
Marginalia Reviews

Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe

Caroline Walker Bynum

(New York: Zone Books, 2011)

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Should we venerate worms that have fed on the bodies of saints? Can Christ's foreskin bi-locate? And what is happening, exactly, when miraculous bleeding hosts start to look a bit mouldy round the edges? These are some of the questions that exercised medieval minds when they thought about "holy matter", the subject of Caroline Walker Bynum's latest book.

Christian Materiality develops, and is very much in conversation with, Bynum's previous work: on bodily disintegration and reintegration (*The Resurrection of the Body*, 1994); on conceptions of physical change (*Metamorphosis and Identity*, 2001); and on transformation miracles and the nature of holy matter (*Wonderful Blood*, 2007). As ever, her approach is consummately interdisciplinary, and she moves easily – and often – between iconographic, theological, literary, and historical registers. The period covered is 1100–1500 and examples are adduced from all over northern Europe. It has been a good year for old body parts, and Bynum's book provides a useful theoretical gloss not only on Charles Freeman's popular history of relics – *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (Yale, 2011) – but also on the British Museum's spectacular exhibition of reliquaries, *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (British Museum Press, 2011).

Bynum's focus here is on 'paradox' (a word she sometimes overuses): principally the paradox implicit in any Christian conceptualization of the physical stuff that is created 'matter' (*materia*), particularly when it is subject to miraculous change. As she repeatedly asserts, contingent, physical matter is 'both the opposite to and the disclosure of God'; it is both 'the changeable stuff of not-God and the locus of God revealed.' Bynum recognizes, of course, that it is the incarnational aspects of the Christian faith that give a particular edge to its ideas about matter. However, she seeks to go 'beyond the body' that has been the focus of so much recent interdisciplinary work in the period (observing that such work 'has tended to substitute the term "body" for "human individual" or "person"'). She therefore stresses the theological importance of God's creation as well as His incarnation, and the book's strikingly beautiful cover appropriately comprises a detail from a fourteenth-century depiction of God creating the world. Her focus is on *corpora* understood not as human 'bodies' but 'in the larger sense of *objects* – the stuff of the universe,' both animate and inanimate. And above all, the book seeks to investigate why 'it was so extraordinarily difficult for people in the later Middle Ages to see matter as truly dead, in the sense of inert, rather than rotten or fertile – that is, percolating with threatening, yet glorious physicality.'

The first chapter ('Visual Matter') discusses a variety of devotional objects including statues, paintings, reliquaries, monstrances, and folding altarpieces. Here Bynum engages fruitfully with art historians including Herbert Kessler and Hans Belting, and broaches a number of potent if familiar issues: the 'three-dimensional,' 'tactile' and 'handleable' nature of much medieval art; its self-conscious materiality ('medieval artists expected viewers to notice and admire the stuff they employed *as stuff*'); and the ambivalent nature of the iconoclastic impulse (with 'its paradoxical sense that images are threatening both because they are dead and because they are not').

The focus of the following chapter ('The Power of Objects') is theological and devotional engagement with the miraculous matter of 'incurruptible' relics and bleeding Eucharistic hosts. Inconveniently, this was matter that tended to go mouldy, a fact requiring elaborate explanation as well as miracles of renewal. Here, citing recent arguments from Steven Justice, Bynum emphasises that such holy objects elicited from clergy and laity alike 'a complex stance in which belief jostled constantly with interrogation' so that the doubt provoked by miraculous matter was almost as important a part of its power as the belief it also inspired. In this section, Bynum returns to the celebrated case of the blood-spotted hosts of Wilsnack in northern Germany (once visited by Margery Kempe), a case she has treated more fully in *Wonderful Blood*.

