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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 Nuria Silleras-Fernandez, University of Colorado Boulder

In *The Erotics of Grief: Emotions and the Construction of Privilege in the Medieval Mediterranean*, Megan Moore convincingly ties together emotions and power, eroticism, desire, and grief, and desire and death, in an analysis of primarily French literature from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Texts, including the *Song of Roland*, *La mort le roi Artu*, Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, and *Floire et Blancheflor*, are read against the background of Classical Mediterranean works, such as those of Ovid. For Moore, these various pieces eroticize grief, which is presented as the reserve of medieval elite culture. She sees the elite building an emotional community through a shared sense of sorrow, one that considers its members the only ones deserving to be grieved. Their lives are presented as mattering more than those of commoners. Moore is aware that her study focuses on the emotional practices of the medieval "one per cent," and justifies this perspective on the grounds that:

- (1) the texts, tombs, and artifacts that have survived depict and produce communities of privilege;
- (2) Mediterranean intermarriage solidified medieval networks of privilege; and
- (3) Mediterranean texts produce their language of elitism by creating and propagating mournable subjects (p. 12).

Although her laboratory is medieval French, Moore's contentions resonate within a broader Mediterranean framework including the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, in this brief response, I propose to discuss how the elitism of love and grief is also evident in late medieval Iberia, where the same classical and medieval texts discussed in *The Erotics of Grief* also circulated and were translated, first in a courtly context, and eventually more broadly, after the proliferation of the printing press in the late 1400s. As Barbara Rosenwein noted, the court functioned as one of the emotional communities contemporaries moved through: "Emotions depend on language, cultural practices, expectations, and moral beliefs. This means that every culture has its rules for feelings and behavior; every culture thus exerts certain restraints while favoring certain forms of expressivity." [1]

Aside from poetry and chivalric novels, the genre of sentimental fiction was popular among the Iberian elite. The protagonist in these texts is typically a lovestruck nobleman who is rejected by his lady and consequently suffers, or even dies, in unrequited passion. These works reflect on the impossibility of love, or at least of a reciprocated love that endures and "ends well." Sentimental fiction is a genre that bridges the medieval and the early modern, flourishing between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries across the crowns of Castile, Aragon, and Portugal. [2]

The epitome of the sentimental novel is *La cárcel de amor* (*The Prison of Love*), by Diego de San Pedro, published in 1492. Here, the protagonist, a noble knight named Leriano, is so lovesick with Princess Laureola that after he is definitively rejected by her, proceeds to die, but not before physically ingesting her letters (in holy communion, as if they were sacramental hosts). In the final *planctus*, Leriano's mother mourns her son as she watches him die, reflecting on how the aristocracy is emotionally deep, and therefore feels and suffers more than commoners ever could:

Bienaventurados los baxos de condición y rudos de ingenio, que no pueden sentir las cosas sino en el grado que las entienden; y malaventurados los que con sutil juicio las trascenden, los cuales con el entendimiento agudo tienen el sentimiento delgado.[3]

Blessed are the base of nature and the rude of wit, for they feel things only to the degree to which they understand them; and unhappy are those of subtle judgment who comprehend all, those who because of acute understanding have delicate feeling.[4]

Consequently, in *La Cárcel de amor*, as across the sentimental genre, elites are portrayed as emotional out of a conviction that having a sensitive nature was the monopoly of privilege. As Moore states, “ancient and medieval texts... imagine that elite love is exceptional,” and alien to “the other 99 percent” (p. 13). Most of the protagonists in works of Iberian sentimental fiction were aristocrats. And even in real life, many noblemen at the time composed poetry ruminating on love, desire and suffering; hence, the association of emotion and refinement with their class. This is, of course, only half-valid, because in fact those who were really on top—that is to say, the ruling monarchs and their heirs—were not encouraged to allow their passions to control their personas. Didactic texts, including mirrors of princes and princesses (i.e., educational texts directed towards royalty), were careful to warn them against allowing their emotions to overtake them. Thus, if sentimental fiction portrayed nobles letting their passions run unchecked, conduct literature whether aimed at men or women had the opposite goal.[5]

