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Introduction

Studying *Piers Plowman* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

Scholarship on *Piers Plowman* in the second decade of the twenty-first century looks very different from that available when the first academic journal devoted to the poem, the *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, arrived on library and personal bookshelves in 1987, soon followed by the first "companion" to *Piers Plowman* in 1988.[1] The quantum of new research, editions, commentaries, and monographs presents a poem and a range of approaches to it that would hardly be recognizable to scholars twenty years ago. New information about the manuscripts of the poem and their affiliations, recent historical discoveries, and important chartings of the literary, cultural, and theoretical scope of the poem, have all emerged. We have reached a point that rewards our taking stock of knowledge about this perennially intriguing poem, and encourages us to highlight some of the most important and promising terms for current teaching, criticism, and research.

The need for a consolidation of current prospects (emphatically in the plural) is hardly surprising, given the many complexities and mysteries that have always made *Piers Plowman* a moving target. Even basic issues are hardly "settled" in the way they are for Chaucer or Gower – after all, there are real reasons why scholars feel it necessary to reaffirm, repeatedly, that one poet named Langland wrote the three (or perhaps four) versions of the poem we call *Piers Plowman*. Both the choice of what edition of the poem to use and the question of how to understand the relations between the different versions – both matters that Ralph Hanna considers in his chapter here – have long remained intriguingly open, and in some respects do so to the present. On the matter of editions for citation, for example, contributors to this collection have chosen either the compendious "Athlone" texts edited by George Kane, E. Talbot Donaldson, and George Russell, or the more student-friendly volumes more recently edited by A. V. C. Schmidt, and of the latter, authors have chosen either Schmidt's parallel-text "full" edition, including the controversial "Z" text, or his paperback edition of

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just the B text. Insofar as this question of "which edition?" is at once a question of "which version?," our contributors might have chosen C as the "final" version of the poem, or they might have used all the versions for comparison of every point. But the warp of research meets the weft of practicality when it comes to publishing scholarship, and in the case of this volume the discussions below are generally based on the B text, as the version most commonly studied and taught (citations not otherwise identified can be assumed to be from that version). These matters can be tedious and thorny, but they need no longer either stifle other discussion or be dismissed from any notice. They simply need to be made visible. For we have reached a time of necessary and productive pluralism of considerable depth and range, which is why now is also the time for a new "companion" to the poem, its contexts, and the wide range of responses it has elicited since its inception.

In fact, more surprising than how much innovation and how many new discoveries have appeared in the last two decades is how durable were the foundations laid down in the late 1980s. The "companion" edited by John A. Alford is a collection of essays that are permanently valuable. Yet it is the product of a different moment in our knowledge of the poem and in the discipline of medieval literary studies itself. In this regard, it is worth briefly reflecting on that earlier moment in the field, in order to appreciate that "companion's" contributions and set in relief what makes the present volume different and, it is hoped, helpful for its moment. It is seldom remembered that for two decades before the publication of Alford's "companion" there were three collections available to guide readers through the poem, helping create something like a discipline called Langland studies: *Interpretations of Piers Plowman*, edited by Edward Vasta in 1968; *Style and Symbolism in Piers Plowman: A Modern Critical Anthology*, edited by Robert J. Blanch in 1969; and *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, edited by S. S. Hussey in 1969.[2] Appearing at roughly the same time, each of these nonetheless tells a quite different story about Langland studies, presenting divergent points of view of the once-dominant critical topics of "exegetical" criticism, the "authorship controversy," and more formalist and aesthetic literary assessment. Each also tells us something different about Middle English studies in the mid twentieth century.

Mid-century Langland criticism: a window onto Middle English studies

Edward Vasta was the first to offer readers a way through not only *Piers Plowman* but its long history of criticism. He sought to tell the story of Langland studies over the eighty years leading up to 1968 (xviii), from the

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debates about authorship that arose after "the publication of Skeat's parallel text edition of 1886" (ix) to "matters of form and idea" in the 1930s, in which it is thought that new editions of the poem were desperately needed, to the "outpouring of interpretive studies" (x) in the 1950s. But when one reads Vasta's volume today, a sense about *Piers Plowman* studies rather different from his stated purposes seems to inform the selection of essays – namely, a concern about how scholars should approach the poem as an allegorical and literary work, in which every rift was loaded with ore for interpretive controversy. Does one follow D. W. Robertson and Bernard F. Huppé, who reasoned that if the Church Fathers and medieval clerics read the Bible according to the levels of allegory (tropological, allegorical, anagogical), then authors like Langland wrote accordingly – thereby prescribing a modern method of reading *Piers Plowman* that asks you to scan timelessly through centuries of exegetical meanings supporting the pursuit of "charity" and the condemnation of "cupidity"? Or do you adopt the equally learned methods of T. P. Dunning, using the same Church Fathers and later exegetes (especially Aquinas) to read the poem not in relation to the *lingua franca* of medieval allegorical criticism, but in light of the poem's penchant to think in threes and prescribe forms of living in a graduated fashion? Or do we, with E. T. Donaldson, read the allegory out of the interstices separating the different versions of the poem? Might readers instead – or as well – adhere to Morton Bloomfield's program of study, in which allegory is seen to indicate larger patterns of history that will end in apocalypse, requiring the individual, in turn, to gain "perfection" or suffer catastrophe?[3] Or does one read the allegory of *Piers Plowman* in the manner of Robert Worth Frank, who proposed that the personifications in this poem should be read literally and in accordance with the poem's own internal logics that frustrate tidy triads or any imposed organization?

These are rhetorical questions now, since the apparent wider and more programmatic issues they referred to in historical and literary understanding have long lost their sense of momentous importance, replaced by more socially, culturally, and economically specific historicism, on the one hand, and more self-conscious pursuits of the idea of "the literary" as such in medieval culture, on the other. As close consideration of two near book-end chapters here shows, Steven Justice's and Lawrence Warner's, there remain fundamentally different ways of thinking about the "literary" or the "cultural," as either recurrent memes or more direct textual transmissions of ideas and literary materials. Intellectual history remains crucial, as is suggested below in a chapter by the editors, but it has come under closer scrutiny for its contradictions and its hidden debts – including the debts of later theory and philosophy to the idea and the thought of the Middle Ages. And

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important studies have emerged proposing more comprehensive answers about how we are to read medieval literary allegory (see also Chapter 4).

All these later developments are useful for thinking about what is *not* articulated in Vasta's *grand récit* of Langland studies. One such point is not only to say, with Vasta, that "a large number of scholars remain unconvinced" by Robertson's "exegetical" proposals (xvi). Rather, it is to emphasize that what Robertson did for Chaucer studies, in *A Preface to Chaucer*, he could never do for Langland studies, even when teaming up with Huppé. It is true that, as Justice observes in his chapter here, *Piers Plowman* has always been seen to display a desire "for poetry to be more than poetry," offering "an interesting challenge to literary history because it has regularly convinced its readers that it has no part in such a history, that it is something more than art." Yet something about *Piers Plowman* has always resisted systematic allegoresis, a fact acknowledged by Robertson's most vigorous defender, Robert Kaske, who admitted that the "most significant weakness" of the exegetical method was "its tendency to proceed from general assumption to the explanation of particulars, instead of vice versa"; "[n]ot every exegetical image or allusion is most fruitfully interpreted by direct recourse to *charitas* and *cupiditas*" (324, 321; see 320). Moreover, although some have claimed otherwise, the Christian allegorical tradition emphasized by Robertson was never the only way in which scholars in Middle English studies approached historical contexts, or for that matter the allegorical tradition. Nor was it the only way of reading Langland within intellectual history. Unlike scholarship on Chaucer, in scholarship on *Piers Plowman* there was no strict dichotomy between historicism and formalism, or History and Literature. That facile distinction was overcome well before Robertsonianism, when work in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that customarily read *Piers Plowman* as a social "document" fell out of favor: Dorothy Chadwick's *Social Life in the Days of Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1922) is the apex of such a documentary reading practice. Thus although Vasta's presentation of the range of options for approaching *Piers Plowman* helped create the sense of a "field" for studying this poem, his selections imply oppositions in approaches to Langland's allegory that obtained more in studies of Chaucer in his period than in work on *Piers Plowman*.

