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**Conor McCarthy, Ed.**, *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages. A Sourcebook*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. xii + 292 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$96.65 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-415-30745-7; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-415-30746-5.

Review by Erin Jordan, University of Northern Colorado.

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In *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, Conor McCarthy states his objective as twofold. First, he aims to include a range of texts that convey the interplay between these three separate yet related topics, and second, he intends to present instructors with a compilation of primary sources that "demonstrate the varieties and differences to be found in medieval writing on these subjects" (p. 22). McCarthy notes the importance of recognizing the existence of both continuities and discontinuities between medieval and modern understandings of love, sex, and marriage, in particular cautioning the reader against assumptions that posit a certain uniformity of behavior across time. According to McCarthy, "although the acts in different centuries might resemble one another, the understanding of what takes place through these actions, the cultural construction of their meaning (both to the persons concerned and to the wider culture that they live in) might vary significantly across time" (pp. 1–2). The primary sources included here span a wide chronological period, from the fourth to the sixteenth century. The authors, although almost exclusively Christian and predominantly male, represent a range of social and economic groups. While the excerpts are primarily drawn from England, McCarthy deliberately includes some from texts originating outside of England that presumably exerted influence across Europe.

The sources, of which most are focused excerpts from longer texts, are prefaced by an extensive introduction in which McCarthy presents readers with the concerns and intentions that dictated his choice of the topics and sources. McCarthy has deliberately chosen documents that illustrate his larger argument about the modern interpretation of medieval texts; he instructs readers to be wary of the modern tendency to presume the existence of a single, homogenous view of such complex topics as sex and love in the Middle Ages (p. 22). Instead, he attempts to convey a sense of the diversity that existed in medieval attitudes through the range of texts he presents his reader. In preferring documents simultaneously addressing "the emotional state of love, the physical act of sex and the social institution of marriage" (or various combinations thereof), McCarthy attempts to demonstrate the existence of a "complex relationship between these three topics, then as now" (p. 22). McCarthy effectively juxtaposes a range of documents that make it impossible for the reader to reduce these very sophisticated topics to over-simplistic--and perhaps even inaccurate--generalizations about medieval attitudes.

McCarthy's attempt to debunk assumptions about a single homogenous view of these behaviours and beliefs perhaps explains his decision to organize the documents into five sections according to literary genres, rather than by topic: Ecclesiastical Sources, Legal Sources, Letters/Chronicles/Biography/Conduct Books, Literary Sources, and Medical Writings.[1] Clearly, his inclusion of documents that specifically address more than one of the focal areas makes such an organization necessary. However, since the organization of these texts does not parallel his discussion of the respective topics in the introduction, which is structured thematically, one might wonder how useful his historiographical discussion will prove to students--especially undergraduates. The onus would be placed upon instructors to assign selections of the introduction along with related excerpts and to specifically draw the students' attention to key connections. The fear of this reviewer is that such an approach, while effectively demonstrating the overlap among these sources, might prove overly repetitive and possibly even confusing.

In the introduction, McCarthy devotes a considerable amount of attention to the interpretive difficulties posed by medieval texts, which modern readers must carefully negotiate. He highlights, in particular, the problems associated with the unavoidable fact that many of the texts available to us are authored by members of the church, who are often assumed by modern scholars to present the normative view of issues concerning love, sex, and marriage (pp. 1–2). McCarthy questions this characterization, suggesting the need for a more nuanced approach and choosing documents that convey a sense of the complexity to which he refers. Forced to reconcile the natural functions of sex and procreation with church doctrines condemning the behaviors associated with these functions, the predominantly

male members of the church expressed views that likely differed considerably from those of the average layperson. McCarthy attempts to counterbalance the often condemnatory tone of ecclesiastical texts by presenting the reader with sources-- both prescriptive and proscriptive--that reveal alternative views of love, sex, and marriage.

By including a lengthy discussion of the historiography of these three topics, McCarthy demonstrates the variance among modern views about medieval attitudes toward love, sex, and marriage, and the range of possible interpretations that exist. He considers the way attitudes about love, sex, and marriage have developed over the course of the last fifty years, beginning each section with an author whose views provided a modern normative view of each topic, and then addressing the various ways the discourse has since developed over time. For example, McCarthy suggests that the dominant model for modern discussions of medieval love was first presented by C. S. Lewis in 1936 in his *Allegory of Love* (p. 4). McCarthy then traces the discussion of love as it evolved over the years, highlighting the contributions of various authors and placing the relevant primary texts within the context of the larger historiographical discourse.[2]

