

THE EVOLUTION OF A POEM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE  
TEXTUAL TRADITION OF *PIERS PLOWMAN*\*

By G. H. RUSSELL

MANY of you, no doubt, will be apprehensive about the subject of this evening's lecture—a subject apparently highly technical and one drawn from an area to which the interests and tastes of educated readers rarely carry their owners. Nor should I wish to deny that the subject is remote, and that it is, in a sense, highly technical. My design this evening is simply to attempt to trace the stages by which a certain mediaeval poem assumed the form in which we now have it and to attempt to disentangle some of the threads of evidence which enable us to make guesses at the mode of composition and at the reasons which dictated the unusual process of revision and re-revision which is at the centre of the process of descent of *Piers Plowman*. The poem which I take as my subject is one to which a great deal of scholarly and critical attention has been paid, much of it at levels apparently higher than I shall attempt tonight. That much of this work retains great value I should not wish to deny: but that much of it has gravely under-estimated the complexity and the relevance of the problem of the shape of the poem that it seeks to explicate is also hard to deny. It is my view that we are overdue for a return to the fundamentals of the *Piers Plowman* problem, and what I have to say tonight is a modest attempt to do this—to look back and to try to evaluate the strength of the ground upon which our critical theories stand and to suggest, perhaps, that there still remains a good deal of work to be done before we can fruitfully attempt the fascinating and exacting task of appreciating and explicating this unexpectedly complex poem.

Again, I have chosen my subject deliberately as being one drawn from an area which is very much the concern of the Chair to which the Senate has appointed me, as being a subject to which over a number of years I have had to give deep thought and, by no means least, as being a subject to which my predecessor, Professor Mitchell, now Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who is unfortunately unable to be present this evening, has made and will make a distinguished contribution. And at the outset I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Mitchell and to my other colleagues in the *Piers Plowman* endeavour—Professor George Kane of London and Professor

\* Inaugural Lecture delivered by Professor G. H. Russell, M.A. (New Zealand), Ph.D. (Cambridge), in the Great Hall of the University on 14 June, 1962.

Professor Russell was appointed to be the McCaughey Professor of Early English Literature and Language as from 5 March, 1962.

Talbot Donaldson of Yale. Much of what I have to say this evening has been formulated and clarified as a result of discussion with these generous scholars, though I am sure that they would by no means agree with all, or perhaps even with much, of what I have to say. It is, then, in part as a tribute to Professor Mitchell's distinguished tenure of the McCaughey Chair that I have made my choice, and I take this opportunity of publicly expressing my admiration for the work which he did for the Department of English across its most difficult years and of expressing our sense of loss now that he has finally elected to devote himself to administration. It will not be easy for any successor to repeat Professor Mitchell's notable success.

Now I trust that you will forgive my saying a little about *Piers Plowman* before I turn to my particular subject for the evening since I am assuming that I cannot expect that all, or even many, of you will be familiar with the poem. *Piers Plowman* belongs to the age of Chaucer, that is to the second half of the fourteenth century, that period of notable and, in most ways, unexpected distinction in English literary history when without real warning we find a number of creative writers of genuine distinction working at the same time and by their efforts producing a literature which, for the first time, is to place England in the forefront of the European vernacular literatures. Chaucer is, of course, the name of greatest distinction in the period and his work is, indisputably, that of the finest quality. Yet he has contemporaries who participate to some degree at least in his quality, and amongst them is the author of our poem, *Piers Plowman*, a long poem in the native alliterative measure which seeks to describe in allegorical terms man's search for salvation.

It was a poem which apparently commanded an unusually large audience. It still survives in nearly sixty manuscript copies, almost all of them from the fifteenth century—a figure not so very far short of Chaucer's own tally, and a very substantial figure for any vernacular work of the English Middle Ages. If we may judge from these manuscripts, its audience was not the upper class audience of Chaucer, but something much humbler—a group of people satisfied with cheaply produced, unpretentious and often unimpressive manuscript copies in a century when the manuscript copies of authors like Chaucer and Lydgate were being produced with the greatest elaboration to meet the needs and tastes of a new and growing reading class. Clearly *Piers Plowman* does not fall into this bracket at all; yet it was widely read and many of its copies bear all the marks of close study. In part this apparently abnormally high reproduction and survival rate of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts may be adventitious, for it was one of the few vernacular texts from the Middle Ages which found favour with the Reformers of the sixteenth century and, presumably, also with their fifteenth century predecessors. In fact, between 1550 and 1560 the poem was printed several times and apparently managed to command a fairly wide reading public. This sixteenth century popularity contrasts strikingly and perhaps strangely with its almost total eclipse from the end of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, when new interest was revived in it. It was not until then that it again found publishers, and it was, in fact, not until Walter Skeat's great series of editions for the Early English Text Society which appeared over the

years 1867–1884 that there was any real evidence of rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup> Since that time it has held to a limited popularity which seems to be proclaimed by its production in a modernized form by such publishers as Dent in their Everyman series and Penguin in their series of translations, and by its inclusion in a series of readings produced some years ago by the B.B.C.

Now even the grossly over-simplified description of the poem which I gave earlier when I described it as a “long poem in the native alliterative measure which seeks to describe in allegorical terms man’s search for salvation”, raises difficulties of all kinds, and this is a prognostication of the difficulties ahead. In fact there is very little about *Piers Plowman* which is non-controversial, very little upon which scholars and readers will not disagree. You will notice, for example, that I spoke of the author of *Piers Plowman* but did not name him. And yet if you consult the Oxford University Press edition of the poem you will find it unhesitatingly ascribed to a William Langland—and certainly there is evidence which declares that that was the author’s name.<sup>2</sup> But the measure of the disagreements about the poem may be grasped if you will also look up the appropriate chapter of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, still in some sense a standard book of reference.<sup>3</sup> There you will be told not that William Langland wrote the poem but that it was composed by five different men, all except one of them nameless. And so it is with almost every aspect of the poem. There are few grounds more bitterly contested than that of *Piers Plowman*, and few areas of English literature where there is so little agreement even upon fundamentals.

Fortunately we have no time for all of these contentious questions, though to some of them we shall have to turn later. For the moment we can confine ourselves to factual matters—and happily they are those upon which almost all would agree. You will notice that in the title of this lecture I have spoken of the evolution of a poem, and this phrase is designed to draw attention to what has proved the most interesting and the most difficult question of all—that is, the fact that *Piers Plowman* does not, as does, say, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, appear in its manuscripts as a poem of single and simple form. Rather it appears in an apparently bewildering variety of shapes and forms which at first glance might lead one to believe that its textual history was a matter of chaos. And certainly at various times scholars have taken this view. But it was that greatest of all the early students of Middle English, Walter Skeat, who found the key to the problem and proposed the solution which finds general acceptance today and which has withstood rigorous scrutiny. Skeat demonstrated that the poem had, in the course of its evolution at the hands of its author or authors, assumed three forms. These three forms he called, in their presumed chronological order of composition, the A-, the B- and the C-texts (sometimes called the A-, B- and C-versions). Of these the A-text is the shortest and appears

<sup>1</sup> W. W. Skeat (ed.), *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman*, Early English Text Society, original series 28, 38, 54, 81, 1867–1884.

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Skeat (ed.), *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman* (Oxford, 1886).

<sup>3</sup> *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge, 1907 et seq.), ii, pp. 1 et seq.

to have been broken off by its author in face of something like a structural impasse which made its completion impossible. This version would seem to date from about 1369—though here again there would be wide disagreement, and some would place the poem as early as 1362. This essentially incomplete poem was taken up again and some seven or eight years later there was completed another version—the B-text—massively amended and recast, and provided with a continuation which more than doubled its length. It is this form of the poem which is best known today and which is usually accepted as *the* version of *Piers Plowman*. But once more the poem did not satisfy and it underwent yet another revision, somewhere between 1383 and 1387, this time issuing in an extensively revised form, which however retained the general shape and dimensions of B-. This is what we now call the C-text.

This division of the extant manuscripts of the poem into these three categories is, as I have said, generally accepted, though there have been demurs, most recently in 1950 by one of the conveniently anonymous reviewers of *The Times Literary Supplement*. And there is, I believe, no doubt that Skeat's proposed division is a valid one and one which reflects the three successive attempts to bring the poem to a successful completion. As so often, of course, the situation is complicated by the forms which the poem assumes in the manuscripts. Here we find a great deal of mixing of the three texts, in particular the grafting on to the early and short A-text of the additional material of one of the later expanded versions to produce conjoint texts, of which the first part is an A-text while the second is, say, a C-text. These editorial or scribal constructs, of course, rarely offer difficulty since the two components are normally easily distinguished and referred to their respective traditions, whether A-, B- or C-. Much more sinister is the situation which arises when a manuscript of one particular version is "contaminated" by one or more manuscripts of another version—that is, where it is, throughout the whole or part of its length, altered into some sort of correspondence with another form of the poem, and a bastardized text which is neither A-, B-, nor C- is produced and the manuscript becomes, for textual purposes, largely useless. As we should expect, the manuscripts of the shortest and earliest version of the poem, A-, are those which are most subject to contamination and some, at least, of the grievous textual problems of the A-text stem from this process.

