BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas L. Reed, Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1990), xi + 461 pp.

Thomas L. Reed, Jr. provides an interesting account of a much-neglected genre in his *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution*. Taking as his central problem the deferral of judgment that characterizes the endings of many medieval debate poems, Reed argues against the traditional readings that interpret this feature simply as satirizing the ineptitude of scholastic argumentation. He suggests instead that the genre answers a larger postnominalist concern with the operation of experiential knowledge and the epistemological problems that arise when individually observed facts conflict with received values. As recreational poetry, unresolved debate poems like *The Owl and the Nightingale, Wynnere and Wastoure,* and Chaucer's *The Parlement of Foules* admit the tenuousness of judgment and allow their readers a release from the human need to judge. By positing fully equal opponents who are refused a final verdict by their judge, these works serve the same cathartic function as the Feast of Fools, best described by M. M. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Mocking the ability of any human "authority" to reason toward absolute truth, the debate genre creates Dionysian settings where the self-consciously rhetorical play between fairly matched contenders absorbs the reader's attention, obscuring his former anxious interest in formal and ideological resolution.

While this approach may sound like an all-too-familiar restatement of some of the fading concerns of "new historicist" discourse, Reed supports his premise with a series of fine historical contextualizations that lend feasibility to his definition of the debate genre. His elucidation of the association between the literary form and the actual debates and mock disputations that took place in the fourteenth-century Inns of Court far excels studies of this connection by earlier scholars. In his second chapter, "Institutional Context and Poetic Content," Reed gives a useful

synopsis of the development of dialectic in the schools, the legal training of late medieval scholars, and the features of scholastic and parliamentary debate that are parodied by Chaucer and Lydgate in *Parlement of Foules* and *The Mumming at Hertford*. This reading of Chaucer expands significantly upon similar observations made by Joseph Hornsby in *Chaucer and the Law*.

Reed's point here is to demonstrate the almost ritualistic levity that can be traced in debates staged in the universities, the Inner and Outer Temples, and in Parliament; the examples he gleans from the Year Books support his position convincingly. It becomes apparent that the same disregard for legal resolution that marks many debate poems found a related expression in courtrooms and lecture halls as legal process was glorified over ultimate decision in mock (and sometimes formal) disputations. Fictive, mock, and real debates all promised a ludic "provisional freedom from the deliberative responsibilities of professional life" (176).

The author moves from historical to literary contextualization in his next two chapters. Many of the sources and analogues to Middle English debate poetry that he describes are commonly known (i.e., the Norse *flyting* tradition, Cicero's dialogues, and the dialectical disputations of the twelfth-century School of Chartres). Nonetheless, Reed's new presentation effectively organizes these materials as background for his actual readings of late medieval poetry, and is thorough enough to stand alone as a valuable annotated account of the genre's wide provenance both in England and on the Continent.

At this point, however, Reed's treatment begins to sound slightly predictable, albeit eloquent, as he returns to his thesis and searches *The Owl and the Nightingale, Wynnere and Wastoure, The Parlement of Foules,* Lydgate's *Horse, Goose, and Sheep* and *The Mumming at Hertford,* and even *Gawain and the Green Knight* for signs of "experiential realism," "ambivalence," multiple perspectives, and any other formal characteristics that contribute to their authors' ludic "acknowledgment of the experiential complexities of earthly reality and obligation" (253). Reed concocts an elaborate redefinition of literary debate in his chapter on *The Owl and the Nightingale*; finely detailed as they are, his subsequent chapters echo this discussion almost too closely.

The crucial element of the genre, as Reed describes it, is its authors' employment of detailed natural observation. This, he believes, provides a clue to the fact that the poems self-consciously confess their uneasy inclusion of experiential logic. In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the literal detailing of the birds prohibits allegorical reading, the only type of inter-

pretation that might give closure to the text. The ornithological realism forces the reader to suspend interpretation and concentrate instead on the verbal play between the birds: "even while the poet encourages us to choose between the two disputants, at virtually every pass he undercuts the assumptions and evidence upon which such a choice might reasonably be based. His likely aim is to make us confront the alternatively daunting and delightful complexity of our earthly condition" (230). This is the strain that is repeated through every subsequent reading in the book.

Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution does many things well. Although its close readings are too repetitive for the work's inordinate length to seem wholly necessary, the text is generally well written. Moreover, Reed proves how recent critical questions can profitably promote total reconstructions of medieval genres. His learned, brilliantly organized study must surely enrich our appreciation of the complexity of medieval debate poetry.

Kari Schoening Diehl
Department of English
University of California, Los Angeles

Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991; distributed by the M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London), 426 pp.

In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Caroline Walker Bynum has gathered together and revised seven articles written during the 1980s. During that decade she emerged as one of the most original scholars of medieval religious history, publishing among other works *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Written in the same period in which Bynum researched the latter book, some of the earlier essays in the present collection address themes familiar to its readers. Others break new ground. Bynum's increasing use of artistic evidence in the later essays deserves particular mention.

Bynum provides an overall multivalent theme in the title of the work. The twin metaphors of fragmentation and redemption describe the focus on fragments of human bodies in some of the essays, and particularly in