

Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts. Edited by Jennifer N. Brown and Marla Segol. The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xii+194; 1 b/w fig. ISBN: 9780230109803. \$85.

Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts opens with the intriguing suggestion that, regardless of religious affiliation or temporal moment, medieval authors explored similar questions about sexuality. Among these were concerns about how sexual acts or identity might reproduce, complicate, or disrupt world order, and whether this produced proximity to or distance from God. Cosmology, as the introduction defines it, is the conception and meaning of world order: the study of the nature of the universe which, for the medieval author, includes an understanding of relations between God, human beings, and the cosmos. Thus the collection seeks to investigate the connection(s) and relationship(s) between the divine, sexuality, and meaningful cosmic order in a wide range of literary texts.

Editors Segol and Brown explain in their introduction that cosmology provides a productive field for explorations of sexuality and its relation to the divine because it offers a model for the orderly working of bodies and the cosmos, and their interactions. Thanks to tenets such as original sin, the way sexuality corresponded with order was important on philosophical and theological levels. The texts analyzed in this volume employ grammatical, philosophical, mythological, and theological avenues to display concerns about sexuality and cosmology, producing a study that, though not comprehensive, does inject important observations into the broad question of how medieval sexuality intersects with and in some senses defines cosmic order. Both lay and religious authors and texts are considered, and it is refreshing to see attention, though minimal, to categories outside the dominant Christian worldview. Perhaps the biggest lack is any discussion of Islamic texts, which would have provided an intriguing counterpoint to the prevailing Christian perspective.

The introduction cites gender as a key characteristic used to order human beings within their appropriate cosmological category. Because the medieval understanding of gender identity and sexual identity differs from our own (and since this understanding is constantly shifting, even “our own” is perhaps anachronistic), there is often cause to be wary when gender and sexuality are cited as primary foci for an exploration of medieval texts. However, *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology* negotiates this territory well. Gender is presented here as embodied and performed, and thus interpreted in each case according to its particular textual presentation. Further, though the focus of gender studies is

often women, and indeed, many of the chapters here focus on female perspectives and concerns, the volume does not neglect examinations of male sexual identity. It even, in Segol's chapter, explores queerness and its contributions to Jewish cosmology.

In chapter 1, Helene Scheck uses Julia Kristeva to argue that Hrotsvit's *Thais* is a story of abjection: by rejecting prostitution, Thais rejects her own embodiment and thus achieves a clean death, which reasserts the cosmological order her profession had disrupted. This pairing of text and theory is intriguing, though it may depend in some cases on a redefinition of Kristeva's terms, making sublimation an achievable, permanent condition. Nevertheless, Scheck offers a strong example of how cosmology is both threatened and supported by even extreme examples of sexuality.

Valerie Allen takes on Alan of Lille's *Complaint of Nature* in the second chapter, arguing that Nature's (and Alan's) complaints against queer relationships disrupt order by erasing difference. Meaning—social, sexual, and grammatical—is removed when the “little bits” that designate masculine or feminine form are confused or disappear. Nevertheless, Allen asserts, both “straight” and “bent” formulations are constructed, and both must be present to understand the other, in grammar and in sex. Considering this, it is interesting that the chapter is immediately followed by Marla Segol's examination of queer hermeneutics in the *Zohar*, in which she uses Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* to discuss the fluidity of bodies in this thirteenth-century Jewish compendium. The text's fluidity and queerness are reactions against the rationalist Jewish theology of thinkers such as Maimonides, who suggest that the body is rational and finite. The *Zohar*, on the other hand, relies on hermeneutics of slippage between unity and connectedness to attempt representation of “a dynamic, everchanging divinity” (69).

The next two chapters, by Nicholas Ealy and Ilan Mitchell-Smith, respectively, look at the developing sexuality and identity of men, filtered through their relationships with women. Ealy argues that the *Libro de buen amor* depicts the contradictory nature of desire: perfect carnal love is impossible—sexual encounters with “real” women will always fail to live up to the ideal. This impossibility is linked to writing and hermeneutics: though we have interpretive tools, meaning is slippery and multiple, and we may never be able to pin it down absolutely. Mitchell-Smith also presents the dangers of desire, looking at the trend of male chivalric identity in medieval English romance as dependent upon avoiding sexual encounters. His chapter, which presents the cosmological idea that excess in any form is negative, reveals a subculture within romance: a trope

of premodern sexuality that rejects erotic encounters and results in an effective erasure of the woman.

Michelle M. Sauer's chapter makes the incredibly interesting argument that female medieval visionaries, through self-blazon, fragment their own bodies and, focusing on the body parts involved in pleasure, rewrite themselves as eroticized subjects. This results in the maintenance of their personal agency even as they reform and present themselves to their audience. The connection here to cosmology is not as explicit as some of the others, but perhaps the suggestion is that these women, and their controlled self-embodiment, write themselves into the divine order.

The final two chapters both explore texts by Robert Henryson. In chapter 7, Jennifer N. Brown looks at Henryson's adaptation of Boethian cosmology to provide a sexual and moral lesson in his Orpheus retelling. Orpheus's movement toward Eurydice and toward a human, carnal center (and ultimately into Hell) distances him from God and the celestial music of the spheres. Brown makes a convincing argument, though some of its intricacies take time to unfold. In chapter 8, Holly Crocker looks at the Scottish author's focus on cosmology in "The Testament of Cresseid," arguing in part that the text "writes an alternative account of the Christian subject, who accrues dignity from an ability to endure overwhelming oppression" (171). In fresh, direct, and sometimes humorous prose, Crocker suggests that Henryson is not antifeminist or anti-Cresseid, but that examination of his use of cosmology shows the story drawn out to the logical conclusion we should have expected.

As a collection, *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology* is more an exploration of a topic than a progression of a single thesis. However, it contributes to our understanding of medieval sexuality and gender not as singular identities, but as embodied, shifting performances. Here, as the texts show us, sexuality is constructed but also constructs: it is not simply shaped by its cosmology; it simultaneously builds and reshapes the very order it is written into.

Chelsea S. Henson
Woodbury University