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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 Glenn D. Burger, Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

In her exciting new monograph, *The Erotics of Grief*, Megan Moore provocatively argues for a major reorientation of our understanding of twelfth- and thirteenth-century romance. Although romances have become linked in the popular and critical imaginary with the development of *fin'amor*, or “courtly love,” Moore argues instead that we focus on “that uncomfortable confrontation between desire and death that occurs in elite medieval culture [...] in the oddest moments of encounter, where death and its byproduct—grieving—are eroticized in a bystander’s gaze” (p. 18). Through such an erotics of grief, Moore maintains, these romances work to make certain kinds of transgressive passion constitutive of noble privilege and fundamental to the construction of elite emotional communities in the period.

The most obvious places to look for such moments of encounter are those with the grieving widows Moore discusses in chapter two. In Chrétien’s *Yvain*, for example, the eponymous hero “sneaks into his vanquished adversary’s castle to spy on and lament Laudine’s self-mutilation [...]. Paradoxically, the sites where Laudine marks her grief are precisely the places that Yvain finds the most arousing—when her eyes are bloodshot and tear-filled, he finds that he has ‘never seen such beautiful eyes’; when she destroys her face, he has never one ‘so well sculpted seen’; when she is unable to restrain her grief-induced mutilation, he has never seen a ‘mirror...so bright and polished.’ In describing beauty as blood and gore, the scene points to the ways that Chrétien uses bodies—and specifically, the disfigured and destroyed bodies of women—as reflections, literally here, ‘mirrors,’ of the men they mourn” (p. 74). By inciting such an eroticization of grief, Moore argues, we don’t just feel what the women feel, but their affective response, and the changes it produces in their embodiment, in turn move their audiences to desire what these women mourn as lost, constructing an emotional script that directs onlookers’ desire, via a grieving widow like Laudine, to desire and commemorate the heroic worth of the fallen warrior’s sacrifice, and along with that, to accept the inherent worth of the elite chivalric values they embody.

Drawing on Bataille’s work delineating eroticism as an emotion, Moore also underscores how such passionate encounters operate at the interstices of privilege and passion and at the limits of taboo and transgression. As she notes, “Bataille locates desire in the transgression of social, religious, and cultural prohibitions; the desire to transgress is the fundamental boundary of human culture” (p. 41). It is precisely in such a sensitivity to transgression that the erotic becomes possible. Moore therefore begins the book not where one might expect—with the grieving widows of chapter two or the distraught warriors mourning fallen heroes of chapter

three—but with the horrifying violence of Chrétien’s *Philomena* story. Here, Moore notes, there are two transgressive acts of violence: first, Tereus’ rape of Philomena and then the cutting out of her tongue to keep her silent, and second, the manifestation of the two sisters’ sororal love in an erotics of violent destruction when they kill Procne and Tereus’s son and serve the son’s body to Tereus to eat. While these are extreme, Moore argues, they throw into sharp relief how a sensitiveness to transgression alongside an elision of desire and death—what Bataille characterizes as “organized transgression”—is *normative* and *foundational* to articulating noble privilege through an erotics of grief. In formulating her argument in this way, around the performance of social boundaries, Moore helps us understand just how much such transgressive desire constitutes the emotional center of medieval elite courtly culture in contrast to emotional centers for other social groups in the medieval period.

Although in a later chapter Moore briefly discusses *fin’amor* passion as a subset of this erotics of grief, her reorientation of “ennobling love” and transgression towards grief provides an important new way to think outside the traditional box of “romantic love” as the defining mode of writing and expressing aristocratic privilege in this period. In her discussion of the *Philomena* story, for example, she notes that the final line of Chrétien focuses on the cry of the nightingale: “oci! oci!” (“kill! kill!”; p. 54 n. 54) and that Chrétien turns his characters into birds just at the point where the characters are exposing their manifestations of elite power as potentially taking them beyond the confines of the human: “Transformed into birds, the triad escapes evaluation by medieval juridical and ecclesiastical authorities[...] puzzling most readers and leaving them to judge the characters’ and tale’s cannibalistic morality in a seeming vacuum, well outside the scope of institutional feudal justice and even textual condemnation” (p. 55).

In Moore’s analysis, then, romance’s erotics of grief elicits a desire not only for the heroic manifestations of the “necessary” and “heroic” violence of a warrior class (commemorated by grieving widows such as Laudine) but also a desire for chivalric culture’s more problematic will to violence *tout court*, that is, for a knight’s pursuit of chivalric prowess or sexual gratification at all costs, even to the point of undoing the social, simply because he can. Moore’s discussion of the *Philomena* story provides a troubling lens through which to view the libidinous, if potentially transgressive, desires unleashed by the passionate grief of the widows in chapter two, or the passionate expressions of love by knights for their fallen comrades discussed in chapter three. It allows us simultaneously to bear witness to desire and to feel the sensitiveness of transgressive desire in celebrating an elite community’s willingness to indulge its will to power simply because it can: or put more mundanely, to be drawn into the complex systems of desire circulating around chivalric knightly violence as the foundation for an elite culture’s universalizing self-identifications.

