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*Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: the Ethics of Erotic
Violence* (review)

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OID'S ART AND THE WIFE OF BATH: THE ETHICS OF EROTIC VIOLENCE. By Marilyn Desmond. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii + 206. 37 illustrations. \$20.95.

Marilynn Desmond's *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: the Ethics of Erotic Violence* opens with an unlikely discussion of sadomasochism, but her real interest in this book is wife-beating. Like this opening sentence, she surprises her readers as she grounds her analysis of rhetorical traditions, erotic discourses, and Chaucerian texts, because "The scandal generated by S/M effectively obscures the everyday violences that work to organize gender and sexuality" (p. 4). Rather than make a catalogue of literary beatings and their medieval justifications, or a series of complaints about the matter, Desmond historicizes this violence to show how it is produced as the signifier of heterosexual desire in the late classical and medieval West.

Invoking a variety of feminist theories of sexuality and sexual practices, Desmond's book rethinks the connections among sexual violence, pleasure, and the Middle Ages. Conventional medieval scenarios show up in modern sadomasochistic and early twentieth-century psychoanalytic writings on identity production. Similarly within the analytic writings of both Sigmund and Anna Freud, stories set in the Middle Ages—classic romance narratives of knights, rescue, and danger—ground sexual fantasy and work to determine sexual identity and pleasure. With these theoretical issues foregrounded, Desmond opens up a history of Ovidian reading and "the paradoxes evident in medieval representations of erotic violence" (p. 6). Desmond's book contends that "The representation of violence in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* marks the culmination of a textual tradition that developed specifically around the medieval reception of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*" (p. 7).

Desmond delineates how erotic violence is woven through the texts she treats by their relation to Ovid's *Ars*. What is essentially a misreading of the historically specific use of colonial masculinity in Ovid's text gets replicated throughout a tradition of medieval citation, appropriation, and re-creation. Desmond shows how this handbook "acknowledges the performative basis of sexuality as it instructs the reader—designated as male in the first two books and female in the third book—in gestures, mythology, attitudes, postures, and rhetoric that enable one to perform amor" (p. 36). As an "ars," Ovid's text presents itself as a rhetoric manual or school text—didactic and authoritative—and Desmond historicizes the production of this text in original and compelling ways to show how it is situated in terms of marriage legislation and colonial conquest and occupation. The irony of Ovid's text "depends entirely on contemporary Roman politics" and particularly "the imperial sexualities of Augustan Rome" (p. 36), in which a moral ideology of marriage and reproduction were legislated in the interests of empire. Further, "the heterosexual script as it develops in the course of the *Ars* emerges from the structure of imperialism so that the *praeceptor's* discourse of sexual domination and conquest mimics the discourses of Roman coloniality" (p. 36). Lacking the proper historical context to read the *Ars* as irony, medieval readers and redactors took it to be an "ethical" treatise on amatory love and seduction.

I found Desmond's second chapter on Ovid to be one of the most provocative and compelling in the book. According to Desmond, in Ovid's parody of Augustus' Roman marital mores, neither wives nor slaves (male or female) were the proper object of desire and hence amatory strategy and love poetry in Ovid's Rome. Matrons were protected from violence by law in a way that suggests they were not subject to the desires out of which erotic violence emerged. Slaves were likewise available for sex without such cultivation. Desmond thus links heterosexual erotics to conquest and colonial masculinity by reading the situations that the *Ars*

uses to teach seduction in this cultural context. The *praeceptor* of the *Ars* teaches men how the spectacles of the theater, arena, and civic triumph offer models of Roman masculinity and dominance for erotic pursuit (pp. 39–41).

The *Ars*' teaching for women is even more interesting, particularly for a reader like the Wife of Bath. The third book of the *Ars* addresses women specifically and teaches them how to gain power over the men who seek them by means of the methods sketched in books 1 and 2. One of the implications of Desmond's study for later literature emerges from her specification about the women addressed by Ovid's *Ars*. Reading historical and cultural scholarship on Ovid's Rome, Desmond designates the liminal state of the women who were the erotic objects of male desire. By excluding slaves, matrons, and prostitutes, we find freewomen or captives are the likely objects of such imperial desires. The implications of Desmond's argument are striking. Here she implicitly accounts for the class difference or socially hierarchical relations of lover and beloved, which we might consider for their importance to later texts like Andreas Capellanus's *De arte honesti amandi* over which readers have struggled. Another question raised Desmond's study raises concerns the education for this female reader—would these women be likely able to read the Latin text that addresses them, and, if not, to whom is its parodic didacticism directed? Since a similar question plagues the Wife of Bath's use of texts, we might wonder here if female literacy or illiteracy is already problematized, acknowledged, or ignored in Ovid.

