BOOK REVIEW: ARVIND THOMAS: PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE REINVENTION OF CHURCH LAW IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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PREFACE

The Middle English poem *Piers Plowman* by William Langland was written in the late fourteenth century and survives in around fifty manuscript editions. This (rightly) evokes scholarly interest in the text because such an abundance of physical manuscripts is rare for texts belonging to the medieval period. This textual abundance is indicative of the poem's popularity—it has been said that *Piers Plowman* was the single most popular text in England for a time.

The poem itself is a series of dream visions, and sometimes dreams within dreams. The main character, Will, over the course of his journey, meets and interacts with

personified theological, moral, and social attributes such as Mede and Contricion, Faith, Hope, and Wrong. Through these interactions, the poem paints a new vision of canon law while simultaneously satirizing contemporary social and religious norms.

Langland wrote three different versions of the poem, known as the A-, B-, and C-versions. These three variants appear to revise each other—A was the first edition (dating to the 1360s), followed by B (c. 1377), followed by C (sometime after 1388). A-version has typically been cast as a half-finished draft—it is significantly shorter than B and C, and significantly less refined. B is often hailed as the apex of the poem's revisional trajectory, whereas C has suffered from the critique that it is not "poetic" enough. Generally, the three versions move towards a progressively sharper rendition of canon law; Langland appears to have refined his thoughts on the subject over time, and modified his seminal work accordingly.

In addition to Langland's revisions, scribes who copied the poem often made their own interventions: in some cases fusing multiple versions, supplementing the A-version with pieces from the other texts, or even changing the text to suit the preferences of their patrons. The organic process of copying texts makes it difficult to differentiate between Langland's deliberate literary choices and the intervention of third parties. It also creates a vast web of literary realities; Langland *and* the scribes are both responsible for establishing normative religious behavior via the poem and its stories. Effectively, the entire book production sphere of fourteenth century England operated in conjunction with canon law to enforce Christian modes of thought.

The following review is of Arvind Thomas' *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages,* a deep and exploratory treatise on the reciprocal relationship between literature and canon law in medieval England as seen in *Piers Plowman.*

For further exploration, we encourage readers to leaf through the scans of British Library MS 35157, a fourteenth century copy of *Piers Plowman*, C-version:

http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_35157

ARVIND THOMAS, *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages*. University of Toronto Press, 2019.

Arvind Thomas' *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law* is a probing exploration of the relationship between the allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* and the rapidly developing concept of canon law in the late Middle Ages. Over the course of five chapters, the book deconstructs Langland's treatment of penance, and the way the poet effectively does the job of regulating Christian normative behavior through the narrative of the poem. Naturally, the book becomes ensnared in the hot-button issue that surrounds *Piers Plowman* like a mist: did Langland intend to critique canon law, or did he aim to re-enforce it? In contrast to the Langland editor A.V.C. Schmidt, Thomas argues that if the first and last confessional scenes are read alongside contemporary confessors' manuals, then both the B and C versions can be seen to stress penitential orthodoxy rather than reform. Of *Piers Plowman*'s treatment of the confessions of Mede and Contricion, Thomas writes, "the poem finds fault not with the procedures of canon law but with those entrusted with their implementation."[235]

Asserting a stance, however, on the issue of whether or not Langland favored orthodoxy is not the purpose of this book. Rather, Thomas complicates the debate by proposing that *Piers Plowman* exists neither to reject nor to re-enforce, but instead to *reinvent* canon law. Thomas convincingly argues his point throughout the text, taking up point by point the elements that form the act of contrition and exploring how each is portrayed within the B and C texts of the poem. According to Thomas, medieval canon law was not nearly as static as some scholars make it out to be. In fact, medieval university education encouraged creative interpretation of canon law by its executors. The High Middle Ages were, in essence, a continuous process of interpretation wherein law was "reinvented" every time it was forced to contend with reality; that is to say, canon law was remade every time it was practiced. *Piers Plowman*, in its simultaneous courting and critique of canon law, shapes Christian penitential norms. We must then wonder if the debate over Langland's personal feelings about canon law is truly productive—it is perhaps too simple to say that he favored the orthodox penitential process, and it may be more fair to say instead that *Piers Plowman* existed in dialogue with canon law. Thomas' nuancing of this debate is the crowning achievement of the book, and urges scholars towards a more holistic view of the issue.

While the book's subject matter and language are quite advanced for undergraduate readers, especially those just beginning a foray into medieval history, the introduction summarizes the book's argument beautifully. However, in order to truly appreciate Thomas' thoughts, reading the five main chapters is a must—they provide concrete examples of *Piers Plowman*'s reinvention of church law through the characters of Mede, Contricion, Conscience, Covetise, Wrong, and Patience, among others. A student with a particular

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affection for medieval English poetry and its contexts could certainly tackle this text, but those inclined in other directions might struggle. Nevertheless, the book is a wonderfully nuanced approach to long-standing issues surrounding the contextualization of *Piers Plowman*, and a much-needed addition to the field.