

Langland, Father of American Literatures

John M. Bowers

University of Nevada Las Vegas

Geoffrey Chaucer's position as "father of English literature" has been steadily challenged in recent years. This paper both proposes and interrogates the other fourteenth-century English poet William Langland's possible claims as the origin for the Puritan tradition of New England and, hence, the later traditions of American literatures—in the plural. We know that the first copy of his satirical, theological dream-vision *Piers Plowman* arrived in New England in 1630 with the father of Anne Bradstreet, and as a result any patriarchal genealogy is already problematic because the first author in the American family-tree was a woman. Rather than the linearity of the English tradition, America offers a sprawling mosaic of minority writings marked by spiritual restlessness, calls for social reform, and the urgent need for self-definition, all already established in the English Puritan *Piers* tradition. The discussion ends with Florence Converse's largely (and aptly) forgotten novel *Long Will* (1908) that sought to retrieve the lost life-story of the author of *Piers Plowman*.

My book *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition* interrogated Geoffrey Chaucer's position as the Father of English Poetry imposing coherence upon the English literary tradition through genealogical affiliation. Meanwhile the controversial fourteenth-century visionary poem *Piers Plowman*, virtuously anonymous since the time of its release in the late 1370s, lurked as a shadow-presence because its author, seeking safety during dangerous times, had disappeared into a near-invisibility until Walter W. Skeat conjectured about his name and career in his monumental 1886 edition. This article follows the largely subliminal afterlife of *Piers* among seventeenth-century Puritans including those who migrated to New England and formed a textual community fostering later American literatures—in the plural. What secures this line of transmission is the discovery that Thomas Dudley, father of Anne Bradstreet, carried with him a copy of Langland's book across the Atlantic aboard the *Arbella* in 1630.¹ Bradstreet, of course, became

1 McCarl, *The Plowman's Tale*, 9. This was almost certainly Robert Crowley's 1550 edition, or later reprint, which named the author as Langland, albeit "Roberte Langelande."

America's first notable English-language poet and thereby the taproot of the Puritan tradition in the New World. In spite of my title, Langland emerges not so much as the progenitor as a prototype for a tradition that remains essentially a mosaic of minority writings marked by spiritual restlessness, calls for social reform, and the urgent need for self-definition already established in the English *Piers* tradition.²

Yet things are never that simple with Langland. Dudley did own a copy of *Piers* when his estate entered probate in 1653, and there is the presumption that the book passed to his son Joseph Dudley who graduated from Harvard College in 1665. There is further presumption that Joseph donated his copy to the Harvard Library where it perished in the fire of 1764. The first printed catalogue of the Harvard College Library did list a 1650 edition of *Pierce Plowman*,³ but this could not have been Dudley's copy and therefore not the one available as Bradstreet's background for *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* in 1650. This typifies the frustration in tracing Langland's influence upon American letters. Dots do not connect as they do in the English Chaucerian tradition to Lydgate, Spencer, Shakespeare, Milton, and beyond. Even if Helen Vendler shrewdly spots the linkage between Langland and Adrienne Rich by way of Walt Whitman, we cannot find evidence that the author of *Leaves of Grass* ever spent time loafing over *Piers Plowman*.⁴

Cultural studies usually insist that the center produces the margins, but Langland's legacy exemplifies the process by which the margin creates and maintains the Chaucerian center. In terms of chronology, Langlandian literature emerged *before* the creation of the majority position. *Piers* was read and imitated during the later fourteenth-century, manuscripts were copied, leaders of the 1381 English

2 Bowers, *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*, 226-227.

3 I am grateful to Harvard librarian Susan Halpert for providing information on the earliest *Piers* holdings.

4 Vendler, "Mapping the Air: Adrienne Rich and Jorie Graham," 215.

Rising appropriated its title-character's name, and Lollard heretics found support for their reformist agenda in the poem's religious satires at a time when Chaucer wrote for a narrow coterie and left his works to be copied and circulated only in the decades after his death in 1400. Though pushed farther to the margins during the fifteenth century, *Piers* would remain permanently available as the model for later fringe discourses. When the Puritans moved to New England, their own minority writings moved from the periphery to the authority-position so that the transplanted textual community began generating new alterities which would eventually make their own bids for centrality.

Protestantism had made explicit the longstanding Christian tenet that the "elect" would comprise only a small minority. Once these nonconformists arrived in New England, Puritan instincts continued to confer special authority to fringe voices constituting what has been called an *official marginality* where "the periphery is never someplace else."⁵ Originally conceived in opposition, *Piers* remained in England on this periphery where it was steadily consigned by the official discourses. Provoking repudiation, the poem demanded exclusion as the fundamental grounds for constructing the majority identity in which its own ingredients stubbornly and subversively inhered. Thus early Tudor publishers even credited Chaucer with his own *Plowman's Tale*.⁶

When Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the minority performer "who dwells at the margins of discourse,"⁷ he describes textual strategies traceable back to Langland's paradigmatic practices. Because these contests are negotiated within tight parameters of language, geography, and even technologies of textual production, many of the factors that had excluded Gates's minority productions from

