

Arvind Thomas, *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages*. University of Toronto Press, 2019. xiv + 267pp. £77.00 (hbk). ISBN 9-781-4-875-0246-1

This fluently argued and attentive study begins with a long acknowledgement, which provides a sense of the book's genesis and of the geographical and intellectual travels of the author. In this it is not unlike *Piers Plowman* itself, although of course we may be considerably more confident that we know the identity of the author. Across acknowledgements, introduction, five chapters and an epilogue, Arvind Thomas offers us a series of ways to be located within the mindset of the thinkers, writers and readers who together responded to and shaped canon law in the later Middle Ages. As a whole, the book successfully proves its case for the value of canon law being automatically and seriously considered as part of the backdrop for socially engaged literature. Each chapter explores specifics of the close relation between church law and a given section of the poem, thus individually and cumulatively presenting Langland's poem as a dynamic participator in its contemporary world.

The introduction suggests that the relation between the church law and literature may be seen to be exemplified by the way a copy of *Piers Plowman* and of William of Pagula's *Pars oculi* keep company, first in the library of Walter de Brugge and then in that of John Wormyngton to whom Walter bequeathed both volumes, amongst others. Already we have a sense of the people who read and responded to these works, to which Thomas soon adds a sense of how such works responded to each other.

Chapter one, '*Contritio Cordis*: the Laughter of Mede and Tearlessness of Contricion,' reminds us that posture matters, especially where contrition is concerned. Here Contricion is revealed to have mounted a flamboyant, but failed, performance of the action he

embodies, a kind of mis-placed *tour-de-force*. Thomas's focus on canon law points out that the failure is not of the sinner alone, however, but also of the confessor, who ought to be looking out for actions that indicate contrition actually felt, rather than publicly demonstrated. The specific, technical terms in which the C-Text Mede promises to 'amende' church and cloister walls as a way to demonstrate her association with the friar's 'ordre' (C 3.64, 67) is a crucial shift from the more general 'couere', 'maken', 'house' used in B 3.60–63, sharpening the satire, as Thomas indicates, but arguably also increasing the comic undercurrents of Langland's text, although Thomas does not remark upon that.

Mede remains a key player in chapter two, which focuses on the knotty matter of usury. Mede herself is revealed as a dynamic force, involved in every part of the process, as epitomised in a striking opening sentence: 'Gifts, goods, payments, and profit: wherever they appear in the poem, Mede is either ahead of or behind them' (p. 63). The detailed explanation of usury in its various forms is both informative and engaging, and makes Thomas's argument for using formal sources that transmit law rather than sources that record the origin of those laws a compelling one. This discussion reveals how fundamentally troubling commerce is any value system and thus makes sense of the poem's preoccupation with it. When and how much one gives, or promises, matters; the line between necessary profit and avaricious gain is a narrow one indeed.

As the book moves on to consider restitution (chapter three) a footnote informs us that the argument that follows remakes one made by Thomas in an earlier article on Canon Law an admission that evinces a smile of recognition at the way one's interpretation shifts upon returning to the poem, even when one expects to build on previous certainties. The detailed attention given in this chapter on the way laws are created and implemented, and the way that Langland persistently returns to the

effects such laws and understood and practiced have on the ‘folk’ brings to mind the similar theme of Emily Steiner’s *Reading Piers Plowman* (2013) and serves to reinforce their shared point that, while Langland is evidently more than a match for the churchmen and their thinking, his concern is always for how those arguments play out in everyday life, and in particular for the consequences they have for the poor, the needy and the genuinely well-intentioned.

Wrong’s trial offers a moment when we see such playing out, and it is here presented in a chapter four which focuses on satisfaction. Thomas’s discussion of Langland’s nuanced, or perhaps worried, and extensive consideration of the forms satisfaction might take, or, rather, the forms various interested parties would like it to take, is evident in the differences between B and C-text, which here again Thomas amply demonstrates. However, while such moments of precise comparison are indeed illuminating and interesting, they also serve as reminders that the poem should also be read as a whole. It may, and indeed does, contain contradictions, but those are part of the thinking the poem enacts: *Piers Plowman* is a process as much as it is a text. This view is in harmony with Thomas’s study, which demonstrates that canon law was also continually evolving, and implies that *Piers Plowman* itself might be seen as part of that process of evolution. It is an appealing thought that a poem that survives for us in multiple texts might have shaped the laws, habits and opinions that so evidently shaped it.

Chapter 5 brings us to Peace’s sermon and puts the case for the B-text being more peaceable than the C-text. Hawkyn is, of course, a key character and his re-invention as *Activa Vita* gives rise to a nice exposition of how the B-text uses ‘concrete material and visual symbolism,’ particularly in the scene discussing the cleaning of Hawkyn’s cloak, whereas the C-text passage ‘stands out as symbolically impoverished’ (p. 221). As well as illuminating the meaning and different

strategies of the two versions, and the shift from individual, Christocentric covenant to institutional church-centred penitential system (p. 218) this particular part of Thomas's study helped make clear to me why the B-text retains its position as the most favoured and studied version of Langland's poem.

That said, Thomas's Epilogue makes a most appealing claim for *Piers Plowman* innovations as proof of its 'continuous interaction with and improvisation around traditions that have already been handed down' (p. 238). Setting aside the quibble over whether there can be a tradition that is not "already handed down" this book not only amply demonstrates that improvisation in respect to canon law, but also reinstates the poem, in both main variants, as texts of reinvention and intervention – both terms with which Thomas ends this study. Sustained focus on the detail of words and the rigorous thought behind them pervades this study as much as it does the poem it discusses and throughout Arvind Thomas steers a sure course between B and C texts, as well as through the poem in general. Taking B and C as the two significant versions of the poem may beg the question of A's status, but it has the advantage of meaning Thomas's study finds a place easily alongside other, established, readings of the poem, such as A.V.C. Schmidt's *The Clerkly Maker* (1987), Helen Barr's *Signes and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition* (1994) and Emily Steiner's *Reading Piers Plowman* (2013) as a further, attentive study which illuminates not just the thinking, but also the literary construction, of this perpetually absorbing poem.

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