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Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xii + 235pp. Bibliography and index. ISBN-13: 978-0-19-927207-5; ISBN-10: 0-19-927207-7.

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As children we are told not to judge a book by its cover, but no one warns us away from epigraphs. Thus, the opening quotation in Simon Gaunt's new book is a good place to grasp the work's salient features and virtues. Gaunt offers us verses from the 1970s Italian pop singer Lucio Battisti: "che non si muore per amore/ è una gran bella verità." Prosaically translated as "It's a great and beautiful truth that people don't die for love," the phrase conveys a down-to-earth perspective on dramatic declamations concerning love's absolute power; it is love lyric assessed. But it is love lyric nonetheless, and its association of love and dying (*amore/muore*) invites us to take it seriously. Gaunt's choice of a popular entertainment genre to introduce a work that treats canonical medieval literature by way of demanding critical theory shows a mischievous humor that stays with him throughout. But his playfulness never tempts him to manipulate his reader through imprecision or obfuscation; he holds himself accountable in his analyses, his intellectual honesty benefitting his audience.

Gaunt's inquiry is fed through multiple literary and interpretative lines that he works to keep clear, even as he attempts to synthesize differing approaches. His analyses range widely through twelfth- and thirteenth-century courtly literature. The first two chapters are devoted to Occitan, with chapter one on Bernart de Ventadorn, and chapter two on troubadours Arnaud de Maruelh, Raimon Jordan, and Gaucelm Faidit. In chapter three, the focus shifts from lyric to romance; analysis targets the *Chastelaine de Vergy* and the *Castelain de Couci* as two examples of "eaten heart" narratives. Chapter four treats the similarities and differences among romances presenting Tristan and Lancelot: Béroul, Thomas, Marie de France's *Chevefoil* and the *Tristan en prose* for the first, and *La Mort le roi Artu*, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, and the Prose *Lancelot* for the second. Chapter four also contains a final section on Cligès in Chrétien de Troyes' eponymous romance as a counterweight to the better-known heroes. In chapter five, Gaunt revisits many of the texts examined in earlier chapters from a new perspective, asking whether gender affects literary characters' relation to love and death; do female figures die differently from males? The greatest emphasis in this chapter is placed on scenes from *La Mort le roi Artu* and Marie de France's *Eliduc*. In the book's final chapter, Gaunt again widens his angle of vision; after examining men's claims that they are martyrs to love for their ladies, and women's acts of self-sacrifice for men, he turns his attention to men in love with men: Narcissus (in the *Lai de Narcisse* and the *Roman de la Rose*) and Galehaut (in the *Lancelot en prose* and the *Tristan en prose*).

All these medieval texts are only one component of Gaunt's active bibliography, however; *Martyrs to Love* draws heavily on recent theoretical writing to make its arguments. Lacan's theory of the subject and Derrida's views on the ethics of gift-giving inform the work as a whole. Individual chapters also make use of Bataille's ideas on the fusion of audience with victim in the spectacle of sacrifice, and of Agamben's writing on *homo sacer*, or sacred man. References abound to theorists and commentators such as Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, Sarah Kay, R. Howard Bloch and Jean-Charles Huchet. From the start, Gaunt voices his conviction that post-modern, largely psychoanalytic reading is well suited to the texts he has chosen. He affirms that in applying contemporary theory to the Middle Ages, his critical work responds to one of medieval literature's signal traits: namely, a self-awareness that privileges the

power of rhetoric in shaping subjects, objects and stories. Gaunt is clearly drawn to what he sees as this literature's inherently theoretical bent; it deliberately reflects on itself while singing its song or recounting its tale. It offers itself up for subsequent interpretations through its own self-conscious wordplay and investment in intertextuality.

