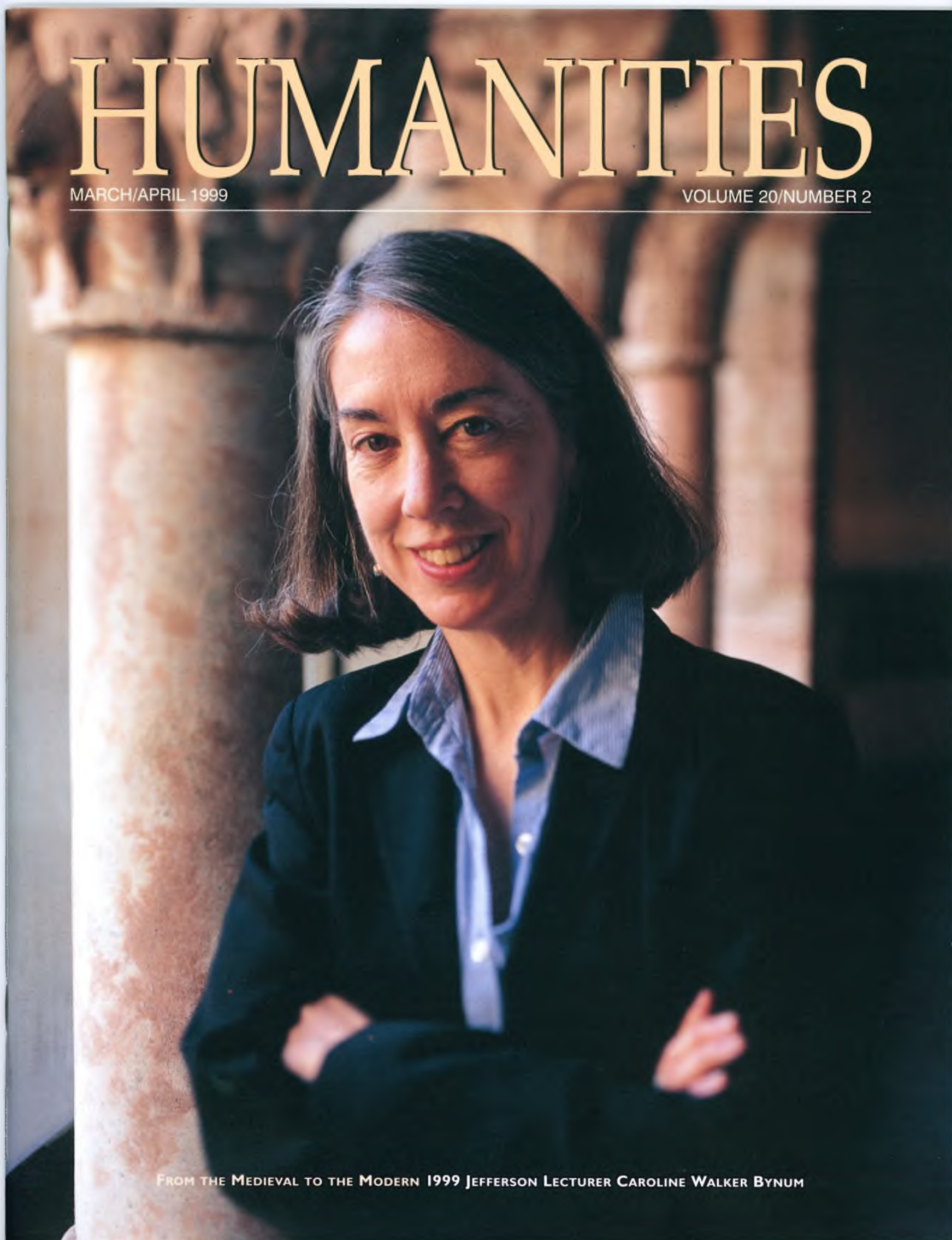


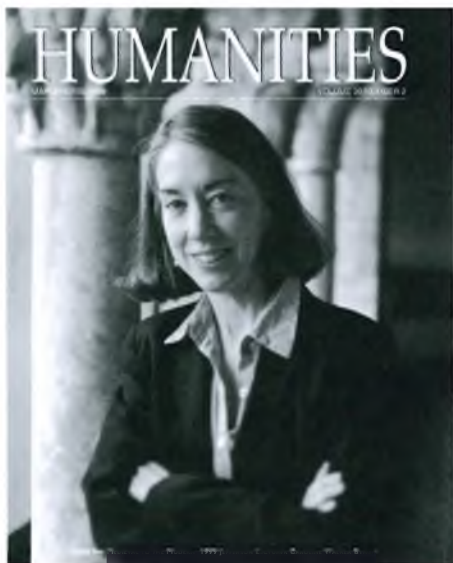
# HUMANITIES

MARCH/APRIL 1999

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FROM THE MEDIEVAL TO THE MODERN 1999 JEFFERSON LECTURER CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM



Caroline Walker Bynum, 1999 Jefferson Lecturer in the Humanities.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM

In the introduction to her book, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum writes: "I argue . . . that the writing of history must come to terms gracefully with the incomplete, that it must be a conversation open to new voices, that its essential mode is a comic one."

Bynum is this year's Jefferson Lecturer in the Humanities, the highest honor the federal government bestows. She has been teaching for the past decade at Columbia University in New York, where she holds the rank of University Professor.

In her classrooms at Columbia, Bynum willingly risks the unorthodox. Discussion can turn to *Star Trek* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as easily as to Aquinas as she and her students explore the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the Middle Ages. Modern-day "body-hopping" in movies and television—in which people inhabit other bodies or bargain with Death—to Bynum's way of thinking can offer a flash of identification across the centuries. It is not to draw parallels, she cautions, but to begin to get a glimmering of what the questions might be.

Bynum has written a number of books, among them *Jesus as Mother, Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, and her most recent, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*. "Her meticulous and imaginative exploration of the texts and artworks that have come down to us from these centuries has changed the way scholars, students, and general readers alike understand the age," says Martha Howell, the head of Columbia's history department.

The age stretches a thousand years, give or take a century or two, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. It wears no easy label. It was a time of the building of cathedrals, of the copying of manuscripts, of inventions like the windmill and the mechanical clock, of quarrels over the rule of law and theologies. A Florentine named Dante wondered over the whole of life and afterlife in an epic called *The Divine Comedy*; a century later a diplomat-turned-writer named Chaucer looked on the vagaries of humanity in a more earthy way in a work called *The Canterbury Tales*. It was a time in which a young man of Assisi, whose father was a woolen merchant, found sainthood, and a red-bearded German emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, ravaged the cities of Italy, and a scientist named Roger Bacon dreamed of machines that could fly.

In this issue of *Humanities* we travel back to a little-visited corner of the early Middle Ages, a place called Thingvellir in Iceland, where a thousand years ago feuding chieftains learned to settle their disputes without bloodshed at the Althing. Scholar Jesse L. Byock calls their society a "proto-democracy." We also visit the murky and mythic world of *Beowulf*—not just *Beowulf* himself but how the manuscript has come down to us—lost for five hundred years, found again, damaged in a 1731 fire, pieced together by scholars. We now have a newer version, this one done by Kevin Kiernan and his colleagues at the University of Kentucky, who have used fiber optics and ultraviolet light to recover obscured passages and to correct miswritings. The Electronic *Beowulf* Project is attracting young students as well as scholars, says Kiernan. "They think it is so 'cool' that these pictures are on the Internet. And I hear from high school teachers, too."

The casual and questing style sounds a little like Bynum herself. In *Fragmentation*, she goes on to say: "I suggest that the pleasure we find in research and in storytelling about the past is enhanced both by awareness that our own voices are provisional and by confidence in the revisions the future will bring . . . I dedicate this volume to my students. May they find that the comedy of history welcomes them, both as actors and as authors." □

—Mary Lou Beatty



page 4



page 8



page 14

# HUMANITIES

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

MARCH/APRIL 1999

## FROM THE MEDIEVAL TO THE MODERN

- 4 **A Conversation with . . .** 1999 Jefferson Lecturer Caroline Walker Bynum talks about the legacy of the Middle Ages to the present day.
- 7 **Historian of the Ambiguous Core** A colleague admires the ways of an "improper medievalist." *By Fred Paxton*
- 39 **Excerpts** Bynum's writings interpret another time's view of soul, identity, and community.

## OLD TALES FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

- 8 **Chivalry Revisited: In Print and Online** Romance, poetry, and protest literature are rescued from obscurity. *By Rachel Galvin*
- 20 **Why Read *Beowulf*?** How a manuscript that was nearly lost still speaks to us. *By Robert F. Yeager*

## PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

- 14 **Amid Rubble and Myth**  
Excavations beneath  
Florence's cathedral  
reveal a church for a  
saint that never was.  
*By Franklin Toker*
- 24 **A Land Without Lords**  
Early Icelanders turned  
feuding into an art form.  
*By Anna Maria Gillis*

## AROUND THE NATION

- 28 **State by State**  
Exhibitions, lectures,  
films, and conferences  
throughout the country.
- 32 **Women of Power**  
An eleventh-century  
nun with attitude  
becomes the subject  
of a Maryland film.  
*By Erin Erickson*
- 34 **The Lunts**  
At Home in Wisconsin.  
*By Amy Lifson*

## DEPARTMENTS

- 19 **Noteworthy**
- 52 **Calendar**
- 54 **Literary Notes**
- 55 **Deadlines**



# from the Medieval to the Modern

A Conversation with Caroline Walker Bynum

*The chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, William R. Ferris, spoke recently with medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum about the legacy of the Middle Ages to the modern world. Bynum, who has been chosen as the 1999 Jefferson Lecturer in the Humanities, is University Professor at Columbia University in New York and the author of HOLY FEAST AND HOLY FAST and THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY.*



Caroline Walker Bynum



William R. Ferris

**WILLIAM R. FERRIS:** The Middle Ages, which is your scholarly world, runs from the fall of the Roman Empire to Renaissance humanism. When we talk about Middle Ages, the question is, what does that mean? Is it a time period or a geographic boundary? A way of thinking?

**CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM:** I would say that it is fundamentally a chronological period, and I would extend it beyond fourteenth-century humanism, too.

We talk about the Middle Ages because the Renaissance humanists thought of a middle age that came between them and classical antiquity. Most medievalists today put an emphasis on the "ages" part—plural! Most would say that there are at least two middle ages—an early medieval period that is a preparation and then a Middle Age proper running from around 1050 right on down to Luther and the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In any case, it is a period or periods in which much of what we think of as the Western tradition was formed.

**FERRIS:** How has our understanding of the Middle Ages changed over the last thirty years?

**BYNUM:** Thirty years ago the Middle Ages were seen as important because of institutional, political, and constitutional developments. They were seen as the beginning, on a small scale, of the modern world. More recently the Middle Ages, particularly the early Middle Ages, have been seen as interesting because they are different from the modern world.

"In the visions and tales of the early Middle Ages, heaven was the realm of gold, gems, and crystal, whereas hell was the place of digestion and excretion, process, metamorphosis, and fluids." —Bynum, *critical inquiry* 22, 1995

the jaws of hell, winchester psalter. —The British Library, MS 1846  
Cott. Nero, c4, fol.39



detail from *The Last Judgment* mosaic at the cathedral in Torcello, Italy.

*"We do not actually understand*

*modern constitutional government*

*if we do not understand the central*

*and later Middle Ages."*

There has been a shift from looking at institutions, politics, and government as the building blocks of much what is considered to be typical of the Western tradition, including liberalism and constitutional

government, to looking at the Middle Ages as different and more "primitive." The shift is marked by the use of anthropology rather than political science in the study of institutions. Models from African or Asian history are used to understand social and political life rather than those from the Anglo-American legal tradition.

**FERRIS:** What are the questions you feel still need to be answered about the Middle Ages?

**BYNUM:** Almost everything you could think of asking. There is so much material to be explored. We need to know more about the nature of medieval communities on the local level and how they functioned. We still do not understand who joined certain religious movements and why. We do not understand who commissioned and paid for many of the devotional and artistic objects or many of the important works of literature or art. There is even a great deal we do not understand about linguistic change. In some cases we do not actually know what language people were communicating in.

Basic questions also remain about cross-cultural contacts and exchange. We still know far too little about relationships between Eastern and Western Christendom. We know far too little about cultural borrowings, influences, prejudices and resistance in places where Christians were in close contact with Muslims.

**FERRIS:** So there is plenty of work to be done.

**BYNUM:** There is plenty of work to be done, for both Middle Ages. There are new paradigms to be used. And for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there is a tremendous amount of unedited material still in manuscripts and still in archives. The later you get, the more material there is that hasn't been published. Therefore, in a curious sense, the later you get in time, the more there is potentially to know and the less we know of the total picture.

**FERRIS:** Let me ask you two questions that are connected. Why study the Middle Ages, and are there any parallels between the Middle Ages that we can draw to modern life?

**BYNUM:** Those are big questions. Why study the Middle Ages? The answer is implicit in the two kinds of paradigms for studying it, or approaches to studying it, I just alluded to. The older one, which sees the Middle Ages as the roots of the modern world, is still in many ways valid. We do not actually understand modern constitutional government if we do not understand the central and later Middle Ages. Without knowing its medieval roots, one cannot understand the whole Anglo-American legal tradition, for example, or constitutionalism; one cannot understand the modern university, or the modern curriculum.

The other reason is almost the contradiction of that: The Middle Ages in many ways is not like the modern world. I think understanding this is just as useful because it gives you a built-in contrast within your own tradition. The only way to understand yourself or your own society is by seeing how it might be other. Where some things are familiar, the differences stand out more starkly.

**FERRIS:** Beginning in the 1980s you made a name for yourself in medieval history with your works such as *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of*

*Food to Medieval Women*. Both of these works look at the complex relationship between women and religion. How did you come to write these works?

**BYNUM:** *Jesus as Mother* is really more about gender than about women. Much of it is about men's use of female images. That project came about because I had been working on monastic reform movements in the twelfth century and had noticed that men, particularly men who were worried about their exercise of authority as religious leaders, tended to use images of themselves as women to talk about their anxieties. To some extent they were also using feminine issues to talk about God and God's exercise of authority.

That led me to wonder how religious women used similar kinds of gender images, so I worked on gender images in women's writing. What I was basically doing was working on people's self-conceptions and how gender images relate to their self-conceptions. And gender images turn out to be very complicated. It is not just that women think in female images or men think in male images, nor is it the reverse.

Then it occurred to me that beginning with gender images—that is, male and female—might itself be a prejudicial way of asking the question. Maybe I should just stand back and ask, "Are there differences in the images that men and women use to think about themselves?" rather than assuming that men and women imagine themselves in different ways and express this difference in gender images. In other words, it could be that both men and women used maternal—that is, mothering—images for God but women might think of religious community as a household while men thought of it as an army. Or even this might be too simple. Once I asked the question this way, new areas to explore opened up.

I had noticed that food imagery seemed crucial not only to women's writing, but also to their actual religious behavior, in a way that was not central to men's concerns. That led me to *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. The book became an exploration of a variety of connected images in women's practices, as well as their writing. I talked about food multiplication miracles, food denial, the image of food, the idea of consuming God, and the Eucharist. But the book became more than simply an exploration of food practices. It became as well an exploration of images of the body, of physicality, of bodily location, and bodily expression. So that is how that came about. If that makes sense.

**FERRIS:** It makes absolute sense. My wife is doing a study of Jewish foods in the South and acculturation.

**BYNUM:** There is, of course, a lot of anthropological and sociological theory about why food is so important in constituting communities. Excluding from the table is a major way of indicating who is the "out" group. Those you eat with are the "in" group. The sharing of food is a sharing of community and a sharing of self.

**FERRIS:** What about these works do you feel captured the public's attention, as they clearly did?

**BYNUM:** My husband said once that if *Jesus as Mother* had had a different title, it would have sold only a fraction as many copies. I'm sure that is true.

The image of God as woman, as mother, although it was only one theme in the book, caught people's attention. There had been in the seventies a hunger on the part of women, particularly religious women, to find female

*Continued on page 43*

A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

## HISTORIAN OF THE AMBIGUOUS CORE

By Fred Paxton

I N THE AUTUMN OF 1977, I ATTENDED A LECTURE SERIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON WHERE EACH WEEK A DIFFERENT MEMBER OF THE FACULTY ADDRESSED THE THEME OF "MEDIEVAL TRADITIONS." THE PRESENTATIONS WERE INTERESTING, BUT LITTLE MORE, AND I BEGAN TO CONSIDER DEVOTING MY WEDNESDAY EVENINGS TO OTHER PURSUITS. THEN IT WAS CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM'S TURN. THE TITLE OF HER LECTURE, "THE REFORMATION OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY," SUGGESTED SOMETHING DIFFERENT—I HAD HEARD OF A TWELFTH-CENTURY RENAISSANCE, BUT NEVER A REFORMATION—SO I TOOK MY SEAT WITH SOME REAL ANTICIPATION.

*Continued on page 36*

# Chivalry Revisited:



IN PRINT AND ONLINE

BY RACHEL GALVIN





Voices from the High Middle Ages are being rescued from long neglected manuscripts through the Middle English Texts Series project. Until now, the study of the vernacular literature of romance, poetry, and protest in English from 1000 to 1550 has focused on a canon of core authors: Chaucer, the Gawain-Poet, Langland, and Malory. The Middle English Texts Series, or METS project, is expanding that canon by making obscure and out-of-print works available in durable, reasonably priced scholarly editions and on the Internet. More than one hundred texts are online at the METS website, complete with scholarly essays and linked annotations for easy navigation between text and notes.

"The METS editions have transformed the teaching of Middle English across the world," says Russell Peck, general editor of the series and professor at the University of Rochester. Courses dealing with literature of social and ecclesiastical protest or stories of heroic women from the Old Testament in Middle English verse, which simply could not be taught before, are now being offered. "Students of medieval literature have some small notion of this from Chaucer's satires of the friar, but now we have these primary documents, which are very exciting to study."

The METS editions shed new light on daily activity, religion, social change, political unrest, and women's lives and writing in the Middle Ages. The texts represent a wide sampling of literary genres, styles, and rhetoric, ranging from early Scots poetry and medieval romances to stories of saints' lives. Texts are accompanied by scholarly apparatus—essays and notes designed for beginners through specialists—and are particularly friendly to the contemporary reader, as they are written in the modern alphabet, without Middle English *thorns*, *edhs*, and *yoghs*.

The Middle English Texts Series began in 1990 with a group of scholars determined to widen the selection of texts available for their medieval

courses. They surveyed two-hundred-fifty scholars on which texts they would like to see included in the series and who would be qualified to edit the texts. Sixty-four editors have chosen to donate their expertise and labor, writing scholarly notes and collaborating in the complex editing process.

METS produces six or seven volumes a year and has published twenty-eight volumes already. By May 2000, forty volumes should be available. The series includes the only student editions in Middle English of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Gal-lacher's *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a key text about medieval English mysticism; medieval English political writings; the first scholarly publication of the *Middle English Breton Lays*; and the definitive volume of *Robin Hood* and other outlaw tales.

Works such as *The Plowman's Tale* and *Piers the Plowman's Crede* expand what we know about ecclesiastical protest in the fifteenth century. *The Plowman's Tale*, an apocryphal Chaucerian tale, and *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, which takes off on the *Tale*, are satiric attacks on monastic establishments. "*Piers the Plowman's Crede* presents a poor man's quest for spiritual truth," explains James Dean in his introduction. The narrator consults a number of friars from different orders in the hope of learning the Apostles' Creed, but is



APRIL  
LES TRES RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY  
DEPICTS EVERYDAY MEDIEVAL LIFE. —Musée Condé

disappointed. Instead of discovering the “graith,” or the plain truth, the speaker encounters friars who apparently do not know the Creed and are more concerned with insulting rival fraternal orders and obtaining money from the narrator than discussing religion. Finally, the narrator meets a plowman named Piers who tells him the friars are hypocrites and teaches him the Creed in ordinary language. The poem articulates the age’s predominant stereotypes of fraternal corruption and hypocrisy, and is a source of information about antifraternality and church reform movements of the late fourteenth century.

*Why I Can’t Be a Nun*, an early fifteenth-century poem portraying a young woman who wishes to become a nun, criticizes the corruption of ecclesiastical institutions and addresses the dilemma this presents to a pious young woman. The poem was edited and published only once after its original composition, in F. J. Furnivall’s 1862 *Early English Poems and Lives of Saints*. Before the recent METS edition, *Why I Can’t Be a Nun* could only be found tucked away in Furnivall’s book or amidst the British Library’s manuscripts.

