PIERS PLOWMAN: THE FIELD AND THE TOWER. By Priscilla Martin. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Pp. ix + 172. $22.50.

Reviewed by Anne Eggebroten, Golden Gate University

Professor Martin offers a brilliant solution to the enigma that has troubled modern readers of *Piers Plowman*: "Why, when Langland's theology is orthodox and even optimistic, does his poem convey such a sense of pain and insecurity?" (p. 12). Beginning with her own close analysis of several important endings within the poem, she next surveys critical reaction and finds that there are two camps. "Whatever their personal religious beliefs, critics have tended to align themselves as orthodox or agnostic readers of *Piers Plowman*" (p. 32). Those in the agnostic group (including Muscatine and Donaldson) find the poem to be "deeply pessimistic" and appeal to the social context of the fourteenth-century Church to explain Langland's uneasy and even heretical mood. The "Christians" prove from patristic tradition, the visual arts, and other contemporary sources that Langland's position is orthodox; these critics, most notably Robertson and Huppé in *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition*, minimize tension and see overall harmony and assurance.

Into this stalemate Martin brings a dazzling structural analysis that demonstrates the scholarship of both sides to be accurate, though their conclusions diverge. Langland's theology is thoroughly orthodox; yet his multiple dream structure and his kaleidoscope of literal and allegorical characters, none of which satisfactorily answers the Dreamer's questions, produce confusion and frustration. "Rather than invoke the disillusioning context of the fourteenth-century Church to explain the distress of *Piers* or the reassuring scheme of Christian orthodoxy to refute it," writes Martin, "we should consider in poetic terms how doctrine and despair interact" (p. 39).

She argues that Langland has deliberately organized his poem around "ironic structures" in order to undercut the complacent spirituality that is a danger within the allegorical mode. One such structure is the division of the *Vita* into three parts titled *Dowel*, *Dobet*,

and *Dobest*. This method of exposition, in such works as the *Scala Perfectionis*, suggests that growth in the Christian life can be orderly and progressive. Langland's *Dowel*, however, is "digressive and perplexing"; the *Dobet* section is no better, and Martin describes the final section, presenting the story of the Church, as "anticlimactic, a history of failure and compromise" (p. 28). Truth cannot be neatly disclosed or encapsulated, even in the pronouncements of Conscience, Reason, Clergy, or Holy Church. Instead, Truth becomes increasingly identified with the figure of Piers/Christ, and "the truth Piers represents can be manifested only in the violence of the longing for it and the rejection of all else as not it" (p. 55).

Another misleading structure, which has trapped both the Dreamer and subsequent critics, is the quest for "do wel." Agreeing with Middleton that Will "sets a grammatical trap for himself" by mistaking an imperative for a noun, Martin shows that Langland thus deliberately proposes but then disrupts patterns for organizing experience. In three final chapters she outlines Langland's objections to allegory: its assumptions tend to beg the question, its idealism needs correction by reality, and its spiritualism neglects the importance of the literal and physical. She argues that Langland's allegory is an inquiring form, used for purposes of exploration and definition, and constantly checked by shifting structures and by the intrusion of reality (p. 91).

Langland's poem disappoints our desire for comfortable conclusions yet in doing so it sends us out in search of Truth/Piers. Martin, an agnostic reader of the poem, notes, "It may be that the consolations of orthodoxy are overrated" (p. 30). As an orthodox reader, I would like to confirm this insight and to congratulate her on a reading of *Piers Plowman* that appreciates both the complexity of the poem and the complexity of the Christian life.