



# Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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Gender, Science, and the Natural World:  
Essays on Medieval Literature  
from the 2020 Gender and  
Medieval Studies Conference



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**A Journal of Gender and Sexuality**

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careful attention to the intersectional nature of oppression faced by marginalized and non-normative bodies in the premodern Byzantine world, Betancourt makes a timely and substantial intervention in the broader field of medieval studies. Readers who are not familiar with Byzantine social, political, or theological history will find this volume accessible and insightful. The meticulous and extensive primary source citations make this book invaluable for those interested in expanding their understanding of marginalized Byzantine figures. Betancourt's lively prose renders the book utterly readable, making it an excellent addition to both undergraduate and graduate curricula across the fields of religious studies, history, and women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

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*The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, by Holly A. Crocker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. 360. ISBN: 9780812251418.

How can this broken world be made whole again? Holly Crocker's *The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare* re-values the "feminine" as universal and the "weak" as powerful and offers an important and persuasive counter-history of ethics. In doing so, she shows how stories told about women long ago can offer hope for how we think about ethics today. Historically, women could not have virtue if "virtue" was defined solely by the kinds of actions women couldn't take. As Crocker writes, "the classical formulation of *virtus*, with its emphasis on empowered, public action, rendered women's excellences largely invisible" (6). Here, she imagines the power of vulnerability in a way that genuinely offers an alternative to the doctrine of the self-created, independent individual, and the hope that this alternative has existed at least since the Middle Ages.

Crocker's reading of the medieval and early modern periods bears witness to the decline of ethical systems governed by the idea of virtue and the rise of systems governed by rules, neither having much room for the kinds of actions available to women. The ancient heroic virtues often have violent consequences—the Trojan War burnishes its heroes' glory and makes of Criseyde an object of exchange, and later

authors could see that. The new inward self has violent consequences as well—*Hamlet* “invents” interiority but Ophelia goes mad. Women are particularly open to being acted upon by violence, but also capable of exercising what Crocker refers to as “material virtue”: endurance, kindness, empathy, dignity, patience, the ability to yield, and compromise. These are neither static forms nor instances of passivity, although these virtues mark a highly circumscribed field of activity. A culture fixated on individualism cannot see these virtues’ importance, however. Crocker’s is not an essentializing claim: those who find themselves in positions of vulnerability all have the potential to participate in material virtue. The severe limitations placed upon women’s actions have just meant that women are more likely to have no choice in the matter. Only a very few get to be heroes, and to exhibit the virtues lauded in epic and song. Crocker’s material virtues are rooted in experiences of finitude and mortality belonging to any and all embodied beings.

*The Matter of Virtue* is that rare book that coheres *as* a book. It has a provable argument that advances in a series of stages, and while chapters can (and should!) be excerpted for teaching, it works best as an effective and powerful whole. Chronology is not the governing principle—Crocker begins with *Hamlet* on Gertrude’s virtue and ends with the *Legend of Good Women* and Chaucer’s choices around representing the suffering of women. The book is divided into parts, and the parts into chapters, each of which explores clusters of meaning that have formed around certain fictional women, and how different authors represent these women’s capacity for material virtue.

Part 1 wrestles with the figure of Criseyde/Cressida, whose story reflects the limitations of heroic ethics and the price paid by the many for the heroism of some. This is not the usual trio of Chaucer, Henryson, and Shakespeare; Crocker engages with Lydgate at length, as well as Renaissance responses to the story of Criseyde. A chorus of Tudor poets, including Gascoigne, Greene, Howell, Edwards, and Whetstone, are heard from, because the history of ideas is not created solely by those who have the most fame in posterity. Part 2 addresses Custance, the protagonist of Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale,” and other female characters whose roles in their respective narratives might seem painfully passive to their modern readers. Here, Crocker is most fully theorizing her way out of the active/passive binary. Part 3 narrows the broad geographical territory covered by Custance and those like her to examine the dominance/ submission tension inside marriage, so often the arena where female virtue is exercised. This chapter is organized around the figure of the “shrew,” although Crocker begins with

Griselda, the wife so put-upon that she prompts a call from Chaucer's Clerk for future women to refuse to suffer as she had. From Griselda and her plentiful premodern kin, Crocker turns to the more conventional marriage discourse around Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize*. The book's substantive concluding chapter examines Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, a brilliant reading of that undervalued work.

This summary barely does justice to the sheer number of texts that contribute to the book's argument. Full of a remarkably playful erudition, *The Matter of Virtue* skips merrily between writings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, pausing to give both "major" and "minor" works due consideration. Criseyde, Custance, and Griselda: these are not necessarily the figures one thinks of when imagining the representation of virtuousness, and this, Crocker convincingly demonstrates, is to the detriment of how we think about virtue. If we want to know what the gender binary has wrought, here it is, in how these women's stories are discounted in accounts of ethical life. One new direction for scholarship coming out of this book is to push at the binary *as such* and to ask more about how it is constituted so that the category "Woman" functions as it does in relation to virtue. Another is to ask how the ethics of vulnerability described in this book might be particularly available to medieval culture, fixated as it was on Christ's suffering and death as an action for the good of humankind. Crocker sees the inherent strength in humility, vulnerability, and openness; for some medieval mystics, such positions were *particularly* available to those who submitted themselves to the power of the divine. Part of what is so laudable about *The Matter of Virtue* is how much new work it renders possible by opening up fresh avenues of inquiry.

Holly Crocker's career has itself been an embodiment of what it means to do generous, feminist, discipline-building scholarly work. This book deserves to be read not only by feminist scholars of pre- and early modernity, but by all those who find themselves hoping for a world that values cooperation and kindness over the brutal and toxic qualities that the neoliberal individualist so often exhibits. After all, the writers Crocker describes did not set out to be "feminist," a word not invented for centuries after their deaths, just as they did not set out to be philosophers challenging Aristotelian tradition of ethical thought. Rather, the material ethics that their narratives depicted arose out of the challenges of crafting narratives with female protagonists at their centers. It is hard to write about femininity without disparagement, given that language and narrative both seem designed to dismiss



and lessen women. But, as Crocker writes, “when men write female characters, new forms of heroism emerge from the challenges these female characters face. That most men share something with these female characters—namely, their precarity—should prompt us to rethink what counts as virtue, and how ethical action transpires” (267–68). This line of thought makes Crocker’s achievement seem modest—to a certain sort of reader, she has *merely* discovered a set of tropes that the authors of narratives about women tend to use. However, what this book’s ambition offers is a true revolution in thought, based on re-imagining what constitutes ethical action.

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Christine de Pizan, “*The God of Love’s Letter*” and “*The Tale of the Rose*,” edited and translated by Thelma S. Fenster and Christine Reno. *The Other Voices in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series*, 79. New York and Toronto: Iter Press, 2021. Pp. 209. ISBN: 9781649590060, 9781649590077.

With this superb new Middle French edition and facing-page English translation of two late medieval verse narratives, Christine de Pizan makes another appearance in the prestigious “Other Voices in Early Modern Europe” series. These two poems were previously translated by Fenster for a 1990 Brill edition, now out of print, that also included translations by Mary Carpenter Epler of Hoccleve’s “Letter of Cupid” and Sewell’s “Proclamation of Cupid.” In this new edition by Thelma Fenster and Christine Reno, Christine’s poems are freshly translated into unrhymed verse; the translations are engaging and clear, conveying both Christine’s light touch and her serious engagement with neo-Aristotelian theory and Christian doctrine on female nature. (The earlier translations are not to be faulted, however; comparison of selected passages suggests that both translations convey Christine’s thinking with clarity and wit.) The poems’ new edition works with all extant manuscripts of the poems—four for the *Epistre* and two for the *Dit*. Christine’s revisions (thought to be in her hand or under her direction) suggest that she was actively engaged in the poems’ production over the years.