What we then have is a large and heterogeneous collection of manuscripts testifying with varying fidelity and usefulness to three successive stages of the poem. Our first task is to attempt to purge away the mass of textual corruption which inevitably accompanies any work which has descended to us through the medium of handwritten copies. It is only after this exacting and difficult task is completed that we can, with any confidence, begin to address ourselves to the poem itself.

Now this task has been going on for some time and is approaching its end. We already have a new A-text in print<sup>4</sup> and the critical editions of B- and C- are nearing completion. Certainly, enough work has now been done to make the main lines of the subject clear, though one can be quite sure that the interpretations of the evidence

<sup>4</sup> George Kane (ed.), *Piers Plowman: the A-Version* (London, 1960).

revealed will be as various and conflicting as they have always been in *Piers Plowman* studies.

Yet on one point at least there can hardly be dispute. Professor Kane's A-text has revealed the extent of the damage that has been done to the poem by its scribes and early editors and has made it clear to us that the A-text is now hardly recoverable in anything approaching its original form. His text, based on a manuscript different from that used by Skeat, has been subjected to rigorous and courageous emendation which has produced a vastly improved form of this earliest shape of the poem, but few (and least of all Professor Kane) would feel any confidence that the result accurately represents the poem as it left its author's hand.<sup>5</sup> Even our best A-manuscripts are far removed from the postulated date of the completion of the poem, and this chronological gulf is a pretty accurate index of a similar gulf between the original form and its present lineaments. And this gulf is not simply the result of scribal stupidity and/or perverseness. *Piers Plowman* is a poem whose focus on contemporary life and attitudes is constant and unwavering. It is a poem in which even the least sensitive reader continually finds himself mirrored. This is part of the vitality of the poem, but it is also, unfortunately, a large part of its textual vulnerability. And here Professor Kane's warning is most timely. He reminds us of a situation which no *Piers Plowman* editor can afford to forget. I quote him :

“ To sum up : while scribes evidently had a sense of obligation to reproduce their exemplar *verbatim*, they departed from this as readily when there was need to cover up their own mistakes as when their original was corrupt. If they mistook the meaning of this exemplar they did not refrain from substitution to bring what they wrote into line with their misconception. In general they were anxious to make the text more easily intelligible. To this end they very often made its utterance more explicit, changing its wording so that relationships of meaning were more fully expressed. They were quick to find the poem difficult ; sometimes they were unable to do more than make an approximate visual substitution for the expression which baffled them. They made many other substitutions which glossed difficult expressions more or less precisely. The deliberate character of such substitutions is shown by their readiness to sacrifice the metre of a line in the course of making its meaning easier.

“ It does not seem probable that these substitutions originated simply or wholly in concern on behalf of possible readers. Another factor to account for them was almost certainly a lively, but not necessarily intelligent participation by many scribes in the poem that they were copying. *Piers Plowman* was a living text ; its content was a matter of immediacy to a man reading, or reading and copying it during the fourteenth or fifteenth century. He would be likely to associate himself with its sentiments and to identify himself to some extent with its author. Thus the text of a contemporary document, transmitted by copyists to whom it was of direct, personal moment, could not fail to be variously

<sup>5</sup> The manuscript in question is Trinity College, Cambridge, R.3.14.

affected by the reactions of that medium. Related in the first instance to the undisputed difficulty of the poem, this consideration suggests that the many substitutions designed to produce an easier text record not anxiety that others should find it easy, but a primarily selfish interest, resulting in an actual working out of the meaning in the mind of the scribe. In these substitutions his interest in what he was copying took the form of a desire to define and express, as clearly as his resources allowed, the sense of his text.”<sup>6</sup>

And Professor Kane’s splendid edition of the A-text is an eloquent comment on the effects of all this on the poet’s handiwork. And so completely has he covered the central issues of A- that I need say little more of it here.

