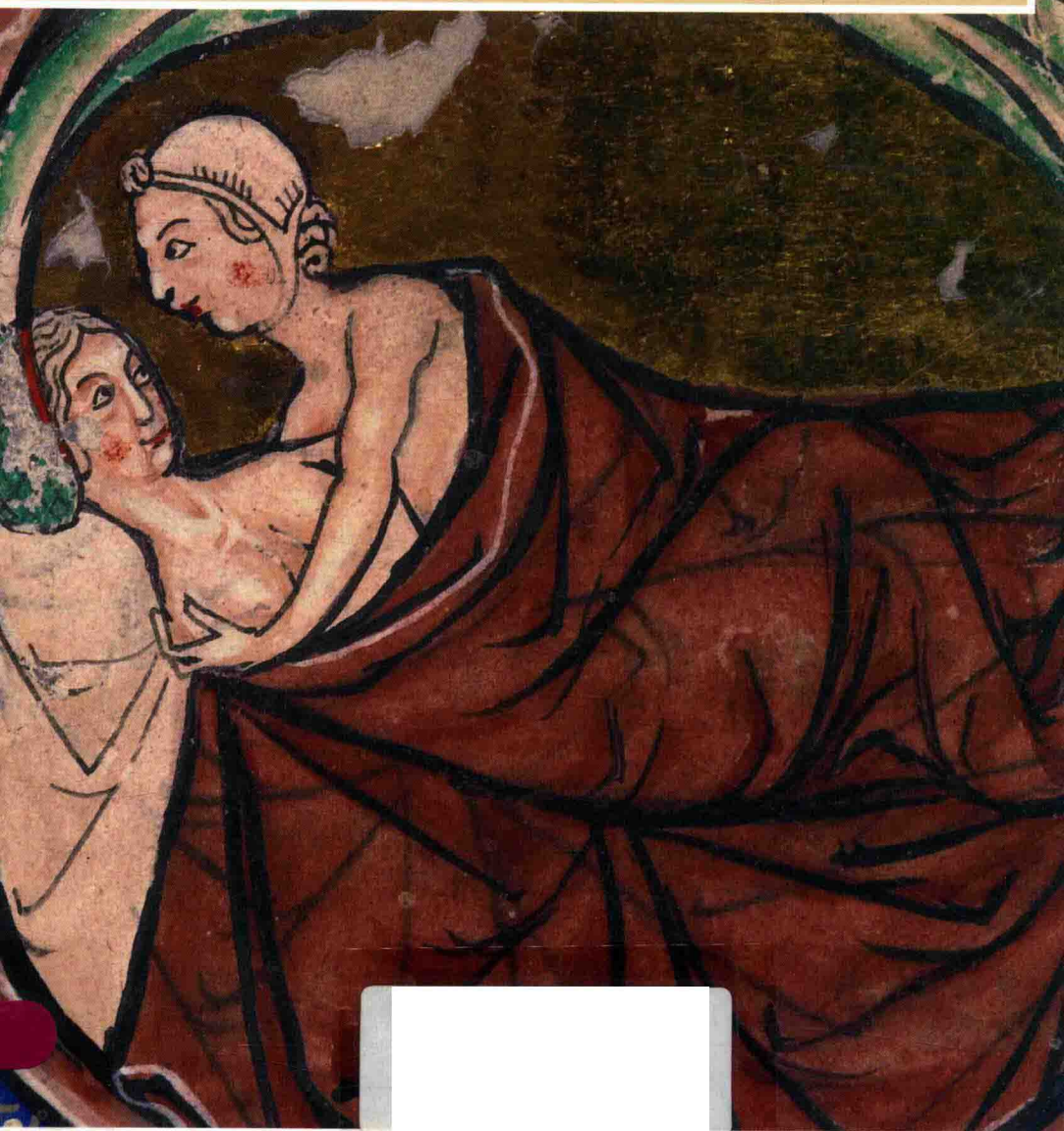


# SEXUAL CULTURE IN THE LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL BRITAIN



EDITED BY AMANDA HOPKINS, ROBERT ALLEN ROUSE  
AND CORY JAMES RUSHTON

# SEXUAL CULTURE IN THE LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL BRITAIN

Edited by  
Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse  
and Cory James Rushton

---

D. S. BREWER

© Contributors 2014

*All Rights Reserved.* Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

First published 2014  
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 978 1 84384 379 5

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd  
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK  
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.  
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA  
website: [www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com)

The publisher has no responsibility for the continued existence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

# Contents

Introduction	
A Light Thrown upon Darkness: Writing about Medieval British Sexuality	I
ROBERT ALLEN ROUSE AND CORY JAMES RUSHTON	
1 'Open manslaughter and bold bawdry': Male Sexuality as a Cause of Disruption in Malory's <i>Morte Darthur</i>	13
KRISTINA HILDEBRAND	
2 Erotic (Subject) Positions in Chaucer's <i>Merchant's Tale</i>	27
AMY S. KAUFMAN	
3 Enter the Bedroom: Managing Space for the Erotic in Middle English Romance	39
MEGAN G. LEITCH	
4 'Naked as a nedyll': The Eroticism of Malory's Elaine	55
YVETTE KISOR	
5 'How love and I togedre met': Gower, Amans and the Lessons of Venus in the <i>Confessio Amantis</i>	69
SAMANTHA J. RAYNER	
6 'Bogeysliche as a boye': Performing Sexuality in <i>William of Palerne</i>	85
HANNAH PRIEST	
7 Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance	99
AISLING BYRNE	
8 Text as Stone: Desire, Sex, and the Figurative Hermaphrodite in the <i>Ordinal</i> and <i>Compound of Alchemy</i>	111
CYNTHIA MASSON	
9 Animality, Sexuality and the Abject in Three of Dunbar's Satirical Poems	127
ANNA CAUGHEY	
10 The Awful Passion of Pandarus	147
CORY JAMES RUSHTON	
11 Invisible Woman: Rape as a Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance	161
AMY N. VINES	
Notes on Contributors	181
Index	183

## Introduction

# *A Light Thrown upon Darkness: Writing about Medieval British Sexuality*

ROBERT ALLEN ROUSE and CORY JAMES RUSHTON

THE hit HBO cable series *Game of Thrones* (2011–14) – the fantasy-medieval saga based on George R. R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* novels – has provided more than its fair share of salacious sex scenes. Rape, marital rape, attempted rape, prostitution, group sex, sodomy (of both heterosexual and homosexual forms), incest, sex leading to castration, sex leading to leech-application, and even – occasionally – vanilla consensual sex, have appeared on the screen in the first four seasons of the show. The show, while generally well reviewed, has come under sustained criticism from certain sectors of the media for its depiction of a brutal medieval sexuality, a misogynous sexual culture replete with the threat of violent coercion. This popular (mis)representation of sex in what passes for the Middle Ages in the popular mind is, of course, far from a new phenomenon, and can be traced back through a long genealogy of such representations. One much dissected recent moment in this genealogy is found in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where the African-American gangster Marsellus (Ving Rhames), having been saved from looming sodomitic rape by Bruce Willis’s character Butch, vows his own distinct form of violent sexual revenge: ‘What now? Let me tell you what now. I’m a call a coupla hard, pipe-hittin’ niggers, who’ll go to work on the homes here with a pair of pliers and a blow torch. You hear me talkin’, hillbilly boy? I ain’t through with you by a damn sight. I’m a get medieval on your ass.’<sup>1</sup>

For modern western culture, ‘medieval’ often acts as unsophisticated shorthand for ‘barbaric’ or ‘backward’, as is witnessed by the common use of the term to describe the place of women in, for example, Islamic-dominated societies such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. This transtemporal deployment of the medieval to describe modern misogynistic societies partakes

<sup>1</sup> See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Communities and Sexualities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC, 1999), pp. 183–206.

of a long tradition of developmental geo-temporalist thought, characteristic of nineteenth-century anthropology, but showing no signs of disappearing from the popular western world-view.<sup>2</sup> This pejorative sense of 'medieval' also colours the understanding of sex and sexuality in a similar transtemporal manner; western society views such cultures as sexually repressive and misogynistic, thus labelling them as 'medieval'. This then inflects the popular understanding of the western medieval itself. It should hardly come as a surprise, then, to see the harsh sexual landscape of Martin's fiction – and the television series that it has spawned – being conflated with, and confused for, the sexual culture of the 'historical' Middle Ages.

