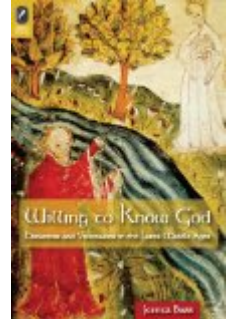


Jessica Barr. *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010. 262 pp. \$9.95, cd-rom, ISBN 978-0-8142-9226-6.



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Medieval texts frequently invoke visionary experiences. Accounts of visions proliferate from Boethius's sixth-century *De Consolatione Philosophiae* to William Dunbar's late fifteenth-century/early sixteenth-century *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, and include celebrated works like Dante's *Divina Commedia* (ca. 1306-21) and the *Le Roman de la Rose* (thirteenth century) as well as countless hagiographic texts. In *Willing to Know God*, Jessica Barr maintains that the medieval idea of the vision can only be grasped by abandoning distinctions between "literary" and "authentic" vision texts and, instead, pairing "literary" dream vision poems like the fourteenth-century *Pearl* with accounts of divine revelations like those of the thirteenth-century Benedictine nun Gertrude of Helfta. Thus, Barr advocates an interdisciplinary approach, since dream visions have typically been the domain of literary critics while religious studies scholars tend to discuss mystical accounts. This approach is not entirely new--as Barr notes, Barbara Newman's *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and*

Belief in the Middle Ages (2005) employed a similar methodology--but the project is a worthy one, and Barr's witty and perspicacious readings of the selected visionary texts contribute insights into visionary epistemology and experience in the late Middle Ages. The book considers both how human intellects unify with divine grace and the impediments to such efforts.

Willing to Know God concludes with an epilogue that summarizes the qualities essential for a successful vision according to the medieval texts Barr has surveyed: a will oriented away from the world and toward God; and the integration of the *intellectus*, which allows for the direct reception of divine knowledge, and of the *ratio*, which is necessary for the visionary to comprehend and relate to the vision. In fact, readers might be advised to read the epilogue immediately after the introduction, as it provides the best explanation for the selection of primary texts and the book's emphasis on late medieval England--the final five chapters concern *The Showings of Julian of Norwich* (late fourteenth century), *Pearl* (last quarter

of the fourteenth century), William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (Barr focuses on the B-text, ca. 1377-79), Geoffrey Chaucer's *The House of Fame* (ca. 1370), and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1420). Barr focuses exclusively on female mystics because scholarly discussions of female mystics have emphasized their affective, intuitive understanding. In contrast to such previous work, her readings reveal that the *intellectus* and the *ratio* complement one another even in these accounts, which suggests that this structure of visionary knowing in medieval Europe was dominant across genders. Second, Barr concentrates on five sources from late fourteenth-/early fifteenth-century England not only to demonstrate that most of these writers exhibited a troubled attitude toward the possibility that humans can grasp larger truths through visions, but also to suggest that these texts participated in a crisis of authority in the philosophical and religious culture of the era, a crisis corroborated by the empowering effect Franciscan visual meditation had on laypeople and the disruptive effect of the Lollard heresy.

The first chapter introduces the European visionary tradition with brief accounts of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, *Le Roman de la Rose*, and Dante's *Divina Commedia*. These accounts establish what Barr calls "a number of seemingly dichotomous categories," including active and passive knowing, educative and revelatory experience, and *intellectus* or intuitive understanding and *ratio* or reason (p. 9). These categories appear in medieval accounts of visionary experience and are often adopted by modern scholars. In this discussion, Barr highlights medieval scholarly debates between Dominican intellectualists and Franciscan voluntarists over whether the intellect or the will plays the primary role in knowledge acquisition. Following Thomas Aquinas, the intellectualists asserted that *ratio* and deduction are essential for human understanding of the divine, while voluntarists, like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, emphasized the will and the direct understanding of the *intel-*

lectus. Barr's analyses of *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, *Le Roman de la Rose*, and the *Divina Commedia* demonstrate that, despite these scholarly debates, popular accounts of transformative visionary experiences emphasized the fusion of these intellectual modes.

Chapters 2-4 offer sustained readings of texts about the visions of three mystics, Marguerite d'Oingt (ca. 1240-1310), Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301 or 1302), and Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342-ca. 1416). Together, the chapters show that all three synthesized will and intellect, *ratio* and *intellectus*, but that they employed different strategies to apprehend and interpret the visionary messages they received. Barr lucidly delineates these differences: Marguerite, a Carthusian prioress, wrote in both Latin and French and shared an Augustinian faith that language can be transformative and that texts can communicate divine revelation; Gertrude, a Benedictine nun in Saxony, relied on liturgical language and structures to acquire transcendent knowledge; and Julian, the English anchoress, produced two distinct accounts of the visions she had in 1373 separated by about twenty years, illustrating that experiential encounter with the divine requires sustained interpretive work for a full understanding of its meaning. The chapter on Julian is particularly illuminating and provides a much-needed corrective to many feminist critics' overemphasis on Julian's affective, bodily knowing by highlighting the equal importance of Julian's rational faculties. Barr effectively argues that Julian relied on reason not only in the interstice between the Short and Long Texts but also within the visionary experiences themselves. For example, she recounted the thoughts she had when she saw a three-tiered heaven in revelation 3, explaining not only her astonished response but also the cognitive work she undertook within the vision.

