

The Erotic



in the Literature of Medieval Britain

Edited by AMANDA HOPKINS
and CORY JAMES RUSHTON

The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain

Edited by
Amanda Hopkins
Cory James Rushton

D. S. BREWER

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The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain

This volume examines the erotic in the literature of medieval Britain, primarily in Middle English, but also in Latin, Welsh and Old French. Seeking to discover the nature of the erotic in the literature of the period and how the eroticism of the Middle Ages differs from modern erotics, the contributors address a wide range of topics, including the Wife of Bath's opinions on marital eroticism, the role of clothing and nudity, the tension between eroticism and transgression, the creation of the early modern world in Petrarch's romantic lyrics, the interplay between religion and the erotic, and the hedonistic horrors of the cannibalistic Giant of Mont St Michel.

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Abbreviations

EETS ES	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
EETS OS	Early English Text Society, Original Series
ELS	English Literary Studies
EMETS	Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies
MED	<i>The Middle English Dictionary</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MRTS	Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
OED	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
SELIM	The Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature
TEAMS	The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages
TEAMS METS	TEAMS Middle English Texts Series

Editorial Note

This collection examines literature from various parts of the area now incorporated into the United Kingdom, comprising modern England, Wales and Scotland. For ease of reference, and in accordance with medieval usage by authors throughout the period covered, from Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1138) to the *Gawain-Poet* (c. 1400) and William Dunbar (c. 1505), the term 'Britain' has been adopted in this volume.

Foreword

Having been present at the inception of this project, it is a particular pleasure to see it realised. It arose, as all Arthurian projects should, at a round table, in good company: in this case, in the bar, at the 2002 International Arthurian Congress, in Bangor, Wales. The group assembled, with the exception of the present writer, could all be termed 'Young Arthurians' and they mooted the idea of a collection of essays, with a working title not fit to print in a scholarly work, which this volume exemplifies. It is a tribute to all the contributors, and not least to the editors, that the concept survived not only to the light of the following day but to that of many more, with the result you have before you. To those editors, Amanda Hopkins and Cory Rushton, I offer congratulations and thanks for inviting me to contribute these few remarks.

A. C. Grand

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Introduction:

The Revel, the Melodye and the Bisynesse of Solas

CORY J. RUSHTON and AMANDA HOPKINS

The Background: Sexuality in the European Middle Ages

‘... “da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo”.’¹

AN INDIVIDUAL’S sexual behaviour in the Middle Ages was not a personal matter. The twin powers of state and Church attempted to control every aspect of people’s lives, and sexual behaviour was no exception: as Ruth Mazo Karras observes, ‘One’s choice of sexual partner affected one’s family and the inheritance of property. One’s choice of sexual act affected the social order and therefore was of concern to the entire community’.² The Church promoted chastity,³ and considered virginity to be the superior sexual state for men and women.⁴ Women were considered a disruptive influence and sexually predatory by both Church and state;⁵ clerical and secular misogyny were widespread;⁶ and in

- ¹ ‘“give me chastity and self-control, but not yet”’ (St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, 8.7.17, from the version at *The Latin Library* (ed. anon., [n.d.], stable URL: <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/augustine/conf8.shtml>>), translation ours).
- ² *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York and London, 2005), p. 22. Requirements of state and Church were often in opposition, as can be seen in the Church’s support of consensual marriage, which challenged the dynastic and economic priorities of the aristocracy (see, for example, Jeffrey Richards, *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages* (London and New York, 1991), pp. 24–5).
- ³ Although Karras observes that ‘the fact that chastity is so remarkable in saints’ lives would seem to indicate that it was not expected in normal people’s behaviour’ (*Sexuality*, p. 26).
- ⁴ See, for example, Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1993), p. 18. This view is contested hotly by Chaucer’s Dame Alisoun (*The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1987), 62–146. All subsequent citations to Chaucer’s works refer to this edition). Her arguments on sexuality demonstrate that in the Middle Ages virginity, as Simon Gaunt notes, was considered ‘a form of sexuality as much as monogamy or promiscuity’ (*Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 186). Women were classified by marital (and thus sexual) status in registers and other official documents (Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate. A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (1983; London, 1991), p. 5 et passim).
- ⁵ See, for example Carla Casagrande, ‘The Protected Woman’, trans. Clarissa Botsford, *A History of Women in the West. II: Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1992), pp. 70–104, esp. pp. 86–91. The character of Dame Alisoun illustrates this vividly.

