

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

George H. Russell, "As They Read It": Some Notes on Early Responses to the C-Version of *Piers Plowman*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 20 (1989), 173-89

Permanent URL:

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Leeds Studies in English
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'As They Read It': Some Notes on Early Responses to the C-Version of *Piers Plowman*

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The scholarly literature of the years since the rediscovery of *Piers Plowman* attests many frustrations, but perhaps none more persistently than those relating to the identity of its author, or authors, and the nature of its presumed audience. Short of the discovery of new documentation, it is not easy to see how further clarification might be achieved, but, as some recent work, notably that of Professor Anne Middleton,¹ has shown, the existing documents still repay close study and often offer some assistance. One might, for example, ask what these documents have to tell us about early reader response, and, as a small contribution to this study, this paper looks at the surviving manuscripts of the C-version of the poem, at their shapes, their interrelationships, at their reflections of contemporary or subsequent concern. In doing so, it raises and exposes questions rather than resolves them.

At first glance, the pattern of textual relationship of these C-version manuscripts is unexciting. All surviving manuscripts may be shown to filiate eventually to an archetypal manuscript, and all are at least one remove from that archetype which, itself, is at least one remove from any postulated original shape of the C-version, whether as completed manuscript or draft, completed or unfinished. As such the situation is not abnormal, but it displays the complexity characteristic of a text frequently copied under diverse circumstances and over a relatively long period, and read and used in very different ways by readers with widely different backgrounds and, it would seem, different interests and responses.

The first of these readers will obviously be the revising poet, and we know, inferentially, what he read: he read a scribally prepared copy of the B-version which contained a good deal of error. He seems not to have had access to anything like an author's fair copy or even to his own final draft, though it appears that the manuscript which he elected, or was forced, to use offered a better B-text than that of the archetype of the surviving B-manuscripts.²

Even if we cannot say with confidence how he read this copy, we can infer how he responded to what he read. For whatever reason — and the author's haste, the state of his health, the physical state of that original, audience reaction to the earlier version, the political climate are all possible explanations — he seems not to have undertaken a line-by-line revision, though he may have begun with this in mind since the Prologue and Passus I, exceptionally, contain a good deal of close reworking of the text that suggests that he was looking hard at, and was sharply attentive to, the detail of the line and the detail of the disposition of the line. In the face of the centrally important role that the Prologue plays in the strategy of the poem, this occasions us no surprise; nor does the fact that this process, once begun, should spill over into the opening passus. Nevertheless, this close scrutiny was not to be his characteristic or permitted procedure. Instead, he seems to have decided, or to have been obliged, to confine his revising activity to the realization of two resolves. One was to rework certain parts of the poem which apparently now seemed to him unsatisfactory or inadequate. The Hophni and Phineas analogy, the rat and mouse allegory, the *meed-mercede* distinction, the 'autobiographical passage', the characterization of the Sins, the first appearance of Piers, the pardon, the theology and sociology of poverty, the meditation on marriage, the question of the salvation of the unbaptized, the vision of the tree of Charity come to mind as themes within the poem; there was also to be a great deal of deletion from, and addition to, the text, and some transposition. These are large examples — and there are many smaller ones — of rewriting and recasting that are the issue of a rereading not obviously generated by perceived corruption in his copy, but offering the fullness of recreation. It is such passages that give the C-version its distinctive shape and texture and make it so much more than a simple second edition of B.

But as he read in this apparently selective but purposeful way, the poet cannot have remained unaware of the deficiencies of his copy, and his response to those deficiencies which he perceived but declined to allow to stand generates a second kind of revising activity which we can identify. Sometimes it is simple repair work: the lost syntax restored, the damaged metre repaired, the misconceived substitution removed, and the like. But two things are to be said of this process. The first is that, having begun with immediately urgent repair, he does on a number of occasions allow craft to become technique, in Seamus Heaney's distinction, repair to become recreation. And this is conspicuously true where he seems to reject what his B-scribe offers him but where he cannot recall the lost A or B shape and where mere tinkering will not satisfy him. Major reconstruction will issue from this conjunction. The second is that he did not attend to all the transmitted error of his B

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copy, if by 'attend' we may be allowed to understand, on the one hand, either refusal to concern himself with what, under the given circumstances, could, and would have to, pass muster or, on the other, the simple passing over without any attempt to alter what was before him because the passage was not one to which, for whatever reason, he proposed any kind of revising attention. Indeed, there may well have been stretches of the poem which he never reread for this purpose, since the revising process does not seem to have been a protracted affair, rather to have been undertaken with urgency and haste.