*Why I Can’t Be a Nun* demonstrates women’s involvement in issues of piety, religion, education, and the need for vernacular literature. “It is a wonderful poem which shows you how



JUNE

sophisticated women in the audience might be and what the expectations of a young woman might be,” says Peck.

Katerine, the speaker, wishes to join a convent but her father is concerned that she “may not fulfille in dede / The purpose that ye have begun,” that is, that she may not be able to fulfill her wish to live a pious life if she joins a convent, because of the rampant corruption in ecclesiastical institutions. Although downcast, Katerine respects her father’s opinion.

In the garden, Katerine encounters a dream vision of Lady Experience. “The character of Experience is like a philosophy teacher,” explains Peck. “She guides Katerine on her own terms through the question to the end so that she makes her own decision. That’s really remarkable as a poetic statement.” Experience shows Katerine that the personifications of Pride, Hypocrisy, Sloth, Vainglory, Envy, Love Inordinate, Lust, Wantonness, and Dame Disobedient all dwell in the convent. In fact, the convent is full of women so “feble, lewde, and frowarde” (weak, lewd, and unruly), Charity and Patience must live outside it.

“Although the poem is similar to Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*, it doesn’t have the same satiric edge,” says Peck. The poet does not ridicule Katerine’s idealism and devotion, her father’s concern for her, or even the convent.



JULY

"Rather, Lady Experience points to the worldliness that has infiltrated the convent. The poet isn't saying that the girl shouldn't be educated, but that she should have a more protestant education in which she studies on her own and reads in the vernacular. There is a great sense of the need for vernacular literature for educational purposes."

The gender of the poet has not been established, though scholars guess that the poet was most likely a man. It is possible that the author was commissioned by a woman to write the piece. "Many of these manuscripts are of male-authored poetry and probably copied by scribes, but they are often commissioned by women for a specific purpose such as the education of a great household," says Peck. "Here you have educational programs in the vernacular with literature at the very heart of those programs."

The misconceptions that women of the Middle Ages received no education and that the so-called Dark Ages had no literary culture are dispelled by the Findern manuscript. "The manuscript contains poems that were apparently copied down by several women, whose names appear in the manuscript," says Peck. Some of the women whose names appear in the Findern manuscript were daughters of John Shirley (1366–1454). Shirley was a copyist, a little younger than Chaucer, who had a bookshop and lending library that



AUGUST

circulated texts among his patrons, many of whom were women.

It is suspected that the women who created the Findern manuscript held garden gatherings where they read poems aloud to each other, either poems they'd written themselves or other people's writing that they admired. "Whether the poems in the Findern manuscript were collected on formal occasions is not known," explains Peck. "It seems likely that they must have been occasions like those described in *The Assembly of Ladies*." In the poem *The Assembly of Ladies*, nine women assemble in the Court of Love to petition Lady Loyalty with their *complaintes d'amour*, or complaints against men's behavior in the game of love.

Thomas Usk's *The Testament of Love* is another significant document about literary circles in London at the end of the fourteenth century. "It is a veritable gold mine of information on who was reading what and how they read it," Peck says. "It is also of enormous importance to students of Richard II's trouble-fraught reign in the 1380s." Usk, who was a friend of John Gower and Chaucer, imitates both of them and alludes to the philosophies of St. Anselm and Boethius.

"Usk was accused of treason by the Merciless Parliament, tortured, hanged, eviscerated, beheaded, and then quartered," recounts Peck. "He writes the *Testament* from prison, and in the



PANELS OF THE FIRST KISS OF LANCELOT AND GUINEVERE (LEFT); SENECHAL AND LADIES, FROM *LE ROMAN DE LANCELOT DU LAC*.

manner of Boethius, defends himself from the charges brought against him while offering a polemic on the care of one's soul in times of crisis. His text is highly literate."

The authorship of *The Testament of Love* was in doubt until a century ago when W. W. Skeat discovered an acrostic of sorts woven into the text. When the letters at the beginning of each section are read sequentially, they spell out Usk's signature: "THINE OWN USK."

The METS publication of *The Middle English Breton Lays*, edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, is the first scholarly edition of English poems in the genre of romance. These romances, which often deal with love, faith, patrimony, quests, and the supernatural, and which are threaded with folklore and fairytale motifs, tend toward what Peck terms "intriguingly bizarre plots."

The fourteenth-century romance *Sir Degaré* contains all the ingredients necessary for a heroic romance: Degaré, the hero, undergoes trials with dragons and giants in his quest for knighthood. The tale begins with Degaré's grandfather, the king of Brittany, challenging his daughter's would-be suitors. When the princess visits her mother's grave in the woods one day, she slips away from her entourage and encounters a scarlet-robed fairy knight. The knight ravishes the princess and gives her a broken sword to pass on to the "knave" to whom she will give birth.

When Degaré is born, the princess leaves him on the doorstep of a hermitage with a quantity of gold and silver, the broken sword, a pair of gloves sent by the fairy knight, and a letter instructing that Degaré be given these objects when he is ten years old. The hermit names the baby Degaré, or "lost one," and raises him.

At age twenty, Degaré goes on a quest to find his parents. In his first trial, he rescues an earl from a fire-breathing dragon using only an oaken bat.

The earl knights Degaré in recognition of his strength and valor.

Degaré goes on to fight his grandfather, the king of Brittany, for the princess's hand. Degaré manages to defeat the king and win the princess. Unaware that she is his mother, he marries her and he tells her to try on the enchanted gloves. The gloves fit, and the two recognize each other. Degaré leaves to seek his father and becomes a knight errant, enduring a series of trials, knightly missions, and battles.

In one episode, Degaré discovers a community of women living in an island castle. The lady of the castle teaches him about chivalric love and sends him on a mission to kill a marauding knight who has murdered all her protectors. Degaré breaks a magical enchantment, slays the knight, and is rewarded with arms, a horse, gold, and silver.

Sir Degaré finally encounters his father, although he does not know his identity, and the two knights engage in battle. When they begin hand-to-hand combat, Degaré produces his broken sword and his father immediately realizes Degaré is his son. The fairy knight shows Degaré the point of the sword, which he has carried with him for twenty years, and father and son are reunited. Degaré's parents are soon reconciled, the incestuous marriage is nullified, and Degaré marries the lady of the island castle.

As Laskaya and Salisbury's introduction explains, *Sir Degaré* is similar to Oedipus's tragedy and to fairytales in which a quest resolves a conflict or undoes a magical spell. In this case, the poem concludes with forgiveness and reconciliation.

The short romance based on a single character is an example of English literary innovation in the Middle Ages. "Other innovations include the complex developments of dream visions, such as elaborate uses of multiple personae, dreams within dreams, first person and 'autobiographical'



GAWAIN SLIPS PAST KNIGHTS WHO GUARD THE WAITING DAUGHTER OF THE KING OF NOGALES.

narrative," says Peck. Shifts in diction, prosody, and poetic structure occurred during this period, and French forms such as the *fabliau* and *balade* were appropriated into English vernacular.

Vernacular literature in English burgeoned in the last quarter of the fourteenth century with the works of Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, and many romance poets. "This terrific outpouring suggests that they were aware of the possibility and value of vernacular literature," Peck comments. "In the fifteenth century they look back to Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate as the parents of a great literary tradition."

METS is editing Lydgate's *Troy Book*, a work that recounts the Trojan War and provides detailed architectural descriptions of the construction of private places. "Lydgate has often been regarded in a pejorative manner and called tedious in his meter and prosody, endless in his prose—you can get lost in it, and so forth," says Peck. "But when we started looking at his work, I was amazed at the literary sophistication of his *Troy Book* and the terrific experimentation present." *Troy Book*, which was meant to be read out loud, adapts Chaucer's heroic couplets from *The Canterbury Tales*.

John Metham is another fifteenth-century writer who wrote in a sophisticated, experimental rhythm. METS has just published his book *Amoryus Cleopes*, which is a prose narrative written in a rhyme royal, seven-line stanza. "People have railed against him for lacking any sense of prosody," Peck says. "But what is really exciting is that he's writing in rhymed, seven-line prose that reads aloud really well when you don't try to force it into iambic pentameter. You might see it as incompetent or you might see it as experimental."

After 1350, many more writers chose English over French as the medium for vernacular literature. "Once the impetus of English as England's vernacular language is underway it carries the

day hands down, despite the continuance of French in the courts," says Peck.

The rapid development of vernacular literature was a result of social, political, and cultural changes. A preoccupation with salvation led people to meditation and self-reflection, which was generally conducted in Latin. For those who didn't speak Latin, particularly the new bourgeoisie, this was an obstacle. "A great deal of vernacular thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literature consists of debates of the body and soul, allegorical journeys, meditations on love, romances that take the acolyte through various sorts of moral trials, saints' lives, penitential treatises, and so on," says Peck. The genre of philosophical and literary autobiography also arose at this time. Household education and church schools helped create a public literate in English.

For Peck, the most inspiring aspect of the METS project is that vernacular literature from the High Middle Ages which has been lost in obscurity or has not been available in current editions—sometimes for centuries—is being brought to light. "The texts may have been edited once in a scholarly edition, but those are virtually unusable in a classroom," he says. "What's exciting about this project is to have texts available so that you can teach them in an ordinary way. It's then that ideas about the text come to life and you can see the whole area of study. It's a great eye-opener to go over texts that were on the margins of study and see how rich they can be." □

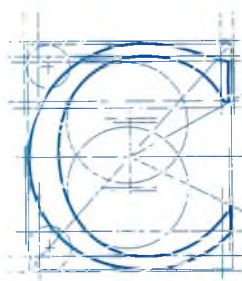
Rachel Galvin is a writer in Austin, Texas.

The Middle English Text Series has received \$415,000 in grants from NEH.

# AMID RUBBLE AND MYTH

EXCAVATING BENEATH FLORENCE'S CATHEDRAL

BY FRANKLIN TOKER



lues from a Latin biography, a dozen Roman palace walls, and a nonexistent saint have solved one of the older riddles in European scholarship—the origins of the church that once stood beneath Florence's cathedral. Taken together, the biography and decades of archaeological excavation and interpretation explain the origins of the Duomo of Santa Maria del Fiore. Unraveling this riddle tells us a good deal about how medieval culture worked, and how contemporary scholarship can still open doors that were once regarded as sealed forever.

During my direction of the Florence cathedral excavation and after, I have used archaeology to draw a sketch of the earliest years of medieval Florence—years for which documentary history is almost completely silent. Solving the mystery of St. Reparata's church, the ruins of which lie beneath the Duomo, represents a fragment of my work, but it illustrates the methods and reasoning necessary in studying medieval archaeology.

The hardest of my tasks was to date and theoretically reconstruct the St. Reparata ruins, determine why the Florentines had picked that particular building site, and why they had incorporated large chunks of a Roman palace into the building's walls. I also had to figure out why the Florentines

dedicated the church to Reparata, an obscure—in fact, nonexistent—martyr with no clear connection to their city.

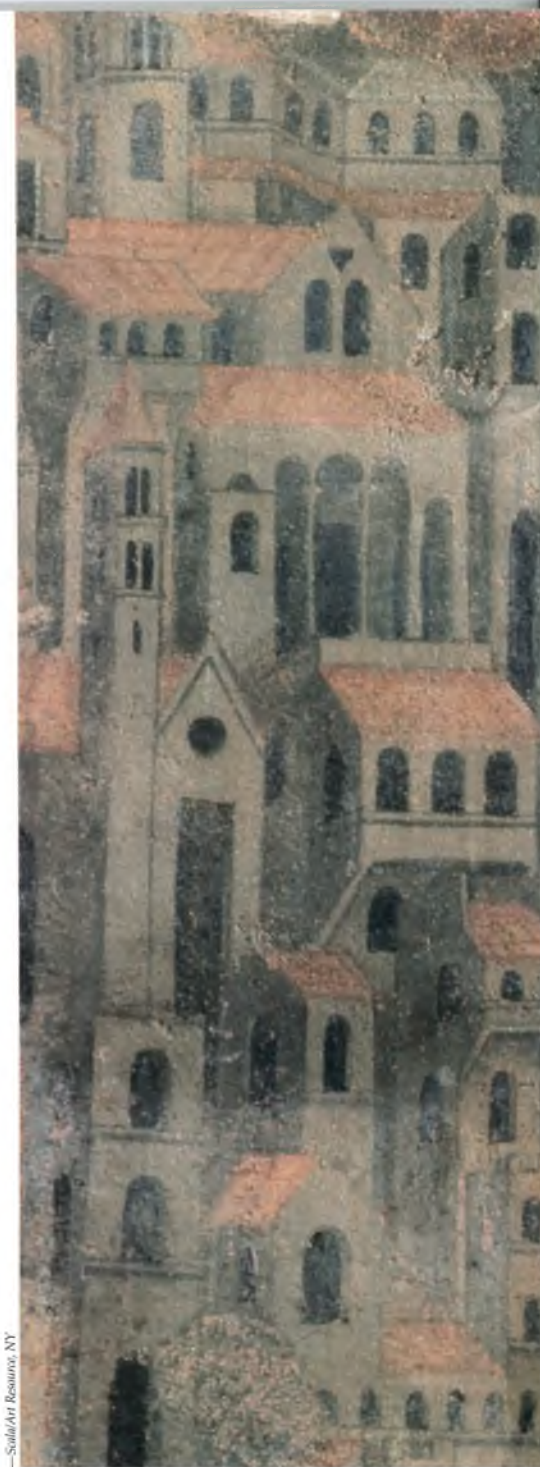
The nonexistence of St. Reparata became an acute political issue in 1352, when Naples played one of the crueler tricks of medieval history on Florence. Florence, strangely, and perhaps tellingly, claimed no relic of Reparata even though she was patron of its cathedral. But a town in Neapolitan territory did. Legends related that the body of Reparata, who had been martyred as a teenager in 250 at Caesarea in what is now Israel, had floated across the Mediterranean to a port north of Naples about six hundred years later.

The Florentines asked the Neapolitans for Reparata's right arm, which they reverently carried in procession through the city the next year. But when the Florentines unwrapped the arm for placement in a reliquary, they found that Naples had sent them nothing more than a plaster cast. Whether this deception stemmed from the Neapolitans' reverence for the body of Reparata or, conversely, from their own doubts about its authenticity, we shall never know.

Naples's treachery pushed the Council of the Republic of Florence to hold a special session in October 1353. Its aim was to discover who Reparata was and why the Florence Cathedral had been built in her honor centuries before. Finding no documents, the Council was left with the old and unreliable legend that Reparata had engineered Florence's victory against some two

hundred thousand Germanic troops who had besieged the city in 406. The victory of 406 is a historical fact, cited even by St. Augustine in his *City of God*, but Reparata's participation in the events is so improbable that even in the Middle Ages few Florentines appear to have believed in it.

In consequence, Florence declared that the Virgin Mary, and not Reparata, would be the patron saint of the new cathedral it was beginning to build as a replacement for St. Reparata's church. In 1412 the Republic forbade citizens to even mutter the name Reparata as the cathedral's title-saint. When the Duomo





**THIS 1352 VIEW OF FLORENCE SHOWS THE BEGINNINGS OF THE DUOMO TO THE RIGHT OF THE OCTAGONAL BAPTISTRY. DETAIL FROM THE *MADONNA DELLA MISERICORDIA* FRESCO, MUSEO DEL BIGALLO, FLORENCE.**

opened a generation later, not one of its sixteen altars was dedicated to her.

What is striking in this tale of St. Reparata is how little the Florentines of the late Middle Ages knew of their own early medieval history. By the time of Dante, even though the church of St. Reparata was then still standing, the Florentines had no clear-cut idea of its age, its original name, the patron who built it, or even why it was built. In contrast, the earlier and far better-documented ex-cathedral of San Lorenzo stood just a few blocks away.

The last parts of St. Reparata's church were torn down around 1375. It came

to light again in 1965 in the middle of the nave of Santa Maria del Fiore, with some of its walls just centimeters below the Duomo's marble floor. The imposing dimensions of the earlier church, the richness of its mosaic floor, and its numerous structural ties to an underlying Roman domus, or palace, were taken by many Florentine scholars as signs that the church dated from the fourth or the early fifth century. These vague indications of an "early" date seduced the same scholars into assuming that the victory legend of 406 was true: they reasoned that the church had been

built right after that victory, to thank Reparata for her help.

But when I took over the excavation in 1969, I came to a set of totally different conclusions. I argued on the basis of numismatic evidence, radiocarbon dating, and a close reading of stratigraphy—all three methods newly introduced to the excavation—that the domus below St. Reparata's was still standing, as a house, until at least the late fifth century. That meant that the church could not have materialized on the site until about a century after the victory date of 406.



EXCAVATIONS BEGIN ON PIAZZA IN 1980.

My late dating of the church stemmed also from my analysis of the floor mosaic, which on stylistic bases compared to dated floors of the late fifth or early sixth century. In 1975, I proposed that the construction of the church of St. Reparata probably came around 500, during a break in the deteriorating military situation caused by incursions of barbarians headed for Rome. Instead of traveling to the earlier cathedral of San Lorenzo, which was nearby but outside the Roman city walls, Florentines may have wanted a new cathedral within those walls.

Nonetheless, the placement of St. Reparata's church is still surprising when one considers the urban context of Florence fifteen hundred years ago. Roman Florentia was laid out checkerboard-style, aligned with the cardinal points of the compass. In this dense environment, the cathedral's site was obscure and peculiar. What was fine for a private palace—a quiet district immediately inside the north city wall—was an inferior site for the city's cathedral, where it was dark, visually insignificant, and vulnerable to attack.

Also, with the whole city to choose from, why stick the new church so close to the old but still viable San Lorenzo? Surely Christians from the other quarters must have grumbled plenty that both of the city's two big churches were in the same quarter.

Not only was the site poor, the building's construction was somewhat

odd. In design it was a standard basilical plan with an apse. The eastern half of the structure was built from the first as a church, while the western half had quite evidently been converted from the earlier palace, which originally dated to the first century. The building crew had gone to exceptional lengths to preserve the main exterior walls of the old domus to provide the shell of the new church.

I had initially imagined that the builders had reused the old walls for economy, but anyone who has done both new construction and retrofitting of old buildings knows that working with old structures is actually wasteful of time and money. It seemed contradictory that the Florentines would have spent a small fortune on floor mosaics and then disfigured the exterior of their cathedral by insisting on reusing the scarred and crooked walls of the pre-existing palace. There must have been some burning reason why the new church retained a shape that deliberately reminded worshippers that it had once been a house.

Had this once been a pagan house of worship that had been taken over as a sign of Christian triumphalism? Unlikely.

Had a rich widow disposed of her mansion as a gift to the church? There were numerous earlier cases in which a wealthy widow or a Pope tore down their homes and paid to have a basilica constructed over it. But by the sixth century, the Church had rules against consecrating all but the best of these "gift" churches, and then only if they came with endowments. It is improbable that any donor would have bamboozled the bishop of Florence into accepting a compromised building on a compromised site.

We know of many cases in which a miracle, a martyrdom, or the presence of a holy person pushed an ordinary house into the realm of sacred architecture. Was it some such event that turned this house into a church? The archaeological data were encouraging to such a hypothesis: Within what was probably the main bedroom of the house someone had installed a sacrario, or tiny shrine, complete with a pilgrim's oil flask. This was done *before* the house was turned into a church. Such shrines were uncommon in late antique houses: they typically designated a place of holiness.

This placement of a shrine does not mean that the Florentine domus

immediately became a church. In Rome, for example, the palace in which St. Cecilia suffered martyrdom in the third century was turned into a church only hundreds of years later.

Today, in fact, there stands such a church-in-the-making in Pittsburgh. Reportedly, the pious housewife Delfina Cesarespada was brought back to life in 1963 through the intercession of Blessed Nunzio Sulprizio. The Cesarespada family members were so grateful that they put a plaque to Blessed Nunzio on the outside of their house and turned their entire first floor into a shrine where Mass is said once a month. Were this a more spiritual era, and were there an increasing and not decreasing need for churches in Pittsburgh, the Cesarespada house would undoubtedly turn itself into a full-blown church.

Poor as the early church records are in Florence, there happens to survive a document of a momentous event in a private palace of exactly the right era and the right neighborhood. This happening may have caused the placing of a sacrario in the palace below the church of St. Reparata and the eventual transformation of the house into a church.

The momentous event involved not the mythical St. Reparata but the well-documented St. Ambrose, archbishop of Milan and arguably the most important churchman of fourth-century Europe. We know from the *Vita Sancti Ambrosii* that Ambrose lived in Florence between March and August of 394. He resided in the palace of a senator or a nobleman of senatorial rank named Decentius, who had a wife named Pansophia and a son, Pansophius.

During Ambrose's stay, Pansophius suddenly died on the upper floor of the palace. His mother carried the dead body down to Ambrose's bedroom on the palace's ground floor, where Ambrose reportedly brought the child back from death.

