

# The Feral Piers



# The Feral Piers:

*A Reader's Experience  
of the British Library Cotton  
Caligula A XI Manuscript  
of Piers Plowman*

By

Rosanne P. Gasse

Cambridge  
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## **For Spooky and Nefertiti**

I could not have endured to the end of this long journey without your  
companionship.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

This volume on occasion uses print adaptations to represent medieval manuscript abbreviation signs. The most common of these adaptations are as follows:

@ = er

e.g. eu@ = *euer* (ever)

≈ = er

e.g. diu ≈sa = Latin *diversa*; pou ≈te = *pouerte* (poverty)

j = is

e.g. heremytj = *heremytis* (hermits)

p. = per or par

e.g. p.sones = *persones* (persons) or *parsones* (parsons)

~ = re

e.g. p̃est = *preest* (priest)

^ = ri

e.g. c^st = *crist* (Christ)

superscripted vowel in mid word = usually r + vowel

e.g. c<sup>a</sup>che = *crache* (scratch); c<sup>e</sup>pe = *crepe* (creep); but kyng<sup>e</sup> = *kyng* (king)

<sup>9</sup> = us

e.g. catt<sup>9</sup> = *cattus* (cat's)

short or long dash over top of word = usually missing nasal(s) or several missing internal letters

e.g. kun̄yng = *kunnyng* (cunning); p̄ccis = Latin *peccatis*; h̄t = Latin *habet*

short or long dash at the end of word = usually missing nasal(s) or several

missing internal letters or final e

e.g. du\_ = Latin *dum*; aia\_ = Latin *anima*; spus\_ = Latin *spiritus*; cam\_  
= *came*

& = Latin *et*; &c\_@ = Latin *et cetera*; &~ = English *and*

qd, q<sub>v</sub> or qd<sub>7</sub> = Latin *quod* or English *quoth*

y<sup>t</sup> = *that*

y<sup>n</sup>, ye = *thou, thee*

w<sup>t</sup> = *with*

ihc = *Jesus*

xpc, xps = Latin *Christus*

## INTRODUCTION

Much effort continues to be put into the attempt to restore as accurately as possible both the authorial identity and the authorized texts of *Piers Plowman*. While these aims are in themselves admirable, albeit elusive goals, the focus upon the reclamation of the author and his authorial words must by necessity ignore the medieval non-professional reader's experience of the poem. For the early reader, the concept of a set, authorially-sanctioned version of this typically anonymous text would be mystifying. In this sense, the generally recognised two, three, or four versions of *Piers Plowman*—the A, B (?), C, and Z (??) texts—are a myth, and there are, as even Kane has admitted, as many different versions of the poem as there are surviving manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> C. David Benson and Lawrence Warner, among others, have wonderfully outlined the ups and downs, the ins and outs of the tortured recension history of the text known as *Piers Plowman* as to theories about in which order the three (two? four?) versions appeared and also about how the text came to be put together,<sup>2</sup> but this entire conundrum would have been utterly meaningless to the early non-professional reader for whom the *Piers* text was whatever it was he or she was holding in hand at the moment. However, little work apart from textual editing has been done with the overall *content* of most individual manuscripts beyond their scribal interventions through annotation and rubrication, although the recent publication of facsimile editions and the electronic archive have made it much easier for scholars not fortunate enough to be situated near major research collections to pursue interests in the early readerly rather than the authorial or scribal traditions of *Piers Plowman*. Nonetheless, while there has been a recent explosion of interest in what appears in the margins of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts and in the scribal culture which lurks behind them,<sup>3</sup> until equal attention is paid to detailed study of the actual and full content of these manuscripts beyond the existence of their textual variants and occasional scribal interventions, our knowledge of the reception of this text and how it was understood can only remain incomplete in its historical context. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, for instance, likely the most sympathetic of modern scholars to the early readers of *Piers Plowman*, once argued that “real professional readers wielded a great deal of power; they could not only silently affect every aspect of textual reception, but they could do

so with a consistency and vision that created not only new readings but, in effect, a new text (of which the most striking example in Langland scholarship is likely the Z text). The range of their intervention could be staggering, and for modern scholars, extremely valuable, as important evidence of regionalism and ideological pluralism in medieval culture.”<sup>4</sup> Even so, when she herself continued on to discuss the annotations and the spurious lines of the scribes of Corpus (F) and Newnham (Y), it was the modern Athlone edition from which she quoted to illustrate the contexts of the annotations, and not from either manuscript that these scribes actually copied out.<sup>5</sup> The resultant discontinuity deprives the annotations of their full and genuine meaningfulness within their own spaces as unique recensions of the poem.