Since the documents provide the book's main focus, McCarthy can only address to a limited extent the vast body of scholarship devoted to these topics. Even though he effectively presents a sense of the various approaches taken by both historians and literary scholars, instructors need to stress to students that McCarthy's discussion is not intended to be exhaustive. While students of upper division courses would find these sections quite useful in providing a sketch of scholarly views over time and across disciplines, students in surveys or introductory courses would obviously gain primarily from the documents themselves. For advanced students, McCarthy's choices of works that, in his opinion, established the parameters for the modern discussion of these topics, might prove somewhat problematic--most notably in his section addressing sex; many medieval historians might be surprised at his choice of Michel Foucault to provide the dominant model for current discussions about medieval attitudes towards sex. However, this section of the book should certainly prompt a lively classroom discussion.

As mentioned earlier, English sources predominate in the collection. McCarthy concedes the emphasis on medieval England but suggests that such a description is in and of itself misleading, since "[t]here is no such place as 'medieval England', politically or geographically speaking" (p. 23). McCarthy argues that in the absence of intellectual isolation, continental texts probably exerted considerable influence on English authors. Although correct in his belief that attitudes in England did not prove impervious to views of the church originating in Rome or literature circulated on the continent, one might wonder to what extent legal texts and court records reflect such external influences. While certainly not posing a problem for instructors teaching courses that focus specifically on medieval England, this regional focus might prove problematic for courses that cover a broader geographical spectrum. It would be difficult, if not dangerous, to generalize about attitudes across Europe based upon excerpts of Anglo-Saxon law or Norman legal codes. It is important to note that while English texts clearly predominate in some sections (most notably part two and part four, which concentrate on legal and literary sources), other sections (such as part one on ecclesiastical sources and part five on medical writings, which includes both documents discussing women's health and several interesting treatises on the topic of love) are more geographically representative.

However, the regional focus of his study does provide an advantage in making room in most sections for sources seldom encountered in such document collections, offering students a wider range of views, attitudes, and beliefs. The sources that McCarthy chooses range from fairly standard extracts of St. Augustine and St. Jerome on marriage and sex (likely to be found in most sourcebooks of this nature) to actual court cases from Canterbury. In a similar fashion, the section on literary sources presents excerpts from such standards as Beowulf and Andreas Capellanus alongside slightly more obscure old English riddles. This combination proves extremely successful, introducing students to a range of attitudes as well as a range of authors and allowing McCarthy to effectively illustrate the interpretive difficulties that result. When presented with such variance, who is to say that St. Augustine outlines a norm while the ideas conveyed by the riddle diverge from that norm, and not vice-versa? By juxtaposing texts from difference regions and genres, McCarthy does well to demonstrate the gap that often existed between ideal behavior as expressed in narrative sources and reality as it was revealed in documents of practice.

Overall, McCarthy's attempt to demonstrate variance among medieval views about love, sex and marriage is to be applauded. Clearly, the existence of a single, uniform view of any topic would have been as scarce in medieval society as it is today. Even to suggest the existence of a "normative" view about any topic is problematic when one considers the vast divide that separated various members of medieval society: clergy and laity, men and women,

peasant and noble. By juxtaposing more visible texts that modern scholars tend to privilege with those that express a wider range of views and considerable divergence from the supposed norm (and are deserving of more detailed examination than they have so far received), McCarthy successfully conveys to his reader the diversity of medieval attitudes and encourages students of all levels to appreciate the complexity of the period, which is often lost in the modern need to generalize. By including such a detailed and well-developed discussion of historiography in his introduction, McCarthy provides a useful tool for instructors who address the historical process and the challenges posed by any attempt to interpret a society that is, in many ways, so far removed from our own. Since it offers both advantages and disadvantages depending on the course in question, McCarthy's emphasis on England--while acknowledged in the text--should probably be noted more clearly in the book's title. While the collection of sources here would be extremely useful for courses on medieval England and offer an advantage by introducing students to texts that they would not have encountered in other sourcebooks, this reviewer hesitates to recommend it for use in a course with a broader geographical focus.

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#### NOTES

[1] Compare to Jacqueline Murray, ed. *Love, Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages: A Reader* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001).

[2] In the course of this discussion, McCarthy refers specifically to the views of a dozen scholars, highlighting the contributions of Philippe Ariès, "Love in Married Life," in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, eds. Ariès and André Bejin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985): 130–39; Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Museum, 1984); Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1994); Howard R. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sarah Kay, "Courts, Clerks, and Courtly Love," in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 81–96 among others.

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