

***Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. Edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage. (New York: Garland, 1996. Pp. ix + 426, Index, ISBN 0- 8153-1287-3 cloth.)**

Pamela E. Coristine

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In "As Recolhas Inéditas do Romancero Transmontano" (p. 415-444), Dias Marques presents a valuable catalogue of unpublished collections of ballads from this region of Portugal. Louise Mirrer applies so-called female and male language to the *Romance de Landarico* found in the sixteenth-century broadsheet (p. 523-547). When female characters use powerful language features, they are seen as subversive and subsequently serve to justify misogynist practices. *El Conde Claros Confesor*, strongly represented by 242 Pan-Hispanic and Portuguese versions, gave birth to a number of contaminated texts. In order to study the mechanisms that contribute to the retention of certain elements, B. do Nascimento analyzes the variants in the sequence of the confession of the princess.

Other subjects included in this volume deal with folktales in Costa Rica (p. 217-230), incest in Lope de Vega's *El castigo sin venganza* (p. 583-602), the work of F. M. Luzes, collector of Breton folktales (p. 341-352), the art of Anglo-Scots balladry (p. 583-602), the short story in Costa Rica (p. 217-229) and *Conde Lucanor* (p. 469-496). The possible dependency of Jimena's prayer in the *Mio Cid* on the French epic model (p. 619-647) and the divergence and subsequent agreement of M. Machado and J. R. Jiménez concerning the concept of popular poetry (p. 603-617) are also analyzed.

This volume represents a fitting homage to Professor Armistead. The editor could have grouped these essays thematically. Some of the articles are unnecessarily long; nonetheless, the variety, breadth and number of contributions constitute a clear testimony to Professor Armistead's scholarly and didactic impact.

Reference Cited

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MESSOD SALAMA
 Memorial University of Newfoundland
 St. John's, Newfoundland

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According to Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, the editors of the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, it has only been during the last two decades that medieval scholars have begun to turn their attention away from traditional

areas of research and towards the area of human sexuality. Although considered “trendy”, the editors point out that human sexuality has become an important area of study in many disciplines. With this collection of essays, Bullough and Brundage offer an informative overview and introduction to its study within the context of the medieval period.

The book is divided into three sections; “Sexual Norms,” “Variance from Norms,” and “Cultural Issues.” The first three chapters of Section One deal with the types of medieval documents most often consulted by researchers and what these documents (the penitentials, canonical laws, works dealing with medicine and natural philosophy) have to say on the subject of sex. Chapter One, “Confession and the Study of Sex in the Middle Ages”, offers a fascinating introduction to the penitentials, a type of document most easily described as a catalogue of sins and penances. Although the penitentials offer researchers a wealth of material to draw upon, the author of this chapter, Pierre J. Payer, warns: “Research regarding sex and confessional literature is in a primitive state, largely because of the dearth of critical editions of the relevant texts” (p. 16). With the establishment of an adequate documentary base, Payer suggests several areas upon which future exploration of the penitentials may shed some light including “the debate about medieval tolerance or intolerance of same sex relations”, a debate to which many papers in this collection make reference (p. 16).

Completing the first section are three chapters concerning gender, chaste marriage and masculinity. In Chapter Four, “Gendered Sexuality,” Joyce E. Salisbury takes a look at gender in the medieval context. According to Salisbury, most medieval scholars have attempted to remain gender neutral when examining medieval sexuality. This is a result of the twentieth-century view of gender as something determined by culture rather than biology. Salisbury believes that biology and gender were linked in the medieval mind and that gender was a significant organizing principle during the Middle Ages. Salisbury goes on to recommend a specific line of attack: “Approaching the texts on sexuality from a gendered perspective offers a fruitful and important method for scholars of the Middle Ages who want to understand sexuality as medieval people did” (p. 82).

The second section of this book, “Variance from Norms,” deals with homosexuality, lesbianism, cross dressing, prostitution, contraception, abortion, castration and eunuchism. These topics are not only fascinating in themselves but also provide a glimpse into contemporary controversies regarding sexuality and gender within the context of medieval scholarship. Within medieval studies much controversy seems to have centered around the works of John Boswell (1980; 1994), both of which are attempts to “find Church toleration if not sanction for homosexuality” (p. 178). Johansson and Percy believe their treatment of “Homosexuality” in Chapter Seven differs from Boswell’s as they examine what they believe to be the medieval roots of homophobia. Concerning

Boswell's work, Johansson and Percy make the following comment: "His work, brilliant as it is, can best be understood as a work in the tradition of Christian Apologetics, not dispassionate scholarship..." (p. 179).

Chapter Eleven, "Contraception and Early Abortion in the Middle Ages", is especially intriguing in view of current debates over the legal status of fetuses. According to the author of this chapter, John M. Riddle, the medieval belief that body and soul were united meant that the people of the medieval period believed a human being's soul originated at some point after conception and after the development of a "body." Methods of abortion and contraception were known and widely used during the Middle Ages; however the distinction between the two was blurred, making the acceptance and/or condemnation of these acts inconsistent.

The third section of the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* is entitled, "Cultural Issues." It is in this section that the reader will find several papers which go beyond the western Christian world view of the Middle Ages.

The predominance of this western Christian view, which is primarily the result of past research bias and a dearth of English translations, accounts for the brevity of Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen, involving notes on Jewish and Muslim sexuality. Chapter Fifteen deals with medieval sexuality as viewed by "Eastern Orthodox Christianity" and Chapters Sixteen and Eighteen deal with, respectively, sexuality in French and English medieval literature. Chapter Seventeen, "Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women, and Beasts", by Jenny Jochen, is the only chapter which deals with a pre-Christian "pagan" tradition. Using Icelandic sagas and law, Jochen explores "descriptions of actual heterosexual activities engaged in for purposes of reproduction and pleasure, and verbal references to sexual acts between a man and a woman, between two men, and between a man and an animal..." (p. 369). Norse men often practiced what Jochen refers to as "erotic libel," a type of insult by which one man accused another of homosexual/passive behavior and bestiality, but "meager evidence of homosexual relations in the Norse world does not reflect eroticism and affection but power struggle and domination" (p. 388). Jochen concludes that "this study lends support to the theory that although men in the distant past included acts of sodomy among their sexual activities, their culture did not know homosexuality in its modern sense" (p. 390).

One feels slightly disappointed by the lack of illustrations in the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. There is only one illustration (repeated from the book's cover), occurring in Jacqueline Murray's chapter "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in which she makes the point that medieval art is an area of study which could contribute further to the understanding of medieval sexuality. This critical quibble aside, one can have only praise for this book. Beginning with the introduction, in which the editors offer a concise synopsis of the "sexual evolution" within medieval studies, this collection not only provides a broad overview of medieval sexuality, but also

offers tantalizing suggestions for future research. The *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* is a solid collection of introductory papers each accompanied by notes and extensive bibliographies and will, I believe, prove to be a highly informative and essential reference work for those interested in medieval society and in human sexuality, past or present.

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PAMELA E. CORISTINE
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
