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Review

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[1987]). Much else in Kane's section remains open to challenge, but the reader is not given the necessary documentation to pursue the problem. It would be perhaps improper for this reviewer to complain that his edition is not even mentioned in Kane's bibliography were it not that the omission conceals from the reader that a large number of the emendations and conjectures to be found in the Kane-Donaldson B-text are shown in the extensive textual commentary of that edition to be inadequate or unnecessary. The *Companion's* editor should have realised that the authority of so distinguished a textual scholar as Kane can only be diminished, not augmented, by the "overskipping" of contrary critical arguments. Once again, the utility of this chapter for the "beginning student" (who is nowhere more in need of guidance than in the domain of textual criticism) is seriously compromised.

This objection cannot be lodged against Lawton's chapter on alliterative style, which is clear, balanced, and undogmatic. It is unfortunate that the *Companion* went to press before the appearance of the reviewer's *Clerkly Maker*, which offers the fullest and most systematic account of Langland's versification to have appeared, including a short critique of the Kane-Donaldson view of Langland's staves. Lawton has also had to omit mention of Hoyt Duggan's "Authenticity of the Z-text . . . Further Notes on Metrical Evidence" (*MAE*, 56 [1987]), a piece also, and more excusably, not mentioned by Kane; but the great strength of that study is its rigorous comparison of Langland's practice with that of other alliterative makers. Nonetheless, this chapter, like the introduction and the epilogue, and even the more controversial chapters of this book, will be a constant source of information and ideas in the study of a great work that has at last come into its own. The *Companion* appears a year after the first volume of the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* (co-edited by its editor, the indefatigable John Alford) and in the same year that two more volumes in D. S. Brewer's *Piers Plowman Studies* series, one again by Alford, have achieved publication. The intellectual quality of current Langland work is high—higher, it seems to me, than much that is being done on Chaucer. It is a good time to be taking up Langland studies, in areas as diverse as metre, diction, and thought. This *Companion* should do much to encourage "advanced students" to urge the less advanced to begin.

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PIERS PLOWMAN: A GLOSSARY OF LEGAL DICTION. By John A. Alford. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988. Pp. xxxi+170. \$45.

It is not often one can curl up by the fire with a good dictionary, but John Alford's *Piers Plowman: A Glossary of Legal Diction* offers just such an opportunity. Though Alford surely intends us to use the volume as we do any other glossary, he has done his work with such a deft combination of scholarly accuracy and humane sensibility (with an occasional dash of wit) that those who seek an introduction to the function of law in daily life in medieval England would do well to read this volume from cover to cover. In addition, its bibliography and footnotes are all the reader's guide one needs to find one's way deep into that field.

The strengths of the *Glossary* are many. Alford has listed not only the strik-

ing old legal terms such as *mainpernour* and *questmongere*, which cry out for attention, but also (and more importantly) terms that are less recognizably legal, like *contree* and *paper*, which might otherwise escape our attention. (*Contree* not only referred to a jurisdictional district but also stood as a metaphor for a jury, made up of countrymen. *Paper*, then as now, referred to a written promise to pay a debt.) This becomes crucial when the lesser known legal meaning almost contradicts the more general one that has survived (*defenden* referred not only to providing a legal defence but also to acts of forbidding or prohibiting).

The introduction is a compendium of good sense. It deals briefly but intriguingly with the way poetry and law have differing but overlapping needs for the use of language. “[The law] wants *certainty*. . . . Poets take the opposite point of view. Instead of adhering rigorously to the traditional use of words, poets deliberately bend and twist and stretch their meanings; far from trying to avoid the ambiguity of language, poets thrive on it” (p. xiii). While Alford’s language (especially words like “meaning” and “ambiguity”) does not take into account the work currently being done in literary and legal theory of interpretation, we can still see and appreciate his point. He does fall into line with current theory when he stresses that no word has meaning apart from its context (p. xvii). He recognizes that his making of a glossary is in itself necessarily an act of interpretation.

He traces (p. xiv) how metaphoric language “slips from the schoolroom into the courtroom,” suggesting a parallel that by itself would justify the making of a legal glossary for *PP*: “[j]ust as grammar defines the rules of *recte loquendi*, so law defines the rules of right living.” Alford highlights this transformation by concentrating throughout the volume on Langland’s use of puns, many of them legalistic, as a vehicle to make his main points: “The puns implicitly support one of Langland’s main arguments. The grammar of ‘truth’ or ‘doing well’ has its basis in logic, in reason, in the very nature of things; it is not a matter to be decided by individual wills according to their own convenience and desires” (p. xiv). Alford does a convincing job of arguing that legal language is powerfully the central metaphor of the poem. Without a knowledge of the legal implications of Langland’s specialized vocabulary, we are yet further removed from being members of the poem’s intended audience.

Alford does many interesting things with legal language in his introduction, but, thank goodness, he does *not* do what the jacket blurb implies as his first concern. Its hype begins, “Scholars have long believed that William Langland had a technical knowledge of the law. [Alford’s book] is the first attempt to confirm that belief through a comprehensive study of the poet’s language.” Alford actually pays little attention to that relatively unfruitful issue of biography and concentrates instead on putting modern readers more in touch with the legal context of the poem’s language.

Perhaps Alford’s most striking conceptual contribution to *PP* studies in this volume comes from an unexpected angle. One might have thought that accurate knowledge of all this legal language would allow a modern reader better to understand its metaphoric use in the poem; but Alford points out that the poet constantly achieves his effects by the very literalism of his legal usages: “In Langland’s analogy, therefore, [the “allowance”] the poor servant of the Lord claims ‘by the lawe’ is not ‘praise or approval’ (Skeat) or ‘favour’ (Schmidt) but *literally* a credit for what he has paid already in suffering and

deprivation. Such daring literalism has not been generally appreciated" (p. xvi). "Daring literalism," indeed: From our vantage (or disadvantage) point, we must use the Christian metaphors we already recognize in order to work our way back to what fourteenth-century readers would have recognized as mundane legal allusions. On that road of interpretation, we would pass them on their way back.