If we now turn to the poem’s second shape, the B-text, our problem changes its nature and increases in complexity. Superficially, everything here seems very satisfactory. We have a good selection of manuscripts for B- and, unlike A-, their testimony to the genuine state of the text is characterized by a quite remarkable degree of harmonious agreement. Skeat was so impressed by this unwonted harmony amongst a group of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts that he decided that the B- textual tradition was unusually good and required little editorial attention. Indeed, he went further than this: he thought that one of the manuscripts—a manuscript found in the great Laud collection in the Bodleian Library at Oxford—was very likely the author’s autograph. He wrote:

“I look upon this MS. as of the very highest importance. My original reason for printing it was that it seemed to me, after a short examination, much upon a par with the MS. printed by Mr. Wright, and I considered that, supposing the MSS. to be of nearly equal value, it would be a great gain to print the unprinted one, in order to have two complete copies of the poem in type. I began my collation with no very great respect for the MS., and was ready to amend it wherever it seemed to have inferior readings. But when, in several instances, after making some such alterations, larger knowledge compelled me to alter them back again, the case was altered. The conviction was gradually *forced* upon me that the MS. is of the highest order of excellence, and the chief authority upon all difficult points. When, in certain somewhat doubtful places, after consulting the other MSS. of the B-class, the A-text, Whitaker’s text, Crowley’s text, the Cotton MS. of the C-text, &c., I found this Laud MS. helping me out of the difficulty for about the twentieth time, I felt compelled to pay to it all due respect. But the circumstance that most attracted my attention was the occurrence of numerous little crosses made by a corrector’s hand in the margin. Wherever a word is misspelt or some other error, even of quite a trivial nature, occurs in the text, so surely (except very rarely) do we find the corrector’s mark. In a few cases the correction has been actually *made* (in one case in *red* ink or paint), but not in general. Sometimes it is very difficult to make out why the cross is there, and the corrector seems to have been very particular. But

<sup>6</sup> Kane, *ed. cit.*, pp. 136–7.

these small crosses are not all. There are also some large crosses made by very fine thin lines, in the same faded ink as the text, the meaning of which I believe to be that they *mark passages which the author intended to alter, and, in every case actually did alter*, viz. in the C-text. There are also very small ticks against some lines, for what reason I cannot explain. On the whole, I cannot see any reason why we should not attribute these marks to the author himself, as this seems by far the simplest solution. There is no doubt about the age of the MS.; it may have been written at any time between the years 1377 and 1410. Indeed, it may be an autograph copy, as Langland was very probably himself a poor professional scribe, and speaks with scorn of those who could not write out things properly . . . ; and this MS. is a good specimen of calligraphy."<sup>7</sup>

It is, then, not surprising that Skeat printed the Laud manuscript with only minimal changes and felt happier with that part of his work than with any other other.

Unfortunately Skeat was very, very wrong. Great as he was as an editor, his estimate of the B-tradition was as far wrong as it could possibly be. In fact, we are now sure that the B-text is the most hopelessly corrupt of all the three versions. Detailed demonstration of this must await the appearance of the edition being prepared by Professor Kane and Professor Donaldson, but I have no doubt at all, following discussions with them, that this is the real situation. Skeat's B-text is a hopelessly inadequate representation of the true shape of the poem, and the full horror of the textual situation quite evaded him. This has made, I fear, something approaching nonsense of much of the critical writing on *Piers Plowman* which has, properly, centred itself on the B-text as being aesthetically the finest of the trio.

The fact is that the archetype of the B-manuscripts—that is, the manuscript of the poem from which all existing B-manuscripts descend—was a very corrupt manuscript: and, what is worse, the unwonted unanimity of the B-manuscripts suggests that the number of manuscripts upon which the textual tradition rests was very small. We believe, in fact, that it was a single manuscript.

