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Review Essay: David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Middle English Literature*

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Chaucerians will find much to disagree with in Kolve's theory, selection, and interpretation of narrative images, as well as his understanding of Chaucer's position in cultural history. Nevertheless, this study and its marvelous pictures contribute to our understanding of the visual and narrative iconography of the late Middle Ages. All Chaucerians of whatever critical persuasion will recognize the independence, comprehensiveness, and wholeness of this personal, inevitably partitive, but rich assessment of Chaucer's fiction.

Charles R. Smith
Colorado State University

David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Middle English Literature*, University of Washington Press, 1984. \$25.00

This study traces patterns of scriptural influence on the vernacular literature of late medieval England, particularly the fourteenth century. The author proceeds through a close textual analysis of a variety of literary works, culminating in a novel thesis on the meaning of *Piers Plowman*.

In the first two chapters Professor Fowler examines cyclic dramas like the Cornish *Ordinalia* and selected lyric poems that range in inspiration from the creation themes of *Genesis* through the doomsday motifs of the *Book of Revelation*. He finds both forms of religious literature closely linked in their origins with the liturgical cycle of the medieval church. In particular, he sees the wide-ranging cyclical dramas as receiving crucial stimulation from the contemporary vogue of the great illustrated Bibles.

The next chapters focus on poems of Chaucer and the *Pearl* poet. Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, for example, is construed as a creation poem based on *Genesis I*, as glossed in the hexameral commentaries of St. Ambrose. Fowler here advances a persuasive new theory of the poem's deeper structure. He then identifies the resonant biblical themes in the various works of the *Pearl* poet, above all in the uses of the *Book of Revelation* in the *Pearl* itself.

But if a serene faith and a calm rationality infuse the works of the *Pearl* poet, *Piers Plowman* clearly mirrors the "agony of its age." It is precisely the troubled historical context of the poem that Fowler seeks to evoke. He has long argued for at least two distinct authors of the poem's separate versions. Thus the "A" version, generally regarded as preceding the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, presents a striking contrast to the "B" and "C" versions composed in the decade or so after the failure of that revolt. For Fowler, the tone, emphasis and style of the "A" version differs so markedly from the others as to convince him of their separate authorship.

He contends that the "A" poem's praise of the simple faith and spiritual vitality of the English peasant, coupled with fierce attacks on the corruption

and the abuse of wealth and power by the churchmen and politicians, provided substantial fuel to the fire of the Peasant's Revolt. John Ball himself acknowledged the poem's influence on his leveller ideology.

But if the "A" version revolves around the prophetic denunciation of present ills in the optimistic hope of a future amelioration, the "B" version, coming after the shattered rebellion of 1381, reflects a disillusionment that, despairing of any reform of society, concentrates on the reform of the individual. Fowler discerns here an almost tangible longing for the end, and a sense of imminent divine intervention as in the *Book of Revelation*. Thus the overriding concern of the "A" version to reform a bad situation is superseded by the apocalyptic conviction of the "B" poem that all such efforts are futile given the impending Second coming.

While Fowler has offered some suggestive new arguments and evidence for his multiple authorship thesis, the great majority of scholars continue to subscribe to the William Langland tradition of single authorship as most concisely stated by George Kane in 1965. Professor Fowler's concern with the historical dimensions of medieval English literature is nonetheless to be welcomed in what is, generally, a very readable and stimulating book.

Donald Sullivan
University of New Mexico

RENAISSANCE

Warren Threadgold, *Renaissances Before the Renaissance*, Stanford University Press, 1984. \$28.50

Although the Renaissance, and "renaissances," have been much studied, Warren Threadgold's collection of essays is the first attempt at a comprehensive survey of the revivals of Western culture which took place between the first century A.D. and the Renaissance.

Scope and methods of the study are discussed in a lengthy introduction which also places the various rebirths in their historical and cultural settings. The individual essays, by accomplished scholars in either Classics, Literature or history, include copious notes with selected annotated bibliographies.

As a survey of the cultural revivals selected (Second Sophistic, Fourth-Century Latin, Carolingian, Macedonian, Anglo-Saxon, Twelfth-Century and Palaeologan), this work is penetrating in its analysis of each period in terms of why and how it arose, what it accomplished, and whether or not it qualifies as an actual renaissance. Occasionally editor and contributors do not agree.