CHAPTER 1

Introduction
(Prologue)

"Thow myghtest bettre meete myst on Malverne Hilles . . ."
(Prol. 215)

The poem we call *Piers Plowman* is testimony to the massive literary output of late fourteenth-century England, the period that produced works as diverse as *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the English Wycliffite Bible. The reputation of *Piers Plowman* does not ride on the life of its author, about whom we know little more than what the unique note in Trinity College, Dublin, MS 212 reports, that William of Langland was a son of Stacy de Rokayle, a gentleman dependant of the lords Despenser in Oxfordshire.[1] By contrast, Geoffrey Chaucer's activities as page, diplomat, and bureaucrat are well known, the translator John Trevisa's Oxford career can be traced from the 1360s through the 1390s, and John Gower's tomb can still be visited at his senior residence, St. Mary Overie, Southwark. The Protestant reformer, John Bale, writing the history of English reform, named Robert Langland as the author of *Piers Plowman*; in his inscription in a Huntington Library manuscript, Hm 128, Bale places the poet at Cleobury Mortimer, not far from the Malvern Hills in south-west Worcestershire, the dialectal region of the poet.[2] However, medieval readers, such as the early fifteenth-century poets who penned Langlandian poems like *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, were not especially invested in naming an author. They cared about the social imperative embodied by Piers the Plowman, the poem's critique of the clergy, and its program for spiritual reform.[3]

In many ways, *Piers Plowman* is a cultural phenomenon that exceeds the documentable life of its author. For one thing, the dreamer's evasive self-naming and the poet's apparent reluctance to identify himself, patron, or other writings, suspends the text between authorship and anonymity. In B.15, for example, the dreamer hints at the presence of a historical author at the very same moment in which he describes the general will to gain knowledge through a lifetime of moral choices: "'I have lyved in londe,'

quod I, 'my name is Longe Wille – /And fond I nevere ful charite, before ne bihynde'" (15.152–53).[4] It is hard to say whether this authorial presence is meant to be common, as Anne Middleton explains, the author's name embodying everyman's "unsatisfied desire" or "ethical volition" ("Longe Wille" + "in londe" = the longstanding desire to know), or whether it is supposed to be proper, functioning like an authorial apology or signature ("Longe Wille" + "in londe" = William Langland).[5] The poem holds these two possibilities continually in tension. For another thing, though widely influential in the 1380s–1400, the poem was a work-in-progress even by the standards of manuscript culture. The poem survives in a remarkable fifty-eight+ manuscripts, perhaps as many as a dozen copied before 1400. It was composed in at least three versions, between about 1362 and 1388, dates wrested both from events internal to the poem (a 1362 hurricane is mentioned in A.5.13–14, for example) and external references (for example, the C.5 "autobiographical" passage evokes the language of the 1388 Cambridge Labor Statutes[6]). The A-text, which abruptly breaks off ninety-eight lines into passus 12,[7] is probably the earliest version, although it seems to have had the latest circulation.[8] The B-text, on which this present study is based, is a complete, intermediate version of the poem, running to about 7,000 lines of twenty passūs and a prologue (containing altogether eight dreams and two inner dreams). It is the most formally and intellectually experimental of the three main versions, possibly written when the poet was about 45, the dreamer's age during his mid-life moral crisis in B.11.[9] In the B-text, the poet writes his way out of a theological problem regarding predestination, posed at the end of A, and he exploits the resources of a "bilingual textuality" only thinly mined in A.[10] The C-text, an authorial revision of B, possibly released in several stages, contains twenty-two passūs plus a prologue. A fourth version of the poem, surviving in one manuscript, which scholars call the Z-text, may be an authorial proto-A text or a scribal creation influenced by readings from A and C.[11]

