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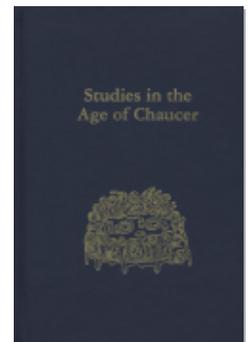
*Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* by  
Karma Lochrie (review)

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*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 29, 2007, pp. 517-520 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2007.0033>



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by Wycliffism, in the normative techniques of penitential self-definition. Moreover, the absence of considerations of other seemingly relevant works by Hoccleve—such as the more purely confessional *Male Regle*—makes such assessment of Hoccleve’s concerns provisional. More generally in regard to coverage, in a book investigating the discursive relays between penitential self-definition and religious reform, one fairly expects *Piers Plowman*, especially the figure of Will, to make more than the brief appearance it does, and the same may be said about the famously complex and ecclesiastically entangled selves of the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Pardoner (to whom Little devoted a chapter in her 1998 Duke dissertation).

These criticisms, however, are not intended to put either the book’s achievement or value into question. Indeed, inasmuch as they represent a call for further investigation and corroboration, they underscore the importance of the research direction Little’s book so auspiciously opens up. To those interested in the discourses of religious reform and self-definition—most readers of this journal, I wager—this book is a must read.

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KARMA LOCHRIE. *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Pp. xxviii, 178. \$60.00 cloth, \$20.00 paper.

Lochrie’s Introduction and first chapter (“Have We Ever Been Normal?”) offer smart, informed discussions of the impact of statistical science and the concept of the “average man” on sex research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is still, even in our modern times, a surprising way to begin a book about the Middle Ages. But Lochrie means to distinguish contemporary from medieval knowledge-production, and accordingly it behooves her to explain why she sees the “norm” as a modern artifact. “Heterosyncrasy” is Lochrie’s term, indicating “diverse forms of desire, sexual acts, medical technologies, and attendant theologies” bound neither to the “procreative model of heterosexuality” (p. xix) nor to recent notions of number. In brief, *Heter-*

*asyncretasies* claims that there was a time when normal “wasn’t,” and that time was premodernity. The book goes further: there was a time when “norms,” “normality,” and “normativity” did not rule discussions of sexuality.

Lochrie wants “to imagine a preheteronormative past that is neither hopelessly utopian nor inveterately heteronormative,” awakening us “to the medieval residues [in our present] that must now be accounted for in the way we will imagine sexualities in the future” (p. 25). There is actually not a lot of future talk in this book. But it is incontrovertibly visionary. The uncanniness of the Middle Ages emerges from its pages with joyous clarity. Lochrie’s ability to think variously challenges many of the timelines sacred to contemporary historians of sex, for example, the discussion in chapter 4 of the “medieval ignorance of the clitoris,” its “discovery” by Renaissance anatomists, and the consequent breakdown of the “one-sex model of sexual difference” and “emergence of the lesbian” (p. 72). Now, one might reasonably find risible the idea that the clitoris was ever unknown to anybody anytime, the organ really not being as difficult to locate as all that. Do today’s female infants owe their masturbatory pleasure to centuries of anatomical study? But life is funny, morphology is cultural, and knowledges differ, so it is useful to learn that “anatomists had already begun dissecting corpses at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century,” and that the Middle Ages “had two clitorises instead of one and . . . both of them were dangerous” (pp. 74–75). (As Lochrie observes, “to see . . . a clitoris does not necessarily amount to . . . less confusion about it.”)

Although I’m still not sure why we can’t question Suger’s allegations against the behavior of the nuns at Argentueil (an assertion made in Lochrie’s second chapter, “Untold Pleasures”), her exploration of Heloise’s remark to the effect that “women are most vulnerable to seduction from each other” is all you need to make you appreciate how important the convent was in medieval culture, and why. It was an exceptional, extraordinary way of life that was in theory open to all women, and nothing has ever replaced it in Western culture. Chapter Three, “Far from Heaven,” persuasively argues that Chaucer’s Prioress is a Lollardish satire of “a late medieval spirituality associated with women that emphasized affective devotion”—Chaucer as Dominick Dunne sticking it to the Hollywood wife who adopts unfortunate African children and dresses them up like jockeys for garden parties. Finally, “Amazons at the Gates” (chapter 5) establishes once and for all the queerness of the