This story intrigued me. Did the sacrario designate the cubiculum or bedroom in which Ambrose had stayed? I tried not to be too literal, but this palace did have an upper floor (most did not, but I had excavated the stone support for the wooden access staircase).

Another passage in Ambrose's biography made me catch my breath. It reported that Ambrose had posthumously reappeared in Decentius's palace in 406, when he guaranteed



Courtesy of Franklin Toker

EXCAVATIONS IN FLORENCE'S DUOMO UNCOVER REMAINS OF THE SIXTH-CENTURY CHURCH OF ST. REPARATA.



THE PIAZZA DEL DUOMO IN A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LUNETTE, MUSEO DI FIRENZE COM'ERA.

the Florentines their miraculous victory over the Goths who were encamped on the other side of the north city wall.

This was the famous victory of 406 that was later garbled into the legends of the mythical St. Reparata.

Senator Decentius was no figment of the biographer's invention. I have found a second ancient text—the *Relationes of the praetorian prefect Symmachus*—that mentions a nobleman Decentius just a decade before "our" Decentius played host to Ambrose in Florence. It is highly probable, though certainly not inevitable, that both references are to the same man. That would make a near-perfect match between the literary and archaeological evidence for this site. The palace I excavated below the Duomo almost has to be the one belonging to Senator Decentius. The house was rich enough and of the right time and place to fit the home of a senator, and it bore two marks of sanctity: the sacrario and its later transformation into a church.

We can at last understand why this particular palace was selected as the cathedral site, despite its disabilities. And it finally makes sense why the Florentines, when they transformed this palace into a cathedral a century later, sacrificed aesthetics to symbolism and deliberately kept its outside walls as a talisman. The barbarians had been repulsed once through the agency of those walls—if they ever returned, the remnant of the palace would repel them again.

There are objections to my hypothesis, of course. If Ambrose was the holy person associated with the site, why wasn't the later cathedral dedicated to him and not to Reparata? Politics may

explain the snub. Perhaps Milan was jealous of sharing the fame of its archbishop with Florence; Rome surely would have been jealous of Milan's getting credit for the victory against the Goths. After all, Florence had at least been saved in 406 from the invaders, but Rome was devastated by other Germanic tribes just four years later.

Enter Reparata. The involvement of Ambrose with Florence is beyond doubt, yet it still leaves room for, and even demands, the invention of the mythical St. Reparata. Years of visiting her two dozen other cult-sites in Italy and France has convinced me that, as in the case of so many saints, Reparata is an allegorical designation that was later personified into a fictitious woman.

This sort of personification also happened with Ste.-Foye at Conques, who started out as Holy Faith, but was later misperceived as a young martyr named Faith. The early Christian designation of Hagia Sofia (Holy Wisdom) in Istanbul was anthropomorphized in the later Middle Ages into a saint named Sophia. So also the early allegorical designations of churches to Holy Peace and Holy Victory were twisted centuries later into the fictive saints Irene and Victoria.

Reparata in Latin means "rehabilitated" or "repaired." Her name was her game: Following Florence (which remains the earliest of the miracle-sites) numerous cities acclaimed Reparata every time they were liberated from external threats, whether these threats came in the form of Goths, Saracens, vikings, earthquakes, political strife, or the plague. There are Reparata churches in the Abruzzi and on Sardinia that were originally dedicated to Liberata, which makes the wordplay still more obvious.

In Florence, too, Reparata was often called "Liberata," which is halfway between Liberata and Reparata.

The invention of St. Reparata was possibly helped along by a Constantinian motto that circulated on coins for centuries. This was *felix temporis reparatio*—"happy times are recovered." A politician of today might render the motto as "let the good old times roll again." Who could have resisted a saint with political muscle like that?

So a mystery that Dante's contemporaries and modern scholars despaired of solving is now solved. And Florence, so richly endowed with the literary, scientific, and artistic genius of Dante, Giotto, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Galileo, gets visible and tangible evidence of something it forgot it had also had: a touch of sanctity.

It may be paradoxical that the solution to the old question of the origins of Florence's cathedral came from the United States. But medieval scholarship is like any other kind of study in the humanities or the sciences: It requires method and evidence, though a fascination with legends and myths probably does not hurt. □

*Franklin Toker, a past president of the Society of Architectural Historians, is professor of the history of art and architecture at the University of Pittsburgh. He directed the archaeological excavations below the Cathedral from 1969 to 1974 and the outside excavation in 1980. He is writing a four-volume archaeological history on the Florence cathedral district for the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto. He received NEH funding in 1979 (excavations), 1985, and 1992 (research support).*



## NOTEWORTHY

BY LISA ROGERS

### TWICE THE SPACE FOR NATIVE ARTS

The Heard Museum in Phoenix reopens in March with double the space, including new galleries and classrooms. The \$18 million expansion of the museum, which specializes in American Indian art, artifacts, and crafts, was funded in part by NEH. The reopening festivities culminate in the Forty-first Annual Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market, showcasing contemporary arts and crafts, as well as music and dance performances.

Along with galleries and classrooms, the museum's additions include storage and exhibit preparation areas. The new galleries offer visitors an extensive introduction to American Indian art and culture, an overview of contemporary fine arts by American Indian artists, and an opportunity to watch artists-in-residence at work. The privately run museum, founded in 1929



An artist's rendition of the newly expanded Heard Museum.

by Dwight B. and Maie Bartlett Heard to house their personal collection, attracts about 250,000 visitors a year.

### CITY SPEAKERS KEEP ACCENTS

A major study of speech patterns, funded in part by NEH, shows that regional accents are alive and well in many American cities. William Labov, a linguistics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has been working on a comprehensive telephone survey to record speech patterns since the early 1990s. Using a software program he wrote specially to plot people's accents, Labov maps changes in the way urban Americans present themselves to the ears of the world.

One of his findings is that northern cities from Syracuse, New York, to Madison, Wisconsin, are hotbeds of what's called the Northern Cities Shift, a gradual move along the pronunciation continuum of vowels and diphthongs in words such as cad, cod, cawed, and cud. The South is on the move, too, in its speech, with changes in the way words like coed, code, cord, and card are spoken. These changes can be heard right through the Midwest and Rockies where Southerners have migrated.

As the results of the survey are mapped and analyzed, Labov is adding them to his online edition of the *Phonological Atlas*

of North America. The website at [http://ling.upenn.edu/phono\\_atlas/home.html](http://ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html) provides maps and charts, raw data, and even sound clips offering examples of the Northern Cities Shift.

### TENEMENT MUSEUM GETS FEDERAL BOOST

As it celebrates its tenth anniversary, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York is also celebrating its designation by Congress as a National Historic Site. The museum can now get technical assistance from the National Park Service in areas such



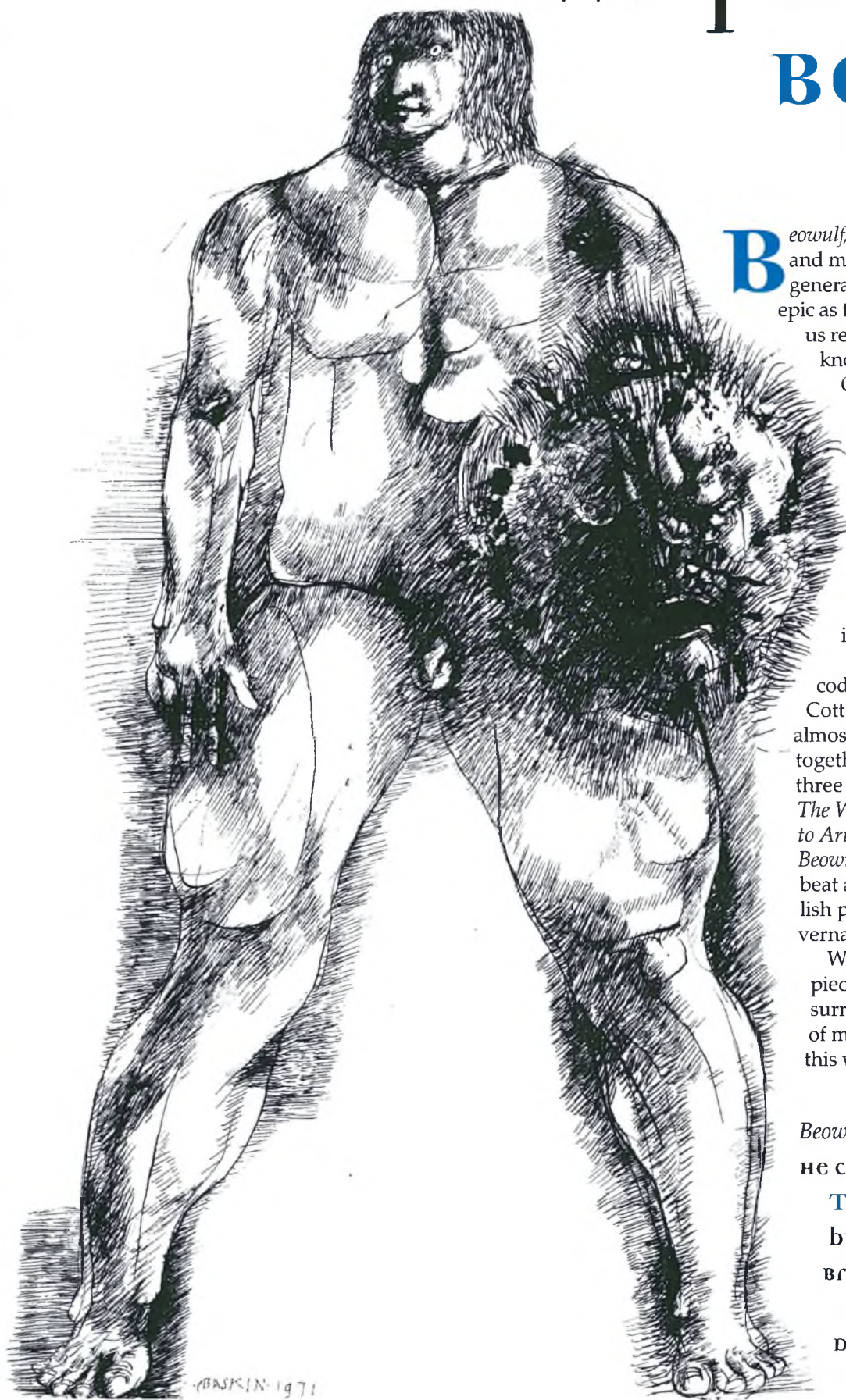
The Baldizzi family apartment in the 1930s.

as exhibition construction, security, and traffic flow.

The museum is in the heart of Manhattan's Lower East Side. The area's cheap rents have long attracted the nation's newest immigrants. A hundred years ago, the Lower East Side was the most densely populated place on earth, housing 240,000 people per square mile, about ten times the city's current average. Today the five-story building recreates tenement life from the 1870s to the 1930s through its restored apartments, period actors, and interactive tours. Among the museum's latest additions are a tour of the 1918 Rogarshevsky family apartment and an exhibition of New York's floating bathhouses. Twenty of the wooden structures lined the Hudson and East Rivers before the era of indoor plumbing, drawing up to 15,000 bathers a day in the summer for a wash and a splash. □

# why read Beowulf?

BY ROBERT F. YEAGER



**B**eowulf, the rousing Old English poem of man and monster, has been a classroom classic for generations. Its own survival as a text is nearly as epic as the story it tells. *Beowulf's* presence among us reminds us upon what slender threads our knowledge of the past depends.

Only through a series of extraordinary escapes has *Beowulf* come down to us.

in the late 900s, two anonymous scribes wrote the story on parchment using West Saxon, a Germanic dialect dominant for literary composition in England at the time. Known among scholars as the Cotton Vitellius A.XV, the *Beowulf* manuscript is modest, measuring only about five by eight inches, and without any illumination.

Compared to the three other extant codices containing Old English poetry, Cotton Vitellius A.XV seems a rough-hewn, almost journeyman work. *Beowulf* was bound together with four other works in Old English: three in prose (*The Passion of St. Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East*, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*), and *Judith*, a poem. *Judith* and *Beowulf* are composed in the unrhymed, four-beat alliterative style characteristic of Old English poetry and are among the earliest wholly vernacular works in the English canon.

Why these five works were considered of a piece ten centuries ago is one of the mysteries surrounding *Beowulf*, although the presence of monsters in each suggests that perhaps this was the common thread. It may be this

*Beowulf*:

he carried that

**TERRIBLE TROPHY**

by the hair

brought it straight to where the  
danes sat,

drinking, the queen among them.

it was a **WEIRD**

and **WONDERFUL** sight ...

everlasting human interest in monster stories that initiated *Beowulf's* survival.

The whereabouts of the manuscript during the five hundred years after it was written is unknown. We hear of it in 1563, when the Dean of Litchfield, Lawrence Nowell, owned it at least long enough to write his name and the date on the first page. Very likely Nowell saved the manuscript and *Beowulf* from destruction when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and broke up their libraries. From Nowell, again via unknown ways, the manuscript found its way into the famous library of the Elizabethan physician and antiquary Sir Robert Cotton. (It was Cotton's practice to catalog his manuscripts according to the busts of Roman emperors standing over his bookshelves; hence the manuscript's name.) After Cotton's death, his collection was eventually recognized as a national treasure and came under the protection of the Crown.

Today *Beowulf* rests safely in the British Library in London, along with what remains of Cotton's books. Miraculously, one might say. In 1731, the Cottonian Library caught fire and much of the collection was destroyed. The codex containing *Beowulf* was scorched. Its pages, made brittle by the fire, continue to crumble. Fortunately, in the early nineteenth century Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, a linguist and antiquary from Iceland, made two transcriptions. Thorkelin's copies preserved evidence of now missing or faded words.

If our possession today of the manuscript containing *Beowulf* is a story of good luck and mystery, the tale of the poem's making—as much as we can piece together—seems similar. A variety of evidence suggests that *Beowulf* began as an oral poem, passed by singers of one generation to the next. It's a good guess *Beowulf* would have disappeared along with those singers themselves if someone had not caused the poem to be written down around 1000.

No one knows who "wrote" *Beowulf*. Like all early oral poetry, it had as many authors as singers who performed it. The singers may have performed it when warriors gathered in mead halls like those described in *Beowulf* to celebrate their prowess. In fact, it is from this poem that we derive many of our reconstructions of Anglo-Saxon social life.

Scholars speculate that the poem may have been shaped by a singer who recited the poem while a scribe took it down or possibly by the two scribes in whose handwriting *Beowulf* has reached us. Did the scribes of Cotton Vitellius A.XV copy their version of *Beowulf* from another manuscript, or did they rely on ear and memory? Alas, they left us no description of their practice and no clues as to how the poem came into their hands.

Perhaps settling upon an author might be easier if we could be sure when, where, or why the poem was composed. But with *Beowulf*, even these basic facts are uncertain. *Beowulf* himself seems to have been entirely fictional. There is only one historically

verifiable moment in the poem, but this at least gives us an earliest date for that portion. *Beowulf* tells us that Hygelac, lord of the Geats, died in battle against the Frisians. This event is corroborated by the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours (d. 594), who notes in his chronicle that in the year 521 a "Chlochilaichus" (Latinized "Hygelac") was killed in a raid on Frisia.

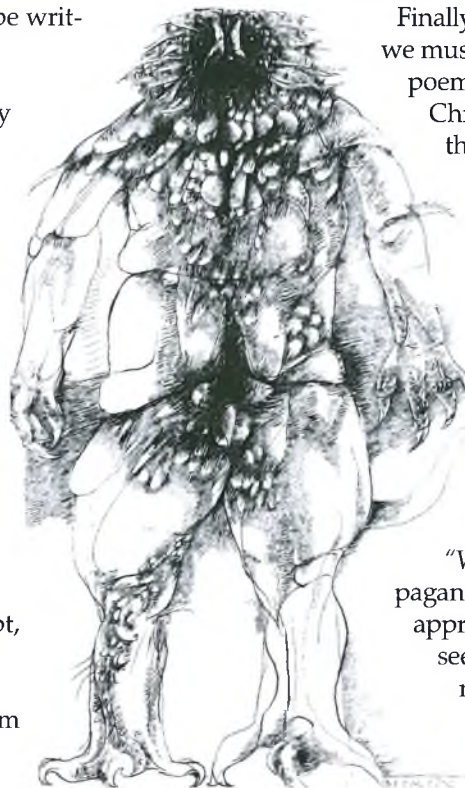
Proposing that *Beowulf* was composed in the sixth century raises more questions than it answers. Where was it being told, and how did the poem change, as it passed from singer to singer for five hundred years before it was written down in the manuscript we have? Why did people continue to listen to it and keep it alive?

Archaic vocabulary and grammatical forms preserved here and there in the manuscript, like insects in amber, suggest a little of the transmission story. From these we know that there were versions of *Beowulf* earlier than that contained in Cotton Vitellius A.XV, but scholars disagree over how many of these were oral and how many written down.

Why the poem with a Scandinavian hero exists in Old English at all is a mystery. As a member of the tribe of Geats whose significant adventures took place in Denmark and Scandinavia, *Beowulf* seems an unpromising hero for an English folk epic, particularly in tenth-century Saxon England. At the time the manuscript was being copied, Scandinavian raiders had been ravaging English shores for two centuries. This inauspicious timing has been used by some scholars to bolster their arguments that *Beowulf* was composed before the coming of the Northmen about 790. However, a poem featuring a Scandinavian hero may have been able to flourish at the court of King Cnut, who added England to his Danish empire in 1016.

Finally, to the list of mysteries surrounding *Beowulf* we must add the ambiguous role of Christianity in the poem. That the scribes of Cotton Vitellius A.XV were Christian is beyond doubt; and it is equally certain that *Beowulf* was composed in a Christianized England, since conversion took place in the sixth and seventh centuries. Yet the only Biblical references in *Beowulf* are to the Old Testament, and Christ is never mentioned. The poem is set in pagan times, and none of the characters are demonstrably Christian. In fact, when we are told what anyone in the poem believes, we learn that they are idol-worshipping pagans. *Beowulf's* own beliefs are not expressed explicitly. He offers eloquent prayers to a higher power, addressing himself to the "Father Almighty" or the "Wielder of All." Were those the prayers of a pagan who used phrases the Christians subsequently appropriated? Or, did the poem's author intend to see *Beowulf* as a Christian ur-hero, symbolically refulgent with Christian virtues?

Any of these issues—from the perilous history of the single manuscript, to the uncertainties of oral transmission from audience to audience, to the use of a pagan, foreign hero in medieval Christian England—could have prevented the manuscript from enduring. And yet *Beowulf* is still read and serves as an inspiration. It has influenced classical music



Grendel:

He strode quickly across the inlaid floor,  
snarling and fierce:  
his eyes gleamed in the darkness,  
burned with a gruesome light ...

(the American composer Howard Hanson's *Lament for Beowulf*, 1926), a novel (John Gardner's *Grendel*, 1971), animated film (*Grendel! Grendel! Grendel!* with Peter Ustinov, 1982), even a comic-book series (*Beowulf, Dragon-Slayer*, 1975).

What is the secret of this poem that has kept it quintessential to the English literary canon? To this question there must be many answers, perhaps as many as there have been hearers or readers of the poem. But certainly common to every experience of *Beowulf* is the sense that its poetry reaches, somehow like lightning, to the core of what we understand about ourselves stripped to basics, even amid the twentieth-century world of central heating and computers.

Interlaced with the stories of Beowulf's battles with monsters are tales of human struggle and less-than-exemplary people: Heremod, the wicked king who hoarded and put many of his own people to death; Modthryth, the queen who arbitrarily executed those who displeased her; and Hrothulf, the treacherous usurper-in-waiting.

The struggles the poem depicts are of good against evil: strength of sinew, heart and spirit, truth and light, pitted against dark power that gives no quarter as it shifts from shape to shape. That the darkness (be it Grendel, a dragon, or treachery, greed, and pride) is familiar only renders it more frightening—and the more instructive.

In the poem's narrative, challenge is constant and death always waits. True, there are victories—glorious ones, sometimes, like Beowulf's triumph over Grendel—but in the end even the hero's strength and vitality must be sapped by age.

And yet, although the poem ends with the death of its hero and the prophecy of extinction for his people, *Beowulf* is not a gloomy work, and our experience of it does not incite despair. That is because, like Beowulf himself, the poem never backs away but greets what comes with courage. To this, probably as much as the tales of monsters, or the high adventure, or the blood and gore (of which, relatively speaking, the poem contains little), *Beowulf's* audiences have always reacted most strongly. Students respond to the lack of falsifying sweetness that would gloss over a world that they recognize as basically an image of our own.