Indeed, while it may be tempting to focus largely upon the scribe’s power to create new readings within a unique interpretative framework, the scribe’s ability to, in effect, become a sub-author in the process of manufacturing *Piers Plowman*, this fascination upon the importance of difference still needs to be framed diligently within reading the context of the work as a whole. Nonetheless, such an approach seems a rarity. Noelle Phillips, for example, has recently pointed to the effect of changes found within Oxford Corpus Christi MS 201 (F):

there are also several unique omissions of poverty material, perhaps out of concern that an overemphasis on poverty might be too reformist in tone. The manuscript seems to find a cautious balance somewhere between reform and the status quo. Orthodoxy is still a matter of concern for the scribe, as is evident in several other emendations: at 15.395, for example, he refers to the receipt of communion at an austere rate of once a year, as opposed to once a month in BX. At 14.391, he polarizes mercy and righteousness in an attempt to separate himself from any association with Pelagianism. These interventions gradually reshape the poem’s priorities.<sup>6</sup>

Sarah Wood in a like manner discusses the effect of changes found within the notorious HM 114 manuscript, again with an eye largely toward difference:

A closer examination of the use, in HM 114, of the C-text materials shared with J, alongside other interpolations in the second vision, allows some refinement and expansion of these earlier comments on the purpose and effects of Ht’s insertions. Ht’s use of these C-text interpolations in the second vision does not seem wholly “random,” displaying indeed an attentiveness to the themes and language of the poem that extends beyond simply connecting “lollars”/bad hermits and wasters. The intrusion of additional lines into Passus 6 represents not only a seemingly deliberate adjustment of the respective roles of Piers and Will but also one that stands

interestingly at odds with the poet's own use of his new C-text materials—although equally with some of the redactor's own “editorial” decisions elsewhere in the second vision. The Ht redactor works, in general, against the direction of the authorial revisions in C in order to re-emphasize Piers the Plowman's status as the text's source of authority although he also admits into his text of B one of the major C-text revisions that sees Piers's role partly usurped by Will. Ht's deployment of the materials shared with J, which some have taken to reflect authorial draft, thus represents rather a creative misreading—although not, perhaps, an entirely coherent one—of Langland's original.<sup>7</sup>

Such logic as Wood's may pertain aptly to discussions of a particular scribe's meddling with the exact manuscript he ‘read’ in the preparation of his text, but any other reader of this same manuscript, unless a textual editor of the poem herself with an extensive knowledge of what is authorial and what is scribal, will not be positioned to be able to tell the difference. For this non-professional reader, against the weight of the whole manuscript text, the vast majority of which is untouched by editorial redaction, is it plausible to contend that these scribal interventions are capable of reshaping the priorities of the poem, of making an actual “new text” as Kerby-Fulton contends? Or would they be overwhelmed and pulled into the gravitational orbit of what existed already somewhere in the expansive authorial vision? And what do we even mean by a label such as “new text” under these circumstances? At what point indeed might a reader come to regard the text in his or her hands as being not a bona fide copy of that work of literature known to us today as *Piers Plowman* but as being something else? Until we begin to read the historical versions of *Piers Plowman* as much as for how they maintain continuity as for how they manufacture difference we cannot know begin to know the answers to these critical questions.

*The Feral Piers: A Reader's Experience of the British Library Cotton Caligula A XI Manuscript of Piers Plowman* is a close examination of one particular manuscript of *Piers Plowman*: British Library Cotton Caligula A XI in which Langland's masterwork is found between folios 170recto and 286recto, with folios 274recto to 276verso being blank, although no part of the text is missing as a result. According to its formal description by Kane and Donaldson in the Athlone B edition, Cotton Caligula's version of *Piers Plowman* is a CAB text, giving more or less C readings from the Prologue through to C.2.128, then A readings from A.2.86 through to the end of passus 2, and then B readings from B.3.1 through to the end of the poem.<sup>8</sup> Cotton's text is closely related to that of two other manuscripts, Oxford Bodley 814 (Bo) and British Library Additional 10574 (Bm), which exhibit the same CAB textual combination and which surpass it

both in terms of closeness to other C, A, or B manuscripts and in overall quality of presentation. It is therefore generally agreed that Cotton was the latest of the three to have been written.<sup>9</sup> These three manuscripts also have a particular textual relationship with Cambridge University Library Dd.1.17 (C) with which they share, for instance, the omission of 36 lines of text as a block in passus 16.<sup>10</sup>

