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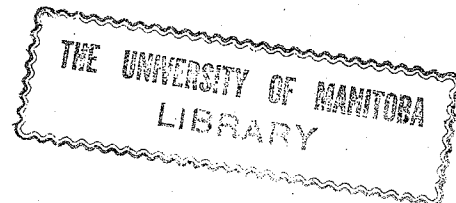
"PIERS THE PLOWMAN" AS A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENT.

by

Lucy Gwendolyn Chaplin, B.A.,

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Introduction.

In the latter half of the fourteenth century, an era in which the minds of thinking men were perplexed with problems arising from political strife, changing social conditions, and increasing dissatisfaction with the contemporary church and churchmen, not the least ^{important} thinker was the obscure author of "Piers the Plowman". Living poor and unknown in the busy city of London, he saw and comprehended, as few men of the period did, the evils of his time. Perceiving the sickness of society, he offered the remedy; and the poem in which he criticised the follies and vices of his contemporaries and pointed out to them the way of reform, has become of great value to us, not only as a work of art, but also for the picture which it gives us of English life in the later middle ages.

Concerning the value of this poem as a social and historical document, Dr. J.J. Jusserand has written:— "Next to the 'Canterbury Tales', the poem usually called Piers Plowman is the greatest literary work produced by England during the Middle Ages; and it was considered so from the first, these two poems being almost equally popular. Fifty seven manuscripts have preserved for us Chaucer's tales; forty five Piers Plowman. This latter work is a unique monument, much more singular and apart from anything else than Chaucer's Masterpiece. It is more thoroughly English; of foreign influences in it there are but the faintest traces. Allegorical as it is, it gives us an image of English life in the

fourteenth Century of unsurpassed vividness. If we had only Chaucer, we should know much less; Chaucer is at his best when describing individuals; his portraits are priceless. The author of Piers Plowman concerns himself especially with classes of men, great political movements, the general aspirations of the people, the improvements necessary in each class for the welfare of the nation. Contemporary events and the lessons to be deducted from them, the hopes, anxieties, problems, and sufferings occupying his compatriots' minds, are never far from his thoughts; plague, storms, French wars, questions of labor and wages, bishops becoming royal functionaries, power of Commons and the king, duties of nobles, the priest, the workmen. He does not describe them simply to add picturesque touches, but to express what he feels, and show how the nation should be governed and be morally improved. He is not above his time, but of it; he is not a citizen of the world, but a thorough going Englishman, and nothing else!

Chapter 1. Poem -- The Three Texts.

The poem really consists of two distinct parts. The first was originally known as the Vision of Piers Plowman. In this are contained the visions of the Field Full of Folk, Holy Church, the marriage preparations and trial of Meed, the Repentance of the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Setting out of the pilgrims in search of St. Truth. In this last vision Piers the Plowman appears, as the only one who knows the way to Truth.

The title of the second part of the poem was at first "Visio ejusdem de Do-wel, Do-bet et Do-best" and is an account of the Dreaner's search for the three. "But the two portions were subsequently treated as constituting one long Book, and the name 'Liber de Petro Plowman' was conferred upon the whole."¹

There are still extant, forty five manuscripts of the poem, "and from a comparison of these, it is evident that it takes five or six distinct shapes, of which some are due merely to confusion, or to the carelessness of the scribes; still after all allowances for such causes of variation have been made, it is clear that three of the shapes are due to the author himself. It is certain that he altered, added to, and re-wrote the whole poem, not once only, but twice. ----- Let us call the three forms of the poem, as at different times composed; the A text B. Text and C text!"²

¹ Skeat. "Piers the Plowman" P. VIII ² Ibid P. LX

Concerning the re-writing of the poem, Mr. Manly disagrees with the foregoing. He believes, and brings forth many points in support of his theory, that the three texts are the work, not of one man, but of five; that the three authors of the A text had no share in the B text, and that the author of the B text, in his turn, had no part in the writing of the C text. It would be impossible in a work of this nature to give any succinct account of the arguments which have been advanced in favor of both theories of authorship; all that can be said is that the question is still unsettled, and each side has many supporters.

But whatever view one holds concerning the authorship of the poems, all agree that there are three distinct versions of the poem, and continue to call them, the A, B, and C. texts.

The A text is thought to have been written about the year 1362, and contains about 2567 lines, - "In it the Vision of Piers the Plowman, and the Vision of Do-Wel, Do-bet, and Do-best are kept quite distinct."¹ In the confession of the Seven Deadly Sins, Wrath is omitted

The date assigned to the B text is 1377. This Vision which contains 7242 lines is three times the length of the first, and is considered the best of the three. The confession of Wrath, and the famous fable of the rat-parliament are added. The distinctions between the Visions of Piers Plowman, and Do-wel, Do-bet, and Do-best are not so careful.

¹ Manly, Prof. J.M. "Piers the Plowman and its Sequence" P.I. Vol. II Chap. I of
² Skeat. "Piers the Plowman" Intro P.IX. "Cambridge History of English Literature".

The date of the C. text is thought to be about 1390 or later. "It contains additions and revisions made at various periods later than 1380".¹ This is of still greater length than text B.

The A. text consists of a prologue to both parts, and eight and three passus respectively;² in all, 1557 lines.

The B. text has a prologue and seven passus to the first vision; a prologue to each of the three sub-divisions of the second part, and six passus to Do-wel, three to Do-bet, and one to Do-best; in all, the second division of the B. text contains three prologues and ten passus.³

The C. text contains ten passus of Piers the Plowman, seven of Do-wel, four of Do-bet, and two of Do-best; a total of twenty-three ^{passus} and no prologues.⁴

¹ Skeat. W.W. "Piers the Plowman" Harmondsworth Press. 1906. P.XI.