In the third chapter ('Holy Pieces') Bynum examines aspects of medieval thinking about the relationship between part and whole, particularly as this relates to body-part relics and Eucharistic 'concomitance.' 'Fragmentation,' she observes, 'was central to the Christian cult of Holy Matter' since Christians were always busy dividing bodies for religious purposes – either the bodies of saints divided into relics or that of Christ divided in the Eucharist. Bynum argues that it was decay rather than disintegration that was feared the most. 'Reliquaries glorify and sublimate partition. What they deny is putrefaction.' With Christ, on the other hand, 'part is whole.' Concomitance – the theory that Christ is wholly present in every particle and fragment of consecrated host – had been developed in the eleventh century to explain why he was not damaged or destroyed when the host was broken and chewed. This 'theological use of synecdoche,' which became a late medieval 'habit of mind,' also allowed Christ to be present at the right hand of the Father in resurrected glory and on the altar at every celebration of the Eucharist. The 'bi-location' of his foreskin (both in his glorified body and in discrete earthly relics) was similarly accounted for.

Further theological and philosophical attempts to *explain* the miraculous behaviour of holy matter are discussed in Bynum's final chapter ('Matter and Miracles'), which charts an increased use of natural philosophy to explore theological issues in the later medieval period. The chapter also includes a particularly interesting discussion of the important influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (a poem whose first and last books emphasise 'the fecundity of things forever breaking into new forms') as well as that of Aristotle's *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Medieval people, Bynum emphasises, saw matter 'not only as stuff [...] but also as *dynamic* stuff'; for them there was 'a kind of propensity or yearning in matter.' Following Isidore of Seville, therefore, whose influential *Etymologies* identifies a connection between *materia* and *mater*, they regarded matter as 'fertile, maternal, labile' and – that word again – 'percolating.'

Bynum's style, in this book as elsewhere, might itself be described as per-

colating. She tends to keep in constant circulation a repertoire of ideas and examples, repeatedly reprising earlier remarks in later sections but without always adding substantially to the argument. This makes for a sometimes repetitious book, and an overall thesis about materiality that is, so to speak, difficult to get hold of. (This is not helped by a tendency to make erratic chronological and topographical leaps.) The book makes no mention of the peculiar "materiality" of medieval drama, and is strangely reticent about the subject of angels – that other order of creation that is entirely immaterial. Those caveats aside, it should be stressed that this is, as one would expect, an enormously learned and insightful rumination on the subject. The volume as a whole is beautifully produced, complete with 50 full-page monochrome illustrations. Irritatingly, however, there is no bibliography.

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Tradition, Translation, Trauma: The Classic and the Modern
Ed. Jan Parker and Timothy Mathews
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
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£70

The object of this volume, which arose from the collaboration of two research groups and from a series of international colloquia was, to quote Jan Parker, 'to release "translation" from its disciplinary home into an interdisciplinary questioning' (p. 17). In the tapestry of intertwining and interrelated themes and sub-themes introduced by the editors and contributors, this object has clearly been attained. The extraordinary breadth of subject and the wide variety of interlocking issues which make up the fabric of the volume combine to produce a kaleidoscope of theory which will present a different picture to each reader.

In the Prologue, Susan Bassnett speaks of the various meanings of the word 'translation,' but the one semantic shade which she does not mention is the Latin *translatio*, as part of the medieval concept of *translatio studii*, which seems to me precisely what this book is about: the transference of knowledge, transference in the sense of both appropriation by a new host culture and in the sense of transformation.

Both on the level of discussion and of technique, each of the contributions to the volume raises fundamental questions about how we see and interpret texts. 'Interpretation' is perhaps a particularly useful term in this respect as it overlaps semantically not only with 'translation,' but also with that other major theme of many of the contributions: 're-enactment' (for the latter see, in particular, the essays of Jan Parker and Jane Montgomery Griffiths). The re-creation and re-interpretation of classical texts are major themes in the discussions of the re-inventions of the *Aeneid* by Frederick Ahl, the *Iliad* by David Hopkins, and Cicero by Matthew Fox. Indeed, much of the volume deals with a re-evaluation

