

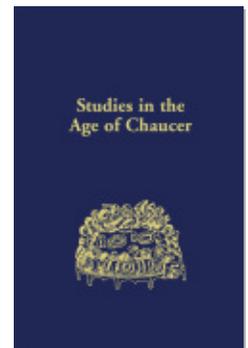


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*Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern
West* ed. by Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler
(review)

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Medieval Medeas," of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, and ultimately Christine de Pizan.

That the final chapter of Morse's book should thus provide the primary locus for the greatest number of exclusively medieval authors, as well as the title of the work itself, is both telling and puzzling. For if one were to have to say what *The Medieval Medea* is about, lacking the title as a clue, it seems doubtful many would call it a book about the Middle Ages. Indeed, in the seven-page conclusion entitled "Silence, Exile and Cunning Intelligence," which serves as a coda to the rest, Morse herself remarks, "This book takes its place in a succession of studies of these legends which have been the purview of classicists and anthropologists, for none of whom have the Middle Ages been of prime interest" (p. 240). And indeed, Morse has it right. Much of the old-fashioned texture of *The Medieval Medea* comes suddenly clear when, following this directive, Morse's study is placed in line with ethnoliterary works of the last century. Here, as there, we find great reach and sweep, but little time to squander on any single medieval author save Lefevre, on whom Morse writes with wisdom and authority. The result of Morse's choice of models will be, predictably, that puzzlement about the title, and a vague sense among medievalists when the final page is turned of disappointment rather difficult to pin down. But it is a sentiment to be resisted, as a second reading, or a third, rewardingly establishes. True to her claim that to apprehend something truly we must place it fully in context, Morse delivers a *Medea* feminists should encounter fresh, and strive again to know.

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JACQUELINE MURRAY and KONRAD EISENBICHLER, eds. *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. xxviii, 311. \$21.95 paper.

In a properly run Republic of Letters, special orders of merit would be reserved for conference organizers. They must serve first as some combination of budget travel agent, social worker, dietician, and hunt-master. They must then edit a volume of conference papers in which

written unity appears by magic out of performed multiplicity. The conference papers—products of the hundred accidents of scholarly obsession, competence, ambition, delay—must be presented as so many “flowering branches” rising from one “verdant field of research” (p. vii). Or other metaphors to that effect. Of course, the same Republic of Letters would also offer medals for reviewers of conference volumes, who often confront not so much a flowering tree as a public plot planted by diverse hands to contrary tastes.

The fifteen essays gathered in this volume had their first germination in a conference on “premodern” sex and sexuality. The editors prefer “premodern” to alternate labels because it “highlights the similarities and continuities” in Europe from the twelfth through the seventeenth centuries. “Premodern” may also be more marketable, as Nancy Partner suggests in her vivid rebuke to standard medieval scholarship. The rhetoric of labeling aside, the papers in this volume do not seem to highlight similarities or continuities. They share few interests and fewer methodological assumptions or procedures. Where the papers cluster chronologically (six of them are at work in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries), the material discontinuities are still enormous. Ivana Elbl collects instances of sexual irregularities in Portuguese colonial records from the 1490s through the 1550s. Carol Kazmierczak Manzione finds cases of sexual misconduct adjudicated by the governors of a London charity hospital between 1560 and 1580. Guy Poirier summarizes fantasies about Middle Eastern and North African sexual mores from sixteenth-century French travel writing. Rona Goffen’s elegant analysis of the three Paduan frescoes completed by Titian in 1511 discovers unexpected lessons about the burdens of marital chastity. So the four papers trace out material from adjacent decades, but they do so without intersecting. Even where essays in the volume seem to be treating identical or closely related material, they do not engage. Robert Shephard recovers sexual innuendo in gossip about Elizabeth I and James I, while Joseph Cady sorts through a richer trove for attacks on Henri III and his *mignons*. But the papers make contradictory theoretical assumptions about the reconstruction of historical homoerotic identities. Such a contradiction might have been the occasion for an exciting exchange; it provokes in fact only dismissive cross-references in two footnotes (p. 122, n. 49, and p. 153, n. 80, to which compare Poirier’s casual judgment on the French evidence at p. 160).

