

Introduction

In spite of the tremendous influence woman is known to have exerted upon numerous facets of medieval civilization, until now her role has not been the subject of a special concerted effort using critical perspectives gained from multidisciplinary approaches. The papers in this volume represent an attempt to develop and to demonstrate the use of such critical perspectives. Before turning to these methodological considerations, let us briefly outline aspects of her role stressed in this work.

Taken as a whole, the six essays collected in this volume paint a diversified portrait of the medieval woman. They cover these topics: (1) the factors influencing the span of her life and the value placed upon her existence by society; (2) the interaction of those sociological, historical, anthropological, and literary factors which determined her possible functions in illiterate as well as in literate medieval narrative communities and the literary representations corresponding to these functions; (3) the complex relational possibilities emerging out of various ambivalent thematic, motivic, and structural relationships of her role in the courtly romance; (4) the idealized personal as well as supra-personal feminine image capable of resolving the apparent and potentially conflicting impulses pulling the artist in bifarious directions of antiquity and Christianity; (5) a study of France's first professional woman of letters who was aware that written history has been masculine history, convinced that women are able to play an important role in the

body politic of France, and adamant in her demand that women learn to adapt to ever-changing circumstances; (6) the typological portrayal of woman in idealized as well as in caricatured depictions with correspondence to the vertical structure of the hierarchical ladder, studded with rungs positioned at unequal intervals so as to discourage upward mobility, and to the horizontal structure of the manuscript page which discriminated unmistakably between that which was depicted in the center and in the marginalia. The essays corroborate Karl D. Uitti's perceptive portrayal of the women in Chrétien's romances: "What a picture of the Lady one might derive from juxtaposing and comparing Énide, Guenevere, Soredamor, Fénice, Laudine, Lunete, Blanche-fleur, and others! The creation is overwhelming in its nuance, its sophistication, and in its sympathy; and, of course, it is profoundly literary." *

With regard to methodology, historical, economic, sociological, anthropological, and literary data as well as material taken from the visual arts have been consulted for clues as to how woman's role was conceived and depicted by medieval society. Conversely, the typologies emerging out of such traditional depictions—seen through their evolution into conceptual and normative constructs—are examined in turn for evidence as to how they function within works of art and, upon acquiring an independent role, shape successive works. The existence of such constructs, e.g., the Lady or the ideal Lover, which depend upon and correspond to the level of expectation of medieval intellectual communities (i.e., the medieval perceivers responding to works of art) made for possible irony and satire within these works of art. Moreover, the emergence of such constructs, either acknowledged implicitly within works of art or formulated explicitly in treatises like Andreas Capellanus's *De amore libri tres*,** prepared the way for the evolution and the creation of new genres, genres which naturally followed the realiza-

* *Story, Myth, and Celebration in Old French Narrative Poetry 1050-1200* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 219.

** Cf. also *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, ed. F. X. Newman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1967).

tion that particular overly systematized conceptual constructs like "courtly love" had outrun their course and deserved to be earmarked for the shelves of history.

Amour courtois and *chevalerie* as understood in the High Middle Ages were recognized by some thinkers in the late Middle Ages as inapplicable to that society in view of a new consciousness and new constructs corresponding to it. Christine de Pizan, for instance, regards these older constructs as cumbersome strictures actually inimical to the healthy functioning of the body politic. Irony and an ironic perception of woman's role can enter the realm of literature, Franz H. Bäuml informs us, upon the transition from oral to written literature. Because literature is endowed with a different function in illiterate and in literate medieval societies, the particular function of woman is to a large extent a function of the level of literacy of a narrative community and that community's place in the given social stratification. The development of the courtly romance—whose celebration of *chevalerie*, the *clergie*, and the Lady reaches a high point with Chrétien according to Karl Uitti—hinges on irony and on the ambiguous narrator.*

In the visual arts a similar process unfolds before our eyes. Illuminations occupying the center of manuscript pages accord generally in tone and attitude with the text they illustrate; such ocular guidelines or strictures appear to have lost their binding force as they shifted off-center, that is, were located in the marginalia and the *bas-de-page* which began to be filled out after 1250. Here, in a new physical position, the conventional idealized depictions are questioned, declared invalid, and turned around; impulses for the creation of new genres in art given by the bizarre inhabitants of the marginalia reveal an irreverence and intellectual detachment from the text on the part of the artists. The literary outgrowth of such forms is discussed, for instance, in Klaus Lazarowicz's *Verkehrte Welt*; ** the progeny

* See also Dennis H. Green, "Irony and Medieval Romance," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 6 (1970): 49-64.

