

Piers Plowman by William Langland

an edition of the C-text

Derek Pearsall

Ihus y jobed in iussit / I romed aboute
as a somer seoun for to seeke doctel
and flayned ful ofte of folc pat I mette
if eny wight wiste. / wher doctel was at june
and what man he myghte be. / of many men I asked
was neuer wight in pe worlde. / pat me wisse coupe
where pis longed. / I lasse no more
til it bifell on a friday. / I was fieser I mette
maistris of pe men. / men of gret wille
I haufede hem hendelich. / I hadde leied
and played hem prii chaite. / I pey passed for pe
if pey knewe eny craft of coostes aboute
where pat doctel dwellede. / derc fiendes telly me
for ze are men of pis molde. / pat most wide walken
and knoden amysse and courtes. / I many byn places
bope paces paleys. / I stand pouy men cotel
and doctel and de enele. / wher pey duellen bope
sorely sude pe sta. / he soioner is us fieser

York Medieval Texts
second series

Piers Plowman

by William Langland

An Edition of the C-text
by Derek Pearsall



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Preface

This is the first annotated edition of either of the longer texts of *Piers Plowman* to appear since the great editions of Skeat. No-one could be more conscious than I have become of the foolhardiness of the undertaking, and both text and notes are presented here in the full recognition that they may be merely interim statements in a continuing process of discovery. It seemed important, however, that readers and students of the poem should have, without further delay, an up-to-date text which would at least answer their preliminary needs and questions; the reasons for choosing the C-text are given in the Introduction. The Notes aim to provide, within their practical limits, what is essential to the understanding of the poem, and to incorporate whatever is immediately relevant to that understanding from the criticism and scholarship of recent decades. A particular function of the Notes is to provide cross-reference within the poem, which is long enough and complex enough to act as a commentary, and often the only relevant one, on its own developing structure. The Glossary serves purely pragmatic needs. The Introduction gives necessary information on the poem and the text, but it makes no claim to be a critical essay on the poem or a considered 'interpretation' of it; it will be found to work most usefully as a guide to the contents of the Notes.

I should like to thank the Trustees of the Huntington Library of San Marino, California, for permission to publish the text of *Piers Plowman* from their MS HM 143, and for supplying me with microfilm both of this MS and of MS HM 137. The kindness of the Librarian of University College London in allowing me to borrow the Library's copy of the rare facsimile of MS HM 143 (Chambers Papers 21) made the task of transcribing the MS much easier. My thanks are due also to the British Library Board and to the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge for supplying me with microfilm of MSS in their possession, and particularly to the staff of the Palaeography Room of the University of London Library for their care in supplying excellent photostat copies of the much mutilated MS [S.L.] V.88. In the later stages of the preparation of the edition I was very grateful for the help of Brenda Cornell, who typed up the whole of the text of the poem; Simon Pearsall helped me with the Glossary. Professor George Russell answered my questions about his forthcoming critical edition of the C-text with unfailing courtesy.

Many friends and colleagues have given me help in the preparation of the Notes to this edition, and would have given me more if I had known where I needed it. I should like to thank them all, with a special mention of John Alford, Denise Baker, Anna Baldwin, James Binns, Norman Blake, David Fowler, Albert Friedman, Helen Houghton, Andy Kelly, Carl Marx, Peter Newton, Oliver Pickering, Elizabeth Salter, Geoffrey Shepherd, Ron Waldron, Siegfried Wenzel and Rosemary Woolf. I owe a particular debt to Tom Hill, of Cornell, who has been generous with information on specific passages. I continue to be grateful to Talbot Donaldson for having written the best book on *Piers Plowman*,

and having written it on the C-text; this has been a source of constant comfort to me. The notes of J. A. W. Bennett to his edition of the B-text, Prologue and Passus I–VII, have been invaluable, and I have plundered them mercilessly; the passage into the storm-tossed seas of the *Vita* was infinitely more forbidding in the absence of his guidance, and infinitely more precarious, as will become readily apparent to the informed reader. Finally, I should like to acknowledge the debt I owe, like all students of the poem, to W. W. Skeat. His knowledge of the poem remains unrivalled, and the magnitude of his contribution to the understanding of the poem, in the midst of all his many other labours, remains a cause for wonderment. To his memory this edition, I hope without presumption, is dedicated.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations for the names of books of the bible are included only where the Vulgate form of the name of a book is used in the notes, conventionally abbreviated, as being different in substance from the AV form.