of the Classical, and indeed history itself, and of its impact, sometimes traumatic, on the modern. Three further contributions concentrate on the issues of interpretation of the past: Pat Easterling discusses the interpretation of journeys in Sophoclean plays by both the characters and the audiences, Christopher Pendergast explores the concepts of modernity, history, and the counterfactuals, and Helena Buescu investigates the role of the visual in the negotiation with the past in *Das Áfricas*. Indeed, the attribution of the act of interpretation to the figures of the Classic (whether they are characters of historical figures) and the negotiation between that interpretation and the interpretation of the present-day audience, a feature of both Easterling and Pendergast's discussions, is a recurring idea in the volume. An example of the combination of the two is Richard Armstrong's discussion of the *Fellini Satyricon*, where a re-evaluation and reconstruction of the past is taking place in both the essay and in its subject. The main characteristic of the film, as Armstrong notes, is fragmentation and dismemberment, not only of a character, Eumolpus (Eumolpo in Fellini), but also through the fragmentation and dismemberment of the narrative which is being adapted for the screen (pp. 121-2, 124).

This brings us to the next major theme of the book: the fascination of dismemberment. This is a particularly strong (traumatic) image in the volume, and is best illustrated by Rilke's image of the Archaic Torso – the ultimate fragment, isolated from its original context, yet thereby particularly compelling (pp. 13-14). This fascination with the fragmentary is strongly reminiscent of the sculpture of Rodin (1840-1917). One thinks in particular of Rodin's torsos which imitate damaged antique statues, (see, for example <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/sculptures/torso-young-woman-arched-back> [last viewed January 14, 2011]).

Another strong parallel which might have been used to illustrate some of the points in the volume is Rodin's technique of *assemblage*, adding small plaster figures to antique pottery (for an example, see: <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/sculptures/standing-female-nude-vase> [last viewed January 14, 2011]). Translation and interpretation as *assemblage*, building on the fragments of the Classic, can be argued to be the subject of Rachel Bowlby's enquiry into the meaning of Sophocles' *Oedipus* in the twenty-first century. Her investigation of the interrelation between understandings of the play and contemporary developments in child-parent relations and familial identities in comparison with previous eras and interpretations, as exemplified by the mid-twentieth-century example of Freud, provides a fascinating insight into the subjectivity of interpretation. Jan Parker's illuminating investigation of the tragic figures of Hecuba and Electra, identifying the first with pathos and the second with trauma, also can be argued to raise the issue of *assemblage*, in particular in relation to the episode (objected to by Brecht) of the actor genuinely mourning over real ashes on-stage during a performance. The communication of trauma from character to actor to audience is also the subject of Jane Montgomery Griffiths's essay 'Trauma and the Body.' Both Parker's and Griffiths's essays illustrate how the boundaries between character and actor, actor and audience, and Classical and modern become 'fuzzy,' to borrow Lorna Hardwick's term. Similarly 'fuzzy' are the divisions between public and private, classical, traditional and modern forms of the expressions of lament discussed by Gail Holst-Warhaft.

The issue of 'fuzziness' insomuch as it entails a blurring of boundaries, is

tightly linked to the issue of evolution and mutability. In his discussion of the poetry of Ezra Pound, Mary Butts, and T. S. Eliot, Ian Patterson brings up the image of modernist verse as poetry's way of coping with the past and with change. A similar issue is raised in Wen-chin Ouyang's discussion of modernity in Arabic poetics, focusing primarily on the avant-garde Arab poet Adonis, presents the unexpected cultural encounter as trauma which becomes a 'catalyst for another modernity' (p. 191). Both these essays, and that of Jonathan Monroe, explore the role of various 'encounters' in the fluidity of the 'modern'. The same fluidity and mutability can also be observed in a genre we would tend to regard as fixed rather than fluid, the memoir, in Piotr Kuhniewicz's discussion of the various versions of Władysław Szpilman's *Śmierć Miasta* (better known in the English-speaking world as *The Pianist*).

Wen-chin Ouyang also gives us the image of modernity sandwiched between the nostalgic past and the fantasy-future (p. 196), and this is echoed by Timothy Mathews in his discussion of Noteboom, Walter Benjamin and Alberto Giacometti, when he writes of translation failing, losing the original voice, and giving in 'to the fantasy of recovery' (p. 328). The concepts of nostalgia and giving in are explored in greater detail George Rousseau's contribution.

