

The Early Reception of Chaucer and Langland

A.S.G. Edwards

To compare the available evidence for the early reception of Chaucer and Langland is not without its challenges. On the one hand, for Chaucer there is a plethora of material that testifies to the swift, varied and widespread responses to Chaucer's works.¹ On the other lie (in proportion to Chaucer) a few scattered, often rather tenuous, indications of the influence of Langland's poem.² Even at such a crudely quantitative level we are conscious of the fundamental differences between the two rather than of any similarities in their reception histories, differences that relate to the very different biographical and literary patterns of their lives. In what follows, I want briefly to explore some of the more significant of these differences as they emerge in the earlier history of the reception of Chaucer and Langland, and to show something of the factors that shaped the ways they were first understood and the responses their works evoked. I will also try to suggest that reception history does reveal some connections between poets who never had a great deal in common, albeit connections largely of a somewhat curious and late-developing kind.

Perhaps inevitably one begins with the biographical and geographical conjunction. Chaucer and Langland were contemporaries and lived in the same city, circumstances that more than one critic has felt to be of absorbing significance but which have produced no insights of any real value. Where London was of crucial relevance was in the reception of the works of both poets. It was a nexus for the production and dissemination of both Chaucerian texts and those of alliterative poetry, from both west and north, including, of course, the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, the majority of the manuscripts of which can be linked dialectally to the London area. *Piers* itself was associated with the crucial initial environment for the commercial production of manuscripts of Chaucer's works. The famous metropolitan scribe, Scribe D, copied a manuscript of it (London University V. 88—the 'Ilchester' manuscript) in the early

fifteenth century as well as a number of the *Canterbury Tales* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which the fundamental work of Ian Doyle and Malcolm Parkes has demonstrated.³ John Bowers sees an ideological shift in this scribe's movement from Langland to the more politically correct Chaucer and Gower, particularly through his association with Hoccleve in the copying of the Trinity Gower manuscript.⁴ But other manuscripts of *Piers*, some of them quite handsome, survive, a number of which can be circumstantially connected with the metropolis, and this scribe's interest in Langland was probably wholly commercial.⁵

It is also evident that scribal activity such as this was representative of the broader links between the transmission of alliterative verse and the circulation of Chaucer manuscripts during the fifteenth century in London. Alliterative verse romances were being copied there during this period, often by copyists who can also be linked to Chaucer's works. For example, a manuscript containing *The Siege of Jerusalem* and the *Awntyrs of Arthur*, Lambeth 491, was copied by a London scribe, one who also copied a manuscript of *Troilus*.⁶ Another scribe, the so-called "Multon" or "Hammond" scribe, working in London, copied a text of *Piers the Ploughman's Crede*, as well as manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* and other works by Chaucer, Lydgate and Hoccleve.⁷ A southern scribe with connections to courtly circles, Richard Frampton also made a copy of the *Siege* (now C.U.L. Mm. v. 14), very probably in London; he in addition copied de luxe manuscripts of Lydgate and Gower among others.⁸ The alliterative poem, "The Crowned King," appears in a manuscript, Douce 95, with pronounced Westminster connections.⁹ Most curious of all, perhaps, is the alliterative conclusion appended to the Cook's Tale in one manuscript, most probably of London origin, of the *Canterbury Tales*.¹⁰ While there seems nothing in the passage to link it to *Piers Plowman*, the grafting of alliterative verse onto Chaucer's corpus provides an odd testimony to metropolitan proficiency in this mode of composition.

There are other, more specifically textual, links between the composition and circulation of alliterative verse within the metropolis and *Piers*. We have the evidence of the recently discovered poem "A Bird in Bishopswood," in unrhymed alliterative verse, drafted on a rent-roll from St Paul's Cathedral, set in London and written in South East Midlands dialect,¹¹ the opening line of which clearly echoes the opening line of *Piers* ("In a sesone of somere þat souerayne ys of alle"). Such links proved surprisingly durable. For example, a late medieval alliterative poem, the opening line of which again clearly echoes *Piers Plowman* (it begins "In soumer seson, as sounne as the

sonne") occurs in the Blage manuscript (TCD D.2.7), a manuscript otherwise known to posterity as an anthology of early sixteenth-century courtly verse, mainly of poems by Wyatt and his circle.¹²

These facts suggest something of the evident metropolitan popularity of alliterative poetry. The popularity of Chaucer's own poetry within this environment needs, I take it, no further demonstration. The evidence suggests that London was not simply the earliest centre for production of copies of Chaucer's works, but that its primacy endured throughout the fifteenth century.

The link in sites of production is not, however, supported by much evidence of early literary interconnection between the two poets. Chaucer almost certainly knew *Piers Plowman* (most probably in the A-text as Helen Cooper has recently argued)¹³ and this knowledge seems to have been reflected most immediately in his concern with estates satire and the pilgrimage form in the *Canterbury Tales*, which has many points of contact with Langland. Nevill Coghill¹⁴ and, more recently, Jill Mann have demonstrated this indebtedness.¹⁵ But there is not much evidence of the influence of Chaucer and Langland in the same literary contexts. With a couple of rather inconclusive exceptions the early history of their reception tends to insist on the separation of the two poets. The earliest of these exceptions is the most intriguing. Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* was completed in the mid-1380's. (Usk himself was executed in 1388.) Set in the form of a prose allegory, it demonstrates the range of its author's reading, particularly of Chaucer, whose translation of Boethius is quoted extensively, as are, although less frequently, *Troilus* and the *House of Fame*. Usk's knowledge of these works perhaps makes more convincing the more tenuous evidence of his reading of the C-text of *Piers Plowman* that has been adduced by Skeat.¹⁶ The parallels are scattered throughout the work and are occasionally quite striking, as in the "perfect alliterative line" (to quote Skeat) "For he is worthy no welthe, that may no wo suffer" (18/153-4) quite close to the Langlandian "For no wiht woet what wele is þat neuere wo soffrede" (C, XX. 211). Other echoes suggest some form of memorial recollection,¹⁷ or some general acquaintance with the ideas in *Piers*¹⁸ expressed in formulations too diffuse to be more than suggestive. Usk's unusually retentive ear does, however, make it seem likely that he had at least a passing acquaintance with Langland's poem to set alongside his more intimate acquaintance with Chaucer, an acquaintance that once again confirms the London circulation of the two poets.

