

**CLARENDON PRESS SERIES. PIERS
THE PLOWMAN. THE VISION OF
WILLIAM CONCERNING PIERS
THE PLOWMAN**

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Clarendon Press Series. Piers the Plowman. The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman by William Langland & Walter W. Skeat

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WILLIAM LANGLAND & WALTER W. SKEAT

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Clarendon Press Series

PIERS THE PLOWMAN

SKEAT

London
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New York
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Clarendon Press Series

THE VISION OF WILLIAM

CONCERNING

PIERS THE PLOWMAN

BY

WILLIAM LANGLAND

(OR LANGLEY)

ACCORDING TO THE VERSION REVISED AND ENLARGED BY THE AUTHOR

ABOUT A. D. 1377

EDITED BY THE

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INTRODUCTION.

THE title 'Piers Plowman,' or, as I prefer to write it, 'Piers the Plowman,' is one which has been frequently misconstrued and misunderstood by many authors, and concerning which many text-books have blundered inextricably. It is most important that the reader should have a clear idea of what it means, and as it is rather a difficult point to explain accurately, I must ask him to give me his best attention; and I cannot refrain from adding the hope that, if he succeeds in mastering the explanation of it, he will abstain from using the phrase in future in the old slovenly way.

The difficulty is three-fold, as originating in a three-fold error. The three mistakes commonly made are these. First, *Piers Plowman* is used as though it were the name of an *author*^a; secondly, two poems which are quite distinct, and the respective titles of which are familiarly expressed as *The Vision of Piers Plowman* and *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, have been frequently confounded together; and thirdly, the name of 'The Vision of Piers Plowman' is commonly given to what is really the 'Liber de Petro Plowman,' of which the 'Vision' forms only about a third part^b. I must ask the reader to bear in mind that, in what I am now going to say, I make no reference whatever to the *Crede*, and do not make any assertion about it till I again expressly mention it by its full title. Unless this be remembered, our chance of arriving at the truth is much lessened.

Just as Christian is not the author of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but only the subject of it, so Piers the Plowman is not the author of the *Vision*, but the subject of it; he is the personage

^a This mistake occurs, for instance, in 'Chaucer's England,' vol. ii. p. 230, by Matthew Browne; who should have known better.

^b It was Crowley who originated this error, but I do not see why it need be perpetuated.

seen in a dream, not the dreamer himself. Neither does the Book describe one continuous dream, but a succession of several; in some of which Piers is neither seen nor mentioned. Yet the whole poem is named from him, because he is the most remarkable figure in the group of allegorical personages who pass successively before the dreamer's sleeping sight. He is of more importance than either Lady Holy-church, Lady Meed, Falschood, Conscience, Reason, Hunger, or the impersonations of the Seven Deadly Sins; for he is the type of a truly honest man^o. But we may dismiss the consideration of his character for the present.

The true name of the dreamer, the poet, is not certainly known. The poem has been ascribed to one Langland, whose Christian name has been variously given as William, Robert, and John. Yet of the author's Christian name we are sure; for in nearly all the numerous MSS. it is invariably given as William, not to mention that the author frequently calls himself *Wille* in various passages. The true surname is more doubtful, but in an able article in the *North British Review* (April, 1870), Professor C. H. Pearson has forcibly argued that the name must have been Langley rather than Langland; nevertheless, I would rather adhere, for the present, to the traditional form. We have then advanced clearly as far as this, viz. that one William Langland, during the latter part of the fourteenth century, wrote an alliterative poem describing a series of dreams, in *some* of which he beheld the person whom he calls Piers the Plowman, after whom the poem (or part of the poem, at least) was named.

Strictly speaking, only a *part* of the poem was at *first* named after Piers. The true title of the latter portion was originally *Visio ejusdem de Do-wel, Do-bet, et Do-best*, or the Vision of the same [William] concerning Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best; but the two portions were subsequently treated as constituting one long Book, and the name *Liber de Petro Plowman* was conferred upon the whole.

We must next consider the forms in which the whole poem exists. There are not less than forty-five MSS. of it still extant,

^o See p. xxviii for the full meaning of the name.