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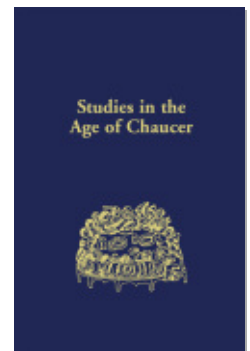
Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry by Theresa Tinkle (review)

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THERESA TINKLE. *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry*. *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture Series*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. xiii, 294. \$39.50.

This is an excellent book: clear and intelligent, innovative and well-balanced. Basing her analysis on formidable and penetrating research into mythographic writings, Theresa Tinkle destroys the all too long entrenched belief that medieval writing on Venus and Cupid, as love deities, planetary powers, and personifications of passion, can be adequately interpreted in terms of authoritative reifications like the “two loves” or “courtly love.” No such simple and hegemonic duality as the two loves emerges from the material, whether iconographical, poetic, or philosophical, usually cited to sanction such interpretations. Classical and medieval iconology was multiple, flexible, inconsistent, and historically subject to change and development. Tinkle’s account of Alberic brings out clearly not only the “chaotic polysemy” (p. 61) created by his encyclopedism, analogous to the multiplicity and multivalence discernible in other twelfth-century discourses, but also the sense of “the sequentiality of the creation of meanings” (p. 61), and of the discrete realms of different kinds of meaning, discernible in his writing. The discovery of multiple readings emerges from this book as not merely a twentieth-century taste; it seems for many of the great medieval mythographers a consequence of their efforts to codify ancient poetry and myth-making. They are, in Tinkle’s title for chapter 2, “semiotic nomads.” It proves impossible to make a distinction, as she says on page 32, “between problematic ‘literary’ and pellucid ‘source’ texts.”

Chapter 2 offers an overview of the tradition of mythographic writing as “one of the very few discourses on sexuality that span the entire Middle Ages” (p. 43), and then outlines the classical sources for the medieval tradition. There follow succinct analyses of several key mythographers, including Augustine, Fulgentius, and Isidore, considered as writers responding from the perspectives of different Christian eras to the challenge of interpreting and evaluating pagan mythology and fiction for Christian culture. Some mythographers, including Bernardus Silvestris, Boccaccio, and Christine de Pizan (that trio of names alone surely amply indicates the absence of a monolithic inherited tradition) are poets. Conversely both the authors of medieval poetry and also on occasion their scribes, commentators, or imitators may follow mytho-

graphic systems of interpretation slavishly. Some poets in their handling of these personifications of human love limit and determine their readers' interpretations; others—notably but not exclusively Chaucer—transfer the task or authority of interpretation to their readers.

Venus, as the supposed focus of an age-old dilemma at the very heart of human desire, conceived as masculine desire, has dominated scholarly writing; gender difference and the evolution of Cupid/Amor has engaged less academic attention. Tinkle clearsightedly corrects the distortion introduced into much mainstream iconography, literary history, and criticism not only by the overexclusive modern embrace of the “two loves” concept, which obscures the importance of other dichotomies like the contest between Ganymede and Helen (and she writes well on Alain de Lille), but also by the bias among modern scholars toward locating conflict in opposed images of the female (the two Venuses as Eve and Mary) and ignoring the history and problematic potentialities of the figure of Cupido, “desire.”

Tinkle writes perceptively (pp. 67–70) of the mixture of careful analysis and confusion in Boccaccio's encyclopedic efforts to catalogue classical mythology in the *Genealogia*, and she lays welcome emphasis on the central significance of his Promethean self-image as poet—and as modern, vernacular poet in a Christian era—in the proems to that work. Tinkle discusses Christine de Pizan's *Epistre d'Othéa* as a programmatically contemporary didactic essay that uses parallels between ancient and modern chivalry as commentary on her own society and nation. Christine, Tinkle argues, is innovative both in the precision with which she turns mythography to social commentary (conservative in implication) and also in simultaneously translating what Tinkle calls “clerkly mythography” (p. 73) into the vernacular and attributing it to a female divinity as authority figure. While this is true, it passes over Christine's audacious and drastic transformation of the rich poetic multiplicity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into a far more rigid and scholarly genre: retrospectively turning it into something like the mythographies and moralizations derived from it. Given Tinkle's developing agenda of tracing the birth of a poetics focused on sensual pleasure, a poetics of desire, it is a loss that she could not give more attention to this particular metamorphosis.

