ELIZABETH EVA LEACH, *MEDIEVAL SEX LIVES: THE SOUNDS OF COURTLY INTIMACY ON THE FRANCOPHONE BORDERS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023), ISBN 978-1501-77187-3, 324pp, $46.95 (hardcover)

Sex isn't new—and while we might dress it up under titles like 'Gender and Sexuality Studies' or 'Feminist Theory', questions related to sex and sexuality have by now long been well-integrated into academic discourse. While this process was a somewhat belated one in musicology, feminist approaches have fruitfully opened discussions on the relationship between sound, sex, and gender over the past few decades. Arguably more so than other forms of expression, music invites us to examine the co-constitutive relationship between culture and the body and the historical entanglements of discourse and desire. Sound's sensuality has some part to play in this, but so does its performativity. Music demands re-enactment and embodiment; in realising it we must always engage with our own physicality.

The relationship between music and desire sits at the centre of Elizabeth Eva Leach's impressively wide-ranging and provocative new monograph, *Medieval Sex Lives: The Sounds of Courtly Intimacy on the Francophone Border*. This book serves two distinct, but mutually reinforcing, functions. On one hand it is a manuscript study, a reassessment of D308 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 308, or TrouvI[1]), a bound manuscript containing a collection of trouvère song alongside several other medieval texts. On the other hand, it presents a new argument about the relationship between courtly love songs and the real sexual lives and desires of late-medieval subjects. These songs were evidently popular; they appear to have been copied for much of the 13th century in costly books such as D308. In asking why this is the case, Leach leads the reader through a deeper exploration of the social and sexual function of *chansons d'amour* at the nexus of the 13th and 14th centuries.

The opening chapter tackles the question, 'Why D308?' D308 is certainly unique amidst the extant *chansonniers*, and worthy of a book-length study. The song collection is one of several items currently gathered in the manuscript, but it was originally copied alongside the *Le Tournoi de Chevauncy*, a verse narrative by Jehan Bretel that recalls the events of its eponymous 1285 tournament. These two pieces constitute the 'original manuscript' that Leach focuses on, though useful summary descriptions are given of the

[1] GB-Ob MS. Douce 308. A scanned version of the manuscript (and link to a full catalogue record) is available on the Bodleian Library website at the following link:
https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/dd9d1160-196b-48a3-9427-78c209689c1f/

DOI: https://doi.org/10.35561/JSMI20253

other three items (Richard de Fournival's *Li Bestiaire d'amour*, the romance *Les voeux du paon*, and the allegorical poem *Le tournoiement Antechrist*). D308 is the only major *chansonnier* housed in Britain or Ireland (where it resides in the Bodleian Library at Oxford), and a rare example of a trouvère source produced in Lorraine. Using the song collection and the *Tournoi de Chauvency*, Leach manages to both spin an evocative portrait of courtly life on the Francophone borderlands in the early years of the 14th century and to put together a compelling argument on the manuscript's provenance. Leach proposes that D308 was produced to commemorate a marriage that bound together the two feuding houses of Bar and Lorraine, a suggestion that is key to two of the purposes of her study. Firstly, it gives us a more detailed understanding of the history and provenance of the manuscript. Secondly, by re-inserting the manuscript into a historical milieu populated by subjects navigating interpersonal politics, Leach lays strong foundations for her proposal that courtly love songs enacted a sort of sexual diplomacy, modelling modes of desire for elite subjects whose hands in marriage (and ability to produce heirs) were valuable political currency.

