

Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350–1600. Ryan McDermott. ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016. xiv + 432 pp. \$45.

This is an exciting new book about tropology at work in literature and in the lives of laypeople in late medieval and early modern England. Tropology was central to the reading of scripture, but as Ryan McDermott argues, it was also a means of literary invention, and one with tremendous staying power: tropological invention “survived” into the Reformation and ought to be seen as “the most important principle of continuity between ‘medieval’ and Reformation biblical cultures” (4). McDermott brings theological inquiry and biblical exegesis into conversation with late medieval literature in ways that challenge traditional disciplinary divides, demonstrating how a wide range of texts and genres—*Patience*, *Piers Plowman*, the *York Cycle*—function as “powerful theological thought machines” (10). Tropological invention proves flexible, dynamic, and inclusive.

The book begins with an evocative description of tropology as “the church’s circulatory system” (12), a vehicle for turning words into works and helping laypeople participate in salvation history. For McDermott, tropology stands at the intersection of rhetorical practice and biblical exegesis, bringing literary ethics to bear on biblical culture

in productive new ways. The book's hefty introductory chapter surveys twelfth-century debates before turning to *Piers Plowman* as a case study of biblical poetry "as a source of tropological theory" (12). Chapter 2 brings us to *Patience*, a poem that mediates between biblical history and ethical practice, illuminating "the participatory metaphysics by which readers write themselves into the history of salvation" (89). The poem's fascination with realistic detail—its "realizing imagination," as McDermott calls it, via A. C. Spearing (92, 121)—draws readers into the story, inviting them to share in the experience. Tropological and allegorical invention go hand in hand, making tropology an engine of creativity as the poet amplifies and expands the Jonah story in collaboration with the reader. McDermott reflects on practices of reading, thinking through the history of approaches to figural reading (Auerbach, Frei, Largier), as well as the history of inventive glossing. In exploring Martin Luther's and William Tyndale's translations of the Jonah story, each an "occasion to theorize about spiritual exegesis," McDermott illustrates how tropological invention offers an "alternative path of continuity across the Reformation" (136–37).

The book's excellent middle chapters offer powerful new readings of *Piers Plowman*. Tropological theory helps us better understand the poem and its ethical and inventive engagement with its sources, an enterprise that invites the active participation of the reader. "Langland is striving to conceive and practice a new kind of writing, of making, that will count as action" (152), McDermott argues, paying close attention to discourses of exemplarity and imitation. Tropology models the work of salvation—it is a "pilgrim invention," as McDermott nicely puts it, "always underway between doctrine and fulfillment, between model and perfect copy" (170). Chapter 4 supplements recent readings of *Piers Plowman* that emphasize failure and obstruction, arguing instead that the poem foregrounds eschatological fulfillment as a process, and one associated with hopeful momentum. Indeed, McDermott reads *Piers Plowman* as "a key text in the history of satisfaction," a poem that presents both writing and reading as forms of sacramental participation that work toward redemption (193). Langland's "practices of satisfaction" resonate in surprising ways with later Protestant doctrine and poetics, particularly the basic notion of penance as an ongoing, lifelong pursuit of good works (189).

Chapter 5 provides an introduction to Reformation tropologies and tropological forms, with short sections treating a broad range of English and Continental authors from the sixteenth century. Two closing sections on drama develop the idea of lay participation in "the drama of salvation," a useful preface to the book's concluding chapter on the *York Cycle* (289). Chapter 6 considers tropological participation in anagogical, end-of-time perspective. Although the York Mercers' doomsday pageant explores tropological participation, virtuous action is not the "final horizon of ethics" here (296). Instead, the play focuses on the Last Judgment and on a "catoptric" understanding of bodies and time: peering into the mirror of Christ, laypeople see themselves, and from God's eschatological perspective. In articulating the play's tropological shift from doing well to being seen as having done well, McDermott

explores the history of “moralized optics” (329) in the context of natural philosophy, phenomenology, material culture, and religious practice.

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