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Sobecki, Sebastian

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Hares, Rabbits, Pheasants: *Piers Plowman* and William Longewille, a Norfolk Rebel in 1381

Sebastian Sobecki

ABSTRACT

Since *Piers Plowman* occupies a central place in the study of medieval English literature, much attention has been paid to the vexed question of the poem's authorship. This justified interest in revealing the human agent behind the family of interrelated versions of the poem, usually named A, B, and C, continues to feed a vibrant industry of speculative scholarship on the person behind the poem. This article reassesses the relevance of the 'Langland' myth for the contemporary reception of the poem, and argues that medieval audiences of the B Version associated the work with a 'Long Will' author-persona. In this context, the case of a previously unnoticed Norfolk poacher in the weeks leading up to the 1381 rising, a William Longewille, and his encroachment on the estate of the former sheriff and tax collector Richard Holdych echo the Ploughing of the Half-Acre in *Piers Plowman*, in particular as it is presented in the B Version of the poem. As a result, this article proposes that both the A and B Versions of the poem may have been available to (some of) the rebels of 1381, and that the B Version may have circulated in Norfolk along Cluniac and Benedictine networks before and after the unrest.

I. THE LANGLAND MYTH

The desire to find a historical author, usually named 'William Langland', who was responsible for *Piers Plowman* shows no signs of abating, despite the anonymous condition of alliterative poetry in general and the temptation of falling down the rabbit hole of the intentional fallacy in a poem that is wrapped in the nesting-doll principle of Will's dream sequences. Although the literary reward of securely locating an individual in time and place who composed the poem's three versions appears tempting at first sight, the existing evidence for the authorship of *Piers Plowman* is frustratingly scant.¹ It is as if the author did not want to be found.

This article has profited from exchanges with Ralph Hanna, Lawrence Warner, and Andy Galloway. I am particularly grateful to Dan Wakelin, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, and the journal's two anonymous readers for their detailed and immensely helpful comments.

- 1 The basic evidence has been trenchantly evaluated by George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship* (London, 1965). Kane's work remains the starting point for most discussions of the authorship of *Piers Plowman*, whereas much of the relevant historical material on this topic is gathered in Ralph Hanna, *William Langland* (Aldershot, 1993). For an overview of the literature on the surmised authorship of *Piers Plowman* see Michael Bennett, 'William Called Long Will', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 26 (2012), 1–25; and Michael Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*,

The source of most attributions of authorship is a late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century note at the end of what may be the oldest extant copy of the poem, Dublin, Trinity College, MS D.4.1, which contains the C Version of *Piers Plowman*. The note, on fol. 89v., identifies the author as one William de Rokele *alias* Langland:

Memorandum quod Stacy de Rokayle pater Willelmi de Langlond qui Stacius fuit generosus & morabatur in Schipton under Whicwode tenens domini le Spenser in comitatu Oxon' qui *predictus* Willelmus fecit librum qui vocatur Perys Ploughman.

(Let it be remembered that Eustace de Rokele, the father of William of Langland, was born and died in Shipton-under-Wychwood, holding [lands] of Lord Despenser in the county of Oxfordshire. The aforementioned William made the book that is called Perys Ploughman).²

George Kane's clinical discussion of this passage together with the surmised authorship of this poem has established lasting scholarly consensus in a number of areas: that the A, B, and C Versions of *Piers Plowman* were written by one individual; that the Dublin, Trinity College D.4.1 ascription is generally authentic and therefore credible; and that William de Rokele may indeed have been the name of the author who, for various reasons, may also have been known as William Langland.³ Notwithstanding Kane's elegant disquisition, having to reconcile the two names—William de Rokele and William Langland—has proved to be more than a hiccup in an otherwise neat line of argument: numerous readers have tried to explain why the writer chose not to use his paternal name, and even suggested the possibility that he may have been Eustace de Rokele's illegitimate son.⁴ If not necessarily common, the name 'Langland' has been attested in various parts of England. Ralph Hanna has drawn attention to the Langelond family who provided sheriffs of Somerset and Devon, and who had various associations with the Despensers.⁵ To the Somerset branch of the Langelonds we can now also add a shade of notoriety to John

30 (2016), 29–74. The literary implications of this quest and its contested relevance for the poem have been discussed by Anne Middleton, 'William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England', in Lee Patterson (ed.), *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380* (Berkeley, CA, 1990), 15–82; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, 'Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380–1427', *New Medieval Literatures*, 1 (1997), 59–84; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, 'Langland and the Bibliographic Ego', in Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (eds), *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* (Philadelphia, PA, 1997), 67–143; and James Simpson, 'The Power of Impropriety: Authorial Naming in *Piers Plowman*', in Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (ed.), *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays* (London, 2001), 145–65. Among the most recent attempts to identify the author and map his social network are Bennett, 'William Called Long Will'; Robert Adams, *Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman* (Dublin, 2013); and Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball'.

2 The translation is mine.

3 Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship*.

4 Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship*, 28; Hanna, *William Langland*, 4–5. See also Simpson, 'The Power of Impropriety'; Kerby-Fulton, 'Langland and the Bibliographic Ego'; and Middleton, 'William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England'.

5 Hanna, *William Langland*, 5, n. 16.

Langelond (active between 1377 and 1381), whom I have located in five contemporary records.⁶

As an authorial attribution 'William Langland' has been assumed to gain additional support through the internal evidence provided in B.15.152: 'I haue lyued in londe', quod [I], 'my name is longe wille',⁷ though not every manuscript yields this reading. But if B.15.152 is supposed to be an authorial anagram or cryptogram, it only works because we have access to Dublin, Trinity College D.4.1, and this nifty trick therefore only works for *us*. For medieval readers any puzzle in line 152 was a 'conspicuous failure', as Anne Middleton concedes in her defence of reading this line as an anagram.⁸ There is also David Benson's formidable rebuttal of the reverse anagram theory by noting that the C Version instead has 'Ich haue yleued in londone monye longe yeres' (C.16.286).⁹ Are we to unravel this line as '[Will] Long London' or 'Long [Will] London', then?¹⁰ We are thus trapped in a circular argument because Kane, in his fight against prevailing theories of multiple authorship, lifted us so persuasively into a position in which a moderately credible note in the Trinity College Dublin manuscript of the later C Version is taken to explain a line in the earlier B Version.¹¹ From an evidentiary point of view, therefore, we cannot use B.15.152 to corroborate the Trinity College MS 'Langland' ascription, and we cannot use this ascription to 'Langland' to corroborate B.15.152. No medieval reader of the known

6 John Langelond was sued four times in the Court of Common Pleas during Trinity Term 1377. He was a defendant in three Somerset suits involving debt (The National Archives [hereafter TNA] CP40/466, m. 150d.), trespass and the theft of animals (CP40/466, m. 78f.), and other offences (CP40/466, m. 184d.). He was also sued for debt in Cornwall (CP40/466, m. 114f.). By 1381 this John Langelond appears to be dead (CP40/483, m. 199f.).

7 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, eds George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1988). Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations from the B Version are to this edition.

8 Middleton, 'William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England', 25.

9 C. David Benson, *Public Piers Plowman: Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, PA, 2004), 37–8. The line is quoted from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, eds George Russell and George Kane (London, 1997). Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations from the C Version are to this edition.

10 There also exists a cluster of sixteenth-century ascriptions associated with John Bale that attribute the poem to a 'Robert Langland' in manuscripts of the B Version. These include Oxford, Bodleian [hereafter BodL] MS Laud Misc. 581 and San Marino, California, Huntington Library, MS HM 128 (For a discussion, see Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship*, 37–46; see also Adams, *Langland and the Rokele Family*, 21) Ralph Hanna identifies Bale's source as Nicholas Brigham, a sixteenth-century antiquarian who 'is supposed to have written a lost work on medieval authors used extensively by John Bale'. Hanna adds that Bale was the beneficiary of 'the activities of a little-known group of antiquaries during the 1530s or 1540s' (*Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive edition of Oxford, BodL MS Laud Misc. 581, Introduction, l.10 Provenance (pubd online 2014) <<http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/L/intro>> accessed 27 April 2017). But since these instances are restricted to copies of the B Version of the poem, all of which contain 15.152, they do not lend authority to the Dublin, Trinity College D.4.1 ascription to a 'Langland'. Rather, they point to early antiquarian attempts to resolve B.15.152 as a reverse anagram, much as some modern readers do.

