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Bibliographical Mirrors

Philip A. Metzger
Lehigh University

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Bibliographical Mirrors

Recently University of Virginia doctoral student in English Carter Hailey stopped off at Lehigh University to look at two editions of William Langland's (1330?-1400?) *Piers Plowman*. Hailey's interest lay in three separate editions (which in the hand press period means three separate settings of type) printed by Robert Crowley in London in 1550.

Lehigh is one of the few places he's found that have more than one of the editions. We have, in fact, the first and the second, both given to the library in the 1950s by Robert B. Honeyman as part of a large gift of important first editions in English and American literature.

Hailey's concern in examining as many copies as possible of these editions is not to study the meaning of the text, but to look for variants in the printed text which could conceivably have bearing on establishing its correctness.

To find variants reliably, he used a device of his own manufacture, a simplification of previous devices called "collators," which allows him, using mirrors, to superimpose the image of one page over that of the other. If the two pages are identical, the eye sees only

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one image. However, if there are variations – changed letters, shifted lines, etc. – the differences will appear quite obviously in the combined images.

Hand printing practice was conducive, to say the least, to variation. It was customary for the pressman to begin printing sheets while the proofreader was looking for errors. When these were identified, the presses were stopped and corrections made. The sheets already printed were not discarded, but instead often showed up in copies of the bound book.

In addition, inking could pull out letters while printing was going on, and these might or might not



be replaced in the correct position. In more drastic circumstances, pages of type might be dropped, and reset more or less correctly. And sometimes printers underestimated demand for the book. When they were part-way through printing, they might then go back and reset earlier leaves to print more sheets. The proofreader, in turn, may or may not have been involved in checking this resetting.

Once it has been determined what the variations are, through the examination of as many copies of the edition as possible, it is up to bibliographers or other literary scholars to decide the textual significance of these variations.

For the specifics of Mr. Hailey's work, his own comments will serve as the best explanation:

The subject of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia is the editing and printing of Robert Crowley's editions of Piers Plowman (1550). Written sometime in the 1370s by an otherwise unknown cleric named William Langland, Piers is an allegorical dream vision in alliterative verse that recounts the struggles of the dreamer Will to discover what it is to "do wel, do bet, and do best" in seeking salvation. Crowley was the first to print an edition of this important Middle English poem, and did so in service of his radical Protestantism. Rightly or wrongly, Crowley viewed Langland as a Wicliffite proto-Protestant whom God had inspired to "moste christianlie enstruct the weake, and sharplye rebuke the obstynate blynde." The project was an evident success, as the poem rapidly went through three editions, all dated 1550.

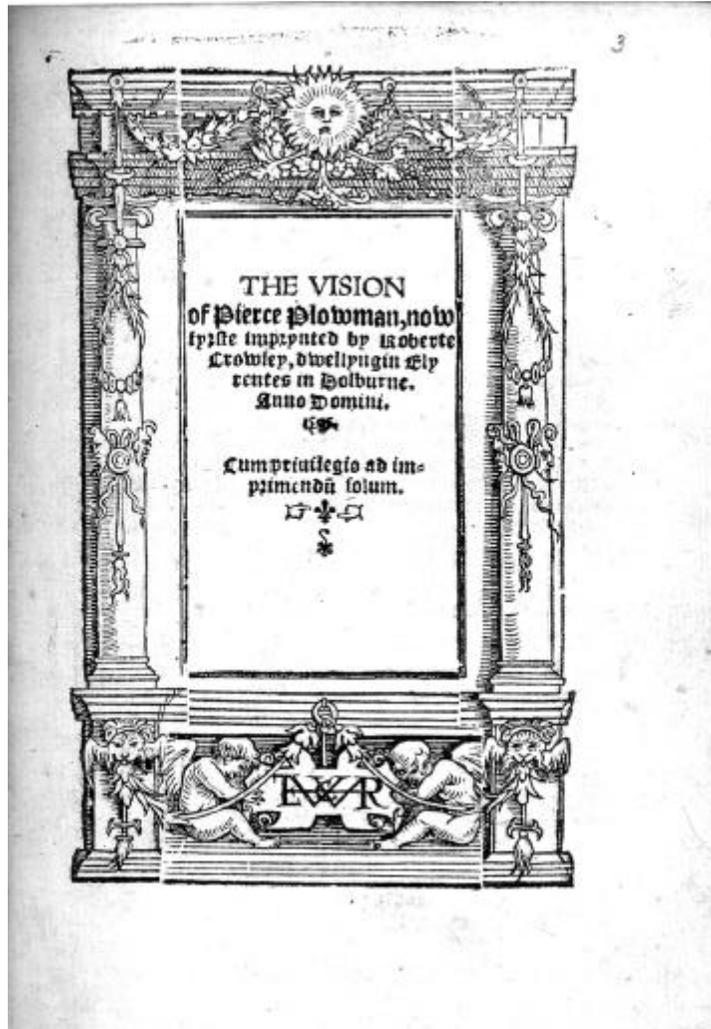
The focus of my research has been the optical collation and physical examination of as many copies as possible of each of the three editions in order to learn as much as possible about Crowley as an early critical editor of a medieval poem with a complex manuscript history. How did he select the no-longer-extant base manuscript from which he printed his first edition? What other manuscripts might he have consulted as he revised for his second and third editions? Did he, as some scholars have contended, occasionally intervene in the text to suppress pointedly Catholic theology? What degree of care did he take to see the editions through the press?

More generally, I'm interested in the many ways the physical evidence of the artifacts can reveal details of the printing and book trades in mid-sixteenth century England. Particularly significant has been the discovery that some twenty-five different paper stocks were used in producing the thirty-three quarto sheets of the first edition of Piers. So, second only to optical collating in my biblio-

graphic investigations has been identifying and classifying paper stocks through the careful examination and measurement of watermarks and chainlines.

Over the past few years I've examined some sixty copies of the various editions in libraries all over Great Britain and the U.S., and it happened that Lehigh was the final stop on my bibliographical mystery tour. Special Collections at Linderman is one of the few libraries to hold multiple copies of Crowley's Piers. Both the first and second editions of these copies were among the most beautiful I've seen: complete, undamaged, and in generally excellent condition, making them particularly good objects for paper study. The first edition copy is also significant for extensive marginalia which I intend to make the subject of a paper after the dissertation is finished. And in the second edition copy, the eighteenth I'd collated, I discovered a stop-press correction I'd never seen before—a salient reminder that examining multiple copies is essential to bibliographical scholarship.

*R. Carter Hailey
University of Virginia
— P.A.M.*



FIRST EDITION OF PIERS PLOWMAN, LONDON, 1550

Special Collections has an exhibition of its books in the permanent gallery of the Lehigh University Art Galleries in the Zoellner Arts Center. The exhibition includes a volume of Audubon's *Birds of America*, along with eight other volumes illustrating the role of books in physical and intellectual exploration. The gallery is open from 11 a.m. to 5

p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Special Collections Librarian or Marie Boltz, Special Collections Assistant. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 974-6471; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu.