

**Caroline Walker Bynum**

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## Caroline Walker Bynum

Caroline Walker Bynum promised us, in the introduction to her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, history not with the somber cadences of tragedy but rather in a comic mode. There is no question she has kept her word. One of the most influential practitioners of the art alive, she holds readers and listeners captive with the sheer delightfulness of her curiosity, her inventiveness, and her imagination. It is hard to conceive of so serious a contribution to learning made with more joyful enthusiasm or greater confidence in the redemptive potential of human existence.

It's fair to say that Caroline Bynum has been preparing for a life in scholarship from the start. For her there is no boundary between her life and her work, and she has always made the fullness of her own experience available to students and readers while retaining the ardor of her intellectual vitality in the intimacy of family life and friendship. Surely this organic unity of life and learning explains the appeal of her work, a running commentary on the most human aspects of the human stories she has chosen to tell.

Born in 1941, raised and educated in Atlanta, Bynum never lost the drawl slowly rounding off her sentences or the liquid tones a Georgian accent brings to even the harshest discourse of conferences and colloquia. Yet she has spent most of her adult life in the North, starting at Radcliffe and continuing at the University of Michigan, where she completed her B.A. in 1962. She went back to Harvard for an M.A. and received her Ph.D. there in 1969. Already in those years she was a formidable presence on campus, one of the most sought-after of those stalwarts of undergraduate education, the graduate teaching fellows, and a spokesperson for women in an environment that liked to pretend the old-boy network was a myth and the way to professional success open equally to all, men and women.

Taken on by Harvard as an assistant professor upon completion of her graduate degree, she plunged into the business

of faculty politics, serving as cochair of the Committee on the Status of Women at Harvard and coauthoring a report putting Harvard on notice that times were changing and on record as recognizing that, “genderly speaking,” things were not all right. Meanwhile Bynum’s teaching went ahead with passion, as she developed what became a classic for undergraduates in the intellectual history of medieval Europe, took on graduate reading courses in the full array of medieval fields, and continued what had already emerged as a heroic record of mentorship in tutorials and senior theses. The orderliness of her mind combined with a dose of conviction and her personal warmth produced magic in the classroom. Undergraduates and graduate students flocked to her classes, waiting for her legendary tripartite analyses of everything from Augustine’s vision of the church to Richard of St. Victor’s biblical theology.

When Bynum’s term as assistant professor of history ended in 1973, Harvard students were spared losing her for another three years as she transferred next door to become assistant and then associate professor in the Department of Church History at the Harvard Divinity School. There she began to work gender studies and female spirituality into the curriculum in a way new to both college and divinity school. Her audience grew accordingly, and student acclamation for her only increased. For those who knew her and Harvard at the time, the university has never been the same since she departed.

In 1976 the University of Washington lured Bynum to the opposite coast as associate professor in the Department of History, where in 1981 she was appointed professor and given adjunct status in Religious Studies and Women’s Studies. Her whirlwind energy now began to work its wonders in the West, where the memory of her tonic effect on colleagues and students alike still shines among those who worked beside her. For over a decade it was her eastern friends’ turn to watch her from afar, stirring up a campus and igniting student enthusiasm. This was when her major publications began to appear and her mark first set upon medieval studies. It was soon to be set upon the entire field of history.

The book *Docere verbo et exemplo: An Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality* came out in 1979, a reworking of her Ph.D. dissertation written under the direction of Giles Constable, exploring novelties in the spirituality of regular canons in twelfth-century Europe. Readers could here get a taste for the unique blend of intellectual, psychological, and social history that characterizes Bynum's work, and learn to recognize her knack for prizing a mental universe from her subjects' sometimes fervid rhetoric and the imagery of their diction. Her ability to uncover the formal structure of a chain of thought while keeping in mind the context—institutional, material, even physical—ensured that her analysis penetrated deep. From such solid foundations rose a body of writing that has changed the appreciation of medieval spirituality and the understanding of the culture of those times.

Each of Bynum's succeeding works has taken off from the preceding, following up on earlier interests while turning new ground and opening up broader intellectual horizons. In 1982 appeared the stunning collection of studies, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, where the achievements of ten years' thinking about female spirituality and the gendered attributes of psyche and religion among both men and women were laid out for the first time in book form. The chapters on regular canons and the monastic experience of communal life drew her into the debate over twelfth-century personality already opened up by Richard Southern, but it was the attention to feminine imagery and the surprisingly gendered imagination of medieval religious writers that created the most stir among colleagues, ensuring that every subsequent word of Bynum's would be anticipated and read with intensity.

*Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* was published in 1987 and disappointed none among her audience. Awarded the Governor's Award of the State of Washington and the Philip Schaff Prize of the American Society of Church History, it laid out an argument so grand in its implications for history, religion, and even anthropology and psychology, that it is quoted

throughout the humanities and the social sciences. No one can think about medieval spirituality, feminine or masculine, without reference to this book, just as it is virtually impossible to investigate the place of body in religion and psychology or the influence of social role and institutional office on rhetoric and ideology without starting with Bynum's complex analysis of the interplay of all these in high medieval life and thought. Only a year before, Bynum had received a MacArthur Fellowship, and the book's publication confirmed the foundation's judgment of her. Here was one of the few people who could, without embarrassment, accept an honor that comes with such celebrated expectations.

But Bynum has never rested on her laurels. 1991 brought *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, which, spinning out her thoughts about mind and matter from the previous book, laid down more fully her views on the relation between imagination, social experience, and material existence and reached out into areas of philosophy and theology—ideas about soul, for example, and eucharistic devotion—that have had to be reconceptualized in the wake of her contextual approach. It is no surprise that her efforts won the Trilling Prize and the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion from the American Academy of Religion. Most recently, in 1995, she published *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, a breathtaking panorama of attitudes toward body and materiality in Western spirituality that begins with examining the Christian expectation of bodily resurrection only to end in broad speculation about human mind and personality, even the character of religious experience itself. Phi Beta Kappa's Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize and the American Philosophical Society's Jacques Barzun Prize in Cultural History simply ratified the importance of her work.

Yet Bynum's attention to the written word has never reduced her commitment to the active life. In 1988 she moved to Columbia University, where since 1990 she has been the Morris A. and Alma Schapiro Professor of History. Her reputation as

teacher and mentor hardly had time to precede her as she immersed herself in courses, advising, and academic committee work, always the passionate intellectual and untiring colleague. A series of campus responsibilities as editor, committee chair, and advisory board member led inexorably to her appointment as Dean of the School of General Studies and Associate Vice President of Arts and Sciences for Undergraduate Education from 1993 to 1994, during which time she undertook a review of the undergraduate curriculum and authored a report on reforming Columbia's undergraduate major. Meanwhile, since her days in Washington, she has been keeping to the demanding routine of mother to her daughter, Antonia, a responsibility and privilege she has for years shared with her devoted friend and husband, Guenther Roth.

Bynum's current scholarly interests take their cue from her latest books, tackling issues of biological as well as psychological identity and change, while returning to the twelfth century as a lens through which to peer into the human mind. Her towering presence in the field brings its share of formal duties as well: From 1986 to 1988 she was president of the Medieval Association of the Pacific; from 1993 to 1994 she served as president of the American Catholic Historical Association; and at the end of this year she will step down as president of the American Historical Association only to take up the mantle of president of the Medieval Academy of America. But Bynum's energy guarantees that we can look forward to learning from her for years to come. Given her record in the past, it is dizzying to contemplate the accomplishments that lie in store.

Respectfully submitted,  
Steven P. Marrone  
Tufts University

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