

Barbara Newman, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) ISBN 978-0-268-03611-9 (Paperback); 416 pages; \$42.

What Barbara Newman proposes in *Medieval Crossover* is nothing less than a new paradigm for reading medieval literature. Her primary hermeneutic is that of the 'principle of double judgment' she finds both of use to the modern critic and inherent in theology and exegesis in the Middle Ages. This principle, threaded through the book, is one of 'both/and'; it permits the sacred and her various forms of the 'profane' to be understood as united in textual and intellectual symbiosis. As in the motet, her 'crossover genre *par excellence*', a sacred *cantus firmus* – the tenor voice which intones a liturgical phrase – is both foundational and yet strangely in counterpoint to middle and upper voices singing longer, and perhaps themselves contrasting, vernacular lyrics. The whole tones precisely as it contrasts, melds, and agrees in a harmony musically dependent on difference. Newman finds this type of situation, with all its interpretative dilemmas, more the medieval rule than the exception.

Gorgeously written, full of piquantly scented and coloured phrases and paradoxes, this book is a garden to be walked through not just by medievalists alone. Indeed it stands as a contribution to the cross-disciplinary secularization debate in its own right. For if the holy and the seemingly unholy engage and co-contribute even in the normatively sacred Middle Ages, this surely opens the way to a more capacious understanding of sacred content in later literature – although this is to read deliberately against Newman's rather provocative foreclosure of 'crossover' in the early modern period. Identifying such a complex sacred-secular 'spectrum' implicitly questions the existence of an end-closed 'secular'. Along the way, she provides fruitful new readings of old and well-carved oaks: engaging with the convergence and divergence of Celtic pagan and Christian chivalric strands in Arthurian romance through *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chrétien de Troyes' *Chevalier de la Charette*, *Perceval*, the *Queste del Graal*, and the ending of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Newman also cultivates some fertile new crosses; the heresy-accused mystic Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* is located in the soil of a diverse Picard literary culture, and as cross-pollinating with the ecstatic poetry of the Béguines, and even with the 'profoundly profane' *Roman de la Rose* – and its many sacralizations. She introduces us to some rarer and more dangerous strains in her chapter on parody: the *Lai d'Ignaure*, the Middle French *Dispute between God and his Mother*, and the poisonous bloom that is the Latin *Passion of the Jews of Prague*. Finally she renews two old varieties; her last chapter unravels the complementarity of René d'Anjou's devotional and amorous allegories, the *Mortifiement de Vaine Plaisance*, and the *Livre du Cœur Epris*. Demonstrably here, Newman's medievalism is firmly European, acknowledging vernacular exchange and English francophonia as well as latinity.

D.W. Robertson's infamous 'exegetical' approach risked viewing the Middle Ages itself as *hortus conclusus*, as a fair enclosed garden of moral and hermeneutic alterity. Within this garden, all critical interpretation tended towards his

understanding of allegoresis as a perfect decoding: no tree could grow that was not also either tree of life or tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He read with what he considered to be the correct, and medieval, mode of interpretation after Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. This meant a 'wheat-and-chaff hermeneutics' whereby the form exists only for the sacred content, the husk only for the aesthetic pleasure of the hulling. Robertson's readings tended to fetch forth *either* deep irony *or* deep sacrality, charity upheld or cupidity revealed. For Newman the main problem is that, in the wake of the rejection of Robertsonianism, there has been something of a scorched earth policy on these questions. Whilst many cultivators are working individually at their plots, the terrain has been barren of any fresh attempts to posit large-scale interpretative paradigms. In the vacuum, she suggests at points, have arisen the alternatives of either literary 'subversion' whereby texts are archly and in anachronistically modern manner read to be working against the sacred 'norms' or the endlessly mobile and infinitely differentiated Middle Ages, a permanent indeterminacy which can exercise its own effective tyranny. Where others have been tempted to either to tear Robertson's garden to pieces or to question its existence Newman, refreshingly, picks up the rake.

Newman rightly realises that a proper critical return to 'exegetical criticism' requires a new account of medieval exegesis. The relationship of scriptural reading modes to literary ones cannot be got rid of; texts such as Dante's *Epistle to Can Grande* tell us explicitly that vernacular poets could suggest their work be read using a typological process. Newman joins a recent array of critics concerned with the both/and, the paradox, and the irony innate in medieval exegesis and allegoresis: Sarah Kay, Catherine Brown, and Larry Scanlon, to cite just a few. What is particularly innovative here is that she argues that the very division we find in reading medieval texts – which can appear to be between the possibilities of a 'profane' or secular versus a 'sacred' sense – is paralleled, if not originated, in both exegetical practice *and* the theological ideas which underlie and inform it. Her 'principle of double judgment' is rooted in fundamentally theological ground as she points out that salvation history itself involves a 'doubleness' principle, and hence a possibility of double-reading, in the idea of the 'fortunate fall'. The theological principle of *felix culpa* is that by which the narrative of the fall is necessarily a part of the narrative of salvation: the way down is the way up. Second – and evidently in a related fashion – reading the *sensus mysticus* in scripture frequently involves interpretation 'against' the literal 'grain' with its perhaps self-evident immorality. Hence David's adultery with Bathsheba can be, mystically, the rejection of the old law for the new. Exegesis in Newman's account envelopes and even *celebrates* such paradoxes – and suggests the distinct possibility that medieval readers would find the both/and had a certain sense – just as they could read both in moral and mystical senses.