** *Vorstudien zu einer Geschichte der deutschen Satire*, Hermaea, Germanistische Forschungen, no. 15 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963).

of the grotesques and drôleries is found in Hieronymus Bosch and grotesque *emblemata* of the Renaissance. The methodological considerations of such cross-fertilization and its implications are evident in the majority of the volume's essays, but are developed for literature particularly by Franz Bäuml and for the visual arts by Philippe Verdier.

Taken individually, the papers disclose the multifarious facets of the role of woman, many of which have as yet been examined only tangentially.

David Herlihy presents evidence related to the life span of woman in classical antiquity, in the early Middle Ages, as well as in the High and late Middle Ages. He establishes an inverse relationship between her longevity and her favorable numerical ratio over men on the one hand, and the value society placed on her on the other. He correlates, moreover, the reversal in life expectancies of women during the High and late Middle Ages with other changes taking place in the fabric of medieval society: the rise of the cities, wars which decimated the numbers of men, the deterioration of the social position of woman, various religious movements (*Frauenbewegungen*), and other transformations. In following woman from the cradle to the tomb from classical antiquity (and its dearth of women) to the late Middle Ages (with a higher number of women than men), David Herlihy has advanced our knowledge in a field where objective evidence is sparse and difficult to come by.

By linking textual analysis with historical, cultural, sociological, and anthropological determinants of the medieval work of art, Franz H. Bäuml demonstrates that the role accorded to woman in a particular medieval literary text is contingent upon these very factors. Kriemhild, the "heroine" of the *Nibelungenlied*, is the vehicle by which he demonstrates the concurrent and interdependent transformations taking place in the narrative community, a community which progresses from "functional illiteracy" to the level of a disadvantaged illiterate subgroup in a literate medieval society, and finally to the literate community. In the context of the heroic oral epic Kriemhild's actions illustrate the mores and cultural values of her community, but in the written *Nibelungenlied* she is transformed into a villainess

whose actions are inimical and disruptive to society. The recognition that changes in the representation of women (and of men) as well as changes in the attitude of the narrator, are direct functions of historical, sociological, anthropological, and cultural factors, is gaining more and more ground—in no small part because of Bäuml's efforts.

Although he draws on extra-textual data, Gerard J. Brault favors the analysis of the thematic and motivic texture of the works he considers, so as to allow the multifaceted and multiassociational contours of Isolt's and Guenevere's complex roles to emerge more fully. His choice of the ring motif in Thomas's *Tristan* allows an analysis of convergent motif, theme, and structure. The motif is shown to assume an organic function in relationship to the theme of sadness and the circular narrative structure; more importantly for this investigation, the ring motif establishes Isolt's primary function as magical healer and idealized lover. A similar motivic analysis of the comb, the well, and the carol in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* reveals the highly religious nature of Guenevere's role in this romance. The exploration of symbolic ambivalences associated with these motifs discloses the artistry of narration, realistic detail in depiction, and great complexity in the portrayal of the fictional role of the heroine. Last but not least, it opens an avenue of access to the perception of woman by men, by revealing to us clerical fantasies about women at that time. Such fantasies about woman and attitudes toward her are ultimately reflected in the bifarious conception of woman as Eve/Ave, chattel/Lady. In time these conceptions, fantasies, and attitudes crystallized into various poetic myths and constructs. As such, they played a demonstrable function in the literary genres which emerged around them, the courtly lyric and the pastourelle for instance, which ceased to function organically in the society only when the older poetic constructs dissolved or gave way to others more in accord with new aesthetic sensibilities, historical necessities, sociological factors, and other forces.

Aldo S. Bernardo begins his presentation with the divergent medieval conception of woman as the "creature of extremes," a source of sin on the one hand, but a source of

perfection on the other. The resolution of this dualism translated by Petrarch into a dualism between the classical impulse and Christianity—Mt. Parnassus and Mt. Calvary—constitutes the difficulty but also the great poetic resource of the *Canzoniere*. Bernardo addresses himself to this transformation of a personal encounter into a supra-personal poetic construct by tracing the evolution of Laura's image through five forms of the *Canzoniere*. Having become integrated into the poet's very being, Laura functions as rejuvenating, spiritualizing poetic mainspring; the potential contradictions utilized in the casting of each form of the poems intersect in her image and in doing so, bestow depth and conviction on it. Laura evolves into a poetic construct capable of generating a *rapprochement* between Mt. Parnassus and Mt. Calvary, capable of bridging—though not fully reconciling—the two extremes, which, in the final form of the *Canzoniere*, are no longer found to be mutually exclusive.

