

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
An Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference
University of Missouri
Presented April 12, 2008

Leta Reppert

MU Department of English

Oral presentation

“Mighty Maidenhood”: Medieval Women and the Attempt to Break Free from the Curse of Eve

Throughout the middle ages, women were seen—and condemned—as daughters of Eve, representing the flesh and sexual desire. However, women were not left with Eve as their sole role model, since Eve has an exact opposite in the person of the Virgin Mary. Mary, like Christ, could serve to redeem her followers, and her purity could undo the effects of Eve’s sin. For women trapped in their fleshliness by the sin of Eve, Mary provided a way out; by living as virgins they could affiliate themselves with the Mother of God, rather than following in the footsteps of the archetypal temptress. The decision to follow Mary, rather than Eve, did not remove women’s fleshly nature, however. Rather, Mary herself was seen as fleshly but as embodying a redeemed and redeeming fleshliness, since she gave flesh to the Son of God. The decision to link themselves with Mary allowed women to enter a new category—either as desexed “men,” as in the cases of the transvestite saints, or as brides and mothers of Christ, represented in stories that are often surprisingly erotic, reinforcing these women’s redeemed fleshliness.

This issue has long been a matter of debate among feminist scholars, with some arguing that women were suppressed, rather than freed, by their choice of virginity. Others, however, see these women as using their virginity to radically oppose the dominant society. My argument will take the middle ground between these two positions. While it is true that choosing to represent Mary, rather than Eve, did not remove women from a male-dominated world, it did give them a measure of control over their own lives and bodies and freed them, to some extent, from blame for Eve’s sin. This choice of virginity removed them from the role of a literal wife and mother, allowing them a degree of independence. For many women, the struggle to achieve and maintain this autonomy was difficult and came at great personal cost. For those who succeeded, however, this choice could be empowering, enabling them a measure of control over their own lives unknown to their nonreligious contemporaries.