Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of* Piers Plowman*: The Earliest Transmission of Langland’s Work*. Philadelphia/Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

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The textual condition of the Middle English *Piers Plowman* is notoriously complicated. The poems we assign that title survive over 50 manuscripts, which editors since Skeat (in the 1860s) distribute into three versions (A, B, and C). Modern scholarly consensus attributes the versions in this chronological sequence to a single author, William Langland, who produced the poem(s) over (approximately) the years 1370-1400. That consensus is not unchallenged in recent decades: first, another MS (sigil Z) was proposed as an authorial antecedent to A; and, second, the chronological relationship of A and B was questioned, with B now proposed not as an expansion of A, but its original. While neither of these arguments has been widely adopted, A.V.C. Schmidt’s magisterial new parallel-text edition does, significantly, include Z, and this will ensure that the debate over its status will continue.

Now along comes Lawrence Warner to raise a fresh challenge by casting substantial doubt on the authorial status of the B Version, the version which for nearly a century has been the usual objective correlative for *Piers Plowman* in classrooms and wider critical discussions. His brief book (127 pages, of which fully fifty are taken up by the notes, bibliography, index, and acknowledgements) must unsettle the current consensus. Like the apple cast by Eris among the guests at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Warner’s book will, deservedly, set off fundamental debates about what the B Version looked like in its authorial original, whenever and wherever that came into being. And resolving that debate will have ramifications affecting other versions, and perhaps even reopen for serious debate the question whether there was in fact a single author behind the versions that appear to lie behind the MSS of *Piers Plowman*.

Beginning with what appears to be fairly simple question—what is the date of the archetypal B manuscript? (p. ix)—he proceeds in the following pages to add substantial material and argument to earlier essays he had published. His expanded argument and linked evidence produces, in brief compass, what may prove the most troubling challenge to the current consensus about the text of *Piers Plowman*. A substantial Preface is followed by four chapters – 1. *Piers Plowman* before 1400: Evidence for the Earliest Circulation of A, B, and C; 2. Scribal Conflation, Convergent Variation, and the Invention of *Piers Plowman* B; 3. The Poison of Possession: B Passus 15; 4. The Ending, and End, of *Piers Plowman* B – and a Conclusion: Lollars, Friars, and *Fyndynges*: C Passus 9 and the Creation of *Piers Plowman*.

Warner’s energetic and muscular argument frankly and directly attacks basic presumptions about editing the distinct poems that go under the single title *Piers Plowman*. He sets out the case for a thorough revision of the late-fourteenth-century “editions” of *Piers Plowman*, employing densely presented details and sharp logic to ground questions about critical and editorial assumptions. He undermines a century and a half of editing, and the critical commentary that depends on it, and this small book will mark a threshold in study of this important Middle English work.

It will likely take more than twelve years to resolve the dispute set off by Warner’s book. Like Homer’s *Iliad*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman* is a text worthy of repeated reconsideration. Warner’s book has significantly shifted the terms for its next stage.