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LESBIANS IN THE MIDDLE AGES: BIETRIS DE ROMANS

Maggie Benware
Young Historians Conference
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“These things put you before all others and draw me to you without deceit.”¹ It is clear that the author is enamoured of the subject of this poem, Lady Maria. This attraction is apparent - regardless of the fact that the author is a woman, Bietris de Romans. There is a large focus on sexual lesbianism in the field and there has not yet been a full exploration of the “lesbian-like” classification introduced by Judith Bennett.² Bietris and her love for Maria exemplify lesbianism in the Middle Ages, and this first-person account is a neglected example of a “lesbian-like” woman in the Middle Ages.³

The term “lesbian” is not a self-explanatory term when applied to the fourteenth century. The word itself is tied closely to modern identities, and the majority of homosexual females in the Middle Ages do not fit this modern profile. Instead, scholars suggest they fall into two categories: sexual lesbians and the “lesbian-like.”⁴ Sexual lesbians are those who took action on their homosexual desires, including sex. These women are in contrast to the “lesbian-like,” a term coined by Judith Bennett. This latter term encompasses women “whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love,” and allows historians to find evidence of

¹ Bietris de Romans, “Na Maria, pretz e fina valors,” In *Troubadour Poems from the South of France*, trans. William D. Paden, Frances Freeman Paden, 239.

² Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (2000): 1-24.
<http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3704629>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

female homosexuality outside of those women who took actions based on their attraction.⁵ This is a crucial view within the field to have, as the evidence for any one type of lesbian is sparse.

There are four main reasons historians find little evidence of lesbians. Two are closely tied to the medieval belief that women were inferior to men, meaning that there is already limited evidence of women's daily lives, let alone their sexualities. Medieval record keepers were rarely concerned with documenting women's lives or achievements. Additionally very few women worked at the time, and of those that did, few produced lasting creations such as writing or historical documents.⁶ Of the writing that has emerged about women, there is still minimal evidence of lesbians, especially sexual lesbians. Sexuality in the Middle Ages was phallogentric. This means that many people did not consider lesbian relationships as sexual, as they did not involve a phallus. Additionally, sperm was considered an essential part of a sexual relationship and without it, the relationship was not considered sexual. Despite this popular opinion, the church still considered the relationships to be sodomy. This meant women would not have been open about same sex feelings or actions, and most lesbian relationships would have gone undocumented.

Despite this complication, there is sufficient evidence of lesbians in the Middle Ages, and through this evidence it is clear that Bietris de Romans cannot be classified as a sexual lesbian. Interestingly, most of the evidence for sexual lesbians comes from the church. Many nuns were sexually active lesbians, and the church directly acknowledges their presence in laws passed. Feminist theorist Carol Anne Douglas states, "in the Middle Ages, the church established specific

⁵ See note two.

⁶ The notable exception being Bietris de Romans (see note one)

penalties for nuns who slept together or used dildos.”⁷ This shows not only were nuns having sexual relationships with each other, but it was common enough that the church had to acknowledge it and enforce punishments for it. Further and more blatant evidence of inter-nun sexual relationships is found in a love letter sent from one “bavarian nun to another, saying ‘it kills me to remember how you touched my breasts.’”⁸ This explicit evidence of a sexual relationship between nuns shows that lesbian sex did occur, and that lesbian relationships were not only based on emotional attractions that could never lead to physical relationships, which is in contrast to the “lesbian-like.”⁹ Author Patricia Simons suggests that visual evidence is the most credible window into the past. She provides the example of *Two Women Embracing*, an engraving that depicts two women touching each other intimately (see figure 1). The engraving shows two women who are blatantly engaging in a homosexual act. This, in combination with other writings, suggests that sexual lesbianism was a frequent practice among nuns and civilian women alike in the Middle Ages, and provides a critical basis for comparison in the analysis of *Na Maria Pretz e Fina Valor*.

