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Megan Moore, *The Erotics of Grief: Emotions and the Construction of Privilege in the Medieval Mediterranean*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2021. x+204 pp. Appendix, notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 (cl). ISBN 9781501758393. \$32.99 (eb). ISBN 9781501758409.

Review Essay by Tracy Adams, University of Auckland

I first approached Megan Moore's *Erotics of Grief* from the wrong perspective. It is not news that publications devoted to French studies, like *H-France*, attract both literature specialists and historians of various kinds or that these scholars at times bring differing sets of expectations to their readings of secondary sources. Although interests within the disciplines of literary studies and history have converged to a large extent over recent decades, and scholars in both fields are typically well versed in a variety of scholarly genres, reviews by historians of monographs by specialists of literature—and, somewhat less frequently, the reverse—that rely on norms inappropriate to the reviewed work continue to appear. The issues are usually minor: for example, scholars of literature want to know exactly which words are used to express a particular idea and complain if the original is omitted; historians wonder why an author wastes space reproducing the original. But the problem is at times more serious, resulting in studies reviewed unfavorably because the reviewer misunderstood the genre and expected something from the work that it was never intended to provide.

To frame my own enthusiastic response to *Erotics of Grief*, then, I begin by acknowledging my default to the expectations of a historian of the emotions during my initial encounter with this text, along with my recalibration and subsequent re-reading. Graduate of an interdisciplinary PhD program, I moved away from literary studies early in my career, and, used to reading like a historian, I first approached *Erotics of Grief* with what I retrospectively recognized to be unsuitable assumptions. But the error was a happy one, and, in what follows, I would like to highlight how glad I am to have returned to a type of scholarship that I have long neglected and how much I appreciate Moore's innovative and subtle readings. The study, an exploration of the ways in which certain medieval texts construct an aristocracy that distinguishes itself through shared performances of grief and desire, offers a pleasure that I found all the greater for having originally sought that pleasure in the wrong place.

My original misreading was based on the work's subtitle, "Emotions and the Construction of Privilege in the Medieval Mediterranean." Expecting something along the lines of Gabrielle Spiegel's *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France*,^[1] which argues that the anxieties of northern-French nobles in the face of the French king's power consolidation were reflected in their vernacular prose histories about Charlemagne, I imagined that the author of *Erotics of Grief* would locate and define a community of Mediterranean aristocrats, real human beings, who shared a group identity, and then examine writings commissioned by them as fictitious representations of a socio-historical phenomenon: the emotional practices that helped bind them together. The first pages of *Erotics*

of Grief seemed to confirm my assumption, plunging the reader into the world of the thirteenth-century fabliau known as “Cele qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari,” which features a widow performing her wild grief upon her husband’s grave. A passing lord and squire comment on her anguish, the lord expressing admiration for her devotion, the squire deciding that she is probably up for a good sexual encounter. It turns out that the squire is right: in response to his boast of a sexual prowess so spectacular that he had accidentally killed his last lover, the lady begs him to do the same for her. Moore offers a short discussion of this fabliau as a springboard into an exploration of how “twelfth- and thirteenth-century narratives designed for and commissioned by the medieval elite imagine the contours of their communities of privilege through eroticized grief. In texts as diverse as the fabliaux, travel narratives, chansons de geste, and romance, grief and sexuality are never far apart” (p. 4).

However, it soon becomes clear that the communities referenced in the title of the introductory chapter, “Desire and Death in Elite Medieval Emotional Communities,” exist within the world of narratives. Moore’s earlier study, *Exchanges in Exoticism: Cross-Cultural Marriage and the Making of the Mediterranean in Old French Romance*,^[2] is grounded to a greater extent in real communities: the Mediterranean in this case is “a geo-cultural space in which identity is not relegated to fictitious feudal borders, but rather created through patterns of patronage and cultural exchange, through trade and warfare” (p. 7). In this earlier study, women played a fundamental role “in the creation and exchange of cultural knowledge as they married and reproduced with foreign men...” (p. 9). In contrast, the *Erotics of Grief* focuses resolutely on textual performances. Moore makes this crystal clear in her introductory pages, as I should immediately have realized: her study treats how a variety of different types of “twelfth- and thirteenth-century *narratives* designed for and commissioned by the medieval elite imagine the contours of their communities of privilege through eroticized grief” (my emphasis, p. 3). In other words, what Moore promises and delivers is not a history of the emotions, but a set of provocative readings, after the manner of Bataille, Butler, Barthes, Derrida, of a generically diverse corpus of medieval works inspired by Mediterranean sources that demolish the pervasive notion of love in the Middle Ages as an idealized emotion. Far from reading scabrous genres as parodies of courtly romances or imagining that “the kinds of love that are ‘ennobling’ are by default platonic, asexual, or free from passion” (p. 18), Moore reads the works of her corpus as embodiments of an ideology that conjoins love, inevitably and inextricably, with grief, brutality and death, and, most important, argues that these works make the terrible emotion into a marker of privilege. “Passion is constitutive of noble privilege and fundamental to noble community,” she observes; more specifically, her readings suggest that “that transgressive passion—the kind that mingles death and desire—is at the heart of elite identity; desire is entwined with mourning and is fundamental to the narrative of elite exceptionalism” (p. 18).

Chapter one, “Philomena and the Erotics of Privilege in the Middle Ages,” explores the two transgressions, incest and infanticide, recounted in Ovid’s appalling tale to show how the medieval French lai’s retelling casts both as perversions of love, *amor*, and uses them, together, to support noble exceptionalism. Assuming that Chrétien de Troyes was the lai’s author, the medieval romance represents not the continuation of an ethos of chivalry and courtly love but one of lust and violence: an erotics of grief. Tereus, overcome with desire for the vulnerable Philomela, as she is called in the lai, rapes her and then cuts out her tongue; Tereus’s wife, Procne, avenges her sister by perpetrating an act whose horror derives from its status as the most transgressive act imaginable, murdering Itys, her son with Tereus, and serving him up to his

father for dinner. Moore observes that Itys “represents not only the transgression of all limits, but also how the text imagines medieval noble desire—and privilege, and subjectivity—as fundamentally rooted in grief” and describes him as “the symbol of the tightly knit emotional entwining of grief and desire foundational to elitism” (p. 53).

Moore opens chapter two, “Widows and the Romance of Grief,” with a discussion of the attraction that Enide’s grief exerts on male observers before turning to several other grieving heroines: Laudine, the lady of Chaitivel, Floire. Inserting the performances of these distressed women into a tradition of ostentatious female lamentation in ancient Greek literature and showing the trope’s continued popularity in medieval literature, Moore considers the work that grieving textual women perform as builders of community. Women like Enide commemorated the men they mourned, becoming story tellers in a genre that did not often give voice to female characters. Although mourning is typically gendered feminine, in the romance grief can be experienced by men and women; however, it requires the proper object, a man in service of chivalry.

Moving from romance and female grief into the homosocial world of men mourning the dead on the battlefield in chansons de geste, in chapter three, “Masculinity, Mourning, and Epic Sacrifice,” Moore suggests that from “Achilles’s deep and raging mourning of Patroclus to Priam’s grief for Hector, men’s mourning is fundamental to epic” (p. 114). In the realm of medieval literature, the intensity of Charlemagne’s grief for Roland inversely mirrors Roland’s worthiness as a warrior. Indeed, Charlemagne’s own strength is paradoxically demonstrated through the slaughter of his troops, who are willing to offer their own lives for their king, and the sorrow that the king manifests; through his grief, Charlemagne both commemorates Roland and glorifies himself. *La mort le roi Artu* makes the point from the opposite perspective. In this text, the destruction of Arthur’s kingdom serves to illustrate emotions gone awry—the king’s death arouses no narrative (Arthur vanishes into the mists), revealing that men’s emotional regimes in this kingdom have failed.

Chapter four, “Toward a Mediterranean Erotics of Grief,” defines more clearly in what sense the erotics of grief that characterizes Moore’s corpus can be regarded as Mediterranean: “for elite medieval audiences, the emotional boundaries of their community were delineated by feeling rules imparted by dialogue with Mediterranean literary and emotional traditions to figure power among interconnected elite medieval Mediterranean reading communities;” through “texts like the *Le roman d’Alexandre*, *Le roman de Troie*, and the *Roman d’Enéas*, twelfth-century audiences learn that their nobility flows from the veins of Mediterranean forebearers” (p. 123). The chapter concludes with a particularly intriguing intertextual reading of an illumination of the Satalian episode in the version of Mandeville’s *Travels* found in manuscript français 2180 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, BNF Fr. 2810. This magnificently illuminated compendium known as the *Livre des merveilles et autres récits de voyages et de textes sur l’Orient*, was collated for Duke of Burgundy, Jean sans Peur, for his uncle Jean, Duke of Berry, in 1413. Moore interprets the illumination, which relocates the obviously transgressive sexual encounter of a man from Satalia with his dead partner (resulting in the birth of a hideous head) by turning the man into a king clad in royal blue, as an illustration of an “erotics of privilege” (p. 154): as part of a broader ideology that assumes an “alternate set of feeling rules” for the manuscript’s community of readers.

A work as rich as this one inspires many questions. True, the last chapter points out some similarities in the ways in which medieval French and Greek romance entwine love and grief, which might suggest a common identity, but Moore never directly supports her claim of a “Mediterranean elite.” Certainly, the medieval Mediterranean world was alive with travel and migration; foreigners from all reaches of the vast territory populated its cities. Undoubtedly intermarriage took place to some extent. Still, did such a concept as Mediterranean exist at all in any sense beyond the geographic? Did aristocratic peoples of different faiths, languages, customs and different political allegiances really identify as a communal “Mediterranean” elite? At times, the notion feels like question begging: the corpus is presented as evidence of a Mediterranean identity, the existence of which is then proven by the corpus. Or is my question irrelevant in the first place? Should we understand Moore’s Mediterranean elite as a purely textual construction?

Another question arises from Moore’s use of Bataille. Surely one of the most pertinent aspects of Bataille’s work for a discussion of the erotics of grief is the idea of love and death as gateways to the continuity that humans lack in this world of isolated discontinuity. Thinking in these terms, I wonder if Moore’s readings become at times slightly too literal? For example, both Tereus and Philomela manifest somatic signs indistinguishable from the symptoms of love even though the lai identifies the former as illicit lust and the latter as terror; is the point not that cultures taxonomize profound continuities in ways that obscure this original continuity, in Bataille’s sense? Might we not read what Moore identifies as transgressive assertions of love as privilege as reflections on specific social or psychological problems associated with discontinuity? Some of the texts even seem to propose ways of harnessing the emotion into a positive force. Dido’s unproductive love for Eneas for example, seems to be corrected by Lavinia’s version of the same emotion, which reveals itself in precisely the same physical signs but which is associated, in Lavinia’s case, with empire building, that is, establishing a new genealogy in a new land.

Despite the enormous interest that love in medieval narrative has long aroused, critical examinations of the emotion are surprisingly rare. Megan Moore’s study confronts the reader with complex versions of love that have nothing to do with received notions of “courtly” or “noble” love. The readings uncover conjunctions that feel both alien and, psychologically speaking, weirdly modern: as Moore notes in her conclusion, the communities depicted in the works she analyzes resonate in many ways with modern fixations on love unto death and, I would add, dying for one’s country. The popular image of courtly lovers engaged in erotic behavior that privileges the submission of a chivalrous hero to the whims of his lady yield the floor in this study to an erotics of grief, to “hymn[s] of love and pain” (p. 159), revealing one more time that medieval literature remains relevant to modern life.

NOTES

[1] Gabrielle Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose. Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] Megan Moore, *Exchanges in Exoticism: Cross-Cultural Marriage and the Making of the Mediterranean in Old French Romance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

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