From start to finish, *Beowulf* demands our acknowledgment that sorting out the monster from the hero and the coward is a lifetime's struggle in the dark. *Beowulf* joins us to our ancestors—whoever they might have been, in whatever far country—at the top of their game, as we would like to imagine them, and as we dearly hope those who come after will someday envision us. □

Robert F. Yeager is a professor of literature and language at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He has directed five NEH-funded Summer Seminars for School Teachers on *BEOWULF* AND THE HEROIC AGE. His sixth seminar will be held this summer.

Illustrations by Leonard Baskin and accompanying quotes by Burton Raffel are from Raffel's translation of *BEOWULF*. ©1971 by the University of Massachusetts Press. Used with the permission of Mr. Baskin and the Press.

## The poem begins...

The poem opens with an old king, Hrothgar of Denmark, in despair. For fourteen years, Grendel has haunted Heorot, Hrothgar's meadhall. Any who attempt to stay in Heorot are torn apart and devoured by Grendel, who is half man and half beast. There seems no remedy, until young Beowulf, a warrior from the neighboring Geat tribe, comes to take on the monster. Grendel attacks Beowulf in the hall, but the Geat is stronger and wrests Grendel's arm from its socket. Howling, Grendel bolts for his home in the swamp to die.

Although Beowulf is hailed as the savior of Denmark, the danger is not over. Grendel's mother—also a monstrous being of appalling hideousness—falls upon the sleeping revelers in the hall and carries one off with her. Along the way to the monsters' lair, Beowulf, Hrothgar, and their men find the head of the abducted warrior impaled on a rock.

Beowulf dives into the lake, swimming for hours in full armor, until at last he finds the monster's cave. Inside, Beowulf's sword is powerless against the attacking she-monster. Only when he seizes a huge sword hanging on the cave's wall is Beowulf able to kill Grendel's mother. He then finds Grendel's body, cuts

off his head (the giant sword melts in the cutting) and swims to the surface, where he finds only his own dozen warriors still waiting, although they are certain he has been slain.

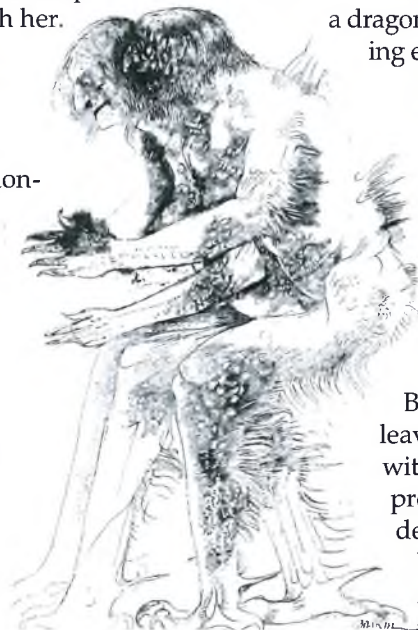
Upon his return to Heorot, Beowulf is given much treasure and advice by Hrothgar. He sails home to Geatland where he is honored with gifts and lands as the story is retold.

Then a chronicle of killings and retaliations involving various characters marks the passage of fifty winters between Beowulf's youth and old age.

During that time, Beowulf has become leader of the Geats, and has ruled well, preserving the kingdom with strength and wisdom. But one day a cup is stolen from the hoard of a dragon in Geatland. The angry beast flies out, burning everything, including Beowulf's own hall.

Beowulf commands that an iron shield be made, and with twelve warriors goes to the dragon's barrow to defend his people. The dragon and Beowulf fight, but the shield cannot protect the hero sufficiently, and his sword will not penetrate the dragon's scales. Beowulf's men hide in panic, all except Wiglaf, who thrusts his sword into the dragon's soft belly.

Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon, but Beowulf is mortally wounded, and dies after leaving his armor to Wiglaf. The poem ends with Beowulf's funeral pyre, and with the prophecy that the Geats soon will be destroyed by their neighbors, now that Beowulf is dead and his people have shown their cowardice in not coming forward when he was in need. □ —RFY



Grendel's parents:

... He was spawned in that **slime**  
Conceived by a pair of those  
**monsters** born of Cain,  
**murderous** creatures ban-  
ished by god, punished forever ...

The same technology that helps uncover clogged arteries also helps unlock literary mysteries. About a dozen years ago, Kevin Kiernan, a professor of English literature at the University of Kentucky, found himself deep in conversation with a cardiac specialist at a dinner party. "He had just gotten a medical imaging processor, one of the first in the United States. We got interested in each other's problems. We were talking about how computer enhancements of X-rays of cardiac patients could reveal hidden deposits of fat or, for that matter, a pen stroke that had been completely obliterated," Kiernan says.

From this conversation the Electronic *Beowulf* Project was born. *Beowulf*, the earliest and most important English literary epic from the period before the Norman Conquest, exists only as a single intact manuscript that survived a 1731 fire. In the nineteenth century, as the edges of the original manuscript were crumbling, the pages were placed in double-sided mounts to protect them from further deterioration, thus partially or wholly covering letters, words, and images.

Kiernan, who is editor of the project, says he learned how the new technology could recover bits and pieces of the charred *Beowulf* manuscript that had crumbled away or were obscured. That same technology also provided him with the tools to uncover erasures and revisions that had been made to the original vellum manuscript that no one had ever noticed before. As a result, *Beowulf* was no longer a static manuscript, but a living work of literature.

The project employs fiber-optic technology, a safe source of cold light, to illuminate pages of the *Beowulf* manuscript from behind. As a result, letters and words obscured by the well-meaning mid-nineteenth-century attempt to stabilize the vellum pages are now visible. The process shows that many parts of the manuscript that were believed to be gone still exist.

In addition, ultraviolet light has been used to uncover parts of the manuscript that can't be seen in ordinary light. Kiernan believes the scribes who wrote the legend down made scores of corrections where they erased using pumice or a knife to scrape off the ink. "It's interesting to discover what kinds of mistakes they were making and what kind of mistakes they were correcting," he says. These were not simple typographical mistakes, Kiernan observes, but mistakes that affected the course of the story, the meter, that made "the sense" different. "I believe two scribes were putting together two different sources for the very first time," he says.

"My own personal feeling is that this new technology is going to force people to look at how the actual manuscript has been so radically changed in modern editions. The Electronic *Beowulf* will allow the possibility of looking at the origins of misconceptions," says Kiernan. An example of this: the original text is arranged into forty-two brief sections. Traditionally, they were never read in that way. In the past, people read it as three main stories: the fight with Grendel, the fight with Grendel's mother, and the fight with the dragon.

"If you read it in those traditional three episodes there are many things that seem digressions. But if you read it in the sections as the manuscript presents it, there are no digressions at all. Each section is self-contained and has its own coherence. In our modern editions we have departed from the way it was presented, and we lose something that way," Kiernan maintains.

NEH grants have supported efforts to index the text and to mark up an edition and transcription of *Beowulf* so they could be searched electronically. This allows scholars



<http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/BL/kportico.html>

## The ELECTRONIC Beowulf

BY RICHARD CARTER

to conduct broad as well as detailed searches of themes, ideas, and words in the manuscript.

But the Electronic *Beowulf* Project is not just for graduate students or professors of literature. Kiernan has found, much to his surprise, that young people like the Electronic *Beowulf*. "One of the odd things is I hear from kids all the time," Kiernan says. "They write with the craziest questions. They think it is so 'cool' that these pictures are on the Internet. And I hear from high school teachers, too."

"The project shows how *Beowulf* developed over time. Today, with so much of our written culture on computer, we often only see the finished project. We don't see how a work develops over time, its evolution. Of course, I also feel that we shouldn't stop our interpretation of something like *Beowulf*. It would be kind of perverse to come up with some kind of definitive version. It should be an open process that many people add to."

After many years of studying the manuscript, Kiernan sees *Beowulf* as a tale of moral dimension rather than one of heroic exploits. "Considering the first monastic origins of *Beowulf*, my own view is that heroism is not a virtue in the way it works out in the story. The fight with the monsters can be seen as conflict between jealousy and first murders. Grendel's mother represents the idea of the vendetta culture. I believe in *Beowulf* we are told that cyclical murders are not heroic and that a vendetta culture destroys civilization rather than holds it up."

Maintaining that the story was written down during a time when England was invaded and conquered by Danish kings, Kiernan concludes, "That's hard for a lot of people to swallow. For me it explains much of the moral dimension of the epic." □

# a land without lords

BY ANNA MARIA GILLIS



he settlement of Iceland caused the first western mass migration across the Atlantic. "It was like the Oklahoma land rush," says scholar Jesse L. Byock.

Iceland's frontier society was a social experiment. For more than three hundred years, farmers notorious for feuding managed to govern themselves without benefit of knights, lords, or monarch.

The society created by the Icelanders has been portrayed as a democracy, but that is a romantic and exaggerated view, says Byock, professor of Old Norse and Icelandic studies at the University of California at Los Angeles and author of *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Iceland was "proto-democratic." What medieval Iceland and democratic societies share is a struggle with the issue of overlordship.



"Icelanders rejected overlordship," says Byock. They created a complex rule of law, but formed no government bodies or military authorities to enforce the law or to manage conflicts. Guided by self-interest in preserving their rights as freemen and the social order in their nonhierarchical community, medieval Icelanders used consensus to resolve disputes.

To understand how a people famous for long-lasting feuds reached consensus, Byock studies the family sagas. Unlike some other classes of Icelandic saga, the family stories are not fantastical adventures or chivalrous tales. Instead, they deal with issues of land ownership, insults, accusations of witchcraft, claims on beached whales, stolen hay, feud negotiations, and other everyday matters. The thirty or so chronicles, written in the vernacular, focus mainly on people and events of the mid-tenth to early eleventh centuries, the period shortly after Iceland's settlement.

The family sagas are similar to the realistic novels of the nineteenth century, says Byock. Although all the details are not necessarily true, they paint a picture of the society's attitudes and ways of functioning.

As the Icelandic sagas interpret events, Norwegian royal power drove the first settlers to the North Atlantic island. King Haraldr Fairhair, who ruled from 885 to 930, reputedly was a tyrant. His practice of taxing landowners who had traditionally held their lands as inalienable family possessions caused some of his subjects to emigrate to the British mainland, the Hebrides, the Shetland and Orkney Islands, and Iceland.

Although medieval Icelanders claimed that increased royal power compelled their ancestors to move to Iceland, Byock says the story is more complicated: Iceland represented opportunity.

Soon after Scandinavian sailors came upon Iceland in 850, rumors began to fly through the northern countries about a place with large tracts of land that were free for the

# how early icelanders settled their feuds

taking. There were no inhabitants, except for a few Irish monks, and it was removed enough to be safe from invasion.

"The family sagas would have one think that the ancestors who settled Iceland were all aristocrats, or that Iceland was the retirement home of freebooting vikings who had gotten into trouble with the king. But most of the settlers were just ordinary farmers," says Byock.

From 870 to 930, hordes of landseekers and their families made the perilous journey to Iceland. The movement of those ten to twenty thousand people, mostly from Norway, was made possible because of improvements in shipbuilding and the wealth that had been brought back to Scandinavia by vikings. (The word *vikings* means pirate. Most medieval Scandinavians would never have used the word to describe themselves.)

The first *landnámsmenn*, or landtakers, found their new home green and verdant; the bird life was vast, and the land was covered in scrub birch. But the subarctic ecosystem was fragile. Land productivity dropped rapidly with deforestation and livestock raising. After the first sixty years, most of the good sites were taken. The getting and keeping of limited land and resources fueled many of the feuds in the family sagas.

Feuds could begin when one party bought land that another party claimed, or when inheritance was in question. Disputes between families would occur if land that was part of a woman's dowry wasn't returned when the wife and husband separated. Insults, seductions, and thefts of sheep, hay, and horses sometimes escalated into killings.

Among Byock's favorite stories is *Njáls Saga*, which he first read as a law

student. Njáll is an honorable man who believes that "Our land must be built with law or laid waste with lawlessness." Unfortunately, he is saddled with a dishonorable family that continually perpetuates feuds that Njáll then tries to mend using legal channels.

At one point, Njáll reaches a money settlement with Flosi, the kinsman of a man murdered by Njáll's sons. (The Icelanders often exchanged money as compensation for murder.) However, one of the sons ruins the settlement by insulting Flosi, who retaliates by attacking Njáll's household.

Instead of fighting, Njáll orders his family into the house, which the attackers set afire. Only Njáll's son-in-law escapes. Resolution only occurs after legal skirmishing, vengeance killings, and finally, the marriage between Flosi's niece and Kári, Njáll's son-in-law.

Modern readers of the family sagas have tended to look at them mainly as a literature of conflict, filled with people unable to resist a good fight. This view tends to support the stereotype that Icelandic society was exceptionally anarchic and violent.

But Byock contends that the family sagas taught medieval hearers and readers (by the thirteenth century, most Icelanders were literate) how to succeed in their world. The sagas provided a code of conduct and showed people how to use the law and a complex system of advocacy that characterized Iceland's non-hierarchical society.



—Manuscript Department, National and University Library of Iceland, Lib. 3305.40c

njáll in  
seventeenth-  
century dress.  
is a protagonist  
in a major  
icelandic saga.

## Ninth-Century Site Uncovered

Using a combination of saga stories, land registers, tax rolls, and local lore, UCLA's Jesse L. Byock and a team of U.S. and Icelandic archaeologists were able to locate remains of a ninth-century farm in Iceland's Mosfell Valley last summer. The building walls they found had been undisturbed for more than nine hundred years.

The site is especially valuable because there is a large written record about the settlement of Mosfell, says Byock, who is directing the Mosfell Archaeological Project. Often archaeologists studying Viking-Age (A.D. 800 to 1066) sites have been constrained when interpreting them because they had no information about the people who lived there.

Byock and his colleagues suspect that the Mosfell farm may have been home to an important chieftain at the time of settlement and to the warrior-poet Egill Skalla-Grimsson in the tenth century. Egill, the subject of *Egill's Saga*, is known to have lived in Mosfell in his old age with his stepdaughter and her husband, who was a Law Speaker.



—Courtesy of Jesse L. Byock

The Mosfell Project team searches for twelfth-century church remains.

The farm, located in a strategic position in the valley, had been buried in a landslide and abandoned sometime after 1000.

The archaeologists were able to date the turf walls to the late ninth century because they contained a layer of volcanic ash from an eruption that occurred in 872.

The research team also found evidence of a twelfth-century Christian church and studied the pagan burial mound where Egill was buried during the pre-Christian era. Additional work is planned for this year. □ —AMG

*Jesse L. Byock received NEH funding to study in archives in Iceland in preparation for the Mosfell Archaeological Project.*



The Icelanders had several ways to resolve differences. The person who had done wrong could offer a self-judgement that would allow the injured party to fix the terms of settlement. When this occurred, there was the expectation that the injured party would practice *hólf*, or moderation, in setting terms. Dueling, until it was outlawed, was another option. Arbitration was the most common way to redress wrongs.

The local courts provided Icelanders with a forum for negotiation and arbitration. The worst feuds eventually went to the courts at the *Althing*. This national assembly of chieftains, formed in 930, met every June on the *Thingvellir*, a plain in southwestern Iceland. (*Thing* means assembly.)

During the two-week-long proceedings, the council of chieftains would make new laws that would be announced by the Law Speaker, nominally the most important person in Iceland. In each of the three years of his term, the Law Speaker would also repeat from memory one third of the entire body of law. (The Icelanders only began putting their law—known as *Grágás*, or gray goose—into writing in the twelfth century.)

Legal cases were heard in the four Quarter Courts: there was one court for each section of the country. To prevent bias, judges were drawn from around the country and were assigned by lot to each court. Although chieftains named them, the judges could be disqualified if interested parties believed they might be unfair.

A successful court outcome depended on advocacy by bringing in a network of supporters, says Byock. In *Njáls Saga*, for instance, the politically astute Flosi visited various important men after he killed Njáls's family. In preparation for the Althing, Flosi bought support by reminding possible advocates of past obligations and promising them future friendship. Kári, Njáls's son-in-law, was a foreigner and didn't know how to exploit the advocacy system well, and doesn't get the just outcome he expects. This triggered a fight at the Althing. Blood was shed, and then the Law Speaker and two other leaders negotiated a truce.

When fighting broke out at the Althing, it usually didn't last long. If disputing parties showed up with large numbers of armed supporters, it indicated that a "significant number of men had chosen sides and were prepared to participate in working toward an honorable resolution. With chieftains and farmers publicly committed, a compromise resting on a collective agreement could be reached. Men of goodwill would arbitrate," writes Byock in his book *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*.

The family sagas are filled with examples of aggrieved individuals going from one chieftain's booth to another at the Althing, lobbying for their cause, says Byock. Sometimes, the advocates would take on a person's case out of high-mindedness and a desire to do what was right. But often they could increase their



property holdings and prestige by arguing in support of the supplicant. In return for their brokerage of a problem, advocates also might receive a good marriage alliance or foster care for a child.

Because Icelandic law had no provisions for the government to administer a death penalty or other punishments, advocates and arbitrators also worked with injured and offending parties to reach settlements on murder, theft, and assaults. Vengeance killing was allowed in some circumstances; and fines were common. Aggrieved parties could ask that their opponent be declared a lesser or full outlaw. To be declared a full outlaw was a virtual death sentence—no one could offer the outlaw help and anyone was free to kill him.

Ideally, a prudent person would develop a network of supporters who would take his side because of some self-interest, says Byock. "It was a very commercial way for people to conduct themselves."

A chieftain's performance as an advocate and arbitrator was important if he wanted to keep the loyalty of *thingmen*, farmers who had allied themselves with him. The Icelandic chieftains didn't hold huge territories, and they didn't have the power that higher-ups in other medieval societies had to use force. The farmers could not be compelled to do something against their will, and they could change allegiances.

Advocacy made it possible for ambitious men to advance and for a nonhierarchical society to function. Bringing in advocates also limited violence because the strong supporters were not about to foolishly risk their power, Byock argues. Because they were somewhat detached, they could

take some of the hot-headedness out of a feud.

The aim of the legal system wasn't necessarily to reach a just solution, only a compromise that would be considered fair enough to maintain the status quo and prevent major shifts in the power balance.

Until the mid-thirteenth century, the Icelanders had been able to keep that balance. For most of the three centuries that the Icelandic Free State existed, there were no significant differences between chieftains and prosperous farmers. Byock asserts that Norway was able to gain control in 1262 partly because of the turmoil that ensued when a few families began to concentrate the power that had previously been dispersed in Icelandic society.

Iceland wasn't unique in having active assemblies of freemen. They

thingvellir, a natural amphitheater in southern Iceland.

is the place where medieval

chieftains met for the althing,

the annual national assembly.

were a common feature of most early societies in northern Europe. The rights of freemen and the concept of a jury were also found in southern Europe.

What made Iceland unusual was the pervasiveness of advocacy and the attention to consensus. It was the main way medieval Icelanders dealt with each other, Byock says, and offers today's students an early model of conflict resolution. □



a tract on

manslaughter

from GRÁGÁS.

the Icelandic

free state's laws.

A roundup of humanities activities across t

## Around The Nation Around The Nation Around

### Arizona

The 1999 Arizona Book Festival, held April 10 at the Margaret Hance Park in Phoenix, includes readings, author signings, book discussions, workshops, and presentations for adults and children. The festival, now in its second year, features writers Barbara Kingsolver, author of *Pigs in Heaven*, James Welch author of *Winter in the Blood* and *Fools Crow*, mystery writer J. A. Jance, and Mas Masumoto, author of *Harvest Son*. Other events take place around the state from April 3–9.

### Colorado

Robert Conklin portrays a Civil War soldier at a Chautauqua in Greeley. Based on diaries, biographies and stories from his family, Conklin presents the story of Corporal Taylor Conklin on April 8.

The first panel discussion in a series titled "Taking Testimony," takes place at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center on April 9 in Denver. Writer Barry Jay Glass moderates a discussion on elders in the HIV/AIDS community. The second panel discussion in the series takes place on April 23 at the Capitol Hill Community Center,

and focuses on "The Changing Culture of HIV/AIDS." Shelli Coen moderates this discussion.

### Florida

Two writers, one black and one white raised only a few miles apart, were commissioned to write short memoirs for a presentation in "Parallel Lives," an initiative that partners five communities with humanities scholars to evaluate issues of race relations. During March and April, each community partnership creates a project focusing on the history of race relations in their communities. The projects include collections of oral histories, research in archives and libraries, community forums, panel discussions, and presentations.

### Georgia

School and community groups learn about the Holocaust through presentations by Joey Korn, who edited his father's Holocaust memoir, *Abe's Story*. Prior to the presentations, held between March 3 and 6, eighth-graders in Worth, Grady, and Lowndes Counties read *Abe's Story* and participated

in interdisciplinary studies on the Holocaust.