To what literary tradition or genre does *Piers Plowman* belong? The poem's early readers did not form a consensus on this question. Eighteen *Piers* manuscripts have *explicits* that refer to the work variously as the dialogue, vision, debate, or book of Piers Plowman.[12] That the poem in any version was a must-have item at the end of the fourteenth century is evident from the sheer number of manuscripts that survive; among medieval literary works in English, *Piers Plowman* is fifth only to the *Prick of Conscience* (*c.*1350), the two versions of the Wycliffite Bible (*c.*1380), the prose *Brut*, and the *Canterbury Tales* (*c.*1390). According to chroniclers of

the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, the leaders of the revolt carried English broadsides, which mention Piers the Plowman and may have been inspired by the poem.[13] *Piers Plowman* appears in a variety of manuscript contexts: it is compiled, for instance, in the deluxe Vernon manuscript (*c.*1390), a veritable archive of English religious works, as well as in the hulking Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.i.17 (s.xiv/xv), a collection of English chronicles, world histories, and travel narratives, mainly written in Latin. Of *Piers* manuscripts, only Huntington Library MS, Hm 114, which consists primarily of long narrative works, can be described as a literary anthology in the modern sense: its scribe copied *Piers*, *Mandeville's Travels*, *The Epistle of Sweet Susanne*, *The Legend of the Three Kings*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and a fictive letter to Lucifer, the last item suggestive of *Piers Plowman*, which enrolls several fictive documents.

Medieval texts in manuscript are beholden to *ordinatio*, the divisions of a text, and they often contain abundant apparatus, such as tables of contents, running titles, book and chapter summaries, paraph marks, and commentary. *Ordinatio*, in turn, helped foster a taste for literary texts with legible schemes, such as the *Prick of Conscience*, a 10,000-line Northern poem, divided into a prologue and seven books neatly arranged by religious theme (the wretchedness of mankind, death and the afterlife, and so forth). Early readers of *Piers Plowman* were discouraged neither by its narrative incoherence nor by its confusing and overlapping textual divisions, as evidenced by the haphazard state of the rubrics. In most manuscripts the poem is divided into passūs ("steps") and into two large sections, the *Visio* (passus 1–passus 7, 8, or 9) and the *Vita*, the latter being subdivided (most consistently in the C tradition) into three lives: the lives of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. Some scribes also divided the poem into dream-visions (e.g., in Corpus Christi College MS 201); some envisioned the whole poem as a *Visio*; and many scribes double-numbered passūs (e.g., the title for B.16 in Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.15.17, "Passus xvjus & cetera et primus de Dobet," or the "16th Passus, etc., and the first of Dobet").[14]

From a modern critical perspective, *Piers Plowman* draws heavily from two literary traditions, alliterative long line poetry, which describes the poem's meter, formulas, and some of its diction, and French and Latin dream poetry, which describes the poem's overall structure, many of its characters, and much of its dialogue. The poet resorts to many other genres: sermons, liturgy, satire, penitential treatises and confessional handbooks, proverb collections and bestiaries, chivalric romances, and above all, the bible, in its multiple and various incarnations. *Piers Plowman*, like other

Middle English unrhymed alliterative poems, such as the *Siege of Jerusalem* or the *Wars of Alexander*, features a four-stress line with a medial caesura dividing the line into two syntactical half-lines. As with other alliterative poems, Langland's line is heteromorphic, that is, not governed by one metrical foot, such as the iambic foot (x') in iambic pentameter.[15] The first half-line (a-verse or on-verse) typically contains two and sometimes three metrically stressed syllables or staves. The second half-line (b-verse or off-verse) is normally restricted to two staves. The two half-lines are bound by alliteration, the first half-line alliterating on one or both staves, the second half-line alliterating only on the first of two staves. By far the most common of these patterns is aa/ax.[16]

In what way *Piers Plowman* relates to this corpus and in what sense it helps to define that corpus as a tradition depends on which metrical rules we take to be normative or categorical, and how we construe the relationship between alliteration and meter. Hoyt Duggan argues, for example, that Middle English alliterative poets composed with a limited number of syntactic patterns and in metrical patterns as regular, if more varied, than those used by Old English poets. He argues, too, as do many scholars, that alliteration works as a structural feature in the long line: for example, it does not confer metrical stress on an unstressed syllable. In his view, deviations from these rules were the fault not of poets but of scribes.[17] The implications of these rules for editing long line poetry are considerable, and the problems modern editors face when emending a poem like *Piers Plowman* are compounded by the number of extant manuscripts and the propensity of a text for scribal error and innovation, as well as for authorial revision. For example, *Wars of Alexander*, in many ways a paradigmatic alliterative poem, survives in just two manuscripts, in contrast to *Piers Plowman* with its convoluted history of transmission.

