

## The Life of the Poet

No one knows who wrote *Piers Plowman*, and if someone named William Langland did so, no one knows anything certain about him.<sup>1</sup> The only evidence for that name's association with the poem comes from three notes that readers penned into the pastedowns (the inside covers) of two medieval manuscripts. These short, spontaneous glosses, read together with the few references in the poem to the narrator as "Will," provide the only grounds for attributing the poem to a named author.

The first note, dated ca. 1400, in a manuscript of *Piers Plowman* from Gloucestershire but discovered in Ireland (Dublin, Trinity College, MS D.4.1), reads:

Memorandum, quod Stacy de Rokayle, pater Willielmi de Langland, qui Stacius fuit generosus et morabatur in Schiptone under Whicwode, Tenens domini le Spenser in comitatu Oxon., qui praedictus Willielmus fecit librum qui vocatur Perys Ploughman. (Adams, *Rokele Family* 19)

It was Stacy de Rokayle who was William de Langland's father; this Stacy was of gentle birth and lived in Shipton-under-Wychwood in Oxfordshire, holding land from Lord le Spenser; the aforesaid William wrote the book called *Piers Plowman*. (Kane, *ODNB* 488)<sup>2</sup>

The other notes are found in a manuscript now in the Huntington Library, Hm 128. One, penned by Tudor historian John Bale, offers information similar to that of the Dublin manuscript but gives a different first name for the poet:

Robertus Langlande natus in comitatu Salopie in villa Mortymers Clybery in the claylande, within .viij. myles of Malborne Hylles scripsit, Peers Ploughman, li. i / In somer season whan set was sunne.

Robert Langland, born in the county of Shropshire in the village of Cleobury Mortimer in the claylands within 8 miles of the Malvern Hills, wrote *Piers Plowman*, line 1: In somer season whan set was sunne.<sup>3</sup>

The other, a shorter note by Ralph Coppinger (d. 1551), also expresses some confusion as to the name of the poet: “Robert or William langland made pers ploughman.” Why were readers confused about the poet’s name? The erroneous name “Robert” comes from a misreading of the opening of *passus* 8 of the B text. The narrative reads at this point, “Thus, yrobed in russet [Thus, robed in homespun woolen],” indicating how Will is coarsely dressed. But some manuscripts (one A and one B text) have the phrase “I Robert” instead of the past participle “y-robed.” Thus a sonic mistake led some early readers to think that Robert was the poet’s name. This situation illustrates the contingent nature of historical information about the poet.

However, a corrective about the name comes from another line in B (15.152), where the narrator calls himself Will and says he has “lived long in land.” Scholars take the hint and have understood this as the poet naming himself: “Will long-land” = William Langland. Langland may be an invented name, and the poet may have really been named William Rokele, but as A.V.C. Schmidt concludes, from the existing evidence, “it is convenient” to call him “William Langland” (*Parallel-Text* 2.271).

Eminent scholars such as Robert Adams, Ralph Hanna, Kane, and Schmidt have attempted biographical profiles based on these identifications, on scattered historical documents relating to the poet’s proposed family history, and on what can be ascertained from the poem. Kane has confirmed the poet’s birthplace by studying “records of deeds of gift and grants of land made by various Langlands between 1399 and 1581 not actually in Cleobury Mortimer but a bare 5 miles away in the manor of Kinlet and in adjoining Highley” in the county of Shropshire in the West Midlands of England. The name Langland, says Kane, could have come from his mother’s family, and the fact that he used it and not his father’s may simply indicate that he was “not in line to inherit through primogeniture.”

On the basis of the various gifts, deeds, and land grants associated with the Langlands from 1399 to 1581, Kane concludes: “The span of dates implies a family of substance” (*ODNB* 488).

Kane dates the poet’s life from about 1325 to 1390, based on historical allusions in the A and C texts, arguing that possible references in C to the 1388 Statute of Laborers indicate the poet lived beyond that date. Kane bases the date of birth not only on allusions but also on his sense that the poet could not have been immature when he wrote even the first version of the poem, which strikes Kane as somewhat seasoned: “The mature excellence of the writing in the A text, and allusions in it to Edward III’s French campaigns, and to a great storm in 1362, between them have suggested that the poet was born about 1330.” Also helping to map the poet’s birth is evidence that a certain “William Rokele, who might conceivably be the poet, received the first tonsure from Bishop Wolstan of Worcester not long before 1341,” which indicates “a somewhat earlier date, say 1325” (*ODNB* 489). As Robert Adams explains, the tonsure is received by those “understood as merely contemplating careers in the priesthood, not as having committed irretrievably to its course” (*Rokele Family* 24). For the death date as well, Kane tries to make sense of the potential political content of the final version and argues for moving the poet’s demise from 1387, as previously thought, to slightly later, as he explains, “having Langland alive after 1388 enables understanding of veiled, but unmistakably political, allusions in C. A better date for his death, taking account of fourteenth-century life expectation, would be c.1390” (*ODNB* 489).

Kane next writes one of the most important, cogent, and axiomatic observations that one can read in the great corpus of *Piers* scholarship, worth quoting at length:

By its character Langland’s poem encourages speculation about him. It belongs to a genre called the dream-vision, which takes the form of a report by a first-person narrator who claims to have experienced the vision he recounts. He figures as participant, encountering personages ranging from the allegorical or fantastic to the possible, even the historical. The dreamer, if he is named, is called after the poet and, where this can be checked, has some of his attributes. He is to an indeterminable extent fashioned in the image of that poet who, for his part, comes to live imaginatively in the personage of his creation.

The poet uses him as a means of engagement, obviously powerful in a time when poetry was written as if to be read aloud. (ODNB 489)

Readers should keep this paragraph to hand as an official passport into the world of the poet.

No one will ever know if Langland anticipated that modern readers would speculate about the real and the imaginary, and such urges may reflect the demands of modern positivist study. What Langland thought about his self-representation must remain mysterious, but all modern readers will want to judge for themselves this man's identity "in real life" and how his experiences may have influenced his writing. For example, one can wonder where he acquired his sensitivity to injustice and also his belligerence against the powerful and corrupt. Traditionally a thinker attains these traits in one of two ways, either through experience of poverty and destitution at the hands of the powerful, or from witnessing such injustice from the other side, as it were, when born into the power that maintains inequity and then rebelling against that privilege. Each reader will inevitably develop his or her own sense of "Will" based on the evidence in the poem. The art of scholarship and the work of sensitive reading compels one to distinguish the likely from the unlikely in the absence of certain historical truth. Kane puts the entire matter quite well, noting that in study of *Piers Plowman* "nothing seems to admit of absolute proof" but depends "on assessments of likelihood and relative plausibility of argument." Despite these ambiguities, continues Kane, "interest in the poem is actually growing," and is likely to continue:

A vogue of scepticism about received opinions fails to diminish its power of engagement, and disagreements reflect possessive attitudes to its text, and indeed to its poet, who has been anything but marginalized, quite simply because of the quality of his poem as a memorable archive of human experience by which it has the power to engage notwithstanding the passage of six centuries. (ODNB 491)

Kane's bold assertion may very well hold true for centuries to come.

Despite the difficulties of discovering Langland, the poet has made it easier (or perhaps not) by offering in passus 5 of the C text an autobiographical portrait.<sup>4</sup> Kane shows a healthy scepticism about it.

The new episode in C, he says, depicts the poet as “a kind of itinerant ‘beadsmen-for-the-living’ . . . a sketch that “fits the concept of a younger son in a family of standing, cherished by father and ‘frendes’ (that is, in Middle English, ‘patrons’ or ‘kinsfolk’), who ended a promising career in the church by an impulsive marriage and could not fit into any of the various secretarial, administrative, or legal jobs open to a minor cleric.” This Langland, one might say further, appears to modern eyes as a failed graduate student who married before qualifying exams and had to take a job tutoring children of the wealthy. Kane also notices the episodes in the text that seem like parts of a real biography: the encounters with Fortune and with Recklessness, the bouts of dementia and alienation, the final decline into baldness, deafness, and impotence. Kane notes that “each of these four carefully located disclosures leads up to a literally represented episode of moral insight and reorientation, of spiritual reassurance for the Dreamer” (*ODNB* 489), a fact that speaks to the craft of the poet in composing what seems like a plausible account of a real man’s life. On the other hand, less skeptically, one can counter that craft may actually reflect reality, and perhaps Langland, like many young men, sowed some wild oats and, like all men, got older and faced the grim realities of aging. Medieval literature offers many depictions of aging, but Langland perhaps wrote about the stages of his life as he actually witnessed change and experienced the mental, spiritual, and physical advances (for better or worse) that mark the progress of all lives.

Kane sees aspects of the real poet in the C text autobiography but cautions that “further biographical inference from this episode can seem hazardous.” For example, Langland may have invented Will’s wife and child, and in fact the bookish Langland could be inventing his entire persona purely from texts and imagination. Kane explains that such deflection may go even further and that Langland may have had good reason to obscure his real person. For if Langland was in fact the tonsured and ordained cleric William Rokele mentioned in ecclesiastical records, then in light of his vicious ecclesiastical satire, perhaps he adopted his mother’s name as a sort of *nom de plume* and wanted to “give the critic who is his speaking voice a markedly different external personality from his own.” Kane continues: “Whether or not such identification is accepted, the breadth of his knowledge, and that he had leisure to write, imply

either patronage or a relatively secure place, and, moreover, access to books” (ODNB 490). In the context of Kane’s inquiry, all readers must ponder for themselves whether Langland had some reason to protect himself and did so by forging a plausible but fictive persona, or whether he boldly revealed his real self, confident that his privilege was already protection enough.

Developing Kane’s work, Robert Adams traces a string of legal and ecclesiastical documents that mention the Rokele family. Adams offers the fullest account, however circumstantial, of the poet’s potential profile, of what political and social world he lived in, and of how he could have composed the poems attributed to him.<sup>5</sup> Adams’s book, like Kane’s entry, challenges past understandings about the poet’s social position. Broadly depicted, readers have longed to see Langland as a populist, a man who had himself struggled, wandered, and seen the world of the common man. This reaction of most readers arises from the poem’s sensitive engagement with the realities of social injustice and suffering, issues as apparently critical in the late fourteenth century as in the twenty-first. Langland’s direct experience of humanity would seem to belie any aristocratic status that would make him part of the ruling or privileged class.

Those who teach the poem know that readers tend to project onto Langland their own desire for his rebel stature, imagining him as a union leader or some sort of activist close to the people, laboring for the public good. But the biography that Adams posits for him reveals a member of one of the most politically connected, financially powerful families in England, a man of means, engaged at the highest echelons of landowning, money, and power in the late fourteenth century. Such a posh Langland may unsettle some, especially if one sees him as committed to the cause, whatever one considers the cause to be.

As Adams explains, Langland had a “professional level of education in theology,” and “obtaining such an education in the fourteenth century would have been massively expensive,” implying “disposable wealth beyond the means of all but a few people,” a wealth that “almost certainly came, if not directly, from his father” (*Rokele Family* 29–30). This would argue against, and in fact disable, readings that demand a gritty, demotic writer, on the order, perhaps, of Jack Kerouac, another spiritually inquisitive Catholic wandering through life in search of answers while sponta-