

PROPHETIC *PIERS PLOWMAN*: NEW SIXTEENTH-CENTURY EXCERPTS

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In recent decades, a slew of textual discoveries has prompted a reconsideration of the sixteenth-century transmission and reception of *Piers Plowman*. Research on this topic began in 1989 with Sharon Jansen's discovery of *Piers Plowman* excerpts in London, British Library, Sloane 2578 (mid sixteenth century) and has accelerated in recent years, refocusing questions of literary history, textual tradition, and the genres of *Piers Plowman*. A key conclusion of this new scholarship is that Langland's poem circulated as political prophecy in manuscript and print in the sixteenth century. This article registers a new entry in the sixteenth-century archive of Langlandiana: two freestanding excerpts, each combining the same two passages from *Piers Plowman* B, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C.813 (mid sixteenth century). The Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts, I argue, add incrementally to the case for a prophetic *Piers Plowman* in the sixteenth century and also indicate a richer codicological, generic, and metrical context for this period in the poem's reception history. I begin by providing diplomatic texts of the excerpts and placing them in the context of Rawlinson C.813, the genre of political prophecy, and the alliterative tradition. I then argue through comparison and close reading that the prophetic *Piers Plowman* of the sixteenth century points up an underappreciated aspect of Langland's poetic practice.

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C.813 is not the sort of book in which one would hope to find the text of *Piers Plowman*, but it should be. Texts in Rawlinson C.813 tend to be short, monolingual, informally presented, and attributable to sixteenth-century authors and revisers—nothing like *Piers Plowman* as this poem appears in deluxe London manuscripts and modern critical editions. Yet, alongside other prophecies on folios 140v and 142r-v of Rawlinson C.813, there occur two heretofore unrecognized freestanding excerpts, each combining the same two passages from *Piers Plowman* B.

Rawlinson C.813 is composed of two originally distinct compilations.¹ The first compilation (fols. 1–98, early sixteenth century) contains lyrics, verse prophecies, and other items in English; it is well-studied and has been edited in full as the 'Welles Anthology'.² The second compilation (fols. 103–67, mid sixteenth century)

1 Rawlinson C.813 described in William D. Macray, *Catalogi Manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Bodleianae Partis Quintae*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1878), 415–20 (second compilation described at 420). On the second compilation in this manuscript see also Sharon L. Jansen Jaech, "'The Marvels of Merlin' and the Authority of Tradition", *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 8 (1985), 35–73, 48–9. Thanks are due to Anya Adair for help in capturing digital images of Rawlinson C.813.

contains a number of prose and verse prophecies in English and is relatively neglected. To judge from the binding, the two compilations were bound together in the seventeenth century, presumably with the intention of producing a compendium of English prophecies.

The *Piers Plowman* passages that comprise both excerpts are the ‘two monks’ heads’ and ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ set-pieces (B.6.321–31 and B.10.322–35).³ These passages represent two moments at which William Langland affiliates his poem with the genre of political prophecy. As such, the Rawlinson excerpts emphasize one facet of the kaleidoscopic genre identity of *Piers Plowman*. In doing so, however, they adumbrate an unfamiliar sixteenth-century archive of Langlandiana. Though related to other kinds of medieval prophecy more commonly associated with *Piers Plowman* in modern scholarship, political prophecy possessed its own intellectual lineage, literary conventions, and manuscript tradition. This article attends to the Rawlinson excerpts both in their sixteenth-century context and as an early commentary on the fourteenth-century poem. First, I provide diplomatic text of the excerpts and place them in codicological, generic, and metrical context. I then argue through comparison and close reading that the prophetic *Piers Plowman* of the sixteenth century points up an underappreciated aspect of Langland’s poetic practice.

The Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts are laid out as prose in a single column on fols. 140v and 142r–v. While prose format for verse remained an (increasingly uncommon) option in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English book production, and while it was historically associated with the alliterative metre, the deformation of alliterative hemistich structure through error and revision in these excerpts leads one to question whether the Rawlinson scribe or his immediate predecessors recognized the excerpts as verse.⁴ The excerpts are untitled and lack other kinds of paratextual organizational features, such as tags, paraph marks, or marginal annotations. Both excerpts are followed by a form of ‘finis’. Both texts are written in the same casual if not careless secretary hand. This hand is marked by numerous cancellations of hastily written text and by wide graphetic variation, for example in the width of the loop of the ascender of *f* and the curve of the descender of *y*. The second excerpt, but not the first, is separated from the preceding item by a horizontal line.

In the following diplomatic transcriptions, I omit all scribal punctuation. Italics indicate expansion of scribal abbreviations, except that the ampersand is silently

2 *The Welles Anthology: MS. Rawlinson C. 813: A Critical Edition*, ed. Sharon L. Jansen and Kathleen H. Jordan (Binghamton, NY, 1991).

3 References to *Piers Plowman* B are to *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975).

4 A. S. G. Edwards, ‘Editing and Manuscript Form: Middle English Verse as Prose’, *English Studies in Canada*, 27 (2001), 15–28; and Eric Weiskott, ‘Lawman, the Last Old English Poet and the First Middle English Poet’, in Marie-Françoise Alamichel (ed.), *Lažamon’s Brut and Other Medieval Chronicles: 14 essays* (Paris, 2013), 11–57, 41–2.

expanded to 'and'. I forgo capitalization except in the case of the first-person singular pronoun. 'Y' for 'þ' in abbreviations of particles such as 'the' and 'then' is printed 'þ'. Editorial virgules (/) mark line-endings in the corresponding text in George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson's critical edition of *Piers Plowman B*:

Piers Plowman excerpts

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C.813, fols. 140v and 142r-v

(1)

[140v] and I warne yow workmen men wynn whiell you may/ for honger hetherwarde hastith/ to chaffer/ rr ffynne be fullfyllid ffamyn shall ariese/ throwe ffloides and ffoull wether frevetes shall fayell/ and so sayd sattarne and sent yow I warne/ when you se the so and þe monkes heades/ meadenes have þe mastery and multiply by viij/ þen shall death whether and darthe by iustice/ and davy þe dyker for honger/ but yff god of his goodnes grant vs a trust/ and ther shall com a kyng to corrett you relegus/ and beat you as the bylle sayth for brekyng yor reulle/ and amende nones and monkes/ and put them to þer promotioun ad prystinium statum ire/ and barnes and earles beaton throwe beatis vire/ and blam þem foulle/ and þen freares in þer fratory shall fynd a key/ of constant cofferes in þe which is þe castell/ of gregoris goode childrin have evyll desspendid/ þen shall þe abbot of abbingdon and all his issues for ever/ hav a knocke of a kyng and an vncuarrable wond/ and or this kyng com kame shall ane/ finnyis

(2)

[142r] I warnne yow workmen winn whyell yow may/ for hungerward hastyth/ to chaffer/ rr fiue be fullffillyd shall ffamyne shall ariese/ throw flouides and foull wether frevetes shall fayell/ and so sayd sattarne and I sent yow I warne/ when yow see the so and þe monckes heades/ a meayden have the mastery

[142v] and mvltyplyed by viij/ þen shall death wether and darth by iustys/ and davy þe dyker for honger/ but iff god of his goodnys grant vs a truse/ and ther shall com a kyng to correcte yow relegeous/ and beat yow as þe bybell saythe for brekyng your revll/ and amend nonnes and monkes/ and put þem to þer promocyone ad pristinum statum ire/ and barnyes and erles beaton throw beatus vire/ and blam þem foulle/ and þen freares in þer fratures shall fynd a key/ of constantives cofferes in þe which þe cattell/ that gregorius good childerne han evell disspendide/ then shall þe abbotte of abingdone and all his issue for evere/ have a knocke of a king and an vncuarrable wonde/ and or this kyng com kame shall an 11/ fyniys

Both excerpts represent *Piers Plowman* B.6.321–31 + B.10.322–35, less 10.327a, 10.333, 10.333a, 10.335, and most of 6.323 and 10.327. The corresponding text in the Kane–Donaldson edition is as follows (caesura represented by a tabbed space except in Latin lines):

Ac I warne yow werkmen, wynnep̄ whil ye mowe
 For hunger hiderward hastep̄ hym faste.
 He shal awake [þoru3] water wastours to chaste;

Er fyue [yer] be fulfilled swich famyn shal aryse.
 Thoruȝ flo[od] and foule wedres fruytes shul faille,
 And so sei[þ] Saturne and sente yow to warne.
 Whan ye se þe [mone] amys and two monkes heddes,
 And a mayde haue þe maistrie, and multiplie by eizte,
 Thanne shal deef wiȝdrawe and derþe be Iustice,
 And Dawe þe dykere deye for hunger
 But [if] god of his goodnesse graunte vs a trewe.

(6.321-31)

Ac þer shal come a kyng and confesse yow Religiouses,
 And bete yow, as þe bible telleþ, for brekyng of youre rule,
 And amende Monyals, Monkes and Chanons,
 And puten [hem] to hir penaunce, *Ad pristinum statum ire*;
 And Barons wiȝ Erles beten hem þoruȝ *Beatus virres* techyng;
 [Bynymen] that hir barnes claymen, and blame yow foule:
Hij in curribus & hij in equis ipsi obligati sunt &c.
 And þanne Freres in hir fraytour shul fynden a keye
 Of Costantyns cofres [þer þe catel is Inne]
 That Gregories godchildren [vngodly] despended.
 And þanne shal þe Abbot of Abyngdoun and al his issue for euere
 Haue a knok of a kyng, and incurable þe wounde.
 That þis worþ soof, seke ye þat ofte ouerse þe bible:
Quomodo cessauit exactor, quieuit tributum? contriuit dominus baculum impiorum, et
virgam dominancium cedencium plaga insanabili.
 Ac er þat kyng come Caym shal awake,
 [Ac] dowel shal dyngen hym adoun and destruye his myȝte.

(10.322-35)

Notable unique errors in the Rawlinson excerpts include ‘hungerward’ for 6.322 ‘hunger hiderward’ (excerpt (2) only), ‘rr’ for 6.324 ‘Er’, ‘ffynne’ for 6.324 ‘fyue’ (excerpt (1) only), ‘shall ffamyne’ for 6.324 ‘swich famyn’ (excerpt (2) only), ‘so’ for 6.327 ‘sonne’ (Kane and Donaldson emend conjecturally to ‘mone’, thinking of C.8.349 ‘mone’), ‘w(h)ether’ for 6.329 ‘wiȝdrawe’, ‘trust’ for 6.331 ‘trewe’ (excerpt (1) only), the omission of most of 10.327, and ‘castell’ for 10.329 ‘catel’ (excerpt (1) only).⁵ The unique shared errors, together with other unusual shared substitutions such as ‘non(n)es’ for 10.324 ‘Monyals’, indicate that excerpts (1) and (2) derive from a common archetype no longer extant. The preponderance of unique errors in the ‘two monks’ heads’ passage might indicate that this portion of the text enjoyed a longer independent transmission than the ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passage. The unique errors found in one excerpt but not the other may be due to the Rawlinson scribe himself. However, given their relative abundance in these short texts, at least some of the unique errors found in only one excerpt are likely due to earlier scribes in the same textual tradition. If so, it follows that the excerpt already appeared twice in the Rawlinson scribe’s exemplar. The repetition of a short text

5 On the emendation at B.6.327 see *Piers Plowman*, ed. Kane and Donaldson, 181. References to *Piers Plowman C* are to *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. George Russell and George Kane (London, 1997).

in swift succession is not uncommon in prophecy books. This would in turn imply that the prophetic texts that separate the two excerpts on fols. 140v–42r also stood in this position in the exemplar. The Rawlinson scribe may have had more extensive knowledge of the text of *Piers Plowman*: the cancellation ‘constant ~~coveres~~ cofferes at 10.329 in excerpt (1) conceivably reflects a memory of the equivalent C-text line, C.5.175 ‘constantyn [...] couerour’.

The considerable textual and codicological difficulties posed by prophecies and manuscripts containing them account for the failure of the Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts to attract critical attention. In her *First-Line Index of English Poetry 1500–1800 in Manuscripts of the Bodleian Library Oxford*, Margaret Crum identified the excerpts as ‘Alliterative prophetic verses’, but she evidently did not recognize their relationship to *Piers Plowman*.⁶ This index entry of 1969 is, as far as I can determine, the first and only record of the existence of the Rawlinson excerpts. It is, indeed, moderately surprising that Crum was able to pick out the excerpts as verse, inasmuch as they are both laid out as prose, like some other poetic texts in Rawlinson C.813. Crum misses the item that immediately follows excerpt (2), *New Index of Middle English Verse (NIMEV)* 1967.8, an alliterative verse prophecy laid out as prose in this manuscript.⁷ Taking the form of an interview between one Sir William Banastre and God, *NIMEV* 1967.8 begins in this manuscript: “lord tell me for thi medenes love | þat þou thi mother callythe / what shall beworth of our king | lord iff it be thi will” (quoted fr. Rawlinson C.813, fol. 142v). The Bodleian Library catalogue entry for Rawlinson C.813, though more detailed than most catalogue entries for late anthologies of prophecies, notices neither *Piers Plowman* excerpt nor any of the material that separates them on fols. 140v–42r. (The Bodleian catalogue does, however, notice the Rawlinson text of *NIMEV* 1967.8, unlike *NIMEV* itself.) Prophecy books, in which older and newer texts in little-studied subgenres freely intermingle with few or no structures of textual layout to divide one from the next, are hard on bibliographers.

It should be clear by now that the value of the Rawlinson excerpts as textual witnesses to some twenty lines from *Piers Plowman* B is limited. The ejection of these passages from Langland’s poem into the world of recombinable anonymous prophecies has been turbulent. The textual form of the excerpts directs attention away from the fourteenth-century poem (to which I will return) and toward the more immediate generic and formal contexts of Rawlinson C.813.

Political prophecy was a major locus of literary activity well into the seventeenth century in Latin and the British vernaculars.⁸ Prophecies influenced the decisions

6 Margaret Crum (ed.), *First-Line Index of English Poetry 1500–1800 in Manuscripts of the Bodleian Library Oxford*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1969), A1272.

7 Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (London, 2005).

8 On late medieval and early modern British political prophecy see esp. Rupert Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York, NY, 1911); Sharon L. Jansen, *Political Protest and Prophecy under Henry VIII* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1991); Karen R. Moranski, ‘The Prophetic Merlini, Animal Symbolism, and the Development of Political Prophecy in Late Medieval England and Scotland’, *Arthuriana*, 8 (1998), 56–68; Tim Thornton,

of kings, shaped public perception of national politics, and landed people in prison (or worse). But the obscure political allusions and confusing textual history of most prophecies has kept the genre on the periphery of critical ken. Prophecies employed a polysemous symbology featuring animals, heraldic devices, abbreviations, and numerology to reenact or reconfigure key political events. Moreover, prophecies tended to be recycled and recombined from manuscript to manuscript and century to century, their symbolic imaginaries amplified, redacted, and updated in light of new developments in political and literary history. Most of the texts that appear alongside the *Piers Plowman* excerpts in Rawlinson C.813 have never been printed, carry no modern titles, and bear an undocumented relationship to similar earlier, contemporary, and later manuscript texts. From the perspective of the textual transmission of a late medieval bestseller, prophetic *Piers Plowman* may be something of a belated curiosity. But from the perspective of the late medieval and early modern traditions of political prophecy, prophetic *Piers Plowman* is one corner of a large and still incompletely mapped literary field.