Piers Plowman has more syntactical variation than most alliterative poems; it has a roving medial caesura, which often disregards regular syntactic disjuncture;[18] its lines are longer than average with more syllables; and it contains many more rhythmically and semantically heavier b-verses than do other alliterative poems (e.g., B.Prol. 51, "To ech a tale that thei tolde hire tonge was tempred to lye," or Prol. 64, "For sith charite hath ben chapman, and chief to shryve lordes").[19] Correspondingly, *Piers Plowman* has a much higher rate of metrical variation and metrical irregularity, which the poet as reviser did not always see the need to fix. In short, although the poem is composed as if according to a system governed by strict metrical rules, it also presents a special case to the alliterative corpus. (In the case of

Piers Plowman, for example, Duggan concedes that, if there is a conflict between alliteration and stress in a line that seems authorial, for example, on the second stressed syllable of a b-line, alliteration can be assumed to confer stress.[20]) If metrical rules are categorical, *Piers Plowman* should be considered not an exemplar of long line poetry, but either a seriously flawed instance or a different beast entirely; if metrical rules are normative, *Piers Plowman* demonstrates a high degree of modulation within a standard metrical scheme.[21]

Taking a very different approach, Ralph Hanna has proposed that alliteration in Middle English alliterative poetry is not a central metrical feature but a "regularization of an ornamental feature."[22] By unyoking alliteration from meter, Hanna situates unrhymed long line poems like *Piers Plowman* in wider literary contexts: end-rhymed alliterative poetry, shorter-lined poetry with ornamental alliteration, and even alliterative prose. David Lawton and Ian Cornelius likewise note the affinities between alliterative long line poetry and Latin prose.[23] Along similar lines, Lawton speculates that unrhymed long line alliterative poetry in the late fourteenth century owed its vogue to *Piers Plowman*: though it likely already existed as performed entertainment – as the poet assumes to be the case – Langland reclaimed it for a sober, more penitential age.[24] In this reading, alliterative poetry does not account for the metrical form of *Piers Plowman* as much as *Piers Plowman* explains something about the pieties of fourteenth-century long line poems.

It may be, too, that *Piers Plowman* helped make alliterative poetry appealing to a wide readership, especially in London. Most fourteenth-century alliterative poems cannot confidently be assigned a date earlier than their manuscripts (usually after *c*.1390) so it is difficult to say when and if they coalesced into a tradition. Of the long narrative poems, only *William of Palerne*, a werewolf romance written before 1361 for Duke Humphrey of Bohun, surely predates *Piers Plowman*.[25] *Wynnere and Wastour* (*c*.1352–70), like *Piers Plowman* a dialogue concerned with broad social reform, may or may not predate the A-text. In either case, *Piers* and *Wynnere and Wastour*, along with *The Parliament of the Three Ages* – another alliterative poem about social abuses – shows that, by the early 1370s, alliterative poetry was considered an appropriate form for spiritual exhortation and political counsel; *Piers Plowman* may have been the text that made the difference. Chaucer's Parson, defending his choice of prose, says that, as a Southern man, he does not know how to "geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre," nor does he prefer (end) rhymed poetry.[26] In these much-cited lines, the Parson

regionalizes alliterative poetry as a Northern phenomenon, which it was in part: *The Siege of Jerusalem* was likely composed at Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire;[27] the poems collected in Cotton Nero A.x. share a north-west dialect.[28] But the Parson may also be paying homage to *Piers Plowman* as a successful – and accessible – penitential poem, which, although Northern in poetic form, circulated not only in the West Midlands, the poet's birthplace, but also in London, where scribes produced B-texts in a range of dialects, and where the poet may have first circulated his C-revision. In London a scribe of a *Troilus and Criseyde* manuscript also copied a *Piers Plowman* manuscript, British Library, MS Additional 35287, a manuscript which, in turn, was corrected by Adam Pinkhurst, the London scribe of the Ellesmere *Canterbury Tales* and the *Piers Plowman* manuscript, Trinity College, Cambridge, MS B.15.17.[29]

