

NB. This is a pre-publication draft and not for citation. If you are an academic or student wishing to cite this article, please contact me by email. It will appear soon in the journal *Men and Masculinities* (<http://jmm.sagepub.com>)

Discourses of masturbation: the (non-)solitary pleasures of the (medieval) text

Introduction: Masturbation and (post)modernity

The 2006 film *Shortbus*, written and directed by John Cameron Mitchell, opens with a short sequence of extreme close-ups tracking across a digitally generated Statue of Liberty, before revealing a cartoon Manhattan behind, as Anita O'Day sings 'Is You Is Or Is You Ain't My Baby'.¹ Travelling down into the city's heart and peering into windows, the camera enters three real-life and non-simulated sexual scenes. These distinct narratives intercut all the way to sexual climax.

The characters depicted seem to form three separate groups, although they turn out to be interconnected. First, a naked man films himself urinating under the water in his bathtub, and, later, supine on his apartment floor, he films himself masturbating until he ejaculates onto his face. Secondly, a dominatrix cleans her sex toys on a windowsill in front of her next client, then becomes increasingly violent, verbally and physically, towards him as he tries to chat and ask her banal questions until eventually she whips him as he masturbates. Finally, another man cunnilingues his female partner on a piano, after which they have sex in various athletic positions until they appear to reach orgasm. All three climaxes are intercut, after which the camera lingers on the couples, revealing that none of the characters is happy. Indeed, we see the first man crying, before his partner returns home and his own backstory and their relationship begin to be unravelled. Each of the characters, we discover, is lying to his or her partner about their happiness, sexual and otherwise.

¹ *Shortbus*'s awards include wins at the 2006 International Film Festivals in Athens, Gijón, and Zurich, as well as a 2007 Independent Spirit Award.

James, the masturbating man, is haunted by his past as a hustler and his wish not to be gay; as he discusses in sex therapy sessions with his partner Jamie his desire to open up the relationship, he is secretly putting together a film which will constitute his suicide note to Jamie, for whom he wants to find a replacement partner. Severin, the dominatrix, far from being tough and self-sufficient, despairs at her inability to form a meaningful human connection. Sofia and Rob's apparently joyful and athletic sexual relationship is belied by the fact that Sofia has never had an orgasm, which is compromising her work as a sex therapist with couples like James and Jamie. All of these characters converge upon the sex club of the film's title: 'Shortbus', so-called in contradistinction to the 'big yellow bus', since it is a 'school for the gifted and challenged'. This club acts as a site of coherence for the film's various vignettes as well as a site for its characters' sexual salvation, but the film's main lynchpin is sex itself.² The end of the film brings all the characters, after various relationship realignments, back to Shortbus in a New York City blackout. In a candle-lit room Justin Bond, the club's drag artist host, sings a plaintive song, titled '(We All Get It) In the End', a note of surety which contrasts with the opening song's uncertainty. It grows into a bacchanalic anthem as Bond is joined by a brass band and crowd of other performers, while Sofia, in the arms of a welcoming couple, achieves orgasm for the first time.

The emphasis in this film would thus appear to be on orgasm as a sign of sexual fulfilment and human interconnection, although the film's reception in the media initially focussed on the putatively pornographic aspect of non-simulated sex and male ejaculation. James's first orgasm, achieved as a result of solitary masturbation and resulting in sorrow and estrangement from his partner, would seem to run counter to this narrative, suggesting the traditional trope of masturbation as lonely, sterile, dysfunctional. However, a further character, Caleb, only glimpsed in the opening set of scenes, complicates this reading. At first, we are given only a brief shot of Caleb filming James from a nearby apartment as James films himself masturbating, but

² As Mitchell explains in a director's commentary (Mitchell 2006), the film emerged from the trend for 'real sex' films and his desire to present a positive version to counteract what he perceived as the negativity of these films, using sex in a way analogous to the use of music in his earlier film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Mitchell 2001).

later Caleb's voyeurism and stalking of James turn out to be crucial in rescuing the latter after his suicide attempt. James appears to be able to trust Caleb in a way he could not trust Jamie, and, after he unburdens himself to Caleb, he allows himself to be penetrated for the first time. This narrative strand opens up a different reading of the film's opening which acknowledges a complex interaction between characters and cinematic audience. James thinks he is alone as he masturbates, both literally and existentially, but in fact Caleb is watching him and is later able to help him recognize his interconnectedness with others; the cinematic audience is watching Caleb watching James, alone yet physically close to a room full of strangers. The film suggests that one is never alone, at least in the city: that all one has to do (in a reworking of E. M. Forster's dictum) is to be open to connection. The filming of this initial scene also suggests something further – it suggests masturbation as a paradoxical act: one that is engaged in alone, but which is always involved in human interactions, whether as a symbolic rejection of partnership, or as a potentially observed action. In this sense, *Shortbus* can help us disentangle some of the meanings of masturbation as a literary act of representation. Just as one cannot ordinarily film a solitary act of masturbation – it always involves at least one other participant, whether camera-operator or audience member³ – one cannot represent it thus in literature either: that representation always creates a relationship between the character, the implied author, and the implied reader. Masturbation is usually represented as a negative, solitary, often sterile, life-denying act, but this denies the extent to which it is always already relational and the creative potential which aligns it with that other presumptively solitary act, reading.

Masturbation, sodomy and mediation

³ The technical exception would be a self-filmed act, the footage of which is never released, but even then there is a conceptual split between the viewed and viewing self.

Shortbus helpfully draws attention to the relational and creative potential of masturbation in modernity. The material analysed in the rest of this article demonstrates that, in the Middle Ages too, notions of masturbation as a solitary, meaningless act are complicated by its status as a potentially observed phenomenon.

Masturbation is a relatively ignored aspect of human sexuality within medieval culture. Sodomy has come under increasing scrutiny from medievalists, whether from socio-legal, theological, medical, literary, or art-historical perspectives.⁴ However, one aspect of Foucault's 'utterly confused category' which has not received much attention has been masturbation, defined by Aquinas and others as one of four subcategories of sodomy. In the most important book on masturbation as a cultural phenomenon, *Solitary Sex*, Thomas Laqueur uses a long and useful chapter to review the medieval discourse. However, he dismisses the significance of the medieval material for the overall cultural history of the practice, for his own hypothesis is that it constitutes the sexuality of an individualistic modernity.⁵

The relation of masturbation to sodomy is described most clearly by Peter Damian in his notorious *Letter 31 or Liber Gomorrhianus (Book of Gomorrah, c. 1048-54)*. In the letter he demands that Pope Leo IX (1002-54) depose from office those clergy who sin against nature:

Four types of this form of criminal wickedness can be distinguished in an effort to show you the totality of the whole matter in an orderly way: some sin with themselves alone [*siquidem secum*]; some commit mutual masturbation [*aliorum manibus*; lit. 'by the hands of others']; some commit femoral fornication [*inter femora*; lit. 'between the thighs']; and finally, others commit the complete act against nature [*consummato actu contra naturam*]. The ascending gradation among these is such that the last mentioned are judged to be more serious than the preceding. (Damian 1982, 28)

⁴ Amongst other studies, see Burgwinkle 2004, Clark 2009, chs 2-5, Frantzen 1998, Jordan 1997, Mills 2015, and Olsen 2011.

⁵ This hypothesis is beyond the scope of this article to consider in detail, though see further comments below. On Laqueur's use of pre-modern evidence, see, e.g., King 2011, 219-20.

Although Pope Leo's reply proposed more moderate treatment of errant clerics than Peter demanded, he did not dispute his quadriform division.⁶

Masturbation is regularly associated with other forms of sodomy – sometimes as appetiser, sometimes as side-dish – throughout the Middle Ages. However, although masturbation can often seem a minor sin on the margins of other juicier and more serious activities, its current critical neglect is unfortunate, for its status in medieval discourse on sex and gender is in fact multiple and contested.

