

WILLIAM LANGLAND'S



Piers Plowman

A Book of Essays

Edited by Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith

WILLIAM LANGLAND'S **PIERS PLOWMAN**

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A BOOK OF ESSAYS

EDITED BY
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ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published in 2001 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York NY 10011

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

William Langland's *Piers Plowman*: a book of essays / edited by Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith.

p. cm. (Medieval casebooks; v. 30)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8153-2804-4 (hb)

1. Langland, William, 1330?-1400? *Piers the Plowman*. 2. Literature and history—England—History—To 1500. 3. Christian poetry, English (Middle)—History and criticism. I. Title: *Piers Plowman*. II. Hewett-Smith, Kathleen M. III. Title. IV. Medieval casebooks; vol. 30.

PR2015.W5 2001
821'.1—dc21

2001016593

Printed on acid-free, 250-year-life paper
Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Stan and Alexandra

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WILLIAM LANGLAND'S **PIERS PLOWMAN**

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Introduction

Interest in *Piers Plowman* has grown enormously in the past decade. Because it has much to contribute toward the lively contemporary debates over such issues as gender, dissent, representation, and popular religion and culture, the poem has enjoyed renewed critical attention. Likewise, because *Piers* is available in a number of new editions and translations, those scholars interested in teaching a more “integrated” version of fourteenth-century English literature and culture have turned to Langland’s poem with great enthusiasm.

The present volume takes up some of the central (and in many cases long-standing) questions within *Piers Plowman* studies—How is the poem implicated in fourteenth-century literary and cultural history? How have nineteenth- and twentieth-century constructions of the author, even the text, of *Piers Plowman* affected our understanding of poet and poem? What is the nature of Langland’s art? Of his allegorical poetics? How useful is literary theory to the study of early texts, especially *Piers Plowman*? These essays, ranging as they do from source study to critical historicism to queer theory, demonstrate the variety of critical tools presently brought to bear upon medieval texts. Nevertheless, in the midst of such diversity of method and approach, they all share an overwhelming interest in social context and meaning; three contend with Chaucer; four are concerned with gender; six with aspects of subjectivity; eight with rhetoric and rhetorical constructions—and *everyone* is worried, to varying degrees and for different reasons, about what C. David Benson calls the “myths” of poet and poem. Indeed, what all of these essays insist upon most energetically is the need for a fundamental reconfiguring of even our most basic and constitutive understandings of *Piers Plowman*—of its author and audience, the order of its texts, the power of its poetry, its understanding of women,

of the poor, of allegory, of history, and its relation to fourteenth-century culture and ideology.

The volume's essays are arranged under a series of thematic rubrics which represent, in my opinion, the most important and productive areas of current thinking and writing on Langland's poem. "*Piers Plowman* in Context," by far the longest of the volume's sections, is also the most methodologically diverse. In "Making History Legal: *Piers Plowman* and the Rebels of Fourteenth-Century England," Andrew Galloway offers a striking example of the power of critical historicism to negotiate past texts. In this piece Galloway argues that Langland's vision of history can be more deeply understood when considered within a legal and social context "where history, law, and social relations were being placed under mutual pressure, driven by conflicts between newly politically self-conscious lower orders and their powerful landlords, a context of legal dissent in which tradition itself...became increasingly clearly a legal construction." Joan Baker and Susan Signe Morrison demonstrate the force and depth of Langland's social concern by exploring medieval attitudes toward marriage in "The Luxury of Gender: *Piers Plowman* B.9 and *The Merchant's Tale*." Their essay argues, provocatively, that while Langland, like Chaucer, demonstrates an interest in gender issues, *Piers Plowman* ultimately "privileges the exigencies of human necessity over a concern for the burdens of gender." The final two essays in this section suggest that even the most fundamental contexts of *Piers Plowman* have yet to be explored fully. Stephen Shepherd's "Langland's Romances," a study of the possible connections between *Piers* and medieval English vernacular romance, reveals, for example, that the literary milieu in and through which Langland works is only incompletely understood; and C. David Benson's "The Langland Myth" observes that the persistence of assumptions about both the "author" and "text" of *Piers Plowman* have influenced scholarship on the poem.