Ultimately, this volume will be useful not only to classicists and modernists, but also to medievalists and historians: to all those who engage with the problems of translation, transmission, reception, and interpretation of the past.

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Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c.1400-1700.
Edited by E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham
(Woodbridge: Boydell&Brewer, 2010)
ISBN: 978-1-84383-547-9 (Hardcover); 255 pages

Since the scrutinizing research on Sion Abbey by John Rory Fletcher (1861-1944), rightly described by Anne Hudson as an 'indefatigable researcher' (p. 246), much scholarly interest has been devoted to the late medieval community of the Bridgettine nuns in England. Scholarship on this Bridgettine monastery founded by Henry V in 1420 ranges from investigations about book culture and religious learning (C Annette Grisé: 'Women's Devotional Reading in Late-Medieval England and the Gendered Reader,' *Medium Aevum*, 71 (2002), p. 209-225; Ann Hutchinson: 'What the Nuns Read: Literary Evidence from the English Bridgettine House, Syon Abbey,' *Mediaeval Studies*, 57 (1995), p. 205-222; Rebecca Krug: *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practise in Late Medieval England*, Ithaca, NY, 2002) to Roger Ellis' outstanding study *Viderunt eam filie syon*, *Analecta Cartusiana*, 68 (Salzburg, 1984). Ellis focuses his investigation on the spirituality of Syon that can be traced from the Middle Ages to the present day, which cemented Syon's reputation as a centre of devotion and religious zeal.

The present volume arose out of a conference on Syon Abbey and its books held at the University of Exeter in October 2005 to celebrate the deposit of medieval and early modern manuscripts from Syon Abbey in the University Library. A chronology on p. xv highlights the changeful history of Syon Abbey up to 2009. The overriding theme of this essay collection is the 'interconnection between late medieval and post-Reformation monastic history and the rapidly evolving world of communication, learning, reading and books' (p. 2). Methodologically, the present volume draws on studies concerning religious history and culture as well as research on dissemination of literacy and the transformation from manuscript to print. An in-depth introduction provides the historical context for the individual essays outlining the development of Syon from its medieval origins to its eventful post-Reformation history. It is surprising that this comprehensive and otherwise well researched introduction only mentions one study concerning Birgitta of Sweden, the founder of the Bridgettine order (p. 3 n. 6, 'the chief source for this summary is Bridget Morris: *St Birgitta of Sweden*. Woodbridge, 1999') when there are other important works to be considered (for example Claire L Sahlin: *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*. Woodbridge, 2001 or the two volumes: *Studies in St Birgitta and the Bridgettine Order*. Salzburg, *Analecta Cartusiana*, 35:19). Furthermore, the introduction fails to mention the Latin edition of Birgitta's revelations which one would expect to find in the footnotes (Bergh, Birger: *Sancta Birgitta Revelaciones*, I-VIII, 1967-2002). This points to one of the disadvantages of the volume, the lack of bibliography that would have been useful for reference.

The book is divided into four sections each comprising two essays. The first thematic strand entitled 'Brothers and Sisters' with essays by Peter Cunich and Virginia Bainbridge gives an insight into life at Syon, the community's wanderings through various forms of exile after the Reformation, and their religious learning which resonates in the books they collected. In chapter 1, 'The Brothers of Syon, 1420-1695,' Peter Cunich investigates the community of brothers at Syon and their books. The learning and intense spiritual life housed in Syon continued even after the violent suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1539 (p. 41). Cunich examines in this context the role of the brothers in implementing survival strategies for the community.

Chapter 2, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415-1600,' by Virginia Bainbridge focuses on the culture of learning and the dense network of leading intellectuals within Syon Abbey. Bainbridge presents extensive examples of books owned by the nuns without giving a concise conclusion. Furthermore, Bainbridge presents the Bridgettine brothers as sole mediators of learning (p. 95), but Susanne Buerkle has shown how limited the *cura monialium* could have been, in this case for the Dominican nuns of Southern Germany. (Bürkle, Susanne: *Literatur im Kloster*. Tübingen, Basel: 1999). However, Bainbridge's research is excellent in providing ample evidence of links between Syon with the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (p. 102) and in demonstrating how the interaction with leading intellectuals helped to create a unique atmosphere of spiritual devotion and learning.