Chapter Two establishes the book's methodology and theoretical framework. Leach sidesteps any potential debates on the anachronistic nature of the 19th-century term 'courtly love' by clearly defining her use of it as locative, rather than qualitative. Courtly love is love that takes place at court, rather than love that is somehow intrinsically courtly. Even though Leach is interested in the former, rather than the latter, the differentiation between these two ideas lies at the foundation of her approach. *Medieval Sex Lives* examines the relationship between the culturally transmitted version of an idea (such as when recorded in songs and romances) and its historical reality (namely 'the intimate, amorous, erotic, and sexual practices of the producers and consumers of that literature' (42)). Leach details the different phases of trouvère criticism, describing how early studies inevitably treated the songs as autobiographical, while later deconstructive approaches insisted on their textual origin. In doing so she carefully justifies her own manner of connecting these songs to lived realities. She is not alone in this project (one might turn to Sarah Kay's *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry*, or, more recently, Jennifer Saltzstein's *Songs, Landscape, and Identity in Medieval France*), however her study uniquely explores the interpersonal element of the desire expressed in these songs: how we can relate them to sex.[2] Her primary methodological tool is the idea of sexual scripting, a concept first developed by the sociologists John H. Gagnon and Wiliam

[2] Sarah Kay, 'Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry', *Cambridge Studies in French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jennifer Saltzstein, *Song, Landscape, and Identity in Medieval Northern France: Toward an Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Simon in the 1970s.[3] It proposes that, far from being natural forces, sex and sexual desire are socially constructed and hence culturally (and historically) specific, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between representations of sexual desire and our experience of it. Widely diffused across Western Europe, courtly love poetry had the potential to establish a set of sexual scripts shared by nobility across different regions. Leach ties this idea in carefully with the performative potentialities of music, a medium which encourages self-identification even as it refuses to hide its artificiality. Songs invite singers and listeners to position themselves within different narrative and affective contexts, becoming a stage for sexual fantasy.

In the chapters that follow, Leach employs this methodological lens on three different sets of materials, and proposes that *grands chants*, *sottes chansons*, *jeux-partis*, and *pastourelles* (amongst other various songs and sounds) might all be understood as cultural frameworks that shape and reflect desire. Each casts new light on genres that, long considered vulgar, have been occasionally marginalised in the study of trouvère song. Here they are taken seriously—both as objects of music analysis, and as evidence of the sexual lives of medieval subjects. Chapter Three examines the manuscript's selections of *grands chants* and *sotte chansons*, the first of which also includes Marian devotional lyrics. Taking the manuscript's first four songs as representative examples of manuscript's *grands chants*, Leach juggles readings of their content as quasi-masochistic with analyses of their musical form, arguing that they invite listeners and singers alike into fantasy via self-identification or aural voyeurism. Chapter Four returns to *Chauvency*. The narrative poem is used as a prompt to consider the role of sound, *refrains*, and music making in medieval courtly narrative, and treated as both a mediation of and a script for courtly behaviour. D308's *jeux-partis* and Love Questions form a thematic unit with the *Tournoi*—they too stage kinds of mock-competition and violence under the banner of chivalry, and accordingly are treated here. Finally, Chapter Five enters into the field of discourse on the *pastourelle*, a genre which is unusually well-represented in D308.

While each chapter presents novel ways of thinking through trouvère song, Leach's approach to the *pastourelle* is the most radical. These songs typically re-enact amorous, frequently sexual and often non-consensual, encounters with a knight and a shepherdess, and it should come as no surprise that the genre has inspired much

[3] John H. Gagnon and William Simon, 'Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality', *Observations* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1973).

feminist scholarship.[4] D308 contains a total of fifty-seven songs labelled explicitly as *pastourelle*, creating a uniquely medieval corpus (generally, *pastourelles* have been retrospectively identified). This collection is more varied that what we would typically imagine and includes songs that might otherwise be labelled *chansons de malmariée,* dialogic songs, and songs that appear closer to the classic *chanson d'amour*. Leach intervenes not merely in the question of generic attribution; *Medieval Sex Lives* proposes a new way of reading the sexual attitudes transmitted in these songs. Earlier critiques have pointed to how the *pastourelle* reinforces rape narratives in which blame is placed on the victim—in many *pastourelles*, the initially reluctant shepherdess ultimately voices her own enjoyment. While there has been a tendency to treat this as an instance of patriarchal puppetry, Leach dares us to imagine that the shepherdess can and should be believed in both instances. She argues that women's voices can be resituated in the genre if it is understood as a space in which medieval voices (female as well as male) could explore rape fantasies. This is a bold suggestion and will prompt certain debate.

