

**AN ESSAY TOWARD THE CRITICAL
TEXT OF THE A-VERSION OF
"PIERS THE PLOWMAN": A
DESSERTATION; VOL. XII, NO. 7,
JANUARY 1917, PP. 129- 161**

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The University of Chicago

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AN ESSAY TOWARD THE CRITICAL TEXT
OF THE A-VERSION OF "PIERS
THE PLOWMAN"

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS
AND LITERATURE IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH)

BY

THOMAS A. KNOTT

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The execution of such a piece of work as this would have been impossible without my incurring many obligations. I wish to express my warmest gratitude to the authorities and the librarians of the British Museum, the Bodleian, Trinity College, Dublin, Trinity College, Cambridge, and Lincoln's Inn, for their courtesy and cordiality, and to the Duke of Westminster, the late Sir Henry Ingilby, and Sir William Ingilby, for the courteous and liberal spirit with which they made their MSS accessible. Dr. Furnivall and Professor Skeat gave me valuable advice and assistance (and every student of "Piers the Plowman" is under a heavy debt to them for their labors in locating the MSS long ago). Professor Kittredge was kind enough to give many hours to the examination of some of my results. My friend, Dr. J. R. Hulbert, read my MS and gave me advice. Professor C. H. Beeson also read the article and criticized it. It is impossible for me to acknowledge adequately what I owe to my teacher and friend, Professor John M. Manly, to whose inspiration this study is due, and whose training and assistance have given my work whatever value it may possess.

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AN ESSAY TOWARD THE CRITICAL TEXT OF THE A-VERSION OF "PIERS THE PLOWMAN"

The interest of students of Middle English literature in the Piers Plowman poems was greatly stimulated several years ago by two articles by Professor John M. Manly, "The Lost Leaf of 'Piers the Plowman'"¹ and "'Piers the Plowman' and Its Sequence."² I was so fortunate as to be a student under Professor Manly in 1905, when his belief in the diversity of authorship of the several versions was daily receiving fresh confirmation from his investigations, and we recognized the need for an adequate critical text in order that the differences between the three versions might be determined satisfactorily. Accordingly, in my first subsequent vacation, in the summer of 1907, I began the necessary work by collating the fourteen MSS of the A-version as far as 8.130 (Skeat's numbering),³ with the object of studying their relationship to one another, and attempting to settle the existing uncertainties of the text. This work I have since been carrying on as time and opportunity offered, and the results I now publish in this essay. The critical text, with the collations, must wait until similar work on the B- and C-versions has been finished (when all will be printed

¹ *Modern Philology*, III (January, 1906), 359-66.

² *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, II (1908), 1-42.

³ This study of the critical text covers only the prologue and the first eight passus to 8.130 because it is at this point that Mr. Manly (and I) believe the work of A1 ceases. This line marks the close of the most vigorous, the most readable, and the best organized part of the A-text.

together), but the text I hope to publish in a short time in the form of a reading edition.

For the A-text there are fourteen MSS, some of which unfortunately are not complete, and some of which are not pure A-text throughout. A table of these MSS, showing what each contains, and where each is defective, and where any one is B- or C-text, may be helpful to the student, and therefore is appended.¹

I. Vernon Codex. Omits 1.176-83 (178-85) and 2.106-21 (111-27).

II. Harleian 875. Omits 6.49-7.2 (6.52-7.2).

III. Ingilby. IV. Lincoln's Inn 150. V. Trinity College, Cambridge R 3.14. VI. Rawlinson Poet. 137. All practically complete save for a few sporadic omissions of single lines.

VII. University College, Oxford, 45. Omits 1.33-99 (folio torn out).

VIII. Douce 323. Omits 3.120-34 (128-42).

IX. Harleian 6041. Parts of ff. 23, 24, 26, and 27 are torn out, thus causing the loss of 7.59-74 (60-79), 82-105 (87-110), 115-36 (120-41), 145-87 (150-94), 198-218 (205-25), 228-47 (235-54), 258-78 (265-86); and the loss of parts of 7.53-58 (54-59), 77-81 (82-86), 108-14 (113-19), 139-44 (144-49), 188-97 (195-204), 219-27 (226-34), 248-57 (255-64), 279-89 (287-97).