What most distinguishes *Piers Plowman* from other alliterative poems, and helps to explain its metrical irregularities, is its bilingual embrace.[30] Langland thinks and composes in Latin as well as in English, often translating scriptural passages from Latin to English and *vice versa*, or patching Latin quotations into English passages, sometimes ingeniously incorporating Latin tags – names, technical words, and bits of prayer – into the long line. As Tim Machan points out, the breakdown of Latin–English diglossia in England and the ascendance of English as a literary, administrative, and devotional language, was a condition of the poem's existence.[31] To be sure, the major linguistic trends that would eventually sideline Latin, would first exclude *Piers Plowman*, the dialect and meter of which made small impact on the age of print. In this view, *Piers Plowman* represents a double loss: the loss of multilingualism in the making of English poetry and the loss of a medieval alliterative tradition.

However, *Piers Plowman*'s bilingualism does not simply gesture to some future estrangement from literary culture; more importantly, it shows what was required to fashion a supple literary vernacular in the 1360s and 1370s, a vernacular both spiritually electrifying and intellectually rigorous. Latin in *Piers Plowman* appears most frequently as citation as, for example, in the Prologue, where a politically savvy mouse laments the instability that a child-king brings to a realm: "For I herde my sire seyn, is seven yeer ypassed, / 'Ther the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge.'/ That witnesseth Holy Writ, whoso wole it rede: *Ve terre ubi puer est rex*" [For, seven years ago, I heard my father say, / "Where the cat is a kitten, the court is completely miserable." / Holy Writ confirms this, for whomever should consult it: "Woe to the land where the king is a child."] (Prol.193–95a) (Ecclesiastes 10:16). In this scene, introduced in the B Prologue, a company

of rodents has failed to bell a frightful cat, and its spokesman – a mouse – decides that quietism is the best course during a period of political uncertainty. Royal succession has skipped a generation, and the throne has passed, or is about to pass, from a long-reigning king, presumably Edward III, to his grandson, who, if Richard II, was only ten years old when crowned in 1377. As topical political allegory, the mouse may stand for Commons speaker Peter de la Mare, whose outspokenness was praised in the records of the 1376 Parliament (a session which strongly impressed contemporary writers) but was denounced by Richard's uncle, the powerful John of Gaunt, a likely candidate for the Cat.[32]

In this passage, the Latin biblical proverb endorses the mouse's warning about royal minorities. The quotation, however, has already been rendered into English two lines earlier, or perhaps the English proverb has recalled to the poet its Latin equivalent. Together, the two versions shape the topicality of the political moment. The English proverb acts as a bridge between the cat and mouse allegory and general political wisdom ("Ther the cat is a kitoun . . ."). It also personalizes proverbial wisdom, incorporating it into a recent oral history – the mouse's ("For I herde my sire seyn, is seven yeer ypassed"). The Latin quotation, by contrast, highlights the written authority behind the proverb ("That witnesseth Holy Writ, whoso wole it rede"), while at the same time insisting upon its relevance to contemporary politics. In both languages the proverb substitutes for the political action that the rodents dare not perform. And yet, some of Langland's contemporaries may have recognized the Belling of the Cat fable from a Latin sermon preached by Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester, to a convocation of clergy at the 1376 Parliament. In this well-known sermon, Brinton rebukes the lords spiritual and temporal for not fighting injustice and the King for not hearing the wisdom of his many counselors.[33]

