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Citer ce compte rendu
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*Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350–1600.*  

In *Tropologies*, Ryan McDermott extends recent scholarship on the status of biblical interpretation within medieval literary culture in order to reposition its significance to the development of vernacular English literature. Writers such as Langland and the *Patience*-poet, McDermott suggests, drew heavily upon exegetical reading practices in generating ethical discourses in their poetry. Such practices were not, however, based solely in rhetoric or in abstract moral philosophy, but rather in specifically biblically-based tropologies, as described in the work of Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux, among others. The significance of the distinction is that while moral philosophical interpretation could assist readers in distinguishing between virtue and vice, tropological exegesis exhorts readers to participate in salvation history by bringing their reading of the Bible into the world through the performance of good works, which may include the composition of literary texts. Tropological reading thus plays a crucial role in literary production, both in the Middle Ages and, McDermott argues fascinatingly, in the early modern period as well. While Protestant reformers disavowed traditionally “Catholic” interpretive theory, mid-sixteenth-century court drama and reformed cycle plays reflect the same understanding of literature as a conduit for biblically-based ethics that is characteristic of pre-Reformation writing. Tropology, then, presents a powerful mechanism for ethical and literary innovation and, surprisingly, for cultural continuity.

In integrating allegorical and anagogical reading and providing a framework for translating the contemplation of Scripture into practical action, tropology acts as an interpretive “circulatory system” (12). For McDermott, the literary operation of this system is most clearly evident in *Piers Plowman*, which serves as the book’s central object of study. Virtue must, in Langland’s view, be both inherent and the product of virtuous behaviour. While the individual’s faculty of discernment and capacity for love can be expanded through the contemplation of Scripture, virtue must be made legible in specific actions. This interpretive and productive doubling that lies at the heart of biblical tropology is applicable in a specifically literary context because literature provides a venue
that makes particular demands both on interpretive faculties and on the creative
imagination. Langland’s social vision, in other words, certainly looks out to
the half-acre, but also inward to the act of literary production. Ethical action
(written or otherwise) that imitates scriptural exemplars is a performance
that recognizes the limitations of human agency and gestures toward new
approaches to ethical fulfillment, even as it acknowledges that this fulfillment
cannot occur within the temporal framework of history. The tropological ethics
of writing, then, take on for Langland a partly penitential cast, because literary
production is constantly attempting to reconcile human shortcomings with the
imperative to emulate scriptural example. The final passus, which figure Will’s
participation in Holy Week, enable the poem to generate a vision of tropological
writing as a form of sacramental satisfaction rather than as a means to represent
satisfaction. The circular relationship between discernment and practice that
serves as the foundation of biblical tropology allows McDermott to frame Piers
Plowman not merely as a series of ethical prescriptions, but as a varied and
dynamic form of continuous participation in salvation history.

McDermott finds similar interpretive models at work in the writing of
early Protestant reformers, despite their hostility to what they often referred to
simply as “allegory.” While the interpretive parameters are somewhat different
for early Protestant writers such as Ochino and Udall than for Langland, the
ethical stakes are similar. McDermott shows that mid-sixteenth-century court
drama, as well as continuing performances of revised versions of medieval
cycle plays, emphasized the participation of the believer—and of the Tudor
state—in the unfolding of God’s providence. The (not insignificant) distinction
is one of context: for Langland, the sacramental system of the church provides
a social and spiritual vocabulary through which believers can make their
ethical behaviour tropologically intelligible. For the reformers, this vocabulary
is perceptible more generally in the gradual movement of human history
toward the apocalypse. However, the imperative is clear in either case. The
contemplation of Scripture must at its fullest produce acts of literary or social
participation that translate biblical ethics into the lived experience of human
history.

The book’s first, programmatic chapter is somewhat laboured and heavy-
handed; however, this is likely because McDermott recognizes that some
readers will suspect that the book advocates a return to a thinly disguised
Robertsonianism. As such, the opening movement is very careful to distinguish
McDermott’s tropology from Robertson’s allegorical decryption (completely convincingly, in my view). *Tropologies* is perhaps overly cautious in other ways as well, notably in its two chapters on early modern tropological practice. The claim that tropological interpretation informs the production of literature in an early modern, Protestant context is compelling, and one for which groundwork has been laid (notably in Brian Cummings’s *Literary Culture of the Reformation*). It would thus be helpful for the last two chapters to expand their analytical scope beyond a selection of texts that consists primarily of fourteenth-century writing that was revised and edited in the sixteenth century. These minor criticisms, however, do not detract from the extremely significant contributions that *Tropologies* makes to the fields of medieval and early modern literary scholarship. Its reading of *Piers Plowman* as itself a kind of tropological intervention into medieval ethical discourse is extremely valuable and complements recent work on the poem by scholars such as David Aers and Kate Crassons. McDermott’s model of the relationship between literature and ethics also offers an elegant rejoinder to early modernists, who often read ethical concerns in medieval writing as evidence of proto-humanist interpretive inclinations. Medieval literary culture possessed rich intellectual resources of its own that were brought to bear on ethical questions, and medieval interpretive and creative practices indeed proved so vital that, as this book demonstrates, they continued to exert important influence well into the post-Reformation era.

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**Milligan, Gerry.**

*Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature.*


This monograph examines Renaissance literary discourses surrounding gender’s relationship to military activity. Representations of women who acted in military roles are not new to Renaissance studies, and as Gerry Milligan notes, the work of Frédérique Verrier stands out as especially significant. Nevertheless, this monograph proves productive in its attention to how