ÉTUDE CRITIQUE / REVIEW ESSAY

To Stagger Drunkenly in the Shadow of Peace: The Twelfth-Century Experience

BISSON, Thomas N. — *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 677.

FLANAGAN, Sabina — *Doubt in an Age of Faith: Uncertainty in the Long Twelfth Century.* "Disputatio," vol. 17. Turnhout: Brepols, 2008. Pp. 212.

BALINT, Bridget K. — *Ordering Chaos: The Self and the Cosmos in Twelfth-Century Latin Prosimetrum*. "Medieval and Renaissance Authors and Texts," vol. 3. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Pp. 242.

EVEN AS historians express misgivings over the special terms they use to capture twelfth-century lustre, most appear hesitant to relinquish the well-known catch-phrases. We still hear of "renaissance," "renewal," and "humanism," though such expressions tend to be malleable, bent by cautioning qualifications to ward off anachronism. We also find the age envisaged as one of "discoveries," including that of the individual and romantic love, again with qualifications made to warrant such usage.[1] Even the temporal markers of the period, 1060–1230, seem lavish, indicating an expansiveness that the ordinary reckoning of a mere hundred years cannot contain.[2] Indeed, historians refer to the era as "the *long* twelfth century," a neat way of saying that, as far as centuries go, this one is so special, it begins early and ends late. The twelfth century, then, is

1 On the terms and scholarly trends, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 31 (1980), pp. 1–17, with the reply of Colin Morris, "Individualism in Twelfth Century Religion: Some Further Reflections," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 31 (1980), pp. 195–206. For a revised and expanded version of Bynum's essay, see *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 82–209; and, more recently, Susan R. Kramer and Caroline Walker Bynum, "Revisiting the Twelfth-Century Individual: The Inner Self and the Christian Community" in Gert Melville and Markus Schürer, eds., *Das Eigene und das Ganze: Zum Individuellen in mittelalterlichen Reiligiosentum* (Münster: Lit, 2002), pp. 57–88.

2 The temporal expansiveness is also noted by R. M. Thomson, "Richard Southern and the Twelfth-Century Intellectual World: Review of R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe, Vol. I: Foundations; Vol. II: The Heroic Age*," *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 26 (2002), p. 266: "Southern's twelfth-century renaissance … emphatically embraces the thirteenth as well." Thompson also states his reservations with such periodisation (p. 269).

magnificent, and, as C. Stephen Jaeger has noticed, we tend to like rhetoric that keeps it that way.[3] Consider, for instance, the word "renaissance" in the modern scholarship on the period. Jaeger, a rare proponent for "scrapping the term," generously sums up why it persists:

> The term rests — legitimately — on the argument from grandeur. And who will refute that argument? The twelfth century is a great and fascinating age, probably of the long stretch of the "Middle Ages" the period whose remarkable individuals and high accomplishments have provoked and inspired the most and best scholarship: its exhilarating intellectual life, the growth of independent schools and famed teachers in Paris, the rise of the Universities of Bologna and Paris; the great Gothic cathedrals and abbey churches of England; Gothic style in architecture, book illustration, and handcraft design; a new classicism, plasticity, and humanity in the representation of the human body in sculpture; the grand poetic-philosophical-ethical visions of Benrnard Silvestris, Alan of Lille, and John Hanville. . ... We have credited the age with the "discovery" or the rediscovery, or even the "invention," of individuality, philosophical rationalism, and romantic love.[4]

The list goes on. Many of us have heard it before, perhaps in a lecture hall: "Particularly striking," notes Jaeger, "is the number of university courses" bearing the title "twelfth-century renaissance." For those of us enticed by such talk, the volumes of scholars whose names and accomplishments sound as dignified as the era — think of Charles Homer Haskins or Sir Richard Southern — have enhanced our image of twelfth-century grandeur.[5] Among the characteristics heralded by historians, however, we do not usually find violence identified as one of the age's common features. Of course, such an observation is not meant to imply a prevailing imperviousness to the period's capacity for brutality. On the contrary, even an undergraduate who nodded off during a class on the period's grandeur would likely be able to give an example or two of twelfth-century violence — Abelard's famous castration, for instance, or a crusade. Others keener on this span of time might also cite the destructiveness of the Norman Conquest or the truculence of the

3 In addition to the studies cited in note 1, Jaeger gives ample bibliographical references related to the debated terms and scholarly trends in "Pessimism in the Twelfth-Century 'Renaissance'," *Speculum*, vol. 78 (2003), p. 1151, n. 1.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 1152.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 1151, n. 1. Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1927; reprint New York, 1955). The twelfth century figures prominently in the work of R. W. Southern; in addition to the two volumes of *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), see also his *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), especially pp. 219–257, along with *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

Investiture Conflict or the murders of Charles the Good and Thomas Beckett.

