



The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500 (The Middle Ages Series)

Dyan Elliott

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The early Christian writer Tertullian first applied the epithet "bride of Christ" to the uppity virgins of Carthage as a means of enforcing female obedience. Henceforth, the virgin as Christ's spouse was expected to manifest matronly modesty and due submission, hobbling virginity's ancient capacity to destabilize gender roles. In the early Middle Ages, the focus on virginity and the attendant anxiety over its possible loss reinforced the emphasis on claustration in female religious communities, while also profoundly disparaging the nonvirginal members of a given community.

With the rising importance of intentionality in determining a person's spiritual profile in the high Middle Ages, the title of bride could be applied and appropriated to laywomen who were nonvirgins as well. Such instances of democratization coincided with the rise of bridal mysticism and a progressive somatization of female spirituality. These factors helped cultivate an increasingly literal and eroticized discourse: women began to undergo mystical enactments of their union with Christ, including ecstatic consummations and vivid phantom pregnancies. Female mystics also became increasingly intimate with their confessors and other clerical confidants, who were sometimes represented as stand-ins for the celestial bridegroom. The dramatic merging of the spiritual and physical in female expressions of religiosity made church authorities fearful, an anxiety that would coalesce around the figure of the witch and her carnal induction into the Sabbath.

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