

*Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession,  
1150–1300*

PIERRE J. PAYER

This volume rounds out an important trilogy of studies by Pierre Payer on the topic of sex in the ecclesiastical thought and writings of the middle ages. His first volume, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550–1150* (1984), provided a comprehensive survey of the treatment of sexual issues in early penitential writings. *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (1993), his second book, carried the discussion forward into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, assessing the contributions to the topic in the era of the great scholastic theologians, such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Albert the Great.

In every way the equal of the two magisterial studies that preceded it, this third volume examines the treatment of sex in the “new” literature of penance and confession. Composed by canon lawyers as well as by theologians for the instruction of priests, it is one of the most popular genres of writing of the later middle ages, although it remains largely unknown and underutilized as a historical source. Sex figures prominently, revealing the concerns and expectations of the authors and presenting their solutions to the practical matters of how sexual behaviour was to be confessed, what questions were to be asked of penitents, and what penances were to be imposed.

Pierre Payer guides readers through this varied and heterogeneous corpus with great patience and erudition. His analysis ranges over the origin and development of the idea of lechery as one of the capital sins and the distinction between natural and unnatural acts, and explores the moral consequences of sexual behaviour even within marriage, providing us much insight into the act, and art, of confession and the intimate relationship between priest and penitent that underlies it.

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