On a small and large scale, then, the violence of this period is nothing new to us; if anything, our knowledge of its uses and our study of its multivalent interpretations among mediaeval contemporaries enable us to view it with a precision and complexity like never before.[6] However, there are other accounts of violence that scholars, suspicious of hyperbole, seem reluctant to accept as an accurate gauge of the period's turmoil — at least, the first book under consideration gives that impression. This violence is less isolated than a famous canon's castration, but more "banal" than a holy war. It is "arbitrary," persistent, and perhaps so common that it cannot be distinguished from custom. Significantly, this violence also registers a "crisis." What is this crisis of which violence is the salient symptom? The immense work of Thomas N. Bisson formulates an answer, with a scene in the book's crystallizing epilogue furnishing, arguably, the most telling example of it. Pondering an episode highlighting the abuse of a subordinate's power, the author presents "a poor villager named Durand, who told investigators that a bailiff of his place (Langlade, not far from Nîmes) had bullied him so badly that he had felt compelled to flee; and that as he tried to go away, the bailiff intimidated him by forcing excrement into his mouth" (p. 581).

So much for twelfth-century "humanism" — or so those of us not used to finding "excrement" listed in the descriptions of grandeur might be tempted to say. But even in light of such evidence — and Bisson supplies plenty of it — dispensing with the historiography that privileges sources indicative of the twelfth century's high cultural achievements is hardly called for. As challenging as the book's thesis is to our received ideas of the period, the author has not "intended to substitute 'crisis' for 'Renaissance': the twelfth century, with its luxuriant legacy of records and artifacts, is far too vast to be comprehended in a single perspective" (p. x). Indeed, rather than displacing the scholarship we are accustomed to find on the twelfth century, all three books under consideration here,

6 See, especially, the wide-ranging essays in Thomas Head and Richard Landes, eds., *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); see also Stephen D. White, "Debate: The 'Feudal Revolution'," *Past & Present*, no. 152 (1996), pp. 205–223. White writes in response to Thomas N. Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past & Present*, no. 142 (1994), pp. 6–42, who rearticulates his argument in *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century*, discussed here. Bisson's positions on the period's violence and changes elicited strong responses, worth examining for those who, like the present writer, are not specialists in the economic and social changes but are interested in learning more about the historical controversies surrounding issues revisited in *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century*: Dominique Barthélemy, "Debate: The 'Feudal Revolution'," *Past & Present*, no. 152 (1996), pp. 196–205; Timothy Reuter, "Debate: The 'Feudal Revolution'," *Past & Present*, no. 155 (1997), pp. 177–195; Chris Wickham, "Debate: The 'Feudal Revolution'," *Past & Present*, no. 155 (1997), pp. 196–208, with Bisson's "Reply," *Past & Present*, no. 155 (1997), pp. 208–225.

to borrow a phrase from the first one, make a "turn of the lens" through which we have been perceiving the period (Bisson, p. 578). In each turn, we see the disruptions of proliferating lordships rather than government (Bisson), the multifaceted expressions of doubt among faithful Christians (Sabina Flanagan), and a blue streak among writers even as they turned to an ancient source of consolation (Bridget K. Balint). To the authors' credit, taken together their works offer fresh perspectives on the twelfth century that may be viewed profitably alongside the visions of grandeur, with each study showing, respectively, the era's experience of power, uncertainty, and pessimism.

Conceptual Confusion

The experience of power, on which the first book concentrates, comes most obviously in the form of violence, "allusions to which are ... deafeningly frequent," if not very well heard (Bisson, p. 6). In Bisson's view, the countless records of brutality have been falling on the deaf ears of scholars who tend to "tune out" the violence. Why this reluctance to listen? The documents exaggerate and are "self-serving": often they represent the church's position by providing well-rehearsed, hyperbolic invectives of ecclesiastics embroiled in property disputes with laymen. To Bisson, however, such exaggerations of violence are "impressively informative" for the way "truth filters through" them (pp. 61, 250). Moreover, when we actually listen to the accounts, we hear more than just brute force: a mentality is detectable, one that might easily escape our notice were it not for Bisson's attentiveness to the way a common phrase can be freighted with the period's cataclysm. Put in another way, what is striking about the incident involving the man from Langlade is not so much the cruelty he endured, but what he is reported to have said as he endured it; what he said tells us about a blurring of categories in the conception of social hierarchy, and that blurring lays bare the crisis of the twelfth century. With the villagers watching the intimidation, Durand responded to his abuser, "You can do it, as lord and bailiff of the village." Why was the aggressor called both titles when bailiffs should be agents of lords? This ambiguity in the simple utterance elicits Bisson's final reflection, worth quoting at length not only for its succinct re-articulation of the book's argument, but also because the author's final comment offers a humble yet stirring call to reconsider something crucial, though little understood, about the period:

> *Lord* and bailiff? Was that conceptual confusion still normal in Durand's society? Was it not, indeed, the abiding crisis of the twelfth century? The inability of agents to exercise power on accountable terms, to behave as servants not masters, was to be its conspicuous legacy in later medieval Europe. Justice, law, accountability, office and election, the perception and debate of causes: all these, of which only the first two or three were yet functions of

