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Review of Piers Plowman and the Books of Nature by Rebecca Davis

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fleeting glimpse of utopia does not come to be, but it provides a critique of and a forward-looking alternative to the present. Similar hopeful moments recur throughout the poem, “seed[ing] the present moment with the possibility for future transformation” (p. 175). Utopia is “not yet” rather than not here (p. 176). Lochrie treats the narrative’s repeated failures of governance, communal action, and social unity as moments at which possible futures are imagined. She suggests at the end of the chapter that William Morris’s *A Dream of John Ball* shares with *Piers Plowman* an idea of “utopian failure as the premise of utopian hope and promise” (p. 179).

The final chapter brings medieval texts into conversation with More’s *Utopia*, not as sources but as “points of reference” that suggest “engagements with, and departures from, previous idioms” (pp. 182, 184). Lochrie discerns melancholy in Hythloday’s attitude toward the Utopia he found and lost, as well as estrangement from the English present. She proposes that estrangement is the “affective mode of all utopianism” (p. 188), and reflects on More’s affective kinship with the *Land of Cokaygne*. Mandeville’s *Book* offers a different kind of lens through which to examine More’s work: where Lochrie reads Mandeville’s traveler as cosmopolitan, she finds More’s Utopians deeply provincial, a people intolerant of and uninterested in the cultures surrounding them. I am not fully persuaded by this argument: it seems to me that More’s Utopians are less provincial than Lochrie proposes, just as Mandeville’s traveler is less cosmopolitan. Finally, Langland’s “radical pastoral,” and the tradition he inspires of plowmen critiquing the Church and society, “haunt[s]” Hythloday’s positions about labor and spirituality (pp. 202, 203). Both Langland and More view labor as potentially healing the commonwealth, and both imagine artisans as the core of a better social system.

Lochrie sets out to establish the value of medieval utopianisms for literary history and to expand the archive of what constitutes utopianism. She succeeds on both scores, while demonstrating the vitality and in some cases the persistence of medieval utopian visions. Some readers may quibble with her expansive definition of utopianism, but I see this as a productive strategy to reinvigorate utopian theory. She uses the medieval past so as to establish aspects of utopianism: the centrality of estrangement, of perspectival shifts, of melancholy, of cosmopolitanism and provincialism, and of social critique. This is an important and original book.

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PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE BOOKS OF NATURE. By Rebecca Davis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvi + 272; 9 illustrations. \$90.

Classroom discussion of Middle English literature may often be enriched by exploration of the word *kynde*, a word whose primary senses were mostly taken over by the French loan *nature* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, leaving the modern noun and adjective with such attenuated meanings as “type” and “nice,” respectively. In coming to see these modern senses of *kind* as semantic outcroppings of a submerged mother lode, students obtain insight into the processes of language change and obtain a linguistic entrée into thinking about material existence and moral responsibility. Readers of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* encounter *kynde* in its full range of “natural” senses, plus one provocative sense apparently unique to this poem: early in the third vision, the character Wit states, in definitional mode, that “Kynde” is “creatour · of alle kynnes þinges / Fader

and fourmour · of al þat euere was maked / And þe gret god · þat gynnyng
had neuere / Lorde of lyf and of lyzte · of lysse and of peyne” (I quote from *The B-Version Archetype*, ed. John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre [2014]). Thus, *kynde* = God, at least for Langland’s Wit. Wit’s peculiar usage is duly recorded in the *Middle English Dictionary* (s.v., sense 8c), and in George Kane’s and A. V. C. Schmidt’s glossaries to Langland’s poem, and it underwrites Rebecca Davis’s new book, “*Piers Plowman*” and the *Books of Nature*.

Davis’s titular “Books of Nature” are, in the first place, the twelfth-century Neo-Platonist personification allegories featuring *Natura* as demiurge: the *Cosmographia* of Bernard Silvestris and the *De Planctu Naturae* and *Anticlaudianus* of Alan of Lille. These works and their tradition are passed in review in Davis’s Chapter 1. It seems that a note by A. V. C. Schmidt pointed Davis down this path. In his single-volume edition of the B Text, Schmidt glosses Wit’s *Kynde* as “Nature’s creator [sic], *natura naturans*, not created Nature, *natura naturata*” (quoted by Davis at pp. 8 and 113; Schmidt corrects his rendering of *natura naturans* in the three-volume parallel-text edition). The *naturans/naturata* distinction was established by the scholastics in the thirteenth century and appears, intriguingly, in Robert Grosseteste’s *Château d’Amour*, a work that Langland knew. (See Davis’s too-brief discussion of Grosseteste, pp. 113–19.) Langland might also have known Alan’s *De Planctu*, and probably did know Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* and Guillaume de Deguileville’s *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine*, works that would have supplied precedent for his varied personifications of Nature/*Kynde*, though not for Wit’s affirmation that *Kynde* is God.

