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Review Essay: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*

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Annie Samson's "The Southern English Legendary: Constructing a Context" examines a popular work and tries to put it within the framework of the thirteenth century.

In any collection of articles, especially one diverse as this one, it is impossible to analyze the contents in a brief space. Together these articles provide useful and interesting insights into the life of thirteenth-century England.

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Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, University of California Press, 1987.

A companion work to Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), Bynum's latest book studies food-related religious practices (e.g., rigorous fasting, eucharistic devotion, and feeding miracles) and food imagery (e.g., lactation) in the spirituality of medieval women. From a feminist perspective, Bynum argues the thesis that food was a more important motif in the piety of medieval *women* than of men. More generally, she presents her study as a corrective to the view that medieval spirituality focused on poverty and chastity as the central practices of religious life.

Many will recognize Bynum as a reputable scholar in women's studies from her previous book *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (University of California Press, 1982). Bynum there described the use of *female* imagery for the divine by both women and men during the Middle Ages. The results of that study can easily be appropriated by contemporary feminist theologians as an enrichment of religious language. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, while no less scholarly, presents an account of medieval women's spirituality likely to be perceived as disquieting.

Bynum recounts case after case of women reported as living without food, except perhaps for partaking of the eucharist; as engaging in abstinence to the point that certain normal bodily functions ceased; and as drinking pus from the sick they tended in place of ordinary food. While many of these accounts come from *legends* about holy persons and may well represent exaggerations of the actual facts, such legends still merit attention as setting out a vision of the ideal spiritual life. And the vision is of a spirituality which glorifies apparently pathological conditions. The impression of the unhealthiness of medieval women's spirituality is reinforced by Bynum's contention that women used food behavior as a means of *manipulating* their environment, for example, as a way of rejecting unwanted marriages

or avoiding menial familial duties, or of appropriating teaching and reforming roles which the religious tradition reserved for men.

Bynum's study leaves the reader challenged. The Middle Ages, particularly in contrast to our contemporary society, is often considered a paradigm of religious devotion. How is one to make sense of the type of spirituality Bynum describes?

Bynum constructs much of her account from medieval sources considered obscure. The text is appropriately accompanied by extensive reference notes. The study is commendable and useful in calling attention to a fascinating body of medieval literature that has largely been ignored. In addition to using the written records that are the standard materials of the historian, Bynum examines medieval visual art, perceptively describing the ways in which such works reflect and embody the spirituality of the period.

Bynum's book is definitely not for a student audience but should prove intriguing to a wide range of scholars. As well as appealing to those engaged in women's studies, it can be profitably read by medievalists, by theologians interested in asceticism, hagiography, or sacramental theology, and by psychologists attracted to the varied phenomena of religious experience.

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Graciela S. Daichman, *Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature*, Syracuse University Press, 1986.

In her revised doctoral thesis, Daichman argues that the wayward nun in medieval literature is a reflection of the women found in Western European nunneries of the later Middle Ages. Daichman examines nuns cited in episcopal reports for infractions of bishopric rules ranging from wearing too much jewelry to becoming pregnant. The Church hierarchy considered these nuns potentially dangerous because they might lead other nuns away from the religious life.

In the historical tradition of Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries* and Derek Baker's *Medieval Women*, Daichman offers a closer look at the social background and character of the women who became nuns in the later Middle Ages. Yet, like the literary scholars John Steadman and Roger Walker, Daichman also uses the historical perspective and the literature of this period to examine miscreant nuns who were represented in medieval literature.

Historians will not find much new information in this work, but both historians and literary scholars will benefit from the cross-disciplinary approach. A lecturer in Spanish and English at Rice University, Daichman studies the types of women who entered Western European nunneries