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978-0-521-04454-7 - *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism*

Wendy Scase

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Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism

The medieval English poem *Piers Plowman* is noted for its attacks on the clergy. The later fourteenth century, when the poem was written, is often thought of as an anticlerical age. Yet this is the first book on fourteenth-century English anticlericalism, and the first extended investigation of the anticlericalism of the poem.

Dr Scase challenges the usual assumption that long-established anticlerical traditions continued unchanged in the conflicts of this period. She describes and analyses important but little-known medieval polemics and satires (many of them only available in manuscript), tracing the emergence of a distinctive 'new anticlericalism' which entailed nothing less than the making of a new anticlerical literature. With the writing of *Piers Plowman*, she argues, this literary challenge was accepted. Always referring closely to the contemporary controversies, and with constant attention to the detail of the text, she reveals the significance of the poem's anticlericalism. Informative and rigorously argued, this book is intended to convince literary critics and historians alike.

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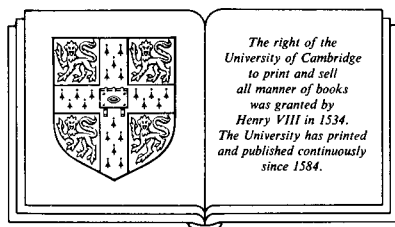
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Preface

This book is a study of the anticlericalism of *Piers Plowman*. The approach is historical and contextual. As a basis for my account, I have studied anticlericalism contemporary with the poem, exploring the many sides of that opposition to the clergy: its satire, polemic, theory, language and politics. I have studied the defences and apologies put forward by the clerics, and the traditions drawn upon by both sides. In the pages which follow, I argue that we have in this period a transformation of tradition: a 'new anticlericalism'. I have charted the emergence of the new anticlericalism in the bouts of the conflict with the clerics. This book is about the part played by *Piers Plowman* in that drama.

The perspective and treatment of the subject here are very different from those of previous studies in the field. Previous work on the opposition to the clergy in this period has considered attacks on clerics of different kinds as examples of disparate anticlerical 'traditions', for example, as traditional antifraternalism, or antimonasticism, or antipapalism. Later fourteenth-century examples of satire and polemic have been considered in relation to earlier writings, as continuations of traditions found there. Writings from the later period of anticlericalism have not been considered in their contemporary context; most importantly, they have not been considered in relation to one another. Thus it has been thought that the various anticlerical traditions of the past continued, unchanged, in what I have called the *Piers Plowman* period (the period during which the poem was composed), and in *Piers Plowman*. This is the thesis, for example, of P. R. Szittyá's book, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*, which includes a chapter on *Piers Plowman*. The contextual examination of anticlerical traditions has led me to propose a very different view in this book. I have described discontinuities with the past, transformations of the old anticlerical traditions and the emergence from their disparateness of an anticlericalism with implications for all clerics: the new anticlericalism.

I have chosen the epithet 'new' to characterise this anticlericalism in order to stress the innovatory character which distinguishes it from the older traditions. The older traditions were 'anticlerical' in the sense that they had as their targets specific classes of cleric. Anticlericalism in the poem and in the period has, however, been misinterpreted when seen simply as a continuation of these disparate traditions. It was the distinctive innovation of the 'new

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anticlericalism' to refound the old traditions on a new basis, and thus to find and release the potential of the old traditions to be 'anticlerical' in the fullest sense. The old traditions of opposition to clerics were developed and unified in a new polemic which opposed all clerics. This was the essential strength and danger of the new anticlericalism.¹

The full history of the opposition to the clergy in this period has never been written, while knowledge of even the individual conflicts, polemicists and polemics is scarce and patchy. This is undoubtedly one reason why anticlericalism in the period has been considered simply 'traditional'. There are many sources for a history – polemical sermons, records of university disputations, treatises on theoretical issues, official pronouncements, legal documents from litigation, letters, narratives – but very little is known about most of this material, and hardly any of it has been edited. The student has to begin where the controversialists left off: with Latin manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, or sometimes with sixteenth- or seventeenth-century printings. With this state of affairs, it is, of course, impossible to write anything other than a preliminary and selective study, and in any case, an exhaustive history would not be appropriate for the purposes of this book. Equally, it would be quite impossible to study the anticlericalism of *Piers Plowman* contextually, without beginning with these sources.

