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Holy Feast and Holy Famine, The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (review)

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Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast, the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. xvi + 444.

This book seeks to examine the significance of food practices and symbolism to religious women during the Middle Ages. While much has been written on poverty and chastity as religious practices of great importance during this time period, Bynum argues that medieval people were much more obsessed with food than money or sex. "Medieval people often saw gluttony as the major form of lust, fasting as the most painful renunciation, and eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God" (p. 2). Food practices were especially central to women's spirituality, not only through fasting, but through Eucharistic devotion and charitable acts of feeding others.

Bynum's book is divided into three parts. The first part seeks to provide background both on the religious options open to women in the Middle Ages and on medieval fasting and Eucharistic piety. The second section gathers and examines the evidence concerning women's food practices. Here Bynum is careful to seek out feminine voices when at all possible. She makes use of the writings of Hadewijch, Beatrice of Nazareth, Catherine of Siena, and Catherine of Genoa in addition to the *Nonnenbücher* and the various *vitae* of contemporary female saints. Not only fasting, but all associations with food are examined: food distribution, miraculous exudings of milk and/or oil from the body, the practice of devouring the filth of sick bodies, Eucharistic devotion. Metaphors and symbolism for food are used repeatedly in the writings of Medieval women: hunger as longing for God, eating the Eucharist as becoming one with God, suckling at the breast of the Virgin or the wound of Christ, suckling the infant Jesus, the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the broken and bleeding body of Christ.

The final section of Bynum's book offers some explanations for medieval religious women's food practices. Bynum acknowledges modern theories of anorexia but does not see sufficient detail in medieval accounts to make a diagnosis possible. Even when some evidence is present, such theories are only helpful in individual cases and are not useful in addressing the cultural and religious questions surrounding the widespread phenomena. Bynum sees women's food practices as functioning in a variety of ways: to control circumstances (i.e., reject marriage, family wealth), to criticize and control those in authority (detecting unconsecrated or unworthily consecrated hosts, visions that circumvented church authority), to serve others (food distribution to the poor), and to encounter God

(receiving the Eucharist). More important than function is the notion of symbol. Bynum rejects the idea put forth by most modern historians of religion that the practices of these medieval women symbolized a dualistic rejection of body or an internalization of misogyny (pp. 208-9, see especially notes 66-71). The key is not their self-denial but their embrace of the suffering human body of Christ on the Cross as symbolized through the Eucharist. "They gloried in the pain, the exudings, the somatic distortions that made their bodies parallel to the consecrated wafer on the altar and the man on the cross" (p. 296).

Holy Feast and Holy Fast, well-documented and well-argued, makes a valuable contribution to scholarship. Its greatest strength is Bynum's ability to examine what to the modern mind are extreme, if not pathological practices, from the point of view of their practitioners. One is left with a respect for and deeper understanding of the religious fervor of these medieval women. While not advocating their extreme ascetic manifestations, Bynum uncovers a rich complex of religious symbolism that is not without relevance to any age.

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Leigh Arrathoon, ed. *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*. Rochester, Michigan: Solaris Press, 1986. Pp. xxv + 430.

These fifteen essays explore one of the cornerstones of Chaucer's narrative art—the "translation" of traditional materials to form a new work. In her introduction, Leigh Arrathoon follows the footsteps of Percy Lubbock, whose *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) noted that even as we read the text, "it melts and shifts in the memory." For Arrathoon and her fellow contributors, this process of transformation is shared by both Chaucer and the literary critic. Both face experience—whether in the medieval manuscript or in its mysterious creative process—even as its shape and design on paper slip away as quickly as they examine them.

Three essays reveal Chaucer's "metamorphosis" of his allusive materials. For John Fleming, the image of "smokey reyn," traced from Vergil through Ovid to Boccaccio and Jean de Meun provides a "muted cacophony of textual associations Latin and vernacular alike" for the text of *Troilus* (18). The purpose of all Chaucer's lucid use of language and fa-