5 Gates, "African American Criticism," 316.

6 McCarl, *The Plowman's Tale*, 13-52.

7 Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 52.

the mainstream canon—such as contested authorship, uncertain dating, and indeterminate layers of revision—are the same issues still swirling around *Piers Plowman*.⁸

Christopher Hill made the steady case that Lollardy's core values—which were also Langland's values—led directly into the mainstream of seventeenth-century Puritanism.⁹ Crowley's preface to his 1550 edition had already linked Langland with Wyclif as harbingers of the Protestant movement, and John Bunyan found in *The Book of Martyrs* the heroic history of the reform movement descending from Wyclif and early Lollard preachers.¹⁰ Langland's name continued to be invoked in this reformist reading of English history by Thomas Fuller in 1662, and *Piers* was still studied during the seventeenth century by men such as Gerard Langbaine.¹¹ Thus Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* almost inevitably echoed Langland's opening lines: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a den; and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a dream."¹² Barbara Johnson's *Reading "Piers Plowman" and "The Pilgrim's Progress"* finds the fingerprints if not the smoking gun, so to speak, when investigating Bunyan's indebtedness to Langland.¹³ So too with Langland's presence across the Atlantic. When he was a lad in Boston, Benjamin Franklin began his education by reading *Pilgrim's Progress* which transmitted the progressive values of this nonconformist culture.¹⁴

8 Warner, *The Lost History of "Piers Plowman."*

9 Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* and specifically "From Lollards to Levellers," 2:89-116.

10 Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, 29.

11 Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (1811), 261, and Edwards, "Piers Plowman in the Seventeenth Century: Gerard Langbaine's Notes."

12 Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 11.

13 Johnson, *Reading "Piers Plowman" and "The Pilgrim's Progress"*, esp. "Whom God Hath Chosen: Lollards, Reformers, and the Figures of Piers Plowman," 63-98.

14 Franklin, *The Autobiography*, 13.

If Bunyan was not directly influenced by *Piers*,¹⁵ the real question is what “influence” means within the Langlandian tradition. Puritan writers show few signs of careful reading, seldom cite Langland’s name even after 1550, and typically demonstrate only a second-hand knowledge, even blurring the distinction between *Piers* and the author himself. When the Puritans migrated to New England, this vagueness about the Langland tradition arrived with them. Whether or not she spent long hours with her father’s copy of *Piers*, Anne Bradstreet found spiritual meanings in commonplace objects such as a tree or a sea-tossed boat which had already figured in Langland’s allegories. Her *Contemplations* made the restless search for faith both its subject and structural principle, doubling back and wandering off to pick up another subject rather than moving directly to her alliterative conclusion—“Their parts, their ports, their pomp’s all laid in th’ dust”—in a manner reminiscent of her fourteenth-century antecedent.¹⁶

As a subliminal subtext, Langland’s vision of the remaking of England in a new spiritual form abetted Puritan confidence that a Christian community could be remade in New England. This transplanted culture was self-evidently Langlandian, and yet Langland himself cannot be installed as Father of American Literature because the trope of paternity had already been claimed by the official Chaucerian tradition. From the outset, then, the American tradition stubbornly resisted formulation as a family-tree of authors linked by acknowledged descent from a single founder.¹⁷ Although William Faulkner famously hailed Mark Twain as the Father of American Literature, many other nineteenth-century predecessors could lay claims to this title. Faulkner himself was a devoted reader of Melville. If Anne Bradstreet is our first poet, moreover, the Father of American literature would have been a woman.¹⁸

15 Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, 539-40, 543 and 550, makes Bunyan’s knowledge of Langland almost axiomatic.

16 *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, 204-14 (line 230).

17 Baker, “Figurations for a New American Literary History.”

18 For a tradition not configured as patriarchal succession, see Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589*.

Langland's vision of a society remade under the trope of pilgrimage was enacted as a program of emigration and colonization utterly different from the Dutch in New Amsterdam or the gentleman-adventurers in Virginia. Though they understood that their voyage was a one-way journey for resettlement, these Plymouth colonists conceived of themselves as they are still popularly known—"Pilgrims"—which was already a Langlandian conceit.¹⁹ The New England experience rendered itself meaningful in terms of Israel's settlement as a minority population with special providential status in the land of Canaan. Puritan writers such as William Bradford, John Winthrop, Edward Taylor, and Cotton Mather took as their paradigm the Book of Exodus where the chosen people endured a prolonged sojourn in a wilderness.²⁰ *Piers* had also proposed one final quest for an ideal form of Christian livelihood that would find expression in Samuel Danforth's famous sermon *Errand into the Wilderness* (1670).²¹ As the poet of landscapes without borders or place names, Langland set the terms of escape with the ever-ready option to "go west" yet again.

