

assembles from late Antiquity to the Renaissance, the term *mediocris* seems consistently to indicate a socio-economic category—that is, middling between noble/rich and unfree/poor. While I don't disagree with his hypothesis that these patterns of categorization "laid the basis for the later emergence of the modern concept of the middle class" (360), his argumentation is weak.

In sum, this is a book that cannot be recommended for its historical arguments and has severe limitation even as a data base for the history of ideas. Readers of *MFN* will be especially disappointed on the absence of intellectual engagement with gender issues in discussions of these three promising topics.

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Desmond, Marilyn. *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*. Medieval Cultures 8. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Pp. xiii+296.

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In Marilyn Desmond's work, the title, *Reading Dido*, is the key to her thesis, as the gerund emphasizes reading as an active, rather than passive, engagement with a text. Her study of medieval representations of Dido is organized as a series of medieval confrontations with this potentially dangerous and powerful character. But her aim is more ambitious than simply to catalogue the various Didos created by her medieval readers; Desmond also investigates how the cultural authority of the *Aeneid* creates a particular sort of reader. Backed by a powerful tradition of cultural authority, the *Aeneid* of the university has historically addressed an elite masculine reader who bonds homosocially both with the individual male characters of the text and with the masculine ethos it evokes. As Desmond points out, it is this tradition of reading the *Aeneid* like a man that profoundly shapes the interpretation of Dido through the Middle Ages. Yet Desmond does not suggest that this ideal reader remains impervious to the forces of history, and so she is careful to detail the historical position of each of the Dido-readers, beginning with an awareness of the rhetorical posture each assumes when approaching Dido: "Ovid attempts to read *Aeneid* 4 as Dido might; Augustine, for instance, reads Dido as a boy; Chaucer reads Dido as a loveless male narrator of classical stories; Caxton reads Dido as a compiler and a printer as much as a translator . . ." (19). With its focus on the interaction between the *Aeneid* and its medieval readers, Desmond's book is as much about the construction of the reader of Dido as about the Dido who is constructed by that reader.

Of course, the Virgilian Dido is only one of many Didos which circulated in the Middle Ages, a phenomenon which Desmond comprehensively surveys in the first chapters, "Virgil's Dido in the Historical Context." It is the conflict between the accounts of the historical Dido, Desmond's term for the Dido celebrated in pre-Virgilian accounts for her chastity, and the Virgilian Dido, famous, as all those tutored in the Western canon know, for her "fole amour," which directs the writings of most of the Dido-reader/writers in the Middle Ages. Medieval commentators either devoted themselves to one of the models or attempted to reconcile the contradictions between the two. Yet, although the two models are opposed in their depiction of Dido's fate, both nevertheless serve in discourses on female sexuality in the Middle Ages as positive or negative models depending on the perspective of the reader in question.

Ovid's *Heroides* 7 added yet another Dido to the gallery, as it introduced the Dido of exemplary pathos. Yet the most interesting aspect of this Dido, as Desmond points out, is how she functions as a reader, specifically a reader of Virgil. Through Dido, Ovid invites his reader to read doubly, as the allusions to the *Aeneid* within *Heroides* 7 lead the reader to recall Virgil's account and compare the two. In this way, Ovid sets the model for re-reading the *Aeneid* as re-vision of the *Aeneid*. Through his impersonation of Dido the female reader, Ovid also initiates two rhetorical moves which will influence much medieval commentary: first, he decontextualizes Dido, by extracting but her voice from the *Aeneid*. More important, perhaps, is Ovid's characterization of the female reader as a resisting reader, demonstrated through Dido's critical response to the imperial edicts Aeneas appeals to: "Ovid's *Heroides* 7 depends on a discernibly different concept of *femina*, a definition of woman as a skeptical reader of language and meaning" (43).

The remaining chapters in the book discuss Dido in other important medieval incarnations, Desmond's theoretical method focusing on how discourses of gender, power and empire shape Dido's characterization. Chapter 2 explores the allegorical tradition of Augustine, Fulgentius and the commentary attributed to Bernardus Silvestris. This tradition reads Dido as a symbol of libidinous desire, enticing perhaps but morally dangerous nevertheless. Desmond also demonstrates the powerful pull of the erotic Dido as she demonstrates that even those commentators who referred to the historical Dido (Servius and John of Salisbury) perpetuated the reading of Dido as libido.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the Dido of courtly romance, as she appears in Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*, the *Roman d'Eneas*, and the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. Here, Desmond argues that Dido is fashioned in terms appropriate for the concerns of twelfth-century feudal society. Basing her analysis on the work of Gayle Rubin and Georges Duby regarding the circulation of women in

patriarchal cultures, Desmond views the courtly Dido as an exemplar of the dangers of female sexuality unrestrained by male authorities; without husband, father or lord to direct her circulation as an object of exchange between men, "Dido's sexuality has disrupted the standard circulation of land and women in terms of feudal ideology" (114). Yet, this dangerous Dido is given much more emphasis and allowed to be more of an independent subject than she is in Virgil's text, a phenomenon which, Desmond writes, produces a "hybrid discourse," which gives space and character to women even as it subsumes their interests to those of dominant males in the narrative.

Chapter 5 covers the Dido of Caxton's *Eneydos* and Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*. While Caxton claims to be largely interested in the noble line of Aeneas, his attempt to include the majority of the variant accounts of Dido has the effect of taking up fully one third of the *Eneydos*, so that Dido effectively displaces Aeneas as the center of attention. Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*, a sixteenth-century translation of and commentary on the *Aeneid*, employs epideictic rhetoric and its radical separation of praise and blame to produce an *Aeneid* which banishes the moral ambiguities of Virgil's text and also the sympathy for Dido found in Chaucer's texts. Through his comments appearing at the beginnings of each book and judicious translation of morally ambiguous terms, Douglas renders a moralistic *Aeneid*, which makes Aeneas an unquestionable hero and Dido the victim of two deaths—the first her own lust, and the second, her inevitable suicide resulting from indulgence in that lust.

Chaucer (Chapter 4) and Christine de Pizan (Chapter 6) depart the most from the model of the masculine medieval reader, though to different ends. While Chaucer still reads Dido like a man, his confrontation with her is less secure than, say, Gavin Douglas's, as the act of reading Dido stages a confrontation with masculinity itself. In setting up this argument, Desmond uses film theory to explore the dynamics of gendered viewing in the ekphrasis of *The House of Fame*. The masculinization of the reader is signaled at the beginning of *House of Fame* I with the description of the portrait of Venus "Naked fletynge in a see." Desmond parallels this scene with the child's visual acknowledgment of sexual difference: "this initial image of Venus authorizes the authorial role of the dreamer, whose masculinity is reaffirmed by the visual evidence of female castration as well as the heterosexual erotic of his readerly responses to the female as object of desire" (139-140). Yet the narrator's visual mastery of the naked Venus is not entirely secure, for when he approaches the material of Book 4, references to the act of viewing cease, a circumstance which, according to Desmond, reveals that "[f]or this dreamer/narrator, reading Dido challenges any easy categories of understanding and any distinct boundaries between text and image" (145). The Dido who so unsettles the narrator here is Ovid's Dido, sympathetic as the victim of betrayal. Yet, when describing Dido's death, the narrator recovers

himself and returns to a narration of the Virgilian Dido, reminding the reader that one should “excuse Eneas/Fullyche of his grete traspas,” since his betrayal came at divine behest. Desmond interprets the narrator’s difficulties with Dido as symptomatic of his own difficult relationship to masculinity; he is masculinity “at the margins” (151).

