

Sexuality, Iconography, and Fiction in French

Jason James Hartford

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Queering the Martyr

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for my parents, Madelon and the late James T. Hartford

FOREWORD

This study looks at two concepts, the queer and the martyr, as they overlap periodically in a given modern culture over a period of time. Both terms are politically sensitive, and subject to a variety of interpretations contingent on history and point of view. It seems that almost anyone might be expected to have an opinion on queer martyrs without needing much background in the subject, assuming that the queer martyr existed as a subject. Even before dealing with what “queer” and “martyr” may mean, I would like to give an idea of this book’s scope in proposing the queer martyr as a subject.

The book focuses chiefly on literary representations, in works composed in French. There has been plenty of work on queer martyrs in visual art in the West, but comparatively little on literary figures. A relative abundance of these subversive figures seems to appear in fiction in French, in work from France and occasionally from Belgium.

The figures to be investigated hereafter come from modern and broadly Roman Catholic milieux. Hence, understanding this term from the Catholic point of view is key to this book. The term “martyr” is not always used according to its meaning in modern Catholicism, especially throughout large parts of the English-speaking world and within English-language scholarship. Even though the featured authors by no means necessarily represent Catholic opinion, they do belong to a culture whose implicit assimilation of martyrs and martyrdom is different from that of most English-speaking culture for a number of reasons, not least the relatively greater influence of Protestantism in the UK, USA, and elsewhere. The study of subversive uses of religion within French-language culture

could invite comparisons with figures from other literatures, but these comparisons should be set aside until the backgrounds can also be compared properly.

With all allowances made for origin and cultural context, I posit the queer martyr as being separate from Catholic literature and the Catholic novel *per se*. A discussion of martyrs as developed in majority Catholic countries would look naïve if it did not discuss Catholicism. At the same time, few of the authors treated here were practising Catholics, let alone orthodox in their beliefs. All but one of the principal ones could be described as outsiders to the Roman Church, the exception being the Belgian Georges Eekhoud, a popular author in his time but all but unknown today. In terms of the surrounding culture, the pieces to be discussed are all works of cultural subversion.

Queer theory is sensitive to power relationships, and to subversions of category. One could therefore expect it to empower unusual treatments of other discourses that rely on categorization, such as Catholic doctrine. On the other hand, most classic queer theorists, most notably the hugely inspirational Michel Foucault, implicitly or explicitly subvert the Church and almost everything associated with it. In their eyes the Christian heritage overall is an elaborate, resilient system designed to oppress. For this reason, it seems wise to highlight from the outset that any discussion of religion and queerness should acknowledge and, as necessary, explore this opposition, bearing in mind that two discourses with a history of mutual hostility between their exponents should be combined with care. In other words, the decision simply to invoke the two in the same study could be, or be seen as being, political. For readers with a queer theory background, the idea of a queer martyr figure might seem paradoxical or incoherent. It could be hard for some in this group to imagine a queer religious figure that was not an anti-religious one as well. This might equally be said for some readers of religious background, although of course for different reasons.

As the title may anticipate, this book is critically interested in minority sexualities and the cultural roles they play, and so develops its topic in the context of contemporary queer theory. This means that its terminology is drawn from and partakes in an independent, developing, and controversial realm elsewhere within the humanities. From time to time some explanation will be needed for both newcomers and specialists in that area.

Generally, “queer” as used hereafter may usually be taken to mean non-heterosexual *and* non-heteronormative. The subtext is that “gay,” although meaning homosexual, does not necessarily mean non-heteronormative.

There is a feminist branch within queer theory that, while demanding that sexuality remain central to the term “queer theory,” also recognizes that patriarchy is an ever-present root problem with which queer theory grapples in Western society. Homosexuality alone can sometimes be reconciled with patriarchy, whereas queerness cannot.

The texts discussed hereafter display a wide variety of attitudes towards patriarchy. As a collective, they bespeak a breadth of opinion that does not map conveniently onto a historical narrative of rising feminist or queer consciousness. This is a political reality that needs to be underlined from the beginning. At the same time, all of these texts are non-normative and anti-normative in their many approaches to sexuality, according to their individual contexts.

