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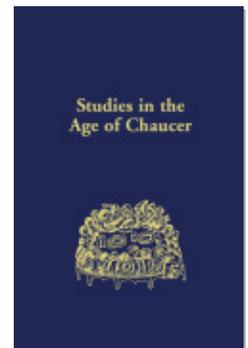
*The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in  
Late Medieval English Culture* by David Aers and Lynn Staley  
(review)

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## REVIEWS

DAVID AERS and LYNN STALEY. *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. Pp. 310. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

*The Powers of the Holy* is one of those books you keep feeling you've decided about, only to find you haven't. Passionately argued and replete with historical analyses, literary interpretations, theoretical observations, and generally well considered polemics, it is unusual to the degree in which it treats students of Middle English as though we all approach our subject as intellectuals, personally and politically engaged in the fourteenth century as part of our wider engagement in life in the present. While its historicism is broadly consistent with the work of scholars like Paul Strohm, Lee Patterson, and Steven Justice—who, of course, also seek to engage us in the past in a rich variety of ways—its particular drive towards an *ethical* understanding of Ricardian religious and literary culture and how we study it seems reminiscent of feminist scholars with whom the authors are in little sympathy, such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Gayle Margherita. As a consequence of this consciously ethical brand of historicism and the confidence it gives the authors that their subject is relevant to anyone who takes it seriously, this conversational, slightly sprawling book about a quarter century of late-medieval English literary history is likely to be one of those rare studies of Middle English literature that are read by many people who work in quite different areas, and so come to represent our field to a larger world. (For example, the *Bryn Mawr Review* has already published a fine review of the book by a feminist theologian, Jo-Anne McNamara, and I am confident it will be read with care by early modernists.) I have learned a great deal from this book, agree with much that is in it, disagree with much else, and expect to be telling all the students of medieval and early-modern culture and thought I encounter over the next few years that it is one of the books they must read.

The book circles around several themes dealing with gender, politics, literary representation, and the theology of Christ's humanity; three major texts—Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Julian's *Revelation of Love*, and

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and a handful of late-fourteenth-century historical processes and incidents, especially the Revolt of 1381, the condemnation of Lollardy from the Blackfriars Council of 1382 to the heresy trials of the early fifteenth century, and the troubled relations between Richard II and successive Parliaments through the 1380s. The themes cannot readily be rendered as a single argument or simply related either to the texts discussed or the incidents the book connects with these texts; indeed, the themes are occasionally hard to spot amid the careful readings of particular textual moments of which a good deal of the book consists. But this must be more or less a deliberate policy, as the axiom on which the book is ostensibly built is that the complexity of the interrelationships between cultural discourses makes it necessary to explore these discourses only as they are played out in particular historical contexts. Foucault, Marx, and Quentin Skinner are cited to this effect in the book's joint introduction, and Aers had previously explored this axiom in a published response to a sweeping condemnation of late medieval culture by Kathleen Biddick.<sup>1</sup> While the axiom might seem obvious to some, its implications for Marxist historiography, and its ethical implications, are at once far-reaching and hard to put into practice—as the book's lapses from its own principles indeed show. *The Powers of the Holy* is unified by its fierce concentration on three decades of English history and impassioned desire to find in these decades a key to the processes by which power circulates and the forces of social conformism and protest operate. Ricardian and early Lancastrian England—not twelfth-century France, fourteenth-century Italy, or Tudor England—emerges as an exemplary battleground for conflicting energies which are seen simultaneously as particular to their own time and place and still alive in other forms.

I mean no slight to the collaborative work that has gone into this book by describing its authors' contributions separately; for all the interconnections between the parts of the book, and the conversational tone of both, its voices are confessedly distinct (p. 9). David Aers's three chapters, which constitute part 1, form the most narrowly argued part

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Biddick, "Becoming Ethnographic: Reading Inquisitorial Authority in *The Hammer of Witches*," chapter 2 of *Figures of Speech: The Body in Medieval Art, History, and Literature*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and David A. Robertson, *Essays in Medieval Studies: Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* (1994), vol. 11 (Chicago: Illinois Medieval Association, 1995), pp. 21–37, with a response by David Aers, pp. 38–41. Chapter 1 of the same book, Aers's own "Figuring Forth the Body of Christ: Devotion and Politics" (pp. 1–14), has its own response by Biddick (pp. 15–20). This interesting exchange is clearly drawn on in the book under review but oddly is never cited.