*Martyrs to Love* sets out to see how, over time, a notion of "the secular" detaches itself from an all-covering wrap of religiosity. Gaunt writes in his introduction that "courtly literature appropriates and incorporates models of sacrifice and desire associated with religious discourse and practices to produce an alternative ethical space in which salvation and redemption may be sought... through a passionate attachment to another human being, rather than to God" (p. 10). His readings of troubadour poetry begin by examining its religious language: its references to martyrdom, suffering, and mercy. He is committed, he says, to taking such language at "face value" (p. 7) and asking what was at stake for authors whose writing bound religion to erotic love. In a typically forthright remark, Gaunt characterizes his own previous work on troubadour lyric as participating in the late-twentieth century move to "demystify" literary texts by looking beyond their surface for a different, most often ironic meaning. He writes, bracingly, that his political motivation in the past was his "[dissatisfaction] with the uncritical misogynous and heterosexist garbage about love that was so often peddled in criticism of troubadour poetry" (p. 19). In *Martyrs to Love*, he sheds some skepticism to accord greater attention to the surface, to what he calls "manifest content" (p. 6).

The book's first two chapters form an intriguing unit as they trace a pair of distinct but related notions of the lover's relation to his lady as emerging from the notion of sacrifice. Gaunt's study of Bernart de Ventadorn's "Can vei" and other songs in which the poet evokes his own suffering death begins with the Derridean assertion that death is "the only thing one truly owns, the only thing that is truly one's own to give;" it is thus "that which confers individuality on the subject" (p. 25). In sacrificing himself, the poet makes his lady into a divinity – an Other worthy of such a gift – and at the same time claims a sort of ethical superiority over her: he is admirably willing to die for love, while she remains cold and distant. Lacan and his theory of the gaze inform the discussion. The gaze, like the gift, defines the subject, but while the poet creates himself by making his life a gift to give, the gaze that makes the poet is the lady's. In privileging the Other's gaze, the poet imagines himself her object; occupying this place stabilizes and ensures his existence. Gaunt writes: "[The subject's] integrity and wholeness are guaranteed by the Other's gaze" (p. 32). Sacrificing oneself to the lady recognizes her power, but more significantly, it indicates the desire that such power be present; the Other gives the self grounds for being. Gaunt uses the parallel that sacrificial desire creates between the Other-lady and the Other-God to posit a certain rivalry in troubadour poetry between profane love and religion, or between secular and spiritual – certainly, the religious coloring of language used to describe erotic love heightens the latter's prestige.

The lady as secular ruler takes center stage in chapter two, merrily entitled "To Die for: The Sovereign Power of the Lady in Troubadour Lyric (this, after the soberly named chapter one, "Lover's Martyrdom and the Ethical Subject;" Gaunt regularly leavens his measured analysis with drollery). Whereas sacrifice and suffering were the poet's complaints in the first chapter, in the second the focus shifts to the desire for the lady's mercy. In chapter one, the lady was the Other, and the poet loved his subjection; with the lady's removal absolute, his song was circular or narcissistic, always returning to the self-as-martyr. In chapter two, reading Arnaud de Maruelh, Raimon Jordan, and Gaucelm Faidit, Gaunt alters his emphasis to present the lady as sovereign: still Other, but indifferent rather than hard, inaccessible rather than exacting. The poet's aim is to win her attention, which would amount to absorbing some of her power; a sovereign who takes notice of a subject grants him some status, and thereby cedes a measure of a previously unlimited domain. If the lady notices, shows mercy, a connection or relation exists between her and the poet. The sovereign's supremacy lessens, and the poet-subject fleshes out. Gaunt speaks of the poet's gambit to *seduce* his sovereign lady into responsibility, into an ethical position that acknowledges him as supplicant (e.g., p. 58). Though the choice of verb may raise doubts in the

reader's mind – can accepting responsibility be seen as a deviation, a straying from principle? – it is true that if the lady recognizes the poet, she does indeed fall away from the perfect invulnerability of the sovereign. And she is, of course, seduced in a narrower, erotic sense: charmed or attracted by the pull of the poet's song.