As Joan Cadden points out, the medieval conception of gender is 'not a grand synthetic scheme [...] but rather a cluster of gender-related notions, sometimes competing, sometimes mutually reinforcing; sometimes permissive, sometimes constraining; sometimes consistent, sometimes ad hoc.' (*Meanings*, 9-10) The same is true of sexuality and indeed sex acts including masturbation, which might better be called 'masturbations' or 'onanisms' on the current pluralizing model of 'masculinities' and 'sexualities'.⁷ Nevertheless, despite the diversity of opinion on the subject, and the differing judgements of severity in relation to other sins, this article will show that masturbation does have a recurrent cluster of associations: namely, nocturnal emission, pollution, the sin against nature, softness and effeminacy, unsanctioned pleasure, and boys or young men.

The semantic constellation which surrounds masturbation discourse repays further investigation. It demonstrates that masturbation is indeed an act that has a meaning (and multiple meanings), because of its status as an act that is *never* solitary or unproblematic – always involving others, whether as object of desire, physical participant, angelic or demonic onlooker... or reader. Within textual discourse, as within film, masturbation is always used to create a relation between author-creation and reader-audience, whether that

⁶ For further contexts for the letter, see further Jordan 2007 and especially part II of Olsen 2011, and in particular ch. 5. For the original text, see Reindel 1983.

⁷ Compare Olsen 2011, 6: 'Sodomy in the middle ages was not one thing but several, each with its own traditions and linguistic usages.' Olsen later speaks of 'mutually incompatible and ever-shifting stylizations of gender and relations between the sexes' (89), and his book throughout champions 'the full plurality of things' (421); the present article tries to heed his warning against premature and incautious generalization.

is one of voyeurism or scopic pleasure, prudery or power. At its root, like the characters of *Shortbus*, masturbation in medieval literature testifies to the fact that we are never alone, that the self is always already mediated, relational, an(other) other.

Clerical attitudes towards masturbation

It must be said that, although most of the extant medieval texts discussed are written by (and often for) clerics, condemning masturbation in various ways and to various degrees, in the real world the practice seems to have been ignored or even embraced.

Pope Leo's reply to the letter from Peter Damian discussed above permits readmission to the former clerical rank for:

those who elicited their seed either with their own hands or mutually with someone else, and even those who elicited it interfemorally, if it was not a long-standing practice or performed with many men and if they have restrained their desires and atoned for these shameful sins with a suitable penance.⁸

(96)

Peter Damian's uncompromising stance seems therefore to have been seen, even by the Pope, as being rather extreme.⁹ Moreover, both letters presuppose that a large number of clerics are committing these sins, and

⁸ No recovery of rank is possible, however, for those who commit such sins over a long period, or with many men, or for those who have engaged in anal sex.

⁹ On the possibility that Peter Damian coined the term *sodomia* 'sodomy', see Jordan 1997, 29 and 43, but cf. the slightly earlier 'scribal error' discussed at 36. Olsen 2011 critiques Jordan's use of evidence (270) and argues that Hincmar of Reims invented the term in the ninth century (15, 33-41, 270).

that many of these men do not see them as a problem or indeed perform them defiantly. For instance, Pope Leo feels he must give dire warning to any clerics who 'dare to criticize or question this decree' on penalty of their own rank, and states 'he who does not attack vice encourages it' and should be 'accounted guilty [and worthy] of the [same] end as he who perishes through sin' (p. 97). This very need to censure clerics who condone or encourage sodomy fits in with other writings around this time which imply a frequent attitude of leniency and pragmatism around these sins, even in clerical circles.¹⁰ Moreover, the fact that Popes Alexander VII in 1666 and Innocent in 1679 also had to condemn masturbation indicates that religious strictures on the act were seldom heeded (Patton, 137).

There were several other official efforts to clamp down on moral laxity, such as the judgement of the Council of Westminster in 1102 (c. 29), which unusually classified all 'unnatural' sins as reserved sins, which could only be forgiven by bishops, whether committed by clerics or the laity (Whitelock, 678-79; Brundage, 535). However, such efforts were neither consistent nor effective, and most commentators agreed with Burchard of Worms and Ivo of Chartres, judging that male masturbation was not a serious or criminal offense, and could therefore be dealt with by standard confession and penance.¹¹

The penitentials and youth

When reviewing the degrees of penance allotted to masturbation in medieval penitentials, there is what seems an almost wild variance. For instance, although the early penitentials often borrow from one another, the penances they impose are scarcely comparable (Brundage, 165-66). The seventh-century

¹⁰ On pragmatic attitudes to same-sex eroticism, see also the *Colloquies* of Ælfric Bata, discussed in Clark 2009, ch. 10. On anxieties around the homoerotic potential of the cenobitic and eremitical lifestyles, see Sauer 2010.

¹¹ Burchard of Worms, *Decretum* 17.41, 43; 19.5, in PL 140.927-28, 968; Ivo, *Decretum* 9.111 (= *Panormia* 1.159); 112; 113, in PL 161.687.

Penitential of Theodore specifies thirty days' fasting for boys and forty for young men (McNeill and Gamer, 1.2.9). This compares with the Irish *Penitential of Cummean*, which allots forty days for a boy of fifteen, three forty-day periods for a man, and a year for one with clerical rank (McNeill and Gamer, 2.6, 12-16).¹² However, the early Old Irish penitential *Bigotianum* gives 100 days for a first offense and a year for a repeat offender (Bieler 2.2.3); it gives no justification for the lesser penance of three weeks for a priest who masturbates (Bieler, 2.1.2). Columban's *Penitential* (c. 600) is much stricter, imposing a year's penance for a first offense by a young man; it treats masturbation as seriously as bestiality and specifies two years' fasting for laymen and three years for clerics (Bieler A.7, B.10).¹³ The canons of the sixth-century Welsh Synods give a year in confinement for masturbation. Again, boys get a reduced penance of forty days or three forty-day periods (McNeill and Gamer, 170).

The Old English Penitentials are divided on this, some allotting a three-year fast for habitual offenders, others giving much more lenient penances measured in days rather than years. The *Old English Confessional* allots seven days for a boy (McNeill and Gamer, 6.7c), twenty days for a man (6.7d), and twenty days for a priest who is stimulated by his imagination alone, with an extra week if he uses his hand (7.8g and h). The *Old English Penitential* and *Old English Handbook* prescribe three years for habitual offenders, with no meat except on Sundays, and only bread and water during Lent (Raith, 4.11; Fowler, sections 256-58; cf. Davies, 95). The tenth-century *Corrector* of Burchard of Worms exacts ten days of penance if a boy masturbates alone and

¹² Pollution because of words or glances receives twenty to forty days; pollution by 'a violent assault of the imagination' seven days. Similar penalties are allotted to nocturnal pollution. Later, however, the penalty of 100 days for solitary masturbation by a man is recorded, which rises to a year if repeated (10.13).

¹³ Compare Rabanus, *Poenitentiale Heribaldi*, in PL 110.490; Bede 3.23-26, in Haddan and Stubbs 1869-73; Bieler, *Columban* B.10 and B.17. Brundage 1987 states that the early tenth-century Abbot Regino of Prüm gives 'special prominence... to homosexual offenses and masturbation' (173); cf. PL 132.333-34 (not 313-14).

thirty days for mutual masturbation, rising to forty days' penance for male masturbation with the use of mechanical aids (Wasserschleben, 142-45).¹⁴

Clearly, then, the punishment allotted for masturbation might vary according to country and perhaps native culture, but equally clearly the status of masturbation (and its consequent punishment) might depend on the company it was thought to keep. For instance, in Robert of Sorbonne's 'If the sinner should say' (c. 1261-74), he treats masturbation as more serious than maternal incest: 'for it is more serious to know a relation than to know a stranger, and the closer a person is as relation the more serious the sin done with that person. So someone who pollutes himself in this way sins most seriously.' (Jordan, 105.)¹⁵

However, in most of the penitentials, penances decrease according to the age of the penitent, and this reflects a link between masturbation and boys or youthfulness that becomes prevalent later on and hints at an important gendered aspect of the practice. Boys are not yet men, and thus have not yet entered the sphere of hegemonic masculinity, and, as we shall see, masturbation is regularly associated with effeminacy and sodomitical vice, both of which involve non-hegemonic expressions of masculinity.

The penitentials and gender

The penitentials are unusual in texts on masturbation in that they discuss female masturbation. This practice is sometimes discussed in late medieval medical discourse which cautiously recommends it for some

¹⁴ Compare Burchard, *Decretum* 19.5 (PL 140.971-72). Mechanical aids feature in *Corrector* 111, and Burchard, *Decretum* 19.5 (PL 140.968); cf. Brundage 1987, 167.

¹⁵ As Jordan 1997 points out, the unusual logic here appears to be that 'Because you are closer to yourself than to anyone else, having sex with yourself is the worst kind of incest.'

women on therapeutic grounds (Green, *Trotula*). However, it is largely ignored or skirted over elsewhere.¹⁶ Burchard is rare amongst clerical commentators in being harsher on women than men in this regard: his *Corrector* imposes a whole year on women who masturbate with mechanical assistance and three years on women who masturbate together (Wasserschleben, 658), and it is likely that this reflects worry not about female self-pleasuring but rather about the more troubling notion of women taking on or replacing the male sexual role: that is, the act of penetration.¹⁷ The *Penitential of Bede* gives a penance of seven years for nuns who masturbate with other nuns ‘using an instrument’, and although, as Jacqueline Murray points out, there is nothing to indicate ‘whether the increased severity of the penance was due to the participants’ status as religious women or... the use of an “instrument”’ (198), it seems likely that penetration is the major issue. This certainly seems to be the case in Hincmar of Reims’s discussion in *De divortio Lotharii et Tetbergae*, who states that ‘They do not put flesh to flesh in the sense of the genital organ of one within the body of the other, since nature precludes this, but they do transform the use of the member in question into an unnatural one, in that they are reported to use certain instruments of diabolical operation to excite desire. Thus they sin nonetheless by committing fornication against their own bodies.’¹⁸

In general, however, most discussions of masturbation other than the penitentials presume maleness, and this reflects a greater anxiety attached to male transgression in this area. If, when women are condemned for masturbation, it is because they are inverting their gender role by penetrating others, or by allowing a dildo to usurp the role of the male organ, this opens up the possibility that male masturbation also involves some form of gender inversion.

¹⁶ For an obscure and late but explicit and violent depiction of female masturbation, see *Der Ring*, Wiessner 1964, 67, lines 1564-1606. The character Mätzli may be a parodic version of the Virgin Mary; cf. the similarly blasphemous and explicit texts in Brandstetter 1886, *Blasphemiae accusatae*, 400; Bobertag 1900, *Solomon und Markolf*, 307, lines 242-43; Euling 1905, *Priamel*, 337.

¹⁷ Compare *Decretum* 19.5, in PL 140.971-72. Theodore’s *Penitential* gives the same penance of three years both for women who masturbate and who have sex with other women (McNeill and Gamer 1990, 1.2.12-13). For fuller commentary on female masturbation, see Lochrie 2005, Mills 2015 (ch. 5), and Murray 1996.

¹⁸ PL 125.692-93; cf. Boswell, 204; Murray 1996, 198.

As seen above, the medieval conception of gender is better seen as 'a cluster of gender-related notions' (Cadden, 10). However, one of the strands is unpicked by Thomas Laqueur in his influential book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Here he shows that some Ancient and medieval medical authorities worked on the assumption that men and women were not two opposite sexes but rather part of a one-sex model where, anatomically and genitally speaking, women were inverted men. Although Laqueur oversimplifies the complexity of medieval discourse on sex and gender, his work does emphasize the potential fluidity of gender in the period, since women could become more like men (interpreted as a positive shift) and men could become more like women (a negative one).¹⁹ Viewed in this context, the masculine status of masturbators in the discourse is no longer straightforward and unassailable but rather potentially problematic. Masculinity is thus a permeable category, and this permeability is most obvious in the differentiation of boys and men.

Masturbation and boys

We have already seen that the penitentials specify more lenient penances for boys who masturbate, but this could be explained in several ways: older men who masturbate could be punished more severely not because of their age but because they have sinned more often. It is to the work of the eighth-century cleric Alcuin and the fifteenth-century commentator Jean Gerson that we must look for a more revealing connection.

¹⁹ On the idea of women taking on 'masculine' attributes and their implications in Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, see Clark 2009, chs. 9 and 10.

Alcuin's letters to his former students are well-known for their affectionate nature and kindly concern for the intimate details of their lives. In Letter 127 Alcuin writes to rebuke the addressee for a form of intransigent sexual behaviour.²⁰

What is this that I hear about you, my son... that you are still addicted to the filthy practices of boys and have never been willing to give up what you should never have done. Where is your fine education? (Allott, 134)

Here, masturbation features as a practice associated with boys: implicitly something the student should have grown out of, although Alcuin hints at its addictive nature.²¹

In a similar letter to a student he nicknames Dodo, Alcuin again criticises such practices, and he invokes Ecclesiastes 11: 10 to state that 'Youth and pleasure are vanity. You have a boy's body but be a man in spirit.' (Letter 126; Allott, 132-33). Again, this foregrounds the distinction between boyhood and manhood enshrined in the penitentials, and gives it Biblical authority.

Several hundred years later, Jean Gerson (1363-1429) becomes one of the most important medieval commentators on masturbation. His one work specifically on masturbation, *De confessione molliei*, was not widely distributed and so its impact on public discourse is uncertain (Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 165). Doubt has also been raised about its authenticity (Tentler, 91, n. 15). However, the text does expand on the association of youth with masturbation seen in Alcuin and the penitentials. In it Gerson recognizes that young boys of three to five years begin the practice before they know what they are doing. By the time they are old enough to know better they are already addicted to the vice, even though it can lead onto even more serious sins like

²⁰ Both Boswell 1980 (191) and Frantzen 1998 (199) assume without discussion that this letter concerns a 'homosexual indiscretion', but see Clark 2009, 81-82.

²¹ Robert of Flamborough's *Penitential Book* (c. 1208-13) also characterizes masturbation as 'typically a sin of boys' (Robert of Flamborough 1971, 5.10.243, section 294).

full sodomy (8.11, 13-14, 71-73).²² The same association is implicit in another work, *De cognitione castitatis* (*On the Knowledge of Chastity*).

In this text Gerson encourages priests to question a penitent directly in the following words:

‘Friend, do you remember ever in your childhood, around ten or twelve years, that your penis [*virgam*] or shameful member was erect?’ If he says no, he’s immediately convicted of a lie because he wishes to flee and fears to be caught... If he should confess that it is so, again the confessor should say, especially if the [penitent] is young: ‘Friend, was that indecent? What therefore did you do so it would not be erect?’ ... If he does not want to answer, it should consequently be asked more plainly: ‘Friend, did you not stroke and rub your penis in the way boys do?’ (9.63)²³

Here, it is clear that male erections are deemed to be universal from the onset of puberty – anyone who denies it ‘immediately convicted of a lie’. Moreover, although the phrase ‘in the way boys do’ is here specifically a means of entrapping the penitent into divulging his sinful behaviour, the implication is that masturbation is also a universal practice amongst boys or young men.

The explicit questioning recommended here opens up another important facet of masturbation literature: that is the implications of discourse itself and the pleasure-power dynamic inherent in the confessional and in confessional literature. These implications are addressed at length below. However, it is possible to trace the connection between masturbation and effeminacy further and thus to explore why it is so closely associated with the other ‘sins against nature’.

