Piers Plowman has long been considered one of the greatest poems of medieval England. Current scholarship on this alliterative masterpiece looks very different from that available even a decade ago. New information about the manuscripts of the poem, new historical discoveries, and new investigations of its literary, cultural, and theoretical scope have fundamentally altered the very meaning of Langland’s art. This Companion thus critically surveys traditional scholarship, with the aim of recuperating its best insights, and it ventures forth into newer areas of inquiry attuned to questions of social setting, institutional context, intellectual and literary history, theory, and the revitalized fields of codicology and paleography. By proceeding through chapters that offer cumulatively wider views as well as stand-alone analyses of topics most crucial to understanding Piers Plowman, this Companion gives serious students and seasoned scholars alike up-to-date knowledge of this intricate and beautiful poem.

Andrew Cole is Associate Professor of English at Princeton University.

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3 *Piers Plowman*, Newnham College, Cambridge MS 4, fol. 35r. Reproduced by permission of the Principal and Fellows, Newnham College, Cambridge.

4 *Piers Plowman*, Trinity College, Cambridge MS b.15.17, fol. 77r. Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.


6 *Piers Plowman*, Trinity College, Cambridge MS r.3.14, fol. 42. Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.
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Transmission of Langland’s Work (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) and The Myth of Piers Plowman: Creating a Medieval Literary Archive (Cambridge University Press, 2014), and, with Andrew Cole and Fiona Somerset, was co-editor of the Yearbook of Langland Studies from 2004 to 2012. He has also published and taught on many non-Langlandian topics, ranging from a twelfth-century autobiography by a convert to Judaism to Shakespeare’s Othello.

Nicolette Zeeman is Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge and Lecturer in the Faculty of English. She is author of Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire (Cambridge, 2006) and has published on medieval Latin, English and French literature, including authors such as Gower, Chaucer, and Langland; her interests include medieval psychology, literary theory, commentary, allegory, song and scepticism. Currently, she is working on a number of theoretically or psychoanalytically oriented projects and writing a book on Piers Plowman and the history of allegorical narrative.
Locales in London may be found on the map (Figure 1)

1327–77  The reign of Edward III.

c. 1337–1453  Edward III claims crown of France by hereditary succession; Hundred Years War.

c. 1340  Geoffrey Chaucer is born.

1348–9, 1361, 1369, etc.  Plague in England (between one-third and half of the population killed).

c. 1350s–c. 1420s  Efflorescence of alliterative poetry: Wynnere and Wastour, Morte Arthure, Parlement of the Thre Ages, the works of the Gawain poet, Saint Erkenwald, Siege of Jerusalem, Destruccioun of Troye, and others.

1360s  Langland works on the A text.

1360 (June 14)  Treaty of Brétigny signed by Edward III, relinquishing claims on the French crown for large tracts of Normandy and a ransom of 3 million gold crowns for the release of John II, king of France (captured during the battle of Poitiers in 1356, imprisoned until 1360 in London). See B.3.189–208.

1360 (October 24)  Treaty of Calais, ratification of the Treaty of Brétigny, first payment of 400,000 écus paid on the ransom of John II of France.

1362 (January 15)  Great southwest wind on Saturday (see A.5.14, used to date the A text).

1362  Tournament at Cheapside, London, with the challengers arrayed as “The Seven Deadly Sins.”
Chronology

1362 Pleading in English Act (36 Edw. III c. 15), mandating all pleas in courts to be in English and enrolled in Latin.

1370s Langland works on the B text.


1374 John of Gaunt returns to England to assume leadership of the government during the dotage of Edward III and the illness of his older brother and heir apparent, Edward the Black Prince.

1376 (June 8) Death of Edward the Black Prince.

1376 (April 28–July 10) “Good Parliament,” in which the Commons, appointing a Speaker for the first time, impeach some royal officers and counselors for financial mismanagement and illegal profiteering, including the wealthy and flamboyant Alice Perrers (reputed to be mistress of Edward III). See B.Prol. 146–208, and passûs 2 and 3, used to date the B text.

1377 John of Gaunt reverses most of the convictions in the Good Parliament (not reversing that of Alice Perrers), imprisons the first Speaker of the Commons, Peter de la Mare.

1377 Death of Edward III (June 21); coronation of Richard II (July 16) at age ten, son of the Black Prince and grandson of Edward III. Richard’s coronation celebrated in London at Cheapside with a castle pageant with four virgins (the Daughters of God?) and a mechanical angel that descended to offer Richard a golden crown. See B.Prol. 128–45.

1378 Papal Schism; two popes elected, one at Rome (Boniface IX) and one at Avignon (Benedict XIII); restoration of the western church achieved at the Council of Constance (1414–18). See B.Prol. 107–11; 13.174–76, 19.431–51.

1381 “The Rising”: widespread rebellion of laborers, some clergy, and others, destroying many legal archives and killing some church officials. Archbishop Simon Sudbury was decapitated by the mob outside the Tower of London.

1382 (May 17–21) Blackfriars Council (also called the “Earthquake Council”) held at the Blackfriars house in London, publicly condemning twenty-four conclusions on such topics as the Eucharist and church endowment drawn largely from
chronology

John Wyclif’s works (though Wyclif was never named in the published proceedings).

1380s Langland works on the C text.

1380s–90s Wycliffite Bible translation; English Wycliffite sermons and other writings.

1384 John Wyclif, doctor of divinity, dies at his living (benefice) in Lutterworth, Leicestershire, after leaving the University of Oxford in 1382.

c. 1385–93 John Gower works on the Confessio amantis.

1388 Cambridge parliament, reissuing the Statute of Laborers (possibly alluded to in Piers Plowman C.5.1–105, thus perhaps dating the C text to after 1388).

1390s Chaucer works on the Canterbury Tales.

c. 1390 John But “finishes” the A text (A.12), mentioning how Death “drove” Will “a dint.”

1396 Richard II marries Isabella of France, who is seven years old at the time.

1399 Deposition of Richard II; coronation of Henry IV, son of John of Gaunt.

c. 1400 Death of Chaucer.

1400 Richard II murdered at Pontefract Castle.

c. 1401 Richard the Redeless.

c. 1401 Pierce the Plowman’s Crede.

c. 1409 Mum and the Sothsegger.

1550 Robert Crowley (in the Holborn area of the Inns of Court, outside the walls of London) first prints Piers Plowman (glossed as prophesying Protestantism).

1561 Owen Rogers (near Aldersgate, London) reprints Crowley’s Piers Plowman (not printed again until 1813 by T. D. Whitaker).
## Abbreviations

### Piers Plowman Editions:

**Athlone Editions:**


### Other Abbreviations:

- **EETS** Early English Text Society
- **e.s.** extra series
- **o.s.** original series
- **SAC** *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*
- **YLS** *Yearbook of Langland Studies*

References in notes with * are given in full in Guides to further reading.
Figure 1 Map of London in the later fourteenth century.