

Pleasure in the Middle Ages

Naama Cohen-Hanegbi and Piroska Nagy

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Cohen-Hanegbi and Nagy's edited collection of essays is divided into three parts: pleased bodies, didactic pleasures and pleasure in God. As a whole, this volume has three aims: to uncover the range of pleasures in the Middle Ages, to challenge the perception that this period was one devoid of pleasure and to inspire further studies on the topic of pleasure in this period. Formed from a rich array of contributions by historians, art historians, philosophers, theologians and literary scholars, this book is imbued with a truly impressive breadth of expertise and gives the reader the sense that pleasure is, and should be treated as, an interdisciplinary topic. A result of the 2013 Leeds International Medieval Congress on pleasure, *Pleasure in the Middle Ages* has sixteen chapters in total which, between them, address pleasure in everything from theology and courts to medicine, manuscript illuminations and reading.

The first part of Cohen-Hanegbi and Nagy's volume is comprised of seven chapters and focuses on the theme of pleased bodies. Across these seven chapters, pleasure is discussed in relation to the monastic lifestyles of the high middle ages (Cohen), merriment in late medieval England (Maddern), medicinal and theological attitudes to health, sex and self-discipline (Salmón: Cohen-Hanegbi: Reddy), the creation and reading of illuminated manuscripts (Doyle), and the construction of a masculine code of conduct in the East from the third to ninth centuries (Moukheiber). Combined, these chapters are particularly striking for the sheer variety of the types of pleasure which they uncover across the medieval world during the third to fifteenth centuries, and for the diverse range of methods which the contributors have used to approach and discuss pleasure, or pleasures, in relation to the body. Several chapters awareness of the issue of translating medieval descriptions and perceptions of pleasure using modern notions, but they do so in different ways. Cohen and the late and much-missed Philippa C. Maddern's respective chapters for example, try to navigate the problems present in the translation of medieval descriptions of pleasure by arguing that these need to be analysed within the notions of the self, external world and language that existed in the high and late middle ages, not those which we hold today. William Reddy, in his chapter on pleasure, twelfth-century courts and neuroscience, highlights the difficulties present in translating the results of neuroscientific research into terms that can be useful for historians of pleasure, owing to the tendency of the sciences to 'kidnap' words such as 'emotion' which they then apply to their own

research without first problematising and acknowledging the cultural aspects of the terms first.

In the second part of *Pleasure in the Middle Ages*, the focus moves away from exploring pleasure and the body to examining pleasure in connection with didactic instruction. Consisting of five chapters, part two opens with Barbara Rosenwein's exploration of pleasure in Alcuin's *Sentences of Paternal Admonitions* or *On Virtues and Vices*. Perceiving the treatise to be a precursor to the present-day emotion self-help manual, Rosenwein suggests that it was created with a view to inciting pleasure in the mind of its intended reader, Wido, Count of the Breton Marches, by giving him instruction on how to master his feelings and actions. Pleasure, although not explicitly discussed in the text, was something that the treatise was intended to stimulate, by giving Wido confidence in his ability to obtain self-mastery. The connection between pleasure, instruction and self-mastery established in Rosenwein's chapter is carried forward in Newhauser and Perret's respective chapters. In Newhauser's chapter, the argument that twelfth to thirteenth century contemporaries perceived a complicated relationship to exist between pleasure, a multifaceted concept, sin and self-mastery becomes clear through the analysis of the influential writings of William Peraldus. Newhauser traces that pleasure developed an 'exchange value' with 'business' and 'narrative' aspects, something which resulted from Peraldus's adoption of the marketplace system of valuation as a metaphor to comment on moral values and the role of pleasure within them. Like Rosenwein and Newhauser, Perret explores pleasure in the work of the influential writer Giles of Rome, whose *On the Rule of Princes* had an enduring impact on contemporary thinking long after its composition in the late thirteenth century. Perret highlights that Giles, following the perceptions of Aristotle, perceived pleasure to be inextricably connected with education and the acquisition of virtue. For Giles, pleasure was instrumental in the physical and intellectual education of children, whose senses needed to be instructed to derive pleasure from performing virtuous actions. It was only by learning to take pleasure in the virtue of these actions, that a child could become a virtuous being. The importance of pleasure to virtue is also rendered apparent in Biron-Ouellet's chapter, arguing that Richard Rolle and Simone Fidati perceived pleasure to be an essential means by which one could judge the effectiveness of their spiritual practices. Biron-Ouellet's chapter is especially notable since, through its analysis of Fidati and Rolle's alternate uses of *gaudium* and *laetitia* to refer to spiritual pleasure, it bridges part two with part one and the discussions on words made by Maddern and Cohen. Élyse Dupras's chapter, illustrating the perverse pleasures which the accounts of the early martyrs, twelfth-century visions of Hell and Mystery Plays of the fifteenth to sixteenth century contain and invoke, is a fascinating read. Although there is little focus on didacticism, the theme upheld by the other chapters, Dupras's thought-provoking chapter does display a rounded, critical handling of pleasure in the sources. Over the course of the chapter, Dupras examines all the facets of the perverse pleasures which the descriptions and stage productions

