Barbara Newman. 2013. *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred*. Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. — 400 p.

American medievalist Barbara Newman is a professor at Northwestern University (Illinois), as well as a brilliant translator and prolific scholar. She is well known as the author of new translations and critical volumes of several significant medieval sources, including the correspondence between Abelard and Heloise (Newman 2016). In addition, she is known as a productive researcher of medieval Western Christianity, as well as of feminine themes and the role of women within Christianity. Her first monograph, *Sister of Wisdom* (1987), was dedicated to the feminine imagery in the teaching of Hildegard of Bingen, an influential abbess and mystic in the High Middle Ages. Her later book, *God and the Goddesses* (2003), on the female figures in the medieval Christian pantheon, according to Caroline Walker Bynum, "changed the face of scholarship and maybe even our understanding of Christianity itself," having shed light on its little-known and undervalued feminine dimension (Bynum 2006).

Newman's latest book has also garnered high praise from colleagues and critics for its conceptual innovation, as well as for the eloquence and refined style that characterize her as an author and translator (see Grange 2014; McDermott 2015). The book is dedicated to the relationship between the sacred and the secular in various genres of medieval literature. In the nature of the correlation between these two foundational categories, one sees the principal difference between the modern and the medieval worldviews. For us, the secular is the norm, but the sacred is the exception and the sphere of the Other, whereas in the Middle Ages, people presumably had the opposite perception and experience.

The theme of the correlation between the sacred and the secular in medieval studies, of course, is nothing new; yet, in recent decades, as Newman notes with regret, it has been studied very little,

with the exception of the "vernacular theology" in Nicholas Watson's use of English material and Jean Gerson's use of French material. Newman claims that scholars "left exegetics behind" and replaced it with the study of other topics, following the linguistic, feminist, and queer turns (3).

Newman contrasts D. W. Robertson Jr.'s approach with that of Jacques Ribard (1–3, 63, 69, 107, 170). Half a century ago, Robertson adopted an "exegetical" approach of decoding chivalric romances with the assistance of theological tracts in order to read the sacred in the profane, contrasting the one to the other. Conversely, Ribard understood the profane *as* the sacred and integrated the former into the latter through the reading of medieval texts. Newman, however, rejects both approaches. She sees the correlation between the sacred and the secular that is apparent within the medieval literature and mentality differently, as the starting point of analysis. She emphasizes the concept of "crossover" — the intersection, crossing, overlapping, and even the merger of the sacred and the secular in their various forms. Newman thus describes their relationship metaphorically: "[S]ometimes the sacred and the secular flow together like oil and water, layered but stubbornly distinct. At other times they merge like water and wine, an image dear to mystical writers, producing a blend that may or may not be inebriating" (7). Secular literary genres could be subjected to reinterpretations in sacred categories. For example, Marguerite Porete, the French Beguine, mystic, and female writer converts the profane and carnal love from *Le Roman de la Rose* into spiritual, sacrificial love toward God and the text itself into an esoteric mystical dialogue (144–65).[1] And conversely, sacred genres — lives of saints, hymns, *passiones* — and sacred topoi were frequently used in a secular context and were even parodied, as was the Passion of Christ, for instance, in *The Passion of the Jews of Prague* (201). If the allegorical view lifts a completely worldly narrative up to heaven, then the parodic view returns it back to the earth (262).

Newman stands against the hermeneutic of "wheat and chaff," which calls people to reject the external, secular meaning as a shell and to look everywhere for the sacred core. She argues against the assertion in the medievalist tradition to see in all Latin texts or at least in sacred genres like exegesis and hagiography a predictable, uninteresting, and orthodox norm, but in vernacular texts a rebellion against this norm. In addition, she

1. As a philologist, Newman insists on a philological perspective, in particular by calling her fellow scholars to consider Marguerite Porete and Julian of Norwich not only as female mystics, but also as writers.

stands against the adoption of any sort of single meaning. She calls scholars not to lose this duality, supposing its intentionality: "[D]ouble coding by writers required double judgment from readers" (259). The heated polemics regarding one or another "cultic" text, such as *Querelle de la belle dame sans merci* or *Querelle de la Rose* (245–47, 261–62), demonstrates the truth of Newman's argument that "if critics today cannot agree about the intentions of Andreas Capellanus or Chaucer [. . .], it is likely that medieval readers couldn't either" (261).

