

MEDIEVAL CROSSOVER



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Reading the Secular against the Sacred

BARBARA NEWMAN

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
List of Illustrations	xv
<i>Chapter 1</i> Theorizing Crossover: Principles and Case Studies	1
A Hermeneutics of Both/And	7
<i>Felix Culpa</i> and the Principle of Double Judgment	13
Pagan <i>Matiere</i> , Christian <i>Sen</i> , and Secular <i>Conjointure</i>	25
Hagiographic Romance: “Everything That Rises Must Converge”	37
<i>Chapter 2</i> Double Coding: Knights of Arthur, Knights of Christ	55
Chrétien’s <i>Charrette</i> : Double Coding, Double Judgment	56
<i>Perlesvaus</i> : The Grail and Christendom’s “Old Laws”	70
Lancelot and the Grail: Chrétien’s Ambiguous Legacy	83
<i>Le Morte Darthur</i> : Double Coding, Double Ending	92

<i>Chapter 3</i>	Conversion: The Literary Traditions of Marguerite Porete	111
	The <i>Puys</i> of Picardy and the Valenciennes Prize Poems	113
	Beguine Lyrics, Recycled Songs, and the <i>Mirror</i>	122
	Roses, Crimson and White	144
	The <i>Mirror</i> and the <i>Rose</i>	153
	From 1277 to 1312, or the Perils of Crossover	161
<i>Chapter 4</i>	Parody: From Profane Communion to Blasphemous Passion	167
	<i>Parodia Sacra</i> and the Principle of the Two-Edged Sword	168
	Obscene Communion: <i>Le lai d'Ignaure</i>	174
	Mocking Mass Murder: <i>The Passion of the Jews of Prague</i>	181
	A Lawsuit in Heaven: <i>The Dispute between God and His Mother</i>	201
<i>Chapter 5</i>	Convergence: René of Anjou and the Heart's Two Quests	223
	Mortifying Vain Pleasure: The King as Vernacular Theologian	226
	The Grail, the Rose, and the Love-Smitten Heart	237
	Converging Quests	249
	Conclusion: A Backward and a Forward Glance	257
	Appendix 1. <i>The Passion of the Jews of Prague according to John the Peasant (1389)</i>	264
	Appendix 2. <i>La Desputoison de Dieu et de sa mère / The Dispute between God and His Mother</i>	272
	Notes	288
	Works Cited	348
	Index	382

PREFACE

Jack shall have Jill;

Nought shall go ill;

The man shall have his mare again,

And all shall be well.

—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.ii.461–64

A Midsummer Night's Dream is the perfect secular comedy. It ends with a few marriages, resolves the absurd twists of its plot, and lets everyone live happily ever after. The supernatural is present, as it must be in every fully imagined world—but the fairies are not angels, and Puck is no devil. Rather, he is the mischievous sprite who declaims these lines as complication bends its merry course toward resolution. Such a comedy is inconceivable in the Middle Ages. Though “all shall be well” is a celebrated medieval refrain, it occurs in a wholly different context where the agent of restoration is—not Puck. The reason that purely secular comedy (or tragedy) cannot exist in a medieval frame of reference is

simple, but this kind of simplicity can be so obvious as to elude our sight. Sacred and secular coexist in our world, after all, just as they did in the Middle Ages. But for us, the secular is the normative, unmarked default category, while the sacred is the marked, asymmetrical Other. In the Middle Ages it was the reverse.

In American culture, “sacred music” and “gospel” are niche markets within the wide world of music, which is presumed secular unless stated otherwise. The same holds true of “spirituality” and “Christian fiction” as publishers’ categories. So thoroughly has secularism become our default that even the religious speak of “giving God a place in their lives,” as if he were lucky to get a slice of the pie. This way of thinking would again have been impossible in a medieval context. By saying this I do not wish to revive the old cliché about an Age of Faith, for levels of faith varied then as they do now, if less openly.¹ What I mean is rather that the sacred was the inclusive whole in which the secular had to establish a niche. That is why the profane appears so ubiquitously in the mode of parody: gargoyles on cathedral roofs, obscene marginalia in books of hours, marital squabbles on misericords, lecherous monks in fabliaux, foxes preaching to hens in beast epics, and so forth. Despite generations of wishful thinking by scholars, little if any of this is transgressive, any more than the shelves of spiritual self-help books at Barnes & Noble are subversive of capitalism. For to parody the sacred is emphatically to engage with it, not to create an autonomous secular sphere. The sacred might be viewed with skeptical, profane, or jaded eyes, but it was still the sacred.

