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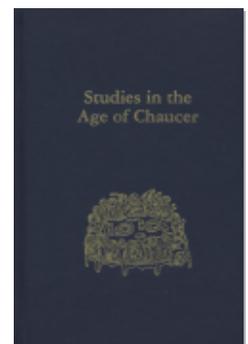
Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages by Ann W. Astell (review)

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REVIEWS

ANN W. ASTELL. *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 296. \$39.95.

Ann Astell's latest book studies the Eucharist not from a historical or social perspective, as much recent scholarship has done, but from an expressly theological one. In her own words, she is interested in the "theological aesthetics" of the Eucharist, a phrase that she defines via Robert Viladesau to describe the study of theological objects as aesthetic and of aesthetic objects as theological (p. 16). Specifically, she reads the Eucharist as the vehicle by which beauty enters the world and reads her subjects' eucharistic devotion as illustrative of their own understandings of beauty. As she does so, she refers to their own "theological aesthetics"—hence "Bonaventure's theological aesthetics" or, more broadly, "Cistercian theological aesthetics" (pp. 128, 72)—thus suggesting that her approach is their approach and that a fundamental continuity links the medieval past to the present. This justifies the extended historical scope of the project, which extends from Bernard of Clairvaux to the twentieth-century philosopher Simone Weil. It also bridges the spiritualities that Astell studies with her own, which is expressed directly in two of her own poems included in an appendix. Embodying the duality of the phrase "theological aesthetics," the book is both theology and literary criticism.

The basic argument of the book is that "every genuine spirituality" (though it's not clear what it takes for a spirituality to qualify as genuine, aside from its Christianity) seeks to restore the paradise lost through original sin, a restoration that the Eucharist enables (p. 257). The first chapter to explore this is also the strongest: Chapter 2 (Chapter 1 is the introduction) demonstrates compellingly that the eucharistic host was often figured as the antidote to the Edenic apple, making one form of eating a corrective to another. To eat the Eucharist is to eat from the Tree of Life, or Christ. This eating restores paradise by implanting in each person, through the Eucharist, a key virtue that is consonant with his or her religious vocation. This virtue, in turn, develops into a way of life that restores the beauty of paradise both to the individual and,

though the individual, to others. Chapter 7, which Astell calls the other theoretical chapter, determines the relationship of the Eucharist to beauty in the aesthetics of Simone Weil and Hegel, locating beauty in Weil's Eucharistic devotion and siding with her against Hegel to conclude that the Eucharist is the basis of art which transmits beauty to the world.

Chapters 3–6 consider four virtues, each appropriate to a different religious order, that undo original sin. With reference to Bernard of Clairvaux and Gertrude of Helfta, chapter 3 identifies curiosity as original sin according to Cistercians, or elsewhere more generally to “monks,” and humility as the virtue which reverses it. Chapter 4 uses Bonaventure's life of Francis to define concupiscence as original sin for Franciscans, and poverty as its virtuous antidote. Chapter 5 primarily focuses on Catherine of Siena, though it also discusses Dominic, Catherine of Genoa and the Peruvian saint Rose of Lima, to establish a Dominican concern with preaching as the remedy for the original sin of gluttony. Chapter 6 characterizes disobedience as original sin and obedience as its opponent according to Jesuits, focusing on Ignatius of Loyola and Michelangelo (who, she notes, was not a Jesuit). Throughout, she is interested in how the saints discussed embody a key virtue communicated to them through the Eucharist. In spite of the title of the book, however, the Eucharist generally remains in the background of the study, serving as the largely implicit source for each saint's virtue, which is Astell's true focus. One might object to the rigidity of the order-based distinctions, themselves not always faithful to order (again, Michelangelo is with the Jesuits), or to the grouping of figures separated by sometimes substantial temporal or spatial distance, but Astell does not pretend to describe the historical development of different spiritualities or even to offer a comparative study of early Christian religious orders. The book is organized by chronology and by religious order, but its fundamental goal, at least in my reading, is to demonstrate what Astell perceives as an essential and constant truth about Catholicism: that it seeks to restore paradise by the exercise of virtues, themselves embedded in and communicated through the Eucharist.

Astell's general instinct is to privilege unity and continuity over historical or political difference. In line with this, she consistently and self-consciously treats saints' lives as historically precise, reading Bonaventure's *Legenda Major*, for instance, as a faithful and nonpolemical account of Francis's spirituality and downplaying the political concerns that

clearly impacted it. Further, because she seeks to link virtues, the Eucharist, and beauty as often as possible, the concepts of beauty, and even of the Eucharist, end up being quite broad. In order to keep attention focused on her central themes, she often appends phrases about beauty or the Eucharist to her quotations and paraphrases, but in such a way that implies that the original quotations explicitly address these themes. For instance, she claims that, for Bonaventure, “The substantial form of a thing unites its essence, nature and species, and its beauty consists in that harmonious unity of expression” (p. 105). Although Bonaventure does liken the three, he does not discuss them with respect to beauty (Astell often defines *species* as beauty, but in the passage she cites at the end of the sentence above, it connotes only “image”). Or, although a quotation from Catherine of Siena ends by describing Jesus as “the incarnate word and only begotten Son of God,” Astell adds “present in the Eucharist” after the quotation, suggesting that Catherine drew attention to the Eucharist proper (p. 147).

This is not to detract from the sustained creativity of the work, which brings new and productive approaches to bear on the study of medieval (and later) spirituality. The book adds a crucial dimension to the study of the Eucharist in the Middle Ages by relating it to original sin, and its individual readings are often compelling, displaying Astell’s ability to make unexpected connections between texts. This will be a useful read for anyone interested in the aesthetic content of medieval theology.

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ALCUIN BLAMIRE. *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 263. \$90.00.

Having spent his recent career examining the role of women in medieval culture, Alcuin Blamires turns his attention to the nexus of moral and gender questions in Chaucer’s work. Offering a set of examples of these questions in the Introduction (including “Does the Wife of Bath’s discourse allege that women are mercenary, or generous, or profligate? What is the value of brotherhood in *The Knight’s Tale*? If a female fortitude is projected in *The Clerk’s Tale*, how much are we to admire it?”