Matters are scarcely more conclusive in the other early instance where the joint influence of Chaucer and Langland can be discerned, the fifteenth-century romance,

The Sowdome of Babylone.¹⁹ This contains several insistent echoes of Chaucer, particularly in its opening lines, which at times recall the opening of Chaucer's General Prologue (lines 42, 45), but there are also echoes elsewhere of the Knight's Tale. At the beginning of the second part of the romance we have yet another reminiscence of the opening of *Piers*: "In the semely seson of the yere, / Of softenesse of the sonne" (963-4), and, though less compelling, some echoes from Passus XI. The parallels are again suggestive of the diffusion of Chaucer and Langland within the same environment. One is tempted to suppose the work was composed within the sort of metropolitan milieu in which manuscripts of both authors were circulating—certainly the only manuscript that survives seems of East Midland origin.

At the very least one can perhaps say that such allusions or echoes confirm the evidence of manuscript production and provide some sense that Chaucer and Langland were capable of evoking responses within the same work, at least if that work was circulating in London. But such indications seem atypical.

Beyond this, it is hard to point to manuscript contexts in which the two authors were brought together in ways which suggest a meaningful conjunction. It seems noteworthy that virtually no surviving manuscript includes works of both authors within the same covers. The sole exception is a manuscript of *Piers* in the Huntington Library (HM 114) which also contains *Troilus*.²⁰ Nor is there much evidence to suggest that they found the same readership. I have found only two medieval wills or early book-lists that record copies of both Chaucer's works and *Piers* together. The *Canterbury Tales* and *Piers* occur together in the library of a mid-fifteenth-century lawyer, Thomas Stotevyle,²¹ and in a list of books belonging to Sir Thomas Charlton, Speaker of the House of Commons (d. 1465) who owned "an engelysche boke the whiche was called Troles ... j of perse plowman, a nodr of Cauntrbury tales."²² It may be again suggestive that both instances are, again, metropolitan.

The history of their respective receptions in their earlier stages suggests that Chaucer and Langland found responses in markedly different ways and forms. The Chaucer tradition of reception is both more voluminous and more explicit about the terms of its indebtedness to the master. Chaucer was to posterity, as his first disciple Thomas Hoccleve has it, "the firste fyndere of our fair langage" or, in the words of Lydgate, "Among the Engliche that made first to reyne / the gold dewe dropis of rethoryke so fyne / Oure rude langage only tenlwyne." In Caxton's words he was "the first foundeur & embelisser of ornate eloquence in our englissh."²³

This recognition of Chaucer as the historical mile zero, the point of departure for real English poetic activity, is linked to a sense of the particular, sophisticated form of that activity which he embodies. In the generation after his death, John Walton (one of the first to borrow from Chaucer) acclaims him as "floure of rethoryk / In englysshe tong;" for Hoccleve he is "flour of eloquence / Mirour of fructuous entendement." The fifteenth-century scribe John Shirley puts the same idea rather worse, "Geffrey Chaucier / Which in oure volgare had neuere ys pere / Of eloquencyale Retoryke / In Englysshe was neuer noon him lyke," while Skelton invokes him as one who "nobly enterprysed / How that our englysshe myght fresshely be amende," and as "noble Chaucer, whos pullishyd eloquence / Oure englyscshe rude so fresshely hath set out."²⁴

This sense of Chaucer's importance in initiating a tradition of literary history is reflected in the range of appropriation from his works in the century after his death. Unlike Langland, whose literary progeny—as we shall see—seem singularly uniform in their controversial shape, Chaucerian influence suggests a consolidation and cautious expansion of the various literary forms and modes he established in English, ranging from dream vision, to historical epic, to *de casibus* tragedy, to the courtly lyric, as well as in more specific forms of indebtedness in the various continuations of the *Canterbury Tales* evidenced by Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, the "Tale of Beryn" and the adaptation of Hoccleve's "Miracle of the Virgin" to form a Plowman's Tale (in the Christchurch manuscript), or in the clear intertextual relationship of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* to *Troilus*, or in the conscious awareness of the potentialities of Chaucerian stylistics as evidenced in the development of aureate diction or the imitation of his syntactical and rhetorical forms, as well as more straightforward forms of simple plagiarism. It is the replication and elaboration of such forms and modes that marks the early growth of the Chaucer tradition in a predominantly stylistic debt that was strengthened through the subsequent conjoining of Gower and Lydgate into that tradition. As George Ashby has it, writing around 1470: "Maisters Gower, Chaucer & Lydgate, / Premier poetes of this nacion, / Embelysshing oure englysshe tendure algate / Firste finders to our consolacion / Off ffresshe douce englysshe and formacion / Of newe balades, not vsed before."²⁵

This formation of what we might very loosely term the "literary" Chaucer, the writer's friend, sets Chaucer at some remove from Langland. Langland has no equivalent "literary" traditions to which he can be related. The *Piers Plowman* tradition, as defined recently in the admirable collection of poems under this rubric by Helen

Barr,²⁶ reflects very different forms of appropriation from those evidenced by Chaucer's early followers. It is a tradition which locates Langland in contexts where the ideological rather than the aesthetic predominates.²⁷ The poems the tradition encompasses are few in number—*Piers the Ploughman's Crede*, *Richard the Redeless*, *Mum and the Sothsegger* and *The Crowned King*—and indicate a tradition more narrowly and more clearly channelled, more sharply defined, more insistently social than literary in its emphases. The central modes here are complaint and satire deployed in forms of admonition either to or against those perceived to be in positions of authority; these modes are foreshadowed in those of John Ball's letters that circulated during the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 with their references to "Peres the Ploughman" and their various explicit borrowings from the poem.²⁸ These letters must have been a significant factor in the famous identification of Piers Plowman as one of the leaders of the Peasant's Revolt in the Chronicle of Dieuealcre's Abbey.²⁹ From these earliest stages in its reception history the poem was seen as embodying tenets that could be summarily appropriated by those seeking reparation for particular forms of social injustice. The forms of address these works employ often locate their concerns in quite specific social, political or doctrinal issues: for instance, the anti-fraternal satire in *Piers the Ploughman's Crede* or the exhortations to the king in *Richard the Redeless*. It is such specificity of reference that perhaps limits the force of the *Piers* tradition in the fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries: the issues it raises tend to have a limited temporal applicability in ways that contrast with Langland's own far wider allegorical vision. And the circulation of the works associated with this tradition, which generally survive in unique copies, suggests its audience lay among coteries—with consequent limitations on circulation, probably within the West Country. It is worth noting that *Piers* itself, by contrast, continued to be copied, in whole or in part, into the middle of the sixteenth century.

What is not so clear (to me) is the exact nature of the influence of the work *Piers Plowman* upon the Piers Plowman tradition. All the poems that are a part of this tradition are written in the alliterative long line and, as Helen Barr notes, "their literary indebtedness to *Piers* is shown in the recall of key words and phrases and in the reminiscence of important episodes."³⁰ However, the evidence for these stylistic and verbal debts often seems rather limited, although Alcuin Blamires has worked hard to establish the Langlandian idiom of *Mum and the Sothsegger*.³¹ Indeed, in a work like *Piers the Ploughman's Crede* (the most widely circulated of these poems) the verbal echoes of Chaucer are far greater than those of Langland, a fact that suggests there is not much to be gained by attempting to identify the influence of *Piers* through the

pursuit of verbal parallels. Langland was never viewed as a source of "eloquencial Rethorik," as a literary role model like Chaucer.

As hard to define with any precision is the question of the ideological appropriation of *Piers* and/or this narrow literary tradition during the fifteenth century, particularly by the Lollard movement. The extent of Langland's knowledge of and sympathy with Wycliffite thought is a complex issue that has been helpfully assessed recently by Christina von Nolcken and John Bowers.³² There is a natural predisposition to look for Lollard connections to any literature of protest in the fifteenth century. But it is not easy to be confident about the security of such association. Anne Hudson, for example, in a survey of the *Piers Plowman* tradition finds rather meagre evidence of the impact of the poem on the Lollards. The strongest evidence she finds is in *Piers the Ploughman's Crede* which she identifies as a Lollard work "even if a Lollard not on the extreme wing of the party,"³³ following David Lawton who has given the best and the most detailed discussion of the poem.³⁴ But it is hard to parallel such ideological indebtedness, and even in this instance it may be worth noting that the poem's Lollard sympathies did not preclude its being perceived as a work sufficiently respectable that it could be copied within mainstream scribal traditions by the Multon or Hammond scribe in London. Perhaps the subject matter and the form of the *Crede* were broadly based enough to make it sufficiently accessible to invite wider circulation, even if not respectable.

The earliest evidence of Langland's reception, then, tends to confirm the distinctness of the ways he was perceived in terms of the linking of *Piers* with forms of social and political protest and action. For Langland, we can posit a tradition of explicit protest and social grievance linked to the economic concerns of an emergent artisan class significantly, but not exclusively, rural in origin. Indeed, the audience for *Piers* to some degree confirms the connection of the manuscripts to metropolitan centres of production. Two manuscripts were evidently owned by Londoners, one by Thomas Roos, a mercer, the other by a parish priest, William Palmere. But in other respects this audience differs markedly from the audience for Chaucer. Evidence locates the ownership of *Piers* manuscripts largely within religious circles, often provincial, as the researches of John Burrow and R. A. Wood have confirmed.³⁵ In addition to Palmere's manuscript, two copies were owned by Yorkshire clerics and one, Rawlinson poet. 137, by a religious house—the Franciscan convent at Canterbury, of which it is the only surviving vernacular book.³⁶ Harley 6041, an A-text, was apparently also in the possession of a Canterbury religious "at an early

date.³⁷ Bodley 851 may have been owned by John Welles, a monk of Ramsey. And, of course, one of the earliest surviving manuscripts of the A-text is the one in the massive anthology, the Vernon manuscript (originally over four hundred leaves) possibly written for a Cistercian house in the Worcester/Warwickshire area, an area proximate to Langland's own putative Malvern origins.

In addition, the works with which *Piers* was collocated often confirm these "clerical" associations. It appears, for example, with the *Prick of Conscience* in two manuscripts,³⁸ and with other religious works in Pierpont Morgan 818 (including the *Pistill of Susan* and the *Form of Living*), and in Trinity B. 15. 17 (the *Lay Folk's Mass Book*). It may seem hard to link such associations to the most recurrent pattern of collocation of *Piers*, the five manuscripts in which it appears with versions of Mandeville's *Travels*.³⁹ It seems, perhaps, that the idea of the pilgrimage or journey of exploration, whether literal or metaphoric, was seen as a point of contact between the two works by early compilers. Only occasionally are the associations more obviously secular, as in Lincoln's Inn MS 150 where *Piers* occurs with Middle English romances.

The early association of *Piers* with forms of social and political protest stands in contrast to the reception of Chaucer's works, a reception marked, most obviously, by a lack of any direct reference to contemporary events beyond, of course, the famous allusion to the Peasant's Revolt in the "Nun's Priest's Tale." Such inferences as we can make about the contemporary or near-contemporary circulation of his works suggest forms of coterie circulation in circles very different from those of the *Piers* tradition, circles urban and urbane (the casual reference in the Envoy to Bukton to "The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede" is an indicator), among readers sufficiently experienced in the realities of courtly life to respond to the adroitness and obliquity that seems to characterise his relationship to the contemporary world in his poetry.

It would be nice, if only because it would be pleasingly clear-cut, to set up the dichotomy of courtly, urbane Chaucer and the uncouth, in-your-face Langland. But this was not the only way of looking at them that posterity found. Such immediate points of contrast should not obscure more striking interrelationships and parallels. I have already noted the direct influence of Langlandian models on Chaucer's estates satire. And, it seems clear that Chaucer became linked to other, more didactic, models. In addition to the courtly Chaucer, the moral Chaucer also became a literary entity in the fifteenth century.

One dimension of this identity is the evidence of the selections from the *Canterbury Tales*. More than a quarter of the extant manuscripts comprise such selections and they almost invariably testify to a predilection for Chaucer's religious and didactic tales: the Prioress's, Clerk's and Melibee (each extant separately in five manuscripts);⁴⁰ and the Monk's, Second Nun's, Man of Law's and Parson's (each in two). The Chetham's manuscript, which contains two of the excerpted *Canterbury Tales*, the Second Nun's and the Prioress's, was actually copied by one William Cotson "canonicus" towards the end of the fifteenth century.⁴¹ To such excerpts of whole narratives can be added the unique occurrence of an extract from the General Prologue, part of the portrait of the parson, added with his lyric "Truth" to a manuscript of Chaucer's *Boece* in B.L. Add. 10340 to provide some sort of individualised moral compilation of Chaucer's works. In addition to these kinds of evidence, we have the appropriation of a stanza from *Troilus* in the very early fifteenth-century didactic treatise, *Disce Mori*.⁴² The context of these borrowings points to the existence of audiences and forms of transmission that enabled the swift assimilation and appropriation of Chaucer's poem into a variety of pious environments.⁴³ They seem also to testify to the conservativeness and orthodoxy of the religious interest in the *Canterbury Tales*, a circumstance which makes it particularly ironic that it should have been used as evidence in a heresy trial in 1464, a fate, as Christina von Nolcken has pointed out, that never befell *Piers*.⁴⁴

But, except in such excerpted forms, few of Chaucer's major works (I disregard here his translation of *Boece* for obvious reasons) seem to have found their way into the hands of religious. The clearest instance of such clerical engagement is B.L. MS Harley 7333, a very large collection, chiefly of Middle English verse and prose, seemingly written for a house of Augustinian canons in Leicestershire.⁴⁵ The manuscript includes a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* that seems to have been intermittently edited to accord with the sensibilities of its clerical audience. This audience found no objection to Chaucerian fabliau: the Miller's and Merchant's Tales survive intact. But it did apparently object to the institutional implications of some of Chaucer's representations: in the Reeve's Tale, the fact that the miller's wife is the daughter of a parson is changed; she becomes the daughter of a "swanneherde;" and she is "yfostred" not in a "nonnerye" but in a "dayrye."

The chief audience for Chaucer's full works in the fifteenth century seems to have been primarily a secular mercantile or gentry one, if the existing evidence of provenance and relative lack of elaborate decoration provide valid indicators. The

ownership of the Pierpont Morgan or Corpus copies of *Troilus* by the future Henry V and possibly Charles d'Orléans respectively, or Henry VII's mother, Margaret Beaufort's, possession of a copy of the *Canterbury Tales*, seems atypical of the general range of Chaucer's early readers. In this respect, his early readership seems different from that of Gower or Lydgate, of whose works a number of de luxe copies survive, manifestly intended for noble owners. In this lack of an evident audience among the great, Chaucer has a point of contact with Langland, without, however, being able to share with him an audience of the (professionally) good.

Another aspect of this audience that differentiates Chaucer from Langland seems to concern gender. There are not many indications that *Piers* was read by women. The only manuscripts I am aware of that contain any certain indications of female readership, if not ownership, are Liverpool University F. 4. 8, which has the name "isabell poniell" in a sixteenth-century hand and C.U.L Dd 1. 17, which has the name "Jane Stafford." A London priest bequeathed, in the late fourteenth century, "librum meum vocatum peres plowman" to one Agnes Eggesfield.⁴⁶ Finally, Felicity Riddy has speculated on the female readership of the former Clopton manuscript, now London University MS V 17⁴⁷—but the evidence is not convincing.

It is clear that Chaucer's early readers—and documented owners of his works—included numbers of women and that others can confidently be inferred. The evidence for such readers ranges from such de luxe manuscripts of *Troilus* as Cambridge, Corpus 61, owned by Anne Neville, to such provincial anthologies as C.U.L. Ff. 1. 6, the Findern Anthology, containing extracts from Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as well as from other of his shorter poems and which may have been copied, at least in part, by women, and to a number of early owners/readers of the *Canterbury Tales*. Some of these indications of female ownership have recently been discussed by Carol Meale.⁴⁸ This is hardly surprising in a poet whose works often demonstrate a consciousness that his audience included "he and she," but the extent of such female interest, in contrast to the lack of evidence for it in Langland's work, suggests, once again, the separate spheres of reception the two poets enjoyed.

But how did these different readerships read these very different works? One important body of evidence is the forms of annotation their respective works received from posterity, a body of material that is extensive and which constitutes the first forms of commentary on both authors. This material has, however, been little studied. The only work of substance in this respect so far published on *Piers Plowman* is George Russell's study of selected C-text manuscripts;⁴⁹ he concludes that the

annotations reveal "an intense interest in the institutions and personnel of the church in their strengths and weaknesses, and they display a parallel interest in what we might broadly describe as ethical questions ... and they have a firm faith in the authorities that sustain this" (pp. 283-4). It remains to be seen whether the publication of Marie-Clair Uhart's 1988 dissertation on "The Early Reception of Piers Plowman,"⁵⁰ which contains a detailed record of all manuscript commentary, will confirm these interpretations and conclusions.

We have no equivalent systematic record for the annotation in the manuscripts of most of Chaucer's works, apart from *Troilus* where the various glosses have been recorded by Benson and Windeatt⁵¹ and astutely examined by Julia Boffey.⁵² A full study of the *Canterbury Tales* glosses by Stephen Partridge is forthcoming, based on his Harvard dissertation.⁵³ The potential significance of this material has already been demonstrated in Susan Schibanoff's important study of the marginalia to the "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" in the Ellesmere and Egerton manuscripts.⁵⁴ These records tell us a certain amount which is of value concerning the responses of both scribes and readers to Chaucer's verse, responses which, as the manuscripts suggest, range from those of the antiquarian to other more complex literary forms of interest. Julia Boffey, for example, notes in her study of *Troilus* annotation the emergence of "certain critical perspectives on the poem, concerned with its structure and its subtle welding together of distinct rhetorical set pieces, in which lyrics and letters play an important role."⁵⁵

These indications of reader involvement extend from the margins, as it were, into the text itself. Indeed, one of the ways in which Chaucer and Langland can be compared—and differentiated from other major Middle English poets—is in this sense of the active engagement of the scribes themselves in the texts they were transcribing. Professor Kane has discussed this in the case of the A-text of *Piers*, for he describes the scribe as "re-enacting the composition of the poem in his own person,"⁵⁶ changing, for example, names and occupations in the poem to reflect his own experiences, reacting to the poem's politics, or increasing its emphases. Barry Windeatt has traced similar, probably related, tendencies in the scribes of *Troilus*.⁵⁷ The *Canterbury Tales* have not been extensively or systematically studied in this way, but Seth Lerer's recent analysis of two manuscripts, Hm 140 and the former Helmingham (now Princeton University Library 100) points fruitfully to what can be done in this regard.⁵⁸

But the reception of both poets was not limited to the contemplation of and

commentary on received materials, nor to the forms of imitation I have described. As time increasingly separates them from their original historical situations, they can be reinvented in ways which permit ideological expediency conveniently to triumph over historical fact and literary sensibility. Hence in the sixteenth century *Piers* achieves a new identity, albeit one oddly related to his earlier one as Lollard spokesman, in *Piers the Ploughman's Crede*. The identity is as Piers the Ploughman, a figure who appears in a number of sixteenth-century works as spokesman of anti-Catholic satire: *A goodly dyalogue & dysputacion betweene Pyers plowman and a popysh preest; I playne Piers who cannot flatter; Piers Plowmans exhortation vnto the lordes, knyghtes and burgoyses of the parlyamenthouse*, all printed circa 1550; and the printing of *Piers the Ploughman's Crede* in 1553 all testify to the sudden emergence of Piers as a spokesman for a new Protestant orthodoxy in the early 1550's. At a bibliographical level this flurry of polemic may be related to the identification in 1548 by Bishop John Bale (himself a noted anti-Catholic controversialist) of the work he terms "Petrum Agricolam" as one of the writings of John Wycliffe.⁵⁹ (Bale, a great bibliographer, subsequently changed his mind, perhaps after first-hand examination of the text: one manuscript, Huntington Hm 128, contains a note in his hand identifying the author as "Robertus Langlande.")

Langland and Wycliffe are explicitly linked in this Reformation polemic through the publication in 1550 of three different versions of Langland's poem by Robert Crowley, a tireless anti-Catholic controversialist. Crowley's preface sets the poem in the reign of Edward III, a time when many were moved "to open their mouthes and crye oute agaynste the worckes of darcknes, as did John Wicklefe."⁶⁰ His career and his edition of *Piers* have been examined in detail by John King, who links the printing of *Piers* to contemporary anti-Catholicism and anti-monasticism: "there is no maner of vice that reygneeth in any estate of men, whyche thys writer hath not goodly, learnedlye and wittilye rebuked,"⁶¹ Langland's reformist zeal becomes linked to a millennial vision in which Edward VI appears as the harbinger of the Last Judgment and particular passages in *Piers* are annotated as prophecies of Henrician attacks on the monasteries. The currency of Crowley's views has been recently confirmed by Sharon Jansen's discovery of a Tudor manuscript version of part of *Piers* in which the poem is similarly glossed as a contemporary political prophecy.⁶² Also, it has been suggested that Hugh Latimer in the 1550's may in his sermons reflect the influence of *Piers*.⁶³

But this sudden emergence of a fiercely orthodox Catholic poet as a spokesman

for Protestant policy is more readily documented than explained. A partial cause can be found in the increasingly revisionist tendencies of anti-Catholic apologists as they sought historical validation for the overthrow of papal authority. But this process, insofar as it relates to Langland, has links to earlier Reformation literary occasions, and in particular to the publication of Chaucer.

The appearance of William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer's *Works* marks Chaucer's assumption of his own new identity with the Renaissance canonisation of him in printed form. He is the first English poet to achieve the status of a collected works, a status confirmed by the inclusion of the first biography, together with portrait and genealogical table. The very comprehensiveness of Thynne's editorial vision becomes something of a drawback beyond a certain point, not least in his rather optimistic sense of the actual canon of Chaucer's works, for he seems to have been animated by a desire to include everything that either might be by Chaucer or which can be associated with his work. As a result, the Chaucer canon merges into the Chaucerian tradition, accommodating such contemporaries and followers as Usk, Clanvowe, Hoccleve, Lydgate, Roos, and Henryson.⁶⁴

Among the works that Thynne optimistically accommodates into the Chaucer canon is the *Plowman's Tale*. This does not actually find a place in the 1532 edition. Thynne apparently wished to include it in his first printing, but was prevented by the fact that Cardinal Wolsey "caused the kinge so much to myslyke the of that tale, that Chaucer must be newe printed, and that discourse of the pilgrymes tale lefte oute."⁶⁵ Godfrey (who printed the 1532 Chaucer) did bring out a separate publication of it at about the same time as the Chaucer.⁶⁶ The *Plowman's Tale* was added to subsequent reprints of Thynne's Chaucer, after Wolsey's death, beginning with the 1542 as well as in the later sixteenth-century editions by Stow and Speght. In all of them it is placed either immediately before or immediately after the Parson's Tale.

