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MLA 2016 (Austin)  
Roundtable: Becoming Human: Medieval

### In Pursuit of a Postsecular Posthumanities

A new constellation, sometimes called “the posthuman turn,” sometimes “the nonhuman turn,” has come into view in recent years. Marked by the bright lights of the new materialisms, object studies, assemblage theory, critical animal studies, and media studies, its appearance has been hailed for the new routes it provides for (in the words of Julian Yates) “configuring the textual traces named ‘past’ as an archive or contact zone which may offer occluded or discarded ways of being” (Yates, 2010). New routes such as those brought to light through the posthuman turn use as landmarks certain traces of the past that have previously registered only as meaningless blips on the landscape. In recent years, posthumanism’s decentering of the human and flattened ontologies have helped us see in familiar medieval texts any number of participants that had remained invisible to dominant humanist approaches—the previously autonomous chivalric knight, for instance, was revealed by Jeffrey Cohen to be an assemblage of man, metal, animal (in forms both living and dead)—working in concert with any number of intangible agents. Where the humanist reading esteemed the singular valor of Sir Lancelot as exemplifying human exceptionalism, posthumanism reveals that the productive collaboration of the Round Table extends well beyond its human participants, and that chivalry (and the Human it praises) is insufficient in itself—that, in effect, it has never existed. In the light of the nonhuman turn, the late medieval past appears to have conceptualized human existence in ways we’d only partially perceived, complicating our understanding of

medieval ethics, intercultural relations, natural history, and religion, among other very salient cultural markers.

Yet posthumanism's predominantly technoscientific ecology—its cyborgs and AI, its exclusive faith in reason and hard data—is inhospitable to some of the past's ways of being. In addition, the commonly presumed ethos of posthumanism's flattened ontologies—that is, its secularist inheritance—tends to be hostile to divine things, which proliferate in medieval cultural remains. A website announcement of a seminar by Rosi Braidotti at the University of Groningen last April, on “The Postsecular and the Posthuman,” noted that “The critique of Humanism [offered by posthumanism] entails special consequences for the discussion of secularism, because the humanist tradition guaranteed a secular space not only politically (separation of Church from State) but also intellectually, in so far as it accepted the rule of scientific reason.” Posthumanism largely maintains humanism's assumed ideals of scientific reason and political-intellectual secularism and, by extension, these ‘special consequences’. In grappling with these consequences, I'm influenced by Braidotti (herself following William Connolly) in seeing what she calls the “specific brand of secularized humanism” that posthumanism descends from (even as it challenges certain aspects of humanism) as “pass[ing] itself off as the embodiment of universalism, thus achieving absolute moral authority and the social status of a dominant norm” (Braidotti, 2008, 8-9). In using posthumanist tools to read what I would call everyday English texts of the 14th and 15th centuries, I have found it difficult to do so in the face of the “moral authority” of scientific reason and secularism, which is so “absolute” that even posthumanist medievalists, when we decenter the human, exclude

the sacred in the process. We decode it as a natural event, or we discard it as a purely human product that thus exists only in conjunction with, wholly dependent upon, the human—as a result of which, the human must either be re-centered, or the sacred discounted.

In this, those of us guided in our engagement with the medieval past by the posthumanist constellation have yet to achieve its full potential in recuperating the occluded or discarded. Medieval ways of being, witnessed in the ubiquity of the sacred in its “textual traces,” challenge us to discover ways to reckon with the nonhuman agency of the divine. Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated how the agency of medieval holy matter depended on its material existence as much as on its holiness. As she puts it, “various types of holy matter . . . were powerful because they were physical presences. It was as objects that they conveyed divine power” (Bynum, 2011, 153). Within Middle English literary studies in particular, engagements with the sacred object have highlighted the particular difficulty of apprehending this power without ascribing it solely to the human imagination or interpreting its significance as wholly symbolic. As a recent dissertation abstract puts it, “the supernatural has a quite particular role to play in the texts in this study; it functions as an amplifier of signification. Objects become invested with more meaning because they are associated with supernatural power” (Matthew McGraw). In their introduction to “The Sacred Object,” a special issue of *JMEMS* that came out in 2014, Shannon Gayk and Robyn Malo focus the collection’s attention on the human perception of the sacred object—calling on the earliest associations (as recorded in the OED) of the word “object” with “something placed before or presented to the eyes

or other senses”; the issue’s overriding concern is, in their words, “how sacred objects are understood as instruments of divine power.” They actively contrast their aims and methods to those of object-oriented studies, at least as articulated within medieval studies by Jeffrey Cohen, using his instruction that in such approaches things “must possess a power that comes from themselves, not via human allowance” (Gayk and Malo, 2014, 461; this from *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*). Given Gayk and Malo’s historicist aims of determining how, for medieval thinkers, sacred objects held cultural significance, they conclude that “Insofar as object-oriented ontologies listen for the voice and action of objects before and beyond human thought, they are unable (or unwilling) to account for the potential instrumentality and derivative power of objects within the sacred economy” (Gayk and Malo, 2014, 461).