Elevating to a principle the medieval tendency toward paradox, Newman develops a hermeneutic of "both/and" in place of the hermeneutic of "wheat and chaff" (either/or). The clearest example of such an approach takes place when the author and the reader are in one and the same plot or the heroes know how to see both the profane and the sacred, both the low and the high, both the bad and the good simultaneously. This is the concept of *felix culpa*, or "fortunate fault," a transgression that leads to a pleasant result. It is this that makes heroes out of such sinners as Lancelot, Tristan, or "Saint Merlin" in the eyes of the readers. Another principle frequently utilized in anti-Judaic and supercessionist constructions is the principle of allegorical inversion, when Old Testament heroes are deemed prototypes of New Testament heroes, but they receive the completely opposite assessment. Thus, King David who sinned with Bathsheba and repented, "is a type of Christ," but Bathsheba's husband Urriah "signifies the Jewish people" who are to "return to [their] conscience, cleansing the filth of [their] evil deeds with the tears of penance and the water of baptism" (18–19).

The relationship of the sacred and the secular becomes more complex — or becomes richer — with the presence of the pre-Christian stratum. It would be a mistake to ignore medieval people's fascination with the pagan heritage, including the Celtic mythology that attracted them just as classical antiquity attracted the humanists of the Renaissance. Therefore, in many flawless chivalric romances, even in those that are the most theologically minded, magic ships float by and enchanted swords protrude from rocks. As Newman argues, "The dialectic of sacred and secular is not dual, but triple, for the sacred is itself constructed by a dialectic of Christian and pagan" (260).

Newman, having expounded upon the history of the question at hand and having formulated the principles and foundational concepts or her approach in the first theoretical chapter, uses the following chapters to delineate the various types of interplay between the sacred and the secular in both

canonical and little-known medieval texts. The second chapter is dedicated to "double coding," using the example of the remarkable cycle of prosaic chivalric romances on Lancelot and the Holy Grail. In these texts, Christian concepts are couched in pagan images, and sacred and worldly values are asserted simultaneously. The third chapter describes the "conversion" or "transformation" of the literature of courtly love into a spiritual mystical literature and of carnal love into an elevated love for God, using the example of Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. In the fourth chapter, to which I will return below, Newman discusses parody and its various types and assumed goals. The fifth chapter analyzes the "convergence" of the sacred and the secular, using the example of the writings of René of Anjou, in which erotic adventures and spiritual quests lead to the exact same end. In all chapters and, correspondingly, in all types of interplay that Newman expounds upon, the sacred and the secular neither submit to nor engulf one another. Rather, they coexist and comingle.

In the concluding chapter, Newman summarizes the approaches suggested at the beginning of the book and tested out in the course of her close reading of various sources in order to understand the sacred-secular dialectic. She states her hope that further research will emerge that utilizes the framework of this proposed paradigm. "The achievement of a book," Newman writes, "is measured not just by the ground it covers, but by the space it opens" (262). And critics, by comparing Newman's new book with Robertson's *A Preface to Chaucer*, are predicting an even greater productivity for her, an influence on other scholars not only in the field of medieval theology and philology, but also in the sphere of the epistemology of modernism. In particular, Newman's analysis of contradiction and paradox in late medieval literature seems to be extremely relevant for the study of the transition to the modern era.

With respect to this issue's theme on the poetics and pragmatics of blasphemy, the fourth chapter of this book is particularly relevant. Newman dedicates this chapter not to the "high" genres (from the amorous lyrics of trouvère to the celebration of divine love), but to inverse transformation, or parody. Surveying the existing research on this genre, Newman (167–68) notes that the essence of parody eludes any definition clearer than the one provided by Linda Hutcheon: "imitation with critical difference" (Hutcheon 1985, 36). With few exceptions, scholars have predominantly studied the great masters of medieval parody — Jean de Meun, Giovanni Boccaccio, or Geoffrey Chaucer —

rather than the actual genre itself. The works of Paul Lehmann and Martha Bayless — the exceptions — focus on the well-known Latin texts that have been preserved in multiple scrolls and belong to the mainstream "tradition of clerical humor based on the inversion of Scripture, liturgy, and hagiography" (168). Newman draws upon texts that are much less well-known and are preserved in only one or a few copies, such as *Le lai d'Ignaure*, *The Dispute between God and His Mother*, and *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*. By doing so, she unveils other approaches to resolve the conflict of sacred vs. profane. These three texts show that no one and nothing was immune from being parodied in the Middle Ages — not even the Eucharist, the Passion of Christ, or the Virgin Mary.