> record, were waiting in the wings. How little we know about the human experience of power! Yet the evidence is there, however problematic it may seem. In the end it is the image of Durand that prevails: the haunting image of an ignorant peasant in Languedoc — "poor, simple, on bended knees," these were the scribe's words — who could imagine no better world than his old one of arbitrary lordship, the only world he had ever known; a shared culture not so much of rights as of power: the pitiless, disdainful power into which his tormentor had so easily lapsed. "You can do it," for you have the power. It is for us to imagine in his place. (p. 582)

That closing admirably sums up a study whose breadth, both in terms of the abundant sources treated — they range from charters to troubadour songs — and the regions represented — "the societies that succeeded Charlemagne's west-Frankish dominions ... León-Castile, England, Lombardy, Bavaria, Saxony and Poland" (p. ix) — is remarkable. Certainly, running through the whole inquiry is an appreciation for difference, but the comparative approach yields findings that are generally applicable. Based on such an inclusive analysis of texts of wide-ranging genres and geographic scope, Europe appears under the strain of a societal transformation arising from the growth of lordships. The bailiff mentioned earlier was supposed to be an underling, but the sort of force he exercised over the peasant exemplified one way in which those who aspired to dominate attained lordly power. Castellans, knights, provosts, and the like — that is, people capable of exercising power but not belonging to the princely cast — craved the status of lords (see p. 56). Around the year 1000 the world of elite nobles, who were few in number, was "passing," as "power devolved to lesser mortals through usurpation and default" (pp. 7, 24). "More and more" of these petty lords "were pretending to noble powers and inevitable status" (p. 7). Exactly how all this occurred remains "an unsolved problem of history" (p. 24), but we do know, as Marc Bloch had once detected, that the submission to lords became almost ubiquitous by the end of the ninth century. Enabling the surge of aspiring dominators was pronounced economic and demographic change, specifically, an increase in wealth and population (see pp. 212–213). Thus more people with "the means and will to coerce others," together with the attenuation of public officials theoretically responsible for keeping the peace, eventually led to the experience of power that Durand knew all too well (p. 7). This crisis was not played out as class conflict between poor and rich, however. Durand, remember, could not imagine a world without lords. The issue at stake was really the role of power-bearers, the diminishing of the old *potentes* and the burgeoning of the new ones. The crisis unfolded in the post-Carolingian centuries, as the fragile legacy of government gave way to those "militant new men" with the urge and wherewithal to dominate (p. 7). As representatives of government lost their hold on the public exercise of power, the "abrasive,"

exploitative personal power of banal lords flourished (p. 48). The increase in the rise of this power had its concrete expression in the explosion of castles, "the leverage of lordship," which cast their shadows over the dwellings, fields, and churches where anxious peasants, monks, and clerics conducted their lives (pp. 41, 241).

Life under the shadow of violence is what Bisson captures. He has such an existence in mind when introducing Alan of Lille's notion of three kinds of peace. Besides the "eternal peace of God," there is the praiseworthy pursuit of peace based on intention, that is, the "peace of conscience," which the virtuous person, battling the vices, seeks. There is yet another kind of peace that has no lasting or reliable quality. It hardly seems real. This is the "peace of the times," characterized as "illusory and slippery." It is a mere "shadow of peace" (p. 471). Ecclesiastical responses, such as the various peace councils, tried to resist this "shadowed reality," and the resistance, if largely futile, became concerted. Bisson notes that "from 1148 to 1195 normative institutes of peace were promulgated in almost every country and diocese between the Pyrenees and the Alps" (p. 472). Yet such initiatives, while marking "a new stage in the history of medieval peace," are also "proof of the violence they aim to remedy." Thus peace movements "breaking out everywhere in Europe" were the surest indicators of the "incessant failure of territorial justice" (pp. 471–473). Of course, there were other ways to try to curb the violence, for shame too could be "a mode of pacification": a contrite knight might be moved to repent in public before holy relics (p. 483), and compunction, too, could induce a fit of conversion (see p. 287). Occasionally, severer measures were taken, say, the "memorably gruesome" boiling alive of a "fully armed knight" (p. 150). More often, though, it seems that "Christ and his saints slept" while the castles went up and the lordly pretenders harassed working people (p. 276). Significantly, it is out of this turmoil that princely justice emerges (or re-emerges, if one believes that the Carolingian world had such public order). Thus government, of which only the foreshadowing may be detected in the twelfth century, came as a compromising response to coercive lordships, which gradually and grudgingly gave way to the "collective interests" and public power associated with office rather than persons (p. 580). Under the "shadowed peace," then, the "growing pains" indicative of the origins of European government may be heard (p. 9).