11 I employ the expression 'moderately credible' since it does not follow that because the writer of the Trinity College Dublin ascription knew William de Rokele to be the son Eustace de Rokele he also knew anything about William's abilities (for Kane's claim to the contrary, see *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship*, 30–1). There is no reason to assume that the author of the ascription had detailed or intimate knowledge of the de Rokeles. If the same hand also produced the brief series of annals concerned with the broader region, then this does not mean that the writer's knowledge of the de Rokeles was unmediated.

copies of the B Version had access to the apparently privileged information in Trinity College D.4.1; or if they did enjoy such access, they surprisingly did not register it in writing. Instead, they chose to read the name as 'Long Will'.¹²

In their discussion of the surviving manuscripts of the B Version, David Benson and Lynne S. Blanchfield catalogue medieval scribes' and readers' reactions to this line.¹³ All instances of scribal or notational intervention in these eight manuscripts of the B Version (ten, if we include the two early modern instances) suggest a left-to-right reading of the name as 'longe wille',¹⁴ perhaps not least because this reading generates narrative meaning in the sense of a (paradoxically impatient) '*longanimis* common will', which James Simpson understands to be 'the locus of long-suffering charity who speaks for the whole land'.¹⁵ More importantly, the multiple manuscript reactions to this line do *not* support a reverse reading as 'wille long londe', otherwise we would not have 'longe wille' but 'will longlond' highlighted or spelled out in the margin. At the very least, we could reasonably expect someone to have registered 'longe londe' as a possibility. Benson and Blanchfield conclude their overview of the manuscript evidence with the evaluation that 'the poet's supposed last name "Langland" is not indicated in any way' in any of the B Version copies.¹⁶ But this is not to say that B.15.152 was not understood as an authorial signature. Both the Pauline verse on identity (1 Cor. 13:12) in line 162 and the responses of medieval readers to line 152 support an authorial or quasi-authorial signature, albeit one that is not an anagram but that was read from left to right as 'Long Will'. To contemporary readers of the B Version of *Piers Plowman*, therefore, 'Long Will' became synonymous with a conflated author-narrator persona, an interpretation most fully explored in London, British Library, MS Add. 10574: 'Nomen auctoris huius libri est longe wille' ('the name of the author of this book is Long Will').¹⁷

Using a combination of B.15.152 and the marginal and scribal annotations giving the author's name as 'Long Will' or 'l.w.', Michael Bennett has recently mounted an attractive case that the poet may have been known as 'William called Long Will' or 'Longewille'.¹⁸ Bennett adduces two related indictments from the Court of King's Bench referring to a certain 'William *vocatus* Longwyll' (spelled as one word; it

12 See my discussion of this point below.

13 C. David Benson and Lynne S. Blanchfield, *The Manuscripts of Piers Plowman: The B-Version* (Cambridge, 1997), 22. For details of the scribal rubrics and marginalia, see the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive editions of F, Hm, M, R, O, and W: (pubd online 2014) <<http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts>> accessed 27 April 2017.

14 To Benson and Blanchfield's tally we can also add the marginal entries in later hands in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ll.4.14 and Oxford, BodL, MS Laud Misc. 581 (Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship*, 69–70, n. 2).

15 Simpson, 'The Power of Impropriety', 163. For the argument that B.15.152 is to be read as an authorial signature, supported by a Pauline verse on identity (1 Cor. 13:12) ten lines further down, see Hanna, *William Langland*, 4.

16 Benson and Blanchfield, *The Manuscripts of Piers Plowman: The B-Version*, 22.

17 This passage is discussed by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, 'Professional Readers at Work: Annotators, Editors, and Correctors in Middle English Literary Texts', in Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo, and Linda Olson (eds), *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2012), 230–2.

18 Bennett, 'William Called Long Will'. For the manuscript references, see Benson and Blanchfield, *The Manuscripts of Piers Plowman: The B-Version*, 22.

becomes 'Longewille' in the second indictment).¹⁹ This individual, Bennett speculates, is the Langland/de Rokele responsible for *Piers Plowman*. An important component of his claim is the scarcity of the name 'William Longewille': 'There is no one of this name, for example, in the large body of administrative and legal records that have been calendared and indexed.'²⁰ In fact, one such legal record can now be adduced.

II. WILLIAM LONGEWILLE, A NORFOLK POACHER IN 1381

A lawsuit from the Court of Common Pleas dating to Michaelmas Term 1381 features a 'William Longewille' from Cotes in Norfolk as a co-defendant in a trespass suit. The record (CP40/483, m. 133d.) was submitted by the attorney William Bodeney on behalf of Richard Holdych, a former sheriff and Norfolk tax inspector.²¹ In this document Holdych accuses Richard Cappe, Peter Cappe, Thomas Baas with his son John, and William Longewille of Cotes in Norfolk of trespass ('vi et armis') against Holdych's free warren in Didlington and nearby Colveston ('liberam Warennam . . . apud Dudelingtoun et Colvestoun'), where they took and carried away 'hares, rabbits, pheasants, and partridges' ('lepores cuniculos phasianos et perdices ceperunt el asportaverunt')—a legal formula interchangeably used to characterize poaching and a person's entitlement to a free warren. The suit furthermore accuses the defendants of 'other outrages' against the peace ('alia enormia . . . contra pacem'). The defendants were originally ordered to appear during Trinity Term, in June, but because of the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt the Courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas remained closed for Trinity Term that year, and all cases were adjourned until Michaelmas Term by a royal writ of 15 June.²² The original plea against Longewille was actually entered in Easter Term 1381 (1–27 May); it can be found on CP 40/482, m. 451.²³

The discovery of a Norfolk poacher with the name of William Longewille or Longewilles does not mean that we have a new lead on William Langland, even though someone will surely be tempted to link this individual with the Norfolk de Rokeles:²⁴ it is true that this Longewille hailed from the now deserted hamlet of Cotes, a former Norfolk settlement near North Pickenham, which lies less than 6 kilometres (3.5 miles) from Watton, the main estate of William de Rokele, identified by Robert Adams as #5 in his index of William de Rokeles.²⁵ But despite the

19 Bennett, 'William Called Long Will', 1–2.

20 Bennett, 'William Called Long Will', 5.

21 See the appendix for my complete transcription and translation of this record.

22 W. M. Ormrod, 'The Peasants' Revolt and the Government of England', *The Journal of British Studies*, 29 (1990), 1–30, 8.

23 See the appendix for a transcription and translation.

24 The Norfolk branches of the de Rokele family, which also includes a Benedictine monk in Norwich, John de Rokele, are covered in Robert Adams, 'The Rokeles: An Index for a "Langland" Family History', in Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 2014), 85–96.

25 Adams, 'The Rokeles: An Index for a "Langland" Family History', 9. There is even a direct Holdych-Rokele connection since Holdych sued for wardship of a Robert Rokele in 1377 (TNA CP40/466, m. 262d.), and in 1381 (TNA CP40/483, m. 507f.) the same Rokele sued Holdych and others for attachment on prohibition, that is, he made an attempt to contest a suit of prohibition against him (a writ of prohibition attempts to stop a subordinate doing something prohibited by the law). The two cases are

geographical closeness, there is no positive evidence at all of any link between the de Rokeles and William Longewille. However, rather than entertaining notions that this 'William Longewille' or the 'William *vocatus* Longewille' identified by Bennett was the actual name of Langland/de Rokele, there is good reason to believe that 'William Longewille' was a rebel pseudonym inspired by *Piers Plowman* B.15.152, not least because this name agrees with the evidence that medieval readers of the B Version perceived 'longe wille' to be the name of a narrator-author persona.

At first sight it would not appear that this incident was linked to the rising of 1381, which had started in Essex in late May and spilled into Norfolk by 14 June. But there are a number of internal and external factors that tie this incident to the growing resistance to Richard Holdych which flared up during the rising in Norfolk. While various, at times protracted, special commissions were investigating the rebellion, victims of the rising also sought redress through private litigation. In particular, actions for trespass connected to the rising were brought to the Court of Common Pleas and the plea side of the King's Bench.²⁶ Andrew Prescott has shown that the action of trespass was the main legal tool in such cases, and he discusses a number of these instances specifically from Norfolk.²⁷ The main feature that helps to distinguish regular cases of trespass from those related to the revolt is the identity of the plaintiff. In this case, Richard Holdych was a known target of the 1381 rising in Norfolk, which had the largest recorded number of identified insurgents during the revolt.²⁸ Holdych had served as sheriff for Norfolk and Suffolk in 1367–1368 and as MP for Norfolk in 1369; he had also been a commissioner of tax assessments and had investigated tax evasions in 1379.²⁹ On 16 June 1381, the same rebel band which had just burned the court rolls at John of Gaunt's manor of Methwold (and did the same in Langford and West Dereham to Gaunt's steward for the manor of Castle Acre, John de Methwold) moved to attack Binham Priory before making a concerted assault against Holdych's properties.³⁰ The rebels demolished his houses at Tottington, killing the manor's lessee and another person, then moved on to ransack and destroy Holdych's main residence, at Didlington, stealing 300 sheep; after that they extended their attack to his estate at Foulden.³¹ The suit of Easter and Michaelmas 1381

undoubtedly linked and concern the Richard Holdych attacked by William Longewille, not least because in all these suits William Bodeney appears as the attorney. 'Rokele' may or may not be a different family name altogether, and the spellings 'Rokele', 'de Rokele', 'Rokele' are found throughout Norfolk records at the time.

