WENDY LOVE ANDERSON

The Discernment of Spirits

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The Discernment of Spirits

Assessing Visions and Visionaries
in the Late Middle Ages

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Introduction

A Tale of Two Visions

Sometime around 1115, the Virgin Mary appeared in a dream to the twelfth-century Englishwoman Theodora (later Christina) of Markyate (c. 1097–1156), who was seeking to end her unwanted betrothal in order to live a celibate religious life. The Virgin urged Christina not to fear and then promised to help her escape her fiancé, leaving Christina with "immense joy ... [and] a cheerful countenance."[1] However, when the fifteenth-century Italian woman Giovanna (later Veronica) Binasco (1445–97) likewise sought to clear her way toward religious life by teaching herself to read, the apparition of the Virgin who appeared to her and urged her not to fear had a very different reception: "Veronica said to her, 'I will never believe that the Mother of God has come to an unworthy woman such as I, but rather I think that you are the devil, who has put on the appearance of this remarkable woman in order to deceive me.'"[2] These two visionary experiences had a great deal in common: both women sought religious life, both enjoyed the Virgin Mary's intercession in order to resolve difficulties in the pursuit of their vocation, both enjoyed later visions of the Virgin, and both found their episodes written into a *Vita* intended to position its protagonist for canonization (although neither woman achieved formal sainthood). The aftermath of the two visions was also similar: in both cases, the Virgin helped remove obstacles to entry into religious life, appearing to Christina's fiancé to convince him to annul the betrothal and teaching Veronica three mystical letters to substitute for the ones she could not understand. But the initial reception of these Marian visions was very different. Christina's delighted acceptance of the Virgin's message was not complicated by doubt; her hagiographer records that she awoke from the dream to find her pillow wet with tears and immediately concluded that "just as the tears she dreamed she had shed were real, so were the rest of the things she had dreamed."[3] Veronica, on the other hand, required further assurance from Mary: "Do not doubt, daughter, that I am the mother of Christ; I am indeed she."[4] Only after Mary's repeated assurances that she was the true Mother of God did Veronica agree to listen to the remainder of her message.

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[1] *Vita* of Christina of Markyate 24, ed. Paulette L'Hermite-Leclerq and Anne-Marie Legras, *Vie de Christina de Markyate* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 1:108: "Magnitudinem leticie quam conceperat ex spe liberacionis sue vultus propalabat hilaritas." A good English translation is Charles Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Recluse*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching, 1998). Of course, the Virgin's admonition not to fear replicates the Angel Gabriel's advice to Mary herself in Luke 1:30.

[2] Isidore Isolano, *Inexplicabilis mysterii gesta Beatae Veronicae Virginis praeclarissimi Monasterii Sanctae Marthae urbis Mediolani*, reprinted as *Vita Veronica de Binasco* in *Acta Sanctorum Januarii* (Antwerp: Société des Bollandistes, 1648), 2:172: "Cui Veronica: Hocce numquam crediderim, quod ipsa vilis femella cum sum, indigna existam ad quam Mater Dei veniat. Arbitror potius te diabolum fore, qui me deceptum veniens hujusce eximiae mulieris speciem induisti."

This book addresses the question of what happened in the centuries between the two visions to make their protagonists respond so differently to the helpful Virgin. This is not a book about the details of individual prophecies and visions; rather, it is a book about how these revelations were received and understood by the visionaries themselves and by the people around them between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries in Christian Europe. Among the world's religious traditions, Christianity had a unique relationship with the concept of prophecy: like the other Abrahamic faiths, its scriptures included and relied on prophets and prophetic texts, but unlike the other Abrahamic faiths, Christianity provided significant opportunities for contemporary prophecy as well. In both Judaism and Islam, mainstream traditions had identified a point at which prophecy had ceased, so that when revelations and visions appeared throughout Jewish and Muslim history, they were viewed as distinct from any scripturally authorized tradition of prophecy.[5] Over the course of two millennia, Christian thinkers occasionally took a similar position, arguing that prophecy had died out after the apostolic era.[6] Most of the time, however, a straightforward reading of the New Testament committed Christians to the position that prophecy could continue to exist within the Christian community.[7] Christian visions and revelations were therefore generally treated as part of a continuous spectrum including prophecy, with all its attendant theological implications. Discrediting all revelations was impossible, since it could lead to discrediting the foundations of the Christian tradition.