A two-day conference in Rome on March 26 and 27 celebrates the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of Shorter College. "Georgia Women Meeting Challenges" includes a keynote by Dr. Christine Farnham, editor of the *Journal of Women's History*. Women of Achievement are co-sponsors of the conference and hold their induction ceremony on the campus during the conference.

### Idaho

Black and white photographs taken by Leo Leeburn from 1943 to the present are on display in "The Changing Capitol," an exhibition at the Historical Museum in Boise. The photographs include streetscapes and gatherings, and document downtown Boise before, during, and after the urban renewal movement of the 1960s.



Leo Leeburn's photographs of the changing face of Boise are on display in Idaho.

Courtesy of Leo Leeburn

country in March and April. Compiled by Erin Erickson.

## the Nation Around the Nation Around The Nation

### Indiana

A race through the Crown Hill cemetery takes competitors by the gravesites of Victorian men and women. "Crown Hill: Race Through Hoosier History" takes place March 7 and includes a 5-mile run and a 3-mile walk.



FROG FOUNTAIN by Janet Scudder (1901), one of the women artists featured in a lecture in Indiana.

—Swope Art Museum, Terre Haute, Indiana

Dr. Laurette E. McCarthy lectures on "Terre Haute Women in American Art" at the Swope Art Museum in Terre Haute on March 6. The lecture focuses on four artists, Amalia Küssner Coudert, Caroline Peddle Ball, Blanche Bruce, and Janet Scudder.

Guided walking tours of historic Purdue University take place during April. Project director Michael Hunt talks about the historic buildings on campus through a slide presentation and a walking tour.

David Guterson, author of *Snow Falling on Cedars*, presents a reading at Purdue University Calumet in the Alumni Hall. The program, which takes place April 9, is part of the Ethnic Writers Series. Also part of the series is a literary workshop for K-12 teachers and students, on April 10 at Purdue University Calumet in Hammond.

A viewing of selected photographs in the "Lloyd Riley Collection: Photographs of Pike People and Place in Perspective" takes place at the Archives Room in Indianapolis on April 19.

"Reading 'Round the World,'" the Endwright Center Book Club, continues with a discussion led by Indiana University English instructor, Katherine Gehr on March 17. On April 21, Purnima Bose, doctor of comparative literature, leads a discussion on *Cracking India* by Batsi Sidwa. Both programs take place at the Area 10 Agency on Aging in Bloomington.

### Kansas

"Sunflower Journeys," a series of thirteen half-hour programs examining the history, culture, and geography of different areas in Kansas airs on radio stations across the state. The theme called "Blue Highways" takes audiences on a listening tour of Kansas. March and April programs include a March 4 program that explores the area from Fort Dodge to Monument; a March 25 program that describes the area from Colby to Logan; an April 1 program that looks at the region from Stockton to Clay Center; an April 8 program that takes the listener from Manhattan to Troy; an April 15 program that discovers the land from Atchison to Lawrence, an April 22 program that considers the area from Osasatomic to Fort Scott, and an April 29 program that brings listeners the story of the region from Pittsburg to Peru.

"Sunflower Journeys" takes listeners on a radio tour of Kansas culture.

### Maine

A conference focusing on "The Spanish American War of 1898: Birth of the American Century" takes place at the University of Southern Maine, April 9-10.

A weekend seminar focusing on Dante's *Inferno* and late medieval Florence, takes place March 5-6 at Bowdoin College.

"First Light: The Dawn of Photography in Maine, 1840-1860," an exhibition, conference, and interpretive programs exploring early photography in Maine takes place at the Center for Maine History in Portland, April 2 through October 31.

### Maryland

A documentary series on important women through the ages distributes its most recent film on Hildegard of Bingen. See page 32.





THE ORPHAN TRAINS is a documentary featured at a Speakers Bureau program in Nebraska.

### Massachusetts

Programs about historic maple sugaring operations are held at the Bidwell House in Monterey. On Saturday, March 20, a lecture and demonstration examine the evolution of harvesting techniques from the Native American method of dropping hot stones into hollow logs to the nineteenth-century method of using evaporating pans.

J. Thomas Weldon demonstrates setting up and using a historic hotbed at the Bidwell House on Saturday, April 3. Using the nineteenth-century Shaker hotbed as a model, Weldon discusses other historical types and shows methods of sowing and maintaining a bed, as well as transplanting to a second bed and into a garden.

"Ends of Civilization: Taking Stock on the Eve of the Millennium," a reading and discussion series, continues this spring. From March 16 through May 11, the weekly program takes place at Medford Public Library and at Graves Memorial Library in Sunderland. From March 20 through May 15, the weekly program takes place at West Roxbury Branch Library of the Boston Public Library.

### Missouri

A series of discussions, exhibitions, and events commemorating the one

hundredth anniversary of the publication of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is sponsored by the Kirkwood Public Library in St. Louis, four local universities, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Missouri Historical Society, and the St. Louis Public Library. On April 22 and 23, Emily Toth, a Chopin scholar at Louisiana State University, lectures at Maryville University and the Kirkwood Public Library. On April 24, she gives a public reading at St. Louis University. A reading and discussion series at the Kirkwood Public Library takes place throughout March and April.

The Second Annual Ethnic Heritage Cultural Tourism Conference takes place in St. Louis, March 26-28. The conference examines preservation and interpretation issues, as well as future sites for cultural tourism in Missouri.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa is the featured poet at the Second Annual Langston Hughes St. Louis World Black Poetry Festival. The festival takes place at the Missouri Botanical Gardens and other locations between April 11 and 18. Others appearing at the festival include Naomi Long Madgett, Wardell Montgomery, Jr., and the poetry ensemble called The Last Poets.

### Nebraska

Eight days of performances representing ethnic and cultural groups in the Great Plains takes place in Lincoln at the Great Plains Music and Dance Festival and Symposium from April 2 through 11. A symposium including panels, workshops and demonstrations takes place April 9 and 10. An accompanying exhibition is on display from March 10 through April 30 at the Love Library on the University of Nebraska campus.

A. Scott Momaday, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and member of the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma, is the keynote speaker at the John G. Neihardt Annual Spring Conference on April 24, in Bancroft. The conference focuses on a sense of place from the American Indian perspective.

Several Speakers Bureau programs take place during March and April. Included in the programs are "The Story of the Orphan Train," "African American Homesteaders and Cowboys of Nebraska," "Myths of Women's Madness on the Plains," and "A Day in the Life of a Victorian Lady."

### New Hampshire

"The Many Faces of God" continues in March and April. Workshops in biblical Hebrew and Judaism take place on Wednesdays, March 31 through May 26, at the Manchester Historic Association. "Mahabharata and Ramayana: A Program of Dance, Music, and Philosophy" takes place at the Plymouth Silver Art Center on March 20, and at the Annicharico Theater in Concord on March 25. Public lectures on Hinduism take place throughout April, and include discussions of religion, culture, and daily life. A Buddhist retreat is held at the Aryaloka Retreat Center in Newmarket on April 1.

### New Mexico

Medieval Scandinavia is the topic for the 1999 Medieval Studies Spring Lecture Series at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. The event, running from March 22 through 25, takes an interdisciplinary approach to examining the Vikings and their culture. Carol J. Clover, professor of Scandinavian, rhetoric, and film, at the University of California at Berkeley, and Else Roesdahl, professor of art and archaeology at Aarhus University in Denmark are the featured speakers for this year's series.



*"The Many Faces of God" are explored in New Hampshire.*

Yaksha Permalwar, India, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

"Thinking Makes It So: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, and The Mind," a celebration of the arts and humanities, includes post-performance discussions of *Hamlet* and Calderon's *Life's a Dream*; a *Hamlet* video series; a film and discussion series; and a workshop for secondary school teachers. The program takes place at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

#### New York

The seventh annual Young Scholars Contest has High School students from New York busy working on essays for this year's topic, "An Act of Courage," chosen from a work of fiction or an actual event. Using both primary and secondary resources, the students are to write an analytical essay on the subject to be entered by April 1. Winners of the Young Scholars Contest receive college scholarships ranging from \$500 to \$5,000.

#### Oklahoma

Nell Irvin Painter, professor of American history at Princeton University, lectures on "Slaves/Slavery in the American Imagination" at the Fourteenth Annual Oklahoma Lecture in the Humanities. The event takes place at St. John Mis-

sionary Baptist Church in Oklahoma City on March 19.

#### Pennsylvania

"The Anne Frank Story," a traveling exhibition,

*A traveling exhibition takes Anne Frank's story through Pennsylvania.*

—© AFF/AFH, Basel, Amsterdam



examines the life and death of Anne Frank using photographs, diary entries, and historical information. The exhibition travels to North Penn, Indian Valley, Blue Bell, and surrounding communities through March 21. Several education programs take place in conjunction with the exhibition.

"Healing History: The Story of Racial Integration in West Mount Airy" unites social scientists, historians, and community members in a public forum examining the town's history as it went through racial integration. The forum is held at the Unitarian Society Sanctuary on March 25.

#### South Dakota

The first of four discussion groups focusing on "Dakota Way of Living and Surviving" takes place March 24 at the Sisseton Wahpeton Community College Library. This discussion features five speakers addressing Indian art, stereotypical representation of Indians in film and literature, the overlooking of Dakota and Nakota tribal people in discourse, and the revival of traditional music, instruments, and dance.

Professor and author Kenneth Robins speaks at a two-day program held by the Black Hills Writers Group. The program, which takes place April 10-11, focuses on "Writing Across the Genres and Writing the Regional Novel."

Susanne Woods of Brown University and F. Xavier Baron of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee are the featured speakers at a two-day conference taking place April 23 and 24. The conference examines British literature prior to 1800, with special focus on women writers and on literature in London before the modern period.

#### Texas

Four weekend seminars and lecture and discussion programs focus on "Media and American Identity." The series, which takes place during March

and April in Salado, includes topics from new developments in journalism to the role of the media in shaping American identity. On March 6 and 7, the series presents James W. Carey; on March 20 and 21, the series presents Barbara Ehrenreich; on April 10 and 11, the series presents Richard Rodriguez; and on April 24 and 25, the series presents Roger Rosenblatt.

A conference for K-12 educators, taking place March 5-6, and a public exhibition on display until June 30, examine millennial movements and ideas. The programs focus on millennial trends in Renaissance Europe, nineteenth-century America, China,



Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

*Eleanor Roosevelt, here holding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is portrayed in a one-woman play in Vermont.*

and Africa, and the contemporary United States. The conference and exhibition take place in Huntsville.

#### Vermont

Recitations, readings, and commentary are a part of "The Magic of Shakespeare," a performance by Sam Lloyd. The program takes place at the Latham Memorial Library in Thetford, on Monday, March 1.

A one-woman drama and historical interpretation by Elena Dodd introduces the audience in Shelburne to Eleanor Roosevelt. "Meet Eleanor Roosevelt: Private Citizen and First Lady of the World" takes place at the Shelburne Town Hall Auditorium on April 29.

*Continued on page 35*

# WOMEN of POWER

BY ERIN ERICKSON

In the *Symphony of the World: A Portrait of Hildegard of Bingen* is a new documentary that brings the life and ideas of this eleventh-century nun to a modern audience. Hildegard defied the gender roles of her time and became a leader in intellectual pursuits. She was the author of three major theological works, composer of more than seventy songs, and dramatist of the first known morality play. On top of these accomplishments she was a doctor, a theologian, and a poet. Even in her death she excelled the norm by living until the ripe age of eighty-two.

The film combines a score of Hildegard's once-again-popular compositions, interviews with modern-day nuns and scholars, and scenes of the landscape that inspired this great thinker from the Middle Ages.

Filmmakers John Fuegi and Jo Francis of Flare Productions Inc. have produced the film as part of a series called "Women of Power," supported by the Maryland Humanities Council. So far, Fuegi and Francis have produced three films for the series—*The War Within: A Portrait of Virginia Woolf*, *Red Ruth: That Deadly Longing*, and the newest on Hildegard of Bingen. The first two films have already won several

awards and have been circulated internationally, besides being aired on Maryland Public Television.

Hildegard was born in 1098 and at the age of eight her parents placed her in a religious atmosphere to be educated.

When she was fourteen, Hildegard entered the cloister at Disibodenberg, where she fell under the guidance of Jutta von Sponheim, the abbess of the convent. In 1136, Jutta died and Hildegard was named abbess, a title she held for twelve years.

Throughout her life, Hildegard had visions, which at first she kept closely guarded. At the age of forty-three, Hildegard decided she could no longer keep these visions to herself. She was told in a vision to "Cry out!" At a time when women only learned enough Latin to sing songs, it was difficult to find a public voice, so she enlisted the help of a monk and political support from another nun. With their help she completed her first theological book, *Scivias*.

Hildegard took great risk in challenging the role of women in her society. Women accused of heresy ran the risk of being killed or driven out. Yet, Hildegard's writings were well received. The Pope approved of her work and she was hailed a prophet. People made pilgrimages to her at



A page from the *LIBER DIVINORUM OPERUM* (Book of Divine Works) shows Hildegard's vision and her efforts to describe it, circa 1240.

Disibodenberg, seeking spiritual advice and medical help. Hildegard studied horticulture and understood herbs and used them for medicine, which was offered at the abbeys and monasteries. Two of her writings document her extensive knowledge of herbs and their medical uses.

How does one make a film about someone who lived hundreds of years ago? "We knew it would be difficult to make Hildegard's world and context accessible because people know so little about the Middle Ages. It was culturally so different from the modern age, but Hildegard is hard to understand outside her context," said Francis. "We didn't want to turn Hildegard into a twentieth-century person, because she wasn't."

One technique the filmmakers used was to film the modern nuns in the successor abbey to where Hildegard lived. "Monastic life is in some ways the same as it was in the twelfth century," says Francis. "We really had to work to put the nuns into a context that explains Hildegard and her world. We tried to make visual Hildegard's perception of the universe and nature." To do this, throughout the film there are images of nature, reminders of the landscape where



HILDEGARD DEPICTED  
IN 1240.

Hildegard once lived, studied, and interpreted her world.

Other female figures from the last one thousand years to be featured include the author of *The Tale of Genji*, Lady Shikibu Murasaki (987–1016), the painter to the court of Philip II of Spain, Sofonisba Anguissola (c.1532–1625), and the first computer programmer Ada Countess Lovelace (1815–1852). The series is projected for global television distribution in 2000–2001. According to Fuegi, the

women represent "a variety of different fields of human knowledge, a variety of different countries, and different class levels." Francis says that each of these women "illuminates something about the condition of being a woman that is universal. Each documentary starts with a sense of knowing that there is this tremendously interesting person that has something to say to us today, but has either been forgotten or else has been so interpreted through various kinds of lenses and filters that her chief statement has been distorted." Francis said that the work of Flare productions is an attempt "to restore the speaking voice of somebody whose work, or voice, is lost or seriously distorted." □



The ruins of Disibodenberg Abbey, where Hildegard was abbess for twelve years.



WARREN S. O'BRIEN  
Photo #35-676

1935  
35-676

# At Home in Wisconsin

BY AMY LIFSON

**A**lfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne became stars of New York's stages but returned each summer to Wisconsin and a place they called Ten Chimneys. In the 1930s, their private life became part of a publicity campaign that idealized the domestic bliss of this glamorous couple.

Thirty years of photographs taken by Warren O'Brien of the couple and contemporary images of the elaborately decorated house by Zane Williams are featured in the traveling exhibition "Ten Chimneys: The Lunts on Stage in Wisconsin," which will tour the state through March 1, 2000.

Long before he even met Lynn Fontanne, Lunt purchased the land in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin, and began building Ten Chimneys. Lunt had been born and bred in Milwaukee and had attended Carroll College. In the early 1900s, Lunt's and Fontanne's rising careers crisscrossed Broadway until they finally met on the set of *Made of Money* in 1919. That same year, Lunt introduced Fontanne to Ten Chimneys. In 1926 they married. They acted exclusively on stage together from 1928 until Lunt's death in 1977.

It was their long-lasting, peaceful relationship that appealed to the public's imagination. Nowhere more than Ten Chimneys offered a window onto the relaxed moments of their lives. Pictures of Alfred baking bread or of Lynn sewing dresses gave a sense of normality to their star reputations. The house itself was a loved pet project of the couple's. Lynn would send knick knacks back from her travels with explicit instructions on how and where they should be placed in the house. She once said, "Offering us a room without furniture and bare walls is like offering a dog a bone. Decorating, cutting out a new dress, arranging our flowers—they can be as stimulating as a new play."

The Lunts became household names in an age of movie stars. Well known for their interpretations of Noel Coward's drawing-room farces, the Lunts perfected the technique of overlapping dialog in which the actors speak their lines simultaneously, but by keeping separate tempos and pitches are able to keep the dialog moving forward. So, too, were they able to blend their tastes in making Ten Chimneys a showcase of design—from their rococo Belasco Room to their hand-painted folksy cottage kitchen.

After Lynn Fontanne's death in 1983, the estate was in limbo for some years. Finally in 1996, Ten Chimneys was bought by a private individual and subsequently acquired by the Ten Chimneys Foundation, Inc. in 1998. The show supported by the Wisconsin Humanities Council appears at the Waukesha County Museum from April 8 through June 28, at Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery from July 7 through 31, at the University of Wisconsin in Madison from August 13 through September 5, at the University of Wisconsin in Green Bay from September 15 through November 20, and at Carroll College in Waukesha from December 1 through March 1, 2000. The exhibition is a preview to when the house opens its doors to the public in 2001. □

*Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne photographed outside the Studio at Ten Chimneys by Warren O'Brien, 1935. —O'Brien Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, SHSW36-676*

Continued from page 31

Malcom Bevins presents an informal lecture and discussion on genealogy at Corinth Town Hall on March 19.

Linda Myer portrays Amelia Earhart in a performance celebrating Women's History Month. The performance takes place at the Vermont State House on March 17, the sixty-second anniversary of Earhart's first, but not fatal attempt to fly around the world.

The eleventh annual statewide adult student literacy conference focuses on the history and legends of The Underground Railroad in Vermont. The conference takes place on April 24 at Castleton State College.

"Connections," a reading and discussion program supporting adult literacy, discusses American Indian life on March 9, 16, and 23 at the Expanding Caring Community from the Abenaki Learning Center in Swanton.

Other reading and discussion series include discussions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Lawrence Sanders's *First Deadly Sin*, Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

## Virginia

The fifth annual Virginia Festival of the Book takes place March 24–28 in Charlottesville. The festival includes readings, book signings, a children's parade of storybook characters, workshops, and many other book related events. This year's featured authors include Alice McDermott, 1998 recipient of the National Book Award, James McBride, Tami Hoag, and Marita Golden. Other literary events are held throughout the state.

## Washington

Several Washington's Speakers Bureau programs take place throughout the state during March and April. From April 22–24, the new speakers presentation is held at the Bellevue Hilton. Other programs taking place across the state include presentations on topics ranging from opera to women of the ancient world.

## Wisconsin

Alfred Lunts and Lynn Fontaine, the famed theatre duo of the 1930s, made Wisconsin their summer home. Life at their house, Ten Chimneys, is the subjects of a traveling exhibition of photographs. See this page. □



AS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT HARVARD IN 1972.

Courtesy of Caroline Walker Bynum

*Continued from page 7*

The slight young scholar at the podium beamed intellectual energy. She made the complexities of her topic accessible to the audience. She used the actual voices of medieval reformers to reveal their preoccupations and their world. Best of all, she noted where questions remained and work needed to be done. I remember, in particular, her noting briefly the lack of a full account of how the living and the dead came to share the same space in medieval Europe. Throughout Mediterranean antiquity, the tombs of the dead lay outside city walls, but slowly during the Middle Ages they came to rest right in the heart of the living community. No one was quite sure why. I left the auditorium wanting to be her student.

I did not see Bynum again, however, until a year later. In the meantime, she had adopted a daughter in Ecuador, and my wife and I had had our first child. We hoped that a master's degree in history might qualify me to teach English as a Second Language at a community college, a step up from the private school where we taught then. When I presented this plan to Bynum, she asked if I knew Latin and French or German. Fortunately, a Catholic education had supplied me with some Latin, and we had lived and taught in Germany for a couple of years before coming to Seattle. That satisfied her. She seemed pleased that I did not expect to make a career out of history, since the job market was terrible, and encouraged me to apply for admission to the graduate school.