The *Plowman's Tale* is among the most unChaucerian of the works Thynne was disposed to include among Chaucer's. Chiefly in Monk's Tale stanzas (never a form in which Chaucer is at his most attractive), it offers a series of attacks on priestly abuses and corruption, divided into three books. Its tedium is to some degree offset by its timeliness. It presages the full brunt of Henrician religious reforms in its wide-ranging critique of the clergy. It climaxes with a dialogue between the Griffon (Catholic orthodoxy) and the Pelican (emergent Anglicanism), which concludes with the intellectual and martial victory of the Pelican. The extent of the poem's critique makes it uncertain whether all of the poem is a medieval composition: its most

recent student has suggested that it is a contemporary reworking of an earlier poem.⁶⁷ (Speght, however, in his edition of Chaucer claimed to have seen a manuscript of it in Stow's possession "in a booke of such antiquity, as seemeth to have been written neare to Chaucer's time.") In any case, its publication in these various editions of the first half of the sixteenth century provides an important link between the reception of Langland and Chaucer.

Two factors are of obvious relevance. The first is the title, with its joining of the figure of the Plowman to the literature of complaint, a link that (as I have already noted) becomes specifically associated with *Piers* in later print literature. The second is stylistic: the opening lines of the *Plowman's Tale* are alliterative verse and the form is employed with varying degrees of emphasis:

A sterne stryfe is sterede newe
 In many stedes in a stounde
 Of sondry sedes that ben sewe
 It semeth that som ben unsounde
 For some be grete growen ungrownde,
 Some bee souble, simple and small
 Whether of hem is falsere founde
 The falsere foule mote him befalle (1-8)⁶⁸

It is interesting that these lines (1-52) are among those it has been argued were added to the *Plowman's Tale* specifically in the sixteenth century.⁶⁹ The fact is noteworthy if only because of the paucity of printed alliterative verse in the sixteenth century. Indeed, before Crowley's editions of *Piers* in 1550, only one verse alliterative work was printed.⁷⁰

The conjunction of style (for want of a better term) and subject in the *Plowman's Tale*, together with the obvious Langlandian (as well as Chaucerian) implications of its title, indicate a curious merging of the reception of the two traditions in association with forms of explicit protest in the sixteenth century. They suggest an obvious attempt to associate Chaucer with the language and preoccupations of contemporary ideology through the figure of the plowman and the alliterative mode of *Piers*. And, with the merging of the vestigial *Piers Plowman* tradition with the dominant Chaucerian one, as confirmed in subsequent editions of Chaucer's *Works*, we get a virtual end to the significant reception of Langland's poem. The urgency of the association between the two lessened with Elizabeth's more pragmatic religious policies. *Piers*

was only reprinted once, in 1561, before disappearing from print until the nineteenth century. Awareness of it from the 1550's is intermittent and not particularly informed. The *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559) includes an approving reference to "the sentence of the Rat of renoune, / Which Pierce the plowman discribes in his dreame."⁷¹ But thirty years later Puttenham placed it in a way that is more representative of its lack of later reception when he observes that "he that wrote the satire of Piers Plowman seemed to have been a malcontent of that time, and therefore bent himself to tax the disorders of that age and specially the pride of the Roman clergy, of whose fall he seemeth to be a very true prophet." Langland is still a prophet, but the interest in his prophecies has been lessened by their evident fulfilment.⁷² Only Spenser, whose sympathy with all forms of medieval allegory was so capacious, provides evidence of any serious late-sixteenth-century interest in *Piers*.⁷³ The rest is very largely silence.⁷⁴

Chaucer's fate was, of course, completely different, and can be much more extensively documented. In effect, the editorial tradition ends in 1602 (not to begin again until 1721), with Speght's second edition, an edition accompanied, significantly enough, by the first glossary, emphasising the growing linguistic distance that separated audience from work. Chaucer continued to be read though, and to influence a range of writers even as his textual tradition decayed throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Dryden's famous preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700) does not simply articulate the enduring appeal of Chaucer even while the rest of medieval English literature was being ignored; it also implicitly establishes the fundamental aesthetic differences between Chaucer and Langland, to the disadvantage of the latter. His insistence on Chaucer as the founder of the English poetic tradition ("the father of English poetry") and his characterisation of the distinctive Chaucerian qualities of "simplicity" and adherence to "Nature,"⁷⁵ as well as his attempts to produce "harmonious" verse, define the very qualities that Langland could never be shown to possess, and hence explains retrospectively why he had already passed from critical and scholarly view. This divergence in the traditions is, of course, the final illustration of difference: the triumph of the smiling public Chaucer, always accessible to his readers and always capable of drawing an admiring response, over the elusive, cryptic, aggressive Langland, marginalised by posterity. Only in the later twentieth century, with its critical, historical and textual recuperation of Langland's work, has he been permitted to stand as a figure of comparable significance to Chaucer, to redress the balance of earlier traditions of reception.⁷⁶

Endnotes

1 Assembled by Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357-1900*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1925). This has been supplemented most recently by James D. Johnson, "Identifying Chaucer Allusions, 1953-1980: An Annotated Bibliography," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984), pp. 62-86, which lists earlier supplements to Spurgeon.

2 See most notably J.A. Burrow, "The Audience of Piers Plowman," *Anglia* 75 (1957), pp. 373-84; Anne Middleton, "The Audience and Public of 'Piers Plowman,'" in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background: Seven Essays*, ed. David Lawton (Woodbridge, 1982), pp. 101-123; Anne Hudson, "Epilogue: The Legacy of Piers Plowman," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John Alford (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 251-66. For an earlier study see Myrta E. McGinnis, "Piers the Plowman' in England, 1362-1625: A Study in Popularity and Influence," Ph.D. diss. (Yale University, 1932).

3 A.I. Doyle & M.B. Parkes, "The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis* in the early fifteenth century," *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker* eds M.B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London, 1978), pp. 163-210.