Moore’s argument about how these romances explore the complexities of aristocratic power by inciting passionate manifestations of and responses to the grief caused by the exercise of chivalric heroism and might is wide-ranging and thoroughgoing. In doing so, she provides an exciting and original addition to the growing body of work on medieval affect and emotion. Her use of word clusters to highlight emotional work in the romances, as well as her discussion of grief serving to create emotional communities that define elite, “noble” identity for the period, draws on the foundational work of Barbara Rosenwein and other historians of medieval emotion. But Moore’s emphasis on the narrativization of grief, and the flows of desire created by the toll of such passionate expression (on the part of widows) and passionate apprehension (on the part

of a libidinous knight or reading public), also highlights the ability of the literary to register the pre-social feelings and the flows of affect between such feelings and socialized emotion. Neither Rosenwein's somewhat static theory of "emotional community" nor McNamer's "affective scripts for the performance of feeling," "sensitiveness" to the erotics of grief in Moore's nuanced discussion of affect and emotion becomes a complex phenomenon experienced individually in embodied, pre-linguistic ways yet also moved into the social and linguistic through the operation of erotic desire.

Although Moore includes *fin'amor* as a subset of romance's erotics of grief, at the same time she brackets the effects of romantic love by claiming that a male lover's expressions of grief are more delimited than those of a grieving widow or male comrade mourning the death of a fellow warrior, and that the woman exists to heal male grief. This analysis offers a challenging new perspective on how we think about the supposedly transgressive nature of ennobling love in the genre, as well as the structures of feeling organizing it as an erotics. But I wonder if this focus on *fin'amor* as a variety of grief rather too neatly delimits how it figures as an erotics. Might there not be a way to consider how aristocratic *fin'amor* and an erotics of grief function as two intertwined but separate structures of feeling serving an elite community's instantiation of privilege? While Moore's discussion of the operation of grief within an erotics of *fin'amor* or ennobling/romantic love makes sense and connects romantic love with an erotics of grief, the transgressive power of *fin'amor*, the ways it involves "sensitiveness" in Bataille's terms, seems more complex than Moore allows for. Unlike the erotics incited by the grieving widows, say, the sensitiveness to transgression initiated by the embodied display of feeling on the part of the lovesick courtly lover seems a transgression arising out of enforced inaction rather than the transgressive power of power itself (seen in the grievable bodies of worthy chivalric heroes), a stalling of male power and knightly activity in order to feel all the extra-ordinary things only a lover feels. The willful taking on of powerlessness by the powerful that we see with the male lover in *fin'amor* offers an alternative way to manifest elite identity founded through displays of privilege. The performative element in such an erotics could thus open it up in unexpected ways to voice the privilege achieved by emergent elites outside the nobility.

Moore wisely limits her discussion to texts produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This allows her to range widely across a variety of cultural and geographical boundaries and to lay a strong foundation for her claim that such an erotics of grief was vital in constructing privilege across the medieval Mediterranean. A major question that the book raises for me, however, and one obviously outside the confines of Moore's book project, is what the afterlife of such an erotics might look like in the later Middle Ages. Here the example of *fin'amor* could prove illuminating. I would argue, as others have, that romantic love morphs in the later Middle Ages from an erotics, in Moore's definition of the term, to something more like a new premodern sexuality, increasingly defined less by the kind of "sensitiveness to transgression" that Moore notes with the erotics of grief and more by material signifiers of courtliness. Ennobling love in such a secularized sex/gender system becomes more a set of performances available to new as well as established elites rather than a coherent structure of feeling that performatively enunciates the inherent value of aristocratic privilege. It becomes what James Schultz has so aptly described as "aristophilia," or the love of the courtly, that can serve as its own kind of uniquely premodern (hetero)sexuality akin to but markedly different from a more strictly biological sexuality organized around aristocratic dynastic marriage.[1]

I'd ask, then, whether the erotics of grief could be open to such adaptation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and morph into something less an erotics and more a sexuality—that is, more concerned with the maturation of elite subjects and capable of being bought into by wider groups of elite communities. Or does Moore's erotics of grief remain purely the purview of subjects noble by birth or by chivalric achievement? My suspicion is that the Mediterranean model of an erotics of grief that Moore articulates is less likely to follow the path of *fin'amor*. Instead, the connection of an erotics of mourning to an inherent and transgressive will to violence, to the exercise of power for the sake of it, that we associate with aristocratic, knightly warfare, seems more likely to ensure that such an erotics will come to be less valued because it is less appropriable by other social groups and situations. In that case, might the erotics of grief become less serviceable than that of *fin'amor* to late medieval elite communities, now defined in broader, more complex social terms? And if an erotics of grief survives as an erotics, might it be in those instances where the ability to incite desire for the exercise of a privileged subject's inherent right to power have particular purchase for late medieval/early modern audiences, for example, the need of late medieval tyrants or the increasingly absolutist rule by monarchs of early modern nation states to justify a will to violence as right to rule.

Thinking in this way about Moore's Mediterranean model of an erotics of grief and its possible afterlives also makes me aware of a whole new context for Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and why he might have chosen it to start the *Canterbury Tales*. I now see anew just how much the question of grievable bodies permeates the action of the tale, how much its uneasiness with *fin'amor* erotics and women resonates and shifts the inheritance of the Mediterranean model of an erotics of grief that Moore has laid out in her book. And I look with fresh eyes at how the grief of the royal and aristocratic widows that open the *Knight's Tale*, when they seek Theseus's help in finding a proper burial for their dead husbands, or Theseus's repeated attempts to model the dead Arcite as a properly grievable body might connect to the masculine violence and tyrannical rule never far from the surface of the tale. All of this is to highlight yet again just how much and how widely Moore's ambitious and provocative argument reverberates.

NOTES

[1] James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

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