The rod in the dung heap

The Danish archbishop Andrew Sunesen (Anders Sunesen) on sex in marriage, c. 1200

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There has since the 1960'ies been a rapidly growing interest among historians in carnal details of intimate relations between individuals whose bodies corrupted and turned into dust more than half a millennium ago.

In one sense, this interest reflects the status of the medieval sources which are filled with such details, if you choose the right ones, and they are wonderful to sift for disgusting, chauvinistic quotations or for thrilling phrases that in any other context than a university discourse would have branded the person quoting as very un-academic.

In another sense, this interest is a striking misrepresentation of the sources, because the preoccupation with sex is a modern phenomenon. Medieval clerics were horrified and attracted and fascinated, not by sex but by sin. That is actually the conclusion of this talk and I shall try to substantiate it by referring to the writings of the Danish archbishop Andrew Sunesen.

Andrew was archbishop of Lund in Medieval Denmark from 1201 to 1223. He was primas over the whole of Scandinavia, and he had papal legatine power to lead a very important part of the crusading and missionizing efforts in the Baltic area. Before being bishop, Andrew functioned as chancellor to king Knud, probably for almost ten years. The close relations continued under the new king, Valdemar the Victorious, who was a brother to Knud and since his ascendancy to the throne in 1202 continued the military expansion in

Northern Germany and the Baltics. Denmark became a strong military power in the region, but the royal house was newly established and disputed by other family lines. The father of Knud and Valdemar, Valdemar the Great, had become king after long civil wars that are described in great details by the historian Saxo around 1200. Since then, Saxo has often been used to reconstruct Danish political history in the twelfth century; but it has been demonstrated by Thyra Nors at Copenhagen university that Saxo's presentation of events and persons is dictated by one sole purpose: To show that only the Valdemarians and their direct forefathers were born in legitimate marriage, while all other claimants to the throne were illegitimate according to the rules of canon law in the late twelfth century. Saxo used marriage law as an important political instrument, and he was very well informed about the international discussions of marriage law in his time.

There is a close connection between Saxo and Andrew Sunesen. The hero in Saxo's narrative is Andrew's predecessor, archbishop Absalon, and Saxo's work was dedicated to Andrew Sunesen. It is therefore interesting to look closer at Andrew's attitude to marriage and see, whether it has a similar political function and how it relates to contemporary, international discussions (and especially concerning the latter issue, I am much indebted to Thyra Nors for her suggestions).

Andrew Sunesen wrote a Hexaemeron in more than 8000 beautiful and classical hexameters. He might have composed it as help for his students while he was teaching in Paris, and then it should be dated no later than the 1180'ies. But it might as well be a work of instruction for the clergy in the cathedral diocese of Lund and then it might have been finished as late as in the 1220'ies. The work describes the creation and fall in 9 books and the redemption and recreation of mankind through Christ in the last three books.

Throughout the Hexaemeron, sex is presented as a basically illogical thing, or a very irrational thing to do. It is opposed to spirit, to animus, and especially to ratio, the faculty of reasoning and understanding - in this context: understanding the commandments of God (e.g. verse 2143 ff., 2210 ff.).

Book 9 begins by telling that the newly created flesh in Adam became corrupted when it fought against the spirit in him - when the creature revolted against the Creator in the fall in Paradise (5084 ff.).

Corruption is an important word here because it refers to two different things. Book 8 had ended with a long exposition explaining that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6,23), and that man shall die because of the fall (4559-64; 5062-64). By corruption of the flesh is clearly meant the physical death of the body, when it is used in book 8.

Book 9 then introduces another meaning of the same word. This corruption is the direct cause of the urge in the flesh to multiply itself by mating (5090; cf. 1802; 5280). By position and by semantic parallelism, sex and death is closely linked together by Andrew Sunesen here, so the corruption is also the preoccupation with sex. Intercourse is an attempt to escape death by multiplying, but instead it leads to death because of the burning pleasure connected with the physical act. The pleasure prevents us from being rational and is therefore an impediment to salvation (5109). By this formulation Andrew simply seems to mean, that we because of the pleasure love ourselves and forget to love God (cf. 5103-4). Even worse, this pleasure necessarily transfers the corruption and death upon the children. Andrew refers to the penitential psalm 50/51 verse 5/7: "Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (cf. 5269). The optimal solution to this would then be to beget children without enjoying it, but Andrew admits that a minimum of pleasure is simply and physically necessary (5200 ff.). It is futile to think you can avoid it, he explains, just as you cannot put a rod into a dried heap of dung without it becoming dirty and smelling (5137-44).