of Hell contain and elicit: everything from the pleasure of the demons torturing sinners to that of saints who watch those tortures unfold and the audience, who get to see those who did wrong receive their just desserts.

Pleasures in God is the theme of the final part of this volume. Three of the four chapters discuss earthly pleasure and spiritual pleasure in relation to food and drink. Spiritual pleasure, as Guiliano explores, was discussed by Bede in the language of food and drink. Pope Gregory VII, as revealed by Grant, did not so much feel that it was the worldly pleasure attached to the consumption of leeks and onions that needed to be rejected so much as he felt that it was the leeks and onions themselves that needed to be rejected since, through their connection with carnal pleasures, they presented a diversion from the focus on the eternal path. Mews's chapter beautifully demonstrates that Bernard of Clairvaux, and indeed many other theological writers from Origen to Anselm, did not always interpret the opening to the Song of Songs as being hostile to the experience of physical pleasure. Guiliano's, Grant's and Mews's chapters, are particularly compelling because they complicate and debunk the traditional assumption that all thinkers of the medieval church perceived pleasure to be negative. Indeed, as these chapters show, the perception that there was a consistently negative attitude to pleasure in the church could not be further from the truth. Furthermore, the evident care taken by Guiliano, Grant and Mews to not only engage with a variety of late antique and early medieval sources that stretch beyond the scope of their immediate focus, but also to try and comprehend how their subjects perceived the pleasure they discuss, deserves high praise. Such care is carried through into Faesen's chapter which serves as the conclusion to the book as well as the third part. Faesen's chapter does not focus on pleasure in relation to food and drink as the preceding chapters do. Nevertheless, it does relate to the other three chapters through its focus on highlighting the spiritual pleasure visible in the relationship between enjoyment and the love of God that appears in the works of Ruusbroec and Hadewijch. Readers will find Faesen's chapter an appropriate conclusion to this book on and of pleasure, as it re-highlights the issue of translation which Cohen and Maddern emphasise in their opening chapters and thus brings the book full circle.

As a whole, *Pleasure in the Middle Ages* will be of especial interest to scholars who are interested in exploring attitudes to medicine, religion, sex, philosophy, community, friendship, the body and soul in the Middle Ages. Many emotion scholars will also find this volume stimulating through the contributions of Rosenwein, Reddy and, in particular, the last work of the much-loved Philippa Maddern. The impressive range of methodologies, sources and historical views contained within this volume enables it to provide something for every humanities scholar who is interested in exploring pleasure in the Middle Ages – everything from how modern scholars can discern pleasure in the sources of the Middle Ages to what pleasure there were, who experienced them and what people thought about them.