Robert J. Blanch's collection crystallizes a moment in Langland studies in a different way. Surely all critical history is "transitional," but Blanch's volume captures a period when the "authorship controversy" was waning but innovative methods of textual editing were just beginning to emerge, promising fundamental changes in the possibilities for understanding the poem's forms, although these textual studies had not yet advanced far enough to

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influence in a significant way interpretations of *Piers Plowman*. Eclipsed though it now is, the authorship controversy is still worth thinking about, because it is a critical moment referenced to this day. In the early twentieth century, scholars of Langland began to wonder whether one person wrote all three versions of the poem, or whether in fact up to five different authors contributed to each version. Why scholars started asking questions about authorship is easy to see: W. W. Skeat's editions of the poem made the comparative study of the versions relatively efficient, especially when his parallel-text editions were printed. As soon as John Manly published in 1906 his "The Lost Leaf of *Piers the Plowman*," which challenged the single-authorship theory endorsed by Skeat, the authorship controversy was off and running, and (as Hanna remarks in his chapter here) persisted through sustained rebuttals by Donaldson, George Kane, and others. Bloomfield's essay in Blanch's volume remains essential reading on the authorship debates, an excellent point of departure for reconsidering the critical atmospheres of these disputes and rethinking their issues. But the essay itself embodies the belatedness of Blanch's volume, and the futility of collecting papers published across a rapidly changing span of criticism as a way of giving shape to something that could be called "Langland studies." Entitled "The Present State of *Piers Plowman* Studies," Bloomfield's essay is tasked to summarize Langland criticism up to 1969, but the bulk of the essay was written thirty years earlier and received only minor updating. That Blanch thought it was a good editorial decision to include this essay can only be explained by his sense that the field had not changed substantially in the interim. But more fundamental change was underway, as Blanch indicates in a footnote about Bloomfield's essay: "Since the appearance of Bloomfield's essay, the definitive edition of the A-text has been published" by George Kane (vii).

Kane's edition of the A text, and especially the Kane–Donaldson edition of B, produced new, often heated debates about editorial methods; about the poetics – from meter to anything else – that were being reconstructed; and about the unity of the poem's project. The Athlone editorial project supported a further study by Kane himself of some familiar old topics in his *Piers Plowman: The Evidence of Authorship*, which sought to end any suggestion that more than one person wrote this poem – at least in the three "versions" that Kane, following Skeat, accepted as authorial (a contention that, in having excluded Z, has been vigorously resisted by Charlotte Brewer who traces this critical history and who produced with A. G. Rigg an edition of the Z text, which has attained in Schmidt's parallel-text edition at least careful presentation and commentary if not universal acceptance as Langland's). The "life records" that Kane presented there are quite minimal

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by necessity, since only one record (quoted at the outset of Robert Adams's chapter below) can be said to offer a local and early identification of the poem *Piers Plowman* with the poet William Langland, son of Eustace de Rokele. To be sure, there is evidence enough to support a speculative biography of Langland, including the materials that Hanna has collected,[4] as well as a unique contemporary reference to "long Will" recently discovered by Michael Bennett.[5] But speculative that biography remains; all we can say is that Langland was probably born sometime between 1325 and 1335, and died evidently between 1385 and 1395, probably soon after 1388 – if indeed the C-text "autobiography" refers to the reissued Statute of Laborers from that year.[6] A more precise sense of the poet's range of worlds, however, is becoming clearer by indirect as well as direct means, especially in the important new collection of the poet's more widely extended and longer family history offered here by Adams.

Even these hazy vistas were not possible just a few years ago. But Blanch's collection displays the origins of something else in Langland criticism. Readers were ready to give "literary appreciation" new emphasis, after some previous assorted attempts (especially by Lawlor; see Vasta, xvii). In Blanch's words, it was time to realize "the *desideratum* for *Piers Plowman* scholarship – the importance of turning away from authorship and textual problems to the literary merits of the poem" (viii; see vii). At first, this turn to literary matters was motivated not by scholars' great passion for literature qua literature. Unlike Chaucer criticism, as noted, Langland studies never saw a belle-lettristic movement pressing back against the historicists. Rather, scholars began to appreciate *Piers Plowman* as a poem, with affective and sensuous appeal, because so much clinical attention had been previously paid to its author in the authorship controversy. Those embroiled in any aspect of the authorship controversy necessarily read the poem as indexers and cataloguers of poetic effect and development, isolating passages and juxtaposing their variations among the versions of the poem; in the early criticism on this topic, scholars looked keenly for differences of poetic temper, meter, argumentative clarity, theological sophistication, and political adventurousness. Such studies were obliged to do many things at once – cups, saucers, tilting chair and all – but chiefly to decide how much discrepancy of opinion and fineness of craft might fit inside the head of one author before one can determine that all of these data points represent either multiple personalities or multiple authors.

The authorship controversy was a necessary phase of Langland studies and gave the field a significant hermeneutic still used to this day. It was also the moment when scholars were finally coming to terms with the poet's perspectival and often polyvalent form. Yet it was a phase that many scholars

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were from an early point ready to move swiftly beyond – or at least, they were ready to discuss the poet's complex ideas and dialectical, exploratory forms under some rubric other than authorship. More recently, however, versions of this issue have reappeared. Provocative new work requiring such close attention includes detailed cases supporting the authenticity of the Z text by Rigg and Brewer and Schmidt's modern commentary on Z, as well as research that unsettles earlier assumptions by arguing that the origin of the popular B text itself is in large a scribal confection modeled after C.[7] Even a recent student edition of the A text – the last version to be given a student edition – is framed with the assumption that that text, and indeed all the versions, should be treated as distinct poems, best understood outside of the idea of unified authorship.[8] These modern claims have brought scrutiny back to the material and historical evidence of the poem's (or poems') extremely complicated genesis and development, and that topic is of continuing importance even within the transformations of what is usually understood to have made B into C.

Turning now to the third "companion": in the late 1960s, S. S. Hussey's collection succeeded in moving *Piers Plowman* scholarship as a whole beyond the early forms of the "authorship" debate, but almost by accident. For Hussey was compelled to assemble a different kind of anthology of *Piers Plowman* criticism, finding "little point in reproducing what has been made conveniently available elsewhere" (vii) by Vasta and Blanch. Instead, he commissioned authors to write essays for the volume itself. Although Hussey expresses this editorial endeavor with a hint of frustration – that is, with the sense that he was beaten to the punch of anthologizing pre-published papers – the results of his alternative program are important and can be regarded as the first experiment in seeing what would happen if authors worked up original essays exemplifying "Critical Approaches," as the subtitle to the volume reads. Hussey's is the first attempt to conceptualize "Critical Approaches" as something other than a museum wherein is collected important scholarship from the previous thirty years. This project has obvious importance for the history of Langland studies (as well as of "companions"). To be sure, Vasta's and Blanch's volumes emerged at a moment when no overall school of interpretation could be declared for Langland studies, but Hussey's was the first to make something of this fact, practically cornered into acknowledging the impossibility of assigning to the poem any single meaning or theme. Most of the articles contained therein admit that the poem offers contradictory points (Russell, 27; Woolf, 51; Kean, 108; Elliott, 226; Evans, 246). Two papers make contradiction – or uncertain knowledge (Burrow, 112, 123) and incompatibility of meanings (Jenkins, 125) – a theme of the poem itself. If this means that Langland

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studies was fissiparous, it was so in a productive way that opened up the field, introducing new scholarly variety – not the variety that offers different takes on one overarching topic, such as the authorship controversy or allegory (as above), but a variety that supplies within the same collection an essay on text and manuscripts (Russell), one on place and locality (Elliott), one on genre (Knight), and one on Chaucer (Bennett). A version of Langland studies we can now recognize, with its multi-faceted thematic, manuscript, and contextual approach, begins to emerge in Hussey's collection. It was there all along, to be sure, but the other two anthologies were not able to show it, much less conscientiously document it. Even Hussey's volume limns the outlines of what was only a nascent "field," and does so more by happenstance, more visible forty-four years later than in its own time.

Langland today

John Alford's *Companion* was the first properly modern set of commentaries on *Piers Plowman*. That volume showed, by its collection of essays ranging from history, literary influences, alliterative poetics, reception, dialect, and text, that those earlier "moments" of Langland criticism so documented by the previous anthologies were in large measure an exhibit of how disciplines wax and wane over the decades – textual scholarship for one period, interpretive scholarship in another, and historical work on the poem every now and then. Alford's volume, in other words, realized in full the directions opened up in Hussey's collection, which, like the anthologies before it, had not argued the case for Langland studies as a discipline *in the present* pursuing in one moment a diversity of fundamental approaches. To reap the full benefits of a volume like Blanch's required knowing already what was going on in the field over the last few decades; one had to be enough in the thick of the scholarly debates on "one author or five?" to yearn for something else: namely, the questions of literary value, poetic merit, and formal and symbolic quality. Alford's volume, by contrast, starts in the now, and assumes no specialization in the field; it was intended to be an education in the field, almost in the manner of a *Bildungsroman*. "[T]he book," Alford writes, "is arranged to facilitate a linear reading. Each chapter builds to some extent on its predecessors. The earlier parts are more general; the later, more specific and technical" (xi). Whether readers approached the *Companion* in the prescribed way is hard to know – and such readers would inevitably be those new to the poem. The upshot of Alford's program is that some chapters made for great reading assignments in the undergraduate

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classroom, while others were better suited for devoted, longtime readers of the poem.