Of course, no summary can adequately encapsulate the nearly 600 pages in which Bisson's argument unfolds. What is more, the impression of violence is so strong that we can easily lose sight of the book's nuances, some of which Bisson himself had made explicit earlier as part of his reply to critics debating, in journal articles, his position on the "feudal revolution." What is not being claimed is as important to note as what is. However disordered and beyond the reach of government Bisson's twelfth-century

seems, the situation is not called anarchy.[7] Some "façade" of public order persisted (pp. 136–137). Moreover, as widespread as the violence was, he does not claim that everyone experienced it. Even lordship was "not inherently vicious," for "everywhere personal powers over people expanded benignly in the hands of princes, barons, bishops, abbots and priors" (p. 64). Yet, at the same time, "almost everywhere" the temptations of (what the sources call) "bad lordship" — that is, the coercing of commoners into forced labour, the plundering of churches, the arbitrary taxing ("tallage"), the violating of defenceless men's wives and daughters, the taking of captives to gain ransoms, and the demanding of protection money from the vulnerable — were often too great for ambitious and armed men to resist. How would villagers like those of Durand's community know the difference between the lordly pretenders, mounted and mailed as they descended their stony, hilltop encampments, and the real thing? Was there any real difference?

To answer that question, consider one of the most "deeply illuminating" and well-documented cases Bisson treats, the Capuchins of Velay (p. 475). Their leader, also called Durand, was a "poor carpenter" fed up with the "local violence." In 1182 he first appealed to Bishop Peire of Le Puy to restore order. After the bishop "rebuffed" him, Durand took matters into his own hands. He managed to get hundreds to swear to a "pact of peace" (p. 476). The number of his supporters then "swelled" to 5,000 by one account. They established "institutes of peace," which consisted of "a uniform code of dress, a solemn oath preceded by confession of sins," and, to support the cause, various payments from the brothers who joined. They made vows "to fight when summoned" (p. 476). Their hooded dress was striking, too: "white capes with cloth pendants front and back resembling the woolen pallium worn by archbishops." Looking like clergy, they were "a visible moral force" (p. 476). On the front they bore "an image of the Virgin and Son," encircled with an inscription whose well-known words linked the movement to sacrifice, the removal of sin, and, most significant given the context of regional violence, pacification: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem*. Durand's initial success actualized the inscription. By the Feast of the Assumption (August 15, 1183), the bishop had confirmed the carpenter's *institutia*; with the backing of "knights … 'princes, bishops, abbots, monks, clerics, and women without husbands'," the "Castle-*dun*" was attacked. The righteous killing included "'a prince of robbers' together with many hundreds of coterels" (p. 476).

These measures to bring justice to the region all sound so hopeful and appealing to us, for they are "rational and socially purposive: the solemn oath, surely bound to the commitment to fight when summoned, the

7 See Bisson, "Reply," p. 211.

pecuniary assessment and the uniform" (p. 479). Durand's group seemed to present something resembling government. However, the movement "collapsed." The group had no lords to whom they were accountable, and life without lords, as the response from the peasant of Langlade illustrates, was as difficult to imagine as it was menacing to the bearers of power. In the organization's early stages, Durand's community must have been able to maintain the distinction between the "magnates" who supported the cause and the "robbers," for without that difference the endorsement of the Capuchins by local *potentes* would not have been given. The distinction was short-lived. Once members of Durand's group threatened the lords who had initially favoured the institutes, once some of the Capuchins "relished the idea of getting even" — in other words, once the group became subversive to lordship itself, so that the original distinction between robbers and princes was no longer maintained — the group was discredited, likened to heretics with an excessive penitential streak (pp. 479, 481). Durand's movement thus receded into the shadowed peace of the Massif Central.

Tipplers

The externalized and regional "peace of the times," which Alan of Lille thought shadowy, had an internal corollary. Thanks to the account of one contemporary, it is not too hard for us to appreciate how the violence and disorder arising from the Investiture Conflict (1075–1085), along with the vexation of choosing sides, could trigger the onslaught of doubt, described as a dark, enveloping cloud. Here is what Wido of Osnabrück said as he situated himself among the partisans in the battles between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV:

> Often I reflect how many people there are in support of each party, and how they are as well advanced in learning as men can be, and most serious-minded, and how it would therefore be wrong to believe that one side or the other is deliberately acting in defiance of justice or of the peace of the church. So I find that my own small judgment begins to waver, and I am covered with a dark cloud of doubt.[8]

Given that doubt, in all its varieties, has received relatively little attention from mediaevalists, Sabina Flanagan's *Doubt in the Age of Faith* is most welcome. The passage just quoted offers a rather conspicuous instance

8 *Excerta ex Widonis Osnarugensis libro de controversia inter Hilderbrandum et Heinricum imperatorem*, ed. L. de Heinemann in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Libelli de lite*, vol. 1 (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1981), p. 462. For the translation, with brief comments, see Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 126.

