the scribe from the investigations who writes Bartolomea's confession and testimony, she says,

So disturbing was Bartolomea's testimony for the scribe who recorded it that he actually lost his composure.

Like, you can see in the texts, an actual change in his handwriting. It was super neat and orderly up until this very moment, which actually starts to grow illegible.

Gretchen: Oh, wow.

Leigh: And several things are crossed out and had to be rewritten. So, here he writes,

"The sister Benedetta then, for two continuous years, at least three times a week, in the evening, after disrobing and going to bed, would wait for her companion to disrobe, and pretending to need her, would call. When Bartolomea would come over, Benedetta would grab her by the arm and throw her by force on the bed. Embracing her, she would put under herself and kissing her as if she were a man, she would speak words of love to her, and she would stir on top of her so much that both of them corrupted themselves."

When asked whether she thought that she was sinning against nature, Bartolomea answered that,

"To entice her and deceive her further, Benedetta would tell her that neither she nor Bartolomea were sinning because it was the angel Splenditello and not she that did these things."

Sometimes, even Jesus would speak through Benedetta telling Bartolomea that he wanted to marry her and he's gonna forgive her for her past sins. There's a lot going on there. Furthermore, the authorities were trying to figure out exactly what the two nuns– had done. There– judging by what Bartolomea had said, there was no evidence of "material instruments". But, Bartolomea related that Benedetta had grabbed her,

"Hand by force, putting it under herself, she would have put her finger into her genitals and holding it there, she stirred herself so much that she corrupted herself. And also by force, she would put her own hand under her companion and her finger into her genitals and corrupted her."

And things didn't happen just at night. Benedetta offered to teach Bartolomea, who was, you know, much younger and was also illiterate. She offered to teach her to read and write, and often used their study as a place where they sinned. So while teaching her to write, under the guise of Splenditello, again Benedetta would,

"Touch her breasts and her neck and kiss her, telling her words of love."

Benedetta never admitted to having any participation in these acts. Using, you know, Splenditello and Jesus speaking through her as a useful cover. She said that she had no awareness of these things happening. But, in a final investigation, she did admit that these were– you know, she admitted that while she had no recollection of these things and she was not actually aware of these things, she did admit that, hey maybe this wasn't Jesus, maybe these– maybe this was the devil. [agreeing noises]

At this point, she stopped having visions, and she took to living a humble life as an ordinary nun under a new abbess. The authorities apparently decided that the two sisters hadn't committed sodomy. Like we were talking about before, you know...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: That lack of material instrument really made the big difference. Cause otherwise, if they had come to that conclusion, they would have been condemned to death by burning at the stake. But, Benedetta actually lived out the rest of her life in prison in the convent, and Bartolomea just returned to normal life as a nun.

And here I want to insert this kind of questions of consent and participation and what the nature of this relationship was, right? The investigators tried to determine the extent of Bartolomea's cooperation in this. You know, had she willingly made love with Benedetta or had she tried to resist her advances? Bartolomea is always careful to establish that she was forced into the relationship, but it's difficult for historians to determine whether this was an abusive and manipulative situation and that– Bartolomea was coerced and– or at the very least felt uneasy. Right, like– she was unsure about Splenditello at the very least. [agreeing noises]

Or, if Bartolomea is in a very difficult situation, right? Like, is this Bartolomea's only option to avoid even harsher punishment and possible death? Especially when it comes to their, you know, the fact that in the first investigation four years earlier, her descriptions of her relationship with Benedetta are very different. [agreeing noises] The language of violence and

fear isn't there describing like, her nights, her nightly vigils with Benedetta. She says,

"When I was there, by her bed, I was not afraid but felt happiness."

So, [agreeing noises] I mean, it's a really tricky subject, and I don't want to dispute anything that could be, you know, this medieval victim of sexual violence.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: And also, we have no way of knowing these things. And so—

Gretchen: Right! Right. I mean, and we saw that a little bit in our first episode, though I don't think we went into a whole lot of detail. But in our research into, like, piracy and things, and even in the male monastic communities, like, when you have situations where punishment is involved, I think it makes it really hard to figure out exactly what happened. Precisely because, like, there is— I mean there's real... I hate to say benefit but there is in some sense a benefit to describing a situation as coercive because it mitigates punishment. Which isn't to say that like, everyone who does that, means that. But that does make it more complicated because in a society that like, heavily condemns voluntary homosexuality, like and that's the thing. Voluntary homosexuality would've gotten these women killed.

Leigh: Exactly.

Gretchen: And in certain situations with like, male homosexuality as well, you find similar things, which raises a similar question. Is the only reason we have these records because they only happened in abusive situations or is the only reason we have records of abusive situations is because— that was the way that these men knew how to describe their experience in such a way that would not get them killed by an authority that perceive mutuality as so offensive as to be worthy of death.

