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Review Essay: Cindy L. Vitto, *The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature*

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BOOK REVIEWS

To a historian, these essays are the meatiest and most interesting chapters in the volume.

Friedman's contribution attempts to answer the baffling question of why there are no direct depictions of the plague in late medieval art. He claims that medieval artists, who were conservative and constrained by tradition, preferred to use familiar symbols to confront this new calamity. His persuasive thesis is backed up with many excellent black-and-white illustrations.

The other two essays in this collection are on literature. Robertson points out that Chaucer, like many other writers of the era, was disgusted with the corruption and moral failure he saw in society in general and in politics in particular. Within the confines of a relatively few pages, Peck attempts the difficult task of trying to trace "truly basic changes in the medieval psyche" (116) that occurred, he believes, in the three decades after the 1381 peasant rebellion. He focuses on the writings of John Wyclif and *Piers Plowman*, *Plowman's Tale*, and *Jack Upland*. Although not entirely persuasive, Peck is thought-provoking.

At \$16.00, this hardbound book is a bargain despite its rather narrow scope of subjects. It is of interest to students of history, art, and literature. If not startlingly original, all the contributions are well written, solidly researched, and worth reading.

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Cindy L. Vitto, *The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 79, Part 5, 1989, 97 pp., biblio., index, \$15.00

In fourteenth-century images of the Harrowing of Hell, Christ is often pictured wounded but triumphant, extending his pierced hand to a line of souls issuing out of the mouth of hell. The first two figures to leave hell are almost always recognizable as Adam and Eve; occasionally others in the line will be identifiable as Old Testament figures. But Plato will not be there, nor Socrates, nor Aristotle, unless one assumes that the anonymous figures might be taken to represent these ancients. Their absence is symbolic of a problem that medieval theologians and writers faced: What was the ultimate fate of the virtuous pagan, that person who earnestly sought after God, who followed innate rules of goodness and charity, but who lived too early or was geographically too removed to have knowledge of Christ's incarnation and passion?

This is the question that Cindy Vitto deals with in her slim volume, *The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature*—something of a misnomer since only about half of the study examines Middle English literature. She begins the study rather traditionally—a lengthy chapter dealing with the theological background of the question. In this chapter she examines such worthies as Justin, Clement, Origen, and Augustine, comparing their conflicting visions of the possible union of philosophy with Christianity and the eternal implications of such a union. If reason or philosophy were seen as adjuncts to faith, these men and others argued, then certainly it was possible that God had made some provision for the virtuous pagans.

Vitto continues with the emergence of this question in popular lore, focusing on its appearance in legends such as that of the emperor Trajan, whose gift of humility would eventually result, in some stories, in a saving baptism after death. Vitto's consideration of Dante's use of this question leads her to conclude that Dante believed explicit faith was necessary for salvation—perhaps a too obvious conclusion.

Vitto's main interest in Middle English literature lies in *St. Erkenwald* and *Piers Plowman*, and herein lies this volume's greatest contribution. She concludes that *St. Erkenwald* demonstrates that a pagan can be saved, but not through his or her own merit; further, the poem demonstrates the unequivocal need for divine grace both for the individual and for the Church as a whole. *Piers Plowman*, in essence, shows this same need, though it establishes a tension between the need for good works and the role of divine grace. The virtuous pagan can be saved, but only through divine grace and intervention.

This book is somewhat too slim for its topic, a problem Vitto compounds by allowing herself to stray widely, dealing with questions of faith versus reason, good works versus faith, the historicity of the Harrowing and its meaning, and the ways in which all of these questions touch upon medieval understandings of the virtuous pagan—all in one hundred heavily footnoted pages. The opening chapter on the Church fathers suffers from its use of a wide range of sources that are not effectively integrated. The final effect is that of a series of opinions that do not add up to anything solid. Nor is there any direct evidence of how notions of the fate of the virtuous pagans filtered into popular literature; I suppose we are meant to assume such filtration.

Much of the background to the question of the virtuous pagans' fate is examined in G. H. Russell's "The Salvation of the Heathen: The Exploration of a Theme in *Piers Plowman*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 101–16. Vitto might have followed Russell's model to improve her work, which reads like a dissertation: There is an almost overwhelming amount of material in the package, but it hasn't been sorted out and organized to lead to

significant conclusions about the influence of the question of the virtuous pagan on the literary art of the later Middle Ages. What different impulses are apparent in the folklore and in structured works like *Piers Plowman*? How did the question of the virtuous pagan play into some of the anonymous accounts of the Harrowing? Where did it appear in the sermon literature that might have popularized the question? In short, this study is only a preliminary step; deeper, more penetrating studies are needed to examine the place of the virtuous pagan in Middle English literature beyond the boundaries Vitto has set.

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RENAISSANCE

Leon Battista Alberti, *Dinner Pieces: A Translation of the Intercenales*, trans. and ed. David Marsh, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies and The Renaissance Society of America, 1987, ix, 268 pp., ill., biblio., index, \$20.00.

Leon Battista Alberti's writings have always commanded a central place in the history of Italian Renaissance art and architecture, but Alberti, whom Jacob Burckhardt more than a century ago proposed as a prototype for the "universal man" of the Renaissance, has in recent years emerged as a central figure in literary studies as well. Though we still lack an English translation of his important political satire, the *Momus*, David Marsh's new translation of his short satires, which Alberti in his autobiography described as "dinner pieces" to "be read over dinner and drinks," goes far in recovering for English readers his reputation as a satirist and moralist. Marsh's skill as a translator is evident throughout. He has performed great service to Renaissance studies in assembling a manuscript tradition that is not without some confusion, providing what is without question a definitive edition of the *Intercenales* works.

Dinner Pieces shows the influence of Lucian's satires in a number of places, making Alberti an important early proponent of the tradition of Menippean satire that would flourish in the sixteenth century, but they also reveal some debts to the fables of Aesop, a genre Renaissance humanists referred to as the apologue. Two of the satires, "The Slave" and "The Deceased," included orations that might be most accurately considered in the tradition of the mock or paradoxical encomium, praising, respectively, the condition of servitude and the superiority of death to life. A rhetorical genre often classed with Menippean satire