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History of the International Piers Plowman Society

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Abstract

Louise M Bishop, Associate Professor *emerita* at the University of Oregon, reflects on the history of the International *Piers Plowman* Society, and its developments and major figures in the research of Langland's poem. Bishop honors a long list of contributors to Landland's legacy: scholars that edited *Piers Plowman's* different texts, wrote about the subject, organized conferences, and even a website (*Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*), allowing for the expansion and diversification of academic discussion.

An International *Piers Plowman* Society originated, more or less, with a significant conference held in the summer of 1993 at Queen's College, University of Cambridge. The conference treated the Middle English poem *Piers Plowman* under the title "First International *Piers Plowman* Conference." By all accounts, it was indeed the first conference to treat exclusively, and internationally, Langland's poem. James Simpson (Harvard University), then of the Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, deserved much of the organizing credit for the conference. It featured both new and established Langland scholars. Joining Simpson were John Alford (Michigan State University), Rob Adams (Sam Houston State University), Helen Cooper (University College, University of Oxford), and many others whose work affirmed the conference's *raison d'être*. They all continued over the course of decades to contribute to the eventual creation of the International *Piers Plowman* Society.

Six years before that legendary Cambridge conference, the first volume of *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* had appeared, in 1987, published by Michigan's Colleagues Press and supported by Michigan State University. Initial editors Alford and M. Teresa Tavormina (Michigan State University) ferried *YLS* into existence along with editorial board Adams, Stephen Barney (University of California, Irvine), Judith Bennett (University of Southern California), Jeanne Krochalis (Pennsylvania State University), David Lawton (Washington University), Anne Middleton (University of California, Berkeley), and A. C. Spearing (University of Virginia). The first volume of *YLS* included essays by Middleton, Simpson, Hoyt Duggan (University of Virginia), and Lawton. Editors Alford and Tavormina's Foreword to *YLS*'s inaugural volume pointed to Middleton's bibliographical essay in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* (1987) as a record of the 1980s growth of Langland scholarship, acknowledging the prolific Middle English scholar David Aers (Duke University) and his 1980 book publication, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination*, the first in a long *Piers Plowman*-centric career. Alford and Tavormina rejoiced that the new serial *YLS* annual "appears during a time of unprecedented activity in *Piers Plowman* scholarship" (vii), noting among the many scholarly publications listed in the volume's two bibliographies a half-dozen new book titles. The first bibliography for 1985, collected by Adams, enumerated forty-three items on *Piers Plowman*; the second bibliography for 1986 was a forty-eight-item list compiled by Vincent DiMarco (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), who served as *YLS*'s first annual bibliographer. The Foreword to the *Yearbook of Langland Studies*' inaugural volume promised that *YLS* would take full advantage of (re)newed interest in *Piers Plowman* as well as in other alliterative, didactic Middle English poetry, treating the full range of Langland scholarship to analyze the big picture and/or unravel difficult local issues and cruxes, in either lengthy essays or short notes.

Why this growth in Langland Studies that spawned, first, an annual publication and then, six years later, a Cambridge conference? As *YLS* Volume 1's editors assert and its two bibliographies demonstrate, scholarship on the poem's backgrounds took advantage of deeply-learned and painstaking editorial work on *Piers Plowman* manuscripts in the second half of the twentieth century. Every Langland scholar knows that in the late nineteenth century the Reverend William Walter Skeat had discerned from manuscripts, and named for posterity, the poem's three versions: A-text, B-text, and C-text. Beginning in 1960, new editions of *Piers Plowman* appeared, copiously and expertly edited by premiere Middle English scholars. George Kane (University of London, later University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) produced the 1960 Athlone edition of the A-text of *Piers Plowman*, with the promise of B-text and C-text editions to come. In 1967 both York and Northwestern published

selections of a C-text manuscript chosen by Derek Pearsall (University of York, later Harvard University) and Elizabeth Salter (University of York), accompanied by a substantial introductory essay by Salter. In collaboration with E. Talbot Donaldson (Yale University, later Indiana University), Kane published the Athlone B-text of the poem in 1975. Only in 1997 did Kane publish, with George Russell (University of Melbourne), his final hefty scholarly edition of the poem's C-text. Before Kane's C-text appeared, Pearsall's edition of the C-text was published in 1978. In 1983 A.G. Rigg (Pontifical Institute, University of Toronto) and Charlotte Brewer (Hertford College, University of Oxford) broke new ground by publishing what they called the "Z-version" of the poem. In 1995, two years before Kane-Russell's C-text edition appeared, Longman published a parallel text edition of the poem's three versions edited by AVC Schmidt (Balliol College, University of Oxford). That same year JM Dent, in its Everyman series, published a paperback edition of Schmidt's B-text. These new editions of *Piers Plowman* revitalized interest in the poem.

