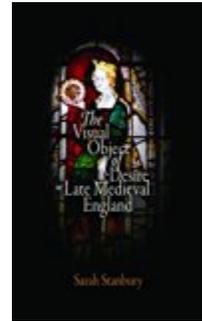


Sarah Stanbury. *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 320 pp. Photographs, map. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4038-2.

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The English and Their Fetishes: Devotional Objects and Religious Life during the Later Middle Ages

Almost entirely defaced and destroyed during sixteenth-century Reformation-inspired iconoclastic violence, precious little medieval religious art from England survives. As Sarah Stanbury notes in the introduction to her book, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*, marvels of Gothic architecture like the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral now stand as vivid reminders of that violence and loss. Clear glass windows, plain gray stone, and smashed statuary are bleak mementos of a space once suffused with colored light and of walls once lavishly decorated with devotional objects and images. Stanbury situates her study along this trajectory of future loss. Drawing on Michael Camille's much-cited claim of a later medieval "image explosion," Stanbury opts to explore this proliferation of religious object and images in England between 1380 and 1450, a crucial period during which Lollard critiques and orthodox defenses of religious images reveal a range of complicated and anxious responses. "England in the late Middle Ages," Stanbury contends, "was keenly attuned to and even troubled by its 'culture of the spectacle'" (p. 5).

Much of this returns us to what at first may seem like well trod and well examined ground. If orthodox Catholics contended that the use of religious images and objects was invaluable to the faithful, their Lollard critics feared such devotional items were the devil's snares. For the orthodox, everything hinged on the distinction between *dulia* and *latria*, between the proper use of objects as means for directing the believer's thoughts to God as opposed to the improper worship of those very same ob-

jects. Stanbury acknowledges this debate and sheds good light on the fine line between *dulia* and *latria*, but for the most part she is after something different. Using key texts – Henry Knighton's *Chronicle*, Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Clerk's Tale*, Nicolas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Christ* and Margery Kempe's *Book* – Stanbury explores individual responses to images, to their staging and ritual use in church.

Certainly Lollards suspected that any use of religious imagery would ultimately devolve into idolatry, but their critique had another valence as well. Lollards repeatedly stressed that resources that could go to help the poor were instead given over to the manufacture and decoration of religious objects, decorations that did more to demonstrate the wealth and status of their owners than to assist in any real devotion to God. What was explicit in Lollard writings was often implicit and never far from the surface of orthodox writings. This, Stanbury contends, suggests a generalized anxiety about the role and use of devotional objects that had as much to do with debates about *dulia* and *latria* as it did with concerns about the commodification of religious objects and their exchange on the open market. Consider the sorts of images that orthodox believers valued—richly decorated objects often bearing the names of their donors, that is, objects whose value derived from the market place, from market forces, and from their ability to define and consolidate social and economic hierarchies (a point Stanbury makes nicely through a reading of the Despenser Retable, an al-

tar screen dating from about 1385 at Norwich Cathedral). In any event, these objects were not valued, or so argued the Lollards, in terms of what would seem to have been most important and most in accord with the demands of proper worship, namely their ability to direct the faithful's attention from the world through the image to God.

Stanbury's approach to medieval visual culture clearly differs from much recent work on the subject, most of which approaches questions about medieval visuality from the perspective of natural philosophy, the mechanics of vision, or the science of optics and reads outward from the viewer to the objects of vision. Stanbury places the object front and center. The emphasis on commodification usefully deflects attention from visual theory and compels us to think about the object itself. More importantly, it gives heft to repeated Lollard charges that saints' statues and images are "dead" precisely because, Stanbury argues, these mere dead things had taken on a fluid and changing existence, a sort of life in the marketplace infusing them with power and "blur[ring] the boundaries between body and spirit," matter and soul, investing them with a nonexistent efficacy and false meaning (p. 107). All of this leads Stanbury to a fascinating claim: Lollard critics, she contends, charged the orthodox with transforming devotional objects into fetishes.

