



Smith, Susan L., *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. Pp. xv, 294. 48 figs.

Susan Smith's doctoral dissertation of 1978, "'To Women's Wives I Fell': The Power of Women Topos and the Development of Medieval Secular Art,"¹ has had an enormous impact on the field of art history.² Smith was the first to explore in depth a major theme of medieval and early modern culture, and numerous scholars have eagerly anticipated the revision of her dissertation, which was recently published under the title *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature*. This book explores the Power of Women topos, which Smith defines as "the representational practice of bringing at least two, but usually more, well known figures from the Bible, ancient history or romance to exemplify a cluster of interrelated themes that include the wiles of women, the power of love, and the trials of marriage" (2). The purpose of this theme, which was extremely popular in both art and literature, was to demonstrate that even the strongest and wisest of men, such as Samson and Aristotle, were powerless to resist women. As Smith observes, this topos expressed a vision of the world upside down and was "in violation of every officially sanctioned norm of female behavior that demanded the submission of the female to the male" (2). In the first half of the book, Smith examines the theme in literature from its rise in the patristic period to its demise in the early modern; in the second half she investigates its treatment in the visual arts from its first appearance in the twelfth century through its denouement in the sixteenth. Her focus is on the period of its greatest popularity, from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, and her primary goal is to demonstrate that the topos was a site for contested interpretations, depending on whether its context was secular or ecclesiastic, private or public, and whether it was created or used by a man or a woman.

The book's introduction outlines Smith's aims and theoretical approach. The first chapter discusses the multivocal expression of the topos in literature and explores its underpinnings, the rhetorical device of argumentation based on example. Indeed, as Smith demonstrates, the belief that an argument is more persuasive if it is buttressed by a series of examples from history was a commonly held conception in both ancient and medieval times. Smith notes that the Power of Women topos was invented by the patristic fathers to advocate celibacy, but with the rise of a lay society in the twelfth century, it was reinterpreted by court poets who held dear the ideals of chivalry and courtly love. Just as preachers adopted the vernacular in part to co-opt the "new and potentially transgressive pluralism of thought and expression," so did church artists use the Power of Women theme (15). The topos appears largely in the

marginal areas of Gothic cathedrals and manuscripts, where, Smith argues, they were intended, much like contemporary sermons, as “act[s] of appropriation and interpretation intended to represent those images and the discourses to which they are related as marginal, secondary, and contingent in relation to the works at its center and subject to interpretation in accordance with it” (18).

Smith’s second chapter examines the topos as a site for contested interpretations in the later middle ages and the third focuses on the most popular example of the topos, the story of the philosopher Aristotle, who submitted to Phyllis’ desire to ride him like a horse. Whereas the church interpreted this theme as showing that women are evil and manipulative, others saw it as “championing the cause of true love” (67). Dissenting from the church’s viewpoint, some recognized that women as well as men were touched by the power of love and female characters such as Leëce, in Jehan le Fèvre’s *Livre de Leëce* of c. 1370, were able to argue that not all women were malicious, that it is better to marry than to have adulterous relationships, and that men who fell under the domination of women have only themselves to blame (50). Although most texts were written by men for men, a female author, Christine de Pizan, contested the Power of Women theme, insisting that women are hurt by deceitful lovers, and that male writers perpetuate false notions about women. Christine argues that if women wrote the books, their interpretations would differ from those of men (64). One preacher, in fact, confirmed that gender affected one’s reaction to the Power of Women topos. In the thirteenth century, Jacques de Vitry complained: “Video quod mulieres ille indignatur mihi, eo quod loquor de mulierum malitiis” [I see that these women are cross with me because I speak of the evil qualities of women] (81).

The fourth chapter is the first devoted to art. It focuses on depictions of the story of Aristotle, which first appear in the mid-fourteenth century. Smith explores how visual representations of the tale differ from written ones. Because the story was generally not depicted visually as a series of narrative scenes, but was rather shown as a single motif of a mounted rider, Smith assumes that viewers would associate it with the idea of riding as a metaphor for sexual intercourse and with the figurative transformation of a sinful man into a beast. Since it was believed that men should dominate women, a depiction of a man who has lost his upright position, bends over so that a woman may mount him, and accepts the bridle that cedes control to the woman forms a transgressive image, which might operate in a subversive manner, particularly for female viewers. Smith also demonstrated that the mounted Aristotle was associated with related iconographic themes, such as Luxuria and the amorous hunt, but was not generally dependent on a specific text. In the next chapter, Smith explores a series of fourteenth-century images that demonstrate not only their artists’ inventiveness, but also the theme’s ability to embody a range of interpretations. The final chapter investigates the depiction of the Power of Women topos in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

