Piers Plowman in London, *c.* 1370-*c.* 1590

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The relationship between London and *Piers Plowman* is one of both proximity and paradox. As other scholars have observed, a text which is frequently drawn to agricultural symbolism and metaphors, and which partly situates itself in a specifically provincial location, is at the same time a distinctly urban, specifically London-focused, even London-obsessed, text. As Derek Pearsall famously observed, 'London is the problem that the poem cannot solve'.[1] This essay explores this peculiar relationship between poem and city in a number of different ways, and at different points in the life of the poem, from its origins in late fourteenth-century civic discourse, to key moments in its reception history across the sixteenth century. At each point, a number of aspects of the text's 'urban-ness' repeatedly coalesce: a preoccupation with the urban commercial trade in small-scale victualling and associated famine, the representation of the urban environment in its aural plenitude and busy kinetic crowdedness, and a curious relational position

1 Derek Pearsall, "Langland's London", in Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Written Work. Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, pp. 185-207, pp. 185-6. It might also be added that much of the evidence of the manuscripts of the poem also provides a substantial connection to London. See, for example, Robert Adams and Thorlac Turville-Petre, "The London Book Trade and the Lost History of *Piers Plowman*", *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 65, 2014, pp. 219–35; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380-1427", *New Medieval Literatures*, Vol. 1, 1997, pp. 59–83.

which places the poem, poet, and its titular figure both demonstrably in, and at the same time in an oppositional relationship to, the city of London. In 1370, 1550, and the 1590s, *Piers Plowman* offered to its readers (and latterly audience), something with arresting relevance to a changing economic and cultural urban landscape that was always drawn back to this curiously agrarian figure.

John Stow's *Piers Plowman*

Piers Plowman has a part to play in perhaps the most quintessential of London texts: John Stow's seminal chorographical and civic-historical text, *The Survey of London* (1598, 1602). In Stow's account of Limestreet Ward, and in particular the history of the Leadenhall as a granary and market building, he assembles a sequence of medieval and sixteenth-century historical sources concerned with the commercial life of bread in the city.[2] Amongst these records, Stow writes:

> Moreouer in the 44. of Edward the third Iohn Chichester being Maior of London, I read in the visions of Pierce Plowman, a booke so called, as followeth. 'There was a careful commune, when no Cart came to towne with baked bread from Stratford: tho gan beggers weepe, and workemen were agast, a little this will be thought long in the date of our Dirte, in a drie Auerell a thousand and three hundred, twise thirtie and ten, &c'.[3]

The quotation is an arresting adaptation of Hawkyn's speech in *Piers Plowman* B13, a deployment of the allegorical '*vita activa*' to the traffic in bread between Stratford-at-Bowe in Middlesex and London:

> 'Al Londoun, I leve, liketh wel my wafres,
> And louren whan thei lakken hem; it is noght longe ypassed
> There was a careful commune whan no cart com to towne
> With bake breed fro Stratford; tho gonnen beggeris wepe,
> And werkmen were agast a lite – this wole be thought longe;
> In the date of Oure Drighte, in a drye Aprill,
> A thousand and thre hundred, twis thritty and tene,

2 The Leadenhall is discussed in Caroline M. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200-1500*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 55-56.
3 *John Stow, A Survey of London. Reprinted From the Text of 1603*, ed. C L Kingsford, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1908, 2 vols., vol 1, p. 157.

My wafres there were gesene, whan Chichestre was maire'.[4]

Stow's editor notes that the quotation is not quite an accurate version of the text of *Piers Plowman*, as it appears in Walter Skeat's edition.[5] Elsewhere, a more recent scholar of the manuscripts of Piers Plowman (two of which were owned and briefly annotated by Stow), writes that Stow's interest here (also reflected in a brief annotation of the passage in Trinity College, Cambridge MS b.15.17) suggests that Stow 'construed the poem to be a social document rather than a poem'.[6] However, we might observe two related things about Stow's interest in *Piers Plowman* here, which are both about style and substance.

Firstly, despite the observations about accuracy and poetics, it would have been perfectly possible for Stow to simply cite or paraphrase the passage (as he does with the surrounding details regarding the assizes of bread and other matters regarding the life and activities of the Leadenhall). Instead, Stow adapts and reorganises the passage of Hawkyn's speech to retain (or perhaps adapt) the nature of Langland's alliterative verse. It is not, of course, that Stow recreates the stress and rhythm of the Middle English alliterative verse as such, but is it plain that the fact that he is quoting alliterative text remains significant for Stow. The 'careful commons', 'weeping beggars' and 'aghast workmen' are all transmitted from the Middle English text, along with the curiously specific, prophetically-inflected dating of this lamentable civic famine to 1370, in the mayoralty of John Chichester (1369-70).

At the same time, it is striking that the focus on the specific nature of the Leadenhall as a nexus of commercial life regarding the low-level subsistence trade in bread (Hawkyn's 'wafers') that seems to have piqued Stow's interest. It is not, after all, the London civic elite or aristocracy who suffer from the breakdown in quotidian traffic of bread into the city, but the lamentations of the 'beggars' and 'workmen' who are immortalised in Langland's discourse, and which Stow then memorialises in his partial quotation. For Hawkyn, the loss of basic sustenance was a matter of public memory with a specific date

4 A. V. C. Schmidt, ed., *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, London: J. M. Dent, 1995, Passus XIII, lines 264-71. A modern English translation might be: "All of London likes my wafers, I think, and complains when they lack them. It is not long past when the commons were distraught when no cart came to town with baked bread from Stratford. Then beggars began to weep, and workmen were aghast: this will be long remembered: In a dry April, in the year of our Lord One thousand, three hundred, twice thirty and ten [ie. 1370] my wafers were seen, when [John] Chichele was mayor' [my translation].

5 Kingsfold, ed., *John Stow*, *A Survey of London*, vol, 2, p. 296.

6 Simon Horobin, "Manuscripts and readers of *Piers Plowman*", in Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 179-197, p. 196. Horobin reproduces Stow's relevant annotation in Trinity College, Cambridge MS b.15.17, fol. 77r on p. 183 (figure 4).

in the mayoral narrative of the city, and a place in communal civic history; just so for Stow it is the breakdown in rudimentary victualling for the poor of the capital which was worth passing down in the annals of the history of the Leadenhall.

Piers in and against London

That Stow found the poem's interest in civic history arresting is, in itself, significant. The poem, as Hawkyn remembers the civic famine of 1370, was already immersed in and fascinated by London in terms of its victualling: the bread and pies, beer and wine which were the daily commercial life of the city streets. It is notable that Stow was drawn to precisely this aspect of the poem. Langland's poem is not an exclusively 'London' text, of course. As others have noted, the poem sets itself initially in the south-west midlands, in the Malvern Hills, and its scope is almost universal as it surveys the 'fair feeld ful of folk […] [w]erchynge and wandrynge as the world asketh' (B. Prol.17, 19).[7] However, it also contains 'a vivid and particular impression of London life' and is 'rooted in the streets of London in the 1370s'.[8] Strikingly, the passage above quoted and adapted by Stow about the famine of 1370 is the single point in the poem which identifies a contemporary, historically specific, person: a London Mayor.[9] While acknowledging that the poem remains one of 'London and oplonde bothe' (C.5.44), I want here to dwell on two aspects of the poem which situate it most closely in England's medieval metropolis.[10] Firstly, I am interested in the peculiarly crowded urban business and soundscapes of its prologue and, secondly, the additional self-positioning in the famous 'apologia de sua vita' passage of the C-text of the poem. My argument focuses on the relational position of poem (and poet) to the city. Across the poem, *Piers Plowman* creates a stance of both inclusion and ethical distance from the city: *Piers Plowman* is both a poem of the city, and one against it. This curious position – at once both sharply urban and

7 For a carefully nuanced acknowledgement of the passage as not 'exclusively' urban, see Pearsall, 'Langland's London', *op. cit.*, pp. 186-7. It is worth noting that the initial landscape the poem suggests is an agrarian field, though by the end of the prologue that has become a distinctly urban, metropolitan street scene.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 187; Caroline M. Barron, "William Langland. A London Poet", in Barbara Hanawalt, ed., *Chaucer's England*: *Literature in Historical Context*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 91-109, p. 93.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

10 Quotations from the C text are to Derek Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman. The C text*, Exeter, Exeter University Press, 1978. The much-quoted phrase is unique to the C text; I turn to this passage below.

sharply critical of urban economic cultures – will then become central to the poem's reception and adaptation at key points in the sixteenth-century: in 1550 when Robert Crowley first edited and printed the poem in Ely Rents in Holborn, and in the 1590s when its titular character appeared on stage in the Southwark suburbs south of the city.

The B text of *Piers Plowman*, the poem 'rooted in the streets of London in the 1370s' is also always poised in a proximate but awkward relation to the city. The first vision of the prologue moves from the generic dream-vision setting of a 'bournes syde', 'on a May morwenynge' (B.Prol.8,5) in the Hills above Malvern, before the initial vision which is both of 'field' and 'wildernesse' (B.Prol.17,12). Yet the survey of fourteenth-century life the prologue lays out – via creation myths for the institution of kingship and the commons and the governmental beast-fable of mice and rats, perhaps suggestive of the 'Good Parliament' in the latter reign of Edward III – ends up in an urban street scene. The direction of travel in the prologue, the route towards the first passus or 'step' of the poem's journey, is always towards London. After pointedly refusing to interpret or '[d]evyne' the political beast-fable, the narrator witnesses the particular group of money-hungry lawyers who '[p]leteden for penyes and poundes the lawe' (B.Prol.213). The legal profession, predominantly based in Westminster to the west of London, will become one of the defining preoccupations of the first vision of the poem in passus 2-4, as Langland ponders (negatively, as it turns out), whether money might be reconciled to Conscience. The situation of the narrator is both witness and outsider: '[t]how myghtest better meete myst on Malverne Hilles / Than get a 'mom' of hire mouth er moneie be shewed!' (B.Prol.215-16). This stance of provincial separation from the economic and cultural attractions of the metropolis is one shared with other alliterative narrators, who tend (following the geographical and dialectical nature of their poetry) to situate themselves to the West of the country, and at an ethical and personal remove from the city.[11] However, the community of people who gather around the narrator as the prologue reaches its closure are distinctively urban in nature, something which the stylistic qualities of Langland's verse reinforces:

> Barons and burgeis and bondemen alse
> I seigh in this assemble, as ye shul here after;
> Baksteres and brewesteres and bochiers manye,
> Wollen webbesters and weveres of lynnen,

11 A good example is the narrator of the earlier alliterative debate poem, *Winner and Wastour*, who uses the opening of the poem to comment that 'Dare never no westren wy while this werlde lasteth / Send his sone southewarde' Warren Ginsberg, ed., *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 1992, ll. 7-8.

Taillours and tynkers and tollers in markettes,
Masons and mynours and many othere craftes. (B.Prol.217-22)

The seemingly miscellaneous 'assemble' of 'craftes' has a busy, crowded aspect to it, allowing aristocracy ('Barons'), urban elites ('burgeis') and peasants ('bondemen') to occupy the same, rather cramped, space. The prominence of small-scale victuallers, the 'bakers, brewers and butchers' who drew John Stow's interest in the poem, is also notable, as it is these social types that London civic governmental discourse was frequently preoccupied by, and whom Langland is drawn back to when he writes about 'Covertise' and his entrepreneurial wife 'Rose the Regrator' later in the poem. It is also their voices which will leave the final impression on the poem's prologue. The small-scale commercial life of victualling is joined by the weavers of fabrics, tailors and market-chargers who made up a portion of the urban craft guilds which often produced the government of London life. These are also joined by the architectural crafts that shaped the built environment of the city. The density and variety of characters here represents the busy-ness, the kinetic crowdedness, of an urban street. This stylistic plenitude of an 'assemble' is sometimes, in Middle English poetry, a way of representing the collaborative nature of 'making', of cultural production, in the later Middle Ages (especially architectural projects), but here the poems cumulative vision of community is a distinctly crowded urban street scene.[12]

The final vision of the prologue is actually not a 'vision' but a sound, or perhaps a 'sound-scape', as busy and teeming as the urban crowd who produce it:

Cokes and hire knaves cryden, 'Hote pies, hote!
Goode gees and grys! Go we dyne, go we!'
Taverners until hem tolden the same:
'Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,
Of the Ryn and of the Rochel, the roost to defie!' (B.Prol.226-30).

It is the verbal demotic of a street market, the voices of the small-scale urban victualling trades touting their wares, full of colloquial repetition and greasy, geographically diverse advertisements for gastronomic and stomachic attractions and their underpinning commercialism, that fill the air of Langland's street-scene as the prologue comes to a close. The sound of beggars 'weeping' when bread didn't arrive on London streets in 1370 – the sound that Stow records in metropolitan memory – can be linked to this

12 Mike Rodman Jones, "Chaucerian Ekphrasis: Craft, Intertext, *Dispence*", *Parergon*, Vol. 41, 2024, pp. 191-212, pp. 197-200.

aural phenomenon of the poems prologue: the market of bread, pies, and wine, advertised through voices crying, weeping, and shouting out in the busy crowded London streets, was always a preoccupation of the poem and those who read it.[13]

This stylistic interest in urban sensory and communal experience is one of the things that allows the poem its 'sharp', 'specific' and 'evocative' representation of London.[14] However, the topographical aspects of the poem similarly demonstrate a proximate, but also distanced, relationship between the poem and the city. In one of the most significant additions to the poem made in the C text, Langland's narrator is imagined living within the city walls, in a moment of specific urban setting:

> Thus y awaked, woet god, whan y wonede in Cornehull,
> Kytte and y in a cote, yclothed as a lollare,
> And lytel ylet by, leueth me for sothe,
> Amonges lollares of Londone and lewede ermytes,
> For y made of tho men as resoun me tauhte (C.5.1-5).

Amongst the dazzling spatial imagination of the poem, which takes in locations as disparate as the Malvern Hills and the depths of Hell, Langland chooses to situate his narrator in the streets of London, in Cornhill. Poor ('lytel ylet by') and habitually shabby and disreputable, Will appears as a member of a sort of premodern urban underclass, a gathering of wasters, charlatans and hypocrites. The setting, as Pearsall notes, 'had something of a reputation as a resort of London vagabonds'.[15] At the same time, though, Will is a poet, and a satirical one ('made of tho men'). That 'making', the composition of poetry, is itself a disreputable – or at best ethically uncertain – activity is clear from Ymaginatif's accosting of Will later in the B text of the poem. In a passage very comparable to Reason's critique of Will's choice of lifestyle in C5, Will is accused of 'meddling with making' when his imaginative powers might have been redirected towards penitential activity (B12.16). The re-writing of this connection between poetic making and ethical activity in C5 is striking, as it suggests that Will's verse-making has some kind of satirical or ethical dimension, that it is part of his attempt at a personal 'apologia' or self-defence in the face of Reason's interrogation about

13 On the literary and musical tradition of urban street cries, see Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman*, Volume 1, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, pp. 143-6. Galloway links these cries to other particularly urban moments in *Winner and Wastour*, *London Lickpenny and Dunbar*, as well as much longer traditions into the Industrial Revolution.

14 Derek Pearsall, 'Langland's London', pp. 188-9.

15 Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman*. The C text, p. 97, note to C.1.

the nature of his life.[16] Langland represents his narrator, then, as a Londoner writing satirical verse about his own milieu: a London writer producing anti-London literature.

Piers in Print: Nodnoll

When *Piers Plowman* was first printed, by Robert Crowley in 1550, it was again a London poem. We can also be more specific: it was printed in Ely Rents in Holborn, at a printing house set up in 1549 in an area closely connected to a network of prolific Edwardian printers which linked Crowley to Edward Whitchurch, Richard Grafton and John Day (later printer of Foxe's Acts and Monuments), whose print shop at the intersection of Fleet street and Shoe Lane was a short walk to Ely Place.[17] The title page device that Crowley used for *Piers Plowman* (figure 1) was owned by Edward Whitchurch, and Ely Rents, like Ely Place and the surrounds of St. Andrews in Holborn, were a 'liberty' historically owned by the Bishops of Ely (hence the name) which existed slightly outside the jurisdiction of the civic government.[18] It was here that Crowley printed *Piers Plowman* in 1550: characteristically both in London and slightly against it. The metropolitan geography is also matched by the nature of Crowley as a printer, antiquarian scholar, and a poetic writer in his own right. Like Langland's Will 'making' of London as Reason teaches him, Crowley was, amongst other things, primarily a satirical writer *against* London, even as he wrote and printed in the city.

Strikingly, the passage of Langland's poem memorialised in Stow's *Survey* about the failure of the bread trade into London in 1370 is also a passage of text which prompted Crowley to print a marginal annotation in his edition: 'Of þe dere yere' (Sig.R4v), marking the text for a reader's attention, and Crowley's editorial preface to the reader also singled out the passage.

16 On the distance between indolent Will and those he writes about, see also Ralpha Hanna, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman*, *volume 2*, *C passus 5-9*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, p. 30: "Yet he simultaneously claims to be distinguishable from such figures, either by his ability to rationally assert the meaning of their activities or by his composition of verses satirizing those actions"; also pp. 43-44. Hanna's fullest exploration of this phenomenon of satirical London writing is in his L*ondon Literature, 1300-1380*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 182-212.

17 On Grafton's and Whitchurch's printing press, see Peter Blayney, "The Site of the Sign of the Sun", in Robin Myers, Michael Harris and Giles Mandelbrote, eds., *The London Book trade*: *Topographies of Print in the Metropolis from the Sixteenth Century*, London, British Library, 2003, pp. 1-20. The most detailed discussion of Crowley's output as a printer is Blayney, *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London*, 1501-1557, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2 vols., II., pp. 637-9.

18 On the printer's device, see Ronald McKerrow, *Printer's & Publishers' Devices in England & Scotland 1485-1640*, London, Bibliographical Society, 1913, pp. 37-8, No. 108.

As Crowley writes about attempt to date the poem's composition, part of his evidence is that an 'auncient copye' of the text mentions 1370: 'in the seconde syde of the lxviii leafe of thys printed copye, I finde mention of a dere yere, that was in the yere of oure Lorde M.iii. hundred and Lxx John Chichester than being mayre of London' (Sig.*2r). Precisely the passage that drew Stow's interest also drew Crowley's in 1550. Moreover, in his editions of *Piers Plowman*, Crowley is often careful to emphasize the London-based economic concerns of Langland's writing. For example, in passus 3, Langland writes:

> For these ar men upon mold, that most harme worketh
> To the pore people, that percell meale byghe
> For they poysen the people, priuely and oft
> They richen through regratry, riches hem bighen,
> With that the pore people, should put in her wombs.[19]

Next to the passage, Crowley prints the marginal comment: 'What harme yll vitiliers do, & what abuses in regrating'. Crowley's marginal annotations are now understood to be less ideological and more practical in nature than some scholars had previously thought, but Crowley's interest in Langland's satire on the London markets is a very strong aspect of his interest in the poem.[20] Moreover, of the 17 books printed in Ely Rents by Crowley in 1550-1 (3 of which were editions of *Piers Plowman*), a large number were new poetic and polemical works by Crowley himself, and the focus on commercialism, satire, and London is often very sharp.[21]

Indeed, Crowley's Langlandian interest in London satire was so strong that the modern editor of Crowley's own works, Joseph Meadows Cowper, made a remarkably forceful, if decidedly Victorian, point of emphasising it in his introduction to his edition. His introduction overtly connects the mid-Tudor and Victorian city by stating that Crowley's writings 'present a picture of London life not yet extinct', and asking rhetorically 'Are we much better than those

19 Robert Crowley, ed., *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, London, 1550, sig. D1r. The lines in a modern edition of the B text are passus 3, ll. 80–4. I have quoted here from Crowley's edition, only modernizing abbreviations.

20 On the practical, rather than ideological, nature of Crowley's annotations, see especially Larry Scanlon, "Langland, Apocalypse, and the Early Modern Editor", in David Matthews and Gordon McMullan eds., *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 51–73.

21 The number is from Blayney, *The Stationers Company and the Printers of London*, p. 638. There seems to be a degree of uncertainty about the printing of some volumes, which have been variously attributed to Richard Grafton or John Day, as well as Crowley.

whom Crowley sketched upwards of three hundred years ago?'[22] The Early English Text Society edition of this mid-Tudor writer presents the mid-Tudor text as an ethical and rhetorical precursor to Victorian imaginative and political responses to the city of London – one of horror and indignation at the extent of poverty and homelessness in a contemporary urban setting.[23] The 'aghast' labourers of 1370, the cries of the London street, Will's urban underclass, and the economic crises of the mid-sixteenth century all echo around Cowper's Victorian edition of Langland's early Modern editor.

One of the most striking moments in Crowley's writing is in what has been called his 'masterpiece': *The Philargyrie of Greate Britain* (1551).[24] Crowley's work is indebted in a number of ways to *Piers Plowman*, but it is worth noting that one of the key actions of his nefarious protagonists acts of commercial consumption and power (Philargyrie eats money) is to build a neatly inverted parody of England's capital:

> Then builded he
> A greate Citie
> Nodnoll he dyd it name
> It was all one
> Wyth Babylon
> If it were not the same (ll. 509–14).[25]

'Nodnoll', of course, is London spelt in reverse. Philargyrie stores up 'more golde / I dare be bolde / Then wold in poulis church [ie. St Paul's Cathedral]' (ll. 674-6).

Similarly, Crowley's *One and Thirty Epigrams*, published in the same year as the editions of Langland, is full of moments which suggest that Crowley is imagining mid-Tudor London through the lens of his reading of one of the great medieval dream-vision poems. London is: 'a citye / in name, but, in deed, / It is a packe of people / that seke after meede' (ll. 193–6). In ano-

22 Quotations are from J. Meadows Cowper, ed., *The Select Works of Robert Crowley*, EETS e.s. 15, London, 1872 [repr. 1905], pp. xiii–xiv. All references to Crowley's works are to this edition, barring *Philargyrie* (on which more below).

23 The effect is strengthened by Cowper's additions of newspaper cuttings regarding a case of homelessness and attempted suicide in April 1871 into the notes of his editorial introduction (Cowper, pp. xxiv-xxvii).

24 John N. King, "*Philargyrie of greate Britayne by Robert Crowley*," *English Literary Renaissance*, Vol. 10, 1980, pp. 46-75. Oddly, Meadows Cowper did not include the poem in his edition of Crowley's Works.

25 On other debts of Crowley's to Langland's poem, see Mike Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral, 1381-1594: Appropriation and the Writing of Religious Controversy*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 42-7 and "This is no prophecy": Robert Crowley, *Piers Plowman*, and Kett's Rebellion", *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 42, 2011, pp. 37-55.

ther, Crowley describes a 'leasemongar / of London' on his death bed, and 'whilse he thus laye, / he fell in a sloumber, / and sawe in his dreame / pore folke a greate number' (ll. 1177–80). Inspired by Langland's 'fair felde of folk', Crowley writes a moral proverb in which all the people appearing in the dream are notably poor, and come to tell the conscience-stricken dreamer that 'leaesemongars' 'haue hell / by ryght inheritaunce' (ll. 1191–2). Later in the text, Crowley's narrator mimics an alliterative long-line, as well as a dream vision frame: 'Of late, as I laye, / and lacked my reste / At suche tyme as Titan / drewe faste to the Easte' (ll. 1389–92), 'Than slombred I a little, / and thoughte that I sawe / Thre sortes of vayn menne / condempned by Gods lawe' (ll. 1405–8). Crowley's Langlandian anti-London satire then reaches an appropriately prophetic closure:

> Well, let thes forestallars
> repent them bytyme,
> Lest the clarke of the market
> be with them ere pryme.
> For he, when he cometh,
> wyll punysh them all,
> That do any nedeful thynge
> ingrose or forestall (ll. 965–72).

The 'esoterica of early Tudor economic coinages'—the regrating, forstalling, ingrossing—is here densely packed into a passage which figures Crowley's marginal commentary 'what harm yll vitiliers do & what abuses in regrating' as a prophetic, scriptural warning to the urban marketplace of mid-Tudor London.[26] Langland's hostility towards those who 'richen through regratry' was particularly focused on trades in what 'the pore people should put in her wombes' (precisely what Stow saw in Hawkyn's wafers) and so Crowley's warnings are focused particularly on any 'nedeful thynge': the small-scale trade of bread, wine and 'hot pies, hot' which reverberates around at the close of Langland's prologue. There is a shared economic, commercial frame of reference in the worlds of both Langland's poem and the writing of someone who was probably Langland's most attentive and appreciative early modern reader.

26 Laurence Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 97.

'Piers Ploughman' on the London Stage

Around forty years after a Londoner might have bought a copy of one of Crowley's poems, or a print of *Piers Plowman*, in Ely Rents, 'Piers Plowman' (the figure, if not the text), was still addressing Londoners, but now on the stage of the Rose theatre, in Southwark, across the river south of where Crowley's print shop had been. That Southwark was regarded as deeply disreputable in contemporary accounts of London might come as not much of a shock, given the steps that *Piers Plowman* has taken around Cornhill, Ely Rents, and other slightly shabby areas of the capital. For Stow, Southwark, standing outside the jurisdiction of the civic government, like the streets around Ely Place, was synonymous not with Shakespearian drama but with prostitution and civil disorder.[27] It was at the Rose that the Character 'Piers Plowman' addressed a London audience, in *A Knack to Know a Knave* (1592, printed 1594). The play was printed, possibly in an attempt to make some money at a time when the playing company associated with it – Strange's Men – were undergoing decimation as its various members became parts of two other playing companies. The title page also marketed the text through its associations with particularly well-known members of a specific London company and playhouse: it states that the play 'hath sundrie tymes bene played by ED. ALLEN & his companie. With KEMPS applauded Merriments'.[28] Edward Alleyn, the name most associated with Marlowe's 'mighty line' in the roles of Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus, played with Strange's company from 1591 onwards, but retained the livery of the Lord Admiral's men at the same time.[29] The play was something of a money-spinner for Strange's Men in the 1592 season, when it was performed at the Rose theatre six times between 10 June 1592 and 24 January 1593.[30] The company's repertory included Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*; Marlowe's *Jew of*

27 Stow's account of Southwark is predominantly concerned with the history of the Stews and associated prohibitions designed to police prostitution in the Borough; see Stow, ed, *Survey*, II. pp. 52-69. Notably, Stow shows virtually no interest in the city's nascent playhouses, only mentioning the two oldest, The Curtain and Theatre, both in Shoreditch, and then only briefly in an addition to the 1603 edition; see *Survey* II. p. 262. Neither text makes mention of the Southwark playhouses which, by 1599, also included the Globe. The Rose was built very close to the Bear garden, which Stow does mention.

28 On the play, see Mike Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral*, pp. 160-8. The only edition of the text is G. R. Proudfoot, ed., *A Knack to Know a Knave*, Oxford, Malone Society, 1963. All quotations are to this edition.

29 Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 259.

30 R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, eds., *Henslowe's Diary*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961, pp. 19-20.

Malta; Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI*; and, possibly, *Sir Thomas More*.[31] *Knack* took, on its opening performance, £3 12s; substantially more than either the performance of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* the previous day (28s) or Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* four days later (38s).

'Piers Plowman's role in *Knack* is both part of a long Tudor tradition of such appropriations, and one with specific resonances for the early 1590s. The nature of Langland's poem, which we saw reflected in the mid-century writing and interests of its Tudor editor and printer, is now used again to reflect a sort of satirical anti-metropolitan light on its obviously metropolitan, urban, audience:

> *Enter Honestie and Piers Plowman* […]
> Kin Alas, poore *piers plowman*, what ailest thou? Why doest Thou weep, peace man, if any haue offended thee,
> Thou shalt be made amends unto the most.
> *Piers plow*. I beseech your Grace to pitie my distresse,
> There is an vnknowne theefe that robs the common wealth,
> And makes me and my poore wife and children beg for maintenance,
> The tyme hath bene (my Lord) *in diebus illis*,
> That the Plowmans coat was of good homespun russet cloth, Whereof neither I nor my seruents had no want,
> Though now both they and I want,
> And all by this vuknown farmer […]
> I haue kept a poore house where I dwel this four score yeare,
> Yet was I neuer driuen to want till now:
> I beseech your Grace, as you haue still bene iust,
> To seek redresse for this oppression.
> I beseech your Grace reade my humble petition.
> *Kin*. Let me see the humble petition, of poor *piers plowman*, Alasse poore piers, I haue heard my father say,
> That *piers plowman* was one of the best members in a commonwealth
> For his table was neuer emptie of bread, beefe, and beere, As a help to all distressed traueilers. (*A Knack to Know a Knave*, ll. 1219–49).

The language of Crowley's mid-century complaints is again writ large, but now on the London stage, and also now combining economic complaint with the sharply contemporary discourse associated with the 'downfall of hospitality' in a decade (the 1590s) of catastrophic economic crisis bad enough for the Elizabethan government to try to impose legislative guidelines on

31 Andrew Gurr, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-77, 263.

hospitality.[32] As others have shown, there developed in the last decade of the century a potent coalescence of economic complaint and politicised nostalgia when tended to divide a predominantly rural past ideal of hospitality from a declined urban present.[33] This is what made Piers Plowman an arresting presence on the stage at the Rose in Southwark in 1592. The anonymity and alienation of economics can be found in Piers' repeated use of 'unknown' ('unknown thief', 'unknown farmer') whose avaricious hoarding of land then produces a dual poverty – not just dearth, but the resulting loss of hospitable subsistence. What seems to be a stage traffic in legal documents (a 'petition' is clearly exchanged between Piers and the King) evokes a long tradition of literary 'petitioning' with roots in the early Reformation.[34] However, it is, whilst newly acute in the crisis of the 1590s, notable that the nostalgia for 'plain russet cloth' is accompanied by a longing for the 1590s equivalent of hawkyn's much missed wafers: 'bread, beefe, and beere, / As a help to all distressed traueilers'. The small-scale commercial traffic in 'needful things', bread, 'hot pies, hot' continued to adhere to the name Piers Plowman. So too did the odd relation to London. In identifying the culprit for Piers' penury and its resulting effect on hospitality, Piers' companion, 'Honesty' summons a figure of economic governance, 'Enter Clarke of the Assyse'. He, again brandishing a legal document (now an 'Inditement' against 'Walter would have more' and lists a sequence of crimes:

> First, he hath conueyed corne out of the land to feede the Enemie. Next, hee hath turned poore Piers Plowman out of dores by his great raising of rents. Next, he is knowne to been a common disturber of men of their quiet, by seruing Writs on them, and bringing them to London, to their utter undoing' (ll. 1263-8).

One wonders what the audience response to this at the Rose might have been. How many of Henslowe's urban audience in Southwark might have grunted or laughed in recognition that their own presence in London had been, and was, perhaps, 'their utter undoing'? There are other examples of 1590s popular drama that was both historically orientated (often nostalgic) and sharply contemporary in its language of socio-economic complaint.[35]

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32 The best discussion is in Felicity Heal's *Hospitality in Early Modern England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

33 Kristine Johanson, "In the Mean Season: *Richard II* and the Nostalgic Politics of Hospitality", *Parergon*, Vol. 33, 2016, pp. 57-78.

34 On this connection, see Mike Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral*, pp. 163-5.

35 On this trend of politicised nostalgia on the stage in medievalist drama, see Mike Rodman Jones, *Literature and Medievalism in Early Modern England*: *Strange Histories*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2024, pp. 159-63.

However, that 'Piers Plowman' could be seen on the stage in Southwark links us all the way back, through Crowley's editions, and Stow's interest in the dearth of 1370, to the text of *Piers Plowman* itself. The demotic cries of the close of the poem's prologue reappear in a cultural environment (a professional London playhouse) which was impossible in 1370, but the particular nature of those demotic cries is still tangible: vocative voices and victualling always appeared together, in 1370, in 1550, and in the 1590s.

Piers Plowman, then, itself always existed in a complex relationship with the city of London: it was both satirically orientated towards the metropolis and yet proximate to and preoccupied by it. The reception of the poem often took place in London, by London writers, antiquarians, historians, poets and dramatists. The "Langlandian London Writing" of Langland's narrator was consistently concerned with a network of connections between economic ethics, 'needful economics' and writing about sustenance versus commercial and financial exploitation. But Langland's poem was repeatedly reconstituted to be relevant to contemporary economic concerns, whether that be the 'dere year' of 1370, the economic crises of the mid-sixteenth century, or the newly controversial urban economic crisis of the 1590s (and indeed, the London of Cowper's Victorian edition of Crowley's works in 1872).

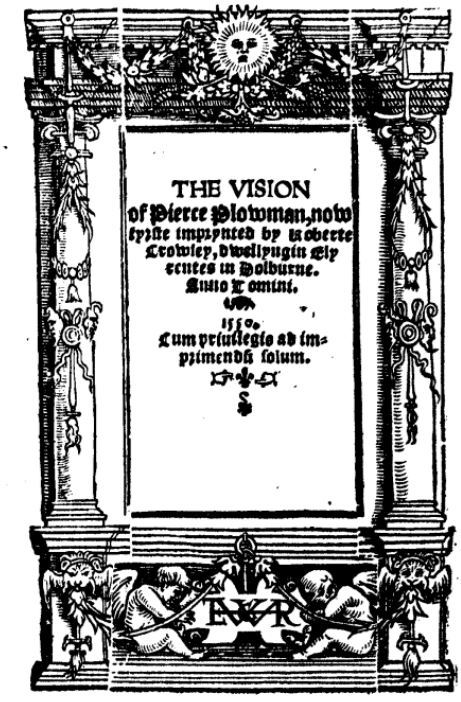

Figure 1. *Title page of Robert Crowley's first edition of Piers Plowman*, *STC. 19906*.

[Alternative text: This 1550 book title page features elaborate columns and cherubs framing black-letter text topped by a sun-faced icon]