The poet as reader is, of course, centrally important, but, as we know, he was not the only reader who reveals himself in the documents. A succession of readers followed him, and the first of these is the most difficult to identify and characterize. Perhaps, indeed, he never existed. But we have, at least, to ask whether he did, because there is some evidence in the surviving C-manuscripts that what we have identified as the 'revising poet' may not have finished even that kind of sporadic and directed revision that has been postulated or, at least, that the finished revision did not reach the copyists of the archetypal tradition and that what we are given in the archetypal text is an editor's construct from a sometimes disordered original, with its insertions, deletions, transpositions and alterations not properly or finally ordered, perhaps also with its final two passus missing or, if not missing, having escaped the revising process.

If this were so, how did this 'editor' read the draft? The evidence of the manuscripts suggests that he read it reverently; but this is treacherous ground. 'Reverently' proposes itself as the appropriate characterization because the archetypal tradition does not convey a sense of heavy editorial intervention, that is, substantial and perceptible modification by a hand other than that which we identify as that of the revising poet; it suggests, rather, a light hand which still left stand some awkward transitions, some unfinished lines, and some quite unconvincing readings inherited from the corrupt B-manuscript, thus allowing these to pass into the revised text. There may, of course, have been many places where he did intervene and where the identification of the correcting hand is not possible. This we cannot know.

In the nature of things, it is difficult to dogmatize. It is clear that there is frequent modification of the B-version, modification on a small scale along with massive reworking by way of recasting, relocating, adding, and subtracting. Not all of this is necessarily to be identified as the product of a single hand, that of the revising poet. There is the inevitable scribal intervention. But beyond this, the absence of revision in Passus XXI and XXII strongly suggests either a damaged

exemplar or an uncompleted revision; the ruinous or inchoate state of the transferred Hophni and Phineas exemplum (Prologue, ll. 106–21) seems clearly to confirm that the shape of the poem, at least as it reached the archetypal manuscript, was imperfect. And there are other places where we may, with some confidence, identify similar, if less spectacular, damage.³

This is obviously a very large question, not to be adequately discussed here. It is, for present purposes, perhaps enough to postulate the existence of a reader of special authority, who read the poem in the earliest stage of its transmission in its new form and left his mark upon it as he judged necessary. Perhaps, indeed, he was no editor as we would conceive the function; perhaps he was, rather, the supervisor of a scriptorium to which the revised manuscript found its way, a man who conceived his role modestly and made no heavy-handed attack upon a text which was only occasionally patently defective.

If this were so, his treatment anticipated that of the scribal tradition which has preserved the C-version for us. This — and here is the testimony of our most important body of early readers — was transmitted to us with what we may judge to be admirable fidelity. It is not a tradition characterized, other than exceptionally, by attempts at sophistication and re-editing. The textual tradition, which can be demonstrated to be bifid, is characteristically represented by the Huntington manuscripts Hm. 137, which is Skeat's text, and Hm. 143, which is Professor Pearsall's text, and varies only in recognizable detail, important as, in the long run, that variation proves to be in registering the texture of the poem. No manuscript of the tradition of Hm. 143 displays any wide variation in the kind of text that it attests, except in the localized interference found in the 'Ilchester' manuscript (University of London S.L. V. 88) and some signs of contamination in Douce 104, 'Ilchester' and BL Additional 34779; of the other tradition, two of the manuscripts, Bodley 851 and National Library of Wales 733B, are frequently widely variant, one, the Westminster manuscript, is notably aberrant and three others, Vespasian B. XVI, CUL Ff. 5. 35, and CUL Dd. 3. 13 show traces of lateral descent of readings, whether by consultation or reminiscence.