For Christine, reading Dido means confronting her own identity as a woman within a patriarchal world. Rather than reading like a man, Christine actually adopts Dido as “a textual construction of her authorial self” (223), according to Desmond. As a woman who, when widowed, must function like a man, building cities and ordering civilization, Dido’s biography mirrors that of Christine, who wrote that when widowed, she became “En home naturel parfaict,” a change necessitated “par Fortune.” The parallel between these two women leads Christine to use Dido as a vehicle for her “self-fashioning,” a term Desmond borrows from Stephen Greenblatt but with a difference: while Greenblatt’s discussion of self-fashioning focuses on men who fashioned themselves on opposition to an Other, women such as Christine must fashion themselves while already occupying the category of Other. Desmond argues that through the rhetorical devices of *antiphrasis* and *inventio*, Christine recuperates Dido in order to fashion a feminist space for herself and for other women. Recognizing that the diversity of commentary about Dido could liberate rather than simply constrict a writer, Christine invokes the theoretical trope of antiphrasis to “talk back” to the many Didos of the classical tradition and medieval commentaries. Thus, rather than condemning Dido’s love as foolish or deadly, Christine praises her constancy in love. Christine also alters some details of the Virgilian tradition to emphasize Dido’s agency in her choices. No longer the dupe of fate, her passions, or Aeneas, Christine’s Dido is a clever, resourceful, and purposeful woman who makes difficult choices in perilous circumstances.

Desmond’s book is useful for its attention to the “politics of reading,” the relationship between medieval writers and authoritative models, and the variety of medieval discourses about women which in turn produced a dizzying array of Didos, each inflected to further the poetical or moral aims of her reader/writers. Yet, this is not a book for those seeking a simple survey of the medieval representations of Dido, as it assumes that the reader is familiar with many types of critical theory; reader-response theory, feminist film theory, psychoanalytic theory, visual theory, and cultural criticism are just a few of those put to use, usually interwoven with one another. While Desmond’s facility with these various approaches is admirable, the multiplicity of theories sometimes works more to obscure than clarify her points. Desmond has clearly lived with these texts a long time and wants to say everything that can be said about them. But

she needs to trust her argument. Her central concern with the relationship between medieval readers and the Carthaginian queen is by itself elegant, illuminating, and often fascinating. That's all a reader asks.

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Frakes, Jerold C. *Brides and Doom: Gender, Property, and Power in Medieval German Women's Epic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

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Frakes offers close readings and a feminist-Marxist analysis of three thirteenth-century texts: the *Nibelungenlied*, *Diu Klage*, and *Kudrun*. This narrative trio is found in a manuscript from the fifteenth century known as the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* (now in the Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna). The texts in question have been classified by scholars as Middle High German "heroic" literature, despite the fact that the texts focus to a large degree on female characters, and that the original titles—if extant—acknowledge women as the main characters. Frakes agrees with Inga Wild's (1979) perception of the thematic unity of these texts, an argument based on their placement in the Ambraser manuscript and on the ethical antithesis to the male Dietrich heroes of the surrounding texts presented by these women-centered texts. To describe them, Frakes borrows Wild's term "Frauenepos" (women's epic). In the closing chapter, Frakes parallels this term to the genre "Frauenroman" (women's novel), giving a valuable critique of the term's application and significance.

Frakes also focuses on conventional scholarship which defined the genre of heroic poetry and then molded its understanding of these three texts to fit the concept. As a feminist analysis, Frakes' "conscious political project" (5) does not attempt to read, from a twentieth-century perspective, the female characters as proto-feminists, nor to attribute an "original" meaning to the texts. Rather, he addresses gender relations as an element in the political formation of the societies represented in the narratives, and simultaneously points to the ideological attempts of modern masculinist critics to overlook or deny the sexual politics inherent in the texts. Frakes' analysis is furthermore a Marxist one in that he posits property to be the basis for power, and argues that the narrative gender relationships are articulated through property control; the *Nibelungenlied* is then a tale of how men rob women of their property, *Diu Klage* supports this view by defining the guilty (Hagen) vs. the innocent (Kriemhild) in the Nibelungen epos, and *Kudrun* is a tale of women as the property of men.