The first courses I took with her seeded both the research program and teaching methods I have followed ever since. None of Bynum's students had much real background in medieval history, so she taught us how most efficiently to acquire it. In her field seminar, we wrote responses to historiographical classics and

familiarized ourselves with the specialized dictionaries, encyclopedias, and bibliographies she regarded as basic tools of the trade. We even analyzed complete runs of journals, from their inaugural editorials to their demise or current state. Her research seminar, on genres of twelfth-century

spiritual literature, led us directly into primary texts, which we read in their entirety. I had to report to the seminar on a monastic customary, an assignment I regretted at first, for the customs books of medieval monasteries seemed to describe the minutiae of daily activity without offering any insight into the actual experience or quality of monastic life. As I neared the end, however, where the text turned to the final illness, death, and burial of a monk, the pages came alive. Here was something too important to be reduced to mere instructions. It was just the kind of experience Bynum wanted for her students, and the questions it generated still reverberate in my thinking. I was hooked.

Bynum's own scholarship focuses on close readings of medieval texts, and many of her most characteristic insights are the result of attention to the exact textual context in which particular words, images, and arguments appear. Many people, for example, had noted the fact that certain twelfth-century spiritual writers spoke of Jesus "as mother." It was Bynum, however, who showed that they were mostly Cistercian abbots struggling to understand the proper relationship they should have with the monks in their charge. The abbots were not feminizing Christ or imagining God as a woman, but revising their notions of authority in terms of nurturing, rather than disciplining or demanding. They simply could not do so without writing as if they, and God, were mothers. In Bynum's analysis, their odd use of language betrays unarticulated concerns, and both their use of language and their hidden concerns emerge from the realities of their lives and spiritual aspirations.

Similarly, in an article that won the 1985 Berkshire Prize for women's history, Bynum showed how medieval female mystics made creative use of contemporary preconceptions about women in their quest for spiritual illumination. The

AS A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY  
OF WASHINGTON IN THE EIGHTIES.

certainly that women's essential character was fleshly, whereas man's was spiritual or rational, placed them in closer relation than men to the central Christian mystery of the Incarnation, by which God had entered into flesh. Thus, their bodily suffering, which mirrored the suffering of Christ, and their devotion to his body in the Eucharist, could become sources of spiritual authority. Such ironies underlay the great blossoming of female spirituality in the later Middle Ages, which, thanks to Bynum, now makes much more sense, right down to the strangest of its literary and behavioral manifestations.

One day Bynum asked me if I had considered pursuing a doctoral degree. By then I wanted nothing more than to continue studying with her. To my surprise and consternation, however, she advised against it. I had done all I could do at Washington, she said. I should go somewhere with a larger faculty and bigger libraries. Besides, teaching positions were so rare that only graduates of the very best programs in the country had a chance at getting one. Reluctantly, I took her advice and left the next year for the University of California, Berkeley.

In early 1980, the University of California Press asked me to help edit the Bynum manuscript that became *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Bynum's letters over the next year or so capture some of the complexity of her relations to the profession at that time. When I wrote that some professors at Berkeley seemed uncomfortable with my enthusiasm in seminars, she responded: "It hits you and me in different ways. But there is a kind of male personality type that is expected of scholars. . . . It (the proper stance) is compounded of deference and caution, with a touch of fear of being misunderstood; it involves fear of young minds (read—usually—students), of new topics and methods, etc. Of course your enthusiasm does not include 'loss of logical clarity' but it is enthusiasm—not quite masculine and upper class! As I say, it hits me in different ways; I'm licked before I start (can't be masculine) and so am in a curious way freed, although also automatically excluded."

The problem was not just a matter of personal style. Ultimately most historical scholarship focused on the distribution of power, a subject that interested Bynum far less than "the ambiguities at the core" of individual behavior and belief. "I have a feeling that what I care



Courtesy of Caroline Walker Bynum

about discovering in the past—the subtle interweaving of factors, the way in which groups are both hedged in by and creative with their reality, the paradoxes and tensions that define the context of human courage, etc.—are in a profound way related to how I want to be as a historian."

Such considerations underlay her repeated misgivings over the title that the press wanted for the book. More than one senior scholar had remarked that her kind of history was underdeveloped and marginal. She did not want to provide reviewers an opportunity to ignore her book by taking issue with a title that referred to only one of its related essays. She yielded at last only because calling the book *Jesus as Mother* promised to attract the attention of more than just professional medievalists and historians.

And it did. The reviewer in the usually staid journal of the Medieval Academy of America marveled that he had come upon a copy in San Francisco's City Lights Books "on a prominent shelf downstairs among books on feminism and on spirituality." Calling the title "a wily choice," he applauded Bynum both for the quality of her scholarship and for her "evangelistic efforts on behalf of medieval history." He likened her to the seventh-century English monk Aldhelm, who gathered sermon audiences by "singing Anglo-Saxon poems out-of-doors."

In 1981 the University of Washington promoted Bynum to full professor. A Thanksgiving Day letter from her the following year reported that, although experiencing some teaching burnout, and concerned about her daughter and her father's health, she felt "free at last from the pressure to be a proper medievalist." Moreover, her immersion in sources by and about medieval women mystics, with whom she was "totally, obsessively, wonderfully preoccupied," was already producing the buds that would blossom into her extraordinary next book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. "I want to find some way of



ON A 1987 FELLOWSHIP IN SANTA MONICA WITH HER HUSBAND GUENTHER ROTH AND DAUGHTER ANTONIA.

talking," she wrote, "in a really fine-textured way, about how the women talk themselves—their images and language as well as their ideas. . . . And the more I work the more it seems to me that the real issues aren't those historians have talked about. The eucharist, for example, and fasting—everybody knows those are late medieval concerns. . . . but nobody notices that they're about food. . . . and food has profound meaning for women cross-culturally." In an amusing aside, she admitted how difficult it was "not to sneak off for a doughnut occasionally when you're slogging through detailed descriptions of saints who don't eat."

In 1986, the MacArthur Foundation chose Bynum for one of its prestigious fellowships. The next year *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* appeared, and in 1988 she left Washington for Columbia University. Her career had taken off. And her interests were moving from the margins into the center of scholarly concern. Not that she has escaped criticism. Some have faulted her for ignoring the possibility that the abbots who spoke of Jesus as mother were ambivalent about their own sexuality. Others have charged her with indifference to the support that medieval saints and mystics gave to an oppressive, patriarchal, and anti-Semitic ecclesiastical order. But her goal has been to elucidate the complexities behind their quest for the divine, not to weigh them, or their religion, in the scale of present-day sensibilities. In an essay for *Disability Studies Quarterly* published in 1992, Bynum may have alluded to such criticisms by noting that raising a child whose infancy was marked by neglect and malnutrition had made her "chary both of ignoring 'oppression' and 'marginality' and of using these terms lightly." For her, ultimately the "common human experience of death" is more fundamental than "the oppressions that divide us." The medieval people she writes about would certainly agree.

A year before the publication of her most recent book, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christendom, 200–1336*, I heard Bynum lecture at Columbia on death and resurrection in early Christian thought. There lay the roots, she argued, of the modern Western view that particular bodies are essential to personal identity. We cannot imagine ourselves as bodiless minds or souls, or in someone else's body, and still *as us*, because centuries of debate over the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection have left their mark on our sense of self. To illustrate, she spoke about her father, stricken with Alzheimer's disease in the early 1970s. Witnessing his heartbreaking mental and physical deterioration for more than twenty years had affected her deeply. He had long ago stopped recognizing her. He no longer spoke and could make only incomprehensible sounds. But the sounds still carried the southern cadences of *his* voice. The hands and feet were *his* hands and feet. In some profound way, he *was* his body. In *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Bynum had written, "I do not think I would be writing the book that I am at this moment writing without having spent many hours of my adult life beside my father's geriatric chair holding his hand." He was "living death," but he was still *that* person, *her* father. *The Resurrection of the Body* is dedicated to him, Andrew Jackson Walker, and to Antonia Walker, the granddaughter he never knew.

Like the medieval women mystics whose spirituality she has so brilliantly illuminated, Caroline Walker Bynum has re-envisioned a part of the world. From her early studies on differing ideals of religious life, to her current work on medieval notions of mutations and metamorphoses, she has led us to the "ambiguous core" of some of the most mysterious of our common human experiences—embodiment, death, ecstasy, even change itself. We could ask for no better guide. □

*Fred Paxton is a professor of history at Connecticut College in New London. This year he is a member of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.*

# EXCERPTS

From the Writings of

## Caroline Walker Bynum



### Body and Soul

Of the so-called world religions, only those that emerged in the Middle East or in the Mediterranean basin—rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism—teach the resurrection of the body. And, of these, Christianity has defended the idea that the body is crucial to self in the most strident and extensive, the most philosophically and theologically confused (and rich) form. It is in the images through which resurrection doctrine has been debated, explored, and preached that we see most clearly the assumption that formal and material continuity is necessary for the survival of the body and

that the survival of body is necessary for self. . . .

. . . The bodily resurrection hoped for by Jews and Christians in the centuries just before and after the beginning of the Common Era was supposed to occur in a reconstituted universe—a “new heaven and new earth.” The heroes and heroines of 2 Maccabees 7 and the Book of Daniel, like those of early patristic writers such as Papias and to some extent Irenaeus, were thought to sleep in *refrigerium* (repose or refreshment) until God should return to reign over an earthly kingdom. Such hopes had not disappeared by the fifth century, but few any longer expected the millennial age to come soon, and eschatological yearning was increasingly focused on heaven, to which the soul might go while the bones still reposed underground. Oscar Cullmann seems to be right that early Christians, like their Jewish contemporaries, thought primarily of a unitary person, which slept in the dust between death and resurrection, whereas by late antiquity Christian theologians held soul to be immortal but defined body as that which falls and must therefore rise again. Although the doctrine of a physical return at the end of time was not discarded by mainstream Christians, hope concentrated

increasingly on the soul’s ascent to heaven. By the thirteenth century, soteriological expectation focused on a judgment seen to come at personal death. The individual’s status for all eternity was determined at the moment when soul and body separated rather than at the last trumpet when they rejoined. Moreover, the emergence of the doctrine of purgatory—a third (and provisional) time and place to which the soul might go after death for cleansing and penance—lodged change or development in the afterlife, which had been the realm of stasis.

Thus, to put it a little simplistically, the awakened resurrection body was, to early Christians, the person; to later theologians it was a component (albeit an essential component) of the person. Early Christians expected the body to rise in a restored earthly paradise, whose arrival was imminent. Most late medieval Christians thought resurrection and the coming of the kingdom waited afar off in another space and time. . . .

Both the literalist interpretation of resurrection popular in rabbinic Judaism and the early church and the somatized soul that populated late medieval tales of purgatory seem to modern tastes quite strange. Contemporary Christians

tend to reject the more picturesque elements of conventional eschatology. Although opinion polls tell us that most Americans believe in heaven, it is clear that the resurrection of the body is a doctrine that causes acute embarrassment, even in mainstream Christianity. Thoughts of "life after death" still conjure up for most people some notion of a disembodied soul flying, rather forlornly, through pearly gates and golden streets. Preachers and theologians (especially Protestants) pride themselves on avoiding soul-body dualism, but pious talk at funerals is usually of the departed person surviving as a vague, benign spirit or as a thought in the memories of others.

Yet analysis of current philosophical discourse and of contemporary popular culture suggests that Americans, like medieval poets and theologians, consider any survival that really counts to entail survival of body. However much late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theology, psychology, philosophy, and theosophy studied out-of-the-body experiences and transmigration of souls as clues to survival and identity, today's movies and television shows—no less than academic philosophical discussions of person—consider obsessively the problem of embodiment. Movies such as *Maxie*,

*Chances Are*, *Robocop*, *Total Recall*, *Switch*, *Freejack*, and *Death Becomes Her* gross millions; their drama lies in the suggestion that "I" am not "I" unless my body, with all it implies (sex and sexual orientation, race, temperament, etc.), survives.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY IN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY, 200–1336. Copyright © 1995 Columbia University Press, New York. Reprinted by permission.

### Female Imagery

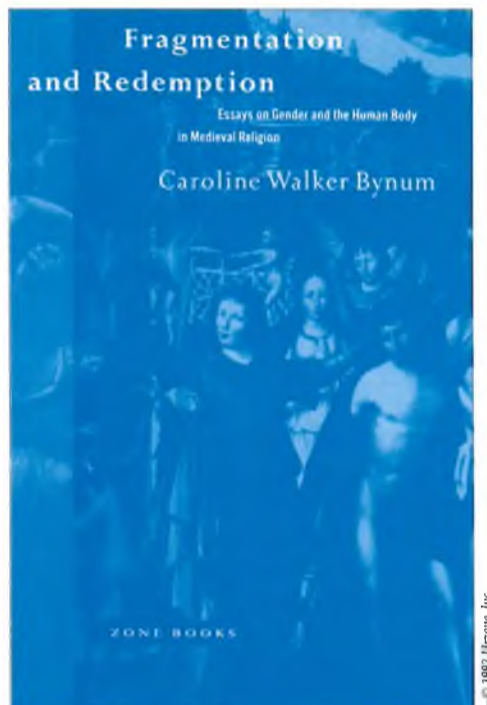
The misogyny of the later Middle Ages is well known. Not merely a defensive reaction on the part of men who were in fact socially, economically, and politically dominant, it was fully articulated in theological, philosophical and scientific theory that was centuries old. *Male and female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy and order/disorder. In the devotional writing of the later Middle Ages, they were even contrasted in the image of God—Father or Bridegroom—and soul (*anima*)—child or bride. Although noble women managed property while their husbands were away on Crusades and middle-class women ran businesses and formed

guilds in towns, there was little positive discussion of the role of mother or wife. When devotional writers mentioned marriage and motherhood, it was by and large to warn against the horrors that accompanied them; when secular literature commented on women's roles, it was chiefly to romanticize adultery by aristocratic ladies or to mock the sexual appetites of peasant or middle-class wives and girls. Even the folk rituals of town and countryside suggested an identification of woman with the disorderly. And as sex ratios and life expectancies altered in favor of women, the size of dowries went steadily up; the birth of a daughter sometimes seemed an extraordinary piece of ill luck.

Historians, whether they have found such misogyny titillating or horrifying, have in general assumed that medieval women internalized it. Much recent interpretation of later medieval religion, for example, has seen misogyny as a causal factor not only in the persecution of women as witches, heretics, or eccentric mystics, but also in women's own religious behavior. Such interpretation has argued that women—seeing

themselves as "lust" or "emotionality" or "disorder"—castigated their flesh for its fleshly desires and were sometimes driven to hysteria by the notion that they remained sexual by definition, even if their bodies were anesthetized by self-abnegation. Assuming that women's religiosity was fundamentally shaped by the misogyny their clerical advisers so often articulated, historians have suggested that chastity was the central religious issue for women and that Mary, God's ever-virgin mother, was the dominant symbol. Behind such suggestions lies an even more basic assumption—that is, that the image of woman in the later Middle Ages is primarily an aspect of, and an influence on, the history of women.

But, if we look carefully at what medieval religious 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. In the period from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, in contrast to the early Middle Ages, positive female figures and feminine metaphors took a significant place in spirituality alongside both positive male figures and misogynist images of women. Devotion to the Virgin and to women saints increased; the proportion of women among the newly canonized rose sharply; heretical movements occasionally claimed female clergy or a female god; female erotic experience, childbirth and marriage became major metaphors for spiritual advance, for service of neighbor, and for union with the divine.

FRAGMENTATION AND REDEMPTION, ESSAYS ON GENDER AND THE HUMAN BODY IN MEDIEVAL RELIGION. Copyright © 1991 Urzone, Inc., New York. Reprinted by permission.

#### Possibilities of Flesh

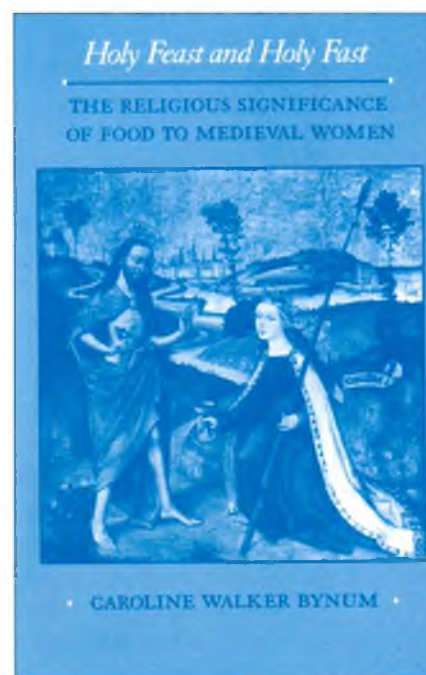
... Medieval asceticism should not be understood as rooted in dualism, in a radical sense of spirit opposed to or entrapped by the body. The extravagant penitential practices of the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the cultivation of pain and patience, the literalism of *imitatio crucis* are... not primarily

an attempt to escape from body. They are not the products of an epistemology or psychology or theology that sees soul struggling against its opposite, matter. Therefore they are not—as historians have often suggested—a world-denying, self-hating, decadent response of a society wracked by plague, famine, heresy, war, and ecclesiastical corruption. Rather, late medieval asceticism was an effort to plumb and to realize all the possibilities of the flesh. It was a profound expression of the doctrine of the Incarnation: the doctrine that Christ, by becoming human, saves *all* that the human being is. It arose in a religious world whose central ritual was the coming of God into food as macerated flesh, and it was compatible with, not contradictory to, the philosophical notion that located the nature of things not in their abstract definitions but in their individual matter or particularity. Thus Francis of Assisi telling his disciples that beatings are “perfect happiness,” Beatrice of Ornacieux driving nails through her palms, Dorothy of Montau and Lukardis of Oberweimar wrenching their bodies into bizarre pantomimes of the moment of Crucifixion, and Serafina of San Gimignano, revered *because* she was paralyzed, were to their own contemporaries not depressing or horrifying but glorious.

They were not rebelling against or torturing their flesh out of guilt over its capabilities so much as using the possibilities of its full sensual and affective range to soar ever closer to God....

... Women and men existed, of course, in the same universe of symbols and doctrine and were taught by the same scriptures, the same preaching. Women were clearly aware of their supposed inferiority; some commented upon it or even appropriated it as a way to God.... But from among the symbols and doctrines available to them, women and men chose different symbols—men renouncing wealth and power, women renouncing food. They used symbols in different ways. Men, who

were dominant, used symbols (among them the male/female dichotomy) to renounce their dominance. Reversals and oppositions were at the heart of how symbols worked for men. The image of woman as contrasted to that of man was, in the later Middle Ages, a topic of primary interest to men. To women, however, male/female contrasts were apparently of little interest; symbols of self were in general taken from biological or social experience and expressed not so much reversal or renunciation of worldly advantage as the deepening of ordinary human experience that came when God impinged upon it. In their symbols women expanded the suffering, giving self they were ascribed by their culture, becoming ever more wonderfully and horribly the body on the cross. They became that body not as flight from but as continuation of self. And because that body was also God, they could sum up their love of God in paradox: “Hell is the highest name of Love,” as Hadewijch said, or as Maragaret Porete put it, “I am the salvation itself of every



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creature. . . . For I am the sum of all evils."

. . . Women saw themselves not as flesh opposed to spirit, female opposed to male, nurture opposed to authority; they saw themselves as human beings—fully spirit and fully flesh. And they saw all humanity as created in God's image, as capable of *imitatio Christi* through body as well as soul. Thus they gloried in the pain, the exudings, the somatic distortion that made their bodies parallel to the consecrated wafer on the altar and the man on the cross. In the blinding light of the ultimate dichotomy between God and humanity, all other dichotomies faded. Men and women might agree that female flesh was more fleshly than male flesh, but such agreement led both sexes to see themselves as in some sense female-human. For it was human beings as human (not as symbol of the divine) whom Christ saved in the Incarnation; it was body as flesh (not as spirit) that God became most graphically on the altar; it was human suffering (not human power) that Christ took on to redeem the world. Religious women in the Middle Ages saw in their own female bodies not only a symbol of the humanness of both genders but also a symbol of—and a means of approach to—the humanity of God.