In addition, the late 1980s saw another revolution in textual editing owing to broad development of, accessibility to, and training in, electronic editing possibilities. Duggan, Adams, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (University of Nottingham), joined in the early 1990s by Ralph Hanna (University of California, Riverside; later Keble College, University of Oxford) and Eric Eliason (Concordia College), began to construct and share through electronic means the huge trove of *Piers Plowman* manuscript material. The *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, now housed at <https://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/> and hosted by North Carolina State University, began to take shape at the same time as the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* began to see print. The *PPEA* website lists eighteen scholarly contributors, including the project's five originators as well as editors and board members of the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* and other Middle English scholars: a veritable who's who of premiere Langland scholars of the last forty years. Moreover, these dedicated Langland scholars and editors supervised Ph.D. students who themselves furthered Langland scholarship. For instance, Pearsall and Salter supervised Lawton and Aers; Kane supervised Duggan, Michael Kuczynski (Tulane University), and Josephine Koster (Winthrop University).

The "Langland revolution" of the fourth quarter of the 20th century had at hand more than print and electronic editions to foster a wealth of scholarly research. New collections of Langland scholarship provided scholarly background and foregrounded new *Piers Plowman* research areas. Alford himself, who had credited Middleton's bibliographical essay in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* with encouraging "unprecedented activity in *Piers Plowman* scholarship," edited a 1988 collection, *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, featuring the leading lights of Langland studies: Middleton, Anna Baldwin (Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge, UK), Adams, Barney, John A. Yunck (Michigan State University), Siegfried Wenzel (University of Pennsylvania), Kane, M. L. Samuels (University of Glasgow), Lawton, and Anne Hudson (Lady Margaret Hall and St Hugh's College, University of Oxford). Two years later, in 1990, Alford's *Companion* appeared in paperback. That same year Simpson published *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-text* with Longman, in both hardback and paperback. The B-text, locus of Simpson's *Introduction*, was at that time—and perhaps now—the most popular version of the poem. Alford's paperback *Companion* (1990), Simpson's paperback *Introduction* (1990), and Schmidt's paperback B-text (1995), taken together, provided contemporary tools that sounded a clarion call to extend the poem's reach beyond publications and conferences towards a learned society.

A year after 1993's First International *Piers Plowman* Conference at Cambridge University, the eighth volume of the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* (1994) appeared. Beginning with that volume, Alford enlisted Simpson as co-editor, with Tavormina moving to the editorial board. There she joined Adams, Aers, Barney, John A. Burrow (University of Bristol), Christopher Dyer (University of Leicester), Middleton, and Wendy Scase (University of Birmingham). Volume 8's essays, drawn from the first conference's plenaries, included work by Kane, Jill Mann (University of Notre Dame and Girton College, University of Cambridge), Adams, Hudson, Aers, D. Vance Smith (Princeton University), and Dyer. Alford's preface to Volume 8 also announced that the following year's Volume, number 9 (1995), would publish further papers and their responses from the initial Cambridge conference.

Scholarly Langland activity grew throughout the 1990s. The National Endowment for the Humanities supported a 1995 summer colloquium on Chaucer and Langland at the University of Colorado, Boulder, organized by David Benson (University of Connecticut), Elizabeth (Beth) Robertson (University of Colorado, later University of Glasgow), and Simpson. After Andrew Galloway (Cornell University) became Alford's co-editor of the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* Volume 11 (1997, copyright 1998), their volume's Foreword announced the Second International Langland [sic] Conference, 29-31 July 1999, at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. The Foreword stated that the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* and Pegasus Institute for the Humanities, an arm of Pegasus Press, which began publishing *YLS* with Volume 10, would be the sponsors of the 1999 conference. Links between the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* and a series of international *Piers Plowman* conferences were now vividly apparent to readers.

The University of North Carolina at Asheville hosted the 1999 Second International *Piers Plowman* Conference *avant la lettre* of officially—that is, legally—establishing a related scholarly society. Apparently, though, vigorous Langland scholars—*YLS* editors, editorial board, contributors, and a growing number of graduate students—could envision a scholarly organization: an inchoate *Piers Plowman* Society had gathered momentum through continuous publication of *YLS* and institutionally-funded formalized conferences. Both institutional assistance and individual scholars' support put Langland studies, collectively and consciously—*de facto* if not *de jure*—into a rhythm of scheduled conferences buttressed by annual *YLS* publication, all of which would benefit from an organized scholarly society. That a learned society was in the offing showed in the nascent every-four-or-five-years schedule for international *Piers Plowman* conferences. Such a schedule consciously differentiated a Langland society from the New Chaucer Society and its biennial Congresses. The burgeoning Langland community avoided competition with NCS while also taking cues from NCS on the lineaments of a learned society.