Of the manuscripts, then, only Bodley 851 and National Library of Wales 733B offer texts that are radically variant. Opinions are evidently divided upon the nature of the early passus of Bodley 851 — that is, whether it offers an ur-text anterior to A, as Professor Rigg and Dr Brewer hold, or a deeply corrupt and modified A-text as others would believe.⁴ Whatever, its latter half is an orthodox C-version of mediocre quality and identifiable textual affiliation. Either way, the manuscript is important to us because it offers a startling example of a not unfamiliar

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situation; there must, at some stage, have been a change of exemplar which has left us with a first part of the poem attesting either an ur-text or an A-text ruthlessly manhandled, yoked to a second part which offers a mildly inefficient copy of a C-text without any attempt at radical alteration.

Bodley 851 may, then, be the product of unusually heavy reader intervention; if so, it is merely an extreme example of that process registered in National Library of Wales 733B persistently and 'Ilchester' briefly, and these in turn are paralleled by texts supplied elsewhere in the *Piers Plowman* tradition: conspicuously in the Huntington Library manuscript Hm. 114 and the Sion College manuscript, the first of which offers an extraordinarily deformed B-text heavily and deliberately contaminated from both A and C, and the second a B-text so heavily corrupted as to register nearly 3000 variants not appearing in any other manuscript.

All these phenomena are unique and distinct, so far as we can judge. The versions which they offer appear in only one surviving manuscript, and there is no example of their altered text being copied and circulated, though it must be conceded that these manuscripts may be sole survivors of a dissident tradition otherwise lost and that there is no intrinsic impossibility that their shape of the poem might have been accepted by readers and circulated.⁵ Among them the difficult case is 'Ilchester', for throughout most of its text it is an orthodox C-version with close textual affiliations with a substantial group of manuscripts of good standing, its sole important departure being the unique form of its Prologue (which is extensively reworked in a passable but, as Professor Pearsall has shown, non-Langlandian long line, and which appropriates for this purpose material found elsewhere in the poem and combines it, not with a C-Prologue but with what is basically an A-Prologue).⁶ Whoever was responsible for this seems not to have been our revising poet or even the scribe of 'Ilchester', since the transferred material reappears in its original position; and since this radical reworking does not extend beyond Passus I, one can only presume that, if it represents full-scale revision, that revision was abandoned in its earliest stages. It may be that we have here the beginnings, not carried through, of the kind of harmony of the versions which we find fully attempted in the unique text of Hm. 114. This fragmentary attempt in 'Ilchester' and the completed attempt in Hm. 114 may, in the event, produce grotesque results, but in the present context they have, at least, the interest of showing us two readers who knew the poem intimately in its variant forms, sensed their differences, and sought to contrive what was, for them, a more satisfying shape of the poem.

These readings we properly see as more or less elaborate and complete reworkings of the whole or part of the poem, reflecting either a determination to

improve the original or transmitting a form of it so altered that it no longer attests a recognizable shape of the putative original. There are, however, many more manuscripts where the agreement in the shape of the text is firm and where we meet our largest identifiable group of readers, those who, by choice or under direction, undertook the copying of the long text with no thought of conscious modification.

They are a group in terms of their avocation, and, like any group, they are a diverse collection in their competence in reading, writing, organizing, and laying out their copies. Langland, characteristically, expressed no concern about his scribes; so far as we know, he had no designated patron, sponsor, or audience to or for whom the poem was to be produced. There is no evidence that he shared, or indeed was in a position to share, the concerns of contemporaries like Chaucer and Gower. But he knew of, and feared, the damage and falsification of dishonest or incompetent scribes.

While we would sense that Langland's lack of expressed concern was justified in the transmission of the C-version, we need to recall the extremely unsatisfactory nature of the B-tradition and the degree to which its lineaments were deformed in transmission and to remember that Langland himself was aware of this. We need also to be quite clear that, when we accept with gratitude the prevailing accuracy and reliability of his C-scribes, we nevertheless inherit in their copies a great mass of error.

Scholarship has rightly selected Hm. 143 as the manuscript which, by virtue of its completeness, the apparent conviction carried by its readings, and its lack of wilfulness, and in spite of its eccentricities, is the most reliable single witness to the shape of the C-archetype. It is, nevertheless, sobering to realize that, while it is regarded as a 'good' manuscript, a count comes up with an average of one identifiably false reading unique to this manuscript every nine lines. A good scribe, then, unaided contributes something like three hundred false readings across the length of the text. But we need to keep the matter in due perspective; such a figure is alarmist and misleading. That total comprises mostly mechanical errors which are easily identified and are normal to the process of copying. They are overwhelmingly slips of the pen: mechanical misreadings, eyeskips, misspellings, and the like; they are not, in general, deliberate attempts to improve the copy, and, indeed, if we study the pattern of their appearance we can see, in the periodic accumulation of error, fatigue as the source of many of them.

