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2017

## Review of *Les Échos Bibliques dans 'Piers the Plowman' (Texte C)* by Helga Maillet

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### Recommended Citation

Strakhov, Elizaveta, "Review of *Les Échos Bibliques dans 'Piers the Plowman' (Texte C)* by Helga Maillet" (2017). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 526.

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*The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, Vol. 31, (2017): 335-337. [DOI](#). This article is © Brepols Publishers and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Brepols Publishers does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Brepols Publishers.

## Review of Helga Maillet. *Les Échos Bibliques dans 'Piers the Plowman' (Texte C)*. Aachen: Shaker-Verlag, 2014. Pp. 233.

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Helga Maillet's *Les Échos Bibliques dans 'Piers the Plowman' (Texte C)* is a reprint of a doctoral thesis from the 1970s in which the author argues that *Piers Plowman's* rich diversity of citations, echoes, rewritings, and allusions to the Old and New Testaments can be understood as its own eccentric form of biblical exegesis. Langland, Maillet notes, prefers to source directly from the Bible, rather than rely on the Church Fathers or later medieval commentators. Meanwhile, numerous passages in the text, both in Latin and Middle English, represent intentionally amalgamated, rewritten, and rearranged biblical citations and allusions. On the level of the narrative itself, Langland repeatedly inveighs against false and incompetent glossators and stages numerous scenes in which Will receives instruction from various characters in the form of homiletic exegesis. Taken together, the practice of repeated borrowing, the privileging of exegesis as an intradiegetic tool of instruction, and the focus of Langland's anticlerical critique on poor glossing practices mutually point to Langland's own exegetical aspirations for his text. Maillet goes on to note that Langland intentionally omits and/or fragments multiple biblical lines and passages into novel combinations to produce unexpected characterizations and scenes. Her book's stated methodology, therefore, is to reconstitute the full biblical sources for a variety of key moments in *Piers Plowman* in order to showcase Langland's combinatorial exegetical strategies.

The rest of the book progresses in the form of individual expositions of Langland's exegetical technique that help shed light on some of the choices behind Langland's vibrant text. For example, Maillet shows (p.114) that lines 227–28 in C.16, 'And riht as hony is euel to defie, | Riht so sothly sciences swelleth a mannes soule [...]' (in Derek Pearsall's 2008 edition), overtly make reference to 1 Corinthians 8.1 ('Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth'). The section regarding honey, however, is a palimpsest of references to Proverbs 25.27 ('It is not good to eat much honey: so for men to search their own glory is not glory'), as well as to Proverbs 24.13–14 ('My son, eat thou honey, because it is good; and the honeycomb, which is sweet to thy taste: So shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul: when thou hast found it, then there shall be a reward, and thy expectation shall not be cut off'), but also to Proverbs 25.16 ('Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it'). Similarly, the portrayal of Avarice and his wife as fraudulent merchants who cheat their clients by manipulating the weighing of goods can be traced back to Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 19.35–36, Deuteronomy 25.13–16, and Proverbs 11.1, in which unrighteous behaviour is metaphorically represented as the use of fraudulent measurements (pp.51–52). In this way, Maillet shows, some of Langland's imaginative choices in his narrative can be understood as the reification of biblical metaphors and allegories. Maillet further suggests that Langland's biblical allusions can be still more distant and playful when she argues, for example, that Langland's Barn of Unity image can ultimately be traced back to the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, whereby the community of Christians as good seeds must be, following the logic of both parables, harvested and placed in a granary (pp.206–07).

In teasing out these parallels, Maillet is able to show that Langland does not only rely on direct citation of biblical passages but also builds up accumulated references to multiple passages treating similar themes, allowing him to enrich the semantic fields evoked by his word choices. He further constructs images that proceed organically, but distantly, from key passages, such as the parables, that he does not cite directly. Through these divergent but overlapping approaches to biblical citation and allusion, Langland forces his reader to become an active reader who is invited to read *Piers Plowman* and the Bible side by side for a full elucidation of Langland's meaning (p.214). The majority of Maillet's book consists of such individual close readings of images, scenes, and representations in *Piers Plowman*, organized not into traditional chapters but rather as thematic clusters around what Maillet perceives to be the work's dominant themes articulated by Langland as sets of binary opposites: falsehood versus truth; earthly versus heavenly benefits; earthly versus heavenly joys; and flesh versus spirit.

The strength of Maillet's work lies with her extensive knowledge of the Old and New Testaments that demonstrates, in turn, the richness and diversity of Langland's uses of biblical allusions throughout *Piers Plowman*. Unfortunately, Maillet's analysis largely relies on simply identifying the biblical parallels for a particular passage or moment in Langland's text without much further commentary on how this identification might complicate our understanding of Langland's text. For example, Maillet notes parallels between Meed's resplendent attire and Jerusalem, the Lord's faithless bride, in Ezekiel 16.10–12 ('I clothed thee also with brodered work, and shod thee with badgers' skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head'). She then points out the evident contrast between Meed and Holy Church, but, despite having just brought our attention to Ezekiel 16, she does not mention Langland's emphasis on the fact that Holy Church is also clothed in linen (C.1.3). Thus, Maillet's identification of allusions to Ezekiel 16, in which Jerusalem wears both linen and gold, interestingly problematizes, to my mind, the stated contrast between Holy Church and Meed, given that one is described as wearing linen and the other gold. However, Maillet does not go beyond merely identifying this biblical parallel. The limited quality of such an analysis is felt throughout the work.

Her analysis also does little by way of contextualizing Langland's uses of biblical allusion alongside that of his more significant predecessors and contemporaries, other than passim generalized reference to Robert Grosseteste's *Chateau d'amour* and to contemporary sermons. As a result, while the depth of Langland's biblical knowledge appears undeniable, it is difficult to discern, from Maillet's book, the degree to which his choice of biblical texts might be singular or, by contrast, fully conventional for his period and project. The absence of contextualization also leaves the reader wondering whether the diversity of these allusions is owed purely to Langland's extensive knowledge of the Bible, or whether other genres, such as preachers' manuals, may have contributed to his project. Furthermore, being a reprint of a 1970s dissertation, the book's bibliography is, at this point, somewhat fossilized.

That said, if Maillet's intention is simply to offer her readers examples of Langland's use of the Bible as a kind of productive raw material to shape their own analyses of *Piers Plowman*, then she admirably succeeds in this endeavour. In many ways, this work reads like an encyclopedic compendium of the breadth and variety of Langland's biblical allusions. As such, it further enriches readers' understanding of Langland's project and offers innumerable avenues, byways, and delightful rabbit holes for Langlandians to follow in their own continued explorations of Langland's breathtaking *chef d'œuvre*.