

BOOK REVIEWS



Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain. Edited by Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse, and Cory James Rushton. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014. Pp.192. ISBN: 9781843843795.

THE EDITORS OF *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain* seek, by their own admission, both to continue the discussions raised in their previous collection on medieval eroticism and sexuality, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (2007), and to address specific criticisms of the earlier volume, such as the marginalization of major authors including Malory and Chaucer, a point well addressed here. This collection moves away from the specifically literary erotic in order to situate the discussion more squarely in the broader social contexts for the production and consumption of literature by problematizing the concept of the “erotic,” often an amorphous concept in the essays selected for this volume, as it is presented in medieval British literature. The concept of sexuality in medieval British literature, for the contributing authors, deals extensively with the heteronormative cultural constructs that both medieval readers and authors engage in and an interest, sometimes bordering on the obsessive as in the case of Chaucer’s Pandarus, with the Other, the withheld, or the forbidden. The essays as a whole present sex and sexuality, in the editors’ words, as the collision of men and women “in all their various paraphiliac heterosexual and homosexual conjunctions” while the erotic remains the “affect of attraction that structures and articulates desire” (10). This emphasis not only refines the definition of sexual culture as the overarching theme of the collection but also reinscribes the work done in the earlier project in terms of locating eroticism and the affective nature of the erotic in the essays presented.

The eleven essays in the collection present a number of perspectives on the role of sexuality and eroticism in medieval literature, with fair attention paid to the major authors of the period as well as the thematic and social norms the literature engages. Malory is well represented in three essays, along with three focused broadly on Chaucer, a single essay on Gower, and passing mentions

of the three in other essays as well. Worthy of note are the inclusion of both Dunbar's satirical poetry as a representation of the marginalized or animalistic erotic in Ana Caughey's essay and Cynthea Masson's treatment of the sexualized imagery in alchemical texts, which add diversity to the selected essays and present a broader context for sexuality—including hermaphrodite imagery and sexual deviancy—in the literature of the period. Concepts of the eroticism of vulnerability and sexual submission, seduction by both male and female characters, and sexual violence collectively present a spectrum of sexualities and facets of the sexual cultures in which the individual narratives operate. While the collection does not holistically locate these elements within a broader discursive framework, the individual contributions do sometimes achieve a sense of internal constructedness which adds to the discussion of medieval sexuality and cultural specificity in a number of ways.

Themes of control of sexuality and the optics created through these narratives in terms of both visual and cultural space run through a number of these essays. Of particular note in this regard are Megan Leitch's contribution, focusing on the bedchamber as defining space for sexuality in Middle English romance, and Asling Byrne's essay dealing with the optics of fairyland and the (in)visible sexuality of fairy lovers. A slightly different tack is taken by Amy N. Vines, who presents an examination of rape as chivalric necessity through a number of visual and spatial locations. These three essays serve to underscore the locatedness of sexual identities and sexual politics in the literature through their use of defined spaces and the limits of gaze.

Masculine agency, or the surrender of agency as an erotic tool, serves as the focus of another cluster of essays. Kristina Hildebrand's discussion of male sexuality as a disruptive force in Malory's *Morte*, Yvette Kisor's analysis of Elaine's submissive eroticism in the Lancelot tradition, and Hanna Priest's essay focusing on the uses of perceived rape in *William of Palerne* as a normalizing sexual device, as well as Vines's essay mentioned above, highlight the instability of male sexual identity and the role of female passivity as a sexual trope in the literature. Kisor's suggestion that Lancelot's interactions with Elaine become sexualized not through her nakedness but through her passive, visible submission highlights this movement in the collection as a whole nicely. The presentation of male and female sexuality in these essays speaks directly to the value of this collection to the field as the individual essays both make contributions on their own merits and are thematically enhanced by being placed in dialogue with each other.

The Chaucerian offerings are strong essays, but less contextually interrelated than the other thematic or authorial offerings. Amy S. Kaufman presents an

interesting analysis of the use of subjectivity and subject positions as sexual and erotic tools in the *Merchant's Tale*, while Cory James Rushton's discussion of Pandarus's destructively homosocial and incestuous sexuality in *Troilus and Criseyde* takes the volume's theme in a different direction. This is not to say that Rushton's reading is flawed, but rather to illustrate the diversity of the discussions present in this collection. Vines's exploration of the rape motif in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* marks her contribution as one of the most thematically flexible in this collection, but also serves to underscore the differing directions each of the authors has chosen to go in their use of Chaucer's work.

The diversity of the collection as a whole is both a strength and a potential weakness in terms of the volume's overall contribution to the broader discussion of medieval British sexuality and defining the sexual culture the literature embodies. While presenting a broad and well curated spectrum of interpretations of the theme and providing needed insight into the role of individual characters and texts in addition to possible frameworks for analyzing the subject across multiple texts, the absence of a central textual or interpretive point to bring each of the essays into greater dialogue with one another serves to somewhat diffuse the effect of the volume as a whole.

Christopher Flavin
Northeastern State University