Ovid's exile had the effect of bequeathing the Middle Ages unglossed and un-commented upon texts of the *Ars*; his were not central texts in the classical or early medieval curriculum. But in the twelfth century, Ovid's works were appropriated for use by an increasingly literate society with the expansion of the schools, where the *Ars amatoria* gets read straightforwardly as a non-ironic and ethical handbook on love. Reading the academic prologues and introductions to Ovid, the *accessus ad auctores*, she sees his work positioned as a set of instructions about love and situated as ethical philosophy. Letters are also one of the primary means of the erotic behavior scripted by Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, and Desmond reads the letters of Abelard and Heloise in terms of the rhetorical identities that Ovid's "script" offers them as "literary figures identified by the nature of their love" (p. 70) and that makes them legible as such.

Her final three chapters reread the *Roman de la rose*, the Wife of Bath's Prologue, and Christine's *Epistre au dieu d'amours* in terms of the handbook pedagogy offered by the *Ars*. Desmond presents the five French translations, and particularly the prose *Art d'amours* (an adaptation of all three books of Ovid), as the "almost certain" source for Chaucer's and Christine's knowledge of Ovid's *Ars* (p. 76). The *Roman* replicates the information of the *Ars*, using the material addressed to women in book 3 to create *La Vieille*, the central source for the Wife herself. This chapter, in particular, tackles a rather large set of issues in its reading of the *Rose*, dealing as it does with both Guillaume and Jean sections of the poem. Desmond writes, "Precisely because Guillaume's text was recognizable as an Ovidian project structured according to the *Ars amatoria*, Jean de Meun could look to the *Ars* as a means of generating his sequel to the allegory of the Rose. Thus the enclosure of the *Ars amatoria* forms the poetic crux of the conjoined *Rose* texts" (p. 79). Desmond thus effectively de-ironizes the *Roman*, especially Jean's continuation. In fact, much of what appears as the questionable presentation of a cleric in the *Rose* (e.g., the advice of *la Vieille*) comes from the third book of Ovid's *Ars*, which according to Desmond "parodies ancient sex manuals" (p. 109). Thus, Desmond could say that the irony many detect in the *Rose* is not Jean's or Guillaume's per

se but Ovid's breaking through the medieval text. One notable omission in her discussion is Peter Allen's *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose* (1992). Allen presents a rather different picture of the reception of Ovid, suggesting that book 3 was rarely translated in the French vernacular versions of the *Ars* and was usually accompanied by the anti-feminist *Remedia amoris* (p. 56). Desmond and Allen do not make entirely different textual claims about the French translations, but they do present these texts in divergent ways that make for a very different impression of the French *Ars amatoria*. While a reference technically appears on p. 180 n. 34, it remains surprising that Desmond does not engage with Allen's work.

Chapter 5 focuses on Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Mistaken for an author within the *Canterbury Tales* and throughout its reception history, the Wife speaks not from female "experience" but, according to Desmond, from Ovid's *Ars* mediated through the *Roman de la rose* and thirteenth-century French translations of Ovid. Acknowledging the familiarity with which the Wife is treated, Desmond returns her to her textual origins. In her final full chapter, Desmond treats Christine's response to the *Ars* in the form of her critique of the *Roman* in the letters that have become part of the *Querelle de la rose*. In ways distinct from her contemporary, the Wife of Bath, Christine "develops a critical discourse and even a critical subjectivity. . . . from which she could develop a language of female embodiment as a form of authority" (p. 164).