There are potential pitfalls inherent in applying modern concepts to pre-modern culture. There is always the danger of anachronism and distortion, not to mention confusion. And certainly throughout the book, Stanbury has a tendency to invoke superficially contemporary theory in ways that confuse, rather than enlighten her arguments. In the course of one page, for example, she invokes Jacques Derrida on gifts, Michel Foucault on "originary freedom," and Judith Butler on "the art of voluntary insubordination in the politics of truth" (p. 48). These could all be useful touchstones for her arguments, ways to elaborate them in new and interesting ways. If that really is the case, if they are worth bringing up at all, then they are worth bringing up well, and Stanbury should have done more (anything really) to connect the theoretical dots. As it stands, such sweeping and vague name-dropping does little more than make an often interesting analysis seem murky. Nonetheless, Stanbury's invocation of the language of fetishism here seems right and useful, grounding an object-based study of later medieval visuality.

What follows, for the most part, are a series of text-based case studies that illuminate the tensions that peo-

ple read into various religious and devotional objects. As Stanbury contends in her first chapter, even anti-Lollard writers like Henry Knighton and John Capgrave continually, if unknowingly, undermined their arguments for a legitimate distinction between *latria* and *dulia*. In his *Chronicle*, Knighton relates the tale of two vagabond Lollards who use a wooden statue of St. Katherine as firewood to heat their gruel. For his part, Capgrave narrates the events leading up to Katherine's famous martyrdom. What both stories reveal, Stanbury points out, is the inability of orthodox writers to avoid turning the object of devotion into a fetish. As Knighton berates the Lollards in his story, he transforms the Katherine statue into a marker of social, religious, and economic hierarchy. And even as Katherine (in Capgrave's narrative of her martyrdom) argues for the hollowness of idols with the Roman emperor Maxentius, "her own bodiliness consistently belies her own iconic status" (p. 66). Stanbury caps this initial examination off with an intriguing analysis of the tokens and symbols that came to represent saints, such as Katherine and her wheel and Lawrence and his griddle. Records, for example, indicate the existence of a Katherine wheel brooch, set with diamonds. While the orthodox would argue that such tokens should be the means by which we raise our thoughts to higher things, again and again this process short-circuits and the believer finds herself enmeshed in the material (pp. 67-75).

In the course of three separate chapters on Chaucer, Stanbury extends her analysis highlighting tensions inherent in the commodification of devotional imagery. Taken as a whole, they seem like the weakest chapters of the book, with an ever-tightening focus on details in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Pardoner's Tale* that seem to repeat, rather than deepen her analysis, and a reading of the *Clerk's Tale* that becomes so involved with itself that opportunities to open the analysis to its broader connections with Lollardy and the vernacular are lost. In sharp contrast, the final two chapters, on Nicholas Love and Margery Kempe, form a lively couplet, a set of related responses to Lollard critiques of dead images. In the *Mirror*, a selective translation and re-working of the popular *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Love draws on the very religious images painted on the walls of churches to present his readers with verbal pictures of Christ's life. Urging his readers to "participate, as voyeurs and players, in the lives of the text's characters," Stanbury writes, Love's book offers "an embodied answer to [the] Wycliffite demand that people worship not images, but the 'quick' image of Christ." (p. 179). Likewise, Margery

Kempe's many visions draw on images she would have seen in churches in East Anglia, bringing them to life and allowing her, if only spiritually, to participate in the very commodification of the religious that her poverty prevented her from partaking in materially.

Stanbury ends her book abruptly with Margery Kempe, successfully and even seemingly contentedly, finding her own way into the spiritual life of late medieval England. Stanbury provides no conclusion to frame the results of her analysis, nor does she make any

attempt to place them within the trajectory of future iconoclastic violence with which she begins her book. How do the tensions she describe relate to or lead to the now barren and cold interior of the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral? Lacking that concluding return to themes introduced at the beginning, that larger picture, Stanbury's study has a decidedly unsatisfactory end. On the other hand, taken as a collection of independent studies on the religious culture of early fifteenth-century England, her book has much to offer.

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