Masturbation and effeminacy

²² Compare Gerson’s *De arte audiendi confessiones* (Gerson 1960-73) 6, 14, 15; Brundage 1987, 535; Tentler 1977, 91-93, 228.

²³ Quoted in Elliott 1997, 8-9; cf. Tentler 1977, 91-92.

In the sixth-century penitential attributed to John Jejunator ('The Faster', b. 595), masturbation is linked with, but differentiated from sins against nature. The priest is to ask patiently:

In what way, my brother, did you first lose your virginity? By fornication, lawful wedlock, masturbation [*malakia*], or one of those sins which are against nature [*para phusin*]? (PG 88.1893-96 in Boswell, 363.)

The Latin equivalent for *malakia* is *mollicitia* or *mollitia* 'softness', and the Latin term and its cognates appear regularly in association with masturbation in early medieval religious writings. However, they do not simply connote that sin alone, and one of the things that complicates research into medieval masturbation is the fact that it is referred to in many ways such as *pollutio* 'pollution', as a species of *luxuria*, as part of the *peccatum contra naturam* 'sin against nature', or the *vitium Sodomiticum* 'Sodomitic vice'. It is clear, however, that in this passage John means manual stimulation, since he elaborates two types of this act:

one wherein he is aroused by his own hand and another by someone else's hand. (364)²⁴

Nevertheless, *molli(c)itia* and its cognates have long-lived associations with the whole complex of pollutions, from nocturnal emissions and masturbation, to sexual passivity or, more accurately, receptivity. The word itself implies a certain malleable quality, since its semantic range encompasses 'softness, tenderness, susceptibility; weakness, irresolution; effeminacy, voluptuousness, wantonness', and it is also associated with 'movableness, pliability, flexibility, suppleness' (Lewis and Short, s.v.). Furthermore, the idea of 'softness' (*mollier*) was explicitly linked by some clerics to the state of womanhood (*mulier*; McLoughlin, 193). It is thus an apt term to employ of an act which it is often difficult to disentangle from other forms of sodomy. This is

²⁴ Hence the status of 'masturbate' as both a transitive and an intransitive verb.

partly because of the ambiguity of the terms employed, an ambiguity which was exploited by clerics.²⁵

However, it is partly because the various forms were seen as intrinsically connected.

Masturbation and/as sodomy

Paul of Hungary's *Summa of Penance*, for instance, includes masturbation within the category of sodomy, since he defines this as any emission 'outside of the natural vessel, however it is brought about'.²⁶ He connects this sodomitic vice with two groups of people. The first comprises, as Mark Jordan puts it, 'certain courtiers who are not strong enough to have a quantity of women [*copiam mulierum habere non valentes*]' (364). Although the description of the first group is somewhat opaque, it clearly connotes male effeminacy: a weakness defined in gendered terms. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, in his thirteenth-century *Summa Theologica*, characterizes masturbation as the first (and least serious) of the four types of sin against nature, defining it as: procuring pollution, without any copulation, for the sake of venereal pleasure: this pertains to the sin of uncleanness which some call effeminacy [*mollities*].²⁷

²⁵ In Peter of Poitiers's chapter on *mollitia* in his *Compilatio praesens* (c. 1216), for instance, he tells confessors the sin should not be named except euphemistically as *pallatio* 'softness', thus explicitly forbidding the plain discussion of the act, presumably motivated by the common medieval fear of giving the innocent 'ideas' (Peter of Poitiers 1980, 18-19); cf. Jordan 1997, 105.

²⁶ Jordan 1997, 102, citing Paul of Hungary, *Summa de poenitentia*. This also chimes with William Peraldus's view that sin against nature involves either male-female sex in the wrong position, or 'against nature in terms of the substance, when someone obtains or consents that semen be spilled elsewhere than in the place deputed by nature.' Gulielmus Peraldus, *Summa de Vitiis* 3.2.2, cited in Karras 2005, 17.

²⁷ On Aquinas and homosexuality, see further, Jordan 1997, ch. 7; Moore 2003, ch. 7.

However, Paul's second group is made up of clerics and monks 'who have little devotion in prayer and who detest discipline of the flesh', that is, the fleshly and unascetic: religious men who are ill disciplined and perhaps overly concerned with the physical pleasure invoked by Aquinas.

Both men simultaneously try to differentiate masturbation from other forms of sodomitic vice but at the same time, by their very catalogic discussion, render it inseparable from them, and this paradox holds true of other medieval discussions of sodomy. The association with unsanctioned pleasure, too, is supported by such theological texts, and even more in medical writings.

Masturbation, sodomy, and pleasure

In some of the earliest writings on masturbation, the root problem of the act seems to inhere in its status as a physical response to sexual desire or temptation. For John Cassian (c. 360-435), for instance, masturbation lies neatly amongst six gradations of monastic chastity. The simplest stages involve the increasing ability to resist temptation whilst awake, whether physical or inspired by the sight of a woman. The later stages, however, turn inward such that the monk is not perturbed mentally by reading about sex (perhaps in penitentials), and finally remains pure even in his unconscious mind whilst asleep (Elliott, 'Pollution, Illusion, and Masculine Disarray', 3).

James Brundage's monumental study of canon law includes a brief discussion of Cassian's 'schemes of discipline' which he devised in order to eliminate any 'physical, mental, or emotional stimuli that might trigger sexual responses and sexual desires' (109). Brundage notes that Caesarius of Arles likewise thinks dreams and

fantasies indicate lust: therefore sexual longing, especially masturbation, is as sinful as adultery or too much sex within marriage.²⁸

What Brundage does not mention is that Cassian's sixth and ultimate stage of chastity involves the monk's ability to purge himself of excess semen without sexual desire.²⁹ Cassian comments in his *Conferences*:

Doubtless he has attained to a state in which it will be found during the day as likewise during the night, the same in his bed as at prayer, alone and amongst a crowd (12.8, page 135).

As Dyan Elliott comments: 'the total lack of affect in this description was rather disconcerting' (12). It is thus not the ejaculation involved in masturbation or nocturnal emission *per se* that is problematic.³⁰ Rather, it is the mental and imaginative aspects of sinful pleasure (with the potential to cause an ejaculation) which are to be regulated.

At around the same time, Augustine (354-430) had similarly commented in his *Confessions* on the danger of sexual memories, saying

when I dream [*in somnis*], they not only give me pleasure but are very much like acquiescence in the act [*non solum usque ad delectationem sed etiam usque ad consensionem factumque simillimum*]. The power which these illusory images have over my soul and my body is so great [*tantum valet*: lit. 'they

²⁸ *ibid.* *Sermon* 177.4, in CCSL 104.720. The absolute purity of the *via angelica* is rarely attainable, but it is also advocated in Caesarius's *Sermon* 45.4 in CCSL 103.197; Basil, *Sermo asceticus* 2 in PG 31.873-74; Cyprian, *De disciplina et bono pudicitiae* 7, in PL 4.855-56; John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 10-11, in PG 48.540-41.

²⁹ Indeed, this renders problematic Brundage's statement that 'Cassian considered masturbation and nocturnal pollution central issues in sexual morality' (Brundage 1997), since he ignores the distinction Cassian draws between culpable emissions resulting from lust and passionless emissions.

³⁰ On the early debates over nocturnal emission, see Brakke 1995.

have such strength'] that what is no more than a vision can influence me in sleep in a way that the reality cannot do when I am awake (10.30).

Of course, in his *De bono coniugali*, Augustine also prohibited any form of sexual intercourse even amongst married couples except for the express purpose of engendering children (200.6-7, pages 194-96), just as Gregory the Great judged in the sixth century that pleasure within marriage could not be without fault, in his Letter 64, 'Ad Augustinum Anglorum Episcopum' (PL 77.1196-97). In this, as in all other such matters, there was much debate. It is therefore inadvisable to look for a consistent discourse of pleasure across the medieval period.