Besides the rich and compelling argument it offers, the book is also handsomely produced. Its 37 illustrations nicely situate its points regarding the visual programs of the manuscripts. Desmond's facility with Latin, French, and Middle English and the full translations she offers in the text with the original language quotations make it a book that is easy to use and more convincing in its readings. Informative, compelling, and well-presented, Desmond's is an excellent study of the *Ars amatoria* in center of the medieval literary tradition and as the grounding text of one of its most important fictional female speaking subjects, the Wife of Bath. I have little to quibble about with this book. The one weakness of the study lies with its theoretical underpinning, and thus where it seeks to connect its historicist gestures to the interests of contemporary feminism and sexuality studies. This is a noble and, I think, important gesture, and she should be commended for reminding contemporary readers of the long history of gender debate and constructivity in the West. However, the means by which this gesture is carried out cause some unintentional problems. Desmond's chapters begin with provocative epigraphs from theorists of many stripes: post-colonialist, psychoanalytic, and culturalist (to name the most important). While offering possibilities for productive analysis and engagement, these theorists are invoked mostly because they raise the currency and current capital of her thematic and historicist interest in violence and eroticism. Rarely, if ever, does she engage fully with such work. The epigraphs merely attract one's attention; they sustain no argument or analysis. For instance, where the book relies upon the historical claim that masculinity, violence, and heteroeroticism are produced at a particular moment in the late antique period and are imported wholesale into the Middle Ages, the book also thus imports the idea that after that moment violence is eroticized in particular ways. However, much of the psychoanalytic theory so lightly invoked instead suggests the opposite: that there is an inherent aggressivity and thus violence in any erotic relationship and, further, that such aggressivity is managed (and even sublimated) through courtly tactics. There is thus more at stake in the "relatedness" of violence and the erotic than the traditional kind of historicist narrative given here suggests. It

does not appear enough to say merely that they “are connected,” as Desmond so often does. Similarly a recurrent allusion to the Lacanian and Derridean writings on the “Seminar on the Purloined Letter” animate Desmond’s discourse about letter writing in these texts, but neglects the issues regarding the “itinerary of the signifier” that the purloined letter traces. And indeed it should not. It is unclear that this theoretical debate has any place in this book or could add to its argument. Instead, Desmond deploys the rhetoric of the “letter arriving at its destination” (or not) for stylistic effect.

If this might be seen as theoretical opportunity lost, there is also outright error. The book consistently misuses the term “commodity fetish,” by which it understands an intense interest in luxury items and material goods by one character or text, yet which fails to grasp (or even be aware of) the specific meaning of Marx’s term or, for that matter, Freud’s important understanding of fetishism. While there is no great loss in the misuse, it does reveal an attempt to capitalize on a theoretical sophistication the book does not have. It is unfortunate because the colonialist reading of Ovid and its medieval uses and translation is excellent, and it need not try to borrow capital it cannot repay. Desmond’s strength, and the book’s, is in the rhetorical tradition that emerges from the medieval schoolroom use of Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* and its later vernacular translations. And it is as such a reception history of Ovid that this book is a success and should be read.

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PHILOSOPHICAL CHAUCER: LOVE, SEX, AND AGENCY IN THE CANTERBURY TALES.

By Mark Miller. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. x + 289. \$75.

CHAUCER’S AGENTS: CAUSE AND REPRESENTATION IN CHAUCERIAN NARRATIVE. By Carolyn Van Dyke. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005. Pp. 371. \$63.50.

Subjectivity and its companion term agency have been privileged terms in literary criticism since the eighties, coming to the fore in the criticism of medieval literary texts not only through the paradigmatic work of Marshall Leicester, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Lee Patterson, but also in the debate between medievalists and early modernists over the origins of the self-conscious subject set in motion by David Aers’s “A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists.” There Aers argues that the early modernist claim that Hamlet is the first “modern” subject, one divided and self-reflexive, is belied by the medieval evidence, beginning most notably with Augustine’s *Confessions*. Despite Aers’s call for a richer understanding of the contours of medieval subjectivity, the term itself, often either linked with or seen as identical with agency, has until recently received little detailed attention. Mark Miller’s *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* and Carolyn Van Dyke’s *Chaucer’s Agents: Chaucer and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* make a major contribution, not simply to the study of Chaucer, but to literary criticism more generally by delving deeply into the meanings of the term agency as those concepts are revealed in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Mark Miller’s elegant meditation on agency focuses on representations of love, sex, and gender in Chaucer’s work, especially in *The Canterbury Tales*, because these three areas crystallize Chaucer’s interest in the nature of agency, autonomy, and practical reason and his commitment to a poetic understanding of the “dialectical structure of thought and desire” (p. 2). Central to Miller’s discussion is