After Newman's first chapter 'Theorizing Crossover', which introduces her paradigm, Chapter Two, 'Double Coding' applies this approach to the Old French and Middle English Arthurian texts listed above. Here she argues that both the 'wheat' of the sacred and the 'chaff' or the erotic or the comedic must be taken seriously.

Newman's readings of Lancelot in the *Morte* and the *Chevalier de la Charrette*, for example, challenge the sense that he must be *either* an erotic hero *or* a perhaps allegorical ideal of Christian chivalry *or* an adulterous anti-hero. Lancelot's quest in the latter to rescue Guinevere from the giant Meleagant includes Christ-like elements of humiliation and ordeal, but is also at times ribaldly comic and – of course – is at the plot-level a story of adultery. C.S. Lewis celebratedly found the moment of the *Charrette* where Lancelot kneels before the 'altar' of Guinevere's bed, the most 'ridiculous' of all in what he still thought of as the 'Religion of Love'. The (in)famous Jacques Ribard reading deals with the problem of a Christianized erotic by a 'Song of Songs' reading, interpreting the whole as a spiritual allegory of the spiritual union of the Soul or the Church with Christ. Robertson's moralistic rather than mystical interpretation draws the inverse conclusion – that the sacred elements are only there as a raucous and biting funny indictment of the deeply anti-Christ-like mode of Lancelot's cupidity. Newman takes new steps here not just with this one text but with the entire question of the relationship between the discourses of profane and sacred love. The text remains both/and: 'Lancelot's love is sublime *and* idolatrous, his behaviour heroic *and* ridiculous.' What is particularly interesting is that Newman seems genuinely to be attempting to navigate between both the danger of reading in only a sacred or only an ironic sense *and* that of culminating in an amorphous open-ended postmodern preference for the text's ahistorical infinite polysemism. The both/and is a hermeneutic that is at the outset based in theological ideas – although perhaps here one feels that Newman could carry her own *felix culpa* argument further. Fallen nature nuances questions of 'justice' and can question a moral perfection so rigidly felt it refuses space for gracious action – such as that of Gawain before his encounter with the Green Knight. One could argue that the double judgment on Lancelot has a great deal to do with the realization that our sinful natures are the means of our redemption, and that it is human 'doubleness' – divine potential in fleshly form – with which this literature is concerned.

In Chapter Three, 'Conversion', Newman demonstrates the historicism of her approach by engaging with the particular context of Marguerite Porete and the Picard literary culture of her time. In Porete's home town of Valenciennes in the fourteenth-century, literary and religious fraternities called *puy*s ('podiums') *de nostre dame* ran poetical, musical, and dramatic competitions based around the composition of the love song proper – the *amoureuse* – and its sacralization and burlesquing in the *serventois* and *sotte chansons* respectively. Newman finds this a convincingly shaded and blended backdrop against which to read Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Certainly Porete's 'courtly' tales and dialogues are pressed into mystical service, but Newman is also arguing here for a parallel development and a mutual borrowing of ideas central to the 'metaphysics' of both one and the other love. So she finds in the poetry of the *trouvères* ideas suspiciously akin to Marguerite's of the abandonment and annihilation of the self – for the distantiated 'other' of the lover rather than the divine. I would question this reading only to wonder whether the texts on romantic love, precisely by refusing to cast out intermediate human charity as Porete's perfected soul

finally does, do not pull these ideas *back* from her arguable quietism. The final flourish in this chapter is to argue for a surprising ‘convergence’ of the *Roman de la Rose* and Porete’s *Miroir*. Both the Lover and Porete’s Free Soul depart from Reason and the Virtues for Love – in the one case to lift the soul above, making her mistress of servant virtues, and in the other, eventually, to cause the Lover to sink into a spiral of sin and lechery. Newman argues that both the *Roman* and the *Miroir* are engaged with debates of their age. It is well known that the *Roman* mocks the possibility of a spiritualised *fin’amor*, for its spiritualising allegorisation ironically stresses its grossly corporeal nature – the hard, stiff pilgrim’s staff and its hanging bag or scrip are the means of pornographic suggestion. To expand on Newman, if this relation is a real one then it could be argued that its mockery cuts two ways – both skewering *fin’amor*’s religious aspirations and perhaps entering into the theological debate, critiquing the *demesure* which had also become a feature of sacred discourse, as in Porete’s graduation from the requirements of virtue.