But the designated scribe was not the only near-contemporary reader of the poem represented in Hm. 143. This scribe presumably worked in a shop or a scriptorium, and, as seems to have been customary with the C-manuscripts at least,

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he was given the task of copying the entire poem. From his practised formata hand we would judge him to be a good professional scribe, and his employer presumably regarded him as reliable. But he was not left without scrutiny; he had a supervisor who reviewed his work and left evidence of his activity. He corrected a number of the scribe's errors; he added a simple *ordinatio* of the text; he supplied running titles and marginal notes; he attended to the rubrication and inserted guides for the rubricator.⁷ But, for some reason, the corrector did not finish his task. His supervising activity perceptibly slows down as the poem nears its end, and the last folios bear a distinctly unfinished appearance, as being both written with apparent haste and lacking supervising attention. Why, we obviously cannot know. It is not a cheap manuscript; it is not a reader's self-copy; it has an evidently professional appearance. Were there no buyers for it? Was its prospective buyer out of patience with copying delays? Was it a copy on order upon which the owner did not wish to spend any more time or money? Was he dissatisfied with its quality? Obviously we can only speculate.

Each of the manuscripts offers a different version and consequence of the process of copying. They are a heterogeneous collection which are singularly unselfconscious and taciturn about their origins. We know the names of four of the early readers who produced texts for us – Preston in BL Additional 35157, Thomas Lancaster in Hm. 137, Adrian Fortescue in Digby 145, and John Cok in Gonville and Caius 669*/446.⁸ Of these, the first two, we would guess, were professional scribes who supply their names in a colophon; the third, we know, was a Tudor nobleman of distinguished family who went to execution under Henry VIII; John Cok was a London religious.

We might pause briefly to see what these early readers tell us. Preston himself tells us little. He was, we may judge from his work, a competent professional. His layout is good, his parchment well prepared, his hand a clear but certainly not elegant or elaborate formata. His manuscript is a utility copy of good quality without pretension and without vice. In fact, its claim to our attention in the present context is not so much what Preston made of the text as an early reader, but rather what later readers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made of his work, for this is one of the manuscripts which aggressively displays a part of the progress of its pilgrimage to us. It has been hard used. It is now battered and worn, and it carries a massive supply of commentary by later readers which tells us that in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries it was in the hands of two or three articulate and aggressive Reformers for whom the Anglican Settlement was only a slight improvement upon the popery which is the marrow of the poem. Their views

on almost all the major themes and concerns of the poem are stridently registered in heavy marginal annotation, and, for them, the poem is a relevant and apposite commentary upon the issues of their own world.

This placid original with its urgent commentary is an interesting contrast to its genetic partner, Douce 104, a manuscript of known date since its colophon tells us that it was completed in September 1427. In this case there are two kinds of early reader intervention — the first, distinct signs of textual contamination by its scribe or one of the scribes in the descent of his exemplar, and the second, appearances of lexical modernizations and other alterations, probably by a second hand. Yet another hand has added the marginal supply which seeks to provide a rudimentary *ordinatio* for the text, while the large collection of marginal illustrations, unique among *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, may well be by yet another hand since they appear to be later than the supply. But it is not their date or even their origin that are of immediate interest in the present context; it is rather the keen sense of the moments and the personae of the poem that they display. Whoever drew them read the poem with attention and impressive critical intelligence. Beyond this, the readers of Douce 104 are silent; there is no further supply of any significance, and the scholarly Douce is the only later reader to leave any mark upon it. And this, *a fortiori*, is true of Lancaster's manuscript, Hm. 137. This handsomely written manuscript of the best professional standard bears almost no marks of later use; it looks very much like a library copy but carries no identifying marks which might confirm this and locate the provenance.

