

**Arvind Thomas: *Piers Plowman* and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages. Toronto/ON: University of Toronto Press, 2019. p. xiv + 267, \$75,00, ISBN: 9781487502461**

*Piers Plowman* is certainly a poem which still speaks to us today, with its rich imagery, touching upon many different themes. The allegorical narrative, which incorporates social satire, describes the narrator's quest for a good Christian life. This makes for a richly allusive work, abounding in quotations from the Bible and from patristic writers. The dreamer's quest is concerned with penance and the penitential process which was required by canon law. In his book, Arvind Thomas takes a fresh look at penance in *Piers Plowman* and the interaction and co-production of texts on canon law (with focus on penance) and literary texts.

The association between *Piers Plowman* and texts concerned with canon law goes back to the first recorded owner – a will documents that in 1396 Walter de Brugge, canon of York Minster, left *Piers Plowman* to Dominus Johannes Wormyngton. As Arvind Thomas underlines in his "Introduction", this is not just a mere coincidence. According to Thomas, *Piers Plowman* was written with texts on canon law in mind. What is more, the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman* exhibit different approaches to canon law. Arvind's study intends to bring together two strands of *Piers Plowman* scholarship, that on the relationship of the versions and that focussing on *Piers Plowman*'s engagement with legal texts. Thomas sets out to demonstrate that *Piers Plowman* offers an alternative vision of canon law (and the stages and procedures of penance in particular) and that C shows a stronger involvement with canon law than the B text. He is interested in what he calls the "reinvention" of canon law in *Piers Plowman* and his detailed analysis of central passages in *Piers Plowman* aims to demonstrate how they actively engage with, rework and reinvent their sources and analogues with the intention of reforming canonistic practices.

Thomas's book is divided into several chapters reflecting the penitential stages. Thus, Chapter 1 is concerned with contrition, since the canon law pertaining to contrition is invoked in a number of confessional scenes in *Piers Plowman*, as for instance in Mede's confession and Contrition's confession. Thomas reads Mede's and Contrition's confessions in the light of different penitential works, in particular Raymond of Penyafort's *Summa de casibus poenitentiae*. The penitential manuals stress the importance of gestures and postures of the penitent, as does *Piers Plowman*. However, the canonist's approach to contrition is more evident in C than in B, as is the contrast between theory and practice.

In Chapter 2 the author focuses (again) on Passus 3 and the discussion of usury. In the debate with Mede, Conscience explains that there are two types of "meed": rewards given by God to those who work well on earth, and the rewards that men on earth receive from one another, as when priests charge for their services and gain wealth from lack of work. A comparison of the B and C versions shows that in C usury is not explicitly mentioned. Thomas proposes that the most fruitful way of reading the Passus is to consider not only the scriptural *loci*, which scholars usually refer to, but also the canonical sources which comment on these, since they go beyond the biblical passages and interpret them, thereby formulating the major principles of usury. In the C version we see a modification of the model of spiritual

usury which could be applied to the relationship between a secular lord and his vassals. It therefore offers a possible solution and reform of labour.

Chapter 3 is concerned with Covetise's confession and restitution. When Covetise confesses the sin of usury, Repentance in the B version seeks for signs of remorse in Covetise and urges him to repent (and to make restitution of his own accord) whereas in C Repentance stresses the confessor's obligation to pay attention to restitution, and exhorts Covetise to make restitution to his victims to obtain absolution. By reading this passage with the relevant passages of the canonical rule on restitution in mind, Thomas is able to make the case that there is a shift in focus and perspective from B to C arguing that in C the rule on restitution is treated like a law whereas in canon law sources the rule is subservient to or regulated by the law; Repentance's invention of a law derived from a rule thus creates a law on restitution which would curtail the power of the Pope to grant exemptions.

Thomas points out in Chapter 4 that since satisfaction is not often required from the penitents in *Piers Plowman*, the last stage of the penitential process is usually forgotten. This mirrors the neglect of satisfaction characteristic of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas analyses a section in Reason's trial of Wrong in Passus 4 and looks at the maxim "Nullum malum inpunitum, nullum bonum irremuneratum" ("no evil will be unpunished, no good unrewarded"), which serves as a basis to determine the punishment of Wrong, and invokes the discourse around the penitential forum and marks a shift from secular to spiritual. Thomas proposes that in *Piers Plowman* we see a synthesis of differing theories about satisfaction which appear in penitential treatises composed at different times. Out of these there emerges a novel theory of satisfaction as socially productive and beneficial physical labour (Reason's image of Law as labourer). Thomas also succeeds in demonstrating that the B and the C version interpret the Latin quotation differently; in B the confessor is concerned only with mercenary benefit whereas in C the adverb "kyndeliche" is used, denoting a charitable mode of action.

In Chapter 5 Thomas argues against C being merely a revision of B, e.g. an attempt by the poet to distance himself from accusations of Wycliffitism by changing the text. In Thomas' opinion the differences are due to C's more innovative and co-productive engagement with canon law. Thomas points to the difference between "patente" (B text, passus 14) and "chartre" (C text, passus 16) to categorise the document Patience describes for Haukyn in the fourth vision when explaining Christ's covenant with man. For Thomas, "patent" is an interpersonal, reciprocal symbol for Christ's covenant, whereas "charter" is a verbal, institutional sign, a means to administer penance. In C the penitential process is presented as more temporal and processual thus challenging the conception of penance as a semiotic process of mediation between the penitent's inner contrition and divine remission, which results in an eschatological vision of penance.

The book ends with an Epilogue which offers a retrospective assessment of *Piers Plowman* and canon law from the later perspective of Luther's burning of books on canon law in 1520. In stark contrast to the treatment of canon law in *Piers Plowman*, Luther viewed it as fixed and incapable of development.

An extensive bibliography and a detailed index round off the book, which has been well proofread. The book under review makes a strong case for not treating law and literature as separate discourses, and in particular for reconsidering the relationship

between *Piers Plowman* and canon law. Thomas, it should be noted, goes beyond the law in literature movement, and his demonstration that the C version of *Piers Plowman* engages with active debates on canon law and penitential practices. This does not come as a surprise once one recognises that canon law was a body of texts (not a static set of norms) characterised by its openness and dynamic qualities – features which it shared with fictional writings. This perspective makes Thomas' book a highly stimulating and interesting read. It provides an innovative and convincing analysis of *Piers Plowman*. It bears witness to the author's exceptional knowledge of canon law and of the poem itself, and will certainly spark off new readings and discourses about *Piers Plowman*.

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