

# CHAUCER, *THE PLOWMAN'S TALE* AND REFORMATION PROPAGANDA: THE TESTIMONIES OF THOMAS GODFRAY AND *I PLAYNE PIERS*

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THAT most humble of Canterbury pilgrims, Chaucer's plowman, enjoys the unique distinction of having had two apocryphal tales fathered upon him. It is not difficult to understand something at least of how the first of these came about, for there are texts of Thomas Hoccleve's poem on the miracle of the Virgin and the Sleeveless Garment<sup>1</sup> both before and after it was furnished with its spurious "Prologue of the Ploughman" by which the poem was grafted on to the framework of the *Canterbury Tales*<sup>2</sup> in the Christ Church manuscript.<sup>3</sup> On this occasion the grafting operation may have been carried out on the initiative of an individual scribe or at the request of a particular patron. One thing is certain—having met the needs of the moment, the first *Plowman's Tale* was subsequently rewarded with oblivion. Such was not the case with the second *Plowman's Tale*. Fame and indeed notoriety characterized its subsequent life, yet just as its origins have not always been clear,<sup>4</sup> so too the circumstances attending its initial publication in printed form have defied satisfactory explanation. The only contemporary account of the poem's first appearance in print is that of Francis Thynne, which was written more than half a century after the events he claims to

<sup>1</sup> Included in *Hoccleve's Works, The Minor Poems in the Ashburnham MS.*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, *EETS*, ES. 73, 2 vols. (1925), ii. 16–19. See also Beverly Boyd, "Hoccleve's Miracle of the Virgin", *University of Texas Studies in English*, xxxv (1956), 116–22.

<sup>2</sup> See *A New Ploughman's Tale*, ed. A. Beatty, *Chaucer Society*, 2nd series, vol. xxxiv (1902).

<sup>3</sup> Manuscript described in *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. J. M. Manly, 8 vols. (Chicago, 1940), i. 85–91.

<sup>4</sup> See my "The Genesis of *The Plowman's Tale*", *Yearbook of English Studies* (M.H.R.A.), ii. (1972), 21–40.

be describing. Thynne's story,<sup>1</sup> correctly understood, is complicated, confused and inaccurate and has caused later scholars, summarising the story, to introduce complications, confusions and inaccuracies of their own. Common to all discussions has been a failure to associate the poem's initial publication with a calculated and official propagandist purpose. The present paper seeks to suggest such an association.

The second *Plowman's Tale* was first printed about 1536 by Thomas Godfray. Both the date and the printer are significant. The only extant copy of the Godfray text contains no indication as to its date of publication.<sup>2</sup> The original title-page is missing whilst the colophon merely identifies the printer. However, there is external evidence which argues in favour of a date of c. 1536 for the book, for there are clear indications that a curious anti-monastic poem called the *Pilgrim's Tale*,<sup>3</sup> written almost certainly between late 1536 and 1538, borrowed lines from the *Plowman's Tale*.<sup>4</sup> In the latter poem the Prologue describes the appearance of the plowman :

Our hoste behelde wele all about,  
And sawe this man was sunne ybrent ;  
He knewe well by his senced snoute,  
And by his clothes that were to-rent,  
He nas a man wont to walke about,  
He nas nat alway in cloystre ypent

(lines 17-22)

<sup>1</sup> *In Animaduersions vppon the Annotacions and Corrections of some imperfections of impressiones of Chaucers workes . . . reprinted in the yere of oure lorde 1598*, ed. G. H. Kingsley, *EETS*, OS. ix (1865). This edition was revised by F. J. Furnivall in 1875 and reprinted in 1965.

<sup>2</sup> This copy, unnoted in STC, is in the Henry Huntington Library in California. I have been able to examine a microfilm of the book.

<sup>3</sup> The most recent edition of *The Pilgrim's Tale* is that of R. A. Fraser, *The Court of Venus* (Durham, N.C., 1955), pp. 82-110. All line references in the present article are to F. J. Furnivall's edition in Francis Thynne's *Animaduersions*, *EETS*, OS. ix (1875), pp. 77 f. References to Captain Cobler (lines 447-8), otherwise Robert Melton, a leader of the October 1536 Lincolnshire rising, and to the famous Walsingham shrine (line 11) which was destroyed by Henry VIII in 1538 establish the terminal dates of composition for the poem. I intend to examine the poem more fully in a forthcoming article.

<sup>4</sup> All line references to the *Plowman's Tale* relate to the text established from the 1536 Godfray text, in my unpublished University of Birmingham doctoral dissertation (1969). A more accessible text is that edited by W. W. Skeat in the Supplementary volume to *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1894—Supplement, 1897).