Footnote 6 appears on page 2

noble households the number of female inhabitants was kept to a minimum, their movements restricted: in aristocratic records, 'courtesy and household books indicate a hostility towards the presence of any unnecessary women'.⁷ While the secular patriarchy was obsessed with the purity and continuation of bloodlines and the avoidance of female sexual incontinence,⁸ the Church was deeply concerned with the details of sexual behaviour in terms of specific activities and relative morality, the latter usually assessed on the basis of male sexual response.⁹

Acceptable sexual practices were debated by canonists (celibate and, at least hypothetically, chaste men¹⁰) and defined in canon law as the Church attempted to regulate every aspect of human sexual behaviour.¹¹ In fourteenth-century canon law, four reasons for coitus are documented: (1) procreation; (2) payment of the 'marital debt'; (3) the avoidance of fornication; (4) the satisfaction of lust;¹² the

⁶ See, for example, R. Howard Bloch, 'Medieval Misogyny', *Misogyny, Misandry, Misanthropy*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Francis Ferguson (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1989), pp. 1-24, and Bloch's monograph, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago and London, 1991).

⁷ Roberta Gilchrist, 'Medieval Bodies in the Material World: Gender, Stigma and the Body', *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester, 1994), pp. 43-61 (p. 59). Gilchrist notes that such households were 'for all intents and purposes male. The masculine character was reflected in the small number of women in aristocratic households; for instance, in the fifteenth-century household of the Earl of Northumberland there were nine women and 166 men. This proportion includes servants of the household who would have been predominantly male, with only a small number of female launderers, chamberers and nursery servants' (p. 51). Women of higher status often had their own separate households within the castle or palace: 'increasing status seems to be accompanied by greater segregation of women's quarters, so that residences of the highest saw a duplication of households for male and female members of the castle. This tendency towards female segregation is apparent even where women appear to have been active in commissioning their quarters' (p. 53).

⁸ See, for example, Silvana Vecchio, 'The Good Wife', trans. Clarissa Botsford, *A History of Women*, ed. Klapisch-Zuber, pp. 105-35, esp. p. 115.

⁹ Payer, *Bridling*, p. 6. This was not always echoed in secular law: for example, medical belief stated that female secretions necessary to achieve pregnancy resulted from pleasure, so that a woman who became pregnant as the result of rape was deemed to have enjoyed the act and probably to have encouraged her rapist (Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, p. 17).

¹⁰ The literature of the period offers much evidence to suggest that chastity was not universally practised by the clergy, such as Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*, and this is supported by historical records. For example, in an examination of legal documents from the Paris area in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Kathryn Gravdal finds evidence of gang rape perpetrated by students: 'These collective rapes seem to have been youthful sprees. Patterns in the records indicate, however, that when young clerics eventually became priests and rectors, they continued to practice sexual abuse and these constituted the second largest group of rapists brought to trial in the Cerisy court. . . . This finding corresponds to the figures Hanawalt and Carter have established for the clergy in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England, where clerics constituted the largest group to stand trial for rape in the secular courts. The power and prestige of their office may have led them to commit sexual abuses with a certain regularity' (*Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 126-7, citing Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities 1300-1348* (Cambridge, 1979), and John Marshall Carter, *Rape in Medieval England: An Historical and Sociological Study* (Lanham, MD, 1985)).

¹¹ Vaginal copulation, performed in what later became known as the missionary position, was the single permissible method of coitus (Payer, *Bridling*, p. 76). Intercourse was forbidden on days of feast and fast (of which there were 273 in the seventh century, although the number had decreased to 140 by the sixteenth century); intercourse was also prohibited during Advent and Lent, on Sundays, and, following Old Testament prohibitions, during menstruation, pregnancy, nursing and for 40 days postpartum (Richards, *Sex, Dissidence*, p. 29).

¹² Payer, *Bridling*, p. 62, cf. pp. 18-19.

first two were allowed some degree of moral legitimacy, but the others 'posed problems that were never satisfactorily resolved in the Middle Ages'.¹³ Even in specifically procreative intercourse, sexual pleasure was deemed sinful by some authorities,¹⁴ although 'The mainstream view remained the one expressed in the thirteenth century by St Thomas Aquinas and St Albertus Magnus, that sex had an integral part to play in marriage for the prescribed purposes so long as it was not "excessive"'.¹⁵

Clerical attitudes towards marriage and other sacraments gradually became more stringent in the Middle Ages,¹⁶ and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 decreed that communicants must make confession at least once a year.¹⁷ Penitentials were composed and circulated for the guidance of confessors,¹⁸ providing a framework by which priests could discover what sins had been committed and impose the appropriate penances.¹⁹ The Church was aware that confession could be problematic: the confessor was required to ascertain precisely what sins had been committed by asking questions, but without providing suggestions for new and exciting (but, of course, prohibited) forms of sexual activity.²⁰ James A. Brundage notes that 'Sexual offenses constituted the largest single category of behavior that the penitentials treated'.²¹ In giving 'central prominence to sexual offenses, . . . they implicitly told both confessor and penitent that sexual purity was the key element in Christian morality'.²²

¹³ Payer, *Bridling*, p. 62.

¹⁴ Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Richards, *Sex, Dissidence*, p. 27.

¹⁶ Richards, *Sex, Dissidence*, pp. 10–11, 24–5.

¹⁷ Richards, *Sex, Dissidence*, p. 7.

¹⁸ James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago and London, 1987), pp. 152–69.

¹⁹ See, for example, Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 950 to 1150* (Toronto, 1984); Brundage, *Law, Sex*, pp. 152–175 *et passim*. Penance comprised fasting (a diet of bread and water) and sexual abstinence on the fast days of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, as well as on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday each week, in addition to the generally prohibited times already in place (Richards, *Sex, Dissidence*, p. 28; see pp. 29–30 for a summary of sins and typical penances (based on Burchard of Worms' *Decretum*, c. 1008–13). Duration varied from a few days for a minor sin, such as masturbation practised by a male to three years for dorsal and rear-entry intercourse, seven years for anal intercourse and fifteen years for the habitual practice of the most serious sins, such as incest, sodomy and bestiality. Penances for comparable female transgressions tended to be more severe, for example, one year for masturbation using a dildo).

²⁰ Payer, *Bridling*, p. 77.

²¹ *Law, Sex*, p. 153. Notwithstanding Brundage's carefully phrased theoretical question, 'How much did medieval canon lawyers – professionally, of course – think about sex?' ('Sex and Canon Law: A Statistical Analysis of Samples of Canon and Civil Law', *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage [sic] (Buffalo, NY, 1982), pp. 89–101 (p. 89)), the longevity of the debate and the stringency of the extensive prohibitions seem to validate Leo Bersani's view that 'the most rigidly moralistic dicta about sex hide smoldering volcanoes of repressed sexual desire' ('Is the Rectum a Grave?' *October* 43, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Winter, 1987), pp. 197–222 (p. 198)).

²² Brundage, *Law, Sex*, p. 174. Karras supplies a caveat, observing that the handbooks do 'not tell us much about how the offenses were perceived by the laity at large' (*Sexuality*, p. 20).

The Erotic in Medieval Literature

erotic

A. adj. Of or pertaining to the passion of love; concerned with or treating of love; amatory. . .

B. n. a. An erotic or amatory poem. b. . . . A 'doctrine' or 'science' of love.²³

The opening pages of Karras' monograph describe a polarised representation of sexuality in medieval Europe by contrasting stark condemnation in clerical writing with the sexual playfulness of the fabliau.²⁴ Despite the explicit, frequently obscene, activities and language found in fabliaux,²⁵ literary censorship was not unknown in the Middle Ages, and some scholarly texts dealing with biological sexuality were censored: Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset note that some Arabic works proved problematic since they combined 'poetry and didacticism' and displayed an understanding of the erotic stimulation of the imagination.²⁶ In the secular world, even literature that appeared to champion romantic love (if stopping short of physical sexuality) was, in fact, an instrument by which sexuality was regulated: the values of the literary construct of courtly love were one way in which the state attempted to govern the sexual behaviour of the young aristocracy.²⁷

²³ *OED*, 2nd edn (1989), online (stable URL: <www.dictionary.oed.com>).

²⁴ *Sexuality*, pp. 1–3.

²⁵ See, for example, John Hines, *The Fabliau in English*, Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (Harlow, 1993), pp. 1–33, esp. pp. 20–1.

²⁶ *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, 1988), p. 3. In 'The Nature of Woman' (trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *A History of Women*, ed. Klapisch-Zuber, pp. 43–69), Thomasset explains the problem: 'Arab civilization being polygamous, men needed to understand their bodies, and women were encouraged to explore pleasure for themselves.' The *Canon Medicinæ* of Avicenna [Abu Ali al-Husain ibn Abdallah ibn Sina], for example, 'asserted a right to [sexual] pleasure' (p. 63), and 'alludes to caressing the breasts as a preliminary to love-making' (p. 47). More practical texts were not censored: Thomasset notes that, in some western texts, 'Intercourse was considered necessary to maintain the body's equilibrium. Trotula insisted that sexual abstinence led to serious problems in women. . . By the end of the thirteenth century the body had asserted its rights. A treatise was even published on the art of love, or, more precisely, on sexual positions': twenty-four positions 'described in a dry, technical manner' are included in *Speculum al foderi* (*The Mirror of Coitus*), which was 'a far cry from the single position recommended by the Church and advocated by the doctors' (p. 64). Thomasset's assessment of the text's style is apparently based on second-hand evidence, since he states that it is unedited and cites G. Beaujouan's description of the manuscript ('Manuscrits médicaux du Moyen Age conservés en Espagne', *Mélanges de la Casa de Velazquez* 8 (1972), p. 173); but see *The Text and Concordances of Biblioteca Nacional Manuscript 3356: Speculum al foderi*, ed. Michael R. Solomon, Medieval Spanish Medical Text Series (Madison, 1986), and *The Mirror of Coitus: A Translation and Edition of the Fifteenth-century Speculum al foderi*, ed. and trans. Michael Solomon, Medieval Spanish Medical Texts Series (Madison, 1990).

²⁷ Georges Duby comments that works of courtly love 'beguiled their audience and therefore exerted some influence on the way people lived. Hagiographic literature was also intended to influence behaviour. The chansons and romances, like the lives of saints, dramatised exemplary lives so that they might be imitated. Although their heroes embodied to perfection certain virtues, they were not supposed to be inimitable' ('The Courtly Model', trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *A History of Women*, ed. Klapisch-Zuber, pp. 250–69 (p. 255)). Within the concept of courtly love, Duby writes, the lord's wife held the role of primary educator, 'at the heart of an instructional system designed to discipline male sexual activity, prevent excesses of masculine brutality, and pacify – civilize – the most violent segment of a society undergoing widespread

Yet, as surviving literature demonstrates, even the chastity or virginity of incumbents of enclosed communities did not preclude the use of explicitly erotic terminology in response to the divine, sometimes modelled on the Song of Songs.²⁸ Such a response was not automatically considered problematic because, as Karras observes, 'for many medieval thinkers the erotic, to the extent it overlapped with the spiritual, was opposed to the carnal'.²⁹ She also notes the dangers inherent in applying the term 'erotic' to medieval texts:

One way of determining whether it distorts the medieval past for us to label discourses as 'erotic' is by asking whether anyone at the time did so. In fact, medieval sources not infrequently express concern over this.³⁰

Here, Karras is considering only religious works, more particularly those recounting visions,³¹ but her acknowledgement of the dangers of anachronistic interpretations and terminology reflects issues relevant to the wider subject of this volume. How can modern readers identify, analyse, appreciate the erotic in medieval literature? What response did medieval authors hope to provoke in their contemporary audience? What are the differences, and what is the relationship, between the sexual and the erotic?³² Between the erotic and the pornographic – and is such a distinction applicable to medieval works?³³ How is the modern reader to interpret the dynamic between the erotic and the transgressive in texts produced by a culture in which all sexual activity was (supposedly) regulated, and sexual desire was, of its very nature, transgressive? Should personal literature not

and rapid change' (p. 261). Yet the educative process clearly differentiated between classes: the model of courtly love could 'influence the attitude of certain men toward certain women, for the same class division that existed between men carried over to women. Thus "ladies" (*dames*) and "maidens" (*pucelles*) were sharply distinguished from peasant women (*vilaines*), whom the men of the court could treat as brutally as they pleased' (p. 256, Duby's emphasis).

