

Notices of Books Received

Britton J. Harwood, *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). xii, 237. £14.00, \$US24.00, paper.

The author, professor of English at Miami University, has published extensively on Middle English literature and critical theory. In this study, he considers *Piers Plowman* as an expression of a crisis of faith and, as such, a landmark in the theological and philosophical history of the mediaeval era. The author shows how the protagonist of the poem represents himself as one in need of a knowledge of Christ as present and existing. This kind of knowledge was elaborated in late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thought as "notitia intuitiva": the poet wants, not a report of Christ, but Christ as an object of perception. Any conversion for him is consequent upon the vision of God. The action of the poem, then, consists in the poet's testing of certain human capacities for their ability to recover the vision of God. Following through each segment of the poem, Harwood charts the course of the poet's inquiry, showing how each vision advances the poet's search until he reaches the knowledge of Christ in remorse—suffering being the point where God and humanity meet.

On this basis Professor Harwood suggests that *Piers Plowman* is the first Middle English poem to have been motivated by the deterioration in theological and philosophical foundations experienced by the fourteenth-century writer, as argued by Charles Muscatine and Anne Middleton. This is the first book on *Piers Plowman* to take the narrator seriously when he rejects moral instruction as a substitute for the knowledge of God, and to argue that the poem is authentically exploratory.

Carolyn Larrington, *Women and Writing in Mediaeval Europe: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1995). xiv, 277. £12.95, \$US17.95, paper.

This is a unique collection of writings by and about mediaeval women. The impressive selection of primary source material made by the author, who lectures in mediaeval English at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, goes beyond existing stereotypes to raise vital questions of representation and

autobiography. The range of material extends from Iceland to Byzantium, and spans one thousand years. The selections include literary, historical, theological, and other types of narrative and imaginative writing. The pieces explore the themes central to mediaeval women's lives and their relationship to cultural and social institutions.

The sourcebook encompasses marriage; love, sex, and friendship; motherhood and work; women and Christianity; women and power; education and knowledge; women and the arts. Larrington places the writings in their historical context, with clear, helpful introductions. All primary material is in modern English, some translated here for the first time.

Richard Barber, ed., *The Pastons: A Family in the Wars of the Roses* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995). 208. \$US23.00, paper.

The editor's introduction to this selection, first published in 1986, reminds us that "private letters written in English were almost unknown before 1400." With the editor's invaluable linking narrative, these letters bring the Middle Ages triumphantly to life. Within three generations (1426 to 1485), and through the dark and dangerous years of the Wars of the Roses, the Pastons established themselves as a family of consequence, both in their native Norfolk and within court circles. Ambitious and highly mobile—womenfolk as well as men—they kept in touch by correspondence, usually but not invariably through the medium of a clerk.

These letters, a rare survival, break upon us across the centuries with the urgency, and sometimes the violence, of their preoccupations: defending property, fighting court cases, making the right alliances, and, on the domestic side, managing their estates, conducting their courtships, stocking their cupboards. The edition is not provided with an index, but there is an informative epilogue that relates the subsequent history of family members and that of the letters themselves.

The Index of Middle English Prose, Handlist IX and Handlist XI (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992 and 1995). xxviii, 164, and xxxviii, 251.

Handlist IX in this series, under the general editorship of A.S.G. Edwards with co-editors N.F. Blake and R. Hanna III, has been compiled by L.M. Eldredge, formerly Professor of English at the University of Ottawa; it comprises manuscripts containing Middle English prose in the Ashmole Collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. *Handlist XI* has been compiled by Linne R. Mooney, Associate Professor of English at the University of Maine; it comprises manuscripts in the Trinity College Library, Cambridge.

The Ashmole Collection is large; more than 700 manuscripts in all, with well over 100 containing items in Middle English. There are manuscripts of great interest, such as the Ashmole Bestiary with its fantastic drawings of animals and its rich gold leaf background, but the important items in Middle English, though of more modest appearance, are no less noteworthy. These include the unique copy of an English translation of Bernard of Gordon's *Lilium medicinae*, one of the more influential medical texts of the later middle ages. There are many items concerning alchemy and astrology, and, although there is not a great deal of religious material, there is the Wycliffite Bible.

In this handlist all the Middle English texts are described by a generous incipit, an explicit, rubric or title if any, and a bibliographical description. The indices — incipits, explicits, titles, authors (the most frequently cited name being George Ripley, author of alchemical treatises who died in 1490), and subjects — are intended to give full and ready access to the whole. These indices are preceded by a macaronic index for works in Latin and English, in English and French, in English, Latin, and French, and in English, Latin, German, French, and Italian.

Handlist XI deals with the collection of mediaeval manuscripts in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, the largest such collection of any college in Great Britain, and one of the most important collections in the world. The subjects contained therein cover the whole range of topics usual to mediaeval manuscripts, with the single bias being that the majority were produced in Britain. Particularly noteworthy are Wycliffite translations of the Bible, sermons, and Wycliffite tracts, as well as major collections of devotional tracts. Trinity is also rich in mediaeval scientific manuscripts, including a large number of medical manuscripts whose compilers were apparently trying to bring together much of the current knowledge of the day. The collection also

contains major compilations of alchemical tracts, historical and legal material; and unique Middle English translations of classical and early mediaeval texts. A number of known Middle English texts not previously thought to be in the Trinity collection are identified, opening new areas of study of this library's manuscripts.

Because of the greater size and complexity of Trinity's holdings, compared with those in the Ashmole Collection, it is not surprising to find that the apparatus in *Handlist XI* occupies nearly twice the extent of that in *Handlist IX*. The macaronic index lists works in Latin and English, in French and English, and in Latin, French, and English. There is a list of manuscripts examined, followed by indices of incipits and rubrics; acephalous incipits; reverse explicits; reverse atelous explicits; authors; titles; owners, scribes, and provenance; persons and places; and lastly subjects, in which some 400 entries appear for various kinds of "recipes" alone.

The usefulness of both these handlists is enhanced by the admirably concise and informative commentaries provided by the compilers for the individual manuscript entries.

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