Piercy, Hannah. 2023. *Resistance to Love in Medieval English Romance: Negotiating Consent, Gender and Desire*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. Pp. xi + 275. ISBN 9781843846727.

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Resistance to Love in Medieval English Romance: Negotiating Consent, Gender and Desire by Piercy Hannah looks at the ways in which both men and women resist love or refuse to love in Middle English romance, a genre which upholds the norms of heterosexual marriage and fulfils most desires for love. The *bumps*—characters' nonnormative actions against the generic principle—serve as the fissures through which Piercy zooms in on the external contexts of society, culture, gender, politics, religion, and race. These concerns might not be able to derail the narrative trajectory of romance entirely, but they bear significant influences on characters' decision-making and incite potential outbursts of nonconformity and discontent. After a foundation-laying introduction, the book develops its argument in five chapters with the first two chapters on the ways in which romance guides deviating desires back to the right track and the last three chapters on the ways by which one can locate the right target of desire and obtain him/her. Chapter 1 "Men Who Resist Love" features unwilling men, who are transformed to take up the normative path of marriage. Chapter 2 "The Proud Lady in Love" examines the ways in which women of higher social status have to be disciplined and even to compromise their autonomy before love. Chapter 3 "Resisting Mesalliance" focuses on the concerns about social gaps for both men and women before a marriage is achieved. Chapter 4 "Hierarchies of Desire, Race, and Empathy" looks at inter-racial unions in crusading romances to reveal the ways in which the hierarchies of gender and desire are racialized. Chapter 5 "Resisting Adultery, Resisting Rape Culture" reverses the stereotypes of men and women in rape culture. This review begins with explaining some important decisions on terminology that the author makes for her discussion, proceeds with a summary of each chapter, and concludes with comments on some highlights in the analysis.

In the "Introduction," Piercey explains her approach to the issue of resistance and defines the scope of her research. Following Helen Cooper (2004, 3–7), Piercy sees the motif of resistance to love spread across the corpus of Middle English literature, while different genres might adopt different, or even conflicting, views on the same motif. On the one hand, the ubiquity of the motif

enables Piercy to add more dimensions to the consideration of resistance in romance; on the other, the ubiquity of the motif projects an image of well-informed readers, who could consider the other layers of the same motif in accordance with their respective realities.[1]

By exploring the ways in which romance characters reject, negotiate, and finally consent to a relationship, Piercy ultimately seeks to expose how the genre engages the structural pressure of rape culture on characters. She uses the term *consent* often, which is understood as granting one party permission to another party, but she acknowledges the word's ethical inadequacy in cases of *raptus* and sexual violence. She points out, however, that consent is a useful framework for medieval scholarship because it was widely used in historical sources to talk about marriage and rape (4–5). Even though the word is neither sensitive nor ethical to modern standards, it rightly reflects the ways in which the considerations for sexual violence and marital relationship were equally limited and restricted in the Middle Ages. As the title of the book suggests, Piercy focuses on the process before the final consent is reached by locating the discussion on the actions of resistance, a process that reveals the decision on love is not entirely about love.

A discussion about resistance to love in a genre that upholds heterosexual normality can hardly ignore homosexual and queer relationships, and even though Piercy's approach is certainly informed by modern literary theories, she explains another decision on not to use modern terminology of gender studies to avoid penetrating modern perceptions in medieval texts. "Medieval sexualities were defined in drastically different terms . . . predicated on an understanding of sexual practice rather than sexual orientation" (18), as she points out. To avoid the conceptual baggage of modern terminology, Piercy uses *aromanticism* and *asexuality* rather than *queer* and *homosexuality* to refer to an individual's other sexual orientation, and their disinterest in amorous approaches are understood as "romantic a(nti)pathy" (32–33). Romantic apathy is indifference to love; romantic antipathy, hostility to love.

