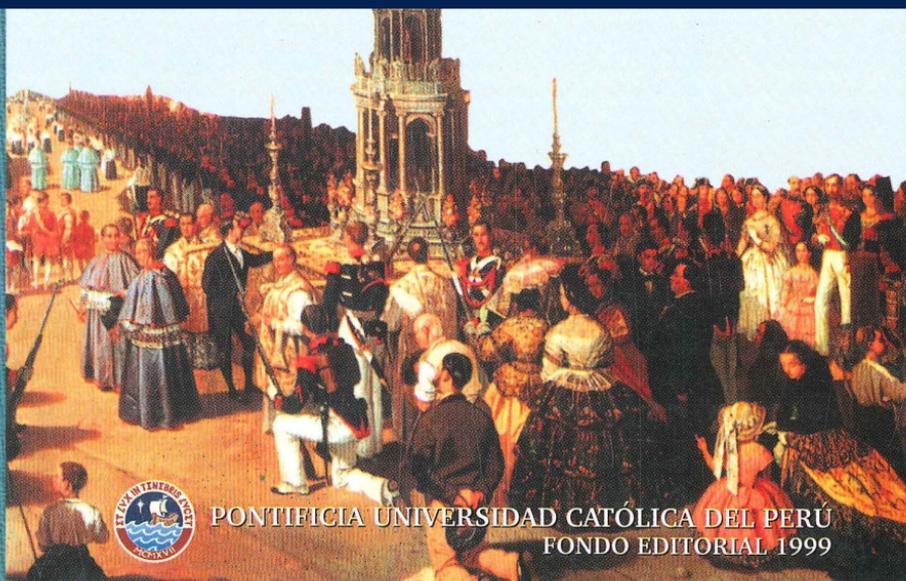


Celebrando el **Cuerpo** de **Dios**

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editora

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CORPUS CHRISTI:
THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT
OF A LATE MEDIEVAL FEAST

by Miri Rubin

Rituals and the religious festivals which accompany them are most usually encountered as 'traditional, long-standing phenomena, well-placed within the rhetoric of custom, authority and antiquity. They rarely have histories which those living them are aware, or that we, historians and anthropologists can trace. This is particularly true when one is studying any Christian feast. The Christian calendar is an array of commemorative events: days devoted to the memory of saints, and feasts tracing and reenacting every stage of Christ's life, and increasingly in the later Middle Ages, of his mother the Virgin. Nativity, Easter, Ascension, feasts born in the commemorative practice of early Christian communities, theorised and liturgically designed by the Fathers of the Church, remodelled in the liturgical reforms of the Carolingians, and then stamped with the authoritative attempts of the thirteenth century papacy towards formation and homogenisation of Christian practice, only to be rejected by reformers in the sixteenth century, or rearticulated and lavishly redeconstructed by the activists at Trent and the Catholic reformers who followed. It is of particular interest and pleasure, therefore, to be able to trace a different type of evolution, one which is at the very least unique in its extraordinary popularity from the later Middle Ages and un-

til this very day, in its very singular beginnings. This is the feast which has brought us all together here, the feast of Corpus Christi.

I shall trace for you some of the background out of which this new medieval feast arose and then describe some of the modes in which it was celebrated in late medieval Europe, practices which you may have observed in contemporary practice. I shall try to identify some of the symbolic possibilities inherent in the feast and ultimately to claim that the eucharistic feast was full of powerful possibilities of the articulation of power, but that many other symbolic possibilities were formed and re-formed around it.

Most accounts of Corpus Christi will tell you that the feast was founded by Urban IV in 1264, and repromulgated by John XXII in 1317. This is the merest, barest and most misleading account¹. The impulse towards the creation of a feast celebrating the eucharist first crystallised in the diocese of Liège in the early thirteenth century, but it is also true to say that the milieu within which it developed was one which could have been found in many other towns of the Low Countries, the Rhineland, and even in some northern Italian towns. The context is the new world of lay religious initiative, and particularly the feminine circles. Forms of lay participation and greater female participation in religious practice were developing from the twelfth century in the new burgeoning urban sector. Here were founded new forms of religious participation; as opposed to the monasteries which were almost exclusively joined by members of the nobility, founders and benefactors of such houses, and as opposed to the secular colleges which were formed for reformed clerical living *in* the world, layfolk who could not and wished not to retire totally from urban life congregated

1. See analysis of the foundation of the feast in Liège diocese and its spread as a universal feast in M. RUBIN, *Corpus Christi: the eucharist in late medieval culture*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 164-212.

in a series of loose formations in the towns. In Liège and its surrounding area there was a particular string groups of female religious enthusiasts, some were guided by confessors from one of the many religious houses of the diocese of Liège and some were even more loosely congregated in houses where they worked, prayed and undertook charitable works ².