In "The Poetry of *Piers Plowman*," this volume's second section, Stephen A. Barney and Sister Mary Clemente Davlin remind us of the power of Langland's verse. Both critics illuminate Langland's prosody by comparing it with Chaucer's—a necessary strategy in a field still dominated by study of the poet who has defined the age—and argue that in the case of Langland, difference is a virtue. In "Langland's Mighty Line," Barney demonstrates persuasively that Langland's poetic lines have a broader range of both sound and sense than do Chaucer's. Sister Clemente, too, in "Chaucer and Langland as Religious Writers," observes that "whereas Chaucer, with Shakespeare, is the greatest poet we have of human character, Langland is the *only* poet we have (with the possible exception of Milton) who dares to probe at any length the nature of God, contemplating the central beliefs of Christianity."

In the fourth section, “Through the Lens of Theory,” articles by James Simpson and Elizabeth Robertson demonstrate some of the ways in which literary theory has begun to inform the discourse and doctrine of the study of *Piers Plowman*. Simpson’s “The Power of Impropriety: Authorial Naming in *Piers Plowman*” considers the question of the author—indeed the constitution of authorship itself—in Langland’s poem through a focus upon the ways in which the developing logic of the personification of will/will “creates a communal authorial position.” Elizabeth Robertson, looking through the lens of feminist criticism, argues that, in its association with measure and excess, “gender, or more precisely the ‘feminine,’ as it was understood in late fourteenth-century England...opens up possibility and possibilities” within *Piers Plowman*.

Essays in the volume’s final section, “Allegory Reconsidered,” address, and perhaps even begin to remedy, what James J. Paxson identifies as the “general exhaustion with and from allegory” in *Pier Plowman* studies. In his “Inventing the Subject and the Personification of Will in *Piers Plowman*: Rhetorical, Erotic, and Ideological Origins and Limits in Langland’s Allegorical Poetics,” Paxson asks us to reconfigure the relationship of *Piers Plowman* to theories of representation by showing how “sexualized rhetorical figures undergird the [poem’s] allegorical poetics.” The essay argues furthermore that “such a turn...enables a new way of theorizing the ideological and political implications of maleness, monarchical rule and social identity” in fourteenth-century England. In “‘Nede ne hath no lawe:’ Poverty and the De-stabilization of Allegory in the Final Visions of *Piers Plowman*,” Hewett-Smith re-examines the relationship of allegory to history by demonstrating the ways in which the subject of poverty in the final passus of *Piers Plowman*, particularly as figured in the personification of Nede, involves the poem in an intense confrontation with its own modes of referentiality. Such essays remind us of the continuing relevance and vitality of *Piers Plowman* within the ever-changing landscape of critical discourse.¹

¹ I would like to thank Christopher Kleinhenz, editor of the Medieval Casebook series, for giving me the opportunity to realize this project. Special thanks must go, however, to the contributors to the volume whose intelligence and hard work are evident in every page of these essays, and without whose patience and support I could not have brought this collection to fruition.

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Piers Plowman in Context

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Making History Legal: *Piers Plowman* and the Rebels of Fourteenth-Century England¹

Andrew Galloway

Forþi lakke þow neuere logik, lawe ne hise custumes,
Ne countreplede clerkes, I counseille þee for euere.
For as a man may noȝt see þat mysseþ hise eizen,
Na moore kan no Clerk but if he cauȝte it first þoruȝ bokes.
Alþouȝ men made bokes {god was þe maister}
And seint Spirit þe Samplarie, & seide what men sholde write.
(B.12.97–102)²

Thus Imaginative, the stern if elusively definable allegorical teacher, to Will, the narrator of *Piers Plowman* who constantly “countrepledeþ” his authoritative interlocutors of religious and secular “law” within the poem and often indirectly criticizes—sometimes directly confronts—his powerful legal audience outside it: “Ye legistres and lawieres” (B.7.60); “ye wise men þat wiþ þe world deleþ; / That riche ben and reson knoweþ”

¹ Previous versions of this essay were presented before marvelously challenging and encouraging audiences at the University Seminar at Columbia University, November 11, 1997; and as a Visiting Faculty Lecturer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, March 8, 1998. I thank Professors Christopher Baswell at Columbia and Lori Newcomb, Charles Wright, and Lisa Lampert at Urbana-Champaign for these opportunities and for their warm hospitality.

