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Kirja-arvio / A book review

Arvind Thomas

Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages

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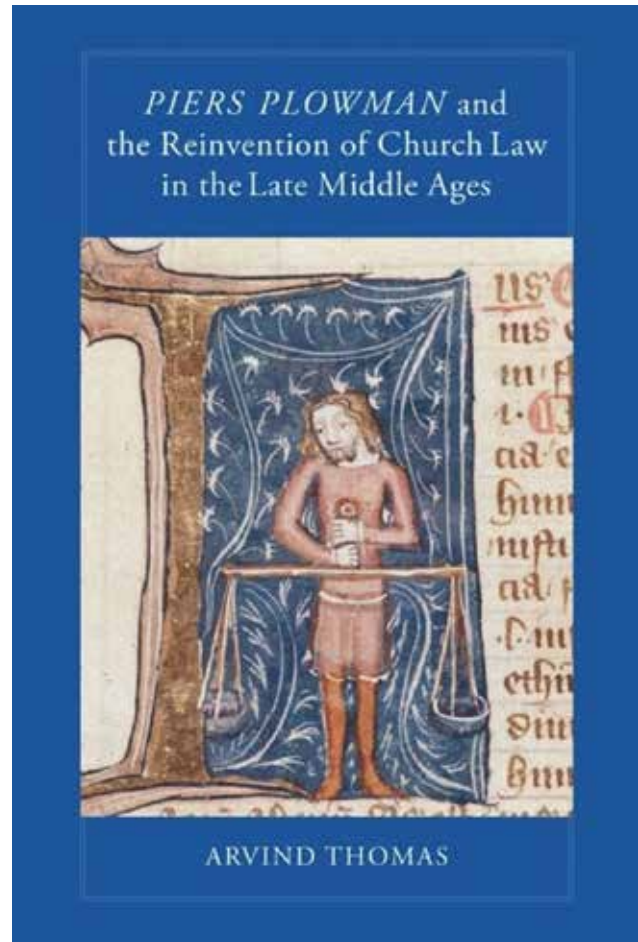
Arvind Thomas

Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 267 pp.

Does poetry have the power to shape the world around us? Arvind Thomas's *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages* addresses this age-old question through an exploration of the conceptual alliance between William Langland's fourteenth-century dream poem and the body of writings constituting the system known as canon law. Through this exploration, the author sets out to provide an alternative vision to the one commonly present in the law and literature movement¹, which tends to strictly separate the two forms of discourse. Likewise, he explicitly departs from the traditional idea of one-way influence from law to literature shared by many studies investigating the relationship of *Piers Plowman* to its legal intertexts.² Instead, the book treats the poem and canon law as engaged in bidirectional exchange, or "co-production" (p. 6), which results in a "poetic reinvention" (p. 18) of canon law. In this process, *Piers Plowman* develops, through quotations and conceptual borrowings from Latin canonistic sources, "a poetics informed by canonist thought" (p. 9), and at the same time actively participates in law-making by opening up a space for an imaginative reform of the canon law of penance.

After the introduction, which articulates the argument of the monograph extremely well, the model of co-production is carefully developed over the course of five chapters structured around the different stages of the penitential process (contrition, confession, restitution and satisfaction), with the final chapter concentrating on the process in its entirety. Combining formalist and historicist



¹ For an overview, see James Seaton, 'Law and Literature: Works, Criticism, and Theory', *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999), 479–507.

² E.g. John Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations* (Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 77), Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies: Binghamton, NY 1992; Nicholas Gray, 'Langland's Quotations from the Penitential Tradition', *Modern Philology* 84 (1986), 53–60.

approaches, Thomas performs a detailed close reading of several passages involving representations of confessions, trials and sermons in the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman*. Thomas makes use of an impressive number of canonistic sources, many of which have not received earlier attention in Langland studies or have been treated as sites of “derivation” (p. 22) rather than transformation, including Raymond of Penyafort’s *De paenitentis et remissionibus*, Gratian’s *Decretum*, and the *Glossa ordinaria* by Johannes Teutonicus and Bartholomew of Brescia. By investigating the allegorical characters’ dialogues and what modern literary theory would call “narratorial” commentary,³ Thomas not only shows Langland’s creative adaptation of the academic penitential discourse present in these source texts, but also illustrates the depth of the poem’s engagement with contemporary legal thought, which goes beyond mere quotation.