26 Andrew Prescott, "'Great and Horrible Rumour': Shaping the English Revolt of 1381", in Justine Firnhaber-Baker and Dirk Schoenaers (eds), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (London, 2016), 76–103, 82; for a detailed discussion, see Andrew Prescott, 'Judicial Records of the Rising of 1381', PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 1984, 253–91.

27 Prescott, 'Judicial Records of the Rising of 1381', 257–60.

28 Herbert Eiden has identified 1,214 Norfolk rebels as opposed to 954 from Essex and much smaller contingents from other areas ('Joint Action against "Bad" Lordship: The Peasants' Revolt in Essex and Norfolk', *History*, 83 (1998), 1–30, 10; and 'In der Knechtschaft werdet ihr verharren': *Ursachen und Verlauf des englischen Bauernaufstandes von 1381* (Trier, 1995)).

29 Miriam Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt: The Bishop of Ely and his Peasants at the Manor of Brandon in Suffolk c. 1300–81', *Rural History*, 23 (2012), 1–19, 14; Juliet Barker, *England, Arise: The People, the King and the Great Revolt of 1381* (London, 2015), 329.

30 Barker, *England, Arise*, 329.

31 Barker, *England, Arise*, 329. For the records and names of the defendants, see TNA KB27/489, m. 32d., and TNA KB27/493, m. 13d.

against William Longewille concerns Holdych's free warren at his residence at Didlington, his main estate and the primary focus of the violent assault in June. During Michaelmas Term, Holdych brought a total of four suits of trespass, at least two of which were also submitted during Easter Term.³² In one of Holdych's parallel trespass suits during both Easter and Michaelmas a Geoffrey of Northgate was accused of assaulting, beating, and wounding a servant of Holdych's in North Pickenham, where Holdych also owned property.³³ As with the Longewille suit, the proceedings were delayed by a royal writ of 15 June,³⁴ the defendant could not show up during the quindene of Trinity (24–30 June 1381) because of the rising, and the matter was adjourned until Hilary Term.³⁵

However, the original trespass suit against Longewille was enrolled on one of the last rotulets for Easter Term, rotulet 451 of 469, suggesting that the plea was heard in the last days of the law term, which ran from 1 to 27 May 1381.³⁶ Since the same lawyer, William Bodeney, also filed suits for Holdych much earlier during this law term, the Longewille incident must have occurred later that month.³⁷ Similarly, the trespass suit against Geoffrey of Northgate for assaulting Holdych's servant was also first filed very late in the term—it appears on rotulet 450.³⁸ By that time, the rebellion was already flaring up in Essex, and anger at the reassessment of the poll tax was clearly visible in Norfolk: Geoffrey of Northgate does appear in the poll tax record of 1379, during which Holdych was in charge of the reassessment.³⁹ Holdych was a collector of the 1377 poll tax and a reassessor of the 1379 tax.⁴⁰ The reassessors for Norfolk were appointed on 16 March 1381,⁴¹ and the reassessment was complete by the following month. Thus, by late May 1381, Holdych was personally experiencing a prelude to the violence of the rising in Norfolk.

A recent trend in historical studies emphasizes forms of enduring and organized resistance to social oppression in medieval England. Such work has focussed on identifying the 'more mundane forms of peasant resistance over the long term leading to the rising 1381'.⁴² These simmering tensions contributed to the rapid spread of the revolt of 1381,⁴³ and, in this case, beyond its Essex epicentre into Norfolk. Effective peasant resistance particularly concentrated on poaching: 'entering the lord's warren

32 TNA CP40/483, m. 133d. (vs Longewille et al.); TNA CP40/483, m. 255f. (vs Northgate); and two suits on TNA CP40/483, m. 414f. In addition to my findings, Eiden has identified a total of 65 names accused by Holdych of the attack on Didlington, based on a series of undated trespass suits (*In der Knechtschaft werdet ihr verharren*, 320).

33 Michaelmas: TNA CP40/483, m. 255f.; Easter: TNA CP 40/482, m. 450 f.

34 Ormrod, 'The Peasants' Revolt and the Government of England', 8.

35 Holdych's remaining two trespass suits from Michaelmas 1381 are located on the same roll, TNA CP40/483, m. 414f.

36 C. R. Cheney, *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History*, rev. edn (London, 2000), 123, for the dates of Easter Term 1381.

37 See, for instance, TNA CP 40/482, m. 135d. and m. 151f.

38 TNA CP 40/482, m. 450 f.

39 See my discussion of the poll tax records below.

40 Carolyn Christine Fenwick, 'The English Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381: A Critical Examination of the Returns', PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 1983, 499–500.

41 Fenwick, 'The English Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381', 500.

42 Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt', 2. For this type of research, see Müller's article; she lists further examples on p. 2, n. 6.

43 Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt', 11.

and taking beasts therefrom was an act which carried a political message'.⁴⁴ In fact, 'the demand for the right to hunt and fish freely was echoed by many rebel contingents in 1381'.⁴⁵ Thomas Walsingham reports the gruesome detail that the rebels who seized the Abbot of St Albans's warren and woods during the 1381 revolt then 'took a certain live rabbit in the fields and fixed it to the pillory in St Albans to symbolize the liberty of the warren':⁴⁶

Ceperunt quemdam cuniculum vivum, inter eos in plano campi per multitudinem populi vi captum, et in quadam hasta coram se ferri statuerunt, et super collistrigium in villa Sancti Albani, in signum libertatis et warrenae sic adeptae, difixerunt.⁴⁷

(They seized a certain live rabbit, caught with force in the open field by a great crowd, and had it carried among them on a spear and fixed it on a pillory in the town of St Albans as a symbol of the liberty and warren they had obtained in this manner.)

By same token, many of the charters and documents that were targeted for destruction by the rebels regulated not only the ownership of land, as is usually stressed, but also privileges of hunting and the liberty of the warren.⁴⁸ Most significantly, unfettered access to the lord's warren was the rebels' core demand according to Henry Knighton, whose *Chronicle* has shaped perceptions of the revolt's final unravelling. Knighton states that Wat Tyler *alias* Jack Straw presented the following demand when he met King Richard in Smithfield on 15 June 1381:

Petunt a rege omnes warrenne tam in aquis quam in parco et boscis communes fierent omnibus, ita ut libere posset tam pauper quam diues ubicumque in regno in aquis et stagnis piscariis et boscis et forestis fera capere, in campis lepores fugare et sic hec et huiusmodi alia multa sine contradiccionne exercere.⁴⁹

(The commons asked of the king that all game, whether in waters or in parks and woods, should become common to all, so that everywhere in the realm, in rivers and fishponds, and woods and forest, they might take the wild beast and hunt the hare in the fields, and do many other such things without restraint.)

The nature, timing, and target of William Longewille's attack align him not only with the main objective of the rebels as given by Knighton but also echo the Ploughing of the Half-Acre in *Piers Plowman*.

44 Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt', 11.

45 Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 2003), 70–2; Miriam Müller, 'Food, Hierarchy, and Class Conflict', in Richard Goddard, John Langdon, and Miriam Müller (eds), *Survival and Discord in Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of Christopher Dyer*, 4 (Turnhout, 2010), 243–6; Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt', 11.

46 Müller, 'Food, Hierarchy, and Class Conflict', 243.

47 Thomas Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, vol. 3 (London, 1869), 303. The translation is mine.

48 Müller, 'Food, Hierarchy, and Class Conflict', 243.

49 Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle 1337–1396*, ed. G. H. Martin (Oxford, 1995), 218 (text) and 219 (translation).

