

Gender Swapping in Illustrations of the *Psychomachia* Manuscripts

In Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, Christian Virtues and Vices do battle as embodied female warriors. Around twenty of the more than three hundred Prudentian manuscripts contain various illustrations of these female Virtues and Vices (along with illustrations of other ancillary characters such as Abraham, Melchizedek, Job, and the fighting host); these illustrated manuscripts follow their own stemma, separate from but related to that of the sole text-based manuscripts (Stettiner 1895; Woodruff 1930). Because the illustrations exist in an independent tradition, and as such are not *ad hoc* visual interpretations of the *Psychomachia*, much thought has been placed on the relationship between the images and the text, often with the illustration existing solely to support the text: should the images be used as memory aids, prompting a reader to recall pre-memorized passages by displaying the major actions of the poem (Solivan 2020); or, are the illustrations meant to educate the reader's habit viz. their gender such as presenting the Virtues as demure while the Vices are presented as wild (Breen 2021), the nominal purpose of the poem itself (Nugent 1985). Both options imply that the manuscripts are primarily teaching texts, either through private study or in a classroom setting, a theory also supported by the use of heavy glossing in the *Psychomachia* manuscripts (Wieland 1985).

This framework is complicated by a scribe introducing persistent corrections into a few of the originally transmitted manuscript illustrations; some of the more obvious changes include the Vices' hair becoming more wild (e.g. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Ms 023 ff. 9v *et al.*) and swapping of the gender presentation of certain characters from women to men through the addition of facial hair or change of clothes (e.g. British Library, Ms Add.24199 ff. 17r *et al.*). Stettiner has premised that one such change, the bearded head of *Superbia* in BL, Cotton MS Cleopatra C VIII, arose from a theorized manuscript in which her hair, flowing past her severed neck, appeared to a later scribe as a beard, a change which was then adopted for later manuscripts in that stemma group. This singular occurrence does not account for other gendered variations in the illustrations, however,

such as the defeminization of the Virtues (removing overt feminine signifiers and defaulting to a masculine state) and the Virtues' similarity to other gender-bent hagiographical texts (such the trans(vestite) Thecla and the constant clothing swaps of the Vices and Virtues) (Breen 2022), or other characters' overt masculinization (such as *Ira's* beard). More recent scholarship having investigated the reason why the illustrations' gender presentation has been altered has realigned the image alterations with the original didactic function of the poem and the manuscripts: by highlighting the contrasting gender representations of the same character across multiple discordant images, the reader learns that gender—and its associated traits—is not tangential to the allegory, but rather an essential teaching tool to the male and female readers of *Psychomachia*, teaching a different lesson depending on the reader's social role (McGucken 2019).

Gender signifiers of any sort applied onto non-sexed concepts is itself a strange juxtaposition; the Virtues and Vices themselves are non-corporeal concepts, being only allegorically mapped onto female bodies in the *Psychomachia*. Thus, the application of gender signifiers of any kind is already an external, psychological, process. The Virtues and Vices, though, have entered the poem as gendered beings, partaking in the discourse of contemporary Christian morality as women, in fact existing as pure discursive beings. As purely discursive beings, they are intrinsically tied to the text which allegorizes them, inseparable from their traits. This paper will expand on the didactic readings of the changed illustrations by linking them to a close reading of both *Luxuria* and *Superbia's* changed physical appearance and actions, theorizing why such image changes would alter a reader's perspective in a queer direction.

Bibliography

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