

ter, however, is a separate question. Here I strongly disagree that Eve's gesture of submission elicits Adam's faith or that "Eve's plea *first* open[s] Adam's eyes." In Milton's narrative there is a quiet but definite disjunction between Adam's reconciliation to his spouse and his reconciliation to the Almighty. He rejects the "vehement despair" of Eve's loving and suicidal words (x.999–1007) in favor of divine words freshly remembered—now as a promise instead of a sentence (x.1030–35). The content of this sudden "literary" insight does not follow from the drift of her romantic desperation. God's "motions" work in spite of Eve's despair.

When Hunter argues that Eve's love is the immediate cause of Adam's faith, she is faced with the task of explaining how a "selfless" and Christlike love urges suicide upon her mate.

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Public Dreams and Private Myths

To the Editor:

In his essay "Public Dreams and Private Myths: Perspectives in Middle English Literature" (*PMLA*, 90, 1975, 461–68), Russell A. Peck argues, as he says in his abstract, "that the presence of a common myth to which the society generally adheres accounts for most essential differences between medieval and modern poetry." Peck's basic point is that the shared system of belief which binds artist and audience together in the Middle Ages creates a perspective radically different from what one finds in the modern era: the artist now works in isolation, and the only belief he shares with his audience is that a universal mythic system can no longer exist. Like January's conception of wedlock, Peck's argument has the virtue of being "so esy and so clene," but in both instances lucidity has been achieved at the expense of accuracy.

Throughout, Peck seems to assume a monistic Christian system which infuses medieval art with an equally monistic Christian meaning. Thus, in an imitation of the polyphony which he briefly mentions (p. 461), Peck's essay runs along several parallel tracks simultaneously, elucidating thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poetry, for example, with citations from fourth- and eleventh-century theologians. In a post-Robertsonian universe we may be more inclined to accept such practices than their validity warrants. Peck's critical method, a variety of *per ignotum ignotius*, obscures gross differences between text and gloss in terms of time, place, language, purpose, and audience. Even though the Middle Ages are Christian in a more meaningful sense than the one in which America is frequently referred to as "a Christian country," we nevertheless do not have the right to subsume crucially important dis-

tinctions under the rubric of an all-encompassing system of Christian belief.

The literature that Peck examines in his essay is, significantly, vernacular literature and, except for Guerin's fabliau, is all in English. It is more important in Peck's view that the artist and his audience are Christian than that they are English. But can we really assume that the shared aspects of their Christianity would enable them to perceive in the lyrics what Peck perceives? Consider the following passage from the *Tale of Beryn*:

The pardoner and the miller and othir lewde sotes
Sought hem selffen in the chirch right as lewde gotes;
Pyrid fast and pourid highe oppon the glase.
Countirfeting gentilmen, the armys for to blase,
Diskyveryng fast the peyntour, and for the story
mourned.
And a red it also right as wolde rammys horned.
"He berith a balstaff," quod the toon, "and els a
rakis ende."
"Thow faillist," quod the miller: "thowe hast nat
wel thy mynde.
It is a spere, yf thowe canst se, right with a prik
tofore.
To bussh adown his enmy and thurh the sholdir bore."¹

Is this exegetical disagreement, based as it is upon totally, even absurdly, different interpretations of the same work of Christian art, funny because such gross disagreements could never occur or because they occurred all too frequently? And if we reject the question because the disputants in this case are called "lewde sotes," we must inquire as to the general composition of medieval audiences for whom vernacular or public art was created.

Peck's reading of "Erthe took of Erthe" is indicative of the deficiencies of his monistic approach. "Let me suggest," he says, "four reflections (perspectives) to indicate something of the range of response we might expect from a medieval 'reader'" (p. 465). It is unfortunate that Peck's range of meanings, or perspectives, should be limited to four; it still has not been demonstrated that the exegetical method of reading the Old Testament² is anything but reductive when applied to secular literature. Furthermore, Peck's exemplary perspectives suggest not "as many variants as there are meanings and perspectives on earth" (p. 466), but rather a series of tetralogical readings limited only by the ingenuity of the exegetical critic. The poem itself demands ingenuity, but not necessarily that variety which is bounded on four sides.

Similarly, Peck's brief comments on the Miller's Tale attest to the dangers of his approach. We are warned not to see Nicholas as a type of Christ (p. 463), but were it not for those oversimplifications about medieval Christianity that pervade Peck's essay, we would hardly be inclined to do so. Peck asserts that

the references to Noah, inter alia, "do not demand 'organic' integration with character, situation, or whatever it was that evoked the myth" (p. 463). Instead, he says, "[t]hey establish a play area for the audience" (p. 463). However, it seems to me that the view of Chaucer as an indulgent poet who tosses exegetical bones to his audience regardless of the animal they come from is repudiated by the obvious fact that they *are* "organically" integrated into a tale which indeed could not function without them. This is not the place for an extensive treatment of the Miller's Tale, but surely every reader, medieval or modern, realizes that the flood plot is entirely dependent upon John's "affeccioun," his belief in his own piety and ultimate salvation. And he is a carpenter because, among other reasons, he, like Noah, must be able to construct the vehicle of that salvation.³

Of all the "misprisions," to use Puck's term, in Peck's essay, the most glaring appear in his treatment of Williams' "Red Wheel Barrow." Peck says, "He [Williams] would strip words of cultural accretions in an effort to realize the thing depicted on its own terms" (p. 464). What Peck seems not to realize is that this poem, no less than "Erthe took of Erthe," is a riddle. What is the "so much" which "depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow"? Paronomastically the rain water, but primarily the poem itself. Were there no wheelbarrow there would be no poem, and the ironic self-deprecation of "so much" is exactly consonant with similar tendencies in medieval art in general and in Chaucer's poetry in particular. Whether *e pluribus unum* or *ex uno plura*—and this seems to be the ideological difference that Peck cites as separating medieval and modern literary perspectives—is irrelevant, a distinction without a difference. That medieval people delighted in debating such distinctions is not evidence for their possible resolution; on the contrary, what we know from extant *débats* is that the attractiveness of the issues was directly proportional to the difficulty in deciding the superior position.

No one who reads medieval literature would deny the importance to interpretation of a thorough grounding in medieval Christian thought. But "Christian thought" in the Middle Ages is almost inconceivably diverse, and literary reflections of, or perspectives on, this mythic system are more diverse yet. Augustinians, Dominicans, and Franciscans are all Christians, but to emphasize their similarities, as Peck has implicitly directed us to do, denies the reasons for their having become differentiated in the first place. And to view all of medieval literature from within the confines of an exegetical tetrahedron is to impose artificial constraints on what attracts us to art in the first place, namely the uniqueness of the individual work.

This is not to suggest that there is anything chimerical about Peck's attempt to distinguish generally between

medieval and modern literature. But there is something deeply disturbing about Peck's cursory and selective study of such a complex esthetic problem. The very brevity of Peck's essay demands oversimplification and in spite of his obvious sensitivity to the scope of the problem (p. 461), Peck in my view has not dealt with it adequately.

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Notes

¹ *Middle English Literature*, ed. Charles W. Dunn and Edward T. Byrnes (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 507, ll. 18–27.

² See, e.g., John Wyclif, *Prolog for Alle the Bokis of the Olde Testament*, Ch. xii; Dunn and Byrnes, pp. 485–86.

³ As a carpenter, John probably constructed the "knednyng trough," "tubbe," and "kymelyn" which he hangs "in the balkes" (A 3620–26) even though he could not have anticipated their present use. We are told that he builds three ladders by which the tubs are to be reached (A 3624–26); cf. Gen. vi.14. For Noah's skill as a carpenter, see, e.g., *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, Monachi Cestrensis, Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, *Rolls Series* 41, II (London: Longman, Green, 1865–86), Ch. v.

Mr. Peck replies:

Though the argument of "Public Dreams and Private Myths" may be "so esy and so clene," Walter Scheps seems to have missed its point. (1) He has confused mythology with theology. Nothing in the essay suggests uniformity of medieval theological positions. (2) The essay does not argue, as he implies, that one need be a theologian to read medieval poetry, or that all medieval people were theologically sophisticated, or that medieval poetry is a veiled excuse for theology. (3) The essay never advocates systematic fourfold exegesis. In fact, its argument moves in an opposite direction from a patristic, exegetical approach to emphasize instead the riddling, playful, enigmatic quality one so often finds in medieval secular literature. (4) The observations on Williams' poem which Scheps finds so inappropriate are a paraphrase of Williams' own observations on what he thinks the poet should do with language. I readily admit, however, to gross simplification in my treatment of the modern scene. I do not say, as Scheps says I do, that "a universal mythic system can no longer exist." Perhaps if there is a single myth toward which modern Western culture is tending it would be a myth of language itself, a notion which in turn might lead to interesting comparisons with the medieval cultural myth. But the limited confines of my argument left no room to develop that line of thought. (5) For the sake