III. HOLDYCH ON THE HALF ACRE

But why would a 'William Longewille' participate in this attack against Richard Holdych by hunting in and attacking Holdych's free warren near his residential property? The social contract between the Knight and Piers in the Ploughing of the Half-Acre passage in *Piers Plowman* offers an explanation.⁵⁰ All three versions of the poem have Piers appeal directly to the gentry: 'Helpiþ hem werche wiȝtly þat wyne ȝoure foode'.⁵¹ The Knight responds readily by stating that although he had never learned how to plough a field, he would gladly do so now: 'I wile [conne] eren' (A.7.25b). In the B Version this commitment is still sincere, with most manuscripts giving either a form of the A Version's text or the equally committed '[by Crist] I wol assaye'.⁵² But in the C Version the Knight's willingness to take up a plough in aid of his subjects is transformed into a subjunctive expression tinged with ridicule: 'Y wolde y couthe,' quod the knyhte, 'by Crist and his moder! / Y wolde [assaye] some tyme, for solace as hit were' (C.8.21–2). The readiness to take up a plough to help the labourers has now become a promise to try his hand at recreational ploughing for his own amusement ('solace') at some undefined point in the future ('some tyme').⁵³ Naturally, Piers's emphatically positive reaction in A and B gives way to resignation in C: where both the A and B Versions have 'Be seint poule,' quaþ perkyn, 'for þou profrist þe so lowe' (A.7.26, B.6.24), the C Version not only removes Piers's delighted exclamation ('Be seint poule') but restores the hierarchy of knight and labourer by discarding the familiar 'þou' together with the entire half-line that consists of the Knight's offer of climbing down the social scale ('so lowe'). The result is an anodyne line that barely masks Piers's disappointment: 'Sikerliche, sire knyhte,' sayde [Peris] thenne' (C.8.23).

Then in all three versions follows the contract ('couenaunt') not only to plough but also to hunt on behalf of labourers and peasants. This section is consistent across A, B, and C:

I shal swynken & sweten & sowe for vs boþe,
 A[nd] ek laboure for þi loue al my lif tyme
 In couenaunt þat þou kepe holy[k]ir[k]e and myself
 Fro wastours [and wikkide men] þat wolde me destroye,

- 50 On this contract see David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London, 1980), 13–9; Myra Stokes, *Justice and Mercy in Piers Plowman: A Reading of the B Text Visio* (London, 1984), 195–8; James Simpson, 'Spiritual and Earthly Nobility in *Piers Plowman*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 86 (1985), 479–81; Simpson, 'Spirituality and Economics in Passus 1–7 of the B Text', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 1 (1987), 97–100; Andrew Cole, 'Trifunctionality and the Tree of Charity: Literary and Social Practice in *Piers Plowman*', *ELH*, 62 (1995), 8–13; Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory on the Half-Acre: The Demands of History', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 10 (1996), 1–22; Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350–1547* (Oxford, 2002), 363–4; Cole, 'Scribal Hermeneutics and the Genres of Social Organization in *Piers Plowman*', in Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel (eds), *The Middle Ages at Work* (New York, 2004), 192–5; Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Exeter, 2007), 72–4; Ralph Hanna, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, Volume 2: C Passus 5–9; B Passus 5–7; A Passus 5–8* (Philadelphia, PA, 2017), 211–79.

- 51 A.7.22, B.6.20, and C.8.18.

- 52 A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text* (London, 1995); Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, 349, n. 23.

- 53 On 'solace' in this passage, see Hanna, *Penn Commentary*, II, 222.

And go hunte hardily [to] har[is] & [to] fox[is],
 And [to]boris & [to] bukkes þat breken myn heggis,
 And fecche þe hom fauconis þe foulis to kille,
 For þise comiþ to my croft & croppiþ my whete. (A.7.27–34)⁵⁴

All three versions also have the Knight respond by plighting his troth (A.7.36, B.6.34, C.8.33) to seal the contract and fulfil his part of the bargain, from which his genuine dedication to ploughing has been removed in C. A comparison of the subsequent lines reveals that the C Version does not show that the Knight will actually commit to doing what he had agreed to do. The A Version has the Knight pledge to do his part for as long as he can muster the strength to do so: 'To fulfille þe foreward whiles I may stande' (A.7.37). In B physical strength becomes the need to fight, but this does not mean that the Knight will fight for his subjects which would make little sense in a feudal arrangement. Rather, he appears to be saying that he will uphold his end of the contract despite the constraints of his other obligations to offer military service to his lord: 'To fulfille þis forward þouȝ I fiȝte sholde' (B.6.35). But in C the contract has been weakened from the outset by the Knight's flippant remarks about ploughing: 'To defende þe in fayth, fyhte thouȝ y sholde' (C.8.34). The promise to plough and hunt while his strength lasts (in the A Version), gives way to the realization in B that knights have other tasks, while C once again restores the pre-1381 hierarchy by turning this line into a watered-down permutation of various chivalric mottoes. Yet whereas the A Version then moves on to Piers, B inserts a unique line that emphasizes the weight of the Knight's pledge and his commitment to support ('mayntene') his subjects: 'Als longe as I lyue I shall þee mayntene' (B.6.36). 'Mayntene' comes with high expectations in Middle English. The MED gives a range of meanings, many of which resonate here: 1. 'preserve', 'see to the wellbeing of', 2. 'support', 'back, help', 'assist', 'sustain', 3. 'spend money on', and crucially 4. 'provide the means of livelihood'.⁵⁵ The A Version does not yet have this momentous expectation, while the C Version has removed this and any remainder of the egalitarian language together with the terms of the contract between the Knight and Piers. For the Knight the stakes are highest in B.

In his reading of the Ploughing of the Half-Acre passage Michael Johnston recognizes the central social significance of this scene for the revolt of 1381 and for John Ball's thought, and he highlights the Knight's non-fulfilment of the contract.⁵⁶ Johnston continues that 'the Knight's failure to live up to Piers's terms leaves Piers as the lone social authority on the half-acre', abandoning the labourer (rather than Johnston's 'villager') altogether.⁵⁷ But Johnston then argues that his interpretation of 'Piers as radical social critique fits best with the A text',⁵⁸ yet this reading downplays the gravity of the Knight's failure, which is exacerbated, as I have argued, in the

54 The equivalent passages in the other two versions are: B.6.25–32 and C.8.24–31. A and B are very close to each other, whereas in C the second half-lines of 30 and 31 depart slightly from the earlier two versions.

55 Hanna understands 'I shall þee mayntene' in B.6.36 as a 'narrow legalism', but this is to re-read the B Version's text in the light of the Knight's casual understanding of his commitment ('solace') in the C Version (Hanna, *Penn Commentary*, II, 223).

56 Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball', 58–9.

57 Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball', 59.

58 Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball', 59.

B Version. What is more, even Piers's appeal to the Knight is more detailed and more urgent in B, so that Piers certainly does not get 'largely drowned out' in this key moment as Johnston states.⁵⁹ Where the A Version simply has Piers's three-line call for help (A.7.146–8), the B Version adds two lines of its own to this passage (B.6.159–63), featuring the salient detail that when wasters do not work there will never be 'Plentee among De peple De while my plow³ liggeþ' (B.6.163). In B, the consequences for Piers are so grave that his plough lies unused, halting all productivity. This is not a silenced Piers; this is the voice of a desperate labourer that makes the Knight's failure all the greater in the B Version.

Richard Holdych was a knight in all but name. He had held the office of sheriff for Norfolk and Suffolk, and participated in local affairs as MP and later as tax commissioner, and, in 1379, he investigated tax evasions. But despite his income and status, he never took the knighthood. In fact, in 1365, before becoming sheriff, he had paid distraint, a penalty for not taking the knighthood despite enjoying sufficient income from land.⁶⁰ He was also exempted from the knighthood in 1354 and again in 1382, on account of old age.⁶¹ And yet, during the Parliament of 3–11 June 1369, Holdych attended as a knight of the shire whilst serving as sheriff.⁶² Holdych's quasi-chivalric status is further corroborated by the 1379 poll tax records for the South Greenhoe hundred of Norfolk, which has survived complete. Holdych is listed as one of the three wealthiest individuals in the entire hundred, each of whom was taxed at 20s: the other two are Sir John Harsyk (listed as 'chiveler') and Lady ('Domina') Cecilia de Weylound (also 20s).⁶³ Holdych, it would appear, wanted all the perks that came with knighthood without taking on any of the responsibilities incumbent on this office, as presented in the Ploughing of the Half-Acre passage. In 1381, Holdych's documents were not burned, as was the case with some of the other high-profile targets in Norfolk; after all, the rebels' grievances did not concern his property titles. Instead, his sheep were taken and his free warren was violated. This might have been a rebuke for his failure to do what a knight was expected to do, especially a knight in all but name who could not insist on the title 'sir': Holdych was the kind of 'knight' whom the Piers of the A and B Versions could address as 'Pou'.

