Filling the Gap in *Piers Plowman* A:

Trinity College, Dublin, MS 213

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he surviving texts of *Piers Plowman* provide ample witness to the vagaries of scribal copying, to the absence of a clear sense among many early readers that there are distinct versions of the poems we call *Piers Plowman*, and to the depredations of time and use on the fifty-plus unique manuscriptsthat transmit those poems to us. The fragmentary nature of the extant record, the interrelations among those MSS, and the composition or conflation of versions all contribute to a fascinating picture-puzzle whose outlines appear clear but whose details remain uncertain. We *think* we have the photo on the cover of the box to guide us, but the pieces inside do not always fit together in the exact ways the ideal image suggests. Among other problematic features, in the surviving manuscripts are numerous and varied gaps, extending from a single word to lengthy passages that originally filled many pages. There are entire missing sections often, but not always, at the beginning or end of manuscripts. And there are sections of text dislocated as a result of physical events at various stages in the composition of the sewn manuscript: folios were, for instance, improperly arranged in the quires they constituted. We may hesitate to present arguments based on silence or absence, but we proceed at our peril if we ignore such gaps entirely.

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 213 (*olim* D.4.12) is witness to at least two substantial gaps: its second quire is missing (taking with it the end of its version of *Piers*), and its copy of *Piers* shows that at an earlier point in the transmission of the poem a bifolium was probably misplaced with the result that some 144 lines were moved, unnoticed, from Passus 7 to Passus 1. MS 213 is a late-fifteenth-century manuscript (hereafter cited by the *sigil* E, its more common form in modern *Piers* editions)[[2]](#footnote-2) that contains two works of Middle English produced in the hand of a single scribe: *Piers Plowman* and (one of the two surviving copies of) *The Wars of Alexander*. Both of these texts have been subjects of sustained interest to Hoyt N. Duggan: as the editor (with Thorlac Turville-Petre) of *The Wars of Alexander[[3]](#footnote-3)* and as the godfather of the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, he has had repeated occasions to look at and think about the MS whose gaps this essay studies. His efforts as co-editor of the forthcoming PPEA edition of E will ensure that he has occasion to look at the MS again—and again.

The more obvious of the gaps affecting *Piers* in E is the missing second quire of the MS, which contained the end of it’s A-version text, as well as the beginning of *Wars* (otherwise known, uniquely, from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 44). It is, of course, impossible to make incontrovertible claims about what exactly was the extent of a missing quire, since scribes or their supervisors were not always consistent in constructing these gatherings of bifolia. Nevertheless, we can advance plausible arguments about such matters. It is necessary, however, first to gain some sense of what might be the range of plausible arguments; so we will begin with a brief consideration of the variants that E shares with two other MSS of *Piers* A: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson Poetry 137 (Ra) and University College, Oxford, MS 45 (U). After this general introduction to the RaUE group, we can look more constructively at its major shared variant, the displaced lines of Passus 7. By examining their distinctive treatments of the results of this gap in Passus 7, we can gain some additional insight into the transmission of this important text of *Piers*, which may complicate the picture we have of the relations among its surviving manuscripts and the various shapes that the poem took in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The significant though subtle differences in how RaUE locate their displaced lines in the earlier portions of their texts complicate what has been more generally taken as a largely unproblematic situation. An investigation of the relations among the three MSS in their treatment of the displaced lines will illuminate the relations among these *Piers* MSS and provide the foundation for the (admittedly more speculative) conclusion that the missing second quire of E provides (silent) witness to its having at one time contained the so-called Passus 12. It is, arguably, a fourth MS of what we may term the A-plus version of *Piers Plowman*. The relation of this to our received texts of the poem deserves reconsideration, and such reconsideration could have more than passing effect on how we read the texts, and not merely the textual history, of the distinct poems we call *Piers Plowman*.

I

Among the MSS of *Piers*, the trio RaUE is distinguished by two quite dramatic variants: not only are they the three witnesses to the approximately 144 dislocated lines of Passus 7,[[4]](#footnote-4) they also are the unique witnesses to the striking variant in the very first line of the poem. Instead of the familiar “whanne softe was the sonne” supported by *all* other manuscripts and versions of *Piers*, their second half-line reads: “as I south wente” (with “whenne” for “as” in Ra). As Kane carefully details in his critical note about this rejected half-line, “The difficulty is to account for the rejected variant. Neither of these readings is likely to have given rise to the other. It is possible that *softe was the sonne*, which receives overwhelming manuscript support, is an author’s variant replacing an earlier form; equally, that it is a B/C reading that has almost completely ousted *I south wente*.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

But these are not the only variants that distinguish RaUE. That trio in fact stands near the top of Kane’s ranked list of “Variational Groups of Three Manuscripts,” and probably deserves attention on this ground alone. RaUE appears third, behind TChH2 and EAM, among those that he says “attract notice” in their “order of persistence:” the first (TChH2) Kane lists as evidencing “some 90 agreements”; the second (EAM) with “some 50” and the third (our RaUE) with “some 40.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He slightly understates the actual number of variants. If we limit ourselves to the 1500 or so lines of *Piers* common to RaU and the foreshortened E (i.e., Prologue to 7.44 and 7.70-213a) we will find that this trio matches *exactly* the number of agreements within those same lines listed for Kane’s *favored* variational group, TChH2. By my count, there are 52 shared variants in each group.[[7]](#footnote-7)

We ought not, perhaps, assign too much weight to the simple number of these correspondences, but their sum can at least alert us to something *like* the similar persistence of these variational groups *as* groups. In this regard, Kane’s practice of grouping the MSS looks, to the untrained eye at least, remarkably similar to the stemmas produced by Manly-Rickert and others of the Chicago School.[[8]](#footnote-8) Knott-Fowler and Kane chose the same MS T (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.14) as their base MS, and, despite their theoretical and methodological differences, produced editions that are in most substantive respects “very nearly the same.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Though he forcefully resists recension as a method, Kane, in his final, *quasi*-genetic listing of A Version MSS, associates RaU with the first of his most persistent trios: i.e., TChH2.[[10]](#footnote-10) Along with D, this constitutes a group of six, which he had earlier referred to as a “family,” or “tidy organization” of MSS: namely, {<[(TH2)Ch]D>RU}. This he characterized as “the most convincing piece of genealogical reconstruction authorized by the groupings of the A manuscripts.” Although he immediately qualified this “family” as “at best an imperfect description of the relationship of these manuscripts,” he does nevertheless appear to give particular weight to this group, in which he includes Ra and U.[[11]](#footnote-11) This marks a point, in fact, at which the fundamentally different methodological approaches of Kane and Knott-Fowler arrive at remarkably close agreement.