In chapter 1, Thomas uncovers the poem’s critique of fraternal abuses through its representation of the tensions between theory and practice in Mede’s and Contricion’s confessions, bringing to light their failure to outwardly display contrition, and their confessor’s failure to encourage it, according to the rules outlined in penitential manuals. Chapter 2 turns to canonist prohibition of usury, illustrating how, especially in the C version, Conscience shapes the canonistic concepts pertaining to avaricious profiteering, in order to generate a new model of spiritual usury concerning secular lords and their vassals. In chapter 3, the focus is on how Repentance transforms an authoritative maxim, which is handled in its legal commentaries as a rule on restitution for penitents, into a law for confessors. Chapter 4 continues to discuss Langland’s treatment of penitential maxims. Under exploration is another maxim on penance quoted during the trial of Wrong by Reason, who also synthesises earlier and more contemporary phases of the penitential tradition by employing the metaphoric image of law as a labourer, thus developing a new approach to the theory of penitential satisfaction. Chapter 5 investigates allegory and the documentary representation of canon law. By comparing Patience’s description of Christ’s covenantal “patente” in the B version to its designation as a “chartre” authorised by the church in C, Thomas reveals a shift from B’s understanding of the document as an interpersonal symbol towards its perception as an institutional sign in C.

Through these meticulous readings, Thomas’s book challenges the manner in which both *Piers Plowman* and canonistic writings are traditionally read, offering instead a vision which seeks to “rethink the classical canon law from a poetic perspective” (p. 20) and “reconceptualizes the art of poetry” (p. 5) as a means of law-making. Thomas contends that canon law in the Late Middle Ages had an aspect of ambiguity which brings it close to poetry: it was not a “static compendium of norms” (p. 15) providing exact solutions, but rather a flexible method of creatively interpreting those norms on a case-by-case basis. This practice is reflected in the ways that Langland’s characters and the dreamer-narrator dialectically debate and forge possible solutions to the different cases in the style of canonists, thereby challenging and reshaping existing canon law. Thomas thus “acknowledges the poet as a penitential legislator” (p. 5–6), who places his poetic apparatus in the service of shaping Christian behaviour in the “extra-textual” (p. 23) world. Building on John Alford’s remark that Langland pushed the analogy between law and theology “further than anyone

³ On the concept of the narrator in medieval literature, see A.C. Spearing, ‘What is a Narrator? Narrator Theory and Medieval Narratives’, *Digital Philology* 4.1 (2015), 59–105.

else dared”⁴ (quoted on p. 24), Thomas himself boldly pushes the analogy between poetry and law even further, seeing “legal and literary discourses” (p. 17) as employing “common interpretative methods of engaging often identical textual sources in order to realize a common goal in their shared present” (p. 10). From this standpoint, the two practices slide towards and ultimately into one another, to the point of poetry becoming part of the history of canon law, and vice versa.

It is a polemical suggestion, one which, by necessity, somewhat downplays the specificity of literary discourse – its drive to convey a meaning through an organised structure for its own artistic ends – that was acknowledged by grammarians in the medieval arts of poetry.⁵ At the same time, however, Thomas’s stance calls for further adjustment of our understanding of the flexibility of generic boundaries and the dialogue between fact and fiction in the Middle Ages, curbing the modern penchant for setting borders where they perhaps did not exist in the minds of medieval users of literature.⁶ Indeed, as Thomas remarks in the introduction, his is a perspective that allows *Piers Plowman* to straddle the divide between the rhetorical categories of history (*historia*) and fiction (*fabula*),⁷ since the poem, in reinventing its sources within its fictional space, provides a window for contemporary readers into how the system of canon law “could be or could have been modified and mobilized” (p. 16) in Langland’s England. In this sense, the book is also a thought-provoking exploration of how poetry can matter in multiple ways, affecting change at the level of the reader’s imagination at least.