The divide Gayk and Malo describe here has at times struck me as insurmountable. How might we decenter the human without destroying systems of sacredness that, from perspectives both medieval and modern, seems to depend upon the human? Graham Harman has helped me to posthumanize holiness by recalling that *all* participants in a network “negotiate with [an object’s] reality,” such that atoms today accrue reality through their abundant human and nonhuman allies, while [for instance] the reality of saints’ relics dissolves as its diverse allies vanish: he says, it’s “not that [the atom] exists as a real state of affairs and [saint’s relics] only in our minds. Instead, what makes the atom more real is that it has more allies, including allies stretching *well beyond the human realm*” (Harman, 2009, 26, 110 [italics his]). These allies stretch beyond the human realm, but they also include it. My own work investigates the residue of later

medieval ecologies of ordinary piety, as encountered in noncanonical Middle English literary texts, wherein sacred objects generate with humans and others one way of being that persisted in the medieval past—a way of being that is, on the one hand, recuperated by posthumanism’s methods and, on the other, marginalized by some of its aims and ideological orientation.

To do that, I find much promise in postsecularism, especially as theorized by Jürgen Habermas and practiced by literary scholars working in various periods and traditions. Habermas urges that, in a society comprised of practitioners of diverse faiths as well as those with no faith identity, not only those who hold religious beliefs must be required to compromise in order to generate an ethical community; instead, “a complementary learning process is certainly necessary on the secular side[,] unless we confuse the neutrality of a secular state. . . with the purging of the political public sphere of all religious contributions” (Habermas, 2008, 28). In other words, while modern ‘secular’ societies require individuals to identify publicly as citizens of the state and privately, if at all, as believers of and (especially) participants in a particular religion, they must not require citizens to erase entirely all personal religious belief in order to be allowed to participate as full members of the public state. Habermas insists that “What puts pressure on secularism, then, is the expectation that secular citizens in civil society and the political public sphere must be able to meet their religious fellow citizens as equals” (Habermas, 2008 29). For contemporary communities in their cultural heterogeneity to co-exist ethically, and for that to happen meaningfully, requires not only tolerance, but acceptance: “believers of one faith, of a different faith and non-believers

must mutually concede to one another the right to their convictions, practices and ways of living that they themselves reject. This concession must be supported by a shared basis of mutual recognition from which repugnant dissonances can be overcome” (Habermas, 2008, 23). Here, Habermas offers, I think, a model for how we might co-exist cross-temporally with predecessors, in this case medieval people, whose “convictions, practices and ways of living”—among them misogyny, monarchism, anti-semitism—we find repugnant and reject. Following Habermas, we would need to “concede... the right to their convictions,” which our secularist inheritance actively discourages us from doing, confident in what Peter Caviello and Jered Hickman have called a “particular fantasy of the inevitable or necessary supersession of something called ‘religion’” (Caviello and Hickman, 2014, 646). With William Connolly, I ask “[h]ow . . . these practices of reason [that secularism requires] block potential lines of communication between theistic and . . . nontheistic dogmas” (Connolly, 1999, 9). How, then, do these practices of reason limit modern-medieval dialogue?

To be sure, posthumanist thought has been noted for its tendencies toward the mystical and the magical—this despite its realist, materialist focus and as seen in Timothy Morton’s title *Realist Magic* (2013); it regularly expresses and actively encourages wonder, exhibiting what Braidotti calls a “residual spirituality” (Braidotti, 2008, 18). Such observations might seem designed to undermine the realist claims of posthumanism, but Dana Luciano, in her work on ‘queer inhumanisms,’ asserts that “[t]he mystical. . . is not an attempt to transcend the material in pursuit of the spiritual but an effort to meet materiality otherwise, on strange, unknown, and potentially spiritual terrain” (Luciano,

2014, 717). Viewed from such angles, posthumanism seeks to track unfamiliar ways of being by defamiliarizing without demystifying, as modeled in Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism, which Luciano characterizes as "postsecular or anti-disenchanted materialism" (Luciano, 2014, 717).

As a medievalist, I want to argue for *more* than a "residual spirituality" in our posthumanism and instead encourage a specifically postsecular posthumanism that helps us apprehend the extensively distributed sacred in medieval society and its remains. Vital to doing so is de-emphasizing the temporal associations with "post" (in the case of postsecular as well as posthuman); postsecular need not mark a time after the secular, itself a time after the unsecular, or religious. Instead, postsecular calls forth what Caviello and Hickman describe as "an epistemological and methodological reorientation from which history might look different" (Caviello and Hickman, 2014, 646). Where Habermas insists that the secularists—those with the authority in modern society—must give up some of their claims to rational superiority, we critics confident in our secularism, which has put us in a position of (self-imposed) superiority to those whose cultures we study, could reorient ourselves in order to see history differently.

In my pursuit of a postsecular posthumanism that can explain miraculous cherries, speaking stags, ympe-trees, and miraculous and magical knightly accoutrement without relegating them to systems of symbolism (literary or religious) or removing their supernatural agency, I invite more grappling with the supernatural and divine things that abound in medieval texts and continue to delight and confound us today.

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