Christian West's fascination with the *jouissance* of paganism, and the weird centrality of the nonetheless rarefied figure of the Amazon in medieval Britain. Amazons meant many things to the medieval imaginary: "nostalgia for a masculinity that exceeds feminine nature, and even male masculinity" (p. 112); "a sort of gendered erotics outside heterosexuality" (p. 114); "a masculinity that is not male" (p. 115); "a courtly lover" (p. 116); "a sexual, masculine female body split between axes of maternity and martiality," for which "there is no word," though Lochrie obligingly (if only to expose the limitations of "available sexual terminology" [p. 121]) offers "stone butch" along with "virilophilia," "highly developed procreative selection," "bello-eroticism," and "a virginal identity and lifestyle." Lochrie's critical gifts derive to a considerable degree from her ability to help us imagine extraordinarily, to show us how layered, complex, and surprising the most powerful fantasies—the ones that achieve a certain social "consensus" (in Lacan's term)—always are.

*Heterosyncrasies* is a short book that would have profited from a more generous format. Long-term readers of Lochrie will recognize a degree of compression that can leave an argument less persuasive than it might otherwise be. In chapter 2, for example, Lochrie contends that "in spite of the fact that Heloise's sexology of the convent taps medieval misogyny, it nevertheless also condenses a cultural anxiety as a form of female sexuality, one that fosters unlimited forms of female eroticism and fellowship" (p. 29). Is this still subversion/containment, or some homology thereof? Why *wouldn't* a sexology of the convent condense a cultural anxiety? What does it mean to condense a cultural anxiety anyway, and to whom does this anxiety belong? What is at stake in this distinction between tapping medieval misogyny and condensing a cultural anxiety, if distinction it in fact be?

*Heterosyncrasies* displays some occasionally rattletrap argumentation on the level of its historicism as well. The book invokes multiple timelines—including its ethical commitments to contemporary imaginative activity—but draws nonetheless some perplexingly definitive boundaries between the medieval past and modernity, on the score of the exceptionalism of the Middle Ages. One is made nervous by a claim that implies a bit of binarism, however likeable. That is to say, one would like to know what's really so uncanny about a historiography that seems to equate the Middle Ages with uncanniness? When Lochrie multiplies her timelines, moreover, one often goes away with more questions than

answers. Are all the centuries before statistics premodern? Would eighteenth-century formulations of sexuality, for example, libertinism, be heterosyncratic but also modern? Is de Sade's Gothic revivalism an identification with those strains of Catholicism that despise "nature," or with an Enlightenment preference for natural law stripped of sentiment? Did Elizabeth I preserve or even extend, as well as redefine, the parameters of medieval chastity? Although Lochrie is not obliged to address matters beyond the scope of her book, one would like more guidance as to how such matters *could* be addressed. But *Heterosyncracies* is required reading nonetheless, for the growing number of ethnographers interested in sex as well as the growing number of medievalists aware of its historicity. If the eclecticism of its uses of periodicity is inadequately explored, the book is nonetheless a wonderful example of how rich historiography can become when it takes multiple timelines into account. *Heterosyncracies* is a curious, flexible, humane inquiry, open to anomaly on all levels, and perhaps could not have enchanted me as much as it did, or achieved so much in the arena of "re-thinking," if it had insisted on dotting every methodological "i" and crossing every meta-discursive "t." Countering the notion that significance resides in the majority, the widespread, and the enduring, Lochrie extends a generous welcome to heterogeneity, on the level of practice as well as content. The result is a marvelous challenge and addition to the way we appreciate the Middle Ages and the history of its reputation for danger.

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TIM WILLIAM MACHAN, ed., with the assistance of A. J. Minnis. *Sources of the Boece*. The Chaucer Library. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 331. \$85.00.

The stated aim of the Chaucer Library is to present modern editions of the medieval works that Chaucer "knew, translated, or made use of in his writings in versions that are as close as possible to those that were in existence, circulating, and being read by him and his contemporaries" (p. ix). The complexities surrounding the sources of the *Boece* render such a task especially difficult, necessitating, in the words of general