Why is it important to read *Piers* in light of the idiosyncrasies of one particular utility-grade manuscript? What is to be gained by such a micro case study approach? It is not, as George Kane<sup>11</sup> and Nicolas Jacobs<sup>12</sup> may fear, to displace the importance of the authorial text, which will always be preeminent for serious contemporary appreciation of this great literary achievement, however problematic a concept the authorial text (or the author himself) might be to define in the case of *Piers Plowman*. Nor does it seek to displace efforts to put together how *Piers* came to be through study of its scribes and their culture. But simply put, if we are ever to fully understand the early literary reception of this text we need to look beyond how it was dealt with by its professional readers. Emphasis upon scribes and their context is indeed important work, but it cannot be the only approach to the problem. We need to understand also how the early non-professional reader—the reader who may or may not have had any special training in the production of manuscripts—approached *Piers* as a text, to know to which aspects of its discourse this reader responded and how these elements might have informed his or her social and cultural horizons. To be able to discern such things we need to know beyond how texts were being transmitted within a scribal culture or how they fit largely into one category such as any particular genre or other. We need to understand at the micro level the *Piers* manuscript itself as a particular material and aesthetic object so that we know what it was exactly that early readers were reading and responding to.<sup>13</sup>

We know that the “text” of *Piers Plowman B* differs significantly between the Athlone version as edited by the team of George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson and the Longman version as prepared by A. V. C. Schmidt, and we know that these differences can and do result in radically different interpretations of the poem. Rejecting, for example, the business of “bilyue” (the necessities of life) in the Athlone edition is not at all the same thing as turning away from the business of “belly joy” in the Longman edition. The great strengths and profound weaknesses of both editions have been well documented by Langland scholars, and such is very significant work to point out because, for scholarly studies of *Piers*, it matters very much as to *which* text one is using to make one’s argument. The same recognition of how significant textual difference can be to



interpretation needs to extend to the content of the individual manuscripts themselves, especially for those studies of the narrative that claim to be historically situated. In this regard, my admittedly micro study of one manuscript in detail does not strive to be in competition with the aims of the *Piers Electronic Archive* to make readily available to scholars the textual tradition of all three versions, but it hopes to be complementary to its purpose by showing how else *Piers* might be approached and understood through study of its manuscripts. That is, my micro study concentrates on recapturing the experience of reading *Piers* in manuscript form far more than it ponders the circumstances of its authoring, the techniques behind its textual editing, or the conditions of scribal culture which underlie its copying.

Over the nearly two generations that elapsed between its author's release of *Piers Plowman* into the public domain and the Cotton scribe's completion of his transcription likely some time in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, the author's words had been altered, for better or for worse, first of all perhaps by the author himself in a process jestingly summed up by John Bowers as, "The A version was snatched unfinished and abandoned from his work desk. The B-text was published in such a slapdash manner that a corrupt archetype served as the exemplar for all surviving copies. He was forced to settle for a defective B copy as the basis for revising his C version, which was posthumously disseminated, unfinished and unpolished"<sup>14</sup> and then by successive scribal editorial interventions, by various copyist lapses in the execution of the craft, and by well-intentioned (if all too often fumble-fingered) scribal efforts at textual reconstruction and artistic refinement. For every medieval author, this danger to the essential integrity of the text was an all too familiar reality of creative work because, as Kerby-Fulton has described it, "no medieval author could be certain that a text, once it left his hands or the hands of the scribe he'd supervised, would ever be copied the same way twice. Authorial anxiety about maintaining textual integrity, especially in instances where a work invited scribal 'participation' by its polemical nature, as *Piers* did, can only be imagined."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Matthew Fisher points out that "the threat to medieval authorship was not only the inescapable issue of scribal textual corruption, but the danger of reasoned interventions—scribal invention and scribal authorship" and that it is our own modern "strenuously erected division between scribes and authors" which sidesteps the challenges inherent in dealing with such modified texts.<sup>16</sup> Nor do all scholars agree that the author of *Piers* feared or even thought it advisable to try and thwart scribal meddling with the substance of his text. Alan J. Fletcher, for one, posits that Langland accepted and

accommodated

the provisionality of his text. To observe that provisionality was, of course, thrust upon him by the exploratory nature of his poem, an exploration that never ended, as far as we can see, or that it was thrust upon him because his poem had committed itself to responding to (changing) historical circumstances [...] is not to remove the fact that provisionality became, in effect, part of his poem's ethical presence. Langland's release into the world of at least three or four versions of it may implicitly acknowledge that provisionality was not only an acceptable, but also an ethically mandatory, part of its existence in time, and would similarly so have been regarded by his contemporaries, including some of his 'co-authorial' copyists.<sup>17</sup>

*Piers*, that is, to use contemporary parlance, lent itself to quickly becoming a "feral" text, one which escapes the control of anyone to limit its boundaries. Jill Walker, for instance, has described the feral hypertext of the twenty-first century as follows:

The clearest examples of feral hypertexts are the large collaborative projects that generate patterns and meanings without any clear authors or editors controlling the linking. While the semantic web and other standards-oriented projects clearly follow the domesticated paradigm, attempting to retain control of hypertextual structures, these feral projects accept messiness, errors and ignorance, and devise ways of making sense from vast numbers of varying contributions. The online version of the Encyclopædia Britannica is an example of a domesticated and carefully controlled hypertext, while the Wikipedia is an example of a feral hypertext. An online library catalogue, with its careful categorisation, is domesticated, while Google's interpretations of links or Flickr, Del.icio.us and CiteULike's collaborative freeform tagging are feral. This doesn't mean there are no structures or rules. Quite the contrary: these systems work because they have simple but flexible ground conditions that establish environments that make emergent organisation instantly visible. These hypertexts are both 'intimate extensions to memory' and complex representations of a collective narrative.<sup>18</sup>

Take away the cyber-speak and Walker could easily be describing the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*.