Stephen Justice has shown that the rising of 1381 was a literate rebellion that targeted documents and was fuelled by readings of *Piers Plowman*.⁶⁴ Even though we still refer to the rising as the 'Peasants' Revolt', it is clear that the ranks of the insurgents were much broader and included individuals capable of various forms of literacy, leading Ralph Hanna to speak of the existence, in 1381, of a 'general vernacular

59 Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball', 59.

60 Richard Gorski, *The Fourteenth-Century Sheriff: English Local Administration in the Late Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2003), 99, n. 151.

61 Gorski, *The Fourteenth-Century Sheriff*, 99, n. 151.

62 Gwilym Dodd, 'Crown, Magnates and Gentry: the English Parliament, 1369–1421', PhD thesis, University of York, 1998, 206.

63 Carolyn C. Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381: Part 2: Lincolnshire-Westmorland* (Oxford, 2001), 146 and 147. Holdych's assessment appears on p. 148.

64 Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1994), Chapter 1, 'Insurgent Literacy', and *passim*.

literary public'.⁶⁵ *Piers Plowman* offered the most forceful motive for the attacks on Holdych, not least because the poem also includes Piers's addendum to the contract that the Knight should not keep ('tene') 'no tenaunt but treuþe' (A.7.39, B.6.38, C.8.36). The 1381 documents I discuss show that two of Holdych's tenants were killed at Tottington, while his servant was assaulted and beaten in North Pickenham. The breach of and attack on Holdych's free warren near his residence in Didlington was the most political of all the attacks against him in the build-up to and eruption of the 1381 rising in Norfolk. The implied threat in Piers's covenant is one of trespass against a free warren, the very essence of Wat Tyler's demands before King Richard: the covenant in *Piers Plowman* starts its list of animals of the warren with a 'hare',⁶⁶ the same animal that initiates the legal formula of the free warren which is also used in such trespass cases as the one involving William Longewille: 'hares, rabbits, pheasants, and partridges' ('lepores cuniculos phasianos et perdices').⁶⁷ This was a sufficiently powerful warning by the poet while not incriminating himself by repeating verbatim the legal language of the writ.⁶⁸ There even exists previously unconnected archival evidence that the inhabitants of the most important and affected of Holdych's estates, at Didlington and Foulden, were sufficiently literate to organize impressive legal opposition in the years immediately preceding the rising.⁶⁹ They filed a parliamentary petition because the bishop of Ely's mill obstructed the river Wissey from flooding their land which prevented their ships from transporting grain,⁷⁰ thereby directly threatening their livelihoods (not unlike the sense of 'mayntene' in the B Version). This was a significant problem because the Wissey traffic was the main means for them to reach Lynn. Holdych had failed his tenants and his peasants. Though had he wanted to intervene, he would have encountered a formidable opponent in the bishop, who was no one else but Thomas Arundel.⁷¹ In 1381, the rebels razed Holdych's properties in both Didlington and Foulden, while William Longewille targeted Holdych's warren at Didlington.

The motives for the assault on Holdych's properties echo in the failed contract between the Knight and Piers in the Ploughing of the Half-Acre passage, arguably the most significant section in the poem in the economic and political context of the

65 Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, CA, 1996), 240. See also Lynn Arner, *Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Poverty of the Populace after 1381* (University Park, PA, 2013).

66 Although 'haris' alliterates with 'hunt hardily' in the same line, the contextual significance and initial position of this animal (in the poem's list of animals as well as in the legal formula of the warren) suggest that 'hare' dictated the alliterant 'h' for this line rather than the other way around.

67 On peasants and beasts of the warren, see H. S. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor: A Study of Peasant Conditions 1150–1400* (Cambridge, 1937).

68 Langland's knowledge of legal matters is well known (John Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Glossary of Legal Diction* (Cambridge, 1988)).

69 On the writing of petitions and the voicing of collective dissent see Wendy Scase, *Literature and Complaint in England, 1272–1553* (Oxford, 2007); Gwilym Dodd, *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007); Gwilym Dodd, 'Writing Wrongs: The Drafting of Supplications to the Crown in Later Fourteenth-Century England', *Medium Aevum*, 80 (2011), 217–46; Gwilym Dodd, 'Kingship, Parliament and the Court: the Emergence of "High Style" in Petitions to the English Crown, c.1350–1405', *The English Historical Review*, 129 (2014), 515–48.

70 TNA SC 8/111/5515, dated by the TNA to c.1378–c.1379.

71 On the deterioration of the relationship between Arundel during his tenure of the see of Ely and his peasants, see Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt'.

1381 revolt. The William Longewille who trespassed on Holdych's property did so when discontent in Norfolk was about to peak, and I believe that he may have assumed this name as a *nom de guerre*, inspired by the authorial 'longe wille' pseudonym in *Piers Plowman*, to which no less than eight of the existing manuscript copies of the B Version react in one form or another. Pseudonyms were common during the rising, not least to avoid legal repercussions, and the rebel letters encourage the use of *noms de guerre* among the insurgents—Jack Straw and Piers Plowman are the best-known cases.⁷² In the documentary culture associated with the revolt such pseudonyms could even appear side-by-side with real individuals, as in the *Dieulacres Abbey Chronicle*: 'Iohannis B., Iak Strawe, Per Plowman et ceteri'.⁷³ 'Long Will' or 'Will Long Will' may have been circulating much as 'Jack Straw' or 'Piers Plowman'—knowing such characters and using them as pseudonyms is a political statement and does not presuppose literacy or even direct or indirect familiarity with *Piers Plowman* or other texts, but it does show that the poem was in circulation at the time. Crucially, Knighton reports in his *Chronicle* that when Wat Tyler met King Richard in Smithfield on 15 June, Tyler 'had now changed his name to Jack Straw' ('set iam nomine mutato uocatus est Iakke Strawe').⁷⁴ Tyler became the poacher Jack Straw when he presented the king with the rebels' assault on the very idea of the free warren, while William Longewille became the literary alias of an instance of such an attack on a high-profile landowner in Norfolk.

Unsurprisingly, there seems to have been no one in the region named 'Longewille' or 'Longewilles'. The 1379 and 1381 poll tax records for the South Greenhoe hundred of Norfolk, to which not only Cotes but also North Pickenham, Didlington, and Foulden belong, do not list anyone of this name.⁷⁵ It should be added that the 1379 record for this hundred is complete.⁷⁶ By contrast, however, Geoffrey of Northgate, who in one of Holdych's parallel trespass suits of Easter and Michaelmas 1381 is accused of having assaulted the plaintiff's servant in North Pickenham, is listed in the 1379 poll tax roll for North Pickenham as 'Godfredus de Northgate', while Richard Holdych, his lawyer William Bodene, and Gaunt's retainer John de Methwold, all feature in the poll tax records.⁷⁷ Thomas Hulp of Spore (next door to Cotes), who in 1381 led a rebel band in the attack against John de Pargrave, appears on the 1379 poll tax, as does his victim.⁷⁸ The surname of one of Longewille's co-defendants, 'Baas', shows up twice as 'Basse' in East Bradenham,

72 Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*, 214–5; Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 222–3.

73 M. Clarke and V. Galbraith, 'The Deposition of Richard II', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 14 (1930), 125–81, 164. See also Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 223; Andrew Galloway, 'Making History Legal: *Piers Plowman* and the Rebels of Fourteenth-Century England', in Kathleen Hewett-Smith (ed.), *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays* (New York, NY, and London, 2001), 7–39, 13–4; Anne Hudson, 'Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*', in John A. Alford and Anne Middleton (eds), *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), 251–66.

74 Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle 1337–1396*, 218 (text) and 219 (translation).

75 Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, for 1379: 145–9, for 1381: 194–5. Cotes fell under Pickenham. It is of course possible that he was too poor to figure in the tax documents.

76 Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 72.

77 Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 149 and 150.