² George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, rev. ed. (London: Athlone; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988). I cite *Piers* using the Athlone editions throughout: Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, rev. ed. (London: Athlone; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); George Russell and George Kane, eds., *Piers Plowman: The C Version* (London: Athlone; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically. All emendations of the Athlone editions that I consider based on slender empirical evidence, but which I retain, I leave bracketed, but I do not print their brackets for their other emendations of their copy texts. In the rare instances when I wish to print the archetypal textual reading instead of the Athlone emendation, I indicate this by curved brackets. While these may seem peculiar solutions to the textual complexities of *Piers Plowman* and to the Athlone editions, I take the position (as do the Athlone editors) that readers should be provoked to consider the matter of the text for themselves by

(B.17.262–63). But in the same breath as he stifles Will's aggressive 'counterpleading' of law, Imaginative's historical presentation of the originary moment of the New Law also implicitly attacks vengeful law and its corrupt practitioners, however officially sanctioned. For Imaginative is here elaborating the gospel account of Jesus's judgment on the woman taken in adultery, where Jesus's writing of "caractes" in the dirt is taken—as often by medieval exegetes—as indicting the sins of the woman's accusers, the Jews. Hence Jesus's writing becomes the "Samplarie," the original exemplar, of all the books and learning ("Clergy") that encompass logic, law and its customs; a law that ideally, therefore, should provide merciful pardon for those accused who repent, and damnation for those, particularly corrupt judges, who do not:

For þoruȝ caractes þat crist wroot þe Iewes knewe hemselue
 Giltier as afore god, and gretter in synne,
 Than þe womman þat þere was, and wenten away for shame.
 [Thus Clergie þere] confortet þe womman.
 Holy kirke knoweþ þis þat cristes writyng saued;
 So clergie is confort to creatures þat repenten,
 And to mansede men meschief at hire ende.
 (B.12.78–84)

Thanks to valuable work on the legal terminology used in the poem, on its themes of justice and mercy, and on its relationship to judicial procedures like the chivalric duel and to social legislation like the Statute of Laborers of 1351 and 1388, modern readers of *Piers Plowman* will likely not need reminding, as Will does here, that law and "hise custumes" are crucial to this dream-vision poem's ways of "seeing."³ But legal history in the fourteenth century—that is, law in the context of political struggle and social outlook, as an imaginative construction emerging, like literature, from traditions remade in particular social contexts—can claim a still greater role for understanding the poem's participation with its world. In particular, the

means of the Athlone critical apparatus and introductions. On some of the advantages and peculiarities of the Athlone editions, with references to previous discussions, see my essay, "Uncharacterizable Entities: The Poetics of Middle English Scribal Culture and the Definitive *Piers Plowman*," *Studies in Bibliography* 52 (1999), forthcoming.

³ See William J. Birnes, "Christ as Advocate: The Legal Metaphor of *Piers Plowman*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 16 (1975): 71–93; Myra Stokes, *Justice and Mercy in Piers Plowman: A Reading of the B Text Visio* (London: Croon Helm, 1984); Anna Baldwin, "The Double Duel in *Piers Plowman* B XVIII and C XXI," *Medium Ævum* 50 (1981): 64–78; John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Glossary of Legal Diction* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1988) and "The Idea of Reason in *Piers Plowman*," in Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig, eds., *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane* (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 199–215; Lawrence M. Clopper, "Need Men and Women Labor? Langland's Wanderer and the Labor Ordinances," in Barbara Hanawalt, ed., *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 110–29; and Anne Middleton, "Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388," in Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 208–317.

poem's constant projection of legal ideals into the ancient past may be more fully appreciated than heretofore if considered in relation to a pervasive element of many of the legal conflicts of fourteenth-century England, particularly those instigated by communities of the lower orders that become only fully—if then luridly and distortedly—visible in the accounts of the Rising of 1381: namely, the effort to use antiquity to transform or maintain legal status and capability. The most majestic dimension of Langland's work, its vision of history, can be better appreciated as part of this legal and social context where history, law, and social relations were being placed under mutual pressure, driven by conflicts between newly politically self-conscious lower orders and their powerful landlords, a context of legal dissent in which tradition itself—paradoxically, given Langland's and others' intense engagement with history—became increasingly clearly a legal construction.

