

Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le cloître des ombres*, Paris (Gallimard) 2021, 480 p. (Bibliothèque des histoires), ISBN 978-2-07-293146-8, EUR 29,50.

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Jean-Claude Schmitt's new book, »Le cloître des ombres«, is really two books. The first is a detailed analysis of a 13th-century treatise of demonology called the »Liber revelationum«. The second is a translation of the text itself. Written by a monk known only as »N« (which Schmitt suggests could stand for *nomen*) and divided into 174 chapters, it contains the details of the otherworldly encounters of Richalm, the abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Schöntal. An eccentric work, the first 83 chapters contain dialogues in which N. and Richalm discuss his experiences with »good spirits and demons«. Chapters 84 to 159 then switch to third person narratives, probably because N. composed them after 1219, when Richalm had died. The final 15 chapters contain, mainly, an attack on an unnamed monk who had made a faulty copy of N.'s text before N. himself was ready to circulate it. Although the »Monumenta Germaniae Historica« published an edition of the »Liber revelationum« in 2009, the text remains little-known among medievalists, even among specialists of monastic thought. Schmitt's commentary and translation thus provide a real service by calling attention to the world of N. and Richalm and perhaps the wider worlds of a 13th-century monastic thought.

Schmitt divides his commentary into two sections of four chapters each. The first part provides an overview of both the text and of monastic life more generally. In the opening chapter we meet N., a learned monk with a solid training in biblical exegesis and patristic studies, and Richalm who, in addition to confronting supernatural spirits, is also subject to a string of more mundane struggles –toothaches, coughs, an irregular heartbeat, nausea, and flatulence. He also suffered from occasional memory loss, a detail which will no doubt inspire medically minded readers to seek psychological explanations for his visions. In the second chapter, Schmitt discusses monastic life more generally, including the basics of Cistercian history, the arrangement of monastic space, and the organization of the liturgical calendar. The accent in these passages is on the theme of enclosure, perhaps the key force in shaping Richalm's psychology.

Chapter three addresses these psychological and supernatural themes more directly. Returning to a topic from one of his earlier books, Schmitt observes that monks in the story tend to go unnamed, unless they are dead and visiting the monastery as revenants, seeking prayers to help them escape Purgatory. Although the living monks tend to be nameless, they are not without personality. The monastery, as Schmitt describes it, is a place of bickering, resentment, and petty jealousy. Readers



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familiar with other monastic literature – for example, Jocelyn of Brakelond's »Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmund's« – will not be surprised to learn these details. But unlike in Jocelyn's book, Richalm lays blame for conflicts at the incorporeal feet of demons. The final chapter of the book's first part examines the theme of bodily discipline. The emphasis is less on asceticism and more on overall conduct, which in part is shaped by demons. These four chapters have several sophisticated observations, but they seem aimed mostly at a general public rather than medievalists, for whom much of the material here will seem basic.

The book's second part, however, is much more sophisticated and at times even frightening. After a somewhat pedestrian chapter on Richalm's visions of saints, the sixth chapter, the book's longest, offers an elaborate discussion of just what the spirits haunting Richalm's monastery were and what they were not. The good spirits, for example, were not angels as usually understood. There is no angelic hierarchy in Richalm's system. Similarly, with demons, Richalm does not write of them as servants of the devil. He never refers to Satan. Rather, his world is full of demonic essences, not the anthropomorphic creatures made familiar through countless illustrations, but rather armies of disembodied beings who in military fashion bombard monks with temptations so powerful as to undermine the concept of free will. There are heroic good spirits to oppose them, sometimes presenting themselves as animals. A little bird, for example, appears to Richalm as an avatar of Christ. But the evil demons in the text vastly outnumber their beneficent counterparts. Richalm is often the only one who recognizes the danger. When others hear a rooster crow, Richalm senses a demon speaking through a rooster. The rumblings of Richalm's tortured digestive system are the murmurings of foul spirits. Tinnitus is the whispering of demons. Sometimes demons seize control of human voices and speak in repetitive, spell-like phrases. After, in the seventh chapter, a comparatively unengaging meditation on the senses, Schmitt returns to these unsettling themes in the eighth chapter. Richalm does not, he observes, tell typical stories of exorcism. What he describes instead are lives and minds under siege, debilitating battles interrupted by an occasional hint of heaven, hidden for example in the scent of a rose, but a contest that ends only in death, if then.

Throughout »Le cloître des ombres«, Schmitt suggests that this conception of the spiritual world was more widely shared in the monastic world. It is a difficult case to make, in part because the text's circulation was relatively limited, and in part because of Schmitt's microhistorical approach. We see very little beyond the »Liber revelationum«. Other texts and writers do appear, among them Otloh of Saint-Emmeran, Guibert of Nogent, and Hildegard of Bingen, but only briefly. A more fulsome discussion of demonology in medieval texts, integrated throughout the book, would have made for a richer historical presentation. If Richalm is typical of his world, one wonders how the Benedictine ideal has become so warped from its presentation by Gregory the Great in his »Life of St. Benedict«. In that earlier world, monastic walls



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combined with the heroic virtue of the abbot kept demons at bay. Monks were safe so long as they practiced stability and obedience. Demons never got inside. For Richalm monastic walls have become ineffectual. The enemy moves throughout the besieged city at will. It is a profoundly disturbing vision of life, and the urge to psychoanalyze it is almost irresistible. Schmitt is right to resist it. One does not need to appeal to modern clinical methods, however, to wonder if Richalm is in fact an outlier in his medieval world.

Readers can draw their own conclusions, of course, because the last 170 pages of »Le cloître des ombres« provide a translation of N.'s text. It is a marvelous tour of a mind struggling against the confines of a small, enclosed place, a world which – as Schmitt writes in a brief preface – is not entirely unfamiliar. For an audience right now, at this historical moment, so long confined by a pandemic, a thick army of aery spirits that threatens health and life and leads to madness, is lamentably familiar.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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