Chapter Four, ‘Parody’, has further theoretical contributions to make. Before the sixteenth-century *sacra parodia* meant precisely the opposite of what it might to us now – not the subversion of the sacred but its elevation by imitation, as when lines from Virgil were pieced together to create full Gospel narratives. Newman argues for the meaningful sacred content enacted even in those texts which ‘parody’ in a modern sense. The *Lai d’Igneure* features what can be read as a cannibalistic mock-Eucharist where the body of an adulterous lover is fed to his twelve ladies. This not some wildly avant-garde mockery of the sacrament of the altar itself but a parody of one mode of extreme Eucharistic piety in the Beguines – still sacredly serious, as its seemingly ‘other’ reading as romance tragedy might also suggest. Most troubling of all, but given a fascinating treatment at Newman’s hands, is the case of the *Passion of the Jews of Prague*. This is *sacra parodia* in the ancient sense, taking the historical narrative of a fourteenth-century Jewish pogrom and narrating it as a patchwork of Latin gospel texts in the form of a Passion. Here, she argues, whilst the the authorial intent is unremittingly and sickeningly justificatory, the text may unwittingly parody itself. The Jews of Prague play both the part of the populace who condemn and that of Christ condemned: first turned upon for an alleged attack on a Host procession they nonetheless also play disciple and Christ roles including crucifixion-like deaths presented with words used of the Passion. Here Newman’s idea that no generic ‘convergence’ can be *merely* the adoption of forms, but involves, even against the author’s will, the convergence of some inherent content, salvages some redemptive possibility for the text. She convincingly argues that the very use of the Gospel citations and the identification of the victims with Christ must have made it possible for a medieval reader to see horror in the plight of the Jewish victims, and the text as a whole to become the darkest of satires on their persecutors.

One problem with Newman’s paradigm overall – which, it must be stressed, does not take away from the immensely illuminating content of her individual studies – lies in her use of the term ‘secular’. If celtic paganism, classical paganism, the ‘courtly’, historical narrative *per se*, and seemingly any literary form outside a narrow

range of 'sacred' ones (hagiography, mystic devotion) can all be 'secular', the term seems to have become too laden. Does it stand for the non-Christian, or just for the non-clerical or ecclesial? Newman does in passing acknowledge that the first two are actually their own forms of the sacred, and of course her Chapters 4 and 5 hinge on describing the interplay of courtly and devotional 'metaphysics'. If the sacred is early on categorized by Newman as the medieval 'norm', then perhaps the secular is basically the neutral, the generically or the formally constrained—the husk for the wheat. And yet what Newman's work itself shows is that forms and conventions themselves have hybridity, potentially mundane, potentially sacramental. So the 'secular' constantly escapes conventional definition into a series of alternative sacralities, be they the 'metaphysics' used to speak of romantic love, the ghosts of pagan rite in beheading rituals and reborn kings, or indeed the classical pagan world which interlopes into both to allow such possibilities as personified *Amor*. When Augustine used the term *saeculum* it meant something more temporal: precisely the worldly mixity of the 'two cities' with their two loves. This is the state of the world's perpetual middle age, its *medium aevum* between Eden and Jerusalem, whose 'new' is a perpetual renewal of the eschatological orientation of ourselves and the world towards one city or the other. Newman could even have exchanged her 'principle of double judgment' for a theory of the 'secularity' of medieval literature in this sense.

A further caution I have with regards to this book would be one of periodization. Newman identifies an 'early modern shift' which ends her 'crossover' period and the possibility of double judgment, and represents the entry of the 'properly' secular. She argues that this shift allows the imagining of a 'purely secular realm' for which the Middle Ages used the classical era as a substitute, and could nonetheless not properly conceive. Her framing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a 'perfectly secular comedy', the move with which she opens the book, must be questioned—Beatrice Groves, for example, has written on the echos of medieval drama in Bottom's burlesque resurrection, and his 'dream' speech's relationship to Pauline writing. Newman identifies this fairy-world as unquestionably secular, and yet surely her own development of how pagan, giant, and fairy forces in *Gawain and the Green Knight* can appear to represent divine will has not entirely lost its relevance here? Shakespeare's comedy is patterned through with questions about the stability of the governing supernatural order and its relationship to the human one—themes which do not become radically secular overnight.

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