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WHAT IS *PIERS PLOWMAN*?

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The title of this essay poses a question that has, in one form or another, stymied readers and editors for more than six centuries. There are many ways to attempt an answer, depending upon one's needs and interests. But *Piers Plowman* is a poem for which there are rarely, if ever, easy answers. Even a basic summary of the poem's history and structure runs immediately into complications. Composed late in the fourteenth century by William Langland, *Piers Plowman* survives in at least three distinct versions, designated the A, B, and C texts. The most commonly accepted explanation of the different versions is that Langland first revised and expanded the A text to that of B, almost tripling the poem in length from approximately 2,500 to 7,300 lines, and subsequently revised the B text to that of C, which is roughly the same length as the B version but contains substantial revision and rewriting. Each element of this, the identity of the author, the number of versions of the poem, what constitutes a separate version, and the order in which they were composed, has been the subject of lengthy and vigorous scholarly debate. Regardless of one's convictions regarding which theories of authorship and revision are most convincing, however, it is clear that *Piers Plowman* is not simply a poem, or at least not a single fixed poem. And it is amply evident that the fifty plus surviving manuscripts (the exact count depends upon how one counts fragments and splices) constitute an intractable set of editorial and critical cruces, for there are significant hurdles not only in working among the three versions, but also within the textual witnesses for each tradition.

Critical responses regarding how the text, once established in one form or another, should be read have been at least as diverse and divisive. Perhaps the poem has encouraged such dissent from the time of its composition; it has certainly been energetically misread over the centuries. Scholars have posited that the revisions that resulted in the C text were an attempt by the poet to make the poem less aligned with contemporary religious and political upheavals, including the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, although these, like most other theories, are strongly contested. While there is a dearth of early direct critical responses to the poem, the manuscript contexts in which it survives suggest highly engaged readers and copyists who read *Piers Plowman* in diverse ways. By 1550, when the poem was first printed by Robert Crowley, it was read as a proto-Protestant critique of the Church.[1] Crowley associates Langland with his contemporary John Wyclif, whose writings were instrumental in Lollardy, and with translators of the Bible into English, all of whom Crowley sees as progenitors of the Protestant convictions that he himself held.[2] In later centuries the poem fell into obscurity before becoming the

subject of sustained and increasing scholarly attention from the late nineteenth century to the present. It would be hubris to attempt to summarize the enormous range of critical responses to the poem here, and to do so would far exceed the scope and space of this essay. Those familiar with *Piers* will already be familiar with many of these dissenting scholarly opinions as well as the significant complexities surrounding its composition, revision, and manuscript transmission; others, who are likely coming to this volume due to an interest in digital humanities and/ or from a variety of backgrounds in medieval studies, should bear this in mind when reading what follows.

This essay approaches the question of what *Piers Plowman* is in a different way by considering a series of manifestations of the poem in physical and digital media, including one medieval manuscript (Huntington Library MS Hm 128), Crowley's print editions, the Athlone critical edition of the B text edited by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, and two digital editions published by the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive: a documentary edition of Hm 128 edited by Michael Calabrese, Hoyt N. Duggan, and Thorlac Turville-Petre and a critical edition of the B archetype edited by John Burrow and Turville-Petre. The goal is to consider the ways in which digital editions of past literary works are bound up with and inextricably linked to specific physical iterations of those works. Printed texts are built from and constituted by manuscript texts and other printed texts, and digital editions encompass the handwritten, the printed, and the digital within themselves.

Huntington library, MS Hm 128

Huntington Library, MS Hm 128 contains a 15th-century copy of the B text of *Piers Plowman* as well as another small fragment of *Piers* occupying four folia, which seems to be an abandoned false start at copying the poem, along with four other works: *The Prick of Conscience* (Southern Recension), *Expositio sequentiarum*, the alliterative *Siege of Jerusalem*, and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*.[3] As described by Turville-Petre, the manuscript is a complex one, "containing several interrelated texts and involving a number of collaborating scribes probably in a religious house whose dialect has been located in Warwickshire by the *Linguistic Atlas*."[4] It is a good choice for the purposes of this essay for a number of reasons. First, it has been edited in a documentary edition as part of the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive and thus facilitates comparisons between media; this also means that full images of the portion of the manuscript containing *Piers Plowman* are freely viewable online. Second, it was consulted as an important copy of the B text by both the editors of the print Kane-Donaldson edition and the electronic edition of the B archetype edited by Burrow and Turville-Petre. Third, Hm has a close textual relationship to Crowley's printed text, as discussed below. Finally, the manuscript is interesting in its own right, as it provides not only an important copy of the B text, but also valuable evidence of the reception and transmission of the poem in the century following its composition. The manuscript is particularly valuable as an example of the correcting behavior of medieval copyists of *Piers* and other texts.