The remaining member of the RaUE group (i.e., E), however, Kane has already included in his second most persistent trio, EAM; and these, along with W and H3, he associates as his secondary group of A MSS, the quintet of (E)A(W)MH3. In other words, in Kane’s account, the highly persistent trio RaUE would appear to provide a bridge between these two larger groups of MSS. Knott-Fowler, for their part, had connected RaU to this latter group (i.e., T2[=E]AMH3) in their more numerous *y* branch of the stemma for the *Visio*, while for the *Vita* they connect it with the former group, TH2ChD (as Kane does). (Since E breaks off in Passus 7, it offers no information relevant to the stemma for the *Vita*.) In both editions, then, the affiliations of RaUE are quite important to establishing the critical text of *Piers* A, perhaps even more important than their subordinate role in those editions. The well-documented disagreements over method between the Chicago and London editions of *Piers* A should not obscure those points at which they were in substantive agreement. Nor should it prevent us from re-examining *both* of their groupings of MSS, in which the affiliations of E appear both connected to RaU locally, but disconnected in the larger groupings. A closer look at the major shared variant in RaUE—the displaced lines from Passus 7—will illuminate the complex relations among these witnesses to *Piers* A.

II

Since the first quire of E ends with 7.44 and, on the basis of the comparative evidence provided by Ra and U, it is unlikely that the displaced lines were repeated in their proper place, we are not in any position to comment on how the site of the gap in Passus 7 might have appeared in E. By looking at the lines where they do appear near the end of Passus 1, however, we can draw some conclusions about the nature of the displacement itself.

Kane’s note to A.1.180-3 gives a useful overview of the practical situation in the three MSS:

After I 179 R copies VII 70-213a and then carries on with I 180. After I 182 E copies VII 70-213a, but recopies I 180-82 before going on with 183. U inserts the misplaced passage after II 23, but returns thereafter to I 180, recopying I 180-3 and II 1-23.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In all three, the extent of the lines displaced from Passus 7 (70-213a) corresponds quite closely. What is clear from Kane’s note, however, is that the specific *location* of these consecutive sets of lines in the earlier part of the poem does not entirely correspond. The problem is how to describe accurately, and then explain, the differences.

Kane’s longer comment (in his description of Ra [R for him]) offers necessary further details:

Like E and U (cp. also the Pembroke fragment) it misplaces a passage of 145 lines (VII 70-213a), which are copied in Passus I after line 179, on fols. 5*b-*7*b*, and do not appear on fols. 24*b* ff., where they belong in the sequence of the poem. The dislocation did not take place in R, but in an unsewn ancestor, where the misplaced lines were copied on an inner fold of a quire containing 36 lines to the side, which fell out of place *as lance leueȝ of þe boke þat lepes in twynne*, and was later stuffed carelessly into the middle of the first quire. In R the last line of the dislocated passage, VII 213a, is followed immediately by I 180. In E and U there are signs of tinkering. In E, after the misplaced passage, three lines of the text which preceded it (I 180-2) are recopied. In U, where the misplaced passage follows II 23, the text returns to I 180 after VII 213a. Evidently a scribe in the tradition of E, having copied mechanically to the end of VII 213a, now perceived that something was amiss, and from his own manuscript or from comparison with another copy, gave Passus I at least a few lines of its own conclusion. The situation in U is harder to account for, but the return of U’s text to I 180 rather than II 24 at the end of the misplaced passage shows that, whatever the attempts at adjustment, the point of dislocation in a near antecedent, as in the case of E, was after I 179.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Kane’s attractive narrative account places Ra closer to the source of the original transposition of lines, but his resort to “tinkering” and “adjustment” to describe the situations in E and U does not get us much closer to the *actual* decisions that would plausibly account for the noticeable differences in each of those MSS. Without some more precise rationale we cannot hope to make clear sense of how, practically speaking, the three differing ways these lines are relocated. Elsewhere, Kane refers to the lines as suffering a “*similar dislocation*” or as being“*similarly misplaced*” and describes the point of relocation as “Passus I after line 179.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This is not, as a careful reading of his longer account quoted above would show, strictly speaking the case. Knott-Fowler more properly characterizes the location as “a position immediately preceding 1.180.”[[15]](#footnote-15) But this, too, while a slight improvement over “after line 179,” does not describe altogether accurately what the E and U actually show us: all three MSS in fact locate the displaced lines in quite markedly different places in their texts of the poem. And two of them (U and E) not only relocate lines from Passus 7, they also *repeat* lines from Passus 1 (and, in the case of U, also from Passus 2). There are distinct similarities in what these MSS have moved from Passus 7; but there are distinct, though subtle, *dis*similarities in where they move them. Could a more careful analysis of those differences throw useful light on the relations among these three MSS? We may ask whether reformulating the *description* of the situation offers a fresh, and better, insight into the sequence of events that led up to the current situation.

What Kane terms “tinkering” in E is rephrased as “cobbling” in his description of U: “The original point of dislocation in the U tradition was thus after 1.179 as in E and R, and the present character of the text in U here is the result of cobbling.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Now “tinkering” and “cobbling” do not sound like definitive terms of editorial art from the extremely careful Professor Kane. Rather, they sound like words that implicitly acknowledge his inability to provide a fully convincing explanation of the events that produced what we find in these two MSS. We may well sympathize with his desire to set these complicated issues to the side, which is where they have remained till the present. There may indeed have been “tinkering” and “cobbling” going on, and perhaps after further reflection we might be able to give some better account of what materials the scribes were tinkering *with*, and what sorts of cobbling they were actually engaged in. What follows, therefore, is some attempt to offer some details that might comprise such an account.

The case in Ra is relatively straightforward, and we have had no qualms about adopting Kane’s view that, somewhere in its line of transmission, a bifolium from the middle of a quire containing Passus 7 came loose and was “stuffed carelessly” into the middle of the first quire of the MS, thereby interrupting the original flow of text from line 179 of Passus 1 to lines 180-83. The lines of Passus 1 run as follows:

Loue ys þe leuyste þyng . þat oure lord askeþ

and eke þe redyeste gate . þat goþ in to heuene ; 179

…. [*inserted lines (~144) from Passus 7*] ….

For þy I seye as I sayde ere . by sent of þese tyxtes 180

whan alle tresoures are tryde . truþe is þe beste ;

now haue I told þe what truþe is . þat no tresour is betere

I may no longer lette . now loke þe oure lord . 183

**Passus secundus de visione**

Nothing, as far as we can tell, has been changed in the lines of Passus 1 on either side of the relocated lines, and Kane’s narrative provides a highly plausible explanation of how this occurred. An opening quire of *Piers* with four bifolia and containing an average of 36 lines per page would, in its middle opening, have line 179 on the bottom of fol. 4v and line 180 at the top of fol. 5r, and we can conceive of a loose bifolium of Passus 7 lines being physically placed in the middle. Of course, this is not literally what we have in Ra, so we have no smoking gun here. But the flow of text in Ra does suggest that this sensible hypothesis is probably not too far from the truth. It is a very attractive explanation.

We might even go so far as to say that it has perhaps been *too* attractive, that its apparent clarity has deflected attention from the much more complex cases evidenced by E and U. We do like simple and straightforward explanations, and we may well be seduced by the straightforward simplicity of this account for the case in Ra. But because the account makes eminent good sense, it leaves us to wonder how the more complicated situations in E and U could have derived from the conditions that produced Ra, if indeed it stands closest to the original displacement. The simple movement of a bifolium from Passus 7 to Passus 1 does not, finally, offer a satisfactory explanation for what is involved in the two more complicated cases. And even with relatively capacious terms like “tinkering” and “cobbling,” the cases in E and U cannot be lined up easily as derivations from Ra’s inferred ancestor. There was, no doubt, some substantial common event in the background of all three; otherwise their dislocated lines of Passus 7 would hardly have been more or less identical in extent. (We may leave aside the Pembroke fragment, whose displaced lines of Passus 7 (94-212) do *not* correspond with the lines (70-213a) in RaUE.) But the *differences* among the three MSS in their location of these lines at the end of Passus 1 (and in U of the first two-dozen lines of Passus 2) have not been accorded their due attention.

As we saw above, Kane locates the transposed lines “after line 179,” whereas Knott-Fowler says “immediately preceding 1.180.” Only in Ra, in fact, does this constitute a distinction without a difference: the lines from Passus 7 appear in Ra between lines 179 and 180. The same, however, is distinctly *not* the case with E and U. In those two, matters are more complicated, so that it is not quite accurate to say that the lines from Passus 7 were inserted *either* “after line 179” *or* “immediately preceding 1.180.” Attributing these differences to “tinkering” or “cobbling” falls short of describing, much less explaining, those differences. Only by pressing for more careful description of the differences can we hope to develop a plausible explanation for their sources—and to provide definition for what lies beneath Kane’s imprecise terms.

While all three MSS inscribe the equivalent four lines of the conclusion of Passus 1 *following* the displaced lines from 7 (and thus Knott-Fowler is more correct in saying “immediately preceding 1.180”), in two of them the displaced lines do not come “after line 179”: E begins the lines from Passus 7 after lines 180-82 of Passus 1 (which are then repeated later); and U’s insertion follows a passage that runs continuously (including 1.180-83) through 2.23 (all repeated later). Because of the repeated lines, neither of these cases, therefore, can be easily reconciled with Kane’s narrative of a misplaced bifolium, and this may explain his resorting to less than precise terms like “tinkering” and “cobbling.” Unlike the case in Ra, more complicated (and possibly quite distinct) actions occurred in (the tradition of) these two MSS, E and U. Moreover, neither scribe (any more than Thomas Tilot, the scribe of Ra)[[17]](#footnote-17) appears to have grasped that there was any difficulty with the continuity of their texts caused by the insertion of 144 “alien” lines. None of the three appears to have noticed anything unusual about the flow into or out of these lines. Nothing, furthermore, demonstrates that the scribes of E or U (or their exemplars or supervisors) were aware that they were also repeating lines from Passus 1 (and 2) that they had already copied. This suggests that at some point in the transmission of the text the last four lines of Passus 1 became firmly attached to the 144 lines from Passus 7.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In E, the repeated lines from the end of Passus 1 are quite close to those inscribed earlier, which might indeed support some individual “tinkering” on the part of this scribe or an ancestor. The differences are consistent with double transcription of the same exemplar:[[19]](#footnote-19)

For þi I say as I sayd ar be þe text*e* 180

When al tresores er tried trouth is þe best*e*

Now have I tald qwat trouth is no tresor bett*er*

…. [*inserted lines (~144) from Passus VII*] ….

For þi I say as I sayd ar be sight of þis text 180

When al tresors er tried trouth is þe best

Now have I tolde yow qwat trouth is no tresor bett*er*

I may no lang*er* lende nowe luke you owr lord.