AN	Anglo-Norman
Apoc.	Apocalypsis B. Ioannis Apostoli (The Revelation to St John in AV)
AV	The Authorized Version of the Bible (the King James Bible of 1611)
<i>BJRL</i>	Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
BL	British Library
Cant.	Canticum Canticorum (Song of Songs in AV)
<i>CT</i>	Chaucer's <i>Canterbury Tales</i>
<i>E & S</i>	<i>Essays and Studies</i>
<i>EC</i>	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
Ecclus.	Ecclesiasticus (apocryphal in AV)
EETS	Early English Text Society, Original Series (ES, Extra Series; Supp., Supplementary Series)
<i>EGS</i>	<i>English and Germanic Studies</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>EStn.</i>	<i>Englische Studien</i>
<i>HF</i>	Chaucer's <i>House of Fame</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>JWCI</i>	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>
<i>MÆ</i>	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
ME	Middle English
MED	Middle English Dictionary
MnE	Modern English
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Mediaeval Studies</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
<i>NQ</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
n.s.	new series
NT	New Testament
OE	Old English
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OF	Old French
ON	Old Norse
OT	Old Testament

Para.	Paralipomenon (1 and 2 Chronicles in AV)
PBA	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
PF	Chaucer's <i>Parlement of Foules</i>
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeco-Latina</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
Reg.	Liber Regum, Book of Kings (1 and 2 Reg. correspond to 1 and 2 Samuel in AV, and 3 and 4 Reg. to 1 and 2 Kings in AV)
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
Sap.	Sapientia (The Wisdom of Solomon, apocryphal in AV)
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
Spec.	<i>Speculum</i>
TC	Chaucer's <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
Vg.	Vulgate (Latin) version of the Bible (see Reference List)
YES	<i>Yearbook of English Studies</i>

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Introduction

*Piers Plowman*¹ exists in three recensions, known as the A, B and C texts. It is now generally accepted, as a necessary rather than a merely convenient hypothesis (see Kane, 1965), that all are the work of a single author, William Langland, of whom we know nothing but what we can deduce to be relevant to the poet from the characterization of the dreamer in the poem² and what we can accept as authoritative in some brief manuscript notes of the fifteenth century (see V 36n). The poem is, to all intents and purposes, Langland's whole known existence and his whole life's work. The A-text is the product of the 1360s, and was probably still being revised and rewritten in 1369–70 (see V 116n); the B-text, mainly to be assigned to the 1370s, contains much allusion to events of 1376–9 (see notes to Prologue 134, 139, 165, XV 171, XXI 428); while the C-text was probably complete by 1387, when Thomas Usk, who was executed in 1388, borrowed some phrases (which are in C only) in his *Testament of Love*.³ Evidently, it is not possible to date with any exactness the different versions of a poem which, despite the testimony of the extant manuscripts to the integrity of the three versions, had such a continuous life in the mind of its creator over a period of some 25 years.

The poem is in two parts, as indicated by the Latinized rubrics or titles that appear in most manuscripts: the *Visio Willelmi de Petrus Plowman* and the *Vita de Dowel, Dobet et Dobest*. In the simplest form of the poem, the A-text, which is 2558 lines long, the *Visio* is an allegorical portrayal of the corruption of the social estate and of the attempts to remedy this corruption through the agency of Piers Plowman, representing the life of humble and honest obedience to God's law; the *Vita* is a vision of the dreamer's search for the good Christian life, conducted in allegorical terms through a series of interviews with personified faculties and ways of life (Thought, Wit, Study, etc.). The *Vita* is thus more introspective, seeking a rational basis for individual faith through intellectual enquiry after the failure of the attempts to reform the community in the *Visio*. The A-text has an ending, but the search is inconclusive. The B-text is an extensive rewriting of A, with much new material added incidentally, and with the further addition, after the omission of A's interim ending, of nine

1. For the sake of its traditional familiarity, *Piers Plowman* is kept as the title of the poem and the name of its hero in the title to the present edition and in this Introduction, though the form of the name in the text here presented is invariably *Peres* (*the plowman*).

2. See notes to Prologue 6, I 5, V 1, 2, 24, 36, VI 2, X 68, XI 168, XII 2, XVI 2, XVI 286, XX 472, XXII 183.

3. For this and other evidence supporting a date for C in the 1380s, see Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin, 'The Date of the C Version of *Piers the Plowman*', Abstracts of Theses, University of Chicago, Humanistic Series IV, 1925–6 (Chicago, 1928), 317–20. See also Donaldson, 1949, 18–19. Skeat's date in the 1390s (see III 207n) has little to support it.