The second section, 'Syon Abbey and the Book Trade,' begins with 'Syon and the English Market for Continental Printed Books: The Incunable Phase.' Vincent Gillespie establishes the connection between book quantity and pastoral duties of the Syon brothers, who needed access to a vast library in order to fulfil

their responsibility (p. 108). This led to an eager acquisition of printed books even before 1500 which might be connected with the arrival of Thomas Westham as Confessor General from Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, who brought with him his extensive library in the form of *Sammelbände*. Gillespie's contribution offers an in-depth account of the book and print culture at Syon and the added Appendix, 'Identified Incunables in the Syon Registrum' (p. 126-128), proves helpful for future research.

The second essay in this section, "'Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon": Syon Abbey and English Books,' by historian C Annette Gris  explores Syon's contribution to the pre-Reformation English book market (p. 130). Gris  emphasises the shared characteristics of Syon literary production such as didactic and practical focus (p. 140). Her restricting statement (p. 142) that many of the characteristics of Syon texts are typical for printed texts of the period indicates how problematic it is to connect a literary tradition solely with one religious house, especially when one bears in mind the collaboration and book trade between Sheen Charterhouse and Syon Abbey. However, her final conclusion makes a valid point: 'Syon offered a more programmatic attempt to publish devotional works than any other monastic house produced [...]' (p. 154).

The third part, 'The Bridgettines in Exile,' features an essay called 'Continuity and Isolation: The Bridgettines of Syon in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century.' Walker maps the Bridgettines' experience of exile in the Low Countries and France before finally setting sail for Lisbon in 1594 under the patronage of the Spanish king Philipp II. Walker demonstrates the 'nuns' goal of returning to their native soil' (p. 176) as the driving force which led to their return to England in 1861.

The second essay in this part, 'Books and Reading in Syon Abbey, Lisbon in the Seventeenth Century,' by Caroline Bowden, ties in with the theme of exile in regard to reception of books. As Bowden points out, different reading practises were important for the community: for example, performing the office, which required reading and singing in Latin as well as communal reading to reinforce conventional ideas. Bowden summarizes that a sense of continuity was established in their reading practice as the book collection in Lisbon confirms Syon's reputation as a learned community (p. 201). Both essays in this section make a valid contribution to Bridgettine scholarship and illuminate the difficulties that the nuns overcame in finally re-settling in England.

The concluding section 'History and Memory' begins with 'The Syon Martiloge' by Claes Gejrot, who is currently working on an edition of this important manuscript (London, British Library, MS Add 22,285) with Virginia Bainbridge, which contains a list of all members and benefactors that were to be remembered on a certain day. In his essay Gejrot investigates the arrangement and function of the book, focusing on the obituary and other historical parts of the Martiloge. Gejrot's contribution is well-researched and presents detailed knowledge of the source manuscript. His essay is especially of interest to historians as it contains dates and facts about Syon, but as Gejrot remarks, 'to the philologist it offers further possibilities,' possibly in relation to the *martyrologium*, which is not included in the discussion (p. 204, n. 3). The final essay, 'Syon Abbey Preserved: Some Historians of Syon' by Ann M Hutchinson, throws light on how 'different' histories have been written about Syon Abbey, for example by two of

the late sixteenth century Syon nuns, Mary Champney and Elizabeth Sander. She ends her chapter with John Rory Fletcher (1861-1944) who documented a wide range of materials concerning Syon and whose detailed notebooks are a rich resource for scholars up to this day.

The volume ends with an Appendix, 'Syon Abbey's Books at the University of Exeter' (p. 252-254), and an index (p. 255-267) which is useful for finding relevant passages. All in all the essay collection presents an excellent range of research on the fascinating history of books and life in Syon Abbey and is a vital contribution to the growing research on the Bridgettine community.

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