Narrowing the genre's field, Newman invokes the term *parodia sacra* (sacred parody), which received widespread attention thanks to Mikhail Bakhtin, who defined it as the use of sacred texts or topoi in a profane context with the goal of their abasement and/or ridicule (168–69). Notably, this term, having emerged in the early modern period, originally denoted something quite different in the mouths of humanists: "the 'upward' . . . adaptation of pagan classics for Christian ends," as in compositions like *Horatius Christianus* (*The Christian Horace*) or *Martialus renatus* (*Martial Reborn*) (169). This epistemological excursus already hints at the variability of parodic intention. In contrast to the cases examined by Bakhtin, the texts that Newman analyzes were not connected with rituals of social or liturgical inversion, nor did they necessarily include a folkloric (vernacular) element, "for most religious and even anticlerical satire was produced by clerics themselves" (169). Newman proposes that medieval sacred parody added humor to the parody's text and professed a certain distance, but it did not entirely abrogate the solemnity and, as such, the sacredness of the parodied content. Here, the hermeneutical principle of "both/and," or *sic et non*, is at work, allowing the reader not to choose one meaning or one presumed authorial intent, but rather to read the text polyphonically.

Le lai d'Ignaure tells the story of a gallant knight who is the lover of twelve women at once until their baron husbands find out about it, kill the knight, and serve their wives the penis and heart of their lover [a fact only revealed to the women at the end of the meal — Trans.]. The poem reveals "twelve devotees of a single lover, a confessional scene, [an] arrest in a garden, a traitor paid to inform, a grisly execution, an anxious fast before communion, [and] a ritual feast on the body of the Beloved" (178). Newman suggests here that the reader see this not as a parody of the Eucharist, as much

as a misogynistic mockery about the religiosity of women, and primarily of beguines, who insisted on weekly communion, practiced lengthy fasts, and ecstatically worshipped Christ as their Beloved, Divine Bridegroom (177–78).

In *The Dispute between God and His Mother* (*La Desputoison de Dieu et de sa Mère*), "God" stands before the papal court at Avignon and accuses his mother of appropriating "the lion's share of his father's legacy, leaving him nothing of value" (202). He complains that all of France's best cathedrals belong to her. If one were to see here a variation of a dispute between allegories — the soul and the body, the Church and the Synagogue — then it is possible to consider Jesus the embodiment of a mendicant position that includes a critique of the Church's riches, along with a modicum of proto-Protestant criticism of the hypertrophied Marian cult. The Virgin Mary's very "bourgeois" opinion, with which the judge from the avaricious papal curia subsequently agrees, is that poverty is not a virtue, but rather a characteristic of the laziness and stupidity, squandering and debauchery by which her son sins. Newman compares this source with Pierre de Nesson's *Lay de Guerre*, which was familiar to the anonymous author of the *Dispute*. In Nesson's work, War, the daughter of Satan and goddess of hell, argues against her archenemy Grace-Dieu. Newman, in her analysis of this comparison, suggests that readers not equate the author's opinion with the victorious position of Mary in the *Dispute*. Rather, she suggests that they see here the "double-edged sword" of satire — directed toward Christ's poverty-stricken life and an earth-bound consciousness that is incapable of understanding this life, while also directed toward the Marian cult, apostolic poverty, judicial corruption, and the papacy's "Babylonian captivity" in Avignon (219). Yet, considering the absolutely conventional texts that surround the *Dispute* in an anthology compiled by a scribe, Newman argues that it was perceived as a piece of provocative mischief with a shade of blasphemy, but not as a subversion of foundational principles. The author's purpose was more likely to have fun and to entertain the reader than it was to polemicize seriously, much less to incite crowds of paupers to revolt against the well-fed Church (219).

The third source, *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*, is not nearly as lighthearted as the *Dispute*, and in contrast to the darkness of *Le lai d'Ignaure*, its gruesomeness has a completely realistic foundation. Drawing on the case of *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*, a brief description of the Prague pogrom of 1389 written in terms of a gospel and liturgical narrative of the Passion of Christ, Newman demon-

strates that parody could be in the genre of hate speech, not always in the genre of comedy. Rather than a "progressive" revolutionary protest against ecclesiastical corruption and duplicity, *The Passion of the Jews of Prague* reveals that medieval parody could express a completely trivial, traditional anti-Judaism that is at best marginalized by the great extent of its radicalness.

In the seven-page *Passion of the Jews of Prague*, over ninety biblical verses are cited, more than half of them from the Gospel of Matthew (194). Most of them are inverted to such a degree that a blessing morphs into a threat, salvation into destruction, and a victim into a criminal. It also inverts liturgical Christian prayers. By way of example, a fragment of the well-known prayer *Exsultet*, read at the beginning of the Easter Vigil, originally reads, "This is the night which today throughout the world delivers those who believe in Christ from the vices of the world and the darkness of sin, restores them to grace, and clothes them with sanctity. . . . O truly blessed night, which despoiled the Egyptians and enriched the Hebrews! O night on which heaven is united with earth, the divine with the human!" Yet, in *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*, it was rewritten as follows: "O truly blessed night, which despoiled the Jews and enriched the Christians! O most sacred Passover of ours, in which the faithful, . . . liberated from the chains of sin . . . , spared neither the Hebrew children nor their white-haired old men" (198–99).

