

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

desire to appropriate, by whatever means, what he fears, lacks, and/or desires most—the female, the mother, nature in all her awesome beauty, terror, and cruelty. The psychic drama of the artist, usually male, is projected into his work in the form of sexual personae. Fascinated by what he cannot be, the Western artist is in essence driven by the androgynous—and Paglia presents us with an idiosyncratic taxonomy of androgynes in her whistle-stop survey of the literary giants. In spite of the subtitle, the only female writers included are Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson, who apparently conquer their biological sex with hermaphrodite personae.

The manipulation of violence and sexuality by the male artist in patriarchal societies is indeed a fascinating topic, but the conclusions *Sexual Personae* offers are limited by Paglia's conservatism. Her attempt to master a couple of millenia of thought (roughly from the Ancients to the Moderns) is achieved at the expense of ignoring historical and socio-cultural difference. Western culture up to 1900 fits neatly into this first volume (the second, naturally, will address the twentieth century), and the omissions are tellingly familiar. The Middle Ages are dismissed so as to privilege the Renaissance—Dante, oddly enough, forms an index of comparison for remarks about later writers but fails to merit specific discussion; Europe really means England and France, with the conventional gestures towards Italy (Spain gets a tired comment about Goya, and Germany is included largely by virtue of yes, you guessed it, Goethe); America gets the last three chapters.

It would be unrealistic to expect comprehensiveness in a book with such a broad canvas. Nonetheless, Paglia's attempt to reverse the preeminence of Rousseau over Sade in Western thought is not as new as she claims. The analysis of Sade would have benefitted, for example, from Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*: but Carter's subject is women—and women are what Paglia is anxious to avoid. *Sexual Personae*, as a result, repackages old goods (old men?), and employs the style of the advertising slogan with tedious regularity. As with the slogan, assertion is substituted for argument ("Attraction is repulsion, necessity—bondage," for example), a technique which would be refreshing had Paglia unpacked her assumptions a few times. But Paglia's style is that of the shopping mall while her substance is the universe of psychic sexual symbols (Freud! Jung! the anxiety of influence!). In the end, *Sexual Personae* is just another example of the marketing ploy that I like to think of as the capital(ism) of criticism. Hence, its popular success.

It would be a mistake to ignore this success. As the capital of 1990s sexual politics, *Sexual Personae* makes disturbing reading. The book succeeds because it tells conservative men what they want to hear—that men create culture. This is a convenient platitude, but its modicum of truth is bought at the expense of sacrificing the complex interrelationship of art with sexuality, gender, history, society, culture, and *women*. Such are the tactics of a reactionary politics that allies capitalism and patriarchy. In fact, neither capitalism nor patriarchy are central concerns of *Sexual Personae* but both inform Paglia's work and its reception. The relationship between capitalism and art is, according to Paglia, "one of the greatest male accomplishments in the history of culture." And, in a breathtaking denial of feminism and political process, she says that patriarchy liberated her while capitalism gave her the time to write this book. Such a wholesale reinstatement of patriarchy, built on a vociferous rejection of feminism, is, I fear, a sign of things to come.

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