### **'For love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes'<sup>3</sup>**

When Thomas Malory tells the readers of his *Morte Darthur* that he cannot be certain just what Lancelot and Guinevere were doing in her chambers late at night – 'whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis' – he means that he simply won't say whether they were having sex or not. Malory scholars have duly argued over this exact issue, how it seems to contradict earlier passages where they do sleep together, and just what it says about Malory as an author (incompetent, sly or elusive). The word he uses, 'disportis' or 'amusements', seems to justify an either/or question: they were having sex, or they were engaged in other – non-sexual – activities. Chaucer uses the phrase 'greet desport' to describe the dignified appearance of the Prioress (Prol., I. 137), but also uses it when the Wife of Bath suggests how husbands ought to let wives amuse themselves as they wish: 'Thou sholdest seye, "Wyf, go wher thee list; / Taak youre disport; I wol nat leve no talys. / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, Dame Alys"' (WoB III. 318–20). Of course, Alys is not exactly a true wife, and her suggested advice is full of erotic ambiguity swirling around the possibility of adultery. Indeed, critics have often noted the latent eroticism of the portrait of the Prioress: 'disport', for Chaucer, is always at least potentially an erotic pun carrying a sense of frisson. The baseline reading of Malory, then, might be misguided. One possibility has to be that their amusements are non-sexual, but another is that a bed might not be physically involved: are Lancelot and Guinevere in bed having sex, or are their sexual games being conducted in some other way? Where would flirting lie on this spectrum? In an era that could see the word 'paternoster' take on 'an amatory coloring' because the murmuring of prayer sounded like love-making to the anonymous author of the Latin *Prisciani regula*, erotic possibility seems a wider category than we have often imagined.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the medieval operating in this untimely manner see John Ganim, *Orientalism and Medievalism* (New York, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3 vols (Oxford, 1990), p. 1165.

<sup>4</sup> Jan M. Ziolkowski, 'The Erotic Paternoster', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88 (1987): 31–4.



Any history of sexuality shares with other histories (social, literary) a tendency towards the unitary; this is doubly so with the Middle Ages, because the historiographies of other periods insist on their unitariness in order to demonstrate the diversity of other eras. Michel Foucault does precisely this in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*:

The Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries, this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism. More precisely, the secure bond that held together the moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession (equivalent to the theoretical discourse on sex and its first-person formulation) was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified: between the objectification of sex in rational discourses, and the movement by which each individual was set to the task of recounting his own sex, there has occurred, since the eighteenth century, a whole series of tensions, conflicts, efforts at adjustment, and attempts at retranscription.<sup>5</sup>

To a significant extent, Foucault's assertion is demonstrably true: the modern era has seen an intense interest in categorization and disciplinarity that paradoxically worked to form a new master narrative comprised of ever-smaller narrative identities. But as any medievalist knows, much is lost when we accept the forced 'unitarification' of an entire complex period. What David Perkins says concerning literary history holds true of all histories: 'We could argue that the intention organizing a literary history justifies its omissions and its emphases. But whatever the intention, to a reader who knows the material as well as the literary historian and, of course, to the literary historian himself, any narrative will seem incomplete and somewhat arbitrary.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if we are now beginning to understand that sexuality is always 'various' – paraphiliac, manifesting in a perhaps infinite number of ways – then to ask for the complete picture is to consciously or unconsciously insist on something teleological, also-ran sexualities lumbering imperfectly towards the heteronormative.

The question of, or insistence on, a difference between sexuality and the 'erotic' has this teleological longing at its heart, and uncomfortably assumes that heteronormativity can somehow paradoxically include variation (apparently through the notion of consent between adults). This distinction is important to a degree, but it a question complicated by modern ideas of the individual's identity, of a sexuality that is also the self. Perhaps the difference is that sexuality contributes to what you are, where your attraction will be directed, but the erotic is about what happens when you feel that attraction:

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), pp. 33–4.

<sup>6</sup> David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore and London, 1992), p. 31.

the erotic is about frisson, desire and need. Anything outside the ordinary, in medieval ecclesiastical doctrine, was by definition considered a sin: if this act contributed to your identity, it was to confirm that you were a sinner, not that you were either hetero- or homosexual, a sadomasochist, or someone sexually attracted to people wearing plush animal costumes, or dressed like a fire-fighter or the anime super heroine Sailor Moon. While western culture still maintains a socially useful all-encompassing category, the 'pervert', decisions about what constitutes perversion are no less arbitrary than the acts that might place one within that category.<sup>7</sup> Behavioral patterns that are deemed to be outside the norm depend on a definition of the 'norm' that is itself problematic, even for the supposedly homogenous Middle Ages. Our individual sexualities are, at least in part, the result of our encounters with the world: first crushes, a particular scent associated with one individual, a kind of uniform, an exposure to pornography, would all seem to play a role in what we individually find erotic. Sexuality may be inherent or even genetic; the erotic is learned. In this way, gender and class (among other things) would matter when it comes to erotic moments, and the same moment could be fundamentally different to the people involved (as in moments of rape or the voyeuristic, discussed in some of this collection's essays). For all the differences between how we see love and how Malory saw love, it was likely always true that our environments modified our individual sense of what was hot and what was not. In another section of Malory's book, three knights come to blows over which queen is the most attractive: Guinevere, Isolde, or Morgause. Morgause's supporter, Lamorak, makes the case that nobody can force somebody else to feel an attraction. All three are heterosexual men, apparently with a shared fetish for royal women, but even within that category the three men value different things. The insistence that we distinguish between sexuality and the erotic, or between who we are and the acts we perform and commit, has uncomfortable connections to the medieval that go beyond popular conceptions of barbarity, intolerance and gender inequality. These connections are rooted in the idea of the heteronormative itself.

Louis-Georges Tin's recent monograph, *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*, encapsulates the problem by first raising a very good question and then, second, steadfastly refusing to read anything by a medievalist that might help answer it: historical criticism assumes that heterosexuality is 'ever-present' and 'transparent to itself', evading critique because it presents itself as 'a self-evident point of departure'.<sup>8</sup> Making a necessary distinction between reproduction and the culture of romantic love, Tin reminds us that the latter is worth considering:

heterosexual practices are universal, whereas the culture of heterosexuality is not. Although human nature is manifestly heterosexual, which allows the

<sup>7</sup> In the twenty-first century, psychiatric diagnosis may have replaced canon law in the designation of paraphilia and other sexual perversion, but these categories are equally arbitrary.

<sup>8</sup> Louis-Georges Tin, *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2008; 2012), p. vii.



reproduction of the species, human cultures are not necessarily heterosexual – that is, they do not always give symbolic primacy to the man–woman couple and to love in its cultural, literary, or artistic representations, as close study of ancient and archaic civilizations reveals.<sup>9</sup>

This is one way to isolate the difference between sexuality and the concept of the erotic, but it also testifies to the way in which cultures resist making that distinction. Tin's thesis is that the culture of courtly love testifies to a new heterosexuality, an insistence on companionate love between men and women in opposition to the homosocial culture that came before and was more interested in the relationship between men. It is difficult to say who would have been responsible for this sea-change, given that Tin outlines the extensive ecclesiastical, noble and medical opposition to the new heterosexuality. Surely there is nobody left to blame. But something does seem to change between the *Song of Roland* – where Aude only matters as the woman who will bind her brother and his best friend together – and Andreas Capellanus, who says that passionate love cannot exist between people of the same sex.<sup>10</sup> While Tin makes little reference to Christine de Pizan, she would appear to confirm, in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, that by the end of the Middle Ages, attraction between the sexes appears so natural to the culture that its mystery can be assumed rather than explained:

'My lady, there's a kind of natural attraction at work on earth which draws men to women and women to men. This isn't a social law but an instinct of the flesh: stimulated by carnal desire, it makes the two sexes love each other in a wild and ardent way. Neither sex has any idea what it is that causes them to fall for each other like this, but they succumb in droves to this type of emotion, which is known as passionate love.'<sup>11</sup>

By the twentieth century, Tin argues, the struggle to valorize homosexuality is a struggle against a heterosexuality so normative that it can barely be questioned. But it could be argued that Tin does not go far enough, that what he sees as a pre-heterosexual homosocial culture is in fact a pre-heterosexual paraphiliac culture, a world of sexual experiences and desires as potentially infinite as the number of existing individuals (and the combinations between those individuals).

