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The Medieval Chastity Belt: A Myth-Making Process (review)

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THE MEDIEVAL CHASTITY BELT: A MYTH-MAKING PROCESS. By Albrecht Classen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. 222. \$69.95.

In popular opinion the medieval chastity belt is believed to be a (metal) girdle jealous husbands or crusading knights attached with padlocks to their wives' private parts in order to guard the woman's honor and lock away her sexual organs from potential lovers. The chastity belt is therefore considered to be a device that gave peace of mind to the absent husband, while at the same time it was a means to control and reign in a woman's otherwise uncontrollable lustful nature. Specimens of iron chastity belts can be found in a number of European museums; an image in Conrad Kyser's *Bellifortis* from 1405 is generally taken to be the earliest depiction of a chastity belt, while written references attesting to their use occur in medieval literature dating back as far as the twelfth century.

Beyond any doubt, there is a plethora of evidence that can be produced in order to argue in favor of the historical reality of the medieval chastity belt, and scholars have done just that in the past. Conversely, Albrecht Classen argues in his recent monograph that the chastity belt is nothing more than a myth that has been propagated throughout the centuries. To prove his point, Classen meticulously retraces the making of this myth by carefully reading the relevant secondary literature dealing with the chastity belt literature that dates from the eighteenth century onward. The study of these secondary sources is followed by close analyses of the actual medieval and early modern texts and illustrations that deal with the chastity belt—a corpus that turns out to be surprisingly small. Classen's investigation of the primary sources makes a convincing case in favor of an unfortunately often forgotten basic rule of scholarship that stipulates that it is the actual sources that need to be consulted in order to make claims about the literature and culture of the Middle Ages.

The book opens with a discussion of the modern-day belief—or rather the widespread myth—that medieval people firmly believed in the flat-earth theory, a claim that can easily be discredited by consulting actual medieval sources attesting to the opposite. Classen argues that despite clear scientific evidence to the contrary, “the myth of medieval people having been entirely convinced of the flat-earth theory has been a dominant feature in common modern notions about the Middle Ages” (p. 9). Such misguided notions about the Middle Ages tend to be deeply ingrained in the mindset of the general population and many lay writers, but, as Classen documents, they quite frequently also inform the work of scholarly authors. This can be attributed to many causes. Classen suggests, for example, that modern opinions about the Middle Ages often “draw from a mythical concept of the past which relies on a false interpretation, or on fake objects, most likely in order to pride themselves of our scientific, social, and political progress” (p. 10). The monograph on the making of the myth of the chastity belt is concerned with one such “false object.” Inspired by the obvious myth of the medieval flat-earth theory, Classen successfully exposes the chastity belt as just such a myth. The sources he investigates range from modern websites, popular novels, and reference works to lexica and encyclopedias written by authors of fiction, by cultural historians, anthropologists, or scholars of sexuality, technology, and art history.

Classen does an admirable job of collecting and tracing the pertinent sources that contributed to the myth of the medieval chastity belt. Most impressive are his close readings and comparisons of the leading entries in lexica and encyclopedias that are concerned with the topic, which allow him to unveil the major role these entries played in propagating this particular myth. He concludes that “once an

idea has entered into such a reference work, it becomes impervious to critical examination and unchangeably insists on representing a factual phenomenon over many editions" (pp. 15–16). In addition to uncovering what can only be called haphazard scholarship, Classen presents excellent analyses of the written medieval sources that are said to refer to chastity belts, including Marie de France's twelfth-century *lais* "Guigemar" and "Eliduc," Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir Dit* (1363–65), and Dietrich von Gleze's *Der Borte* (ca. 1266–96), as well as the late medieval and early modern illustrations and historical sources that allegedly depict chastity belts and describe their use and origin. It would have been helpful for the reader to see more illustrations of the actual woodcuts Classen discusses in such great detail. This especially applies to Kyser's critical first depiction of the chastity belt.

Classen not only truly succeeds in debunking the myth of the medieval chastity belt, his study can also serve as a welcome tool for teachers who are all too weary of their students' indiscriminate use of online and printed resources. Classen impressively uncovers how erroneous information and allegedly historical facts are copied by lay authors and scholars alike without actually revisiting the actual primary sources that should be the ultimate basis for all scholarly undertakings.

Classen's methodology and results are sound and truly commendable. Unfortunately the same cannot be said about their actual presentation in the book, as the text is plagued by mistakes that at times interfere with comprehension. There are two page breaks that leave sentences and thoughts incomplete as they break off mid-sentence (pp. 28–29 and 29–30), causing the reader to wonder how much information has been lost. Moreover, there are missing translations from Latin (p. 37), French (p. 91), Italian (p. 92), while there are other translations that are not clearly marked as such by parentheses or quotation marks (pp. 33 and 104); there are inconsistencies in spelling, for example, of Melchior Schedel's bookplates, *ex libris* (pp. 42, 56, 104, and 105); and an error in the title of the exhibition catalogue *100.000 Jahre Sex* which twice appears as *1000.000 Jahre Sex* in the main text (p. 69), though it is correct in the English translation, the footnote, and the bibliography. There are also some regrettable problems of logic, for example, in the discussion of the third stage of myth making, which, according to Classen, is represented by Eric John Dingwall's 1923 monograph *The Girdle of Chastity: A Fascinating History of Chastity Belts* (stage one being Alcide Bonneau [1836–1904] and stage two being Dr. Caufeynon [1904 and 1905]). Classen states that "Dingwall's monograph, the only one of its kind published in the twentieth century, but still ignored by Bonneau, was first printed by Divan in Paris in 1923 . . ." (p. 34). This statement is confusing for two reasons; firstly, according to the bibliography, Dr. Caufeynon's *La ceinture de chasteté* was published in 1905 and thus, like Dingwall's study, in the twentieth century. Secondly, it was not possible for Bonneau to use Dingwall's work, since Bonneau had died in 1904, nineteen years before Dingwall's book was first published. Classen correctly presents the dependency of the two works later in the chapter, when he states that Bonneau was Dingwall's source (p. 37). These oversights are especially regrettable as they unfortunately distract the reader from an otherwise meticulously presented argument and a fascinating study of the myth that is the medieval chastity belt.

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