It is now time to take stock of all we have learned about *Piers Plowman* – the poem and the field – since the publication of Alford's volume. Our goal is to offer a *Companion* evenly suited to beginning and more experienced readers – a text that does not require sequential reading and instead invites the reader to start anywhere and choose his or her own adventure. Indeed, one thing that has changed substantially since the publication of Alford's *Companion* is the sense of how some methods and materials that have historically been kept distinct are, or should be, closely related to a range of others. A single essay on "the text" of the poem, for example, no longer seems desirable in view of the scholarly consensus that textual issues should always be a factor in reading Langland. Thus here, textual issues are discussed across a set of essays that are all textual, historical, and linguistic: Hanna's, Simon Horobin's, and Warner's. We have not included chapters on Langland's alliterative meter or dialect, since excellent overviews of current understandings of the poet's meter have recently appeared,[9] and since the foundations for assessing the poet's dialect have also recently been both surveyed and unsettled.[10] Even so, two chapters below touch on some matters of meter and dialect (Justice and Horobin, respectively).

So, too, recent research dealing with the spiritual, visionary, theological contexts in which Langland wrote suggests that the religious and theological elements of the poem cannot be conveyed in a single chapter. Instead, two chapters are needed – one on scholastic theology and the poem's elusive redefinitions of "philosophye" itself (Cole and Galloway), another on "everyday" church institutions (especially the range of medieval religious orders) and the values such as "conscience" that both sustained and later shattered them (Simpson). Other chapters have subtler connections and may be read in various combinations. Justice's discussion of the poem's relation to "literary history" involves an analysis of how the poem's effect of "art shipwrecked on reality" shows how central are its imaginings of ecclesiastic and political institutions, thus directly resonating with James Simpson's account of how "religious institutions" are shown to construct the poetic "I." The assessment of medieval allegory and *Piers Plowman* by Jill Mann speaks to some of the "theoretical" readings surveyed in the final chapter on "*Piers Plowman* in theory" by Nicolette Zeeman. The "versions and revisions" of the poem that Hanna treats merge readily into the early history of medieval copies and copyists of the poem surveyed by Horobin.

Readers will also find that the volume offers a logical linear progression, each chapter building on the last all the way to the volume's end, where they will discover a list of 'further reading' keyed to each chapter (except Zeeman's, which uses secondary sources as its main focus). The volume is divided into three sections, beginning with "The poem and its traditions," which presents the poem in terms of its most "literary" contexts and properties. An initial chapter by Helen Barr offers a thematic and dramatic summary of "major episodes and moments in *Piers Plowman* B," in order to provide an overview of the poem's most crucial passages and topics. This section then moves through the versions and their revisions (Hanna) to the poem's peculiar place in "literary history" (Justice) to its complex modes of allegory (Mann).

Each of those chapters looks out upon a wider medieval context, but Mann's chapter especially does so, thus offering a bridge to the next section, on "Historical and intellectual contexts." That section opens with a summary of the latest understanding of the poet's family lineage (Adams), allowing us for the first time to chart the poet's social origins by way of the kinds of figures that his family included, emerging from the basic documentary materials summarized and listed for further exploration. This section of the volume continues with, first, the "religious" (Simpson) then the "political" (Matthew Giancarlo) "forms and institutions" found in and around the poem – readings that display the potency of wide historical contextualizing for understanding the poem's unusual attention to its contemporary world. As Giancarlo observes, "more than any other poem – indeed, perhaps more than any other work of art from its era – *Piers Plowman* is suffused with the language and sensibilities of contemporary institutions." As Simpson further notes, the idea of those institutions precedes even the poem's idea of what we would call an individual "self." This second section continues with the editors' chapter on "Christian philosophy in *Piers Plowman*," which, like the other contextual chapters, seeks both to lay out some of the pertinent contexts (here, of intellectual history), and to pursue the poem's resistances to and endorsements of those.

To be sure, all the essays in the second "contextual" section also treat *Piers Plowman* as a poem, offering its own reimagination of preceding and surrounded contexts and discourses. This is no less true of Adams's discussion of how Langland's family history leads us to see the artificial nature of the poet's persona, than it is of the final essay in this section by Suzanne Akbari, on the non-Christian entities within the poem and considered through the range of other late medieval imaginings.

The final section, on "Readers and responses," takes up the issue of the interpretations of the poem, as figured in multiple ways. The section begins

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