The “Degenerate Morals and Fashions” of Anglo-Norman Society at the Turn of the Eleventh and Twelfth Century:

Interpreting the Sources

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In this paper I should like to investigate a certain attitude to gender and to sexuality that emerges from the comments on the behaviour of the court of William Rufus in the works of four twelfth-century clerical historians of his reign, and the light it throws on the contemporary concept of homosexual practice. I shall be looking in particular at the work of the monk Ordericus Vitalis, the most important source for our knowledge of the first two Anglo-Norman kings. What strikes me in the comments of the chroniclers is the extent to which their reaction to homosexual behaviour is bound up with their absolute conviction of the inferiority of women to men, and with their vehement disapproval of any manifestation of human behaviour which goes beyond the bounds of what they perceive to be the virtuously useful.

William Rufus succeeded to the English throne on the death of his father William I in 1087, at the age of about 30, and was killed by an arrow while out hunting in 1100. At the very end of the century (1198 circa), William of Newburgh summed up the opinion of earlier writers in this damning character-sketch:
Homo vecor et inconstans in omnibus viis suis: Deo indevotus et ecclesiae gravis: nuptiarum spernens et passim lasciviens: opes regni vanissima effusione exhausriens, et eisdem deficientibus subditorum fortunas in hoc ipsum corradens. Homo typo immanissime superiae turgidus, et usque ad nauseam, vel etiam derisionem doctrinae evangelicae, temporalis glorie foedissima voluptate absorptus. (42) [my italics]

(He was thoughtless and inconstant in all his ways; he showed no respect for God and oppressed the Church; he was contemptuous of marriage and was consistently dissolute; he exhausted the resources of his kingdom with pointless prodigality, and when they were exhausted he squandered his subjects’ wealth for the same purpose. He was a man swollen with the vanity of monstrous pride, taken up with the most disgraceful desire for worldly glory to a disgusting degree, even to the point of sneering at the teaching of the Gospels). [these and the following translations are mine]

It is worth noticing that the term lascivia is not used by medieval writers to describe homosexual desire in particular, but all forms of lust. The medieval theologians called it luxuria, and counted it as one of the Capital Sins: in fact inconsideratio and inconstantia, which correspond to William’s ‘vecors’ and ‘inconstans’, are according to Gregory the Great (c 621B) two of the offshoots of luxuria. It is perhaps not without significance that William applies the very strong expression ‘foedissima’, which is typically linked with sodomy by the Church writers, not to Rufus’ sexuality, but to his pride (which incidentally is the first of the Capital Sins).

Writing in about 1133, Ordericus Vitalis, who was twelve when Rufus came to the throne, presents Rufus in a less negative way:

Guillelmus Rufus...patrem...suum in quibusdam secundum seculum imitari studuit. Nam militari probitate et seculari dapsilitate uiguit, et superiae libidinique aliisque uiciis nimium subiacuit, sed erga Deum et æcliae frequentationem cultumque frigidus extitit. (110)

(In some aspects of his worldly behaviour [William Rufus] assiduously emulated his father; in fact he was outstanding for military prowess and worldly munificence, and excessively prone to pride, lust, and other vices. But he was indifferent to God, to the Church and to divine worship).

Libido, like lasciviu, means ‘lust’ generally, and we shall see that Augustine uses it for an excess of heterosexual desire within marriage; certainly William I was never considered anything but heterosexual. Of the twelfth century writers I quote not one as far as I can see singles out
William himself as having indulged in homosexual acts (see Frantzen 235-46); they all condemn him rather for having tolerated every sort of abuse of office and profligacy on the part of his knights. Rufus’ military prowess and his fearlessness elicited Ordericus’ unstinted admiration, when they were used against enemies and against common criminals.

In 1951 Poole expressed the opinion of nineteenth scholarship when he wrote that it was ‘tolerably certain that [Rufus] indulged in unnatural vice’ (99). He went on to sum up William’s character thus: ‘from the moral standpoint he was probably the worst king that has occupied the throne of England’ (ibid.). This damning judgement does not refer merely to Rufus’ sexual misdemeanours, but also to his absolute indifference to the Church and to the well-being of all his subjects who were not in arms. Writing in 1973, Marjorie Chibnall was less dogmatic about Rufus’ sexual behaviour: ‘whatever his personal inclinations, one possible political reason for William’s prolonged bachelorhood may have been his failure to find a suitable heiress’ (57). She indicated the fundamental flaw in his administration of the country and of his reputation: ‘William Rufus’ great failure was with the church. The extent of that failure is shown in the hostility of all the leading ecclesiastical chroniclers’ (59-60). In two brief sentences Henry of Huntingdon, writing in about 1130, sums up the character of a man who, encouraging and encouraged by his knights, wilfully adopted the most extreme forms of behaviour forbidden by the Church, in order to flaunt his disbelief in, and contempt for, its teaching:

Postremo, quicquid Deo Deumque diligentibus displicebat, hoc regi regemque diligentibus placebat. Nec luxuriae seelus tacendum exercebant occulte, sed ex impudentia coram sole. (233)
(In sum, whatever was displeasing to God and to those who loved God, was pleasing to this king and to those who loved the king. They did not practise the crime of lust that should go unspoken in secret, but shamelessly and ostentatiously).