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[3] *Vita* of Christina of Markyate 24, in L'Hermite-Leclerq ,76: "sicut verum flere fuit quod sompniasse putabat, ita de reliquorum eventu non ambigeret que per idem somnium viderat."

[4] Isolano, *Vita Veronica de Binasco*, in AS, 2:172: "Cui mater Dei: Ne ambigas, filia, me matrem Christi esse: ipsa enim ego sum."

[5] Rabbinic Judaism maintained that prophecy ended with the biblical Malachi (as codified in the Babylonian Talmud Yoma 9b), and Islam took the position that Muhammad was the final prophet and "seal of the prophets" (as codified in Qur'an 33:40 and numerous other verses). Judaism did have one major later claimant to prophetic status, the seventeenth-century visionary Nathan of Gaza, who argued that prophecy had returned along with the messiah Shabbatai Tzvi and whose claims ended after Shabbatai's apostasy.

As a result, the emerging institutions of Christianity had to contend since their earliest days with potentially destabilizing claims of new revelations ranging from reiteration to supercession of Christ's message. From the Montanist sect of the second century C.E. to the Pentecostal movement in the twentieth, Christian individuals and groups have attempted to bypass established institutions and claim religious authority by virtue of some supernatural connection with the divine. As a result, Christian thinkers have devoted considerable effort to authorizing the new revelation of Jesus, working out the implications of the Spirit's gift of prophecy, and warning about false prophets whose arrival would herald the imminent apocalypse. Who could be a prophet under the terms of Christ's new covenant? What would such a title signify? How were believers to distinguish between the equally plausible possibilities of true and false prophecy? At some points in the history of Christianity, of course, these issues were of more immediate interest than at others. For Christina of Markyate, at the beginning of the twelfth century, prophecy was not an important contemporary category, and her dream-vision of Mary was merely one of many signs of divine favor. But beginning in the twelfth century, European Christians rediscovered prophecy, and so late medieval Western Europe became a time and place in which prophetic and institutional claims to Christian religious authority clashed repeatedly and generated a discourse about verification to which clergy and laity, men and women, visionaries and hagiographers all contributed. This discourse was gradually routinized and systematized until the mid-fifteenth-century Church inherited both the doubt which plagued Veronica Binasco and the set of doctrines and techniques for distinguishing between true and false revelations which her avowals of humility were intended to demonstrate. Late medieval Christians kept the connection to biblical prophecy when they referred to these doctrines and techniques either as "testing spirits" (1 John 4:1), evoking a warning against false prophecy, or as "discernment of spirits" (1 Cor. 12:10), that is, the spiritual gift of interpretation which Paul had juxtaposed with prophecy.

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[6] For a rare medieval example, cf. Chapter Two's discussion of Augustinus of Ancona's 1310 *Tractatus contra divinatores et sompniatores*. Modern examples are relatively easy to find in the mainline Protestant traditions; cf. the Christianity-centered account of "rhythms of prophecy belief" in chp. 2 of Paul Boyer's *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[7] Relevant passages from the New Testament include Acts 2:17–18 (quoting from Joel 2:28–32), which argues that prophecy is a sign of the "last days" which have begun at Pentecost, and Paul's several assertions that prophecy will continue until Christ's return (1 Cor. 1:4–8, 1 Cor. 13:8–10, Eph. 4:7–13).

The Visionary Context of Discernment

The earliest historiography on the late medieval development of doctrines and techniques for the discernment of spirits assumed that medieval thinkers were merely recording a static doctrine handed down from the Church Fathers. Until the end of the twentieth century, the topic was usually addressed in the context of Christian (usually Roman Catholic) theology, often as part of a sweeping historical survey which tended to privilege famous figures (e.g., Aquinas) over minor but more influential authors (e.g., Gerson) and to harmonize patristic, medieval, and modern doctrine at all costs. These surveys also ignored sources outside the genres of either scriptural commentary or scholastic treatise; this produced a significant bias in favor of the early modern period, when scholastic treatises on the discernment of spirits were relatively common.[8] Contemporary theological treatments of the "discernment of spirits" often continue this trend, leaving the impression that the Middle Ages was devoted largely to waiting for Ignatius Loyola to burst onto the discernment scene.[9] As a recent study notes, "one tendency reflected in the popular historical surveys of discernment is to speak of a 'discernment tradition' or a lineage of 'discernment literature' which communicates a similar voice extending from the Patristic Fathers up to and through Ignatius."[10] The few works devoted specifically to late medieval discernment reflected the same tendency: Paschal Boland's 1959 study of *discretio spirituum* in Gerson made no claim to address Gerson's work in any kind of historical context but instead tried "to indicate that the norms, rules, and observations proposed and taught by Gerson… vary little from that of later writers."[11]

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[8] See, for instance, F. Vandenbroucke, "Discernement des esprits: au Moyen Age," in *DS* 3: 1254–66; A. Cholet, "Discernement des esprits," *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1911), 4:1412–15; and Günter Switek, "*Discretio spirituum*: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Spiritualität," *Theologie und Philosophie* 47 (1972): 36–76.

