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Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted : The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. xvi + 171 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4058-0.

Review by Rachel Fulton, The University of Chicago.

This book makes two complementary, albeit distinctly provocative, claims. On the one hand, there is the overt argument as stated in the opening sentence: "the men and women of high medieval France saw the world around them as the product of tensions between opposites" (p. ix). On the other, there is what one might call, in medieval exegetical terms, the moral or tropological argument as stated intermittently but forcefully throughout the book: "this work seeks to restore some of the strangeness of the twelfth century. The point is to recognize the fundamental strangeness of twelfth-century thought when viewed in modern terms" (pp. 148 and 114; cf. pp. x, 7, 58-59, 98-99). Appropriately for a book concerned with entensioned opposites, it is difficult to decide which it is the more requisite to address first.

According to Bouchard, unlike Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas (and, it would seem, most of their contemporaries, as well as their modern successors), for whom contradictions and dichotomies were difficulties in search of resolution, twelfth-century thinkers intentionally introduced such oppositions into the construction of their experience: "they were perfectly willing to have two opposing things be true at the same time" (p. 4). This "discourse of opposites," as Bouchard styles it, revolved around the creation of categories body and soul, love and honor, chivalric warrior and humble monastic convert, lay justice and monastic justice, masculine and feminine, which were never intended to be resolved. Rather, this discourse "deliberately *valued* both halves of the equation" (p. 145).

As Bouchard sees it, the mistake modern scholars have made in their analyses of twelfth-century scholastic theology, chivalric romance, monastic conversion, property disputes, and discussions of gender (the sites Bouchard highlights as participating most significantly, albeit by no means exclusively, in this discourse) is to assume that where tension remains, there is a resolution that failed. It is not that Abelard failed to complete his *Sic et Non* and so resolve the theological contradictions among the fathers in their interpretations of scripture; rather, maintaining the tension was necessary so as to emphasize the paradox at the heart of religious belief (p. 40). It is not that Chrétien de Troyes expected either his heroes or his readers to be able to choose between honor and love (*Le chevalier de la charrette*) or chivalry and marriage (*Erec et Enide*); rather, "both had valid if opposed claims on his characters" (p. 66), for which there was no resolution short of death. In converting from the secular to the monastic life, twelfth-century christians described the process not in terms of radical transformation (à la Augustine), but rather as requiring the creation of a status symmetrically opposed to the previous one (p. 77): one ceased being a knight or secular nobleman in order to become a monk (Bouchard says relatively little about women converts, except to cite Caroline Walker Bynum's work on the significance of women's preparation of food [p. 81]). When twelfth-century ecclesiastical and secular lords found themselves in conflict over property or involved in other legal disputes, the most agreeable settlements were those in which each party, in a sense, "won" without either being "wrong." One of the more effective, if risky,

ways of achieving such settlements was for one party to surrender to the other more or less immediately. Here "vulnerability became a weapon," as promised in the gospel: "The last shall be first" (p. 107; cf. Matthew 19:30, 20:16; Mark 10:31). And, contrary to some of the more persistent stereotypes of a rampantly misogynistic, clerically-dominated middle ages, twelfth-century men and women did not see themselves as respectively normative and defective (à la Aristotle or Freud), but rather equally created by God (cf. Genesis 1:27), with different but complementary roles to play, both theologically and socially (pp.115-28). So far, arguably, so good: Bouchard structures her case clearly, she draws on a wide selection of primary sources, a number of them still in manuscript, and she grounds her larger argument well in the current literature on medieval gender theory (Bouchard appeals especially to Bynum, Joan Cadden, and Alcuin Blamires) and the social history of monasticism (here Barbara Rosenwein's work on Cluny is especially significant).^[1] The problem is whether any of this is enough. Bouchard notes in her preface that the reader reports for her press were somewhat mixed ("highly divergent"), on the basis of which she began to realize that her argument was "more controversial than [she] had imagined" (p. xi). It is not difficult to see why. Certainly, the evidence would seem to suggest that twelfth-century French people were able to see the world around them in terms simultaneously exalted and humble, to come to agreements in which both parties maintained their respect, to imagine situations in which heroes (and heroines?) found it difficult to reconcile the demands of honor against those of love, and to value women as well as men (Hildegard of Bingen makes a cameo appearance in chapter five, suggesting that perhaps it was not only the French who were able to do this). But--and this is where things get tricky--was this "discourse of opposites" really as normative for, and likewise distinctive to, the twelfth century as Bouchard contends? And was it at all times as desirable as she would seem to want to imply?

I find myself struggling here. It is not that the argument seems wrong, just that it is too simple. Nor am I convinced that this way of thinking by keeping opposites in tension is as foreign to present-day thought and experience, and therefore as unique to the twelfth century, as Bouchard would have us believe. At stake here, as Bouchard herself realizes, is the way in which we as historians approach and, therefore, value the past. Is the past, as has often been said, "a foreign country," strange to us because "they do things differently there"?^[2] Or is the past also ourselves, whether the sum of all of the ideals, aspirations, mistakes, constructions, and contingencies that have converged upon (or become casualties to) the moment we call the present, or the perduring humanity that enables us to recognize in past thoughts, behaviors, and actions (insofar as they survive in their evidentiary traces) motivations we might otherwise privilege as uniquely our own? There are dangers in both approaches. If we look in the past only for ourselves, we risk finding only ourselves; if we expect only the strange, we risk missing the commonalities. The problem is whether there is a middle ground from which to see both.

For medievalists, particularly North American medievalists working in the past century or so, the contradistinctions have been peculiarly intense. If the period that we study was not the "Dark Ages" of catholic ignorance and superstition against which the protestant polemicists and other early modern reformers were prone to contrast themselves, was it then an "Age of Faith," as nineteenth-century apologists like Kenelm Digby averred? Or, against these more static images, was it an age of renaissances, beginning either with the Carolingians or the eleventh-century ecclesiastical reformers, and thus the period during which many of the institutions on which the modern West prides itself began to take shape? Or was it rather, as many have more recently argued, a period not only of revolution, but also of persecution, during which society began to structure itself along lines (christian vs. non-christian, man vs. woman, literate vs. illiterate, natural vs. unnatural) the oppressive effects of which persist to this day? Is the medieval "Other" ("Dark Ages," "Ages of Faith") or modern ("renaissance," "persecuting society")?^[3]

Bouchard's position on this shifting spectrum is relatively straightforward: historians have tended to laud the twelfth century, "with its rapid development of universities, urban culture, the legal profession, banking, government bureaucracies, and vernacular literature," as "'modern,' analogous to Western society at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (p. 6). It is her purpose to demonstrate why this

analogy does not work, and so "to restore the fundamental strangeness of the twelfth century" (p. 7). But why? And to whom? Bouchard herself notes, again in her preface, that her own students found the idea of viewing "the world as the product of tensions between opposites" extremely difficult, indeed "foreign" (p. x). Does this not make the twelfth century already strange, or did it become so only when she suggested they view it that way? More to the point, who are these "modern scholars" who are incapable of accepting two opposing, but "correct" answers to a problem at the same time? (cf. pp. 7, 147-48). For Bouchard, the principal culprits would seem to be the Aristotelian scholastics of the thirteenth century, who sought in their disputations to come to a "*single* right answer, not a balance between two 'right' answers" (p. 148), along with their modern descendants (of whom, presumably, Hegel would have to be one), who sought in the history of the twelfth century the problems which the thirteenth century subsequently resolved. I wonder, though: has the ability to see the world in terms of mutually-reinforcing opposites really been lost? I can think of one such conceptual dichotomy right now: the past and the present, which, for modern scholars at least, must necessarily exist always in tension and for which there is, experientially, at least, no middle ground (except, possibly, in memory, but this is not the same thing as either the past or the present). But if I can think this way, does this make the twelfth century less strange (or myself, as a medievalist, only stranger)? Perhaps strangeness is not the best criterion here.

There remains a more fundamental interpretive problem, however. If twelfth-century men and women conceptualized their experience in terms of opposites, did they do so because they found this way of thinking reassuring: a good way of settling disputes, of maintaining (for monks) good relations with secular donors, of composing compelling stories, of thinking about the Incarnation; or because they found themselves caught in the middle of two equally compelling goods, or two equally inescapable evils? It is noteworthy that the majority of examples Bouchard invokes points to a positive cognitive, likewise social and emotional outcome to these tensions, suggesting that, in fact, twelfth-century people found this "discourse of opposites" fundamentally reassuring. And yet, this outcome is to some extent analytically determined by the way in which Bouchard has established her own categories: that twelfth-century men and women conceptualized their world in terms of mutually valued opposites. What if the opposites were equally bad, or if it were bad simply for there to be irreconcilable opposites at all?

As so often for our understanding of the twelfth century, much of the argument of the book rests heavily on that self-proclaimed "chimera of his age," Bernard of Clairvaux. As Bouchard reads him, Bernard used such oppositional categories as cleric and lay, monasticism and knighthood, "worldly" glory and "true" glory, humility and pride, not as, for example, when speaking about conversion to value one of the poles of these opposites over the other, but rather to describe the act of conversion as an act of choice, in which the convert chooses between nicely balanced demands, both of which have plausible claims on him (p. 88). It was not that the secular life was evil and the cloistered life good, but rather that "the opposite poles needed each other even while keeping their separate integrities" (p. 87). Accordingly, when advising converts to the monastic life, [it] was not enough for Bernard to say that the spiritual joy of the cloister was best; he had to define it by invoking a series of opposites (p. 84). For Bouchard, it is particularly important that Bernard never equated "the monastic life with good and the non-monastic life with evil" (p. 88). Always, she insists, he kept the two poles in tension, thereby acknowledging that "just as both body and spirit needed to be redeemed, so both knights [i.e. the laity] and monks [i.e. the religious] stood in need of salvation" (p. 87).