The case of the third scribe whom we can name, that of Digby 145, is different again — and exemplary. Adrian Fortescue and his family are well known to history. For our purposes, however, his interest lies in the perhaps startling proposition that his manuscript offers us: that of a conservatively orthodox nobleman of the first third of the sixteenth century taking the time to copy, along with one of John Fortescue's treatises, a full text of *Piers Plowman* (and doing this without any detectable attempt to intervene in or to censor a text which some at least of the Reformers were identifying as revelatory of the corruption of the medieval church and supportive of their own initiatives for change, and which they were soon to print as such), and to copy it without any attempt to renovate the lexis and syntax. His manuscript, in fact, is a very accurate copy and suggests that Fortescue had no difficulty with the language or script and experienced no revulsion from, and certainly offered no attenuation of, the Langlandian critique of his contemporary church and society.⁹ We might, as a postscript to this, note that the manuscript descends to us through the collection of Kenelm Digby, a convert to Catholicism,

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and, knowing Digby's staunch attachment to his new faith, we might wonder if the manuscript is not, in some sense, a relic. This might be one of the reasons for its freedom from later annotation and interference: a holy object, perhaps, the artifact of a martyr. But we should not push such a notion too far. After all, Digby also obtained his A-version manuscript from Fortescue's collection, and he also possessed, in Digby 171, a manuscript once owned by Stephen Batman, who annotated it in most approving terms even though he was, we recall, a voluble and enthusiastic Reformer and chaplain to Matthew Parker. To this we might add that Digby also owned the anthology containing another text of the C-version now labelled Digby 102. All this rather suggests his deep interest in the poem, consistent, of course, with his documented interest in the antiquities and beliefs of the Middle Ages.

Any sense of surprise at the nature of Fortescue's enterprise directs our attention to Royal 18. B. xvii, another sixteenth-century manuscript copied not much later than Fortescue's, which, however, shows distinct signs of difficulty with the language — and apparently with the script — of the exemplar. Perhaps these signs of incomprehension are the explanation for its otherwise unlikely conjunction of *Piers Plowman* with *Piers the Plowman's Creed*, which, not surprisingly, do not appear together elsewhere. The final bizarre touch that this Royal manuscript offers us is that it is at least possible that the name of an early reader, perhaps owner, of the manuscript, John Gylldon, is followed by what appear to be the letters 'o.p.', and, if one is correct in reading them thus, they must stand for *ordo praedicatorum* and identify Gylldon as a Dominican friar. It is not easy to imagine a Dominican friar relishing the reading of either text, unless he were about to become an ex-friar. But whoever the early recorders and owners of Royal 18. B. xvii were, they did not seem to see the text as standing in need of confessional correction or modification. There are a good many alterations in hands other than those of the scribe in the earlier folios, but these do not seem to be tendentious; they seem rather to be corrections of real or imagined scribal misreadings.

Our fourth identified scribe is John Cok who signed Gonville and Caius 669*/446, a collection of Rollean texts. To these he adds an excerpt of twenty lines from *Piers Plowman* C, XVI, 181-200 α on a blank folio which follows the main texts. This, too, he signs with his own name. We shall meet him and his text again a little later. Here it is enough to say that he is a careful clerical scribe whose work is part of his vocation and was carried through under conditions likely to be very different from those of the other three. He is the only identified clerical scribe and,

as such, is perhaps a little unusual in so identifying himself, for one suspects that there are other manuscripts from the scriptoria of religious houses not so identified. His fragment is particularly interesting in what, despite its brevity, we may venture to identify as its very close textual relationship to CUL Ff. 5. 35 which, in turn, has in its expert textura hand the look of a clerically written manuscript.

These references to the ownership of individual manuscripts take us beyond the initial stage of reading and open what would seem a fruitful approach to the identification and understanding of early responses to the poem. In fact it proves to be a rather disappointing body of evidence; disappointing because we have little positive information about these early owners of the C-manuscripts, or, indeed, of those of any of the versions.