The implied or overt use of history to justify, define, or challenge legal claims is common before the fourteenth century; indeed, it is central to the densely document-oriented style of post-Conquest medieval history writing.⁴ Property claims, especially by the great institutions responsible for recording history, typically depended on some construction of the past, sometimes but not always a flagrantly imaginary construction.⁵ In broader social applications beyond institutional or individual property disputes—that is, in issues of defining the legal status or freedoms of whole communities, or the law of the land as such—the topic of historically oriented legal endeavor deserves further exploration. Scholars have most thoroughly studied the strategies of claiming or assuming antiquity for English constitutional law in the seventeenth century, a context from which “anti-quarianism” and medieval studies itself can be said to emerge.⁶ The theoretical relation between law and history, considered in the most abstract terms by writers from Aquinas through seventeenth-century constitutionalists, can appear in either deductive or inductive forms; that is, this relation can be defined in such writings as either the view that the divine or collective “reason” contained in law adapted itself by custom and further devel-

⁴ See Andrew Galloway, “Writing History in England,” in David Wallace, ed., *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 255–83.

⁵ See Eleanor Searle, “Battle Abbey and Exemption: The Forged Charters,” *English Historical Review* 83 (1968): 449–80, for just one example of institutional manipulations of history; I touch on others in my “Writing History in England,” op. cit. See also Paul Brand, “‘Time Out of Mind’: The Knowledge and Use of the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Past in Thirteenth-Century Litigation,” in Marjorie Chibnall, ed., *Anglo-Norman Studies* 16 (1993): 37–54 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), for some individuals' uses of history in litigation.

⁶ See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and “The Origins of Study of the Past: A Comparative Approach,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4 (1962): 209–246; and Glenn Burgess' important critique of Pocock, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution: An Introduction to English Political Thought, 1603–1642* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

opment into the forms necessary for particular times and places, or the view that the special “reason” of the law can be manifested only from cumulative custom and tradition.⁷ But elaborations of the diverse uses of history for communities—not monastic, individual, or national—legal ends are something distinctive to the fourteenth century, and generate special features that help lay the groundwork for post-medieval debates about the legal antiquity of the whole community of the realm.

My word “elaborations” is too tame by half to describe the striking density throughout the conflicts between rural and borough communities and their ecclesiastic landlords in the fourteenth century, a century as noted for its gradually centralizing legal systems as for its severe dangers to legal practitioners. Especially in the last decades of the century, attacks on lawyers and judges at all levels reached an unprecedented severity: the murder of a chief justice of the king’s bench and numerous other lawyers by the mob in 1381; the execution by the Lords Appellant of another former chief justice of the king’s bench in 1388 as one of the king’s favorites; the Lords’ Appellant sentences of death (commuted to exile in Ireland) imposed on all but one of the judges of the common bench in 1388 for supporting the king with affirmative answers to his infamous “questions to the judges” of 1387, where Richard II asked the judges to declare treasonous the earlier efforts by the Commons to constrain his closest advisors. Although the same sentiments against lawyers and judges have reappeared at various times, actual carnage, execution, or exile like this is unparalleled before or since.

Such attacks suggest with particular crudeness how politicized law became during the fourteenth century. Many legal issues that passed through the highest courts also riveted national attention, indeed constituted a form of national consciousness (if not administrative reality) that we may justly call “political” on a national scale both because of the social depth of the laws’ purview and because of the politicizing consequences of their enactment and the resistance to them. In recent years, legal and social historians have argued that a solidarity between the artisan and laboring classes was hardened by the legal endeavors of the higher nobility to keep such lower classes in their place, such as the Ordinance (1349) and Statute of Laborers (1351 and 1388), resisting the massive demographic and hence wage and vagrancy changes wrought by the Black Death, and followed by a series of legal innovations and legal instruments by which the actions and products of artisans and laborers could be regulated.⁸ At the same time, the

⁷ For example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II qq. 90–97 (henceforth ST). I use the convenient selection and translation in Dino Bigongiari, ed. and trans., *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas: Representative Selections* (New York: Hafner Press, 1953, 1981). See Burgess, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution*, for a lucid analysis of seventeenth-century understandings of the relation between law and custom.

⁸ See Alan Harding, “The Revolt Against the Justices,” in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds., *The English Rising of 1381* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 165–93, and Robert C. Palmer,

continuous complaints by communities throughout the century against legal oppression by local magnates and landlords, who were granted special legal powers and seized legal influence with the collapse of the general eyres in the early fourteenth century, along with sporadic legal battles between communities of tenants and their great monastic landlords with their vast estates, burdensome and inconsistent labor and rent demands, and enormous legal resources and influence—all this created a further impetus for socially polarizing legal struggle between, on the one hand, the laboring and artisan classes and, on the other, the great institutions and lords of fourteenth-century England. This culminated in the Rising of 1381, an event notable for the rebels' hatred and murder of lawyers and justices and widespread destruction of legal records, as well as their own general political cohesiveness. This last element is clearest from the rebels' efforts in various parts of the Rising to establish new political rights based on claims to ancient legal rights, including both the general manumission of serfs and particular liberties from their powerful, institutional landlords.⁹