of doubt arising from one of the period's most disruptive events; it is also an example of the way the state of uncertainty is often presented figuratively, with dark and foggy attributes. While neither the Investiture Conflict as an occasion for indecisiveness nor the specific imagery of a dark cloud as a rhetorical topos of uncertainty are addressed at length in her study, Flanagan's presentation of doubt nonetheless can enhance our appreciation of another aspect to the above quotation — the sense of motion to capture the experience of doubting. "To begin to waver" or, as Wido puts it, "*incipit vacillare*," certainly conveys such movement, as does the verb "fluctuate," also derived from Latin. Thus there emerges in her early discussion of "what doubt means" a vivid back-and-forth quality to this mental state, which writers describe in terms of physical effects. Doubt is a "teetering," a "wobbling," a "to-ing and fro-ing." In comparison to English, Latin has "a greater number of metaphorical doubt-words" (p. 2). Of the more "colourful" terms Flanagan cites, one in particular has the advantage of conveying both doubt's unsteadiness and its capacity to cloud the mind; it is a verb classical authors would have also used to describe a bibulous guest's ungainly departure from a banquet. The word is *titubare*, which, besides signifying a state of absolute uncertainty, means "to stagger drunkenly." Such are doubt's connotations, and they inform the book's image for conceptualizing this condition, an image that keeps the sense of movement intact, for doubt is measured on a sliding scale: neither an affirmation nor denial, it leans in degrees toward one direction or the other, capable of increasing or decreasing in accordance with the doubter's judgement. There is, then — and Flanagan's book, from beginning to end, illustrates this point most effectively — a rich and great range to the twelfth-century experience of doubt.

Doubt's many forms make the devising of a system by which to classify it especially challenging. After considering possible approaches, Flanagan proposes a "radically simple division" to categorize doubt according to its "worldly" and "spiritual" manifestations (chapters 2 and 3), with the distinction between the sacred and profane being one that "would have made sense to medieval people" (p. 8). However, given that the interconnectedness of mediaeval religion and society also deserves to be taken into account, perhaps Flanagan's radical distinction needs, at times, some refinement. For instance, certain examples she gives of "secular" doubt entail the settling of an uncertain issue through the use of divination and prognostication, alternative *religious* practices that — and this too would seem to weaken the category's integrity — ecclesiastical writers condemned as diabolical. While the concerns may have been "worldly," they were often addressed, as the second chapter shows, by appealing to "supernatural guidance" (p. 16). Unambiguous species of doubt, then, may not be as easy to identify as the book's initial division suggests. Consider again Wido's dark cloud (*dubitationis caligo*). How should that

doubt be classified, as temporal or spiritual? The issue seems difficult to label as one or the other. Investiture, after all, underscores the period's intractable mingling of the secular and the sacred.

Whatever reservations readers may find with the categories, Flanagan's book does a great service for showing the many ways doubt crept into twelfth-century life. Like Bisson, she is after a specific kind of twelfth-century experience. Much of Flanagan's inquiry tries to capture the experience of doubt episodically, by briefly presenting texts addressing its "nature," "benefits," and "disadvantages" (chapters 4, 5, and 6).

In addition to surveying doubt as a twelfth-century phenomenon, the inquiry also takes up scholarship treating attitudes toward Jews, whose religious difference gave rise to debatable questions for Christians to consider. The encounter with Jews, then, could lead to doubts for Christians that might entail social and spiritual risks. Some took them. Herbert of Bosham (d. 1194) likely enjoyed "close and amicable relationships with Jewish scholars in order to reach the exceptional level of linguistic competence in Hebrew that has been ascribed to him" (p. 175). Following the lead of Deborah L. Goodwin, Flanagan notes that Herbert's knowledge of the Psalms "led him to a remarkably positive attitude towards the Jews," who, he thought, would be "redeemed by their own Messiah rather than simply absorbed as the 'Jewish remnant' into Christianity" (p. 175).[9] Reflecting his encounter with Judaism, Herbert's doubt revolved around the question of transubstantiation, a question entangled in his uncertainty over the historical appearance of the Christian Messiah. He began to wonder whether the sacrament of the Eucharist was "justified at all" and even "whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah." He dreamed of his chalice wavering. But his doubt was alleviated when he acknowledged that, even if "'there were not a sacramental conversion of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ,' its usage would be a more pleasing sacrifice to God than the bloody offerings of the synagogue" (p. 84).

