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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 Joseph P. Derosier, Beloit College

Megan Moore's *The Erotics of Grief: Emotions and the Constructions of Privilege in the Medieval Mediterranean* begins with two epigraphs, one from George Bataille's 1957 *Eroticism* and another from Judith Butler's 2004 *Precarious Life* (p. vii). In the first, we have Bataille with "[b]etween death and the reeling, heady motion of the little death the distance is hardly noticeable," where Bataille marks death (*la mort*) as an exceptional or extreme case of *une petite mort*, jouissance or climax (p. 240). It is also a moment when Bataille is thinking about St. Theresa's cry of "I die because I cannot die" (*Je meurs de ne pas mourir*)—a very extreme and exemplary form of living, according to Bataille.[1] Butler's words then mark a turn: "Who am I, without you?," shifting from the economies of death and jouissance for Bataille to Butler's concern with the intersection of mourning, violence, and politics. As Butler writes, "[w]ithout grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life," marking life in the future anterior.[2] It is at this nexus of the erotics of death and grieving with the questions of who grieves, whose grief is important, and whose lives are grieved (and how) that Moore articulates a biopolitical and erotic function of grief in medieval Mediterranean communities, at once anchored in the contemporary Mediterranean of these writers and readers as well as in the exemplarity and fantasy of classical Mediterranean texts.

Moore opens with a fabliau, *Cele qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari*, where a widow is both desirable in her lamentations at her late husband's grave as well as desiring herself, as a squire, titillated by her sorrow, brags about killing his last partner in an act of sexual prowess, which leads her to plead for him to fuck her to death in turn. As Moore argues, this "imbu[es] grief with not only sexual, but also narrative, power" (pp. 3–4). Tales such as this thus perform a narrative and formative function for the Mediterranean elite in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries around desire and grief, linking Bataille's concerns with death, transgression, and jouissance with Butler's concerns for affective community. This approach builds, I think most productively, on Barbara Rosenwein's idea of emotional communities—discourse in a Foucauldian sense that has a controlling or disciplining function, or internalized norms in Bourdieu's definition of *habitus.*[3] As Rosenwein writes, "[w]hile emotions may be expressed more or less dramatically, *they are never pure and unmediated drives or energies*".[4] Moore's work on grief does the work of untangling the messy emotions of Mediterranean literary culture, of situating emotions within discursive and historical contexts, and helping readers better understand some of the questions with which anyone who has taught Chrétien de Troyes's *Philomena* has been confronted. As Rosenwein asks of her own work, if her "book speaks of norms, codes, and modes of expression rather than feelings [… i]s it then a history of emotions?"[5] Moore in turn asks us, as readers, to think of the medieval contexts of the erotics

of grief as well as "modern expressions of passion-as-death" and how they inform how emotions are experienced, and most importantly, for whom? (p. 163).

The Mediterranean emerges as a site for cultural exchange and community "where shared emotional practices facilitated the imagining and negotiation of shared communities of power" (p. 11). This is an elite space where death and desire, as transgression, are at the heart of elite identity, which then emerges as a privileged space for identity formation: "desire is entwined with mourning and is fundamental to the narrative of elite exceptionalism" (p.18). Here Moore reframes the erotics of transgression and death in Bataille, a unique and internal experience (Bataille's *expérience intérieure*, which he argues is not mystic in that it is neither confessional nor narrative),[6] to have a communal, narrative, and boundary-forming apparatus. The question of who is mournable, in Butler's framework, is thus imbricated with the erotic questions therein. Medieval, elite Mediterranean emotional communities are thus structured through desire and death, passion and mourning, and inclusion and exclusion.

Perhaps the most compelling argument that the book makes is a connection between modern emotions and medieval emotions—not through collapsing or flattening register but rather through looking at form and function. As Angela Warner writes of the *Chanson de Roland*, "[g]rief is exhausting, frustrating, painful, and heavy"; further, "to grieve is to labor."[7] Moore looks at that labor as what is produced through grief and shows its links to the erotic and communal. The "conscious coupling of grief and desire" that Moore identifies in Chrétien de Troyes's *Philomena* finds echoes in the later works of the Marquis de Sade, marking Tereus (Chrétien's Térée) as a Sadean figure (p. 38). Moore links de Sade's narrator and Térée through "their refusal to share in communal frameworks of desire" linking both figures to Bataille's "formulat[ion of] the erotic around the performance of social boundaries" (pp. 41-42). In turn, Procné's desire is cannibalistic, "literally embodied in the flesh—the cooking, serving, and consuming of the flesh of the son enact her own *forsenee* [mad] desire: not for sex and its thrust to life, but for revenge and its incipient grief" (p. 51). Moore thus offers us a schematic of the relationship that Térée has to community, desire and death that is mirrored and refracted in Procné and Philomena. As Moore notes, Itys (Ithis), Procné and Térée's son "becomes the ultimate 'erotic object'" in Bataillean terms (p. 52). These desires—at once noble, being of the nobility, and courtly, part of courtly life—reveal Itys at the center of an elite emotional matrix, marking him as far more symbolically charged than as simply a rubric for Procné refusing her spouse his fatherhood and bloodline.

