Hildegard of Bingen acutely observed the ways in which men look at women and responded in her own texts. Hildegard refused to depict Eve at the Fall in the normal way—nude and seductive—showing her instead as a cloud of stars (which appropriates the biblical metaphor of Abraham as progenitor 22:17). Caviness discusses resonances of Hildegard's work with those of twentieth-century women artists. This case study concludes with a reading of the eleventh vision of Scivias, Book III, arguing that it demonstrates how bodily fragmentation can be a technique for survival. Caviness artfully uses examples of contemporary artists who also try to de-fetishize the body using fragmentation as a defense, although she carefully notes ways in which these arguments are problematic.

Caviness refers to the work of the modern artist Kiki Smith, which is also featured on the cover, to lead to a discussion of “What is obscenity?” As Kristeva emphasized, the abject is repulsive, for fundamental biological reasons that protect the individual. But when repulsive bodily things are framed as “art” the gap between anticipated aesthetic pleasure and its absence is the essence of obscenity. Thus, both medieval and modern women attempt to remove their own bodies from circulation as sexual objects by creating some kind of counterimage to the erotic. This is not completely a woman’s issue, for as this study shows, both the patriarchy of the medieval church and modern artists such as Picasso colluded with a feminist agenda—and thus a problematic ending: “in this scopic economy, our readings do not have to be bound by the gender of the artist or by a gendered gaze.”

Caviness’s analysis of her material proceeds at both an introductory and advanced level. It is introductory when she discusses the overall theme of the study, looks at theory, discusses specific texts, and examines artistic representations. But as the work progresses, the heavily nuanced readings resonate with more sophisticated readers. In all, Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages is a compact book with a multiplicity of purposes.

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La Femme médiatrice is part of a doctoral dissertation, directed by Emmanuèle Baumgartner, for the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III) in 1998. The title of the dissertation, “Figures et fonctions du médiateur dans quelques romans en vers du douzième siècle,” indicates this study of women intermediaries was originally a subsection of a larger study focusing on masculine characters in the romances. This relationship of women as subsidiary to a more important group, men, underlies La Femme médiatrice. Despite the promise of the title and despite a number of perceptive readings of individual narratives, American feminist scholars will find the book frustrating and ultimately disappointing.
The principal works discussed are the lais of Marie de France and the anonymous lais; the romances of Tristan (Béroul, Thomas, and the Folies Tristan); and two romances of Chrétien de Troyes, Yvain ou Le chevalier au lion and Lancelot ou Le chevalier de la charrette.

The introduction begins with an overview of “L’homme nouveau,” the solitary, wandering knight who appears in these twelfth-century narratives and who becomes “la figure même de l’Homme,” the figure of Man. It is “la Dame ou la Fée” – the fairy mistress of the lais, including Laudine, Guenevere, and Iseut – who becomes important to the knight in his wanderings. These women characters are studied as mediators helping or hindering the knight to attain full psychological and social development. They are the “puissante et ultime catégorie de médiateurs” (15). Although Dessaint claims to see these women characters as individuals, her study focuses on the traits they have in common, particularly those that allow them to make of the knight a new man.

All the women are powerful characters able either to harm or to help the mortal men who fall in love with them. They have extraordinary beauty (“cette perfection physique qui annonce les destins hors du common,” 20). Hyperbolic descriptions of possessions and accouterments such as tents and clothes indicate wealth. They display their power in their regal arrogance and pride and sexual assertiveness. They can appear capricious, cruel, immoral. For example, Dessaint suggests that Guenevere’s innate promiscuity can be attributed to her fairy origins (27). Even as Méléagant’s prisoner in Gore, Guenevere appears to have the power of life and death over him. Dessaint stresses the powers of the Lady both in terms of magic and words–Guenevere in Le chevalier de la charrette is described as “une magicienne des mots” (46). Both of these powers will become male attributes in later periods. However, even in the twelfth century, the beauty, power, licentiousness, and capriciousness of these fairy ladies are implicitly described from the point of view of the hero in terms of what she can, or will, do for him, of how her power affects his destiny.

An examination of encounters between a mortal woman and an otherworldly male, the “chevalier-faé” (the fairy knight), precedes Dessaint’s analysis of the female intermediary’s effect on the knight at two points, “La rencontre merveilleuse,” and “La fin de la quête.” The only adventure open to women who love otherworldly men is “celle de la maternité” (61). According to Laurence Harf-Lancner, to whose work Les Fées au Moyen Age Dessaint often refers, the fairy mistress moves through a more complex pattern than that of the “chevalier-faé.” Union and agreement are followed by the mortal man’s violation of the pact and, finally, the disappearance of the fairy mistress. She takes the man she desires according to a ritual which often involves water and a white animal and by means of which the hero is able to surpass “une scission artificielle entre Bien et Mal” (66). Even her intransigence when the mortal lover has broken her interdiction facilitates his “accomplissement d’un destin hors du common” (82). She has become the “idole d’une nouvelle religion” (86); source of light and warmth, she is for the hero both divine and diabolic; she has taken the place of an apparently indifferent God (92). From her rejection...
ensues madness (a symbolic death), despair or suicide, through which the knight must pass on the road of initiation to a new self. The long analysis of the hero’s despair again points to Dessaint’s emphasis on what the adventure means to the hero rather than to the Lady.

The final stage of the knight’s initiation is the subject of the last section of the study. Beginning with a second departure whose goal is reunion with or at least pardon by the Lady, the quest may end with the changed hero’s return to the Arthurian world, or with his choice to remain in the Other World, or, for a few, with unending wandering or death. While the Lady mediates the hero’s quest, she herself cannot choose to pursue a quest: “La quête ne se décline pas au féminin dans les lais” (128). Dessaint argues that the adventure “est désormais féminine” (189); a few pages later she recognizes that the adventure in the works studied “est celle du héro en quête de lui-même, et qui se trouve par la Femme” (194). From this analysis of the hero’s adventure the author draws some tenuous parallels between his quest and modern psychoanalysis, but it is difficult to see in what way Guigemar and Lanval prefigure the psychoanalytic patient, that they will show the way to “bon nombre d’analysants” (142).

The principal weakness of this study is the omission of contemporary work on gender in medieval romance. Although Dessaint stresses that the figure of the female intermediary is characterized by power, knowledge, and sensuality, she barely alludes to the fact that this character is ultimately a masculine construct, created to give meaning to the hero’s exploits. Even the lais of Marie de France implicitly recognize the overwhelming weight of the masculine construction of erotic relations (see my forthcoming article in Dalhousie French Studies.) There are no references in Dessaint’s study to the important gender analyses of medieval narratives by feminist scholars such as Jane Burns, Joan Ferrante, and Penny Schine Gold. In fact there are virtually no references to any scholarship outside France. Thus, although the study offers a number of insightful readings of individual texts, feminist scholars will find unacceptable the traditional, out-dated mode of analysis on which Dessaint relies. Finally, readers should be aware that La Femme médiatrice requires reading knowledge of Old French; some familiarity with the works studied is probably also necessary.

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Conference papers and articles have whetted the appetite for Sharon Farmer’s important new book on poor women in the Middle Ages. From original sources of ambiguous narrative structure mediated by clerics, Farmer has