long passus,⁴ altogether trebling the length of the poem to 7302 lines. The quest for Dowel is continued at length, merging into Dobet, the life of Christ, and Dobest, the life of the Church, both allegorically represented in the person of Piers Plowman, brilliantly resurrected from the *Visio*. The C-text (7338 lines in the present edition) is an extensive but incomplete rewriting of B, with several major additions and omissions,⁵ much radical reworking and transposition,⁶ and much detailed line-by-line revision of less significance. This latest revision seems to have been prompted by an urgent desire to clarify the meaning of the poem and to reshape certain sequences, perhaps partly as a result of the trend of contemporary events and the new context in which they placed the poem (see below, p. 16). The C-reviser seems to have worked piecemeal, outward from certain cores of dissatisfaction, rather than systematically through B from beginning to end (see Russell, 1969, 39–40). The later passus are relatively little altered, and the last two not at all, but this may be because Langland was satisfied with them, understandably, rather than because he never reached them in the process of revision. The incompleteness of the C-revision is more clearly evidenced in the partially digested state of some of its additional lines (especially Prologue 106–17) and in the exposed seams where new material has been patched to B with little care for detailed congruence.⁷

It is proper that we should attend to all three versions of Langland's poem, separately and in relation to one another. The argument for presenting an edition of the C-text, therefore, needs no special enforcement, but it may seem to, in view of the virtual unanimity of scholars up to now in basing their discussions, with more or less consciousness of the issues involved, on the B-text. In the first place, then, the C-text has been ill-represented by the only text hitherto available, that of Skeat (see below, p. 20), which is based on a manuscript which has been fussily 'improved' by an intelligent and pedantic scribe or editor (the classic example is the substitution of *unwyse* for *wyse* in Prologue 49, where the scribe seemingly thought that the simple irony might escape the inattentive reader). Secondly, the C-revision, being the author's latest revision, presumably represents his latest thinking and therefore, *a priori*, what he is entitled to ask to be remembered by, unless it is marred by evident senility. Discrimination of relative merit is in such a case a highly subjective matter, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of the different versions of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, but the *prima facie* authority of an authorial revision is not similarly arguable. Thirdly, though it would not be possible to argue

4. *Passus*, pl. *passūs*, is a Latin word meaning 'step' or 'stage'. It is used elsewhere to distinguish the parts of a poem in *Richard the Redeles* and *The Wars of Alexander*, both presumably under the influence of *Piers Plowman*. There may be some original or even partly surviving reference to the practice of dividing a poem for the purposes of oral delivery: in the text of the *Wars*, as distinct from the scribal rubrics, the reference is to *fittis*, e.g. line 3473 (ed. EETS, ES 47).

5. See notes to Prologue 95, III 77, 235, 290, V 1, VII 292, IX 70, 187, 291, X 254, XI 137, 163, 196, XII 153, XV 194, XVII 125, 187, XVIII 76, XX 283, 350. A list is provided in Skeat xv–xxi. On the C-revisions in general, see Donaldson, 1949, 20–32.

6. See notes to V 146, VI 3, 63, 170, 196, 309, VII 1, 70, X 51, 157, 184, XI 76, 163, XIV 11, XV 138, XVI 157, XVII 1, XVIII 8, 199; and Donaldson, 1949, 23–4.

7. See notes to Prologue 125, II 73, III 77, V 122, VI 37, VII 70, IX 294, X 170, XII 30, XIV, 16, 100, XV 11, 48, XVIII 179, XX 18.

that C is artistically superior at every point to B – indeed it is quite possible to show that in vividness, picturesque concretion and ‘poetic’ quality it is often inferior⁸ – it is nevertheless clear that the excisions from B, ruthless as they are in their single-minded concentration on essentials, are the work of a man who knows what he is doing, while the great additions (viz. V 1–108, IX 70–161, 187–281, XII 153–XIII 99) reveal no waning of poetic power, passion or purpose. Fourthly, the C-text is substantially successful in achieving its overall purpose of reshaping and clarifying the general outline of the poem. There are still many blurs, and some new ones created in the process of revision, but there are not so many fundamental problems of interpretation as there are in the B-text, and fewer of those abrupt transitions and juxtapositions and dark meanderings that have earned B the epithet ‘surrealistic’ (Muscatine, 1972, 88, 106). C may be less exciting, but it makes better sense. Finally, however, the necessity of all such arguments is merely relative, and their importance diminished in the light of the great good fortune we have in possessing all three versions of Langland’s poem, and a unique and compelling record, therefore, of the growth of a poet’s mind over the whole of his mature life.

Before examining the nature and form of the poem, it will be necessary to give a brief analysis of its contents.

