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McDermott, Ryan. Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350–1600

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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.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. xi, 332 + 3 ill. ISBN 978-1-4875-0314-7 (hardcover) $75.

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