I have used only sparingly the writings of Wyclif's followers, the Lollards or Wycliffites, as sources for anticlericalism. For the most part, they appear to have been written slightly later than *Piers Plowman*, if we take Dr Hudson's dates of 1384–1414 for the Wycliffite writings and the usually accepted dates of 1377–9, and mid 1380s for the composition of the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman*.² Moreover, an assessment of their value as sources is complicated by the probability of their debt to the poem. The question of the relationship between Wycliffite anticlericalism and that of the poem is an important one, but it is a question which requires a separate study. In view of the complexity and obscurity of anticlericalism as a whole in the period, it has seemed better initially to take a broader view.

This discussion of sources should have made it clear that much of this book is concerned with writings not previously considered to have much importance for the history of Middle English literature. Yet the implications of the new anticlericalism were, as I shall show, literary as well as political, historical and theological. These literary implications were, also, more far-reaching and profound than might be supposed. Traditions of satire and polemic are the reflexes of anticlericalism most often noticed in Middle English literature. The new anticlericalism, I shall argue, generated transformations and adaptations of these traditions. But I shall show that, in addition, changes in the basis for anticlericalism had implications for vocabulary, for practices and principles of literary interpretation, for literary authority, for translation and for the writer's choice between Latin and English.

There are good reasons for beginning the study of these implications with a book on the anticlericalism of *Piers Plowman*. Literary history suggests that

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Piers Plowman was one of the first, and certainly one of the most influential, Middle English texts in which the challenges of the new anticlericalism were confronted, and its opportunities exploited. This is indicated by the nature of the early reception and influence of the poem. The poem's manuscripts give much evidence of the intense interest of early readers in anticlericalism, for example through medieval annotations of the text. The writings of the '*Piers Plowman* tradition', described by, among others, D. A. Lawton and J. N. King, suggest that anticlerical Wycliffite and Protestant reformers looked to the poem as a source of a viable way of writing in English about matters of church and state. In more modern times, the anticlericalism of the poem has often been remarked – indeed, it greatly excited fervent Victorian opponents of Roman Catholicism, such as the early editor Thomas Wright – yet, like the anticlericalism of the period generally, it has always been considered 'traditional' by modern scholars and critics, and therefore not to require detailed analysis. It has never before been the subject of a book.

If the drama of the poem's anticlericalism is acted at the interfaces between text and context, then one important locus of this drama is the manuscript, or textual, interface. By this I mean that the various shapes, or 'versions', of the poem provide contexts for one another, that every collection of variant readings is a 'context' for a 'text', and, in a rather different way, that medieval marginal annotation in the manuscripts is a context. This is the principle which has guided my approach to a problem which besets all studies of *Piers Plowman*: the problem of establishing the authorial text.

There has been much debate over whether it is possible, in practice or even in principle, for editors to recover an authorial text, or texts, of *Piers Plowman*. Many critical studies, however, have been founded exclusively on editions of the poem. While modern editions are undeniably necessary if the poem is to continue to be read and studied, critical studies based wholly on one or more of these are founded on texts whose authority must be open to question. Even if scholars could be confident that editors had recovered the authorial versions of the poem, it would still be questionable whether they should in every case disregard the state of the poem in its manuscripts. For even if editors have recovered what the poet wrote, it is perfectly clear that they have not recovered what any medieval reader could have read. Kane's conclusion that the B-text must have been based on a corrupt A-text manuscript, and the demonstration by Kane and Donaldson that the C-text revision was based on a corrupt B-text suggest that an 'authorial text' was not even available to the poet. Indeed, studies based wholly on one or two modern editions exclude a mass of evidence for the poem's medieval history. In other areas of Middle English studies manuscript evidence has been exploited for critical purposes, for example in Windeatt's work on scribal variants and marginalia in *Troilus* manuscripts ('The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics'), but the mass of data in the *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, arguably more important both quantitatively and qualitatively, has for the most part been used only for editorial purposes. The large amount of medieval marginal annotation in the

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Piers Plowman manuscripts has been ignored, or perhaps not even suspected, by most of the poem's critics. Russell's article, 'Some Early Responses to the C-Version of *Piers Plowman*', is the main contribution on the subject. Textual variants have never been used as evidence throughout a study, although their potential value for critical studies was noted by Hudson in her paper 'Middle English'.