That homosexual acts were indeed widespread and tolerated in this period is I think sufficiently proven by a letter of instruction that Anselm wrote to his archdeacon after the Council of London in 1102 (c95):

Considerandum etiam est quia haecutens ita fuit publicum hoc [sodomiticum] peccatum, ut vix aliquis pro eo erubesceret; et ideo multi magnitudinem ejus nescientes, in illud se praecipitabant.
(As regards those who have committed the [sodomitic] sin...it must be borne in mind that up till now this sin was so common, that hardly anyone felt ashamed of it, in fact many people, unaware of its gravity, have fallen into it.).

I shall now look at how women come into the chroniclers' condemnation of Rufus' court. The chroniclers seem not so much to hate them as to be convinced of their inferiority to men in every sphere of life, including, inevitably, the sexual. These writers therefore consider that any behaviour on the part of men which makes them resemble women is degrading and shameful, and hate the men who betray their gender thus. This attitude of course reflects both Classical and Scriptural modes of thought, which we can trace in the following description by Ordericus of the catastrophic effects of Rufus' example:

Femineam mollitiam petulans iuventus amplexititur; feminisque uiri curiales in omni lasciuia sumnopere adulantur. Pedum articulis ubi finis est corporis colubrinarum similitudinem caudarum imponent...Humum quoque puluerulentam interularum et palliorum superfusio sirmate uerrunt: longis latisque manicis ad omnia facienda manus operiunt, et his superfluitatibus onusti celeriter ambulare uel aliq- uid utiliter uix possunt...Vix aliquis militarium procedit in publicum capite dis- cooperto; legitimique secundum apostoli preceptum tonso. (188, 190)

(Wanton youth gives itself over to effeminate foppery, and courtiers woo women with every kind of lewdness. They add excrescences like serpents' tails to the end of their feet where the body ends...and sweep the dusty ground with the unnecessary trains of their robes and mantles; they cover their hands with long, wide sleeves whatever they do, and thus impeded by superfluities they are unable either to walk briskly or to do anything useful. Hardly a single knight goes in public with his head uncovered, properly shorn according to the Apostle's precept).

In his study on homosexuality and Roman law, Dalla observes that in early republican Rome homosexual acts were not only legitimate, they incurred no social stigma, as long as certain roles were observed: women and slaves were passive; men, the owners of the slaves, were not, because the position of women and slaves was associated with their position in society: submission, lack of virility, weakness, dressing up (15). Paul has this to say about long hair and head covering:

For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man...Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman
have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering. (King James Bible: I Corinthians XI, 7,14-15)

When Ordericus condemns the times of Rufus by observing that ‘tunc effeminati passim in orbe dominabantur’ I think he has in mind Isaiah III, 12 which numbers among the calamities which will befall the people of God the fact that ‘children are their oppressors, and women rule over them’. If this is so, then Ordericus has assimilated effeminate to women; and it is perhaps not without significance that the passive partner in homosexual acts in republican Rome was known as the puer; that is, ‘male child’, and William of Malmesbury says of the luxury loving knights at Rufus’ court that they taught the adolescents ‘mollitie corporis certare cum foeminis’. In their contempt for women our chroniclers go so far as to criticize a man’s sexual interest in women as being effeminate, as we may see in the quotation from Ordericus. This reaction of course also reflects a general hostility to sexuality which I shall look at anon. It is interesting that whereas Ordericus is virulently opposed to the effeminate clothes and gestures adopted by Rufus’ courtiers, he sings the praises of Isabel of Conches, whose apparel and actions are those of a courtly knight (212): ‘Isabel uero dapsillis et audax atque iocosa...In expeditione inter milites ut miles equitabat armata’ (Isabel was generous, daring and gay...she rode out to war on her steed among knights, wearing her armour like a knight). It is almost as if for Ordericus human beings are not divided into two genders, each with its own code of dress and behaviour, but there is one real gender, and one non-gender, which he admires when it manages to emulate the real one.