Yet how did this process of feral provisionality function at the micro level of an individual manuscript, especially a text authored by an unknown writer, as is the case for the Cotton Caligula A XI manuscript of *Piers Plowman*? Singly, one altered reading or one ambiguous spelling or one textual manipulation will not be enough to change the overall impression a reader gains of a text. However, the combined effect of

hundreds of these is an altogether different matter, and hence there is a need for more careful attention to be paid to the vagaries of individual *Piers* manuscripts and how these might change the ways in which this complex text was read and understood by its non-professional readers in their time, if not in our own. If modern textual editors cannot, without resort to intuition and impressionism, tell authorial writing apart from scribal writing, we can hardly expect the early non-professional reader of an anonymously-authored text to have done so—or even to have cared about the difference.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the early non-professional reader's response to Cotton Caligula A XI cannot be divorced from the manuscript medium in which it was produced, for there are some aspects of the scribal craft, such as abbreviation, which can and do impact upon interpretative meaning and which are inevitably lost in the translation to a print medium. Andrew Taylor has pointed out how early print texts have been shown to possess particular formats intended for particular types of reader.<sup>20</sup> Building on the work of Michael Camille, Taylor has also convincingly argued that the editorial decisions made in translating texts from a manuscript to a print medium affect how one regards the whole: "what we read when we read a medieval poem will be some form of printed edition—and the form matters. Medieval poetry has been shaped into modern literary canons through the visual design and interpretative apparatus of modern editions .... The choice of titles, the connotations of different fonts, the treatment of illustrations and musical notation, as well as the layout—all these details of print bibliography are therefore of concern for those who wish to study medieval texts. The full range of the material support of any given text across the centuries deserves attention."<sup>21</sup> Noelle Phillips supplements such thinking in her argument that the rubrication patterns of the F scribe offer "an interpretative scaffolding" to the readers of Oxford Corpus Christi MS 201.<sup>22</sup> And as Maura Nolan has pointed out, reading a digitised copy of a manuscript offers a radically different experience from engaging directly with the material object created in the Middle Ages (or a modern print copy, for that matter). Gone is the original physical experience—the touch, the smell, the sound, perhaps even the taste of working with the manuscript as a material thing—because while the digital can enhance one's ability to peer into the most inaccessible nooks and crannies of a manuscript, it can capture none of the other sensory modalities of the original object.<sup>23</sup> Early non-professional readers of *Piers Plowman*, in sum, did not know the text we do today, and they did not know it in the medium in which most of us today experience it.

Throughout this micro study the copyist is referred to as the Cotton

scribe. Such nomenclature is for the sake of convenience because, whoever the scribe was and whatever motivated him to make his copy, he had no connection whatsoever to Sir Robert Cotton, the famous antiquarian who acquired the manuscript in the sixteenth century and who had it bound as the fourth item of five in a disparate collection of works all by different scribes: a Latin table of contents, *The Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, 43 lines of anonymous Latin verse, *Piers Plowman*, and Aldelm's *De vita monachorum*. Likewise, the copyist who wrote out this manuscript version is not responsible for every deviation from the unknowable authorial norm to be found in his transcription, for while he certainly added some new features to the mix, overwhelmingly he inherited most of them from his exemplar copy which in turn had inherited deviations from its exemplar and on backwards in time to the lost authorial autographs. Just that detail by itself exposes the problematic issue that studies oriented to contrast a scribal text with the authorial one begin likely wrong footed: unaccounted for difference is already present. The process which altered the author's own original text involved a slow accretion of changes over successive transcriptions in combination with some sudden, dramatic developments. The dramatic developments, with the one exception of a spectacular mistake made at some unknowable point in the copying of a section in passus 16, are clearly planned, editorial decisions: most obviously, to splice together three different textual traditions to form a CAB manuscript; on closer observation, to omit text deemed redundant, or repetitive, or perhaps even offensive. Less frequently, the occasional line or two of text was added. More than one person made these various editorial choices over time which resulted especially for the three sister manuscripts of Bo, Bm, and Cotton, in the "quite exceptional persistence"<sup>24</sup> of this genetic group of *Piers* manuscripts, but credit for these decisions is not due to the "Cotton scribe".

