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Archetype ed. by John Burrow, Thorlac Turville-Petre
(review)

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manuscripts from the seventh century). While the criterion for including a given writing culture remains somewhat opaque, as discussed, the editors should be applauded for bringing such a broad body of scholarship together, and for doing so in such a short time frame. Combined with its very low price, this book deserves a place on the bookshelf of anybody working with medieval manuscripts.

The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, vol. 9, *The B-Version Archetype*. Edited by John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre. *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive Series A.12*. Charlottesville: Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts, 2014. Web. 30 September 2015. <http://piers.iath.virginia.edu/exist/piers/crit/main/B/Bx>.

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THE ONLINE PUBLICATION OF John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre's edition of the B archetype of *Piers Plowman* seems thus far to have been met with undeservedly little acclaim. Yet their editorial achievement ranks with the monumental Athlone editions and A. V. C. Schmidt's *Parallel-Text Edition* as one of the most important contributions to the field of *Piers Plowman* textual studies. Burrow and Turville-Petre's work departs from previous editions in seeking not to establish the authorial B-text, but rather to present the archetype of all extant B manuscripts *exactly as it was*, deliberately letting stand any erroneous or even nonsensical readings that were present in that manuscript. The digital medium of this edition, moreover, opens up a whole new range of possibilities for editing, which are particularly important for a text as complex as *Piers Plowman*. Every textual decision made throughout the edition is recorded in the copious notes, which can be accessed instantly by clicking a tag next to the relevant lection. Unlike the printed editions of the past, in which such textual information was either absent or very difficult to find, this edition thus allows a

complete editorial transparency, in which each choice can be easily checked and scrutinized. In a particularly useful feature, readers can click on any line number to open an apparatus at the foot of the page with transcriptions of that line from each B manuscript. For those manuscripts with completed transcriptions in the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive (PPEA), the lines also link to the respective editions. This ability to cross-reference is an extremely valuable feature of the edition, which would again be impossible in a printed text.

This review will focus primarily on Section II of the Introduction, which discusses the relationships of the B-version manuscripts and the editorial theory underlying the edition. In this section, Burrow and Turville-Petre argue that the B tradition is not as heavily corrupted as Kane-Donaldson and Schmidt believed. They thus conclude that a stemma of B is indeed possible, arguing that “the majority of agreements in error are genetic” (II.1), and provide a stemma supplied by Robert Adams. The editors note that these stemmatic relationships, in conjunction with a “direct method” of identifying scribal error, make the determination of the alpha and beta readings “generally pretty straightforward” (II.1). Burrow and Turville-Petre accept the argument previously made by Adams that manuscripts L and R are the most accurate representations of the two hyparchetypes, beta and alpha respectively, and find them to be uncorrupted by other versions, arguing that the agreement of L and R is “very strong evidence for Bx” (II.1). The edition uses L (Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 581) as its copy text and allows its readings to stand where they agree with alpha.

The main editorial difficulty, therefore, is presented by the readings in which alpha and beta diverge, and it is here that more controversial editing methods must inevitably be brought to bear. One issue is that manuscript R has three gaps in the text due to missing leaves, and thus in these passages the editors are forced to consult the extremely unreliable F for the alpha reading. Another problem is the omission of various passages in L and others in R, all of which the editors, siding with Kane-Donaldson, have chosen to include in Bx. Burrow and Turville-Petre dismiss previous arguments by Hanna and Schmidt that these omissions represent rolling revision, noting that both states of the text were available to the C-reviser. They suggest a convincing explanation for these differing patterns of omission in alpha

and beta, positing that Bx may have existed in an unfinished state, “having revisions entered in margins and on loose sheets, so that the alpha and beta copyists each overlooked some of the additions” (II.2).