The works of Herbert, along with the writings of his contemporaries Baldwin of Fiorde and Peter the Venerable, offer a way for Flanagan to test the thesis of Gavin Langmuir, who argued that the "internal frontiers of faith were threatened by doubts" arising from the presence of Jews in a Christian society that was also experiencing, as part of the twelfth-century renewal, "a new emphasis on empirical knowledge as well as logic" (p. 162).[10] Within this context of renewed rationality, and when faced with Jewish disbelief, Christians experienced doubts that could not

9 For sustained treatment of Herbert's attitudes, see Deborah L. Goodwin, *Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew: Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

10 Flanagan is quoting Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 9.

always be openly acknowledged, but that found irrational expression in the paranoia and violence characteristic of the intolerance and repressiveness often associated with mediaeval society. Peter the Venerable, Cluny's abbot at a time when the monastery might have been in debt to Jews, is certainly one example of prominent Christian intolerance (p. 173). Yet, after examining the sources, Flanagan finds reasons to challenge Langmuir's position, asserting that it cannot account for the case of Herbert, who was in close contact with Jews and the Hebrew Bible, but whose religious doubts were not, ultimately, threatening to his faith; nor did his doubts vent themselves in paranoid and dehumanizing *contra-Judeos* invective or violence. As for Peter the Venerable, who did dehumanize Jews by likening them to animals, Flanagan is emphatic that doubt was not the motivating factor of the abbot's animus. Quite the opposite: "rather than doubt being implicated in his extremely hostile attitude towards contemporary Jews, it would seem that misplaced certainty was the cause" (p. 183).

Torn Dresses

There are other valuable surprises in Flanagan's study, such as the comparison between Anselm of Canturbury and Abelard, with the former rather than the latter emerging as the more radical doubter — not what we might expect when we think of Abelard's famous saying in his *Sic et Non* (p. 145).[11] We also see — and the comparison Flanagan later makes with the modern "advice columns" of newspapers is also apt here — esteemed figures implored by doubters to resolve their conundrums. Hildegard of Bingen, for instance, received the pestering inquiries of monks whose minds were riddled with uncertainties (pp. 61–63). Significantly, Hildegard also sensed that doubt could lead to despair, which she personified "as a woman dressed entirely in clothing of dark and gloomy hue" (p. 96).

In garments less evocative of bleakness comes another personification, that of philosophy. As a famous text from Late Antiquity presents her, Lady Philosophy appears to Boethius in his prison cell. The *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most widely studied classics during the Middle Ages, and its imprisoned author, executed by Theoderic in 524, is instructed by Philosophy to recognize the fickleness of fortune and embrace the surer comforts of reason. Though not as dark as Hildegard's personified doubt, there is still a touch of sadness represented by Lady Philosophy's clothing. When she appears to Boethius, she wears a torn dress, indicative of the rift between philosophical schools.

11 "By doubting we come to question and by questioning we reach the truth." See Flanagan, *Doubt*, pp. 12–13, with Blanch B. Boyer and Richard McKeon, eds., *Sic et Non* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976–1977), p. 103.

Similar personifications are represented in the works of five twelfth-century authors who, between 1100 and 1170, revived the *Consolation*'s genre, a mixture of poetry and prose, thought to be a combination of "pleasure" (*dulce*) and utility (*utile*), called by Bridgit Balint, in her *Ordering Chaos*, "Boethian prosimetrum" (pp. 8, 18). The twelfth-century revival of the genre was short-lived, and Balint provides a clear and compelling study that addresses the circumstances surrounding the revival and decline of this literary form. Her relatively short book offers close readings of the works produced by the period's principal practitioners of this distinctive though fleeting genre: Hildebert of Lavardin (1056–1133), Adelard of Bath (c. 1080–c. 1152), Lawrence of Durham (c. 1114–1154), Bernard Silvestris ("*magister* at Tours 1130s–1160s"), and the previously mentioned Alan of Lille (c. 1120–1203) (pp. 9–11). There are aspects to the inquiry that also recall the situation Bisson has uncovered. Surely, the fact that Lady Philosophy appears in the *Consolation* as a rape victim would have resonated in a time of "shadowed peace" (p. 45). The authors are also deeply occupied with the question of whether it is possible to find "order" amidst the "chaos" and "disturbance" of the world (p. 7). What is more, one of the authors, Adelard, "speaks as a knight of argumentative ... prowess" (p. 53). Flanagan's work, too, finds echoes in Balint's study on a number of central issues: the prosmetrum writers show the give and take of dialogues resistant to closure on debatable matters; portray the interlocutors fluctuating between hope and despair; are almost all tinged with pessimism (Bernard is the exception) arising from uncertainties over the ability of reason to solve the problem of human existence; find the relationship of language to truth vitiated; and are also hesitant, as Boethius was not, to offer reassurances when faced with life's most troubling questions. In short, the world of the prosimetrum writer was highly unstable.