The *Piers Plowman* text of Cotton Caligula A XI has been dated by Doyle as written between 1410 and 1430 and by Hanna to the first quarter of the fifteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Kane and Donaldson concur, although they would place it toward the beginning of that range of dates rather than its end. To Kane and Donaldson, and to Doyle also, the textual relationship between Bm and Bo and its sister manuscript, Cotton, is so close that Doyle sees Cotton as "related at one remove" to Bm and Bo, and Kane and Donaldson argue the three "originated in close proximity."<sup>26</sup> The early fifteenth-century date for Cotton is thus necessitated by the dating of the other two manuscripts both to the turn of the century, although such a line of reasoning is dependent on the assumption that a new copy could not be

written years later from an old exemplar. Some readings indeed acquire a different context if the manuscript—or its non-professional reader—is dated later than 1420.

In fact, the origins of the *Piers* segment of Cotton Caligula A XI are in dispute. Kane and Donaldson have argued that it, like Bm and Bo, is the product of the same professional, if not intelligently regulated copyist workshop, a thesis which suits their dating theory.<sup>27</sup> Bm and Bo are certainly closely related: even their page layout is near identical and they share the odd feature of a fourth gathering of two bifolia.<sup>28</sup> Cotton, however, differs from Bm and Bo in both of these respects, and upon closer inspection it differs also in its placement of paraph marks and in several other features, and the evidence therefore which supports the same workshop origins for Bm and Bo cannot be shown as applicable to Cotton. Kerby-Fulton has offered the alternative theory that Cotton was written by an Exchequer clerk, presumably in his spare time,<sup>29</sup> while Carl Grindley has described him as a well-established London copyist with experience in the preparation of *Piers* manuscripts.<sup>30</sup>

My study of the Cotton text of *Piers* differs from the approaches taken to manuscripts by scholars like Kerby-Fulton, Grindley, and Lawrence Warner in several important respects. First and foremost, it is not a textual history. My aim is not to meticulously analyze Cot's textual relationship to Bm and Bo in order to determine as precisely as possible how this particular manuscript came into being. The text of Cotton is what it is and, from the point of view of its non-professional readers in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, it matters little as to who made a change, or when the text was changed, or why any particular change happened. Having an explanation for the alteration, whether it be a deliberate effort to reshape the poem, an accidental slip of the pen, or an honest mistake, does not take away from the fact that the words on the page in Cotton have at some point mutated from what its anonymous author wrote. Moreover, Cotton's non-professional readers were often closely attentive to the minutiae of the text: there are several instances of altered spelling, some redone more than once, and of word substitutions and marginal definitions made by someone other than the scribe. Hence if even one of these non-professional readers had recognized, for example, that a slip of the quill had occurred in the second line of the poem, it is more than likely that one of them would have intervened at some point to fix a major textual error, because that is what happened elsewhere in the text when these readers did think there was a significant problem with the written copy before them.

When these non-professional readers sat down to peruse the folios of

their manuscript, they were not reading the C version, or the A version, or the B version. They were not even reading the CAB version. They were reading the Cotton version of *Piers Plowman*—an unique amalgam of words that had accreted many changes over many years done by many different hands but still recognizable as “that” *Piers* text. Thus my study is different from others also in that it is not an attempt to read the scribe’s intent with respect to (changing?) the meaning of the author’s work. Cotton’s scribe, for that matter, was not reading the author’s work either: to state the situation simplistically and according to only one of the many possible stemmae, he was reading Bo’s scribe who was reading the Bm scribe who was reading the CAB scribe who was reading the  $\beta^4$  scribe who was reading the  $\beta^3$  scribe who was reading .... all the way back to the lost authorial original(s). At each one of these stages change happened, deliberate and accidental. Even if one accepts the highly dubious prospect that scribal intention is somehow discernible, even though authorial intention more than fifty years ago was debunked by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley as impossible to know,<sup>31</sup> and that we can therefore by some mysterious means confidently tell apart a deliberate act from an honest mistake and know why the scribe chose as he did, a focus upon just the unique textual alterations made by Cotton’s scribe is too narrow a field of vision to account for the cumulative effect upon the non-professional reader of all the changes wrought upon the author’s original poem. It would be a piecemeal approach to something which demands a holistic one.

My study also deviates from some standard editorial procedures. I do not, for instance, silently emend the stylized thorn that looks like a y to the letter shape þ instead because to do so would obscure the evidence for the professional practice of the scribe which is examined in the second chapter of my book.<sup>32</sup> Since the scribe uses both the undotted y and the þ (as well, of course, as the th combination) to signify the interdental fricative, if he had wanted at any point in his manuscript to write the letter shape þ, one presumes that is the letter shape he would have chosen.

I also do not silently expand standard medieval abbreviations like ihc for Jesus and xpc for *Christus*, and on occasion I even leave all words in their abbreviated form. This again was done in order to not obscure the evidence for the scribe’s professional practice, but also for another reason which can perhaps be most readily demonstrated with an example pulled from the twenty-first century. Consider the following statement taken from *The Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples*: “A useful way of understanding the general impact of the European presence on aboriginal peoples in Canada is to focus upon the reasons that the two groups, native and

newcomer, had for coming into contact.”<sup>33</sup> As seen in this passage, today’s standard bibliographic code capitalises *European* and *Canada* but leaves words like *aboriginal* and *native* uncapitalised. No confusion results in the meaning of the sentence, and many if not most, readers might not think twice about what is going on in the sentence. But is the obvious really all that is being said? On the contrary, the difference in practice has much to say about a systemic imbalance of power, notions of White cultural superiority, and Native/settler relations in a colonised environment, and all of that is why the standard bibliographic code of leaving *Aboriginal* and *Native* uncapitalised is ever so slowly starting to evolve toward putting them on an equal footing with their *European* and *Canadian* counterparts. The same import is true of medieval standard practices. To put the name of Jesus in Greek letters speaks to difference, to the special nature of this word and the concept it signifies. It is saying something, just as it is saying something today when one chooses, or not, to capitalise *God*. Each and every standard practice likewise contains within itself the potential to be saying something beyond the obvious, provided that the reader, professional or non-professional, has the acumen to hear it. Hence it is important to preserve as much as possible such standard medieval bibliographic codes that just might have something unexpected to say to us in the reading of the manuscript.

I also do not critically edit the passages quoted from the Cotton manuscript but maintain as closely as possible the punctuation, capitalisation, and spelling as they appear in the original manuscript. This is not to say that I regard critical editing as unimportant. In most circumstances it is vitally important work, but editing is also an intrusive act upon the text and inappropriate for the terms of this study. The reason why, especially pertinent to punctuation, is attested to by several famous cases in history and literature, from Delphic oracles crafted to be correct regardless of which side won the battle,<sup>34</sup> to the last lines of the Old English poem *The Wanderer*<sup>35</sup> and those of Donne’s *Love’s Alchemy*,<sup>36</sup> to the joke about the panda in the bar who eats shoots and leaves,<sup>37</sup> all the way to simple one-liners like the misogynistic tag “a woman without her man is nothing,” a claim which can be turned against itself through the application of punctuation.<sup>38</sup> Critical editing is an act of interpretation, and while it may purport to represent the intention of the author or in Cotton’s instance the scribe, in actuality it reflects the interpretation of the editor, a modern reading of the old manuscript’s evidence. Such may not matter in the overwhelming number of cases, but where the evidence is ambiguous and the passage could be construed in more than one way, the editor’s intervention is the interpretative act which tips the balance. One need only

compare the Athlone and Longman editions to see how critical the role of the editor is in shaping the meaning of this text. Where, for instance, does Trajan's speech in B.11 end? The early non-professional reader of Cotton did not have any interpretative guidance beyond what appears in the manuscript. And so, because there may very well be different readings possible of the manuscript's evidence from my own modern attempts, leaving the text's meaning as open as possible by adding no interpretative framework beyond that which the scribe himself provided his reader, seems the most prudent course of action to allow for difference.

For Cotton's non-professional readers in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the manuscript was not an ossified relic whose value lay in what can be gleaned through it about modes of scribal production, its textual relationships to other *Piers* manuscripts, and knowledge of the social and intellectual milieu of its readers and scribe. Such things describe the value placed upon Cot by today's textual historian who uses the evidence of the manuscript to further the difficult task of putting all *Piers* manuscripts into relation with each other. For the early non-professional reader, however, Cotton's value lay in the fact, first, that it was a text to be read, enjoyed, and responded to as a thoughtful work of literature and, second, that it added to the sheer joy of building a library collection.

*The Feral Piers* dares to read the Cotton manuscript once again as these early readers did, as a work of literature. I do not pretend that this reading will somehow be a medieval one—the interpretation found in the third through fifth chapters of this book is of course my own modern response to this late medieval historical version of *Piers*, while what can be gleaned about the marginal responses of the many layers of fifteenth and sixteenth-century non-professional readers is addressed in its own chapter. Yet if it is proper to heed Derek Pearsall's call “that we should attend to all three versions of Langland's poem, separately and in relation to one another,”<sup>39</sup> it is also right to attend to the historic versions of the poem recorded in the manuscripts and the earliest print editions. My reading will trace the path of the entire Cotton text in three stages—the opening section of the narrative from the Prologue through passus 7; the setting forth of the Dreamer on his quest for Dowel after the pardon scene from passus 8 through passus 14; and the Dreamer's continued journey in the wake of his encounter with Haukyn from passus 15 through to the end—with an eye to show how the natural contours of its altered landscape—diked, dredged, and rechannelled by many scribes over nearly two generations—redirect the flow of Langland's argument in new, sometimes unexpected directions and yet maintain its essential essence. Ultimately, in



gaining a better understanding at the micro level of this particular historic version of *Piers Plowman* as a work of literature, we will better understand the category-defying *Piers* itself, its fit in the scrum of late medieval and early Renaissance England, and its fifteenth and sixteenth-century readers. Indeed, a complete contextual knowledge of *Piers* in its early years demands an understanding of the historic versions of the poem beyond what knowledge of their textual relations to each other, their modes of production, and personal information about their scribes and owners can tell us. We need to read the historical versions as their author and scribes intended them to be read and as their readers in fact did read them—in their own right as a work of literature. *The Feral Piers* does this for one of these historical versions.

