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Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred

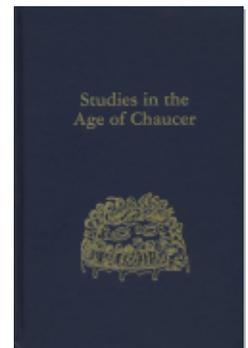
by Barbara Newman (review)

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vory. Alliterative romance becomes a doomed voice crying in the wilderness, against Anglo-Norman, southern, and Lancastrian literary empire-building. As a result, Mueller's argument ultimately reechoes in a more theorized and clerical key J. R. Hulbert's thesis linking alliterative romance with provincial resistance. Anyone interested in British national fantasy, ideologies of empire and their discontents, vernacular politics, and deeply learned, well-written historiographical argument should read this book and judge for him or herself.

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BARBARA NEWMAN. *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. 416. \$42.00.

There has been a flurry of recent interest in the category of the "secular" as it pertains to medieval literature, partly in response to the grouping of work on vernacular religious texts under the aegis of a "Religious Turn" and partly in response to the thriving debate about the secular in the fields of anthropology, political theory, sociology, and philosophy. In this debate, the secular is frequently defined in spatial terms, as a coordinate of the "public sphere," for example, or the nation state, whereas for medieval Christians the secular was primarily a category of time. This alternative definition suggests one contribution that medieval studies can make to current theorizing about the secular, and it is one framework in which to understand perhaps the broadest contribution of Barbara Newman's *Medieval Crossover*. Drawing on her formidable command of medieval literary and religious cultures, Newman argues for a complementary relationship between the secular and sacred in a range of texts and genres, a "both/and" model of "double judgment" that depends on their simultaneous presence, and that is thus antithetical to the figurative spatiality of the secular in modern discourses, with their strong presumption that the secular and sacred map discrete zones.

Medieval Crossover, developed from Newman's 2011 Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies at Notre Dame, positions itself as a correction of both "Robertsonian" "exegetical" readings that overvalue the influence

of Latinate theology on the meaning of vernacular texts, and more recent interpretations that attend only to “subversive” responses to dominant Christian paradigms. This may seem to overlook the wealth of scholarship that falls into neither camp, but Newman’s approach nevertheless represents a methodological advance in the way it accords roughly equal status to the “sacred” and “secular,” neither crediting the cultural primacy that some theology claimed for itself, nor reading religion as merely epiphenomenal to “secular” economic or political formations.

Newman outlines three key conceptual frameworks in the introductory first chapter. She first posits a hermeneutic of “both/and” that echoes medieval dialectic and derives its authority, above all, from the idea of *felix culpa*, in which sin is seen in terms of its redemptive complement. A form of the secular emerges from the “conjointure” of pagan and Christian: that is, as a “meeting place for two rival forms of the sacred.” Newman elaborates this strikingly original claim through a reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the secular “meeting place” materializes as the Green Knight’s barrow-chapel, where the green man of pagan lore meets the Christian knight. In the spirit of “both/and,” I wonder how one might reconcile this reading with an alternative one that recognizes the Green Knight’s “paganism” less as a rival form of the sacred than as a sort of negative impression of Christianity that preserves—and thus naturalizes—some of its core assumptions about the status and function of religion: e.g., that religion is a mechanism for cultivating or revealing a private identity, or that it comprises a set of rituals whose external form can be distinguished from their real force. Rather than a point of conjunction between two antithetical religions, that is, Gawain’s confessional encounter with the Green Knight may be seen to conceptualize religion as a category in Christian terms.

Hybrid texts and genres—crossovers between erotic and religious lyric, for example, or romance and saints’ lives—provide a third model of “both/and.” Newman attends not only to shared formal and representational strategies (such as the oft-remarked similarity between the virgin martyr and the lady of romance), but also to the distinctive relationship between ethics and allegory often cultivated in such hybrid texts. Thus in the *Life of Pope Gregorius*, the saint—the product of incest who inadvertently marries his mother—is redeemed not only through confession and penance, but also through the allegorical significance assigned to his sin: the saint and his mother signify Christ married to

the Church. A violation of Christian ethics is revealed nevertheless to point to Christian truth. Newman develops a very useful hermeneutic for understanding texts such as this. But, as this case study suggests, the “double coding” of ethical transgression as confirmation of the sacred may also be read as evidence of a much more closed system than the model of “both/and” proposes. On the other hand, a text like the *Life of Pope Gregorius* may be read as an exploration of the tensions that attend the improbable linking of ethics (practices in the *saeculum*) and the supraethical sacred in Christian thought. As several of her case studies show, medieval literature repeatedly probes the contradictions that arise from rooting ethical systems in a sacred that is defined as that which transcends social norms.

