

## Medieval Academy of America

---

Allegory and Poetics: The Structure and Imagery of Prudentius' "Psychomachia" by S. Georgia Nugent

Review by: Ralph Hexter

*Speculum*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Apr., 1988), pp. 448-449

Published by: [Medieval Academy of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2853278>

Accessed: 13/11/2013 14:53

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Medieval Academy of America is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Speculum*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Pfaff's two contributions, like Müller's and Vogler's, are thorough and informative. As articles, each amply meets the expectation of the reader. It is only as a book that this publication falls short. Although all of the essays are compatible in approach and in format, the authors refer to several different versions of the basic text. Their work would be much easier to use if they had agreed on a single edition. Indeed, since the inventories are hardly household items, and since they must be consulted for the essays to be meaningful, it does seem that the full texts could have been included here. The additional six or seven pages would have changed this from a supplement for existing publications to an independent work in its own right.

As a supplement, this book should be useful to medievalists in many fields. It makes the information contained in this very rich codex accessible to those not specializing in paleography and monastic history. One may hope that, as Vogler suggests, it will also provide a stimulus to further study of the manuscript itself.

GENEVRA KORNBLOTH, College of William and Mary

S. GEORGIA NUGENT, *Allegory and Poetics: The Structure and Imagery of Prudentius' "Psychomachia."* (Studien zur klassischen Philologie, 14.) Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York, and Nancy: Peter Lang, 1985. Paper. Pp. 109.

Nugent's excellent book is at once revisionary and a fine introduction to a first reading of the *Psychomachia*. Some general readers may have to use it in conjunction with a translation, since Nugent does not translate Latin citations. (Alas, only block quotations are consistently outfitted with line numbers. Other quibbles: Patientia, not Ira, is "accompanied . . . by Job" [p. 21; vv. 163 ff.; correct p. 33]; "allegorical cronies," not "cronies" [p. 47; *Metus*, v. 464, is masculine]; *Harmatigenia* 428 reads *sequuntur*, not *sequunter* [p. 79].)

In a brief introduction Nugent neatly formulates the major paradox of *Psychomachia* criticism: "why such a bad poem should enjoy such a great success" (p. 12). Hence the impulse not only to read the poem more carefully but to attempt a revision of our view of allegory. Nugent provides a healthy selection of recent secondary literature, wisely eschewing a full-scale survey. To quibble about omissions is misplaced. The miracle of Nugent's book is what she packs into ninety-one pages of text, not what she doesn't.

"Contents" (p. 5) divides the study proper into "The Battles of the *Psychomachia*" (pp. 17–62) and "Interpreting the *Psychomachia*" (pp. 63–100). The first chapter of part 1 contains general remarks on Prudentius's approach to personification as well as specific analysis of the battle of Fides and Veterum Cultura Deorum. The level of analysis is high throughout. Every few pages there is a truly arresting observation: for example, the "landscape" of the poem is bare space without "a single feature (unless it be the very absence of solid ground — the abyss into which *Superbia* falls)" (p. 20), or Ratio, the first champion to oppose Avaritia, literally remains in Ope-ratio when the vice metamorphoses to Frugi (p. 55). "[S]erious punning" (p. 22) is not trivial when "the allegorical strategy depends so much upon reifying words" (p. 63). Likewise, what appear inconcinities in the structuring of the allegory become invitations to read the *Psychomachia* anew and to reexamine allegory itself.

Nugent characterizes the shift from first to second part as a "move from the surface of the poem to . . . [its] conceptual basis" (p. 63). She parts company with all who come to the poem assuming a "naive polarization which must determine [its] structure" (p. 65). Neither is the allegory of the *Psychomachia* simple nor Prudentius incompetent. Nugent aptly adduces Prudentius's *Harmatigenia*, where he addresses the origin of sin

and explicitly rejects Gnostic dualism. The *Psychomachia* as Nugent reads it — and she is very persuasive — becomes a meditation on the much subtler (orthodox) problematic of inmixed good and evil. Vices (for example, Libido, Avaritia, Discordia) deceive virtues in different ways. At least one virtue, Concordia, has a chink in her armor (vv. 672–80; p. 72). Virtus is ambiguous, a “virtue,” yet also “strength,” predicable of a vice, especially in a battle poem. (Nugent barely hints at the additional ambiguities involved in female warriors exemplifying *vir-tus*. Note *virilem* in v. 358.) Complexity is the new watchword, structuring the entire poem. In the longest chapter (“A New View of the *Psychomachia*’s Complexity,” pp. 71–85), Nugent charts the progression of increasingly difficult battles, treated at increasing length, and with increasing risk of deception and self-deception.

In “A Speculative Model” (pp. 95–100) Nugent suggests as “an analogy for the writing of imaginative allegories in literature . . . the construction of theoretical models in the sciences and social sciences” (p. 95). This is a thought-provoking and potentially powerful hypothesis, hard to establish in a few pages. The case is best made in Nugent’s book by the rich insights and meaning revealed in the *Psychomachia* through a willingness to think of allegory in this way.

RALPH HEXTER, Yale University

PER NYKROG, *L’amour et la rose: Le grand dessein de Jean de Meun*. (Harvard Studies in Romance Languages, 41.) Cambridge, Mass.: Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, 1986. Paper. Pp. 98. \$8. Distributed by French Forum Publishers, P.O. Box 5108, Lexington, KY 40505.

This slender book, much of which is plot summary, is likely to be of use mainly to students having their first encounter with the *Roman de la Rose*. The *Rose* is certainly a bewildering text for the uninitiated, and Nykrog’s step-by-step description of its development, as well as the synoptic table at the end, could be a helpful guide. It has little to offer to more experienced *Rose* scholars, however, and even its usefulness for students is lessened by its lack of documentation: Nykrog cites virtually none of the considerable scholarship published on the *Rose* in the last fifteen years. His interpretation of the poem, which emerges in bits and pieces in the course of his summary, does touch on some very interesting and important points; it is a pity that he did not choose to develop these more fully, especially given the controversies that currently characterize modern *Rose* criticism.

In certain details I found myself in disagreement with Nykrog’s reading of the plot. For example, he states correctly that the poem recounts a dream that the narrator supposedly had at the age of twenty; but his statement that the dream itself was set five years before that, when the narrator was only fifteen (pp. 14, 16), strikes me as odd. The standard interpretation of the *Rose* prologue is that we are looking back to a time five years before the present moment of writing, not an anterior time five years before the already past moment of dreaming. At the very least any refutation of this reading would require an analysis of the syntax of the lines in question; no such analysis, however, is offered. Similarly Nykrog’s assertion that la Vieille was hired by “la jeune fille elle-même” (p. 26), and therefore does not represent any sort of external authority, is questionable. Nykrog bases his reading on la Vieille’s statement to Bel Accueil that she was hired by “votre dame” — but would this not be Jalousie, the imposing figure who commanded and orchestrated the construction of the fortress and its management by la Vieille, Dangier, and the others? Like the other allegorical personifications whose grammatical gender is feminine, Jalousie is a female character