Whereas earlier studies undertaking an interdisciplinary analysis of *Piers Plowman* and its relation to legal documents have tended to concentrate on the B version of the text, Thomas opts to read the B and C versions together. He discovers that C is co-productive of canon law more so than B, yet he distances himself from the traditional view that considers the C version to be merely a revision of B, possibly undertaken by Langland to disassociate himself from the interest shown by Wycliffites in B. Thus, the focus shifts from trying to understand the poet through the text to the manner in which the poem presents versatile responses to reality and canon law across its different versions. Besides law and penance, the comparative method would undoubtedly prove insightful with regard to the other aspects of the poem as well. Furthermore, reading the B and C versions side by side also beautifully contributes to Thomas’s commitment to restore *Piers Plowman* “to the

⁴ John A. Alford, ‘Literature and Law in Medieval England’, *PMLA* 92 (1977), 941–951.

⁵ See, for instance, Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s discussion of the natural and artificial order of narration (*ordo naturalis* and *ordo artificialis*) in *Poetria nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, Margaret F. Nims transl. and ed., Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies: Toronto 2010, 18–23. On studying medieval literary texts in relation to history, see Derek Pearsall, ‘Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry’, *The Modern Language Review* 99.4 (2004), xxxi–xlii.

⁶ See, e.g., Paul Strohm, ‘Middle English Narrative Genres’, *Genre* 13 (1980), 379–388; Ardis Butterfield, ‘Medieval Genres and Modern Genre Theory’, *Paragraph* 13 (1990), 184–201; Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature’, in Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward and Aesthetic of Reception*, Timothy Bathi transl., University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1982, 76–109; Suzanne Fleischman, ‘On the Representation of History and Fiction in the Middle Ages’, *History and Theory* 22.3 (1983), 278–310; Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation and Reality*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1991.

⁷ For a discussion of the rhetorical categories of narration in relation to medieval vision literature, see Jonas Wellendorf, ‘True Records of Events that Could Have Taken Place: Fictionality in Vision Literature’, in Panagiotis Agapitos & Lars Boje Mortensen eds., *Medieval Narratives between History and Fiction: From the Centre to the Periphery of Europe, c. 1100–1400*, Museum Tusulanum Press: Copenhagen 2012, 141–166.

immediacy of a moment” (p. 238), as the method stays true to the poem’s late fourteenth-century reproduction and reception: Langland wrote at least three different versions that were all simultaneously copied, circulated and available to readers.⁸

The book will appeal to a varied academic readership. In particular, it is a valuable contribution to *Piers Plowman* studies, shedding light on some of the poem’s less discussed passages, while drawing on previously overlooked sources and adding to the understanding of its relationship to the established ones. Concentrating less on Langland’s personal views on canon law, Thomas shows how extensively the poem, especially the C version, engages in dialogue with legal writings and invites its audience to envision canonistic practices of penance in new ways. Readers with previous knowledge of *Piers Plowman* will be best positioned to fully appreciate Thomas’s nuanced readings. Those less familiar with the poem and with Langland’s Middle English might have benefited from accompanying Modern English translations, and from a brief exposition of the poem and its different versions in the introduction.

The book is to be highly recommended also to scholars of medieval literature in general, as it provides food for thought on such long-standing areas of interest as intertextuality, authorship and genre. Moreover, it will be of interest to historians seeking to understand the medieval system of canon law, approached here from a less common perspective that brings it out as a multifaceted, malleable phenomenon. In this regard, the book is suitable also for beginners perhaps intimidated by the towering ecclesiastical concept, since canon law is briefly glossed in a footnote on the first page, and English translations are provided alongside the extensive citations in the original Latin from the various canonistic sources.

Elegantly and convincingly argued throughout, the learned study makes a compelling case for rethinking *Piers Plowman*’s relationship to canon law, and also enhances our understanding of some basic literary concepts relevant to the study of medieval literature. It presents its complex subject matter in lucid prose and offers a richly rewarding reading experience also in terms of its balanced structure. Evoking a mood very different from the opening anecdote recording *Piers Plowman*’s side-by-side existence with canon law around the end of the fourteenth century, the epilogue concludes the study with Martin Luther casting into the flames many of Langland’s (and Thomas’s) sources, now seen as components of a closed and rigid entity. Between these two poles, Thomas’s readings of the poem emerge, in a manner that is quite moving, as a testament to a moment in history that “flickers and fades” (p. 29) out of sight with the dawn of the Reformation. Besides its academic value, this book is a reminder that erudition and enjoyment can – and should – walk hand in hand.

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⁸ Ralph Hanna, ‘The Versions and Revisions of *Piers Plowman*’, in Andrew Cole & Andrew Galloway eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2014, 33–49.