Many of Alford's entries straightforwardly present us with the pleasure of knowing new things. See, for example, his clear and informative definition of *ragman*, with its delightful development into our provocative modern word *rigmarole*. Or note how helpful it is to know the distinction between an "officer" and an "official," the former being "a high government official; *specif.* an officer of the court, a judge."

Other entries quietly prevent us from making obvious and understandable errors of interpretive reference. It is important, for example, to know that *spiritualte* refers not to an inner quality of holiness but rather to "an endowment, ecclesiastical property or revenue held or received in return for spiritual services." How easy it would be to misconstrue this otherwise apparently recognizable word.

Other entries present us in just a few brush strokes with a picture of daily life that might take up pages in a study of social history. The entry on *fore-stallen* accomplishes this neatly: "To intercept or buy up goods before they reach the market, usually for the purpose of resale at a higher price; to sell before legal business hours . . . to avoid paying customs." Suddenly we know more about medieval mercantile practices than we did before.

With the same purpose in mind, it is interesting to note how many words existed to refer to unlawful taking of others' property: *despoilen*; *fecchen*; *piken*; *pilen*; *ravishen*; *riften*; *robben*; *stelen*; and *thefte*, to name a few. Their very plentitude suggests the nature of some of the primary legal concerns of the time. The individual definitions of these words complicate the matter interestingly by demonstrating that the illegal act in an adverse context can be transformed into a legal act: *fecchen* means not only "to steal" but also "to recover what is rightly one's own," especially through ransom. In some ways, two wrongs could make a right.

Of course, such a volume as this *Glossary* is bound to suffer here and there from errors, omissions, or insufficient acknowledgment of uncertainty. It is difficult to imagine how to avoid such pitfalls, and prudent to point out a few.

On a few occasions, Alford neglects to include a second or third definition of some significance. Sometimes it is mere oversight: In defining *custume*, he neglects to note that it often means "tax," even though he uses it that way himself in his entry on *forestallen*.

More significant in this kind, however, is his entry on *lege*. He defines *lege* as (noun) "a vassal" and (adjective) "bound by a feudal tenure; owing allegiance to a lord or king." However, the word refers not only to the inferior status of one of the bound parties but also to the nature of the bond itself. That is, it points upwards and downwards at the same time. "A liege man" is indeed the man of inferior status to his lord; but "a liege lord" describes his superior equally accurately. This omission reflects our common tendency to regard feudalism as a downwards-pointing social structure, rather than the two-way pact of rights and responsibilities it intended to be.

More troubling to me than these details, however, is Alford's hesitation to

include instructive etymologies. When he does shoulder the etymological burden, he often lays it down prematurely. Example: *Lewed and lewed* is left defined only as “clergy and layfolk.” Since *lewed* became “lewd” in modern English, we might be interested in how a word meaning “layfolk” developed into a word meaning “obscene and indecent.” The *OED* marks its progression in some detail, demonstrating that the transformation was complete even by Langland’s time. According to the *OED*, *lewed* referred to layfolk (“not in holy orders”) as early as 890 A.D.; by 1225 it had encompassed “unlearned, untaught.” The development continued: “belonging to lower orders; common; base” (1380); “ignorant (implying a reproach)” (1380); “of persons or actions: bad, vile, evil, wicked, base” (1362, citing Langland); “lascivious, unchaste” (1386). In light of this strong progression, “layfolk” appears a bit inadequate.

Alford seems to have made a general decision in this volume not to chase the etymological butterfly. By doing so, he may have been choosing to err on the side of accuracy, since many of our pronouncements on this subject are no more than imaginative guesses. But even our questionable etymologies can prove informative: If *noumpere* (“an arbiter, umpire, or mediator”) did undergo the separation in modern English from *a noumpere* to *an umpire*, did the original word then not mean a “non-peer”?

Some of the safer etymologies are also often missing: Why not mention the significance of *parle-* in *parlement*? What of the root words of *patente* or *simonie* or *prevaricator* or *ravener* or *seneschal*? I find this especially puzzling since Alford is so keenly attuned to Langland’s use of puns and other wordplay (see *riflen* for an example). Attention to etymological sources would have made this fine volume even finer.

Occasionally, this lack of etymological attention produces an outright error. Alford defines *outlawe* as “a fugitive from justice; a miscreant or robber; *fig.* the devil.” This definition fits our modern Western more accurately than *Piers Plowman*. In the fourteenth century, *outlawe* referred literally to someone who was “outside the law”—that is, outside the *protection* of the law. The contract of law was bilateral: If you obeyed the laws, then you could seek their protection when in need; if you disobeyed the laws outrageously enough, then you might put yourself outside that protection and thereby become fair game for anyone, no holds barred. Murder, rape, robbery, and the like were not considered crimes in and of themselves, but only in respect to the person they victimized. They all became legal acts when perpetrated on *outlawes*—people whose own actions had put themselves outside the law.

As I have suggested, it is impossible to assemble an immaculate glossary. What John Alford has given us is an immensely interesting and helpful volume that not only elucidates a great deal of *Piers Plowman* but also opens doors for all medievalists into the misty but not musty world of medieval law. We can profit not only by using the *Glossary* as a reference source, but also by reading it as a cohesive text in its own right. It is a job well done.

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