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Review Essay: Francis X. Newman, ed., *Social Unrest in the Late Middle Ages: Papers of the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*

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Franciscan scholasticism. Monastic study advocates the repeated reading of Scripture, while scholasticism engages in the pursuit of new knowledge with its attendant risk. There are other oppositions in this medieval power play, between spiritual and carnal love, between sinner and saint, between serious and comic. Poverty, knowledge, love, and laughter are thus seen as having potential to challenge established power. This view ties in with semiotics, with the problem of distinguishing between similar phenomena with different names and different phenomena with similar names. The larger issue in Eco's work is the cultural production of meaning.

It is impossible, within the limited scope of a brief review, to bring out the topical diversity of Coletti's book. What precedes will have to suffice as a sampling. The book contains a useful topical index, but no bibliography. An annotated bibliography would have been a welcome addition, and it could easily have been assembled from the material available in the copious notes that accompany the text.

Frede Jensen
University of Colorado

Francis X. Newman, ed., *Social Unrest in the Late Middle Ages: Papers of the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 9, 1986, 148 pp., ill., \$16.00.

This little volume consists of five essays: "Social Change Versus Revolution: New Interpretations of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381" by J. A. Raftis; "Peasant Resistance to Royal and Seigneurial Impositions" by Barbara A. Hanawalt; "Chaucer and the Economic and Social Consequences of the Plague" by D. W. Robertson, Jr.; "'He hath a thousand slayn this pestilience': Iconography of the Plague in the Late Middle Ages" by John B. Friedman; and "Social Conscience and the Poets" by Russell A. Peck.

These papers focus exclusively on England and are primarily concerned with two events, the 1381 peasant revolt and the 1348 Black Death. The title of the book thus promises more breadth than the book provides.

The first two essays on the peasants are excellent and pack a lot of information into a few pages. Of course, this is only what one would expect of such pioneers in this field as Raftis and Hanawalt. Both scholars offer a sweeping view of changing economic, social, and political conditions in English villages, although Hanawalt, as usual, also manages to fit in many specific details of peasant life.

BOOK REVIEWS

To a historian, these essays are the meatiest and most interesting chapters in the volume.

Friedman's contribution attempts to answer the baffling question of why there are no direct depictions of the plague in late medieval art. He claims that medieval artists, who were conservative and constrained by tradition, preferred to use familiar symbols to confront this new calamity. His persuasive thesis is backed up with many excellent black-and-white illustrations.

The other two essays in this collection are on literature. Robertson points out that Chaucer, like many other writers of the era, was disgusted with the corruption and moral failure he saw in society in general and in politics in particular. Within the confines of a relatively few pages, Peck attempts the difficult task of trying to trace "truly basic changes in the medieval psyche" (116) that occurred, he believes, in the three decades after the 1381 peasant rebellion. He focuses on the writings of John Wyclif and *Piers Plowman*, *Plowman's Tale*, and *Jack Upland*. Although not entirely persuasive, Peck is thought-provoking.

At \$16.00, this hardbound book is a bargain despite its rather narrow scope of subjects. It is of interest to students of history, art, and literature. If not startlingly original, all the contributions are well written, solidly researched, and worth reading.

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Cindy L. Vitto, *The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 79, Part 5, 1989, 97 pp., biblio., index, \$15.00

In fourteenth-century images of the Harrowing of Hell, Christ is often pictured wounded but triumphant, extending his pierced hand to a line of souls issuing out of the mouth of hell. The first two figures to leave hell are almost always recognizable as Adam and Eve; occasionally others in the line will be identifiable as Old Testament figures. But Plato will not be there, nor Socrates, nor Aristotle, unless one assumes that the anonymous figures might be taken to represent these ancients. Their absence is symbolic of a problem that medieval theologians and writers faced: What was the ultimate fate of the virtuous pagan, that person who earnestly sought after God, who followed innate rules of goodness and charity, but who lived too early or was geographically too removed to have knowledge of Christ's incarnation and passion?