However, this is not to say that there are no points of connection between modern and pre-modern sexualities. Slavoj Žižek observes that:

We are thus dealing with the structure of a temporal loop: there is sexuality not only because of a gap between adult sexuality and the child's unprepared gaze traumatized by its display, but because this child's perplexity

<sup>9</sup> Tin, *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*, p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> Tin, *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*, pp. 6–9, 28–9.

<sup>11</sup> Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (Harmondsworth, 1999), p. 171.

continues to sustain adult sexual activity itself. This paradox also explains the blind spot of the topic of sexual harassment: *there is no sex without an element of 'harassment'* (of the perplexed gaze violently shocked, traumatized, by the uncanny character of what is going on). The protest against sexual harassment, against violently imposed sex, is thus ultimately *the protest against sex as such*: if one subtracts from the sexual interplay its painfully traumatic character, the remainder is simply no longer sexual. 'Mature' sex between the proverbial consenting adults, deprived of the traumatic element of shocking imposition, is by definition *desexualized*, turned into mechanical coupling.<sup>12</sup>

Žižek's point is quite close to Leo Bersani's oft-repeated claim that sexuality, for our culture as for others, is wrapped in comfortable lies: 'the redemptive reinvention of sex' as one of mutual tenderness and emotional depth rather than penetration and power.<sup>13</sup>

Romantic love has been one of our more effective myths for making sense out of our sensations. It organizes bodily intensities around a single object of desire and it provides a more or less public theater for the enactment of the body's most private life. In love, desires and sensations are both structured and socialized.<sup>14</sup>

While Bersani's case may be overstated and modern society may have good reason (even if Bersani were absolutely right) to redefine sex along more constructive lines, it remains true that the Middle Ages saw sex exactly as Bersani sees it.<sup>15</sup> If there is a depiction of mutual and emotionally resonant sexual activity, it usually comes as a result of negotiation. Where we see loveliness, the texts often see things otherwise: the poem is correct in judging that Erec's fall into uxoriousness is wrong, even if we do not necessarily agree; Chaucer's one depiction of beautifully equal sex is Alison and Nicholas, but they are committing adultery. In fact, as Allman and Hanks have argued, even Chaucer (traditionally viewed as medieval literature's great liberally progressive hope) sees sex as something inherently violent and competitive. In their opinion, 'the English canon's favorite "wayside drama" has this specific, jaundiced bodily economy of the erotic: males pierce; women bleed'.<sup>16</sup> This is undoubtedly a dark view of medieval sexuality, and it is almost certainly the one that Martin and HBO responded to in crafting the *Game of Thrones* franchise. Indeed, the one 'pleasant' depiction of a sexual relationship in Martin's books

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York, 2009), pp. 343–4.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Bersani, *Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (New York, 1984), pp. 214–15.

<sup>14</sup> Bersani, *Future for Astyanax*, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. A. Hopkins and C. J. Rushton (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 9–11.

<sup>16</sup> W. W. Allman and D. Thomas Hanks, 'Rough Love: Notes Towards an Erotics of *The Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review* 38:1 (2003): 36–65 (53).

is the careful, negotiated beginning of Daenerys Targaryen's marriage to Khal Drogo – unfortunately turned into another brutal encounter in the series.