4 John Bowers, "Piers Plowman and the Police: Notes Towards a History of the Wycliffite Langland," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992), pp. 1-50, p. 10.

5 See A.I. Doyle, "Remarks on Surviving Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*," *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of George Russell* eds G. Kratzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 35-48, especially 39-41.

6 See Ralph Hanna III, "The Scribe of Huntington HM 114," *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989), pp. 120-133.

7 See A.I. Doyle, "An Unrecognized Piece of *Piers the Ploughman's Creed* and other Works by its Scribe," *Speculum* 34 (1959), pp. 28-36.

8 See Ralph Hanna III, "Contextualizing *The Siege of Jerusalem*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992), pp. 117-18.

9 Doyle, "Remarks on Surviving Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*," p. 99.

10 Bodleian MS Bodley 686, ff. 54v-55v; for this text see R. Morse, "Chaucer's Man of Law in Sequence," *Poetica* 28 (1988), pp. 29-31.

11 Ruth Kennedy, "A Bird in Bishopswood,' Some Newly-Discovered Lines of Alliterative Verse from the Late Fourteenth Century," *Medieval Literature and Antiquities: Studies in honour of Basil Cottle* eds Myra Stokes and T. L. Burton (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 71-87.

12 For the text of this poem see D. S. Brewer, "An Unpublished Late Alliterative Poem," *English Philological Studies* 9 (1965), pp. 84-88. The influence of *Piers* is not restricted to the opening line; it also contains the proverbial locution "blynd as a bytel" (13) which is otherwise recorded only in *Piers Plowman* B. xviii (Whiting 180, not noting the later occurrence).

13 Helen Cooper, "Langland's and Chaucer's Prologues," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 1 (1987), pp. 71-81.

14 Nevill Coghill, "Two Notes on Piers Plowman: II: Chaucer's Debt to Langland," *Medium Aevum* 4 (1935), pp. 89-94.

15 Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973), *passim*, but especially pp. 208-212.

16 I follow the text of Usk in W. W. Skeat, ed., *Chaucerian and Other Pieces* (Oxford, 1897), cited by page and line.

17 See, for example, "weninge his owne wit more excellent than other; scorning al maner devyse but his owne" (24/117-19) and compare C vi. 24-5.

18 See, for example, Usk 97/86 ff.; 133/11 ff.).

19 Quotations are from the edition of Emil Hausknecht (E.E.T.S., e.s. 38, 1881), cited by line numbers.

20 See Ralph Hanna III, "The Scribe of Huntington HM 114," pp. 129-30.

21 J.M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, 8 vols (Chicago, 1940), 1, 610-11.

22 K. B. MacFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 237-8.

23 All these passages appear in Caroline Spurgeon, I, 22,19, 58.

24 All these passages appear in Caroline Spurgeon, I, 20, 21, 49, 74.

25 Spurgeon, I, 54.

26 Helen Barr, ed., *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London, 1993).

27 One possible exception to this generalisation is to be found in a poem by John Audelay, who lived in the northwest Midlands in the late fourteenth century. He produced at least one poem which "exhibits a profound debt to Piers Plowman in its attempt to adopt the prophetic manner and alliterative rhythm distinctive of Langland's style" (from Susannah Greer Fein, "A Thirteen-Line Alliterative Stanza on the Abuse of Prayer from the Audelay MS.," *Medium Aevum* 63 [1994], pp. 61-74.)

28 See Cooper, p. 73, n. 4 for a helpful summary of these; see also R.F. Green, "John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature," in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* ed. Barbara Hanawalt, Medieval Studies at Minnesota 4 (Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 176-200.

29 See Henry Knighton, *Chronicon*, ed. J.R. Lumby, 2 vols, Rolls Series (1889-95), 11, 139 and Hudson, "Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*," pp. 251-2.

30 Barr, *The Piers Plowman Tradition*, pp. 5-6.

31 Alcuin Blamires, "*Mum and the Sothsegger* and Langlandian Idiom," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975), pp. 583-604.

32 Christina von Nolcken, "*Piers Plowman*, the Wycliffites, and *Pierce the Plowman's Creed*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 2 (1988), pp. 71-102; John Bowers, "Piers Plowman and the Police."

33 Anne Hudson, "Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*," p. 256.

34 D.A. Lawton, "Lollardy and the 'Piers Plowman' Tradition," *Modern Language Review* 76 (1981), pp. 780-93.

35 Burrow, "The Audience of Piers Plowman;" R. A. Wood, "A Fourteenth Century Owner of *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Aevum* 53 (1984), pp. 83-90.

36 See N.R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, 2nd ed. (London, 1964), p. 48.

37 George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London, 1960), p. 7.

38 Huntington Library HM 128 and Society of Antiquaries MS 687.

39 B.L. Harley 3954 (with other didactic works), C.U.L. Dd. 1. 17 (with other historical works), C.U.L. Ff. 5. 35, Huntington HM 114 and the dismembered Clopton manuscript (the *Piers* portion of which is now Sterling Library, University of London, S.L. v. 17).

40 The "Prioress's Tale" in Harley 1704, 2251 and 2382, Rawlinson C. 86, C.U.L. Kk. 1. 3 and Chetham's 6709; the "Clerk's Tale" in Rawlinson C. 86, Harley 1239, Longleat 257, Naples and HM 140; "Melibee" in Arundel 140, MH 144, Pepys 2006, Sloane 1009 and Stonyhurst.

41 On this manuscript see Manly and Rickert, I, 82-4; N.F. Blake, "MS. Chetham 6709 and Some Manuscript Copies of Caxton Prints," *Language and Civilization: A Concerted Profusion of Essays and Studies in Honour of Otto Hietsch*, ed. Claudia Bank (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1992), pp. 239-254.

42 This has been exhaustively studied by Lee Patterson, "Ambiguity and Interpretation: A Fifteenth-Century Reading of *Troilus & Criseyde*," *Speculum* 54 (1979), pp. 297-330.