X. Trinity College, Dublin, D 4.12. Omits 7.45-69 (46-70) and 7.210 (217) to the end. 7.44 (45) is actually the final line in the MS, but 7.69a-209 (71-216) had been transposed in an archetype to a position before 1.180 (182), and therefore were preserved.

XI. Ashmole 1468. Begins at 1.142, because the preceding leaves have been cut out; then omits 2.18-145 (18-158); 3.30-33 (32-35), 112-226 (120-235); 7.33-81 (34-86); 8.32-80 (32-81), all but 3.30-33 because leaves have been cut out.

XII. Harleian 3954. Is B-text to (B) 5.128, then A-text from (A) 5.106-8.111 (5.107-8.113), then omits to 9.97. No extended omissions.

XIII. The Duke of Westminster's MS. Inserts a large number of lines and passages from the B- and C-texts: B 1.32-33 after A 1.31; B 1.113-16 after A 1.111; C 3.28-29 after A 2.20; C 1.84-87, 89, 92, 98-100, 102-4 after A 2.65 (68); C 3.185-88 after A 2.130 (140); C 3.243-48 after A 2.194 (208); C 4.32-33 after A 3.33 (35); B 4.17-18 after A 4.17; B 4.62 after A 4.48; B 4.119-22 after A 4.105; then follows A 108, then B 4.123-25; B 4.152-56 after A 4.143; B 4.165-70 after A 4.145; B 5.36-41 after A 5.33; B 5.49-56 after A 5.39; B 5.60 after A 5.42; B 5.87-93 after A 5.68 (69); B 5.120-21 after A 5.98 (99).

¹ The line numbers in this paper refer to the Critical Text, but in order to facilitate reference until that is published, I give in parentheses the line numbering of Skeat's Early English Text Society edition, wherever the number in the CT differs from Skeat's.

XIV. Digby 145. No extended omissions. Has several contaminations from the C-text, especially in the prologue, which is chiefly C, with some readings from A. The other insertions are B 3.52-54, 56-58 after A 3.45 (47); C 7.423-8.55 after A 5.220 (228); then A 5.215-20 (223-28) is repeated; (Digby changes 214 (222) so that it reads "this giotoun" for "sleupe"); C 8.70-154 after A 5.251 (259); C 8.189-306 substituted for A 6.31-123 (34-126).

As the basis of my text I have used MS R 3.14 in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, represented in my paper by "T." By "basis" I mean, of course, not that I shall print that MS as it stands, nor with such occasional readings from other MSS as may "seem better" to me. On the contrary, the readings adopted into the CT must always be the critical readings, as attested in every case by the weight of evidence, genealogical and other. No matter how plausible the reading of T may seem, it must not be retained if not supported. By "basis" I mean, therefore, little more than the basis for spelling and dialect, for whenever the reading of T is replaced by the critical reading, it seems better to make the latter conform in spelling and dialect to T. Otherwise we should have a critical text containing too many inconsistent forms and spellings. In every case, of course, when the apparatus is printed, the footnotes will record all variants from the CT, including those of T.

MS T was chosen as the basis of the CT because it is early (shortly after 1400), because it is well spelled, and because it contains comparatively few individual deviations and errors, and therefore probably requires less changing to make it a critical text than any other MS. It should be said that the CT would have been exactly what it is, save for dialect and spelling, no matter what particular MS had been chosen for a basis.

The numbering of the lines differs in this paper from that of Skeat in his E.E.T.S. and Oxford editions, because I have numbered the lines of the CT, and of course the CT does not contain the unsupported expansions and the spurious lines, contained in only one MS, some of which Skeat admitted into his text.