Describing a monk in the *Pilgrim's Tale*, the poet notes that he was :

rownd visagyd, and sum-thing son-ybrent,  
he loked not as he were closter-pent

(lines 181-2)

Again, in the *Plowman's Tale*, the lines :

For I am wont to go to the plowe,  
And erne my meate yer that I dyne ;  
To sweate and swynke I make avowe

(lines 27-29)

find an obvious echo in the *Pilgrim's Tale* :

whan for there bred men vsed to swynk,  
and erne ther met or that they drynk

(lines 33-34)

One notes, too, a similarity between " I beseke god amend it for his grace " (*PilgT* line 348) and the refrain at the end of the stanzas in sections of the third part of the poem—notably " God amend it for his grace " (line 1316). When these verbal similarities are put together with the overall similarities of form and content between the two poems, there seems every reason to believe that the *Pilgrim's Tale* poet knew the *Plowman's Tale* when writing his own poem. Between the years 1536 and 1538 there were only two ways in which he could have known of the *Plowman's Tale*. He could have read it in manuscript or, surely more probable, in Godfray's edition. This being so, a date of c. 1535-6 for the Godfray volume seems likely, and this date would fit in with the dates attributed to other undated books which Godfray printed.<sup>1</sup>

At precisely this time the activities of the official Henrician propagandist organization were at their height.<sup>2</sup> The rationale behind these activities was clear enough. The king could and did take statutory measures to implement such policies as the

<sup>1</sup> A convenient list of Godfray's books arranged in order of projected date of publication is in P. G. Morison, *Index of Printers, Publishers and Booksellers in STC* (Charlottesville, Virg., 1950), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, F. Le Van Baumer, *The Early Tudor Theory of Kingship* (New Haven, Conn., 1940); W. G. Zeeveld, *Foundations of Tudor Policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948); A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York* (Oxford, 1959); J. K. McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics* (Oxford, 1965).

royal supremacy and the dissolution of the monasteries but legislation could be so much more effective if accompanied by a systematic attempt to prepare the country psychologically for all the changes taking place. So it was that energetic attempts were made to reinforce legislation by the constant output of justificatory and explanatory material—art and drama as well as printed books. The paintings of Girolamo da Treviso<sup>1</sup> and the plays of John Bale<sup>2</sup> were generated by just such considerations, but it was the printed word that represents the most lasting monument to the energy which went into the Henrician propaganda organization. The publication in 1536 of an abrasive Lollard poem like the *Plowman's Tale*, anti-papal, anti-curial, anti-monastic, anti-mendicant, anti-clerical and pro-royalist in sympathy,<sup>3</sup> a poem particularly well orchestrated to the ideological needs of the moment, is hardly likely to have incurred official displeasure. On the contrary it is exactly the sort of work which one could imagine receiving official encouragement and sponsorship. Indeed, it is possible to go beyond “imagining” official encouragement—it is possible to show it, by indicating the extent to which Thomas Godfray, the poem's first printer, was directly involved in the printing of Henrician propaganda.

There are several reasons for believing that Godfray was an integral part of the Henrician propagandist organization. To begin with, Godfray's association with the king's official printer Thomas Berthelet seems to have been very close. The two printers sometimes use the same title-page border. For instance, two books which have Godfray's name on the colophon—the 1532 Chaucer edition and *A treatyse of the donation gyuen vnto Syluester, pope of Rhome* (STC 5641)—both have the same title-page border as a succession of books, each bearing Berthelet's

<sup>1</sup> See P. Pouncey, “Girolamo da Treviso in the service of Henry VIII”, *Burlington Magazine*, xcv (1953), 208–11.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, see *King Johan*, ed. B. B. Adams (San Marino, Calif., 1969), and *Comedy concernyng Thre Lawes*, ed. M. M. A. Schroeer (Halle, 1882). More generally, see D. Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968) and Thora B. Blatt, *The Plays of John Bale* (Copenhagen, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> The nature of the poem, and the evidence in favour of an early fifteenth-century date of composition for most of it, are discussed in my “The Genesis of *The Plowman's Tale*” *ut cit.*

imprint, which were issued between 1530 and 1549. Similarly, Godfray's printed text of Giles Duwes's *An introductorie for to lerne Frenche* (STC 7377) uses a title-page border which can also be found in books attributed to Berthelet's press which were printed as late as 1541.<sup>1</sup> This strongly suggests that at some point the two printers had pooled their equipment and were working within the same establishment. Another reason for associating the activities of the two men is the recurrence, in books attributed to both printers, of the number 4 misprinted as ↵. There are several instances of this curious and distinctive error in Godfray's books—in *The Fountayne or well of lyfe* (STC 11211) alone there are twenty-two instances in Signature A. This same misprint can be found in the 1536 edition of *Dives and Pauper* (STC 19214) whose colophon declares it to have been printed "in aed. T. Berthelet" [in the house of Thomas Berthelet]. I have found no instance of this error in books printed by any other contemporary printer.

