

## Introduction

When I was studying at the University of Florida back in the early 2000s, I was fascinated by the ways in which women were represented in medieval art and what these images could tell about a society's perception of women. Although Medieval Europe was fragmented into many different political units and cultures, the fact that Christianity unified most of the continent under one single faith, allowed for a type of generalization regarding its understanding of women that permeated most of the arts. Fraught with a religious and ideological agenda, many of these representations showed a rather daunting image of opposites that in many cases could be reduced to a simple division between good versus evil. These images were conceptually focused on the ever-present dichotomy between the Virgin Mary and Eve as the forefront symbols of the two ends of the spectrum that were impossible to emulate or overcome. But, as is the nature of absolutes, this idea could have never reflected the reality of daily life with all its complexities, contradictions, and idiosyncrasies. Moreover, the arts have a way to challenge, subvert, and overturn these binary perceptions while affirming them at the same time.

From this interest came the idea to organize a series of sessions at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds and at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo whose focus was women and their shady grey area of ambiguity. If we consider the nature of ambiguity to mean that several plausible interpretations could be given to a specific idea or statement, then we can see how the representation of women in the Middle Ages could be nothing more than ambiguous. This is especially true when we try to make sense of the experiences of people who lived in the past, and their understanding of gender, through the lens of our own experiences—and our own biases. Regardless, it is not the aim of this volume to present an anachronistic introduction of present-day ideas into the past, but rather to unravel the

intricacies of gender and the ambiguous position of women as represented in and through the seven examples gathered in this volume.

This volume is organized following a specific narrative that will take the curious reader through a journey connecting interpretations of women's bodies and experiences. In the first essay, *Disease Woman: A Neutral Representation of Health?*, Sara Öberg Strådal analyses the schema of the *Disease Woman* in the Wellcome Collection, MS 290. Her research shows how women's bodies were conceived medically and how they related to late medieval ideas regarding the gendered human body. Through a thorough visual analysis of the *Disease Women* in the context of the other (male) representations in the manuscript, as well as through a comparison with other illustrations found in similar scientific manuscripts, Dr. Öberg Strådal demonstrates the way in which this medical illustration not only described the types of ailments that women suffered from, but it also emphasised the way in which women's bodies were constructed as inferior to those of men.

In the second essay, *The Woman Giving Birth: A Navarrese Relief of the Twelfth Century in San Martin de Tours, Artáiz*, Dilshat Harman investigates what the representations of the *Woman Giving Birth* in the central corbel on the façade of this Spanish church might have meant for the medieval woman and man. She connects the *Woman Giving Birth* not only with contemporary attitudes to sex and gender, but also to a complicated system of associations based on the contextualization of this image with the rest of the programme found on the façade. In the end, the *Woman Giving Birth* in this context could be subjected to multiple interpretations, chief among them is the intriguing connection between life and death, and how these interpretations were directed to all the parishioners and not only at one specific gender.

In *Bathsheba's Bath and the Seven Deadly Sins: A New Interpretation of a Visual Narrative Strategy in Late Medieval Books of Hours*, Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo (me) takes the image of Bathsheba's Bath and analyses it in the context of penitence of the late medieval period. She emphasizes the role that this image played in setting the tone for the performance of penitence by demonstrating how certain elements of the image may have aided in the remembrance of the readers' sins. In addition, she demonstrates how these images, which traditionally have been assigned for the consumption of a male audience, were created for a female audience as well.

Anastasija Ropa, in *King Solomon's Ambiguous Wife in the Queste del Saint Graal*, presents the problems posed by King Solomon's wife in this Arthurian romance of the thirteenth century. What started as a neutral representation of this nameless woman in the story found in the Grail quest narrative regarding how the Ship of Solomon came to be, became in subsequent versions the image of the evil and sinful wife. This change could be understood under the conflicting discourses on gender, family, and heredity in England and France at the time, and it may explain the reluctance to represent this story in the illuminated cycles of the *Queste del Saint Graal*.

In the fifth essay, *Saint Eugenia Outside-Inside-Outside Rome: An Iconographic Continuity?*, Andrea-Bianka Znorovszky traces the iconography of Saint Eugenia, one of the cross-dressed saints, in and outside of Rome. Saint Eugenia's cult was well established around the eternal city, and it contributed to the spread of her imagery throughout northern Italy. Dr. Znorovszky reconstructs her earliest images noting in the process how her attributes were firmly established (visually and textually) as feminine, even though she lived her life as a man.

In *Doubly Crowned: The Public and Private Image of Two Fourteenth-Century Hungarian Queens*, Christopher Mielke analyses four pieces of stonework visible in the public sphere which featured two Hungarian queens of the fourteenth century, Elizabeth of Poland, wife of Charles I Robert, and Elizabeth of Bosnia, wife of Louis I "the Great." Dr. Mielke places these images in the context of royal propaganda, and how these queens used public art as a method to emphasize their respective roles, albeit in two very different ways.

The seventh and last essay is *Material and Temporal Ambiguity at Santiago de Compostela: The Case of the South Portal's Woman with the Skull*. Written by Karen Webb, it explores the evidence surrounding the physical displacement of the sculpture of the *Woman with the Skull* in the south portal of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Dr. Webb connects this happening with the discontinuity of King Alfonso's family in its violations of consanguinity and conceptually presents it as propaganda concerning spatial and material identity.

These seven essays illustrate seven different approaches to the question of ambiguity and the representation of women in medieval art. They demonstrate the complexities of a topic that is as contemporary as it is ancient. Through them, we can get valuable insights on the

understanding and experience of gender in the past and the ways in which these experiences have shaped our own understanding of this topic.

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