Reading Medieval Reviews

Megan G. Leitch, *Sleep and its Spaces in Middle English Literature: Emotions, Ethics, Dreams*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021, 296 pp. ISBN: 9781526151100

Megan Leitch's *Sleep and its Spaces in Middle English Literature* makes a compelling case for sleep as a symbolically-charged presence, not an absence, in medieval writing. The depiction of sleep is a point where some of Middle English literature's key thematic concerns intersect. In addressing the 'complex intertwining of the ethical, affective and visionary possibilities of sleep' (p. 28), this book offers fresh perspectives on familiar areas, such as the dream poem, romance and Chaucer's works, while also engaging with more recent trends in medieval studies, like the medical humanities and the history of emotions.

The book's first chapter, 'Emotions, Epistemology and the Nature of Sleep', considers the medical and emotional dimensions of sleep in medieval English texts. Galenic medicine, mediated through medieval English dietaries, contextualises approaches to sleep in works by a range of authors, including Langland, Chaucer and Malory. Chapter 2, 'Ethics, Appetite and the Dangers of Sleep', draws several major literary texts into dialogue with medieval instructional works, particularly sermons and courtesy manuals. Advice texts frequently admonish against untimely sleep or sleep which occurs as a failure of self-restraint or decorum. Interpreting literary depictions of sleep in light of these warnings can illuminate the ethical state of characters and it is clear that sleep (somewhat like swooning) can embody complex internal responses to external events.

Chapter 3 considers the 'spaces' of the book's title, exploring the symbolic role of beds and bedchambers in some very different romance works, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, *King Horn* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Leitch's earlier work, particularly her work on treason in the prose romances, has done much to illuminate Malory by reference to the wider cultural context in which he worked. This chapter also sheds new light on some of the more

enigmatic passages in the *Morte* and, in particular, on how the chivalric world and the world of the bedchamber both overlap and exist in tension with each other. The final chapter, 'The Hermeneutics of Sleep in Chaucer's Dream Poems', also offers a new approach to well-trodden ground. In doing so, it places the accent on Chaucer's engagement with English culture, even when he is drawing on Francophone source material.

Sleep and its Spaces is richly interdisciplinary and wide-ranging in its frame of reference. One of the book's most interesting claims is that there is a distinctively English 'cultural grammar of sleep' (p. 93) which emphasises sleep's ethical aspects. This is evident in how writers like Chaucer deviate from their (usually French) sources when treating sleep, drawing on English rather than continental conventions in their approach to this subject. Although the book's main focus is on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – the 'golden age' of Middle English literary production – this material is contextualised by reference to works from the twelfth through to the seventeenth centuries. The book's coda, which looks at Shakespeare's approach to sleep, makes his debt to medieval culture abundantly clear.

Elegantly written and deeply learned, *Sleep and its Spaces* is an engrossing study, offering new perspectives on some of the most central works in Middle English literature.

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The Penguin Book of Spiritual Verse, edited by Kaveh Akbar, London, Penguin, 2022, 400 pp. ISBN: 9780241391587
English Renaissance Poetry, **selected by John Williams,** New York, New York Review Books 2016, 400 pp. ISBN: 9781590179772

'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty'

My title quotation is from St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter Three, verse 17. The new selection of Spiritual Verse published this year by Penguin comprises 110 favourite poems of the editor who teaches writing and Poetry of the Divine at Purdue

University in Indiana. It is organised along historical principles and, as the editor states in his Introduction, privileges 'no single belief system or vantage point'. It hopes neither to be 'Eurocentric or male dominated'. An episode from *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* dated at c.2010 BCE, is the second entry. Like all entries in the collection, it is factually introduced and briefly described on a page facing its quotation. Psalm 23, which follows two chapters from the *Song of Songs,* is quoted from the King James Version of the Bible. This is a part of the editor's introduction to the Psalm:

(David's) ability to write simple and unmistakeable music into his Psalms – music that survives centuries and translation – preserves them. David's strength wasn't just his might or mind, but also his ear.

The Psalm, in the anthology, is followed by a quotation from Homer's *The Odyssey* then two Sappho fragments. The collection is eclectic – the next verse is by Patacara, 'an ancient disciple of Buddha' of whom the editor comments 'Her simple clarity astonishes'. This in turn is followed by an extract from the *Tao Te Ching.* Hildegard of Bingen, St Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas are included. The German, Mechtild of Magdeburg (c.1207–c.1281) is introduced as: 'an early Christian mystic – her poems were largely recordings of her visionary encounters with the Lord'.

Ambitiously, this is claimed for this beautifully produced collection: 'This anthology is a holistic and global survey of a lyric conversation about the divine, one which has been ongoing for millennia'. Beyond the illumination which comes from its juxtapositions and its sheer span, everything is presented with an admirable clarity.

With a different kind of ambition, Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) – recognised for his love poetry from the Renaissance Court – also wrote 'A Paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms' which were, to quote the Penguin edition of Wyatt's *The Complete Poems*: 'recognized as a group in the Middle Ages, appearing frequently in Vulgate Latin in devotional handbooks, Books of Hours, missals and primers. They were used by both clergy and laity...'. Fascinatingly, Wyatt's paraphrase includes a prologue and narrative links between the seven psalms so that they become 'speeches in a large "historical fiction" based on the story of David and Bathsheba'.

Sir Thomas Wyatt is not quoted in *The Penguin Book of Spiritual Verse* but is extensively quoted in the anthology with the title *English Renaissance Poetry.* John Williams who made this selection, which does not include the Penitential Psalms paraphrase, suggests in his Preface that in some of his poetry Wyatt's writing 'leaps forward' to resemble 'no one so much as the mature poets of the major phase, Ben Jonson and John Donne'. One of Sir Thomas Wyatt's poems that John Williams states achieves this is the Ballade which Sir Thomas Wyatt entitled 'The lover showeth how he is forsaken of such as he sometimes enjoyed'. Its opening line is: 'They flee from me, that sometime did me seek'.

In *English Renaissance Poetry,* Sir Thomas Wyatt is the third poet with a generous selection by John Williams. He is one of twenty-three poets together with one general category – 'English Madrigal Verse', a selection from 'the dozens of song books published between 1588 and 1622'. John Donne is the penultimate poet included, he is also included in *The Penguin Book of Spiritual Verse* where he follows Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare and is represented by the sonnet 'Batter my heart, three person'd God'. This is the fourteenth of John Donne's 'Holy Sonnets'; six of these are included in the *English Renaissance Poetry* selection.

Inevitably many of the poems in the Penguin collection are translations. Amongst his 'Divine Poems', John Donne included his translation: 'The Lamentations of Jeremy', a rhymed version of the book of *Lamentations,* the collection of five poems in the Old Testament of the Bible. A section from this book is in neither anthology. John Donne also highly praised Sir Philip and Mary Sidney's version of the *Book of Psalms*: 'We thy Sidneian Psalms shall celebrate'. John Williams first made his selection of English Renaissance poetry in 1963, perhaps this explains the absence of Mary Sidney (1561–1621) from beside her brother Sir Philip (1554–86). This is the opening four lines from her version of the shortest Psalm in the Psalter (Psalm 117):

Praise him that aye Remains the same: All tongues display Iehovah's fame.

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