In these circles a particular piety was practised: fasting, frequent prayer, recitation of psalms, by poor young virgins, and more likely widows who had undertaken chastity. It can be argued that they developed a special fascination with Christ's body, with the eucharist, with the suffering, oozing, vulnerable body of Christ. The devotional image of *pieta* may have developed from these circles, known as beguines in the Low Countries³. Within such circles in Liège a prominent woman, Juliana, attached to the Augustinian houses of Mont Cornillon was a particular inspiration. We are told by the author of her *Vita* that sometimes in the 1220s a vision began to appear to her, one in which she saw the moon in the night sky, missing a section, an incomplete moon. In the traditional *topoi* of hagiographic writing Juliana's confusion and torment followed as she pondered the meaning of the dream, until the night when Christ appeared to her and explained that the moon was the Church, and the blemish – the absence of a eucharistic feast in the Christian calendar. Juliana confided in her spiritual guide, a young canon, and this was then reported to the bishop of Liège, Robert of Thurotte. Now this was a fortunate development, since the bishop was attentive and interested in the new forms of religious life in his diocese, and intent on promoting the campaign against heresy, and the tightening of religious obser-

2. See B. BOLTON, «Mulieres sanctae», *Studies in church history*, 19, 1973, pp. 77-95.

3. J.E. ZIEGLER, *Sculpture of Compassion: the Pieta and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries*, c.1330- c.1600, Institut historique belge de Rome, «Etudes d'histoire de l'art», 6, 1992.

vance. He was also a loyal papal servant. He was thus a most attentive recipient of the news from the Juliana's cell. What more orthodox, more full of didactic promise, than a eucharistic feast in the troubled and turbulent religious world of the early thirteenth century? And what more suitable an introduction than from the pious lips of a female mystic of local renown. The Dominicans, recent arrivals onto the religious scene of Liège were enthusiastic too. They gave their doctrinal approval to this proposed innovation, and thus inserted themselves at the heart of a new devotional development.

Whereas we hear about opposition to the scheme, many were enthusiastic about it. Because the eucharist was becoming the most powerful symbol of Christian life, at the centre of a vast project of instruction and ritual practice. Discussion of the eucharist was renewed in the universities of twelfth century Europe to produce the most emphatic formulations about its nature and thus to create the most outrageous claim about its nature: that of transubstantiation⁴. That the sacrament saw the complete change in the substances of the bread and wine offered at the altar after the words of consecration pronounced by a priest – into Christ's own flesh and blood. The eucharist was the sacrament which underpinned clerical privilege and encompassed the promise of salvation. The claims now made about it were rich in promise but also rife with possibilities of error and doubt. To make such claims was to offer the most dramatic mediation of grace, and contact with the supernatural, it was also to open great avenues for ridicule and disbelief. So the development of the eucharistic claim was coupled with a great effort of teaching and preaching a whole pastoral theology of the eucharist, as well as with a liturgical refa-

4. For the development of the theologies of the eucharist see G. MACY, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period*, Oxford, 1984.

shioning – to make the eucharistic ritual fit the eucharistic claim. This was achieved by closer definition of ritual practice during the mass on the part of both clergy and people, as well as redrawing of the ways in which the eucharist was kept, handled, revered and contained. This birth of a whole symbolic world around the eucharist is the soil in which Juilana's dream took root, and on which the creation of, first a local and then a universal, feast was to grow.

The idea of a eucharistic feast, one which was not simply a mournful recounting of the events of Maundy Thursday in the build-up towards Good Friday and Easter, but rather specific occasion on which the happy promise of the ever renewing sacrament could be celebrated, appealed to one of the men deeply engaged in the pastoral project of the Church. Presented as the inspired dream of a well-known local mystic, it possessed enormous authority and rhetorical panache. In October 1246 the bishop of Liège created the feast of Corpus Christi in his diocese. When the diocese was visited soon after by a papal legate to the whole of Northern Europe, Hugh of St Cher, a Dominican scholar, the feast was further publicised and was taken up sporadically by religious communities and by some towns. But it was as yet a regional devotion, taken up most frequently by communities with especial devotional practice (for example the Cistercian order), rather than a common reality of town life.

The feast's fortunes developed further when one of the men who had been closest to the bishop of Liège in the 1240s, Jacques Pantaleon, archdeacon of Campines, was elevated, following a distinguished career in papal service, to the papal see in 1261, as Urban IV. This northerner remembered even during his pontificate the religious friendships and commitments forged during his years in Liège, one of which was the promotion of the eucharistic feast. He brought with him a coterie of men from the north and corresponded with religious women of the diocese of Liège. More significantly, he commissioned Thomas Aquinas to

compose a liturgy for it, and before his death in August 1264 promulgated a bull which instituted the feast, on the Thursday following the feasts of the Trinity as a universal feast of general observance throughout Christendom. But he soon died and the labourious communication with every dioceses of Christendom was neglected. So throughout the thirteenth century the feast was still a regional choice, and the practice of a small number of monasteries. It was not even celebrated in the papal *curia*. Only some fifty years later, as Pope John XXII edited the edicts of recent church councils and papal legislation, was the bull of Urban IV found and republished. This time it was inserted into an extremely important document, the collection of canon law which was to be disseminated from Avignon in 1317 and to replace all earlier compilations, the *Clementines*. With this publication the feast's place in the calendar was an official duty which was to be widely known. This is not to say that its celebrations followed overnight, but rather that as the impact of the new collection of canon law was acknowledged and recognised, bishops would take the initiative of informing their clergy of the new feast, disseminating its liturgy in little booklets⁵. It is fascinating to trace this process: in England for example it was in Canterbury in 1317 already, in York only from 1322, and so on in the next decades throughout the dioceses of England. In France and Spain the spread followed in the 1320s and 1330s. All the papal bull could tell was that Corpus Christi was to be the joyful and reverential celebration of the institution of the eucharist, to strengthen belief and confound error and ridicule by heretics. It is said that joyful chants should be part of the veneration, but no closer instructions on the mode of celebration were laid down, besides the mass for the feast day and the readings for the octave. In that sense, when by the mid-fourteenth century Corpus Christi arrived in most European

5 On the feast's liturgy see Rubin, *Op. cit.*, pp. 185-199.

towns, communities, religious as well as secular were faced with the challenge of devising its celebrations, inventing its traditions. It is here that notions of hierarchy and the symbolic worlds woven around the eucharistic come to the fore, bounded by liturgical rules, the limitations of resources and physical surroundings. The eucharistic feast was being imagined, and invented⁶.

What is most striking about Corpus Christi is the fact that it developed so many similar features throughout Europe, even if some extraordinary ideosyncracies can also be traced. The feast was overwhelmingly *processional* in mode of celebration. And this is of little surprise when we consider the ritual practices which developed around the eucharist in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. From the taking of the eucharist to the sick to the solemn carrying of the eucharist to the altar in larger churches, the logic of the eucharist meant that it should never be seen unattended unprotected, without the proper trappings of the majesty which it was claimed to be. This followed simply from the basic eucharistic teaching: if the consecrated eucharistic host was Christ's very flesh and blood then it should be treated as befitted such divinity, in precious vessels, guarded and surrounded by the clergy. Here practice was determined by the existing customs of relic worship and relic keeping. Indeed reliquaries were often turned into eucharistic vessels, or used for both purposes. Modes of handling the eucharist were becoming increasingly elaborate, and these rules were disseminated to the ritual actors, the clergy in the new genre of guidebooks on the celebration of the mass which proliferated in these centuries. So any thought of celebrating, displaying, venerating the eucharist on its feast day, would necessarily carry such procedures. A model for out-door celebration (and Corpus Christi was a summer feast which could occur from late May to late June) was the outdoor

⁶ On the variety of celebrations see *ibid.*, pp. 243-271.

procession with the eucharist to the dead, elaborately laid down by synods from the late twelfth century, to be a dignified event which treated the eucharist as the God it was meant to be. Protected and held by a priest (and a priest alone), surrounded by chanting clergy and lay people, to be venerated when it passed in the streets and protected from inclement weather. The eucharist, this most powerful offering the Church could make, was caught up in the on-going tensions between the wish to exhibit and share its most powerful treasure and to protect and retain it away from accident, ridicule or abuse. Any feast which attempted to bring the eucharist into the public sphere would have to be designed with similar care and attention to protection, containment and the appearance of veneration and sacred separation.

