

to see continuities that are simply not apparent when reading any individual text in relative isolation, as we are wont to do. Which leads us to a third significant contribution of the book: as the author himself states, he hopes to counterbalance the analyses that sometimes result from that isolation, those that proclaim the appearance, *ex nihilo*, of profeminine material in medieval authors without sufficient contextualization. Our future readings of Hildegard of Bingen, of Christine de Pizan, of Jean le Fèvre, will be richer and more balanced for taking into account the traditions of both misogyny *and* defense that these authors had assimilated as part of their scholarly culture.

Barbara K. Altmann  
University of Oregon



---

Brigitte Buettner. *Boccaccio's "Des cleres et nobles femmes": Systems of Signification in an Illuminated Manuscript* (College Art Association Monograph on the Fine Arts 53), Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996. 208pp., 110 illus (4 in color), appendix, notes, bibliography, index, 8 1/2" x 11".

---

The subject of this study is the production of meaning in a sumptuous illustrated copy of Boccaccio's lives of illustrious and noble women that was presented to Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and brother to the French King Charles VI, on New Year's Day in 1403 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 12420). Apart from the value of her analysis, Buettner has done a great service to the general field of women's studies by making available all the pictorial illuminations, together with their associated decorated initials (albeit for the most part in black and white). They are arranged in the order in which they occur in the manuscript, and there is only one external illustration, both immediate indications of the author's synchronic approach to the book. The women who figure here are presented in chronological order, from the ancient goddesses such as Ceres, Venus, and Isis to mythological characters such as Europa, the Amazon queens, Thisbe, Medea, and Arachne, Clytaemnestra, Helen, Circe, and Penelope, Dido, Sappho, and Lucretia, to Romans such as Irene, Hortensia, Cleopatra, and Portia, and the series closes with a few later Christians—among them Pope Joan, and Joanna, queen of Sicily and Jerusalem. The text life of each is prefaced by a single picture of some salient event enacted in ca. 1400 costumes and settings, the norm for historical representations. Here is an extraordinary series of vivid yet elegant images, of women birthing and committing suicide, avenging murder and riding in combat, being tortured and executed, inventing Latin and working on panel paintings, and acting as ambassadors and priests.

The author immediately introduces her readers to the “structuralist mode of inquiry” that led to this form of presentation, promising “semiotically informed perspectives insofar as they posit that meanings can be generated, and in turn understood, only through *relational* models. For painting, like any other ‘language,’ is inherently a dynamic, open-ended, polyvalent, even self-contradictory, and above all, never finite process of conceptual systematization” (1, emphasis hers). Hers is not to be the old kind of iconography and iconology that so long dominated art historical readings, nor does her reading assume textual primacy: “I hope to demonstrate that images create intelligible visibilities that are only partially dependent on words. But in order to do this one has to attend to the seemingly most insignificant details, because it is there that images often say what texts cannot express—that the discursive order finds its limits” (2). She informs us last that her main reason in choosing to decode this book is that it is “entirely devoted to women” (3).

The chapters that follow meet all these claims. In addition, they offer valuable insights into the viewing community and the circumstances of the translation of Boccaccio’s text into French, and the production of the manuscript (7-17). They offer as well some comments on the relation of this work to Christine de Pisan’s *City of Ladies*, including the interesting observation that the illustrations might have influenced Christine in the more positive attitude to her subject than is found in Boccaccio’s text (21–22; also 25–26). This is the first glimpse of the semantic space between text and image that figures in Beuttner’s analysis. Indeed, she finds that some of the biographies have even been altered or added to in translation (e.g. Pamphile’s role as a silk worker, an interest of the male patron of the work). Yet she ultimately finds agreement between the fluctuating or inconsistent representational codes (color, gesture, space) in the pictures, and the way “Boccaccio’s assessment of women’s achievement fluctuates” (98–99).

A question I should ask to satisfy readers of *MFN*: Is this a feminist study of this extraordinary late medieval array of images of famous women? Gender is acknowledged throughout, yet an analysis burdened by semiotic jargon and sometimes as tedious in the detailing of signs as the old art history was in describing stylistic traits, does not support sustained attention to sex/gender arrangements. Concerned with the minutiae of this polyvalent representation of “women,” and its categorization of their estates and behaviors, the author never steps back from the obsession of the culture of origin with praising and condemning (different) women, by asking why this would be so—or what is its effect (a few gestures to ideology aside). Indeed, the bibliography and notes show no sign of recent theorizing of gender, such as the contributions of Teresa de Lauretis and Michèle Barrett to bridging the gap between semiotics and praxis.<sup>1</sup> In my view this is not a serious defect; I would never require an author to write a different book than the one they have published. This book grew out

of a dissertation that was directed by first-rate traditional scholars, and feminism is not something to force into such a situation. Buettner has done great service to have put this manuscript in view, with a usable level of erudition and a sophisticated reading of the imagery.

Madeline H. Caviness  
Tufts University

1 Teresa de Lauretis, "The Essence of the Triangle or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain," *Differences* 1 (summer 1989), 3–37. Reprinted in *The Essential Difference*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1–39; de Lauretis, "The violence of rhetoric: Considerations on representation and gender," in *The Violence of Representation*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1989), 239–258; Michèle Barrett, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 65–85.



---

Christine de Pizan. *Le Livre des Faits et Bonnes Moeurs du roi Charles V le Sage*.  
Trans. Eric Hicks and Thérèse Moreau (Paris: Stock/Moyen Age 1997). 373 pp.

---

Twelve years ago, when Eric Hicks and Thérèse Moreau brought out their modern French translation of *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, they did a great service to the reading and teaching of Christine de Pizan. One of Christine's major prose texts was finally available in an appealing, accessible modern French format. Numerous scholarly essays and full-length studies produced during the last decade are buttressed by the existence of this translation, and many classes of French literature students have acquainted themselves with late medieval *exempla* through the same work. Hicks and Moreau have now again made an essential contribution to Christine studies by publishing a modern translation entitled *Le Livre des Faits et Bonnes Moeurs du roi Charles V le Sage*.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last century, the text had previously been printed only in Suzanne Solente's two-volume edition, completed in 1941; while excellently edited and meticulously presented, the work in fifteenth-century French remained largely impracticable for college students and non-specialist readers. The new version comes complete with an engaging and serious introduction, a chronology of Christine's works and their modern editions, and a helpful, substantive index to proper names. The translation is elegant, by turns straightforward, playful, or ceremonious, in keeping with Christine's own changes of style. In addition to focussing on the historical genesis of the work, the introduction takes up the