In her analysis of *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*, Newman does with a Christian source what Israel Yuval (whom she mentioned) and Jeremy Cohen (whom she did not mention) have done with Jewish sources. They all reconstruct — or imagine — a certain Judeo-Christian continuum and a common cultural field where a cleric from Prague, despite his apparent anti-Judaism, must be aware of the customs of Purim while a Jewish chronicler from Mainz must invoke the iconographic image of the *pietà* in his account of the Jewish martyrdom during the massacres of the First Crusade (Cohen 2004, 124–25). This approach certainly creates a more extensive and multifaceted picture of Jewish-Christian relations than the erstwhile traditional research on legal discrimination and episodes of physical assault. If the greatest Catholic theologians of one period could learn from Jews the correct understanding of the literal meaning of Scripture and could wonder whether Jews were real people or were better associated with the animal world, then even those who conducted the pogroms might have known the contents of the Passover Haggadah as Newman nearly concedes

(198) with reference to Israel Yuval's argument on the parallel development of the Passover Haggadah and the Easter Liturgy (Yuval 2006, 68–90). Certainly, this line of thinking disavows the traditional argument that Jews themselves are to blame for medieval anti-Judaism because of the hermetic isolation of the Jewish community that engendered enmity, aggression, and a distrust toward the unknown. The ghetto walls were completely permeable, yet that did not stop the aggression; hence, the aggression was provoked not by the unknown, but by something else. However, there is often no concrete evidence that medieval authors were familiar with neighboring cultures, and this Judeo-Christian continuum, which rests on correspondence and parallels only, more often seems a reflection of a continuum of sources in the minds of scholars.

Given all of this, I must ask a number of questions not only regarding *The Passion of the Jews of Prague*, but also regarding the other sources discussed and the other chapters in Newman's book. To what extent does Newman's complex and subtle philological analysis reflect the medieval authors' purposes and the medieval readers' reactions? Did they have in mind double inversion, reverse typology, and ambivalent satire? Or were one or the other of these devices achieved "unconsciously" (as Newman lets slip several times)?

Might the author of the *Passion*, working in the ancient *cento* technique (184), simply have written in gospel and liturgical language, using verses that went with the storyline, but changing the characters, details, and epithets to those of more current interest? Just how radically did this parodied, inverse citation distinguish the *Passion* from many other medieval texts — both Christian and Jewish — that were also rife with biblical citations or paraphrases and also substituted current people and heroes in place of biblical people and heroes?

Why did the authors write these parodies? What did the author of the *Passion* achieve? Perhaps, being conscious of the anti-canonical nature of the pogrom, the author wanted to justify himself in this way, not so much before an earthly judge as before the Heavenly Judge, having sacralized sinful conduct with biblical allusions? Was diversion a sufficient reason for a creative work, as Newman suggests concerning *The Dispute between God and His Mother* (219)? Or perhaps one can see here a variation of the "symbolic contradiction" of the dominant ideology and institution, which manifested itself in mockery of various attitudes held in the framework of this ideology?

And finally, is it actually possible for us to reconstruct the medieval reader's interpretation of a

text? On what basis does Newman suggest that the readers, having caught the parody of the Eucharist, "might have been distinctly uncomfortable" (220)? Are we able to agree with Martha Bayless, who saw in the *passiones* such as *The Passion of the Jews of Prague* "no humorous component whatsoever" (221, commenting on Bayless 1996, 9)? And what is the point in the detection of a "textual unconscious" (185), if such unconscious was hidden as much from the medieval author ("But even if John [the Peasant] was not consciously invoking Esther, the allusion still lurks in the textual unconscious of the Passion" [196]) as it was from the medieval reader? If the breakdown of a text into a multitude of components that were not foreseen by the authors and their contemporaries takes place only to serve the logic of a philological analysis that is pursuing newer and newer sources and parallels, then a deconstructive reading could actually turn out to be unproductive, a deconstruction for deconstruction's sake.

Skillfully discussing examples of duality, transformation, inversion, and convergence in detail, Barbara Newman brilliantly addresses the question of the boundary between the sacred and the profane, saying that it did not exist as a fixed border, as such. Above all, I would like to pose a question with respect to parody: where did the border between the comical and the non-comical run, and at what moment did a medieval reader find something funny? Perhaps this is one of the prospects for further research, mentioned in the conclusion (261–62), that will be germane to the dialectic of the sacred and the profane described by Newman.

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