

Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton,
eds., *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*,
(Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014). Print, 186 pp., £55.00, ISBN:
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Review

This collection of essays begins with a reference to the HBO television series *Game of Thrones*. Although this cultural reference may not stand the test of time, the argument that sex in the Middle Ages was not as violent and brutal as portrayed in popular culture remains valid: one can find the whole spectrum of sexual desire in the literature of Medieval Britain. The introduction of this eleven-chapter collection surveys the theoretical framework surrounding sexuality, the erotic, and the culture of heterosexuality, and states that the aim of this collection is to present the diversity of medieval sexualities and examine how they reflect contemporary thought and behaviour.

The first chapter by Kristina Hildebrand argues that the disruptive power of male sexuality in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* threatens the structures of feudal society and that male desire must be controlled through social practices. Yvette Kisor also examines the representation of male desire in Malory in Chapter 4 but with a focus on the character Elaine. Kisor uses close reading to contrast the description of Elaine with that of the unnamed, but vocal and active, maiden in the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle; observing that it is the vulnerability, passivity, and nakedness of a woman that engenders male desire.

Amy S. Kaufman uses feminist theory and criticism of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* to discuss female agency and desire. Kaufman argues that criticism has focussed too much on May's body and silence during her sexual encounter with Damyan and proposes that this scene conversely presents her desire. Kaufman is persuasive in her argument that the narrative is structured to allow the reader to follow May's

development as an erotic subject and this is evidenced through glossing by readers in the Harley MS. Female agency in relationships is also explored in Chapter 6, where Hannah Priest analyses the text *William of Palerne* to present the ways in which characters perform sexuality. Priest concludes that gender norms remain stable, as any performance, gender or species-bending is merely temporary: these behaviours or disguises are meant to entertain rather than trouble.

Megan G. Leitch examines space within the sexual economy of Middle English romance. Private space is imbued with the social hierarchies and power structures of public life and these spaces are manipulated by both men and women for desire and, more importantly, control. Space is also considered by Aisling Byrne in an intelligent and well-argued chapter discussing the use of the fairy lover as both narrative device and as an adoxic space for the satisfaction of transgressive desires without consequence. Byrne suggests that the fairy lover trope is used to examine gratification; the introduction of the taboo aspect of the human/fairy relationship reveals the need for order and restraint for personal growth.

The final chapter in this collection takes as its focus the importance of rape for a knight's development. Amy M. Vines proposes that sexual aggression is an implicit part of the courtly code, yet the knight-rapist's reparative quest is used to draw the reader's attention away from the rape and onto his chivalric prowess and improved reputation. Vines' argument is well supported by a wide range of examples, such as the staged rape in *Partonope of Blois*; however, this chapter serves more to reconfirm Kathryn Gravdal's work on the subject rather than offer an alternate view on the depiction of rape in medieval culture.

In the introduction, Robert Allan Rouse and Corey James Rushton note that a companion collection, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, was criticised for its lack of attention to canonical authors and, perhaps in response, this collection does concentrate more heavily on Chaucer, Gower and Malory. While the chapters examine

a range of texts, and the desires and behaviours within those texts, what becomes immediately apparent is that over half of the chapters are concerned with sexuality in romance and many of the contributors use the same primary sources. Although this highlights the multiplicity of desire within medieval literature, chapters such as those by Anna Caughey, on sexuality and the abject in Dunbar, and Cynthia Masson, on sexual rhetoric and the hermaphrodite in alchemical texts, seem out of place in a collection so focussed on romance. One criticism of this collection is that although it presents a large range of sexualities, the chapters concentrate on male-female relationships; one area which is conspicuous by its absence is discussion of same-sex desire.

One must note that whilst each chapter is well-written and accessible, knowledge of the canon is often assumed and therefore non-specialists may require additional resources. However, this collection successfully demonstrates the complexity of medieval sexual culture and would be useful for any with an interest in gender, sexuality, and Middle English romance.

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