of the book and arouse in this reader the strongest reactions. In these chapters, discussions of *Piers Plowman* and the *Revelation of Love* develop out of a respectful and important critique of Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. This study is taken partly as a major work of feminist historiography, partly as a representative of a longer scholarly tradition of writing about late-medieval affective spirituality. Arguing that scholars have always paraphrased affective piety, rather than analyzing it, Aers seeks to denaturalize the influential practice of *imitatio Christi* that revolved around passionate identification with Christ in his suffering humanity. Aers notes that "the dominant figurations of Christ's body, including its alleged 'feminization', were made dominant, constituted as dominant, maintained as dominant," in large part by a conservative church and civic hierarchy (p. 34; Aers's italics). It seems to follow that Bynum's hugely influential thesis—that the identification with Christ's humanity through "feast and fast" practiced by late-medieval holy women was a source of empowerment for these women—must be wrong. Far from developing personal or collective autonomy by their self-identification with Christ's suffering humanity, these women (like the modern scholars who have idealized them) reproduced the contours of an official discourse that allowed them the shadow, not the reality, of power. (That is, presumably, they did so in so far as they thought and behaved the way Bynum says they did; Aers's target here is not the holy women themselves but affective piety, and he does not explore the implications of his argument for our understanding of the beguines, Poor Clares, nuns, and religious and lay visionaries who are Bynum's main focus.)

Finally, Aers finds recognition of the true nature of affective piety in Wycliffite and Lollard protests against it (chapter 2)—as expressed in, e.g., *The Testimony of William Thorpe* and the Lollard emphasis on Christ as a preacher—as well as in *Piers Plowman* (chapter 2) and, more unexpectedly, the *Revelation of Love* (chapter 3). In *Piers Plowman*, Christ is active, not passive, his death is a culmination of his life but far from being its sole significant incident, and his humanity unites him with other humans in their multiple passions, rather than being summed up by his own singular one. In Julian's *Revelation*, which feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Robertson have sought to analyze in terms of Bynum's thesis about women's empowerment through their bodiliness, Julian in fact constantly moves away from affective piety and its emphasis on Christ as a suffering body, systematically baffling readerly expectations. Indeed, Aers's analysis of the *Revelation* constructs its progress from the

early visions to the later reflections as a progressive rejection of affective piety. In this revisionist account of late-fourteenth-century religious history, Julian joins Langland and the Lollards in a common (if variously nuanced) critique of the “dominant figuration” of Christ’s life, in protest against the hierarchization of church and state that this figuration was designed to promote.

This is an important argument that deserves attention as the most cogent critique of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* yet produced and as a demonstration of the range and international importance of the “reformist” thinking produced by late medieval England. (The argument also generates an extremely helpful close reading of parts of Julian’s *Revelation*; the material on *Piers Plowman*, by contrast, I found less deeply engaging than some of Aers’s other discussions of the poem.) Yet I have serious disagreements both with what the argument asserts and implies and with the way it is made. Aers’s and Staley’s introduction had me anticipating a critique of Bynum’s “empowerment” thesis that would argue that any detailed study of a specific period of medieval religious history would show her account of holy women, affective piety, and food symbolism to be overgeneralized, and hence simplistic in its assumptions about the nature of “power.” But in fact Aers’s critique is every bit as grandiose as the thesis it attacks, adopting broad-brush definitions of power and affective piety, and too often amplifying Bynum’s always nuanced sense of the tension between center and margin, institutions and reformists, into a fully fledged dichotomy between a powerfully conservative church hierarchy and small bands of plucky dissidents. (The discussion of power on pages 7–9, which objects to Foucault’s later rejection of Marxist notions of power, is moving, but to my mind fails to take Foucault’s formulations seriously.) Indeed, while I am sure this was not Aers’s intention, feminists may take his study as using his Marxist methodology to reinscribe a traditional, pre-Bynum view of medieval holy women (other than Julian) as compliantly marginal. Having pointed the finger at Bynum’s tendency to paraphrase, rather than analyze, the structure of affective piety, Aers proceeds to do the very same for Lollard critiques of that piety, passionately identifying with the terms of these critiques in their polemical understanding of Passion meditation and image veneration, and portraying those who produced them in much the same heroizing language Bynum uses of holy women. Despite the invocation of a variety of reformist positions, we come away from this study with the sense that affective piety was simply bad, and

