



PROJECT MUSE®

---

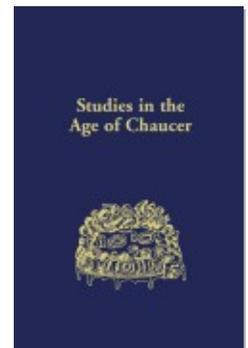
William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The Z Version* ed. by A. G. Rigg, Charlotte Brewer (review)

Robert Adams

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 7, 1985, pp. 233-237 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0030>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658780/summary>

trates on variants from the published text, but it may suggest to many readers that the quantity of variants is more important than their quality. Several of the emendations and many of the variants are based on metrical criteria, and it might have been helpful to have a section on meter and how different scribes responded to the meter of the poem. This would have given us some insight into the nature of individual scribes and their manuscripts.

The introduction and notes contain an impressive review of scholarship dealing with the poem. Here Pearsall is at his best. His judgments are judicious without in any way being mealy-mouthed. His reports of previous scholarship are balanced and fair, though it is clear he has little sympathy with some approaches to the poem. All who use this edition will find its breadth of scholarship stimulating. Little seems to have escaped his net. Those works that are not noticed often concern the language of the *Tale*, such as a series of notes by N. E. Osselton in *English Studies* on the demonstrative adjective (p. 232), though they do not refer to this particular example. The printing is reasonably accurate with the majority of the misprints occurring in the lemmas of the apparatus criticus and notes. However, these are small blemishes in a work which provides a vast amount of information in a learned but easy manner. It will no doubt be quarried by scholars for many years to come.

N. F. BLAKE  
University of Sheffield

A. G. RIGG and CHARLOTTE BREWER, eds. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The Z Version*. Studies and Texts, vol. 59. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983. Pp. x, 137. \$11.00.

The editors of this work offer for our consideration what seems, at first glance, a shocking and nearly incredible thesis: that more than one hundred years of academic research and criticism devoted to the three versions of Langland's masterpiece have overlooked the existence of a fourth version of *Piers Plowman*, which Rigg and Brewer, taking a hint from Walter W. Skeat, have labeled the "Z Version." The arguments assembled in their very learned and judicious introduction aim to convince us that folios

124–39 of MS Bodley 851 comprise the earliest known draft of *Piers*. In marshaling these arguments, they readily acknowledge their debt to the earlier editors, Skeat and George Kane, whose shared opinion concerning Bodley 851's worthlessness they are seeking to reverse. As they remind us, Skeat had rejected the manuscript out of hand as "mere rubbish, written out from imperfect recollection," whereas Kane rejected it on more specific grounds, calling it

a conflated and sophisticated text resembling A more than B or C. There is no doubt that its origin was in the A tradition. . . . That part of the text which is referable to A is much disordered and lacks many lines and passages. . . . *The text there contains many lines not relatable to any version. . . . One possibility is that the early part of Z was copied from a text produced by someone acquainted with all three versions of the poem, literate and able to write tolerable long lines, who was restoring from memory, and occasionally by sophistication, a physically very defective copy. . . . of the A version.* [Quoted in Rigg and Brewer, eds., pp. 9–10; italics added]

Taking this suggestion from Kane's discussion, Rigg and Brewer seek to show, by means of various kinds of evidence, that the person likeliest to have served as the creator of Z is none other than the author himself, William Langland.

Among their various strands of evidence, perhaps the least compelling is the literary, which is characterized by arguments necessarily subjective: viz.: "There are no signs of 'patching' either where Z lacks passages found in A or where Z has material not found in A. . . . Although the quality of the 'spurious' passages varies, many of them seem to us to be beyond the capacity of someone merely 'literate and able to write tolerable long lines'" (p. 11).

Likewise inconclusive, as the editors acknowledge, is the textual argument. One can make the readings of Z support several different hypotheses concerning its origins (including Kane's as well as the present editors'), so textual evidence is essentially neutral. The most damning aspect of this evidence, occasional Z phrases and lines omitted by A that recur in the B and C versions and that would ordinarily suggest scribal conflation, may (if we assume Z's priority and Langland's authorship) be explained as instances of authorial indecision (shifting readings between versions) or as the result of corruptions in the A exemplar. Other evidence pointing toward corruption and conflation in Bodley 851, such as occasional incon-

sistencies or repetitions in the narrative line, are explained away with references to Z's status as a rough draft, "a partial revision of the earliest version of the poem" (p. 13).

In similar fashion the linguistic argument (see especially pp. 26–27, and pp. 126–27) offered by Rigg and Brewer limits itself to defending the negative thesis that the spelling, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary of Z are internally consistent to a far greater degree than "would have resulted from a scribal pastiche." The editors consider the most convincing aspects of this evidence to be the absence of distinctive (hence probably scribal) linguistic features in the lines that are unique to Z and the presence of unusual West Midland words not likely to occur to an Eastern scribe like the one who apparently copied MS 851.

As for the paleographical evidence, it, too, turns out to be patient of the Rigg-Brewer thesis but scarcely can be said to require it. The Anglicana Formata hand of folios 124–39 is of a kind available in the 1370s but also commonly found in MSS dated as late as the 1430s.