No doubt Latin's traditional authority made it attractive to a poet striving for the total reform of society and self, of clergy and laity, rich and poor alike. Indeed, its authority serves many purposes in *Piers Plowman*. As the language of medieval learning, liturgy, and law, for instance, Latin tends to divide lay from clerical audiences and restricts lay access to information, thus enabling the poet to address – and suppress – different audiences. There is perhaps no better example of the restrictiveness of Latinity in the poem as the Prologue's "Coronation" scene, in which a lunatic, an angel, a goliard, and the Commons presume to offer advice to the monarch about his obligations to his subjects, to the law, and to God. The angel, goliard, and Commons speak in untranslated and, in the case of the angel, fairly difficult blocks of Latin. As one would expect, the presentation of this scene

in manuscript preserves the hierarchies between languages and between text and citation: though practices were variable, *Piers* scribes bolded, boxed, enlarged, and rubricated Latin quotations as well as individual Latin words within the English line, producing a *mise-en-page* in which Latin was distinguished from the vernacular, and learned citation from everything else. As Fiona Somerset points out, however, Latin in England was itself multilingual, and the quotations in the "Coronation" scene do not portray Latin as an undifferentiated language of power.[34] Importantly, too, the contrast between Latin and English in this scene is tactical: it enables the speakers to give radically different political advice. Finally, Latinity activates the relation of speaker to language, showing how an ethical discourse might actually be performed as counsel in the presence of a silent king. Although the angel speaks in Latin on behalf of "lewd" men whose status or ignorance disqualifies them from political conversation, he does not merely speak, he "*Lowed* to speke in Latyn – for lewed men ne koude / jangle ne jugge" (Prol. 129–30, my emphasis), and the goliard, though laconic, is called a "gloton of wordes" (Prol.139). In this scene, the gap between Latin and English, like the marginal identities of the speakers, highlights the difficulties of obtaining a political voice.

Generally, however, Latin in *Piers Plowman* is not hard Latin. Its scope is fairly limited – for example, it hardly ever references scholastic literature or classical mythology. It is nearly always translated or summarized, with the translation often preceding the quotation. In fact, at the very moments where the poet uses Latinity as a trope of inaccessibility, he conjures up a range of audiences, democratizing the *lingua franca* of scholars for those for whom it is, in theory, incomprehensible. In B.15, for example, Anima excoriates the clergy for their hypocrisy in no uncertain terms: "I shal tellen it for truthe sake – take hede whoso liketh" (15.91). Anima's ostensible audience of address is the clergy themselves, "Forthi wolde ye lettrede leve the lecherie of clothyng . . . Lothe were lewed men but thei youre loore folowede" [And if you learned men would cast off worldly pomp . . . unlearned men would wish to do nothing else but follow your example] (15.103–08), and yet his message to the clergy requires deliberate acts of translation, as a medieval preacher might perform when adapting Latin preaching materials to an English sermon: "For [in Latin ypocrisie] is likned to a dongehill," etc. (15.111). A few lines later, however, Anima peculiarly refuses to translate a block quotation from a homily by the patristic theologian John Chrysostom, in which Chrysostom warns priests that they are responsible for good and evil in their communities. Anima glosses this act of non-translation:

> If lewed men wiste what this Latyn meneth,
> And who was myn auctour, muche wonder me thinketh
> But if many preest beere, for hir baselardes and hir broches,
> A peire of bedes in hir hand and a book under hir arme (15.119–22)
>
> [If only the laity knew what this Latin means,
> And who the author is, I would not be surprised
> If many priests exchanged their swords and their brooches
> For a rosary in their hands and a (prayer)book under their arm.]

Anima's refusal to translate does not conceal Chrysostom's thoughts on clerical responsibility; in fact, the gist of the homily has just been explained in English. Instead, Anima's refusal to translate shifts his address to a lay audience, characterized by their ignorance, their potential understanding, and their capacity for violence or their ability to "make good" on Chrysostom's exhortation to priests, thereby filling a vacuum of corrective agency ("If lewed men wiste . . . But if many preest beere"). The non-translatability of the Latin quotation, in other words, calls into being a lay audience ready to disarm delinquent priests (see 15.125, 128).