Leigh: Exactly.

Gretchen: Like, it's so complicated because yeah, we don't want to erase a victim at all. And we also, like, it's not quite so clear cut as just, [agreeing noises] you know, assuming that would imply.

Leigh: As Judith Brown mentions, she says,

We can't know what these two women really felt. But, we have to acknowledge that these documents we have can at least show us what they did.

Right? It's probably the most... the most detailed example of anything that we've seen so far that we've been talking about. It goes specifically into the exact acts. So, it's important to not completely disregard that because this is a manipulative and abusive situation. It's— We want to make sure we're not just sugar coating things and glossing over the not-so-savory parts of our history because we still want to acknowledge it and how— you know, how can we learn from history if we bury the things we're not necessarily proud of?

Gretchen: Right, right. And just like with, with straight history, like the people there are a mixed bag too. And just because someone who we might— classify as someone who falls within the LGBTQ+ experience, just because they are— not a nice person or do some awful things, like, doesn't mean that that applies to everyone. It doesn't invalidate our experience. It just means that we're trying to acknowledge that like, this is someone else who belongs in our history whether they are a pure person or not, "pure" in quotes. We come in all shapes and sizes, too. We come in all sorts of experiences and histories as well.

So yeah, we don't want to sugar coat that as well, cause there are a lot of— I mean not a lot but several other monks— that I could talk about who had, you know, situations where we could talk about pederasty. We could talk about, you know, child abuse within the monastic tradition as well, and that's not... that's not something we can ignore and we will probably had a podcast in the future. I know that's something we'll talk about when we get to the Greco-Roman period, and that's not something we want to ignore.

We want to acknowledge that these are truths that exist within our history, but it doesn't define the entirety of our history. [agreeing noises] It's not who we are as the queer community, but I mean, there are unsavory people within our history as well.

Leigh: And that's kind of what we've got for our main players. We've got a couple of other people that, you know, we just want to really quickly go down the list and say, hey if you wanna learn more about these folks, here's some more people to check out. Gretchen, you wanna talk about some other gay monks who wrote some love letters?

Gretchen: Right, yeah, I highly recommend checking out Rictor Norton who we will link in our show notes, but there are other monks who wrote—yearning love letters and poems like Walafrid Strabo from the 9th century, Marbod of Rennes from the 11th and 12th century, Notker Balbulus from the 10th century. You have Salomo III, the Bishop of Constance from the 9th and 10th century and his writing partner, Waldo. You have Egbert and St. Boniface... I just love the name Egbert, it's hilarious, it makes me giggle, [laughter] from the 8th century.

And, I think what we can take from this is that— this isn't an isolated case of like, one or two monks who were writing love letters and poems to other monks. This actually seems, as we saw with what St. Anselm said in the 12th century, that this actually seems to be pretty common and it may in fact be that there is a connection between the men who chose to go into a life that celebrated strong spiritual or even romantic bonds with other men, which also happened to allow them to opt out of traditional marriage and procreation-driven relationships, and what we call their sexual orientation.

Which isn't to say that all monks are gay, but that it's pretty likely that many of what we would call gay men chose a life that would've allowed them an outlet for their desire without forcing them into sex with women, no matter how joyless that sex would have been. Like, it's like we saw with pirates. Probably not all pirates were queer, but seems interesting that piracy seemed to be like, a kind of lifestyle that was more permissive to that. And maybe the fact that we have more evidence of what we would call queer, LGBT, or, you know, gay lesbian experience that we find much more examples of these in, you know, places like pirate communities or monastic

communities or, you know, nunneries than we do in general society makes sense.

Leigh: Yeah, yeah. Definitely! And in terms of like, you know, on the women's side, there's some more folks that you can look into that we didn't have the time to get more into.

But—we couldn't talk about gay lady nuns without mentioning Abbess Hildegard of Bingen who was a 12th century nun who was born in Germany and she wrote a bunch of music and a bunch of morality plays. She basically bossed around the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. She formed a super close relationship with a younger nun, Richardis, and she like wrote a whole brunch of letters to her, to her mom, begging her to make Richardis stay and not go be an abbess of another convent. She persuaded the Pope to change her assignment and the Archbishop to change her assignment. She basically just didn't want her honey to leave.

Gretchen: [imitating Hildegard] Don't take my girlfriend away!

Leigh: We'll post some of those writings because they are very gay. She also had a huge homoerotic devotion to the Virgin Mary. She's also known for her knowledge of the body and herbal lore, and she has a lot of— was basically like a contemporary of Galin and Aristotle in terms of medieval thoughts on physiology. One of my favorites is she talks about sanguine women. If you know about the four humors, people were made up of like four different fluids in their bodies and all sorts of ailments were the cause of things being out of, you know, place—

Gretchen: Medieval physiology was weird, yo.