As discussed by the editors of the PPEA edition of Hm and by Turville-Petre in a separate essay, the corrections are extensive and numerous, and the motives for them are complex. Seven blocks of text have been erased and rewritten, "in every case in order to incorporate a missing line or two."[5] At least three scribes were involved in correcting the text of *Piers*. Two main hands are responsible for copying the poem: Hand 1 copied P. 1–2.207, fols. 113r-120v, with Hand 2 continuing from 2.208–20.386, fols. 121r-205r. Hand 3 rubricated *Piers*, *Expositio sequentiarum*, and *Siege of Jerusalem*, and also made corrections to both *Piers* and *Prick of Conscience*, including three blocks of text in *Piers* ranging from seven to eighteen lines in

length.[6] It seems likely that *Piers* sat unrubricated for a quarter of a century or more before the rubricator worked on a number of texts in the manuscript and made additional corrections to *Piers*. Corrections, whether by the original scribes or the rubricator, were motivated by a variety of factors, including missing lines, minor changes to phrases, corrections of scribal error, and especially changes to spelling, "with particular attention to final <e>."[7] To add to this complexity, the editors of the PPEA edition were not able to agree on the number of exemplars used by the three hands responsible for *Piers*, with the disagreement centering upon whether there is evidence to support the theory that the rubricator/corrector (who was perhaps working a few decades later) had an exemplar that differed from that used by Hands 1 and 2 and whether "there is clear evidence that in his corrections the rubricator has used a manuscript from a different family."[8]

For our purposes, I wish to call attention to two facts. First, as Turville-Petre notes, while scribes copying medieval literary manuscripts certainly produced many errors that eroded the integrity and accuracy of the original texts being copied, within the tradition of *Piers Plowman* there is also ample evidence of "the very considerable trouble that the scribes took to get their text right, if possible even righter than their exemplar."[9] Second, *Piers Plowman* manuscripts tend to be very complicated sites of overlapping scribal, authorial, and editorial activities, a claim that will be obvious, and indeed risk understating the case, for anyone who has labored to edit the poem or sort out what is happening within or between manuscript copies of it. This single copy of the poem involved at least three accomplished scribes who were subsequently engaged with making hundreds of corrections, either to themselves or one another, corrections that were usually motivated by specific goals pertaining to improving the final copy of the poem. And these changes were sufficiently complex that three editors working together were not able to come to an agreement over the exemplars used in these correcting activities; it is quite possible that there were at least two exemplars *in situ* where the manuscript was copied. Keeping in mind that this is merely one manuscript copy of one version (the B text) of a poem that exists in at least three versions and more than fifty manuscripts, it is easy to see why *Piers* is regarded as the Mount Everest of Middle English textual criticism. Being mindful of these things should also serve as an antidote to envisioning the poem as a fixed – or fixable – entity, whether subsequent printed or electronic texts present it as such or not.

Crowley's 1550 editions

In quick succession in 1550, almost two centuries after Langland composed *Piers Plowman*, the Protestant printer and polemicist Robert Crowley published three editions of the poem, which, as noted above, he mistakenly and anachronistically believed to be in line with his own Reformist agenda.[10] While other English literary texts had been printed as early as c. 1477, when Caxton printed Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *Piers Plowman* remained unprinted despite continued interest in the text, as evidenced by the continued production of manuscript copies of the poem.[11] Crowley notes that he had gathered "togyther suche aunciente copies as I could come by" to serve as his source texts.[12] The chief source of his first edition is an unknown B text manuscript, but as discussed in the introduction to Kane and Donaldson's edition, and in greater detail in Carter Hailey's dissertation, the manuscript was clearly related closely both to Hm 128 and to Trinity College Cambridge B.15.17 (W). These three also bear a close relationship to Toshiyuki Takamiya MS 23 (S), *olim* Sion College MS, a sixteenth-century copy that is late enough that its copyist may have consulted Crowley's edition.[13] As Hailey notes, a remarkable feature of Crowley's second edition "is that it was not just reprinted, but to large degree re-edited," with changes made to "many hundreds of readings" from evidence introduced from

new manuscript exemplars.[14] This is particularly remarkable given the fact that the first edition was such a success, apparently selling out in months, and that the second edition was produced so quickly after the first. Likely sources for emendations found in Crowley's second and third editions are Cambridge University Library MS Ll.iv.14 (C2) and Cambridge University Library MS Gg.iv.31 (G).[15]