HOLY FEAST AND HOLY FAST:  
THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE  
OF FOOD TO MEDIEVAL WOMEN.  
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### The Self and Community

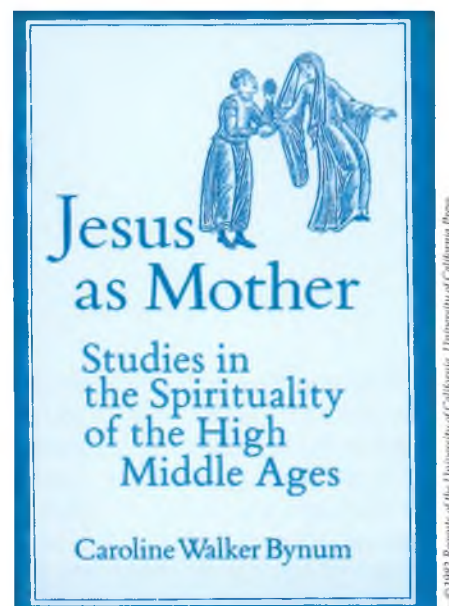
Did the twelfth century discover the individual? For a number of years now medievalists have claimed that it did. Indeed, over the past fifty years, in what Wallace Ferguson calls "the revolt of the medievalists," scholars have claimed for the twelfth century many of the characteristics once given to the fifteenth century. . . . As a result, standard textbook accounts now attribute to the twelfth century some or all of the following: "humanism," both in the narrow sense of study of the Latin literary classics and in the broader sense of an emphasis on human dignity, virtue, and efficacy; "renaissance," both in the sense of a revival of forms and ideas from the past (classical and patristic) and in the sense of a consciousness of rebirth and historical perspective; and the "discovery of nature and man," both in the sense of an emphasis on the cosmos and human nature as entities with laws governing their behavior and in the sense of a new interest in

the particular, seen especially in the "naturalism" of the visual arts around the year 1200. . . .

. . . The concentration of scholars on the discovery and intense scrutiny of self in twelfth-century religious thought has sometimes implied that this individualism meant a loss of community—both community support and community control. The interpretation has also sometimes implied that typological thinking and sense of modeling oneself on earlier examples is in twelfth-century literature a vestige of an earlier mentality that simply gets in the way of a sense of individual quest, experience, and self-expression. Yet . . . research on the twelfth-century religious revival in fact underlines nothing else so clearly as its institutional creativity. It depicts a burgeoning throughout Europe of new forms of communities, with new rules and customs providing new self-definition and articulating new values. My purpose is therefore to place the often discussed discovery of the individual in the context with another equally new and important twelfth-century interest to which scholars have paid less attention: a quite self-conscious interest in the

process of belonging to groups and filling roles. For twelfth-century religion did not emphasize the individual personality at the expense of corporate awareness. Nor did it develop a new sense of spiritual and psychological changes, of intention, and of personal responsibility by escaping from an earlier concern with types, patterns, and examples. Rather twelfth-century religious writing and behavior show a great concern with how groups are formed and differentiated from each other, how roles are defined and evaluated, how behavior is conformed to models. If the religious writing, the religious practice, and the religious orders of the twelfth century are characterized by a new concern for the "inner man," it is because of a new concern for the group, for types and examples, for the "outer man." □

JESUS AS MOTHER, STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES. Copyright © 1982 by the Regents of the University of California, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles. Reprinted by permission.





The Last Judgment at the cathedral in Torcello portrays the blessed rising whole from their graves, while the damned are left in fragments.

Continued from page 7

images to talk about their experiences. As a result, there was some unfortunately simplistic discussion of female imagery that assumed women would respond to the female and men respond to the male. When one thinks about it, that is not very convincing. We are embodied people with fairly strong desires towards our own sex and also toward the other sex in complicated ways, regardless of who we are. I think the book managed to make available some beautiful texts from the Western tradition that talked about God in feminine as well as masculine terms without making the simplistic assumption that men and women respond religiously only, or, even primarily, because of their gender.

*Jesus as Mother* fed into a discussion about language, imagery, and identity that was very important in the culture, both among religious people and among scholars. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* picked up on some of this. At the time I wrote it, the writings by medieval religious women and the writings about them were relatively unknown. Many of the texts had been edited and published, but they had been studied mostly from a philological point of view—as in some cases the first examples we have of a particular vernacular language, for example, Old Flemish—but they hadn't really been studied as women's texts. An

*"They reject or violate ordinary*

*language, ordinary rules . . .*

*So some of these thinkers*

*appear to be heretical."*

enormous amount of that material is now out there in English translation. There are dozens and dozens of undergraduate courses in which these texts are now

read in the wonderful translations that the Paulist Press and others have been publishing. But at the time I wrote *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, most of this literature was not familiar, even to scholars.

The other thing that was important was that, insofar as people had read these texts, they had noticed how bizarre they were from a modern perspective—bizarre in their intense physicality, and eroticism. On the other hand, some of them are bizarre in the tradition of negative theology—the denial of the possibility of speaking about God except in negatives. Some of them are radically antinomian, that is, they reject or violate ordinary language, ordinary rules, this kind of thing. So some of these thinkers appear to be heretical. Indeed, an early article that I wrote and submitted to a journal was turned down by a reader who said—



detail from *The Last Judgment* at the cathedral in Torcello, Italy.

**FERRIS:** I know—that it was heretical.

**BYNUM:** "If what Bynum says about these women is right, then the women are heretical, and if they are heretical, then we shouldn't publish this article." That was worrisome. I think *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* was important because it was not afraid to describe the complex characteristics of this religiosity.

When I gave a lecture in the early eighties before *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* came out, a young scholar came up to me afterwards and said, "Everybody knows that that is true, but I have never heard anyone say it in public. How wonderful just to have someone say what these texts are really like." That in itself was stunning. I think it is a problem that some people still have with the book. It is more than ten years old, which is a long time in current scholarship given how fast things change, and yet there are people who still are frightened and disturbed by the book. It is disturbing to some feminists because the women do not come out the way they want them to. It is disturbing to some conservatives because the Church doesn't come out the way they want it to. It is deeply disturbing material. But this, of course, also made it attractive.

**FERRIS:** Let me ask you about your most recent book, *The Resurrection of the Body*, which looks at how men and women in the Middle Ages viewed the relationship between themselves and their bodies.

**BYNUM:** In part it is about the relationship to the dead body, in part it is about the body that dies and rises again. It has a subtext, if you will, of being about death and dying and the way in which people make sense out of that. But the other, more profound way in which it is about the body has to do with issues of identity. It is about how medieval people thought about "Who I am."

Identity to a philosopher has at least three meanings. My "identity" can be my personality or what makes me unique. My "identity" can also be what many people today would

call my "identity position"—that is, those groups that define me: white, middle aged, female, etc. That would also be who I am. But identity has a third meaning as well—that is, what accounts for my continuity over time and space. How am I the same person that I was when I was five years old?

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body in the Middle Ages—people's ways of thinking about what comes back at the end of time—was really a way of thinking about identity in all three senses of the word: who I am, what characterizes me, and most importantly for the medieval discussion, how one can be the same person not only over time, but into eternity.

What I was looking at was the way in which the doctrine of bodily resurrection—which the Church was, if I can be irreverent, stuck with from about 200 A.D. on—said that your exact body will come back at the end of time, even if you are Moses or Isaac and have been moldering in the ground for thousands and thousands of years. This is a quite bizarre doctrine, after all. Yet people were stuck with it and not just Christians. Orthodox Jews are stuck with it, too. It is one of the three core beliefs of Rabbinic Judaism. It is also very important in Islam. Only the three Western religions among the great traditions of the world have this notion of the return of the physical self. This then becomes a kind of definition of what it is to be a self—it makes the body crucial to the self in a way that it is not in most other cultural traditions.

What I was exploring was the way in which that doctrine—and the complicated need to figure out what that doctrine meant—became throughout the Middle Ages a way of thinking about self.

**FERRIS:** Let me ask you a sequential question. Your work has been at the forefront of what is being called body history. When a historian says that the body has a history, what does that mean?

**BYNUM:** Of course, them's fightin' words, in a way. How far you can put an actual physical entity in historical context is a very interesting question. Historians would debate this with physiologists and biologists, but I think that there are a number of senses in which the body has a history.

Conceptualizations of the body have a history. The Galenic way of thinking about the body in the Middle Ages—that the body is basically a set of four humors—is very different from the way of thinking that begins to prevail in the Renaissance with Vesalius and others, who think of the body in terms of anatomy and organ systems. If you think of your body as fundamentally humors, you are actually thinking of it in a more fluid and complicated manner than if you think of it as a skeleton and a bunch of organs.

There is a history of the body in the physiological sense as well, in that one can study actual physical changes in the body. Modern people are taller. Modern people go through puberty at a much younger age. Modern people are fertile longer. There are basic physical changes that have to do with changes in diet, climate, and social situation. Those can also be studied.

I also think that—and this is the most radical and problematic thing I have argued—the way the body behaves may change profoundly over time because the body is not simply an appendage of the mind, nor a separate thing to which mind or soul is attached. The person is a psychosomatic unit. What we are is a complicated and unitary self, so as pressures, society, and ideas change, the way in which the body actually performs changes.

I have taken some of the radical behaviors that one can find in history—things like the somatic miracles that are talked about in the thirteenth century—stigmata and trances and levitations—and argued that these may be genuinely new bodily behaviors.

I also think that sexuality itself has a history. Sexual response itself may be different in a period in which one of the major turn-ons for people's desire is religious experience and God. In other words, basic emotional and erotic responses may change over time as much as, say, social structures or economic opportunities.

**FERRIS:** You have devoted an enormous amount of time exploring the role of women in the Middle Ages, everything from saints to mystics to heretics. What are the common misconceptions that we have about medieval women?

**BYNUM:** The most fundamental misconception among the general public is that the Middle Ages was a dark and bleak time characterized by rampant misogyny and therefore by an almost complete lack of—to use the current buzzword—female “agency.” And also that Christianity was a vast rejection of the physical—that it was a dualistic religion—and everybody was sitting around sticking nails in their hands and flagellating themselves.

Now, it is true that there was misogyny in the Middle Ages. But it is also true—just to speak in terms of religious life—that there were significant institutions for women, chief among them nunneries, in which they were able to get education, and produce religious and theological writing. And in the high Middle Ages, one sees the first significant professional role for single women living in the world, not withdrawn from it in cloisters—the Beguines. Beguines and tertiaries—sometimes called quasi-religious—were single women who lived in women's communities and did handicraft or social service. They thought about theology, wrote, taught. It is significant that these sorts of roles, outside marriage and motherhood, were created.

Moreover, in towns there were very complicated opportunities for women to engage in business, brewing beer, for example, or weaving. There were also within noble families

significant opportunities for women to manage property, which they could inherit.

Despite the misogyny, which was rampant, and which in some ways got worse in the later Middle Ages, there were clearly women who reacted against it.

There is even a sense

in which the equation of Woman with The Irrational had more complicated effects than most people think. The notion that what she was *not* was rational led to the understanding that she could have special access to inspiration,

*“Some of the misconceptions about women in the Middle Ages are simply misconceptions about people in the Middle Ages.”*

THE 28TH ANNUAL  
JEFFERSON LECTURE  
IN THE HUMANITIES

CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM

University Professor Columbia University

Speaking on “Shape and Story:  
Metamorphoses in the Western Tradition”

7:30 p.m. March 22, 1999

Concert Hall The John F. Kennedy

Center for the Performing Arts

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APOLLO AND DAPHNE by Gianlorenzo Bernini, Galleria Borghese, Rome.  
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both demonic and divine. In the later Middle Ages there were probably more women visionaries than men, and some of them—for example Catherine of Siera or Joan of Arc—had enormous influence.

Some of the misconceptions about women in the Middle Ages are simply misconceptions about people in the Middle Ages. My students are always saying to me, “Not much happened in the Middle Ages, did it?” Well, it was more than a thousand years. A lot happened.

**FERRIS:** One of the refreshing things about your work is how interdisciplinary it is. You draw on religion, art, philosophy, literature, and anthropology. How have these approaches shaped the kind of history that you write?

*“My students are always saying to me, ‘Not much happened in the Middle Ages, did it?’ Well, it was more than a thousand years. A lot happened.”*

**BYNUM:** I came out of graduate school wanting to study the history of attitudes—of what the French would call *mentalité*—to look not so much at the history of ideas as the history of assumptions and conceptions about the world and about the self.

In the sixties, there was more of this kind of work going on in fields such as anthropology. So it was natural for me to look at the work of anthropologists. It was also, given what I wanted to do, natural to look for evidence in the literary field, art history, the history of philosophy and theology.

So there were really two reasons I was led to be interdisciplinary. One was methodological; I was looking for models for how to think. The other was the evidence. When I was in graduate school, historians were inclined to look at charters, at land grants, at legal documents. I wanted to look at other kinds of material. The history of attitudes and conceptions that I wanted to do was really just emerging in the sixties. I was trained in older paradigms that saw only certain kinds of questions in philosophy and theology as appropriate for intellectual historians.

**FERRIS:** In my work as a folklorist, I have used oral history as a way of accessing the subjects I work with. Your subjects are certainly long past giving oral histories. What are the sources that you use in your own work?

**BYNUM:** I work generally with devotional, theological, and philosophical texts, but I don’t use them to do doctrinal history. Instead I read them for their assumptions, their contradictions, the things they don’t quite say. I have also worked on saints’ lives, which are a very, very rich source for the Middle Ages. Some saints’ lives actually do include material that is almost folkloric.

Recently, I have also been looking at what we can call literature of entertainment—the things people in the high Middle Ages wrote about the marvels of the world, travel literature, chronicles, and collections of miracles and ghost



enfleshing of the rising dead is shown in a detail from Luca Signorelli's *The Last Judgment* at the Orvieto Cathedral (1499–1504).



stories. I have been trying to use such materials to explore my new topic—marvels and monsters—which is really a way of examining how people drew the line between self and other, in-group and out-group.

I also use art historical material, mostly iconographically. If I look at a doctrine such as the Immaculate Conception or the Fatherhood of God, for example, I'm interested in why in certain periods God is a man with a long white beard and in other periods God is a hand that comes down from the sky.

Or, if we look at depictions of the Immaculate Conception, why is it often presented as a grandmother and a daughter, as Ann and Mary? I think such depictions tell us about more than just the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; surely we see something here about social structure as well.

But really it is above all texts—the text *qua* text—that I work on. I'm not interested in running around and getting tidbits from a lot of different sources. I like to read the texts in their own complexity and in their fullness. I do not, in other words, want to say, "Let's look at women. Here is a mother and there is a daughter, and let's pull them all together and say, 'Ah, this gives us a picture of women in such-and-such a century.'"

I want to look at the text and say, "What is the author doing? How is this text working? How does it move? How does this argument contradict an earlier one? Is there an assumption here that seems to be fallacious, that seems to be paradoxical, that seems to be a slippage from what the person was saying in an earlier part?"

So, although I do not think it is easy to figure out what people mean and I know it is *impossible* to figure out what people intend, I think it is dangerous just to take things out of a lot of different texts and string them together and say, "Ah ha, here we've got the 1220s." I really, really try to treat the text and the voices in them as a whole before I move to other texts and voices. So I stay pretty close to the text, and I work more slowly in getting from text to text than some people do.

**FERRIS:** In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, more than a fourth of the book is footnotes. I do not know if that is a medieval quality that I share, but I'm always drawn to read the footnotes before the book in some ways because they contain such interesting material. I felt that in your work, the footnotes were as revealing as the text itself.

**BYNUM:** A lot of people say that about my books. Some people even prefer the ones that have the footnotes in the back because they say, "We can just flip to the back and read the footnotes. We do not have to read the text. We can imagine any kind of text on top of it. We just like to read the notes."

**FERRIS:** It is in some ways revealing about the diversity of your interests. I found that a fascinating dimension.

**BYNUM:** I love to find little nuggets in other people's footnotes, so I never feel hesitant about burying some nuggets in mine.

But the footnote is also a fundamental commitment. I do not really have a post-modern sense that history is all construction or that it is all opinion. The footnote is the proof—not that you've got it right necessarily, but that you got it from someplace.

I know how hard it is to find the past, and I know that you never get back to the past. Historians have always known that. What do we find when we dig into the past?

We find a trace or vestige conveyed to us in a text or an artifact. We do not find the past.

Nonetheless, if we do not take it as our fundamental obligation to be true to something other than ourselves—to voices from the past, to the texts, the pictures, the landscape—why be historians? We could be novelists or something else.

**FERRIS:** Exactly.

**BYNUM:** So what's in the footnote is the voice in the text and my doubts about whether I have heard the voice correctly—my doubts about whether the voice is the voice of the author or the voice of what the author is recording—and all my efforts to quarrel with that, to work with that, to explore that. What you put in your footnotes is your bona fides, your indication to other people of how they can go and check up on you. But it is not just for the other historians or

for the reviewers. It is for the people in the past themselves; they, ultimately, are what you put in the footnotes; it is to *them* that you owe the obligation to get it right—as right as you can.

**FERRIS:** Let me switch gears a little here and ask what originally drew you to the study of history and, more specifically, to the study of the Middle Ages?

**BYNUM:** I am a Southerner, and I think Southerners tend to be more interested in history than people in the rest of the country, not just as an interest, but as

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a living memory. We feel more than the rest of the country a certain guilt about our past. I think that a Southerner has a complicated relationship to a past as both self and other. Southerners are drawn to the Middle Ages as a period that is both the root of some modern things and "other than" modern things; also it is a complicated legacy that is not all "good." And then I, having been raised in a family in which religion was central, was drawn also to the period in Western history in which religion was important and problematic. Religion was a defining aspect of my life when I grew up, but not an entirely liberating one. A continuing and deep and serious quarrel with religion shaped me, and it was of course a quarrel with a particular kind of religion because I was raised as an Episcopalian, in a liturgical tradition.

It is hard to even know at what point the Middle Ages began to fascinate me. I have memories of being fascinated by medieval pictures and by medieval stories, by medieval legends, you know, from very early years. When I was in the tenth grade, a friend of mine and I wrote a long—it must have been ghastly—historical novel about a little girl who went on the Children's Crusade. We were involved for a number of months in writing and illustrating this historical novel.

And then in college I had some wonderful teaching. Charles Taylor at Harvard taught my introductory social sciences courses—a very traditional kind of Western Civ. But he was a medievalist, and he did a wonderful job with

medieval ideas. It was really as a result of that that I decided that I wanted to work on the Middle Ages.

I probably knew that I wanted to study the Middle Ages long before I knew that doing it as a historian was going to be the particular disciplinary route.

I think also, finally, that it wasn't just that history and religious history enabled me to explore things about my Southern past. I also wanted to quarrel with certain ways in which my religious upbringing was doctrinaire. The sort of Episcopalianism I was raised in combined many of the most severe aspects of Catholicism and Protestantism. It was a tremendous burden on a young woman who wanted to fight free of certain other basically Southern assumptions about what she should do with her life, that is, grow up, get married, and have kids.

I clearly wanted to do something else. And I felt constrained by many of the assumptions I'd been reared with, but they had been too important in shaping me for me simply to discard them. I needed to fight with them. And the way in which you fight with something that is doctrinaire is to put it in context.

So the wonderful thing about history was that it enabled me to understand that what I had inherited was the product of a particular time and place. I didn't have to throw it all out. I could continue to live with it and think about it; indeed, I could spend the rest of my life thinking about religion, and thinking about society, and thinking about women's roles.

I could say to my parents, "Oh, it is not that you tell me this because it is true. You tell me this because you have a particular situation in the world. I can explain you." It gave me a very powerful weapon against an upbringing which had been filled with absolutes—"Thou Shalt Nots" of all sorts—without throwing them out. Because it wasn't that I felt that all the Thou Shalt Nots that I'd been told were wrong; it is just that I needed to be able to work with them, to change some of them, to make others my own.

So I think history is a wonderful tool for contextualizing, working with, rejecting part of your world without throwing out the whole tradition from which you come.