Now the intriguing question here, I think, is why this is so. Why is it that that version of the poem which almost all modern readers and critics agree in judging to be the most impressive, was the version whose lines of survival were most tenuous; which, in fact, seems to have escaped extinction only by the chance survival of a single manuscript? It may be that this was a mere matter of accident: but the facts of the A- and C- descent suggest that this is unlikely. If the short and essentially incomplete A-text finds readers and copyists in numbers from the beginning, and if the same is also true of C-, why then should B- not find them? The explanation which seems most likely to meet the case is that our B-text is a chance survivor of a shape of the poem which was the product of a massive and intense revision of the first stage—that is, A-—but which, for various reasons, mostly political, religious and ideological, was either called in by the author or was suppressed by others, and that the existing manuscripts are descendants of a single manuscript which escaped

<sup>7</sup> Skeat, *ed. cit.*, Early English Text Society, 38, pp. viii-ix. The manuscript referred to is Laud Misc. 581.

this suppression but which, even so, has been subjected to a thoroughgoing and rather unintelligent process of editorial interference. This editorial process, as Kane and Donaldson have pointed out, was of the kind to flatten and blunt the poetic point of the B-text and, one guesses, to lessen some of the impact of its more outrageous and unacceptable sections. And it is a rather melancholy comment on critical acumen that this fact has not, so far, been strongly stressed. This, of course, arises from that almost total concentration on the purely conceptual aspect of the poem which has characterized much *Piers Plowman* criticism.

Even if this theory is right—and of course it may be wildly wrong—what we still do not know, and what we probably never shall know, is the identity of the censor who withdrew B- from circulation. Was it the author himself responding to the criticisms of a patron or an audience? Was it another? Was it one who was aware of the influence which this poem exerted and was aware of the political and religious climate of the time, which was not propitious to the appearance of outspoken and potentially dangerous commentary upon the contemporary situation? I see no way by which we can ever be sure which of the two explanations is the correct one—and perhaps it does not greatly matter. What seems to me certain is that suppression did take place and that the appearance of the third version—the C-text—is a result of the failure of the second version to hold its ground for reasons that are strictly extra-literary.

You will have noticed that, so far, I have carefully avoided committing myself as to the identity of the poet who was responsible for this revision of the A-text. Those of you who are familiar with the *Piers Plowman* literature will perhaps not be surprised at this. The so-called "authorship controversy" so dominated *Piers Plowman* studies in the first half of this century, with such small profit, that almost all scholars seem to have tacitly agreed to drop the subject. But it can hardly be evaded entirely, and here I should simply like to say that I see no reason why the same hand that produced A- could not have produced B-. I am quite unconvinced by the traditional arguments of the protagonists of the theory of multiple authorship of A- and B-. Even in its present mutilated state the B-text seems to me most likely to be a product of the same mind and sensibility which produced A-, and I judge it to be a second attempt by the same man on the material with which he had struggled with indifferent success in A-. In fact, I should judge it to be a most unlikely situation that another hand would take up an unsuccessful attempt and carry it to a conclusion which, for all incidental differences, is in a quite remarkable harmony with the earlier poem, and resolves its major difficulties. I realize that all this, to command acceptance, would require a detailed demonstration of a kind not possible here. And so I simply register it as an opinion. Of one thing I am sure: unless scholars have changed greatly in the last thirty years there will be many dissentients from my view.

We know then—whether my view of the fate of the text and of the authorship question is accepted or not—that B- grew directly from a reviser's dissatisfaction with A-; from a man's desire to extend and deepen the dimensions of his first attempt. What then of the third attempt, the C-text? If my theory of the present state of the

B-text is correct—namely that we have here a chance survivor of a suppression which has been further subjected to editorial attentions, the attentions of someone other than the author—then the appearance of C- becomes almost inevitable. If the B-revision was for various reasons unacceptable, and if the life of the expanded *Piers Plowman* was to be preserved, then it was necessary that there be produced another, more acceptable, revision which would carry A- forward as B- had done but which would avoid the traps into which the B-reviser, who is, I believe, the A-poet himself, had fallen.

This latest or C-revision of the poem survives to us in a very large number of manuscripts of rather heterogeneous shape—quite the largest number of any of the versions. Further, it is true to say that the reliability and strength of this manuscript testimony are considerably greater than those of its predecessors. It seems clear that this version of the poem—even though it is the version least popular with modern critics—from the beginning circulated among a large number of readers without any of the disadvantages of A- or B-. In this case our surprise perhaps is that the language of the surviving manuscripts suggests that, for all their number, they are derived from a relatively restricted area of England—that of the valley of the Severn and its vicinity. This is in contrast to the much more varied provenance of the A- and B-manuscripts, the linguistic shades of which suggest that they found copyists throughout England.