Nevertheless, we do find exactly this kind of dynamic in Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Parson's Tale*, which is more or less a vernacular translation of the penitential *Summas* of Raymund of Peñafort and William Peraldus. Chaucer's Parson does not treat masturbation explicitly, but it is included in the fifth species of luxury as 'thilke abhomynable synne, of which that no man unnethe oghte speke ne write; natheles it is openly reherced in holy writ. This cursednesse doon men and wommen in diverse entente and in diverse manere' (909-10, cited from *The Riverside Chaucer*). The vague statement that this kind of lechery is done in various ways and with various motivations echoes some of the earlier penitential writers' reluctance to elucidate the exact nature of the different forms of *sodomia*. Like them, Chaucer's Parson associates this sin with nocturnal pollution, and in similar terms:

Another synne aperteneth [relates] to leccherie, that comth in slepyng, and this synne cometh ofte to hem that been maydenes [virgins], and eek to hem that been corrupt; and this synne men clepen [call] polucioun [pollution], that comth in foure maneres.

No differentiation is made between virgins and the sexually corrupt, and the remedy is also the same:

'generally chastitee and continence, that restreyneth alle the desordeyne moevynges [excessive movements]

that comen of fleshly talentes [fleshly desores]'. However, we are told that 'evere the gretter merite shal he han, that moost restreyneth the wikkede eschawfynges [excitement] of the ardour of this synne'. For Chaucer's Parson, then, resistance leads to spiritual merit for those who can tame the disorderly flesh.

This sense that ejaculation, whether through physical or mental stimulation, is culpable when willed or desired, and that sexual desire must be restrained, does offer an explanation of why masturbation is so often associated with effeminacy in medieval thought. It is the way that sexual pleasure involves a loss of self-control and therefore the stigma associated with weakness in a gender dynamic where power equates with manliness.

We can see this connection in the twelfth century writings of Huggaccio (Hugh) of Pisa, for whom pleasure is the central sticking point for any sexual act, including masturbation, since it is always accompanied by pleasure, passion, and desire (*uoluptas, feruor, pruritus*) 'nec potest non esse peccatum' (which cannot be without sin) (Tentler, 174-75; cf. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 138). Not only is sexual pleasure starkly condemned, but the degree of guilt in masturbation is deemed to be in proportion to the pleasure received. As Brundage states, fleeting pleasure that is not 'deliberately sought', as in nocturnal emission, is judged a venial sin: 'But if orgasm was deliberately induced and enjoyed, the degree of guilt and the attached punishment correspondingly increased' (134).³¹

Medical models of effeminacy and masculinity

Nocturnal emissions were a constant source of concern in theological and particularly monastic writings, but they were also discussed in medical texts, along with masturbation and other forms of sodomy. What is even more striking is that some medieval medical authorities also associate both nocturnal emissions and certain conscious sodomitic activities with effeminacy.

³¹ Brundage 1997 cites from the MSS *Summa* to D. 6 pr., in Pembroke 72, fol. 12ora, and Vat.lat. 2280, fol. 6rb.

For instance, the eleventh-century Constantinus Africanus, in discussing men's testicles in his *De coitu*, claims that:

Warmth increases desire and masculinity, whereas cold reduces desire and renders effeminate... men with cold testicles will be effeminate and without desire... If they are cold and moist... semen will be abundant, because of the moisture, and nocturnal pollutions common. (57-58)³²

This comment clearly invokes the terminology and concepts of Galenic medicine, and the theory of humours, which divided people's dispositions into combinations of hot, cold, moist, and dry, and which viewed men as being (ideally) hot and dry, and women as being cold and moist. A man's disposition could be affected by what he ate or drank, and by whether he accumulated too much seed, or alternatively lost too much of it. The most familiar invocation of this idea is in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, which explicitly draws on Constantinus, and Chaucer's Parson also draws upon it in his explanation of the causes of nocturnal emissions:

Somtyme of langwissyng of body [bodily weakness], for the humours been to ranke [overripe] and to habundaunt in the body of man; somtyme of infermetee, for the fieblesse of the vertu retentif [feebleness of the retentive power], as phisik maketh mencion; somtyme for surfeet of mete and drynke [surfeit of food and drink]; and somtyme of vileyns thoghtes that been enclosed in mannes mynde whan he gooth to slepe, which may nat been withoute synne; for which men moste kepen hem wisely, or elles may men synnen ful greuously.

³² The various manuscripts of *De coitu* contain 'major textual variations' but have not been edited properly, so I rely here on Delany's work; cf. Elliott 1997, 12.

These issues and discourses were extremely complex and contested (Cadden 1993; Laqueur, *Making Sex*, passim). However, they are relevant to medieval attitudes to masturbation and other non-procreative sources of emission.

Constantinus's formation would seem to link male effeminacy with a lack of sexual desire, and therefore undermine the postulated association of effeminacy with sexual pleasure. However, desire here must be understood as the desire to have sexual intercourse: that is to penetrate a woman. This is a sanctioned form of desire in medical discourse, although it is more contested in theological thought. As we shall see, it is when pleasure is submitted to that it becomes particularly problematic and especially so when it is associated with the forms of sodomy.

Earlier influential medical authorities such as Galen and the Arabic physician Avicenna, whose *Canon of Medicine* was translated into Latin in the twelfth century, recommended masturbation as a way to release built-up seed which might otherwise be harmful.³³ This was construed as a purely physical act with no moral connotations, of the kind that we encountered earlier in Cassian.³⁴ However, for medieval medical commentators, the issue of pleasure becomes a key one.

The question of which sex derived the greater pleasure from sexual intercourse was much contested, and Joan Cadden documents the debate in detail, which was particularly heated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Writers such as Gerard of Brolio, Jacopo of Forli, and Peter of Spain see men as deriving the greater pleasure, because their pleasure is more intense and is related to their greater physical strength.

³³ Other Arabic commentators on masturbation include Abu'l- 'Anbas al-Saymarl (d. 888) and Ibn al-Shah al-Tahiri, as mentioned in al Nadim, I.332-35; see Roth 1996, 319-43.

³⁴ A very early example is found in Diogenes Laertius 1925, II.6.2, "Diogenes" section 46, pages 46-47. Hicks translates the passage in question euphemistically as follows: 'When behaving indecently in the marketplace, he wished it were as easy to relieve hunger by rubbing an empty stomach.' The key term *xeirourgon* ('behaving indecently') means 'to do with the hand' (especially of 'violent acts'), 'to perform' or 'to operate' (see Liddell and Scott 1819, s.v.) Diogenes' act (as part of his stoic revaluation of shame) is discussed in Krueger 1996, 226. Foucault discusses another instance of masturbation attributed to Diogenes where he is said (by Galen) to be motivated by a desire to avoid the pleasure of sex with a woman: *Care of the Self*, 139.

Indeed, this could partly explain why a few medieval commentators do not seem to view masturbation as worthy of serious attention: for them, countering the trend, it may serve as a sign of intense desire and hence virility. The majority, though, view it as effeminate (when practised by men) and hence deviant. Peter of Abano in the early fourteenth century is representative in his association of women with greater sexual pleasure, mentioning their pleasure in rubbing the part at the mouth of the womb (Cadden 1993, 160, citing *Conciliator*, diff. 34, fol. 57ra).

Here again we see an association of sexual pleasure with femininity, and of course this fits in with the frequent medieval association of women with the bodily, the sensual, the uncontrolled. As Caroline Bynum argues:

Male and female were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy, and order/disorder. (151)

However, not all men conformed to the 'masculine' half of the binary.³⁵ Some men lacked self-control and some were characterized by sexual passivity, often seen as a result of certain kind of body.

