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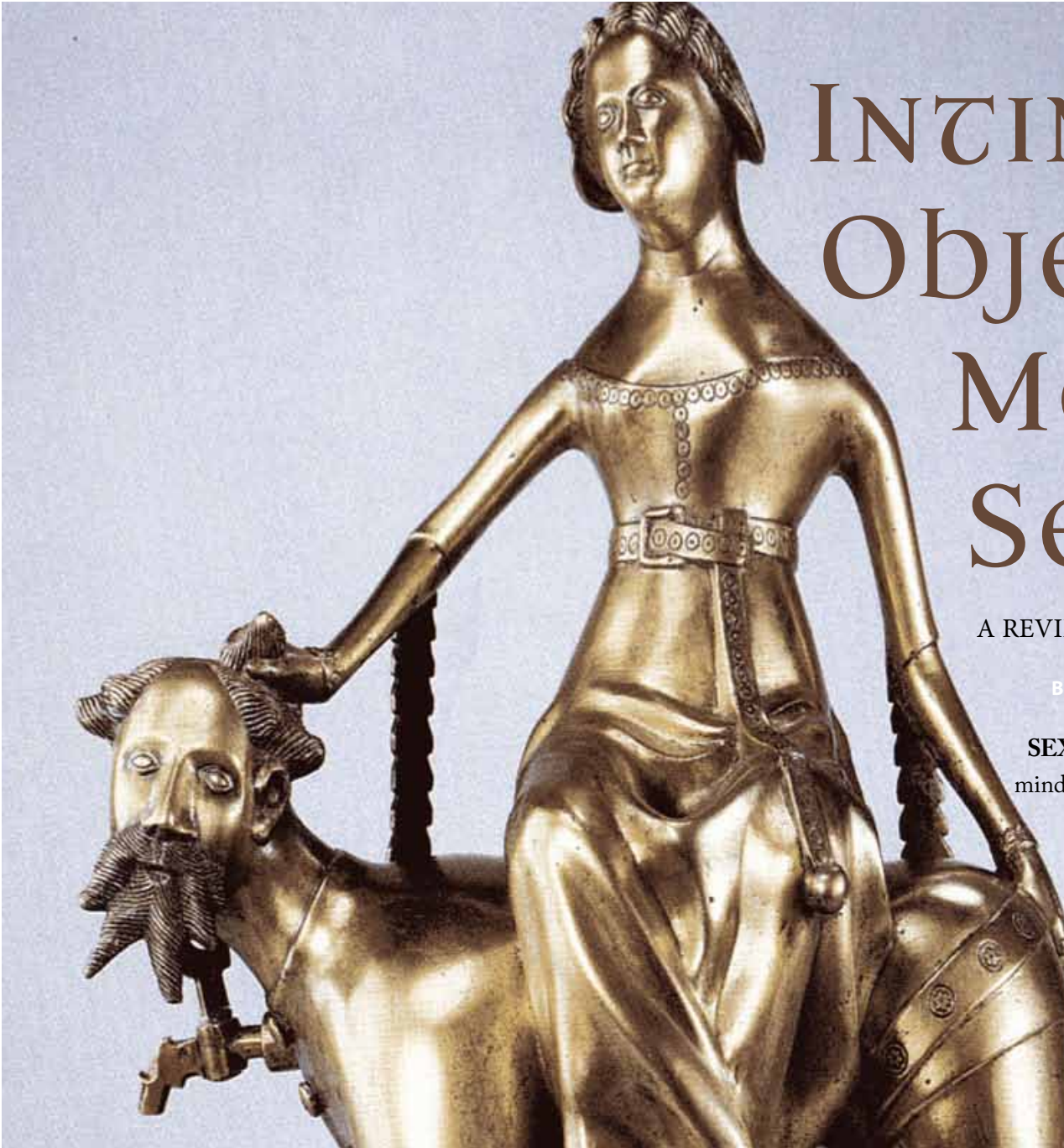
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INTIMATE OBJECTS AND MEDIIEVAL SEXUALITY

A REVIEW OF CMRS MEDIEVAL SEXUALITY 2009

BY ANDREA F. JONES

SEX IS NOT EXACTLY the first thing that comes to mind when most people consider the Middle Ages, but a conference held in Royce Hall on March 6th and 7th amply demonstrated that there is, indeed, plenty to think about when it comes to medieval sexuality. “Medieval Sexuality 2009,” hosted by the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and sponsored in part by the Ahmanson Foundation and cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Women, brought a host of scholars from many disciplines and several

countries together in discussions of topics ranging from marriage to pilgrimage, heresy to confessionals, erotic images to medical theory, and transgendered bodies to metrosexuality.

Unsurprisingly, then, the conference, organized by James A. Schultz of Germanic Languages and Zrinka Stahuljak of French and Francophone Studies, uncovered a number of intriguing themes and crosscurrents, only one of which was the provocative witness of intimate objects. Pilgrims' badges, combs, and prayer books all provide us with hints about how medieval people thought, talked, and enacted sex.

Both Karma Lochrie of Indiana University at Bloomington and Ann Marie Rasmussen of Duke University offered considerations of the apparently obscene pilgrims' badges that have baffled scholars for centuries. Pilgrimage to holy sites was an extremely important part of late-medieval culture, and these

decorations allowed those who had undertaken the dangerous journeys to remember and display the pious intentions that had led them there. Usually, the badges present an image associated with the saint to whose shrine their owners had traveled. Badges commemorating the extremely popular shrine of St. James at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, for example, might be in the shape of a scallop shell; however, Lochrie and Rasmussen discussed images more profane than sacred: capering vulvas and penises.