The poem begins with a Prologue,⁹ the dreamer’s vision of the world in its corrupted state as a ‘field full of folk’, dominated by self-seeking. A ‘Westminster interlude’ shows the higher levels of church and state subjected to the same turbulent misrule. In Passus I, Holy Church explains the dreamer’s vision to him, shows him how a right use of worldly goods would be in accord with God’s Law, and answers his urgent entreaty, How may I save my soul? (I 80), which in a sense initiates the whole movement of the poem, with a preliminary outline of the doctrine of Charity. But the dreamer wishes to understand more of the ways of the world, and is presented in Passus II–IV with the vision of Lady Meed, a brilliant allegorical portrayal of the corruption of every estate and activity of society through the influence of money. The king (an ideal king) wins a measure of control over Meed with the help of Conscience and Reason, whom he takes as his chief advisors, and a golden age, it seems, is about to begin. But administrative reform alone cannot bring this about: men’s hearts must be purged of sin so that they may be reformed inwardly. After offering his own ‘confession’, therefore, the dreamer shows us Reason calling on the folk to repent and to seek Truth (V). The confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins follow (VI–VII), wound up by the prayer of Repentance for general forgiveness. The people rush forth in high enthusiasm to seek for Truth, but find no way until they meet Piers Plowman, who tells them where Truth may be found (in obedience to God’s Law) and promises to lead them there when he has finished his ploughing (i.e. the well-organized Christian community must be based on a well-organized economy). All the folk, of all estates, are to help him. But not everyone works with a will: wasters

⁸ See notes to Prologue 10, 14, I 14, 176, VI 63, VII 136, 250, XI 297, XII 99, XVI 25, 157, XVIII 179. But cf. VI 136, VII 141, X 22.

⁹ The passus are numbered in the present edition as Prologue and Passus I–XXII, in accordance with the proposed numbering of passus in the forthcoming Athlone Press edition of the C-text by George Russell (see below, p. 20), as explained in Kane-Donaldson 78. Skeat numbers Passus I–XXIII.

and layabouts refuse to do their share and Piers has to call in Hunger to force them to work, an admission of defeat, since outward coercion is no substitute for inward and voluntary reformation. The passus (VIII) ends with Piers's programme of reform in some disarray, but he receives in the next (IX) a pardon from Truth granted to all those who help him: its terms as they apply to all estates of society are related in detail, but it is not in the end a satisfactory answer to the quest for Truth. It promises salvation for those who do well but does not explain what doing well consists of. Piers Plowman disappears at this point, and the dreamer, pondering on his dream and on dreams in general, takes up the search for Dowel.

At this point the poem makes a new beginning, as if to signal the movement from the outer to the inner, from the outward reform of society to the inward reform of the individual. The dreamer's search for Dowel is first within himself (X), for the answers provided by his own intellectual faculties (Thought, Wit). These answers are not fallacious, but they are partial, and as he goes on to meet a series of personifications of learning (Study, Clergy, Scripture) the dreamer, initially stubborn and complacent, becomes increasingly bewildered (XI). The answers he receives concerning Dowel and salvation are conflicting and confusing, and he falls into a stupor of worldliness, a fast subservience to Fortune, in which his life is dreamed away. The dreamer temporarily loses his identity, his place being taken by Rechelesnesse, who solaces the gnawing of doubt with his easy answers, crude simplifications and bold disparagement of what he does not understand. Witnesses of Truth, like Trajan and Leaute, are glimpsed briefly before being submerged in the prevailing murk, and hints of understanding on the part of Rechelesnesse, as of the virtue of poverty, are swallowed in presumption and vociferous anti-clericalism. This is without doubt the most difficult and in many ways the most profound part of the poem (XII). The dreamer resumes his identity only to make a grotesque misinterpretation of the vision of Middle-Earth (XIII) that he is granted, giving continued evidence of his unredeemed pride and presumption. At last he meets Imaginatyf, the sum of all the intellect can do. Imaginatyf provides interim answers to his questions about salvation and learning as they relate to the life of Dowel, but also, more importantly, embodies the first full and explicit recognition that Dowel consists precisely in not asking the kinds of question he has been asking, but in preparing the self, through humility and patience and voluntary submission of the will to God, for the admission of Charity (XIV). In the next passus, the dreamer is given an opportunity to exercise this active virtue of patience when he is invited to the feast with the learned and gluttonous friar (XV); for the first time speculation gives way to action, and talking about doing well gives way to doing well. After a momentary glimpse of Piers Plowman, an epiphany of Truth and promise of grace for the dreamer, Patience takes on the role of guide and instructs the dreamer and Activa Vita (another *alter ego* for the dreamer, through whom something of the life of common humanity is brought into the search for truth) in the true nature of patient poverty and the voluntary acceptance of God's will (XV-XVI). The achievement of this understanding of God's will is for man true freedom, and the next guide is appropriately *Liberum Arbitrium* (Free Will), the highest faculty of man as he lives in concord with God. *Liberum Arbitrium*