With the conclusion of first two chapters, we have the merest hint of the possibility of dialogue between lovers; mercy might allow for some exchange. But Gaunt points out that troubadour lyric, with its one-voice format and its near atemporality, quickly forecloses any search for evolving love, or consummated martyrdom. To observe two people, and observe them in time, we need narrative; hence Gaunt's turn in chapter three to romance.

The principal texts studied in this chapter make for an easier transition to a new genre, as they are romances that incorporate lyric passages: the *Chastelaine de Vergey* and the *Castelain de Couci*. The romances comment on inset lyric; the third-person narratives consider, elaborate and explicate the first-person lyric texts. The reader, too, is brought into the textual dynamic as the observer who knows more of the story as the action unfolds than any individual character; the main subject in these pages is, in fact, watching and knowing. The love-catalyzed deaths of romance figures differ from the martyrdoms (or potential martyrdoms) of troubadour poetry because they are sacrifices witnessed by others; they have the status of spectacle. Indeed, Bataille's notion of the spectacle of sacrifice sustains chapter three, as the Derridean idea of the gift of death grounded chapter one and Agamben's perspective on sovereignty helped shape chapter two. In the narrative model of sacrifice, Gaunt argues, the reader's pleasure is born of the distance between him and the story, and of his status as repository of the lovers' secret. As for the tale's characters, they maintain an ideal of shared death, just as they desire symbiotic union in life. The lady in both romances consumes her lover's heart, thus representing life, love, and death as a (secular) trinity.

In light of the troubadours' claims that they are, or will be, martyrs to their ladies, and romance narratives' presentation of lovers who aspire to die together, the question that comes to mind on the threshold of chapter four is: does being in love *necessarily* entail death? The field thus far is strewn with corpses. Gaunt addresses the issue with his next group of texts, tales centered on Tristan and Lancelot. And his analysis suggests that love does connote death when lived without critical distance; however, when lovers adopt a certain perspective on their passion, they live to tell their tale.

The romances of chapter three modelled the importance of incorporating the other – even to the point of ingestion. Eating the lover's heart was a means of achieving fusion with another being, while the reader outside it occupied the role of witness. Chapter four extends Gaunt's discussion of fusion vs. spectacle, this time concentrating on the former. Gaunt stresses that medieval narratives regularly produce pairs of lovers – Tristan and Iseut, Lancelot and Guenevere, and, in a further example, Cligès and Fenice – who all pay discursive tribute to perfect union in death. The frequent rhyme pair *mort/comfort* forges the association of death and love's fulfillment. Gaunt writes: "The one moment when the lovers will be truly inseparable is death. In death, they become indistinguishable, they lose all sense of self, they become one" (p. 116). Tristan's defining characteristic for Gaunt is that he lives this idea to the full; he has "a literal... understanding of the fatal nature of love" (p. 107), so that loving Iseut, he can only desire death with her.

Lancelot, on the other hand, lives at one remove from the love-is-death fantasy fulfillment, understanding "the symbolic nature of discourses of death in courtly literature;" he knows that "the purpose of the symbolic and of its discourses is to preserve life" (p. 107). Thus, while the lovers rhyme *mort* and *comfort* in Chrétien de Troyes' *Chevalier de la charrette*, Guenevere opts not to commit suicide when she thinks that Lancelot has died; and though Lancelot *wants* to die of grief, he cannot manage it. Gaunt judges Lancelot's awkward attempt to choke himself as a comically bungled suicide, and deems him "unable to die for love" (p. 123). The figure of Cligès puts even more distance between the

sacrificial ideal and the impulse to inhabit it; while Tristan *must* die and Lancelot knows he should, Cligès only “expresses incredulity at being alive” when he believes his lady dead – and in the end, he and Fenice live happily ever after (p. 135). The symbolic value of a discourse imbricating love and death is recognized as such; it is not mistaken for reality. As Gaunt says in a characteristic move from theoretical complexity to homey aphorism, “Guenevere and Lancelot have their cake and eat it” (p. 124).