The sheer and unavoidable complexity of Crowley's editions should be apparent even from this brief introduction. Once again we have multiple threads that are difficult if not impossible to disentangle, including the multiple manuscripts used within and among the three impressions of the poem. Crowley's editions also provide good examples of the ways that manuscript and print culture are bound up together. It goes without saying that all editions of literary works that predate printing must have as their ultimate sources manuscript copies of those texts, and that the publishers and printers of first editions of these works must have had direct access to manuscript copies, or worked with someone who did. It is another matter altogether to uncover and sort out these relationships, and the trajectory of history often adds further layers even as it seeks to uncover earlier ones. Consider, for example, the complex ways in which Crowley's editions are interwoven with the other texts discussed in this essay: his first edition was directly related to a number of other early manuscripts, including the lost copy from which he worked directly and a common ancestor shared with Hm and W. A later manuscript, S, is from this same family and perhaps even used the printed text as a source. The second and third impressions add relationships to other manuscripts. In their printed critical edition, Kane and Donaldson confer manuscript status upon Crowley's editions, i.e., they deem the text to be as reliable as a good manuscript copy, and more reliable than some manuscripts. Burrow and Turville-Petre also value it this way in their electronic edition, which incorporates both Hm and Cr1.

The Kane-Donaldson Athlone B text

In 1975 George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson published their landmark Athlone Press edition of the B text of *Piers Plowman*, which built upon Kane's previous work on the 1960 Athlone edition of the A text. The edition constituted a milestone not only for *Piers* scholarship, but also for textual criticism itself, and was especially influential on subsequent approaches to editing Middle English texts. As Tim William Machan notes, Kane "brilliantly exposed the problems of recension and has done a great deal to demonstrate the complementary natures of textual and interpretive studies."[16] Moreover, Kane's ideas constitute "the best-articulated theoretical position in Middle English textual criticism."[17] As is typically the case with work this influential, the edition has attracted enthusiastic supporters and detractors, with good reasons for both positions.[18] My focus here is limited to the ways in which the Athlone editions subsume previous iterations of the poem into themselves.

Kane and Donaldson consulted seventeen manuscripts along with the three Crowley impressions in creating their edition. In keeping with the usual procedures for eclectic editing, they selected a base text (W) and emended it using readings from other manuscript witnesses where they deemed that those readings were closer to or identical with the text Langland intended. But they broke with tradition in their rejection of recension, their decision to establish a text prior to classifying their manuscripts (the obverse of the normal procedure),[19] and their decision to treat each variant reading on a case-by-case basis. Their treatment of variants reflected their beliefs regarding the use and value of individual manuscript copies of the poem and to some extent dictated how they would handle manuscript evidence. The editors worked from a conviction "that no manuscript is sacrosanct; no manuscript is demonstrably 'closer to' or 'more remote from'

the original except with regard to particular reading."[20] While there is a certain power and logic to this approach, it necessarily erases concrete examples of what *Piers Plowman* was – i.e., specific iterations of the poem constructed by medieval scribes and read by medieval readers – with a hypothetical one, namely Kane and Donaldson's conception of Langland's intended text.

The business of the Athlone editions, and indeed of any critical edition, is to provide one sort of authoritative answer to the question "what is *Piers Plowman*?" (or whichever text is being edited). In the case of an eclectic edition such as the Athlone B text, the specific goal is the recovery of a text that is as near as possible to an intended authorial original. There are many virtues to such a goal, and editions produced responsibly along these lines form the foundation of literary studies and many other humanistic endeavors. But of course the approach also comes with inherent limitations. Among these are the ways in which previous iterations of the work are decontextualized as they are subsumed and recombined. This is particularly the case with Kane and Donaldson's handling of variants, as Machan articulates:

> In divorcing readings from their manuscript contexts and the manuscripts, in turn, from the social environments that produced them and in which they meant, Kane and Donaldson adopt a procedure reminiscent of the New Critical separation of literary texts from cultural contexts. At the same time, however, they thereby accommodate the humanist demands for a lexical, idealist conception of the work.[21]

In short, the Kane-Donaldson edition subsumes the sorts of complex evidence found in previous iterations from the manuscript and print history of the poem such as those represented by Hm and the Crowley editions, adding to this tradition yet another version of *Piers Plowman* that demonstrates a complex interweaving of previous versions of the poem and the overlapping (and often conflicting) intentions of multiple authorial, scribal, and editorial roles. It of course does not in fact replace or overwrite previous versions – Hm and the Crowley prints are still with us after all – but in practice an edition of the stature of the Athlone B text can have the effect of dominating the incautious reader's notion of what *Piers Plowman* is.

The PPEA edition of Hm

The final two versions of *Piers Plowman* that I will consider are editions, one documentary and one critical, published by the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive. I should note at the outset that I currently serve as co-director of the PPEA, and thus my position is one of discussing my understanding of the goals and rationale of our publications as opposed to that of a disinterested critic of them. My aim is to discuss how we are using digital media to accommodate some of the multiple textual and authorial/editorial threads that seem inextricable in other media. Vol. 6: San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 128 (HM and HM2) first appeared as a CD-ROM edition published in 2008 by the Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts (SEENET).[22] The edition was later ported to the web, along with six other documentary editions of *Piers* manuscripts originally published by SEENET; new editions continue to be published, with all of them now being published directly to the web.

As with other PPEA documentary editions, Vol. 6 offers a variety of textual layers for the reader to navigate. The heart of the edition is an XML-encoded transcription of the portion of the manuscript containing *Piers Plowman* linked to color digital images of all relevant leaves. The encoding captures a wide array of physical features of the manuscript and scribal activity, including, for example, rubrication, erasures, overwriting, marginalia, shifts in hand, and insertions and deletions. When used in conjunction with style sheets developed by SEENET, this mark-up

facilitates multiple views of the text by suppressing or including text based on how it is tagged. Each of the views is designed to feature a different site of authority. The Scribal style sheet "represents as closely as possible both the readings and features of the manuscript text as well as the most information about editorial interventions." The Diplomatic view is identical to the Scribal with the exception that it "suppresses all notes, marginalia not in one of the three text hands, and indications of error or eccentric word division." The Critical view presents a "reconstructed, putative text" that reads "as it was intended to appear after correction." Finally, the AllTags style sheet, "as its name implies, is intended to display the full content of mark-up in XML tags."[23] There are, then, a total of six ways that a reader may encounter the text: via any of the four style sheet views available from a drop down menu within the edition; via the color images of the manuscript; and by reading the XML transcription, which is available on the site, directly.

Huntington MS 128, Crowley's editions, and the Kane-Donaldson edition all employ previous versions of the poem available in one or more media to construct a new iteration of it. Each of these also shows the traces of multiple agents – scribes, correctors, editors, authors – combining in highly complex and overlapping ways. The PPEA edition of Hm in turn interacts with each of these three via rich mark-up that not only encodes the text but also its relationship(s) to other manuscripts and critical texts. As an example, I have placed below the full encoding for a single line of the text, Passus 1, line 142, *loke thu suffre him to seye and sytthen lerne it after*:

<l id="Hm.1.142" n="KD.1.146"> loke thu suffre him to seye and sytthen
<app loc="Hm.1.142">
<lem wit="Hm Cr C2 F">
<add place="inline" hand="handx">lerne</add>
</lem>
<rdg wit="Most other mss">lere</rdg>
</app>
<add place="inline" hand="handx">it after</add>
<note type="textual" place="unspecified" anchored="yes" id="Hm.1.142.n.1">
<ref targOrder="U">Hm.1.142:</ref> CrHmC <hi rend="sup">2</hi> F have <hi rend="it">lerne</hi>, where other <hi rend="bold">B</hi> manuscripts have <hi rend="it">lere</hi>. The <l> of <hi rend="it">lerne</hi>is perhaps written over an erasure, but the rest of the phrase is added in a different ink over a blank space. CrWHmGH omit the following line (supplied here in the spelling of L):
<hi rend="it">
For thus witnesseth his worde worcheth þow þere <seg type="shadowHyphen">-</seg> after
</hi>. </note> </l>

