

CURTIS A. GRUENLER, *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma: Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. Pp. xii, 586. \$75. ISBN: 9780268101626.

In this scholarly and engaging book, Curtis Gruenler identifies “a distinctive poetics of enigma” that was “essential to many of the most enduring works of medieval literature,” and which found its fullest expression in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (1). The enigma was an important category in three distinct “realms” of medieval “thought and language” (4): in riddling, where it named the form of the riddle itself; in rhetoric, where it described an obscure form of allegory; and in theology, where it referred to signs that both reveal and conceal divine mysteries in scripture and in the created world. In all these contexts, Gruenler argues, enigmas invite responses that are playful, participatory and open-ended: communities of readers participate in riddle contests and coalesce around the challenge of deciphering enigmatic texts, while the condition of enigmatic language itself both reflects the way created things participate in God’s divinity and enables new forms of contemplative participation in the divine. These enigmatic traditions converge in *Piers Plowman*, a poem that contains its own riddles and riddle contests, reflects on the processes of reading and learning, and expresses a strong desire for participatory knowledge in its ongoing search for “kynde knowynge.”

Gruenler begins with the theology of enigma. Chapter 1 describes a long tradition of thinking about the enigmatic in relation to the condition of worldly knowledge that begins with Augustine’s reading of 1 Corinthians 13.12: “We see now through a glass in an enigma [*in aenigmate*], but then face to face.” In his reflections on this verse,

Augustine theorized the forms of knowledge that were available to people through their participation in God and argued that enigmatic language was the medium best suited to extend and deepen this kind of participation.

Chapters 2 and 3 address the evolution of the riddle as a literary form and consider the presentation of riddle contests in the *Eclogue* of Theodulus, the story of Saint Andrew and the three questions, and the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf. Here, Gruenler shows that riddles themselves can illustrate God's enigmatic presence in the world, but he also draws attention to the "relational dynamics" of riddling (90), noting the subversive challenge that riddle contests present to "established authority" (131) and their capacity to defuse competitive violence by engaging contestants in an open-ended game. This section concludes with a reading of the feast of Conscience in *Piers*, where the guests engage in a riddle contest. Here, Gruenler argues, Langland affirms the potential for riddles to challenge institutional authority but also to forestall potential social conflict and to provoke a new engagement with enigmatic forms of revelation.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the experience of learning from enigmatic texts, under the heading of "rhetoric." Chapter 4 explains how the value of enigmatic language was understood in the university curriculum, before turning to Augustine's *Confessions* and its account of the way that reading difficult texts might prepare the soul for mystical illumination. Gruenler proposes that the third vision of *Piers Plowman* tells "an Augustinian story of conversion," as the dreamer encounters the faculties of thought and the institutions of education and learns to "read the enigmas of scripture, self, and world" (174). Chapter 5 reads the second vision of *Piers*, where, Gruenler argues, the eponymous ploughman establishes a community organized around practices of enigmatic

reading, appearing himself as an enigma to interpret and expounding scriptural mysteries to his followers, much as Christ had done for his disciples.

Chapters 6 and 7 mark a return to theology, arguing that vernacular works like *Piers* and the *Revelation* of Julian of Norwich extended the earlier enigmatic tradition even as contemporary theologians advanced theories of nature and language that called the logic of participation into question. Yet these chapters also consider the value of enigmatic open-endedness for other kinds of literature: comparing the ending of *Piers* to the ending of the *House of Fame*, Gruenler argues that Chaucer found an enabling model for secular literature in Langland's poetics of enigma.

Gruenler's project is a hugely ambitious one: this book offers a new framework for thinking about some of the most important writings of late antiquity and the Middle Ages as part of a capacious enigmatic tradition. Gruenler's discussions of Augustine, Aldhelm, Dante, and many others deserve consideration in their own right, even if Gruenler himself sometimes explains his approach to these materials primarily in terms of their significance for Langland. The reading of *Piers* at the heart of this book is a rich and suggestive one, and it offers some exciting new ways to approach the poem. Where earlier criticism has tended to treat the poem's riddles primarily as difficult textual cruxes, Gruenler identifies them as the key to its larger enigmatic project, to the modes of reading it seeks to encourage, and to the forms of knowledge it aims to reveal. He makes a compelling case that *Piers* contains more riddles than its readers commonly acknowledge, describing some of its most arresting images and figures—the plant of peace, the tearing of the pardon, Piers himself—as enigmas, which point in turn to the possibilities for social and spiritual participation.

Throughout the book, Gruenler distinguishes the enigmatic from two closely related modes of thought and expression, both of which are often aligned with institutional authority: the didactic, which is clear and instructive; and the esoteric, which is exclusive and inaccessible. The didactic and the esoteric resemble the enigmatic in some contexts, but, crucially, they preclude the kinds of participatory play that enigmas seek to encourage. This, too, offers an illuminating framework for understanding *Piers*: Gruenler often shows how Langland negotiates between didactic and esoteric alternatives and discovers new possibilities in the enigmatic as his poem moves beyond the impasses at which it arrives. Reading the poem in this context also offers a new way to understand Langland's complex relationship to institutional authority, as he seeks to preserve and promote a form of enigmatic spiritual engagement that lies outside institutional control.

Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma is a generous and wide-ranging book, which places some of the best-known writings of the Middle Ages in a new relationship to one another, and, in doing so, opens several new possibilities for the interpretation of Langland's poem. It offers an appealing account of *Piers Plowman*'s difficulty as inclusive rather than exclusive, an invitation to playful participation as part of a community of interpreters.

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