It should be emphasized that the immediate social effect of all such conflicts was to bring a new range of offenses into the jurisdiction of the king's courts, even if into the hands of corrupt local officials of the king.¹⁰ But this general movement toward centralized law did not obliterate or even soften differences in legal and historical perspective between the ancient institutions and the newly political communities comprised of their tenants. On the contrary, the king's courts functioned in the fourteenth century as a main theater for conflicts between rebellious communities and overbearing landlords found throughout the country and throughout the century, of which the Rising of mid-June, 1381, was only the final act.

While *Piers Plowman* is often situated in response to the Rising itself, the poem's relation to the protracted series of legal struggles that found their way to the king's courts for decades *before* the Rising has never been explored. Yet it is logical to consider an array of these in relationship to a poem so manifestly in touch with, perhaps written not far from, the king's courts at Westminster. We may thus assess more fully the social implications and poetic depth of the poem's "counterpleading" of law from its earliest versions on, rather than simply its final, post-1381 version, including its persistent depictions of ancient models of true justice, where—in a

English Law in the Age of the Black Death, 1348–1381: A Transformation of Governance and Law (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

⁹ See N. M. Trenholme, *The English Monastic Boroughs*, *University of Missouri Studies* 2:3 (1927); Harding, "Revolt"; and Rosamund Faith, "The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology," in Hilton and Aston, *English Rising*, 71–74. Faith's essay treats this topic directly, focusing on the uses of Domesday Book in the late 1370s by rural tenants seeking to establish historical bases for their rights, and she points to the remarkable case of this by the tenants at St. Albans in 1381, a case I also take up below.

¹⁰ So Edward Powell, "Arbitration and the Law in England in the Late Middle Ages," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 33 (1983): 49–67.

paradox found throughout the century—the fullest claims for freedom from the legal oppressions of tradition are expressed.¹¹ Thus in this essay I first discuss some aspects of the poem's ideals of justice from the ancient past in terms of conflict with as well as renewed assertion of tradition and history; next, I present some possible instances of the poem's more topical engagement with legal conflicts between tenants and their powerful, monastic landlords that led up to the Rising of 1381, where the poem's conflict between ideals of justice and traditional social identity reappears. Finally, I turn to the account of the Rising of 1381 by the chronicler at St. Albans monastery, Thomas Walsingham, to examine another text where claims to history infuse the legal debate, a context of historical debate that, as I shall suggest throughout this essay, complicated or even hollowed out belief in the very traditions on which the legal and social order of English culture was being established.

I thus place *Piers Plowman*, and, more cursorily, Walsingham's narrative, amidst a moment of cultural and legal history defined by historical visions emerging from sharply different perspectives. Yet in doing so I am already begging the question of my view of what "debate" of this kind meant in this period. How much mutual comprehension, much less agreement, between the historical and legal views of such profoundly divided social and linguistic realms was—could ever be—actually possible? In what sense does Langland's poem and Walsingham's chronicle "include" these diverse perspectives? It does not necessarily prove anything that Langland's poem was quoted or at least obliquely named by the rebels of 1381—"lat peres þe plowman my broþer duelle at home and dyȝt vs corne," states one rebel letter, quoted by the Leicester Priory chronicler Henry Knighton;¹² "Johon schep...biddeþ Peres plouȝman to his werke and chastise wel hobbe þe robbere...and do wel and bettre and fleth synne and sekeþ pees and hold ȝou þer inne," states another, supposedly found in the pocket of a man about to be hanged for rioting and quoted by Thomas Walsingham.¹³ The Dieulacres Abbey chronicler goes further even than the rebel letters, stating that "Per Plowman" was himself one of the rebels in 1381 who were "striving to destroy the laws and customs of the realm" (*nitentes iura et consue-*

11 On the plausibility of locating the poet and his original audience in the law courts and great houses of London, see Ralph Hanna, *William Langland* (Aldershot, G.B.: Variorum, 1993), 23–24, and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380–1427," *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 59–83, and *ibid.*, "Reformist Intellectual Culture in the English and Irish Civil Service: The *Modus tenendi parliamentum* and its Literary Relations," *Traditio* 53 (1998): 149–203. This context is increasingly plausibly established, although the evidence remains circumstantial.