This immediately raises two theological questions concerning God. The first is that God put on this corrupted flesh and became man in Jesus Christ; is He then also governed by pleasure and death? The answer is clearly no, and Andrew emphasizes in a formulation that is close to being heretical because it seems to limit the omnipotence of God, that Jesus was not "capable" of feeling sexual instincts (5129). Andrew adds in passing that neither was Lazarus after having been called back from death (5130-32). This addition is extremely puzzling and must have created great discussions in the classrooms among the students of Hexaemeron. The problem is, to formulate it shortly: What is the pleasure of being brought back to life, if it is to a life without sex? The more scholastic formulation would probably have been, that if Lazarus did not feel sexual instincts, he was either not really brought back to life but only looked like - which could led to the dangerous analogy that also Jesus was not really human but only pretended to be. Or Lazarus was totally sanctified already in this life by listening to the voice of Jesus and would then have escaped primordial sin before his own death, which would also be a very suspicious notion and against Andrew's ideas. The short notice on Lazarus was not explained or elaborated upon by Andrew; it seems to undermine the whole line of consistent arguments of Andrew, and it remains a paradox in the work.

The reason why Jesus is without sin is much easier to explain. It is because that He was born by a Virgin and not the result of a relation between man and woman (5212 f.; cf. 6076-78). Andrew illustrates this by using a biological analogy. Like all good biologists until at least the seventeenth century, Andrew believed in spontaneous genesis, that small irritating and creeping animals were not the result of mating of parent individuals but were simply a metamorphosis of totally different matter (759 ff.). Acid water and over mellowing fruits are turned into small flies in August, and dust and rotten leaves produce worms. Andrew could therefore write, "Christus was born lik'a worm, that is without the

seed of a mating" (6683). He elsewhere referred to the picture of Christ as a worm on the hook, that God uses to catch the devil (6141-44).

The second theological problem that the rod causes is that God has created man. Has he then also created the sin in man? (The discussion is raised in book 7, 3941 ff., but lies implicitly behind the exegesis in the beginning of book 9.) The answer is no, and Andrews argumentation for this "no" is extremely important for trying to understand all the rest he is writing about marriage. He first writes that sin is not created because sin is not something existing, it is the lack of something (3955; cf. 4857), the lack of obedience, lack of faith, lack of ratio. The implication must be that pleasure in a sexual act is a sin because it is a lack of love of God. The Holy Spirit cannot touch the heart of man during that act. (This formulation, which was not used by Andrew Sunesen, was falsely attributed to Jerome in the middle Ages.)

Andrew then proceeds with a sharp distinction between soul and body, where we are told again that sin originates in the body and is a result of the body's fight against the soul (5145 ff.). But he then, in good dialectical manner, dissolves the distinction by explaining, that the soul is not forced into the body, and it is not especially eager to get into a body - for then it would be eager to sin - but body and soul are complementary. The one cannot exist without the other, and it does not make sense to imagine separating them.

There are a lot of different implications of this anthropology of Andrews. It is fundamental for claiming that no man can be perfect, no one can separate his soul totally from his body. Andrew even reproaches Saint Paul, who had prayed to the Lord that the thorn in his flesh might depart from him (2.Cor. 12,7-8). He ought to have realized that this thorn is a gift from God to teach him humility (4004 ff; cf. 2316, that this thorn is the inevitable result of the fall). This is a very clear rejection of an extreme ascetic ideal, and this rejection seems to be a common feature of late twelfth century theological treatises. We are all under pressure from sin in equal measure, no one more or less than others (5277).

Another implication is that this fight - or perhaps better, this creative dialogue between soul and body necessarily leads to the conclusion that sin is not an absolute but a relative and shifting lack of something, depending on whether the soul or the body speaks loudest. It is then not a question of determining whether something is a sin or not, but to fit in different kinds of sins in a hierarchical system. This was expressed extremely short and precisely by one of Andrew's contemporaries, Allain of Lille, who wrote that it is a lesser sin to fornicate with a beautiful woman than with an ugly one, because it is a greater

temptation (Brundage p. 348). This attitude was flatly labelled hypocrisy when I showed the passage to my wife, but I think it conveys well the fundamental concept of Andrew that the evaluation of sin is dependent on the object, on the sinner himself, and on the circumstances.

Because of this distinction of sin, Andrew can discuss whether Adam or Eva committed the greatest sin by eating of the apple (4450 ff.). In one sense, Eva did, because she did it first and in an attempt to be like God, and her sin affected both the Lord and her man (4539). The motivations of Adam were more complex. He might have hoped to be forgiven the sin, Andrew says (4469), but without explaining why Adam hope so, but it is probably connected to another motive. Earlier in the work, Andrew had dryly observed that a man will normally fulfil the wishes of his wife to avoid tiring talks and troubles (2124-27). The result of Eva's sin being greater than Adam's is that Adam shall rule over Eva, and she shall fear and tremble for his castigation (2281 ff.); but this is immediately modified by Andrew.

He continues that in another sense, Adam committed the greatest sin, because he should have known better than Eva that what they did was wrong (4534; cf. 4640 ff.). Adam is a more knowing and more rational creature than Eva. This is a very important observation by Andrew, because it gives him an opportunity to place clerics and lay people on different levels with respect to sin. Adam had a greater responsibility for avoiding the fall, because he knew better, just like the priest is obliged to avoid sin in circumstances where lay people wilfully commit sin (4537 ff.). Andrew does not use the word celibacy, but it is clearly what he had in mind here, and his distinction between different levels of responsibility and understanding provides him with good theological arguments for insisting on celibacy for the clergy.

Because of Adam's sin shall he live of the land in the sweat of his face (2297), which is the origin of private ownership (2550 ff.). Because of the fall of both Adam and Eva, they shall multiply in sin, which is the origin of marriage. As post-creational inventions, both property and marriage are highly suspect. Andrew even calls private ownership the greatest sin that mankind did to the earth (2564), and he contemplates to abandon it but considers that to difficult to do in practice. Private property must therefore have a function in God's plans, and that is to support man, who is weak after the fall, and help him in the necessary labour on the fields. It means that a sin - property - is allowed by God because of the weakness of man (2581).

Having explained this it is easy for Andrew to explain marriage. It is an institution, which is necessary because man is weak and which allows us to do what in any other context

would be a much greater sin. He uses the example that if a man has promised to live chaste, and he later gets married, it is, because of the marriage, not a sin to break the promise (2587-92).

Andrew returns later in his book to the relations between married people. The basic rule - which is if not outdated at Andrew's time then at least classical - is that they shall know each other with the sole purpose of begetting children, not for pleasure (5186 ff.). But he then elaborates in lengths on the intention of the individuals in marriage. This preoccupation with intention is a novelty of the late twelfth century. The perhaps surprising conclusion of Andrew is, that lay people do not sin by intention alone, if the wrong intention is not followed by the wrong act - in contrast to the clergy for which an evil intention in itself is a sin (5624 ff.). I believe that later in the thirteenth century, intention becomes even more important and could in itself produce sin also among lay people. Andrew continued that evil intentions followed by evil acts are a sin also in marriage, but because of the sacrament of marriage, this sin will be forgiven (5233 ff.). And therefore it is actually not the business of the confessor to ask people about their intentions with their wife. The priest can neither condemn married people nor absolve them because of what they are thinking, when they are enjoying each other (5263). That is because marriage in itself grants indulgence for that sin (5235). This is also a new concept of marriage which would have been unthinkable at the middle of the twelfth century but which had become more common during the pontificate of Innocent III.