We can, of course, venture some inferences. We can, perhaps, say that no one of the C-manuscripts falls into the category of the great and elaborate Chaucerian manuscripts and that none, except for the special case of Digby 145, shows any identifiable sign of aristocratic patronage. There are special aspects of the copying and circulation of the C-version which we shall examine later, but we can offer here a couple of generalizations which can be sustained: the first, that it is a less frequently anthologized version than the other two; the second, that the absence of aristocratic patronage should not drive us to the opposite conclusion, namely that the manuscripts are to be associated with some kind of socially or ecclesiastically dissenting ownership. Indeed, a number of the manuscripts — for example, Hm. 143, 'Ilchester', Hm. 137, Vespasian B. xvi, and CUL Ff. 5. 35 — look like carefully executed products of good scriptoria and may well have been copied for wealthy or socially prominent patrons. We know from the evidence of wills that three priests owned copies of one or other version, and it appears in the inventories of libraries of two men with professional backgrounds. And we can go a little further than these generalizations since we know that Harley 6041 was owned by Sir William Hoo, a man who held administrative office under Richard II and was a landowner with holdings in France and England. Further, by the early part of the sixteenth century its ownership had passed to a monk of St Augustine's, Canterbury, and this, in turn, reminds us that, if there is any discernible pattern of early ownership, we can, with due caution, note the appearance of significant monastic, specifically Black Monk, interest. We have seen Harley 6041 at St Augustine's, Canterbury; 'Ilchester' may possibly have been at Fountains; Trinity College Cambridge 263 has associations with Christ Church, Canterbury; Bodley 851 was certainly owned by a monk of Ramsey, and Hm. 143 carries the name, apparently as a fifteenth-century owner, of John Redbery, and this name seems to

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be preceded by *Dan*, presumably as a title and hence, in contemporary usage, that of a monk.

This is not massive attestation granted the relatively large number of manuscripts that survive, but it may be held to be significant and is certainly the largest group of verifiable class ownership or interest. And to these we may annex the case of the Trinity College, Dublin, manuscript of the A-version with its well established Durham Priory associations. These associations, in turn, may recall an apparent relationship between the C-version and the condemned theological views of Uhtred of Boldon on the question of the salvation of the unbaptized in that Uhtred was a monk of Durham as well as an Oxford theologian and that after his enforced withdrawal from Oxford he lived at Durham or at its cell, Finchale.

Finally, we may return to Trinity College Cambridge 263, once part of an even larger manuscript, which supplies an excellent A and partial C-text. This manuscript formed part of the great benefaction of Thomas Nevile, Master of Trinity 1593–1615, and, before this, Dean of Canterbury. While this manuscript bears no clear marks of monastic ownership, it is known that Nevile obtained a large number of his manuscripts from the dispersed library of Christ Church, Canterbury, and it is clearly possible that this manuscript formed part of that plunder. The hand is a practised one, not obviously liturgical or display-professional in character, which writes an austere text which is totally without decoration, supply running titles, parsigns, or any of the normal apparatus of *Piers Plowman* texts. The one exception to this is that the Latin quotations are made to stand out from the text in a slightly modified form of the hand and are marked up for greater prominence. Beyond this it bears no other signs of early readership except for some discreet marks which may belong to the sixteenth-century hand which corrected a few errors, including the restoration of five missing lines which, it tells us, were discovered in another copy. This reader was, then, an interested and engaged reader of the poem. There are further interventions appearing quite suddenly in the final folios where several hands can be distinguished, including one restoring a phallic reference which had, presumably, been removed by a censor, and one identifying the source of Biblical quotations.

Two other manuscripts can be clearly identified with clerical ownership — the two fragments, Gonville and Caius 669*/446, and Professor John Holloway's manuscript. The former, a Shirley manuscript, was, as we have seen, copied by John Cok. We might pass over as insignificant this scrap of twenty lines on Free Will which he appends to his anthology. But it tells us more than we would expect. We know that Cok was a cleric attached to St Bartholomew's Hospital in the first

half of the fifteenth century, and this fragment tells us that he had access to a *Piers Plowman* manuscript and remembered, or wished to register, the present passage. That it is a kind of *aide-mémoire* to himself seems to be signalled by his change of hand from fere-textura to bastard anglicana, which may be assumed to be a less formal hand. As we shall see, there are reasons to connect Cok's excerpt with another manuscript.

The second of the fragments, that in the possession of Professor John Holloway, offers quite a different case. We know that this was owned by a cleric through the accident of its discovery beneath the floorboards of the Old Vicarage at Wickhambrook in Suffolk. Though now badly damaged, it once formed part of a manuscript of some elegance, the hand of which is not unlike that of Hm. 143, and its general textual character is apparently of the same tradition.