The Rawlinson excerpts join a variety of other textual evidence suggesting the extent to which the expectations of political prophecy shaped the reception and circulation of *Piers Plowman* in the sixteenth century. The manuscript evidence remains less visible than the print evidence in modern scholarship but is in fact more extensive. Early in the century, *Piers Plowman* B appeared in Cambridge, University Library, Gg.4.31 as ‘The Prophecies of Piers Plowman’, complete with glosses and table of contents, including annotations and cross-references for, among others, the ‘two monks’ heads’ and ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passages.⁹ London, British Library, Sloane 2578 (mid sixteenth century) contains a combined freestanding excerpt of both of the same two passages, while British Library Additional 60577 contains a freestanding excerpt of the ‘two monks’ heads’ passage in an early sixteenth-century hand, followed by the tag ‘Quod piers plowman’.¹⁰ A late hand in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 814 annotated the ‘two monks’ heads’ passage with ‘Prouesie’.¹¹ A late hand in Cambridge, University Library, Ll.4.14 annotated the ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passage with ‘A prophecy agaynste y^e Relygyouse’.¹² Several other manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* B show late annotations at 6.321–31 and 10.322–35.¹³ A copy of the C text, British Library Additional

Prophecy, Politics, and the People in Early Modern England (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2006); and Morgan Kay, ‘Prophecy in Welsh Manuscripts’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 26/27 (2006/2007), 73–108.

⁹ Bryan P. Davis, ‘The Prophecies of *Piers Plowman* in Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.31’, *Journal of the Early Book Society*, 5 (2002), 15–36. See esp. 20 (‘two monks’ heads’) and 29 (‘Abbot of Abingdon’).

¹⁰ Sharon L. Jansen, ‘Politics, Protest, and a New *Piers Plowman* Fragment: The Voice of the Past in Tudor England’, *RES*, 40 (1989), 93–9; and Lawrence Warner, *The Myth of Piers Plowman: Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (Cambridge, 2014), 72–5.

¹¹ C. David Benson and Lynne Blanchfield, *The Manuscripts of ‘Piers Plowman’: The B Version* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1997), 190.

¹² Benson and Blanchfield, *Manuscripts*, 145.

¹³ Benson and Blanchfield, *Manuscripts*, 264 and 273.

35157, shows Sir Edward Ayscough's late sixteenth-century annotation, 'A prophycye.trulye fulfilled by Kinge henrye.the.viii.th', referring to the revised version of the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage (C.5.168-79).¹⁴ A late annotator of another C manuscript, British Library Additional 34779, added B.6.327-9 in the margin for insertion in the revised version of the 'two monks' heads' passage (C.8.341-52).¹⁵ The sixteenth-century antiquarian Stephan Batman added the 'two monks' heads' passage to one of his copies of *Piers Plowman*.¹⁶ A sixteenth-century annotator marked the 'two monks' heads' passage as 'pearcys Profacye' and noticed the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage as 'an other profycye of desoluyng of abayes' in British Library C.122.d.9, a copy of the second of the three 1550 printings of Robert Crowley's edition of *Piers Plowman*.¹⁷ Finally, later in Rawlinson C.813 itself there occurs an English rhyming poem, found in at least five copies in four manuscripts, which reworks both prophetic *Piers Plowman* passages.¹⁸

The most conspicuous responses to and presentations of *Piers Plowman* in the sixteenth century occurred later in the century, and in print. Yet in these cases, too, the genre of prophecy loomed large. In the preface to his edition, Crowley takes pains to dispute the authenticity and interpretation of two passages in *Piers Plowman* that might be construed as political prophecies ('And that which foloweth and geueth it the face of a prophycye is lyke to be a thinge added of some other man than the fyrste autour' and 'Loke not vpon this boke therfore, to talke of wonders paste or to come', STC 19906, ii'). The two passages worried over by Crowley are none other than the 'two monks' heads' and 'Abbot of Abingdon' prophecies. In the second printing of his edition, Crowley added a marginal note to the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage for good measure: 'This is no prophecy but a pronostication' (STC 19907a, xxxvi'). Significantly, Crowley titled his edition *The Vision of Pierce Plowman*, and later commentators would read the poem in this form as well as continuing to read manuscript copies. Crowley's desire to foreclose a political-apocalyptic interpretation of *Piers Plowman* may have partly motivated

14 Carl James Grindley, 'Reading *Piers Plowman* C-Text Annotations: Notes toward the Classification of Printed and Written Marginalia in Texts from the British Isles 1300-1641', in Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maide Hilmo (eds), *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower*, (Victoria, 2001), 73-141, 103.

15 *Piers Plowman*, ed. Russell and Kane, 182; and Robert Adams, review of '*Piers Plowman*': *A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C, and Z Versions*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, vol. 1 (London and New York, NY, 1995), in *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 10 (1996), 200-209, 203.

16 Simon Horobin, 'Stephan Batman and his Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*', *RES*, 62 (2011), 358-72, 361-5.

17 Sarah A. Kelen, *Langland's Early Modern Identities* (New York, NY, 2007), 34. On other annotations of prophecy in this copy see Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading 'Piers Plowman' and 'The Pilgrim's Progress': Reception and the Protestant Reader* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL, 1992), 149-53, and Jane Griffiths, 'Editorial Glossing and Reader Resistance in a Copy of Robert Crowley's *Piers Plowman*', in Carol M. Meale and Derek Pearsall (eds), *Makers and Users of Medieval Books: Essays in Honour of A. S. G. Edwards* (Cambridge, 2014), 202-13, 209-13.

18 Warner, *Myth*, 80-1 and n. 40.

him to produce his edition. In his *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Bryttanie* (1557–1559), John Bale notes that Langland ‘foretold many (things) prophetically, which we have seen fulfilled in our days [*propheticè plura prædixit, quæ nostris diebus impleri uidimus*]’ (STC 1296a, 474). In a passing mention of *Piers Plowman* in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham dubs Langland ‘a very true Prophet’ of the Reformation (STC 20519, 50). The unnamed author of the *Petition directed to Her Most Excellent Maiestie* (1591), sometimes identified as the pamphleteer Job Throckmorton, cites *Piers Plowman* as political prophecy: ‘*Piers Plowman* likewise wrote against the state of Bishops, and prophecied their fall in these wordes’, quoting B.15.553–6a (STC 1522a, 34). The alliterating poem *Dauy Dycars Dreame*, printed probably in the late 1540s, echoes the ‘two monks’ heads’ and ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passages.¹⁹ And George Gascoigne’s *Steele Glas* (1576) houses Davy the Diker in a long sequence of prophetic hypotheticals (‘when Dauie Diker diggs, and dallies not’, STC 11645, H.iii^v).²⁰

The manuscript evidence for a prophetic *Piers Plowman*, earlier overall than the print evidence, helps to illuminate the literary-cultural milieu in which Crowley’s edition could appear as an intervention. The appearance, reappearance, and recombination of the two *Piers Plowman* ‘prophecies’ is typical of the ways in which vernacular prophecies circulated and proliferated in late manuscript and early print culture. The Additional 60577 tag (‘Quod piers plowman’) and the BL C.122.d.9 annotation (‘pearcys Profacye’) supply the ‘two monks’ heads’ passage with the conventional paratextual apparatus of visionary political prophecies, which often bore attributions to such reputed prophets as Merlin, Thomas Becket, and Thomas of Erceldoune. Likewise, the title found in CUL Gg.4.31 (‘The Prophecies of Piers Plowman’) refers not to a poem called ‘*Piers Plowman*’ but to a prophet named ‘Piers Plowman’. In sum, the ‘two monks’ heads’ passage appeared within the text of *Piers Plowman* B (in CUL Gg.4.31 and elsewhere), as a marginal insertion (in Additional 34779 and Batman’s addition), by itself (in Additional 60577), and together with the ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passage as a free-standing text (in Rawlinson C.813 and Sloane 2578), an intertext (in *Dauy Dycars Dreame* and the rhyming prophecy found in Rawlinson C.813 and elsewhere), and an editorial problem (in Crowley’s preface). Such convolutions illustrate how genre expectations could detach prophetic set-pieces from larger literary contexts and reinscribe them in other contexts. In the sixteenth century, Piers the Plowman entered the pantheon of prophets, and *Piers Plowman* became the repository or vehicle of his prophetic visions.

The status of Rawlinson C.813 as a book of prophecies invites a programme of reading to which the *Piers Plowman* excerpts readily conform. These excerpts were clearly compiled and consumed as self-contained prophecies and not as ‘*Piers Plowman* B.6.321–31 + B.10.322–35’. The informal script, prose formatting,

19 Wendy Scase, ‘*Dauy Dycars Dreame* and Robert Crowley’s Prints of *Piers Plowman*’, *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 21 (2007), 171–98.

20 I thank Katie Little for this reference.

horizontal dividing line (before excerpt (2)), concluding ‘finis’, and *verbatim* repetition of the same text in the span of three folios typify late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century prophecy books. The Rawlinson excerpts are not so much a case of content overriding form as they are a case of one literary horizon of expectations superseding another. Like CUL Gg.4.31, Rawlinson C.813 presents ‘The Prophecies of Piers Plowman’. In Rawlinson C.813, however, the poem called *Piers Plowman* and the character named Piers Plowman have receded from view, and only the prophecies remain.

The textual form of the Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts lends further precision to this picture of detachment and reinscription. I have already noted the abundance of unique variants shared between both excerpts and found separately in each, especially in the ‘two monks’ heads’ portion of the excerpts—evidence of a variegated and eventful textual tradition. Beyond these unique variants, the excerpts’ closest textual affiliations are with other sixteenth-century witnesses. The most suggestive shared readings are ‘wether’ for 6.325 ‘wedres’ (elsewhere only in the first impression of Crowley’s edition and the Sloane 2578 excerpt), ‘davy’ for 6.330 ‘Dawe’ (elsewhere only in the second and third impressions of Crowley’s edition, Batman’s addition to his manuscript, and the Sloane 2578 excerpt), and ‘corrett/correcete’ for 10.322 ‘confesse’ and ‘non(n)es’ for 10.324 ‘Monyals’ (elsewhere only in the Sloane 2578 excerpt). Together, these variants reveal the limited pool of available manuscripts and/or the high degree of lateral contamination in the production of texts of *Piers Plowman* B in the sixteenth century.

The Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts most resemble the Sloane 2578 *Piers Plowman* excerpt, not only in combining the ‘two monks’ heads’ and ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passages, in that order, but also in more minute textual details, such as prose formatting, the omission of most of B.6.323, and a nonsensical reading beginning with ‘s-’ for 6.327 ‘sonne’. The inclusion of B.10.326–34 in the Rawlinson excerpts but not in the Sloane 2578 excerpt rules out the possibility that the Rawlinson excerpts were copied from Sloane 2578 directly, while errors and substitutions such as ‘ffynne’ for 6.324 ‘fyue’ (excerpt (1) only), ‘castell’ for 10.329 ‘catel’ (excerpt (1) only), and ‘hungerward’ for 6.322 ‘hunger hiderward’ (excerpt (2) only), not found in Sloane 2578, show that the Sloane 2578 excerpt was not copied from the Rawlinson excerpts, either. In light of their close similarities, however, the three texts probably descend from a common archetype. This possibility is supported by the distribution of unique error. As the preceding list demonstrates, the Rawlinson excerpts differ most from the Sloane 2578 excerpt in those lections in which they differ most from one another. The discovery of more conjoint texts of the ‘two monks’ heads’ and ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ prophecies could shed more light on the textual histories of the Rawlinson and Sloane 2578 excerpts.

The two books, Sloane 2578 and the second compilation in Rawlinson C.813, are more generally comparable.²¹ Both books are substantial collections of political

21 Sloane 2578 described by Sharon L. Jansen Jaech, ‘British Library MS Sloane 2578 and Popular Unrest in England, 1554–1556’, *Manuscripta*, 29 (1985), 30–41.

prophecies, though Sloane 2578 contains roughly twice as much material as the second compilation in Rawlinson C.813. Both books were produced in the middle of the sixteenth century. Sharon Jansen dates Sloane 2578 to 1554-1556 on the basis of evident allusions to political events of the reign of Mary I.²² The second compilation in Rawlinson C.813 has received scant codicological attention, but a date in the 1550s accords with prophecies for the years 1536, 1554, and 1565 on fols. 104v-8, for the year 1553 on fols. 153v-4, and for the years 1554-58 on fol. 162.²³

In addition to the *Piers Plowman* excerpts, the Rawlinson and Sloane collections share at least two other English verse prophecies: the aforementioned rhyming poem reworking both prophetic *Piers Plowman* passages, plus an alliterating cross-rhymed poem in quatrains that Jansen has discussed and printed as *The Marvels of Merlin*.²⁴ The latter is classifiable as Middle English due to its appearance in a manuscript of the late fifteenth century: London, British Library, Harley 2382. Taking the form of an animal prophecy, the *Marvels* begins in Harley 2382: 'Of al þe merveilis of Merlyn, how he makes his mone / take tent to his talkyng in tales wher he tellys / how a lyon shal be banshed & to Barwik gone'.²⁵ The *Marvels* also bridges the two compilations that now make up Rawlinson C.813, appearing among the final items of the first compilation and as the first item in the second compilation.²⁶ Such textual connections must be understood as more broadly indicative of literary affinities between Rawlinson C.813, Sloane 2578, and other similar books. By collecting textual evidence of a Middle English verse prophecy from sundry sources and thereby disclosing a largely unremarked literary archive, Jansen made an exception of the *Marvels* in the wider field of English political prophecy. Sloane 2578 and the second compilation in Rawlinson C.813 likely share more prophetic texts not yet bibliographically isolable.

Comparison to Sloane 2578 and other manuscripts containing the rhyming poem and the *Marvels of Merlin* underscores a second noteworthy feature of the Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts, in addition to their prophetic character: their Englishness. The second compilation in Rawlinson C.813, like the first, is overwhelmingly monolingual, favouring English over the other languages of early England. The textual form of the Rawlinson excerpts reflects this linguistic context. The excerpts omit both of the Latin prose quotations in the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage (10.327a and 10.333a) along with an English alliterative line

22 Jansen Jaech, 'British Library MS Sloane 2578', 31-2.

23 See Macray, *Catalogi Manuscriptorum*, vol. 2, 420, items 57.ii, 57.vi, and 57.viii. Cp. Jansen Jaech, "'Marvels'", 48: 'the bulk of [the second compilation in Rawlinson C.813] seems to have been copied around 1556'.

24 To Jansen Jaech, "'Marvels'", cp. Jansen, *Political Protest*, 91-7 (discussion and text) and 165-6 (handlist of manuscripts).

25 Quoted fr. Jansen Jaech, "'Marvels'", 60.

26 To Jansen Jaech, "'Marvels'", 43-4 (first compilation in Rawlinson C.813), 45-8 (Sloane 2578), and 48-9 (second compilation in Rawlinson C.813), cp. *Welles Anthology*, ed. Jansen and Jordan, 281-8 (first compilation in Rawlinson C.813).

introducing the second of these (10.333). The Latin woven into Langland's alliterative lines (10.325 '*Ad pristinum statum ire*' and 10.326 '*Beatus virres techyng*') proved less amenable to deletion. The inclusion of some Latin marks a contrast with surrounding texts in Rawlinson C.813, in which Latin is largely restricted to titles and 'finis'. French, the third major literary language of late medieval England, is as scarce in Rawlinson C.813 as in *Piers Plowman* itself.²⁷ Rawlinson C.813 witnesses the *Piers Plowman* passages rearticulated in a more narrowly vernacularized subgenre and a later moment in the shifting power dynamic between English, French, and Latin.

The connection with the *Marvels* suggests a third historical context for the Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts: the alliterative tradition. The *Marvels* and the excerpts exist on a metrical horizon of expectations that extends beyond the genre of prophecy to romances like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *exempla* like *Cleanness*, and allegorical dream visions like *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, as well as backwards in time to Old English and Early Middle English alliterative poetry. Excerpt (2) is immediately followed on fol. 142v by *NIMEV* 1967.8, an alliterative verse prophecy datable to the 1450s or 1460s on the basis of oblique allusions to the Wars of the Roses. The prose format of the Rawlinson excerpts and the omission of most of 6.323 and 10.327 notwithstanding, a contemporary reader of the manuscript could have perceived the alliteration and hemistich structure of the poetic text as readily as Crum did. Indeed, the Rawlinson scribe perceived these poetic structures (effectively, if not *per se*) and highlighted them through sporadic punctuation. Commas appear after the equivalent of 6.325, 6.327a, 10.323, 10.325, and 10.330 (excerpt (2) only); a *punctus elevatus* appears after the equivalent of 6.325a (excerpt (2) only); a virgule appears after 10.334 (excerpt (1) only); and a *punctus* appears after the equivalent of 10.330 (excerpt (1) only) and 10.334 (excerpt (2) only).

The metrical form of the late prophetic texts in Rawlinson C.813 is symptomatic of larger literary-historical trends. The two categories, metrical and generic, became increasingly intertwined over the course of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth. No fewer than six of the eight unrhymed alliterative poems datable after 1450 are political prophecies. Four of them survive because of their inclusion in the printed *Whole Prophecie of Scotland, &c.* (1603), issued to celebrate the accession of a Scottish king (James VI) to the English throne (as James I), a key prediction of medieval English political prophecies. These four poems appear in the *Whole Prophecie* as the *Prophecie of Beid*, *Prophecie of Bertlington*, *Prophecie of Waldhaue*, and *Prophecie of Gildas*, illustrating the tendency to ascribe prophetic texts to authoritative historical figures. The other two datably late alliterative prophecies, *NIMEV* 1967.8 and the *Ireland Prophecy*, appear in large fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuscript anthologies of prophecies and political

27 On Langland's occasional switches into French, see Ad Putter, 'Code-Switching in Langland, Chaucer and the *Gawain* Poet: Diglossia and Footing', in Herbert Schendl and Laura Wright (eds), *Code-Switching in Early English* (Berlin, 2011), 281-302.

writings.²⁸ The genre of these late alliterative poems and excerpts accounts in large part for their transmission and preservation. The Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts and the Rawlinson copies of the *Marvels of Merlin* and *NIMEV* 1967.8 express a post-1450 prosodic typecasting that thrust alliterative poetry and political prophecy toward the same literary-cultural margins.

In funnelling *Piers Plowman* through the conventions of political prophecy, the Rawlinson excerpts shed light on a significant moment in the reception history of an important alliterative poem. Through recent studies by Sarah Kelen, Wendy Scase, Lawrence Warner, and others, critical understanding of prophetic *Piers Plowman* has progressed considerably since 1989, when, in the pages of this journal, Jansen brought the Sloane 2578 excerpt to light as a ‘fragment from *Piers Plowman*’.²⁹ Writing before the other manuscript evidence for a prophetic *Piers Plowman* came to the attention of literary scholars, Jansen had little choice but to attribute the excerpt to an idiosyncratic reader of *Piers Plowman* B, who ‘carefully shaped a unique and timely political statement’.³⁰ In view of the variety of forms in which the ‘two monks’ heads’ and ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ passages are now known to have been available in sixteenth-century literary culture, including the precise textual form of the Sloane 2578 excerpt, it no longer seems necessary to posit such a reader. Recently, Warner has offered the first substantial discussion of the Additional 60577 *Piers Plowman* excerpt, positioning it alongside other textual evidence as an overlooked contribution to a literary archive.³¹ Warner’s literary-historical arguments about prophetic *Piers* paraphernalia have two strands, on both of which the Rawlinson excerpts bear directly. First, Warner argues that excerpts from *Piers Plowman* circulated widely outside the religio-political context that has always defined the poem’s sixteenth-century reception for later scholars: Protestant polemic. Second, Warner argues that the mode of circulation for the prophetic excerpts was oral and memorial. Pairing these arguments enables Warner to posit an ‘anti-intellectual [...] mode’ as ‘the predominant approach to Langland’s poem’ in the sixteenth century.³²

The Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts support Warner’s first argument, extending the documentary evidence on which it is based. The text of *Piers Plowman* circulated widely as prophecy and in prophecies in the sixteenth century, and often outside codicological or literary contexts that one would identify as

28 On the *Ireland Prophecy* see Eric Weiskott, ‘*The Ireland Prophecy: Text and Metrical Context*’, *Studies in Philology* (forthcoming). The two non-prophetic post-1450 (unrhymed) alliterative poems are William Dunbar’s *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* (c. 1500) and *Scottish Field* (1515–1547).

29 Jansen, ‘Politics, Protest’, 93. For later work on prophetic *Piers Plowman*, see the references *supra*, nn. 9–19.

30 Jansen, ‘Politics, Protest’, 95.

31 Warner, *Myth*, 72–86. An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Warner, ‘An Overlooked *Piers Plowman* Excerpt and the Oral Circulation of Non-Reformist Prophecy, c. 1520–55’, *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 21 (2007), 119–43.

32 Warner, *Myth*, 72.

Protestant or even reformist. To be sure, prophecies could be wielded as sectarian weapons. For example, Jansen characterizes the compiler of Sloane 2578 as a 'Protestant sympathizer' on the basis of the collection's generally deprecatory references to Mary I.³³ However, their obscure and flexible symbology meant that the prophecies moved across political lines with ease. Political ambiguity inheres in the genre. Thus *NIMEV* 1967.8, the alliterative verse prophecy that follows *Piers Plowman* excerpt (2) in Rawlinson C.813, alludes to fifteenth-century dynastic conflicts without telegraphing the poet's politics, just as it expresses anti-Saxon sentiment (a staple of the genre) without telegraphing the poet's nationality.

In these terms, C. David Benson and Lynne Blanchfield's passing comment that a prophetic *Piers Plowman* in the sixteenth century might have appealed 'especially to those who regarded the poem as standing in opposition to the established medieval Church' is not incorrect so much as it is aimed at the wrong critical category.³⁴ In the sixteenth century, the perception that *Piers Plowman* was prophetic transected religio-political affiliation. As Warner observes, the growing manuscript evidence for a prophetic *Piers Plowman* recontextualizes the oft-quoted comments in Crowley's preface about 'the face of a prophecye' and 'wonders paste or to come'. In rejecting the authenticity of the 'two monks' heads' passage and the political-prophetic power of the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage, Crowley was not expressing common knowledge about Langland's poem; he was seeking to neutralize common knowledge in order to clear space for new ways of reading *Piers Plowman*. Crowley was obviously familiar with prophetic *Piers Plowman* in manuscript. Indeed, on the basis of codicological and textual similarities, R. Carter Hailey has argued that Crowley consulted CUL Gg.4.31 in preparing his edition.³⁵ The standard narrative that takes Crowley to be typical of his moment in religious and literary history, articulated most influentially by John N. King, should now be read against the larger manuscript and print archive of sixteenth-century Langlandiana.³⁶ The publication of Crowley's edition remains 'the crucial event in *Piers Plowman* studies in the sixteenth century', but it now appears as a different kind of event.³⁷

If the Rawlinson excerpts support Warner's first argument, they tend to qualify his second. Warner's contention that the 'two monks' heads' and 'Abbot of Abingdon' prophecies circulated orally is based in the first instance on the textual

33 Jansen Jaech, 'Sloane 2578', 36.

34 Benson and Blanchfield, *Manuscripts*, 24.

35 R. Carter Hailey, 'Robert Crowley and the Editing of *Piers Plowman* (1550)', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 21 (2007), 143-70, 161-2.

36 John N. King, 'Robert Crowley's Editions of *Piers Plowman*: A Tudor Apocalypse', *Modern Philology*, 73 (1976), 342-52, and *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), 319-39. For qualifications of King's arguments see Hailey, 'Robert Crowley', and Larry Scanlon, 'Langland, Apocalypse and the Early Modern Editor', in Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (eds), *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), 51-73.

37 Anne Hudson, 'The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*', in John A. Alford (ed.), *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), 251-66, 260.

form of the Additional 60577 *Piers Plowman* excerpt. In this excerpt, B.6.325 substitutes for B.6.329, some other portions of the text are wholly rephrased, and no textual error is evident.³⁸ It is also possible, however, that the Additional 60577 writer was reproducing from memory a text he had seen on the page. Warner similarly attributes the Sloane 2578 excerpt to ‘memorial reconstruction’, but that passage shows signs of textual corruption: omission of 6.322–3 ‘hym faste. / He shal awake þoru3 water | wastours’ (eyeskip from 6.322 ‘hastep’, ‘faste’ to 6.323 ‘chaste’), nonsensical ‘same’ for 6.327 ‘sonne’ (minim confusion or incorrect expansion of a horizontal bar), and nonsensical ‘ryght’ for 6.328 ‘eizte’.³⁹ These are lapses of hand and eye, not of memory. The Sloane 2578 excerpt was conceivably ‘copied from memory [. . .] by the originator of the lines in an earlier exemplar’, which possibility Warner later entertains, but the Rawlinson excerpts establish that these two *Piers Plowman* passages were circulating, together, as an independent written text.⁴⁰ The addition of 6.327–9 in Additional 34779, not claimed as the product of oral transmission by Warner, shows nonsensical ‘drawe hi ye’ for 6.329 ‘wiþdrawe’. Batman’s addition to his manuscript of *Piers Plowman*, also not discussed in this context by Warner, shows correction of ‘eight’ to ‘hight’ at 6.328, probably imported from the third printing of Crowley’s edition or Owen Rogers’s 1561 reprint of Crowley.⁴¹ In a note to his addition, Batman refers the insertion to ‘the olde copp’.⁴² *Dauy Dycars Dreame* and the rhyming poem found in Rawlinson C.813 and elsewhere do little more than name-check Davy the Diker and/or the Abbot of Abingdon, so that it is difficult to know in what form, if any, their authors encountered the text of *Piers Plowman*.⁴³

The Rawlinson excerpts, too, show signs of textual transmission, e.g., ‘workmen men’ at B.6.321 (dittography; excerpt (1) only); nonsensical ‘so’ for 6.327 ‘sonne’ (omitting a horizontal bar for ‘n?’); omission of 6.330 ‘deye’ (eyeskip between 6.330 ‘dykere’ and a form of ‘die’, presumably in ‘dy-’); and ‘prystinium’ for 10.325 ‘pristinum’ (minim confusion; excerpt (1) only). To these one might add the evidence of cancellations: in excerpt (1), ‘abbot of ~~abbyngdon~~ abbot abbyngdon’ at 10.331 (eyeskip from ‘abbyngdon’ back to ‘abbot’); in excerpt (2), ‘yow ~~yo~~’ at 6.321 (dittography) and ‘h for evere’ at 10.331 (looking ahead to 10.332 ‘Haue’). The Rawlinson excerpts were copied from an exemplar. Indeed, I suggested above that the Rawlinson excerpts and the Sloane 2578 excerpt descend from a common archetype. To judge from the density of unique errors, these excerpts stand at

38 Warner, *Myth*, 74 and n. 9.

39 Warner, *Myth*, 80. Contrast Jansen, ‘Politics, Protest’, 94.

40 Warner, *Myth*, 81.

41 Horobin, ‘Stephan Batman’, 362–3.

42 Horobin, ‘Stephan Batman’, 361.

43 Scase, ‘*Dauy Dycars Dreame*’, 173, argues that ‘[t]he structure of the *Dreame* echoes the Dawe passage in *Piers*’, but the evidence she adduces (‘*Dauy Dycars Dreame* is structured as a series of thirteen “when” clauses which are completed by one climactic “then” clause’, 174) reflects the conventions of political prophecy more generally, as Scase acknowledges (174 n. 7).

several removes from the mainstream of the *Piers Plowman* textual tradition as this may be reconstructed from extant substantial copies of the poem.

In sum, then, Warner's argument for oral transmission does not clearly apply to any of the manifestations of prophetic *Piers Plowman*, while the case for copying from memory applies to the Additional 60577 excerpt only. This should not be surprising. Attempts to infer the existence of oral traditions from written texts necessarily imply a procedural paradox. The dichotomy that Warner draws between Crowley's preface and other sixteenth-century responses to the text of *Piers Plowman* is in this respect overstated. Neither the presentation of *Piers Plowman* as 'The Prophecies of Piers Plowman', nor the recording of remembered lines in Additional 60577, nor the inscription of *Piers Plowman* excerpts in two large prophecy books, nor the marginal annotation in Additional 34779, nor Batman's collation of a prophetic *Piers Plowman* passage from multiple written sources, nor the extension of the figures of Davy the Diker and the Abbot of Abingdon into new compositions can stand as 'anti-intellectual' foils to Crowley's editorial project and subsequent critical commentary from Bale, Puttenham, and the author of the *Petition directed to Her Most Excellent Maiestie*. Rather, all these texts delineate a continuum of literate responses to a shared perception about the genre of *Piers Plowman*.

Prophetic *Piers Plowman* was a sixteenth-century phenomenon, elaborated through the material, literary, and cultural forms of that century. At the same time, prophetic *Piers Plowman* names a poorly appreciated feature of *Piers Plowman* itself. Of the various kinds of prophecy written in late medieval England, political prophecy has seemed the least important for Langland's poetic project. Book-length studies treat Langland's entanglements with 'reformist apocalypticism', biblical prophecy, and 'imaginative prophecy', but not with the political prophecy that many early readers saw in the poem.⁴⁴ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton disposes of the subject with a single sentence: 'Langland seems to show little interest in the political prophecy of his day'.⁴⁵ The same cannot be said for his sixteenth-century readers and revisers. I conclude by exploring how modern criticism of the poem might take their perceptions more seriously.

The 'two monks' heads' set-piece concludes a longer passage following Piers Plowman's final reply to Hunger (B.6.292-331). Like the rest of this passage, the

44 Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism and Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1990), building on Morton Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1962); Theodore L. Steinberg, *'Piers Plowman' and Prophecy: An Approach to the C-Text* (New York, NY, 1991); and Ernest N. Kaulbach, *Imaginative Prophecy in the B-Text of Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1993).

45 Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism*, 2 and n. 3. Cp. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman*, 92: 'there is no evidence of any influence [of political prophecy] on him [Langland]'; and Richard K. Emmerson, "'Yernen to Rede Redels?": *Piers Plowman* and Prophecy', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 7 (1993), 27-76, 39: 'Langland shows little interest in the British tradition of secular and largely political prophecy associated with Merlin'. To the following discussion cp. Emmerson, "'Yernen to Rede Redels?'"', 38-41, and *'Piers Plowman': A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter, 2008, repr. 2010, repr. Liverpool, 2014), 36-7.

prophecy begins in the poem's habitual disembodied thinking voice, divorced from allegorical personifications or named characters. The third-person narration of 6.292-320 abruptly gives way to first-person admonition: 'Ac I warne yow workmen' (6.321). In this way, the 'two monks' heads' passage poses a problem of literary voice, of a kind found throughout *Piers Plowman*. Sixteenth-century readers solved this particular problem by attributing the passage to Piers the Plowman. As discussed above, such an attribution emerges from a generically oriented reading practice, in which named prophets authorize prophetic pronouncements.

Langland courts this reading practice: not only the vatic future tense of 6.323-31 and the 'when'/'then' structure of 6.327-31, including a putatively impossible hypothetical scenario (6.328a), but also the accounting of years (6.324) and the obscure reckoning of a date (6.328b) are distinguishing features of Middle English political prophecy. Compare *Thomas of Erceldoune's Prophecy*, found uniquely in London, British Library, Harley 2253 (c. 1330):

When man as mad a kyng of a capped man;
 When mon is levere othermones thyng then is owen;
 When Londyon ys forest, ant forest ys felde;
 [...]
 Whenne shal this be? Nouthur in thine tyme ne in myne.
 Ah comen and gon with-inne twenty wynter ant on.⁴⁶

(1-3; 17-18)

Thomas of Erceldoune's Prophecy resembles the 'two monks' heads' prophecy not only in its litany of *impossibilia* but also in its stipulation of a specific term ('with-inne twenty wynter ant on'). Or again, consider the *Second Scottish Prophecy* (late fourteenth to fifteenth century in three versions):

Quha sa doutis of this deid or denyis heiron,
 I do thame weill for to wit: the dait is deuysit.
 Tak þe forrest of midileird and marke be þe-self
 With four Crescentis closit to-gidder;
 Syne of the lyoun the langest se thow cheis,—
 Louse not þe lyones, lat hir lye still.
 Gif thou castis throw case þe cours of the heuin,
 Tak Sanct Androis croce thryse [...]
 Keip well thir teichementis as clerkis has tawld.
 This beginnis the dait, deme as thou lykis.
 Thou sall not ceis in þat seit assumit in the text.⁴⁷

(β.73-84)

A chronogram spells out 1480 in four groups of coded Roman numerals. All but the first represent heraldic devices: the earth ('midileird'), four crescent moons, a

46 Quoted fr. *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI, 1996).

47 Quoted fr. *When Rome is Removed into England*, ed. Reinhard Haferkorn (Leipzig, 1932).

lion, and three St Andrew's crosses (M + CCCC + L + XXX = 1480). Also reminiscent of the 'two monks' heads' prophecy are the disembodied first-person exhortation ('I do thame weill for to wit') and the inscribed second-person addressee ('the langest se thow cheis', 'deme as thou lykis').

Unlike these texts, *Piers Plowman* inhabits the genre of political prophecy only fitfully. Yet, in certain contexts, Langland was capable of extending an invitation to experience the poem in the hypothetical time of a political prophecy. In this, *Piers Plowman* resembles the alliterative poem often identified as its most proximal literary model, *Wynnere and Wastoure*. The *Wynnere* poet tours chivalric romance (1-3), social satire (4-9, 19-30), and political prophecy (10-18) before settling into dream vision and allegorical debate.⁴⁸

These three *comparanda* (*Thomas of Erceldoune's Prophecy*, the *Second Scottish Prophecy*, and *Wynnere and Wastoure*), along with the *Marvels of Merlin* and *NIMEV* 1967.8, help situate *Piers Plowman* more narrowly within a tradition of alliterative verse prophecy. Yet they also illustrate the ease with which genre conventions move across the boundaries of metrical traditions, even in the space of a single composition. Like *Piers Plowman*, *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *NIMEV* 1967.8 sustain the expectation of alliterative metrical patterning throughout. By contrast, the α version of the *Second Scottish Prophecy* features a long unrhymed section (16-84) bookended by end-rhymed sections in which the ear is invited to hear metrical isochrony (1-15 and 85-99); the β version contains only unrhymed lines; and the γ version, like the *Marvels*, contains only end-rhymed lines. *Thomas of Erceldoune's Prophecy*, though invariably lineated as verse by modern editors, does not adhere to the principles of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century alliterative metre as this may be reconstructed from extant poems.⁴⁹ Its status as a poem (rather than a prose list) is dubious. Increasingly after 1450, experience with texts like these primed readers to expect the conventions of political prophecy, especially but not exclusively in alliterative verse. *Piers Plowman* answered resoundingly, if intermittently, to such metrical-generic expectations.

The sixteenth-century reading of the 'two monks' heads' passage is a misreading, but it is an instructive one. Langland avoids placing exhortations like B.6.321-31 in the mouth of Piers the Plowman. Indeed, he attributes 6.327-31 to Saturn,

48 *Wynnere and Wastoure*, ed. Stephanie Trigg (EETS OS 297, 1990). On the poem's affiliations with political prophecy, see Victoria Flood, 'Wynnere and Wastoure and the Influence of Political Prophecy', *Chaucer Review*, 49 (2015), 427-48. On the genres of its opening, see Katharine Breen, 'The Need for Allegory: *Wynnere and Wastoure* as an *Ars Poetica*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 26 (2012), 187-229. On connections between *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman*, see esp. Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on 'Piers Plowman': Volume 1* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006), 10; Breen, 'Need for Allegory', 189-93; and J. A. Burrow, 'Winning and Wasting in *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman*', in *Makers and Users*, ed. Meale and Pearsall, 1-12.

49 For the principles of Middle English alliterative b-verse metre, see esp. Thomas Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA, 1991), 85-113. Early Middle English alliterative b-verse metre had been very similar: Nicolay Yakovlev, 'The Development of Alliterative Metre from Old to Middle English' (unpubl. diss., Univ. of Oxford, 2008), 188-265.

self-consciously marking the generic affinities of the passage, just as the *Wynnyere* poet attributes his prophecy to Solomon ('Forthi sayde was a sawe | of Salomon the wyse', 10). 'And so seiþ Saturne' (*Piers Plowman* B.6.326) introduces 6.327-31, rather than summarizing 6.321-5 as Kane and Donaldson's punctuation would have it (cp. 10.69). The internal attribution of 6.327-31 to Saturn subdivides the passage into two discourses, the second cited by the first. Sixteenth-century attributions of the 'two monks' heads' passage to Piers the Plowman must overlook the transition to indirect discourse at 6.292 as well as the attribution of 6.327-31 to Saturn. The attributions in the Additional 60577 tag ('Quod piers plowman') and the BL C.122.d.9 annotation ('pearcys Profacye') are best understood against the backdrop of the increasingly loquacious Piers Plowmans of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English writing, beginning with the titular interlocutor of the alliterative *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede* in the closing years of the fourteenth century.⁵⁰ In settling what Langland had left suspended, however, these sixteenth-century readings of the 'two monks' heads' passage grasp a central literary strategy in *Piers Plowman*: the solicitation of textual authority through the activation of generic conventions.

The 'Abbot of Abingdon' sequence makes a less obvious candidate for such attentions. This passage is assigned to a named allegorical personification (Clergy), and it lacks the more overt generic markers found in the 'two monks' heads' passage. The purport of the passage reaches backward and forward through the text of *Piers Plowman* B, as Ralph Hanna argues in a nimble exposition and historiographical critique.⁵¹ In presenting Dowel as a righteous champion, the 'Abbot of Abingdon' prophecy looks backward to the chivalric allegory of B.9.1-24 and forward to the detonation of the poem in B 19-20. Yet here, as in the 'two monks' heads' passage, Langland reaches toward political prophecy at a moment of eschatological clamour. One might note, most obviously, the future tense ('þer shal come a kyng', 10.322), but also a 'then' clause (10.331) and the second-person address, here specifically hailing the regular clergy ('yow Religiouses', 10.322). Clergy's self-reflexive chastisement, though of a piece with Langland's relentless examination of the grounds of institutional discourses, enhances the detachability of the passage. Parallel to the internal attribution of the 'two monks' heads' prophecy to Saturn is the internal attribution of the 'Abbot of Abingdon' prophecy to scripture (10.323 and 10.333). The second and longer of these tags disappears, along with its appurtenant Latin quotation (10.333a), in the Rawlinson excerpts and the Sloane 2578 excerpt.

The sixteenth-century reading of the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage as political prophecy is an even more striking misreading, but it is a misreading licensed, again, by the discursive texture of Langland's poetic thought. The omission of

50 See Hudson, 'Legacy', 255-63, and Lawrence Warner, 'Plowman Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Writings', in Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 2014), 198-213, 200-4.

51 Ralph Hanna, III, 'Reading Prophecy/Reading Piers', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 12 (1998), 153-7.

B.10.333-3a in the Rawlinson excerpts, discussed earlier as a simplification of Langland's interlingual poetics, also has the effect of suppressing Langland's self-conscious designation of the sequence as authoritative prophecy. Turned outward in this way, the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage could serve new purposes. In isolating 10.322-35 as 'A prophecy agaynste y^e Relygyouse' (in the words of the CUL L1.4.14 annotator), sixteenth-century readers again registered their recognition of the features of an explosively popular literary genre.

Langland's invitation to read *Piers Plowman* as political prophecy extends well beyond the two passages that most often attracted such a response in the sixteenth century. Consider a third passage, indexed as 'ye profecy off ye dome to come' in CUL Gg.4.31, noted in Bodley 814 with 'Pers dothe provesye', noted by a late hand as 'prophesiam de vj sunnis & a ship' in London, British Library, Additional 35287, and listed as one of the poem's prophecies by the annotator of BL C.122.d.9:

And er þis fortune falle fynde men shul þe worste
 By sixe sonnes and a ship and half a shef of Arwes;
 And þe myddel of a Moone shal make þe Iewes torne,
 And Sarzynes for þat sizte shul synge *Gloria in excelsis* &c,
 For Makometh and Mede myshappe shul þat tyme;
 For *Melius est bonum nomen quam diuicie multe*.⁵²

(B.3.325-30)

This passage comes at the end of Conscience's discourse on the 'two manere of Medes' (3.231); it is followed directly by Mede's incredulous "'I kan no latyn?'" (3.332). Here, as in the 'two monks' heads' and 'Abbot of Abingdon' passages, the trappings of political prophecy adorn a set-piece at the culmination of a discursive sequence. And as with the 'two monks' heads' passage, the attribution of a speaker for 3.325-30 within the allegorical debate of *Piers Plowman* did not prevent sixteenth-century readers from extrapolating the passage as an utterance of Piers the Plowman ('Pers dothe provesye'). In contrast to the other two passages, however, in 3.325-30 the obscure symbolism of political prophecy envelops an overtly apocalyptic prediction ('ye profecy off ye dome to come'). Langland's use of literary techniques from political prophecy here and elsewhere constitutes one strand of his attempts to fashion a literary discourse at the intersection of political, ethical, and religious practice. To a greater extent than is usually appreciated, Langland showed interest in the political prophecy of his day.

52 Davis, 'Prophecies', 28 (CUL Gg.4.31); Benson and Blanchfield, *Manuscripts*, 174 (Additional 35287) and 190 (Bodley 814); and Kelen, *Langland's Early Modern Identities*, 34-5 (British Library C.122.d.9). The BL C.122.d.9 annotator lists this passage as 'xxxvj lefe or vi sones & a shype & halfe a sheffe of ar' immediately before listing the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage as 'an other profycye'. The folio number refers to the 'two monks' heads' passage, but the line given is a form of B.3.326, probably by confusion following Crowley's comments about the C-text version of the 'two monks' heads' passage, which includes the somewhat similar new line C.8.348. A separate annotated listing of prophecies on the same page in this copy correctly refers the line to the 'xvi lefe': Johnson, *Reading*, 150. To the following discussion cp. Galloway, *Penn Commentary*, 368-9.

Such retrospective readings need not be thought to displace the contingencies of the histories of poetic genres. Undoubtedly, the prophetic *Piers Plowman* of the sixteenth century marks a contrast with the less central position of political prophecy in earlier centuries of literary production. For Langland as for the *Wynnere* poet, political prophecy was only one stop on the tour of genres. The earliest manuscript books containing the text of *Piers Plowman* never emphasize political prophecy to the extent that CUL Gg.4.31, Rawlinson C.813, and Sloane 2578 do.⁵³ Yet in exacerbating a minor trend in literary history, the prophetic *Piers Plowman* of the sixteenth century performs a valuable function of historical conservation. Prophetic *Piers Plowman* highlights one of the horizons of expectations that inform Langland's poem at the level of argument and thought.

The sixteenth-century response to the prophecies of *Piers Plowman* is also, effectively if not knowingly, a response to the poem's versional development. *Piers Plowman* A never makes such close contact with the genre of political prophecy. All the sixteenth-century reproductions of prophetic *Piers Plowman* represent the B text. B.3.325–30 and the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage are additions in B, while the 'two monks' heads' prophecy was expanded from A with the prophecy proper (B.6.327–31) added in B (A.7.302–307 = B.6.321–31).⁵⁴ All three passages are retained at full length in C (respectively, C.3.478–83, C.5.168–79, and C.8.341–52), though the 'Abbot of Abingdon' and 'two monks' heads' passages are somewhat subdued in C.⁵⁵ Crowley noticed the differences between the B and C versions of the 'two monks' heads' passage; these differences underlie his claim that the more insistently prophetic rendition of the embedded prophecy (B.6.327–31 as compared with C.8.346–52), 'which foloweth and geueth it the face of a prophecye', was spurious. However, the prophetic passages he worries over were presumably also a major part of what attracted Crowley to *Piers Plowman* B in the first place. The Rawlinson excerpts and the other evidence for a prophetic *Piers Plowman* show what it meant for passages like B.6.327–31 to have 'the face of a prophecye' c. 1550.

Political prophecy, then, is yet another vector through which *Piers Plowman* B played a central role in the poem's reception history. The prominence of the B version in constructions of a prophetic *Piers Plowman* may owe something to external factors, including the influence of Crowley's edition itself after 1550. Yet Langland's programme of revision and expansion, in which the poem's contacts with political prophecy were significantly expanded and then slightly

53 But note Richard Osborn's flourished red 'Prophecia' in San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 114 (early fifteenth century), beside, *inter alia*, B.3.325–30 (the prophecy mentioning sheaves of arrows) and C.5.168–79 (revised version of the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage): Benson and Blanchfield, *Manuscripts*, 233, and Noelle Phillips, 'Compilational Reading: Richard Osborn and Huntington Library MS HM 114', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 28 (2014), 65–104, 83 and n. 75.

54 References to *Piers Plowman* A are to *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, ed. George Kane (London, 1960, rev. edn 1988).

55 On the versional development of the 'Abbot of Abingdon' passage, see Hanna, III, 'Reading Prophecy', 154–5.

attenuated, must have contributed to the generically charged dissemination of the B text in the sixteenth century.

Political prophecy complements rather than displaces the other kinds of late medieval prophecy with which modern scholars have most often associated *Piers Plowman*. The lines between political prophecy, apocalypticism, biblical prophecy, and imaginative prophecy were fluid. Where political history and religious history intersected, for example, medieval writers could connect and combine political and biblical prophecy. In each of the passages discussed in this article, Langland avails himself of patterns of positive reinforcement between prophetic subgenres. Thus it must have seemed natural to Langland to cite scriptural precedent for the institutionally oriented predictions of the ‘Abbot of Abingdon’ set-piece.

Nonetheless, political prophecy remains a distinct strand within the larger tradition of medieval prophecy, and therefore it is a distinct strand of Langland’s generic allegiances. English political prophecy has its own intellectual lineage, leading back to Geoffrey of Monmouth rather than Joachim of Fiore or biblical prophets. It has its own literary conventions, inherited from Geoffrey’s *Prophetic Merlini* in his *Historia regum Britannie* (c. 1138) but continually embellished in the subsequent centuries. And it has its own manuscript tradition, as in sixteenth-century prophecy books like Sloane 2578 and the second compilation in Rawlinson C.813, as well as earlier collections like London, British Library, Cotton Roll II.23, a mid fifteenth-century compilation of political prophecies and administrative documents in English.⁵⁶ In comparison with the prophetic archives explored by Morton Bloomfield, Kerby-Fulton, and others, English political prophecy was decidedly local rather than international. Whereas apocalypticism and biblical prophecy tie Langland to broader socio-literary developments in late medieval Christendom, political prophecy anchors him and his audience in the British Isles.

The Rawlinson *Piers Plowman* excerpts add incrementally to the case for a prophetic *Piers Plowman* in the sixteenth century. They also indicate a richer codicological, generic, and metrical context for this period in the poem’s reception history. Research on this topic began in 1989 with Jansen’s seminal discovery in Sloane 2578 and has accelerated in recent years, refocusing questions of literary history, textual tradition, and the genres of *Piers Plowman*. Yet late prophecy books like Sloane 2578 and the second compilation in Rawlinson C.813 have barely begun to be trawled for their treasures. These volumes too often fall in between the research interests of self-identified medievalists and early modernists, or historians and literary critics. It appears very likely that more prophecies of *Piers Plowman* remain to be discovered in incompletely catalogued and understudied late manuscript anthologies.

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56 On Cotton Roll II.23 see Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1913), 358–68, and *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York, NY, 1959), xxix–xxx and 1474.