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Review Essay: Warren Threadgold, *Renaissances Before the Renaissance*

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and the abuse of wealth and power by the churchmen and politicians, provided substantial fuel to the fire of the Peasant's Revolt. John Ball himself acknowledged the poem's influence on his leveller ideology.

But if the "A" version revolves around the prophetic denunciation of present ills in the optimistic hope of a future amelioration, the "B" version, coming after the shattered rebellion of 1381, reflects a disillusionment that, despairing of any reform of society, concentrates on the reform of the individual. Fowler discerns here an almost tangible longing for the end, and a sense of imminent divine intervention as in the *Book of Revelation*. Thus the overriding concern of the "A" version to reform a bad situation is superseded by the apocalyptic conviction of the "B" poem that all such efforts are futile given the impending Second coming.

While Fowler has offered some suggestive new arguments and evidence for his multiple authorship thesis, the great majority of scholars continue to subscribe to the William Langland tradition of single authorship as most concisely stated by George Kane in 1965. Professor Fowler's concern with the historical dimensions of medieval English literature is nonetheless to be welcomed in what is, generally, a very readable and stimulating book.

Donald Sullivan
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RENAISSANCE

Warren Threadgold, *Renaissances Before the Renaissance*, Stanford University Press, 1984. \$28.50

Although the Renaissance, and "renaissances," have been much studied, Warren Threadgold's collection of essays is the first attempt at a comprehensive survey of the revivals of Western culture which took place between the first century A.D. and the Renaissance.

Scope and methods of the study are discussed in a lengthy introduction which also places the various rebirths in their historical and cultural settings. The individual essays, by accomplished scholars in either Classics, Literature or history, include copious notes with selected annotated bibliographies.

As a survey of the cultural revivals selected (Second Sophistic, Fourth-Century Latin, Carolingian, Macedonian, Anglo-Saxon, Twelfth-Century and Palaeologan), this work is penetrating in its analysis of each period in terms of why and how it arose, what it accomplished, and whether or not it qualifies as an actual renaissance. Occasionally editor and contributors do not agree.

What to the one, for instance, is “renaissance,” is to the other only a “revival” (p. 171). But as the writers themselves point out, “renaissance” is an elusive concept, and the fine line between survival and revival of a culture is difficult to determine. In a study where each contributor is dissecting a unique set of circumstances from the perspective of his own particular discipline there are bound to be differences. Rather than detract from the quality of the work, these merely serve to emphasize the complexity of the phenomenon that we call renaissance.

Two areas in which this study falls short of its intended goals, however, are that it is both inconsistent and incomplete in its coverage. One is surprised, for example, to learn from a casual comment that there were also Vandalic, Ostrogothic and Isidorian “renaissances” (p. 60), of which the Introduction gives no notice. The flourishing of the Northumbrian monasteries in the seventh and eighth centuries is treated as an early stage of the Anglo-Saxon Revival, even though it is acknowledged that the two movements were separated by an interval in which “attempts at cultural renewal were scattered and . . . soon dissipated” (p. 103). Moreover, since these revivals are treated as one, then why not do the same with the Carolingian and Ottonian? Instead, the Ottonian renaissance is dismissed on the grounds that it was too narrowly based, “unless perhaps we include in it the contemporary cultural activities of the monasteries” (p. 16). Since other renaissances which depended on monastic cultural activities are given thorough treatment, surely the Ottonian deserves similar consideration, even if it should, like the Palaeologan, turn out to be only a revival. Also, a broadly based study such as this can hardly be considered complete without the inclusion of classical culture’s revival under Islam, especially since this is acknowledged by one of the contributors (p. 137). It is hoped that a future edition would fill these lacunae.

For the renaissances it covers, however, this pioneering work is both informative and penetratingly analytical, and should prove a stimulating guide to further inquiry into these and other rebirths of culture.

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Hans Baron, *Petrarch's "Secretum": Its Making and Its Meaning*, Medieval Academy of America, 1985. \$22.00

In eight chapters, Baron traces the history of the *Secretum's* composition (its genesis, growth, and chronology) with the stated aim of defining the six-year period in the middle of Petrarch's humanistic career when “his thinking differed from both the humanism of his youth and from the mature thought of his last two decades” (vii). The focus, as in Baron's earlier studies on Petrarch,