The widow then emerges as an exceptional or exemplary figure, especially in Marie de France's *Chaitivel* and in Christine de Pizan's autobiographical writings, where grief operates less as a retreat from the world and more as a site for performing active, emotional work. Grief once again is a privileged site for memory and commemoration, tied to the hermeneutics of its specific emotional community. "These signs require a community of readers to be decoded; within romance they become keys to a communal language of emotion that describes the values of elite masculinity" (p. 70), Moore writes of Énide's eroticized grief and self-destruction at the misperception that Érec has been killed. Moore is exceptionally deft at situating grief at the interstices and intersections of the communities producing, commemorating, and consuming them. Dido in particular stands out in the *Roman d'Énéas*, where "the true anxiety about desire […] is that Dido abandons the mourning of her dead husband to make love with Aeneas" (p. 136), a marked contrast to the schoolboys seen weeping for Dido in Marjorie Curry Woods's

recent monograph on the use of classics in the medieval classroom.[8] Woods shows how "learning literature was a shared social experience" which prominently featured "boys temporarily inhabiting the feelings of women from the classical and pseudo-classical tradition."[9] Moore looks at different emotional communities than Woods does, and grief and commemoration do very different things in these contexts. As Rosenwein writes of anger, "[n]either the social construction of anger nor the social *uses* of anger constitutes the whole story," and the same is true for grief.[10] Reading Moore and Woods's work on Dido with each other illustrates the important of contexts, from location (elite literary culture vs. a classroom) to content (vernacular romance vs. Latinate epic). Moore's work here is provocative in how it looks at the complicated trajectory of the erotics of grief. "As Christine de Pizan wondered [of *Le roman de la Rose*] […] why must sex be an erotics of pain, of grief?" (p. 156); here Moore places the modern reader alongside one of the greatest critiques of the erotics of grief. Neither the social construction nor the uses of grief are entirely clear for Christine, just as we, modern readers, may struggle to parse out each iteration and use. Christine was deeply aware of context and audience when she expressed anxiety over *Le roman de la Rose* when she asked Jean de Montreuil if and how he would use *Le roman de la Rose* as a pedagogical material for his daughters (as opposed to one's sons).[11]

Masculinity and mourning are next centered in readings of the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Roman de Rou*, the *Iliad*, *Aliscans*, *Guillaume d'Orange*, and *La mort le roi Artu*, among others. Reading epic with and against Barthes, Derrida, and Butler, Moore examines the tensions between lives grieved and the performance of grief, between historicity and commemoration, and between the event and its iterative narrative repetitions, especially in homosocial communities. What emerges is less the extolling of a life grieved and more the maintenance of systems of power, privilege, and the courtly ideal. A text such as Mousket's *Chronique* then emerges as doing commemorative, narrative, and modeling work in its depiction of grief, "imagin[ing] grief as the ultimate story of sovereignty," a climax in narratological terms but certainly in a Bataillean sense as well. The elite Mediterranean becomes clear as a site for emotional community, interconnection and tension, and narrative community in texts as disparate at *Floire et Blancheflor,* the *Arabian Nights*, and Greek romances from *Drosilla and Charikles* to *Livistros and Rhodamni*, building on Moore's previous work on cross-cultural exchange in the Mediterranean.[12]

In sum, this volume is a welcomed addition to histories of emotion, to medieval Mediterranean studies, work on gender, desire and sexuality, as well as work on medieval communities and biopolitics. Moore writes that she hopes that "this study invites further research in considering how emotions and community intersect in medieval literature, perhaps most notably and visibly in the ways that medieval elite communities deploy emotions to create, maintain, and police their privilege" (p. 161). Further, Moore's work has given me new ways to think about texts such as *Érec et Énide* and *Philomena* in my seminars. I have taught these in the contexts of genre, gender, and romance, on medieval animals, and on the idea of the Quest or fanfiction. *Philomena* always provokes so many questions about infanticide and patriarchy, and this volume offers novel approaches to important and difficult texts. Moore's scholarship can thus help us with survivor-centered approaches to pedagogy as well as trauma-informed pedagogy.[13] *The Erotics of Grief* elucidates the mechanisms and structural and social formations in sexual violence, grief, mourning, trauma, and remembrance. I look forward to novel scholarship as invited by Moore, as well as seeing how medievalists and other scholars use these approaches in

teaching. This volume asks new questions with each read, and I look forward to returning to this volume in the future.

NOTES

[1] Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme* (Paris: Minuit, 1957); translated as *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1962), p. 265.

[2] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), p.15.

[3] Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 25.

[4] Ibid., 191.

[5] Ibid., 193.

[6] Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943/1954), p. 15.

[5] Op. cit., p. 191, my emphasis.

[6] Ibid., p. 193.

[7] Angela Warner, "'*Doel'* In Situ: The Contextual and Corporeal Landscape of Grief in *La Chanson de Roland*" in *Affective and Emotional Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andreea Marculescu and Charles-Louis Morand Métivier (New York: Palgrave, 2018) 211–26; 224.

[8] Marjorie Curry Woods, *Weeping for Dido: The Classics in the Medieval Classroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 9.

[9] Ibid., p. 144.

[10] Barbara Rosenwein, "Controlling Paradigms" in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara Rosenwein (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 233–47; p. 247.

[11] Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre des epistres du debat sus le* Rommant de la Rose, ed. Andrea Valentini (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016), pp. 158–59: « Hahay ! entre vous, qui belles filles avez et bien les desirez entroduire a vie honneste, baillez leur, baillez et querez *Le Rommant de La Rose* pour apprendre et discerner le bien du mal — que dis-je ? mais le mal du bien ! »

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

[13] Nicole Bedera, "Beyond Trigger Warnings: A Survivor-Centered Approach to Teaching on Sexual Violence and Avoiding Institutional Betrayal," *Teaching Sociology* 49/3 (2021), 267–77; Jocelyn E. Marshall and Candace Skibba, eds., *Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: Addressing Gender-*

Based Violence in the Classroom (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2022); Alison Gulley, ed., *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom: Approaches to Difficult Texts* (York: Arc Humanities Press, 2018).

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