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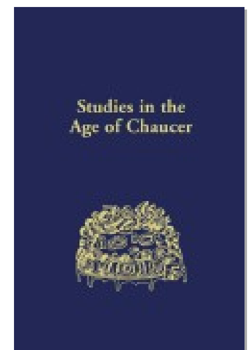
Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages by Caroline Walker Bynum (review)



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Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 7, 1985, pp. 175-178 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0012

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(TC 5.1865) or even "Up roos the sonne, and up roose Emelye" (*KnT* 2273).

For those eager to pursue such matters, Burnley's book provides a useful cautionary introduction on many matters that they need to understand first. But the way remains open for a general synthesis, as well as for more specific answers to the question of what constitutes the *poetic* in Chaucer's language.

I note the following misprints: p. 119, *scarecely*; p. 133, *acknowleding*; p. 166, *ponare* (for *ponere*, or *pausare*?); p. 231, *net* (for *nat*?); p. 236, Anglo-Northern (for Anglo-Norman?).

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CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of California at Los Angeles, no. 16. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Pp. xiv, 279. $7.95.

Jesus as Mother is a collection of four previously published and "substantially rewritten" journal articles dealing with various aspects of twelfth-century spirituality, along with a lengthy new study analyzing the imagery of a small group of women visionaries of the thirteenth century. These carefully crafted essays are supplemented by an appendix listing twelfth-century treatises providing practical spiritual advice and, more important, a short yet compelling introduction in which the author argues for "a middle ground between the older history of doctrinal or mystical theology . . . and the newer stress on the changing social context of religious movements" (p. 6). The essays, which test this "middle ground," provide ample reason why Caroline Bynum in recent years has become one of the foremost students of medieval spirituality.

The first two essays, "The Spirituality of Regular Canons in the Twelfth Century" and "The Cistercian Conception of Community," reflect Bynum's method of approaching specific religious communities by scrutinizing their writings for patterns of imagery that reflect their basic values, assumptions, and attitudes. Emphasizing the recurrence of *verbo et ex-*

emplo, vita et doctrina in canonical texts and noting the particular use of *experientia* by Cistercian authors, Bynum concludes that, whereas the regular canons insisted upon the individual's responsibility to edify others, the Cistercians laid primary emphasis upon individual spiritual growth and salvation.

The third essay, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" is perhaps the most relevant to students of medieval literature, since it raises fundamental questions about the general thesis underlining such works as Peter Dronke's *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (1970), Colin Morris's *The Discovery of the Individual* (1972), and Robert Hanning's *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (1977). A model of common sense and proportion, the essay suggests that what was new was not so much a sense of individualism but of self. Bynum further points to the new emphasis on conforming the self to a group and the growing prominence of personal models to argue that it is misleading "to place in the center of the twelfth-century religious stage the isolated individual, with his personal conversion, his inner motivation, his exuberant emotions" (p. 104). Although it is unfortunate that Bynum did not tackle the qualifications urged by Morris (see *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31[1980]:195–206) in his response to her earlier essay, her argument is persuasive for the religious texts that she analyzes. Bynum does not deal with secular texts, however, or with the argument advanced by Hanning that chivalric romance with its emphasis on the hero's quest develops in the twelfth century a language and psychology of individuality not yet fully evident in theology and philosophy.

The fourth essay, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing," is the collection's most interesting essay and the best example of how Bynum employs "new ways of reading the material we have had all along" (p. 6) to question standard historical interpretations. Approached with a fresh eye and with new questions in mind, these rich texts provide new insights concerning not only the affective spirituality that characterizes the period but also the more problematic "feminization of religious language." Challenging the traditional understanding that this shift in religious imagery reflects shifts in attitudes toward women or that it was particularly developed for or used by women, Bynum draws attention to the distinction between "female," referring to "a person of one gender," and "the feminine," referring to "an apsect of a person of either gender" (p. 167). She concludes that her study of feminine imagery is really the study of "the attitudes of males toward themselves" (p.

