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Editorial

On the New Age and Reception History

The constant reader might at first find herself at something of a loss when entering into the material in this special issue. If so, this is as it should be; to practice scholarship with any sort of integrity is to be constantly surprised, constantly unsettled. Among the goals of *Relegere* are to expand reception history within religious and biblical studies and to call attention to scholarly work that can add some breadth to its currently rather narrow confines, which remains focused on the written text, and particularly on the Bible, though there have been some signs of improvement of late. The eclectic selection of articles in this collection, from scholars in a range of disciplines including religious studies, English, and history, is intended as a deliberate pushing of the boundaries.

There is no reason other than habit—and perhaps no small measure of that special blindness that comes from extreme specialisation—that the practices of mediums who claim to channel Joan of Arc or contemporary gardeners following the cycles of the moon are any less a subject for reception history than the latest literary rereading of the Passion narratives. For reception history seeks to answer one of the oldest, most fraught, and arguably most important questions asked by scholars in the humanities: in what ways—and by what means—does the past continue to inform the present? Here the popular imagination can perhaps provide us with another way of asking this question: the dated and clichéd images of the work of mediums—largely drawn even today from nineteenth-century Spiritualist practices—present us with an image of haunting, something which has long struck me as one of the most appropriate and simply *right* metaphors for the modern era. The article

by Rebecca Krug in this issue nicely outlines an example of the dialectic of disenchantment and reenchantment that so informs the modern. Mediaeval gardening guides, which touched on the influence of the moon for largely practical reasons (after all, many people in Europe in the Middle Ages did not eat if their gardens did not grow), become in the contemporary world a way into an imagined, and always more enchanted, past. Thus mediaeval rationalisation gets re-read as contemporary reenchantment.

It is the essential task of reception histories of the modern era to study these hauntings, to describe, analyse, and explain the ways in which the past continues to haunt the present, either as a weight (to borrow an image from Marx) or as something more ethereal, even spectral. At the same time, these studies also help shed light on the ways in which the present can haunt the past, the ways in which the past remains always elusive, always in motion, always held in thrall to the concerns and the obsessions of the present. Reading and re-reading are endless tasks, and any claim made for a definitive reading of even the simplest text or story is bound always to signify little more than the arrogance of the reader and an ignorance of the never-finished work of writing—and re-writing—history. In a particularly fascinating study in this issue, Federico Stella points to the fact that the writing of scholarly history (however flawed it may be) can itself play into religious practice, can itself become an object of reception. Thus can the study of religion become a integral part of religious ideas and even religious practice, just as the past can become the present and the present can influence the past.

As guest editor Karolyn Kinane points out in far greater detail in her introduction, the New Age can be at times a maddeningly elusive subject. As a number of scholars have noted, perhaps the most salient feature of the wide range of movements, texts, ideas, and people given the label New Age is the sacralisation of the self, perhaps the logical endpoint of the elevation of the individual that so characterises the modern era. That such a tendency owes a good deal to liberal Christian theology and a re-reading of theistic anthropology is something of an historical truism and can perhaps pass without any serious comment, and there is something determinedly, even quaintly, modern about the New Age. It is a form of religious expression and a way of bringing the past into the present that is uniquely suited to late-modern consumer capitalist cultures and is, for all of its counter-cultural tendencies, fast becoming part of the contemporary religious mainstream, and perhaps not only in the West. It is both a product of and an enshrinement of a consumer-centred age and thus it is an eminently important (if ideologically fraught)

subject for scholarly study across disciplines and methodologies, including reception history. In many ways, the New Age and Neopaganism can tell us a great deal more about the way we live now than can the Bible or any number of other ancient religious texts. That both of these movements (or, to think about it in another way, cultural tendencies) should be understood as religious is something that this volume is taking for granted, but it is, as always, up to readers to make up their own minds on this particularly thorny matter of theory and definition.

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions the varied material gathered together in this volume makes to the field of reception history is the picture it paints of reception as a living, breathing process that manifests itself in the way people undertake even seemingly mundane activities like planting a garden. Though re-reading is a broad historical process, it is also, at one and the same time, a narrow and profoundly ordinary human process. The ways in which we live our day-to-day lives are no less guided by dynamic practices of reception than are the ways in which we read and re-read texts, something that too often gets lost in the more rarified work of textual analysis. This issue of *Relegere* should leave the reader with the feeling of grit under the fingernails, grounded (literally) at the same time as unsettled.

Dig in.

Eric Repphun