

Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih, eds.
Medieval Virginites. University of Toronto Press, 2003.
pp. xiii + 296 + illustrations.

Bernau, Evans, and Salih have put together a comprehensive and varied collection regarding the subject of virginity in the Middle Ages. Aply, they have entitled it *Medieval Virginites*, in the plural, as the diversity of subjects the essays cover quickly proves that “virginity” is nothing static and easily defined. The best place to start with this collection is at its end with the closing essay written by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. While Bernau, Evans and Salih open with a useful essay broadly discussing the collection and more specifically addressing the field of “virginity studies” in general, Wogan-Browne ends the collection by thoroughly drawing together all of the essays and their themes and projecting how the questions they highlight are still significant and problematized in our society and scholarship today.

Wogan-Browne’s essay and the editors’ introduction aside, the collection brings together

ten other essays which each address vastly different subjects within the theme of medieval virginites. Expectedly, several of the essays broach the question of chastity and celibacy within religious writings. Sarah Salih looks at “erotic mysticism” (14) and questions the elements and definition of eroticism, and of all the essays, Salih’s least engages with the notion of virginity. Joanna Huntington examines the life of Edward the Confessor and how his designation as “the Celibate” shapes narratives and understanding about his life and works. She argues that Edward is defined by many different virginites, and that the discourse surrounding him ultimately shapes medieval ideas about saintly virginity and what it entails. John Arnold also writes about clerical virginity and masculinity. Both Robert Mills and Ruth Evans look at virgin martyrs in their essays. Mills approaches the question “Can the virgin martyr speak?”

in an essay with that title, through post-colonial theory, specifically that surrounding the practice of "sati," or "widow sacrifice." The unusual juxtaposition pays off and the collection benefits from this unconventional approach. Ruth Evans writes one of the best essays in the book, "The Jew, the Host and the Virgin Martyr: Fantasies of the Sentient Body." While acknowledging that most scholarship has focused on the "vulnerable *female* body" (179; original emphasis) in virgin martyr hagiography and how gender and sexuality work into its themes, Evans insightfully looks at how these tropes intersect in "the anti-Semitic host-desecration narratives" (179) of the Middle Ages.

The remaining essays engage vastly different subjects and it is a credit to the editors of *Medieval Virginites* how informative and interesting the collection ultimately is as a result of its variety. Juliette Dor examines the fascinating phenomenon of the Sheelana-Gig, "a type of ancient grotesque carved stone sculpture of a naked woman displaying

her oversized genitals" (33), dating from the 12th to the 17th centuries and unique to England. Dor posits that contrary to most critical work on the Sheelana-Gig, the grotesques may in fact stand for virginity and not its opposite. Jane Cartwright discusses "Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose," an informative look at texts that are most likely unfamiliar to many medievalists—especially the Welsh medical texts discussed at the end of the essay. Kim M. Phillips "examines the tales of four young English virgins who lived from the late 13th to mid-15th centuries, encoded in the records of common, canon, manorial and borough law" (81). She goes further than the documents themselves, questioning how a woman's family and community have an interest and say in her status as virgin. Jonathan Hughes looks at how reproduction and virginity are treated in late medieval and early modern alchemical writings. Anke Bernau writes about Joan of Arc's questionable virgin status (she at times claimed to be a virgin and to be pregnant)

and how this was a significant problem for Catholics and Protestants alike, raising issues of legitimacy and symbolism for both. Bernau states, "Joan's elusive virginity can be read as a metaphor for historiography itself, connected as it is to nation, politics, religion, truth, rhetoric and ambiguity" (224).

As Wogan-Browne reminds us in her closing essay, the medieval concept of virginity (or virginites) operates under a completely different paradigm than our own. This volume situates and explores the medieval understanding of virginity in many of its contradictions, complexities, and cultural meanings. For many feminist scholars, it will prove to be a valuable contribution and provide a framework within which the exploration of medieval virginites can be broadened.

Jennifer N. Brown
University of Hartford



**"What is love but the
transformation of desire
into the thing loved?"**

□ Richard Rolle,
Incendium Amoris