The substance, therefore, of the claims for a Z Version of *Piers Plowman* resides in a single aspect of the evidence, that derived from codicology. More specifically, the whole matter appears to rest on Rigg and Brewer's contention that Bodley 851 is a series of pamphlets first owned and compiled by the Benedictine adversary of Wycliffe, John Wells of Ramsey. The chain of reasoning is as follows:

1. After acquiring parts I and II of this manuscript (mainly Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* and the *Speculum stultorum*), Wells himself copied the Z Version of *Piers* on two additional quires, made some entries of his own in parts I and II, had the MS decorated, and added a set of flyleaves, "on the last verso of which he drew his *ex libris* inscription" (p. 3).

2. Since Wells died in 1388, his ownership of MS 851 appears to establish a very early *terminus ad quem* for the production of Z, a *terminus* that makes Kane's grounds for rejecting its text seem unpersuasive. After all, if B is to be dated in the mid- to late-1370s and C in the early- to mid-1380s, we are stretching probabilities to imagine, at such an early date, the kinds of startling contaminations in the copying of the versions that might otherwise account for Z. Of course, we know that these degenerative processes began within the poet's lifetime, for his own copies of the versions seem to have been impure; still, it is difficult to envision, at such an early date, anyone other than the poet himself as having been sufficiently in command of the poem's materials to produce this strange hybrid called "Z."

3. Of course, the Rigg-Brewer contention is precisely that Z is not a hybrid but that the later processes of composition through which Langland gave birth to A, B, and C have caused Z's text, judged in retrospect, to take on that appearance.

A close examination of Bodley 851 reveals that Rigg and Brewer's description of the manuscript and its contents is accurate in all the important particulars. Their transcript of the text of Z seems very careful. In a random sampling of some 500 lines, this reviewer found only one indisputable error, viz., at 4.121 (p. 74) they read "In no manere ellus" where the MS reads "In *none* manere ellus." Another minor point worth mentioning in this regard is that their scrupulosity in recording readings exactly as they find them sometimes leads them to be too harsh on the scribe, far more harsh than any of us are with the handwritten correspondence of our friends (to whose intelligence we are inclined to yield the benefit of the doubt). They are especially rigorous with the scribe's lowercase *e*, reading it on several occasions as an *o* (e.g., *Bedlehom* in 6.3 and *plowo man* in 6.13) and then emending it back to *e*.

More important, however, than the question of accuracy is the matter of the strength of their inferences. It certainly seems possible to conclude that John Wells copied folios 124–39 of Bodley 851, that he inscribed the *ex libris*, that he owned the Z Version of *Piers*, and that his ownership of this strange draft at such an early date may, by itself, force us to alter our estimate of its textual status. But no one of these inferences is inevitable, so that the entire chain takes on the appearance of an interesting and provocative set of probabilities. No known samples of Wells's hand exist as a control; the inscription in the *ex libris*, though of the same style as the hand of folios 124–39, is too brief for any conclusion; and a clever bibliographer might make out the relationship of the Wells *ex libris* to the material in folios 124–39 to be rather different from that claimed by Rigg and Brewer. In spite of these reservations, however, one must admit that much of the unique material in Z sounds completely authentic.

It seems indisputable that the Pontifical Institute has performed a useful service by publishing this material, for even if the Bodley 851 copy of *Piers* never attains decisive acceptance for its editors' claims, it will long remain as a useful reminder of the need for medieval literary scholars to master the terminology and methods of the ancillary editorial disciplines before they can ever hope to speak with authority about their favorite texts. And if, as seems more likely, a substantial part of the Rigg-Brewer thesis gains

general approbation, those of us whose special love is Langland will have access to new insights about the birth process of his life work.

One only wishes that Rigg and Brewer had shunned the temptation of marketing hyperbole and titled it "An Early Draft of *Piers Plowman*." Some of the resistance that their thesis will meet is likely to be based on the perception that, valuable as their discovery may be, they have, in calling it a separate version of the poem, been guilty of claiming too much for it. Many *Piers* scholars, one imagines, after reading Z, are going to see it as an early and rather odd draft of A and will sympathize with Kane's decision to exclude it from his collations of the A MSS. We have always known that, if we wished to narrow our focus sharply enough, more than three versions of *Piers* could be discerned. What else should be expected of a poem being constantly revised over some twenty years? But it merely confuses the issues to label something like Bodley 851 as a different version when its plot is identical to A's and no longer and when the percentage of unique expository material is so modest.

ROBERT ADAMS

Sam Houston State University

THOMAS W. ROSS, ed. *The Miller's Tale. A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Vol. 2. The Canterbury Tales, Part 3.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. Pp. xxix, 273. \$39.50.

The General Editors' preface to this edition of the *Miller's Tale* announces that "the complete justification for a variorum edition is the record it presents of the history of scholarship, in short, the commentary" (p. xvi). This programme is carried out by the editor of this volume in the Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer through a review of scholarly writings on aspects of the *Miller's Tale*, a "survey of criticism," a discussion in the introduction of certain manuscripts and all the major printed editions and by the provision of a full apparatus to the text he prints, consisting of textual collations and detailed commentary in notes. The considerable effort of research that this represents is at least partly reflected by the large and useful bibliographical index. Undoubtedly this volume,