The most revealing discussion of this dynamic is found in Peter of Abano's commentary on the *Problemata* of Aristotle (*Expositio problematum Aristotelis*), and specifically in Part IV, Problem 26, where he deals with the subject of why some men enjoy being penetrated.³⁶

First, Peter makes a connection between masturbation and anal penetration, when he describes the different types of what he calls 'illud nephandum opus sodomiticum' (the wicked act of sodomy):

³⁵ Indeed, as Sharon Farmer has pointed out in another context, medieval gender categories are 'always constructed within, and in relationship to, other categories of difference – such as social status or ethnic and religious difference', which complicates any attempt to essentialize a straightforward gender binary (Farmer 2000, 153).

³⁶ For a broader examination of Aristotle's *Problemata*, along with the various commentaries and their contexts, see Cadden 2013. Cadden's 1997 article discussed below is concerned specifically with Peter of Abano.

some exercise [it] by rubbing the penis [*virgam*] with the hand; others by rubbing between the thighs of boys, which is what most do these days; and others by making friction around the anus [*anum*] and by putting the penis in it in the same way as it is placed in a woman's sexual part [*vulvam*], and it seems Aristotle is speaking more about these. (fols [70]vb-[71]ra), Cadden 1997, 214)

The idea of rubbing and friction is important here, since Peter attributes the initial instances of these practices to a response to physical sensations around the penis or anus. He is specifically interested, however, in why some men obtain pleasure from anal penetration, and his unusual judgement is that this can be a natural rather than an unnatural circumstance, as Cadden shows in a detailed discussion of the text.

In some men, Peter says, the cause is anatomical: 'the pores and passages that would naturally convey the spermatic moisture and spirit to the penis are ill-formed, blocked, or severed' and therefore 'the seminal fluid does not reach its destination in the penis, but rather accumulates at the base of the penis or around the anus.' (Cadden 1997, 45.) Presumably the friction of sex relieves this accumulation. Peter includes in this category both eunuchs (i.e. men who have been castrated) and effeminate men with small weak testicles, who 'thus may have complexions so cool that they are reduced to the nature and behavior of women' (45).

He argues that this innate condition means that the preference for sexual receptivity can be considered natural, even though the experience is the opposite of what he thinks should happen in sex (46). However, he also raises a second circumstance in which sexual receptivity can be considered natural, and that is when, as Cadden puts it, 'the inclination is instilled by habitual practices that create what is a kind of acquired nature' (46) – that is, it has become 'second nature' – and Peter cites Aristotle as supporting his position that 'frequent and long habit becomes just like their very nature, [which] is in children from birth' (49).

Peter does call it a sort of 'monstrous nature', along the lines of hermaphrodites (47), but more important here is the process by which he envisages this new nature being acquired:

Boys around puberty are frequently subjected [*supponi*] and rubbed around the anus [*fricari circa anum*]. The experience gives them pleasure [*delectationibus*], the memory of which gives rise to desire, repetition, and habit [*consuetudo*]. This can also happen to young boys who are subjected to ‘this kind of dirty lust’, because at this age ‘their nature is soft and tender’ [*mollis et tenera est natura ipsorum*], so the process occurs quickly with them. (48)³⁷

Given these comments, it is difficult to see how this ‘frequent’ experience of boys and adolescents would not result in lots of men acquiring this second nature. However, the element that is crucial here is that very association of sexual pleasure and receptivity with boys and young men, which we encountered earlier in several theological texts, combined with the category of castrated and effeminate adult men.³⁸

There are other important medieval discussions of sodomy and sexual receptivity (which Jordan surveys brilliantly in his *Invention of Sodomy*). However, what emerges here is a key issue that has been neglected in explaining medieval attitudes to sodomy and masturbation, and why they are associated. It is not simply that such acts are against nature, in the sense of not leading to procreation. *Rather, a gender dynamic lies behind much of the medieval discourse which links sexual receptivity and masturbation to effeminacy and submission to pleasure.*

This conflicts with the judgements of scholars such as Jordan, who states that Thomas Aquinas does not see the sodomitic vice as effeminate (it has nothing ‘specifically to do with gender inversions or

³⁷ Cadden does not supply the Latin original, but I have been able to check the Pierpont Morgan Library copy via a high-resolution scan which they kindly supplied and which I am happy to acknowledge here: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. PML 33108 (h4r-h6r).

³⁸ There are more than thirty extant manuscripts of Peter’s *Problemata*, which was probably used as a teaching text at Paris (Cadden 1997, 51), so it may have been quite influential in France at least. As Cadden says, his concept of a natural preference for receptivity is not the same as the modern construct of homosexuality, but it ‘presents much more than particular sexual acts and desires’, and there is some ‘overlap with respect to significant areas of homoeroticism’ (52).

exaggerations', 33), and Cadden, who states that 'there is no sign that masturbation was regarded as effeminate behavior in the late Middle Ages' (Cadden 1993, 220). However, as we have seen, Thomas clearly does see masturbation, one of his four categories of sodomitic vice, as effeminate, and other such textual associations abound.

Moreover, this gender dynamic provides an explanation for a comment by Alcuin in which he defines the word *molles*, a reflex of the term *mollicitia/mollitia* which recurs in medieval masturbatory discourse. Alcuin states in his *De divinis officiis*: 'Sunt effeminati, qui vel barbas non habent, sive qui alterius fornicationem sustinent' (They are effeminate males, who either have no beards or endure the fornication of another)(PL 101.1195). Of course, the contemporary Western associations of beardlessness do not place it in the same category as a preference for being penetrated, and some scholars have professed to be puzzled by this. Fulk suggests that the passage may refer to men who 'shave in order to seduce other men' (note 58), but there is no evidence for this in the text. It seems more likely that it is an association of beardlessness with effeminacy (and hairiness with masculinity; cf. Phelpstead 2013), and/or a reference to adolescents who are as yet unable to grow beards and are thus gendered effeminate or pre-masculine. As we have seen, in medieval texts the word *molles* and its cognates are often used in contexts which suggest effeminacy, homoeroticism, and masturbation, and are also associated with softness and luxuriousness. The common element of all of these things is the stigmatized experience of sensual pleasure.

Sexual pleasure and submission

The key to understanding this association of concepts, then, may be to think of effeminacy as equating with submission to pleasure. Conversely, therefore, it may be profitable to see masculinity as equating with

the ability to resist pleasure.³⁹ This notion is similar to the kind of thinking Stephen Murray reports in Guatemala, where there is a rigid active/passive binary, and where one young man said he would never be the passive partner in sex because ‘If I let him fuck me I’d probably like it and then I’d do it again, and then I’d be queer.’ (273) The possibility of pleasure must be resisted because of its transgressive and transformative potential.

That masturbation is also associated with transgression of a notional active/passive binary can be seen in Peter of Poitiers’s *Compilatio praesens* (c. 1216), where he deems masturbation more monstrous than full sodomy because the perpetrator is ‘as if man and woman, and as if a hermaphrodite’ (18-19) – that is, as Jordan suggests, he not only plays both the active and passive role, but merges the two in a disturbing way (105).

A notional gender binary emerges from discussions of masturbation and other forms of sodomy, then, which defines sexual difference in terms of masculinity as hardness, self-control, resistance to pleasure, versus femininity or effeminacy as softness, lack of control, sensual indulgence. However, what blurs this binary and complicates questions of sexual difference is the frequent association of masturbation and receptivity with boys and adolescents, and the suggestion that these are tastes that can be acquired or ingrained through repetition. In social terms, boys are, precisely, ‘not men’ or ‘not-yet men’. However, since boys generally grow up to be men, the notion of masturbation as an almost universal practice among boys

³⁹ For a discussion of the controversial Old English term *bædling*, which translates *molles* in the Anglo-Saxon version of Theodore’s Penitential, see Clark 2009, ch. 3., which discusses the possibility that the term represents a concept of sexual identity based on a preference for sexual passivity. The passage is complex, and the word only appears twice in the extant corpus. However, it is clear that the *bædling* is a man who is considered different from other men, and the primary factor identified is that, unlike other men, he is soft and perhaps effeminate, since he is compared to the adulteress. This may indicate that some men were known to defy gender conventions and that they accepted the associations discussed in this article, though, of course, there are still many differences from the later sexual identities of the Early Modern *molly*, the nineteenth-century invert, and the twentieth-century homosexual.

which is habit-forming and can lead to other unnatural vices therefore suggests a picture of adult masculinity as a perilous state, to be maintained only by the most rigorous self-control and discipline.