²⁸ See, for example, Karras, *Sexuality*, pp. 54–7. As Brundage observes, 'the Song of Songs vividly celebrates the joy and pleasure of marital sex and demonstrates that marital eroticism was no stranger [to] Israel' (*Law, Sex*, p. 52); the text has occasionally been subject to censorship (Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Sexual Attitudes: Myths and Realities* (New York, 1995), p. 184), and certainly some medieval interpreters found its erotics disquieting or perplexing (see for example Mary Dove, 'Sex, Allegory and Censorship: A Reconsideration of Medieval Commentaries on the Song Of Songs' (*Literature and Theology* 10:4 (1996), pp. 317–28. On erotic discourse in monastic commentaries on the text, see Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies Series 156 (Kalamazoo, 1995)). Secular authors also used the text as a model: Chaucer, for example, echoes the Song of Songs in Januarie's words to his wife (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2143–6; see Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1996), pp. 210–11).

²⁹ *Sexuality*, p. 57.

³⁰ *Sexuality*, p. 57.

³¹ See, for example, Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe, EMETS (Exeter, 1986), and the assessment of its erotics by Gillian T. W. Ahlgren ('Julian of Norwich's Theology of Eros', *Spiritus* 5 (2005), pp. 37–53).

³² Karras defines the scholarly use of the term 'sexuality' as referring 'to the whole realm of human erotic experience' (*Sexuality*, p. 5).

³³ Bullough and Bullough note that 'The difficulty in distinguishing obscenity from pornography stems from the fact that what is sexually suggestive – erotic if you will – to one person is sexually repulsive or filthy to another' (*Sexual Attitudes*, p. 183). Yet the issue of anachronism is both conceptual – 'When we look at the past, however, it is not always clear that what we think of as either pornographic or obscene was regarded in the same way by the people of the time' (p. 184, a comment equally applicable to 'erotic') – and semantic, since the term 'pornography', in the sense used today, was coined only in 1857 (*OED.*, loc. cit.).

intended for a public readership, such as letters, be examined using different criteria from works, such as romances and religious texts, created for publication? How far does the cultural context signify – is there a peculiarly medieval British approach to the erotic, clearly distinct from a continental attitude?

The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain:³⁴ Critical Context

eroticism

1. Erotic spirit or character; also, the use of erotic or sexually arousing imagery in literature or art. 2. Med. and Psychol. A condition or state of sexual excitement or desire; a tendency to become sexually aroused, usu. by some specified stimulus ...³⁵

In 1996, Vern L. Bullough argued in a collection of essays concerning medieval sexuality that scholars had traditionally avoided the topic of sex through 'fear, both personal and generalized': nobody wanted to be accused of perversion, 'a label that would make it difficult for one to get an academic position or, if one already had such a job, would lessen one's chances of getting tenure'.³⁶ The anecdotal evidence Bullough gathers is convincing, although looking back on the era he is discussing, little convincing should be required. Today, as Bullough notes, scholars working in almost any discipline can regularly engage in sexual topics as diverse as homosexuality, cross-dressing and sadomasochism.³⁷ The essays that follow Bullough's in the collection explore a variety of sexual practices and themes. However, only one deals with textual eroticism as, first and foremost, fantasy: Andrew Taylor writes that his 'topic is the distinctly sexual pleasure of fantasizing on a text, whether in compulsive, solitary rereading of certain passages as a sexual substitute or when two people read together as a form of flirtation or seduction, as in Paolo and Francesca's [*sic*] notorious reading of the story of Lancelot'.³⁸

Taylor's essay is penultimate in the collection, and has been preceded by articles that query sexuality in terms of power or difference; only Taylor talks about the pleasure to be found in reading about sex, whether alone or in company. It may now be easier to 'get an academic position' despite, perhaps even by, writing about sex, but scholars may have somehow forgotten that other kinds of positions should be involved in a thorough exploration of the erotic. Taylor's subject may

³⁴ The present collection examines material from England, Wales and Scotland, and the terms Britain and British here identify the island as a whole in accordance with the practice of medieval authors, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1138), the *Gawain*-Poet (c. 1400) and William Dunbar (c. 1505).