The most pressing issue for Burrow and Turville-Petre’s edition, however, are the variations in individual lections between alpha and beta, where the Bx reading is split between two alternatives. In such readings the editors consult the authority of the other two versions, A and C, where they attest equivalent lines. They are careful to note that other-versional evidence is used only as a point of reference, and not, as in the Kane-Donaldson edition, to import readings unattested in the B tradition. Nevertheless, other-version comparison can still prove highly problematic. In the missing R passage from Bx.18.428 to 20.26, for example, the editors demonstrate that many F/Cx agreements may represent contamination, and thus cannot provide evidence for Bx. The editors conclude that this passage is “the part of our text of which we are least confident” (V.3.2). On other occasions throughout the text, as the editors observe, one of the other versions will attest the alpha reading and the other the beta reading (II.2). Where this happens (twenty-nine instances), the editors have chosen to give both alternative lections in the edited text, one of which “must be either coincidental error or authorial revision” (II.2). They also observe that twenty-eight of these twenty-nine readings agree as such: beta = Ax/alpha = Cx; only one agreement attests alpha = Ax/beta = Cx. The editors here side with Hanna and Adams in rejecting the possibility that such variation in local readings could reflect “rolling revision,” arguing that many agreements can be explained by convergent variation.

Yet, the most fundamental problem with interversional comparison, which the editors themselves acknowledge, is that the references to Ax and Cx “are inevitably provisional, since neither has yet been established” (V.3.2), and reconstructions of the other archetypes must be made on a case-by-case basis. It should also be noted that Bx is by far the most stable tradition, while the A and C texts show a very high quantity of variation in individual readings. One example is in Bx.III.63, where the B tradition is divided between alpha’s *see* and beta’s *seyn* (“say”). The editors prefer the alpha reading, but use the spelling *seen*, which is not attested in any B manuscript, presumably as a way of explaining beta’s misreading as *seyn*.

The editors partially support their choice by noting that the alpha reading is attested in Ax and the X family of C. The problem, however, is that the beta reading is also found in four A manuscripts, (HVWM) and three C manuscripts (DGN), while the P-group of C attests both, reading “see and seye” (PERVAQSK). Even more problematic is the B-continuation, where the editors can compare only with the evidence of Cx. In Bx.11.312, for example, the editors choose the beta reading *no londe* over alpha’s *noper londe*. While the beta reading chosen is attested in the P family of C, the alpha reading is attested in the X family, and the editors note that alpha “may equally be right.” With no intrinsic evidence for determining a *difficilior lectio*, the editors are justified in siding with the copy text, though the example again shows that other-versional comparison cannot always be reliable.

Following the descriptions of the extant B witnesses in Section III, Section IV offers insightful comments on various attributes of the archetypal manuscript: language, passus structure and headings, punctuation, Latin lines, alliteration, and meter. While the language of Bx cannot wholly be recovered, Burrow and Turville-Petre offer compelling evidence that some relict forms can be determined and conclude that L and R may be closer to the spellings of Bx than any other witnesses. The section also offers some important comments on the alliteration in the archetype, noting that the standard aa|ax pattern is found in 80 percent of the lines and providing a useful list of variant patterns and the number of lines in which they are attested. Finally, Section V records the editorial procedures of the edition. While this does, inevitably, repeat some of the editorial theory established in Section II, it provides a refreshingly honest reflection by the editors on their own method, which highlights rather than obscures their own uncertainties.

Despite the inevitable problems posed by a tradition such as *Piers Plowman*, Burrow and Turville-Petre deal masterfully with the text and provide an extremely reliable edition. Yet, the final and most crucial question that remains for readers of the edition, which the editors perhaps take too much for granted, is what purpose is there to an edition of a corrupt archetype? In a tantalizing statement in Section I, Burrow and Turville-Petre define their edition as “a preparation for the final step of seeking to establish an

inevitably controversial critical text of *Piers Plowman*" (I.1), though there is no further mention of such a final end goal. Indeed, an understanding of Bx could be a stepping stone to the most accurate edition of authorial B thus far. But the edition also has merit in its own right; while it is primarily a tool for textual scholars, its accessibility and ease of use could make it a valuable tool in the classroom, from a graduate course in editorial theory to an undergraduate discussion of medieval authorship. Even more important is its historical significance, as the archetypal text was, of course, the text that was actually read in the Middle Ages. Thus, the importance of Burrow and Turville-Petre's work for editors and readers of *Piers Plowman* cannot be overstated. The edition also shows the extraordinary potential of the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive to create a new way of engaging with the notoriously complex editorial problems posed by *Piers Plowman*.