Wit’s notion of *Kynde* is truly strange: one should probably recall that Wit himself represents (and enacts) undisciplined, free-form intellection. Dame Study, Wit’s wife, famously shuts this discourse down at the opening of the next passus; this, and subsequent developments, suggest that Wit’s statements should probably be considered *his* productions, not necessarily authoritative. Early in her study, Davis aptly remarks that “[i]n assigning *Kynde*’s introduction to Wit, Langland announces *Kynde*’s status as an invention, a figure of understanding” (p. 17). In her Chapter 2, the main discussion of these issues, Davis nevertheless reads Wit’s discourse straight, assigns his words to the poet, and flattens the discursive texture of the poem: “Langland insists that God creates ‘wipouten any mene’ (B.9.34). In Wit’s introduction of *Kynde* as ‘[f]ader and formour,’ Langland’s God becomes the direct cause of creation” (p. 87), she writes. One may note, parenthetically, that Langland’s glossators and the *Middle English Dictionary* fall into the same trap, taking Wit’s idiosyncratic identification of *Kynde* to establish a distinct lexicographical sense of this word. With the intriguing exception of the C-Version speech of *Imaginatif*, each of the later instances of *kynde* adduced in Kane’s *Glossary* under the sense “God the Creator” is ambiguous, and could be assigned to other, better established senses of this word. (For Kane’s B.11.326, see the reading of Bx; for B.18.76/C.20.78, see Stephen Barney’s note ad loc. in *The Penn Commentary on “Piers Plowman,”* vol. 5 [2006].) The relevant entries in the *Middle English Dictionary* and Schmidt’s “Indexical Glossary” are vulnerable to the same reanalysis.

Such considerations may affect Davis’s central claim in this book, which is that Langland’s poem expresses an “abiding investment in the positive value of *kynde*” (p. 9). Whereas earlier personification allegories had, to varying degrees, circumscribed the operations and moral authority of the goddess *Natura*, Davis argues that “Langland deploys *Kynde* in a radical recuperation of *Natura*’s moral

and indeed divine potential" (p. 64). Chapter 1, "From Cosmos to Microcosm: Nature, Allegory, Humanism," traces the development of the goddess Natura in earlier European literature. Davis draws ably on work by Peter Dronke, Winthrop Wetherbee, George Economou, Barbara Newman, and Maureen Quilligan, among others, to lay a foundation for her study of Langland. Chapter 2, "'Fader and formour': Langland's Creator Kynde" begins with Wit's lesson, extending from there toward a comprehensive survey of "the poem's representation of God's intimate involvement with creaturely life" (p. 120): the Biblical creation story, Trinitarian analogies, Christ's human nature, his incarnation and bodily death, and the morbid ministrations of Kynde at the end of the poem. Chapter 3, "'Diuerse siztes': Encyclopedism and Interpretation in *Piers Plowman*," is concerned with nature as a mirror of its Creator. Davis reviews "the Latin tradition of exemplarist contemplation and the related metaphor of the *liber* or *speculum naturae*" and explores the "staged failure" of this discourse in *Piers Plowman*, especially in the "Vision of Kynde" at the end of Passus 11 (pp. 133, 136): "given the special value of *kynde* as a principle uniting creator and creation throughout the poem," Davis asks, "why on this occasion does Langland insist on nature's jarring illegibility and the virtual . . . exclusion of its human observers?" (p. 137). To answer that question, the chapter undertakes a consecutive reading of Passus 11–15, cross-referenced to medieval encyclopedias and bestiary literature. Chapter 4, "Beyond Measure: Langland's Law of *Kynde*," takes up the medieval concept of natural law, its affiliations with Gospel teaching and late medieval English legal practice, and its manifestations in *Piers Plowman*, especially in the speeches of Hunger and Trajan. The difficult word *leaute* comes in for sustained discussion. Trajan credits his salvation to "loue and leaute · of my lawful domes," and Davis argues that the word here means approximately what sixteenth-century English jurists would come to call "equity" (pp. 198–217). "Whether we call this principle 'leaute,' equity, mercy, love, or, simply, being 'kynde,'" Davis writes, "it is clear that Langland's ideal of justice must include compassion for the one who suffers both in sinning and in bearing the punishment of sin" (p. 209). Chapter 5, "'Fullynge' *Kynde*: Nature, Salvation, and Human Action in *Piers Plowman*," puns on the Middle English word for baptism to "complicate the optimistic assessment of nature presented in previous chapters" and argue that, "in confronting the deficiencies of nature, Langland presents his most forceful argument for the necessity of human action as a fulfillment of the created order established by God" (p. 218). "Kinship by blood alone, a natural relation, is not enough to guarantee salvation" (p. 224); for that, one needs the sacraments and guidance of the Church, memorably expressed in Anima's call for English clergy to go evangelize heathens and Saracens. "This call-to-action, an empowered view of human capacity to act as partners with God in the work of creation, is," Davis writes, "finally the ground on which Langland's humanistic assessment of nature rests" (p. 229). An epilogue delivers a study of the word *courtesy* in *Piers Plowman* and leaves us with this thought: "the revelation that charity resides in the court of the human heart suggests that *kynde* is never truly *sanz cortisie*: looking within, Will discovers God's grace in nature" (p. 244).