From these three female mystics, Barr then moves to a discussion of three male poets in chapters 5-7. She posits that these fourteenth-century

English poets responded to a tradition of vision writing by women “typically thought to have been excluded from dominant discourses” (p. 120). Barr’s readings compare the mystical texts to the anonymous *Pearl*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*, and argues that these poems do not seek to convey a visionary experience but to reveal the limits human minds impose on visionary understanding. In other words, these chapters explore the reasons a visionary experience may fail. Chapter 5 maintains that *Pearl* focuses on the dreamer’s worldly attachments and not on his vision of heaven. Thus, the poem takes up a common theological concern about the incompatibility of worldly attachment and divine understanding. As Barr explains, “The apparent limitations of the dreamer’s visionary experience are not a failure of the poem, but rather the poem’s point” (p. 123). The chapter on *Piers Plowman* recalls the topics highlighted in Barr’s discussions of the mystics Marguerite, Gertrude, and Julian, as issues of language, liturgy, and interpretation recur throughout her analysis of the poem. Barr maintains that Langland regarded visionary knowing as achievable but so fraught with difficulties that within *Piers Plowman* language and cognitive faculties become unreliable epistemological tools. Her affinity for the poem also inspires some of her wittiest moments. Her book’s title with its pun on “will” recalls Langland’s narrator, whom she drolly describes as “stubborn, quarrelsome, and surprisingly sleepy” (p. 5). In the final chapter on dream vision poetry, Barr maintains that Chaucer’s *House of Fame* most trenchantly challenges the authority of the visionary tradition by suggesting that “the reception of meaningful knowledge through the vision might never be successful” (p. 207). The poem delineates possible impediments to visionary knowledge: it promises revelation that it never delivers; dramatizes meaningless language; recalls that not all dreams are divinely inspired; and revels in interpretive instability, both in the narrator’s accounts

of others’ stories and in his anxiety about how his own text will be received.

The final chapter turns to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The move follows the roughly chronological organization of the previous chapter. It also effectively proves Barr’s central thesis that mystical and fictionalized accounts of dreams must be considered together, since many critics, most especially Lynn Staley (*Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* [1994]), have questioned the authenticity of Kempe’s autobiographical account. In this chapter, Barr argues that whereas Chaucer’s poem deploys conventions of visionary literature to question whether that experience can be adequately understood or communicated, Kempe sought to construct an authentic vision while negotiating the mistrust that affective experience engendered among her contemporaries. Unlike the other mystics Barr considers, Kempe remained a laywoman, outside the confines of a convent or anchoritic cell, and therefore challenged the boundary between cleric and layperson as the repeated accusations of Lollardy within the narrative suggest. Barr points out that the *Book’s* conflicting reliance on Kempe’s inner assurances on the one hand and on public recognition of her on the other to validate her visions carves out a space for Kempe’s sanctity while both affirming and resisting ecclesiastical authority. Barr’s analysis of Kempe’s meditative practices, weeping, and rhetorical appeals relies on a careful differentiation between *The Book’s* construction of her visionary knowing within and outside of the text. Kempe’s knowledge primarily stemmed from experience and was a result of the *intellectus*, yet Barr demonstrates that she deployed that understanding carefully, showing it to skeptical clerics for their analysis within the narrative, while actively asserting her sanctity to her readers. Thus, like the other female mystics considered in the book, Kempe also relied on *ratio* for her visionary knowing.

Willing to Know God makes an effective case for reading literary and authentic visionary accounts together, but the book would have been more unified if it highlighted the arguments about the gendering of cognition and English anxieties about visionary authority from the beginning. Furthermore, the argument about the gendering of modes of knowing would have been even more effective if each category--authentic mystical visions and literary dream visions--included more gender diversity. Male mystics, such as Jean Gerson, Richard Rolle, or Walter Hilton, might have been included. (Rolle and Hilton are briefly mentioned in the epilogue.) Finding literary dream visions by women is more difficult, but there are possibilities. For example, Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson have argued that a woman wrote *The Assembly of Ladies*, an anonymous, fifteenth-century dream vision.[1] Although no consensus exists about the poem's authorship, the dreamer is depicted as a woman who claims to compose the account and thus provides a poetic account of a female visionary. Barr does not pursue this diversity, mentioning Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (ca. 1405), the most famous female-authored dream vision (albeit not a poem), only briefly in the introduction and the epilogue. More discussion of that book might also have provided a continental contrast to support Barr's claim that visions were especially embattled in late medieval England. Ultimately, however, these points are quibbles. The field of medieval visionary writing is too vast for study in a single monograph, and *Willing to Know God* pursues an important new approach to the material to productive ends. Barr moves beyond standard equations of affective, bodily knowing with female writers and rational, intellectual knowing with males. Her work raises exciting new questions relevant to scholars of literature and theology. The book will also be useful in teaching, especially since its organization by primary text makes it easy for teachers to excerpt a chapter on a single text for classroom use.

Note

[1]. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, "The Assembly of Ladies: A Maze of Feminist Sign-Reading?" *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Sellers, Linda Hutcheon, and Paul Perron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 171-196.

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