78 Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 147.

in the same hundred,⁷⁹ and William's co-defendant, 'Richard Cappe', could be 'Richardus Knope' in Sporle, though the 'Cape' and 'Basse' surnames also occur elsewhere in the adjacent Grimshoe hundred.⁸⁰ The only surname in the records I have discussed that does not appear anywhere is 'Longewille' or 'Longewilles': neither in Pickenham nor in Sporle are there Williams with identical surnames or occupational names that would justify a 'Long Will' moniker. In fact, such a surname is not attested anywhere in East Anglia nor in England, for that matter. Nor are there any 'Longwells' or 'Longvilles' in the wider area to help account for a scribal mistake. One further possibility can also be excluded: nearby Swaffham's vicar at the time was called William Cote,⁸¹ but since the only other known Cote in the village bore the first name 'Walter', it is not likely that William Cote would have needed to use a nickname, not least because in 1381 he had been the local vicar for at least 23 years.⁸² Furthermore, 'Willielmus Longewille de Cotes' is described as coming from Cotes and not Swaffham. Finally, Holdych's lawyer, William Bodeney, knew who William Cote was because later that year Bodeney himself sued the vicar, 'Willielmus Cote de Swafham', for debt.⁸³

The pseudonym 'William Longewille' could have found its way into a plea roll in a number of ways. It is common for plea rolls to list aliases or alternative names, especially for first names if the plaintiff does not know the actual name of the defendant. Since the overwhelming majority of pleas never reached trial, most defendants were never prosecuted or appeared in court. In the case of multiple defendants—five in this case—it is unlikely that the plaintiff or his attorney were familiar with the identities of all of them, so that one or more of the defendants, if they were apprehended or questioned, would have been the source for naming the others. Alternatively, the names may have been provided by the attorney's clerk or one of Holdych's administrators—scriveners and paralegal writers who were socially closer to Holdych's tenants and villeins than to Holdych and his lawyer Bodeney. Such 'scribal resistance' is not uncommon.⁸⁴ It is telling, however, that none of the defendants in this plea can be identified with a particular individual despite the appearance of their surnames in this specific area of Norfolk, the only exception being 'William Longewille'. Finally, this band of poachers could not have been a group of children which would have explained why their first names cannot be matched with mostly known regional

79 Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 146.

80 Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 147 for 'Richardus Knope', 105 for 'William Cape', and 106 for 'John Basse'.

81 Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols, 2nd edn (London, 1805–1810), vi, 202 and 224. Cote was vicar in 1381 (202).

82 The 1379 poll tax record for Swaffham has a Walterus Cote (Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 145). Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, vi, 224 and 202, lists Cote as vicar in 1358 and 1381.

83 TNA CP40/483, m. 364f.

84 In a spirited paper delivered at the 2017 London Chaucer Conference Euan Roger discussed a fourteenth-century plea roll in which a clerk expresses his disapproval of an individual by changing that person's first name and giving their surname not as 'Whitchurch' but 'Shitchurch'. On clerks and scribes interfering with evidentiary documents, particularly those written in the vernacular, see Stephen Justice, 'Inquisition, Speech, and Writing: A Case From Late-Medieval Norwich', in Rita Copeland (ed.), *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1996), 289–322, reprinted in *Representations*, 48 (1994), 1–29.

surnames: at least one of them, Thomas Baas, is an adult since John is identified as his son. Furthermore, plea rolls and chancery and exchequer documents always identify minors by adding 'son of' or 'daughter of' if they appear in a documentary context without their parents.

IV. CLUNIAC NORFOLK

But how would the Norfolk rebel 'William Longewille' have heard of *Piers Plowman*? This question cuts to the heart of the debate about the poem's availability to the rebels, irrespective of whether one maintains that the A or B Versions (or both) were read at the time. Benedictine and especially Cluniac circulation offers attractive possibilities. Cluniac emphasis on poverty, salvation, and peace, together with their active development of the *conversi* who, unlike lay brothers in other orders, could graduate and rise in rank, opens up prospects for more research on the early dissemination of *Piers Plowman*. Cotes in Norfolk bordered on Sporle Priory, a small alien Benedictine priory subject to the abbot of Saint-Florent de Saumur in Anjou, France. Sporle priory, which cannot have had more than a handful of monks if it indeed had more than one, should actually be considered a cell rather than a priory. At the time of the rising its prior was a certain William Sporle, who happened to be both prior and farmer.⁸⁵ It strikes me that this is the clerical milieu, that of the ploughing prior and monk, where the keen understanding of the living and working conditions of labourers and peasants overlaps with the privileged education afforded by monastic institutions. Although less institutional in its application, this phenomenon shares a number of contextual factors with what Kathryn Kerby-Fulton calls the 'clerical proletariat'.⁸⁶ It is at this 'ground' level of monastic life where we are likely to find an explanation for the dissemination of vernacular literary culture relevant to the revolt of 1381, in addition to looking for a better understanding of the cultural setting that generated the poem in the first place. Eight of the fourteen manuscripts of the B Version show monastic ownership, six of which can be identified as Benedictine.⁸⁷

Yet while some readers have focused on possible Benedictine milieux for such interest,⁸⁸ William Sporle was neither a Benedictine nor from Sporle. On account of the ongoing war with France, it fell to the bishop of Norwich to staff this alien priory, and, in 1378, a monk called William from the nearby Cluniac priory of Castle Acre was tasked with tilling the land and maintaining the building.⁸⁹ He was only appointed prior in 1379, and although he is said to have resigned by 1385, he appears

85 David Knowles, David Smith, Christopher Brooke, and Vera London, *The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales, 1377-1540*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 2008), 207. This was not an unusual combination for small priories and cells.

86 Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, 'The Clerical Proletariat: The Underemployed Scribe and Vocational Crisis', *Journal of the Early Book Society*, 17 (2014), 1-34.

87 Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, 'Piers Plowman', in David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), 530-1. For the manuscripts, see the appendix to Hanna, *William Langland*. Kerby-Fulton adds that Langland may have been schooled in Little Malvern Priory as a boy (530).

88 Morton W. Bloomfield, 'Was William Langland a Benedictine Monk?', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 4 (1943), 57-61; Kerby-Fulton, 'Piers Plowman', 530-1; Stephen Yeager, *From Lawmen to Plowmen: Anglo-Saxon Legal Tradition and the School of Langland* (Toronto, 2014), 156. See also Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1998), 28, n. 15.

89 *Calendar of Fine Rolls: Richard II, 1377-1383* (London, 1927), 108.

to have been out of his job shortly after the rising, for in 1382 the secular vicar of the church in Sporle, a certain Hamon, was charged with farming and maintaining the priory.⁹⁰ There certainly was documented unrest in Sporle on 17 June 1381.⁹¹ Something in connection with prior William in the months or weeks before the 1382 change seems to have taken the authorities by surprise since there appears not to have been sufficient time to appoint a monk, Cluniac or Benedictine, to this tiny priory. Instead, a secular vicar was chosen to bridge the gap. It will probably not be possible to determine whether this farming Cluniac prior William was involved in the rising or in the circulation of vernacular literature, but I wanted to sketch the type of situation that may have occurred in 'William Longewille's' immediate environment as it surely did elsewhere in England.⁹²

Piers Plowman could have appealed to monks trained in glossing and ploughing, particularly at a place such as Castle Acre, William Sporle's home institution, which, as so many religious houses, was founded on the basis of carucates, the amount of land cultivated by one plough in a year and a day.⁹³ (A monk of this priory might have been reminded by the relevance of *Piers Plowman* and the Ploughing of the Half-Acre: Castle Acre, which was also called Eastacre, shared 'Acre' with nearby West Acre and South Acre.) The priory was a significant Cluniac house, with a number of books in its library, including material relevant to glossing, such as works by Paschasius Radbertus and Gilbert of Auxerre.⁹⁴ It is also possible that the lavish Yale Psalter, Beinecke MS 417, was produced for Castle Acre or for Thetford priory, another nearby Cluniac House.⁹⁵ Just as important is the fact that Bromholm Priory, which supposedly held a part of the Cross, and which is invoked in *Piers Plowman* (A.5.145, B.5.229), was a dependency of Castle Acre, with which it was in dispute about the fragment. Norfolk figures prominently in the poem: in addition to the reference to Bromholm, there is the Walsingham pilgrimage (A.5.144, B.5.228); Greed's admission that he does not speak French since he is from 'Pe ferPest ende

90 See, in turn, *Calendar of Patent Rolls: Richard II, 1377–1381* (London, 1895), 332; *Calendar of Fine Rolls: Richard II, 1377–1383*, 268–9; *Calendar of Patent Rolls: Richard II, 1381–1385* (London, 1897), 525. For the document appointing Hamon, see *Calendar of Fine Rolls: Richard II, 1377–1383*, 2.

91 Eiden, *In der Knechtschaft werdet ihr verharren*, 324–7; Eiden, 'Joint Action against "Bad" Lordship: The Peasants' Revolt in Essex and Norfolk', 17.