To this, as a brief coda, we might add the four lines of *Piers Plowman* copied in a fifteenth-century hand on a blank folio at the front of Hm. 143. These are the opening lines of the B-version of the poem, and so we know that one of the early readers of Hm. 143 had access to a B-manuscript. One wonders why he wrote out the lines. Simply as a pen trial? To register a variant form known to him? Unfortunately we have no way of knowing. What we do know is that he made no attempt to harmonize his B-version with the C-text of Hm. 143. And this observation serves to open the question of how engaged with the poem and how aware of the issues were the early readers of the poem.

Clearly some were. The corrector of Hm. 143 and the illustrator of Douce 104 knew where they judged the emphases of the poem to lie; the anthologizers variously judged its affiliations, and its very appearance in a large number of copies reaching well into the sixteenth century argues for continuing interest. But this interest only occasionally impinged directly upon the text. There is little evidence of what we might style tendentious or ideological copying activity. There seems to be no case in which a C-manuscript has been tampered with by the substitution of purposeful and tendentious alteration over a substantial area of text. There are, of course, scribal interventions, the reasons for which are clearly various. They may represent some kind of meddling officiousness; they may be the consequence of carelessness or stupidity or weariness. But equally they may be well-intentioned and partially successful attempts to rescue a damaged original, with the onus for the disordered state of the text lying further back in the process of transmission.

Just how important and yet how unpredictable the nature of the copying process can be is illustrated by comparing, for example, Trinity College Cambridge 263 with the Westminster manuscript and National Library of Wales 733B. All

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three are conjoint AC manuscripts, but this is their only point of concord. The Trinity manuscript maintains an excellent text throughout, and in both the A and C sections it is firmly established in its genetic relationship with Harley 6041 and the Liverpool University Chaderton manuscript. The AC conjunction clearly preceded the immediate process of copying the three manuscripts. The cases of Westminster and National Library of Wales 733B are quite different. In their A section they form a genetic pair with a text of the prevailing A standard. In their C section they are not a genetic pair. Westminster offers a weakened version of one of the two identifiable textual traditions and stands in a demonstrably close textual relationship with two other manuscripts. National Library of Wales 733B is quite different. Its text, while clearly of the same tradition, stands in no close relationship with Westminster and, instead, offers a wayward version of that tradition that has been exposed to heavy editorial attention and clearly represents a change of exemplar, since it is not credible to assume that the scribe or his supervisor would be patient with the A section and unpredictably impatient with the C.

But this kind of extended attention is not the only form of intervention that these early readers offer. There are some clear examples of what we can only call 'correction' in the most obvious sense of the word, and this is a phenomenon which seems to set the C-manuscripts apart from those of A and B where the data seem to suggest that there is no conclusive evidence of 'genuine' correction.

At least five of the C-manuscripts — Ff. 5. 35, Dd. 3. 13, 'Ilchester', Vespasian B. xvi, and Additional 34779 — contain, sometimes alone, sometimes in combination, readings that are clearly original, which have been lost in the traditions of the other manuscripts and which can only be present as a result of consistently inspired guesses or be the consequence of a knowledge of uncorrupted forms acquired either by memorial reconstruction or by consultation of a more accurate exemplar.

There seems little doubt that the last process, that is, consultation of another exemplar, did take place. As an example, we can see it happening before our eyes in Additional 34779 which is extensively corrected, apparently through the consultation of at least two other exemplars, one of which was a B-manuscript but which, interestingly, was not allowed to modify the revised strategy of C in the direction of B: it was used, instead, merely as a source for the occasional emendation of readings judged to be inferior or, on occasion, to supply short passages that had been removed from C. The other cases are variously different from this. The extreme is 'Ilchester' where, as we have seen, there is some initial sporadic heavy rewriting and relocation of material followed by minor corrections,