Christine de Pizan has been hailed as an early herald of the feminist movement; for this claim Charity Cannon Willard finds little substantiation in Christine's *opera*. Nevertheless, while choosing the traditional medieval form of the *enseignement* or the *chastisement*, she does so with a new purpose in mind: to correct the distorted satires which men have directed against woman, satires such as are found in the *Roman de la Rose*. The reasons for which Christine deserves to be known are many; for our purposes a brief listing will have to do. Her awareness that literature has in the main been written from the masculine perspective is as astute as it is surprising. What does her reliance on prose rather than verse betoken, if not a conscious departure from the well-established didactic mold of the past and a readiness to participate in the forging of a new tool? Not only was she gifted with a fine scent for the winds of change blowing within the hierarchical social structures, but she was also able to draw the far-reaching conclusion that such currents were an enjoinder to women to adapt intelligently to the inevitable changes of the times by seeking to educate themselves as best they could. In contrast to the traditional political, social, and cultural interests a woman of her station can be expected to have had, stands her abiding con-

cern for the internal difficulties of the body politic of France and the place of women within this organism. Last but not least among her achievements is her analysis of the position women actually held in society and the possible positions they could secure. Christine's work carries the imprint of the Middle Ages but reveals also the emergence of new forms characteristic of later times. While she employs the traditional didactic instrument designed to keep woman in her place, Christine de-emphasizes the traditional restraints placed on woman and emphasizes instead the need for woman to educate herself. She makes use of the medieval allegorical vehicle but instead of using religious personifications, she presents a new cast with the secular personifications of Reason, Honesty, and Justice. Willard's study of the author of *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, of the content of this work, of the educational precepts formulated within its structural subdivisions (which correspond to the divisions of the social hierarchy), and of its public—particularly the Burgundian court—allows us to gain insight into a late medieval woman who perceives many of the complexities of her time and responds to them in her writings. Her work, her ideas, and her influence challenge Gustave Lanson's description of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as periods of sterility and disintegration, as well as Johan Huizinga's portrayal of these times as periods of decadence.

The longing of medieval man to embody every conception in a concrete shape is established beyond the need of comment. Whereas most studies focus on the medieval concern with order, harmony, and balance, which led, for instance, by a process of analogy to the creation of nine worthy women to balance the original nine worthies (*les neuf preux*, to which a tenth was subsequently added),* Philippe Verdier focuses on another aspect and another product of medieval mentality. Its offsprings are the reverse of the conventional idealized depictions: they are the vignettes or *drôleries* [drolleries referring to all types of animated

* Cf. Horst Schroeder, *Der Topos der Nine Worthies in Literatur und bildender Kunst* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971).

marginal configurations] and grotesques [referring to the more beastly and monstrous apparitions in the latter category] covering the marginalia and the *bas-de-page* [used for more elaborate compositions] of medieval manuscripts. Revealing often a topsy-turvy world, these drawings focus particularly on the role of woman as it is socially perceived; however, they may also reveal a perception of woman by women who filled the margins with fantastic, hybrid shapes as well as with caricatures and realistic detail. These renderings do not show signs of misogyny; instead, they constitute more often than not a tongue-in-cheek symbolical commentary on the text in question and an indulgence in satirical comment absent from the text they "adorn." The typological exploitation of poliguities traditionally associated with aspects of the text provides often the *point d'appui* for the irreverent drawings in which woman may hold equal footing with man only on the highest rungs of the social hierarchy but considerably less than that on lower rungs. The pictorial punning undercutting the main text—though at times apparently unrelated to it—and the patent marginal irony which lampoons all authority, are described by Verdier as the "naive exponents of a women's freedom movement against the definition of her condition by the church or against rules edicted by man." The *drôleries* and grotesques, which attract as much as they repel, reveal a medieval mentality able to see woman in contradistinction to conventional stereotypes. The vast array of these bizarre, hybrid depictions (with which Lilian Randall regales the reader in her definitive work on the subject,*) offer alternative ways of depicting the role of woman. As these alternatives gained greater foothold and became increasingly typological, they condensed into genres of their own. As typological constructs propelled by a force of their own which enabled them to leave the marginalia for the center, they emerge on the European horizon of art with the onset of the grotesque *emblemata* in the Renaissance.

The six essays presented in this collection constitute the

* *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966).

papers delivered at the Sixth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies of the State University of New York at Binghamton held on *The Role of the Woman in the Middle Ages* on 6–7 May 1972. Apart from the addition of notes and some other minor changes, the original versions have not been altered. Not included are the numerous questions put to speakers by the audience, the responses to such questions, or the records of the informal discussions—to which the format of the conference proved so conducive. An author and subject index will facilitate the use of this text.

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It is hoped that the results of this conference—the first of its kind to focus on the role of woman in the Middle Ages from a multi-disciplinary perspective—may stimulate further critical investigation of aspects touched on but not fully explored in these essays.

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