The importance of textual variation for critical studies of the poem no doubt varies according to the kind of study undertaken. Textual variation has been considered extensively in this book, because the variants are often crucial, and as such the variation itself can be considered to have been generated by anticlerical controversy. As I shall show, anticlerical conflict was often a linguistic conflict. Choices of vocabulary, and even sentence structure, were significant. During the course of the debates, linguistic strategies shifted and changed. Substantial variation in the manuscripts is therefore both crucial and to be associated with the drama of the debates themselves. It is, from this point of view, the primary interface between text and context, and the place where it is hardest to decide which is which.

Some of the manuscript evidence is published in the editions of the poem, but for some it is necessary to consult the manuscripts themselves. The absence of a full critical edition of the C-text means that the full corpus of C-text variants has not been available for study. I have consulted the C-text manuscripts for certain crucial readings, otherwise I have relied on the limited amount of information recorded in W. W. Skeat, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts* (1886; rev. ed. London, 1969), and Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-text* (London, 1978). It is to be expected that, when all the C-text variants are published, the extra data will make it possible to add more detail, but will not alter the outlines of the picture drawn here, since variation illustrates and confirms the arguments concerning the linguistic conflicts. The large amount of medieval marginal annotation in *Piers Plowman* manuscripts has never been systematically recorded. For this, again, I have turned to the manuscripts themselves.

When textual variation is associated with controversial language, the editorial problems posed by the poem are even more formidable than usual. It would be especially difficult to claim with confidence for each and every crux of this kind that an authorial text and authorial revisions could be distinguished from a mass of crucial variants, and such an endeavour would occupy a great deal of space. Therefore I have treated crucial variants equally, without attempting to distinguish authorial text, authorial revision and scribal intervention from one another. For this reason, I have written throughout of the poem *Piers Plowman*, rather than of the author Langland. In this I have followed the practice of the medieval readers who referred, as the early wills show, to a book called *Piers Plowman*.

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Acknowledgements

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Note on quotations and references

When quoting from manuscripts I have silently expanded abbreviations, and added modern punctuation and capitalisation. With the few, brief, quotations of manuscript material in English, expansions supplied do not necessarily reflect the spelling practices of the scribe, since, as will be clear, the nature of this material (mostly marginalia) makes this impractical, if not impossible, to achieve. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to and quotations from *Piers Plowman* in the text and notes are from the following editions: A-text: ed. George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The A Version, Will's Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-well* (rev. ed., London and Berkeley, California, 1988); B-text: eds. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The B Version, Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-well, Do-better and Do-best* (rev. ed., London and Berkeley, California, 1988); C-text: ed. Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-text* (London, 1978); the *Piers Plowman* in MS Bodley 851 (MS [Z]): eds. A. G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer, *Piers Plowman: the Z Version* (Toronto, 1983). I have quoted the Bible in English from *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1970). When supplying translations of Latin quotations, it has often seemed more helpful to translate 'sense for sense' than 'word for word'.

In references to *Piers Plowman* textual variants derived from editions, the manuscript *sigla* used in the editions have been employed, but the name of the manuscript is given in full in references to the variants and other material which I have gathered from the manuscripts themselves. I have adopted this practice in order to make the sources of my information clear. Only those manuscripts cited directly are included in the Bibliography. For a convenient (but slightly inaccurate) list of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts and *sigla* see DiMarco, *Piers Plowman: a Reference Guide* (Boston, Mass., 1982), pp. xix–xxiii, noting that C-text [P] is Huntington Library MS HM 137 (not 114) and adding the Holloway Fragment to the list of C-text manuscripts. Abbreviated references only are given for published works cited, in the form of key words from the title, and where appropriate the name of the author or editor. The Bibliography is designed principally to provide full details of the references.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
Bod. Lib.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
CT	Chaucer, <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> , ed. F. N. Robinson
CUL	Cambridge University Library
EETS	Early English Text Society
Huntington Lib.	Huntington Library, San Marino, California
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
Nat. Lib. Wales	National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PL	<i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> , series latina, ed. J. P. Migne
RP	<i>Rotuli Parliamentorum</i>
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin
Vatican Lib.	Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana