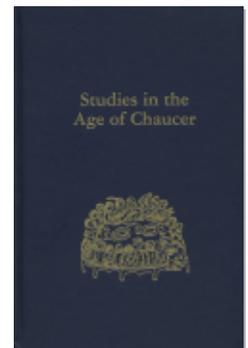*Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* by Cristina Maria Cervone (review)

Eleanor Johnson

CRISTINA MARIA CERVONE. *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. 312. $69.95 cloth.

Cristina Cervone's immensely learned and sensitively written book takes several well-known works of late medieval English literary theology—William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, and Walter Hilton's two-part *Scale of Perfection*—and puts them into a productive dialogue with several much less well-known works—the "Long Charter of Christ," the "Short Charter of Christ," and several anonymous lyric poems—in order to demonstrate persuasively that, for these late medieval literary compositions, poetic form does important theological work. Poetic form, as Cervone puts it, is not merely ornamental, but is indeed foundational to the doing of vernacular theology in the late English Middle Ages. Cervone taps into a wide range of sources—prose treatises; first-person prose narratives; and allegorical, narrative, and lyric poetry. The formal and generic variety of her examples and the diversity of the authors she considers add considerable weight to Cervone's claim that literary form was widely seen as a vital resource for theological speculation and instruction. As its title suggests, *Poetics of the Incarnation* manifests a broad sociocultural interest in showing the importance of poetic form to the late medieval vernacularization of Christian theology—particularly the theology of the Incarnation.

Incarnational theology, of course, brings with it certain core challenges: explaining how God becomes man requires explaining how spirit becomes flesh, how the eternal becomes temporal, how the abstract becomes concrete, and how being becomes action-in-the-world. These challenges, in Cervone's view, are precisely why poetic language is an optimal vehicle for doing theological work. Poetic language consists of textures—layered; sensory; and, most importantly, metaphorical. Because of its formal complexity, poetic language produces what Cervone terms, borrowing adroitly from cognitive science, "linguistic dilation." This is when "language gains enough agency to achieve near-personification" (85). Poetic form, for instance, enables a narrative to generate a secondary narrative within itself, a new concrete figuration underneath a larger and often more abstract idea. Poetic form can also enable multiple temporalities to coincide in a single narrative, so that the "then" of Christ's Incarnation is made palpably coterminous with the "now" of the moment of reading. Finally, poetic form enables a

reader to access, at once, language's immediate, concrete, material signification and a deeper, subtler, more spiritual meaning. Poetic form, that is, is quite literally the stuff of Incarnational theology.

Rather than being organized with one major text in each chapter, Cervone's chapters cluster around particular thematics of Incarnational theology and how they play out in poetic form. This organization has the advantage of allowing us to see how a set of texts explore a single Incarnational dynamic, and what poetic forms seem most useful to a particular text. The first chapter analyzes how Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, *Piers Plowman*, and Julian's *Revelations* all work through, in the vernacular, the problematics of signification that Augustine sets out in his treatment of "enigma" in the *De Trinitate*. Cervone shows that Hilton deliberately mimics Augustine's techniques for making "Jhesu" available to readers as the word of God; she shows that, for Langland, enigmatic language, embodiment, and cognition are all linked through deliberately figural language; and she demonstrates that Julian's substitution of a bodily/ghostly dialectic for the traditional literal/figurative one "allows for specially suitable alignment of the material with the immaterial" (40). For all of these authors, as Cervone sees it, the capacity of poetic language to mean more than one thing at the same time—its innate polysemy—affords it a particular purchase on their doing of vernacular Incarnational theology.

Before moving into her next chapter, Cervone delves into cognitive theory, to ground her explanations of how contemporary theory discusses poetic language's interaction with the mind. This cognitive theory pays dividends in the second chapter, in which Cervone shows how polysemy makes theological meaning in the "True-love" tradition (e.g.: "In a Valley of This Restless Mind," a poem from British Library, MS Harley 7322, "Flourdelys," *Piers Plowman*, Julian's *Revelations*, and the "Long Charter of Christ"). In all of these late Middle English works, polysemy enables an elision of the abstract and the concrete. That elision, in turn, helps the reader to make cognitive sense of the nearly incomprehensible truth of Christ's Incarnation. Cervone's third chapter turns to explore the metaphorics of deeds—conceived both as charters in particular and as acts in general—and how those metaphorics inform the literature of medieval English Incarnational theology. The charter metaphor, Cervone finds, "reinforces Christ's lordship, his aristocratic heritage, and his concomitant lordly responsibilities" (88); this dynamic of textually guaranteed nobility and generosity is particularly apparent

in the "Charters of Christ." But Cervone also examines how Christ's deeds—his actions—are depicted in *Piers Plowman* through its participation in the "leap of love" tradition and in Julian's *Revelations* through repetitions of images of the Crucifixion. In all cases, what Christ *does* in the Incarnation is inseparable from who he *is*, showcasing how poetic language can be used by literary theologians to compress the distance between acting and being.

The fourth chapter examines how poetic form can also compress the distance between history and eternity. Examining Passus XVIII of *Piers Plowman*, and Julian of Norwich's master-and-servant parable, Cervone demonstrates that "temporal fluidity" for Langland and "timelessness and placelessness" for Julian are primary problematics in wrestling with Incarnational theology, and that both authors rely heavily on poetic form in order to do so. Cervone's final chapter leaves off from the dialectical studies of the previous three (abstraction/concreteness; being/acting; timelessness/time) in order to dig more deeply into three image systems mentioned only briefly earlier: Christ's body as language, as clothing, and as botanical growth. Focusing now on the Charters of Christ; select religious lyrics; Hilton's *Scale*; and, interestingly enough, medieval visual arts, Cervone explores how these three images are in fact master metaphors for the literature of the Incarnation.

Poetics of the Incarnation is a thought-provoking and persuasive account, as well as an elegant defense of the importance of formalism in the study of Incarnational theology. It is true that Cervone's formulations are often immensely complex—usually owing to the complexity of her ideas and the ambitious scope of her project—but that complexity seems strangely apt to a project that suggests that the kind of affective devotion to the Passion that has received a good deal of attention in scholarship is *not* the only means of vernacular theological work that was going on in late Middle English literature. Cervone reminds us that there was also a thriving brand of high-flown and intellectual vernacular theology, concerned less with making us feel the suffering of Christ in his final human hours, and more with making us understand the significance of his Incarnation in the first place.

In that insistence on the importance of Incarnational theology, I suspect the book will be important not only for literary scholars, but for scholars of the history of theology, much in the same way that Gail McMurray Gibson's *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1989) has been. Moreover, Cervone's book will not simply appeal to scholars of the medieval world: because of her deep familiarity with and fluency in cognitive theories of how poetry works on the mind, coupled with her commitment to articulating those theories carefully and tracing them out in her discrete readings, I would think that her book will appeal to scholars of poetics from all historical disciplines.

ELEANOR JOHNSON
Columbia University

SUSAN CRANE. *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. viii, 271. $59.95.

Susan Crane has been at the forefront of developments in the field of medieval animal studies. At the New Chaucer Society's Congress in 2010 she organized a lively strand of sessions devoted to "Animal Discourses," select papers from which were collated into a symposium in *New Medieval Literatures* in 2011. In the same year, *postmedieval* dedicated a special issue to "The Animal Turn," to which Crane contributed an essay that now features, in revised form, in the book currently under review. The following year saw the publication of a virtual colloquium on "Animalia" within the pages of this journal, in which the author again participated. Crane's latest study, *Animal Encounters*, represents an exceptionally rich and insightful intervention in these ongoing debates, one that will be a point of reference for years to come.

Animal Encounters responds to a number of key concerns in critical animal studies. First, Crane hopes to rectify what she sees as a tendency to "forget" the animal in literary analysis, by striving, as she puts it in her opening paragraph, "to redirect attention from the animal trope's noisy human tenor back to its obscure furry vehicle" (1). Even a genre such as beast fable, which has generally been viewed as inhospitable to an animal-centered perspective, gets reconfigured in Crane's analysis as a space where animals matter. Additionally, Crane is motivated to reconsider human specificity in relation to (other) animals. What happens when traditional markers of human distinctiveness, such as language or reason, can be shown also to exist among nonhuman animals?