Yet this 'harassment' is not the only, or perhaps even the most important, point of connection between Žižek and the medieval. Žižek's mechanical, desexualized coupling is intended to sound like a nightmare, but it was precisely this that Augustine argued humanity had lost in the Fall: sexuality for procreation without the inconvenient lusts that accompany sex in the fallen world. Augustine's vision was one of perfect male control: instead of feeling 'the morbid condition of lust', the 'sexual organs would have been brought into activity by the same bidding of will as controlled the other organs'.<sup>17</sup> On this account, there is no fear of sex, but explicitly a fear of the erotic, of frisson itself. Augustine's vision of a mechanical, necessary sexual act is also a vision of sex as de-individualized: if the sexual act can occur without arousal, it follows that anyone could breed with anyone else at any time as long as the reason to do so was compelling enough. Individual attraction, the necessity of seduction with its attention to the other individual, becomes unnecessary, not only sinful but an unfortunate distraction. For Augustine, as for Žižek, the erotic is found in the uncanny, the disturbing. Even on the issue of 'harassment', there is a connection: Augustine argues that in the absence of male lust there would be 'no loss of the wife's integrity, just as the menstrual flux can now be produced from the womb of a virgin without loss of maidenhead'.<sup>18</sup> Augustine's vision is that of a procreative sexuality free of shock, trauma, the unexpected, the unlooked-for: the contingent lives of individuals interacting in an unpredictable world. It is this vision that leads to the medieval Church's attempts to regulate sexuality, to determine what is bad and less-bad when it comes to sexual behaviour. To follow Foucault in assuming that the European Middle Ages, across a millennium and a continent, fell easily and comfortably in line with the Church's efforts is to ignore the basic fact that those efforts were continuous and repeated – in short, they were ineffective.

This collection of essays will suggest that to offer a sampling of possibilities is both a better assessment of the past, and perhaps a more optimistic model for the future. *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (2007) was intended as a snapshot (or a series of snapshots) of the situation obtaining in the broad geographical and chronological boundaries of the medieval British Isles, but could well be criticized for not containing enough Chaucer, or enough Gower, or enough *fabliaux*, as in Tison Pugh's review: 'The Lanval legend receives too much coverage; Chaucer's *fabliaux* too little. Many notable authors of medieval Britain – John Gower, William Langland, Robert Henryson, Thomas Hoccleve – are mentioned only in passing, if at all.'<sup>19</sup> While this would seem to privilege the literary canon over issues of the erotic – is there anything in Langland to

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *City of God* III.14.26, in *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, ed. Conor McCarthy (London and New York, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *City of God* III.14.26.

<sup>19</sup> Tison Pugh, review in *English Studies in Canada* 34:2/3 (2008): 271–4 (274).

match the voyeuristic pleasures of *Lanval*? – this current volume sees more essays on Chaucer and Gower. The first volume could also be critiqued for not being able to offer a firm definition of the erotic at the end, as in Kathleen Coyne Kelly's perceptive review:

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.<sup>20</sup>

Kelly's comment echoes, and in part helps to inaugurate, the conversation in the introduction above. The point remains that neither volume is intended as a complete examination of medieval sexual culture as it is represented in the British Isles, even should such a thing be possible. There can be no such thing as 'a medieval erotic' – the 'erotic' is always a category of multiplicity, unified by effect ('are you aroused?') rather than cause ('what are the distinct things which can arouse someone born between, for example, the Fall of Rome and the Fall of Constantinople in a particular continental space?'), for exactly the reasons Kelly astutely suggests.

The sexual culture of medieval Britain was diverse and complex, both in its manifestation in theory and practice, and in the uses to which it was deployed in the literary remains from the period. The essays in this collection reflect this variety of form and function, considering representations of sexualities gendered masculine, feminine, and other, behaviours normative and non-normative, and deployments of sexual culture that structure texts, social and physical spaces, and power relationships. These representations, like all such literary articulations, simultaneously reflect and refract historical social practice, illuminating both the realities and the ideologies of medieval British sexuality.