I would now like to look at the way our chroniclers’ attitude to human behaviour, including sexuality, is coloured by an attachment to the virtuous category of the ‘useful’ as opposed to the sinful category of the ‘useless’. ‘Useful’, or ‘necessary’, is clearly linked in their minds to the idea of ‘natural’: and hence ‘useless’ or ‘superfluous’ to that of ‘unnatural’. Centuries later, Shakespeare’s Lear (King Lear: II: 4: 267-9) is to rebel against that very concept: ‘O! reason not the need; — our basest beggars / Are in the basest things superfluous: / Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s’ (my italics). By natural our chroniclers mean what is natural to man as God’s creature, so that what is useful (to God’s designs) is evidently natural (that is, it is innate to man who is a part of God’s design). Now from the point of view of the male
cleric, that is, of the category to which our writers belong, on a general plane women are of limited usefulness inasmuch as they are necessary for procreation, which ensures a steady supply of virgin denizens for this world and the next. I should note in passing that the women’s role in procreation is to supply the proper receptacle for the male seed. Sexual intercourse with women is hence grudgingly admitted when it is a means of procreation, but any pleasure beyond what is (unfortunately) necessary in order for the act to be consumated is sinful, because as far as God’s design is concerned it serves no purpose:

Concupitus enim necessarius causa generandi, inculpabilis et solus ipse nuptialis est. Ille autem qui ultra istam necessitatem progreditur, jam non ratione, sed libidini obsequitur. (c381)
(Therefore only sexual intercourse necessary for procreation is guiltless, and belongs to marriage. If it goes beyond this necessity, it no longer obeys reason, but lust).

On an individual plane, marriage is second-best for the would-be male virgin who is unable to remain chaste: the true elect are those who give up sexual intercourse altogether. Around the middle of the eleventh century Peter Damian had written a virulent tract against all four species of what he called the ‘sodomitic vice’ in which however he could not resist taking a shot at heterosexual intercourse too (c 186B-187A). He impressed upon his readers the fact that it is not necessary to procreate in order to ensure immortality for oneself, inasmuch as the name of the elect endures for all eternity, quoting Rev. V: 3-4 to that effect: ‘Hi sunt qui cum mulieribus non sunt coïnquinati; virgines enim sunt...’ (These are they who were not defiled with women; for they are virgins). For our chroniclers, for whom any form of unbridled sexual gratification was a clear example of useless, Godless self-indulgence, homosexual acts were one of the most blatant forms of all, because there could be no pretence of aiming at procreation. This was in fact the idea behind Alain de Lille’s definition of the fourth degree of luxuria, the peccatum contra naturam, formulated towards the end of the twelfth century: ‘peccatum contra naturam est quando extra locum ad hoc deputatum funditur semen’ (the sin against nature is when the seed is expelled outside the place designed for the purpose) (Lottin 45).
Several interesting things emerge from Ordericus’ description of the ineffectual rule of Rufus’ brother Robert, and for the shameless revelries of courtiers in the days of William Rufus. He uses the same verb, debachabor, both for the unrestrained pillaging of the helpless peasants by robber bands and for the revelries; and he uses mollis both for the idle, easy-going Robert and for those who committed homosexual acts under his rule. Moreover, in Ordericus’ litany of the evils of anarchy, violence is associated with Godlessness and with homosexual acts:

...predones cateruam discurrerebant per uicuos et per rura; nimiumque super inermes debachabantur ladruncolorum cateruam...grassatores per viii annos sub mollis principe [Roberto] super imbecillem populum suum agitabant furiam. Importune sanctam aeclesiam uexabant...cotidie fiebant incendia rapinac et homicidac et lugebat plebs...Inter haec impune procedebat petulans illecebra mollis flammisque cremandos turpiter fedebat uenus sodomestica maritalem thorum publice polluebat adulteria, et erga diuinac leges observaniam multiplex aderat negligentia...Tunc [in Rufus’ time] effeminati passim in orbe dominabantur indisciplinac debachabantur sodometicisque spuriis foedi catamitae flammas urendi turpiter abutebantur...hortamanta sacerdotum deridebant; barbaricumque morem in habitu et uita tenebant. (146, 188) [my italics]

(bandits overran the villages and the countryside in hordes, and hordes of robbers mercilessly pillaged the helpless inhabitants...and for eight years under the weak duke [Robert] marauders treated his innocent subjects with the utmost brutality. They sorely oppressed the Church...arson, robbery and murder were daily occurrences to the detriment of the people...In times such as these wanton seduction walked abroad with impunity, and sodomitic lust fouly corrupted effeminates destined to the fires of Hell, adultery openly defiled the marriage bed, and respect for the law of God was greatly neglected. ...In those days effeminates ruled the world, unrestrainedly pursued their revels, and foul catamites, doomed to burn in Hell, subjected themselves to the filth of sodomy,...they ridiculed the exhortations of priests, and persisted in their barbarous behaviour and dress).