Leigh: Super wack, guys. But you know, she says,

Sanguine women. Some women are plump by nature. They have soft and delightful flesh. Are lovable in the embrace of love.

Uh huh. Okay, Hildegard.

Gretchen: She digged some chunky ladies. Which is awesome.

Leigh: She digs some chunky ladies. That brings us around to our 'How gay were they?' sort of thing. And so, we're gonna go by topic.

How Gay Were They?

Gretchen: Right. So, love poems. What do we give it?

Leigh: We're giving a ten out of ten. Really damn gay.

Gretchen: Was really damn gay. Really damn gay. So, yeah. I mean, you guys have listened to us reading these poems. Again, like, as I was just saying, is it all that surprising that like men or women who have strong longings for a romantic or emotional attachments to men with other men or women with other women, is it all that surprising that they would seek out a lifestyle that placed a high value on spiritual bonds while simultaneously disallowing sexual expression with, you know, the opposite gender?

So, maybe there's a reason why so many monks and nuns wrote each other love poems while living in the company of other monks and nuns who preferred same gender company. Seems a bit...

Leigh: Mystical visions. How do we feel about... how do we feel about that, Gretchen?

Gretchen: I would say that sweet side pussy is about an eleven out of ten. That's like, that shits extra gay, man. Like, I don't even know, like it's extra gay. Like, turn that up to eleven!

Leigh: Shits extra gay. Crank that shit to eleven! Yeah. Y'all, just do me a favor, look into it.

Gretchen: We'll put some images with some, I guess a not safe, I guess some not safe for work tag?

Leigh: Yeah. We're gonna post some stuff.

Gretchen: Jesus has a side vulva. [Laughs]

Leigh: We're gonna piss so many people off. It's gonna be great.

Gretchen: It's awesome.

Leigh: And brother making unions to round us out?

Gretchen: I would give that a seven out of ten. I mean, it's pretty gay, but like, from the evidence that we have, we know this was an established custom. So, I mean– it depends. If we're talking about like the legal traditions outside of the religious traditions, like that seems to be like a well established social custom that– specifically gay men, because they were the only ones who could own property, would have taken advantage of in order to, you know, make whatever kind of relationship they wanted to have like, a legally recognized relationship.

When it comes to the spiritual tradition, the *adelphopoiesis*, I'm more inclined to think that that was probably more about same gender attracted males than for straight men who just happened to care about each other a lot? I mean it still has roots in the inheritance tradition, but in the religious community, it's much more clearly about, like, spiritual... strong spiritual bonds between unrelated males, which to me clearly has romantic undertones whether or not, you know, a lot of historians want to recognize it or not.

To me it just– to me it's obvious. I'm sure that there are other historians who wouldn't say that that is romantic, especially religious historians. But to me, like why would you get into a spiritual bond of brotherhood with another man if you were unrelated and you don't really have any property to inherit, because you're monks? Or you know, you're like a cleric and he's a laity. To me, that seems pretty obviously about some kind of emotional, romantic bond, may or may not have been sexual, but it may totally have been! So, yeah. I give it a seven out of ten because it depends on what we're talking about. But still pretty gay.

Where to Find Us Online

Leigh: Pretty darn gay.

Gretchen: Pretty darn gay

Leigh: But, uh... as for us, that's it for today's episode! You can find us online individually. Gretchen, where can these fine folks listening find you on the internets?

Gretchen: So, when I am not talking about awesome LGBTQ+ folks in history, I'm writing nerdy media analysis for TheFandomentals.com and my own personal website GNellis.com. Right now, my life is basically Star Wars, so, if you're into that and also a big nerd like me who likes queer history and right now, Star Wars, you can find me on Tumblr and Twitter as @gnelliswriter. And Leigh, what about you?

Leigh: So when I'm not nerding out about, you know, that sweet, sweet Jesus side pussy, you can find me on Twitter @aparadoxinflux and I'm usually talking about comics, queer tv, and you know, probably sitting on my couch thinking about how much Xena and Gabrielle love each other or some other fandom ladies. But if you wanna follow *History is Gay*, we can be found on Tumblr [@historyisgaypodcast](https://www.tumblr.com/historyisgaypodcast), Twitter at [HistoryisGayPod](https://twitter.com/HistoryisGayPod), and you can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, or hey, fan mail, yeah, at HistoryisGaypodcast@gmail.com.

We also wanna ask those of you guys listening and enjoying to rate and review us on iTunes and Stitcher. That way more people will see the show and we get to spread our gay, gay love and knowledge even further.

Gretchen: So, that's it for this episode of *History is Gay*. Until next time, stay queer-

Leigh: And stay curious.

♪ Outro Music ♪