

Carol Falvo Heffernan, *The Phoenix at the Fountain: Images of Women and Eternity in Lactantius's 'Carman de Ave Phoenixe' and the Old English 'Phoenix'* (Newark, DE: Univ. of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated Univ. Presses, 1988)

Carol Falvo Heffernan claims to offer a "radically new approach" to the two phoenix poems in Latin and Old English by drawing upon anthropological and scientific evidence to argue for a pattern of imagery based on female initiation rites. The sequence she outlines in the poems of images of menstruation, conception, and birth are linked to initiation rituals through the figure of the phoenix, a bird traditionally associated with birth and renewal. Heffernan explains this linkage by speculating that Lactantius, an African and pagan by birth, would have been familiar with female initiation ceremonies in Africa. Considering the wealth of parallels between the imagery of these rituals and his poem, Heffernan stops just short of saying that "Lactantius had these rites in mind as he composed" his poem (17).

In the Old English adaptation of Lactantius's poem, Heffernan finds the anthropological parallels transformed into allegory. Here, she makes her most radical interpretive statement by reading the Old English poem as an allegory not only of Christ's Resurrection but of Mary's coming of age and the conception of Christ. The phoenix becomes a figure of Mary and the Church in this new Christian allegorical framework. Without denying the Christological emphasis of the poem, Heffernan maintains that the Old English poet makes the bird do "double duty," representing both Christ and Mary in the poem, to interweave the themes of Incarnation and Resurrection.

Fascinating as the anthropological evidence and the thesis are, the approach suffers from serious problems of methodology. While the anthropological evidence Heffernan brings to the poem is new, her approach is not radical or new. It relies on unquestioned assumptions which anthropology today calls into question. For example, she justifies her use of modern data on African initiation rites for women by citing Cleanth Brooks on "the essential unifying humanity that transcends the differences that separate individuals of various cultures" (17). She also cites uncritically the studies of nineteenth-century anthropologists on these ceremonies. Such methodological claims ignore the critiques of Michel Foucault, and more recently, of Clifford Geertz, which would call her approach into question. In spite of Heffernan's admirable attempt to bring anthropology to the discussion of literature, her approach does not venture beyond the anthropology of Mircea Eliade and Sir James Frazer whom she cites among her sources.

A second problem with Heffernan's approach is her use of translations for all citations from the Latin and Old English poems. Considering the crucial role that translation itself plays in the interpretation of texts, Heffernan's readings of the two poems are limited by her reliance on these translations. More attention to the language of the two texts would have strengthened her case. One of the glaring linguistic problems which works against her analysis is the use of the masculine pronoun in reference to the phoenix, which Heffernan argues is feminine. Heffernan merely explains this problem away, saying it would be an "unnecessary clarification" of the phoenix's function as a feminine symbol. This type of argument is unconvincing, particularly considering the tenuous connection between much of her anthropological evidence and the poem.

Heffernan never explains why the homiletic commentary at the end of the Old English poem elaborates on the Christological allegory but never on the Mariological

one. She is right in cautioning that the poet might have been aware of the Mariological implications even if he did not make them explicit in his gloss (103). Yet she maintains that the Anglo-Saxon poet "was cognizant of the feminine dimension of his poem even though he is silent about it—perhaps even suppresses it—in the explicit second half of the poem" (18). Too much depends on her fashioning of the poet's intentions without further investigation of the evidence of this suppression or the reasons for it.

Heffernan's case for the feminine imagery of the poem never claims to be a feminist one, and it is not. Its insistence on a feminine mythology underlying both phoenix poems is pressed into the service of a universal "theme of transcendence" (35). Few would argue against her claim that the subject of the poem is transcendence, yet the poem never quite sustains the feminine mythology which supposedly inspires it, nor does this mythology illuminate the poem, as Heffernan claims it does. Instead, most of this study is occupied with identifying distant allusions to the mythology in the poems without exploring the implications of this mythology for a reading of them. Heffernan is more interested in how "the awe of woman pervades the medieval imagination", (126) a project which tends to gloss over the complexities and problems it encounters.

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Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. pp. xiv + 718. \$35.

With the publication of *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia has become the newest critical voice to capture the popular imagination, or so the media has been telling me over the last several months. Indeed, Paglia's analysis of what we might call the dark side of Western culture—its powerful sexuality, decadence, and its construction of personality (what Paglia calls sexual personae)—is daring and provocative. And provocation is the name of the game. Paglia's method uses "a form of sensationalism," by which she means "to flesh out the intellect with emotion and to induce a wide range of emotion from the reader". Reading *Sexual Personae*, I admit to being duly provoked but also disappointed: the media's new darling turns out to be relentlessly conservative, and aggressively anti-feminist. The book's reception, however, makes it essential reading for all feminists including medievalists, precisely because Paglia fails to engage in feminist debate and, in a gesture that is tiresomely familiar in studies that claim to have the key to Western culture, silences the medieval period altogether.

In many respects, *Sexual Personae* is an old-fashioned book, and a lengthy one (it covers some 718 pages and a second volume is promised). Conducted in the manner of early twentieth-century *belles lettres*, the thesis is appropriately *ad feminam*, though not feminist. Paglia seeks to appease her Fathers (Freud, Fraser, Harold Bloom) with an interpretation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses that she sees as central to Western art and literature. In its attempt to marry a unified aesthetics to immorality or decadence, *Sexual Personae* is premised on the binarism of sex. Since it is in the nature of binary structures to be opposed to one another, "great" art enacts a struggle between Romanticism and Decadence, paganism and Christianity, woman and man, nature and culture, mother and son, sex and violence, and so forth. This essentialism is used to prove why culture is destined to be the preserve of the male: culture gives men what they lack.

Art, culture, literature (Paglia is reckless in her use of the terms) represent a male