Chapter 1 features several heroes to exemplify their asexuality and apathy. Piercy uses Guigemar (Marie de France's *Guigemar*), Amadas (*Amadas et Ydoine*), Troilus (Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*), and Degrevant (*Sir Degrevant*) to demonstrate the ways in which these men, who resist love initially, succumb to love eventually. Piercy's analyses of these texts detail significant and interesting differences in the characters' respective development. On a more general level, these male characters grow out of asexuality or apathy when they come to the knowledge of, and then conform themselves to, the social norm that

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[1] Piercy uses the idea of textual haunting, proposed by Royle (2008) and Cixous (1976) and adapted by McAvoy (2023, 7), to describe the ways in which one widespread idea creates a network among texts and exercises shadowy influence through the network.

it is normal and correct for a man to love a woman. The last and the most intriguing example is Dynadan, a nearly comical character, in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In stark contrast to his disinterest in Isold, Dynadan is explicitly willing to fight for Tristram. Dynadan is a(nti)pathetic toward love, as Piercy argues, and even though she does not identify Dynadan as homosexual, she understands the comical representation of Dynadan through the theory of camp and the notion of drag, which are commonly associated with queer studies. Dynadan performs/presents himself as an unqualified (non-standard) knight falling short of the standard of masculinity. Ridiculing himself in the circle of the knights justifies and reinforces Dynadan's antipathy to love, and prognosticates his nonconformity to the social norm of love.

Chapter 2 discusses women's resistance to love featuring a collection of romance heroines, who are compelled to participate in the romantic and chivalric economy to accept love despite their own wishes. In Piercy's analysis, Felice (*Guy of Warwick*), Eglantine (*Blanchardyn and Eglantine*), and the Fere (*Ipomadon*) are all under the dynastic pressure to find a successor for their land because their gender is considered to be inadequate at commanding a good leadership. In the case of Felice, her resistance to Guy is portrayed to motivate the rejected hero to achieve chivalric excellence and to become a compatible partner for marriage. Eglantine and the Fere seem to turn naturally from resisting love to falling in love with the heroes, but their change of mind, as Piercy explains, is driven by the political and dynastic coercion, which forecloses on the choice of betraying the normative path of romance. The premise of dynastic continuity renders it customary to compromise women's autonomy. If women refuse to comply with social expectations, however, like Wingliane (*Eger and Grime*) and Ettarde (*Le Morte Darthur*), they are chastised. When Wingliane wants a separation from Eger, who has lied in order to marry her, the heroine dies in the end, while the hero lives on to marry another woman. Ettarde refuses Pelleas's love vehemently, but the romance disrespects her wish, bewitches her to fall hopelessly and helplessly in love with Pelleas, who has already turned away, and leaves her to die heartbroken in the end. Piercy beautifully points out that both narratives punish their heroines for having a will (Wingliane's intolerance of dishonesty and Ettarde's unpretentious distaste for Pelleas) and for being wilful (Wingliane wishes for a separation—i.e., a divorce—and Ettarde remains resistant even after being cheated into sex with Gawain). On the other hand, the narratives easily forget and forgive the heroes' misconducts (deception and near-harassment pursuit) but reward them with other marriages. If a woman follows the correct path of romance (to accept love and to marry), their resistance is understood as a stage of development leading to a desirable end. If a woman's a(nti)pathy persists, she is chastened for asserting her will.

Chapter 3 on resisting mesalliance explores the ways in which social disparity might prevent love. With the analysis of *King Horn*, *Amis and Amiloun*, and *Havelok*, Piercy shows that social parity ensures a good marriage. Horn, Amis, and Havelok have to either prove or improve their social ranks to become eligible to marry their potential partners. Piercy argues that the three romances serve an educational function to teach young readers of different social ranks that overcoming social boundaries is possible, but they also caution that any temptation to cross social boundaries involves risks and dangers. Usually, when the social gap is bridged, the protagonists offer themselves willingly to a normative marriage. Subverting the argument of "resistance to love due to social disparity," she demystifies the notion that social equals effectuate a good marriage. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, although the story ends with marriage, initially the rapist knight is reluctant to keep his promise to marry the old woman after she has saved him from death. As Piercy demonstrates, Chaucer's rendition of the old woman is unique in that the contrast between the knight of nobility and the loathly woman of an obscure origin highlights the moral contrast between the two social classes. The noble knight is unwilling to keep his promise, and the nobility all take sides with the rapist knight against the victim of his sexual crime. The knight's resistance to the loathly woman unravels the dark side of his social group and questions the norm that social hierarchy mirrors moral authority: "*nobilitas virtus, non sanguis*," "virtue, not pedigree, is the mark of nobility" (151). Social equals might make a desirable marriage, but Piercy demonstrates that one's status on the social ladder is not in parallel to their position on the moral ladder.