Noting an embarrassed museum docent's inadvertently hilarious explanation of these little figures as reminders of where their wearers had been, Lochrie explained that we do not know anything about the context for displaying these cartoonish renderings of genitalia. She forwarded the possibility that these items were meant as multilayered parodies, "toy artifacts" that play with both the convention of

sacred badges and the behavior of those who wore them. Noting, for example, that a badge depicting a penis-crowned vulva carried on a litter by several penis-creatures bears striking resemblances to Marian imagery, Lochrie wondered whether it was an image of a "Blessed Vulva Mary," a satire on the conspicuous piety of religious processions in which images of saints were carried through the streets. She also proposed that we might think of these items as "queer souvenirs" that "eroticize the insatiable desire for divine contact."

Rasmussen, on the other hand, speculated that at least some of the profane badges—chivalric penises on horseback and performing vulvas on stilts among them—might be rooted in anxieties about the tension between *fabren* (travel) and *heimat* (home) that is symbolized by the idea of the traveler. The mercenary knights and nomadic acrobats satirized by such im-



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Kren referred to widespread scholarly opinion that women had little to no authority over the content of books that were created for them, but speculated that the *Grandes heures* of Anne of Brittany, twice Queen of France, contains evidence to the contrary. For one thing, Anne herself commissioned and paid court artist Jean Bourdichon to illustrate it—and the pictorial content offers some unconventional, gendered differences from the standard program.

ages, she added, were part of the class known as *fabrendeleute* (traveling folk) in the Holy Roman Empire, people who were both part of and disruptive of the social order. The parody offered by the profane badges, she argued, might work to defuse some of those tensions. Rasmussen concluded that the “riddle creatures” shown on these badges very likely had more than one meaning, perhaps operating as part of Carnival culture, reminders of visits to brothels, or protective talismans.

Diane Wolfthal of Rice University examined another common personal item from the Middle Ages with a talk on combs, proposing that they are striking examples of how medieval and modern sexualities differ. She asserted that, during the Middle Ages, combs were far less utilitarian objects than they tend to be now: both the images carved onto the combs themselves and images of combs appearing in contemporary

paintings, manuscript illuminations, and literature reveal the comb’s status as a sexualized object.

Generally shaped like a widened, capitalized letter “h,” medieval combs had two sets of tines extending outward from the crossbar—one for the coarser work of detangling the hair and another, finer set for smoothing it. The crossbar often was wide enough to allow for carvings and, Wolfthal pointed out, those carvings usually were erotic. Ranging in subject matter from quasi-devotional images of a nude Bathsheba to depictions of lovers in a garden or even copulating couples, such handiwork sometimes was accompanied by phrases enjoining the comb’s owner to “take pleasure” or “have mercy on me.” This last text apparently has a witty double meaning, in that its speaker could either be the implement itself or the lover who offered it as a gift.

In fact, evidence from scenes

on mirror cases and instructional texts for would-be suitors tells us that these combs often were given to women as love tokens, and Wolfthal contended that they could also operate as fetish objects. For example, combs often were made from wood, but the most desired material was ivory—not simply, she suggested, because of its exotic rarity, but also because the white, smooth surface imitated the idealized attributes of a woman’s skin—and because the combs tend to be about the size of a woman’s hand. Since the comb also came into contact with a part of the body that had erotic associations—the loosened hair—and usually was concealed, they could simultaneously serve as representations of its owner and her lover.

Both Thomas Kren, curator of manuscripts at the Getty Museum, and William Burgwinkle of King’s College, Cambridge presented papers on images appearing in devotional books in-

tended for individual use. These manuscripts, generally about the size of a modern paperback or smaller, were meant to provide portable, daily inspiration and frequently contain appropriate illustrations to accompany the text. Kren discussed a book of hours commissioned by Anne of Brittany early in the 16th century, and Burgwinkle analyzed an illuminated manuscript of the *Golden Legend*, the preeminent medieval collection of saints' lives. Intriguingly, both of these books offer provocations to the flesh, as well as to the spirit.

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ventional, gendered differences from the standard program. In particular, he explicated the reoccurring appearance of attractive young men—often in various stages of undress—that sets this manuscript apart from others of the time. It was far more common for such books to contain images of naked women, as is the case in a complementary manuscript Bourdichon produced only a few years earlier for her second husband, Louis XII. In particular, Kren focused on comparably titillating images of a nude Bathsheba in Louis XII's hours and a bound, scantily clad St. Sebastian—and other men—in Anne's.

Burgwinkle, examining the first French translation of the *Golden Legend*, cited it as a demonstration of sexuality as being primarily about “the insertion of affective relations into nearly every realm of social discourse,” rather than about sex itself. A depiction of the martyrdom of St. Julian of Antioch, for exam-

ple, shows him wearing nothing but what Burgwinkle called a “g-string” as he is beaten by his tormentors. Indicating that previous events from St. Julian's life also occupy the panel, Burgwinkle commented that “the torture of the naked saint was, we could say, there all along,” inseparable even from such episodes as the mutual vow of chastity with his wife, St. Basillissa. Other illustrations, including the simultaneous castration of St. Querius and breast-torture of his mother, St. Julita, repeat this dynamic—as do, he noted, some of the writings of the theologian Alain of Lille and the mystic Ramon Llull.

These fascinating investigations of medieval material culture represent only a portion of the conference's offerings, a fact which indicates the variety of medieval sexualities, the diversity of current scholarly work on this topic, and the richness of conversations yet to come. The involvement not only of so

many outstanding scholars, but also of ten UCLA divisions, programs, and departments in addition to the Center of the Study of Women ensures that we have much to look forward to.

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