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Review of *Adam's Grace: Fall and Redemption in Medieval Literature*, by Brian Murdoch

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Olson, Paul A., "Review of *Adam's Grace: Fall and Redemption in Medieval Literature*, by Brian Murdoch" (2003). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 145.

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Speculum, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Jan., 2003), pp. 235-236

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BRIAN MURDOCH, *Adam's Grace: Fall and Redemption in Medieval Literature*. Woodbridge, Eng., and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2000. Pp. xi, 205. \$60.

Brian Murdoch's *Adam's Grace* explores a number of medieval narratives that tell the story of the simultaneity of the Fall and the promise of grace. This idea appears in medieval exegesis of Gen. 3.15's supposed promise to Eve, in the Eva/Ave pun common in the period, implicitly in St. Paul's portrait of Christ as the second Adam, and in the *Vitae Adae et Evae*/Holy Rood legends that establish the pattern for most of the works analyzed in this book. While the *Vitae*/Holy Rood stories are complex and go through many versions, this review requires only a simplified summary of the two often-connected legends concerning Adam's later life and the genealogy of the cross. In these legends Adam and Eve, after a period of hardship outside of Eden, attempt to regain Paradise by doing penance through fasting in a river surrounded by a supportive natural world. Adam finishes his penance while Eve, again tempted by the devil, stops hers, prompting Adam again to confront the envious tormenter who tells of his own Fall. After Cain and Abel, Seth returns to Paradise to try to gain an oil of mercy but is told that mercy will come only with Christ's work. He then receives three seeds or twigs from the Tree of Life (sometimes he also sees the Christ Child or Mary in the tree). In the Holy Rood legend that sometimes continues the story, the rods or seeds from the Tree of Life, now united to make a new tree, receive Moses' and David's care and grow to be a tree selected for Solomon's temple. However, Solomon cannot incorporate the tree in the new building, and it remains in the pool of Kidron until its use at the time of the Crucifixion. The narrative develops over time as some of the details of this material appear to go back to the patristic period and some only to the high Middle Ages.

In treating of the narratives from the latter period Murdoch focuses on a few texts intertextually related to the *Vitae*/Holy Rood material: the various lives of a fictional Pope St. Gregory, notable for incest, penance on a rock in the sea, and a miraculous elevation to the papacy; Wolfram's *Parzival*; the medieval leprosy texts arguing that the blood of innocents can cure the disease, especially as found in the lives of Pope St. Sylvester and a leprous Constantine; and the medieval Adam plays that incorporate bits of the *Vita Adae*/Holy Rood material directly or by way of indirect statement. The last chapter looks at what happens to the Adam story in the post-Reformation plays.

Murdoch's book reflects an enormous range of reading, from Greece and Syria to Cornwall and Ireland. He has a good understanding of the interaction between Latin and vernacular traditions, between exegetical and literary metaphor, and between text and intertext. He shows the complex affiliations among the materials discussed—sometimes in syntax overly complex for my taste. One can find much good sense in the discussion of the Grail as gateway to Paradise or the leprosy/blood opposition figuring sin/redemption. I

could go on commending parts of the book that make cogent and useful points. However, reviews exist to create a discourse with the reviewed. Since Murdoch is dealing with intertextuality, it would have been helpful if he had specified how one discerns what counts as an intertext, an elaboration, or an analogous structure. Clearly the Adam material discussed relates to the *Vita Adae*/Holy Rood stuff. However, in Murdoch's accounts, Gregory's incests are variants of Adam's sin, his blindness is Adam's blindness, and his repentance on a rock in the sea is a variant of Adam's on a rock in a river. The happy conclusion of the story is, so to speak, predicted in the pattern of the *Vitae*/Holy Rood narrative. But such a conclusion is not an evident one. One may ask whether the Gregory story is reenacting the Adam story in any special sense beyond that of all falls, penances, and redemptions; the rock in the river and that in the sea are not very similar as icons. Again, while the *Parzival* section contains much brilliant and persuasive criticism, one gets little evidence that the legendary Adam's story is *in* the Parzival story consistently as an underlying paradigm. This is not to blame Murdoch, but to say that we in the literary-critical community need a better sense of what, in Wittgenstein's phrase, is simply "seeing" and what is "seeing as": what kinds of meanings are implicit in the text of the work, what kinds appropriate the text to patterns of significance that are available to the period but are not necessarily signposted in the work, and what kinds impose on it meanings wholly unavailable to the time and its metaphoric languages. None of these kinds of reading is "wrong," but they should be identified as different exercises in our critical work. Fortunately, Murdoch largely stays within the text or within the period and the semantic possibilities available to it.

The depth of Murdoch's knowledge of the material with which he deals makes one wish that he would have explored other works. For example, he could have looked at the significance of his material in relation to Dante's fallen and upright Edens, gardens, and prelapsarian and redemptive trees. One would also like a fuller discussion than is found on page 79 of the symbolic and structural importance of the story, related to the *Vita Adae*/Holy Rood stories, that is found in the *Queste del Saint Graal* and Malory. Here a carpenter, who works for Solomon or one of his wives, takes the tree that grew at Solomon's house from three twigs cut from the Tree of Knowledge that Eve had brought to the postlapsarian world. These twigs now form natural red, green, and white wood, and the great king makes them spindles on the ship, adorned with the miraculous bed and silk sails, which is sometimes made to figure faith or the Church in the Arthurian story. This ship takes one of the Arthurian cycles' crucial journeys (E. C. Quinn, "The Quest of Seth, Solomon's Ship and the Grail," *Traditio* 21 [1965], 185–222, treating of this narrative, is not cited though Quinn's earlier work on Seth is). Murdoch could have helped us with a really difficult nexus. However, this and all other caveats that I might offer are minor items. To demand more from this work would be ungracious.

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