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The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment

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Situating Conciliarism in Early Modern Spanish Thought
Situier conciliarisme dans la pensée espagnole de la première modernité

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of fidelity: she is a narrator to trust (regarding the fairy tales) and a translator faithful in essence to her author (Ovid) but also creative in adapting his text to seventeenth-century sensibilities and translation practice.

This wide-ranging collection focusing on the early modern translator constitutes a significant contribution to our knowledge of what was translated in the period and equally important, of who was translating and producing it.

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Shagan, Ethan H.

The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv, 385 + 4 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-691-17474-7 (hardcover) \$35.

Ethan Shagan's well-written and engaging book has three aims: First and foremost, he undertakes to prove that the epistemic status of belief and what it means to believe, as distinct from to know and to think, change over time. Second, he seeks to chart and explain the development of belief from the medieval period to the present. Third, he wishes, in passing, to offer a partial rejoinder to the assessment of modernity in Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*, which Shagan feels presents too dismal a view of the modern world.

Shagan begins with a quick sketch of medieval notions of belief. He characterizes this period as stable. Christian thinkers wanted to make faith, and therefore belief, an objective epistemological category, inherently superior to other forms of knowledge. Faith was not an opinion. Shagan limits his discussion to belief only, which is understandable given the need for brevity. However, in avoiding related questions, such as what medievals understood by divine revelation and inspiration, some important complexities and developments within Christian thought in this era risk being overlooked. An engagement with the historical studies of Yves Congar might have provided Shagan with an interesting conversation-partner here.

The Reformation changed what it meant to believe. For magisterial Protestantism, one needed not only to assent to right doctrine but to trust firmly in the promises of Christ. For Radicals, if one did not manifest sufficient asceticism one did not believe. In Catholicism, right believing included an unquestioning obedience to the church. Thus, for all three branches, the number of “true” believers became fewer as various types of belief and faith came to be deemed substandard. In particular, all three decried doubt and speculation as being antithetical to belief. This, according to Shagan, produced so great a burden upon the laity that a reaction became inevitable: the downgrading of the criteria for what constituted belief. This section offers a fascinating history of the development and polemical use of the terms “historical faith” and “atheism,” which shows that the latter meant more than denying God’s existence, but also any attempt to subject dogma to profane analysis. However, in portraying the difficulties faced by Christians trying to meet the external and spiritual demands of faith in the era of confessionalization, Shagan courts controversy. Recent studies on Calvinist consistories and the Spanish Inquisition have gone some way to mitigating their brutal image, a point which could have been more fully engaged. One also questions the prudence of selecting Teresa of Avila and Menocchio as normative examples of early modern Catholic spirituality, an issue Shagan himself admits.

The book comes into its own as it discusses seventeenth- and eighteenth-century developments about what it meant to believe. Shagan has two important contributions. The increasing missions to peoples who did not share the European spiritual and philosophical background forced missionaries to conceive of conversion, and therefore belief, as being an individual’s judgment of the faith as true, based upon material evidence. Back in Europe, the Jansenists, in their conflict with Rome, raised the question of dogmatic fact, challenging individuals to judge whether the works of Jansen actually contained the errors of which he was accused. In these ways the exercise of individual judgment slowly changed from an object of execration to the constitutive criterion of belief.

The second insight concerns how belief came to be associated with opinion instead of knowledge. Both Christian Enlighteners and sceptics like Hume undermined the epistemic value of empiricism, arguing that its conclusions ultimately rested upon belief and experience. The discovery in mathematics that “fictitious” numbers could lead to real, verifiable results did much to encourage people to accept what they could not know. Social theorists like Hobbes and

Mandeville argued it was useful for the good of society for people to believe, even if what they believed was false. These diverse strands of thought, Shagan argues, combined to form modern ideas of belief as a personal form of opinion which one finds helpful, but which requires no objective demonstration.

This broad conception of belief, he argues, has allowed the modern West to become more open and peaceful. Since the threshold for a belief is now so low that anyone can say he or she believes in something, and because belief is seen as inherently personal, multiple expressions of faith can now coexist. Herein Shagan seeks to temper Gregory's pessimism.

Shagan convincingly argues that the concept of belief has changed over time. Drawing on a breadth of sources, his work demonstrates the vitality and volatility of eighteenth-century thought, blurring the lines between religious and radical enlightenments. Further, it invites greater reflection on how and why the religious majority came to follow the pioneering thinkers Shagan identifies and accept lowering the bar of belief. It is a work which challenges scholars once again to engage in the social history of ideas.

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Snook, Edith.

Women, Beauty and Power in Early Modern England: A Feminist Literary History.

Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. x, 230. ISBN 978-1-137-50368-8 (paperback) \$29.

Edith Snook's *Women, Beauty and Power: A Feminist Literary History* is a significant and valuable intervention in the ongoing discussion of the construction and interpretation of female beauty in the early modern period. Snook redirects the current conversation, which includes such important recent works as Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass's *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (2000) and Farah Karim-Cooper's *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (2006), by turning to writing by women. In doing so, she unsettles the notion that in the literature of the period female beauty is comprehensively a trope, deriving from the Petrarchan ideal