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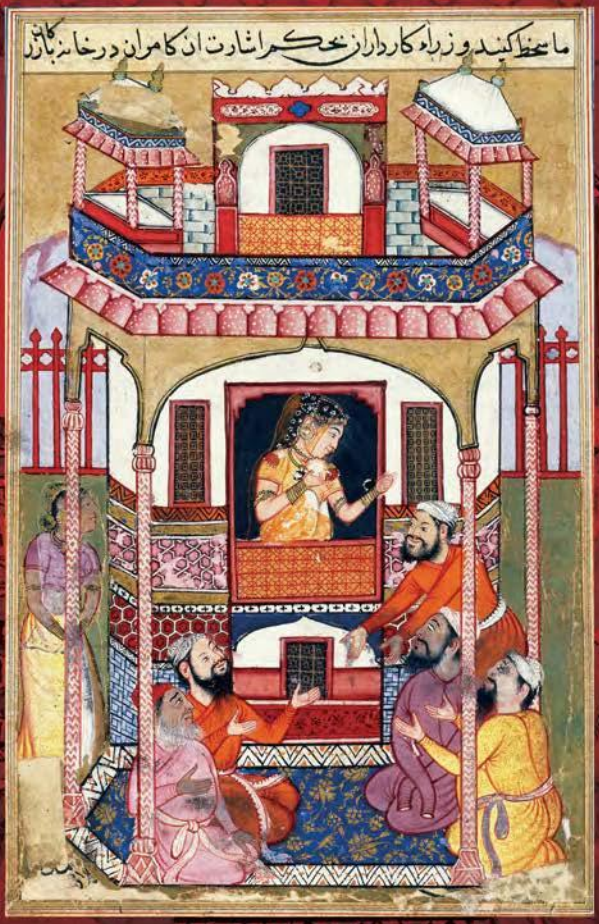

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The particular value of this collection is the illumination it casts on, and the correction it makes to, the tarnished reputation of Catholic polemicists of Luther's era. With nothing to go on but their opponent's claims, one would think that the controversialists were extremely limited in their arguments and entirely unable to meet Luther on his favored grounds of sola scriptura. This collection gives the lie to such imaginings and provides historians with valuable insights into the work of both Luther and his opponents.

Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe.
Caroline Walker Bynum.
New York: Zone Books, 2020. 344 pp. 97 b&w illus. $32.95.
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The book that now binds together revised versions of six previously published articles takes its name from pseudo-Dionysius, who claimed that things deeply dissimilar to the divine nevertheless can "elevate our minds in specific ways toward heaven" (48). The consummate image on the dust jacket enfolding these articles (now book chapters) shows the Virgin Mary's hand holding a crown of roses near a man's rosary beads, while forcing us to manipulate the book as three-dimensional object to see that the flower in Mary's other hand is a prayer plucked from the man's lips. Inside the book, the image is reproduced and discussed in an introduction that frames the chapters' theoretical and practical approaches to the (dis)similarities we find among a variety of medieval objects, between medieval European objects and comparanda from distant times and places, and between objects and the unrepresentable Other.

The commonest enhancement to the previous articles is the inclusion of additional images, which improvement is occasion enough for a book. One consolation for flipping between text and endnotes is the fact that readers need not juggle text and images since detailed captions identify key aspects and explain how each image factors into the chapter's questions or arguments. Exemplary captions point out difficult-to-discern elements of partially damaged objects (61) and illustrate subtle iconographic variations (229, 232–33). Facing pages showcase the remarkable resemblance between a particular Christ cradle and an "exactly contemporary" reliquary altar (76–77), and offer one panel for close analysis but also reveal its place a larger altarpiece (126–27). Contemporary photographs show that modern Joseph is a more involved father figure than his medieval counterpart (79), although nuns' crowns seem little changed since the twelfth century (117–18). We see glimpses of the fundamental differences in attitudes toward materiality that Bynum found between modern goddess processions, despite their morphological similarities (190–91, 194–95). Finally, the resemblance of some devotional objects to genitalia is striking indeed (201, 206).

Although these images and their captions alone nearly suffice as a book's worth of insights and well-supported claims, the introduction lays before readers numerous other objects that "proliferated in all religious texts and venues in the later Middle Ages" (17). It also argues that certain art historical, semiotic, and anthropological theories are inadequate to explore how medieval devotees used, experienced, and understood such objects, particularly those that challenge assumptions about how one thing is "like" another. For example, "objects could carry presence, power, or even identity by mathematical rather than visual similarity" (29), such as strings measured to the length of parts of Christ's body. The focus of each ensuing investigation is therefore "how, in the Middle Ages, particular things were understood to point to, look like, refer to, even convey the un-representable" (40). Methodologically, the essays explore that "how" not with recourse to "a few theoretical statements by theologians or visionaries" (49) but by foregrounding devotional use, which heightens the complexities and contradictions of the objects in question.

The first body chapter works directly with a beguine cradle and a Burgundian crèche, touching also on other marvelous items like little clay cradles (67). These objects are "manipulatable and interactive" (71), underscoring that they are, in one sense, precisely what they appear to be. The bed that is so clearly a bed, however, "is also a church" (73) and resembles both altar and reliquary to boot. The Burgundian crèche includes not one but two beds, preserving the space between a cradle empty and waiting on earth and a bed above in which the coming baby Jesus floats. There could be no more perfect evidence than all of these beds for the two broad claims made in the introduction: that "each object itself not only stresses its tactility (its thingness, so to speak) but also, in doing so, gives contradictory visual signals simultaneously" (51), and that "the objects and the devotions that accrue around them both collapse and maintain the distinction between earth and heaven" (52).

The second chapter strengthens these claims through other objects and practices, like crowning and dressing statues of Mary, which the female community at Wienhausen defended through periods of "reform." This chapter also explores the complexity of nuns' crowns, which are not mere symbols but effect a nun's status and portend "an attribute of the [nun's] resurrected body" (120).

The third chapter pivots away from particular objects and back to theory, cautioning against the "wrong parallels" (132). For example, the most illuminating medieval Christian parallel case for eye-opening rituals of Hindu statues are not medieval images or statuary, but, Bynum argues, the (nonanthropomorphic) Eucharist, which raises more deeply comparable "questions about agency, similitude, consecration, and so forth" (135).

Chapter 4 is "an outlier" (53) for addressing the modern political problem of dangerous medieval images and objects. Examples include footprints supposedly left in stone by a rabbi's wife attempting to drown a host (150); a tabletop that exhibits scratches from Jews allegedly desecrating a host (153); and a bronze

grate formed like the spiderweb said to have intercepted miraculously a host on its way to the latrine (155–56). Bynum describes various attempts to contextualize, digitize, and otherwise neutralize the power of objects, concluding (though as a historian and not a curator) "that it is best for us to encounter the objects themselves" (181).

Chapter 5 offers what may amount to a template for future attempts at comparative religious studies. Bynum begins with comparanda (goddess processions) that suggest themselves for comparison through "morphology, shape, or optical similitude" (187), but betray a "large and glaring" difference: Mary statues "leave their churches and return to them," while Durga "returns to the organic world from which she arose" (193). The parallel, it turns out, was "relatively superficial" (197). Bynum then selects new comparanda, not because they look alike, but because of the comparable "ways in which each is embedded in, and raises questions about, its own cultural context" (198): the side wound of Christ, which sometimes resembles a vagina, and the Shiva lingam, which sometimes resembles a phallus. Lastly, Bynum arrives at a comparison that replaces morphological with structural grounds for selecting comparanda on the basis of what best reveals, in its own context, where "religious presence and power reside" (211). Medieval European objects of choice are relics, sacraments, and sacramentals, rather than images or statues. Scholars who follow this model must articulate fully the "structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional—rather than purely morphological—parallels" (219) between seemingly dissimilar comparanda and, most fundamentally, redress any implicit suggestion that contemporary non-Western cultures are living museums of Europe's religious past.

The final and more reflective chapter considers how Europeanists might direct their "xenophilia" (222). Bynum finds inspiration in medieval devotion to the footprints that Christ left behind on the Mount of Olives at his Ascension. Europeanists might angle their gaze in ways similar to the disciples who, in some medieval images, look to the space between foot-shaped depressions on a mountaintop and Christ's heaven-bound feet. Likewise, scholars might look toward "the gap between the trace and that which has left it behind" (245). Like footprints that signify both absence and presence, "departure and perdurance" (230), the traces that scholars study "always point elsewhere to an other we cannot fully grasp" (251).

Although the book is made coherent by Bynum's claims and methods, cover-to-cover readers will catch a few examples of verbatim verbiage (138–39 and 214, 146–47 and 196), and chapter 6 lingers on a problem (the misleading morphological similarity of footprints in different cultures) that chapter 5 already has raised in different form and moved well beyond. These instances of repetition and nonlinearity result from Bynum's intent to preserve the capacity of each chapter to perform "as a stand-alone piece" (11), while also reflecting the nature of scholarship that proceeds from lifelong curiosity. The book discusses objects first seen

by Bynum as an undergraduate in 1960 (274n1), includes work that is "partly autobiographical" (183), and incorporates childhood memories (221, 258).

Thorough readers also will discover not infrequent references to Wikipedia among the vast amounts of scholarship (from multiple disciplines for over a century in English and German) in the notes. A bit more surprising is the use of such internet-age sources is the long URL of a Google search cited as provisional evidence for the provenance of an iconographic tradition (322n25). Perhaps the author is not entirely dissimilar to other busy scholars who toggle between browser and document. In other respects, she remains incomparable.