[9] One of the most recent and detailed historico-theological surveys of the discernment of spirits – although it deals only with Bernard, Aquinas, Catherine, Gerson, and Denis the Carthusian in the medieval period – is Manuel Ruiz Jurado's *El discernimiento espiritual: teología, historia, práctica* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1994).

[10] Evan Howard, *Affirming the Touch of God: A Psychological and Philosophical Exploration of Christian Discernment* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 18. Howard's own historical overview simply begins with Ignatius.

Beginning in the 1990s, a surge of interest in the writings of medieval visionary women encouraged scholars of history and literature to reassess the discernment of spirits in terms of late medieval women's spirituality. Rosalynn Voaden defined the discernment of spirits primarily as a "discourse developed and defined by men"[12] and argued, replicating decades of theological scholarship, that "the essential points of the doctrine [of *discretio spirituum*] have varied little from Augustine to the present day."[13] Women are therefore denied any participation in the creation or transformation of this static (and inevitably misogynist) discourse; instead, "a medieval woman who wanted recognition as a visionary… had to be able to translate her experience into the masculine discourse."[14] A more nuanced but similarly gendered treatment of the topic appears in Nancy Caciola's otherwise astute 2003 exploration of late medieval debates over lay female sanctity. Caciola rejects the narrative in which visionary laywomen are controlled by male clerical authorities wielding guidelines for discernment but argues that "the medieval debate over the testing of spirits focused with particular intensity on women,"[15] a conclusion she demonstrates by confining her exploration of exorcisms, canonization controversies, and a handful of fourteenth-century scholastic treatises on discernment to those cases or passages which address women. She argues that similar male cases are fundamentally different: "when religious men became targets of controversy, the debate about them usually was encoded in different terms."[16] Dyan Elliott's 2004 work connecting the fourteenth-century "rise of the discourse of spiritual discernment" to "clerical apprehension [about]… highly visible contemporary prophets and visionaries" makes excellent points about the connection between the discernment of spirits and inquisitorial culture, but it also addresses the topic purely in terms of how that connection affected female spirituality in the late Middle Ages, noting its applicability to men only in passing.[17]

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[11] Paschal Boland, *The Concept of* Discretio Spirituum *in John Gerson's* "De Probatione Spirituum" *and* "De Distinctione Verarum Visionum A Falsis" (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), x. (For more on the historiography of discernment vis-à-vis Gerson, cf. the discussion in Chapter Five.)

[12] Rosalynn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Woman Visionaries* (York: York Medieval Press, 1999), 45.

[13] Voaden, "Women's Words, Men's Language: *Discretio Spirituum* as Discourse in the Writing of Medieval Women Visionaries," in *The Medieval Translator*, eds. R. Ellis and R. Tixier (Louvain: Brepols, 1996), 67.

[14] Voaden, *God's Words*, 55.

[15] Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 16.

[16] Ibid., 17.

At this point, it has become commonplace for scholars writing about late medieval visionary women to cite "discernment" as an example of how female visionaries were marginalized by a repressive Church. Recent works on Joan of Arc and Birgitta of Sweden address *discretio spirituum* as a factor – largely negative – in each woman's reception.[18] At the same time, references to *discretio spirituum* has focused on the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (when the first scholastic treatises clearly aimed at the "discernment of spirits" were written) as the beginning of serious medieval discussion on the topic. Voaden's medieval citations come exclusively from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries; Caciola begins her discussion of "clerical" discernment with the late fourteenth-century trio of Henry of Langenstein, Pierre d'Ailly, and Jean Gerson; Elliott expands the trio to include another scholastic author, Henry of Friemar, two generations earlier. An otherwise excellent recent study of demoniacs and mystics in early modern Catholicism argues that Henry of Langenstein wrote "the first systematic attempt to develop a simple method for the discernment of possessing spirits" in the late fourteenth century.[19] This narrow time frame has the effect of reinforcing the preoccupation with gender in the existing scholarship, since it is precisely in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries that the discourse on *discretio spirituum* becomes gendered. Earlier visionary controversies which do *not* revolve around gender are dismissed. For instance, Caciola mentions the Spiritual Franciscan controversies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries briefly as an example of the differences between how men and women were treated, but not as a discussion of "discernment of spirits," since she is applying the latter concept only to women.[20]