If all men thus ran the risk of succumbing to pleasure and of forfeiting their claim to hegemonic masculinity, one might speak of the queer potential of an invisible community of masturbators and other sodomites which inhabits the margins of medieval culture. To leave the matter there, however, would be to underestimate the paradoxical quality which characterizes medieval masturbatory discourse. For that discourse itself both invokes several kinds of community (confessor and penitent, sinner and rebuker, tempter and tempted), and simultaneously creates still another community: that of author and readers.

Virtual communities of masturbation

In the passage from John Jejunator quoted above, he identifies two kinds of masturbation: 'There are two types of masturbation: one wherein he is aroused by his own hand and another by someone else's hand.' (Boswell, 364.) However, he goes on to comment that the latter type 'is unfortunate, since what the parties begin by themselves ends up also harming others to whom they teach the sin'. This second passage implies that mutual masturbation is worse than solitary manipulation, since it can involve teaching a new sin to someone else.

This concern ties in with the widespread reluctance amongst medieval commentators to be too specific in discussing masturbation and other forms of sodomy, particularly in vernacular literature, lest they should encourage vice in the hitherto innocent.⁴⁰ However, it also points up one of the paradoxes inherent in what is often known as the solitary sin: that it is often practiced in tandem. There is also a sense that what are often seen as the lesser forms of sin against nature lead on to and encourage the practice of the more serious forms: masturbation leads to mutual masturbation which leads to interfemoral intercourse which leads to

⁴⁰ On the distinction between discussions of sodomy in Latin and vernacular literature, see Clark 2009, chs. 4-5.

anal intercourse.⁴¹ What is more, even when the sinner is physically alone, he is still not viewed as acting in solitude.

In Alcuin's Letter 126 to 'Dodo' in which he characterizes masturbation as a sin belonging to youth, he warns him starkly against the practice in these terms:

Rebuke yourself instead and accept your father's entreaties, reflecting that you are always in the sight of God and the saints. Be ashamed to do before them what you shrink from doing before men, I know you believe that all will be judged: where do you think they are who did such things as the devil daily urges on you? You had the pleasures of the flesh yesterday – what remains of them today? (132-33)

Here the 'solitary' vice takes on an altogether more cosmic significance. Dodo may attempt to hide his shameful act from the sight of other men, Alcuin implies, but he must remember that he is always being watched: God and the saints never sleep.

Such a dynamic places masturbation within a similar context to the Panopticon, which, in Jeremy Bentham's design, enabled a single guard to watch all the inmates of a prison in such a way that the prisoners never know whether or not they are being watched and thus must behave as though they are. This mechanism of social control – as Bentham put it, a 'mode of obtaining power of mind over mind' (4.Preface.67) – is employed by Foucault as a modern icon of disciplinary power (195-228). Alcuin's formulation here enables us to see that medieval religious thought had already mastered such means of internalising social norms.⁴² However, it also permits a reading of masturbatory acts as always already relational, never simply confined to the realm of the individual.

⁴¹ Masturbation is also condemned as a practice that can lead to the sin of overly frequent sex with one's spouse in William of Rennes's commentary on the penitential of Raymond of Peñafort, IV. 519-20; cited in Delumeau 1983, 240.

⁴² Compare also, e.g., the strictures of the Benedictine Rule, which calls for a light to be kept always burning in monastic dormitories, with seniors present to supervise groups of sleeping monks; Clark 2009, 226-29.

At the start of the passage, Alcuin invokes the gaze of the inhabitants of Heaven. However, in urging his former student to fear the fires of Hell, he also brings in another notional participant in the scene: the devil, who 'daily urges [such things] on you'. Later medieval commentators took this idea even further.

Caesarius of Heisterbach described in his thirteenth-century *Dialogus* how demons called incubi (or incubuses) collected human semen in order to create bodies for themselves: this could be the result either of nocturnal emissions or of masturbation (1.152; cf. Bullough, 216). In a more complex variant of this, Thomas Aquinas recorded the view that succubi sometimes physically seduced men to acquire semen and then turned into incubi to pour it into women (I.1, q. 51, 3.6). Aquinas may have shied away from the homoerotic connotations of the dynamic described by Caesarius. However, an even more suggestive twelfth-century anecdote by Guibert of Nogent describes how a Jew introduces a monk to the Devil so that he can learn black magic. The Devil requires a libation of semen, saying: 'When you have poured it out for me, you will taste it first, as behooves the one offering the sacrifice.' (I.26, p. 89.) Ruth Karras comments 'Guibert does not say that all masturbation is a libation to the Devil, but the implication is clear' (123). Certainly, despite the multiple associations of the act, it is clear that some of the more lurid religious fantasies were built on the principle that masturbation, far from being solitary, was often a means of facilitating a link to the Devil and, therefore, weakening a connection with God.⁴³

As we saw in the work of Cassian and Gerson, penitents were urged to regulate their environment and habits in order to maintain purity and reduce the potential sources of temptation. One such aspect was food and drink, and this idea recurs in a fifteenth-century warning by Antoninus of Florence on the mortal sin involved in both nocturnal pollution and ejaculation through masturbation when they stem from gluttony or intemperance (Titulus 6, cap. 5; Stengers and Van Neck, 26). However, such comments come together with

⁴³ Gerson also recommends that the penitent masturbator renounce the devil, along with other practices of abstinence and self-mortification.

the diabolical associations of the act in a popular mid-fifteenth-century text, *The Alphabet of Tales* which expands on the perils of gluttony and specifically monastic self-indulgence.⁴⁴

Petrus Damianus tellis how on a tyme as a monke bare fryed fruturs [fritters] in-to þe fratur, he was prikkid with glotonny, and onone [at once] he withdrew one of þaim, & keste it in his mouthe, & ete it privalie [secretly] at none of his neghburs saw. And onone after he was strekyn [stricken] with a luste of his flessch, at he laburd hym selfe [lit. worked at himself] in such form as he did neuer befor, vnto so muche, at with his awn hand fretyng [rubbing] he had a pollucion of his sede. And so after þe morsell þat he stale, onone þe fende [fiend] entird in-to hym. (Banks, l.238)

The attribution to Peter Damian here may be spurious, but the passage represents in popular form not only the commonplace linkage of gluttony with lechery, but specifically the idea that an act of gluttony can directly lead to an act of self-pollution which coincides with being possessed by the devil. The very description of demonic possession in terms of penetration ('þe fende entird in-to hym'), associates masturbation with a sodomitical receptivity.

The devil also appears in a set of stories about masturbation in the late thirteenth-century Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré's *De fuga peccati contra naturam* (in his *Bonum universale de apibus*; II.30, pp. 167-74).⁴⁵ Although this text is in Latin it seems to present popular rather than rigorous clerical traditions, and this may suggest a semi-popular tradition of anecdotes used in vernacular sermons or by confessors to warn people of the dire dangers of masturbation. If so this contrasts with the long tradition of caution in addressing this subject openly and explicitly.

The first three of Thomas's stories focus on female masturbation, which, as we have seen, is also highly unusual in this predominantly male discourse. In the first tale a woman confesses to regularly

⁴⁴ The Latin base-text, Arnulf of Liege's *Alphabetum Narracionum*, is from the early fourteenth century.