92 Another William in Sporle could be potentially of interest. The poll tax records of 1379 also list a 'William Palmere' in this village (Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 147). This is the same name as that of the rector of St Alphege in London, who bequeathed a copy of *Piers Plowman* to Agnes Eggesfield in 1400. But 'Palmer' was a common surname in Norfolk and in other areas of England.

93 The foundation charters are printed in William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vol. 1 (London, 1825), 49–50.

94 N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books* (London, 1964), 48; Andrew G. Watson and N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books: Supplement to the Second Edition* (London, 1987), 14. The books are conveniently identified here: Richard Sharpe and James Willoughby, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (pubd online 2015) <http://mlgb3.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/author/title/medieval_catalogues/source/B/47/> accessed 24 April 2017. However, it is difficult to ascertain which items were held at Castle Acre before 1381 since the two sources (John Leland's *Collectanea*, and Thomas Lexham's 1382 will) postdate that year. In addition, it is not clear whether Lexham's books ever reached the priory.

95 Jennifer Mansfield, 'Opening the Macclesfield Psalter: Patrons and Priors', paper given at *The Cloister and the Gate: the Monks of Lewes Priory and the Laity Conference* (2016); available here: (no publication date available) <https://www.academia.edu/31798279/Opening_the_Macclesfield_Psalter_Patrons_and_Priors> accessed 25 April 2017.

of Norfolk' (B.5.239); and the use of Norfolk dialect: 'so thee ik' (A.5.142, only in one manuscript; B.5.226). To this can be added further Norfolk references specific to Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 851 (once regarded as the 'Z Version').⁹⁶ The C Version, however, misses all Norfolk references, which are limited to A and B, with B being the only version to include the reference to French and Norfolk, in B.5.239. In her recent study of the B-Version copy Huntington MS 114, Sarah Wood draws attention to the 'Norfolk humour otherwise only present in B', which is extended by Bodley 851.⁹⁷ Whereas some of these instances could be considered to be 'Norfolk humour', not unlike Chaucer's 'hooly croys of Bromeholm', in his argument for a Norfolk provenance of some *Piers Plowman* manuscripts Simon Horobin perceptively notes that 'such jokes would surely lose their impact in Oxford', and that they may therefore more probably, though not necessarily, imply an audience or readership in or near Norfolk.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Andrew Galloway reminds us of the long-standing tradition, in particular in Norfolk, of depicting plowmen in religious contexts.⁹⁹

The potential rebel pseudonym of 'William Longewille' and the pronounced Norfolk interest and Norfolk place names especially in the B Version of the poem strike me as indicative of an early circulation of *Piers Plowman* in this area along monastic, and perhaps Benedictine and Cluniac, channels. With nine cells and priories, Norfolk had the highest density of Cluniac houses in medieval England.

The Cluniac-Benedictine link through Castle Acre and Sporle is only one example of instances of overlap between a Norfolk/East Anglian circulation of the poem and Benedictine readers. In his discussion of an exemplar of the C Version prepared in southern Norfolk or Suffolk (London, British Library, MS Harley 3954), Simon Horobin notes that a scribe in a Benedictine house in Huntingdonshire must have had access to the poem.¹⁰⁰ Horobin concludes that 'both A and B versions were available within a restricted East Anglian network' probably 'within a group of religious houses situated within a small area of south Norfolk and north Suffolk'.¹⁰¹ This area also included three Cluniac houses: Thetford Priory, which was furthest west; Mendham Priory, a dependency of Castle Acre; and Wangford Priory on the north-eastern coast of Suffolk, a dependency of Thetford. There are of course other exemplars of the poem which have been produced in Norfolk.¹⁰² All of these

96 For an overview of the Norfolk references, see William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The Z Version*, eds Charlotte Brewer and A. G. Rigg (Toronto, 1983), 16–7. See also Hanna, *Penn Commentary*, II, 123.

97 Sarah Wood, 'Monologic Langland: Contentiousness and the "Z Version" of *Piers Plowman*', *The Review of English Studies* (2016), 224–43, 233–4, n. 32. Wood adds that 'such recollection [from the B text] vitiates, of course, any suggestion that the unique Z line [Z.5.98, 'A haued a Northfolk nose. . .'] might reflect authorial draft prior to A' (233). Her conclusion is that Bodley 851 is not an authorial draft (or 'Z Version') but that it represents scribal 'misapprehension' (243).

98 Simon Horobin, 'Harley 3954 and the audience of *Piers Plowman*', in Graham D. Caie and Denis Renevey (eds), *Medieval Texts in Context* (New York, NY, 2008), xx–xx, 79.

99 Larry Dean Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 2008), 1.4286; Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, Volume 1: C Prologue-Passus 4; B Prologue-Passus 4; A Prologue-Passus 4* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006), 58–9.

100 Horobin, 'Harley 3954 and the audience of *Piers Plowman*', 79.

101 Horobin, 'Harley 3954 and the audience of *Piers Plowman*', 81.

102 In addition to Harley 3954, these include Q1 of Bodley 851 and Ashmole 146 (A Version); M. L. Samuels, 'Langland's Dialect', *Medium Aevum*, 54 (1985), xx–xx, 238; Horobin, 'Harley 3954 and the

instances, however, date from the early fifteenth century, but the 'William Longewille' pseudonym can help to push a Norfolk dissemination of the B Version, whether in written, oral, or fragmentary form, to before 1381.

V. B-VERSION REBELS

William Longwill is indeed a rare name, and the only time it occurs outside of the two related 1385 indictments, is, as Bennett points out, in a record from 1450.¹⁰³ Here, 'a labourer from Grays Thurrock named William Broun *alias* Long Wyll incited an insurrection "in the name of John Cade"'.¹⁰⁴ Yet Bennett does not link this nickname specifically to the fact that it was used by an (alleged) insurgent during Cade's Rebellion. But this means that, other than 'William *vocatus* Longwyll/Longewille' in the two indictments, the name 'William Longewille' only appears in the case of two rebels separated by almost seventy years. By extension, this opens up the possibility that the 1450 'William *called* Long Wyll' used 'Long Wyll' as a *nom de guerre*, especially as he is said to have taken it on himself to mobilize a rebel band. More importantly, perhaps, the Norfolk William Longewille lends support to the theory that both the A and B versions of *Piers Plowman* formed part of the poem's circulation among the rebels and rural dissenters of 1381.

The exact relationship between the poem and the rising of 1381 remains a fruitful area for *Piers Plowman* scholarship as Stephen Justice has demonstrated in his influential *Writing and Rebellion*. Soon after its publication, Justice was challenged about assuming that the B Version was available to the rebels. The argument against the availability of the B Version actually turned out to be one in favour of the A Version, and the objections were first made by David Fowler and Anne Hudson.¹⁰⁵ There is no space here to examine them, but two objections deserve close scrutiny. The first is intertextual in nature. Fowler examines the strongest link between *Piers Plowman* and the Peasants' Revolt, the text of the rebel letters.¹⁰⁶ The letters, he notes, omit Wrath from the list of the Seven Deadly Sins, as does the corresponding passage in the A Version, though not in the B Version, which includes Wrath.¹⁰⁷ To this he adds observations about historical references, arriving at a *terminus a quo* of 1383 for the B Version,¹⁰⁸ which led him to the dictum that 'only A could have fanned the

audience of *Piers Plowman*', 79–81; Horobin, '"In London and Opelond": The Dialect and Circulation of the C Version of *Piers Plowman*', *Medium Aevum*, 74 (2005), 248–69; Horobin, 'Manuscripts and Readers of *Piers Plowman*', 182, 187.

103 L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525* (Cambridge, 2004), 259. For the record, see TNA KB9/268, m. 32. Bennett, 'William Called Long Will', p. 5, gives this example.

104 Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death*, 259.

105 Anne Hudson, 'Piers Plowman and the Peasants' Revolt: A Problem Revisited', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 08 (1994), 85–106; David C. Fowler, 'Star Gazing: *Piers Plowman* and the Peasants' Revolt', review of Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1994), in *Review*, 18 (1996), 1–30.

106 On the rebel letters, see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 13–66; Susan Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', in Barbara Hanawalt (ed.), *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* (Minneapolis, MN, 1992), 201–21.

107 Fowler, 'Star Gazing', 6–7. For a full discussion of this point, see Johnston, 'William Langland and John Ball', 56; Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of 'Piers Plowman'* (Philadelphia, PA, 2010), 82, n. 72; Paul Megna, 'Langland's Wrath: Righteous Anger Management in The Vision of *Piers Plowman*', *Exemplaria*, 25 (2013), 130–51, 135–6.

108 Fowler, 'Star Gazing', 19.

flames of rebellion'.¹⁰⁹ Anne Hudson has also advocated the same date by arguing that an admittedly fairly vague passage, B.19.442–8, refers to the 1383 Despenser crusade.¹¹⁰ But this late date of the B Version has not been widely accepted, leaving only the intertextual objection in place: the omission of Wrath in the A Version and in the rebel letters. Strictly speaking, this is not an argument against a pre-1381 circulation of the B Version or against the idea that the rebels did not have access to this text; it is merely a point to show that the A Version may have influenced the letters. But there is good reason to believe that the C Version tempers some of those radical elements in B that corresponded to John Ball's views: '[Langland] removed from B.9 the language Ball had taken'.¹¹¹ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has made a strong case for the insertion of Passus 5 in the C Version as an authorial *apologia* following the excesses of 1381.¹¹² Furthermore, a number of readers, including Justice, have demonstrated the manner in which the C Version treats B as a public document, responding to it through modifications.¹¹³ The Norfolk rebel referred to as 'William Longewille' now offers an external document that strengthens the possibility that the B Version, or parts of it, were circulating in Norfolk before or in 1381.

The historical reality surrounding *Piers Plowman* is sufficiently commodious to host multiple approaches: perhaps a William de Rokele (of Essex, Norfolk, Oxfordshire, or elsewhere) penned a poem about *Piers Plowman* in the 1360s; the A version of this poem then circulated, whether 'authorized' or not, in the regions and perhaps in London, fanning the radicalism of the would-be rebels for years; this was the version most rebels had access to. All the while a more ambitious text was in the works—the B Version. This version was associated by its contemporary readers with 'Long Will' or 'Longwill' as the name or surname of its author. As the discovery of the 1381 rebel 'William Longewille' shows, the B Version became a part of the public literature available to the discontented labourers behind the Peasants' Revolt which intervened in the B-to-C process, but by this stage the B Version or parts of it were already in circulation in Norfolk, allowing a 1381 rebel who targeted the former sheriff of Norfolk to use the *nom de guerre* of 'William Longewille', a name that was taken to designate the author of the B Version, as the relatively high number of independent scribal remarks suggests. In addition, the Ploughing of the Half-Acre passage in the B Version provides a fitting explanation for Longewille's attack against Holdych's free warren in 1381. The new record can offer a terminus *ad quem* of June 1381 for B.15.152, though not necessarily for the whole version of the poem.

Whether the poem was indeed written by a William Langland, who may or may not have been the William de Rokele of Easthorpe in Essex or a William de Rokele of Norfolk or one of the other William de Rokeles, seemed not to have made a difference to early readers, certainly of the B Version, to whom any such information was not available, even though they paid close attention to the signature *qua* signature in

109 Fowler, 'Star Gazing', 4.

110 Hudson, 'Piers Plowman and the Peasants' Revolt', 100.

111 Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 245.

112 Kerby-Fulton, 'Langland and the Bibliographic Ego'.

113 Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism and Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1990), 70; Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 193–254. The dating of A, B, and C as summarized by Ralph Hanna remains generally accepted (Hanna, *William Langland*, 11–7).

B.15.152. The upshot of this realization is that archival revelations about Langland/de Rokele will have little bearing on how we understand the reception of the poem at the time; this may be the same sentiment that led Johnston to cite Justice and Simpson as examples of archival ‘despair’.¹¹⁴ What does matter, however, is that contemporary readers construed this line as revealing someone called ‘Long Will’ or ‘Will Long Will’, and that two rebels, William Longewille in 1381, and William Brown *alias* Long Wyll in 1450, may have used this name as a pseudonym that was derived either directly or indirectly from the B Version’s authorial signature. They did so in one case to participate in a poaching attack against a main landowner in Norfolk, in the other to launch a revolt in support of Jack Cade.

Appendix

1. TNA Common Pleas, CP40/483, m. 133d. Richard Holdych submits a plea of trespass against Richard Cappe, Peter Cappe, Thomas Baas and his son John, and William Longewille of Cotes in Norfolk.

Transcription:

[*Margin: Norfolkscira*] Ricardus Holdyche per Willelmum Bodeney attornatum suum optulit se iiii^{to} die versus Ricardum Cappe Petrum Cappe Thomam Baas et Iohanni filio eius et Willelmum Longewilles de Cotes de placito quare vi et armis liberam Warennnam ipsius Ricardi Holdyche apud Dudelingtoun et Colvestoun intrauerunt et in ea sine licencia et voluntate sua fugaverunt et lepores cuniculos phasianos et perdices ceperunt el asportauerunt et alia enormia etc. contra pacem etc. Et ipsi non venerunt Et preceptum fuit vicecomiti quod capiet eos si etc. Et salvo etc. Ita quod habeat corpora eorum hic a die sancte Trinitatis in xv dies proximo preteritos de quo die loquela predicta inter alias adiornata fuit hic vsque ad hunc diem scilicet in Octabis sancti Michaelis ultimo preteritis celebrato adiornamentum per breve domini Regis etc. Et vicecomes modo mandat quod non sunt inuenti etc Ideo sicut prius preceptum est vicecomiti quod capiat eos si etc. Et salvo etc. Ita quod habeat corpora eorum hic in Octabis sancti hilarii etc.

Translation:

[*Margin: Norfolk*] Richard Holdych, through his attorney William Bodeney, offered himself on the fourth day against Richard Cappe, Peter Cappe, Thomas Baas and his son John, and William Longewille of Cotes in a plea that they with force and arms entered the free warren of Richard Holdych in Didlington and Colveston without his permission and consent, chased, took, and carried away hares, rabbits, pheasants, and partridges and [committed] other outrages etc. against the peace etc. And they did not come. And the sheriff was ordered to arrest them if etc. And safely etc. So that he have their bodies here at the quindene¹¹⁵ of Trinity etc. last past from the day of the aforementioned

114 Johnston, ‘William Langland and John Ball’, 30 and n. 3 on the same page.

115 24–30 June 1381.

speech, [which] among other things was adjourned until this day (namely the Octave¹¹⁶ of St Michael last past celebrated), the adjournment [being] by a writ of the lord king etc.¹¹⁷ And the sheriff reports that they were not found etc. Therefore, as before, the sheriff is commanded to arrest them if etc. And safely etc. So that he have their bodies here at the Octave¹¹⁸ of St Hilary etc.

2. TNA Common Pleas, CP40/482, m. 451f. Richard Holdych submits a plea of trespass against Richard Cappe, Peter Cappe, Thomas Baas and his son John, and William Longewille of Cotes in Norfolk.

Transcription:

[*Margin: Norfolkscira*] Ricardus Holdyche per Willelmum Bodeneye attornatum suum optulit se iiiij^{to} die versus Ricardum Cappe Petrum Cappe Thomam Baas et Iohanni filio eius et Willelmum Longewilles de Cotes de placito quare vi et armis liberam Warennnam ipsius Ricardi Holdyche apud Dudelingtoun et Collestown intrauerunt et in ea sine licencia et voluntate sua fugaverunt et lepores cuniculos phasianos et perdices ceperunt et asportauerunt et alia enormia etc. contra pacem etc. Et ipsi non venerunt Et preceptum fuit vicecomiti quod attachiaret eos etc. Et vicecomes modo mandat quod nichil habent etc. Ideo preceptum est vicecomiti quod capiat eos si etc. Et salvo etc. Ita quod habeat corpora eorum hic a die sancte Trinitatis in xv dies pro Iusticie Et vnde etc.

Translation:

[*Margin: Norfolk*] Richard Holdych, through his attorney William Bodeney, offered himself on the fourth day against Richard Cappe, Peter Cappe, Thomas Baas and his son John, and William Longewille of Cotes in a plea that they with force and arms entered the free warren of Richard Holdych in Didlington and Colveston without his permission and consent, chased, took, and carried away hares, rabbits, pheasants, and partridges and [committed] other outrages etc. against the peace etc. And they did not come. And the sheriff was ordered to arrest them etc. And the sheriff reports that they have nothing etc. Therefore the sheriff is commanded to arrest them if etc. And safely etc. So that he have their bodies here at the quindene¹¹⁹ of Trinity for Justice And therefore etc.

University of Groningen

116 6–12 October 1381.

117 All legal cases were adjourned until Michaelmas term by a writ of 15 June (Ormrod, ‘The Peasants’ Revolt and the Government of England’, 8).

118 20–26 January 1382.

119 24–30 June 1381.