It is not just the evidence derived from the two men's printed books which argues for a close connection between them. In the Preface to his 1532 edition of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Berthelet refers to an edition of Chaucer (almost certainly the 1532 text printed for William Thynne by Godfray) as having been "nowe of late put forthe to gether [sic] in a fayre volume",<sup>2</sup> words which hardly read like an advertisement for a rival printer but which rather suggest Berthelet's involvement with that edition, or with Godfray, or with both. Lastly it is interesting to note the belief of the antiquary Leland, a contemporary of both printers, that the 1532 edition of Chaucer, assigned by the colophon to Godfray's press, was in fact printed by Berthelet.<sup>3</sup>

A closer look at the range of books printed by Godfray reinforces the impression that Godfray may have been employed by Berthelet as a supplementary official printer helping in the print-

<sup>1</sup> R. B. Mckerrow and F. S. Ferguson, *Title-page Borders used in England and Scotland 1485-1640* (1932 for 1931), pp. 13 f. (no. 16), and 16 f. (no. 19).

<sup>2</sup> *Confessio Amantis* (STC 12143), Sig. aa.iii<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See Eleanor P. Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual* (New York, 1908—reprinted 1933), p. 4 where Leland is quoted: "Vicit tamen Caxodunicam editionem Bertholetus noster opera Gulielmi Thynni."

ing of material specially prepared for the king's official printer but which Berthelet could not cope with unaided. The books which Godfray printed are not wholly controversial—mention has already been made of the 1532 Chaucer and a French textbook. Nevertheless many of them, at their differing intellectual levels, do relate directly to the polemics of the Reformation controversy. There are sophisticated and judicious prose pieces as well as coarse-grained verse tracts. There are controversial works written in England as well as continental works translated into English. There are works written during the Reformation<sup>1</sup> as well as works resurrected either from the recent past,<sup>2</sup> or like the *Plowman's Tale* from many years before. There are works which codify historical evidence in favour of the Henrician supremacy as well as works cataloguing current ecclesiastical abuses. There are works whose interest in responsible argument is anaesthetized by their delight in flamboyant invective. Yet this disparate material shares with the *Plowman's Tale* a central focus on values which are hostile to the papacy and favourable to the monarch.

This is immediately apparent in one of Godfray's earliest books—*An epystell unto Christofer bysshop of Basyle concernyng the forbedynge of eatynge of flesshe*—a translation by an officially sponsored scholar, Richard Taverner, of one of Erasmus's works. Many characteristic Erasmian emphases are reflected in the book. It places adherence to scripturally defined essentials of religious observance above obsessive concentration on fasting, clerical celibacy and observance of holy days, all of which are seen as post-scriptural accretions countenanced by the visible church through its ministers. Any work such as this which, however obliquely, sought to devalue the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy was of obvious value to Henry as he set about asserting monarchical rather than papal supremacy in England.

The most weighty and influential propagandist works printed

<sup>1</sup> Notably *A sermon preached at Poules Crosse, 1535* (STC 22575). The preacher was Robert Singleton, and the content strongly critical of the Roman Catholic church. See M. Maclure, *The Pauls Cross Sermons 1534–1642* (Toronto, 1958), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> W. Nelson, *John Skelton, Laureate* (New York, 1939—reprinted 1964), p. 228, note 25, refers to a copy of *Colyn Cloute* printed by Godfray which is not recorded in STC and which is in the library at Woburn Abbey.

by Godfray were three radical tracts written by Christopher St. German, all of which address themselves judiciously and fully to the question of the relative merits of royal and ecclesiastical authority within a state. These are works which seek to justify by reasoned argument rather than by bland assertion the authority and responsibilities vested in the king by *The Act of Supremacy* in 1534. The fullest statement of St. German's position may be found in *A treatyse concerninge the power of the clergye and the lawes of the realme* (STC 21588), which includes a formidable array of scriptural passages in support of the king's position, and which examines critically the biblical basis for the medieval "Two swords" theory of government, which had previously been used to substantiate the view that the king's authority derived from the church and not directly from God. St. German rejects this interpretation and asserts vigorously that the king's assumption of supremacy did not represent a departure from a previously existing situation, but was rather the confirmation of an authority which had been vested in monarchs since it had first been granted to them directly by God.