Chapter 4 showcases that one can reject romantic approaches for the concerns of race, religion, gender, and social status. The romance texts in focus include crusading romances composed in the 14th and 15th centuries, *The King of Tars*, *The Man of Law's Tale*, *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, *Sir Ferumbras*, and *The Sowdone of Babylone*. Piercy structures this chapter with Geraldine Heng's (2003) definition of *race* as a flexible construct, and with the notion of "the ideology of white beauty [as] a racial formation" (156) by the ground-breaking feminist, Kim F. Hall (1995, 1998). Through the fantasized construction of Christian superiority over Islam in crusading romances (167–69), conversion narratives allow the texts to perpetrate other notions such as patriarchy and misogyny. Her most discursive discussion in this chapter resides in the analysis of Custance's two foreign husbands and mothers-in-law in *The Man of Law's Tale*. More important than religions, racial differences in appearance—i.e. skin color—determine the outcomes of Custance's two marriages. The narrative allows her to bear an heir to the second husband, the king of Northumberland but has the first husband, who is implicitly portrayed as a Saracen, die in the wedding. The discrimination based on appearance is further seen in the narrative treatment of the two

mothers-in-law. Arguing along the feminist theory of white beauty, Piercy points out that the two mothers-in-law of color are demonized and characterized as the agents of violence, and their characterization shows the ways in which racism is entangled with misogyny. Custance is the white female victim, while the mothers are villains of a different skin color. The train of characters being refused and accepted in love relationships projects a hierarchy of loveable subjects that Piercy unmasks in the story: white Christians top the hierarchy of desire, then white converts, and last people of different color and religion. Each group is further sectioned by their gender and social status. Following Hall's theory of white beauty (156–58), Piercy seeks to show that in the arena of romantic love, white beauty is not one of the standards of beauty; instead, it is the only view that determines one's access to political, economic, and social authority.

Piercy turns her attention to married characters to explore different dimensions of adultery in Chapter 5 "Resisting Adultery, Resisting Rape Culture." On one level, Middle English romance is usually understood as an exemplary genre against adultery. The accused queens, who resist adulterous approaches in *Sir Tryamowre* and *The Earl of Tolous*, exemplify the standard response that married women should have in the face of adultery. On another level, however, Piercy draws attention to the prospect that romance might incite the fantasy of committing adultery. While Dorigen in *The Franklin's Tale* sets an impossible condition for herself to consent to an adulterous proposal, she acquiesces to the possibility of committing misconduct. These texts consistently critique the persistent tone of rape culture for its misogynist ideology, its falsified representations of suitors and victims, and its stereotype of men. The analysis shows that women are not unfaithful, that rape victims do not ask for aggression, and that men are not immune to sexual violence. Piercy reverses the traditional arguments about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte D'Arthur* and highlights that there are male victims and female aggressors in cases of sexual offenses, too. Struggling to resist with no avail the sexual advancement of the Green Knight's wife, Gawain as a guest is threatened in the name of hospitality (212). Lancelot in *Le Morte D'Arthur* is unable to state his rejection of sex, but his retroactive refusal and unwillingness in the forced relationship makes the knight, as Piercy argues, a rape victim.