Like the book’s initial two chapters, the last two form something of a pair; if, in its beginning, *Martyrs to Love* explored more fully the perspective of the male lover, chapters five and six turn the tables on masculine protagonists to attend to those they love, or those who love them. Chapter five hearkens back to heroines already presented in earlier passages – the Iseut of Thomas, the Chastelaine de Vergy, *Le Castelain de Couci’s* Dame de Fayel – to ask whether their dying is of a different order. These women can and do die spontaneously for love; they exhibit the ethical superiority that comes from asking nothing in exchange for offering their life. Men, while they lament in grief and claim the martyr’s status, ultimately die of physical wounds or at the hand of enemies. They achieve no perfect fusion with their ladies, and resist death’s ultimate union. As only women expire for love, Gaunt contends that such death is a gendered phenomenon. Men talk the talk of martyrdom, he writes, whereas women walk the walk (p. 144). Later in the chapter, Gaunt complicates this analysis by looking at women who refuse to die meekly and on cue; two examples are Guilliadun in *Eliduc* and the Damoisele d’Escalot in *La Mort le roi Artu*. These heroines and others trouble the paradigm of the self-sacrificing lady, and Gaunt probes the particularities of each case. Consistently focussed on close readings of primary texts, calling more often on critics of medieval literature such as Baumgartner and Bruckner than on theorists Žižek and Lacan, Gaunt’s serial examination of stories is at once strong and somewhat frustrating for the reader. His laudable willingness to accommodate each text’s individuality also means that he does not channel his arguments as much as he might; the result here is more a succession of convincing mini-readings than a tightly knit whole.

Chapter six, “The (Queer) Look of Love,” moves away from male-female duos to consider men loving men. The power of the gaze to create and sustain identity, a motif that recurs regularly throughout the book, structures Gaunt’s study in these pages. When Narcissus falls in love with his own image in the *Lai de Narcisse*, what is it about self-contemplation that causes his self-sacrificing death? Once Galehaut looks upon and loves Lancelot in the Prose *Lancelot*, what place can he occupy in relation to the Lancelot-Guenevere couple? Gaunt develops a discussion of the homoerotic impulse in these passions, but ultimately targets something else: the play of self and other in a love that escapes a male-female model at once binary and fusional. He attributes Narcissus’ death to “the impossibility of occupying both subject and object positions” (p. 177). This reconnects us to his analyses of troubadour lyric, in which the poet’s fantasy is that of being looked at in order to be; if it is the other’s gaze that creates or constitutes the subject, the fountain’s image — a false other — will fail to shape Narcissus. When Gaunt turns his attention to Galehaut, he points out that Galehaut’s self-abnegation and death give him the ethical hero status neither Lancelot nor Guenevere can claim (p. 199). Gaunt argues that Galehaut the observer, the third party, in fact sustains Camelot’s lovers through his own superior devotion, and by virtue of a queered perspective.

In distilling the lessons of the myriad texts and multiple genres that feed the analyses of *Martyrs to Love*, its author draws a conclusion to dishearten idealists: “Love...however altruistic it might seem, turns out to be Narcissistic, in that its function seems to be to produce, to ensure and to confirm the self’s integrity, not simply to reach out towards the other” (p. 208). Pop star Lucio Battisti might have agreed when he sang that people don’t die for love. Indeed, when love’s subject and object are both human — when Godlike transcendence is removed from consideration — such a judgment stands to reason. Gaunt is neither enraptured by the discourse of sacrifice nor worried that martyrs to love are less than they say; his approach to the texts he so finely interprets is at once attentive and amused. No doubt he appreciates at full worth the title of Battisti’s ballad, in which the self endures: “Io vivrò (senza te).”

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