What is especially useful is the way Balint historically contextualizes the uncertainty and reluctance to give definitive answers with a change in reading practices. Important works such as the *Consolation of Philosophy* were often preceded by an introduction (*accessus*), which offered either "a list of the topics of rhetorical invention" or gave "information on the life of the author, the circumstances of composition, and the title and order of the text itself." Such introductions "presented the text ... as authoritative, without further evaluation of its contents" (p. 37). A change in the prefacing matter occurred in the twelfth century, with another kind of introduction being preferred. This "new type of *accessus*" focused on "the material of the text, the author's intention, the utility of the text, and its place in the universal scheme of knowledge." A "subjective" element thus came into play. The change "created a space in which the reader might disagree with the *accessus*-writer, and admitted the possibility of a challenge to the authoritative text itself." Not surprisingly, then, the prosimetra examined by Balint "have the effect of undermining the

structure of virtue, wisdom and authority that Boethius had made canonical" (p. 77). The situation Balint describes is thus one that readers of Flanagan's book will also appreciate: "Somewhere between the beginning of the high medieval reassessment of *auctoritas* and the firm establishment of the papacy and the university, writers of Boethian prosimetrum created a textual space characterized by its lack of a sure arbiter, but the cost of maintaining this space is that those who reside there cannot provide definitive solutions to the questions they raise" (p. 49).

As we might sense from such a description, these are highly complex texts that Balint examines, and she has mastered them. She reveals their intricacy without sacrificing clarity in her presentation. Those of us who are not specialists in mediaeval Latin literature will find her study inviting and illuminating for the way it combines factual evidence with literary-critical analyses, which together open up the significance of these sources for the study of mediaeval intellectual culture.

Of the five writings she carefully treats, Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae* (*The Plaint of Nature*) shows most clearly the genre's potential and limits. Alan is also the most pessimistic of the lot. It is hard not to be intrigued by Alan, who, equating rhetorical flaws with moral ones, viewed homosexuality on a par with the breaking of grammatical rules (see p. 11). Playing on and fundamentally reworking Boethius's Lady Philosophy, the authorial Alan encounters a personified nature. Rather than holding bickering philosophical schools responsible for the rent in *Natura*'s dress, however, he implicates all of humanity in sharing culpability for the rip. Yet vice-ridden humans are not entirely blameworthy, for there is a flaw in nature's cosmic design that has put us in "a no-win situation: remain in untaught ignorance and commit the vices exemplified by the animals or become figurative rapists of nature violently disrupting her harmonies by intrusive rational inquiry" (p. 70). In a sense, then, we cannot help but fall into error, for nature, "at the mercy of the vices," has, according to Alan, "delegated her creative authority to Venus." Hence "man commits sexual transgression out of vice but the vice is not solely his," for there is "a force at work greater than the individual moral consciousness." Put differently, "human sexual faults and failings are at least in part due to the flawed way mankind is constituted." Thus "the complaint of nature" (*planctus naturae*) is not just Nature's own complaint, but the narrator's (Alan's) complaint about Nature herself (p. 73).

As Balint sees it, Alan's great "anti-*Consolation*" (p. 75) also exposed "the inherent difficulties of this mode of composition [Boethian prosimetrum] and so signaled its end" (p. 137). Her study concludes with the case for considering the cathedral school of Tours as the formative centre for the genre's re-emergence in the twelfth century (pp. 167–168). Supplementing her insights and interpretations are three appendices of translated sources. At the end, this reader recalled an observation made at the beginning of the book. The mediaeval term for prosimetrum is

satura, "a word that evokes a gastronomical abundance appropriate to the inclusive and sometimes hodge-podge tendencies of the prosimetrum" (p. 3). Balint herself, in a relatively compact and remarkably accessible book, has managed to offer such abundance.

Sobering Anachronisms?

Bisson underscores the scholarly tendency to see in the twelfth century our cherished ideals of modernity. He refers more than once to the "conceptual anachronism" of scholarship, however "excellent," that appropriated "concepts from the vocabulary of the modern state" (pp. 12, 491). What about the present studies? We find a Europe at the mercy of rapacious private interests beyond the reach of government, the famous and obscure wavering in doubt, and the learned inconsolably mistrustful of reason and authority. We might start thinking that the twelfth century looks familiar. Have twelfth-century studies, like the emerging and more general trend one researcher sees in current mediaeval intellectual history, "turned postmodern"?[12] Based on each author's explicit intellectual commitments, the answer is no. Bisson is unambiguous when considering the applicability of that well-known student of *pouvoir*: "An historical study of power will nonetheless inevitably seem beholden to modernism. The very concept is social scientific.... Even the historical reflections on power by anti-modernist Michel Foucault betray their sociological genesis" (p. 20).[13] Flanagan, who enriches our knowledge of doubt's inherent instability, with its many forms, advantages, and disadvantages marvellously illustrated, also has a taste for something she asserts is currently out of fashion: "I would like to rehabilitate the notion of 'enlightenment values' as well, since it has become something of a whipping boy of late" (p. 199, n. 41). Balint, while alluding to Foucault's notion of the "care of the self" when describing the reading practices that led to the open-ended prosimetra she investigates, along with effectively taking up the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin, primarily offers an immensely illuminating study of a literary form in its historical context (pp. 49, 84). In other words, to characterize these publications as being markedly influenced by a postmodern outlook would be inaccurate. The authors make no such claim.