The important part played by clothing, which is linked to behaviour in the chroniclers’ condemnation of Rufus’ court (‘in habitu et vita’) may strike the modern reader as out of all proportion, and Ordeticus’ almost hysterical tirades against what are known as poulaines as positively bizarre. In fact Orderic is prompted to launch into his attack on the ‘degenerate morals and fashions’ of Rufus’ court by this very fashion. After having told us how Fulk married for the third time he says that (186) ‘Fulco in multir reprehensibilis et infamis erat; multisque uiiiorum pestibus obse-
cundat’ ([Fulk] was widely criticized and notorious for his behaviour, and indulged in many pernicious vices) — this denunciation refers to a womanizer, not to a homosexual — and immediately goes on to say, almost as if this were an example of Fulk’s degeneracy, that he was responsible for the invention of poulaines; after which Ordericus’ text moves on to ‘sodomiticisque spurciis foedi catamitae’. Let us look at Ordericus’ description of the way the knights decked themselves out:

Pedum articulis ubi finis est corporis colubrarum similitudinem caudarum imponunt...Humum quoque puluurulentam interularum et palliorum superfluo sirmate uerrunt: longis latisique manicis ad omnia facienda manus operiunt, et his superfluitatibus onusti celeriter ambulare uel aliquid utiliter uix possunt...Vix aliquis militarium procedit in publicum capite disoecerto; legitimique secundum apostoli preceptum tonso. (188, 9)
(They add excrescences like serpents’ tails to the end of their feet where the body ends...and sweep the dusty ground with the unnecessary trains of their robes and mantles; they cover their hands with long, wide sleeves whatever they do, and thus impeded by superfluities they are unable either to walk briskly or to do anything useful. Hardly a single knight goes in public with his head uncovered, properly shorn according to the Apostle’s precept).

and William of Malmesbury, writing in about 1125:

Tunc fluxus crinium, tunc luxus vestium, tunc usus calceorum cum arcuatis aculeis inventus: mollitie corporis certare cum foeminis, gressum frangere gestu soluto et latere nudare incidere, adolescentium specimen erat. (369-70)
(It was in those days that the fashion for flowing locks, luxurious clothes, the wearing of shoes with curved points was launched: to rival women in soft living, to mince with foppish gestures and to flaunt naked flesh, was the example set to young men...)

Ordericus is clearly obsessed with poulaines, for he describes them more than once, together with the luxurious flowing robes worn by the worthless courtiers, which impeded any kind of movement or useful action: and this brings us back to the question of the useful and the natural. Luxurious flowing robes were damnable because they were useless and superfluous; pulley shoes were execrable not only because a great deal of superfluous leather went into the making of their points, which were unnecessary as a protection for the feet, but the points added animal
shapes to men’s bodies: rams’ horns, snakes’ tails. Eventually, a fourteenth-century ordinance of the French King Charles V was to ban them because they looked like horns, or the claws on griffins’ paws:

rostra longissima...alii in obliquum, ut Griffones habent retro et naturaliter pro unguibus gerunt, ipsi communiiter deportabant... res erat valde turpis...et quasi contra procreationis naturalium membrorum circa pedes, quinimo abusus naturae videbatur. (Du Cange, s.v. poulania)
(others went around with very long projections sideways on, like the ones griffons have at the back, and use naturally for claws...this was disgusting, and seen to be contrary to the natural growth of members around the feet, indeed an abuse of nature)

In Anselm’s letter to his archdeacon, quoted earlier, in which he lists the subjects discussed at the Council of London in 1102, four things are mentioned: the sodomitic vice, tonsure, shoes, and the celibacy of the clergy. The reason given for Charles V’s ban on poulaines fits in with what we have seen was the chroniclers’ idea of the useful, the natural and the virtuous, as opposed to the useless, the unnatural and the sinful: what is natural and useful for a griffin is unnatural and sinful for a man. If we bear in mind that towards the end of the twelfth century so influential and thoughtful a writer as Alain de Lille includes the homosexual act with all forms of non procreative sex in his definition of the peccatum contra naturam, it does not seem so strange that poulaines, which in 1356 were still seen as an abusus naturae, should be included in Anselm’s list, and that the chroniclers condemn them in the same breath as they condemn the uenus sodomestica, luxurious clothes, womanizing, and the pillaging of hapless peasants. As for homosexual practices, it seems to me that the mainstream of twelfth-century clerical writers represented by the chroniclers considered in this paper had not assimilated ‘the theological invention of arguments for categorizing — that is, for uniting and reifying, for judging and punishing — genital acts between members of the same sex’ (Jordan 9).
1 This is the text of a paper I read at the “Queer Middle Ages” Conference which took place at the City of New York University Graduate Center in November 1998.


