

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

Volume 57 • Number 2 • Winter 2022



MEDIEVAL FEMINIST FORUM A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

Volume 57 • Number 2 • Winter 2022

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Medieval Feminist Forum is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography, published by the Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor; New York, NY 10004; http://www.mla.org.and Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index, http://www.haverford.edu/library/reference/mschaus/mfi/

Medieval Feminist Forum, e-issn 2151-6073 https://doi.org/10.32773/JQMZ7719

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RETROSPECTIVES

Who Does She Think She Is?

Caroline Walker Bynum

The essay that follows begins with a story. That story sheds light on the state of play in Medieval Studies more than forty years ago. As such, it may seem out of date, anachronistic, a throwback to an earlier time beyond which scholars and scholarship have advanced. After all, it is a tale told by an octogenarian about the long-ago days of her scholarly beginnings. My point, however, is that such events are not just curiosities from the distant past. The students and younger colleagues I mentor have similar experiences still. So the story warns us not only that we must be alert when courage is needed but also that courage is needed far more often than we suspect. It warns us above all that our own self-confidence, not only in our work but also in our own standards for it, is crucial both as a feminist stance of self-protection and as a commitment to the preservation of quality in the field of Medieval Studies to which we have chosen to give our scholarly lives.

Sometime around 1980, a friend of mine at the University of Washington where I taught suggested that I pull together some of my recent essays into a volume to submit to the University of California Press, where he had also published. It happened that I had several essays that had been well received as well as one that had been turned down for publication by a Catholic journal devoted to the liturgy because, said the editor, it was "heretical." The actual rejection said (I paraphrase): "If these nuns said what Bynum says they said, then they

were heretics. But they are saints of the church. So it must be Bynum who is the heretic." Convinced that this essay had a point to make, I was casting about for a place to publish it when my friend suggested the volume of essays. Why not? I thought, and set about to rewrite that piece and revise several others. I submitted the collection to the University of California Press and waited.

When the readers' reports came back, the first was quite positive. The second, however, which advised against publication, opened as follows: "Who does Bynum think she is?" The argument was not so much that the essays were not good as that a young and unknown professor at a public university in the far west had no business publishing her collected essays.

That is not the end of the story of the volume that became *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* and has sold over 13,500 copies (quite respectable sales for an academic book). Two subsequent developments are worth reporting. The first is that the editor at UC Press, perhaps not coincidentally a woman, believed in the book enough to send it to a third reader—a step that is not usually taken when one reader recommends against publication—and that reader was also enthusiastic. Thus the book went to press.

The second, even more unusual development occurred many years later, sometime around 1994. I had naturally assumed that I knew who reader number two was. I, however, gave this relatively little thought. I had always been not so much self-confident as

¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982). The third essay, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" has been influential in discussions of the so-called "twelfth-century renaissance." The fourth and fifth essays, on Cistercian monks in the twelfth century and the nuns of Helfta in the thirteenth, were crucial to generating discussion of the theme of "Jesus as mother" in twentieth-century feminist theology. The fifth essay, on nuns, was also a first step in the study of the female body that I continued in Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987). This discussion of women's bodies became extremely important to feminist historiography and study of religion in the 1990s and 2000s.

realistic; and I assumed that the objections of reader two were quite reasonable, given the state of play in academic publishing. I simply felt lucky that the editor had believed in me. I also never wavered in my conviction that at least three of the essays made original and important points and should unquestionably have been published. But at a meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in the early 1990s, a man on the verge of retirement, who had always seemed to me to be friendly and rather inclined to like younger scholars, came up to me and asked whether we could go for a walk. So we did. The reason he wanted to talk to me was, he said, because "I guess you figured out that I was the reader who told UC Press not to publish Jesus as Mother." He was not at all the person I had suspected, so I stared at him, mouth open. And he continued: "I just want to say that I was wrong." It was an extremely gracious gesture, for which I have always been grateful and always a little surprised, thinking back. Academia is not a place of many apologies, especially not unnecessary ones.

