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Review: Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: the Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago, 1998)

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Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society. By Jean-Claude Schmitt, Jr. (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan) (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998) 290 pp. \$33.00

This is not a book about ghosts per se but about the idea of ghosts. As Schmitt observes in the very first line, “the dead have no existence other than that which the living imagine for them” (1). In fact, the author’s expressed intention is to use medieval conceptions of ghosts as a window into medieval society and culture in general, and attitudes about the relationship between the living and the dead in particular, between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries. Schmitt has avoided the temptation to reduce the great variety of medieval experiences with ghosts to a “universal symbolism” (222). He has also eschewed the construction of an “archeology” of ghosts that would involve tracing their evolution from ancient times. Instead, Schmitt has proposed “to show how beliefs and the imaginary depend above all on the structures of the functioning of the society and the culture at a given period of time,” and to show how inheritances from the past “have continued to be reworked into the *present* functioning of societies and cultures at each moment in history” (3, 222).

As commendable as these goals are, it is not clear that in this case they yield a particularly useful study of ghosts in the Middle Ages. In the author’s determination to avoid sweeping statements about medieval belief in ghosts, he has dedicated much of his book to an uneven sequence of episodes in the history of ghostly encounters—each one interpreted within a specific context—that does not permit general conclusions. Some of the chapters are more thematically oriented than others. Chapter six focuses on the appropriation and standardization of ghost tales for use as exempla in mendicant sermons. The last two chapters (eight and nine) lean more in the direction of a typology of elements in ghost stories, with an emphasis on how, when, and where ghosts tended to appear.

The book as a whole is not without its share of interesting observations, such as the well-illustrated point that although autobiographical records of encounters with ghosts tended to “give no visible form to the spirit” (40), second-hand accounts, when appropriated for a particular ideological purpose, often involved the objectification of the ghost (222).

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