

Reviewed Work: An Introduction to 'Piers Plowman' by Michael Calabrese

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An Introduction to Piers Plowman. By MICHAEL CALABRESE. (New Perspectives on Medieval Literature: Authors and Traditions). Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2016. xxx+355 pp. \$79.95. ISBN 978-0-8130-6270-9.

Those embarking on *Piers Plowman* in all of its versions for the first time will find Professor Calabrese's *Introduction* a handy *vade mecum* as they set out with their parallel text edition. The core of the volume is a 'Narrative Reading Guide' which summarises the 'evolving story' (p. xv) passus by passus. Much like a Michelin travel guide, the chapters set out a route, first of the A-text (the B-Text once the A-version has ended) and then summarising the alternatives and excursions one will discover in B and C. There are several introductions to the poem, but this is the only one that deals with all of the major versions in parallel. Some beginning readers might refer to the relevant chapter after reading each new passus, but more, probably, will read the volume before they start out on the trip.

The volume is deeply infused by Professor Calabrese's knowledge of the poem and its criticism, but all of this learning is worn lightly. There are very few end-notes to side-track the reader and 'need to know' material – on the life of the poet, pronunciation, metre, historical events, major contemporary vernacular writers – is kept to a minimum, in brief, separate sections. Even more than on his wide and deep learning about *Piers*, and his evident love of the poem, Professor Calabrese draws on (and writes passionately about) his experience of teaching the poem and his *Introduction* feels very much like classroom commentary distilled translated into book form.

Sometimes, it has to be said, prioritising readability and momentum leads to some loss of precision that could mislead. For example, Calabrese states that 'Langland wrote only one poem' (p. xiv). Well, in point of fact this is pure supposition: we do not *know* that he only wrote one. There could have been other poems, or possibly some of the poet's other work might have been merged, perhaps by one or more scribe-editors, into the B-text or C-text (does the C IX analysis of lollers really belong there?). For another example, a comment on the revision of the crucifixion passage in C XX states, 'Langland, in his final revisions, thinks upon last things', and suggests, 'perhaps the older poet feels closer both to the calamity and to the redemption' (p. 239). But we do not *know* that the poet revised the B-text in passus order, or even that he was nearing death when he revised C XX.

The 'Narrative Reading Guide' finishes with the imperative: 'Continue the journey'. Having focused on summarising the narrative, how well does the *Introduction* prepare readers for engaging with the poem as poetry? Calabrese advises that 'the rough-and-ready alliterative long line must be received viscerally, though perhaps not at once cognitively understood' (p. 309), recommending hearing dramatic readings and supporting this approach with a kind of *dramatis personae*, a list of 'Persons, Personifications, and Allegorizings'. Every teacher will recognise that hearing the poem read aloud may engage baffled students. But it is only a first step. More models of close reading would have been useful to demonstrate how *Piers* engages and experiments with, and helps to shape, a vernacular poetics.

Teachers lucky enough to be teaching *Piers* in all of its versions will, no doubt, consider recommending this *Introduction* as preparatory reading. Perhaps, though, such users are fewer than Professor Calabrese cares to imagine. A more promising market for this book may lie with independent readers who have encountered the poem through performance, poetry festival, translation, or other means and wish to explore it further.

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