Two assumptions are made in this reading of the Cotton text. First is that the early reader does not have access to another manuscript of the poem for the purposes of comparison or clarification of difficult lines and passages. Such cannot be assumed to have been the rule for early readers, although certainly some manuscript owners do leave evidence in their copy of an awareness of other textual traditions of *Piers*. One example of such is found in Cotton's sister manuscript Bm in which Dr. Adam Clarke, the Wesleyan preacher and commentator, likely wrote in the "missing" B lines for the C part of the poem and added the thirty-two lines lost at the end of the original manuscript.<sup>40</sup> But Clarke is a very late owner from whose estate the British Museum acquired the Bm manuscript at a Sotheby's auction in 1836 and we have evidence that Clarke himself had access to the Hm manuscript located at that time at Ashburnham Place in London.<sup>41</sup> But before the time of the great antiquarians of the post-Reformation age who amassed large collections of manuscripts, why should we assume that any ordinary non-professional reader, especially one on a tight budget who could afford only a utility-grade copy, owned more than one manuscript of any particular text?

The second assumption is that the reader, except perhaps for the most common Biblical passages, will not generally recognise quotations which have been somehow altered significantly from their original. That is, the reader cannot easily leap from altered text, whether the alteration was made by the scribe or by the author, back to that of the original source. The author may well have made good use of foundational school-texts for his Latin, as Christopher Cannon has demonstrated,<sup>42</sup> and from that basic academic background we might expect that most of his readers would have caught even drastically reinvented phrases from these sources. However, while the probability can never be discounted that a reader might have self-corrected mistakes in silence, in the absence of concrete proof that

recognition of error did happen (such as attempted textual correction or marginal notation) it cannot be assumed as a given. For the most part, the reader must make sense of what is found in the manuscript as is.

It remains to be answered as to why Cotton Caligula A XI is a good choice for such an old, and yet radical aesthetic approach to understanding a manuscript. In an ideal world, each and every surviving *Piers* manuscript would be subject to the dignity of such a literary appreciation, and indeed the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* makes such a dream easier to accomplish than the old-fashioned route I adopted when I first began working on this project twenty years ago: that of visiting the British Library and tediously over a period of weeks writing out a transcription with accompanying detailed notes.<sup>43</sup> But the dream is not likely to be a viable prospect in the real world of publishing today. If the viability of such projects is limited, then Cotton is a good choice for several reasons. First is that it is a complete version. While it may be true that by the late fourteenth century, readers of *Piers Plowman* were “jealous of the completeness of their copies,”<sup>44</sup> there are still many *Piers* manuscripts which only survive into the twenty-first century in fragmentary form and there must have been many more, we presume, that did not survive at all. Second, it is a CAB composite version, a fact which one might assume (always a dangerous prospect!) would maximize the degree of alteration that Cotton shows from the modern editions of the author’s text. The third factor is that Cotton exists pretty much at the end of its line textually. It was the last of the three CAB manuscripts to be copied, possessing textual alterations found also in either Bm or Bo as well as its own unique changes, and no other known *Piers* manuscript derives from it. It thus again, maximizes the degree of alteration likely to be found. That said, from the start we must temper our expectations of the difference we will find because, if we can recognize the A and B and C and even the Z versions as all being somehow the same literary construct, we should not entertain unrealistic notions of what difference a scribe can achieve. Indeed, the fourth factor is that the Cotton scribe did not approach the making of his manuscript with any obvious agenda to dramatically reshape the text. While this deference to textual fixity may strike us as unambitious in comparison to the interventionist strategies of certain other “active creators” such as the “elusively alluring”<sup>45</sup> Ht scribe who recently has been identified by Linne Mooney and Estelle Stubbs as Richard Osborn, chamber clerk at the London Guildhall, 1400-1437,<sup>46</sup> and who is responsible for the aberration known as Hm 114, the Cotton scribe’s work instead presents us with a more typical representation of what the average early non-professional reader was engaging with when he or she picked up

a copy of *Piers* than does “a ruinously corrupted descendant of the B archetype”<sup>47</sup> which seems to speak perhaps primarily to one person’s own select agenda with the text.<sup>48</sup> And finally, although its many non-professional readers over the years were not particularly loquacious in their marginal commentary, nevertheless there were several of them and they demonstrably span both the fifteenth, the sixteenth, and even the seventeenth centuries. However we may judge the quality of the scribe’s workmanship, we cannot claim that Cot survives only because it was so little read. Cotton is the version of *Piers Plowman* that these many owners enjoyed and cared enough about to annotate, to correct, and to preserve in good condition for future generations of readers. *The Feral Piers* is the story of their manuscript, its anonymous scribe and its author, and of them.