Walking through the transcription and mark-up in this line will help to demonstrate just how layered and intertextual the edition is. The line id, Hm.1.142, indicates that this is line 142 in Passus 1 of the poem. This corresponds to line 146 in the Kane-Donaldson edition, as indicated by Kd.1.146. As the contents of the <note> tag indicate, and as is clear upon inspecting the manuscript in person or via the provided color image of the folio (117v), the line was initially incomplete, reading only *loke thu suffre him to seye and sytthen*; another hand subsequently finished the line in the space left at the end, adding *lerne it after*. The <app> tag in this edition is used to supply information traditionally available in the apparatus of a critical edition. The lemma, indicated by <lem>, is *lerne*, a reading that Hm shares with Crowley (Cr), Cambridge University Library MS Ll.4.14 (C2), and Corpus Christi College Oxford 201 (F). Most other

manuscripts read *lere*, as indicated by the reading <rdg> tag. The <add> tags indicate that this inline addition is by an unknown scribe (handx), meaning that the editors have not identified it as the hand of either of the two main scribes who worked on the text (hand1 and hand2) or the rubricator (hand3). Finally, it is noted that Hm is one of only five texts (including Crowley once again) to omit a line that follows this in most other witnesses.

While not every line has mark-up quite this dense, this sample line is not atypical either. When multiplied across the more than 7,000 lines of the B text, it becomes clear just how much information is layered within this edition. Digital media provide a level of transparency unavailable – and for the most part unattempted – in previous media. As discussed above, Hm (the manuscript) is the site of many overlapping activities, including at least three scribes who are clearly not only copyists, but also engaged readers and editors. It also stands in a set of complex relationships to Langland's intended text of the B version of the poem, and thus also to the A and C texts, to other manuscripts within the family of B texts, and to Crowley's impressions. Many of these relationships are encoded and searchable within the PPEA edition of Hm; it is possible, for example, to search for every change of hand, to search for and find all identified points of erasure, or to search for affinities with or departures from Crowley's text identified by the editors. The user of the edition may also choose between a number of options for interacting with this information. Reading the manuscript itself from the supplied images offers the least intervention, editorial or otherwise. Diplomatic or Critical views offer, respectively, transcriptions that provide the fewest editorial changes or the least encumbered text. Reading the XML itself is not easy going for most, but provides the maximum amount of information concerning the complex interrelationships manifest in both the edition and the manuscript itself.

The Burrow-Turville-Petre PPEA beta archetype

In 2014 John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre published their edition of the B version archetype as part of the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive.[24] The edition broke new ground in a number of ways. Its goal was not the establishment of an authorial B text, the ultimate goal of the Kane-Donaldson edition, but rather the recovery of the B archetype (Bx), i.e., the text of the lost manuscript from which all extant B text manuscripts descended. As mentioned above, Kane and Donaldson did not believe that *Piers Plowman* was recoverable using the traditional editorial process of recension; specifically, they did not believe that Bx was recoverable. Despite this, as Burrow and Turville-Petre note, "the stemma of the B-version was in fact established by Kane and Donaldson (1975), and their collations were refined by Schmidt (1995, 2008), and further by Adams (2000). It has two independent branches, alpha (represented by R and F) and beta (the remaining manuscripts)." Burrow and Turville-Petre demonstrate conversely that Bx "can be established with certainty in the majority of lines," and that agreement of L (a highly reliable beta manuscript) and R (a highly reliable alpha manuscript) "is very strong evidence for Bx."[25] In theory, this innovation in editing *Piers Plowman* is not specifically related to medium; it would be possible to conceive of editing the archetype as it stood rather than a more directly authorial text, just as it would be possible to collate the manuscripts, create a stemma, and publish the results without creating an electronic edition. In practice, however, the editors link their innovations directly to digital media, noting of Kane and Donaldson that "[t]he medium of print did not give them sufficient space or means to distinguish conjectural emendation from emendation based on attested readings, or to discuss adequately the arguments against the received text and in favor of their preferred reading." Furthermore, they see digital media as substantially enabling their process: "Electronic publication gives us the opportunity of unpacking Kane-Donaldson's work and of attempting to determine, we hope

relatively uncontroversially, the readings of Bx, as a preparation for the final step of seeking to establish an inevitably controversial critical text of *Piers Plowman*. It gives us space to assess the merits of individual variant readings and to express hesitation where we feel it."[26]