while the intruded readings of Ff. 5. 35, Vespasian B. xvi, and Dd. 3. 13 appear in otherwise undisturbed contexts. But the Vespasian manuscript has a further interest. It is established as standing in a close textual relationship with the very much later manuscript, Royal 18. B. xvii, but most of the corrected readings do not appear in the later manuscript. Does this suggest that their appearance in Vespasian is a phenomenon of the latest stages of its copying, perhaps even by the agency of its own scribe, and that the sixteenth-century manuscript represents a pre-corrupted version of the tradition? It would seem at least possible, and hence the early manuscript has a reader that its genetic partner does not know. Again, the fragile nature of our understanding of the means of the transmission of the text might be suggested by that phenomenon to which reference was made earlier, the apparently close textual relationship of Gonville and Caius 669*/446 and Ff. 5. 35. This is attested by the appearance in the twenty lines of their correspondence of five agreements in error. This is an extraordinarily high proportion of agreement and is further emphasized by another four agreements of the two in combination with a third manuscript. If this degree of correspondence were to persist through the length of the poem, we would be in the presence of two manuscripts of quite unusually similar shape.

These few notes might usefully be rounded off by two distinctive aspects of the C-tradition which may be the product of its early history. These seem to set it apart from A and B and may account for the very different picture that it offers. A and B, as they survive in their archetypal traditions, are in what we may venture to call a final form; the manuscripts in general represent at least a definable stage in composition, some kind of point of stasis in the creative process. C does not seem to be of this kind. It shows various signs of indecision and uncertainty that suggest rather an advanced but still unfinished draft perhaps put into its present form by a literary executor. If some such set of circumstances attended the second revision, this might also account for the otherwise not predictable linguistic complexion of the C-manuscripts, that is, as Professors McIntosh and Samuels have made us aware, their bearing the linguistic characteristics of quite a small area of the West Midlands. This linguistic homogeneity is absent from the copies of A and B and suggests that the C-manuscripts were copied and circulated in a restricted area where the relative integrity of the textual tradition and the appearance of consultation of other exemplars would be more easily explained.

It might even explain the extreme specificity of the Trinity College Dublin C-manuscript's memorandum on the identity of the author. In so restricted an area, an early owner of a C-manuscript could obviously be close to sources of

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information not available in those distant areas in which the A and B-manuscripts were copied and circulated. Indeed, Professor Samuels suggests that this linguistic homogeneity might be held to argue an 'authorial presence'. But we need to remember that this localism of the early circulation of C did not persist; its later readers were widely distributed throughout the country, and these early marks of restricted provenance in no way limited the range of its later readers, despite a tenacity which preserved its linguistic complex into those sixteenth-century copyings which stood at the threshold of its two-century oblivion.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Anne Middleton, 'Making a Good End: John But as a Reader of *Piers Plowman*', in *Medieval English Studies presented to George Kane*, edited by Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Woodbridge, 1988), pp. 243-66.

² This is a complex question which cannot be examined here. For details of the relationship of C to B, see *Piers Plowman: The B Version. Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best*, edited by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975), pp. 98-127.

³ For the purposes of this paper, attention might be directed to the following passages: Prologue 105-24; III 43-49; III 74; III 86; IV 127; VIII 35-42; VIII 86α-91; VIII 209; X 22; X 284; X 297; X 301; XI 127-28; XIV 164-66; XV 32-38; XVI 228-29; XVI 284; XVII 73; XVIII 2; XVIII 12; XVIII 39; XVIII 139; XVIII 202; XIX 24-25; XIX 84-86; XX 99. Line references are to *Piers Plowman* by William Langland, edited by Derek Pearsall (London, 1978).

⁴ For a statement of the issues see A. G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer, *Piers Plowman: The Z Version* (Toronto, 1983), pp. 1-2, and the review by George Kane in *Speculum*, 60 (1985), 910-30. I have no hesitation in accepting the position stated by Professor Kane.

⁵ Since this was written, the important article of Wendy Scase, 'Two *Piers Plowman* C-Text Interpretations: Evidence for a Second Textual Tradition', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 34 (1987), 456-63, sheds new light on this problem.

⁶ See Derek Pearsall, 'The "Ichester Manuscript" of *Piers Plowman*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 82 (1981), 181-93. I now share Professor Pearsall's opinion of the nature of the revision.

⁷ A less elaborate example of the same process may be seen in another C-manuscript, CUL Dd. 3. 13.

⁸ In Hm. 137 I accept the transcription Lankastre rather than the traditional Dankastre, though it is difficult to be certain of the identity of the heavily flourished initial capital.

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⁹ We might add to this the equally startling fact that in 1533, the year following his transcription, Fortescue joined the fraternity of the Black Friars. Langland would hardly have approved.