San Pedro's *La Cárcel de amor* ends with Leriano's ignominious death. If a nobleman of his stature were given a funeral, it would have included a burial in a monumental tomb, complete with a procession of clergymen and of paid and unpaid mourners dressed in black, followed by requiem masses, and a series of acts of memorialization. In other words, while, in principle, death is presented as the great equalizer—an inevitable process that no individual escapes regardless of their class, condition, or state—what comes afterward is by no means equal. For the elite, commemoration is in perpetuity, for the *hoi polloi*, anonymous oblivion.

Given this, the finale of San Pedro's *La Cárcel de amor* evidently left many of his readers disappointed, with the result that in 1496 the Valencia poet, Nicolás Nuñez, wrote a fan-fiction alternate ending: *Tratado que hizo Nicolás Nuñez sobre el que Sant Pedro compuso de Leriano y Laureola llamado Cárcel de Amor*, in which Leriano gets the proper mourning that his audience believes he deserved, and in which Laureola finally realizes her mistake, and admits that she had indeed loved him. And, in fact, it became standard editorial practice in subsequent editions of San Pedro's novel to include Nuñez's addition as an epilogue.[6]

In *The Erotics of Grief*, Moore considers Judith Butler's questions from *Precarious Life*: “Who is a mournable subject?” and “What makes for a grievable life?”, which she quotes on p. 13 of

her study.[7] While San Pedro left his readers to grieve, Nuñez also forced Laureola to do so. In the Middle Ages, the reply to Butler’s questions was “the elite,” an answer reflected in literature and material commemorations. For centuries, the wealthy and powerful reminded the world of their standing in life and of the prominence of their lineage by establishing pantheons, and in the late Middle Ages, the royalty started the practice of embalming to preserve their bodies for display.[8] How people are mourned, buried, remembered, and memorialized is intertwined with culture, religion, class, gender, wealth, tradition, medical knowledge, technology, legal practices, and historical context. In the view of medieval royalty and nobility, they were subjects mournable to the point that all of the business and life of the court had to stop when a member of the royal family died. But, even within royalty, a hierarchy was observed—the ruler and the heir (particularly if he was the only male heir) were the individuals most deserving of mourning—far more than a consort or “spare.” Thus, as Moore writes, “we create and negotiate community, privilege, and remembrance through emotion” (p.163), and there is a Mediterranean framework for emotions.

NOTES

[1] Barbara Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *American Historical Review* 107/3 (2002), 821-845.

[2] Antonio Cortijo-Ocaña, *La evolución genérica de la ficción sentimental de los siglos XV y XVI* (London: Tamesis, 2001); Sol Miguel-Prendes, *Narrating Desire: Moral Consolation and Sentimental Fiction in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

[3] Diego de San Pedro, *La Cárcel de amor*, edited by Carmen Padilla (Barcelona: Crítica, 1995), p. 78.

[4] Diego de San Pedro, *Prison of Love, 1492: Together with the Continuation by Nicolas Nuñez, 1496*, trans. and ed. Keith Whinnom (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), p. 148; Nuria Silleras-Fernandez, *The Politics of Emotions: Love, Grief, and Madness in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2024).

[5] Nuria Silleras-Fernandez, *Chariots of Ladies: Francesc Eiximenis and the Court Culture of Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[6] As Nuñez justified, “I decided to make this treatise in order to make it more clear whether Leriano’s firmness in death would give him any reward, since in life he had been denied it.” [“mas por saber si la firmeza de Leriano en la muerte dava algún galardón, pues en la vida se lo había negado, acordé fazer este tratado” San Pedro, *La Cárcel de amor*, p. 83.]

[7] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 20.

[8] Romedio Schmitz-Esser, *The Corpse in the Middle Ages: Embalming, Cremating, and the Cultural Construction of the Death Body* (New York: Brepols, 2020), pp. 272–80.

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