The following lines in the E.E.T.S. edition have been rejected in the CT because they occur only in MS Harleian 875:1.176-77; 2.31, 34, 48, 96, 118, 136-39, 141-43, 182; 3.19-20, 66, 91-94, 98,

234; 5.182; 6.1-2, 5; 7.26; 8.46, 101, 125-26. One line is rejected because it is in V only: 7.286. In two cases one line of the CT has been expanded into two by V: 5.55-56; 7.157-58; the CT numbering in each case is reduced to one line. One line is in H, and, with some differences, in H₁: 2.79. 5.202-7 are in only UT₁AH₁; that is, in one small sub-subgroup, often contaminated from the B-text, and one other MS; the lines are a contamination from the B-text, and are therefore rejected from the CT. Lines 7.71-74, containing the names of Piers's wife and children, are an interpolation, and are therefore omitted.¹ Lines 7.180-81 are an expansion of one line, and, though contained in MSS V, H, and I, are reduced to one line in the CT.

It is hardly necessary to recount here in great detail the processes that must go toward the determination of a critical text. Adequate expositions of these processes have long been accessible, especially in the Introduction to Westcott and Hort's Greek New Testament, and in Edward Moore's *Contributions to the Textual Criticism of the "Divina Comedia," "Prolegomena"*; and the principles have been admirably stated recently by Dr. Eleanor Prescott Hammond in her *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual*, pp. 106-13.

The older method of printing a text was to select an old, well-spelled, well-written MS, the readings of which seemed to the editor to give "the best sense." In case of dissatisfaction with a reading, support for it was looked for in other MSS, and, if support failed, a reading was adopted from some other MS or MSS which the editor thought gave the "best sense." This "eclectic" method was unscientific and unreliable for two reasons: The editor left in his text a large number of readings which gave "good smooth sense," but some of which were sophisticated, that is, introduced by copyists who were practicing conjectural emendation; and others of which (introduced carelessly) were intelligible, but which could not be supported by scientific proof. Secondly, this method laid too much responsibility on the unchecked discretion of the editor, who often adopted a reading merely because it was in the greater number of MSS, and who, on the other hand, often adopted readings merely according to his whim or his personal taste.

¹ *Cambridge History of English Literature*, II, 33; and my forthcoming article in *Modern Philology*.

The dangers arising from the exercise of personal taste or whim, and from reliance on mere number of MSS, are avoided by the critical method. A reading must not be valued according to the number of supporting MSS, for a large number of MSS may be, and often are, descended from one common ancestor, from which the reading has been transmitted to its descendants.

The necessity is therefore evident for classifying all extant MSS according to their family relationships, and for constructing a family tree, before anything is done toward determining what readings ought to be adopted in the text.

Two or more MSS, or two or more groups of MSS, are assigned to an identical, hypothetically reconstructed ancestor, or archetype, if they possess in common a number of clear errors, omissions, and additions. Common errors, deviations, and omissions in two or more MSS must be due to coincidence, or to contamination, or to their existence in the MS from which copies were made. If there are more than a very few significant errors, the laws of probability forbid attributing them to coincidence. If two MSS, copied from two entirely different archetypes, were afterward compared, and a number of erroneous readings were transferred from one to the other by the collator, the position of descendants of the contaminated MS in the family tree would be very difficult to determine. For these descendants would contain the erroneous readings and deviations which were their legitimate inheritance, and also those which resulted from the contamination, and the text critic would find it difficult, if not impossible, to determine the real position of the MSS. But one characteristic will enable him to locate such MSS with some degree of certainty, and thus to determine which are contaminations and which are legitimately descended errors. *Omissions* are not the result of contamination. We have a number of A-text MSS of "Piers the Plowman" which contain readings inserted or substituted in different or later hands or inks than the original hand and ink.¹ In several of these MSS lines or words are inserted which were omitted by the original scribe, or lines are inserted from the B-text. *But in no case is any line or word or passage expunged.* Possessors of MSS who compared them with

¹ E.g., T, H, D, W, D1, T₁, R, I, H.