Sexuality has been a popular topic in medieval studies for a number of years, owing in part to the pioneering work of such authors as James Brundage, Vern Bullough, and John Boswell as well as to more recent essay collections edited by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, James A. Schultz, and by Cindy Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl. Yet a succinct and accessible introduction for students, primarily undergraduates, has to this point been lacking. This interesting and useful introduction to medieval sexuality by Ruth Mazo Karras brings together a number of subjects of interest to medievalists in general and feminist medievalists in particular, chief among them the conflicted and complex attitudes towards sexuality in medieval culture and the disparate ways these attitudes are represented and interpreted, both then and now. Writing for non-specialists, Karras explains that because no single attitude can accurately be said to be the medieval one, the range of sexual identities possible in medieval Europe must be understood in relation to a key distinction between then and now: sexual activity in medieval culture was largely understood as actively asymmetrical, something done to one partner by another. This above all else, Karras believes, should inform our understanding of medieval gender roles and social subjectivity.

The first chapter, “Sex and the Middle Ages,” provides an overview of “sexuality,” which Karras describes as “the universe of meanings that people place on sex acts, rather than the acts themselves” (5). Asserting that sexuality is an ideological discourse and cultural effect rather than, like biological sex, a somatic fact, Karras emphasizes that the distinctions and definitions that constitute sexuality in the modern world did not obtain in medieval Europe. Rejecting can accurately be said to be the medieval one, the range of sexual identities possible in medieval Europe must be understood in relation to a key distinction between then and now: sexual activity in medieval culture was largely understood as actively asymmetrical, something done to one partner by another. This above all else, Karras believes, should inform our understanding of medieval gender roles and social subjectivity.

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the essentialist notion that they exist on their own and across time and place, she argues, “[h]eterosexuality both in the Middle Ages and today tends to be an unmarked category: most people assume it is normal and thus often do not notice that it is socially constructed in the same way homosexuality is” (8). She clarifies that “If medieval people did not think of “homosexuals” as a category, they did not think of “heterosexuals” as one either,” and thus, “[t]his book works from the assumption that we must look at how medieval people thought about sexuality, rather than impose our own categories on them” (8).

Situating the book’s chapters in relation to current terms of categorical distinction, she demonstrates the need for current readers to frame their understanding of medieval sexuality in medieval, rather than modern, categories.

“The Sexuality of Chastity” considers what Karras describes as “the fundamental definition of what kind of person one was,” the distinction between being chaste and being sexually active. Clarifying the definitions of “chastity” (sexually inactive for moral reasons), “celibacy” (the state of being permanently unmarried), and “virgin” (not yet sexually active, a term rarely used for men), Karras describes the typical medieval life-cycle phenomena—virginity, marriage, widowhood—with an emphasis upon the differences in expectations for men and women with women subjected to greater scrutiny and higher expectations of restraint.

Focusing on Christianity’s teachings on chastity as the foundation for centuries of medieval attitudes, Karras finds that while Christianity was hardly the first religion to endorse sexual abstinence in appropriate contexts, “Christianity’s innovation was in making the belief in abstinence part of the mainstream” (32) in recognition and respect, if not in practice.

The subsequent chapter, “Sex and Marriage,” notes that marriage was expected in medieval society, and while there were some who remained unmarried for religious or economic reasons, matrimony was the universal norm. Karras points to the obvious influence of “chastity” (sexually inactive for moral reasons), “celibacy” (the state of being permanently unmarried), and “virgin” (not yet sexually active, a term rarely used for men), Karras describes the typical medieval life-cycle phenomena—virginity, marriage, widowhood—with an emphasis upon the differences in expectations for men and women with women subjected to greater scrutiny and higher expectations of restraint.

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The subsequent chapter, “Sex and Marriage,” notes that marriage was expected in medieval society, and while there were some who remained unmarried for religious or economic reasons, matrimony was the universal norm. Karras points to the obvious influence
of the Church in creating this expectation, noting the irony that most texts about marriage were written by the celibate and the additional irony that marriage was considered the only legitimate outlet for sexual desire by the same Church writers who denigrated it as the second-best option, after chastity. Sexual practices within marriage, which Karras gleans from penitential handbooks and literary representations (primarily fabliaux) focused primarily on what constituted acceptable practice (those leading to conception or at least the possibility thereof) and those considered unacceptable (where conception would not logically result, e.g., oral sex, anal sex, manual stimulation).

A pair of related chapters focuses on the sexual activities of women and men, respectively, outside of the category of marriage. Noting that “women’s sexual activity outside of marriage did not receive anything like the same toleration or acceptance that men’s did” (87), Karras ascribes this not only to the Church’s insistence upon women’s lustfulness and the necessity of controlling them but also to the social correlation of honor and virtue with sexual status. Unlike men, who had commercial, military, and political avenues to establish and maintain their value in society, women were largely relegated to the home and thus to the context of parents and spouses. Adultery, unmarried women’s fornication, prostitution, same-sex relationships, and rape are topics of analysis, all of which are tied to economic concerns and class structure. Women of the aristocracy, for instance, tended to marry at a younger age and, because of the family and political interests at stake, were expected to be virgins at that time, whereas female wage workers were less scrutinized and the consequences of premarital sex much less significant for their families.

“Men Outside of Marriage” notes, in relation to the double standard by which men’s sexual activities outside of marriage were regarded as less serious and not unexpected, that although sex between a man and a chaste woman or another man’s wife would be subject to criticism and the possibility of
legal action, his sexual activity with an unmarried non-virgin would be regarded as much less problematic (or even, as in Muslim tradition, notes Karras, not a sin at all). But male same-sex activity was regarded as highly sinful, in part because it was non-reproductive, and in part because, as noted by Peter Damian in the eleventh century, it was associated with clerical misconduct. Because of the active/passive distinction in the roles undertaken by each partner, the passive partner was reviled as feminine and unmanly and treated more harshly, with implications for our contemporary understanding of gender construction and gender ideology.

An Afterword, “Medieval and Modern Sexuality,” expands briefly on the distinctions introduced in the first chapter. Reiterating the book’s argument that “there was indeed a field of discourse that could be called ‘sexuality’ in the Middle Ages” (155), Karras asserts that we, as modern readers, can perhaps come to better appreciate and understand our own world by first understanding the medieval one. Students, and their instructors, will likely find this accessible and informative book both useful and entertaining.

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