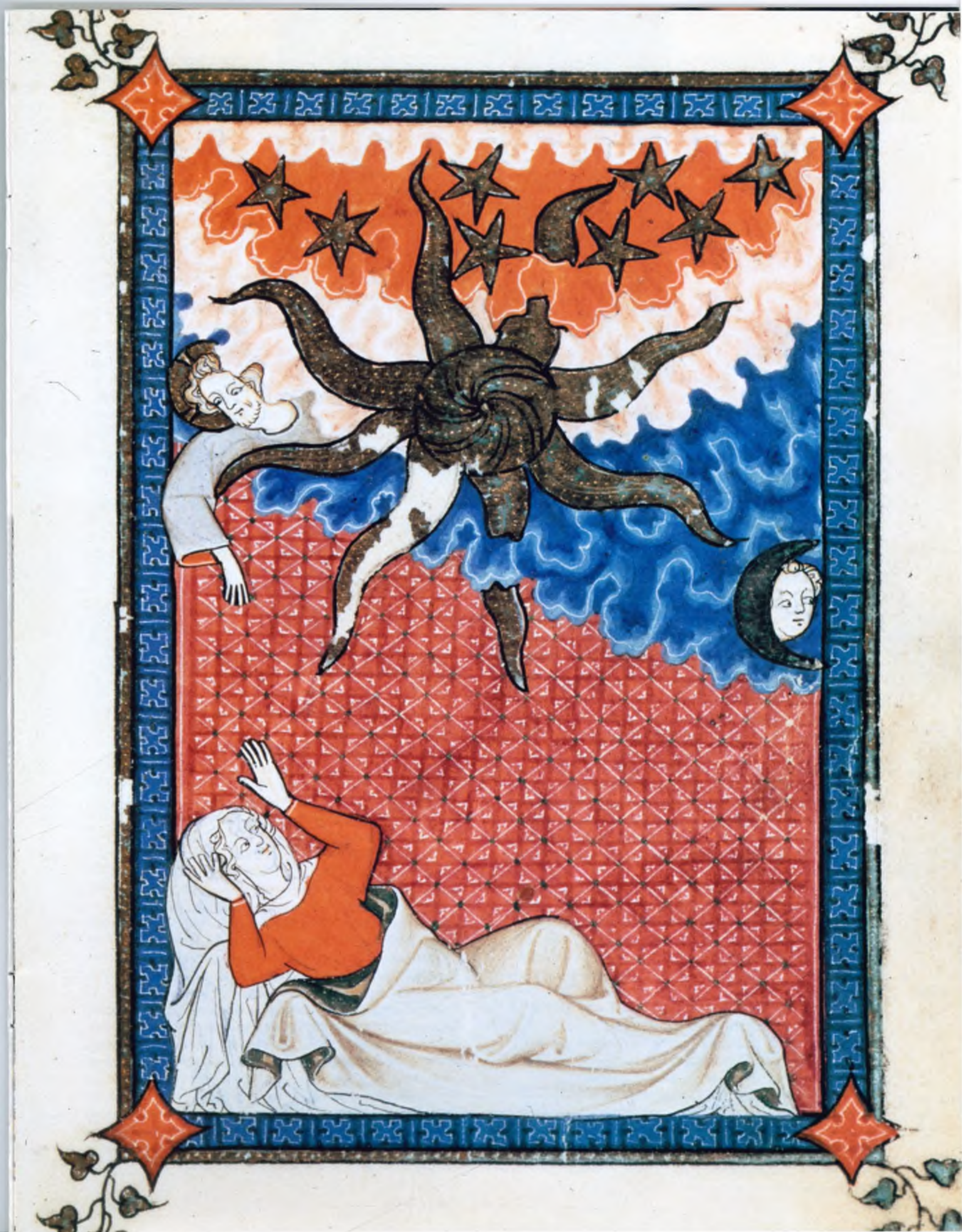
**FERRIS:** We are having more and more conversations about the role and responsibility of a historian to interact with the public, to share his or her work outside the academy, which in part is a mission we have here at the Endowment and that our State Humanities Councils share. Can you talk about the relationship of the historian in the academy with the public?

**BYNUM:** Sure. There are two important needs for interaction between historians in the academy and the wider public.

The first is simply the crying need for all of us who teach at the college level to be more involved in secondary education. There is a crisis in secondary education in this country. All of us have an obligation to work much more actively with people in high schools than we do.

We all have an obligation to join the associations for the teaching of history, to do workshops in high schools, and to talk about how we can get our expectations of college study to dovetail better with the training that is going on in the

The soul receives her lover in mystical union, from *THE ROthschild canticles*.  
—Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, fol. 66



high schools. The high schools are bearing a tremendous burden these days, and they are not in many cases doing very well with it. We must ourselves pay more attention to some of the problems that they are facing.

For a long time, I have had an approach to my time that I have thought of as something like tithing. So instead of always saying yes to Harvard and Chicago and Berkeley, I try to say yes to, for example, the Death and the Dying Project in Minnesota, or to a local community college, or a high school History Day. Sometimes I give the honorarium back or donate it to the local scholarship fund.

The second aspect of increasing the interaction between historians and the community is that I think that the teaching of European history generally needs to change, both at the high school and at the college level. The buzz-

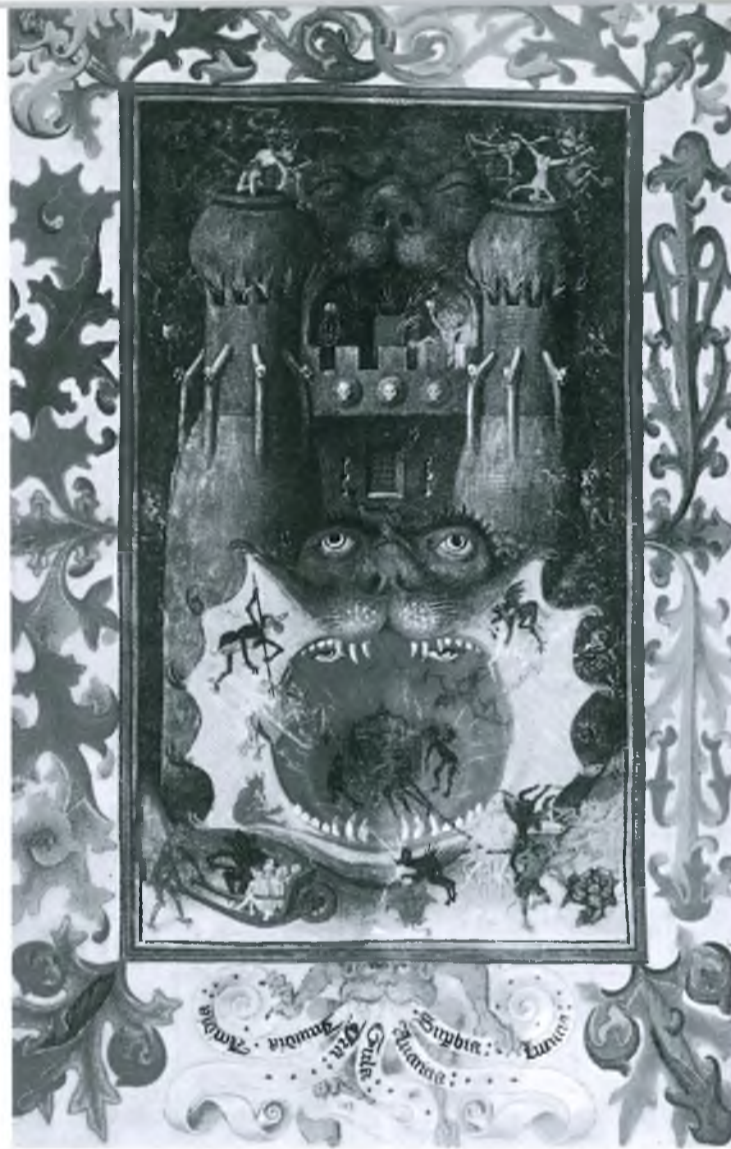
word—globalization—that everybody uses is in fact right.

I have students at Columbia from all over the world. Even when they have been born in this country, they represent a far wider variety of cultural, religious, social traditions than they did in colleges and universities twenty-five years ago. We cannot continue to teach the Western tradition simply as the roots of ourselves. We need to work out ways of presenting the history of Europe much more as area studies, the way we present Southeast Asian area studies, or Latin American area studies.

We cannot assume that students today understand the basic terminology—whether it is “parliament” or “priest” or “sacrament.” They do not know the map of Europe. We cannot assume that the things we refer to when we are using a paradigm from European history—such as aristocracy or feudalism—are things that our students are familiar with.

Although as a medievalist I know much less about it, I would suggest that the teaching of American history needs to be globalized, too. Obviously the Second World War looks far different from a global perspective than it does from an American one. And I think one would learn a great deal by putting it in a larger setting.

But we are just beginning to think about how to do this and what materials to use. Globalization doesn’t mean giving up the teaching of European history. We should



Mouths of hell from catherine of cleves's book of hours.

continue to teach Europe, but we have to do it from a different point of view, and we have to do it in conjunction with some re-examination of the relationship between college and secondary school education.

Those are ways in which people in my part of the academy need to think beyond the academy.

**FERRIS:** You deal wonderfully with art as a historian. Could you talk about the importance of images, photographs, works of art for the historian?

**BYNUM:** Art is a wonderful primary source from my period, although we can never know exactly what people thought when they saw it. Nonetheless, art is one of the ways in which you are in the same world with people who were not literate. It puts you into the world of the stories that shaped their lives in a way that the written text may

never do, unless the written texts record folk material, which is relatively rare.

I also use archaeology and photographs in my teaching. It might seem odd because, of course, you cannot have a photograph of the fifteenth century. But I have, for example, sometimes shown my students just the landscape in Burgundy. I have shots that I took that avoid modern superhighways and power lines, so that the students can see the way in which dozens of hills and small mountains shape the countryside. Then they can understand something like feudalism and how with a castle on a hill you could dominate the surrounding countryside in a way that you wouldn't do in a place that was completely flat.

Or I show them a photograph of the Fen country in England and they understand what back-breaking work it was to drain that area and what it was agriculturally.

Aerial photography can be wonderful for the Middle Ages because we can see sometimes where the Roman villas were and where the roads were. From something that was there two thousand years ago, a vestige remains. It can give you an almost magical feeling of being back in the period.

It is also true that today's students in general read and write with a little less ease than students did twenty-five years ago. They respond to the visual, and therefore the visual can be a way of drawing them in and getting them to ask questions, simply by showing them a photograph

and saying, "How do you imagine you might live in this sort of landscape?"

**FERRIS:** Let me carry this a little further. I was fascinated that in your essay, "Continuity, Survival, and Resurrection" from your book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, you used twentieth-century popular culture.

There is a cover of *Weekly World News* with the painting of Elvis weeping real tears. And you also talk about *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Fly* in trying to evoke the relationships to the medieval period. Can you talk about this idea of things enduring no matter what age or what level of culture?

**BYNUM:** The kinds of issues I was trying to explore in *The Resurrection of the Body*—questions about identity and what it means to be embodied—are very, very pressing questions at the end of the twentieth century. I find that one of the best ways to get students to think about complicated philosophical and theological issues is to talk about, for example, a *Star Trek* episode.

*Star Trek* is a tremendously sophisticated examination of some of the kinds of problems that present-day philosophers of mind are engaged in exploring. It raises questions about identity as sophisticated as those of the philosopher Bernard Williams or Robert Nozick.

Students get confused reading Bernard Williams and say, "Oh, I think this is just silly. Who would ever transplant a brain?" It tends to seem dry and academic, and they think this is a bunch of effete intellectuals worrying about odd things. Whereas, if you've got a *Star Trek* episode or a movie to talk about, they've seen it, they've been excited by it. And then you can say, "But what is it that is so puzzling about this? Why is it that you are unsure about the identity of this character? What might it mean, therefore, to ask about identity?"

Suddenly they are talking about things that are very disturbing to them. That is, of course, the way to get people into thinking about issues from the past. They realize that there is something that disturbs them as modern people, and that people in the past were disturbed by the same kinds of problems.

Today's students, I think, are in some ways afraid to engage with hard questions, in part because of the intensely political environment in which they live. Because they are so different from each other, they are very much afraid of saying something that is politically incorrect. They do not want to hurt someone who comes from a very different place culturally. They do not want to say something that is insensitive to Islam, for example. They do not want to say something that is insensitive to the Midwest. Therefore they are hesitant to speak up. They are not as argumentative and forthright as young people were twenty-five years ago, when students were actually much more the same and therefore much more willing to get in there and scrap.

The challenge for the teacher is to get students to see that ideas matter so profoundly that they have to explore them, they have to disagree about them. It matters too much. You cannot teach if everybody is just sitting around saying it is all a matter of opinion. It is not all a matter of opinion. We

are living beings who have to think about who we are. If we do not explore who we are, life is going to be over, and we will never have engaged with it.

**FERRIS:** That is right.

**BYNUM:** So the real struggle is to get students to see it is not all a matter of opinion. There are good ideas and bad ideas. There is right and wrong. It matters, and they, as some of the most privileged people in the world today, have an obligation to engage with these issues.

How do you get students to understand that it matters? You have to have something that comes close enough to them that they can talk about it and yet that can be distanced in some way.

Popular culture is wonderful. All these movies about people going to heaven or turning into flies or traveling in space—it is far enough away from them that you can get them to engage, and suddenly they are talking about diversity, about selfhood, about values.

And then you can come back and say, "But look, Hobbes is talking about the nature of society. Thomas Aquinas is talking about identity. Descartes is talking about whether or

not thinking is enough to let you know who you are. These things matter."

If you can get the students to see that it is okay for them to argue and disagree and to believe in the things that they believe in, then you've taken a step forward. And popular culture is one of the ways of getting them going on this.

**FERRIS:** Let me close with one final question. What do you see as the future of the field of history?

**BYNUM:** I think that history is going to continue to be central to the humanities. Whether it's music or art or literature or philosophy, scholars are going to continue to understand it in its historical context—its situation in time and place.

Some of the post-modern attack, which would seem to make the writing of history impossible, has faded slightly. And from what has been good about post-modern questioning, we have profited.

That is, we've learned to be more careful and more sensitive to the way in which we are always constructing and always reflecting ourselves. That has been useful.

But I think the danger of four or five years ago—that we might actually succumb to either a narcissism that says, "We cannot really do history, therefore we might as well write about ourselves," or to a kind of relativism, which proposes that nothing is there—I think that danger is past.

There is new material to be found, but even if there were not, there is always history to be written. I cannot see how there can be any humanities without history at the center.

I think that history is going to continue to be absolutely crucial not only to people who study politics and institutions, but to people who study literature and art and philosophy as well.

**FERRIS:** That is wonderful. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your taking this time.

**BYNUM:** Well, thank you very much. I have enjoyed talking with you, too. □

*"I find that one of the best ways  
to get students to think about  
complicated philosophical and  
theological issues is to talk about,  
for example, a STAR TREK episode."*

# Calendar

MARCH ♦ APRIL

BY LISA ROGERS

Chinese New Year is a major event along Eighth Avenue in Brooklyn's Sunset Park. The community's diversity and strengths are the subject of a new exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in Manhattan. "A Good Place to Land One's Feet" opens on March 27.



—Photograph by Alfredo Ishikawa

This hand-embroidered dress is part of an exhibition on the lives of Arab-Americans in Detroit. "A Community between Two Worlds" includes textiles, musical instruments, calligraphy, and family photographs, and continues at the Michigan State University Museum in East Lansing through the end of May.



From the miniature to the larger than life, works of art from the Qajar dynasty of Persia are on display at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center at UCLA. The show runs through early May in Los Angeles and then travels to London.



—Portrait of Prince Yulha, circa 1800, Brooklyn Museum of Art

## ENDOWMENT-SUPPORTED EVENTS



Kente cloth, first created three hundred years ago by the Asante people of Ghana in West Africa, finds new expressions in the modern world. "Wrapped in Pride: Asante Kente and African American Identity" at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles continues until early July.

—Michigan State University Museum, East Lansing



—Photo by Don Cole



—National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Memorabilia from World War II fills the East Baton Rouge Parish Main Library after a request for a few mementos brought a flood of donations. The exhibition dovetails with the library's World War II discussion programs and special events, a six-week series that begins in March.

# L I T E R A R Y N O T E S



Author Barbara Kingsolver is the founder of the new Bellwether Prize.

## PRIZE SEEKS NOVELIST WITH A CONSCIENCE

One of the nation's newest and richest literary prizes will be announced on the first of May. The Bellwether Prize is the brainchild of author Barbara Kingsolver, whose novels appeal for social justice and cultural tolerance. The prize aims to find and print the best unpublished novel that addresses issues of social responsibility by an author who has never hit the best-seller list. In an unusual move to get the winning manuscript to the market, the award provides a contract with a major publisher to print 10,000 copies of the book, as well as a \$25,000 payment to the author.

The winnowing got underway last November when twenty-five literary agents began sifting through manuscripts sent in by eligible authors. Each submitted their favorites to a panel of five judges, all well-known writers, who then narrowed the field to five. In March, the judges will meet with the three-member Bellwether board to choose the winning novel.

One of the three final arbiters of the prize is Arthur Blaustein, a literary critic, author, and professor at the University of California at Berkeley. Blaustein is also a member of the National Council on the Humanities, the panel that advises the NEH chairman on the merits of grant applications. Blaustein is excited about the new prize. "It is a testament to Barbara Kingsolver's generosity, integrity, and commitment to the humanities," he said. "Hopefully, a writer who

otherwise may not be discovered will give us a contemporary version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*—a work of literature to help us clarify our nation's struggle to achieve justice, equality, and community."

## AUTHORS WIN MLA PRIZES

Five NEH-funded authors won awards from the Modern Language Association. The accolades came during the MLA's Presidential Address in December at its annual convention. David Wallace won the James Russell Lowell Prize for *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford University Press), which reevaluates the influences of Italian and English politics on Chaucer's work. The MLA Prize for a First Book went to Katie Trumpener for her explication of the role of literary nationalism during Britain's colonial period in *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton University Press).

An analysis of the provenance of modern college English courses brought Thomas P. Miller the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize for his book, *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces* (University of Pittsburgh Press). Hermann W. Haller's work on writings in Italian dialects in *The Other Italy: The Literary Canon in Dialect* (University of Toronto Press) won the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript

in Italian Studies. The MLA Prize for Distinguished Bibliography went to Kathleen L. Scott for her book, *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390-1490* (Harvey Miller).

## MORE SCROLLS UNRAVELED FROM QUMRAN CAVES

Two more NEH-supported volumes of translations and analysis of the ancient scrolls from the Qumran caves have been published by Oxford University Press. The twenty-one volume series, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*, began with the publication of its first book in 1955. Many of the more recent volumes have focused on small fragments of text found in the Qumran area. Most date from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. The fragments detailed in the two new volumes come from Cave IV, usually associated with the Essenes, an apocalyptic Jewish sect. Their community was destroyed in 68 A.D. by the Roman emperor Vespasian.

Teams of scholars from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East are still working on the remaining official translations. For many years, access to the scrolls was restricted to a small group of scholars, but moves in the early 1990s by outside groups to make photographs of the texts available prompted a lifting of those restrictions. The change brought a surge in publications about the scrolls and renewed interest in the turbulent historical period from which they come. □ —LR



A manuscript fragment from Cave IV at Qumran. —Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority

# DEADLINES • DEADLINES • DEADLINES

## DIVISION OF PRESERVATION AND ACCESS *George F. Farr Jr., Director • 202-606-8570*

e-mail address: <a href="mailto:preservation@neh.gov">preservation@neh.gov</a>	Deadline	Projects beginning
All applications for preservation and access projects	July 1, 1999	May 2000

## DIVISION OF PUBLIC PROGRAMS *Nancy Rogers, Director • 202-606-8267*

e-mail address: <a href="mailto:publicpgms@neh.gov">publicpgms@neh.gov</a>	Deadline	Projects beginning
All applications for public programs (planning, etc.)	February 1, 2000	September 2000
Consultation Grants	May 17, 1999	October 1999
Planning grants only	November 1, 1999	May 2000

## DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS *James Herbert, Director • 202-606-8373*

e-mail addresses: <a href="mailto:research@neh.gov">research@neh.gov</a> , <a href="mailto:education@neh.gov">education@neh.gov</a>	Deadline	Projects beginning
Fellowships and Stipends • 202-606-8466		
Faculty Graduate Study Program for Historically Black Colleges and Universities	March 15, 1999	September 1999
Fellowships for University and College Teachers and Independent Scholars	May 1, 1999	January 2000
Summer Stipends	October 1, 1999	May 2000
Education Development and Demonstration (includes technology-related projects) • 202-606-8380		
Schools for a New Millennium Planning Grants	April 1, 1999	September 1999
Humanities Focus Grants	April 15, 1999	September 1999
Schools for a New Millennium Implementation Grants	October 1, 1999	May 2000
National Education Projects	October 15, 1999	May 2000
Research • 202-606-8210		
Collaborative Research	September 1, 1999	May 2000
Fellowship Programs at Independent Research Institutions	September 1, 1999	September 2000
Seminars and Institutes • 202-606-8463		
Participants	March 1, 2000	Summer 2000
Directors	March 1, 2000	Summer 2001

## OFFICE OF CHALLENGE GRANTS *Stephen M. Ross, Director • 202-606-8309*

e-mail address: <a href="mailto:challenge@neh.gov">challenge@neh.gov</a>	Deadline	Projects beginning
All applications should be submitted to the Office of Challenge Grants	May 1, 1999	December 1999

## FEDERAL-STATE PARTNERSHIP *Edythe R. Manza, Director • 202-606-8254*

e-mail address: [fedstate@neh.gov](mailto:fedstate@neh.gov)

Each state humanities council establishes its own grant guidelines and application deadlines.

World Wide Web Home Page: <http://www.neh.gov>

To receive guidelines for any NEH program, contact the Office of Publications and Public Affairs at 202-606-8400 or by e-mail at [info@neh.gov](mailto:info@neh.gov). Guidelines are available at least two months in advance of application deadlines.

Telecommunications device for the deaf: 202-606-8282.

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