

## Book Reviews

Arvind Thomas, *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, pp. xiv + 267, \$81.00, ISBN: 9781487502461

Academics, particularly in the law and literature movement, have long recognised the tangible influence of medieval jurisprudence on William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Arvind Thomas' monograph, *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages* aspires in many ways to interrupt this approach, electing to study the 'intersections of, rather than relations between' *Piers Plowman* and the dense catalogue of late medieval canon writers that compromised the poem's 'conceptual community' (pp. 10, 6). It is fitting, then, that Thomas opens his study with an example of *Piers Plowman*'s material coexistence beside legal texts in the library of the canonist, Walter de Bruge. It is this intellectual and processual proximity that lies at the heart of Thomas' interrogation. Far from an obeisant interpreter of church doctrine, Thomas renders the image of Langland and his writing as essential in the *co-production* of canon law.

Structurally, this monograph is arranged to reflect the penitential process under inspection, setting aside chapters to discuss contrition, restitution, and satisfaction. Following a thorough interrogation of the academic landscape, the first chapter focuses on contrition, as inverted by the characters of Mede, Contrition, and their fraternal confessors. Here, Thomas centres his focus on the sophistication of Langland's semiotic understanding of contrition, and the need for genuine remorse as demonstrated through actions. Incorporating the work of Raymond of Penafort, the reader encounters the recurrent intellectual threads that Thomas weaves throughout the monograph, namely the role and responsibility of clerical authority, and the 'horizontal' relationship between *Piers Plowman* and canon law. In echoing Raymond of Penafort's writings on shame and contrition, Langland's narrator, Thomas tells us, emphasises the central responsibility of parish priests in overseeing the penitential health of their communities. Canon law can seem impenetrable, but Thomas offers a sophisticated understanding; he also argues convincingly for the depth of Langland's own intellectual proficiency.

Chapter two interrupts the penitential process to discuss the different presentations of usury in B and C versions of *Piers Plowman* as embodied by Conscience's condemnation of Mede's actions. The broadening definition of usury by canonists in the late

medieval period is reflected in the shift in focus from versions B to C. In comparing version C with the writings of canonists such as Hostiensis, John of Freiburg, and Gratian, Thomas argues that even without an overt mention of the term usury, Langland's C version 'articulates a more socially attentive critique' than the canonists, paying particular attention to the usury of the laity (p. 84). Indeed, the central argument of this chapter hinges on the idea that not only was lay trade dictated by local, secular legislation in the poem, but also by theological thought.

Thematically, the third, fourth and fifth chapters build on the groundwork laid in chapter one, though some are more conceptually diffuse than others. It is in the third chapter where Thomas' rigorous interpretation of canon law bears fruit. In what Thomas refers to as a 'twofold shift', this chapter argues for Langland's shift in focus, from contrition to restitution, in version C. Simultaneously he reassigns the onus of restitution from the penitent, as was the case in version B, into the hands of the clerical authorities. In doing so, Thomas argues that, through the figure of Repentance in the poem's C version, Langland seeks to subvert the canonists' approach to legal maxims. Rather than a law defining a rule, Langland's use of texts such as Gratian's *Decretum* 'would render vivid not only Repentance's conversion of a rule into a law, but also the poem's larger contribution to the discourse of what we would today call "the rule of law"' (p. 127). Thomas goes so far to suggest that Repentance challenges the relationship between the verbal production of canon law and the plenary power of the popes, asking whether a lawmaker should 'be subject to the law or be allowed to override it' (p. 163).

Chapter four continues the exploration of the relationship between penitent and confessor, turning to the satisfaction delivered during Reason's prosecution of Wrong in passus 4. Here, Thomas explores the care taken in recasting the litigants in these secular proceedings as penitents, delving into the tension between justice and mercy, and between punishment and the 'hermeneutic labour' of satisfaction. To do this, Thomas labours over the grammatical moods exhibited in Reason's bilingual speech before stepping back to consider Reason's maxim in the canonistic context of divine mercy. Once more, the reader is privy to Thomas' brilliant interpretation of canon law as he demonstrates Langland's conscious move towards a canonistic understanding of satisfaction in version C. This was done, Thomas argues, to promote the reformation of confessors of the late fourteenth century who had long neglected penitential satisfaction.

Chapter five sees Thomas take a thought-provoking step back from close reading to look at the canon law that governs the overarching penitential process through the interrogation of the 'allegorical modes of representing and reshaping the received canonist thought and

practice' (p. 207). Following the work of Steiner, this discussion centres on the semiotic and etymological shift between versions B and C. Here, Thomas argues convincingly that as Christ's covenant changes from a 'patente' to a 'chartre' in Patience's speech, so too does Langland's approach to documentary sources of penance. Most notably, Thomas argues that poem pivots temporally, from a Christocentric focus on original sin (B) to a confessional process oriented towards Judgement Day (C). The retrospective of the outright rejection of canon law by Luther offered by the epilogue, represents the ending of the malleability of the canon law that Thomas strives to depict throughout the text.

Despite Thomas' clear, incisive writing, the penetrative depth of the discourse makes some of the more abstract ideas unruly. Therefore, this book would have been well served by a concluding chapter. The extent to which Thomas convinces the reader of a real, tangible *reinvention* of canon law varies between chapters and will remain dependent on the reader's interpretation of the term. Nonetheless, Arvind Thomas offers an engaging, interdisciplinary method of studying medieval penitential texts.

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Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, pp. vii + 483, £20.00, ISBN: 978-0300256505

Assuring the reader from the outset that his work 'does not attempt to argue a particular thesis about medieval parish churches' (p. 2), Nicholas Orme's latest book on the buildings, staffing, congregations, and uses of the medieval church offers instead a broad work that is rich in detail, as it draws together geographical, social and religious complexities into a comprehensive and engaging whole.

The chapters of this book can be divided into two thematic, complementary halves. The first addresses exactly what is meant by the medieval church, with Orme focusing on the development of the parish structure (Origins of the Parish, pp. 5-47), those employed by and within the church (The Staff of the Church, pp. 48-84), the physical spaces and buildings (The Church Building, pp. 85-139), and those to whom they administer (The Congregation, pp. 140-196). The second explores what happened to the church, and when — what happened at Mass, and how churches, both as buildings and spiritual centres, were understood and used everyday (The Day and the Week, pp. 197-254), through seasonal changes (The Seasons and the Year, pp. 255-301), throughout the individual lives of their parishioners (The Life Cycle, pp. 302-348), and through the changes (though not always