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[17] Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

[18] Karen Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and Deborah Fraioli, *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), both have two-to-three-page sections devoted to defining *discretio spirituum* and then proceed to invoke the concept throughout their studies. Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2001), does an excellent job of examining key passages in Birgitta's *Reuelaciones* but does not credit Birgitta with being other than reactive with respect to "late-medieval criteria for the discernment of spirits" (117).

[19] Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 173. In Chapter Five, I argue that Henry of Friemar was neither simple nor methodical; in earlier chapters, I make my case for why he was not first.

In the following study, I will argue for continuity between thirteenth-century debates over visionary Franciscan clerics and fifteenth-century debates over visionary lay women. More generally, I will argue for a *visionary discourse* about the discernment of spirits throughout the late Middle Ages, that is, not only a forward-looking discourse but a discourse in which many of the participants either experienced revelations and other special spiritual gifts or were reputed by contemporaries to have done so. Academically trained theologians who wrote about the discernment of spirits also wrote about "mystical" theology; authors of saints' lives described their own visions of the prospective saints; preachers and confessors alluded to their own spiritual consolations while offering guidance to visionaries they encountered on a daily basis. Some female visionaries – Birgitta of Sweden prominent among them – could and did contribute to this discourse, which remained relatively egalitarian until the fifteenth century. In other words, there was no absolute distinction between the "visionary" and the "examiner" until the very end of the period in question. What preoccupied these men and women was not gender, but *authority*: they sought to define, regulate, or justify their own or their companions' religiously based claims to influence the direction of late medieval Christendom. Their efforts turned to writing about the discernment of spirits at precisely those historical moments when the Church's authority structures were being called into question (as, indeed, they frequently were during this period). And the precise details of those historical moments had considerable and demonstrable impact on the texts that grew out of them. It is for just that reason that I have also focused on examining writings about the discernment of spirits within their *historical contexts*, a practice which throws the idiosyncratic details of each text into the sharpest possible relief and avoids the temptation of lumping too many disparate formulations into a vaguely understood "discourse."

There are many things that this book does *not* do: most important, it does not presume to define the reality (much less the ultimate inspiration) of any individual's religious or spiritual experience, and it does not address the legal and quasi-legal events such as exorcisms and trials which bear a significant but tangential relationship to the theological discourse under consideration. (The studies of Caciola and Elliott, mentioned above, have done a great deal to illuminate just these sorts of events.) Despite revision, my work bears some of the hallmarks of the dissertation in which it originated and which was cited by many of the "recent" works I have mentioned above. But I have chosen to revise and publish this study because the current consensus that the late medieval conversation about the discernment of spirits was important in defining and limiting expressions of female spirituality simply does not give that conversation enough credit. The late medieval discourse on the discernment of spirits was a visionary project (in both senses), a series of reactions to key events in the history of Christianity, and a dynamic conversation across several centuries addressing widely diverse claims to religious authority within late medieval Christendom. To reduce it to a static doctrine or limit it to discussions of exclusively female spirituality is to miss a great deal.

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[20] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 18.

Notes on Methodology and Language

As I have already suggested, my investigation will view the late medieval discernment of spirits primarily in terms of religious authority rather than gender studies or doctrinal continuity. The sociologist Max Weber, perhaps the first modern theorist of religious authority, tried to distinguish the overlapping sources of authority wielded by magicians, prophets, and priests, arguing that prophets were authorized via "charismatic authentication, which in practice meant magic," despite their focus on doctrine.[21] The priest, on the other hand, "lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma."[22] However, Weber himself was more interested in tracing religion along an evolutionary track:

> A religious community arises in connection with a prophetic movement as a result of routinization (*Veralltäglichung*), i.e., as a result of the process whereby either the prophet himself or his followers secure the permanence of his preaching and the congregation's distribution of grace, hence insuring the economic existence of the enterprise and those who man it, and thereby monopolizing as well the privileges reserved for those charged with religious functions.[23]

According to Weber, once routinized, the "decline or petrification of prophecy is practically unavoidable."[24] Conflict between forces is minimized in this evolutionary model; priest and prophet seldom encounter one another, since they belong to different stages of religious life. This model is quite unlike the realities of late medieval Europe.

