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## BOOK REVIEW

SUSAN L. SMITH (1995);  
 THE POWER OF WOMEN:  
 A TOPOS IN MEDIEVAL ART AND LITERATURE,

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 295 pages, 49 black and white reproductions. Typeset in Linotron Galliard, retaining many features of the 16th century typeface. Printed on acid-free paper.  
 ISBN: 0-8122-3279-8 (hardcover) approx. \$65.00

## KAREN KEIFER-BOYD

While browsing the library shelves I came upon a 1995 book, *The Power of Women* by Susan L. Smith. I was surprised to find inside the book many images of a woman riding a old man with the title under each image, "The Mounted Aristotle." Even more unusual was that these carved stone reliefs, embroideries, and manuscript illuminations were included in the sacred venues of Medieval churches. Later at a social gathering, I asked a group of colleagues if they had ever seen or heard about the mounted Aristotle. A historian who had taken a series of graduate courses in the 1980s taught by a leading scholar of Medieval times had never seen these images or heard about the topic in the three courses he had taken. An art historian, who specialized in Renaissance art, while not familiar with the images thought that they might refer to the woman as representing the spirit while Aristotle represented merely secular knowledge. The university art educators in the group had never seen the images. A brief perusal of the book only made me more puzzled. Once I began to read the 202 page book (with an additional 74 pages listing the abbreviations used, notes to each chapter, works cited, and an index) I could not put it down until I had read the whole thing and explored Smith's interpretation of "The Mounted Aristotle."

I realized that variations of the mounted Aristotle tale in Western Europe, which were abundant from 1200-1600, is still a common theme in contemporary art, film, and literature. I used the Power of Women topos in a course on approaches to art criticism and another course on women and their art in order to introduce undergraduate and graduate students to the concepts of intervisuality and intertextuality, and to issues of interpretation and empowerment. It also is a potent example of the use of marginalized spaces to redefine status quo belief structures of marginalized people. Topos first took visual form around the end of the 13th century in the margins of medieval art. It appeared along the edges of manuscript paintings and on the arms and backs of choir stalls, under choir seats, and other peripheral zones in Gothic churches. It also occurred in textiles, tableware, musical instruments, and objects of personal use (Smith, p. 16). Perhaps due to their marginalized status as profane images in sacred spaces and as "minor" or "decorative" art, scholars did not study the power of women topos until women began to rethink art and history.

There are six chapters: (a) Introduction: The Power of Women and the Rhetoric of Example, (b) "Thise Olde Ensamples Ought I-Nowgh Suffice," (c) Tales of the Mounted Aristotle, (d) "Body It Forth": The Mounted Aristotle's Visual Example, (e) The Power of Women Topos in Fourteenth-Century Visual Art, and (f) Conclusion: The Topos in Fifteenth Century and Beyond. There are 48 figures of the Power of Women Topos from woodcuts, brassplates, a drawing by Albrecht Dürer, painted personal objects, miniature illustrations in manuscripts, embroideries, stain-glass windows, etchings, and sculpted reliefs in ivory, wood, and stone. There is one diagram showing the relationship of topos images in a church. The author began the research for this book in the 1970s as her doctoral dissertation. In writing the book in the 1990s she drew upon recent critical theory to examine the multivocality of Medieval discourse concerning gender relations. Smith goes beyond traditional iconography to an investigation of how text and image acquire meaning, contradict each other, and are sources of reinvention by artists and viewers. She argues that, "visual images cannot be treated as if they were reducible to texts, as merely their secondary representations, as too often occurs" (1995, p. xiv). She explores the intervisuality of the topos images by interpreting them in their physical relationship to one another and to the space, as well as their relationship to oral traditions, text, ideology, and to other images outside the immediate

context but known to the viewers. The original languages of the Middle Ages are inserted throughout the book with English translations to allow Medieval scholars and nonspecialists access to the material. Smith's scholarship is well grounded and explained in an accessible manner for non-specialists. She also encourages reader contemplation and reinterpretation by providing thorough information.

Literally, topos means place: "A place where arguments are found" (Smith, p. 4). It relates to the English concepts of topics or commonplaces. Originally the term topos was introduced by Aristotle (400-320 BCE) in the *Topics* (I.i.) to refer to generally accepted principles or reasoning. A topos is a form of argument with strong persuasive power since it uses examples as if they are truths or common occurrences. Aristotelian logic examines particular cases from which a general principle may be inferred and then applied to a similar instance. However, women's experiences have often been discounted or ignored in history, philosophy, and other areas as not established or not the canonical examples. Yet readers vary and, therefore, the topos has operated in multivocal ways since individuals may derive contrary or unintended interpretations depending on how they see the example. The Power of Women topos included medieval debates about gender hierarchy and female identity. It used celebrated men of the past from biblical and secular spheres to prove the power of women. It has textual, oral, and visual forms.

Much like advertising techniques used today, the topos was used by preachers not as proof but rather to stir emotions. Persuasiveness "derives not from the authority of the history but from the authority of the speaker and from the inherent plausibility of the story itself which anyone could, in principle, have seen or heard" (Smith, p. 9). For the poet, the topos was expressed in such a way to allow different interpretations to please the specific audiences who filled the poet's purse.

The mounted Aristotle tale has three main versions. The basic outline of the story starts with that Alexander the Great warned by his mentor, Aristotle, to abandon his love for Phyllis to allow for serious and important study. Alexander follows Aristotle's advice. Phyllis, angry at being abandoned by her lover (or in some versions her husband) retaliates against the source of such advice. She flirts with Aristotle outside his study window. A window, in the tale, served as a

"metaphor for the eyes through which women arouse men's desire" (Smith, p. 155). This metaphor referred to the belief that we are deceived by sight. Aristotle seduced by Phyllis' raised skirts swears his love and asks her to provide him with sexual pleasure. She agrees if he will prove his love by allowing her to ride him like a horse in the garden prior to their rendezvous. Phyllis invites Alexander to the garden, where he witnesses the folly brought to his wise master by a woman. The Christian sermon version used the tale to prove that women are evil temptresses. The poet version changed to suit aristocratic audiences. Love wins out in these versions which emphasized that love or passion is stronger than reason. Women are the objects of lust in the poet versions. Christine de Pisan, a 13th century writer, argued that the tale was not an example of women's experience and that different stories would be told if women's voices were recorded. She believed that men created the story to deal with women's rejection of male attentions. Her interpretation of the mounted Aristotle tale emphasized women avenging faithless men. She also maintains that it represents men who are insistent in their pursuit of women who are not interested in them, and how women act to get rid of the unwanted attentions.

My students and I began to compile lists of contemporary art, film, and literature that convey these three themes. The Christian sermon version can be found in films such as *Fatal Attraction*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, and *Legends of the Fall*. For the poet version we identified Maid Marian in *Robin Hood*, Aladdin, *Bridges of Madison County*, and Gertrude in *Hamlet*. We found several examples that fit Christine de Pisan's version of the mounted Aristotle tale including: *Nine to Five*, *The First Wive's Club*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Thelma and Louise*. I highly recommend the book as a source to stimulate discussion about gender power relationships expressed in contemporary images that have long, enduring histories.

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