Our earliest information about the absorption of the new feast into communities comes from large religious houses, monasteries or cathedrals. These elaborate administrative structures were obliged to identify and allocate not only the resources to finance the additional to their liturgical routine, but also the person who would be in charge of organisation. Pious bequests often came in to help breach the newly created gap in finance; a new feast created an administrative task and also opportunities for benefactions and participation by lay people. In most cathedrals the arrival of the feast prompted some processional form around the church and thus elements of solemn public display. At the same time the feast was celebrated in parishes, at least with a mass, but sometimes also with small parochial processions. In this sense multiplication between strata within ecclesiastical organisation was an open field. And soon this field grew to encompass the interests and capabilities of town authorities, as the feast gradually poured into town streets and outside the ecclesiastical precincts. This, too, is a process which one can observe in a variety of towns⁷, following the inherent

7. For an analysis of the place of the Corpus Christi feast within the

possibilities of the eucharistic feast. The display of the simple of utmost power and majesty attracted the aspirations of other exclusive groups: patricians, guilds, magistrates, and different towns enacted this drama in their own dialects and in the terms of their own political systems and collectives histories.

Thus by the second half of the fourteenth century a complex web of hierarchically co-celebrations characterised the celebration of Corpus Christi in towns. In the countryside this was far simpler: the unit for organisation in most places was the well defined parish including a village or more and outlying hamlets. Here celebration began and ended in and around the parish church. Special benefaction from the landed aristocracy might provide particularly costly ritual objects: the vessel for the eucharist, the extremely expensive and ubiquitous canopy over the eucharist and the clergy, money for lighting and decoration. Accounts from rural parishes show expenditure on maintenance of the canopy, expenditure of flowers and branches of greenery, and payment for those carrying the processional cross and torches,. There is sometime mention of payment to children who walked in front of the procession and strew flowers on the processional route. In the villages the administrative, political and financial structures were so much simpler that a certain unity delimited the contours of Corpus Christi organisation and celebration. We will return later to the rural Corpus Christi procession, since its experience was hardly impoverished by this structural simplicity.

In towns, boundaries and loyalties abounded. Each procession reflected a different type of affinity, a distinct layer of power. A town like York could have a procession of the ca-

processional and liturgical year of a late medieval town see C. PHYTIAN-ADAMS, «Ceremony and the Citizen: the Communal Year in Coventry 1450-1550», in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack, London, 1972, pp. 57-85.

thedral, a procession of its foremost abbey (St Mary's) and a town-wide procession, organised by the town council, and in which secular and religious corporations of the town took place. There were also parochial celebrations, and the Corpus Christi fraternity celebrated separately its mass and feast. As the feast was initially introduced in the religious sphere with strong expository and processional modes of display, townsfolk, and particular town rulers came to appreciate the possibilities inherent in the event. That they became involved is hardly surprising. A large feast involved the secular authorities at least in functions of policing, lay people further were expected to provide alms and gifts on the day, and to attend along the processional route, saluting and genuflecting as the eucharist passed by. The eucharistic procession this contained elements which presupposed participation, even supervision by secular authority. And the more plentiful the secular attachment to the processions, the more ordered the groupings, the more magnificent the flags and torches and hangings which they sported, the more magnificent the celebratory effect. And there was a very clear focus to the procession, no matter how large and inclusive it became: at its heart resided the most holiest thing, the most powerful symbol within the religious world – the eucharist carried in the hand of a bishop (in a cathedral town), or a priest. It is interesting to note how quickly the canopy became an important element of the processional heart, as if it was invented to provide a position for four high-born men in the position, never quite touching the eucharistic vessel, closest to the symbolic heart of the procession, and of the universe. The language of power which surrounded the eucharist provided the trope of its ordering, it also suggested a whole array of manifestations of power and authority and the rigid ordering of hierarchy, imparted by the eucharist to those closer or further from it. Disputes between corporations, office holders, religious houses, as to their place in the procession could be drawn out over decades.

