

# Symposium

## God Speed the Plough

Andrew McRae

I was at once surprised and dismayed to read the review of my book, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), in the 1997 issue of *Literature and Aesthetics*. While I welcome informed debate about *God Speed the Plough* and its methods of cultural and textual analysis, I object to criticism which either misunderstands or misrepresents a book in order to provide an occasion for polemic. It is in this context that I wish briefly to respond to Dr Barry Spurr's review.

Spurr is clearly disturbed by my decision not to restrict my research in accordance with a notion of literary merit. While this reaction points to important issues in contemporary scholarship, Spurr's comments do little to examine such issues, as they reduce my position to a disturbingly banal level. *God Speed the Plough* has been described in *The Times Literary Supplement* (10 May 1996) as 'an innovative and important testimony to the value of interdisciplinary work, which incontestably succeeds in its object of demonstrating "the role of literature as an agent of social change"'. As this statement suggests, the book does not merely disregard traditional issues of literary study, as Spurr asserts. 'Niceties of genre', for example, are categorically not 'dismissed as such'; indeed I state that 'the role of literature as an "agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality" may *valuably be explored through attention to literary modes*' (p.4). This is precisely what I do: most notably in chapters on Renaissance satire, georgic, and rural poetry. The book is therefore greatly concerned with literary codes and conventions, though its scope is also broader than this.

More importantly, Spurr's review misrepresents my treatment of power. He quotes my aim to consider 'the various and changing ways in which English men and women ... sought to ascribe meaning and order to the economy and society of their native countryside' (p.3), but then suggests that I treat power in binary terms, setting the 'establishment' against its 'victims'. This seems, if nothing else, a remarkable misreading of the words 'various and changing'. In fact I specifically distance myself from a consideration of power as

'oppressive', as I state that 'The representations of agrarian conditions and practices evidence at once cultural diversity and underlying ideological conflict. Discourses take form as mutable and plural, rather than oppressively monolithic' (p.6). Other reviewers have noted this complexity as a strength. The leading new historicist scholar Richard Helgerson, for instance, states that my textual analyses are 'never reductive', but 'rather reveal differences, how they have been constructed, and why they matter' (*Journal of Historical Geography*, 23 (1997): 80).

Spurr consequently transforms my book into an exercise in old-style Marxism, and proceeds to strike it down in the true interests of literature and aesthetics. This misreading, however, takes some effort. To claim that I valorise ploughmen as 'critics and victims of the establishment', for example, entirely misses the point of the opening pages, in which I consider 'the figure of the labourer at his plough'. I point out, in relation to this figure, that 'disparate texts reveal an ongoing struggle over the identity of a cultural icon' (p.2), and that the book aims to analyse such struggles. Spurr similarly rewrites my treatment of the Cromwellian government. Far from presenting this period as 'a marvellous effusion of freedom', I in fact explore divergent ways in which the word 'freedom' was employed and shaped. The book's index notes two pertinent passages: one in which the word is used in Gerrard Winstanley's arguments for agrarian communism; and another identifying its use in a nascent discourse of individualism. The book is therefore concerned with the meanings of 'freedom', which is rather a different matter from the naive celebration Spurr identifies.

Finally, the consideration of religion is perhaps the least satisfactory component of his review, and warrants some notes of correction. My point about the existence of a 'Jacobean Calvinist consensus' within the English Church is amply footnoted, citing the work of major contemporary scholars. This issue is not one of Church government, as Spurr assumes, but rather one of theology: the main reason why William Laud was so controversial when he rose to prominence under Charles I was that he preferred the arguments of Arminius to those of Calvin in relation to issues of individual salvation. Furthermore, Spurr's claim that I 'reduce [the] complexities' of Christianity at the time is curious, especially since religious change is a central issue in the book's first section. This statement entirely ignores Chapter 2, 'Moral Economics and the Tudor-Stuart Church', in which I explore some of the ways in which what Spurr describes as 'the simplicities of the

[sixteenth-century] "Protestant gospellers" were substantially reassessed by subsequent generations.

Spurr's unfortunate review of *God Speed the Plough* stands counter to the overwhelmingly positive response the book has received in international journals. More importantly, it fundamentally misrepresents both the book and the issues with which it deals.