

Caroline W Bynum

A Year of Change and Stasis



Carolyn W. Bynum, Morris A. and Alma Schapiro Professor of History at Columbia University, is the author of a number of books, among them *Docere Verbo et Exemplo* (1979); *Jesus as Mother* (1982); *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987); *Fragmentierung und Erlösung: Geschlecht und Körper im Glauben des Mittelalters* (1991; German trans., 1995); and *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (1995). She is President-Elect of the American Historical Association and the Medieval Academy of America. — Address: Department of History, Fayerweather Hall 611, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA.

I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg straight from a year and a half of service as a Dean at Columbia University. After a period of struggling to build a faculty and a curriculum on the basis of quality rather than politics, I looked forward to a rest from short-term pressures, from "political correctness", from worries about funding sources. Although I soon found that European academics is burdened by similar concerns and pressures, I nonetheless used my fall to gain a broad perspective on issues that had been, for the previous eighteen months, all too immediate for me. I plunged into learning a new city and a new language, while at the same time reading widely in the very large theoretical literature on gender that had appeared during the past three years. In December and January I wrote a long article based both on the research I had been doing for a decade in the history of theology and on my survey of current Gender Studies; if that article displays (as I hope it does) a fresh perspective on these currently very fraught issues, it is owing largely to the distance I was able to gain from being in the very particular setting of this year's Kolleg, both profoundly German and profoundly multicultural. The fact that the article will appear in both English and German in journals edited by Arnold Davidson and Hans Medick is evidence, I hope, not so much of net-working as of ideas and values explored together.

I also spent much time during these past ten months catching up on recent literature in medieval history and writing a large number of book

reviews on topics ranging from feudal institutions to the sense of humor displayed in monastic preaching. An invitation to lecture in Budapest in March provided an opportunity to re-think some of my ideas about burial practices in the light of discussions I had with Jean-Claude Schmitt about ghosts. For a conference in Paris on "La Mama," I wrote a paper on medieval ideas of "the good mother" that echoed conversations early in the year with Donata Elschenbroich.

Most important during the spring months, however, were weeks of what appeared initially to be almost aimless reading around in medieval poetry and natural philosophy. From this reading, a new research topic emerged. Although many months more will be necessary before it is formulated completely, it has to do with twelfth-century European conceptions of stasis and change, both physical and psychological; hexameral literature, the reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, eucharistic theology, alchemy, and ideas of conversion all have their place in it. I want to explore concepts of matter and the four elements in the period before the Aristotelian paradigm became dominant, and to understand (among other things) why matter was so often imagined to be a percolating, bubbling, mass of fertility, why this fertility was threatening as well as promising, and why concepts of the four elements assumed them to be at war. I hope then, by considering these questions in the context of research I did earlier on twelfth-century ideas of "the self" and "the body", to learn something about why the European tradition developed certain hopes for radical transformation (whether change of matter through alchemy or change of moral state through education), yet resisted profoundly other possibilities of species change (a resistance that carries over into current discussions of genetic engineering). Bibliographical suggestions from Hilary Putnam and Michael Hampe, the model provided by Carolyn Abbate's and Pamela Smith's sensitive responses to the material of cultural history, methodological discussions with Pauline Schmitt-Pantel, Hans-Peter Ullmann, Mamadou Diawara, Hans Medick and Arnold Davidson, and above all the tough, probing questions of Karine Chemla about scientific theories of place, change, and relationship have shaped this new research in fundamental ways. It is only now, as I look back on the spring and early summer, that I realize how much work I have actually gotten done and how much the freedom of this year has encouraged me to tackle unfamiliar source material. Those quiet winter months, cooped up in the Grunewald by bad weather, gave me time to pursue genuinely new questions. And without all the wonderful baroque operas on classical themes that I attended with Pamela Smith, Ovid might well not have found a place in my new project.

Beyond — or perhaps deep down under — these academic concerns, however, I have found myself thinking about something else. We were, after all, the multicultural year, and I found myself therefore watching our interactions almost as an ethnographer would. Perhaps because I was struggling so hard to speak German and thus repeatedly put myself into situations where I was forced to be mostly silent, I often heard what we were NOT saying. I have thought a good deal about silence and mis-translation, about what it is hard to say and what cannot be said at all. When people reach toward each other through different languages and cultures, they often hear — indeed they cannot help but hear — what they expect to hear. When they must translate in order to understand, they tend to miss the nuanced, the unusual, the truly original. For much of the year, we appeared to ourselves, I think, to be groping around in a fog of generalizations, even clichés. It was a very courteous fog, to be sure; indeed the difficulty of all the differences we were negotiating — differences of age and gender, of language and culture, of scholarly methods and interests — made courtesy a necessity. But it was a fog nonetheless. Toward the end, however, we found ways to be clearer and more direct. In the last few weeks and in informal settings, we have begun, I think, not just to talk and to translate, but also to listen to each other.

More than anyone else, the person who has helped me — prodded me even — to think about these issues is Eva Hund. Not merely a brilliant language teacher (although she is that as well), she has been for me — and I think for her other pupils in Gruppe B+ — a guide to Germany, past and present. Through this, she has also been a guide in difficult questions about translation, difference, and the nature of culture itself.