As the feast remained pristine within religious houses, the celebrations of parishes and cathedrals could not escape greater participation and elaboration. But the liturgical procession sometimes provided merely the starting point for celebrations which became so elaborate as to eventually develop a life of their own. The celebrations in York were separated in the early fifteenth century into two separate sections: the cathedral procession around the town, and the series of Corpus Christi dramatic pageants, series of biblical tales told by the craft guilds in turn. This was a functional division, as the celebrations came to fill the space of more than one day, a great boost to local shopkeepers and taverners, but also a more substantial statement since the secular part of the celebrations came increasingly to be seen as unruly and undignified, unfitting for the eucharistic veneration which the day called for. In other places the impulse for inclusion was similarly attenuated by circumstance. Whereas in most towns participation aimed to include the political bodies of the town: the guilds and the town council, in a town like London such a project was quite unthinkable because of size and disparity amongst over one hundred guilds. In York we find much more pronounced activity in parishes and parish fraternities, and a single town wide celebration prompted by one of the town's richest guilds, the Skinners, whose fraternity was devoted to Corpus Christi. Here the choice was a procession of *tableaux vivants*⁸ telling the story of salvation and the development of the eucharist in separate scenes. In London, corporatism was more divisive than cohesive, and thus it never developed as the underpinning of wide-spread celebration.

Within the corporate structure of most late medieval towns Corpus Christi came to be celebrated through the efforts and contributions of the guilds, as mediated by the ex-

8. On the drama attached to Corpus Christi see V.A. KOLVE, *The Play Called «Corpus Christi»*, London, 1966; RUBIN, *Op. cit.*, pp. 271-287.

ecutive body of the town council. But some groups chose further articulation of their identity through adhesion to the eucharistic symbol. We find an interesting phenomenon in English towns, where the foremost patrician fraternity, the social and religious groupings which included those in and aspiring to office, chose to dedicate themselves to Corpus Christi. The foremost fraternity in York, Leicester, Cambridge, Coventry, Lincoln, were devoted to Corpus Christi. And this brought with it processional privileges, as fraternity members were those who carried the canopy, surrounded the clerical heart of the procession and even were allowed to provide the tabernacle within which it was carried. So the language of exclusivity which surrounded the eucharist was thus taken up by the exclusive patrician groups of towns as their foremost devotional choice.

The impulse created by the public celebration of the eucharist was thus not only a powerful principle for the ordering and display of hierarchy, but an occasion to spread around for good effect the sacred power which was the eucharist. Itineraries of Corpus Christi processions often show the underlying understanding of the principle of cohesion in the town's history. In Aix-en-Provence the procession traced the line of the eleventh century town, a step back into the mythical past of the town's autonomous existence⁹. In Beverley the procession marked out a backbone to the town in its central commercial section. Procession could sew together parishes to cathedrals, wards to market places, suburbs to centre. It could be made reinforced some chosen principle of connection and mark control and subordination alike. In the countryside the Corpus Christi procession and its liturgy were co-opted for annual restatement of the physical and sacral boundaries of villages, as processions

9. For interesting examples of processional itineraries see N. COULET, «Processions, espace urbain, communauté civique», *Cahiers de Fanjeaux*, 17, 1982, pp. 381-397.

passed along fields, stopped to chant and given trees, rocks, crosses in a public reminder of a community's physical contours. The blessings included in the Corpus Christi office, the readings for its octave were used as powerful statements with immediate and local meaning.

The power of this public display of the holiest and the occasion that it created for the sanctioning of hierarchies and other relations took on a life of its own as eucharistic processions came to be demanded and created on other occasions. Think of the Florentine eucharistic processions to ward off the plague in 1349; of the eucharistic procession to intercede for good weather (particularly common in Germany)¹⁰. Reformers in the fifteenth century complained bitterly that the eucharist was taken out practically every day for some purpose or other, and was thus trivialised. Synods in the fifteenth century try reestablish the primacy of the single eucharistic procession on Corpus Christi day or its octave¹¹. To the profusion of eucharistic showings one must also add the growing profusion of cults of bleeding and miraculous hosts, some of which were the products of alleged host desecrations by Jews. These too drew pilgrims, were displayed on feast days, to further thicken the symbolic atmosphere around the eucharist. To Luther Corpus Christi represented the very worst in Christian ritual practice: the meaningless repetition, the unthinking veneration of crowds, the magical manipulation rather than spiritual reflection which it seemed to induce, and the complicity of the clergy in all this.