that those who engaged in it were reduced to victimhood by their engagement. Only the opiate that Nicholas Love (following St. Paul) calls “spiritual milk,” not any more challenging liquor, was ever sucked from Christ’s wounds. Moreover, Aers’s respect for those who gave their lives to insist on this point in late-fourteenth-century England gives an apocalyptic aura to his presentation of the period, which seems in his account to have had no past and only the most depressing immediate future. The literary history of England before 1380 and after 1410 is a shadowy presence here, and scholars who take a longer chronological view (such as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton or Larry Scanlon) seem to have little impact. Even Margery Kempe, who would have had a lot to say about Aers’s argument, and could prove a stumbling block for him, has only a walk-on part as a representative devotional conservative (pages 55–56). Given the developed sense of history in all the writers Aers considers, not to mention his own belief in the importance of historical work, this acceptance of our field’s too-pronounced emphasis on “the age of Chaucer” at the expense of the equally important eras from which it came and to which it led seems a pity.

It is still very hard to write dissident analyses of medieval religion, and Aers’s adoption of a broadly Protestant critique of the period that belongs in a tradition going back as far as Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* is both understandable and, in this case, highly productive. But to analyze the impact of a complex phenomenon such as affective piety, and the rejection of that piety by some, requires a deeper acknowledgment of the multiplicity of the forms affectivity could take, and of the constantly shifting balances of cultural and social power, than Aers’s argument is able to make. If Julian rejects many aspects of the body- and Passion-centered spirituality within which some have understood her, she does not do so simply, but constructs a theology that carefully straddles the very divide between reformism and orthodox devotion that the first two chapters of *The Powers of the Holy* presents as unbridgeable. Julian’s sense of her personal and intellectual loyalties, like that of so many of her contemporaries, including Langland and Chaucer, is likely to have been conflicted—it’s almost impossible to imagine, for example, how she would have read *The Testimony of William Thorpe*, or *The Lantern of Light*, or Love’s strictures against the Lollards in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. For, as Staley indeed insists in a later chapter, “almost any passage in the *Showings* [i.e., *Revelation of Love*] yields rich evidence of Julian’s refusal to oppose systems to one another” (p. 177). Similarly,

the fact that Langland's account of the Passion is elliptical and carefully historicized does not mean he would have disapproved of the fervid Passion meditations in *The Prickyng of Love*, nor that much of *Piers Plowman* cannot itself be seen as an expression of a version of "affective piety." Aers has issued a characteristically incisive challenge to scholars of medieval spirituality, and provided a corrective to the idealized picture of late-medieval English devotion in Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*, whose conservative pietism is implicitly the target of many pages of this book. But Aers has not yet, any more than Duffy, presented us with a version of late-medieval English religious history that can be accepted without a good deal of talking back.

Lynn Staley's two main contributions to this book, a second chapter on Julian of Norwich and a long study of "Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity," make for equally absorbing reading. Less thesis-driven than Aers's three chapters, her approach to her material is more consistent with the one outlined in the joint introduction to the book and reaffirmed in its conclusion. Here, the complexity of the religious scene in late-fourteenth-century England and its importance to our understanding of other aspects of Ricardian culture are at the forefront of the argument. Staley's discussion of Julian's *Revelation* takes the form of a comparative analysis of the earlier and later versions of the text, both of which she sees as products of the 1380s and 1390s, although she explores the generic roots of the Short Text in particular as far back as the English epistles of Richard Rolle, written in the 1340s. (Her discussion of Julian's relation to Rolle and Hilton on pages 131–39 is especially useful for the way it links the strategies employed by the Short Text with specifically English traditions of spiritual writing.) Staley parallels the evolution from an "experience"-based account in the Short Text to a more confidently authoritative (but simultaneously sometimes theologically evasive) voice in the Long Text with the "crisis of authority" she sees as crucial to the period and its literature. Constructing a mosaic picture of this "crisis" as it was perceived by different kinds of people and enacted in the growth of systematic religious persecution during the period, she attempts to find links between these harsh realities and the apparently inward-looking world of Julian's text. I applaud this difficult undertaking. Julian's skill in concealing the "crises" that the *Revelation of Love* cannot help noticing within the labyrinthine windings of her prose makes it all the more important to winkle them out, if we are to learn how to read this astonishing text in relation to its period.

