Reading “Piers Plowman” is an indispensable scholarly guide to a magnificent – and notoriously difficult – medieval poem. With *Piers Plowman*, the fourteenth-century poet William Langland proved that English verse could be at once spiritually electrifying and intellectually rigorous, capable of imagining society in its totality while at the same time exploring heady ideas about language, theology, and culture. In her study of *Piers Plowman*, Emily Steiner explores how Langland’s ambitious poetics emerged in dialogue with contemporary ideas; for example, about political counsel and gender, the ethics of poverty, Christian and pagan learning, lordship and servitude, and the long history of Christianity. Lucid and comprehensive, Steiner’s study teaches us to stay alert to the poem’s stunning effects while still making sense of its literary and historical contexts.

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READING PIERS PLOWMAN

EMILY STEINER

University of Pennsylvania
For Sophie and Asher
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Acknowledgements

This book is a labor of love for my students past and present who committed themselves to reading *Piers Plowman*. To dedicate oneself to this magnificent poem is not only to face some major interpretative challenges, but also to risk losing oneself in a text that offers no easy way out. Stirring and confounding by turns, *Piers Plowman* asks its readers to forgo the safety of narrative and trust in a poetic process that is all-consuming and frequently unmanageable.

*Piers Plowman* promises that salvation lies in community, a promise on which I depend. I thank Candace Barrington, Maura Nolan, and Rosemary O’Neill, who read chapters in draft, and Lawrence Warner, expert in all things Langlandian, who generously commented on the entire book. Kara Gaston, Jennifer Jahner, and Sarah Arkebauer helped with various stages of research, Sierra Lomuto assisted valuably with the index, and Marie Turner edited the manuscript with her characteristic intelligence. Penn undergraduates Katie Thackray and Shoshana Akabas helped compile the bibliography. My dear colleagues Rita Copeland and David Wallace weathered this project for my own good, and it is much better for their friendship.

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