
REVIEWS

John M. Bowers. *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*.
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Knowing that in college classrooms the teaching of medieval English literature is often restricted to *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*, John Bowers' book is an important reminder of *Piers Plowman* as the best documented and most pervasive English literary work of fourteenth-century England. In fact, as Bowers writes, Langland's work "established itself as a textual presence, really a cultural presence with practical social and political challenges, steadily affecting the development of the official and highly visible 'Chaucerian tradition'" (3). We must remember to teach and consider *Piers Plowman* as the more powerful cultural influence of its time; in fact, as Bowers argues, it is a force against which Chaucer forms his oeuvre.

Bowers discusses the relationship between these two authors in terms of Harold Bloom's *agon* and his theory of "anxiety of influence," arguing that even though Chaucer emerged from the contest as the heroic founder of the English literary canon, Langland was the real victor. As he points out, while there is strong evidence that Chaucer read *Piers*, Langland shows no signs of having read Chaucer's works, and therefore Langland should achieve "historical priority since his work was actually read, quoted, copied, and imitated throughout the last decades of the fourteenth century, whereas there is little hard evidence that Chaucer's works had any wide readership even at court during his lifetime" (2). While Bowers determines that Chaucer suffered from the anxiety of Langland's influence, he contends they are co-founders of the English literary identity. They represent complementary traditions and form a cultural dialectic. While Langland has the insular voice, Chaucer is the internationalist. Langland is the reformer and rural sympathizer. Chaucer is a civil servant, agent of the Lancastrian court and the established church. The two represent radical versus traditional, populist versus intellectual elite, native alliterative style versus continental imitation. As Bowers describes, they are bound in "a mutual relationship, each necessary to configure the other, like the double helix of the DNA molecule" (8).

However, while Bowers provides extensive historical detail to support his claims, a reader unfamiliar with the manuscript transmission of *Piers Plowman* might be

misled on one crucial point: the extent to which we can ever know the author, or possibly authors, of the many extant versions of *Piers Plowman*. In his introduction, Bowers asks why Chaucer and not Langland is hailed as the Father of English Literature, but the answer to this question seems obvious—Geoffrey Chaucer has a biography for a culture to hang its hat on. He was an agent and functionary of three royal courts with a wife named Philippa and a son named Thomas. In fact, one of Bowers' provocative claims is that Thomas is "the true entrepreneur in the business of canon-formation" who established his father as the "patriarch of English letters" (190). He even suggests that Thomas kept the lease on his father's Westminster tenement to house his father's books so they could be copied.

By contrast, William Langland, if that was his name, is still an unknown, untraceable, undocumented figure. Attribution of *Piers Plowman* does not enter the historical record until nearly two centuries after the poem began circulating when the author is identified as Robert Langland of Cleobury Mortimer. Several centuries after that, historians adjusted that name according to a rubric in one manuscript claiming "William" had composed the poem, and eventually, a line in the B text—"I have lyved in londe' quod I 'my name is Longe Wille'"—was accepted as support of that name in spite of the fact that it very likely conflates the narrator with the author. J.M. Manley even went so far as to argue for five authors. It is hard to call an authorial construct a Patriarch; therefore, this title was much more easily attached to Geoffrey Chaucer whose biography and oeuvre can bear the weight.

Bowers anticipates this criticism of his construction of "Langland," but never completely overcomes the impulse to present the author as fully realized, a person with whom Chaucer may have arm-wrestled at a London tavern. To the extent that Chaucer felt an *agon* with Langland, it was a shadowboxing match with the phenomenon of *Piers Plowman*, a communal dream vision created by a composer or composers, intervening scribes, Lollard patrons, Christian readers, and threatened church officials. To be fair, all scholars struggle with the same apples-to-oranges fallacy: there is clearly a relationship between *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer in late-fourteenth-century England intellectual life, but it resists neat comparisons. If we set the discussion in the late 1300s, we must contrast *Piers Plowman*, the literary work, with Geoffrey Chaucer, the person whose writings are not public. If we define our discussion as the post-medieval legacy of the two topics, then we find ourselves juxtaposing the invention of William Langland and the recension of the *Piers Plowman* text (material history) with the rich collection of Chaucerian poems and their interpretation (literary criticism). We can never comfortably settle into a direct comparison of author to author, text to text, time frame to time frame, Chaucer and Langland.

Once we acknowledge the friction created whenever scholars rub these two topics against one other, Bowers' book reads wonderfully as a collection of enjoyable, rich essays, each spotlighting a certain aspect of late-fourteenth-century English literary history. Chapter IV, "*Piers Plowman* and the Impulse to Antagonism," is a careful discussion of the excitement and danger of the Lollard resistance and of the Langland writings as "an on-going threat to the twin orthodoxies of 'lordship and prelacie'" (156). Chapter VI, "The House of Chaucer & Son: The Business of Lancastrian Canon-Formation," explores the construction of Chaucer's sturdy house of fame by Thomas Chaucer, Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, and later, William Caxton. This essay inspires the reader to imagine the posthumous creation of the Chaucer "brand," which often attempted to represent him as traditional and orthodox where he may not have been. And the final chapter, "*Piers Plowman*, Print, and Protestantism," demonstrates the work's enduring presence as an expression of social and religious reform, concluding with the engaging idea that since Puritan readers took the book with them to the colonies, it deserves attention as an "unacknowledged progenitor of an American literary tradition" (227).

So, while Bowers' collection of critical essays may not work comfortably under the title *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*, it does achieve a worthy goal: demonstrating that Piers the Plowman and Geoffrey Chaucer deserve equal billing as founding fathers of the English literary canon. It reminds us, in a good way, of the power of fictional characters. ✱