² Ibid.

P.X.

Chapter 11. William Langland.

(a) His Name.

With the question of the authorship of "Piers the Plowman" still undecided, it would be useless to attempt a biography of the poet. It must suffice to say that, until a few years ago, he was always accepted as one William Langland or Langley. His name was concluded to be such from a few internal and external references. In more than one place in the poem the author refers to himself as "Will"; and once he says;—

"I have lyued in lond" quod I "My name is Longe Wille"
(B. Pass. XV. L. 148)

There seems to be no point to the statement that he "lives in londe" unless he intended by this means to give a clue to his name. In one of the Dublin MSS. in a handwriting of the 15th century, there is a note in Latin, which, after referring to "Pater Willielmi de Langland", states that "Willielmus fecit librum qui vocatur Perys Ploughman".¹ "Again, in a MS. belonging to Lord Ashburnham, is an early note to the effect that 'Robert, or William langland made pers ploughman'".¹

(b) His Life.

Though we accept the poem as the work of one man, and that man the traditional William Langland, any account we can give of his life must be suppositional

and based on very little real evidence. "No outside allusion of any importance, save that of tradition tells us who the writer was. We gather his biography, if it can be called so, from his work".¹

At the time of writing the B. text, the author was forty-five years of age, and therefore must have been born about 1332, probably at Cleobury Mortimer. His father and his friends put him to school--possibly in the monastery at Great Malvern--made a clerk or scholar of him, and taught him what holy writ meant.²

"Whan ich yong was" quoth ich "Many yer hennes,
My fader and my frendes founden me to scole,
Tyl ich wiste wyterliche what holy wryt menede,
And what is best for the body as the boke telleth,
And sykerest for the soule by so ich wolle continue".
(Piers Plowman, C.pass.Vl. ll 35-39).

In 1362 he wrote the A text of the poem, which version he describes as having been partly composed in May, whilst he was wandering in the Malvern Hills. It was probably not long after this that he went to live in London; there he lived in Cornhill with his wife Kitte and his daughter Calote for many years.²

"Thus ich a-waked, got wet whann ich wonede in Cornhulle,
Kytte and ich in a cote clothed as a lollere
And lytel y-lete by-leyue me for sothe
Among lollars of London and lewede heremytes".
(Piers Plowman, C.pass.Vl. ll, 1-4).

¹ Burrell, Arthur. "Piers the Plowman" P.XV.

² Skeat. "Piers the Plowman". Clarendon Press. 1906. P.XVIII & XIX.

"Tyl the day dawed this damaiseles daunced

That men rongen to the resurexion and right with that I waked
And called Kitte my Wyf and Kalote my daughter".

("P. the P.". C.pass XXI. 11.424-6)

In the C. text, written at some time after 1390, the poet presents himself (apparently) as having left London, and in the commencement of Passus VI. gives us several particulars concerning himself, wherein he alludes to his own tallness, saying that he is too "long" to stoop low. *I*

"Certes" ich seyde "and so god me helpe,

Ich am to waik to worche with sykkel other with sythe,

And to long, lefy me, lowe for to stoupe

To worchen as a workeman eny whyle to dure."

("P. the P. C.pass.VI. 11.22-5)

He has also some remarks concerning the sons of freemen which imply that he himself was the son of a franklin or freeman.

"For shold no clerk be crowned bote yf he y-come were

Of franklens and free men and of folk ywedded."

("P. the P.". C.pass VI. 11.63-4)

He had probably taken minor orders. The supposition that he was married explains why he never rose in the Church. He earned a precarious living as a chantry priest. *I*

"And yut fond ich neuere in faith sythem my frendes deyden

Lyf that me lyked bote in thes longe clothes.

Yf ich by laboure should lyue and lyflode deseruen,

That labour that ich lerned best ther with lyue ich shelde;
 And ich lyue in Londone and on Londone bothe,
 The lomes that ich laboure with and lyfode deserue
 Yo 'pater noster' and my primer 'placebo' and 'dirige',
 And my sauter some tyme and my seuene psalms.
 Thus ich syng for hure soules of suche as me helpen".
 (Piers Plowman, C.pass.Vl. ll.40-43)

Lastly, in the poem of 'Richard the Redeless', he describes himself as being in Bristol in the year 1399, when he wrote his last poem. This poem is short, exists only in one manuscript, and terminates abruptly in the middle of a page, so it is quite possible that it was never finished. This is the last trace of him, and he was then probably about sixty-seven years of age, so that he may not have long survived the accession of Henry IV.¹

(C) His Ideals.

But if we know so little of the life of Langland, we know his ideas and ideals from his poem. "But however much the reader may regret that the personal records of a writer so remarkable should be so meagre and obscure, no one who has studied his work in itself can doubt that he was a man of profound religious conviction; that, by force of character and intellect, he was qualified to form a right judgment of man

¹ Skeat. W.W, "Piers the Plowman" Clarendon Press. 1906.

and society; that experience had acquainted him with the minutest details of the life which he described"¹. With the eye of a critical student of human nature, he saw the vices of his contemporaries; with the heart of a reformer and a devout Christian he wished to see these vices amended.

"Before middle life, William, like Dante, had recognized that the world was out of joint"——"he too looked with longing for the deliverer who should set it right.....he too lifted up his voice in warning and menace, before the great and mighty of the earth, before princes and priests; he too held up a mirror to the world in which it saw both its own image and the ideal to which it had grown faithless"².

¹ Courthope, W. J., "A history of English Poetry". Vol. 1. Chap. 6 P. 268

² ten Brink, B. "English Literature" Vol. I Part IV. Chap. VII P. 353