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LANGLAND

PIERS THE PLOUGHMAN



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Nothing is known for certain about the life of WILLIAM LANGLAND, an obscure fourteenth - century cleric, but a tentative outline can be made from supposedly autobiographical elements in the manuscripts of his poem. Born in about 1332 at Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire, the son of a small Oxfordshire landholder, he was probably educated at the monastery of Great Malvern; he trained to be a priest but due to the death of his patrons he only took Minor Orders and was unable to advance in the Church. He wandered a good deal in England and was clearly familiar with London; he also lived for some while in a cottage on Cornhill with his wife Kit and his daughter Colette, making a meagre living by singing the Office of the Dead for wealthy patrons. Langland lived an unconventional life, constantly writing verse, and was thought by some to be crazed. Tall and thin, he was nicknamed 'Long Will'. He died at the end of the century.

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PIERS
THE PLOUGHMAN

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William Langland

TRANSLATED
INTO MODERN ENGLISH
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
J. F. Goodridge



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For Alan Morrison

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INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM LANGLAND was an obscure fourteenth-century cleric, of whom no contemporary record exists and of whose life nothing is known for certain. The only reliable external evidence we have for the authorship of *Piers Plowman*¹ is an ascription on the reverse side of the last leaf of one of the manuscripts,² which gives his name and parentage. Apart from this, we have to rely solely on the clues given in the successive versions of the poem, where the dreamer of the visions is gradually identified with a self who is also their author. Here we are on uncertain ground, since the poem cannot be read as spiritual autobiography. The dreamer is primarily a dramatic *persona* whose function, as in other medieval dream-poems, is to provide a link between the reader and the visions. Yet he reveals his baptismal name as William; in one place (XV, 145) he appears to surrender his full name by means of a cryptogram (a common method of signature in medieval poems); and in the later versions of the poem he takes on a waking existence that is convincingly life-like.* There is no reason to doubt that there are here elements of genuine autobiography. On this basis we may work out a tentative outline of the poet's life.

He was born about the year 1332 at Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire and lived till the end of the century. He was the son (possibly illegitimate) of Stacy (Eustace) de Rokayle, who held land under the Despensers at Shipton-under-Wychwood in Oxfordshire. He was probably educated at the monastery of Great Malvern, where he passed through the usual theological training of a priest. But owing to the death of his patrons he only took Minor Orders and was unable to advance in the church. Mr W. A. Pantin³ describes the class of unbeneficed clergy to which Langland belonged as a clerical proletariat: 'Socially and economically, this class must have been poles apart from the "sublime and literate persons"', though the case of Langland shows us that a more or less submerged cleric might be the intellectual equal of anybody.'

Langland seems to have wandered a good deal from place to place and mixed with all kinds of people. He knew London well

*See Appendix A.

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and worked on his poem there. He tells us that he lived with his wife Kit and his daughter Colette in a cottage on Cornhill, and made a meagre living by singing the Office of the Dead for wealthy patrons. He certainly knew poverty at close quarters.* We also hear his nickname, Long Will, and he frequently refers to his own tallness and leanness. He sometimes lived an unconventional life, dressed like a beggar; he was inclined to treat self-important people with little respect; he was constantly preoccupied with writing verses and some people thought him mad. |

Langland must have spent a large part of his life revising and adding to his poem, for the surviving manuscripts belong to three distinct types representing three different stages in the poet's conception. These are known as the A, B and C texts. The B text is the best known, and has therefore been chosen for the present translation.

The A text consists of a Prologue and eight books of the *Vision of Piers Plowman* followed by four books of the *Life of Do-well* - so that it ends inconclusively with the dreamer's rejection by Learning and Scripture. The B text has a Prologue and twenty books and the C text, a revised and expanded version of this, a Prologue and twenty-three books. Langland calls his Books *Passūs*, which suggests the idea of steps in a developing argument.

Professor J. A. W. Bennett has brought forward convincing evidence⁴ to show that the A text was composed about the year 1370, and the B text recension between 1377 and 1379. The C text must have been composed some time after 1390. The controversial theory of multiple authorship has now been disposed of⁵ and students of the poem may safely regard the three versions as the work of one author.

