

Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe*. Brooklyn NY: Zone Books, 2020. Pp. 352 + 97 black and white illustrations. \$32.95 cloth.

Having built a career that spans across history, art history, and religious studies, Caroline Walker Bynum's work has become legendary among scholars of the Middle Ages. Imparting each field with critical advances in the discourses of gender, the body, materiality, and transformation, her contributions are revelatory experiences for readers. Her latest book, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe*, carries not an expansion of these previous achievements, but a mindful framework that has emerged from decades of dedication to investigating the perception and power of material things in medieval Christianity. Lucidly written, *Dissimilar Similitudes* presents several examinations of objects from late medieval northern Germany. Bynum's sensitive studies—of cradles and beds that served as altars and invited divine encounters, crowns that manifested nuns' hidden spiritual statuses, of things sullied with contemptible violence, and of depictions of Christ's earthly footprints left on the Mount of Olives—construct a compelling argument that emboldens scholars to embrace elasticity in their understandings of devotional objects.

Throughout the book, Bynum questions the use of comparative morphology—the measuring of the physical “likeness” of one object against another—as an interpretive starting point. While not aiming to abandon morphology entirely, she recognizes its limits and pushes beyond them to reveal more about medieval devotional practices. Her primary intention is to re-insert physical images, sculptures, and icons into a conversation about holy matter's capacity to refer to a holy Other. Likeness, according to Bynum, is not about outward appearance, but a deeper similarity that can bleed out of aesthetics and into the function, agency, or representational power of an object. She exposes medieval likeness (or similarity) as a more diverse concept than morphological investigations allow, with even the diffusive qualities of an object (such as color) having the capacity to evoke likeness and to carry holy power. In a sophisticated and lithe fashion, she proposes that we consider similarities not just in the forms of objects and images, but also in their functions, meanings, performances, and contexts. This wider formulation of analysis is not only sensible, but integral to the assemblage of cogent histories, as no cultural artifact is the product of spontaneous generation.

Notably, Bynum clarifies an incongruity between current morphological approaches and the medieval mind: that medieval theorists saw earthly things as similar to heaven not because they were made of heavenly matter, but

because they could link the earth to a holy Other. Readers are encouraged to build a comparable attitude of seeking similitudes between what objects do, not just how they appear, in their scholarship. They are also inspired to position themselves closer to a pre-modern mindset to find a historically distant sympathy for the medieval beholder. Although this task may seem laborious, Bynum comfortingly reminds us that looking was an act of belief, not of disconnected observation, and that the beholder was expected to contribute a substantial effort to understanding what was before them. This process could prove to be difficult and possibly alienating to those who believe it impossible and therefore pointless to seek out the medieval mind; yet, as Bynum's career has repetitively proven, the careful excision of our own passivity from scholarship on faith and its instruments can enhance our identification of what the medieval beholder felt in their convictions, not obfuscate it.

Perhaps the most extraordinary facet of Bynum's work is her ability to point between the past and the present to locate the implications of her argument. This skill is particularly potent in the book's fourth chapter, "The Presence of Objects: Medieval Anti-Judaism in Modern Germany." Here, Bynum investigates and reflects on four sites of medieval judiciary murders: Sternberg, Iphofen, Poznan, and Deggendorf. The objects that remain at these sites—a chiseled pair of feet in the wall mortar, a table, a Host that is believed to have remained intact since the Middle Ages, among others—retain dark historical attachments as agents in false accusations of Host desecration that resulted in the killing of Jews. With particular attention paid to the ageless Host at Deggendorf, Bynum asserts that the stories surrounding these objects, which consisted of both physical miraculousness and of fictions of Jewish assault on the Christian god, are what created their power as holy matter. Responsibly, she does not cease her assessment here and continues with a discussion of the memorials into which these sites have been transformed. Outlining that they should not be framed in positive or noncommittal fashions, Bynum clarifies that these objects and spaces were used to inflict evil during and beyond the Middle Ages, using the Nazi regime's encouragement of pilgrimages to Deggendorf as an example. Contrary to the dangerously neutral suggestions that hateful objects and monuments be explained further or exhibited in dialogue with (often ineffective) counter-monuments, Bynum calls for the confrontation of such objects. Articulating what has remained in the shadows of cultural anxieties, she states, "Perhaps the importance of the objects lies in the fact that they cannot be cleansed." The argument is particularly timely and powerful, coinciding with the growing efforts to dismantle white supremacy in medieval studies and deference to it in institutions of memory.

Following this urgent discussion, Bynum returns to the complications of likeness by looking outside of the confines of the West. Pairing depictions of the side wound of Christ as a mandorla with the cylindrical-shaped Shiva linga of Shaivite Hinduism, she draws out differences in the reading of objects that contain power across cultures: the vaginal appearance of Christ's mandorla-shaped wound, and wound piety more generally, were recognized (and became subjects of sexualized humor in the Middle Ages); conversely, the linga appears to Westerners as phallic in shape, but actually holds no sexual reference whatsoever. Here, Bynum is careful to avoid constructing a generalized approach to Western and non-Western religions, articulating that the divine is not *in* the physical world of Western piety in the same way that it is in the world of Hindu devotion. And, the reader is mindfully advised to avoid the assumption that look-alikes are the best parallels for understanding cultures, as this risks reducing or excluding different forms of religious profundity. The argument culminates in a suggestion that there may be a productive comparison not between images, but between the ways in which each is embedded in and raises questions about its own cultural context. With increasing pressure to write profound histories (something that Bynum herself recognizes), scholars may find themselves at a loss for where to begin; however, this proposal—that scholars start with questions of where power resides, as well as in what does it appear—is invigorating advice that greatly benefits those lost in their formulation of research questions.

Continuing a legacy of enriching studies of medieval art and religion with delicate assessments of what holy matter accomplished for those who experienced it, *Dissimilar Similitudes* offers a nuanced, revisionist approach to the methods that art historians and historians of religion use. It retains natural attachments to Bynum's previous publications, further demonstrating that the work is a thoughtful emergence from her long-standing career, and those familiar with Visual Culture Studies will appreciate its careful blurring of distinctions between objects. Advanced in subject matter and free of jargon, it is a useful text that will easily stimulate the minds of early career scholars and those who have been long-standing in the field to stretch their research into new territory.

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