With this reservation, the tradition of the C-text presents an appearance which gives an editor far more comfort than either the apparently chaotic variation of A- or the insidiously misleading harmony of B-. Its manuscripts fall into three readily identifiable and substantial groups which testify, with varying fidelity, to the text of the archetype. It is unfortunate that the manuscript which Skeat printed—one of the manuscripts now included in the most interesting collection of *Piers* manuscripts owned by the Huntington Library in California—represents this archetypal tradition with the least fidelity. For reasons over which he had little control, Skeat used this manuscript which Whitaker, the pioneer editor of C-, had already used in 1813. Skeat was unable to use the excellent Trinity College Cambridge manuscript which testifies to the C-text only in its second part, and the two best manuscripts of the third group—the one, another Huntington manuscript and the other, a British Museum manuscript—were unknown to him.<sup>8</sup> It is only just to suggest that had Skeat known these last two he would have used one of them. The manuscript he did use, unfortunately, gives a very bad text—a typically scribally mutilated text, smoothed, sophisticated and prosaized. It is in part because of Skeat's choice of a manuscript and of his policy of submitting his chosen manuscript to minimal emendation that there has always appeared such a wide gap between the B- and C-revisions. The new text, which will be based on the second of the Huntington C-manuscripts, will be considerably closer to B- than was the old C- of Skeat's editing. All questions of editorial policy aside, the new C- will differ quite drastically from that at present in

<sup>8</sup> That is MSS. HM143 in the Henry E. Huntington Library and Additional 35157 in the British Museum.

print, and we believe that the new editions of B- and C- will reveal a closer relation between the two than Skeat's texts suggest. This new C-text will, we believe, relieve the latest revision of the poem of a great deal of scribal corruption and dilution. A good deal—though by no means all—of C's apparent mishandling of B- will be shown to be simply a result of scribal misdemeanours. Again and again the C-text based upon the Huntington manuscript and the heavily edited B-text based on Laud will be found to come together in ways that would seem impossible to a reader used to Skeat's editions.

It is typical of the manner in which favourite theories in *Piers Plowman* studies have to be discarded that our views of the nature of the C-textual tradition have undergone gradual but significant revision in the course of our work. It would be true to say that we began on the editing of C- with considerable optimism. Professor R. W. Chambers, who did so much to promote the new editions of *Piers Plowman*, clearly regarded the discovery of the Huntington and British Museum manuscripts and their texts as being an earnest of a new phase in *Piers Plowman* studies.<sup>9</sup> He had come to realize the chaos of A- and he had seen through the meretriciousness of B-. C-, he felt, was the one solid prop we had: here now were good prospects of a sound text, well attested and without conspicuous vice.

Now while it remains true that we still regard this C-tradition as being the best of the three available, and while we are grateful for the honesty of the twin testimony of the Trinity and Huntington manuscripts, our doubts have grown and we are now much less optimistic and confident than was Chambers.<sup>10</sup> It has become clear that, although its best descendants are honest manuscripts, the archetype of the C-manuscripts, while a good manuscript as *Piers Plowman* manuscripts go, was nevertheless subject to a good deal of error. This archetypal manuscript was not the poet's original, and it is possible that it was separated by several copyings from that original. This separation, of course, brings its own inevitable crop of errors, and for this we are prepared. However, there is something much more disturbing. It is, I believe, inescapable that even the poet's original manuscript, which, being a revision of B-, was necessarily based upon a manuscript of B-, contained corruptions of the B-text which the reviser seems to have failed to recognize and seems to have accepted as being a part of the true text. There are a number of places in the existing C-text where this seems to be the only possible explanation of those readings attested by all C-manuscripts which are yet at variance with what we know B- must have read and which yet are clearly not authorial revisions. As an aside, I would remark that it seems possible that this is also true of B-'s revision of A-. There, too, are places where B's reading suggests that it was based upon a corruption in his A-manuscript which the reviser did not notice. But with B- the situation is much less clear, and

<sup>9</sup> R. W. Chambers, "The Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* in the Huntington Library, and their Value for Fixing the Text of the Poem", *Huntington Library Bulletin*, 8 (1935), pp. 1-27.

<sup>10</sup> The manuscripts are Trinity College, Cambridge, R.3.14, testifying to the C-text only in its second half, and HM143 of the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The manuscript printed by Skeat was HM137, one of the Phillipps manuscripts now in the Huntington Library.

so I prefer not to discuss it in detail here. But the question cannot be sidestepped in C-, and there is yet another circumstance which cannot escape a really close study of B- as against C-. There seems little doubt that C- is most apt to revise B- where B- is most corrupt and to let B- stand where B- is not corrupt. Indeed, the matter goes further: there is also a tendency in C-, faced with large-scale corruption in B-, to omit a whole passage as if the correction were now beyond him, and his only alternatives were either to omit completely or to substitute a completely new passage.

During the so-called authorship controversy, and sporadically since, attempts have been frequently made by the protagonists of multiple authorship of *Piers Plowman* to establish this fact, a fact held to be fatal to the proposition of single authorship. The argument is, of course, that if the C-reviser could not recognize corruption scribally introduced into B-, he could not have been the author of B-. What use will now be made of the revelation I cannot tell: all I can say is that I am certain that it is true that the C-revision was based upon a manuscript of B- which was corrupt and that the reviser made no attempt to remove some at least of the corruptions which had been scribally introduced into his B-text. Instead he used them as if they were part of the genuine B-text and incorporated them in his revision.

I do not, myself, see this admission as being necessarily fatal to the theory of single authorship of the poem in its three versions. To evaluate the situation properly we have to remember something of the manner in which a poet like the author of *Piers Plowman* would have proceeded when faced with the need to revise an existing version of his poem. If, as we have suggested, the B-text had incurred disfavour and seemed likely adventitiously to bring trouble to its author, no doubt a more acceptable revision of A- would be set afoot. Now all that we can gather of the author of *Piers Plowman* would lead us to believe that he would certainly not have in his possession anything resembling the carbon copy of the modern author or the fair copy of a substantial and wealthy contemporary like Chaucer. Rather we picture him as a man who would use for his revision such a copy of his poem as he could lay his hands on. Had he been lucky he might have got his hands on the autograph copy of B-: as it was he clearly had to be content with something much less satisfactory—a scribe's version of the original, which was perhaps no longer available because of the disfavour into which B- had fallen—and upon this he would have worked. The evidence is that he did not prepare his revision so much by writing the whole poem out anew so that the revised version would appear from the beginning in a clean copy, but rather that he took his scribally produced copy of B- and amended its lines, struck out some passages, transposed others and inserted others—sometimes by means of marginal additions, sometimes by means of slips attached to appropriate parts of his manuscript. No doubt the reviser, whether he was the author of A- and B- or another, would have scrutinized this manuscript as closely as he thought proper and would have made alterations in face of obvious blunders. Yet we need to remember that *Piers Plowman* in its C-version is a poem of over seven thousand lines, and I feel sure that no mediaeval author in the alliterative tradition would have felt sufficiently strongly about the minutiae of his line structure to attempt a word-by-word check of his manuscript.

Perhaps I am wrong, but I feel that a poem whose metrical structure is relatively free and whose verbal organization only occasionally gains its force from the close interrelation of elements within the line might easily fail to proclaim to its reviser, even if he were the author, that at this or that point a scribal corruption had been allowed to enter. My view of the matter is that this discovery neither confirms nor denies the theory of single authorship. The phenomena that we have been discussing could have arisen no matter who was the reviser in question. And yet I feel bound to say that this discovery undoubtedly weakens—or at least calls in question—the proposition of single authorship for all three versions. Certainly the phenomena are disturbing for those who hold this view and clearly the onus of demonstration will from now on rest with them. The disintegrators clearly have acquired the weapon which they have sought for so long.

