The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200–1500 by Dyan Elliott. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. 480. ISBN: 9780812243581.

In her latest investigation into the connection between women's spirituality and sexuality, Dyan Elliott demonstrates the full range of her extraordinary scholarly abilities. *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell* is at once a painstakingly researched work into primary sources (comprising 18 pages of the bibliography alone) as well as an innovative analysis of the image of the *sponsa Christi* over 1300 years.

As Elliott explains in her introduction, the bride of Christ was originally a metaphor that was not attached to a body. Christ was married to the community of true believers, both male and female. In her first two chapters, she shows how this image became embodied in women. In his attempt to regulate what he saw as the unruly virgins of Carthage, Tertullian (b. ca. 160) began to identify the bride as a consecrated virgin. Believing that certain "Watcher Angels" had once mated with human females, he was afraid that it might happen again. As a safeguard he thus linked women to Christ as their bridegroom. The early church Fathers continued to make the virgin more honorable. Athanasius (c. 296-373) viewed the title of "*sponsa Christi*" as a way to contain the virgins of Alexandria, in Elliott's words, "to transform the feisty virgin into a stay-at-home wife" (39). He also made the first theological claim to Mary's perpetual virginity, setting her up as a model for women. During the fourth century, a large number of treatises on virginity were composed (Ambrose himself wrote four) in an effort to recruit more virgins. As with secular marriage, these women entered into a public consecration ceremony.

Chapter 3, "The Barbarian Queen," is focused on the post-Roman Empire and the question of physical intactness as a prerequisite for being a *sponsa Christi*. There are several interesting discussions in this chapter, for example, Aldhelm's (d. 709) extension of virginity to males and Hincmar of Reims's (d. 882) penalties for the abduction of women. Its center, however, is the example of Radegund (ca. 520-87). Elliott lays out contemporary clerics' positions on the ambiguous status of women who did not consent to marriage and later converted to religious life.

By the mid-eleventh century, intentionality and consent became important parts of the virginity debate, following the legal requirement of consent for secular marriage. Although intactness is still a requirement for virginity, a woman could lose her integrity by desiring sex, while still remaining a virgin.

In chapter 4, Elliott gives a new reading of Abelard's relationship to Heloise, believing that he tries "to secure an honorable place in the celestial hierarchy for women such as Heloise." Thus, his position on virginity is heavily influenced by his personal context and the desire to placate Heloise. Downplaying the traditional break between their personal letters and the letters of direction, she believes that from his first letter to her he tries to reconcile her to her position as the bride of Christ rather than his own wife.

In chapter 5, Elliott remains in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. During this time, she explains, religious men and women developed intense attachments to one another while at the same time being committed to celibacy, a phenomenon she calls "heteroasceticism." Women were fully consensual in these relationships, which were modeled after marriage. At the same time, there was a renewed interest in the Song of Songs: the role of *sponsa Christi* was now available to more women, not simply virgins.

In the following century, hagiographers often conflated carnal and spiritual love. Erotic discourses on religion mirrored more profane discourses on sex. In chapter 6, Elliot provides a rich trove of examples: Albertus Magnus's discussion of the sexual act in detail and Aquinas writing about the sex lives of demons, to name two. Furthermore, the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs was available to all women, not just virgins. Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Angela of Foligno, Bridget of Sweden, and Margery Kempe all used marital metaphors to express their relationship to Christ. In a compelling part of this chapter Elliott focuses on Thomas of Cantimpré's *Concerning Bees*, written between 1256 and 1263. Virulently antifeminist, he warns about the dangers of religious intimacy between men and women, giving women the primary responsibility for transgressions. As Elliott notes, *Bees* showed "how far a bride of Christ could fall." It became the model for a similar work, *The Anthill*, by the Dominican John Nider, the first writer to associate the witch's cult with women.

This "Descent into Hell" is the title of chapter 7, and here the reader sees the full force of Elliott's statement that the book is about how "metaphor evolves, but ultimately devolves, into matter" (7). Here she returns to Tertullian's fear of sexual relations between humans and angels. Despite the Fourth Lateran Council's attempt to dispel these ideas of supernatural miscegenation, many believed that religious women were consorting with demons, which often appeared in the guise of Christ. Fueled by writers such as John Nider, there was a growing fear that the divine and the diabolical could no longer be differentiated. The next step, according to Elliott, was the witchcraft trials of the fifteenth century.

As one reads *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, one can see this end coming, but it is nonetheless shocking. Elliott slowly develops the theme of mystical marriage into its inversion, witchcraft, by showing how the bride of Christ is progressively embodied. It is a compelling argument, one that links the world of the early church Fathers to the Early Modern period.

As Elliott tells us in her introduction, she originally had intended to write a book about medieval marriage in theory and practice, but found herself captured by the bride of Christ as a kind of matrimonial template. One hopes that she will return to her first idea and provide the same kind of scholarly insight into the history of marriage.

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