⁷ Carol Anne Douglas, "Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence," *Off Our Backs* 14, no. 10 (1984): 19. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/25775213..>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See note 2.



Figure 1. Zoan Andrea. *Two Women Embracing*. Early sixteenth century. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Engraving.
Source: Simmons 1994, 91

As previously stated, Biетris de Romans can be defined as a “lesbian-like” woman. These women may have engaged in homosexual activities, but there is no proof of this without the interjection of major assumptions. Despite this, either their lives offered opportunities for these women to become sexual lesbians or they appeared to have emotional attraction to other women. An example appears in the poem “Roman de Silence.” An analysis is offered in “Lesbian Desire

in the Old French "Roman de Silence."¹⁰ Author Kathleen Blumreich focuses on one specific character, Eufeme, and why she can be considered "lesbian." The most obvious trait is her love for Silence, another female character. Additionally, she rejects her marriage vows, clearly unhappy in her marriage when she attempts to "transform her male partner into the feminine shape she apparently prefers."¹¹ Not only is she in love with another female, but she exemplifies traits that would certainly make her more likely to engage in homosexual intercourse. Because it is never explicitly stated in the play that Eufeme and Silence engage in coitus, Eufeme cannot be assumed a sexual lesbian. However, her traits and feelings are so suggestive to her being a lesbian, she falls into the "lesbian-like" category.

Beitris de Romans exhibits many of the aforementioned qualities. Beitris is the poet behind "Na Maria Pretz e Fina Valor," or "Lady Maria, Your Virtue and Pure Worth." She is one of the few female authors during the time of the Troubadours and is the only known author of a lesbian poem.¹² Her location is not known, however based on her name as well as the structure of the French language, it can be inferred that she is from Romans-sur-Isère, a city in France.¹³ She wrote in the provençal style, her poem being lyrical and written originally in langue d'orc. The poem itself is written in four stanzas and is a love poem, as is the traditional Troubadour style. Troubadour poetry is further known for its focus on love, as is clear in *Na*

¹⁰ Kathleen M. Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French "Roman De Silence"" *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 47-62. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/27869254>.

¹¹ Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire", 58.

¹² The Troubadours were poets in the 11th and 13th centuries; their style is marked by poetry written in an old French dialect known as langue d'orc from Provence, France.

¹³ Beitris de Romans translated literally is "Beitris from Romans"

Maria.¹⁴ The poem is written by Beiiris to a Lady Maria, who is never described past her traits; for example, the poem never clarifies her location or status, but describes her as beautiful and graceful. The poem opens with pure flattery of Maria. Bietris compliments her joy, her grace, her conviviality, and sweet gaze, claiming that “These things put you before all others and draw me to you without deceit.”¹⁵ While the compliments alone do not necessarily imply a romantic connection, the last two lines do, especially Bietris’ use of the word “deceit.” Instead of merely saying “draw me to you”, she includes “without deceit.” This implies that being drawn to Maria was seen as something that should have been hidden and lied about, but because she was so in love with Maria, she was not ashamed. Homosexuality has long been taboo by virtue of the church, and in a highly religious state like medieval France a lesbian relationship would have been viewed as wrong and shameful. Moving into the second stanza, Bietris asks Maria to “let true love...help me plead my case,” and asks for Maria to give herself to Bietris.¹⁶ This appears to be Bietris asking for a relationship or some kind of romantic commitment. In the next stanza she begs Maria to “say no to lovers who try to deceive.”¹⁷ This suggests that Maria was being courted by many people, but that Bietris believed that Maria would “enhance [her own] fame” if she said no to the others and yes to her. Alternatively, the line could also suggest that Maria was married to someone who was deceiving her in some way, such as cheating on her. This is less

¹⁴ "Troubadour." Encyclopedia Britannica Online, Accessed November 10, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/troubadour-lyric-artist>.

