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Aers, David. Beyond Reformation? An Essay on William Langland's Piers Plowman and the End of Constantinian Christianity

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Aers, David.

Beyond Reformation? An Essay on William Langland's Piers Plowman and the End of Constantinian Christianity.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. Pp. xix, 256. ISBN 978-0-268-02046-0 (paperback) US\$35.

This book is a fascinating attempt to see William Langland's poem *Piers Plowman* from several viewpoints simultaneously. Its author, David Aers, says in the preface that the book developed through work with both a divinity school and an English department, but upon viewing its content it is easy to add that it could engage history students as well. Aers offers a unique point of view on the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century through his reading of the third edition of Langland's poem, usually called the "C text."

From the beginning of the book, Aers aims to encourage people outside the English department (and medieval studies in general) to read Langland's work. Aers's argument is that the poem is broadly relevant because it raises questions about how culture both did and did not change between the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Because William Langland was deeply familiar with a wide variety of the institutions that affected his culture, he could explore contemporary practices and trends in the Christian faith and in the hierarchy of the church, offering modern scholars invaluable insight.

Langland saw a need for reform that foreshadowed the arguments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and this connection allows Aers to engage with some of the historiography of the English Reformation. This includes considering the arguments of Eamon Duffy in Duffy's famous book *Stripping the Altars*. Despite Aers's great respect for Duffy, he does not entirely align with Duffy's arguments for the vitality of "traditional religion" and the people's loyalty to it. Rather, Aers points out that even as early as the fourteenth century, men such as Langland were dealing with the question of de-Christianization and the church's departure from the values of the early Christian faith. From that starting point, Aers explains several vital terms, including what he means by "Constantinian" Christianity (a term used in the book's subtitle), and "reformation." The first referred to Langland's views on

the Donation of Constantine, and the damage it caused to the Christian faith. Langland considered it to be the “venom” that poisoned Peter’s power, by turning Christians away from living as disciples of Christ and toward a desire for political and economic power.

The second term is defined through Langland’s eyes. Aers argues that medieval reform occurred within particular paradigms: any attempts to reform the church outside those paradigms were acts of defiance that were classed as heresy. In contrast, the Reformation was a revolution that all but destroyed those paradigms, involving not only the church but the state, which resulted in startling innovation. Aers aims to explore whether Langland himself went beyond medieval reform to something more in line with the violent change that occurred during the Reformation, and comes to the compelling conclusion that he did, but only in what Aers calls “a somewhat enigmatic ecclesiology for fools” (xiii).

There is much to admire in this book. Aers begins with an outline of the poem, which greatly furthers his purpose of introducing a wider audience to Langland. The arguments that develop would be difficult to follow without this summary. From there, Aers engages with several themes that were as important for the sixteenth-century reformers as they were for Langland, such as papal power and abuses, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the role of the church in salvation. Perhaps most interesting was Aers’s exploration of Langland’s struggle with the importance of unity in the faith and how it differed from the ideal of unity in the church, which could be better described as uniformity or physical universality. Aers connects Langland’s treatment of these themes to the later acts of Henry VIII regarding the powers of the church and state (and the state over the church), thus demonstrating how Langland’s work reflects a concept of reform that goes far beyond many of his contemporaries.

Aside from these features, which provide great interest and command scholarly attention, the book has the advantage of Aers’s style of writing, which is very pleasant to read and often provides a poetic touch that reflects its source material. At the same time, Aers’s connection to the source material is also problematic in some ways. The book is not divided into chapters but written as seventeen steps or *passus*, reflecting the structure of the original poem. It is possible to see the purpose and possible advantages of such a structure, but for someone outside the English department (and thus a member of the target

audience), more divisions in the text would have been very helpful. Division by chapter and section would encourage more review and clarification of previous points, providing more signposts in the journey.

Aers suggests that any grand narrative that connects the later Middle Ages and the Reformation should consider not only innovations but continuities. For this purpose, Langland's exploration of Constantinian politics, theology, and ecclesiology is ideal. It allows Aers to challenge many oft-repeated interpretations of *Piers Plowman*, including the theory that Piers represents the unbroken succession from St. Peter to the contemporary pope. In contrast, Aers focuses on the significant absence of Piers, his devotional role, and the beautiful figure of the "Holy Church," who represents the pure early faith. This demonstrates Aers's unique point of view, and the inherent value of this fresh examination of an important primary source.

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Anderson, Christina M.

The Flemish Merchant of Venice: Daniel Nijs and the Sale of the Gonzaga Art Collection.

Yale and London: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 264 + 55 ill. ISBN 978-0-300-20968-6 (hardcover) US\$65.

Scholars of art history in Renaissance Mantua are intimately familiar with nineteenth-century archivist Alessandro Luzio's 1913 publication *La galleria dei Gonzaga venduta all'Inghilterra nel 1627–28*, documenting the 1627–28 dispersal of the rich Gonzaga art collections and their sale to Charles I. For Luzio, the villain of this ultimately ill-fated sale was the Flemish merchant Daniel Nijs, whom he characterized as a sort of shady confidence man, bent on engineering the veritable theft of the Mantuan treasures. This lively book about Nijs by Christina Anderson, grounded in solid and unbiased archival research and covering all of Nijs's life, with an emphasis on the Gonzaga sale, does much to illuminate Nijs's mastery of what Donald Trump might call "the art of the deal." While she does not completely rehabilitate Nijs's reputation, her detailed contextualization of the man and his motives does much to correct Luzio's