Speaking at a meeting of the Women’s Service League, in 1931, Virginia Woolf observed that “It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.” Woolf might have sympathized with Albrecht Classen’s efforts to kill the “phantom” of contemporary belief in the existence of that infamous and inhumane sexual regulatory device, the medieval chastity belt. Yet *The Medieval Chastity Belt* is not chiefly about women, or even exclusively about the chastity belt. The subtitle, *A Myth-Making Process*, signals Classen’s real subject: historiography. Classen works with three myths in particular: the flat earth, the chastity belt, and *Jus primae noctis*, the lord’s alleged right to take the virginity of every bride under his jurisdiction. By exposing (and correcting) the dissemination of these three mythical misreadings of history, Classen hopes to draw attention to the ways in which it can be distorted.

Classen rightly problematizes the notion that cultural development is progressive. The text is clear about its motivations and demonstrates his commitment to the correction of the dubious scholarship that underpins each myth under discussion in admirably painstaking detail. Unfortunately, Classen is too critical of the modern world, having almost nothing positive to say about it. Classen views popular culture as a whole, which he sees as a key vehicle for the dissemination of myth, as distorting, a position with which cultural materialists could rightly take issue. Moreover, his characterization of the general public as uncritical consumers of fantasies and myths supplied by modern authors and with no appreciation for the work of “true historians, or literary scholars” (26, my emphasis) does more to alienate a contemporary readership than to spark any real interest in the business of scholarship.

Classen’s is an admirably ambitious task, one that requires the examination of texts in a variety of languages, within a range of disciplines, and across a wide-ranging chronology. Among the simplest and most striking of the book’s conclusions about the chastity belt is the fact of its sheer medical improbability. However, the text does not adequately resolve the tension between this well-documented position of impossibility and the existence of objects that actually seem to be chastity belts. These artifacts may well be fakes, but Classen needed either to pronounce their fakery more conclusively or resolve their existence more compellingly than he does.

The notion that the belt is a fiction does not, of course, originate with
Classen, and Classen does acknowledge his debt to other scholars, including feminist literary historians such as Felicity Riddy. Yet he concurrently disassociates his text from feminism, criticizing feminists for distorting the Middle Ages for political purposes, although he fails to substantiate these claims with sufficiently detailed evidence.

Set against his rejection of the critical acumen of others is Classen’s fervent belief that his own work creates a “truer” vision of the past because it is devoid of mythical foundations. He does not take into account the vast body of scholarship (feminist and non-feminist) that challenges the idea that there is a recoverable objective “truth” (whether that relates to the present or to the historical past). Instead the vehemently held conviction of the veracity of his own scholarship drives his narrative forward.

While I applaud Classen’s desire to shatter the myths under consideration, I have reservations about his methods, specifically about the book’s chronology, structure, and style.

A central weakness of the text is that it moves backwards and forwards in time without a clear methodological justification. For example, Classen begins with Google searching on the chastity belt (26), goes back to the late nineteenth-century work of Alcide Bonneau (27) and continues on to twentieth-century scholarship, goes backwards again to early German encyclopedists (44), then on to Eduard Fuchs (1870–1940; p. 63), and so on. This signals another, even more fundamental issue, which is structural. Classen critiques scholarly critical work on his three chosen myths before he considers the primary sources upon which these myths and that critical work are based. This puts a reader unfamiliar with the primary source material (which come to us from the Middle Ages onwards) in the impossible position of trying to judge whether Classen’s evaluation of another secondary critic’s interpretation of that source material is correct. He himself argues convincingly, and rightly, that myth cannot be deconstructed without a rigorous analysis of sources. It makes only limited sense to analyze those sources last, and it lessens the impact he intends his rigorous critique of other scholarship to have. The volume’s chapter headings and subheadings (and sub-subheadings for that matter) add to the reader’s confusion, for they do not always make their content clear or clarify the distinctions between them. Stylistically the text is curious. It shifts from the formal to the informal. Not infrequent exclamation marks, colloquialisms, and re-castings of famous one-liners (e.g. “fact or fiction, that is the question” [18]) vie with the formal academic discourse that best grounds Classen’s arguments.

Classen wants to recover the medieval past from contemporary misreadings
of it as primitive, using these three myths as case studies. In his desire to correct scholarly inconsistencies, in his exploration of a wealth of primary source materials, and in his aim to explore the nature of myth and its dissemination, a huge task that he approaches with energy, the book is to be commended. In terms of its chronological and structural weaknesses, its curious tone, and its generalized and bleak condemnation of contemporary culture in general, and of contemporary feminisms in particular, it is not. Even if the chastity belt never existed, it does not mean that medieval culture did not attempt to regulate women’s chastity with severity. The non-existence of the belt does not imply that the Middle Ages was any freer a time in which to be a woman. It does not mean that female sexuality was any less controlled and consumed by the medieval patriarchy. Do we require the existence of an iron genital girdle or socially sanctioned wedding-night rape to tell us that power over the female was largely placed in male hands in the Middle Ages? The answer is no. Classen states that “the chastity belt . . . was intimately connected with sexuality, the gender relationship, and power structures within the family” (2), but he fails to examine the implications of the myth itself for all of these. A myth can shed much light on what is true despite its foundation on falsity. In leaving this notion largely unexplored, Classen’s book perhaps misses what could have been its biggest opportunity.

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