¹⁵ Bietris de Romans, “Na Maria, pretz e fina valors.” In *Troubadour Poems from the South of France*, trans. William D. Paden, Frances Freeman Paden, 239

¹⁶ Bietris, “Na Maria.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

likely however, because the church viewed adultery as a crime, and Bietris specifies plural lovers. In her final stanza, Bietris concludes her poem by complementing Maria's charm and delight, citing them as the reason for sending her the poem. In stating that this poem was indeed sent to Maria shows that Maria was most likely a real person, therefore, the love from Bietris to her would have also been real. Regardless of this, it remains unproven if Bietris ever acted on her feelings or not. In the letter written from one nun to another, it is stated, "it kills me to remember how you touched my breasts."¹⁸ This is very explicit, and there is no evidence of any kind of physical relationship in the poem. Additionally, it was unlikely that these two women would have met and been alone with each other. A common Troubadour trait was to write to noble people. In the Middle Ages, Troubadour poets did not come from one socioeconomic background, but because so little is known about Bietris it is unlikely that she was a prominent noblewoman at the time, and thus the two would not likely have come in contact.¹⁹²⁰

As is true of all fields of study there is contrasting evidence and interpretations. There is a considerable debate about the true meaning of the aforementioned poem. While the most widely accepted theory is that Bietris did indeed have romantic interest in Lady Maria, that is not the only valid explanation of the poem's existence. As authors William and Freeman Paden state, "[some scholars] have argued that Bietris was not a woman at all but a man; they interpret *Bietris*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Simon Newman, "Troubadours in the Middle Ages," *Troubadours in the Middle Ages | Middle Ages*, accessed February 09, 2017, <http://www.thefinertimes.com/Middle-Ages/troubadours-in-the-middle-ages.html>.

²⁰ Simon Newman, "Social Classes in the Middle Ages," *Social Classes in the Middle Ages | Middle Ages*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.thefinertimes.com/Middle-Ages/social-classes-in-the-middle-ages.html>.

as a scribal error for *Alberis*.²¹ The Alberis to which they are referring to is nobelman Alberico da Romano, who was the “occasional Troubadour.”²² In that case, this poem would stand as a conventional poem of heterosexual desire. However, it is unlikely that the scribe would misprint the author’s name. It is even more unlikely that the poem would be found separate from all his other work, as this poem was found in France and Alberis lived in Italy. An additional theory is that the desire expressed in the poem is merely platonic and is “a specific form of female friendship.”²³ This too is improbable, as Bietris calls the connection between her and Maria “true love.”²⁴ There is no sign of friendship, and there is an abundance of love. Additionally, Troubadours often made love the focus of their poetry, suggesting that if this poem appears to be about love, which it does, it very likely is.²⁵ While not all agree that Bietris displays her lesbian desire through this poem, it still remains the most plausible interpretation of “Na Maria Pretz e Fina Valor.” This means, regardless of her true intent, Bietris still fits into the “lesbian-like” characterization.

Bietris de Romans’ “Na Maria Pretz e Fina Valor” provides a vital first person account of a “lesbian-like” woman in the Middle Ages. Because she was not explicitly sexual like the Bavarian nuns,²⁶ it would be careless and hasty to merely group her in with sexual lesbians when

²¹ Bietris, “Na Maria.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Bietris, “Na Maria.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Troubadour." Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

²⁶ Douglas, “Lesbian Nuns”.

she is clearly different. Bennett's categorization of "lesbian-like" women provides clarity within such an ambiguous field, and accurately describes Biétris as she presents herself through her poetry. This poem is significant within the field because it is one of the few pieces of first-person evidence, contrary to Eufeme who is merely a character in a play.²⁷ The creation and acknowledgement of additional categories allows for an accurate historical record of female homosexuality; with these groupings, evidence cannot be discarded for not being sexual enough, so long as it falls within the "lesbian-like" parameters. To discount those women who fall into this category would be to discount a copious amount of evidence and is an ignorant and careless approach to the further study of lesbianism during the Middle Ages.

²⁷ Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire", 58.

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