12 Knighton's *Chronicle*, 1337–1396, ed. and trans. G. H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 222–23.

13 Thomas Walsingham, *Chronicon Angliae*, 1328–1388, ed. E. M. Thompson, Rolls Series (London: Longman, Green, 1874), 322.

tudines regni destruere)—an accusation as absolute as Imaginative’s warning to Will, which it closely parallels.¹⁴

No scholar, almost, would claim that the poet deliberately helped foment, or even that he foretold, the Rising, which occurred only after the B-Text was written and, as is often suggested, constituted part of the basis for the C-Text’s revisions.¹⁵ Langland typically comes off as surprised as well as horrified by the uses of his work, rushing to revise and clarify his socially orthodox intentions or at least his relentless indecisiveness about social action. But how *do* we assess the poem’s remarkable accuracy in social prophecy—foretelling, for example, destruction of legal documents, one of the main actions of the Rising, in a conflict between a self-righteous plowman and a smugly legalistic clerk, as when from the A-Text on, the clerk reads the Pardon sent by Truth to *Piers Plowman* and punctilliously declares, “I can no pardoun fynde / But do wel & haue wel, & god shal haue þi soule, / And do euele & haue euele, & hope þow non oþer / þat aftir þi deþ day to helle shalt þou wende,” leading Piers to rip the Pardon apart (A.8.97–100)? Or the prophecy of future disendowment of the monasteries, when friars will open “Constantyns cofres” and “þe Abbot of Abyngdoun and al his issue for euere / Haue a knok of a kyng, and incurable þe wounde” (B.10.329, 31–32)? The sixteenth-century answer was to consider Langland a “pronosticator” of the Reformation.¹⁶ The usual modern scholarly answer is to point to the proposals to disendow the monasteries that had already occurred, and to place Langland within this “new anticlericalism.”¹⁷ We cannot seem to acknowledge or explain how Langland was at times capable of insightful social prediction, or grant that his elaboration of the dangers implied in departures from traditional identity and institutional loyalty—even when demanded by his ideals of jus-

¹⁴ See M. V. Clarke and V. H. Galbraith, “The Deposition of Richard II,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 14 (1930): 125–81, 164.

¹⁵ David Fowler suggests that the A-Text was written to foment the rebellion, and B by another writer to suppress and denounce these implications (“*Piers the Plowman* after Forty-Five Years,” *Æstel* 2 [1994]: 63–76). This claim for A’s purposes is rare if not unique, although Anne Hudson, tracing and affirming the rebels’ use of A, has similarly conjectured that B might be a response to 1381 (“*Piers Plowman* and the Peasants’ Revolt: A Problem Revisited,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 [1994]: 85–106, especially 100–102). B’s dating is indeed speculative; but its latest topical reference is apparently to the papal Schism (1378), and scholars have usually perceived C’s rather than B’s changes to reflect some response to the Rising, which thus falls between B and C (e.g., Hanna, *William Langland*, 12–17; Steven Justice’s views on this are discussed below). Hudson’s stimulating views about B are further incentives for the present essay; her brief comparison of its claims with those of the rebels are provocative and astute, although I explore such connections here as points of shared concerns *before* 1381. The question and its various implications deserve continued debate.

¹⁶ See Anne Hudson, “Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*,” in John A. Alford, ed., *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 251–66, especially 260–62.

¹⁷ See Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anti-Clericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially chapter 4.

tice—might lead him to project where ideals of justice of this kind might lead. So too with Langland's presentation of an irate plowman tearing a document in half after a smug clerk tells him that it is no pardon: we do not read here a prediction of the destruction of legal documents in the Rising of 1381, but rather an accidentally inflammatory gesture that Langland, when a shocking series of real examples of it had come to pass, sought to cover up by excision from the C-Text.

