

**UCLA**

**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion (review)

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5v16q9px>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 22(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

**Author**

Diehl, Peter D.

**Publication Date**

1991-10-01

Peer reviewed

pretation that might give closure to the text. The ornithological realism forces the reader to suspend interpretation and concentrate instead on the verbal play between the birds: "even while the poet encourages us to choose between the two disputants, at virtually every pass he undercuts the assumptions and evidence upon which such a choice might reasonably be based. His likely aim is to make us confront the alternatively daunting and delightful complexity of our earthly condition" (230). This is the strain that is repeated through every subsequent reading in the book.

*Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* does many things well. Although its close readings are too repetitive for the work's inordinate length to seem wholly necessary, the text is generally well written. Moreover, Reed proves how recent critical questions can profitably promote total reconstructions of medieval genres. His learned, brilliantly organized study must surely enrich our appreciation of the complexity of medieval debate poetry.

Kari Schoening Diehl  
 Department of English  
 University of California, Los Angeles

**Caroline Walker Bynum**, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991; distributed by the M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London), 426 pp.

In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Caroline Walker Bynum has gathered together and revised seven articles written during the 1980s. During that decade she emerged as one of the most original scholars of medieval religious history, publishing among other works *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Written in the same period in which Bynum researched the latter book, some of the earlier essays in the present collection address themes familiar to its readers. Others break new ground. Bynum's increasing use of artistic evidence in the later essays deserves particular mention.

Bynum provides an overall multivalent theme in the title of the work. The twin metaphors of fragmentation and redemption describe the focus on fragments of human bodies in some of the essays, and particularly in

the last one, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts." Here the author discusses the extremely literal interpretation generally given in the High Middle Ages to the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body. This conception led, for example, to artists' depictions of wild beasts regurgitating portions of the flesh of their human victims at the Last Judgment, so that the human bodies could be made whole, and Thomas Aquinas's meditations on the problems that resurrection posed for cannibals and their victims. In a less grisly fashion, the metaphor also applies to historical method, a subject that she addresses in the introductory essay, "In Praise of Fragments: History in the Comic Mode," written for this volume.

In this introduction, Bynum addresses the extraordinary ferment among historians in recent years over issues of historical methodology and the validity of historical inquiry. She argues in effect for a fragmentary approach to history—no historian should think that she can somehow know the totality of the subject that she studies; historical interpretation addresses at best fragments of the past. Furthermore, Bynum notes that no single methodology can produce this factitious totality of understanding, nor does she subscribe to any one *a priori*: "In all my work I have struggled first with medieval texts, and discovered only subsequently that my formulation of their significance has resonances with (although also differences from) such theoretical positions as postmodern feminism, deconstruction or poststructural symbolic anthropology" (22). Thus the analytical approaches made available by feminism or anthropology, while often of considerable heuristic value, do not always provide an adequate interpretation of the historical problems that Bynum investigates. She develops this point in the three essays that follow the introduction.

The first of these, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," demonstrates limitations in the applicability of this anthropologist's "social dramas" as explanatory models for crucial transitions in life. As Bynum summarizes it, this model has four stages: "breach between social elements, crisis, adjustment or redress, and, finally, either reintegration of the group or recognition of irreparable breach" (29). The third stage is marked by "liminality," a transgressing of bounds and norms, the suspension of normal rules and roles. This often includes inversion of normal status—males mimicking female roles or children wearing masks of adults or monsters at Halloween, for example—and applies both to patterns of social behavior and

narratives describing transitions. Bynum's critique of this model turns on a simple but fundamental point—it fails to explain social development for half (or slightly more) of humanity: “Turner's ideas describe the stories and symbols of men better than those of women. . . . [W]hen women recount their own lives, the themes are less climax, conversion, reintegration and triumph, the liminality of reversal and triumph, than continuity” (32). Women's stories, or at least those which Bynum has studied closely, the lives of and writings by and about female saints and religious women in the later Middle Ages, do not conform to the pattern described by Turner. To cite two examples, Francis of Assisi could be and was compared to the Virgin Mary (in Bonaventure's life of Francis) at the moment that he renounced his father and was converted to a life of absolute poverty, but Margery Kempe never described herself as possessing male attributes during her mystical experiences. Mystical they were; liminal they were not. Bynum does not argue that Turner's conceptions of social drama and liminality are useless, but only that they are incomplete explanations of social behavior, more useful for one element of society (men) than another (women).