As these examples suggest, the poem's bilingualism is at the core of its vernacular inventiveness. Recently, Traugott Lawler has argued that foremost on the poet's mind as he revised his poem was introducing more Latin quotations (from A to B) and perfecting his existing translations (from B to C).[35] As John A. Alford and Judson Boyce Allen have persuasively shown, Langland constructed entire scenes around quotations derived from Latin biblical commentaries.[36] In *Piers Plowman*, moreover, Latin amplifies the rhythmical quality of alliterative meter, as in the lines from the Prologue condemning ribald entertainers, in which the Latin phrase forms a perfectly metrical half-line: "That Poul precheth of hem I wol nat preve it here: / '*Qui loquitur turpiloquium* is luciferes hyne" [What Paul preaches I will not elaborate here: / "He who speaks evil" is Lucifer's servant] (Prol.38–39, alluding to 5 Ephesians 3–5). As with the Chrysostom passage, the Latin quotation ostensibly masks the object of criticism and the dreamer's critical appetites. However, as the nominal subject of the English sentence and the driving a-verse of the alliterative line, the quotation deepens the criticism of "japeres and jangleres" (Prol.35), described just a few lines above. Latin further gives the impression of depth by creating interplay between metrical and ornamental alliteration, for example, in the lines from B.1 about Lucifer's fall. "And mo thousandes myd hym than man kouthe nombre / Lopen out with Lucifer in lothliche forme / For thei leveden upon hym that lyed in this manere: / *Ponam pedem in aquilone, et similes ero Altissimo* [And

with him many more thousands than one could count / Leapt out with Lucifer in hideous form, / Because they believed in him, who lied in this manner: / "I will place my foot in the North and be like the Most High"] (1.116–19). Here as elsewhere in *Piers Plowman*, linguistic difference achieves a variety of poetic effects: Latin boosts the effects of a learned vernacular poetics at the same time that alliterative meter recuperates the cultural distance between languages.

Ranulph Higden, a Latin historian writing in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, wonders why the English of his day has so many dialects but the Norman French of England only one. His translator, John Trevisa, responds by pointing out that, in France, French comes in multiple dialects, just as English does in England.[37] Langland does not comment on the state of French in England – the Norman legacy, reinforced by contact with continental French through war, trade, and cultural exchange – but he does capitalize on the several registers of French available to English speakers in order to show how language shapes moral behavior. In the Prologue, for instance, French is an integral part of London speech, as in the hypermetric line in which shiftless laborers sing snatches of French songs (or catcalls) to pass the time: "As dykeres and delveres that doon hire dedes ille / And dryveth forth the longe day with 'Dieu vous save dame Emme!'" [As dike-diggers and delvers, who do their jobs badly / And drive forth the long day with "God save you, Dame Emme"] (Prol.224–25). Although the poet quotes the line in French, he does not mark it as French in the same way that Covetousness in B.5, claiming to be a bumpkin and therefore unable to grasp the language of penance, makes French the limit to pastoral care: "And I kan no Frenssh, in feith, but of the fertheste ende of Northfolk" (5.235), he says, explaining why it is that he cannot practice "restitucioun." The Latin term "restitution" may have been absorbed into English via Anglo-Norman, or through translations of continental French, but in the 1370s it was not foreign, just technical, and that's the joke. In this line, which deftly maps status onto region and culture, French establishes a geographical limit in a way that Latin does not. Like Latin, however, French characterizes audiences: Norfolk "hicks" apparently do not know French!

The one full French quotation in *Piers Plowman*, two couplets on the virtues of sufferance at B.11.384a–b, the poet chose not to translate: "Bele vertue est suffraunce, mal dire est petite vengeance. / Bien dire et bien suffrir, fait lui suffrant a bien venir" [Suffering is a fine virtue; to speak evil is little vengeance. / To speak well and to suffer well causes a person to come