With *YLS* Volume 13 (1999), Galloway assumed sole editorship of the annual. He mentioned in the volume's Foreword that, "even before the completion of the Second International Langland conference at Asheville," plans for a third at Birmingham University in 2003 were underway. The volume's Foreword pointed readers towards Scase and Dyer for conference communication. The following volume, number 14 for 2000 (published 2001), opened the millennium with a new publisher, Medieval Institute Publications, and touted the present volume's inclusion of papers from the "Second International Langland Conference at Asheville, North Carolina, in 1999" (1). Editor Galloway's Foreword further noted that "arrangements for a Third Annual *Piers Plowman* Conference in June 2003 at the University of Birmingham" had begun. Also noteworthy is Galloway's conclusion to his

Foreword: "Further efforts for constituting the International Langland Society as an umbrella organization for both *YLS* and future *Piers Plowman* conferences are also afoot" (3).

As *YLS* had already announced, the Third International *Piers Plowman* Conference was held at Birmingham University, 9-12 July 2003, hosted by Wendy Scase and featuring both Dereks, Brewer (Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge) and Pearsall, as well as Mann and other luminaries of the Langland universe. *YLS*'s editor Galloway served as conference program chair. On the heels of Birmingham, *YLS* Volume 17 (2003, published 2004) signaled an upcoming change in editorship, with Galloway to be succeeded by a triumvirate of Fiona Somerset (University of Connecticut), who had been an associate editor; Andrew Cole (Princeton University), who had served as associate editor and bibliographer; and Lawrence Warner (University of Sydney, later King's College, London).

With the new editors' first volume, number 18 for 2004 and published in 2005, the *Yearbook of Langland Studies*' three editors muscled *YLS* into next-millennium standards, such as using Chicago style and listing the academic affiliations of *YLS*'s editorial board. In addition, the volume's Foreword explained,

Over the last year, we have been seeking to increase the visibility of Langland studies by building a website, www.piersplowman.org, to serve as the home of the International *Piers Plowman* Society. IPPS, whose members are the subscribers to *YLS*, was founded at the Second International *Piers Plowman* conference in Asheville, NC in 1999, and we hope the new website will help in its continued development.

Et voilà. On the model of the New Chaucer Society, and officially with Volume 18, subscribers to the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* automatically became members of the International *Piers Plowman* (not Langland) Society. As Galloway had written in his Foreword to *YLS* Volume 14 (2000), a learned society attached to both *YLS* and a pattern of conferences gained traction at Asheville's Second *Piers Plowman* Conference in 1999; some conference attendees inaugurated IPPS that very year, 1999. These dates—1999, 2003, 2004—might seem discrepant about the founding of the International *Piers Plowman* Society. Instead, the dates indicate that there were things to iron out between 1999's Second International *Piers Plowman*—or Langland—Conference and 2003's Third International *Piers Plowman* Conference before the existence of a scholarly society could be fully asserted. The society's name needed to be settled: a *Langland* society or a *Piers Plowman* society? In light of *YLS*'s move to a new publisher for Volume 14 (publishing year 2001), certain complications and legal issues regarding previous publisher Pegasus Press and its director Robert Yeager (University of West Florida) must have had to be addressed.

The International *Piers Plowman* Society's founding year, then, is most appropriately celebrated as 1999, although IPPS's founding was not formally announced in *YLS* until the Third International *Piers Plowman* Conference in 2003. As before, *YLS* provides the best evidence for understanding the lineaments of a scholarly society devoted to *Piers Plowman* and Middle English alliterative, didactic verse. Three new and energetic *YLS* editors, joined by new associate editor Emily Steiner (University of Pennsylvania), worked to meet the requirements a new millennium put on scholarly societies in terms of publication, both print and electronic, as well as administration. Possessed of academic energy in abundance, and in the wake of two conferences—both the Second (1999) and the Third (2003) International *Piers Plowman* Conferences—the editors curated publication of research on the Middle

English alliterative, didactic poetic tradition and simultaneously brought to the fore new theoretical frameworks gaining traction in contemporary scholarship.

The International *Piers Plowman* Society provided an administrative entity, on the model of the New Chaucer Society with its annual publication *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* and biennial Congresses, to house and promote the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* and an expected series of international *Piers Plowman* conferences. The academic entity of IPPS embraced and supported a Langland/*Piers Plowman* research community. Gathering momentum since the 1980s, this academic community, now with a named entity as its face, encountered a not-unexpected yet wide range of needs, such as garnering institutional support for its twenty-first-century administration and conferences. The Foreword to Volume 19 (2005, published 2006) announced the Fourth International Conference on *Piers Plowman*, May 17-19, 2007 at the University of Pennsylvania, academic home of associate editor and Langland powerhouse Steiner. In addition, both *YLS* and IPPS faced the task of establishing a consistent, international, electronically-savvy, and affordable *YLS* publisher. *YLS* Volume 20's Commentary (2006/2007) avered that the *YLS* editors and "the nascent Board of the International *Piers Plowman* Society" (vii) had contracted with international publisher Brepols and its academic databases BREPOLiS to extend through simultaneous print and electronic publication the reach of both *YLS* and IPPS. Volume 20's Commentary further stated that IPPS would henceforth "handle distribution of the printed copies to its members" (vii), a responsibility reflecting the growth and stability of IPPS.

