

MIEVEAL

An intimate history



The Fires of Lust: Sex in the Middle Ages
by Katherine Harvey
Reaction Books,
296 pages, £20

For a book about the medieval era, *The Fires of Lust* is surprisingly timely. In September 2021, the US state of Texas signed legislation into law that severely restricts abortion. Some commentators have lambasted the legislation, which bans abortion at around six weeks, as “medieval”. Yet, as Katherine Harvey demonstrates in her meticulously researched book, such legislation is a very modern phenomenon. The medieval church was actually rather lenient about terminations performed before what was termed the “quickening” – foetal movement that becomes detectable at between 15 and 20 weeks of pregnancy. Well-meaning critique of so-called “medieval” legislation belongs, in Harvey’s words, to “a long tradition of associating the Middle Ages with all the vices... that we like to think we have subsequently become too good for”.

The Fires of Lust challenges this “tradition” head on, offering an expansive, accessible and highly engaging account of what we do – and don’t – know about western European



Prying eyes A couple lie in bed, oblivious to onlookers, in this illustration from the early 15th century. Katherine Harvey’s new book “offers insights into the realities of medieval sex from multiple angles”

sexual culture in the Middle Ages. It offers insights into the realities of medieval sex from multiple angles: from having the “right kind” of sex – reproductive intercourse between Christian spouses in approved positions – to the “right kind” of not having sex, including clerical celibacy and much-prized female virginity.

After establishing the sociocultural norms in play, Harvey traces with nuance the sexual practices and sexual subjects deemed undesirable, immoral and even outright unacceptable. We learn, for instance, about the ambiguous role of sex work in medieval society, the hostility experienced by people in

interfaith and interracial unions, the violent marginalisation of men who pursued sexual encounters with other men, and much else besides. In its impressive breadth, *The Fires of Lust* necessarily sacrifices depth. It’s unsurprising that the reader is often left wanting more – rather fittingly, perhaps, for a book that lets us peek through the keyhole of the medieval bedroom. **H**

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