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,
marrige, 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
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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 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).

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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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