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MANUSCRIPT OF *PIERS* COTTON CALIGULA

Cotton Caligula A XI contains the following texts: a sixteenth-century table of contents written in Latin for the complete volume (f.2r); *The Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, which includes a 47-line strip from the *Short Chronicle* bound into it at some point<sup>1</sup> (f.3r - f.168v); 43 lines of anonymous Latin verse (f.169v); a CAB manuscript of *Piers Plowman* (f.170r - f.286r),<sup>2</sup> and Aldelm's *De vita monachorum* (f.287r - f.288v).<sup>3</sup> This combination of items, however, is almost certainly post-medieval, dating most likely from the sixteenth century when they were individually acquired for the library of Sir Robert Cotton and bound together. The cropping evident in the *Piers* section of the manuscript likely occurred at this point in time to make the pages uniform in size, after which no further cause arose to inflict deliberate damage upon the outer edges of the *Piers* manuscript. Successive rebindings, on the other hand, have caused even more material on the inner edges of the manuscript to be lost. During one of these rebindings, three extra blank pages were inserted, likely by British Museum staff, without loss of text, into the *Piers* segment of the collection after B.19.277. These were then dutifully included as folios 274 - 276 in the third pagination count, written in pencil in the upper right hand corner by British Museum staff, of the Cotton Caligula A XI manuscript as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Signatures survive on f.237, f.242-45, and f.258 of the *Piers* section.

The Cotton *Piers* is in good condition, with just a few scab or wormholes in the vellum. One catchword survives on f.225verso. Textual damage is minor, and only infrequently are a few letters at a time not visible. Where text has been lost, it is usually the fault of the successive rebindings, although sometimes there is damage due to blots caused by water or to erasure of surrounding text. One folio, 172, is written out on markedly different vellum, being darker, coarser, and of generally inferior quality. It is followed by a repair job, f.173, pasted into the original manuscript, written in a different hand and in a notably lighter ink.

Presumably, the repair replaces a folio that was unacceptable in some respect—perhaps badly damaged, or badly rendered, or entirely overlooked in the original transcription.

As a material object, the *Piers* text of Cotton Caligula A XI is a classic demonstration of what J. B. Allen and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton have termed the “utility-grade” manuscript:<sup>5</sup> it is bare of many decorative features; underlining (f.172v, f.175r, f.181r, f.230v, f.240v, and f.255r) appears to be strictly functional as an indicator of textual problems; Latin is not highlighted in any easily discernible visible manner; red ink, with the lone exception of f.258recto, which has a reddish cross written in the right hand margin and a signature, Mj, scrawled at the bottom in red, is restricted to the decorative outline around the blue inked opening initials of the prologue and each passus; and blue ink is found elsewhere only in the paraph marks. The scribe otherwise rarely stretched to include any decorative elements in his transcription, although on a few occasions there are some unusually rendered, although not necessarily decorative letter shapes, such as the h with the elongated bottom swoop to the left at the end of passus 1 on f.176recto.

The prime exceptions to this lack of decoration in the manuscript are the line drawn faces and the several pointing fingers found in the margins. The pointing fingers, one with “cave” written on the sleeve (f.215v), may be from the pen of the scribe, although there is equally no necessary reason to assume that they are. The same uncertainty is true of the line-drawn faces, even though Kerby-Fulton has argued that they are the work of the scribe on the grounds that such marginal visualizations are a trademark feature of Exchequer clerks such as she believes him to be: “The Cotton manuscript identified above as having ‘contaminated’ chancery features also has the Exchequer penchant for rough marginal drawings in profile that could be (and have been) easily dismissed as mere doodling ..... I would suggest that manuscripts like Cotton Caligula and HM 143 were created by the kind of scribe used to connecting text with rough-hewn, often satirical, little images—and unable to resist the same temptation in (off-duty?) copying *Piers*.”<sup>6</sup>

Some features of the manuscript, however, seem at odds with this utility-grade status. The text is laid out block off-centre, with an average of 34 lines per page up to and including f.186recto (ends B.4.79) at which point the scribe’s practice for the remainder of the poem abruptly lowers to a steady 32 lines per page instead. Each page has been carefully mapped out, with doubled upper and lower margins at the top of the page, similar doubled upper and lower margins at the bottom of the page, an inner margin along the vertical of both sides of the page (which frames most of