Susannah Mary Chewning, ed. *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh.* Ashgate, 2005. pp. xii + 213.

This collection of 11 essays focuses, as the title suggests, on the interplay of sexuality and spirituality in medieval literature and culture. With the exception of Alexandra Barratt's "'The Woman Who Shares the King's Bed': The Innocent Eroticism of Gertrud the Great of Helfta," the essays deal with English texts, and with the exception of David Salomon's "*Corpus Mysticum*: Text as Body / Body as Text," which deals with sixteenth-century recusant writings, the essays treat texts dating from the 13th through the 15th centuries. The essays are grouped into four sections–Part 1: "Secular Literature and Drama" (3 essays); Part 2: "Romance and Narrative" (2 essays); Part 3: "Saints and Religious Women" (3 essays); and, Part 4: "Visionaries and Mystics" (3 essays).

This volume raises many questions, beginning with the selection and organization of essays. What, for instance, is the rationale behind including only a single essay on Continental material? Although blurring the boundaries between the medieval and the early modern is an important, productive recent trend, one wonders about the logic of including a single essay dealing with sixteenth-century texts. More importantly, one wonders why these topics are not addressed in the editor's introduction.

I also found myself pondering the definition of genres and categories. Why is drama grouped with "secular literature" when the drama in question is the York cycle's *Joseph's Troubles*? What precisely differentiates the "secular literature" in part 1 (conduct literature and alchemical poems), from the "romances" and "narratives" of part 2? M. C. Bodden's "Via erotica / via mystica: A *Tour de force* in the *Merchant's Tale*," included in part 2, arguably deals with a work more "secular" than any of the texts discussed in part 1.

The logic involved in creating parts 3 and 4 is no clearer. Given the established scholarly tradition of considering hagiography alongside romance, a tradition quite relevant to Julie E. Fromer's "Spectators of Martyrdom: Corporeality and Sexuality in the *Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Margarete*," one wonders why this sole reading of a saint's life in the collection is grouped in part 3 with essays on "religious women." Could not hagiography fit into part 2's encompassing category of "narrative"? Finally, how are the remaining "religious women" discussed in part 3, Gertrud the Great of Helfta and Margery Kempe, to be distinguished from the "visionaries and mystics" of part 4, since both of these women could readily be called mystics and visionaries? I found myself wishing Susannah Mary Chewning had taken time to explain her organizational principles and her understanding of generic categories in the very brief introduction; such explanatory effort is particularly missed since Chewning claims that one of the main contributions of the volume is that the authors "expand upon traditional notions of genre" (3).

The introduction does spend a great deal of time arguing for the uniqueness of the collection. Indeed, after having read the essays, I was left with the feeling that Chewning protests a bit too much on this topic. Although the premise of the collection is a good one, it falls short of meeting Chewning's claims that it "blends traditional ideas of both sexuality and religion in medieval literature with new, post-modern ideas on both topics and on literature itself" (3). Many of the essays present readings that are not new but rather quite mainstream, even in some respects a bit *passé*.

A case in point is the first essay in the collection, Michael W. George's "Religion, Sexuality, and Representation in the York *Joseph's Troubles Pageant*." The piece presents a solid, albeit fairly obvious, analysis of the fabliaux elements in the play, including a reading of Joseph in light of the *senex amans* tradition. Although not especially innovative, the piece's argument is unobjectionable

enough. What is objectionable is the fact that the essay illustrates another problematic trend in the collection as a whole–the failure to engage with, or even acknowledge, relevant recent critical work. Rather shockingly, a perusal of George's notes and citations reveals references to no scholarship more recent than 1990 other than a reference to another piece in this volume. Examining the bibliography included at the end of the volume turns up very few works published after the mid- to late-1990s, leading one to wonder whether this volume had an especially protracted placement and production process.

Several essays present readings that, while certainly valid, are, like George's, simultaneously dated in feel and out of touch with key recent scholarly works in medieval studies. Catherine S. Cox's "My Lemman Swete': Gender and Passion in *Pearl*," for instance, explores the interplay of language, gender and religion in the poem, focusing particularly on figurative language and its "feminine polysemy" (79). Feminist readings have definitely been here before; indeed, the endnotes reveal that this is a reprinting of an essay originally published in the *Chaucer Review* in 1998. Likewise, Liz Herbert McAvoy's "Virgin, Mother, Whore: The Sexual Spirituality of Margery Kempe," claims to be a ground-breaking reconsideration of the ways in which Margery reappropriates gendered roles in the process of her "re/ construction of self" (122). I have no beef with McAvoy's argument *per se*, but that in itself is part of the problem. Her readings of Margery are by now fairly standard ones, and it is not surprising to learn that, as the notes reveal, the argument first saw the light of day as a conference presentation in 1999 and that part of it "appeared in an article in *Parergon* (January 2000)" (134, n.1).

There are essays, though, that do legitimately introduce fresh perspectives. Mark Addison Amos' "The Gentrification of Eve: Sexuality, Speech, and Self-Regulation in Noble Conduct Literature" productively brings to bear the theories of Pierre

Bourdieu to analyze the nexus of gender, class, and religion in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. Cynthia Masson's "Queer Copulation and the Pursuit of Divine Conjunction in Two Middle English Alchemical Poems" introduces readers to comparatively little-known primary texts in an innovative way, reading them through the lens of queer theory; one regrets that this essay is marred by a glaring instance of the all-too-frequent editorial lapses found throughout the volume (in this case, texts written in 1471 and 1477 are described as being written in the 14th century [39]).

Alexandra Barratt's essay also goes in a new direction, presenting an analysis of Gertrud the Great that downplays the sexual dimensions of Gertrud's writings, arguing that her erotic imagery is often "anemic" and "lack[s] sensual imagery" (109). Here, too, a fine piece falls victim to editorial carelessness; the crucial opening quote appears to be missing some text, and another passage on page 117 (one cannot tell whether it is supposed to be a direct quote or a paraphrase) has a problematic series of ellipses.

Michelle M. Sauer's "Cross-Dressing Souls: Same-Sex Desire and the Mystic Tradition in *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*," too, breaks truly new ground. The essay covers more territory than the title might suggest. Sauer does not simply focus on *A Talkyng*, although her readings of its homoerotic dimensions are fascinating; rather, she addresses the more far-reaching subject of male affective piety, considering the ways in which "men reclaimed a typically female expression in order to further their own spiritual growth" (157).

I must close with a few final objections. I assume the press imposed the style of the notes. However, the practice of including, with no clear rhyme or reason, full publication details for some works in the endnotes while forcing readers to look to the bibliography for other references is annoying. Additionally, the format of the notes varies wildly, and some (see, for instance, page 193, notes 3 and 7) seem to

have been cut-and-pasted into endnotes from a previous incarnation's works cited pages with no modification. I wish I had found this collection more impressive. The topic it addresses is important, but, while it contains some strong selections, it is overall, like the notes, wildly uneven.

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"[W]omen did not write these [misogynous] books nor include the material which attacks them and their morals. Those who plead their cause in the absence of an opponent can invent to their heart's content, can pontificate without taking into account the opposite point of view and keep the best arguments for themselves, for aggressors are always quick to attack those who have no means of defence. But if women had written these books, I know full well the subject would have been handled differently. They know that they stand wrongfully accused, and that the cake has not been divided up equally, for the strongest take the lion's share, and the one who does the sharing out keeps the biggest portion for himself."

Christine de Pizan, *The Letter of the God of Love*