Notes, conveniently printed at the foot of the page, supply full bibliographic references, though omitting some of the general *Hilfsmittel* referenced in this review. Readers will need to decide for themselves what they think of Wit's claims for Kynde; the chastened Nature of Deguileville's *Pèlerinage* (discussed at pp. 69–76) may be more relevant to Langland's poem than Davis's argument allows. Davis's one venture into textual criticism (pp. 100–2) is unequipped for that task. She

is certainly correct, however, that *kynde* is one of Langland's richest words. Her book excels in mapping the varied resonances of nature in the literary culture of late medieval England.

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THE MIDDLE ENGLISH BIBLE: A REASSESSMENT. By Henry Ansgar Kelly. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 349; 1 illustration. \$69.95.

Is the Middle English Bible Wycliffian or Wycliffite? The question marks an important distinction that informs Henry Ansgar Kelly's *The Middle English Bible: A Reassessment*. In this volume, Kelly sets out to disentangle the Middle English Bible from the political constraints imposed upon it by its association with Lollardy. Although he believes that the work of Wyclif (and particularly Wyclif's emphasis on the importance of scriptural study rather than scholastic disputation) laid the foundations for the translation, Kelly does not believe that Wyclif or the Lollards were responsible for the translation project itself. Nor, as he demonstrates, did the 1407 constitution *Periculosa* strictly prohibit English translations. In this volume, Kelly considers why modern scholars believe the Middle English Bible to be a Wycliffite project, explores the role of the author of what is commonly designated the General Prologue to the Later Version of the Bible, and investigates both the theologico-political climate of the period and the fifteenth-century interpretations of *Periculosa* to determine how English Bibles were regarded in the later Middle Ages.

The thesis is an enticing one, and Kelly charts the origins and development of many assumptions that have underpinned so much scholarship on the Bible itself and on Lollard writings. The volume brings together some of the dissenting voices calling for a reappraisal of received knowledge, and it attempts to posit an alternative context for the composition of the Middle English Bible. In so doing, key actors, including the author of the so-called General Prologue to the Later Version, are brought more fully into view in an eminently readable and lively monograph.

In the first chapter of the volume, Kelly traces the centuries of critical attention given to the translation, from the second-generation copy attributed to Nicholas Hereford to Forshall and Madden's 1850 printing of the treatise *Five and Twenty Books* as the General Prologue to the Later Version. Kelly centers Dom Francis Aidan Gasquet in the discussion, presenting Gasquet's refutation of the Wycliffite attribution and his challenge to the persistent view that the church of the later Middle Ages condemned English translations of the Bible.

The second chapter deals with the treatise *Five and Twenty Books*, whose author (Kelly calls him Simple Creature because of his self-presentation in the Prologue) claims to have been responsible for the Middle English Bible. Dialect, style, and linguistic principles compel Kelly to doubt the attribution, and he examines a handful of lexical choices to counter Simple Creature's claims of responsibility. With so few examples, however, any conclusions that may be drawn from such scant evidence ought to be handled lightly, but this is not the case here. Instead, Kelly speculates about Simple Creature's level of involvement in the translation, and he presents Simple Creature's assertion of authority as a spiteful maneuver resulting from the rejection of his treatise (on the grounds of its Wycliffite content) as a prologue to the Old Testament.