

Joan Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). Print, 327 pp., US\$85.00, ISBN: 9780812245370.



Review

In *Nothing Natural is Shameful*, Joan Cadden explores the discursive regularities and silences around the subject of sodomy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Europe. The scholars considered in the book grapple with the issue of why some men gain pleasure from what was felt to be the ‘feminine’ role in sex by applying the knowledge garnered from natural philosophy – that is, science – to a topic which was considered the province of moral philosophy and theology.

The scope of the book is far broader than its mission would suggest; Cadden proposes to explore medieval responses to a question posed in Aristotle’s *Problemata* (the work is of uncertain authorship, but following her Medieval subjects, Cadden attributes it to Aristotle): why do some men enjoy the passive role in sex, while some enjoy both the active and passive roles? (book IV, *problema* 26). Though the phrasing of the question is ambiguous, many medieval thinkers clearly interpreted it as referring not to men being active or passive in sex with women, but with other men. Their answers to this question are surprising, particularly to readers who might have thought that medieval attitudes to sodomy were confined to moral repugnance. Cadden conducts a close study of commentaries and marginalia, but she focuses on the influential commentary of Pietro d’Abano. Included in the book is a transcription of d’Abano’s *Problemata* commentary. Cadden demonstrates that even the barest marginalia offers insight to medieval attitudes towards sodomy and sex.

Much of the book is dedicated to discussion of physiological and psychological solutions to *problema* 26. D’Abano and some of the readers of the *Problemata* following him believed that men who gained pleasure from active or passive sex with other men had a physical ‘blockage’ which redirected seminal fluid

to the anus, producing a desire to be stimulated there. This was thought of as a deviation from universal natural order as it was then conceived, but not, interestingly, as unnatural. The desires of those men with a natural defect were in line with their own individual (though 'monstrous') natures. Cadden points out that this solution offers moral, perhaps even spiritual exculpation to groups of people ordinarily (at the time) felt to be damned. Even when forbidden pleasures are sought by habit, d'Abano considered this little more blameworthy than those desires instilled by nature, since he was of the view that habit can become like a 'second nature.' Further complicating these issues was the fact that men who had sex with other men were thought of as feminine, indicating a disposition which, though it differs from the ideal form of the masculine, is natural inasmuch as it is a part of that person's innate makeup. Of course, these views sound far more progressive than they are, and Cadden points out that d'Abano's work is peppered with condemnatory language.

Not confined to examining solutions offered to Aristotle's confronting question, the book also explores the overlaps, chasms and tensions between moral and natural philosophy. Cadden traces how scholars like d'Abano defended their decision to discuss this question in relation to natural philosophy rather than moral philosophy or theology, a decision which was controversial given some of the implications of d'Abano's reasoning, which leaves room for the practice to be understood 'outside the boundaries of vice' (139). Cadden does not, however, leave aside the more expected responses to the issue of moral accountability and sin in sodomy, as she examines responses from scholars like Evrart de Conty, who thought that sodomy should not be discussed within natural philosophy at all, and Walter Burley, who believed that men who engage in sodomy are bestial. Such responses provide a look into the early development of contemporary discourses surrounding homosexual desire and Christian ethics, which still centre on questions of what is and is not natural or sinful. They also provide insight into the development of

science as a discipline, and the way it marked out territory in the academic landscape.

I was expecting a more theological focus in this book, given the subject matter and the reach of Christianity in Medieval Europe, but where the book deals with theological approaches directly, it does so briefly. However, *Nothing Natural is Shameful* elucidates the important contributions of natural philosophy in medieval understandings of sodomy and sexuality, and scholars wishing to explore the theological nature of sodomy could consult the convincingly argued and enlightening book *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* by Mark D. Jordan (University of Chicago Press, 1997). Cadden's work is rigorous and exhaustive, and adds much to what is a distressingly small pool of academic work in the history of understandings of sodomy.

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