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## Review of The Penn Commentary on 'Piers Plowman', Vol. 4: C Passūs 15–19; B Passūs 13–17, by Traugott Lawler

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Traugott Lawler’s volume of *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* covers the fourth and fifth visions, from the feast of Patience to Will’s dialogue with the Samaritan: *passūs* 15–19 in the C Version, corresponding to 13–17 in B. (The A Version breaks off before these segments). Keyed to the Athlone edition of *Piers Plowman* (3 vols., 1960–1997, under the general editorship of George Kane), *The Penn Commentary* is an indispensable guide to Langland’s poem. This is the fourth volume to be published, of five projected.<sup>1</sup>

Plans for a literary and historical commentary on the Athlone *Piers Plowman* began in the late 1980s and involved a re-assessment of what commentary is and should be. In a programmatic essay that expressed a general disaffection with commentary as usually practiced, Anne Middleton remarked that “[annotation] lends to the text it elucidates a rich *vertical* density, a thickness of possible referentiality [...] at the cost of repeatedly cutting across the *horizontal* strands of development” (1990: 170). As usually practiced, annotation “is phrasal, not clausal, eschewing open predication, and largely confined to the appositive mode”; it “adduces” sources, backgrounds, analogues, and definitions, leaving literary meaning to fend for itself (Middleton 1990: 169–170). In an essay published about the same time, Lawler remarked that it is perhaps “the nature of annotation” “to stick to incidentals”:

The author has presumably said what needs to be said on his subject. It would be arrogant of the annotator to add to that. His job is precisely to concentrate on the obiter dicta, on what the author’s concentration on the main subject has caused him to toss off without explanation (1991: 98).

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<sup>1</sup> Volumes 1 and 5 (Galloway 2006; Barney 2006) were reviewed in *Anglia* 126/1. The present author reviews volume 2 (Hanna 2017b) in *Medium Ævum* 88.2. Volume 3 was in preparation by Anne Middleton at the time of her death; responsibility for it has passed to Steven Justice.

The Penn commentators do not stick to incidentals. These volumes attend as much to literary meaning as to sources and backgrounds. This dual focus – Middleton’s horizontal and vertical axes – is aptly stated by Lawler in a preface to this volume: there he states that two distinctive features of his commentary are frequent citation of “Latin analogues” and “emphasis on comedy” (xiii). This is accurate: the volume is packed with Latin erudition; it is also a treasury of good sense and a magisterial performance of literary reading.

To begin with the Latin: Lawler improves upon Alford 1992, the standard reference guide to Latin quotations in *Piers Plowman*. He also identifies new Latin sources for Langland’s English verse (e.g., 220–223, previously reported in Lawler 2013), and he unveils richly articulated Latin contexts for Langland’s fictions. An example is the note on Actyf’s *cote of cristendom* (73–74). Lawler identifies the English phrase as a rendering of “*vestimentum* or *vestis* or *tunica baptismi*”. (‘Baptism’ is a recorded sense of Middle English *cristendom*). By searching the on-line *Patrologia Latina* for these phrases, Lawler uncovers a rich vein of biblical exegesis, which he summarizes, exemplifies, translates, and brings to bear on Langland’s fiction. The results afford the confidence of negative statement (“there is in fact little use made of [Jude 1.23] in the commentary tradition”) and tell against some recent interpretations of Actyf’s coat. This method of inquiry is repeated throughout Lawler’s volume. Of particular interest are notes that identify creative or motivated misrepresentation of Latin sources (22–23, 156, 207, 247). Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea* emerges as a major source of C.17/B.15. In a series of notes, Lawler details the sources informing Langland’s portrayal of the prophet Mohammed (249–254, 277–278).

Though Latin sources, analogues, and backgrounds are richly documented, the relevant literature in Anglo-French and Middle English gets little notice. Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the few vernacular authors to be quoted frequently. Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne* is quoted four times, in each case through an intermediary source, usually Derek Pearsall’s (2008) notes to the C Version. In this area Lawler’s volume should be supplemented with reference to the other volumes of *The Penn Commentary*, especially those by Andrew Galloway (2006) and Ralph Hanna (2017b).

Lawler’s expository style is plain-spoken, generous and sure-footed, always ready to offer a translation or paraphrase when that may clarify a difficult line or idea. A few notes participate in the venerable Langlandian genre of crux-busting: What does Actyf mean when he introduces himself as a *mynstral* (63–67)? Why does Langland say that Paul the Apostle was a basket-weaver, when Acts identifies him as a tent-maker (208–210)? In another series of notes, Lawler walks us through the literal sense of Langland’s Tree of Charity and its three props: what should we basically envisage when *Liberum arbitrium* says that he

strikes down the winds of the World and the Flesh with these implements (306–308)?

