



## Leeds Medieval Studies

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Cecilia A. Hatt, *God and the 'Gawain'-Poet: Theology and Genre in 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2015, x + 249 pp. ISBN 9781843844198.

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*Leeds Medieval Studies*, 1 (2021), 96–97

DOI: 10.57686/256204/5

ISSN: Print 2754-4575

ISSN: Online 2754-4583

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## Reviews

Cecilia A. Hatt, *God and the 'Gawain'-Poet: Theology and Genre in 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2015, x + 249 pp. ISBN 9781843844198.

This study is as much a work of theology as it is a literary analysis of the poems found in MS Cotton Nero A.x. The *Gawain*-poet's detailed delight in the material has led many to consider the poems a celebration of the wealthy and powerful in courtly life. Cecilia Hatt's aim is to rescue the theology of the poet from this position and demonstrate how each poem represents a 'coherent religious vision' (p. 1), which acknowledges an 'utter indebtedness to God for creation' (p. 2). The poet therefore sees all of material creation as a gift from God, understanding humanity not as 'actors and shapers of events, but the recipients of the unfathomable providence and unimaginable generosity of God' (p. 11).

Hatt disputes critics, such as David Aers, whom she maintains have viewed the poet through a starkly Augustinian lens, characterised by a Platonist dualism between soul and body. According to Hatt, the *Gawain*-Poet is more at home with the Aristotelian Aquinas, who resisted such sharp distinctions and was 'not at all fazed by bodiliness' (p. 4). Modern theologians such as Rowan Williams and David Kelsey are drawn upon to illuminate this further. Absent though is any broader context of theology in late medieval England, whether formally or in the daily life that the poet so champions. There is also little attempt to situate the poems within a setting of other similar medieval religious texts. These would certainly bolster the arguments further, particularly on the supposed orthodoxy of the poet's views. Romans 5.5 and the implicit authority of Aquinas are heavily relied upon, and the possibility that the poet might even have been dissenting against some of the religious conventions of the time is not considered.

Hatt does provide an exceptionally close reading of the poems, well informed by scripture, to tease out the 'profoundly incarnational theology' (p. 92) of the poet and its effect on the choice of genre in each poem. Chapter 1 focuses on *Pearl*, which is characterised as a dream with 'no visionary or mystical element' (p. 19). The exchange between the jeweller and the heavenly pearl-maiden is not divine revelation, but a genuine dream in which the dreamer grapples with grief in the context of his religious views, a reflection on the implications of our limitations as creations of God. When discussing *Cleanness* in Chapter 2, Hatt does not shy away from the problems the poem poses for a modern reader, including its apparent homophobia. Still, the poem is described as 'not really about sex' (p. 74), but instead is 'arguing for an attentiveness to the ontological' (p. 96). The recipients of God's wrath in the

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poem sin against their own bodily creation, and by extension pay little respect to the grace of God. On *Patience*, the various traditions of interpreting the Book of Jonah are discussed, and Hatt points to the almost parodic Pelagianism of Jonah in the poem. The poet's aim, she argues, is to demonstrate Jonah's impatience, his refusal to accept and submit to the inevitable will of God in the face of the events of the narrative. *Gawain* is viewed in a similarly Pelagian light, which despite its quite different setting and genre, is seen as still very much 'theologically fuelled' (p. 172). Gawain too mistakenly sees his goodness and virtue as entirely of his own merit, rather than given through the grace of God.

This book offers a sensitive and thorough reading of these poems that warrants much more discussion. Hatt often recognises the difficulty of drawing strong conclusions about genre in each of the texts (*Cleanness* and *Patience* both share homiletic features, but often do not follow the basic principles of a university sermon). Still, the main strengths of the study are Hatt's genuine insights into Christian theology, which not only provide new and useful perspectives on the poems for scholars, but potentially for many Christian readers today.

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