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[21] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 47.

[22] Ibid., 46.

[23] Ibid., 60–1.

[24] Ibid., 78.

To some extent, I am influenced by Michel Foucault, insofar as I can conceive of discretio spirituum as a "discourse" and insofar as I suspect that the rules which evolved around the process of discerning spirits came to (at least partially) constitute the experiences they were intended to regulate.[25] However, the process of discerning spirits I am studying tended to involve negotiation among a number of potential sources for authority, and so it involves an institution where several types of Weberian "prophets" and "priests" function simultaneously and sometimes complementarily. In late medieval Catholic Christianity, those who wrote about visions and revelations – regardless of whether they themselves were identified as the visionaries in question – could select from a plethora of potentially authorizing agents: they could cite confessorial or communal approval, demonstrated virtue, episcopal blessings, scriptural prooftexts, the lives of the saints, miracles, fulfilled predictions, patristic writings, gender (in several different ways), theologians' determinations, papal decrees, canon law, and (last but not least) the charismatic verdict of the Holy Spirit. In theory, all these sources would yield the same answer as to the origin of a given experience. In practice, however, they often differed.

It is precisely this sort of multiplicity that the static and/or misogynist model of *discretio spirituum* fails to take into consideration. In order to suggest ways of dealing with this complex, I will be using ideas derived from the French historian and theorist Michel de Certeau. In partial opposition to the single panoptic institution envisioned by Foucault, de Certeau posits a multitude of "strategies" and "tactics" through which authorities can be interrelated, prioritized, or balanced within and around a given institutional framework. As for many thinkers associated with poststructuralist and/or postmodern thought, the very creation of language for de Certeau implies relations of power and hence of authority: "Once it is spoken – once it can be breathed and felt – a language implies points of reference, sources, a history, an iconography, in short, a construction of 'authorities.'… *Inherited* representations inaugurate a new credibility at the same time that they express it."[26] However, these authorities can from the very beginning be multiplied. In an early article, de Certeau identifies two types of signs of authority in a society: “discourses (works and texts) or persons (who are also representatives).”[27] Of course, the categorization of authorities, along with other types of categorization, “implies, by definition, a relationship of force and domination.”[28] In order to talk about any given authority, whether personal or textual, one must view it as “a *theoretical interpretation* … tied to the *power of a group* and to the structure of the society in which it conquered this position.”[29] Power reproduces itself through any type of authoritative knowledge.[30] But authorities can provide insight into the dominated as well as the dominant groups in this societal structure: “an authority serves as a frame of reference to the very group that breaks away from it or that it rejects.”[31] What we have, then, is a complex social structure in which each of several authorities provides more or less force in order to actualize a whole spectrum of power relationships. The most useful thing about this formulation is the plurality which it assumes: “Both appropriations and displacements depend on a dynamic distribution of possible goods and functions in order to constitute an increasingly complex network of differentiations, a combinative system of spaces.”[32]

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[25] On the term "discourse," I am thinking of the first part of Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 28: "The analysis of the discursive field …must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. … The question proper to such an analysis might be formulated in this way: what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?"

[26] Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*, trans. Luce Giard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 11. I am ignoring de Certeau's distinction between "strategies" and "tactics" in part because I find it difficult to sustain outside the strictly

“Appropriations and displacements” are central in the discourse on discernment of spirits. De Certeau himself was fascinated by the troubled “mystics” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and how they interacted with the “examiners” who bedeviled them, often with fully formulated guidelines for *discretio spirituum* in hand.[33] Although he is more interested in the mystics than in their examiners, de Certeau does suggest the extent to which institutional authority ultimately becomes a key factor in the mystic discourse: “The *institution* itself *is the other* in relation to

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political realm and in part because it does not seem to apply to the texts I am focusing on, all of which combine localized strategies with dislocated tactics.

[27] Ibid., 12.

[28] Ibid., 77.

[29] Ibid., 87.

[30] Cf. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36: “*a certain power is the precondition of this knowledge* and not merely its effect or its attribute. It makes this knowledge possible and at the same time determines its characteristics. It produces itself in and through this knowledge.”

[31] De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 19.

[32] Ibid., 127.

[33] These “examiners” are mentioned throughout *The Mystic Fable*; cf. also 81ff. of *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).