

REVIEW: William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The A Version, Revised Edition, A New Translation with Introduction and Notes*, edited by Michael Calabrese. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2023. Pp. 160. Paperback: \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-8132-3775-6.

When I first began teaching back in the 1980s, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* in Middle English was easy to find in reasonably priced paperback editions. For those who favored the B-text, there was A. V. C. Schmidt's 1978 Everyman edition, while C-text fans had Derek Pearsall's 1978 Edwin Arnold edition. Today, both are out of print, although Schmidt's edition (without introduction, commentary, or glossary) is available at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu>. In between, translations of *Piers Plowman* steadily took over, as if it were utterly unreasonable to ask senior level undergraduates to read Middle English. I once tried to use Norton's B-text Critical Edition with Langland's Middle English on the left-hand side and E. Talbot Donaldson's modern English translation on the right. The Norton editors had not even bothered to number the Middle English lines, and indeed my students did not bother to read Langland's original text unless I forced them to. Donaldson 1; Langland 0. That said, translators work in an underappreciated medium, and without them we would lose access to the classical tradition of Greece and Rome and the vast expanse of world literature, ancient and modern. We need good translators, though knowing that something is always lost in translation, we might well begrudge whether we genuinely need them yet for Middle English texts like *Piers*. In other words, it is with ambivalence that I sit down to review Michael Calabrese's revised edition of his translation of the A-text of *Piers Plowman*.

The A version is the poor cousin of the B and C-texts. Generally believed to be the earliest of the three, A is half the length of B or C and far more straightforward. Even a champion of the A-text such as Calabrese regards it as "a great place for new readers to start their engagement with *Piers*" (xxvii-xxviii). A, in sum, is the beginner's version of Langland's work, making it in Calabrese's opinion the best choice for teaching the text to undergraduates. Calabrese applies the same logic to his translation: it is a starting point designed to introduce new readers to this difficult poem and to encourage them to move on to Langland's own, more challenging, words and recensions.

Calabrese includes samples of that more difficult language for his reader. In a brief outline of Langland's alliterative poetics, he illustrates his lesson with five lines from passus 11. Then, in reference to Langland's linguistically diverse reading communities, he demonstrates Langland weaving Latin and French into his English text. The heart of the book, however, is his revised verse translation. Calabrese's revisions include regularizing the spelling of Latin words (i, u, v), because he does not tamper with Langland's linguistic shifts, arguing that they give the medieval text a degree of inclusivity important in a modern multicultural classroom. He also adds the traditional passus numbers to his catchy modern titles for each section. Then, of course, there are the revisions to wording, tone, and nuance, for which Calabrese acknowledges he much relied upon feedback from the readers of his original edition.

Calabrese aims above all to make his verse translation contemporary in voice, style, and diction to convey the poem's energy and passion, its focus on social justice and excoriation of sinful, corrupt behavior. Translation is a difficult



skill to master, and Calabrese insightfully details the challenges he and others have faced and the solutions they have come up with in translating *Piers* into the modern. Translations are rarely afforded the transcendent timelessness bestowed upon the original classic. Translation in contrast is an ephemeral process because the job of the translator is to make that timeless classic accessible to a contemporary readership. Yet, “contemporary” is fleeting and “old” comes fast for translations, generating an endless need for fresh, new translations, or at least revision, as in the case of Calabrese.

Accompanying the translation are footnotes to explicate what is going on in the text. These are excellent. Especially strong is Calabrese’s contextualizing introduction to the problematic passus 12. Calabrese is quick to point out that only three of the eighteen A manuscripts include a passus 12 and that only the one manuscript ends with the so-called “John But” conclusion, which Calabrese translates clearly labelled as such.

The translation is set up with a sweeping 30-page introduction which, as much as it keeps one eye fixed on those who teach *Piers*, is aimed largely at readers new to the poem, perhaps even new to mediaeval studies. The introduction includes an outline of Langland’s major themes and big questions, the three main textual traditions and their dates, and the turbulent historical context which lurks behind the poem of the Black Death, the 1381 Uprising, and the general longing for reform within the Church, most vehemently expressed by John Wyclif and the Lollards.

Calabrese sidesteps many critical issues. He does not, for instance, mention the multiple authorship theory or the possibility that the three versions of the poem were written for three distinct types of reader. Nor does he mention Lawrence Warner’s controversial thesis in *The Lost History of Piers Plowman* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) that B is not a legitimate authorial recension of the poem. Calabrese refers briefly to Robert Adams’s *Langland and the Rokele Family* (Four Courts Press, 2013), but he comes down neither for nor against William Rokele as the author’s name. Nor should we expect such advanced, even abstruse arguments in a book dedicated to introducing students to Langland’s masterpiece. Such questions can wait.

The introduction ends with Calabrese’s thoughts on how to make the poem appealing to students. He has definite opinions regarding how the poem should be taught, both at the introductory level in translation and at the advanced level in Middle English. The reader, of course, is free to accept or ignore Calabrese’s pedagogical advice. Even so, one must always admire his passion and drive to keep Langland at the forefront of medieval English literary studies.

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