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The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain (review)

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AMANDA HOPKINS and CORY JAMES RUSHTON, eds. *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007. Pp. 182. £45.00; \$80.00.

Building upon the very substantial—and, to take the long view of medieval scholarship, actually very recent—corpus of critical work by medievalists on constructions of gender and sexuality, the contributors to the collection *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* engage with the notion of the erotic in order to read it on its own terms, whatever such may be. What *was* erotic, and what were its representations, in the Western European Middle Ages? As the editors ask in their introduction, “How can modern readers identify, analyse, appreciate the erotic in medieval literature? What response did medieval authors hope to provoke in their contemporary audience? . . . How is the modern reader to interpret the dynamic between the erotic and the transgressive?”

The result is a collection of essays that, while often uneven, is argued with a good deal of liveliness and, appropriately, delight. This collection has as its primary focus romances in English (the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Sir Degarré*, *Sir Launfal*, and others, as well as the figure of Gawain as lover and the figure of the erotic enchantress), but also includes forays into *The Alphabet of Tales*, *Ancrene Wisse*, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, the Paston letters, *The Mabinogion*, and Latin lyric.

What constitutes the erotic is of course culturally specific, realized in local representational practices and personal expression. Thus to attempt to historicize the erotic and erotic experience is ambitious indeed, especially with respect to the Middle Ages. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *erotic* (“of or pertaining to the passion of love; amatory” and “amatory poem”) does not enter English until the mid-seventeenth century. (On the other hand, *lust* in the sense of “pleasure, delight” and even “desire, appetite” has been with us since the earliest English; *lust* in the sense of sinful “sensuous desire,” as well as in the sense of “libidinous desire, degrading animal passion,” followed soon after.) The *OED’s* entry on *erotica* is also brief, defining *erotica* as “matters of love; erotic literature or art (freq. as a heading in catalogues).” The seven entries on *erotica* range from 1854 to 1967, and I find the last, from George Steiner’s “Night Words: High Pornography and Human Privacy,” useful in discussing the essays at hand. Steiner writes: “Above the pulp line—but the exact boundaries are impossible

to draw—lies the world of erotica, of sexual writing with literary pretensions or genuine claims. This world is much larger than is commonly realized.” Steiner goes on to say: “What distinguishes the ‘forbidden classic’ from under-the-counter delights . . . is essentially, a matter of semantics, of the level of vocabulary and rhetorical device used to provoke erection” (pp. 70–71). In 1967, Steiner’s essay offended. In 2008, one is simply annoyed at the assumption about the audience. Still, browsing the dictionary makes one wonder what a Middle English erotic “amatory poem” might be (January’s morning cuckoo? Any number of Harley lyrics?), and what might be considered Middle English erotica (Chaucer’s narratorial sleight in his description of Troilus and Criseyde’s first union? The narrative of seductions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?)—*erotica* being something very different from the *erotic*.

Mindful of the difference, no contributor to *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* offers a Steinerian taxonomy of erotic writing in medieval Britain. The first preposition in the title of the collection is crucial. More often than not, the erotic in the medieval texts under consideration is glimpsed through what Barthes calls “the hole in the discourse.” Until recently, such “holes” have been roundly ignored, suppressed, forgotten, left unexplicated and untouched in literary scholarship. This collection asks us to start with the hole. In “A Fine and Private Place,” for example, Jane Bliss focuses on what she sees as the author’s anxious and occluded proscriptions against same-sex acts in the *Ancrene Wisse*.

Bliss’s reading points to another kind of “hole in the discourse,” and that is the hole in literary scholarship itself. In “Eros and Error: Gross Sexual Transgression in the *Fourth Branch* of the *Mabinogi*,” Michael Cichon reads narratives of sexual transgression, including rape, as cautionary tales that nevertheless are erotically charged: the “hole” in this case is unavoidable, but how a reader treats it—jumps over it, goes around it, or confronts it head on—changes the way we read the, well, whole. For example, Thomas Howard Crofts, in “Perverse and Contrary Deeds: The Giant of Mont Saint Michel and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” pushes previous readings of the story-that-cannot-be-told to graphic extreme in the episode of the Giant and his rape of the duchess and her nurse.