And there do seem to be other implications which we should, however briefly, examine. The first is something which has gradually been borne in upon me the more closely I have studied the text—that is, that this C-revision bears, for me, unmistakable marks of being unfinished, at least in the form that it has come down to us. By this I mean that it may be that the marks of incompleteness are simply a reflection of the state of our particular archetype. But this is unlikely. The matter seems to me to go too deep for this. For example, right at the beginning of the poem, in the Prologue, all our manuscripts except one attest a state of the text which is quite obviously faulty. A large new passage has been inserted and it often lacks all the usual formal elements of the *Piers Plowman* line and looks suspiciously like a first draft left to be organized and polished later. (One manuscript—that owned by the Earl of Ilchester—has a variant form, so bad that it is clearly a scribal attempt to repair the damage.) This kind of thing occurs sporadically throughout the text and it seems that the only plausible explanation is that the reviser was not able to give to these lines and passages the form that they would have had in a completed draft. That this is the correct explanation—rather than its alternative that these passages have been corrupted in the course of transmission—seems to be confirmed by the fact that when we come to the last three passus (or sub-divisions) of the poem, we find that the whole process of revision which had been carried on with an almost unduly scrupulous eye to detail through the first three-quarters of the poem gradually begins to taper off until towards the end of the third last passus and throughout the last two passus there is no sign of revision at all. Had the revision ceased abruptly we might have proposed an alternative theory that our present manuscript tradition was at some point defective, and to remedy the defect a scribe called upon a B-text manuscript to supply what was missing. This is the kind of thing which happens commonly among the *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, but never, I think, unless it happens quite suddenly in face of missing pages and the like. In this case the coming back of B- and C- into textual unanimity is a gradual process: there is no question of a sharp break. It seems that the reviser's work gradually came to a stop and that, for some reason, the closing lines were subjected to no revision at all, and some parts of earlier revisions were left incomplete. Obviously we shall all have theories as to

why this happened, and I assume that the protagonists of single authorship will postulate the illness and death of the poet as the most plausible explanation. Certainly there is no obvious external explanation. At the moment my own theory would be this : the revision of the censured B- was undertaken by the poet of B- who set out to produce for the second time an extensive revision of his original. Before this revision was complete he died or became incapacitated. It was left to an editor to supervise the production of the new version from the materials left by the poet. Using a scribally produced text of B-, which was probably that used by the author himself, he proceeded to incorporate the revisions into it, but did not attempt—even if he were aware of their unsatisfactory nature—to turn these into an appropriately finished form. What we would then have in C- is an editor's attempt to give us what the poet left to him—and to give it to us in a form that has undergone no extensive alteration at this editor's hands.

Whether or not I am right in my guess—and it is no more than that—these twin facts of the reviser's using a corrupt text and of the poem's revision coming gradually to a stop before the process was complete pose difficult problems for the editor of C- who had seemed, at one time, to be in a far happier position than his A- or B- confrères. But now he has to take great care that he does not editorialize beyond his author—that he does not correct and reform that which, for some reason which he cannot certainly determine, his author may well have left uncorrected and unrevised. This I should judge to be the major editorial issue of the C-text, but so complex are the questions it poses that a full discussion of the problem would call for another paper. For our purposes here, it may simply serve as a reminder of the complexities of our problem.

From this collection of observations on the *Piers Plowman* manuscripts one thing certainly emerges. The poem has been sadly mutilated in its transmission. The new editions will need to be courageous editions which, having established their respective archetypes, will have to confront the task of removing the accumulated corruption of the scribes. This is a heavy task in A- : in B- it is heavy to the point of impossibility : in C- it is perhaps less difficult, but, as I have suggested, problems of another order emerge to complicate the situation.

From this situation, the editor may draw lessons of all kinds, but certainly his most important lesson will be the necessity of identifying the nature of his text and of attempting some kind of reconstruction of the history of that text. It has become clear to all of us that failure to do this—or a blunder in carrying it out—will vitiate an edition. This is what happened with Skeat's B-text. Doubtless every editor is aware of the necessity of all this, but few editors will have to face the complexities which *Piers Plowman* offers. Even with the best of luck and the best of equipment, the *Piers Plowman* editor knows that he has lost the real lineaments of his text and that, however skilful his reconstruction may be, it remains largely guesswork and that important areas of his text are irrevocably damaged. It will be an important part of his work to make all this clear and to remind his readers that his edition represents an early, and not an advanced, stage of the process of the elucidation of the poem.

At this early stage of the reconsideration of the *Piers Plowman* textual problem the prospects, then, are not encouraging. At best our A-text is a badly mauled form of the earliest version and a full reconstruction seems out of the question: our B- can only be an editorial attempt to recapture a shape of the poem which was not even accessible to most of the poem's contemporary readers: and while our C- still represents textually the most satisfactory form of the poem, even here the apparent incompleteness of the revision makes this poetically the least convincing of the three. What we can recapture here is, of itself, unsatisfactory and there is nothing that editorial ingenuity can do to complete that which the author himself failed to complete. But all these attempts will, we believe, make possible that full examination of the poem in the light of the total textual evidence which has never hitherto been accessible. We further believe that the image of the poem which will be revealed will be deeper and richer and that this enriched understanding of a major poem is the most important reward of years of editorial labour.

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