In many ways, the Middle Ages needed the classical world in order to imagine a secular one. Only a pre-Christian worldview, complete in itself, might compete—if not on equal terms, then at least on its own footing—with the sacred world bounded by Creation and Doom. But even so, the sacred tended to reemerge at the very least as a framing device. Medieval chroniclers could fit all of classical history within a narrative framed by the six biblical ages, just as allegorists could accommodate any number of pagan deities in their Christian mythogra-

1. Steven Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?” *Representations* 103 (2008): 1–29.

phies. Dante's *Commedia* encloses a capacious secular sphere, both ancient and modern, within the sacred without remainder. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, which for most of its gorgeous length is humanistic, classical, and pagan, ends with a jarring Christian turn, just as the *Knight's Tale* ends with Boethian providence, the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole with the Parson, and the poet's career with the Retractions. Even Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the closest thing to a secular comic masterpiece that the Middle Ages produced, begins with the Black Death and ends with Griselda, whose allegorical purport was obligingly spelled out by Petrarch. But if *A Midsummer Night's Dream* still classicizes, it is in name only, for there is little of the Athenian about Shakespeare's befuddled lovers. What sets Renaissance humanism apart from medieval humanism is neither a love of the classical nor a penchant to mock the holy, for both had been alive and well for centuries. It is rather the imagining of a secular realm that could, but did not necessarily, engage in any way with the sacred.

This book is about the terms of engagement between sacred and secular before the early modern shift. It interprets the secular as always already in dialogue with the sacred, and it probes that dialogue's many modes. For convenience I refer to this dialectical relationship as "crossover" by analogy with contemporary works that combine distinct genres, such as the graphic novel and the rock opera. In those genres an elite art form (literary fiction, opera) melds seamlessly with a popular one (comic books, rock music). Without pushing the comparison too far, such modern forms furnish analogies for medieval hybrid genres like the motet, the hagiographic romance, and the literature of *la mystique courtoise*, or courtly mysticism. This is not to say that the modern distinction of elite vs. popular maps onto the same categories in the Middle Ages, much less those of sacred and secular. Yet crossing the boundary between them creates a similar sense of novelty and excitement, of being where the action is, that attracts avant-garde audiences while provoking a few sniffs of disapproval from conservatives. Crossover is not a genre in itself, but a mode of interaction, an openness to the meeting or even merger of sacred and secular in a wide variety of forms. In chapter 1 I sketch a few of the principles that shape their interaction: the *sic et non* principle, or hermeneutics of both/and; the principle of double judgment, governed by the paradox of *felix culpa*; the confluence of pagan

matiere and Christian *sen* in some Arthurian romances; and the rule of convergent idealism (“everything that rises must converge”) in hagiographic romance. Examples are supplied by a wide range of texts, including *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a Czech *Life* of St. Catherine, Hartmann von Aue’s *Gregorius*, *Sir Gowther*, and episodes from the *Prose Lancelot*. The four chapters that follow analyze case studies in greater depth.

In chapter 2 I continue my exploration of romance, concentrating on the technique of double coding: the propensity of certain texts to enable both sacred and secular readings, rewarding a hermeneutic strategy of double judgment. The chapter deals with selected Lancelot-Grail romances, from Chrétien de Troyes’ *Knight of the Cart* (or *Lancelot*, 1170s) through *Perlesvaus* (ca. 1200–1210) and *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (ca. 1225) to the ending of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (1470). Another form of double coding in these texts, probably more visible to the modern than the medieval reader, sets the plot motifs of Arthurian romance, derived ultimately from pagan mythology and folklore, against their intended meanings, which characteristically fuse Christian and secular elements.

Chapter 3, “The Literary Traditions of Marguerite Porete,” treats the conversion of secular literary forms—the love lyric and the inescapably profane *Romance of the Rose*—to the purposes of divine love. It aims to illumine Marguerite’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* (ca. 1290–1306) by examining her literary milieu, which was rife with sacred love songs composed by and for beguines, as well as clerical efforts to adapt, interpolate, or compete with the *Rose* in order to promote a love quite different from that sought by Amant. This chapter breaks new ground by reading the *Mirror* against the background not of heresy, mysticism, or women’s writing, but of French vernacular theology.