Queer theory is aware of constructed aspects of sexuality, which can and do change over time. For this reason it can be difficult to maintain a coherent discussion when applying its terminology to works that span more than a century. Indeed, the very act of doing so could be seen as taking a position within queer theory debates. Although this book is not a work of queer theory per se, I acknowledge that the way I propose to use that theory within it could be controversial, or could be taken to reflect a controversial branch of opinion within sexuality theory.

The best-known aspect of queer theory’s interrogation of the subject is its mistrust of labels-cum-categories such as “gay,” “homosexual,” and so on. These are often seen to form part of a discourse that produces sexual categories within society, in aid of constructing an oppressive economy of sexualities. It is fair to ask that, when describing a category of people according to their behaviour, one acknowledge that the connotations of a label such as “homosexual” are highly contingent historically, and can be misleading. It would help here to recall some of Judith Butler’s classic description of critical queering. The political thrust of her theory “is not an argument against using identity categories, but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use” (1993: 19).¹ In reply to those queer theorists who might interrogate the idea of the self more radically, I shall locate myself in that debate by saying that I cannot understand motive in the absence of a self, which experiences immanent desires of internal origin and broadly ahistorical nature.²

This is a work in cultural studies, not religious studies; and so the perspective is one of articulating a series of uses of cultural types, without presuming their place within a single doctrine or even a single “movement.” The contrasts between the queer martyr and Catholic doctrine will, I hope,

become plain enough. As for the notion of a movement, it seems wiser to speak of certain patterns of representation that recur, with some changes, at roughly generational intervals. Gay martyrs and queer martyrs from different modern periods seem to have affinities with one another.

I am tempted to describe the gay martyr and the queer martyr as two discrete types, belonging to two streams of representation. Each type would betoken a different underlying political mindset within the material, and this contrast of mindsets would be observable over time. However, such a characterization carries two immediate risks: first, the potential to oversimplify the material, by creating categories out of a spectrum, and second, a temptation to overstate the degree of influence or “succession” from one author to the next. The difference between the gay martyr and the queer martyr as briefly outlined above is a relevant one, but at the same time it makes sense to be cautious about perceiving or presuming a given martyr to belong to a given camp by virtue of their first description. The figures studied in this book are already complex, by virtue of their standing at unexpected cultural junctures. The number of samples is relatively small, and very small in comparison with the analogous field of visual art. I will suggest that it is not too early to speculate about streams or trends in representation, particularly at the end of the book, provided that these limitations be borne in mind. Historical context will be particularly important for describing a given martyr and interpreting its possible meanings.

This work pursues a topic that straddles several developing fields. The combination makes for a wide audience, and also for many potential conflicts. In proposing such a topic as queer martyrs, I am aware that the discussion could be politically fraught for a number of readers, depending on their expectations of religion or of sexuality, or both, let alone their positions within specific debates. It seems fair to say that this contentious nature itself is a motive for study, not least because the subject is both identifiable and rewardingly varied in nature. What is at hand is a cultural complexity that demands more light than heat.

This book is the beginning of a discussion, not the end.

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NOTES

1. Butler's position with regard to all this changes from work to work. Her attitude towards identity categories in *Gender Trouble* (1990 and 1999), for example, is at least as hard line as Weeks's (see Butler 1999: 10-11 *passim*; cf. Weeks 1981: 25). It is interesting that the more measured 1993 article "Critically Queer," quoted here, appeared between the two editions of *Gender Trouble*.
2. "...I am unable to agree with the so-called constructionist argument that the modern period invents sexuality, homo- or hetero-, or that individuals in earlier periods are defined by their acts, rather than by an immanent orientation toward object choice; or that sexual identity itself is a purely modern phenomenon" (Gaunt, 1995: 441). Gaunt explores cases in point in medieval French texts.

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It should also be made clear that anyone's contribution to this book should not be interpreted as their responsibility for it. Specifically, as its sole author, I alone am answerable for any inaccuracies, omissions, flaws, or mistakes within it.

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