Leach is not the first to propose that medieval rape narratives may have been fodder for fantasy—Evelyn Birge Vitz made a similar argument in 1997.[5] Leach draws on a very different set of sources to make her argument however, one which encompasses not just studies on medieval gender and sexuality, but also writings on BDSM and Katherine Angel's writing on modern consent culture (2021).[6] With them, she argues that we keep the ambiguity of desire in mind when hearing the *pastourelle.* Her readings of some of the songs in D308 (and a description of a *pastourelle* performance found in the *Tournoi*) model the nuance that can be brought to these depictions of desire and the role of music therein. Nevertheless (as is likely inescapable when we consider cultural depictions of sexual violence) aspects of this approach remain troubling. There is a long history of

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[4] For examples, see Kathryn Gravdal, 'Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape' in *Medieval French Literature and* Law (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Jennifer Saltzstein, 'Rape and Repentance in Two Medieval Motets', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 70.3 (2017), 583–616; Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*: *Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Lisa Colton, '"Going all the way with Marot": Empowerment in the Pastourelle Motet L'autrier m'esbatoie / Demant grant joie / MANERE' in *Female-Voice Song and Women's Musical Agency in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Anna Kathryn Grau and Lisa Colton, Brill's Companions to the Musical Culture of Medieval and Early Modern Europe, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 271-298.

[5] Evelyn Birge Vitz, 'Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections', *Romanic Review*, 88.1 (1997), 1–26.

[6] Staci Newmahr, 'Chaos, Order, and Collaboration: Toward a Feminist Conceptualization of Edgework', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 40.6 (2011), 682–712; Margot Danielle Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*: *BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*: *Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London: Verso, 2021).

feminist discourse on the ways in which fantasy and pleasure are shaped by social (and patriarchal) forces yet Leach only references these discussions in passing (224). While clearly attempting to push discussions on the *pastourelle* beyond the limits of second-wave feminism, the choice to largely skirt around that body of literature in favour of empirical work from psychology and sexology amounts to an avoidance of a series of complex debates about sex, society, and female agency. This chapter certainly brings a thought-provoking new perspective to bear on the *pastourelle*. Ultimately, however, it engages only lightly with what these fantasies might tell us about the material circumstances of gendered experiences in medieval France, and it falls short of providing any substantial critique on whether we should celebrate the kind of female agency that might be read in these songs.

Medieval Sex Lives covers an impressive breadth of codicological detail and critical material, however one notable absence across this study is the lack of reflection on the absence of music notation in D308. The use of concordances from other sources for analyses is not a methodological fault *per se*—it seems reasonable to imagine that textual lyrics could spur recollection of melodies in circulation. However, Leach seems uninterested in discussing here the tension between the oral and the visual in *chansonniers.* The question of why some manuscripts recorded songs with notation and others do not is given little time, even though this is one of the main distinguishing features of D308.

Early in the book, Leach describes herself as a sailor navigating the Scylla of deconstruction and the Charybdis of cultural studies (43). This striking image stuck with me for much of the book, as Leach often sails in treacherous waters. The strength of *Medieval Sex Lives* lies precisely in how she nevertheless goes forth and outlines the contours of the dangers she sees. This study is supported by an impressive breadth and depth of research, creating a truly interdisciplinary network of interlocutors. If it lacks anything, it is not for want of stimulating ideas, ambitious arguments, and detailed codicological and music-analytical content. Featuring an even-handed balance of data-driven and interpretive research, it deftly interweaves close analyses with critical perspectives. The result is a book that has much to offer a wide range of readers. *Medieval Sex Lives* will be useful not only to those interested in the specificities of trouvère song (for whom here there is both a wealth of important codicological detail as well as a series of engaging musical analyses), but also to those from other disciplines (and even historical periods) interested in the sexual politics of courtly love.

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