There is, however, limits to the sins that marriage automatically gives indulgence for. This limit is drawn at unnatural sex. It is not specified by Andrew what this sin against nature actually is, probably because he presumed that it was common knowledge, so the same will be presumed here. But it is again treated in a hierarchical ordering. If a man wants unnatural sex, he shall abstain from it. If he cannot, he shall go to a prostitute and not to his wife. The reason is, that in both cases he would sin against nature and against the woman, but in the latter case he would also sin against the sacrament of marriage (5294 ff.). The holiness of marriage is so important to Andrew Sunesen that it seems a lesser sin to him to consult a prostitute than to defile marriage by unnatural sin.

What the prostitute should do with the money that she got from this service is explained by Andrew when he comments upon the seventh commandment against stealing (2995 ff.). If she wants to donate it to a church, it shall be refused because it is earned by sinful means just as usury. She might, however, give it directly to the poor, and she might also sometimes give it to a church if the priest reproach her publicly for her sinful life and makes it totally clear to her that she can not buy indulgence by sinful money but only if

she repents and changes her life. Andrew provides a very concentrated discussion of the prostitutes' money, which was generally a hotly debated topic in the decades around 1200.

There are two conclusions to this paraphrasing of Andrew Sunesen's Hexaemeron. The first conclusion is positive. It is actually possible to confirm that Andrew was well informed about contemporary discussions of marriage and sin. The sacramental character of marriage which is so prominent in the Hexaemeron was discussed in Andrew's time, it was propagated by pope Innocent III in 1210, and it was confirmed by the 2. Lateran council in 1215. In this respect, Andrew has been a modernist.

The second conclusion is a negative one in the sense that there are questions that it would be natural to pose to the text but which cannot be answered. One such is the question that I asked at the beginning of this talk: Is there a connection between the historian Saxo's political use of new canonical rules of marriage and Andrew Sunesen's work? We do not know, because Andrew did not write anything about illegitimate marriage or consanguinity or illegitimate children. We cannot answer such questions because it is the wrong text. Andrew's Hexaemeron is a treaty on fall, sin, grace and redemption; it is not a legal treaty so we should not expect to find anything specifically about marriage law in it. Neither do we find one single word in it about crusading in spite of the extremely prominent position that Andrew according to charters and chronicles had for years in the Baltic crusades. We cannot deduce anything e silentio, from the silence of the sources. This is knowledge among historians, which is as common as the definitions of unnatural sex. But it is my impression that we sometimes might be tempted to make an exception when it comes to the attitude towards sex in the Middle Ages. It is a little easier to quote out of context when it concerns sex, and it is a little easier to begin to interpret silence as loaded with meaning while it might simply be the case that sex is irrelevant for that specific source.

It would have been wonderful to end with a final statement about Andrew's personal feelings about and attitude to love and sex, but on the background of what I have just said, that would be a great sin against the métie of a historian. But - to imitate the composition of Andrew's Hexaemeron - I will immediately do what I have tried to show is impossible. It will consist of three short remarks:

First, Andrew actually chose to write about sin and redemption, not about sex and law, so sin in its many varieties might possibly have been more important to him than sex, which is only one of its many manifestations.

Second, Andrew was according to contemporary narrative sources an ascetic and a very hard one. A chronicler, who really wanted to emphasize this, wrote that he remained chaste during his years of study and travels, even in Rome. There are many reasons to believe that this picture of Andrew is true, and it indicates that he felt celibacy to be a personal and important issue.

Third, it is actually possible to find in the Hexaemeron small remarks and comments in unexpected places, which are easiest to explain if we believe, that Andrew also, in spite of his ascetic life, had an understanding of the attraction that two individuals of opposite sex can feel for each other. Such are the descriptions of Adam's feelings when he persuaded himself to eat of the apple to please his wife. Another example occurs in a discussion of what faith is. Faith is fragile, but extremely beautiful. Faith is like the old one who becomes like young, when she opens her house and receives the love from the guest, who enlightens the whole room; she is moved and finds from her hidings her most precious ornaments (3360).

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