Chapter 4 investigates parody of the sacred. Since the “high” genres of medieval literature (courtly romance, hagiography, love lyric, hymnody, devotional prose) all display strong idealizing tendencies, the “low” genres (satire, fabliau, beast epic, dramatic farce) achieve much of their counter-idealizing effect by parodying the tropes and conventions of those modes. Because parody may be the relationship we understand most easily, I have chosen some out-of-the-way material to illustrate the very different forms it could take. *Le lai d’Ighaure* (ca. 1200),

a macabre short romance, obliquely mocks women's eucharistic devotion, while the satirical *Dispute between God and His Mother* (1450) skewers Marian piety and a great deal more. More disturbingly, *The Passion of the Jews of Prague* (1389) adapts a form of political satire—the Latin Gospel parody—to celebrate a pogrom, thus profoundly challenging our sense of parody as a comic or subversive mode.

The Grail and the Rose, as icons of sacred and secular love in medieval literature, are the yin and yang of this study. In the classic Taoist symbol, a spot of dark yin balances the bright realm of yang and vice versa. Similarly, chapter 2 asks what the advent of the Grail does to the predominantly secular world of Arthurian romance, and chapter 3 asks how the Rose can be accommodated in the sacred world of beguine writing. After the interlude of chapter 4, my last chapter asks how a writer equally devoted to chivalry, piety, and *fin'amor* tried to integrate the Grail knights' quest for purity with Amant's quest for sexual love. It examines parallel works by the same author, René of Anjou (d. 1480), to study the convergence of sacred and secular on both textual and iconographic planes. This royal connoisseur commissioned princely illustrations for his two allegories, both built around the fashionable conceit of the externalized heart. René's spiritual allegory, *The Mortification of Vain Pleasure*, is gendered female, starring the Soul and the Virtues, while his secular, erotic allegory, *The Book of the Love-Smitten Heart*, is gendered male, with the knight Cuer and his squire Désir Ardent as the protagonists. Surprisingly, however, both texts bring their protagonists to exactly the same point in the end. Because *The Love-Smitten Heart* populates the allegorical landscape of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* with characters from *The Romance of the Rose*, it enables us to pick up the threads of those texts once more and follow them to an unlikely yet satisfying convergence.

Hoping that students of both French and English literature will find their way to this book, I have supplied original texts as well as translations for all passages I cite. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Without attempting rhyme, I have tried at least to replicate the octosyllabic meter of medieval French verse. In the case of Chrétien de Troyes, I have used Ruth Harwood Cline's remarkable poetic versions; her sprightly couplets imitate the form and tone of the originals to the extent that an English version can. Biblical verses are translated

directly from the Latin Vulgate, though I have tried where possible to stay close to the wording of the Revised Standard Version. At the end of this volume I append a new edition and translation of *The Dispute between God and His Mother*, along with an annotated translation of *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*. (Eva Steinová's critical edition of the latter text is under copyright; an older edition is available in good libraries.) I hope that teachers and students will find it useful to have these rarities now readily at hand.

IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND THANK ALL THOSE who have contributed to the formation of this book. I am grateful, first, to the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame for their invitation to deliver the 2011 Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies. Without them, this book would never have been written. I must also thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for an impossibly generous grant, which not only provided a research leave but also supported the Mellon Symposium on Medieval Subjectivity, held at Northwestern University in July 2011. I thank all the participants in that symposium, students and faculty alike, for their extraordinarily helpful feedback. My colleagues in medieval studies at Northwestern, as well as our tireless interlibrary loan team, have created an ideal climate for this project. I am grateful to the Knights of Columbus Vatican Film Library, St. Louis University, for letting me consult a microfilm of *La Desputoison de Dieu et de sa mère*.

A portion of chapter 3 appeared in an earlier form as "The Mirror and the Rose: Marguerite Porete's Encounter with the *Dieu d'Amours*," in *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 105–23. Part of chapter 4 was published as "*The Passion of the Jews of Prague: The Pogrom of 1389 and the Lessons of a Medieval Parody*," in *Church History* 81 (March 2012): 1–26. I thank the publishers for permission to reprint this material.

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