
Valerie R. Hotchkiss. *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland Publishing) 1996. 201 pp.

In this highly descriptive and largely taxonomic study, Valerie Hotchkiss charts the medieval fascination with transvestite heroines as they appear in texts ranging from Latin hagiographic narratives to historical and pseudo-historical accounts of Joan of Arc and Pope Joan as well as literary tales in Old French and Middle High German. Focusing on disguised women who don male garb to gain social or spiritual advantage, Hotchkiss emphasizes throughout her study that the various forms of inversion borne of female cross dressing considered here do not substantially redefine female identity either sexually or socially. Different from Marjorie Garber who reads the transvestite as a third term that can effectively unsettle established gender categories,¹ Hotchkiss investigates female transvestites who wear men's clothing to conceal a fundamentally problematic femaleness. Indeed it seems that this study demonstrates in many ways how clothes do *not* make the man—or at least that clothing cannot effectively transform a woman into a man. Clothes for these transvestite heroines remain a superficial (if temporarily effective) cover—indeed a disguise—used to hide a potentially disruptive female body until its ultimate disrobing which restores the cultural status quo.

Following a brief introduction (chapter 1), the second and most substantial chapter addresses “Female Men of God: Crossdressing in Medieval Hagiography.” Accompanied by a useful appendix of some thirty-four transvestite saints, this chapter provides the setpiece for subsequent discussions of cross dressed heroines. Recognized as holy only to the extent that they deny their womanhood and achieve the kind of “manly spirit” condoned in Augustine’s appraisal of Perpetua’s sexual inversion, the cross dressed heroines considered here tend nonetheless to retain stereotypically female characteristics of sexual vulnerability, sinfulness, and of maternal and nurturing instincts. Virgin monks, who don male dress to avoid arranged marriages, unsympathetic husbands or inappropriate suitors, effectively renounce their female sexuality, while reformed prostitutes take on male garb as a repudiation of past sinfulness. Thus, “despite narrative claims of total integration among males,” the disguised woman “remains a woman in the narrator’s (and the reader’s) mind” (26) and “in the end, it is femaleness that is at the center of these hagiographies” (30).

Chapter 3 provides an extended case study of one such cross dressed religious, Hildegund von Schönau, who ostensibly lived her entire life as a highly celebrated Cistercian monk. The five extant accounts of Hildegund’s life portray her as a failed man, betrayed at the moment of her death by uterine bleeding that led to the discovery of her true sexual status, although she had been plagued throughout her disguised existence at the monastery by fears of betrayal and

regrets about her successful deception. Chapter 5 chronicles various legends of the female pope, alternately named Johannes, Johanna, Agnes, Glancia, Gilberta or Jutta, whose two-year reign was cut short when she fell to the ground during a ceremonial procession and gave birth to a child, thus demonstrating the dangers and difficulties of attempting to conceal a resurgent and insistent female anatomy beneath male clothes.

In two chapters devoted exclusively to literary narratives, Hotchkiss surveys accounts of the abandoned and calumniated wife who cross dresses typically to save her husband and her marriage (Chapter 6) and tales of disguised heroines whose attractiveness as cross dressed males unintentionally provokes the interest of other women (Chapter 7).

As medieval antecedents to the topos of the calumniated wife developed later in the character Imogen from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* or Zinevra in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Hotchkiss offers a host of German and French heroines who pose alternately as servant, minstrel, trickster or rescuer. But the extraordinary feats of manly heroism performed by these wronged women are used ultimately to prove their worth as loyal wives. And those heroines whose cross dressing significantly troubles norms of sexuality in texts such as *Tristan de Nanteuil*, *Yde et Olive* and the *Roman de Silence* are consigned in the end to heterosexual unions which promote traditional marriage. These descriptive accounts offer preliminary readings without exploring the rhetorical or ideological complexities of the texts in question.

The chapter devoted to Joan of Arc (Chapter 4) conforms less fully to the book's reigning paradigm of the disguised woman, because Joan was a self-avowed virgin who openly dressed in man's clothes for complex ideological and political reasons, as Hotchkiss explains. But this chapter should be read in conjunction with Susan Crane's "Clothing and Gender Definition: Joan of Arc."² And indeed, it is a surprising characteristic of this book generally that it does not engage with the substantial ongoing scholarly debates on medieval cross dressing, sexuality and sexual identity that have focused in particular on the figures of Silence, Joan of Arc and transvestite saints.³

The value of *Clothes Make the Man* lies in its careful documentation of female cross dressing as a significant issue for medieval European culture. It is most provocative at those moments when it suggests that the dominant antifeminist ideologies structuring the narratives under study here might exist in an unresolved tension with other narrative forces: those that promote and underwrite powerful and resourceful heroines or those that record a substantial blurring of gender boundaries (as when cross dressed heroines sprout beards!). One wonders if there aren't other ways to read these wide ranging texts,

interpretations that would more fully acknowledge the importance of literary works that document repeatedly and across a number of genres how disguise allows a displacement of the woman's body, a temporary wandering out of its assigned cultural context, which might significantly alter the parameters of that mold.

As it stands, *Clothes Make the Man* provides a useful point of departure for readers wishing to think further about the substantial implications that female cross dressing holds for feminist medieval studies.

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1 *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 10-11.

2 *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26, 2 (1996): 297-320.

3 For recent bibliography on Joan and transvestite saints see Susan Crane, "Clothing and Gender Definition;" for bibliography on *Le Roman de Silence* see Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), notes to Chapter 4 and *Arthuriana* 7:2 (1997), ed. Regina Psaki. Also pertinent are a number of the essays in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie et al. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997).



Alfred P. Smyth. *King Alfred the Great*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995. xxv + 744 pp.

Alfred P. Smyth's biography, *King Alfred the Great*, has as its aim the representation of the king as a great man and ruler, "a man of profound learning by the standards of his age" (600), a king who "strove to follow the path of 'righteous kingship,'" who was not "a pious wimp, but . . . a leader already well schooled in the knowledge of power and responsibility of his office" (601-2). Smyth's concluding paean praises Alfred as well for "the qualities of a great all-rounder . . . qualities of moderation which were indicative of his great humanity" (601). In order to create this picture, Smyth must remove as primary evidence of Alfred's character and life *The Life of King Alfred*, purportedly written in 893, before Alfred's death, by Bishop Asser, a Welshman associated with Alfred's court. He argues instead that Asser's *Life* was written in the late tenth century as a forgery under Asser's name: "It was inevitable that such a gifted