This book is well researched, clearly organized, and convincing in its complex interpretation of the topos. It will be useful to scholars in a broad range of disciplines. I take issue with only a few minor points. First, Smith writes of the “translation . . . from verbal to visual” (105) and argues that the theme appeared first in written texts and then in visual form. I remain unconvinced that we should grant priority to the textual versions when so much of the visual evidence is lost. Also, Smith places primary emphasis on the artist rather than the patron. For example, she concludes that “the image of the mounted Aristotle is turned loose, as it were, in a form in which it could be appropriated by individual artists who could propose their own interpretations of the tale” (110-11) and argues that “artists set their own agendas” (138). Such statements privilege the artist over the patron, theological advisor, assistant craftsmen, and others who formed the collaborative teams that produced cultural artifacts.

Smith’s study of the Power of Women topos is a shining example of the “New Art History.”³ It unmasks the images’ ideological stance and focuses on noncanonical works, the so-called “minor arts” of tapestry, embroidery and secular boxes. In this way, Smith broadens the art historical discussion to include a wider range of artifacts. She also assumes that literature and art are interrelated, since both participate in the same cultural milieu. Scholars in the field of comparative literature will feel at home with this book, but art historians may regret that there are so few illustrations, only forty-eight, all half-tones. Smith’s revised text is quite sophisticated theoretically. She adopts an intervisual analysis, invoking the notion that artists refer to earlier works of the same theme. Smith’s feminist analysis also takes into account reception theory; she postulates a multiplicity of viewer responses. She views the Power of Women topos as participating in a debate within medieval society, as a contested site for examining the role of women and the power of love. She is less interested in exploring their social or historical context than in viewing these works in their relation to other cultural products; at times I wished for a more passionate feminist voice. But those of us who still possess the tattered remains of the photocopy of Smith’s dissertation will gladly purchase this volume, and those who were unaware of the dissertation will welcome this book as a necessary addition to their library.

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¹Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1978.

² Among those who cite it are Ellen S. Jacobowitz and Stephanie Loeb Stepanek, *The Prints of Lucas van Leyden and His Contemporaries* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1983); Elise Lawton Smith, *The paintings of Lucas van Leyden* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992); H. Diane Russell and Bernadine Barnes, *Eva/Ave: Woman in*

⁹ See Pamela Sheingorn, "Medieval Drama Studies and the New Art History," *Medievalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 18, 143-162 for a recent analysis of the New Art History.



Wiethaus, Ulrike, *Ecstatic Transformation: Transpersonal Psychology in the Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

Ulrike Wiethaus' ambitious goal is to make medieval mysticism intellectually accessible to a modern western audience (2). To do this, she draws analogies between modern psychologies open to the existence and significance of "altered states of consciousness" and the accounts of ecstasies and visions within Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The study is divided into two parts, the first focusing on ecstasy and the second on visions. After an introduction in which Wiethaus outlines her method and makes some preliminary claims about the context for Mechthild's book, Chapter 2 describes Mechthild's understanding of ecstasy, particularly as found in Book 1 of *The Flowing Light*. This is followed by two chapters describing contemporary psychological accounts of ecstasy, in particular the work of humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow and Roberto Assagioli and the psychotherapeutic approaches of Arthur Deikman and Claudio Naranjo. Wiethaus suggests both the explanatory power of these models for understanding and making accessible Mechthild's work and subjects the contemporary psychologies to critique from the perspective of Mechthild's work. Chapter 5 again returns to Mechthild, describing the visions found in Book 2 of *The Flowing Light*. Wiethaus closes her book by arguing that contemporary psychophysiological approaches to visionary phenomena offer fruitful—although crucially limited—modes of access to medieval experience.

This brief synopsis merely suggests the wide array of topics on which Wiethaus touches in her brief book. She clearly knows *The Flowing Light* well, and offers insightful readings of important aspects of the text. Any of a number of mystical texts would have served for Wiethaus' project, yet I find her most compelling when she focuses on the particularities of Mechthild's book. Although on first reading I was troubled by Wiethaus' assertion that "self-actualization" and "altered states of consciousness" could be taken as "approximate twentieth-century equivalents" for medieval conceptions of *deificatio*, *visio*, *alienatio mentis/fruítio/raptus*, she is careful throughout her study to note both points of analogy and *disanalogy*, reiterating the divide between Mechthild's text and twentieth-century assumptions. Most crucially, Wiethaus keeps firmly in