The limited space of a review will allow only fragmentary treatment of the other essays in the book. In “The Mysticism and Asceticism of Medieval Women: Some Comments on the Typologies of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch,” Bynum demonstrates the inadequacies of the two sociologists' models of religious life for the religious experience of women, while in “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,” she criticizes Steinberg for his exclusive focus on the masculine elements in medieval and renaissance portrayals of Christ by showing the significance of feminine or quasi-feminine attributes frequently found in portraits of Christ from the same periods and often from the same artists.

The other four essays primarily address various topics in the religious life of the later Middle Ages and only secondarily treat problems of method relevant to the study of these questions. In the context of the present volume, however, the methodological considerations assume new resonances and importance. The last of these essays is the study of doctrines of resurrection mentioned above. The other three deal directly with issues related to gender and medieval Christian religious practices. While informed by feminist thought to a great degree, these essays argue against a facile presentist reading of medieval texts about women. In “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” Bynum writes,

"The recent outpouring of work on the history of the body, especially the female body, has largely equated body with sexuality and understood discipline or control of body as the rejection of sex or of women. We must wipe away such assumptions before we come to medieval source material. Medieval images of the body have less to do with sexuality than with fertility and decay" (182). Thus a Foucaultian reading, for example, of medieval writings dealing with women's bodies and women's religious experiences runs the risk of grossly misinterpreting the meanings of these practices for medieval people. Bynum argues similarly in another essay, "' . . . And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," that the assumption of many recent studies, that women simply and unconsciously internalized the well-known medieval traditions of misogyny, blinds scholars to the intricate nuances attached to gender in medieval religion: "But if we look carefully at what medieval people wrote, how they worshiped, and how they behaved, their notions about gender seem vastly more complex than recent attention to the misogynist tradition would suggest" (152). Much of Bynum's work is itself a product of the increased awareness of gender in historical study which feminism has evoked, but she refuses to force a twentieth-century ideology on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century people.

The last quotation epitomizes what Bynum has tried to do in compiling these essays into a book. In the introduction, she calls on medieval historians to end their self-imposed isolation from the theoretical debates that animate much current work in other fields of history and in the social sciences. Several of the essays demonstrate the possibilities for fruitful research available by applying new methods and new theoretical frameworks to medieval texts. At the same time, Bynum also points out some of the pitfalls inherent in the simplistic application of these new insights and methods to the complexities of the medieval past. Medievalists should heed her call to explore new methodologies and theories; too many seem content to reexamine old topics with only the traditional questions and methods of the field. We should also note the cautionary examples she provides of the dangers of reductionist approaches to the past that may be produced by a blind infatuation with theory. This message transcends the individual essays, valuable though they are in their own right.

Having thus praised this challenging work, I would like to register one mundane complaint. While the text and pictures are well coordinated, the notes are at the end of the book, an all-too-frequent publishing practice that leads readers to the distracting necessity of having to flip back

and forth between text and notes. This is particularly a problem with a writer such as Bynum, who does not limit herself to merely bibliographical matters in the notes but also makes some important remarks there.

Peter D. Diehl  
Department of History  
University of California, Los Angeles

**A. P. Vlasto**, *A Linguistic History of Russia to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1988), 408 + xx pp.

This important work, the first history of Russian written expressly for English-language readers since W. K. Matthews's flawed *Russian Historical Grammar* (1960), will be of interest not only to specialists in Slavic linguistics but also to scholars in other fields such as general linguistics and cultural history. Vlasto writes in concise, nontechnical language and has a balanced approach that avoids unnecessary polemicizing. This makes his grammar particularly accessible and useful for the non-Slavist.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Vlasto begins the first chapter, "Preliminaries," with a concise account of the earliest homeland, migrations, and linguistic differentiation of the Slavic tribes, the beginnings of Slavic literacy in Moravia and Bulgaria, and its transplantation, along with other elements of Byzantine culture, from Bulgaria to Russia—subjects that he previously treated in his masterful book *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom* (1970). In the same chapter, Vlasto examines the chief phonological and morphological differences between the East Slavic dialects and Old Church Slavonic (OCS), the language of liturgical texts imported from Bulgaria, and gives a historical sketch of the orthography up to the modern period. His account of the varying Church Slavonic and Russian reflexes of Common Slavic *\*tj* and *\*dj* (13–15) is particularly lucid. By contrast, his uneven survey of the "principal early documents" (Table I, pp. 24–30) might more accurately be termed a list of the most anthologized texts.

In chapters 2 and 3 Vlasto provides an overview of the development of Russian phonology and inflectional morphology from Late Common Slavic up to the modern language. (Vlasto does not treat the derivational morphology, except in a few special cases, such as the demonstrative