The late-fourteenth century Middle English poem *Piers Plowman* is not an easy read for most undergraduate students: it lacks a narrative structure, its English is stranger than Chaucer’s, and it includes a vast amount of detail on a world that is barely recognizable. The poem is, therefore, much less often taught than is Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* despite the fact that many also consider *Piers* great poetry, and it was in its time just as, if not more, popular. This comprehensive, thoughtful, and learned collection of essays edited by Thomas Goodmann seeks to persuade more teachers to include *Piers* in their classes. Part one, “Materials,” is a valuable survey of available editions, translations, and guides; the twenty-three brief essays and two appendices in part two, “Approaches,” contain detailed assistance in planning a lesson or course on the poem.

The implicit question guiding the essays is how much students need to know in order to understand the poem. While the essays vary in what they deem necessary, they are uniformly reassuring, providing a number of methods for navigating what could be the instructor’s endless task of explaining and contextualizing. Some essays advocate for training students to be unsettled. Ralph Hanna and Emily Steiner usefully describe this process: how they guide students through the upsetting of literary conventions at the beginning of the poem or of expectations about community throughout, respectively. Similarly, David Benson, Thomas Prendergast, and William E. Rogers pose questions around particular passages to show the poem’s true interest is in interpretation itself.

A number of essays take a formalist track, showing how a familiar or at least explicitly foregrounded poetic or rhetorical device can provide a way into the poem: Ian Cornelius teaches the alliterative line; Thomas Goodmann compares translations; Mary Clemente Davlin tracks keywords, such as *truth*; Judith Anderson and Elizabeth Robertson focus on allegory, either across literary texts (Anderson), or as a means to talk about gender (Robertson); and Andrew Galloway uses performance (in his class, students dramatized the Crucifixion episode).

Another group of essays offers topics of concern in William Langland’s time or our own. These topics include the historical and contextual, such as hunger in the Middle Ages, for Madonna Hettinger’s medieval history class; poverty then and now in Kate Grasson’s service-learning class; the three-estate model for Lawrence Clopper; and the apocalypse or medieval London for Richard Emmerson. Other topics are more traditionally literary. Gina Brandolino and Sarah Kelen discuss the poem’s reception in its own time and in the early modern period. Both Lawrence Warner and Stephanie Trigg focus on the poet’s voice, with Trigg persuasively framing such a discussion in terms of the familiar and still-relevant division between poetry and popular culture.

Most of the essays orient the reader in a classroom setting, and I highlight Davlin’s essay for the clarity of its “how to.” The two essays that argue for the lesser taught versions of the poem A and C, by Mícheál Vaughan and Katherine Kerby-Fulton, respectively, are also admirable in this regard and provide much food for thought for those who automatically rely on the B-text as the standard.

Although the collection addresses the students’ need for historical knowledge, in the essays and in the two appendices on the language of C and the clerical orders, there is a consensus that our interest in the poem should be primarily literary. Although this view may be popular among scholars, it is not, in my experience, an easy point to make to students, who have trouble recognizing *Piers* as literature because of its Christianity and who can find the poem...
unappealingly religious. Not enough of the essays confront this challenge. The one that does is quite good: Nicholas Watson teaches the poem as a kind of “secular theology,” arguing that the value of the poem is “an exercise in the experience of pastness” (84). Only two other essays, by Brandolino and Prendergast, are aware of the challenge, and they solve it, rather less helpfully, by translating medieval Christianity into something else: Piers is a social and cultural figure; or the poem is about interpretation.

The largest obstacles to teaching Piers may not be internal to the poem but may rather have to do with our institutions, with falling enrollments in English courses, and the decreasing number of tenured positions in medieval literature. Of these obstacles, the essays seem largely unaware: they assume a stable, traditional, and homogeneous audience of trained medievalists teaching English majors in required courses. None of the essays, with the exception of Watson’s eloquent meditation, takes up the vital question of why one would be teaching Piers Plowman now, let alone the question of the future of this already under-taught poem in a shrinking field. Indeed, David Lawton’s opening essay on literariness sets a tone that is both scholarly and backward-looking. If this poem is to have a future in the academy, it needs teachers now, and that means coming up with practical solutions along the lines of Crasson’s service-learning. Some sustained attempts to imagine the needs of instructors would have made this collection feel more current, even if the essays did not directly examine the crises I mention. For a model, Goodmann could have looked at another volume in this series, Approaches to Teaching Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales,” edited by Peter Travis and Frank Grady (2014), which is far more audience-oriented: Travis and Grady describe the results of a survey of Chaucerians and include essays for instructors of general education courses, diverse student bodies, and high-school students. Goodmann could have delivered on the opening claim “to support and encourage instructors—nonspecialists and specialists alike” (xiv) by including more essays explicitly directed to a variety of instructors, institutions, and courses. Asking for a book about teaching to address our institutional constraints is perhaps unconventional, but if Piers Plowman has taught me anything, it is that questions about learning cannot be answered without attention to the social and economic conditions under which we live.

Katie Little
University of Colorado Boulder
Katherine.C.Little@colorado.edu


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The delight in the pursuit for the King Arthur, if he existed, is often found in the search itself. Academics, History Channel viewers, and hikers on Glastonbury Tor all have a favorite candidate, and few can be shaken from their positions. Nicholas Higham patiently and painstakingly analyzes all the possible evidence using his tremendous insight and profound knowledge of the pan-historical nature of the Arthurian legends. With a highly engaging prose style and delightful pacing, Higham walks the curious reader through the “foreign” Arthurs in part 1 and the “British” Arthur in part 2. Ultimately, Higham invites the readers to draw their own conclusions. The book is an absolute must-have for anyone studying the origins of how King Arthur’s story began.