To judge from the large number of manuscripts that still survive, *Piers Plowman* was very much a 'living' text in its day, being widely read throughout the fifteenth century and well into the sixteenth.⁶ But in the latter part of the sixteenth century its West Midland dialect began to present serious difficulties. Langland's terms seemed (as Puttenham put it) 'hard and obscure', and he came to be regarded chiefly as 'a malcontent of his time' - a precursor of the Reformation, admired for the bitterness of his invective against the Roman church. Between 1561 and 1813 no edition of *Piers* was printed and its reputation remained more or less unchanged. Whenever it was mentioned it was described as a satire, and Dr T. D. Whitaker, Langland's first modern editor,

*See Appendix B.

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referred to Langland as 'the first English satirist', praising him chiefly for his rich Hogarthian scenes of medieval life. The more allegorical parts were considered 'insipid'.

The rediscovery of Langland's full range as a great English poet – representative of his age as Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth or Yeats were of theirs – has been a slow process. There have been genuine difficulties, as well as prejudices, to overcome. In the nineteenth century many readers were still dominated by the image of Langland as a dour Wycliffite preacher, and tended to regard his allegorizing as a mode of abstraction. Even in this century progress has frequently been held up – by controversy over side-issues, by misleading ideas about the limitations of allegory and also by the largely groundless assumption that Langland wrote carelessly and was no artist. As recently as the fifties, when the present translator was working on this version, there was surprisingly little help to be gleaned from the mass of scholarly material available, and no up-to-date editions of the texts. I was consequently obliged to do a good deal of pioneer work in interpreting the more neglected parts of the poem, and some of this was embodied in a lengthy Introduction and Appendices, large parts of which have been dispensed with in the present edition, since adequate criticism is now available elsewhere. For textual criticism, students should go to George Kane's edition of the A text and his discussion of the evidence for authorship; for closer critical study, to works like those of Elizabeth Salter and John Lawlor.⁸

*

In common with Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Piers Plowman* deals with the largest of all themes: the meaning of man's life on earth in relation to his ultimate destiny. Like Milton, Langland seeks to 'justify the ways of God to men'. But his perspective is different from either Dante's or Milton's. He does not take us on a journey through worlds other than this, or ask us to look back on life from the point of view of hell, purgatory or heaven. Nor does he remove us, as Milton does, to a distant vantage-point in time from which to survey human history. His poem is no epic in the ordinary sense of that word. Langland's cycle of visions begins and ends with fourteenth-century England. (His pilgrimage, like Bunyan's, is that of man's individual life and his life in society, as it has to be lived on this middle-earth between the 'Tower of Truth' and the 'Dungeon of Falsehood') Langland was concerned, as Blake was, both with the condition of society and

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with the history of the human soul struggling to 'cleanse the doors of perception' and come to terms with ultimate truth. But for Langland, this meant translating his visions, at every point, into an art that had an immediate application to practical life. Though epic in scope and constantly rising to a prophetic point of view, *Piers Plowman* is cast in the didactic form of medieval moral allegory – a spiritual journey which, though it takes place in a series of dreams dreamt by an imaginary dreamer, is constantly related to life as it has to be lived. The form allows various different time-scales, and with them different levels of meaning, to operate side by side, or be superimposed on one another. First there is the 'literal' life-span of the dreamer or poet. He is represented at the beginning as a lazy vagabond or ordinary human wayfarer whose interest in Truth amounts to little more than idle curiosity. But through his dreams he sees the world with fresh eyes, is bewitched into thinking seriously and is sent forth by Holy Church on a pilgrimage in search of Truth, which he can only find through learning the law of Love. So he must progressively meet and assimilate every aspect of reality, and rise from his preoccupation with physical, economic, social and political facts to the level of moral and spiritual vision.

Though the story of Will's growth in knowledge and understanding provides the poem's one consistent thread of narrative, it is no regular step-by-step progress. It is as irregular and unpredictable as life itself – there are moments that are crowded with vivid impressions, or flooded in solitude with the wonder of new realization, followed by long barren years of intellectual debate, uncertainty or, perhaps, complete unawareness. In Book XI the poet ironically allows forty-five years of the dreamer's life to drop out as if they had never existed, so that he passes in a moment from the struggles of early manhood to those of old age. Erratic, obstinate and often misguided, he constantly has to double back on his tracks to rediscover what he had half known before. ¶

Unlike Milton or Blake, Langland was a master of comic effects. He could survey the world with humour, sometimes mocking or playful, more often wry and sardonic. So the pilgrimage is partly burlesque – the dreamer's over-eager curiosity and general lack of solemnity lead to many setbacks on his quest. Both he and the *personae* of his dreams bear witness, dramatically, to the absurdity of the human situation in the face of eternity's uncompromising demands. For Langland seems to combine opposite qualities – on the one hand, an almost exasperating sense of the absolute, that insists on following up every hint and will never leave a subject till