This volume begins in the dark, with the problematic nature of unconstrained male sexual desire. Kristina Hildebrand examines the anxiety surrounding the disruptive power of violent masculine sexuality in Malory's Arthurian world, threatening both social and spiritual disorder. Hildebrand reads the chief articulation of this anxiety in the Pentecostal oath, foregrounding the necessity of sexual regulation to the success of Arthur's perfect society. In her discussion of the sexual dynamics of Malory's text, Hildebrand examines first the disruptive sexual acts that break or threaten the bonds and hierarchies of feudal society, and second the incestuous desire that lies hidden behind the concern for the chastity of female relatives. This second theme of male control of female chastity, or sexuality, forms the ground for Amy S. Kaufman's essay.

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, review in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 372–5 (374).

In a striking reassessment of the sexual dynamics of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, Kaufman makes a compelling case for May's subversion of Januarie's normative masculine attempt to literally wall up her sexuality through the construction of the pleasure garden. In the figure of the courtly lover, Damyan, Kaufman deploys feminist theory to reveal a receptive alternative masculinity 'through which the silently oppressed learns to express her desire', providing a rare glimpse into a female-orientated erotic.

From Januarie's failed attempt to control female sexuality in the space of the garden, we move to the consideration of another erotic space, that of the bedroom or chamber. Megan G. Leitch examines the architecture of the erotic in medieval romance through the lens of spatial theory, focusing 'on moments of conflict concerning fulfilment or frustration of desire wherein spaces receive more attention than bodies, or compete with bodies for textual attention'. Spaces, we are reminded, are products of power relations, and the bedroom emerges as a complex site of the projection and negotiation of sexuality and eroticism. Yvette Kisor also begins in the bedroom, observing that when Malory's Elaine 'skipped out of her bedde all naked' (2.795) and kneels to beg for her life, her nudity and her vulnerability combine to produce a powerful effect upon Lancelot. Kisor identifies a complicated frisson in this scene of passivity and nakedness, allowing us to read erotic figures such as the naked Elaine as instruments wielded by other, more aggressive, women such as Morgan le Fay, the queen of North Galys or Dame Brusen. Here we find an active and transgressive female sexuality, disguised in the normative body of the passive female subject, which targets Lancelot in both Malory and the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle.

Lancelot famously fails at sexual self-restraint when presented with such alluring temptation, raising the dangers of sexual desire for jejune men in medieval Britain. However, sexuality is not, despite what our current obsession with the cult of youth may suggest, the sole preserve of the young. Samantha J. Rayner turns to the question of the *senex amans* in the *Confessio Amantis*, examining the relationships of Gower's elderly lovers – and of the poet himself – both to female objects of desire and to the figure of Amans himself. Sexual love is a component of most human experience, and Rayner examines how the interplay between Gower's figures of Genius, Venus and Amans articulate a sexuality that holds truths applicable to readers of all ages.

Sexuality, as with much that constitutes human identity, is performative. Hannah Priest's study of sexual behaviour in *William of Palerne*, a text characterized by somatic and gender transformations, identifies the heroine Melior as performing the role of the masculine courtly lover in her pursuit of William, the object of her desire. In a tale of the metamorphosis produced by lycanthropy, the playful performance of opposite gendered sexuality invokes a fluid sexual culture in which masculine and feminine sexualities can be put on, and taken off, as easily as clothed disguises. *William of Palerne* then, for Priest, is a ludic space in which sexual identities can be temporarily severed

from biological gender in a manner both light-hearted and ironic. Romance also acts as an alternative erotic space in Aisling Byrne's study of the trope of the faerie lover. Tracing the trope through Middle English, Anglo-Norman and Irish narratives, Byrne argues that the adoxic sexual space permits certain types of relationships that would be transgressive in the real medieval world, but also that 'texts like *Lanval* still use the motif to produce plots that highlight distinctly non-transgressive orthodox ideas'. Byrne reads the consequences of complicated sexual relationships with faerie lovers as producing a primarily narratological, rather than ethical, effect, exposing 'the machinery of the plot and the problems that absolute gratification poses for narrative'.