Steven Justice, the most recent and provocative examiner of the 1381 rebels' uses of *Piers Plowman*, argues that they used the poem not just because it employs "the concrete vocabulary of labor as a vocabulary of reform," but also because it displays competing professional definitions of 'doing well,' which work to weaken those authorities' absolute claims; and because it showed English capable of socially conceptual possibilities. Yet such elements "meant something to the rebels that [they] could not have meant even to Langland: that when a particular oppression was shared by a class, the oppressed could protest it as a class, and, once resistance began, could use these generalizing vocabularies to organize their action and critique."¹⁸

These are shrewd claims about the rebels' wresting of a social lexicon from the purposes of the poet. Yet I disagree with Justice's claim that Langland, like all of what Justice calls "official England," was "blind-sided" by and intent on suppressing from real consideration the Rising and the new kinds of class politics it represented, and I disagree, too, with Justice's general argument that "official England," particularly composed of the chroniclers who described the Rising, was unable to fathom the cogency of the rebels' ideology and concerns, reducing these by incomprehension and anxiety into mere parody and "noise." Nonetheless, Justice's terms for treating *Piers Plowman*, like much of his provocative book, are the starting point for many of my counterclaims; and the frequency with which I return to his study in this essay is testimony to its power and suggestiveness. Not just the Rising, but also law itself in the fourteenth century presented a mode of social conceptualizing that can be called political in a newly wide and deep way—both on the part of the communities designating themselves as the "poor" or the "middling people" in petitions to parliament demanding legal reform throughout the century,¹⁹ and by the higher nobility responsible for the century's novel legal efforts to keep such lower classes in their place.²⁰ I propose that both Langland and Walsingham understood this political import of law and its uses of history in terms of the community struggles that were developing throughout the century, and that—an even more controversial claim—their narratives

¹⁸ Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), 137–38.

¹⁹ Harding, "Revolt," 169.

²⁰ See Palmer, *English Law*, passim.

assess the issues behind these struggles, and even the Rising, as cogent and coherent. In Langland's poem, however, the echo of the "counterpleading" by such communities shifts between expressing ideals of justice and appearing as mere subversion. In Walsingham's more sociologically analytical narrative, the cogency of the rebels' legal and historical claims is clearly visible by his legal and historical arguments against them. I consider both of their engagements with these matters something more than responses to mere noise.

I. *Piers Plowman* and the Justice of Antiquity

What I have just called Langland's poem's "subversive" criticisms of law and institutions, Imaginative sums up in the standard legal term "counterpleading," a posture or voice that, in *Piers Plowman*, invariably has an institution, broadly defined, explicit or implied, as its target. When figured most clearly as socially dangerous and parasitic, such a voice may cynically toy with historical questions that have a bearing on general ecclesiastic authority—such as when Dame Study contemptuously describes to Will how "heize men etynge at þe table" (B.10.104) idly offer theological posers, such as why God would allow the serpent into Eden, or, since clerks tell us "*Filius non portabit iniquitatem patris*, / Why sholde we þat now ben for þe werkes of Adam / Roten and torende? Reson wolde it neuere!" (B.10.114–116). The invocation of "reson" here uses the key medieval synonym for "law": "law is reason," as all medieval legal theorists from Isidore on claim.²¹ But it places reason in the role of a swift and simple corrector of custom.

Here, the challenge is to all divine law, as embedded in and expressed through sacred history rather than an individual's ready logic—rather as how Thomas Hobbes later challenged the dictum that law is reason in his *Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England* on the grounds that anyone's reason might therefore be claimed as law, and that custom alone could never be law.²² These challenges, by Dame Study's speaker or Thomas Hobbes', might be refuted with Aquinas' insistence that law, albeit based entirely on reason, cannot be created by the reason of any one person but requires the whole people or the viceregent of the whole people, since the law is for the common good; moreover, it reveals its authority through long duration (ST I–II q. 90 art. 3, q. 97 art. 3). Nonetheless, the challenge in Dame Study's scornful quotation of a wiseacre goes unanswered in the poem. Indeed, its criticism of the law on the grounds of readily available "reson" appears to foster rather than crush

²¹ See Alford, "Reason."

²² Thomas Hobbes, *A Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 53–57, 94–97.

such counterpleading. Once given expression, the voice of ‘reasonable’ dissent against a law based merely on tradition and history opens up to encompass the next passus and a half, with a wide range of issues that finally touch on those proposed by the rebels of 1381.