One section of the work—chapter seven—examines the conflicting and incompatible claims of, on the one hand, the laws of the realm and the king's authority and, on the other hand, the constitutions promulgated by the papal legates, Otho and Othobon. This theme is treated at greater length in St. German's *A treatise concerninge diuers of the constitucyons prouynciall and legantines* (STC 10084). The legantine claims are constantly shown to be erroneously based and unacceptable. A third work of St. German printed by Godfray was *An answeere to a letter* (STC 659), which is organized in the form of a series of lengthy replies to controversial issues and questions raised by a correspondent. The tract is notable for its statement about the position of the Pope—or as he was now to be known in England, the Bishop of Rome—as a result of the king's refusal to recognize his authority within the realm. The change in the Pope's title reflects precisely the change in attitude which had taken place. The Pope was no longer regarded as head of the Universal church; his authority was now not only limited to a particular geographical area, Rome, but also to just one part (the clergy) of the whole community of

Christian people who were now thought of as constituting the church of Christ.

*An answer*, however, does not deal exclusively with the royal supremacy. It has sections on, amongst other topics, saint worship, pardons and the exposition of scripture. Other controversial works printed by Godfray also range over a variety of issues, though in all of them there is some material pointing more or less directly towards the justification of the supremacy. Some of these works celebrate the demise of clerical power and abuse; others look forward to the time of that demise. Among the former category, Godfray printed *A dyalogue bitwene the playnttife and the defendaut* (STC 4370), a work which the colophon attributes to William Calverley, an unknown propagandist poet. In the poem the Defendaunt, representing Reason, explains the fall of clerical authority :

Fortune pulled hem nat from that place  
It is the scourge of god, for that they lacked grace  
(Sig. B.i<sup>v</sup>)

and the poem's attitudes towards Rome and the king are fully in accord with the Henrician cause. Speaking of Rome, the poet declares :

To lyght is come all thy iniquite  
Thy decrees sent forth in to euery countre  
Suche as agreed nat with Christes scripture  
Ar clene extyncke, no lenger may endure . . .  
Your hye prydes are now defaced  
(Sig. B.vi)

whilst in the course of a long eulogy to the king, the poet discusses the obedience due to the supreme head of the church :

Thy obeysaunce playnly, at a worde  
By god thou arte commaunded to owe in souerente  
Unto thy kynge, thy gouernour and thy lorde  
In payne of dedly synne, so he commaundeth the  
(Sig. B.vi<sup>v</sup>)

This is a poem of celebration written in a style and at an intellectual level more accessible to ordinary literate people than the weightier treatises of St. German which painstakingly explain and justify those positions which Calverley proclaims, without argument, as accomplished fact.



Of that other category of books which look forward to reform in the future—books which appeared in anticipation of official action—Godfray printed *The boke of marchauntes* (STC 3321), which attacks the clergy—those “subtyll foxes” (Sig. A.v), “graete [*sic*] mastiues” (Sig. A.viii), and “heuy wolues” (Sig. B.vi)—those whose custom it was to act like dishonest merchants dealing with spiritual goods. They sell that which they do not own and which they should not sell. Their every action is guided not by a concern for the spiritual welfare of the community but by an obsession with the acquisition of wealth. The writer has no doubt that the ordinary people who suffer from the variety of exactions imposed upon them by the church are in need of relief. They are :

so drowned, shorne and deuoured, and from their god,  
so farre set a syde, that it is nat possyble to beleue it.  
(Sig. A.vii<sup>v</sup>)

The final call is to the laity :

What you noble and vertuous princes, lordes and ladyes :  
why do ye nat loke on these marchauntes? And yet, nat  
withstanding, that by pride, that they will nat be visited :  
yet haue you, whether thei wyll or no, auctorite ouer them,  
and vnto you, it appertaineth to chastyse, to correcte,  
and to put downe the great excesse of suche theues.  
(Sig. C.i<sup>v</sup>)

With this sort of tract, the way for statutory legislation against the clergy was prepared.

The official action taken against the monasteries was also supported by specially printed tracts. Henry's reportedly favourable reception of Simon Fish's *A supplicacyon for the beggars* (STC 10883)<sup>1</sup> in 1529 makes the publication of Sir Francis Bigod's *A treatise concernynge impropriations of benefices* (STC 4240) not at all surprising. Though less radical than Fish's work, which demanded the abolition of all monasteries, Bigod's tract which Godfray printed nevertheless stresses the harm done to the spiritual life of a community as a result of the impropriation of so many benefices to monastic houses which did not, in return

<sup>1</sup> See J. Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. J. Pratt, 8 vols. (1870), iv. 656–8.

for revenues so gained, supply a cleric to minister to the communicants in the benefice. Though Bigod's attack is against the evils of these impropriations rather than against the evils of monasteries, and though his remedy envisages the removal of the system of excessive impropriations rather than the removal of the monasteries, the treatise as a whole adds significantly to the weight of criticism aimed at current monastic practice, criticism which must have been regarded officially as playing a worthwhile part in the psychological preparation of much of the country for the eventual abolition of the monasteries.

The extent to which the population, particularly the oppressed, could benefit from the complete redistribution of monastic wealth had been shown with the aid of some primitive statistics by Fish. The way in which the oppressed failed thus to benefit was a recurrent complaint of later writers such as the author of *I playne Piers which can not flatter* (STC 19903a), and Henry Brinkelow.<sup>1</sup> During the 1530s, however, hopes had not yet been destroyed and there was an attempt to provide a theoretical rationale for the notion of redistribution of monastic wealth. Much of this propagandist theory relates to the basic belief that so many of the abuses not just of the monasteries but within the church as a whole could be traced to the initial endowment of the church with temporal goods. There were those amongst the clergy who had been prepared to cite the story of the Donation of Constantine to Pope Sylvester as a justification for clerical ownership of property. This story had, however, been discredited during the fifteenth century and it was of great propaganda value to make available in print a concise summary of the evidence which had been brought against the story. So it was that Godfray printed *A treatyse of the donation gyuen vnto Syluester, pope of Rhome* (STC 5641) in which the evidence, particularly from the writings of Nicholas of Cusa and Lorenzo Valla, was set out.

It is clear, then, that the many-sided nature of Reformation propagandist printing is represented in Thomas Godfray's printed books. The content of these books, taken together with

<sup>1</sup> Brinkelow's works are discussed in A. B. Ferguson, *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance* (Durham, N.C., 1965), pp. 251-61.

the other evidence cited, strongly suggests that Godfray may justifiably be thought of as an official printer during the 1530s and that his works may be regarded as having enjoyed official favour and sponsorship. Thus the role of the *Plowman's Tale* as Reformation propaganda seems established.

Before works came to be printed by any of the official printers they had to be prepared for publication, and through the *Plowman's Tale* it is possible to glimpse something of what this preparation could involve. Analysing the anatomy of the second *Plowman's Tale* in the light of our knowledge of the first, and also in the light of Thomas Godfray's association with Berthelet, leads almost irresistibly to one conclusion: that the second tale was provided with its 52-line Prologue, in which the identity of the plowman narrator is established, by a member of the official propagandist organization, a member whom one can imagine feeling justifiably proud of the inspired stroke which ensured that the anonymous poem's doctrine was lent a cast of antiquity and hence respectability by its new association with England's most celebrated "antient" poet. Yet it has always been necessary to resist this "almost irresistible" conclusion. A putative Henrician interpolator could hardly be given credit for adding the Prologue until it could be decisively shown that at some stage the poem was in circulation *without* such a Prologue. Until now it has never been possible to demonstrate this conclusively.

Certainly the Prologue *seems* to be detachable from the main body of the poem. Its rhyme scheme differs from the predominant rhyme scheme elsewhere in the work, whilst the rhyming word *reproche* (line 51) in the sense of "to upbraid a person" is not recorded in the *NED* before 1513, a date which conflicts with the overwhelming evidence in favour of an early fifteenth-century date of composition for nearly all the remainder of the poem. Yet, if the Prologue seems to be detachable, the fact remains that there is no extant text of the poem, manuscript or printed, which does not include the Prologue. Our knowledge of the poem has thus been inextricably linked to its role as a Canterbury Tale—no evidence of the existence of the poem in a pre-Prologue state has ever been cited. However, it is now possible to show that at least one Reformation writer in England seems to have known the poem

in its pre-Prologue state, thereby suggesting that the contribution of the Henrician officials to the publication of the *Plowman's Tale* did indeed involve the conversion of an anonymous early fifteenth-century Lollard tract into a Canterbury Tale. The writer whose evidence is crucial is the author of the anonymous *I playne Piers* (STC 19903a).<sup>1</sup>

Amongst Reformation controversial tracts, *I playne Piers* is one of the most curious. It contains rather more specifically datable allusions to contemporary events than do many tracts of the period; the work is basically a poem yet was printed entirely as prose; most significantly it silently incorporates, as prose, extensive sections of the second *Plowman's Tale* as follows:

<i>I playne Piers</i>	<i>The Plowman's Tale</i>
Sig. E.iiii <sup>v</sup>	lines 573–9, 705–7
Sig. E.v	lines 709–16
Sig. E.v <sup>v</sup>	lines 285–6, 293–8, 525–6, 882
Sig. E.vi	lines 851–2
Sig. E.vi–vi <sup>v</sup>	lines 791–6
Sig. F.iv–iv <sup>v</sup>	lines 797–813

Why it should be that the writer fails to link Chaucer's name with the lines, or to indicate the source of the quotations is not immediately apparent. There is no doubt that the author of *I playne Piers* could have known the *Plowman's Tale* complete with its Prologue and hence could have known of the poem's alleged association with Chaucer. An analysis of the datable allusions in the prose tract confirms that at least two printed texts of the *Plowman's Tale* complete with Prologue—those of Thomas Godfray (c. 1536) and William Thynne, in his 1542 Chaucer text—were extant before *I playne Piers* was composed. In the prose tract there are references<sup>2</sup> to the executions of William Tyndale, 1536 (Sig. E.ii) and John Forest, 1538 (Sig. B.ii<sup>v</sup>); to the restoration (in 1536–7) of the seven sacraments after their previous

<sup>1</sup> The suggestion that the tract may have been written by William Roy is almost certainly untenable, Roy apparently having been executed in Portugal in 1531–2: see W. C. Hazlitt, *Hand-book to the Popular, Poetical and Dramatic Literature of Great Britain* (1867), p. 473; also Sir Thomas More, *Workes* (1557), p. 342, and John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, ed. J. Pratt, (1870), iv. 696.

<sup>2</sup> Details of the events referred to may be found in P. Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, 3 vols. (1952–4), and A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964).

reduction to three (Sig. C.i-i<sup>v</sup>) ; to the *Act of Six Articles*, 1539 (Sig. C.ii) ; to the enforced exile of Miles Coverdale, between 1540-8 (Sig. E.ii) ; to the imprisonment of printers (Sig. C.ii)—the eight who were imprisoned in 1543 for printing unlawful material may well be the ones referred to<sup>1</sup> ; to the burning of books at Paul's Cross (Sig. D.iiii-iiii<sup>v</sup>)—perhaps the September 1546 occasion.<sup>2</sup> There are also references to the presence of Cardinal Pole in Rome (Sig. E.i)—Pole was there between 1532 and 1553 ; and to the recantations of Nicholas Shaxton and William Crome in June 1546 (Sig. E.ii<sup>v</sup>-iii). The sum of these references points unmistakably to a date of composition after June 1546 but before Coverdale's return from exile in March 1548. Additionally the overall tone of the tract with its embittered resentment at the persecution of those reformers who were, in the writer's view, maintaining the true faith, and its equally unqualified hostility towards those who betrayed their faith by recantation, can be reasonably associated with the mood of a fervent reformer suffering in the more repressive religious atmosphere which characterized Henry's last years. Thus a date c. 1546-7 seems probable for the tract.

Writing at this time, then, the author *could* have known the *Plowman's Tale* in its Canterbury Tale format, but there is every reason to suppose that he did not. If he had associated the work with Chaucer, why is there no indication of that fact when he silently introduces the *Plowman's Tale* material? Few protestant propagandists of later years missed the opportunity of harnessing Chaucer's name and reputation to their cause as a result of their belief in his authorship of the *Plowman's Tale*.<sup>3</sup> It was well into the eighteenth century before this belief was seriously challenged,<sup>4</sup> and it is very hard to interpret the *I playne Piers* author's silence

<sup>1</sup> See J. F. Mozley, *Coverdale and his Bibles* (1953), pp. 284-5.

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Mozley, *op. cit.* pp. 287-8.

<sup>3</sup> Notably William Vaughan, *The Golden Fleece* (1626). See my article "Chaucer, Wyclif and the Court of Apollo", *English Language Notes*, x (1972), 15-20.

<sup>4</sup> First by John Dart in *Westmonasterium, or the History and Antiquities of the Abbey Church of St. Peter's, Westminster*, 2 vols. (1723), i. 86 f. ; more decisively by Thomas Tyrwhitt who in 1775 omitted the poem from his new edition of Chaucer.

as an indication that he entertained doubts as to the poem's authenticity. It is even harder to believe that the *I playne Piers* author felt that his quotations from the *Plowman's Tale* were so well known that identification of their source was unnecessary. The poem, in itself an underwhelming artistic achievement, could scarcely have become an unforgettable part of the English literary heritage in the decade or so since it was first printed. Hardest of all to believe is the idea that the writer, conscious of the poem's generally accepted Chaucerian attribution, would have deliberately suppressed such information thereby depriving his argument of the sustaining force of Chaucer's reputation.

It is much more likely, therefore, that an explanation for the author's apparent reticence lies in the particular text of the *Plowman's Tale* which he was using when selecting quotations for inclusion in his own tract. We have noted that all extant texts of the poem contain the Prologue. There is no evidence to suggest that any early printed edition has been lost. No one in possession of any early edition could have been in the slightest doubt that the poem belonged, or was intended by the Prologue's author to seem to belong, to the *Canterbury Tales*. Thus it seems almost certain that the author of *I playne Piers* did not read the *Plowman's Tale* in one of these editions but rather knew it in a version, presumably in manuscript, which presented him with propagandist material worth quoting in his own tract but which gave him no reason for associating the poem with Chaucer and hence every reason for introducing the material silently into his own work. In short, he must have known the *Plowman's Tale* in a version which did not contain a Prologue. Whether there were many texts of the poem in its pre-Prologue state is not known, but the strong possibility is that during the 1530s one such text was either discovered by an Henrician interpolator or was drawn to his attention and was subsequently, immediately prior to its being printed, furnished with the link Prologue. Perhaps indeed the idea of printing it was generated by its metamorphosis into a Canterbury Tale. It could have been another (or perhaps the same) pre-Prologue text which, several years later, fell into the hands of the *I playne Piers* author whilst he was preparing his own tract.

The evidence to be gleaned from *I playne Piers* offers a clue

about the pre-Prologue state of other parts of the *Plowman's Tale*. As a result of an influential article by Henry Bradley in 1902<sup>1</sup> it has generally been assumed that at least lines 717–1268 of the poem represent a sixteenth-century interpolation of a fourteenth century poem of which only a few fragments now remain. We have noted above, however, that several of the lines from the poem which are quoted in *I playne Piers* come from precisely this section of the poem. To reconcile Bradley's sixteenth-century interpolation theory with what we have come to understand about the existence of the poem in a pre-Prologue state is to strain credulity too far. It would be necessary to envisage *two* separate processes of interpolation in the sixteenth century before 1536. The first would have provided lines 717–1268. The text in this expanded form, without a Prologue, must then have been copied at least once so that the *I playne Piers* author would have had access to a text in this degree of completeness. On a second, subsequent occasion, the Prologue must then have been added. Such a sequence of events seems highly implausible. The greater likelihood, surely, is that such interpolations as were undertaken in the sixteenth century were carried out at one and the same time by the person or persons preparing the text for publication in printed form. A time lag between interpolations is very difficult to imagine, as is the idea that more than one interpolator was involved. It seems likely, then, that lines 717–1268 were part of the poem in its pre-Prologue state, and this view, generated by evidence from *I playne Piers* is confirmed by an analysis of the vocabulary, historical allusions and ideological impetus of the passage, all of which suggest that this section and nearly all the rest of the poem should be thought of as products of the early fifteenth century.

Yet if Henrician interpolators cannot claim credit for reorganising and expanding the middle of the *Plowman's Tale* there is one last indication in the text of the care which was taken by the king's officials in preparing the poem for the press. In addition to the Prologue, they seem to have added lines 205–28 to the poem as they found it. That the lines have been interpolated at some point is certain. Discussing clerical injustice and intolerance, the poet

<sup>1</sup> H. Bradley, "The *Plowman's Tale*", *The Athenaeum*, 12 July 1902, p. 62.

has identified the one authority to whom priests will submit :

All holyest they clepen her heed,  
That of her rule is regall . . .  
For all suche falshed woll foule fall

(lines 201-2, 204)

and he makes clear their indifference to the concept of obedience to Christ :

They ne clepen Christ but Sanctus Deus,  
And clepen her heed Sanctissimus ;  
They that suche a secte sewys,  
I trowe they taken hem amysse

(lines 229-32)

It will be noted that the first passage quoted suggests the two attitudes of the priests towards the papacy—obedience and, virtually, deification—whilst the second passage reiterates those values in juxtaposition with their attitudes to Christ. This is a neat and logical enough development, suggesting that the two passages ought to follow on directly from each other. In fact, they are separated by three stanzas none of which has the refrain—all last lines of stanzas ending in *fall*—common to other stanzas in Part One of the poem.

This discrepancy of refrains arouses suspicions as to the authenticity of the intervening three stanzas—suspicions which are confirmed by a closer examination of the stanzas themselves. In the lines leading up to and following on from these stanzas the main target for criticism is the priesthood. It is their claims for the Pope's authority which are condemned as outrageous. Suddenly, with the beginning of the three stanzas, the narrative focus changes and it is the Pope himself who is directly criticized. In these stanzas the criticism is directed onto that which the Pope himself *ordayneth* (line 213), *semeth* (line 221), *dampneth and saveth* (line 224) and *loveth* (line 205). Immediately after the three stanzas the focus reverts to the clergy and their failings—"They ne clepen Christ but Sanctus Deus" (line 229). The suddenness of the change from and return to the normal narrative focus argues strongly that the three stanzas have been interpolated. It is not difficult to see why. The interpolator stresses the relative powers on earth of spiritual and temporal rulers :



Her heed [the pope] loveth all honour,  
 And to be worshypped in worde and dede ;  
 Kynges mote to hem knele and coure

(lines 205-7)

Here is the spectacle of the nation's supreme head having to prostrate himself at the feet of ecclesiastical authority. Earlier in the poem the writer complains that :

Lordes mote to hem [the clergy] loute,  
 Obeyaunt to hir brode blessing

(lines 181-2)

but the interpolated stanzas set out this basic situation and confrontation in a much more extreme and, for the Henrician propagandist, topical form. It is not lords against priests : it is king against Pope and this increased particularity of reference is exactly what one would expect from an Henrician interpolator. The interpolator is not introducing a theme otherwise missing from the poem.<sup>1</sup> Rather is he anticipating a later emphasis and affording it earlier and greater prominence than it would otherwise have enjoyed. It looks very much as if the same interpolator who wrote the Prologue was moved by contemporary circumstances to insert at the first suitable opportunity (the first mention of the Pope in the poem) a more concentrated and urgent indictment of those same papal claims which were anathema to the original author of the *Plowman's Tale*. The interpolation tilts the ideological balance of the poem in a characteristically Henrician way.

We have seen, then, that the *Plowman's Tale* has to be set against two differing ideological backgrounds. A product of early fifteenth-century vernacular Lollard culture, the poem was resurrected in the sixteenth century by those anxious to emphasise both the historical continuity of the Henrician cause and the extent to which current abuses within the church also had an ancient pedigree. The rationale behind this is set out clearly in the Preface to *The prayer and complaynt of the Plowman unto Christ* (STC 20036), an early sixteenth-century anti-clerical polemic which claims (demonstrably falsely) to have been written

<sup>1</sup> See lines 693-700 at the end of the second section.

“ nat longe after ” 1300.<sup>1</sup> In the Preface the reader is assured that by reading the tract :

thou mayst se playnly that it is no newe thyng, but an old practyse of oure prelates lerned of their fathers the bysshops, pharyse sand prestes of the olde lawe to defame the doctrine of Christ with the name of newe lernynge, and the techers thereof with the name of new maisters.

(Sig. A.iii<sup>v</sup>)

and the promise is made that :

if here after there shall chaunce to come into my handes any more suche holy relyques . . . I shall spare nother labour nor cost to distrybute it in as many partes as I haue done this, by the helpe of god . . .

(Sig. A.iii<sup>v</sup>)

Such an assurance reflects exactly the practice of Henrician propagandists, as apparently exemplified in the case of the *Plowman's Tale*. It is not certain how that particular Lollard “ holy relyque ” came into their hands. Perhaps it was the result of searching libraries,<sup>2</sup> perhaps it came to light as a result of information supplied to the authorities by a member of a family or community in whose possession the poem may have been since the early days of Lollardy in England. It is known that two Lollards from Steeple Bumpstead—John Tyball and Thomas Hilles—journeyed to London in 1526 bringing with them “ certayne old bookes ” which they showed to the Cambridge Lutheran Dr. Robert Barnes. On this particular occasion Barnes was not interested—texts of the Wycliffite Bible translation clearly had a limited appeal for one who was labouring to publicize and sell the newer Tyndale translation.<sup>3</sup> It is not difficult, however, to imagine different circumstances when more serviceable old material, for example a strongly anti-clerical poem, would have met with a much more favourable reception in official circles when

<sup>1</sup> Both the title-page and Sig. A.iii<sup>v</sup> make the claim—the wish has clearly been father to the attempted deception.

<sup>2</sup> See J. J. Scarisbrick, “ Henry VIII and the Vatican Library ”, *Bibl. d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, xxiv (1962), 211–16. For evidence of Henry's interest in John Wyclif and Lollard ideology, see *Letters and Papers*, 22 Henry VIII (1530–1), Items 6546, 6656.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials* (Oxford, 1822), ii. 54–55.

its existence was revealed. In such a way, perhaps, an anonymous early fifteenth-century poem was brought to the attention of the Henrician publishers and given new life both as Reformation propaganda and, subsequently, as the most influential of all the poems in the Chaucer apocrypha. The evidence of both Thomas Godfray and *I playne Piers* enables us to glimpse a little more clearly the way in which this strange and elusive Lollard poem, written originally in support of one reforming cause, saw service in support of another.