⁴⁵ Compare Laqueur 2003, 158, citing Yaron Toren's research.

masturbating in bed. She claims that, when she does so, the devil cries out and makes lewd gestures and this causes her to feel sorrow and shame. However, perhaps even more interesting in this context is the story Thomas claims to have received from the bishop of Lausanne in which a regular masturbator reaches down only to find to his horror that he holds a snake in his hand. Given that the snake is a common medium or symbol for the Devil in medieval thought, it appears that the Devil is not only often represented as an inciter of or participant in acts of masturbation, but he can also literally take the place of a masturbator's genitals, estranging the masturbator from his own body.

Sexualised communion with the Devil, the panoptic gaze of God and the saints: masturbation becomes less and less of a solitary act the deeper into the literature one delves, and what further compromises its putative status as the act of a sinful individual, alone and ashamed, is the paradoxical function of the discourse itself.

Masturbatory discourse

Although the discourse of masturbation seems to function to regulate what can and cannot be said about masturbation and the ways in which it is configured, as well as to proscribe both the act itself and the unwary enjoyment of sources of temptation which may provoke it, there is inevitably another side of the coin. Even if the pleasure of masturbation itself is solitary – which we have seen is rarely the case – then the pleasure is potentially shared by means of the very discourse which circumscribes and prohibits it.

This dynamic is especially evident in penitentiary literature. The confessor is to proceed with patience and by means of careful questioning according to both John Jejunator and Jean Gerson. The former recommends that a priest ask how the penitent first lost his virginity and systematically tease out the possible means, and 'if [the penitent] is overcome with grief and shame' he should kiss and embrace him (Boswell, 363). Gerson, as we have seen, gives the confessor a series of questions to ask which progress from the

general ('do you remember ever... that your penis... was erect?') to the explicitly specific ('did you not stroke and rub your penis?').

These question-and-answer sessions in themselves present a site of intimacy, sexualised discourse and potential homoeroticism. However, the written inscription of the imagined conversation provides fuel for sexual fantasies on the part of unruly audiences, even as its context allows this potential to be disavowed. The same dynamic is found in the sequence of editions of *Onania* in the early seventeenth-century, as described in forensic detail by Laqueur in *Solitary Sex*. Over the course of twenty years and fifteen editions, a brief pamphlet on masturbation is supplemented by letters to the author, testimonials, 'agony uncle'-style advice, and discussion of its reception and rival publications, such that it stretches to well over three hundred pages. This 'conversation in print' is characterised throughout by Laqueur as a double-edged discourse, both prudish and prurient in exactly the way I am postulating for penitentiary literature: paradoxically, by condemning the act in such detail, the discourse enables the interlocutor to dwell on it.⁴⁶ As Christopher Looby points out in a later context: 'Much of the pleasure of reading [an] anti-masturbation text [derives from] the way it brings the reader into imaginary proximity to the masturbating body of the sexual deviant [demonstrating] how the ostensibly anti-social practice of autoeroticism [is embedded] in a homosocial context that renders masturbation a phenomenon of collective male concern.' (163)

Unsurprisingly, we have little explicit evidence of the use of medieval masturbation literature in this way. However, it can be inferred from Robert of Flamborough's *Penitential Book*, in which he includes several questions for confessors to ask about *luxuria* against nature, though he is cautious and says he tries to remain general so as not to give the penitent 'the occasion of sin'. Masturbation is slightly different, however:

⁴⁶ This dynamic also provides an alternative hypothesis for the 'explosion' of masturbation discourse in the Early Modern period: not because of a connection to a 'newly discovered' self, but because titillation in the guise of medical concern helps secular printers to sell books in a new material context of widely circulating printed texts that are not under the control of the Church.

But masturbation [*mollitia*] I extract painfully [*dolorose*] from him, and similarly from a woman, but the manner of extracting it is not to be written down. (4.8.224; Firth, 196; cf. Jordan 103.)

One could read this as implying that Robert always extracts it: that is, that all men and women do it but do not like to admit it. In this reading, the anxiety about writing down the manner of extraction might centre on whether his method is sound or not. However, the more likely interpretation is that Robert takes great pains to proceed carefully toward a confession so as not to corrupt the innocent with new knowledge. By extension, therefore, when masturbation is described in more detail such descriptions provide a potential ‘occasion of sin’.

Moreover, there is evidence that masturbation was seen by some as a cause for boasting and gossip, rather than as something to be hidden. The text in question is Ratherius of Verona’s ‘On the Contempt of the Canons’ (*De contemptu canonum*), written to Bishop Hubert of Parma in November 963. In it Ratherius castigates a cleric who boasted of masturbating soon after having recited the morning office:

I learned recently that a certain person (he told it to others with his own lips – for shame) – in almost the very hour in which he most wretchedly sung the offices... was so burned up with this deadly fire that to his own damnation in lust and wantonness he caused ‘the pleasure that scratches the itch within’ to be stimulated to the point of obscene discharge [*vice reciproca voluptatem obsceni fluxus ad ungnem*]. (2.3, Reid, 376; cited in Balzaretti, 148.)

The circumlocutory way Ratherius describes masturbation and seminal discharge reflects the common clerical anxiety about describing sexual sin of this nature in detail. Nonetheless, although Ratherius is anxious to discourage the cleric’s behaviour and attitude, the anecdote suggests that masturbation was also a source of homosocial interaction: the person talks of it to others, the act is closely connected with the communal singing of the hours.

A similar dynamic is seen in Alcuin's Letter 127 discussed above in which he mentions 'the filthy practices of boys'. Alcuin represents himself as shocked that he has heard about this 'not from one person whispering in a corner but from crowds of people laughing at the story' (Allott, 134). He does not, of course, reveal how many (if any) of the crowd were aroused by this titillatory discourse or whether his former student was ashamed or excited by the public discussion of his private sexual experiences.

Masturbators, then, have another history in between the lines of the orthodox texts which censure them: as those who boast of their practice openly, who enjoy it and who are even celebrated for it, or at least meet with laughter more often than condemnation. They also have a history, hidden in the open, within the homosocial dynamic of the confessional, the charged power relation between confessor and penitent; amongst the pages of the theological, popular, and medical materials, read in public or alone; but also in the scholarly discourse that surrounds the literature; wherever writer and reader meet, joined even amidst their solitude in the fruitful communion of the interpreted word.

Silence and lack, censorship and erasure, contribute to a potentially frustrating dynamic for any researcher of sexual mores in the past. However, even the textual lacuna can come to seem more like an inviting orifice when placed in the context of sexualized practices of self-denial and deferral. In a recent discussion of internet pornography, for instance, Zabet Patterson theorizes 'an endless slippage of desire in which part of the pleasure derives from habitual repetition and habitual deferral', which Frida Beckman uses in order to inform her discussion of the tension between 'linear and multidirectional desire' (49).

The scenes from *Shortbus* discussed at the start of this article embody precisely this tension: fleshing out the individual desire for completion and its complex imbrication in a social network that resists easy closure. Moreover, just such a dynamic of 'habitual' repetition and deferral is characteristic both of the work of the medieval confessor – endlessly repeating his questions, patiently drawing out the penitent's sexual transgressions, raising the spectre of desire only to disavow it and put off the potential of its fulfilment until

the inevitable next confession – and of the work of the medievalist scholar of sexuality – endlessly re-reading, editing, translating texts *about* desire *with* the desire of unfolding them, knowing them, making them part of their own body (of work), endlessly failing to pin them down, conquer them, finish to their own satisfaction.⁴⁷

draft

⁴⁷ Writing is no more a solitary act than reading. I would like to thank Sarah Knight, Ben Parsons, Carl Phelpstead, and Harry Whitehead for help of various kinds, but in particular Holly Furneaux, interlocutor *extraordinaire*.