Chapter 2 explores Arthurian romances, focusing especially on Lancelot, as he appears in Chrétien’s *Knight of the Cart*; two thirteenth-century Grail romances, *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste del Saint Graal*; and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. The secular is here identified with a mythic paganism that surfaces in elements of the plot—the cart, the sword bridge, the abduction of the queen, etc.—whose elusive significance makes possible both Christian allegorical readings and those that celebrate erotic love. In later Grail romances, this structure contracts from the level of tradition to the individual plot: rather than ancient pagan lore rewritten by the poet as a vehicle for Christian significance, secular commitments of characters within a romance are “rewritten” by a sacred counterpart, as when Guinevere’s girding of Lancelot is “recuperated” by Galahad, girded by Perceval’s sister. Malory institutes further changes, crafting the *Morte Darthur* as both a pagan myth of Arthur and a hagiography of a saintly Lancelot, in part by taking advantage of the slippery relation between treason and sainthood in the volatile climate of fifteenth-century England.

Chapter 3 offers a brilliant analysis of the relationship between Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* and vernacular literary traditions in Picardy with which it shares a vocabulary of desire, renunciation, freedom, excess, and annihilation, including the lyric poetry of the *puys* of Valenciennes, beguine poetry, and regional recensions of the *Roman de la rose*. The beautifully textured close readings in this chapter, which trace Porete’s influence on secular literary culture as well as her immersion in it, make a powerful case against the segregation of women’s mystical literature from other forms of vernacular literary production. The chapter closes with an analysis of the *Mirror* as a reading of the

Roman de la rose, “in reverse, de-eroticized and told from the perspective of the Rose” (161), and a stunning argument that the theologians who drew up the charges in Porete’s heresy trial confused her theology with Jean de Meun’s “libertine view of Nature,” which extricates sex from a Christian paradigm of sin.

Chapter 4 explores three very different texts under the label of *parodia sacra*, by which Newman refers to sacred tropes or narratives repurposed for “profane” ends: the *Lai d’Ignaure*, the *Passion of the Jews of Prague*, and the *Dispute between God and His Mother*, the last two of which are edited in appendices to the book. Parody is, as Newman remarks, a mode that destabilizes meaning in ways intended and unintended, and her readings in this chapter are the ones most likely to provoke further debate. In *Ignaure*, the many women who have taken Ignaure as a lover are fed his penis and heart by their vengeful husbands, a narrative that Newman reads as a satire on women’s eucharistic devotion, another “ritual feast on the body of the Beloved” (178). The *Dispute between God and His Mother* pitches “the Christ of the poor” against a bourgeois Mary who rebukes her son for his poverty, as the poem validates and mocks her prudence and his “divine prodigality” in equal measure. An account of the massacre of Jews in Prague in 1389, the *Passion of the Jews of Prague*, attributed to one “John the Peasant,” affiliates the Jews with Christ, even as it celebrates the horrific violence against them. Newman considers this work a parody of the Gospel, a reading that she supports by pointing out the *Passion’s* Gospel intertexts, which, she argues, create a “textual unconscious” at odds with the work’s evident purpose. Newman proposes that some medieval Christian readers might have been capable of recognizing the terrible irony of this savage text. A full analysis of the work as Gospel parody would also need to explain how it functions to construct a categorical difference between Jesus and the Prague Jews that codes the violence against them as legitimate.

The last chapter reads René of Anjou’s devotional *Mortification of Vain Pleasure* and his *Book of the Love-Smitten Heart* against one another. In each, a heart—extracted from the Soul in *Mortification* and from the Lover in the *Book of the Heart*—undergoes a quest that ends in solitary prayer. In the context of the secular love allegory, this ending would be a mark of failure. In the context of the devotional allegory, however, it marks the achievement of the ultimate goal: devout renunciation located in the private self. Newman suggests that this conclusion reflects the “democratization of piety,” as vernacular religious texts made a rig-

orous devotional life accessible to an increasingly broad lay audience. The secular beloved, in contrast, remained potentially inaccessible: “the lady, unlike God, reserved the right to say ‘no’” (253).

In the conclusion, Newman generously identifies her work as laying a path to be pursued by others. In addition to the method it outlines, *Medieval Crossover* provides the ground for exploring why so many medieval texts and genres—in serious and playful registers—construct an inextricable relationship between the secular and the sacred, even when they seem most antithetical to one another. Part of the answer may lie in the way that these texts, individually and collectively, work to identify religion as both normative and counter-normative: in many of the vernacular articulations of the *felix culpa* and other forms of paradox that Newman discusses, secular ethics are instantiated, maintained, and elaborated, even as the moral judgment they presume is reversed by the sacred, a category frequently defined in contradistinction to secular ethical and social protocols. This understanding of religion may be so familiar as to seem to inhere in the category itself, but cultural theorists working in a postcolonial framework—e.g., Talal Asad and others—have taught us to recognize that the particular conjunction of belief and practice on which it relies is historically and culturally specific. In presenting a range of texts characterized by “double coding” and “double judgment,” *Medieval Crossover* puts us in a position to ask why medieval literature endeavored so often, and in such varied forms, to conceptualize religion as the point of intersection between the ethical and the supraethical—or, to put it somewhat differently, to ask why medieval literature defined itself, at least in part and frequently in practice, in terms of its capacity to produce elegant, irreverent, and enigmatic renderings of that intersection.

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JOHN SCATTERGOOD. *Occasions for Writing: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature, Politics and Society*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010. Pp. 272. €55.00.

John Scattergood has produced another collection largely consisting of previously published items. In their original venues, the essays on Chau-