In the context of this collection, in which the erotic is taken seriously in a designated safe space, as it were, I find it surprising that Simon Meecham-Jones, in “Sex in the Sight of God: Theology and the Erotic

in Peter of Blois' 'Grates Ago Veneri,''' aestheticizes beyond recognition the rape at the center of the poem. He describes the rape as a "surrender," and the poem's main event as standing in for "the primacy of Faith over intellect," and does so without any reflection on the long history of troping rape in literary texts and the visual arts. Now, given his project here—reading a number of Latin lyrics that unequivocally describe sexual acts so that he may place the lyrics in their theological and philosophical context—to do so has validity. However, to ignore the "literal" narrative, not to allow for another reading, seems out of step with the purpose of this collection. This strikes me as a missed opportunity to raise some questions about the possible "erotics" of rape—which is, as many of the other essays in this collection suggest, bound up with the "erotics" of virginity. Only scare quotes will do.

While the essays in this collection offer many fine readings of texts, we are not that further along to defining what a medieval erotic *is* at the end of it. Still, given that scholars of medieval sexuality, sexual practices, and desire have had to contend with a shifting, oblique, or missing vocabulary, the contributors to *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* address this problem in what is, perhaps, the only reasonable way to do so; that is, to read for the erotic in narratives of acts or instances of identity-formation, and to read for acts or instances of identity-formation in the erotic. The volume ends with an essay by Alex Davis, "Erotic Historiography: Writing the Self and History in Twelfth-Century Romance and the Renaissance," that not only serves as a way to contextualize the previous essays but also suggests why reading (for) the erotic is productive, for it "is not only an object of study, but also functions in terms of mapping the field of study; it has historiographic value."

Other essays include Sue Niebrzydowski, "'So wel koude he me glose': The Wife of Bath and the Eroticism of Touch"; Cory Rushton, "The Lady's Man: Gawain as a Lover in Middle English Literature"; Corinne Saunders, "Erotic Magic: The Enchantress in Middle English Romance"; Amanda Hopkins, "'wordy vnthur wede': Clothing, Nakedness, and the Erotic in Some Romances of Medieval Britain"; Robert Rouse, "'Some Like it Hot': The Medieval Eroticism of Heat"; Margaret Robson, "How's Your Father? Sex and the Adolescent Girl in *Sir Degarrê*"; Anthony Bale, "The Female 'Jewish' Libido in Medieval Cul-

ture"; Kristina Hildebrand, "Her Desire and His: Letters between Fifteenth-Century Lovers."

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SIMON HOROBIN. *Chaucer's Language*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. x, 198. \$24.95; £14.99 paper.

There are several good books that offer a conspectus of Chaucer's language, but it has been some time since a dedicated handbook approachable by students has appeared (at least in English). In some respects, the likes of Ralph Elliott's *Chaucer's English* (1974) and David Burnley's *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (1983), though both excellent, now appear too demanding for undergraduates who may be coming to the serious study of Middle English for the first time; and the emphases of teaching and scholarship have inevitably shifted somewhat in the meantime. Simon Horobin's admirable new book successfully meets the needs thus exposed: its adroit, patient exposition, which explicitly assumes no knowledge of Middle English or of "technical linguistic terminology" (p. ix), provides not only a practical guide to form and sense but also (as is to be expected from an author at the cutting edge of Middle English language scholarship) makes for a commendably lucid point of entry to the critical attitudes and theories that inform current research.

In the preliminary chapter ("Why Study Chaucer's Language?") Horobin argues with characteristic cogency and effectiveness for students' engagement with Middle English literature in its original form. He explores the fundamental similarities and the cautionary differences between Chaucer's language and the English of today at a practical level, with a demonstration of the tools available to the student in translating sample passages (glossaries, *MED*), and the sounding of *caveats* over some familiar "false friends." In tandem with this, he highlights the importance of context in determining the connotations of Chaucer's words and the significance of the variant forms manipulated by English authors before the solidification of a written Standard. The emphasis