NANCY CACIOLA. *DISCERNING SPIRITS: DIVINE AND DEMONIC POSSESSION IN THE MIDDLE AGES.* (CONJUNCTIONS OF RELIGION & POWER IN THE MEDIEVAL PAST.) CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003. PP. XVI, 327.

Discerning Spirits is a vital addition to the recent cohort of books about medieval corporeality, demonic and divine possession, and femininity, such as Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons*, Dyan Elliot's *Fallen Bodies*, and Gerhild Williams' *Defining Dominion*. In a study that is both broadly conceptual and narrowly contextual, Nancy Caciola offers a nuanced account of the medieval phenomenon of possession, both demonic and divine, and the practice of discernment, or testing, used to determine the source of the possession. Caciola deftly unpacks the questions of social and religious epistemology inherent in testing spirits (or, as it appears, testing the subject). By concentrating both on the politics of knowledge production and the formation of categories necessary to discernment, and also focusing on the content of the discernment dispute itself, the author illustrates the ways in which questions of possession are intricately bound up with social, religious, and political currents. The book concentrates on the period between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries and outlines how methods and criteria for testing spirits changed in this period. These methods and criteria evolved in response to social, political, and ecclesiastical concerns over religious authority and the nature of devotion, especially feminine, as well as in response to changes in philosophical and medical theories about corporeality and sex difference. At the same time, Caciola illustrates that the relationship between discernment and its cultural context was in some ways symbiotic: As accounts of possession increased during the later Middle Ages, laypeople, religious communities, and Catholic church officials sought new interpretative frameworks which were at times complementary and sometimes in conflict.

Discerning Spirits comprises three parts; each one is both a stand-alone extended inquiry into an aspect of possession and discernment as well as part of the larger argument of the book. The author begins with disputes over discernment in the late medieval period and the larger cultural implications that such disputes engendered. By examining the characteristics of both demonic and divine possession and three case studies of possession, Caciola adroitly sketches the ways in which discernment was a process involving factors of identity politics, community prestige, and political alliances. Furthermore, the case-study approach underlines the point that despite papal bulls or theological ideologies, testing spirits

varied widely according to location, time, and political and social factors. The second part of the book investigates some of the contemporary epistemological issues concerning corporeality, spirits, and sex difference. By mapping the semantic field for sex-linked words, Caciola demonstrates that women were believed to be more vulnerable to possession than men because female bodies were considered more malleable and porous. This porosity, due to the female humoral complexion, meant that women's bodies were more easily penetrated by spirits. The physiological basis for the belief in women's greater susceptibility to possession led to an attempt to institute intellectual categories for divine and demonic possession. The model ultimately fell short, as it lacked practical criteria for reconciling the interior states of the subject with the exterior manifestations of her symptoms. Finally, in Part III, Caciola chronicles the shift from the conditions of possibility of either demonic or divine possession in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the assumption in the fifteenth century that all possession was exclusively demonic. As discernment shifted toward exorcism, the correlation between the priest as divine and the possessed woman as demonic, not merely demoniac, intensified and ultimately solidified.

Although many of the people claiming visionary status were women, the author examines how male and female possessed were "tested" using different assumptions and criteria, as well as why claimants were eventually embodied as exclusively female. She is acutely aware of how status and prestige—of the individual, the community, and the Church—may have shaped both the claims of visionaries and their reception by their communities and the Church. Additionally, Caciola acknowledges the problems inherent in relying on hagiographical sources, yet skillfully mines them for evidence about the attitudes toward and reception of a would-be saint by her community. Her analysis draws attention to the difficulties of bridging the gap both in the medieval period and now, historiographically, between the internal experience of the possessed and the external evaluations of those women on the part of the Church, yet she succeeds in her attempt as far as one can by reading *vitae*, hagiographies, canonization trial records, and other sources in a way that is critically informed by the literature of subjective experience and by posing questions about the nature of medieval categories of religious identity.

In a book as thoughtful as

this one, and as carefully attuned to the ways in which social pressure, self-interest, political hierarchy, and institutional ideology can influence the formation, both by "self" and "other," of religious identity, it is startling that questions of class are not more prevalent. In the Introduction, Caciola provides the standard background to the "social revolution" of the post-millennial period into the mid-twelfth century, and notes that shifts in inheritance practices among the elite, the growing middle class, increased urbanization, and intellectual expansion all contributed to a surge in lay religious groups and increased participation by women in those groups. What is missing, however, is a mention that these new lay religious groups were more likely to draw their members from the new middle class or underclass (as was the case with the Waldensians and early Fontevrists). The author convincingly posits that the Church attempted to control the categories of possession and the process of canonization as a response to the increase in lay religious communities in the later Middle Ages. It would be interesting to know if part of this process of control mapped onto the socio-economic struggles between the lay elite and the burgeoning middle class. However, this is a case of an ambitious and well-executed project raising the reader's expectations, rather than meeting them. *Discerning Spirits* contributes much that is new and provocative to the fields of medieval history, women's history, and religious studies.

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