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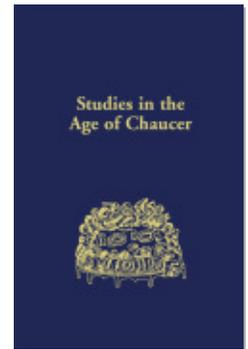
The Medieval Medea by Ruth Morse (review)

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the vernacular. The battle over truth-claims between the paternal and maternal tongue are ultimately conservative, since they simply reverse, and do not question, the structures of institutional dominion of Latin literacy. Thus historicized, the question of the “female patron of vernacularity” has paradox to offer.

The contributors, especially Madeline H. Caviness, John Carmi Parsons, and Ralph Hanna III, attempt to grapple with the contradictions of a too easy and unhistoricized assumption of agency for the “female patron,” but they stop short of articulating a crucial theoretical question posed by the volume: How does patronage function as a set of textual and material relations long inflected by gender? Readers who wish to follow through with this question will find suggestive parallels in Helen Solterer’s study of the “female master” in her book *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Christine de Pizan, a “female master” and a “female patron,” can instruct us about the risks to contemporary medieval scholars of leaving unaddressed the contradictions of agency embedded in the duality of the “female patron.” Christine insisted on calling herself the son (*le fils*) of her father. In so doing she marks the homosociality of genealogy and patronage while at the same time resisting it through disclosure. Such tactics raise questions for the readers of this volume who read it in the “corporate” academy of the late 1990s, in which patronage rules as government and other funding for feminist and queer scholarship and pedagogy becomes increasingly scarce and contested.

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RUTH MORSE. *The Medieval Medea*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996.
Pp. xvi, 267. \$72.00.

Ruth Morse is a meticulous scholar, and in *The Medieval Medea* she has produced a study worthy of her thoroughness. Hers is a sweeping subject: as she establishes elaborately, the story of Jason and the Argonauts is the earliest secular quest narrative recorded in Western literature. Over it looms the inescapable presence of Medea, constantly (as Morse

has it) infusing the tale with a ubiquitous dark vitality even on those few occasions when Jason is center stage alone.

In format the book has an almost old-fashioned feel, scarcely uncomfortable but not much encountered these days when, like as not, ideology is pressed upon us more frequently than scholarship. Morse unfolds her study chronologically, piecing together the beginnings of the Jason legend from what we find remaining in Pindar, Euripides, and Apollonius of Rhodes among the Greeks, and then tracing its development at the hands of Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca. In this process of “handing down,” Medea became not only a single character but a topos as well: the eponym for the woman possessed by passion and driven by it to terrifying excesses of every kind. Also along the way a great deal of what passed for history was transferred, and Morse guides us here through Dares and Dictys and Benoît de Sainte-Maure (the Argonauts and their Colchian cargo reach modernity via Troy) to Guido delle Colonne (whose *Historia Destructionis Troiae* “was the direct source of so many medieval interpretations” [p. 92]) to Christine de Pizan in the *Mutacion de Fortune*. What Morse is intent upon showing is how “what we might categorize as mythographical material [becomes] the highest-prestige medieval historiography” (p. 102). Nor is she interested in doing so without commenting sharply here, as in her earlier study *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Reality and Representation* (1991), on the tendency of contemporary historians to misread the past according to their own conventions. What Morse offers instead (indeed it might be the core concept of the book) is a Heisenbergian caveat about the dangers of believing what you can see to measure, and an appropriate antidote: to follow the bloom back to the root, to focus especially on the context.

Since a great deal of the context Morse must examine is provided by Ovid, she devotes two chapters (out of five) to a careful scrutiny of the Roman poet and his subsequent Christian adaptors. In these we find how, variously, the narratives of Jason and Medea could be allegorized (Morse’s primary concern is with the *Ovide Moralisé* and the *Ovidius Moralizatus*) and transformed by Ovid himself into the exotic woman from the East, possessed of occult power and tempestuous passions whose story, altogether horrifying, is nonetheless denied any apprehension as tragedy. Rather, as Morse argues, from Ovid’s Medea comes a cautionary icon for the Middle Ages and beyond. This figure, *mutatis mutandis*, stalks further through the writings of Chrétien de Troyes, Raoul Lefevre, and, more briefly in the final chapter, entitled “Some

Medieval Medeas," of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, and ultimately Christine de Pizan.

That the final chapter of Morse's book should thus provide the primary locus for the greatest number of exclusively medieval authors, as well as the title of the work itself, is both telling and puzzling. For if one were to have to say what *The Medieval Medea* is about, lacking the title as a clue, it seems doubtful many would call it a book about the Middle Ages. Indeed, in the seven-page conclusion entitled "Silence, Exile and Cunning Intelligence," which serves as a coda to the rest, Morse herself remarks, "This book takes its place in a succession of studies of these legends which have been the purview of classicists and anthropologists, for none of whom have the Middle Ages been of prime interest" (p. 240). And indeed, Morse has it right. Much of the old-fashioned texture of *The Medieval Medea* comes suddenly clear when, following this directive, Morse's study is placed in line with ethno-literary works of the last century. Here, as there, we find great reach and sweep, but little time to squander on any single medieval author save Lefevre, on whom Morse writes with wisdom and authority. The result of Morse's choice of models will be, predictably, that puzzlement about the title, and a vague sense among medievalists when the final page is turned of disappointment rather difficult to pin down. But it is a sentiment to be resisted, as a second reading, or a third, rewardingly establishes. True to her claim that to apprehend something truly we must place it fully in context, Morse delivers a Medea feminists should encounter fresh, and strive again to know.

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JACQUELINE MURRAY and KONRAD EISENBICHLER, eds. *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. xxviii, 311. \$21.95 paper.

In a properly run Republic of Letters, special orders of merit would be reserved for conference organizers. They must serve first as some combination of budget travel agent, social worker, dietician, and hunt-master. They must then edit a volume of conference papers in which