Appealing as it is to imagine the fiery and idealistic abbot of Clairvaux refusing to pass judgment even in the midst of some of his most vociferous criticism (as, for example, of the Cluniacs and their art), it is difficult not to see in Bouchard's Bernard rather more of the twenty-first century and its ideals of mutually-supporting diversity than of the twelfth and its concerns with the life (and death) of the soul. It is likewise difficult not to read Bernard's use of entensioned opposites as somewhat more urgent, not to say anguished, than Bouchard implies. I find Caroline Walker Bynum's recent reading of Bernard much more convincing: [4] Like Bouchard, Bynum notes that Bernard makes extensive use of opposites,

or rather, in Bynum's terms, "two-ness" or "doubleness" in his thinking, but as Bynum reads it, this "doubleness" was as often as not occasion for anxiety as it was for meditating on the salvific paradoxes of christianity. For Bernard, "doubleness" characterized not only Christ in his two natures and the joining of God and the soul in love, but also such monstrous hybrids as the figures so famously depicted in the cloister at Cluny: "creatures part man and part beast, tigers, warriors and many bodies with one head and many heads with one body, tail of serpent on quadruped, head of quadruped on fish, horse with goat combined, horse with horn." [5] Bouchard notes simply that Bernard found these grotesques "startling" and objected to them, "using, it is worth reiterating, the rhetoric of a tension of opposites" (pp. 52-54). Bynum emphasizes rather Bernard's use of the concept *mixtura* or *mixtio* in describing these monsters: *Mixtio*, to Bernard, is usually negative the opposite of *pura*. [6]

The problem here is not, as Bouchard would have it, resisting the temptation to judge one or another of two poles "good" and "evil" so as to avoid the dualist heresy of the Manichaeans (pp. 5, 26, 124, and 144). Rather, it is the problem of conceptualizing change: how one thing a knight, a human being, a sinful self can become another: a monk, a God-man, saved. Bynum situates Bernard's tendency to think of change in terms of hybridity and mixture in the context of twelfth-century natural philosophical conceptions of "replacement-change": like many of his educated contemporaries, Bernard tended to assume "an atomism according to which nothing really disappears." For one thing, to change into something else meant dissolution of the composite and replacement of certain of its elements (parts or bits) with others: "If there is replacement-change, it is negation; a thing ceases to be itself; something else replaces it; it is no more." [7] It is this ambivalence about change that, Bynum argues, we see most vividly in Bernard's discussion of marvels and mixtures, and so likewise, of himself as "chimera," neither layman nor cleric but rather a monster double, because caught between two poles that, ontologically, could not achieve *unitas* to become one new thing.

Opposites, two-ness, contradictions, doubles: there is clearly more to the twelfth-century emphasis on the harmonizing of discordant canons (to paraphrase Gratian's famous subtitle for his *Decretum*) than simply a prelude to the scholastic method of finding resolution through the positing of opposites for disputation. Here Bouchard is almost certainly on the right track, if one in need of further interpretive elaboration. Whether we as historians should find this way of thinking strange that is another question altogether. *Pace* Bouchard, how we answer it will undoubtedly ultimately depend as much on our own ability to resist resolving the tension between opposites between medieval and modern, belief and rationality, continuity and change as it will on the way in which we value the disparate poles. The one thing we should not do is expect it, or indeed anything else in our contradictory world, to make anything more than provisional sense.

NOTES

[1] Bouchard is, to some extent, on her own with the literature on chivalric romance, with which she tends to disagree (p. 59), and she seems unaware of a good deal of the current literature on monastic biblical exegesis, including Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[2] The original phrase is from L.P. Hartley's, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamilton, 1953). For its historiographical significance, see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[3] Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *American Historical Review* 104 (1998): 677-704, have suggested a

third possibility: the post-modern, or grotesque, in which the valuation of the middle ages as "Dark" has merged with that of the present as "Gothic."

[4] "Monsters, Medians, and Marvelous Mixtures: Hybrids in the Spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux," in *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), pp. 113-62. For Bernard as chimera, see pp. 115, 119, 248 n. 7, and 250 n. 19.

[5] Bernard, *Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem* 12.29, in Jean Leclercq, C.H. Talbot, and H.M. Rochais eds., *S. Bernardi opera omnia*, 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cisterciences, 1957-1977), vol. 3, p. 106; trans. Bynum, "Monsters", p. 117.

[6] Bynum, "Monsters", p. 117.

[7] Bynum, "Monsters", p. 144.

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