43 See further A.S.G. Edwards and Derek Pearsall, "The manuscripts of the major English poetic texts," *Book Production and Publishing in England, 1375-1475* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 257-70, especially p. 258.

44 Christina von Nolcken, "*Piers Plowman*, the Wycliffites, and *Pierce the Plowman's Creed*," p. 78.

45 For a description see Manly and Rickert, I, pp. 207-218.

46 R.A. Wood, "A Fourteenth Century Owner of *Piers Plowman*," p. 89.

47 Felicity Riddy, "'Women talking about the things of God': a late medieval sub-culture," *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol Meale, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 17 (Cambridge, 1993), p. 22.

48 Carol Meale, "'...alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, engliche, and frensch: laywomen and their books in medieval England," *Women and Literature in Britain*, p. 142.

49 G.H. Russell, "Some Early Responses to the C-Version of Piers Plowman," *Viator* 13 (1984), pp. 275-304.

50 University of Leicester, 1988. A version of this is currently being prepared for publication.

51 C. David Benson and Barry Windeatt, "The Manuscript Glosses to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Chaucer Review* 25 (1990), pp. 33-53.

52 Julia Boffey, "Annotation in Some Manuscripts of *Troilus*," *English Manuscript Studies* 5 (1995), pp. 1-17.

53 Stephen J. Partridge, "The Manuscript Glosses to the *Canterbury Tales*: An Edition and Commentary," Ph.D. diss. (Harvard University, 1992); to be published by Boydell & Brewer.

54 Susan Schibanoff, "The New Reader and Female Textuality in Two Early Commentaries on Chaucer," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 (1988), pp. 71-108.

55 Julia Boffey, "Annotation in Some Manuscripts of *Troilus*," p. 13.

56 *Piers Plowman: The A-Text*, ed. George Kane (London, 1960), p. 137.

57 "The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1975), pp. 119-141.

58 Seth Lerer, "Rewriting Chaucer: Two Fifteenth-Century Readings of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Viator* 19 (1988), pp. 313-26.

59 *Illustrium maioris Britanniae scriptorum* (Ipswich, 1548), f. 157.

60 Quoted in Anne Hudson, "'No newe thyng': The Printing of Medieval Texts in the early Reformation Period," *Middle English Studies Presented to Norman Davis* eds Douglas Gray and E.G. Stanley (Oxford, 1983), pp. 153-73, pp. 172-3.

61 John N. King, *English Reformation Literature* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 319-57 (the quotation from Crowley is on p. 332); see also J.R. Thorne and M.C. Uhart, "Robert Crowley's *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Aevum* 55 (1986), pp. 248-54 on the influence of Crowley's Protestantism in C.U.L. Ll. iv. 14.

62 Sharon Jansen, "Politics, Protest, and a New *Piers Plowman* Fragment: The Voice of the Past in Tudor England," *Review of English Studies* n.s. 40 (1989), pp.

93-99.

63 Robert L. Kelly, "Hugh Latimer as Piers Plowman," *Studies in English Literature* 17 (1977), pp. 13-26.

64 On this see further A.S.G. Edwards, "Chaucer from Manuscript to Print: The Social Text and the Critical Text," *Mosaic* 28 (1994), pp. 1-12.

65 Francis Thynne, *Animaduersions vppon the Annotacions and Corrections of some imperfections of impressiones of Chaucers workes...*, ed. G.H. Kingsley, E.E.T.S. 9 (London, 1875), p. 10.

66 I follow the date (c. 1532) in the *Revised Short Title Catalogue*; Andrew Wawn, "Chaucer, *The Plowman's Tale* and Reformation Propaganda: the Testimonies of Thomas Godfray and *I Playne Piers*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 56 (1973-4), pp. 174-92, at pp. 174-6 argues for a date of c1535-36, but his arguments are not compelling.

67 Andrew Wawn, "The Genesis of *The Plowman's Tale*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 2 (1972), pp. 21-40 and "Chaucer, *The Plowman's Tale* and Reformation Propaganda," *passim*.

68 I quote from the edition of W.W. Skeat, *Chaucerian and Other Pieces* (Oxford, 1897), p. 149.

69 Wawn, "The Genesis of *The Plowman's Tale*," pp. 35-6.

70 This was the *Quatrefoyle of Love*, by de Worde in [1510?] and that in a form that often sought to conceal its alliterative antecedents; see N. F. Blake, "Wynkyn de Worde and the *Quatrefoil of Love*," *Archiv* 206 (1969), pp. 189-200.

71 *The Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. Lily B. Campbell (Cambridge, 1938), p. 95, lines 92-3.

72 Occasional indications of apparent Catholic sympathies do appear, as in a late sixteenth-century manuscript entitled "Peers plowghman hys answer to the doctours / interogatoryes & scryves of the lawe in stede / of an Apology for the late martyrs of noble memory;" now New Haven, Beinecke Library MS Osborn a.18, ff.1-12v.

73 See Judith H. Anderson, *The Growth of a Personal Voice: Piers Plowman and The Faerie Queene* (New Haven, 1976) and her subsequent summary account,

"Langland, William" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (Toronto, 1990), pp. 425-6.

74 For some indications of later influence see A.S.G. Edwards, "Piers Plowman in the Seventeenth Century: Gerald Langbaine's Notes," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992), pp. 141-44, and Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 198-99.

75 I quote from the text of Dryden in Spurgeon, I, 276.

76 An earlier version of this paper was given as a lecture to the Chaucer and Langland Summer Institute at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in July 1995. I am much indebted to David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson for the invitation to talk at this stimulating occasion and to John Bowers for typically subtle and suggestive comments at that time. A revised version was read at the Learned Societies meeting at the University of Newfoundland in St John's in June 1997. I am particularly indebted to Professor Joanne Norman for this invitation. I am also very grateful to my colleague, Elizabeth Archibald, and to Professor Stephen J. Partridge for a number of valuable observations.