



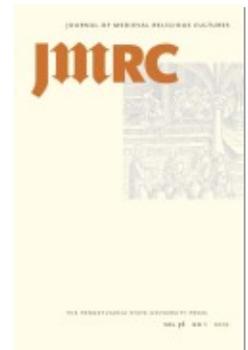
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*Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in
Late Medieval England* (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jennifer Bryan. *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. 270. ISBN: 9780812240481. US\$49.95 (cloth).

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Devotional reading has had a good run lately. After centuries of neglect, such late medieval texts as *The Chastising of God's Children* and the *Stimulus Amoris* are now consulted about matters as diverse as gender, female literacy, patronage, vernacularity, translation, visibility, heresy, and Lancastrian anxieties. But no one before Bryan has studied this vast, varied array of texts with such shrewd and subtle insight into their authors' primary concern: the formation and transformation of the inner self.

"Inwardness," it seems, was a quality everyone wanted to have in late medieval England. But like other goals of personal development, it proves remarkably hard to define. Does everyone have an inner self, or only the literate few? Is this self gendered? Should it be revealed to God alone or performed in public? At its core, will one find a radiant *imago Dei* or an abject consciousness of sin? Bryan's first chapter, borrowing a leaf from Wallace Stevens, offers "Seven Ways of Looking at an Inward Man," which alone would be worth the price of the book. The first six are the ecstatic solitude of Richard Rolle (compared to "a happier and more democratic version of courtly love" [43]); the chaste, tightly policed privacy of the female recluse; an adaptation of anchoritic spirituality for the "mixed life"; a potentially Lollard interiority that spurns "outward works"; a liturgical piety

with the opposite goal of internalizing public, sacramental worship; and the “grimly, exuberantly materialist epistemology” of *The Pricke of Conscience* (62), in which the inner self is totally carnal, with no glimmer of deity. But the seventh and most common model is the Augustinian, best represented in England by Walter Hilton. In this model, the inward man is both an image of the Trinity and ineluctably fallen but above all, a mystery to itself. True inwardness thus requires ceaseless and relentless introspection.

Chapter 2, “Seeing a Difference,” explores the ubiquitous trope of mirroring. If the devotional text is a mirror in which the reader can see his or her inner self, so too are Christ and Mary, and the self in turn can mirror Christ. Langland’s Will says that he has never seen Christ “but as myself in a mirour” (B.15.162), which prompts the dizzying reflection that “Will is and is not the image of Christ, just as Piers Plowman is and is not a figure of Christ or an ideal laborer, just as Will is and is not Langland, who thus is and is not himself the image of either Piers or Christ” (76). Devotional mirrors “could be both exemplary and reflective” (82), revealing at once the ideal self imaged in Christ and the actual self mired in sin. The focal text of this chapter, the Bridgettine *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, links both functions to Mary. Bryan contrasts the visually oriented piety of Syon with Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Booke of Gostlye Grace*, which was recommended reading for the nuns. Mechthild, a thirteenth-century visionary, interacted with Christ, Mary, and the saints but rarely saw herself, whereas the fifteenth-century nuns of Syon were exhorted to constant self-scrutiny and self-correction. Not everyone found value in that exercise. The chapter ends with *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a text that categorically rejects both vision and the particular self in favor of blindness and forgetting. For the *Cloud* author, “sin is autobiography, and he wants none of it” (100).

In chapter 3, “Private Passions,” Bryan turns to a genre for which late medieval Englishmen had an insatiable appetite. Passion meditations evoke “the transformative power of vision-with-desire,” identified as “one of the central tenets of late medieval devotion” (123). Lydgate’s *Testament* juxtaposes a double vision of Christ (glittering conqueror and crucified man of sorrows) with a double vision of self (mischievous young lover and penitent old man), with Lady Memory in the role of Boethius’s Philosophy. In a more typical meditation, *A Talkynge of the Love of God*, a fifteenth-century writer transforms texts from the Wooing Group, written two centuries earlier for anchoresses, to address laymen and -women. Bryan shows how this work’s blend of Anselmian compunction, bridal

spirituality, and abjection aimed to stir up a deliberately violent, painful desire, culminating when the lover “leaps on his prey, clasping and sucking” Christ’s bloody feet, “mad and sick and utterly out of control” (118). The goal of such manufactured ecstasies was not catharsis but transformation, for mnemonic theory held that the most shocking images could best imprint themselves on the memory. Apropos of *The Prickyng of Love*, a favorite of Margery Kempe, Bryan argues that in this work’s change of language and audience from its Latin original, “mystical discourse becomes almost its own obverse.” What had once been meant as unitive rhetoric is transformed into “a language of intense border anxieties” (133), fueling fantasies of rejection that only sharpen the reader’s longing. An acute psychologist, Bryan has a rare gift for reading the same text from multiple subject positions.

Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* are *sui generis*, but some contexts are more revealing than others. Following Nicholas Watson’s lead, Bryan’s fourth chapter sets Julian against the backdrop of English vernacular theology. Readers are often puzzled by the combination of her intensely personal narrative voice with a near-total absence of biographical detail. Yet she is no unitive mystic. “Julian is never drunk with love,” Bryan writes, “never released from the strenuous engagement with the self that is a hallmark of English inwardness” (148). But she rejects two key features of that inwardness, the abject and the erotic. By Julian’s time bridal spirituality had become inextricably bound up with “an isolated, tragic, abject . . . model of subjectivity” that she firmly refused (164). Instead, the self—like the hazelnut representing “all that is made”—is small but never despicable in God’s sight. Contemporary texts such as William Flete’s *De Remediis* and *The Chastising of God’s Children* used even maternal imagery to justify God’s absence or punishment of the wayward child—a trope Julian just as consistently rejects. Bryan ends with a look at Mary’s unusual role as a model less of compassion than of “reverent beholding.”

Descending from the sublime, the last chapter on Hoccleve lands with a muffled thud: the mentally troubled, bureaucratic poet “addresses Prince Henry in the squeakiest and most self-abasing of tones” (176). Yet Hoccleve belongs in this story because, like Kempe, he struggled mightily to bring inner and outer self into harmony and, like more obviously devotional writers, engaged in painfully self-conscious introspection. In a bravura reading of “The Complaint of the Virgin,” Bryan shows how

angrily Hoccleve's Virgin resists her public role as mediatrix of salvation. Instead, she presents herself as a seduced and abandoned woman, bitterly lamenting her personal erotic loss when her Son's nakedness is exposed to all. Yet in the end Mary, like Hoccleve himself in *The Regiment of Princes*, yields to necessity and steps into her requisite submissive role.

Looking Inward is a rich gift for anyone interested in medieval subjectivity, vernacular theology, or English poetry—where late medieval traditions remained in play from Donne and Herbert all the way to Hopkins. Generously learned, with a poet's sensitivity to style, Bryan has deeply searched the souls of fifteenth-century England.



Titus Burckhardt. *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008. Pp. ix + 118. ISBN: 9781933316505. US\$17.95 (paper).

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Translated into English in 1959 from the French original entitled *Du Soufisme*, World Wisdom's 2008 republication of Titus Burckhardt's *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* provides a succinct yet penetrating look into the central ideas and doctrines of Islamic mysticism. This new edition is complemented with the inclusion of a foreword by William Chittick, a leading scholar in the field of Islamic thought. Here, Chittick notes Burckhardt's influence on his own scholarship and situates the present work within the field of contemporary Western literature on Sufism.

In the book's preface, Burckhardt states that his primary concern does not lie with modern methods of scholarship but, rather, in uncovering and exploring the unity underlying the plurality of spiritual traditions. For him, scientific approaches to mystical doctrine serve only to demarcate and define traditions in terms of their historical differences in space and time. Instead, what Burckhardt advocates in this study is the adoption of an interior perspective, an approach that he deems capable of "assimilating" (xiii) the universal meaning that lies at the heart of the diverse forms of religious thought and expression. In this way, Burckhardt aims to convey the unique perspective and expression of Sufism while simultaneously drawing parallels with other spiritual traditions. This method, he points out, does not undermine or challenge Sufism's own significance but,