Readers, however, are a different matter. When encountering each scholar's peregrinations through twelfth-century texts, those onlookers so inclined may take the opportunity with the present books to indulge a

12 Philipp W. Rosemann, *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 5: "These days research in the area of medieval philosophy has turned 'postmodern' — less resolutely, and certainly less consciously than other fields of medieval studies, such as Old French, yet undeniably."

13 For another perspective on power and postmodernism, in a context related to the religious and intellectual traditions of the mediaeval West, see, in general, J. Joyce Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2003).

fondness for instability. That is another way of saying that the studies in question have the potential to enrich a broad spectrum of researchers, including the theoretically and methodologically adventurous. Readers will not only see the effectiveness of the traditional historical-critical and philological approaches; they will also come away with a sense that more is left to be done: the three studies exude the richness of twelfth-century sources with interpretive challenges that will also captivate those engaged in other kinds of scholarly practices.

As has been the case in the critical reception of the earlier research on the period, the question of anachronism will remain a sensitive one when these challenges are taken up. It is not always easy to tell what is fair game when drawing on present cultural artifacts to illuminate the experiences of mediaeval people. Besides referring to advice columns, Flanagan intriguingly concludes her study of mediaeval uncertainty with observations on the contemporary "'What Would Jesus Do?' phenomena" and the Broadway play *Doubt*, recently made into a popular movie (pp. 196, 202). These and similar current examples seem to be presented as suggestive continuities with the twelfth-century experience of doubt; at least, the similarities strike this reader more than the differences. As has already been stated, Bisson is especially sensitive to the snares of anachronism. Even so, the murder of Charles the Good is called "the Kennedy assassination of the twelfth century" (p. 260). It is a tremendously powerful turn of phrase; it rings true; it is as compelling as the massive data he has accumulated.

It also brings to mind, once more, that haunting scene. Because poor Durand does not know government as we do, we are called "to imagine in his place," as if it were possible for us to span both worlds, to be the bridge between them, to pick up where his terrible experience left off, for we have moved on to something else in the evolution of social relations. It is an arresting moment. As the book comes to its end, we too are stopped, standing between the past that was Durand's world and the future he would never know. Obviously, that pause entails a gaze in two (temporal) directions. Not only are we able to imagine what Durand could not, namely, the government that lies in a time beyond his horrendous experience; we also have the capacity to imagine our present hinging on his past; and the continuation of violence, I think, furnishes our abiding link. We realize, when we are looking both ways, that we are able to see farther than Durand not because we are standing on the "shoulders of giants," to recall a twelfth-century saying still quoted today, but because we are standing on a kneeling peasant. Government came as a "resolution" for such humiliating experiences as his.

It therefore seems easy to imagine Durand's ordeal of cruelty; impossible for him, in Bisson's view, to imagine anything resembling our experience of government. As far as envisaging such a future goes, the period's schoolmen are hardly different from that poor villager. They too are in the

"cocoon of lordship" (p. 454), and their manner of thinking Bisson also makes remarkably familiar to us: the masters "sense of evil — and of arbitrariness and violence — was in our terms, a default mode of cognition" (p. 448). Even if "ways of doing things, of talking, evolve" (p. 491), past violence has resonances we can still hear, a language we can still translate. Our own shadowed "peace of the times" is apparent whenever we board a plane.

Of course, we are also told that this experience of "arbitrary" violence was more common to mediaeval people than it is to us.[14] The assertion is striking not as a debatable point but in terms of the label's provenance: Hannah Arendt, a thinker concerned with a crisis not of the Middle Ages but of modernity, spoke of violence's "arbitrariness," as well as evil's "banality." After a very brief allusion to Arendt at the beginning of the book, Bisson repeatedly uses "arbitrary" and "banal" to describe the twelfth-century experience of lordship, violence, and power. Of course, they are the stock terms of his field; one wants to resist making too much of them beyond the context of specialized historiography. At the same time, it is hard for a reader to forget, whenever the words come up, that the mediaeval historian and the political philosopher exchanged a knowing glance at the crossroads before going their separate ways. If we could be permitted to imagine that brief exchange, it would be an amicable one: "How little we know about the human experience of power!" Arendt would agree, and add a bolstering statement she liked quoting: "The problems of violence still remain very obscure."[15] "Yet the evidence is there," the historian would reply, "however problematic it may seem."

As we come to our own parting, we find the twelfth century still holding our concentration, though the books discussed here suggest that, as the lens turns, different (sometimes darker) features, not so apparent to earlier historians seeing the period's luminous renaissance, come into view. There are moments when all three books seem to show the age of grandeur unravelling on the page. We meet, obviously, a distant world unlike ours; sometimes, though, it appears more familiar than strange, and the accumulated force in these evocations of the period's breaking points is enough to make a sober historian stagger.

J. K. Kitchen
University of Alberta

14 Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century*, p. 7, with Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 110.

15 Arendt, "On Violence," p. 51. She has in mind Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, originally published in 1906.