A marvelous and erudite note establishes that the *seuene sterres* of C.17.99 are not the planets, as earlier commentators thought, but the Pleiades (229–230). The stakes are higher in C *passus* 15 and 16, where Lawler’s exposition of Patience and Actyf is a rebuttal to Aers (2004: 122–138), and Watson (2007). David Aers and Nicholas Watson view Patience as a discredited figure of inflexible spiritual perfectionism. Against this, Lawler emphasizes that Patience is a merry ascetic, a “playful ironist” (14), and that the scenes in which he appears are infused with comedy absolutely integral to their meaning. Lawler’s rebuttal operates mostly by implication, but see pages 49, 60–61, 91, 101, 119, and compare Hanna (2017a: 269–351), opposing Aers and Watson on similar grounds. At stake here is the affective quality of the virtue expressed in Patience, and the status of Langland’s poem as a literary fiction: Lawler and Hanna direct us to consider what kind of readerly engagement this poem demands.

In an earlier publication, Lawler wrote, “I confess to a special pride, whenever I have annotated a text, in writing notes that clarify its structure” (Lawler 1991: 97). Such notes form the backbone of this volume; readers will especially appreciate Lawler’s clarifications of the structure and argument of the long speeches by Patience and Liberum arbitrium. Lawler schematizes a long segment of C *passus* 16 as “four consecutive passages of rhetorical amplification” (117). In the headnote to the next *passus* he states, with lapidary sureness, that the topic is “Holy Church and charity” and the “conceptual center is lines 125–49” (198). Often the meaning of a passage is clarified by another, distantly separated from it. The pardon-scene is a touchstone repeatedly invoked by Lawler to clarify what is at stake in a given passage (e.g., 100, 175, 413). On occasion, a clear view of the argument has textual implications. *Passus* 15 of the B Version has been the site of intricate textual speculation and editorial surgery. Lawler finds that a proper understanding of the poet’s argument and expository procedure obviates such efforts (255, 267–268).

Just as important are notes that proceed from the poem’s structure and argument to an explanation of differences between the B and C Versions. An elegant little note explains the omission from the C Version of a ten-line vignette on “millennial peace” (B.17.115–24; pp. 397–398). Langland’s heavier revision of the Hawkyn and Tree-of-Charity episodes receives due attention. The topic calls for literary judgment – that is, willingness to discriminate between better and worse ways of making a point – a responsibility that Lawler accepts. The poet’s C-Version revisions usually come in for reasoned praise, but Lawler is sometimes ambivalent (e.g., 43) or acknowledges that the poet nods or left his work unfinished.

*The Penn Commentary* is not a variorum – there is no attempt to survey the critical heritage for its own sake –, yet Lawler provides helpful annotated bibliographies for the most important scholarship on key topics: for instance, Patience (14–15), Actyf (59–62), the Tree of Charity (298–299), and Abraham’s account of the Trinity (346). Key statements of Lawler’s own interpretative take may be found under the index entries for “*agere et pati*”, “comedy”, “‘Harlots’ Holiness”, “miswinning”, and “semi-Pelagianism” (especially 388). Several of these entries are keywords of articles Lawler wrote during the preparation of this commentary.

Though available in electronic form, the Penn Commentaries are designed to be engaged as books. Users who seek annotation of a particular line should always check the line-number indexes in each of the published volumes and they should leaf backwards, from the point at which the line is annotated, scanning for notes to encompassing segments of the poem. The *passus* headnotes are brilliant distillations, but there are important continuities across *passus* boundaries, especially where those boundaries shifted during revision. Several times, commentary on the action and argument of one *passus* begins within notes to the previous one. Like the earlier *Penn Commentary* volumes, this one should be browsed and read, with the Athlone text volumes ready to hand.

Typographic errors, mostly in punctuation, are infrequent and benign. On page 42 the reference to B.15.14–15 should be to Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee*, probably B<sup>2</sup>, lines 2705–2707 in the Riverside Edition. On page 54 read *Patience’s patient* for *Patient’s patient*; on page 108 read *ad delicias* for *ad deliciis*. On page 269, in the quotation from the Cassiodorus-Epiphanius *Historia tripartita*, I prefer the punctuation of the *Patrologia Latina* (69.898), with a colon after *litterarum*.

As Middleton (1990: 180) remarks, the text volumes of the Athlone *Piers Plowman* resemble Teubner or Oxford editions of classical Greek and Latin texts, in that they lack standard components of modern scholarly editions of medieval vernacular texts. The introductions are mere essays in textual criticism, intending little more than to set out the support, evidentiary and logical, for the text printed. “The evidence for authorship” received treatment within separate covers (Kane 1965) – a publication that could have become the first installment of a fascicular general introduction to the poem in all its versions. The three text volumes were followed by a concordance (Wittig 2001) and glossary (Kane 2005), but there were no further fascicles of a general introduction. The Athlone project never produced synthetic discursive treatments of the poem’s sources, language, or form. These topics have received much good attention in subsequent scholarship, not least in the *Penn Commentary*, the published volumes of which perhaps lay a foundation for new synthetic treatments.

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