YLS Volume 21 (2007) announced the Fifth International *Piers Plowman* conference to be held at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, in April 2011, with Helen Barr (Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford) and Simon Horobin (Magdalen College, University of Oxford) as organizers. The next volume, *YLS* 22 (2008) showed further academic and administrative development of the IPPS. First, *YLS* Volume 22 doubled the size of its editorial board, adding Alexandra Gillespie (University of Toronto), Horobin, Mann, Linne R. Mooney (University of York), W. Mark Omrod (University of York), Ad Putter (University of Bristol), Scase, Smith, Turville-Petre, Nicholas Watson (Harvard University) and Nicolette Zeeman (King's College, University of Cambridge) to board alums Barney, Burrow, Galloway, and Middleton. Moreover, Volume 22 announced Adams as IPPS's first elected Director, and its first elected Executive Board, comprised of Benson, Robertson, Stephanie Trigg (University of Melbourne), and Steiner, along with two ex-officio members: Barr, as chair of the 2011 Oxford conference's organizing committee, and Somerset as the first of *YLS*'s three editors—Somerset, Cole, and Warner—to take the Board's one *YLS* editor's seat. In the following year, *YLS* Volume 23 encouraged readers "to join the International *Piers Plowman* Society. In return for annual dues, members receive a printed copy of *YLS* at a deep discount, as well as an online newsletter and intermittent announcements" (x).

From there, the trajectory was onwards and upwards. Steiner and Rebecca Davis (University of California, Irvine) took over as *YLS* editors with Volume 27 (2013) and former editor Warner—he of the boundless academic, administrative, and social energy—became the director of IPPS. The Sixth International *Piers Plowman* Conference was held at the University of Washington, 23-26 July 2015, with hosts Mícéal Vaughan (University of Washington) and Paul Remley (University of Washington). *YLS* Volume 30 (2016) concludes its Commentary asserting, "These are truly exhilarating times for *Piers Plowman* studies," noting "the vigour and collegiality of the *Piers Plowman* community" (2). With the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* Volume 31 for 2017, the annual entered its fourth decade with three

new editors: Alastair Bennett (Royal Holloway, University of London), Katharine Breen (Northwestern University), and Eric Weiskott (Boston College); the indefatigable Steiner assumed the IPPS director's position. Late in 2016 saw the passing of towering Langland scholar Anne Middleton, prompting IPPS in 2017 to create the Anne Middleton Book Prize for the best book in Langland studies over successive two-year spans. Winners of the first two Middleton Book Prizes were announced at the Seventh International *Piers Plowman* conference held at the University of Miami in April 2019, with Thomas Goodmann (University of Miami) as host extraordinaire.¹

During the pandemic, IPPS was not idle: 2021 saw the creation of the Derek Pearsall Travel and Research Fund to honor the devoted Langlandian and eminent Middle English scholar, who passed away at the age of 90 in late 2021. IPPS (thanks to Steiner) also organized, in pandemic academic year 2020-2021, a monthly Zoom (online) B-text reading group; this feat was repeated in academic year 2021-2022 with a monthly Zoom C-text reading group. Starting in January 2022 and under the expert director of Davis, IPPS also formalized the program for the Eighth International *Piers Plowman* Conference to be held in London in July 2023, with Warner and Bennett as hosts. In light of the continuing pandemic, the Eighth International *Piers Plowman* Conference will follow a limited hybrid model. Hybrid conferences may become the norm because they support scholars with varied resources and abilities to attend: IPPS continues at the vanguard of scholarly societies.

So what makes a scholarly society? The *sine quibus non* are purpose, in this case to explore limitlessly *Piers Plowman* and other non-Chaucerian, somewhat-neglected, passionately-read poetry characterized by challenges in both manuscripts and background; a journal that features questions literary scholars continually ask, with attention to the *how* and the *why*; a committed cohort of energetic and collaborative devotees unfazed by academic challenges; institutional funding and support of minute and global administration; and fearless, tireless collegiality buttressed by devotion to a scholarly society's purpose. IPPS works overtime to challenge the status quo, expanding and diversifying medieval scholarly enterprises, thus completing the circle of publication, conference, and society that encourages and sustains *Piers Plowman* scholarship for many fair fields full of folk.

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¹ For 2015-2016, the winner was Rebecca A. Davis's *Piers Plowman and the Books of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2016); for 2017-2018, the winner was Curtis A. Gruenler's *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma: Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

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