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The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe: Images, Objects and Practices

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To cite this article: Kim Woods (2018) The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe: Images, Objects and Practices, Material Religion, 14:2, 271-272, DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2018.1442205

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1442205

Published online: 12 Apr 2018.

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she argues that—across wide genres of literature—there are distinct overlaps in what oracular consultation stories do and offer, suggesting that they should be treated as a unified body of narratives.

Chapter two examines Herodotus and the well-known stories of Croesus’ interactions with the Delphic oracle. Kindt argues that these stories underline the special care humans need to enjoy benefit from divine knowledge, and shows how oracles work as authority figures within the text (greater than that of the historian writer) that help the reader gauge the limits of human understanding, as well as offer a sense of time and chronology to world events. As such, the oracular story helps underline the “principles and practices of human-divine communication” (32).

Chapter three examines Delphic stories in the works of Euripides, with Kindt arguing that the nature of dramatic dialogue (particularly its ability to offer multiple viewpoints) further elucidates the difficulties of human–divine communication. Chapter four looks at the works of Plato, in particular focusing on Socrates’ defense, and argues that Socrates attempted to explain his own religious behavior using well-established patterns of religious storytelling. As such, Kindt argues for the importance of the religious dimension of Socrates’ trial (often drowned out in favor of its political interpretation and context).

Chapter five examines Pausanias and shows the way in which oracle stories treat the essential difficulties in recognizing divinity and its different manifestations and presentations in the human sphere. Chapter six offers a very welcome focus on the works of Athenaeus, and showcases one way in which oracular stories not only parade human efforts to make sense of the divine as it manifests itself in the human sphere, but also offer some sense of what the scope and limits of that knowledge can be.

The conclusion points to the ways in which—across the different literary genres—these stories present an “oracular discourse” in what Kindt refers to as “the enigmatic mode,” negotiating the links between human and divine spheres, human knowledge and ignorance, and defining the human condition vis-à-vis the gods. They offer—within a religious culture, which, as Kindt remarks, “is a religion of story” (153)—a way “in which this ‘sense-making’ occurs” (164). Kindt also offers an appendix, which focuses closely on Plutarch’s “The E at Delphi” dialogue as an example of a philosophical enquiry into a divine sign, and analyzes the ways in which this text also complies with her key themes of oracular storytelling—particularly the presence of the “enigmatic” mode, the human need for interpretation, the essential gap between human and divine knowledge, and the complex process of human–divine communication.

This book is, as a result, a welcome addition to the increasingly connected thinking on the religious worldview of the Greeks, bringing more closely together the study of the sociocultural, philosophical and material aspects of religion with a more sophisticated understanding of the literary structures, narratives and devices through which Greek religion was articulated, manipulated and perceived.

Reference

The materiality of devotion in late medieval northern Europe: images, objects and practices

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DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2018.1442205

This edited volume is a publication of the European Network on the Instruments of Devotion (ENID). In his introduction, Henning Laugerud quotes Caroline Bynum, saying “until we understand medieval art in a new way—until we see how it plays with, uses and interrogates materiality—we will not understand what it is that we need to explain.” So does this book help us to see religious art, artifacts, and practices in a new way, and does it cast light on materiality? One of the problems of edited volumes is the inevitable disjuncture between the various contributions, but on balance, the answer to both of these is probably yes. The book focuses not just on interiorized meditation on and arising from the material but also the capacity of the material, whether art or practices, to mediate grace in its own right. This determination to
hold the interior and the exterior in tension rather than opposition is a definite merit, and one that moves the debate on from the sometimes rather amorphous concepts of meditation and devotion, and equally from the philosophical hierarchy that, theoretically at least, placed the material as at best the lowest rung in the ascent from human life to the divine. As Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen suggests in his conclusion, the tempting myth that “pure” belief should be direct and unmediated is culturally constructed, whereas such mediation may in fact be fundamental to human experience.

In the first of the eight chapters Berndt Hamm introduces the reader to proximate grace—the concept that the sacred is immediate and present through mediation, firstly through the humanity and brokenness of Christ. Interiorized meditation and prayer belong to the second, difficult level of this proximate grace, termed participatory grace because a believer appropriates grace through their own efforts. An easier route to proximate grace lay through the appeal to the senses of art, spectacles and ceremonies. These, effectively, mediate a bestowed proximate grace in a democratized way to those present. Although this hierarchy is familiar, Hamm demonstrates that art can serve all three forms of mediation and that all are valid.

The next two essays address the theme of visions. Rob Faesen’s consideration of Hadewijch’s visions is fascinating in its own right, but it is editor Henning Laugerud in essay three who enhances our theme of the mediation of materiality, showing how visionary experience “could be made permanently accessible through images.” He points out that visions were considered not simply as mental experiences but as involving actual sight and often related to material images of the time. The insights and experiences available to all through images might be imprinted on the memory to be dwelled on and recalled as “rhetorical evidence” by those able to access aevum, the visionary time bridging life and eternity. Another editor, Laura Katrine Skinnebach, explores the capacity of material images to effect transfiguration, drawing on Aquinas’s claim that we are indelibly affected by what we see: “sense after it has been actualized by a sense object is like that object.” Although often used negatively in relation to the potential for contamination, Skinnebach argues the potential of sensual practices and things for a positive “contamination,” effecting the transfiguration of the inner disposition. This point is picked up again in the conclusion by Jørgensen in terms of “signs producing what they signify,” namely the Christianization of the senses.

The other chapters hold more specialized interest. Vanhauwaert and Geml ask the question whether reliquary heads of John the Baptist should be regarded as sculpture or reliquaries, and why they were often made of base materials such as wood, when the material might be expected to be of precious materials to mediate the importance of what it contained. These are very good questions and ones not restricted to St. John’s heads. The Netherlands in particular produced many painted wooden reliquaries in the early sixteenth century that pose exactly the same issues, though it should be said that the use of gold in polychrome schemes militates against our viewing the materials as “base.” Barbara Baert contributed a characteristically learned though slightly impenetrable essay on the role of the senses in the Annunciation, and there is a chapter on Irish religious poetry by Salvador Ryan.

Even taking into account the difficulties of translating texts of this complexity, the essays vary considerably in their accessibility. Ideally, complexity should be restricted to the concepts, not their expression, and at times the points might have been more simply put. Like the democratizing potential of images to mediate grace, new ideas are best accessible to all.