Sex is the coming together of men and women, in all their various paraphiliac heterosexual and homosexual conjunctions, and the erotic is the affect of attraction that structures and articulates desire. While it is common to speak of repression and sublimation as alternatives to the erotic or the sexual, this obscures the way in which the erotic can linger in that which ostensibly replaces it. As such, there is also an erotic of material objects, as Cynthea Masson illustrates in her essay on 'sexual and gendered play within alchemical language and literature'. In the alchemical writings of the fifteenth century, Masson finds that erotic desire is 'redirected from the physical body and material world toward the divinely inspired knowledge of the alchemical corpus'. This is not simply a metaphorical deployment of the language of human desire, but also a rhetorical one, situating not only the practice of alchemy as analogous with desire, but figuring the very knowledge itself as erotic. If the erotic is about intense desire, the longing on display in alchemical texts would seem to qualify.

Anna Caughey discusses the combination of animal and sexual imagery in the satirical poems of William Dunbar. Taking as her starting point Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, Caughey examines Dunbar's complex intermingling of the abject and the animal with the language of praise and celebration in his poetry, identifying a 'dark *jouissance*' through which the abject becomes a source of the erotic and the humorous. Cory James Rushton continues the theme of such dark pleasures in a reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* that coalesces around the implied 'dark' narratives of incest, possession, force and rape that underlie both the text (and its texts) and the mainstream of male sexuality (medieval or otherwise). Criseyde's status as widow is an important component of her object status under the gaze of men both within the poem and within the academy. Pandarus leads the innocent Troilus (innocent only in guile, not in intent), giving shape and direction to his desires for the 'experienced and non-virginal woman'. These desires manifest in what Rushton reads as 'the trap' where Criseyde is prey, both metaphorically animal and most cruelly human. The subject of rape is also the topic of Amy N. Vines's essay, which asks how we read texts 'where the rapist is also the heroic figure of the text'. Contra to those explicit codes of chivalry that prohibit rape, such as Malory's Pentecostal oath, Vines argues that 'the act of rape is in many cases



a foundational aspect of establishing masculine chivalric identity'. Addressing Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Old French *Percival* Continuation, and the Middle English *Partonope of Blois*, Vines exposes some very uncomfortable possibilities about the fundamental place of male sexual aggression in the implicit expectations of medieval chivalric behaviour.

The essays in this volume speak to the diverse range of erotics and sexualities articulated within the cultures of late medieval Britain. In a volume of this type one can make no claims to comprehensive coverage of time, geography or genre. Rather, we have assembled a range of essays that – we hope – represent to some small degree the diversity of medieval British sexualities. Sexual culture was no more homogenous in medieval Britain than it is today, despite the attempts of canon law and social convention to regulate it. In fact, the very existence of the prohibitions against and penitentials for sexual activities of all types highlights their very presence in the lived practice of medieval people, who were just as invested and interested in sex as we are today.



# I

## 'Open manslaughter and bold bawdry': Male Sexuality as a Cause of Disruption in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

KRISTINA HILDEBRAND

AS Roger Ascham famously observed, Malory's *Morte Darthur* is primarily concerned with 'open manslaughter, and bold bawdry'.<sup>1</sup> I would not disagree; in fact, I would say that these themes are not only dominant but are inextricably interwoven. Male sexuality, in Malory, is consistently portrayed as potentially violent and disruptive, dangerous not only to individuals but to the whole structure of society, and therefore in need of controlling measures. The medieval world did not, of course, often portray any form of sexuality positively. Sexual desire leads both men and women to sin: both directly in committing fornication, incest and adultery, and indirectly in committing treason or disregarding their duties. It could easily be assumed that this is a divide between the clergy on the one side, themselves compelled to live in celibacy and thus suspicious of sexual desire, and the more relaxed nobility and commons on the other, cheerfully ignoring the rules when it suited them. However, this is too simple a dichotomy. Malory himself, despite the bold bawdry, shares in the suspicion of unregulated desire, in his nostalgia for a chaster time,

nowadayes men can nat love sevennyght but they muste have all their desyres ... But the olde love was nat so. for men and women coulede love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes.<sup>2</sup>

David Benson points out that 'human love is highly valued by Malory, but not erotic passion', and that 'Malory is more interested in friends and comrades

<sup>1</sup> Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (1570), in *English Works*, ed. William A. Wright (Cambridge, 1904), p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd edn (1971; Oxford, 1977), p. 649. Further references will be to this edition.