Resistance to Love resonates with the mainstream interpretive approach to Middle English romance in the past two decades, which attends to unravelling the ways in which romantic unions are entangled with, and driven by, factors external to love. Different from the fanatic, and even irrational, passion in courtly love or *fin amour* in the tradition of French romance, the love ethos in Middle English romance serves a practical function to bring back social order and justice

through the fulfilment of love between two parties.² Piercy's analysis, informed by modern theories, provides exciting insights to the field. Each of the chapters examines a collection of romances starting with texts, which convey more typical and straightforward messages, and concluding with highlighted narratives, which move beyond the preceding analysis. For instance, in the light of the theory of camp, which is associated with LGBTQ+ culture, Piercy explores the comic portrayal of Dynadan (*Le Morte D'Arthur*) to understand how an atypical knight like him, who is antipathetic to women, unreservedly loyal to Tristram, and fighting in a woman's dress, situates himself in the masculine circle of Arthur's court (69). Another inspirational insight is her inclusion of male victim survivors in sexual aggressions in the analysis of Sir Gawain and Lancelot (chapter 5). Men might be coerced to succumb to nonconsensual sex or rape, whenever the opposite party tips the balance of power because of their higher social, political, or relational status. Another slightly remote but thoughtful point that Piercy makes is the whiteness of the discipline of Medieval Studies. When she discusses white female vulnerability through the lens of patriarchal anxiety and racism in crusading romances (chapter 4), she makes the parallel between the racialized hierarchy of desire in romance and the racialized hierarchy of academic efforts in Medieval Studies. She cautions that the contribution of scholars of colour has often been excluded, and the hierarchy of scholarship is politically invested with a biased notion of racial disparity (165).

There are moments in the book that require reconsideration, too. When Piercy defines the scope of her research in the "Introduction," the list of the types of amorous relationships to be excluded from her discussion includes age differences. She explains that the resistance because of age (and queer) "tends to serve more simplistic ideological functions," and "[a]ge is not open to negotiation and debate (though of course attitudes to it are)" (4–5). Considering the physical capacity of a book and the scholarly precision required for research, it is understandable that a book cannot cover everything. However, it might be true that one's biological age is not flexible, but one's aversion to seeing the old in love is more than a personal experience. This attitude to an age gap derives from a social construct of the bias against the decay of the body, a social construct of agism and power. The age disparity existing in royal marriages in medieval England was not uncommon, and their unions prove that the ideology of ageism becomes secondary in the face of political, social, or economic interests. The objective fact of age gap can be interpreted, manipulated, minimized, then ignored, or emphasized through an exercise of the power of any party with higher

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² C. S. Lewis (1936) exemplifies the dominance of courtly love in the studies of Middle English romance in early scholarship. Since the early twentieth century, scholars have identified a different type of love ethos that characterizes Middle English romance, whose readerships were the baronial and bourgeois classes. See, for instance, Saunders (2007) and Cooney (2007).

social, political, or moral agencies. Even if biological age is a biological fact, the actions of resisting or tolerating the difference are social (Tai 2015).

Piercy persuasively argues with the notion of *textual haunting* and motif studies to suggest that medieval readers could be informed enough to become a "resistant reader" (196) to perceive the flaws in romance narratives. For instance, the flaws of misogynist perceptions embedded in the rape discourse and the dubious attitudes toward adultery. Although the suggestion that medieval readers share the awareness of resisting the norm is plausible, the ability to exercise different perspectives requires an enabling environment, tolerant culture, and progressive education. The textual environment around Middle English romance might provide opportunities for nonnormative thoughts, but there is still room to explore the extent to which readers can envision resistance and eventually enact their discontent.

Resistance to Love develops a clear argument on the love ethos unique to Middle English romance to suggest that love as an issue is intersected with external factors of gender, race, religion, and society. Romance characters, and their medieval readers alike, are compelled to resist first in anticipation of attaining a desirable result in the end; or they choose to resist before compromising their autonomy too early. Piercy demonstrates her insights in a succession of productive close readings and powerful analyses, meandering through an intricate map of modern theories and medieval texts. The book certainly contributes a new dimension to the scholarship of romance and brings the texts in the past closer to modern readers, and it also exemplifies the value of close reading to young scholars.

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