Corpus Christi, the celebration of the eucharist, prompted an impulse to dramatise the story of salvation and to arti-

10. On the uses of the Eucharist see Rubin, *Op. cit.*, pp. 334-342.

11. On the uses of the holy in daily life see R. Scribner, «Ritual and popular religion in catholic Germany in the time of the Reformation», *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35, 1984, pp. 47-77; for the critique of eucharistic uses see C. ZIKA, «Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages in Fifteenth-Century Germany», *Past and Present*, 118, 1988, pp. 25-64.

culate clerical privilege. In the display of the holiest symbol of Christendom, which resided in tension between its great accessibility – eating God's body at every communion, and its mystery and distance – the holiest substance which was to be handled by the clergy alone. We witness a vast range of interpretations and application as this symbol became integrated into the life of late medieval towns and villages: its ability to suggest a principle for the ordering of hierarchy, affinity and status; its supernatural power in marking boundaries and inducing well-being or disaster. This was the field in which creativity was constantly at work by those who made the feast, attended it, learned from it, financed it, decorated the outer walls of their houses for it, or dressed their children up as angels on its occasion. The meanings thus generated were bounded by 'rules' of eucharistic association, but they were also personal and group utterances in the language of religion, which can never fit strictly into the enunciations which are normative. Too much of the interpretation of Corpus Christi processions has been done in a functionalist mood, or within structuralist constraints, people have sought in its celebrations some inner key to the code of medieval society¹². They have also attempted to see in Corpus Christi rituals some of the social 'glue' which would help historians explain elements of solidarity and cooperation in the life of late medieval towns. I would like to offer Corpus Christi as an intervention which occurs within a specific local context, thirteenth century Liège, which was universalised so as to baring it too a wide European audience. It contained certain possibilities for display, cooperation and the mounting of collective initiatives, it had a language of power, and this was quickly recognised by those who possessed raw political power, and who sought to legitimate it. The degree to which this worked, the effect of

12. M.R. JAMES, «Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval Town», *Past and Present*, 98, 1983, pp. 3-29.

Corpus Christi celebrations on those who viewed them, on those who processed, in terms of the putative acceptance of the social order portrayed by the procession is something which cannot be deduced, and should not be assumed. We have much evidence to show that Corpus Christi processions were occasions for strife, in stages of preparation, as well as in the enactment. The majesty that was the eucharist was often the subject for ridicule, disbelief, and public denunciation by heretics. The eucharist was too vulnerable an artifact for power to flow unambiguously from it. It could be trivialised, and mocked, and over-used.

What we can say is that the eucharist was party of a field of cultural action, of use and appropriation of symbols which is the very life of any culture. That the eucharist was produced pristine from the books of theologians and the preaching of parish priests is in itself a fantasy, but even if there was a clear normative notion of the eucharist and the world that it underpinned which was conveyed more or less effectively to most Christians, this is only the beginning of the process of making and remaking of the eucharist. The same with the eucharist feast: Corpus Christi was an occasion for the eucharistic symbol to be made meaningful in the streets of medieval towns, in the fields of its villages. Through processes of assimilation, analogy, extrapolation, always within a field of contestation and power, the Corpus Christi of every town and village were created, and continued to be created as every summer approached. In this sense, Corpus Christi, the most universal feast was at the same time the most local, the product of local knowledge, and the use of symbols which made the world of late medieval people.

This making can be dramatic, controversial, denying and contestatory, some of these would lead ultimately into the Reformation, when the central symbols of the culture had to be redesigned: the eucharist: rejected or meaningfully embraced. This is perhaps to suggest that a symbol can be-

come too laden with conflicting and overlapping meanings to allow it to remain as useful as it may have been. The eucharist became the object of desire, the subject of so many practices and rituals, many of them flowing through and around the feast of Corpus Christi, that its power as a token of communication may have been impaired by the late fifteenth century, even as its suggestive and creative possibilities for other purposes – mysticism, magic – was still intact¹³. By the late fifteenth century, as the feast was to be taken to continents and peoples new, Corpus Christi was overlaid by local, sectional, confraternal expressions of identity and power, an amalgam of pageantry from the bible to romance, and the trappings of majesty around the royal/divine eucharist. To take this on a long journey and to bring it to new context, would submit the feast to a new series of similar interpretations. And here too, those in positions of power and authority will be able to design the feast, plan its celebrations, bound its order, but as in the tale just told it would be subject of contestation, interpretation and the application to new contexts and issues. In this, as in other areas of the religious culture, politics and identity in these new places will be played out around the symbol of the most powerful, the eternal, the divine.

13. On the multiple modes of identity construction around the Eucharist see M. RUBIN, «The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities», in *Culture and History 1350-1600: essays on English Communities, Identities and Writings*, ed. D. Aers, Hemel Hempstead, 1992, pp. 43-63; and in the context of drama see S. BECKWITH, "Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body, in *Culture and History*, pp. 65-89.