Established in their New England theocracy, these Puritans revived the short-lived optimism of Edwardine Protestants such as writer and publisher Robert Crowley. The American Puritan foundation privileged books and education for a textual community engaged in religious enquiry, moral scrutiny, and sustained reforms—all intellectual projects descending from Wyclif's Oxford of the 1370s. In addition to his 1550 edition of *Piers*, Crowley's polemical poetry maintained a readership among these radical Protestants, influencing in turn the Bay Psalm Book (1640) and Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* (1662).²² America would become the land of second chances where Langland's kind of literature would gain new

19 Burrow, "The Action of Langland's Second Vision."

20 Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, 263-82.

21 This becomes the paradigmatic text for Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*.

22 King, *English Reformation Literature*, "Robert Crowley: A Tudor Gospeller," 319-57.

purchase in this overseas community even if not acknowledged by those who wrote under its remote influence.

Morton Bloomfield's classic interpretation of *Piers Plowman* as a "Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse" established the terms for considering the Puritan millennialism of the *translatio regni* basic to the formation of American identity.²³ Langland's vision of a transformed Christian society resurfaces in what Bercovitch characterizes as the exuberant national eschatology.²⁴ With his pervasive fiction of beginning-again, Langland's purposeful forgetting of native antecedents provided the model for the strategic amnesia of American writers who typically behave as if they belonged to no established tradition and were inventing their literature from scratch. With literary history no less than national history, Ernest Renan's dictum is worth repeating: "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things."²⁵ The myth of the Puritan origins effaced their roiling prehistory as persecuted dissidents with their own internal discourses.²⁶ Also largely erased as part of this collective amnesia was the textual memory of *Piers* as a literary forerunner.

Reclamation of Puritan literary history became the achievement of scholars such as Perry Miller and Kenneth Murdock followed by Sacvan Bercovitch and Emory Elliott.²⁷ In a ground-breaking collection of essays, Elliott made grand claims for the reach of this undertaking: "Puritanism contained the seeds of political and social ideals, structures of thought and language, and literary themes which inspired both the content and the forms of much American writing

23 Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman*" as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, 175-77.

24 Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 93-131.

25 Renan, "What Is a Nation?" (1882), 11.

26 Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America*, 3-25.

27 Murdock's project was epitomized by *Literature and Theology in Colonial England*.

from 1700 to the present.”²⁸ These New Englanders harbored the fantasy of intellectual pioneers for “a world in which the critics and intellectuals of society were not marginal but actually in power.”²⁹ As the earliest version of this fantasy, *Piers* provided ethical values and textual strategies that remained embedded in the deep-structures of American writing across an astonishing range of genres.

The novel’s emergence in the American literary canon followed upon the fact that, from its inception with Defoe and Fielding, the genre had been dismissed by the official literary world and remained a medium for the excluded, especially women.³⁰ Resembling *Piers* through its dialogic deployment of official-sounding voices, Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) employed actual ventriloquism to elude and baffle social authorities. Never managing the chivalric revivals of Sir Walter Scott, the darker medievalism of the American Gothic retains this distinctly Langlandian stamp. To revisit Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* is to realize how American fiction remains steadily estranged from Chaucer’s humorous world where even the tragic *Troilus and Criseyde* was rendered fumbling, parodic, and sometimes downright funny.³¹

Piers Plowman’s allegory as a method for formulating the self’s spiritual progress, with its lapses and setbacks, moved from Puritan devotional practices into literary works, remaining a potent ingredient in the symbolic narratives of Hawthorne and Melville. Despite its Chaucerian title, Hawthorne’s “The Canterbury Pilgrims” reads more like a Langlandian parable.³² As a descendant of William Pynchon, who arrived in New England with Governor Winthrop only to be condemned as a heretic for publishing *The Meritorious Price of*

28 Elliott, ed., *Puritan Influences in American Literature*, “Introduction,” xii-xiii.

29 Fisher, “American Literary and Cultural Studies since the Civil War,” 235.

30 McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, 96-100, 315-37 and 410-21, and Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 151-211.

31 Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed., esp. 112-49.

32 Waggoner, “Hawthorne’s ‘Canterbury Pilgrims’: Theme and Structure.”

Our Redemption, Thomas Pynchon carries forward the tradition of Puritan pugnaciousness.³³ Even the name of the wayward protagonist of *Gravity's Rainbow*—Slothrop—has moral-symbolic meaning descending from Langland's privileging of Sloth as the besetting vice of his own errant dreamer.³⁴ Langland's incorporation of the ancient eremitic vice of *acedia*, which included random wandering among its symptoms, enabled the sprawling picaresque quality of *Piers* and thereafter much travel-narrative of the American mainstream from Twain's *Innocents Abroad* to Paul Theroux's *Great Railway Bazaar* and beyond.

From his entry under the persona of a "heremite vnholy of werkes" (B.Pro.3),³⁵ Langland cast himself as the perennial misfit estranged from any official clerical status as priest, monk, or friar. Langland assigned his fictive alter-ego to the underclass neighborhood of Cornhill where his fringe identity as a member of the "clerical proletariat" was confirmed by the existence of a wife and daughter.³⁶ Residual Puritan anticlericalism ensured that no clergyman in American fiction from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale to Elmer Gantry – with the movie versions of Jim Bakker (and Tammy Faye) – escapes condemnation for failing to maintain the ideals of his religious calling.

Archbishop William Laud heard seventeenth-century Puritans described as opposing "all that ever authority ordains for them."³⁷ Revalued as the spirit of resistance by the nineteenth century, the adversarial zeal of this tradition found new expression among American intellectuals who revived the reform-minded radicalism of the fifteenth century and railed against a national culture dominated

33 Madsen, "Family Legacies: Identifying the Traces of William Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*."

34 Bowers, *The Crisis of Will in "Piers Plowman,"* "Sloth Personified and Transformed," 79-96.

35 Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Schmidt, 2-3.

36 McHardy, "Careers and Disappointments in the Late-Medieval Church."

37 Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, "The Definition of a Puritan," 13-29 at 24.

by big business, corrupt politicians, and materialist complacency. The icons of American literature, whether authors such as Thoreau and Whitman or fictional characters such as Hester Prynne and Huck Finn, retain the oppositional imprint of their Langlandian forebear. The standard American hero became the misfit, the drifter, the outlaw, the bad boy—all of them avatars of the unemployed wanderer and self-styled lowlife Long Will. Though Jack Kerouac was educated at Columbia University, he epitomized this practice of identifying with the lower classes, casting himself as the poor-boy hero of *On the Road* and embracing the economic as well as ethnic under-culture of America as his own visionary equivalent of the Fair Field Full of Folk seen out the window of a speeding Studebaker.

In his spiritual autobiography *Personal Narrative* (1740), Jonathan Edwards rendered an account of his inner experiences by way of a narrator troubled by depression and a loss of direction as one more echo of the Langlandian voice sounded in American letters.³⁸ Permanently distrustful of mere storytelling, the personal essays of Emerson and Thoreau continued this first-person scrutiny of self and society inherited ultimately from *Piers Plowman*. Episodic, autobiographical, and often preachy, *Walden* emerges as the quintessentially Langlandian successor championing hard work, simple living, social justice, and even ecological responsibility—anticipated by Will’s vision of Kynd—against the corrupt collusion of government and mercantile capitalism originally represented by Lady Mede.³⁹

Puritans such as Cotton Mather in his *Essays to Do Good* (1710) had fully inherited Langland’s hostility to idleness and his horror of waste, while productive labor emerged as a spiritual as well as a social duty.⁴⁰ But American writers also inherited Langland’s anxieties that the act of writing constituted no legitimate form of good works. “You write a book,” Gertrude Stein lamented, “and while you write it you are ashamed.”⁴¹ This Puritan imperative of

38 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*.

39 Gilmore, “Walden and the ‘Curse of Trade’.”

40 Levin, “Essays to Do Good for the Glory of God: Cotton Mather’s Bonifacius.”

41 Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 485.

gainful employment continues to challenge the status of writing unless somehow useful in the manner of instructional manuals from *The Farmer's Almanac* to oddball classics like *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* and *The Whole Earth Catalog*.⁴² Edward Taylor may have guiltily deprecated his verse as “ragged nonsense” and “syllabicated jumble,” but he remained nonetheless obsessed with writing, producing over 3,100 manuscript pages with confidence in the *process itself* as a form of Christian action.⁴³ With *Piers* lurking in the background, Taylor provides an early American example of the preoccupation with process which will characterize so many other wayward masterpieces such as *Moby Dick*.⁴⁴

By converting heresy into the new orthodoxy, Puritans had endorsed a transvaluation of values which became basic to later cultural enterprises. Extending the homoerotic imagery suffusing *Preparatory Meditations* of Edward Taylor—who first used the *calamus* in his poetry—Walt Whitman champions a new minority community of men in same-sex relations. Casting himself as the poetic loafer who retreats “to the bank by the wood,” Whitman stands as the clearest incarnation of the Langlandian poet at the center of a new literary mainstream. He writes with no acknowledgment of prior writers. He creates the energetic language of resistance in his vernacular long-lines. He finds a deeply human divinity “in my own face in the glass.” He enters into dialogue with his own Soul and Speech. And he engages in bold authorial inscription with the internal signature “Walt Whitman, an American.”⁴⁵ Much like his fourteenth-century predecessor, Whitman had only one great poem which he spent his lifetime revising. Three years after Whitman’s death came the trial of Oscar Wilde—an event deeply felt in the United States after Wilde’s reading-tour of 1882⁴⁶—so that the nascent gay tradition

42 Kenner, *A Homemade World*.

43 Keller, “The Example of Edward Taylor,” considers process as the key motive for *Preparatory Meditations*.

44 Kouwenhoven, “What Is American about America?”, 66.

45 These lines come from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*; see Whitman, *Selected Poems*, 15-66.

46 Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 180-85, describes the hostile reception in the Puritan stronghold of Boston.

went deeper underground, much like the outlawed Lollard tradition during the fifteenth century, only to emerge with renewed vitality after Stonewall in the 1970s.

Unlike their British counterparts such as Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott who published their novels anonymously, American writers are prone to pseudonyms such as Mark Twain, O. Henry and Dr. Seuss.⁴⁷ When Joyce Carol Oates writes mystery novels, for example, she becomes Rosamond Smith. In contrast to Chaucer who made multiple efforts at attaching his real name to works in colophons and even running headers in manuscripts such as Ellesmere, the author of *Piers* sheltered under the pseudonym Will Langland which can be extracted from his text only with some ingenuity at decoding—"I haue lyued in *londe*, quod I, my name is *Longe Wille*" (B.15.152)—whereas the only witness to his real name remains a manuscript memorandum saying he was William Rokele.⁴⁸

Other American writers such as Thomas Pynchon take this process one step further, perpetuating the particularly Langlandian quality of evasion and escape from public scrutiny. Edward Taylor had established a model for American writers who followed this alternative path, as did Emily Dickinson in the next century, wishing paradoxically to address a reading public while courting obscurity. Writers in the Chaucerian tradition have been publicity-seekers, but Langlandian writers such as J. D. Salinger have cultivated the mystique of retreat and isolation. Another writer who keeps a low profile, Don DeLillo in his *Mao II* offers the disturbing account of novelist Bill Gray (a pen-name) who spent a quarter-century evading publicity while his status as a literary legend grew: "The narrower the boundaries of my life, the more I exaggerate myself."⁴⁹

The near despair expressed by Langland's poem resurfaced in the anguish of emigrant Puritans such as Anne Bradstreet who felt the

47 Budd, *Our Mark Twain*, studies the cultivation of authorial identity made possible by assuming a pen-name.

48 Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity," and Galloway, "Parallel Lives: William Rokele and the Satirical Literacies of *Piers Plowman*."

49 DeLillo, *Mao II*, 36-37.

frustration that an ideal renewal had not materialized in the New World.⁵⁰ These Puritans then mobilized the rhetoric of the jeremiad and pointed to calamities as evidence that the people had fallen away from the high purposes of their forefathers.⁵¹ Just as Langland's vision of social decline sought remedy in a return to earlier Christian standards, these jeremiads enshrined the achievements of the Pilgrim Fathers and privileged a lost ideal that would remain the goal of moral and social recuperation.⁵²

While the Puritan jeremiad persisted among writers like Mark Twain and Norman Mailer, the Langlandian spirit of social discontent lingers at the juncture of high culture and popular activism in the work of fumbling, obsessive satirists such as Michael Moore. *The New Yorker* published a Langland-like profile of the disheveled malcontent and professional trouble-maker that resonates over six centuries:

... a satirist disguised as a loser . . . a working-class malcontent eternally in mourning for the betrayed paradise of his youth . . . He can't seem to understand the way capitalism works in this country, and he pads around asking questions about it . . . He will never be much of a thinker or social analyst, and he can be stunningly unfair. He seizes on the hapless surfaces of American life and projects his feelings of contempt onto them . . . Moore's satirical scattershot method offers no way of distinguishing between real and pathological terrors. He implicates himself in what he hates and fears, and he emerges as a wounded patriot searching for a small measure of clarity.⁵³

The Landlandian tradition continues asserting itself in jagged, jumpy documentaries such as *Capitalism: A Love Story* and *Michael Moore*

50 Martin, *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*, 15-19.

51 Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, examined the persistent role of Puritan jeremiad in American culture.

52 Minter, "The Puritan Jeremiad as a Literary Form."

53 Denby, "The Current Cinema"; I have condensed his review of *Bowling for Columbine*.

in TrumpLand endlessly agonizing over social ills without providing any clear solution or even hope that gross failing can be remedied.

While minority-identifying critics have moved away from political master-narratives to more nuanced readings of individual texts, Langlandian studies have moved in opposite directions to reinstate *Piers* in an historical context in which Langland steadily provokes and invariably loses these contests, destined always to remain Chaucer's Other and emerge as the prototype for the minority author. Puritan advocacy of the ancient Christian *sermo humilis* meant an antagonism to the High Culture that created canonic authors, and consequently these writers kept their own new literature closer to the popular terrain where American literature has largely remained. Long dismissed as rude and rustic, Langland's language anticipated this standard. E. R. Curtius's pronouncement that "canon formation in literature must always proceed to a selection of classics" applied to the masterworks of the European tradition,⁵⁴ but nothing in his notion prevents selection from outsider writings. If Chaucer was installed to represent the Best, Langland champions the Rest.

Newer classroom anthologies which widen the American canon to include the diversities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality extend in a sense the organizing principle in older surveys which began with Puritan writings.⁵⁵ This is because the Puritans themselves had constructed an identity based upon their own minority status. Quickly, however, theirs became another instance of the oppressed becoming the oppressors. For example, while the Lollard movement had a long history of including outspoken women such as Margery Baxter and Avic Moon, American Puritans replicated the structures of patriarchal authority to exclude dissonant female voices. Con-

54 Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 259.

55 Elliott, gen. ed., *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, was designed to revise older literary surveys such as Bradley, Beatty, and Long's *The American Tradition in Literature*.

demned as a “disturber of Israel,” Anne Hutchinson represents the new minority at the heart of the old one.⁵⁶

A whole range of Puritan projects such as Cotton Mather’s *Nehe-miah* enforced a sense of homogeneity which excluded heretics and demonized Natives to re-create the beleaguered community of the faithful previously imagined by Langland in the siege upon Unity Barn. The adversarial stance of the old Lollards became the stern defensiveness of newly empowered Puritans. Reclamation of their history would then privilege their foundational myth to the exclusion of others. In 1607 Captain John Smith’s ship arrived at Jamestown, and in 1610 Pedro de Peralta established the Spanish in the territory of New Mexico.⁵⁷ Hardly a lone outpost, that is, the Massachusetts Puritans already constituted just one more *regional* culture. And since Gaspar Pérez de Villagr  published his *Historia de la Nueva M xico* in 1610 and Captain Smith completed his *Generall Historie of Virginia* fourteen years later, Puritan writings formed a regional literature and not the solitary book culture as it was represented by later New Englanders publishing mostly in Boston.⁵⁸

New England was similarly exaggerated as the major entry-point for British immigration, while the Southern colonies were discounted despite the intellectual as well as political leadership of Jefferson, Washington, and Madison.⁵⁹ F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) gave new vitality to the prevailing notion of New England’s literary dominance by enshrining Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman in a fraternal pantheon. Dubbing them “Renaissance” authors meant constructing an American tradition running parallel to the familiar periods in English literature

56 Lang, *Prophetic Woman: Anne Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent*.

57 Guti rrez, *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away*, 52-54, and Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe*, 20-28.

58 Baym, “Early Histories of American Literature.”

59 These misrepresentations are corrected by Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*.

with Puritans cast vaguely in the role of medieval forerunners.⁶⁰ The ways in which Bradstreet, Wigglesworth, and Edwards were rendered largely invisible repeated the process by which Langland had been mostly erased from English literary tradition.

Attractive as it remains, Matthiessen's story of American literature falters and loses its coherence partly because the Puritan foundations were never successfully formulated as part of a genealogical narrative. Langland himself was no storyteller,⁶¹ and the Langlandian heritage's distrust of master-narratives continues to frustrate literary history as plot-summary. As Bercovitch has noted, "we have nothing in America like the English line from Milton to Wordsworth to explain the 'Puritanism' of Hawthorne or Melville."⁶² Under the long-term influence of Lollard iconoclasm, Puritan sensibilities dismissed the veneration of authors and balked at honoring writers as iconic presences. John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) represents a singular attempt to establish a retroactive relationship with a seventeenth-century Puritan poet, though not as a founding father but rather as a remote sister-spirit or elusive fantasy-lover.

By contrast with the internationalist outlook in Chaucer's writings, Langlandian literature turns inward as befitting America's sense of self-containment verging upon isolationism. Native Americans have sought to revive their tribal traditions fostering a new generation of writers, largely out of oral cultures,⁶³ and in the American Southwest, Latinx scholars have engaged in literary reclamation of texts in both Spanish and English while living storytellers such as Rudolfo Anaya

60 Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, "Problem of the Artist as New Englander: Starting Point," 192-202.

61 Benson, "The Frustration of Narrative and the Reader in *Piers Plowman*."

62 Bercovitch, "Introduction," *The American Puritan Imagination*, 14.

63 *Native American Testimony*, ed. Nabokov, and Shoemaker, ed., *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*.

have drawn upon their own richly imagined roots in New Mexico.⁶⁴ These internal developments push back the boundaries to expand the arena for including more and more participation. For Langland originally, what remains anxiously at stake is the minority author's rightful status *as* a spokesperson for fellow outsiders. Cross-over writers invoke the regionalism of geography and ethnicity only to complicate their own author-positions. Thus probably the most popular New Mexico novel *The Milagro Beanfield War* was written by the Anglo transplant John Nichols.

Langland's emotive style of the vernacular sermon offered the model for African-American writers such as Toni Morrison whose forceful, cadenced prose derives much of its eloquence from the pulpit.⁶⁵ Langland embedded Latin scripture in his poem only to erode the authority of this privileged language even as he appropriated scholastic disputation to expose its inability to reach unassailable conclusions. Langland's strategies for mocking official discourses have been identified in the typical American practices of the trickster figure and the performance artist.⁶⁶ Caginess, feigned rusticity, and the fool's bravery form the catalogue of the minority writer's ploys.

Though Langland spent most of his career in London, the initial action situated itself in the Malvern Hills, and his Worcestershire dialect served as a constant reminder of provincial identity even as *Piers* was copied by London scribes.⁶⁷ Similarly the colonial poet Edward Taylor, though his early education took place in England, located himself on the Massachusetts frontier where domestic isolation transformed the furthest fringe of the English-speaking world into a spiritual center. These markers of regionalism resisted the im-

64 Anaya has edited *Voces: An Anthology of Nuevo Mexicano Writers* and co-edited with Lomeli Aztlán: *Essays on the Chicano Homeland*.

65 Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, "A Literary Echo of the Social Gospel," 548-93, anchors *Piers Plowman* in the preaching tradition.

66 Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 44-88.

67 Bowers, "Two Professional Readers of Chaucer and Langland."

petus for a centralized national culture and anticipated the diversity of sectional voices in more recent American literatures. Whereas Puritan minority status was defined by religion, later regionalisms would divide along the geographic fracture-lines of the North and the South, and later the West.⁶⁸ Nineteenth-century immigration with the arrivals of the Irish, Italians, Chinese, and Jewish peoples would expand this sense of diversity from the geographic to the ethnic.

Assimilation became impossible for many of these newcomers permanently estranged by racial and religious identities so that diversity communities, including the longstanding Latinx and Native American cultures, resisted the homogenizing process of the nation-state's summons to union *e pluribus unum*. Identities based on gender and sexuality become non-negotiable regionalisms of personhood that hearken back to Langland's discourse of self-inscription free from any ready-made social categories. The notorious absence of authoritative voices in *Piers* demonstrates how the banishment of any monopoly of power clears the ground for such self-authorization.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. admitted that "virtually no scholar today would contend that the texts written by Black authors cohere into a tradition because the authors share certain innate characteristics."⁶⁹ This sense of artistic isolation from any genealogical tradition has served as the hallmark of diversity authors from Langland onward. When Anne Hudson concluded that "*Piers Plowman* in the two and a half centuries after its composition was more honored in the name than in the reading,"⁷⁰ she points to the paradigmatic nature of later Langlandian writers negligent at actually reading their founding author and therefore unable to render visible, stable, and consistent a lineage of named successors.

68 Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*.

69 Gates, "African American Criticism," 308.

70 Hudson, "The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*," 263.

Because their first settlements were unified solely by a sense of religious mission, the Puritan colonists already constituted the *mosaic tribe* basic to later national developments.⁷¹ Unlike the English tradition, American literature never configured itself as an interconnected genealogy with a definite moment of origin and founding figure. If any paternity resides with the Puritans of New England—a claim that might be legitimately contested by Virginians—this paternity was subject to a regressive lineage going back to Old England, one which could not be acknowledged by writers asserting their newness as the first condition for creating something entirely their own. What has been described as “the paradoxical centrality of the marginal text”⁷² leads to the sweeping conclusion that American literature constitutes *nothing but* marginal texts replicating the original Langlandian heritage in its resistance to any internal coherence or self-conscious linkages. Rather than the bold strokes of the Chaucer tradition in England, American literature has steadily developed as a many-colored mosaic of regional and ethnic writings.

Thus the “tradition” of American fiction becomes its most brazen fiction. The lack of generational linkages from any *fons et origo* exposes its essential character as a constellation of individual writers representing a diverse and constantly diversifying culture. In what Walt Whitman looked forward to as “that composite American identity of the future” in his letter to gentlemen at Santa Fe,⁷³ American literature consequently lacks a clear, uncontested sense of paternity because even Langland refuses to materialize as a patriarchal figure for this literary history.

I want to conclude by considering a novel nicely representing these Langlandian literary qualities. The fact that its author is now mostly forgotten is itself tellingly Langlandian. In 1908, Florence Converse published a fictional account of Langland’s life entitled *Long Will*.

71 Tichi, “Spiritual Biography and the ‘Lords Remembrancers’.”

72 Tichi, “American Literary Studies to the Civil War,” 216.

73 Quoted from Whitman’s letter of 1883 by Wilson, *Myth of Santa Fe*, 188-89.

Completed concurrently with her M.A. in English at Wellesley College, the novel took fullest advantage of the scholarly discoveries of Skeat's 1886 edition of *Piers Plowman* with its "Author's Life."⁷⁴ Therein William Langland was said to have been born in Shropshire, he wandered in the hills above Malvern Priory, and then he went to reside at Cornhill in London. In England's capital he married and had a daughter while living a disreputable clerical life, and he continued working doggedly at his poem into the 1390s.

Identifying herself as a Socialist, Converse offered an account of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 that fully supports Derek Pearsall's view that the late nineteenth century considered Langland's poem a document of social history,⁷⁵ and Converse would have found these notions in Skeat's edition where his "Criticisms of the Poem" began with Isaac D'Israeli's pronouncement: "Our author's indignant spirit, indeed, is vehemently democratic."⁷⁶ Converse's decision to endow Langland with the virtues of individuality, hard work, and democratic ideals brought to her account of the author a steady advocacy for the rights of other disenfranchised talents, including women like herself. As a fantasy projection, young Calote becomes the story's real protagonist, championing the cause of the oppressed farmers and traveling as far as Yorkshire to incite the people to revolution.

Despite the charm of a medievalism popularized by Mark Twain during this period, Converse's *Long Will* incorporates other deeply subversive ingredients. From 1919 until 1961, she lived with her former teacher Miss Vida Scudder, "the beloved friend with whom she made her home for many happy years," wrote the *Wellesley Alumnae Magazine* in 1967 before same-sex partners were acknowledged

⁷⁴ Skeat, ed., *Piers the Plowman*, 2:xxxii-xxxviii; see Bowers, *Chaucer and Langland*, "Langland's Editorial Lives," 64-79.

⁷⁵ Pearsall, *An Annotated Critical Bibliography of Langland*, x.

⁷⁶ Skeat, ed. *Piers the Plowman*, 2:xxxviii.

as such publicly.⁷⁷ *Long Will* in fact fictionalizes two transgressive love-triangles. In the one, violating boundaries of class, Jack Straw and the young nobleman Etienne Fitzwarine both love the poet's daughter Calote. In the other, challenging boundaries of gender and sexuality, Calote and Richard II both love the handsome young Etienne. "Ay, me," King Richard sighs longingly, "I would thou didst love thy King but the half as well as thou lovest this peasant maid."⁷⁸

As the prototype of the American writer, her Langland becomes a poet of the common people working outside the influences of foreign literatures, the burdens of native traditions, and the constraints of institutional employment. In her Epilogue, Converse follows Skeat's biographical speculations to describe Langland's retreat westward to Worcestershire where he dies in the arms of his beloved older teacher Brother Oswyn, reputed as the *Pearl* Poet. In his desertion of London, Langland anticipates the American instinct for contributing to social confusion (including the muddled textual state of his poem) and then moving somewhere else instead of cleaning it up. Like Huck Finn lighting out for the Western Territories, Long Will makes his final escape to the Malvern Hills.

Converse's historical novel partook of the utopian ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement with its yearning for an end to labor exploitation through a return to medieval practices.⁷⁹ Taking Langland as her model, Converse also represents the particularly American version of a self-educated writer who assaults the status-quo from within the intellectual establishment. By appropriating the individualism, self-reliance, and democratic consciousness that had already fixed themselves in Puritan-derived vocabulary, her *Long Will* then looked forward to the post-1960s project of recognizing and including an

⁷⁷ I am grateful to Wellesley College Archivist Wilma R. Slight as well as Wellesley English Professor Kathryn Lynch for providing much background information on Florence Converse.

⁷⁸ Converse, *Long Will*, 134.

⁷⁹ Lears, *No Place for Grace*.

ever-widening range of communities such as women, gays and lesbians, and newer non-European immigrants.

It is easy enough for English literary historians to locate Chaucer. We can even stand in front of his tomb in Westminster Abbey, or at least the tomb installed by an Elizabethan admirer in 1556, as the first in Poets' Corner giving official visibility to the genealogy of English authors.⁸⁰ Meanwhile on this side of the Atlantic, Henry Louis Gates Jr. has redefined his academic career and currently presides over the series *Finding Your Roots* - for which the PBS website says he "has explored the ancestry of dozens of influential people from diverse backgrounds" – in personalized versions of this article's quest to discover the lost and largely unknown genealogies of America's literatures.

John M. Bowers is an internationally known educator and expert on medieval English literature with books on Chaucer, Langland, and the "Gawain" Poet as well as dozens of articles on writers from St. Augustine to Shakespeare. Educated at Duke, Virginia, and Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar, he has taught at Caltech and Princeton. His work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and his Great Courses lecture series The Western Literary Canon in Context has sold tens of thousands of copies. His award-winning book Tolkien's Lost Chaucer was based on his discovery of an unpublished, unknown book by the author of The Lord of the Rings.

80 Dane, *Who Is Buried in Chaucer's Tomb?*, 11-32.

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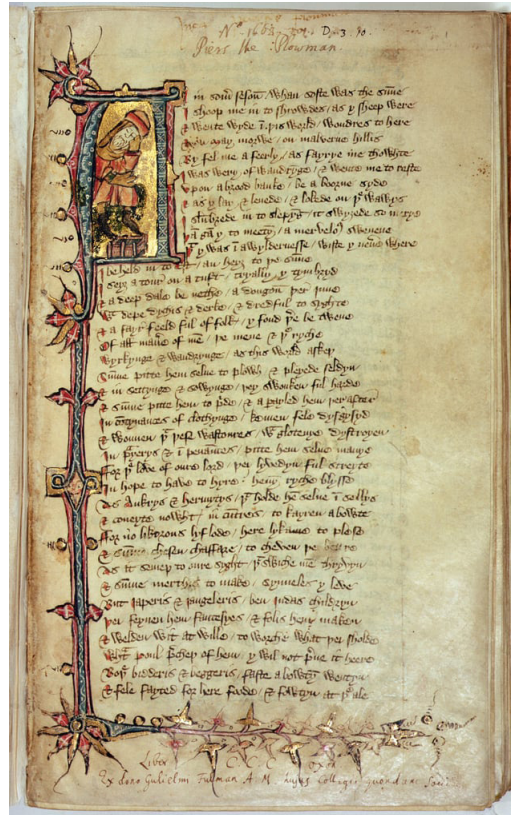
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