168), not toward women. In the Cistercian authors studied—especially Bernard, Guerric of Igny, and Aelred of Rievaulx—the imagery reflects two attitudes: am ambivalence toward the exercise of authority, which they felt should be tempered by "feminine" nurturing qualities; and a sense of dependence upon the cloister and God, which they associated with a child's dependence upon a mother.

The fifth and new essay, "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta," studies the flowering of female piety by carefully surveying the historical background necessary to understand three relatively obscure mystics—Gertrude of Helfta, Mechtild of Hackeborn, and Mechtild of Magdeburg—and then raising two broader questions concerning thirteenth-century spirituality: "Why were women so prominent in mysticism? and why did their piety have the particular characteristics that it did?" (p. 184). Close analysis of the visionary imagery of these three nuns leads Bynum to conclude that, by being socialized in a female community and thus avoiding contemporary attitudes identifying women as morally and intellectually inferior and by emphasizing direct contact with God through eucharistic piety and mystical union, the nuns were able to call directly on the authority of Christ to support their roles as teachers and mediators of God's grace. Although the rich mystical experience of these nuns was not based solely on the "deprivation of opportunities for evangelism" (p. 253)—theological factors are also significant—their visions did provide them spiritual authority without challenging the increasingly clericalized church. In contrast to those historians who see the rise of mysticism as a challenge to the institutional church, moreover, Bynum argues that the devotion of these mystics to the eucharist meant that they explicitly supported clerical authority while the clergy, ambivalent about its own authority, encouraged "an ecstatic alternative to clerical power."

The essay is thus ultimately concerned with the ambivalence about authority which Bynum believes "lies at the heart of Christianity" (p. 261). In one sense or another this concern with the nature of Christian authority is addressed in all the essays, providing a larger unifying theme for the collection. By pointing the essays toward this common theme, the author extends her detailed analysis to more significant issues but also risks specific conclusions that are not equally convincing. Nevertheless, Bynum's combination of precise reading of key texts, careful examination of the monastic setting, and thoughtful attention to the broader historical context makes the collection as a whole persuasive. Avoiding ideological argument

while challenging received opinion, her method and interpretations will long provide models for students of this rich "period of equilibrium or balance in spirituality" (p. 263).

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HELEN COOPER. *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales*. London: Duckworth, 1983. Pp. viii, 256. £24 in UK only.

Helen Cooper's *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales* has as its basis some important ideas. She views Chaucer's work as growing out of the literary and social conventions of his age and proposes to find in his handling of conventions, especially in the variations from convention, important clues to his meaning. She begins with the genre of the story collection, proceeds to two chapters on *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, devotes a chapter to *The Knight's Tale*, another to the relationships of tales within the different fragments, and a third to the more general thematic resonances, before concluding that *The Canterbury Tales* defies formulaic definition, that it refuses to find conclusive answers in *The Parson's Tale* and the Retraction, that it "demands to be looked at whole."

The chapter on story collections concentrates on the "key problems of structure and morality." It ends up considering the three late-fourteenth-century authors whose principal works are collections: Boccaccio, Gower, and Chaucer. Chaucer, who was influenced by the other two, distinguishes his collection from the others by avoiding abstract patterning and by including two characteristics "that have no parallels anywhere," the variety of genres included and the story telling contest. The two features reinforce each other. The contest implies that we are experiencing superior, if not the best, examples of each genre, and the variety gives a multiplicity of perspectives and a sense of the partial truth necessarily present in each. In a later chapter titled "An Encyclopedia of Kinds," Cooper finds parallels for *The Canterbury Tales* in the *Summa* and in Menippean satire. She thus puts a consistent emphasis on the all-inclusiveness of the work; the characters of the *Prologue* reflect the estates of medieval society as the stories in the collection do the possibilities open to the medieval story teller.