The edition also broke new ground technologically, particularly with its critical apparatus. The editors used a total of ten witnesses – nine manuscripts (including Hm) plus the Crowley edition (Cr1). Of these ten, eight had been published previously as documentary editions by the PPEA (i.e., they are available with full mark-up and images, just as Hm is). Burrow and Turville-Petre not only used the XML-encoded files available via the Archive, but also structured their edition so that the critical apparatus makes direct interactive use of those editions. As shown in Figure 5.1, the edition combines traditional critical notes (available here in a pop-up window that can be opened and closed), with a new form of apparatus. The note in this image discusses the editors' reason for choosing *abouten* versus *alle aboute* as their reading for Bx, the sort of note one expects to see many hundreds of in a critical edition. Clicking on the line number in the left margin provides an innovative new way of interacting with the manuscript witnesses that lie behind this decision, as it calls up a new window at the bottom of the screen that lists in full the entire line from each of the new witnesses. This line collation software, which was developed by Paul Broyles, makes dynamic use of the documentary editions already published by the PPEA, utilizing them to populate the apparatus in a way that allows the user of the edition to see in full the evidence that the editors had before them when making their decisions. Furthermore, it allows the user to move between editions; clicking on a line in the apparatus for any of the eight texts published by the Archive facilitates switching to that exact point in the edition. Thus, for example, clicking on Hm.1.6 in the example provided in Figure 5.1 would link the user directly to that line of text within the edition of Hm. The advantages of this should be immediately apparent to anyone who has pored over the algebraic notation and highly compressed and encoded forms typically present in a critical apparatus.

Figure 5.1 Critical apparatus from *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, Vol. 9: The B-Version Archetype* (See accompanying website for the figure referenced in this essay).

This also represents a huge step forward in terms of making the processes and reasoning of the editors transparent to the user of the edition. This is a particularly welcome improvement over the Kane-Donaldson edition, which is famously difficult to use; their edition lacks an index or explanatory notes justifying their readings and is, in Brewer's words, "almost impossible to use for casual reference."[27]

Conclusion

It is easy to oversell the advantages of digital technologies for humanities research, and perhaps especially for editing and publishing texts, and too many examples of such claims are already in circulation. I do not wish to add to them. But there are real and clear advantages to electronic publishing that have only just begun to be realized and utilised, as I hope I have demonstrated in my discussion of the PPEA editions of Hm and Bx. Perhaps the most salient is the ability that digital media afford via mark-up, display, and hyperlinking, to encode and sort among the many overlapping roles and voices extant in single iterations and editions of the texts. In Huntington MS Hm 128 we saw the activities of at least three scribes who were both copyists and active editors; to these strands we must of course add Langland himself and the exemplar(s) consulted by these scribes. In the example of Crowley we had his manuscript sources, which have still not been identified and are likely missing, and the affinities that his text had with B-version manuscripts. And we have not only those changes made across his three editions,

but the usual stop press corrections that one would expect to find in a sixteenth-century book.[28] The Kane-Donaldson edition is, like most eclectic editions of a text surviving in this many manuscript copies, an extremely intricate interweaving of versions of the poem (including incorporating within itself some of the complexities of both Hm and Crowley).

Each of these iterations stands as one possible historically situated answer to the question "what is *Piers Plowman*?" And of course the same may be said of the PPEA editions, which will one day doubtless be replaced with yet more versions and be seen as mileposts in the reception history of the poem. But they are mileposts that have made significant progress in our collective ability to separate and articulate some of the many authorial, scribal, and editorial roles that have tended to be conflated, camouflaged, or erased in previous versions of the poem. This is true, for example, in Hm, where the roles of scribes are clearly encoded, separated, and searchable, or in Bx, where it is possible to move between documentary texts and the critical text and to see more clearly their relationships to one another. Recovering the text that Langland wrote, or intended to write, is an impossibility, even if the attempt to do so remains a worthy editorial goal. But each of the texts discussed here has some claim to being an answer to the central question that this essay poses; each, in a sense, is *Piers Plowman*. Thus the value of tools that allow us to distinguish and navigate the overlapping and frequently conflicting voices which together constitute this complex and enigmatic poem.

Notes

1 Charlotte Brewer, *Editing Piers Plowman: The Evolution of the Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7. See especially the sources cited in note 1 for further reading.