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Aside from the few minor spelling variations, a few words are omitted from the earlier version: *sight* *of* (180) and *yow* (182) appear in the second. Two separate stints of copying from the same exemplar may have occurred. But while this may explain the *second* appearance of lines 180-82, it suggests that the displaced bifolium from Passus 7 was inserted after line 182, not after line 179. A minor point, no doubt, but worth some consideration.

One may be required at this point to imagine an alternative to Kane’s sequence which, inferentially at least, runs from Ra to E. Could a text like E’s have provided the source for Ra, rather than the reverse? Did, for example, somewhere in E’s line of transmission, a scribe note that the first three of the concluding four lines of Passus 1 had appeared earlier, and did he go back to mark those lines for deletion? There is no sign of any such cancellation in E itself, but if such a corrected text were Ra’s exemplar, then we would have a plausible “source” for his version, perhaps one that upon reflection might seem even more likely than Kane’s notion of E’s “tinkering” with a text like that in Ra. But while this alternative account may sound reasonable enough, it only finesses the major difficulty: what could account for the original form of E’s text, before the “correction” was made? If an ancestor or descendant or cousin of E rather than of Ra provided the earlier witness to the shift of Passus 7 lines, then the loose bifolium from the later passus would not be quite as neatly managed as it appears in Kane’s account of the case in Ra. How would a displaced bifolium (such as that hypothesized by Kane) have produced the *repetition* of three lines from the end of Passus 1 in two distinct places? In other words, even if we reverse the order of the relationship between Ra and E, we still need to explain how the version of E, with its three repeated lines from the end of Passus I, came into being.

What sort of displaced bifolium or species of “tinkering” produced the kind of situation we find in E, with its slightly variant versions of the three repeated lines from the end of Passus 1? One possibility suggests itself: that the misplaced bifolium from Passus 7 was inserted, not between 1ines 179 and 180, but between 182 and 183. This may offer a more plausible narrative, one that reverses the relationship between Ra and E. Faced with an unsatisfying ending to the passage and the passus with the single line “I may no lang*er* lende nowe luke you owr lord,” the scribe of E (or an ancestral MS in his branch of the family) recalled the nearly formulaic moralizing pair of lines repeated twice earlier (lines 123-24 and lines 180-81). Having located the most recent version at line 180, he reinscribed them and the line immediately following, which produced a passage that flowed naturally into the concluding line of Passus 1. This may indeed be the kind of scribal “adjustment” imagined by Kane: “At the end of the misplaced passage I 180-2 are recopied.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

A further step already mentioned above would remain necessary to bring us to Ra’s version of these lines: a later scribe/supervisor, noticing the exact repetition of the three lines, marked them for deletion in their initial appearance before the displaced lines from Passus VII, and from such a corrected copy Ra’s version derives. Does a better, more logical version of this sequence suggest itself? If not, then it is more likely that in E we have, despite its complicating repetition of lines from the end of Passus I, something closer to the original site of the displacement from Passus 7: the bifolium was inserted between lines 182 and 183, *not* 179 and 180. Placing E’s witness to the precise location of the displaced lines ahead of Ra’s may seem a minor advance (if it indeed *is* one), but in view of the uncertain (or contested) location of E in the groupings of MSS that guide our editorial judgments, this may prove a minor revision with rather more major consequences.

The case of U is even more difficult to account for, and its relations to either Ra or E are even more distant. Compared to the “cobbling” necessary to explain the text produced by U, however, the hypothetical reconstructions of the situations in E and Ra may seem relatively straightforward. Not only are U’s displaced lines inserted into Passus 2, after 23 of its lines are copied following the end of Passus 1 (concluded with lines 180-83), but its two versions of the repeated passage from the end of Passus 1 and beginning of Passus 2 are also quite noticeably distinct, and probably require us to posit two variant originals (or exemplars). These differences are considerably more striking than those we have seen in the treatment of the last lines of Passus 1 in Ra and E, and they make even more plausible that U (or an ancestor) was more actively editing what was before in its exemplars. The repeated lines from the end of Passus 1 in U are as follows:[[21]](#footnote-21)

þ*er* fore y seie as y seide er by sighte of þese textes 180

Whan alle tresours arn triede treuthe is þe beste

Now haue y told þe what treuthe is þ*at* no tresour is bet*er*e

I may no lengere duellen now loke þe our lord

**Passus secundus de visione**

…. [*23 lines of Passus 2, followed by the inserted lines (~144) from Passus 7*][[22]](#footnote-22)….

For þi y seie as yseide by sighte of þese textis 180

Whan alle tresoures arn tried treuthe is þe beste

Now haue tolde þe q*uod* treuthe is no tresoure bet*er*e

I mai no lengere duelle now loke þe our lord.

**Passus secundus de visione ○○○------○○○**[[23]](#footnote-23)

In order to appreciate the need for a second exemplar, we must also consider the differences in the two versions of the lines (1-23) repeated from Passus 2.[[24]](#footnote-24) While some of the variants may be explained in less dramatic terms, the sum of the differences strongly suggest that there were two different exemplars lying somewhere behind the texts of U here.

The textual situation in U thus requires a more complex narrative to detail what may be covered by Kane’s “cobbling.” It calls for not only a second strand of the textual tradition of *Piers* A, but also another misplaced bifolium (later than that involved in Ra and E) in the process of transmission to explain how U’s divergences from the other two MSS occurred.[[25]](#footnote-25) In any case, no amount of scribal cobbling *after* the fact could have produced *anticipatory* copying of a different version of the lines in U (or, for that matter, in E) that follow the dislocated lines of Passus 7. We certainly cannot explain U’s location of the lines from Passus 7 directly from what we see in Ra or E. A text like Ra’s or E’s simply could not have occasioned editorial “corrections” of the sort that produced U, and we must therefore conclude that U (or an ancestral MS) had an exemplar that looked significantly different from either Ra or E. In any event, the differences (from Ra) apparent in E and U clearly require us to find distinct, alternative explanations for each of them. Upon examination, their *dis*similarities are indeed more weighty than their similarities.

The hypothesis for a *single* displacement of a bifolium from Passus 7, which plausibly explains the situation with Ra and E, cannot explain the current state of U. We should, however, be hesitant to multiply the number of hypothesized loose bifolia from this (or any) section of the poem—even if the Pembroke Fragment were not another pretty clear instance that can probably be best explained in this fashion. Since its run of missing Passus 7 lines (94-212) is different from those displaced in RaUE, we apparently need to imagine *another* floating bifolium from approximately the same position in its exemplar. Even if such a multiplication of loose and misplaced bifolia did not completely blunt Occam’s razor, it would still leave us asking why is this particular Passus (7) is apparently the only one (as far as we know) to suffer this sort of (repeated and variant) displacement? It certainly is a very curious coincidence, which cries out for some explanation. That is not, however, a matter we can resolve here.

Our concern with the differences in the local treatment of the dislocated lines also raises a second set of questions that we must also postpone. Would a more sustained examination of the variants in the text of the transposed lines from Passus 7 reveal relations among the three MSS that may point us to underlying commonalities? Clarifying these may, in turn, point more clearly to the order of events that produced the current MSS. As helpful as Kane’s (and Schmidt’s) textual notes are, a full inventory of these variants will have to await the completion of the PPEA editions of all the A MSS. While we may not wish to depend on simple statistics, a preliminary survey identifies a few interesting features in what Kane would term “persistent” variants in the RaUE trio. I earlier referred to finding 52 such variants in the group, the same number Kane finds in the equivalent lines of the trio he places at the top of his list (TChH2). What is striking, however, is that 25% of those RaUE shared variants occur in the 145 lines of the dislocated lines from Passus 7. This, on average, is nearly one every 11 lines. But the dislocated passage is actually something less than 10% of the 1519 lines of *Piers* that show up in E. In other words, fully 25% of the agreements in variant readings in RaUE occur in a mere 9.5% of their shared lines. The three MSS are statistically more alike in these dislocated lines than elsewhere in their texts of the poem, a feature that has not, I believe, been noted previously. Does this weaken, or strengthen, RaUE’s claim to constitute an important persistent grouping? If these statistics may weaken the overall standing of the trio, they emphatically raise the importance of properly assessing the content (as well as the placement) of the dislocated lines.

There are, finally, some *other* variants in these three MSS (some perhaps shared with one or a few other witnesses) that might well be added to the number that Kane identified in his variational groups. Variants involving the constituent various pairs—RaE, RaU, and UE—and those in the quartet RaUED (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 323 (D) being part of a set with Ra and U that appears relatively high on Kane’s list) probably deserve fresh examination. Also, and despite the fact that it does not share the variant opening line of the Prologue or the displaced lines from Passus 7, at least one other MS probably needs to be examined alongside RaUE: New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ingilby MS M 818 (the “Ingilby MS,” what Kane characterizes as “the unattached manuscript J”[[26]](#footnote-26)). Since it, too, is a witness to Passus 12, and shares an impressive number of variants with U,[[27]](#footnote-27) its relations to all three of these MSS deserves to be very closely re-examined.

III

Because it is missing its original second quire, and consequently everything following Passus 7.44 (except for the dislocated lines discussed above), E does not provide us with all the relevant evidence, perhaps, that might have further illuminated discussion of the dislocated lines in Passus 7. This second gap in E offers its own interest and raises questions, to which we will now turn. George Kane’s note on the missing quire is worth quoting in detail:

The conclusion of *Piers Plowman* and the beginning of *Alexander* apparently occupied an original second quire. The size of this is not palæographically determinable. From the point, however, where *Piers Plowman* breaks off in E to the end of XI is about 1100 lines of which some 140 are already copied…; in E, as in R and U, these were probably not copied again. The 960 remaining lines of *Piers Plowman* VII-XI, with the 677 presumably missing from the beginning of *Alexander*, at an average of32 lines per side, would occupy 51 sides, very nearly a quire of 13 like the first in the manuscript. For genetic reasons … it is probable that the text of E continued originally to the end of XI, and that the loss of such a quire should be inferred.[[28]](#footnote-28)

This makes a useful starting point for what will prove a rather more optimistic view of what the “end” of *Piers* might have looked like in this MS. On the basis of what we have already seen in the relations between E and its cousins Ra and U, we may wish to invoke Kane’s “genetic reasons” to infer not only that “E continued originally to the end of XI,” but that it may have continued through Passus 12.

As Kane indicates, the first quire of E comprises thirteen bifolia (i.e., 52 pages) which contain its text of *Piers* A, from the beginning of its Prologue to line 44 of Passus 7. If we assume that E (like Ra and U) did not repeat the dislocated lines of Passus 7, the missing quire would have contained 7.45-69 and everything from 7.214 to the end. Kane’s note (above) has remained the final word on the lost ending to *Piers* in E. If we accept his plausible inference that the missing quire was like the first in the MS, could it have contained text that extended beyond the end of Passus 11? Could it have contained any, or even all, of Passus 12? Would thirteen bifolia have provided room for as many lines as are contained in Ra (113), as few as in U (19), or the middle number evidenced in J (89)? Or could it have included all 119 lines established in the modern editions of Knott-Fowler, Kane, and Schmidt?[[29]](#footnote-29)

In E, the text of *Wars* begins at line 678[[30]](#footnote-30) after the missing quire of E, and continues (with further gaps) through the remaining four quires of the MS. Since the first surviving quire containing *Wars* has the signature *c* on its first page (fol. 27r), we may safely infer that only a single quire *b* has been lost between it and the first quire of the MS. Likewise, since there is a catchword at bottom of the *verso* of its last folio (fol. 38), it is clear that this quire *c* is complete in its extant form, with six bifolia (24 pages). If we follow Kane in hypothesizing that the missing second quire of E was the same size as its first, i.e., a quire of 13 bifolia, we will be in a position to advance some further guesses about the extent of the text of *Piers* that such a quire would have contained. As we have seen above, Kane concludes that “the text of E continued originally to the end of XI.” However, a careful reconsideration of the work of the scribe of E does not exactly produce “an average for 32 lines per side,” which is what Kane’s count depends on. And that, of course, will have a bearing on whether the text of *Piers* in E ended with the conclusion to Passus 11.

The first quire of MS E contains just over 1500 lines (by my count, 1519 lines, including titles and blank lines), for an average just over 29 lines (29.2) per page in the 13 bifolia of this quire. If the lost second quire was of the same size as the first and averaged the same number of lines per page, then (if the count of 677 lines missing from the *Alexander* is correct) the text of *Piers* would have extended, *pace* Kane, no further than the mid-point of Passus 11: there would have been about 840 lines available for *Piers.* It would, however require about 980 lines to get to the end of Passus 11, and the number of lines available (at 29 lines per page) would bring us to about line 180, and these lines of the Dreamer, responding to Clergy’s welcoming inquiry about Wit and his wife Study (Kane’s lines 179-81 of Passus 11):

And I sei[d]e, ‘soþliche, þei sent me hider

To lere at ȝow dowel & and do-bet þereaftir,

And siþen aftirward to se sumwhat of dobest.’

While these lines might offer an attractive (if open) ending for the poem, it is unlikely that E’s version ended here: no other MS of *Piers* concludes at this point. So if the missing quire *b* were similar to the first quire, it could not have contained all of Passus 11. So what led Kane to choose “an average of 32 lines per page”? It is clearly *not* based on the scribe’s actual line-counts in his first quire. If we look more closely at the pages of the first quire, however, we find that its overall average of 29 lines per page is produced by pages that range from 27 to 31 lines: so, in fact, *none* of these pages achieves Kane’s “average.”

Kane clearly, therefore, did not derive his average from looking at the first quire. We have now seen what the first quire actually contains, but that surely did not provide the basis for Kane’s computation, nor does it constrain what the other quires of E, including the missing quire *b*,might have included. However, the other quires of the MS are even more irregular in their number of lines, an irregularity in part attributable to the fact that pages of this MS do not appear to have been ruled. On the evidence of his practice in the rest of the MS, this scribe’s average lines-per-page varies even more widely than the 27 to 31 in his first quire. Both Kane and Duggan/Turville-Petre affirm that the MS as a whole ranges from 27 to 34 lines per page, and this would make Kane’s estimation of “an average of 32 lines per page” a plausible if not statistically median/mean/average count. However, if we use that range, a lost second quire of 13 bifolia *could* have contained somewhere between 1404 (52 x 27) and 1768 (52 x 34) lines. And if the second quire contained the latter number of lines (1768) it would have provided enough space for 1091 (1768-677) lines of *Piers*: enough, in other words, not only for all of Passus 11, but also for most of the “complete” Passus 12 we find in Ra.

One might reasonably object, however, that making the *upper* extreme of the 27-34 lines range the *average* for the lost second quire would be an egregious case of special pleading. But it really is not, and here is why: although the editors of *Piers* A and of the *Wars of Alexander* both agree in saying that the E scribe’s pages vary between 27 and 34 lines, they are in fact incorrect in this. The actual range is significantly greater than that, namely between 27 and *as many as 38*. The count in the quires (*c*, *d*, *e*) that contain *Alexander* runs between 30 and 38; and the *average* throughout these three quires of *Alexander* is 35 lines per page. And so a quire the size of the first (26 folios), but averaging the number of lines-per-page (35) in the other three remaining quires, would have provided more than enough space (35 lines x 52 pages = 1820 lines) to contain the missing 677 lines of *Wars* and the complete Passus 12 of *Piers* (1096 lines). In fact, at this average, there would have been some 47 lines (i.e., 1820, minus 677, minus 1096) to spare. This would have left as much as 1⅓ pages unfilled by verse, which would have provided ample space for passus headings and an explicit for *Piers*, and any titles, headings, and incipit appropriate to *Wars*. On the basis of the extant evidence, then, and with these corrected line-counts, we can see that where this copy of *Piers* concluded must include the possibility that it was an early (now silent, fourth) witness to Passus 12.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In simple material terms, then, consistent with the overall practices of the scribe of E, we can speculate that *if* the missing second quire had been the same size as his first, it could have provided enough space to contain not only the missing portions of Passus 7 through 11 of *Piers* A, but also the lines of Passus 12, up to and including the 119 that are editorially derived from the three MSS in which any parts of that Passus actually survive: Ra, U, and J. Given the other close relations we have already seen between E and RaU we should take this admittedly speculative possibility into serious consideration. Whether E actually did contain Passus 12, or not, must remain an open question. But on the basis of the other textual correspondences between E and RaU, it appears altogether plausible that E was, before the loss of its second quire, another witness to the A-plus version of *Piers Plowman*.

Admittedly, the discussion of this physical gap in E rests on assumptions and speculations, as did the previous discussion of the displaced lines from Passus 7. Any conclusions derived from such speculations must remain tentative, and any attempt to draw out the implications of combining two such sets of conclusions may be criticized for passing into a scholarly Twilight Zone. Nevertheless, there is value to entertaining speculative arguments, if they call our attention back to details in the record that have been less than fully appreciated or carefully evaluated. Analyzing afresh the displaced lines of Passus 7 reveals that there are complications in their relocation in the earlier part of the poem that require more attention. The possibility that E’s version lies closer than Ra’s (or U’s) to the original displacement enhances the need for further reflection on the shape of E’s text of *Piers Plowman*. If it arguably could have included Passus 12, then a fuller, more precise understanding of E’s place among the surviving MSS of *Piers* A should become a high priority for editors of this version of the poem. As we suggested earlier, this MS plays a key role in bridging the gap between two striking groupings of *Piers* A manuscripts: RaUE and (E)A(W)MH3. The arguments put forward, however tentatively, here can only enhance its importance in the family of *Piers* MSS.

One corollary of any such analysis is that it would make the situation of Kane’s “unattached manuscript J” even more decidedly anomalous. And while we are suggesting anomalies, perhaps a fresh look at the Vernon MS (V) would also be in order. As Kane noted, its missing folio 402 “could have held 320 lines, that is the 135-40 lines needed to finish Passus XI and at least 180 more. It could thus have accommodated the 117 lines of Passus XII as well as a beginning for the next item, *Joseph of Arimathea*. But since the Vernon text of the alliterative life of Joseph appears to be unique there is no way of determining how much of fol. 402 was originally occupied by *Piers Plowman*.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The uncertain extent of the gap in this MS makes it worth considering whether it may be another potential member of the RaUE (and J) team: did the missing final folio of *Piers* A in what may be its earliest surviving witness also provide, as Kane noted, enough space to contain all of Passus 12?

There is no inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the facts and speculations about the various gaps in *Piers* A we have been examining here. If, however, we can accept that E may have also contained the continuation of *Piers* A in Passus 12, then the time is ripe for us to revisit the status of that ending to the poem—and also that of the anomalous first line of the Prologue in RaUE. To repeat what George Kane said about “whanne softe was the sunne”: “[i]t is possible … *equally* that it is a B/C reading which has almost completely ousted *I south wente*.”[[33]](#footnote-33) His “equally” has not been accorded the weight it deserves. Perhaps, while we are reflecting on that adverb, we might ask whether a similar case could be made for the variant ending of the poem: could Passus 12 (in whole or great part) also have been “almost completely ousted” from the text of *Piers* A? Schmidt’s parallel-text edition arguably implies as much, by reserving the designation “Appendix” (which Knott-Fowler and Kane accorded to all of Passus 12) for the concluding nineteen lines of the passus, the so-called “Johan But” passage.[[34]](#footnote-34) Reopening the case of E’s dislocation of the lines from Passus 7, and recalibrating the relations between E and Ra (and U) that result from that, allow us to ask what exactly constitutes the text of *Piers* A—from its beginning to its end. Since there is little sign that the scribes of RaUE even *noticed* that they were copying lines had been awkwardly displaced from Passus 7, that obliviousness itself may even lend additional weight to their anomalous variants at the beginning and end of their versions of *Piers*.

The conclusion (however speculative) that E, which has such striking connections with Ra and U, may also have shared their witness to the so-called Passus 12 of the A-plus version of *Piers* should be factored into future discussions attending the critical edition of the A Version that will be produced by the PPEA editors. Even silent witnesses can have significant bearing on the outcome of contested cases. If this study has reopened the question of *which* MSS of *Piers* A should be accorded priority in such an edition, it will have accomplished more than it was expected to do when it was begun. The unique features of the RaUE trio should not be set aside simply because they areunique. Indeed, they may require even more careful consideration for this reason. The manifold gaps in our knowledge of the shape and substance of *Piers* A and of the relations among the surviving MSS should require that more of our attention be given to the treatment of the gaps *within* the three important MSS we have been examining here. The anomalies in how they manage the dislocated lines from Passus 7 alert us, particularly, to the genuine individuality in their treatment of the texts they produce. A clearer understanding of the diversity in what they were facing and how they were each responding to their particular exemplar(s) will be needed before we can make any final determination about the position of these MSS in the development of the text of *Piers* A. Further attention to matters we have raised here (and no doubt others) will be required.

From the variant in the second half of the first line of their Prologue text to the addition of Passus 12 in the evolution of the poems we call *Piers Plowman*, there are substantive reasons for investing further attention to what we actually have in these three MSS. The complex relations among the trio RaUE in where they place their shared dislocated lines from Passus 7 provide a feasible starting point for reimagining the relations among all three, as well as assessing their status as witnesses to one branch of *Piers Plowman*. Whether they provide grounds for reconsidering the underlying text of the A version (or of an A-*plus* version) of the poem will depend on more sustained study than we have been able to offer here. The scholar-editor whom this collection honors may be one person who can provide the necessary deeper thought to guide us to the next station in our journey.

1. Earlier parts of this paper were delivered *viva voce* in Professor Duggan’s presence: at workshops of the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* (PPEA), at the University of Virginia, on 31 July 2005, and at Loyola Marymount University, on 31 May 2009; and at the 4th International Conference for the Study of *Piers Plowman*, at the University of Pennsylvania, on 19 May 2007. The author thanks colleagues for their comments on those occasions, and especially thanks the editors of this volume and Tom Prendergast for their thoughtful comments on subsequent drafts of the composite article. He also gratefully acknowledges the help of Pamela Troyer in refining details of his account of MS U, which she is editing for PPEA. Throughout this essay I quote directly from of the A-text MSS under study; for MS Ra I draw upon my transcriptions from the MS itself, and in the case of U and E, my transcriptions are from the images of the MSS contained in the David C. Fowler archives at the University of Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. So established by George Kane’s magisterial edition, *The A-Version*. The sigil E is alsoemployed by the editors of the PPEA and by A.V.C. Schmidt in his *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, 2 vols. (New York, 1995 and Kalamazoo, 2008). An earlier sigil (T2) was favored by Thomas A. Knott and David C. Fowler, eds., *Piers the Plowman: A Critical Edition of the A-Version* (Baltimore, 1952). My citation of line numbers from *Piers* A corresponds to those in Kane’s edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. EETS, ss 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 144 is the count of lines in Ra; the displaced lines in E (also numbering 144) repeat three lines from the end of Passus 1 (in addition, it repeats the heading to Passus 2); the number of lines following 2.23 in U is 167, and includes the last 4 lines of Passus 1, along with the heading and first 22 lines of Passus 2 (line 11 omitted). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kane*, The A-Version*, p. 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The A-Version*, pp. 85-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A full accounting must await the completion of the PPEA editions of the A MSS, a project that is well begun and which will allow us to have a complete inventory of the variants, some of which were not noted as such by Kane. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, 1940). See Kane, *The A-Version,* pp. 53ff., for his characterization of this approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As noted by David C. Fowler in his review of Kane’s edition: *Modern Philology*, 58 (1961): 212-14, at p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The A-Version*, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *The A-Version*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *The A-Version,* p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *The A-Version*, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *The A-Version*, pp. 87, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Knott-Fowler, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *The A-Version*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Simon Horobin, “The Scribe of Rawlinson Poetry 137 and the Copying and Circulation of *Piers Plowman*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2005): 3-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Michael Calabrese has called my attention to a not-dissimilar dislocation in the B version contained in Huntington Library, MS 128. The issue is succinctly described in KD, p. 10, n. 64. For a recent discussion, see the section “Dislocation of text” in the Introduction to *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, vol. 6: San Marino, Huntington Library MS 128 (Hm and Hm2)*, ed. Michael Calabrese, Hoyt N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre, SEENET, Series A.9 (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. From fols. 6r and 8v, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *The A-Version*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. From fols. 5v and 7v, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It should probably be noted that both Ra and U omit the following two lines (24, 25) of Passus 2. Whether this has any substantive connection with the relocated lines of Passus 7 is unclear, but the coincidence is striking. The second copying in E of 2.23 after 2.26 may also be worth further thought. They all suggest that something irregular is occurring in the vicinity of 2.23, which may be connected to U’s relocation of the lines from Passus 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Aside from the opening words of 1.180 (“þ*er* fore,” “For þi”) and, perhaps, the “what”/“quod” variant in 1.182, there may be little here to suggest two different exemplars for these lines. (The editors of this collection have suggested to me that this may be indicative of memorial reinscription of these lines.) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The following variants in these lines (in addition to a number of minor spelling variations) should be noted:

    |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- |
    | **Line** | **1st (fols. 5v-6r)** | **2nd (fols. 7v-8r)** |
    | 2.1 | cride | praide |
    | 2.3 | blisful | blisside |
    | 2.5 | þei stonde | he standes |
    | 2.7 | my | þe |
    | 2.8 | And I was; atired | And was; clothid |
    | 2.9 | p*ur*filed | I purfiled |
    | 2.10 | Corowned | I corowned |
    | 2.16 | ful | wol |
    | 2.19 | noght | noght be |
    | 2.20 | *line omitted* (also from E) | *present* |
    | 2.21 | to ben | be |
    | 2.22 | mad | ymad |

    The variants in neither column line up neatly with E, or with Ra, or with Kane (the variant closest to his reading is underlined). Likewise, the variants *not* selected by Kane also do not regularly align with those of any other MS. The reading *atired* (2.8) is unique to U at this point (but it is the universal reading at the end of 2.15). Knott-Fowler, and Schmidt, elect *blisful* at 2.3, their only substantive variation from Kane among the readings cited here.

    In this context, we should probably note that both Ra and U omit the following two lines (24, 25) of Passus 2. Whether this has any connection with the relocated lines of Passus 7 is unclear, but the coincidence is striking. And E’s second copying of 2.23 (after 2.26) may also call for further comment. In sum, however, they all suggest that something unusual is occurring in the vicinity of 2.23, which may be connected in some manner to U’s relocation of the lines from Passus 7 to that position in his text. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In order to contain the 167 lines (i.e., the last four lines of Passus I, the title and first 22 (2.11 omitted) from Passus 2, and its 140 lines from Passus 7 in the repeated section in U, this bifolium would require an average of 42 lines per page (similar, that is to a MS like T, or W). In order to account for the version in U the relocated (and repeated) lines in U of Passus 7 need to be expanded to include (before or after them) the repeated lines from Passus 1 and 2. The hypothetical bifolium containing these lines would then be inserted after 2.23 (or perhaps, alternatively, after 1.179). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *The A-Version*, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *The A-Version*, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *The A-Version*, p. 4, n. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Or Skeat’s 107 lines. He excluded from his edition the last twelve lines “added by one John But:” *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1886) II, p. 165). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The numeration is that of Duggan/Turville-Petre (EETS, ss 10), which agrees with that of W.W. Skeat who edited the earlier edition of *Wars*, also for the Early English Text Society: EETS, es 47 (London, 1886). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 19.34 pages would have been required to contain first 677 lines of *Wars* (if we used the average of the extant quires of *Wars*: i.e. 35 lines per page). This would leave 32.66 pages for *Piers*. It would have taken 27.91 pages to include Passus 11 at this rate; 31.31, for Passus 12. If there had been 32.66 pages remaining for *Piers*, the scribe would have had to average only 30 lines per page to include Passus 11, and average 33½ (33.56) lines per page to include Passus 12. 18.68 pages would have been required to contain first 677 lines of *Wars* (if we used the average of quire *c* alone: i.e. 36.25 lines per page). This would leave 33.32 pages for *Piers*. It would have taken 26.95 pages to include Passus 11 at this rate; 30.23, for Passus 12. If there had been 33.32 pages remaining for *Piers*, the scribe would have had to average just over 29 (29.32) lines a page to include Passus 11, and average 33 (32.89) lines a page to include Passus 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *The A-Text*, p. 17. The Vernon MS is Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS English Poetry a. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *The A-Text*, p. 433 (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Schmidt, *A Parallel-Text Edition,* I, p. 449. The major case against the authorial status of Passus 12 remains Anne Middleton’s: “Making a Good End: John But as a Reader of *Piers Plowman*,” in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Woodbridge, 1988), pp. 243-66.  [↑](#footnote-ref-34)