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the truth of it has been pursued to its final conclusions ('I shal tellen for treuth sake, take hede who so lyketh!'); on the other hand a sense of man's almost incurable folly and waywardness, and an awareness of the plain ungarnished facts of life as it has to be lived from moment to moment. He likes to show common sense confounding theory, but likes even better to show idealism confounding worldly common sense – as Conscience confounds Lady Fee, or Patience subdues the worldly Haukyn by showing him poverty. So the poem sometimes swings back and forth between extremes, harsh prophecy or solemn warning, and Rabelaisian satire that is not afraid to expose contradictions in terms of farce. These opposites are most effectively combined in the swift, sure satire of the final Book – and it is hard to see how such a resilient response to experience can ever have given rise to the idea of Langland as a grim pessimist. There is very little in his poem of the 'Nordic strain'.

One of the effects of Langland's self-mockery is to associate the dreamer, and ourselves, with the action, so that we are directly involved, and made to feel the difference between knowledge and full participation, which is one of the poem's main themes. But the dreamer seldom occupies the centre of the picture. The visions themselves, with their 'higher' time-scales, dominate his life, and the prime mover is an unseen providence that is always a little beyond the horizon of vision. So we gain from the poem a sense of reality as something objective and ineluctable, penetrating and overshadowing life as we know it in the world. ¶

Superimposed on the time-scale of a single fourteenth century life-span, with its direct references to current political events, are the further time-scales apprehended in higher moments of vision. The painstaking allegorical expositions that describe the long way of the commandments are broken by sudden moments of illumination – hard surfaces of doctrine and argument dissolve into kaleidoscopic pictures, each revealing more than the last. One important scale that holds these dramatic variations together, especially in the last five Books, is that of the liturgical year, and we can observe in Langland the process of ritual being turned into drama. Beginning with the Nativity in the middle of Book XVI, the dreamer passes on rapidly through Epiphany and Lent to the climax of Passiontide and Easter (Book XVIII), then returns by way of Pentecost, in Book XIX, to Advent in the final Book. Coupled with this liturgical cycle run the main themes of sacred history – the story of the patriarchs and prophets followed by that of Christ and his church,

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which leads on inevitably to the *terminus a quo* of the present.

But in Langland the contemporary scene is itself shifting and multi-dimensional. (Here, as in the realm of spiritual experience, his clairvoyance can penetrate beyond appearances and show us what lies behind the façade of church and state.) He is one of the few writers in whose work it is difficult to distinguish between prophetic insight – that sometimes works on a historical or eschatological level – and plain truthfulness, especially (as John Lawlor has put it) his ‘unerring eye for woes that are actual’. (He did not sympathize with the poor at a safe distance; he felt need and hunger as immediate sensations and could express them in sharply physical and kinaesthetic terms. His denunciation of hypocrisy therefore carries conviction.) We do not dismiss his prophetic role as a preacher’s mannerism. At almost any stage in his narrative, he can rise easily to a point of view from which he can relate present facts to first causes and final ends. The present fulfils past warnings and shows portents of what is still to come. Christ and Antichrist are here and now. This gift of prophetic vision lends to the poem a time-scale vaster than that of any epic, and fills it with glimpses of a divine economy that may ultimately lead to the salvation of all mankind. Behind Langland’s ‘animated foreground’, there is always ‘the long vista of eternity’.⁹ |

All these perspectives are present *within* the poem – in its flexible language and varied dramatic sequences; we need not look outside it to find the ‘meaning’. Other medieval allegories are more formal and diagrammatic, but *Piers Plowman* does not depend on a fixed scheme of symbolic reference. There is little need, for example, to explain what ‘Meed’ (which I have translated ‘Fee’) is or was – her words and actions provide as full a context by which to judge her as any that Dickens could give. (Allegory was for Langland a dynamic way of thinking or ‘making out’ the truth in pictorial and dramatic form, by intuition as well as by observation and logical argument.) To do this, he freely used all the resources of the vernacular language, and the potentialities of the dream form. He moved easily from brisk reportage to grotesque nightmare, or from angry theological disputation to the dream-within-a-dream that is close to mystical vision. There is no infallible key to such dramatic poetry – we must be constantly alert to changes in tone and direction that would be impossible in the stately verse of a poem like *Paradise Lost*. We are required, in Book III, for instance, to move rapidly from a world that exhibits the perverse power of money, and jingles with thousands of florins, to a moving state-

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ment of the divine law of reward and restitution. This in turn is later associated with one Robert the Robber, who can never hope to repay his debts, and so is compared with the penitent thief on Calvary. The essence of Langland's dream technique is its capacity for what Elizabeth Salter has called 'rapid contraction and expansion of reference' – where vivid realism can play its part within a progressively widening field of religious vision.

Langland's imagination was essentially visual and dramatic, and there are parts of his poem that might make good material for a film. We are struck at once by the fullness and variety of his picture of the Plain of the world, with its crowded panoramas and ugly close-ups, its noisy comings and goings and its intimate details. In the early books we witness a constant clash of opposing forces, and the truth about human society is revealed in the guise of a powerful and absorbing drama. Familiar vices and virtues no longer appear commonplace, but grotesque or disturbing. The 'real' characters – pardoners, lawyers, friars or thieves – are so placed alongside allegorical ones that the latter assume the semblance of life. Guile, Fee, Civil-Law, Conscience and Reason become the dynamic forces that move the world, and all the others fall under their direction.

A character like Sloth or Fraud is the personification of a propensity found in many men; and by embodying it in a single person, the poet shows us what shapes it assumes in human society. He reveals to us our moral qualities, stripped of all the conventions by which we seek to hide them. A schoolboy who uses a nickname, or the dramatist who gives one of his characters a name like Sir Francis Wronghead, is usually pointing to some social foible which characterizes a particular type. Langland employs a similar idiom, but places his types in surprising contexts that shock us out of our stock associations, so that we cannot mistake the enormity of the evils they represent and the perversions of truth that they bring about. By this method of contrast and opposition, familiar virtues also take on a dramatic interest which they rarely have in naturalistic drama or fiction.

Each of the Deadly Sins carries a load of sins greater than any man could possibly carry: the dominant vice is displayed in all its grossest forms. Sloth is not merely a lazy priest who goes hunting when he should be saying his Office; he is all kinds of sloth, lay and clerical, rolled into one. The world is foreshortened, and the gluttony of Glutton is reflected in a crowd of others whom he meets in the tavern. In the description of the soiled coat of Haukyn

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the Active Man, all the sins of the Plain are run together, flourishing under the cloak of self-important worldliness – and it is he whom Langland chooses to test the power of the Christian absolutes, Patience and Poverty. After the dreamer's frustrating struggles with a succession of intellectual faculties and pursuits (Thought, Study, Intelligence, Imagination, etc.), he meets a being, Anima, in whom all the powers of the human soul are combined; and when he has afterwards encountered the separate god-given virtues in incarnate form, he falls in with the Samaritan who unites all these graces in the one attribute of Love. The Samaritan in turn dissolves into the person of Piers-Christ; and it is important to bear in mind that Christ himself in this poem is also an 'allegorical' person, representing a god-like potentiality in the soul – for Langland shared something of the view of Meister Eckhart that 'a good man is the only-begotten Son of God'.

So the *dramatis personae* of *Piers Plowman* are not static abstract categories. Each is a mirror that reflects those aspects of life that stand out at a particular stage of mental or spiritual development, defining its categories of thought or modes of perception. They are the means by which the relevance of those categories and concepts to everyday life can be put to the proof. Langland does not offer us the 'plane mirror reflection' of the comedy of manners, but rather a comedy of humours, where single properties assume a life more powerful than that of ordinary individuals and gather into themselves a large number of observations and experiences. The great strength of such a method lies in its power to cut across habitual expectations – our conceptions, for example, of classes of people or individual 'character' types, or our common notions of what we ourselves are or may become. Langland's form of allegory reorganizes human experience according to new patterns. The cells of the dreamer's thoughts and perceptions keep dividing and coming together again around fresh nuclei. The simplicity of Holy Church's teaching gives way to the multiplicity of Falsehood's following; that of Piers into the contradictions of the mental faculties encountered in the search for Do-well, which is a kind of psychological drama: the dreamer's attention is turned inwards as he seeks the truth among the conflicting powers of the mind. Here the dramatic effect lies in the individual confrontation between the dreamer and his various *alter egos* ('single figures or incidents etched in sharp relief'¹⁰) and in the vigorous to and fro of intellectual debate and homily. What Learning, Study, Intelligence and the rest have to say to him is seldom more than he is capable of