This long, crucial, and notoriously tangled section of the poem (B.10.377–11.404) comprises Will’s complaint against law in its broadest terms. Here Will counterpleads all bookish, Christian and legal knowledge, and finally, in a vision within the dream vision proper that surveys the innate moral actions of animals, counterpleads Reason himself, querying why “Reson rewarded and ruled alle beestes / Saue man and his make” (B.11.370–71)—thus interrogating the fundamental ideological principle of religious, human, and (with regard to the nesting and mating habits of animals) natural law. This series of attacks against law by the “reson” not of Reason, but of Will, swings between tones of social justice and obvious self-indictment, as when Will “counterpleads” Reason himself, ‘aresoning’ Reason, as Imaginative, with a fitting pun, describes it (B.12.218). The diatribe is initially driven by Will’s questions about ancient and salvation history: How can knowledge and ethical living save one’s soul, since these did not save the pagan philosophers? How can the thief next to Jesus on the cross, and Mary Magdalene, and David, killer of Uriah, all be saved and made “souereynes in heuene” (A.11.291; B.10.432), since they did not lead virtuous lives? In the B revision of the poem from the late 1370s, the complaint adds Scripture’s curt remarks on how few are chosen, and this turns the narrator, seemingly by intention, away from counterpleading Scripture toward instead “disputing” with himself on “Wheȝer I were chosen or noȝt chosen” (B.11.117) for salvation, a topic Will pursues legalistically and with a legal analogy—but a surprising one:

For þouȝ a cristen man coueited his cristendom to reneye,
 Riȝtfully to reneye no reson it wolde.
 For may no cherl chartre make ne his chatel selle
 Wiþouten leue of his lord; no lawe wol it graunte.
 Ac he may renne in arerage and rome fro home,
 As a reneyed caytif recchelesly rennen aboute.
 Ac reson shal rekene wiþ hym and rebuken hym at þe laste,
 And conscience acounte wiþ hym and casten hym in arerage,
 And putten hym after in prison in purgatorie to brenne;
 For hise arerages rewarden hym þere riȝt to þe day of dome,
 But if Contricion wol come and crye by his lyue
 Mercy for his mysdedes wiþ mouþe or wiþ herte.
 (B.11.125–36)

Folded into an allegory of Christianity as historically imprisoning, this is a stunning miniature tale of the career of a serf seeking the freedom to contract land purchases and sell property, complete with echoes of a standard formula of sentencing (“riȝt to þe day of dome”), and of an appeal for par-

don by a desperate wife, a role that Contricion here seems to mimic. Its unliberating, imprisoning, and judicial view of Christianity in particular presents history in general as serfdom, as legal bondage; the prisonhouse of history is here an inflexible law of institutional containments. More simply, the vehicle of the simile reminds us that Langland's contemporary Christendom contains serfdom, whose unreasonable and unjust constraints are emphasized by the slughtness of the 'crimes' committed by the "cherl" in the simile: making a charter and selling his possessions. Such activities are abundantly documented among the unfree peasantry from the early fourteenth century onward and helped generate the most politically disruptive legal conflicts between the lower social orders and their powerful landlords. Langland could hardly have chosen a more provocative simile, calculated to invoke the passions and tensions surrounding literate and historically self-conscious but legally servile individuals in the fourteenth century.

Yet, almost immediately following this figuring of Christianity as an overbearing manorial legal system, bursts in the direct voice of the emperor Trajan, whose statements pick up the same image but transform its point to liberations, in a stunning shift of social references and ethical valences. For if the narrator sees himself in prison as subject to a law he cannot evade, Trajan has broken *out* of such prisons of history *into* Christianity:

"Ye? baw for bokes!" quod oon was broken out of helle.

[I] Troianus, a trewe knyzt, [take] witnesse at a pope

How [I] was ded and dampned to dwellen in pyne

For an vncristene creature; clerkes wite þe soþe

That al þe clergie vnder crist ne myzte me cracche fro helle,

But oonliche loue and leautee and my laweful domes.

(B.11.140–45)

Trajan, who is the poem's only speaking human figure from the ancient past apart from Jesus, in one way epitomizes the poem's counterpleading of law that Imaginative asserts Will should suppress. Yet I imagine that most readers are likely to cheer, at least silently, at this point. Trajan is crucial for the poem's ideal of justice, as an equity not requiring any social or personal prerequisites, even of religion. Trajan, whose story as a just pagan posthumously saved by Gregory the Great's prayer was well known, appears from the depths of history paradoxically in order to define freedom *from* history as the principle of justice. Trajan states with imperious authority that he was saved by "his pure truþe" (B.11.156) rather than any "syngynge of masses" or "konnyng of lawes" (151, 166)—and here Langland aggressively rebuts the otherwise universal tradition of Gregory the Great's prayer as the cause for Trajan's salvation. Instead, it is Trajan's adherence to "truþe" defined in opposition to law or institutional ritual that saves him: "'Lawe wiþouten loue,' quod Troianus, 'ley þer a bene!'" (B.11.171)—a view presumably based on the incident in the *Golden Legend's* Life of