Neither of these subsequent developments is the point of this little essay. The point is rather that "who does she think she is?" is still a mantra used to put successful women down. As much as we rejoice when women break yet another glass ceiling, we know that resentment of female expertise, female skill, female brilliance is the reason that ceiling is so often not broken. Hillary Clinton was perhaps the most prepared political candidate in my lifetime, yet she was resented as too cerebral, as not able to connect, not "likeable." To be so well prepared, so knowledgable, so thoughtful, so intelligent not qualities necessarily held against a male campaigner (although, to be honest, not especially valued in him either)—these were qualities that made her seem unsympathetic, slightly humorless, square. So many people had experienced that sort of woman, running PTA meetings and church bazars or local political groups, staffing libraries and charging fines for late books, giving out stayafter-school demerits ... OK in its place, but who does she think she is to try to rise above those roles and claim more power?

The sense that a woman, especially a married woman, is just a little bit peculiar if she is too bright or successful has long roots in American experience. She is especially peculiar if she in any way

eclipses her husband, but eclipsing a man is not necessary to cause unease. Any unusual achievement is dangerous for a woman. The first boyfriend I had in high school asked me one day whether I was embarrassed by my mother. Why should I be embarrassed by my mother? I asked. "Because," he said, as if it were self-evident, "she has a Ph.D." In our lower-middle-class neighborhood that was enough to be shameful. Yet my father had a Ph.D., too, and was always referred to, with respect, as "Dr. Walker." After my mother died, a neighbor who had been fond of her and to whom my mother had been extraordinarily kind, said to my sister and me: "Well. You know your mother just wasn't like other people; she never really fitted in." It was said in reproach, not praise. I have often felt angry that my mother cared so much about kindness to neighbors and published so little, when what she published was so very good. No one, even among his academic colleagues, ever apparently noticed that the male Dr. Walker, also himself kind to neighbors, never published anything. And after his death, when I sorted through his possessions I was appalled to find his commonplace book filled with quotations putting down "the educated woman." Then I understood long after the fact why, deeply as I loved and admired him, I had never thought some of the jokes he told about women were funny.

Of course, women have come a long way, and we are proud of that. And there are supportive, un-threatened men. My late husband was once asked if it bothered him that his wife made more than he did. He answered that it would bother him a lot more if she made less. Nonetheless, I have, inside academia and outside, encountered much evidence that "who does she think she is?" still operates to put women in the vice of a double standard. Of course, they must be competent, but show it? Well, not so much. I have heard too many serious female colleagues described as "schoolmarmish," "tough," "humorless." If they are wide ranging in their accomplishments, they are dilettantish; if they are experts at highly technical fields, they are narrow; if they are pretty, even a bit flirtatious, then they are not only silly, they are hard-core dangerous. I think that the greater burden of mentoring that women faculty and women in law firms, medical practices, and in business carry is not only because they are pioneers and want to help other women; not only because there are

fewer female faculty or administrators or firm members to share the burden; not only out of gratitude to those who helped them when the number of women in their field was even smaller. I think there is also a trace at least of wanting to justify our status by "being kind," of not wanting to "get above ourselves," of not daring to risk the appearance of having claimed too much.

We now have a word for "mansplaining," and I thank Rebecca Solnit for that.2 I, like Solnit, have all too often had men explain not only my field but also my own books to me. In a sense "who does she think she is?" is the other side of that coin. If our female role is soaking up the information given, often at great length, by men-men who know far less about our fields than we dothe corollary is that, if we claim our expertise as our own, we are getting above ourselves. The answer to this duality of unfortunate behaviors is obvious. Men need to shut up; women need to speak up. But I am not interested in drawing such a trite and anodyne conclusion. Rather I'll let men tackle mansplaining. It's their job to silence themselves and each other when necessary. What I want for women is confidence and realism, not hubris. Some ideas are better than others; some compositions more beautiful; some legal briefs, some diagnoses, some scientific discoveries are more important. I want us to have confidence that we know the difference between the competent, the really good, and the excellent, and that we judge ourselves by standards we profoundly believe in. We owe this not only to ourselves but also to the field of Medieval Studies, to which most of us are devoting our careers.

So we must give our *own* answer to "who does she think she is?" That answer will be sometimes "brave," sometimes "accomplished," sometimes "glad just to have squeaked by," and sometimes "truly brilliant." But who decides? *We decide*. It is our honesty, and pride,

² Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

and faith not just in ourselves but in the standards of our field that let us answer the question "who do we think we are?" We have the answer because, by our *own* standards, we *know*. We know who we are; we know how far we manage to come toward meeting our own standards for ourselves. We know—and we are the ones who know—why our work matters.