³⁵ OED (loc. cit.).

³⁶ 'Sex in History: A Redux', in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, 1996), pp. 3–22 (p. 3).

³⁷ Bullough refers to Joyce E. Salisbury's text, *Medieval Sexuality: A Research Guide* (New York, 1990), a thorough bibliography of previous work on the subject, mostly from the two decades prior to publication. Salisbury notes that her text is focused on the history of sexuality (p. xvii), and observes: 'Medievalists are relatively new to the field of the history of sexuality. ... This is probably due to the number of and accessibility of sources' (p. xix).

³⁸ Andrew Taylor, 'Reading the Dirty Bits', *Desire*, ed. Murray and Eisenbichler, pp. 280–95 (p. 280).

still be one that troubles the wider academy: if people are taking 'compulsive, solitary' pleasure in a text, their hands might be too busy to engage in serious scholarship. The old distinction is still there – a kind of (solitary) perversion to be avoided is still present – but the borders, by and large, have shifted from silence to the safer ground of gender studies, with its cool politics and engaged social activism. Susan Crane has argued that the 'first way of conceiving gender is to contrast it to sex': 'Sexuality, broadly understood as the generation, expression, and organization of desire, is the ongoing behaviour that informs gendered identities.'³⁹ As important as the study of historical gender identity is, it is regrettable that the 'desire' that is the root of gender has been downplayed.

The problem is made more acute by the differences between modern and past sexualities, which Taylor himself notes in relation to E. Talbot Donaldson's famous reading of *The Merchant's Tale*. Because May is a young woman, and 'pretty young girls . . . will always warm the masculine heart',⁴⁰ Donaldson can offer 'a carnal continuity' between the past and the present, and between Chaucer and his (male and educated) readers.⁴¹ Our innate knowledge of what is erotic cannot be shared by everyone in our own time, much less shared across vast stretches of geography and chronology. The challenge, writes Karma Lochrie, is to avoid 'presentism' without 'forfeiting the tools of contemporary theories of sexuality'.⁴² It may be that Jeffrey J. Cohen is right that through 'reversing time's arrow' and looking for continuities between present and past sexualities, we might be able to see 'enduring but historically specific' manifestations of sexual practice, here masochism (of which more anon).⁴³ Anthony Giddens is correct in stating that 'plastic sexuality', an eroticism freed from reproduction and the threat of reproduction, has always been a feature of narrative;⁴⁴ the modern question of why neither Guenevere nor Isolde falls pregnant is not a terribly important one for romancers. None of this obscures, or should obscure, some fundamental differences between how sexuality is seen today and how it was seen in the past.

Medieval England appears to be a particular problem for the historian of sexuality: as Bernard O'Donoghue notes, the language itself seems uncomfortable with sex, 'the unease of English with both the terms and the concepts of European love-poetry' prompting a necessary evaluation of the English concept 'of love itself'.⁴⁵ The English recalcitrance about sex can be illustrated by a story about

³⁹ Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 5–6.

⁴⁰ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), p. 49.

⁴¹ Taylor, 'Reading', p. 282.

⁴² Karma Lochrie et al., 'Introduction', *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis, 1997), pp. ix–xviii (p. ix).

⁴³ Jeffrey J. Cohen, 'Masoch/Lancelotism', *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, 2003), pp. 78–115 (p. 79). Cohen's attempt (pp. 84–5) to 'take Lancelot seriously' through the performance of a 'resexualization' of Chrétien's text, which ignores the interpretative judgements of both Dante (Lancelot 'condemned in advance to the . . . Inferno') and Malory (Lancelot as saint), shares a concern with the eroticism of the text with the current project.

⁴⁴ *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, 1992), p. 2.

⁴⁵ 'Love and Marriage', *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Steve Ellis (Oxford, 2005), pp. 239–52 (p. 240). Meanwhile, Chaucer's contemporaries – female as well as male – in Wales were embracing the erotic uninhibitedly, in language both practical and metaphorical; see, for example, 'Cywydd y gal' (Poem of the Penis) by Dafydd ap Gwilym (ed. and trans. James Doan, 'An