It must also be remembered that the plantings in this plot were arranged for the fall of 1991. They appear in print more than five years

later. That is quite a span in the racing development of the history of sexuality. It is, indeed, almost a quarter of the whole history of the (verdant?) field if we go by the editors' own chronology, which starts in 1976 with Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (p. ix). Most of the authors seem to have revised the annotation of their papers after presentation, but the added works are most often their own. In consequence, some of the volume's arguments sound belated. They address views in terms that have since been revised or entirely redone. Cady, for example, engages in a heavy-handed polemic against what he terms the "new inventionism" of gay history. This seems to be the position usually called "social constructionism," which Cady caricatures as holding that "homosexuality is a relatively new historical 'invention'" (p. 123). (It would be somewhat more accurate to move the quotation marks: "'homosexuality' is a relatively new historical invention.") Cady says that the view was "popularized first by the works of Jeffrey Weeks, Michel Foucault, and Alan Bray" (p. 123), but when discussing it he cites only the (very faulty) English translation of Foucault (1978) and David Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990). He does not cite any of the dozen volumes that have changed the terms of debate since 1990. To cite some obvious examples: the introduction to Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) or "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" in her *Tendencies* (1993), half a dozen of the essays in the *Inside / Out* anthology edited by Diana Fuss (1991), Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Halperin's own *Saint Foucault* (1995), or Leo Bersani's *Homos* (1995).

What I perceive as belatedness may be instead a more deliberate rejection. Cady's essay is not the only one in this volume that seems curiously innocent of gender theory, and the number of remarks against Foucault in the introduction by Jacqueline Murray seem to position the anthology as a sober, scholarly alternative to the excesses of theory. To which one wants to say: Of course there have been silly misuses of Foucault, as there have been needless mystifications in high theory. But Foucault and high theory have at least one advantage. They typically make clear the larger stakes and the deeper unities in any particular investigation.

If the volume seems as a whole both motley and belated, not to say reactionary, it does offer fine individual papers. Beyond those by Partner and Goffen already mentioned, I would single out at least three others. Dyan Elliott shows how Bernardino of Siena's remarks on the marriage debt might open a little more room for female agency. Garrett Epp

makes some sense out of the wearying profusion of sexual images in Matthew of Vendôme's *Ars versificatoria*. Barrie Ruth Straus searches cunningly in Chaucer's *Parliament* and *Knight's Tale* and in Margery Kempe for the suppressed voice of women's desires. These branches do indeed flower.

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JOHN CARMI PARSONS and BONNIE WHEELER, eds. *Medieval Mothering*. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities. The New Middle Ages Series, vol. 3. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996. Pp. xvii, 384. \$60.00.

The title of this volume has been very carefully chosen, for it is not just about mothers in the literal sense, as the editors stress in their introduction, but also about "nurturant behavior" (p. xv). The book begins with a challenge from the editors to the stereotypical images of motherhood in the Middle Ages—a serene Madonna holding her baby close, or "a careless aristocrat who callously rejects her children, sending them into fosterage, monastic life, and warfare" (p. ix). They note that mothering can take many forms, and can be practiced by men as well as women (though in this volume only two male examples are discussed).

This collection will be of interest to medievalists in various disciplines, though the majority of the essays deal with religious texts and historical women. "Fiction" is rather thinly represented: Patricia Ann Quattrin sees Herzelojdë in Wolfram's *Parzival* as a spiritual symbol comparable to Augustine's mother; John Carmi Parsons compares the intercession of the pregnant queen in the Middle English romance *Athelston* with that of the historical Queen Eleanor at Calais as reported by Froissart; Allyson Newton argues for the displacement of the feminine and maternal in *The Clerk's Tale* in favor of the masculine and paternal; and there are overlapping studies of mothers in Norse sagas by Jenny Jochens and Stephan Grundy. Rhetorical use of maternal images and vocabulary in religious contexts is analyzed by Susanna Greer Fein in her study of Aelred of Rievaulx's letter to his sister, and by Maud Burnett McInerney and Andrew Sprung in their discussions of Julian of Norwich.