Although I would not make all the connections Staley does—despite the objections to the view raised in this book (e.g., pp. 79–80, n. 4), I still think the Long Text may be partly an early-fifteenth-century work—her linkage of text and historical context is well done, especially in her consideration of the Lord and Servant parable. (It also provides the best model I have encountered for instructors willing to attempt the difficult task of incorporating serious historical analysis into courses on Middle English literature.) The two Julian essays in this volume are the first I know that simply assume her importance as a vital witness to fourteenth-century English religious life. Here, as in Aers's essay, the assumption pays handsome dividends.

Staley's second essay, which reads almost like a sketch for a separate book, again pursues a chronological approach to its subject, analyzing Chaucer's presentation of sanctity in three of *The Canterbury Tales*—*The Second Nun's Tale*, *The Tale of Melibee*, and *The Clerk's Tale*—in order to show how these poems engage dialectically with the politico-religious events of the period. All three readings depend on the same association between literary authority and political power developed in the previous chapter, and in this sense should be taken as speculative historical meditations, rather than closely argued historical analyses (this is, indeed, just what makes them so approachable for students). I wish that this eighty-page chapter had been organized in a way that made it easier to read in more than one sitting, and that the parallels Staley is drawing had been made more explicit; as things are, her analysis of the *Tales* tends to disappear under the mass of contextualizing material, especially early in the chapter. But my slight irritation with this problem is entirely because what she has to say is so interesting, making better sense of Chaucer's surprising interest in the first two tales she treats than any other study I know, and going beyond the findings of other recent commentators on *The Clerk's Tale* by not simply explicating but actually attempting to account for the deep gloominess of Chaucer's later thinking. After a period when we have had to choose between "Chaucer the radical" and "Chaucer the time-server," with little to mediate between these two figures, Staley offers a picture of the poet that draws much of its perceptive charity from her analysis of Julian. As the book's epilogue has it, Chaucer and Julian emerge as "two profoundly intelligent minds at once grappling with the need to think independently of dominant codes and the inherent regulations imposed by conventional models *and* avoiding any decisive rupture with the codes themselves"

(p. 263; Staley and Aers's emphasis). The balance of this statement, as well as its refusal to respect the old dichotomies between sacred and secular that still structure our field, should inspire much further thinking along the lines pursued here.

Despite the periodic dogmatism of this book, it deserves our admiration for its acute readings of difficult and important texts, for its desire to raise questions as well to settle them (the epilogue indeed lists several such questions) and, above all, for the sheer energy and joy of its approach to its subject matters. The book will probably make some enemies or, at least, confirm old enmities, perhaps most heatedly as a result of its discussions of gender and power, and of its particular brand of Marxist historicism. It remains, though, a wonderfully creative contribution to Middle English studies: a book that has the knack of leaving its readers at once better informed and at the same time freer to pursue their own inquiries into the field, invigorated by what they have learned. If scholarly collaborations are this much fun, and this productive, let us have more of them.

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ANN W. ASTELL. *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi, 254. \$35.00.

It is difficult to do justice in a brief review to such a plenitude of learning marshalled in support of a catena of fresh, bold, and provocative arguments. Ann Astell's multifaceted thesis elaborated first in her preface asserts that *The Canterbury Tales* is a *summa* whose social estate exposition in *The General Prologue* is succeeded by a philosophical *summa* in exemplary tales; that the contest of tales mirrors the scholastic *quaestiones* and academic competitions of Chaucer's day; and that the Ellesmere redactor orders the tales into a pattern of planetary descent and ascent which makes of pilgrimage and its roadside entertainment on the bumpy road to Canterbury a smooth philosophical soul-journey through the planetary spheres. All of this constitutes, she argues adroitly, an intellectual dialogue with Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, book