Tinkle's critical analysis weaves together issues of gender, hermeneutics, politics, and poetics with an assured hand, and the analysis of medieval literature is enlivened and illuminated by references forward to

later writers as diverse as Mark Twain, Keats, and Adrienne Rich. At the center of her book is an exploration of Chaucer's poetry and its power to suggest to the reader affinities between apparently disparate ideals of sexuality, class ideology, and poetry. Chapter 6 includes a persuasive argument of the centrality of the astrological references to the challenge to chauvinist exegesis in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Tinkle shows Chaucer in *The House of Fame* and *The Knight's Tale* inheriting a nexus of images and implications and creating a new nexus of dynamic and dialectic recombination. His juxtaposition of mythographic and romance conventions challenges the assumptions of both and raises questions about human sensuality and chivalric myth that offer implicit social critique rather than a simple verdict against class-based carnality or "courtly love." Tinkle's study provides new perspectives on issues that have been authoritatively raised during the last fifteen years by critics such as Patterson and Nolan. Late medieval poets' transformations of Latin mythographic *auctoritas* into vernacular freedom and accessibility parallels, as she points out, tensions associated with Wycliffite translation (she might have taken more account of *The Legend of Good Women* in this context), Lydgate, and the author of the *Assembly of Gods* precisely because, compared with Chaucer's more subtle play with multiple traditions, they often deploy the authoritative systems begotten by mythography, reveal points of stress where Latin hermeneutics meet vernacular poetry, and foreground questions of interpretation in typically fifteenth-century fashion.

In her last chapter Tinkle sees Chaucer's *Troilus* celebrating Venus, with her potential to symbolize both sensuality and affinities with cosmic order, as the muse for a new kind of English poetry, reaching back beyond French models to Ovid as originary *auctor* for a poetics of sensuality dignified with classicizing and intellectual *gravitas*. She also proposes Chaucer as the originator of the fifteenth-century transformation of Cupid into a figure for antimisogynist discussion of masculine sexual aggression. It might be profitable to investigate the presence of similar trends in French fourteenth-century literature, but the precise lines of influence in this particular development of courtly writing are hard at present to trace.

Tinkle writes pleasantly, authoritatively, succinctly, and with wit. It is hard to give more than a summary impression of this complex book and its union of scholarship and critical argument. It is an impressive and exhilarating achievement. The title is refreshingly apt. Titular plu-

realizations are a fashionable precaution for the ideologically circumspect author; here Theresa Tinkle convincingly displays the multiple, discordant, and creatively chaotic nature of her subjects and the deep historical roots of their conflicted meanings, while in no way dissolving, but on the contrary strengthening, her readers' awareness of the profundity of medieval poets' engagement with the figures of Venus and Cupid and the philosophical importance of the poetic structures centered upon them.

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DAVID WILLIAMS. *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. Montreal and Kingston; London and Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv, 392. \$55.00.

David Williams's challenging study of the monster in medieval thought and literature goes well beyond the catalog-style discussion that seems to be a typical feature of books and articles in this subject area. Williams offers a framework of understanding for monstrosity, contending that in medieval cosmology, and specifically in Pseudo-Dionysian thought, the idea of the monster has a centrality to the scheme of things that postmedievales have to recover. The monster is not *contra naturam*, but rather *extra naturam*. Williams quotes Isidore's *Etymologiae* 11.3.1–2: "Varro says that portents are things which seem to have been born contrary to nature, but in truth, they are not born contrary to nature, because they exist by the divine will, since the Creator's will is the nature of everything created. . . ." The monstrous can be seen to have a major function within the scheme of things because of a series of moves Pseudo-Dionysius offers in his cognitive system that effectively constitute a deformed discourse, or the proper interpretation of sacred symbols. Pseudo-Dionysius, readers of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and related treatises will remember, offers the negative path to God: what God is not is easier to consider than what He is. Operationally this negation yields to paradoxical utterances and the failure to make any positive predication about God; this failure, how-