2 See the foreword to Crowley's edition of *Piers Plowman*, STC 19906, "The Printer to the Reader," ii^r–ii^v. William Langland, *The Vision of Pierce Plowman: Now Fyrste Imprynted by Roberte Crowley, Dwellyng in Ely Rentes in Holburne. Anno Domini. 1550. Cum priuilegio ad imprimendu[m] solum* ([Imprinted at London]: [By [R. Grafton for] Roberte Crowley, dwellyng in Elye rentes in Holburne], 1550).

3 For a full description of the manuscript, see the Introduction to *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive Vol. 6: San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 128 (HM and HM²)*, SEENET Series A.9, The Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts, 2014, accessed July 25, 2016, piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Hm/intro or C. W. Dutschke, *Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library*, 2 vols., vol. I, 161–3 (San Marino: The Library, 1989).

4 "Putting It Right: The Corrections of Huntington Library MS HM 128 and BL Additional MS. 35287," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2003): 41–65. Turville-Petre here cites Angus McIntosh and M. L. Samuels, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (New York: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), LP 8040 and LP 6910; these profiles are respectively for hands one and five out of a total of six scribes who copied the manuscript.

5 Turville-Petre, "Putting It Right," 45.

6 See Calabrese et al., section II.1.3.2, "The Rubricator as Corrector" for details. *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, accessed July 25, 2016, http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Hm/intro#Hm.II.1.3.2.

7 Turville-Petre, "Putting It Right," 48.

8 II.1.3.2.1 "One View of the Matter."

9 Turville-Petre, "Putting It Right," 41.

10 The three editions are STC 19906, 19907a, and 19907. Kane and Donaldson refer to them as Cr¹, Cr², and Cr³, respectively. For more on Crowley's misappropriation of Langland as a proto-Protestant, see Carter Hailey, "Giving Light to the Reader: Robert Crowley's Editions of *Piers Plowman* (1550)" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2001), 3–4, and John M. Bowers, "*Piers Plowman* and the Police," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1993): 1–50.

11 Possible reasons for this are the subject of my essay "The Rise of English Printing and Decline of Alliterative Verse," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008): 165–97.

12 From the foreward to Crowley's edition, STC 19906, ii^r. *Early English Books Online*, 2016.

13 Hailey, "Giving Light to the Reader," 33–4.

14 Ibid., 36.

15 Skeat proposed that annotations and a glossary added to C^2 in a sixteenth-century hand may be those of Crowley himself, and Kane and Donaldson note that corrections found in Cr^2 and Cr^3 are derived from a manuscript "very similar to the group ancestor" from which C^2 descended (19, n.13, quoted in Hailey 37). Hailey is the first to propose that "it is probable that Crowley used manuscript G" (38).

16 Tim William Machan. *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 56.

17 Ibid., 58.

18 See chapters 20 and 21 of Brewer, *Editing Piers Plowman* and Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts*, chapter 2 for good overviews of the merits and shortfalls of the Athlone editions.

19 See Brewer, *Editing Piers Plowman*, 383 and George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds. Piers Plowman: the B version: Will's visions of Piers Plowman, do-well, do-better and do-best, an edition in the form of Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17, corrected and restored from the known evidence, with variant readings. (London: Athlone Press, 1975), 17.

20 George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds. Piers Plowman: the B version: Will's visions of Piers Plowman, do-well, do-better and do-best, an edition in the form of Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17, corrected and restored from the known evidence, with variant readings. (London: Athlone Press, 1975), 63.

21 Machan, *Textual Criticism*, 59.

22 The edition was published in collaboration with Boydell & Brewer and the Medieval Academy of America. See piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Hm.

23 Introduction to Vol. 6, III.3, "Presentation of the Text: Style Sheets," *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, accessed July 25, 2016, http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Hm/intro.

24 *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, Vol. 9: The B-Text Archetype*, ed. John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, SEENET Series A.12 (The Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts, 2014), accessed July 25 2016, http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx.

25 II.1, "Alpha and Beta," *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, accessed July 25, 2016, http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx/intro.

26 "Nature of the Edition," http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx/intro.

27 Brewer, *Editing Piers Plowman*, 382.

28 Hailey's dissertation deals with such corrections in details; see Chapter 6, "Textual Variation."

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