

First assignment; Middle English

Localisation of Piers Plowman

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This paper will attempt to localise Willian Langlands' *Piers Plowman* (B version) based on a 34 line extract covering pages 152 till 157. When taken in its entirety, the text is localisable to Ely in Cambridgeshire England, though – due to the limited number of lines – such a specific localisation is not possible in this paper's analysis. Instead, I will aim for a general area or region, paying no mind to the localisation of the full text during research.

This paper will be split into four parts. The first covers the methods used to localise the extract alongside problems that arose during the research process. The second-, and largest- section will detail the results of the survey. This includes the (tentative) localisation without considering the localisation of the full text to Cambridgeshire. Considerations concerning the localisation of the extract in light of the localisation of the full text will be discussed in the following two sections. The first will discuss the general accuracy of my localisation. Aside from covering the general accuracy, this section will also elucidate any disparities alongside the reasons why a more accurate localisation was not possible. The final section will conclude the paper with a renewed localisation and theory in light both of the research and the data available about the text in-full.

1 Methodology

The first step in localizing the 34 lines of *Piers Plowman*¹ was the creation of a linguistic profile. This profile is to contain the spellings of dialectally indicative words. Research on which words are dialectally indicative is available in the Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English².

The linguistic profile was created using a mixture of digital and manual methods. The first step was the creation of a simple computer program which creates a list of every word used in the text preceded with the number of occurrences. This program ignores all differences in capitalisation (So “The”, “the” and “THE” would all be counted together) though it has no way of recognising different spellings of the same word (Such as “the” and “þe”). This step was therefore followed with a manual combining of alternate spellings, as well as an ordering according to the extent to which each word is indicative of dialect. This ranking was done according to the order provided by the LALME.

The Linguistic Atlas was employed again to find the areas in which each of the spellings in the linguistic profile occurred. The eLALME makes this data available in the form of maps with red dots indicating every occurrence of a particular spelling which is definitively localisable to that place. Entering all the spellings from the linguistic profile resulted in a number of maps, ranked in the same order of dialectal indicativeness. Each of these maps exclude certain areas. For instance, the Middle English variant of the Modern English word “the” spelled with initial *th*- is indicative of the midlands and north England, excluding everything to the south of Worcester. With each map excluding certain areas, one can form a picture of where a particular text was likely to be written³.

These exclusions were then listed in a text document, once again ordered according to dialectic indicativeness. Afterwards, I grouped these exclusion areas according to their compatibility. If for instance one spelling was exclusive to Cornwall while another was exclusive to everything north, these were placed in different profiles, because –when taken together– they would exclude the whole of England, which is of course ridiculous. Such incom-

¹Henceforth “the text”.

²Henceforth LALME, with the electronic version being eLALME.

³Such localisations do not necessarily mean a certain text was written in that area, it could also mean that the scribe was from that area, or that the text he was copying from originated there.

patibilities occur specifically when looking at spelling variations which occur only once which may be misspellings, or may be accidental introductions of the scribe's native dialect. For this reason, my linguistic profile also included the absolute frequency of each spelling.

Lastly came the theorising about which profile, out of the three that emerged, was the correct one. I will explain my thought process further in the *Results* section, but here I will point out that, while one profile had many more individual words in its favour, the other had words which were highly indicative according to the LALME, thereby inclining me to pursue said profile as a potentially correct one alongside the one with more individual spellings.

2 Results

The results of the above explained research were as follows. There were three profiles. The first, with the most individual words in its favour being the Midland-Anglia profile. The second, with only two individual words, which were nevertheless highly indicative, localised to North England. And a final profile, or rather, an individual word whose spelling was virtually exclusive to both Anglia and Lancashire, thus being a sort of bridge between profiles one and two. Below you will find tables of these three profiles in the order which they are listed in this paragraph. Consult figure 1 attached at the end of this document for a visualisation of all three profiles.

Word	Spelling	Frequency	Excluded Area
The	"the"	18	South of Worcester
Her	"hir"	10	Cornwall and Wessex
Them	"hem"	6	North of the Wash-Whirl ⁴
Thy	"thy"	3	North of Wash-Whirl South of Cambridge
Then	"thanne"	3	North of Wash-Birmingham ⁵
By	"by"	3	South of Cambridge
All	"alle"	3	South of Cambridge
Though	"thow"	2	North of the Wash

Word	Spelling	Frequency	Excluded Area
She	"sho"	2	South of Wash-Whirl
They	"thay"	1	South of Wash-Whirl

Word	Spelling	Frequency	Area
Thy	"thyn"	1	Anglia and Lancashire

I believe the correct interpretation of the data above to be as follows. The text is localisable to the Midlands or Anglia, though the scribe has some northern tendencies. We see from profile three that this is not entirely uncommon, though profile two describes two very distinctly northern spelling variations which do not occur in the south or the midlands. These two variations are furthermore highly indicative according to the LALME, and can therefore not just be disregarded as outliers. Profile three can very well be discarded, as it contains a single spelling which occurs only once in the entire text, though its value is mainly in bridging profiles one and two.

The main reason then for the inclusion of profile three is to support the following theory. The scribes' native dialect – be that the dialect of his home town, town of study, or town of residence – is different from the dialect in which the source manuscript was written. One of these dialects conforms to profile one and the other to profile two. Profile three bridges the gap between these and supports the theory of a disparity between source-, and authorial-dialects.

I can not say with certainty whether the scribe was from the north of England while taking a lot of spellings from his Anglican source manuscript, or whether he was Anglican himself, copying a manuscript from the north largely in his own dialect. In fact, I am not *entirely* comfortable supporting this theory is general, due to the fact that, when looking at absolute frequency, the support for northern spellings is fairly sporadic. Such is the case with such a limited number of lines though.

⁴The Wash-Whirl line is one commonly found when analysing English dialects and indicates a line going roughly from the Wash North of Anglia to the Whirl by Liverpool.

⁵A line starting in North Anglia running through Birmingham.

3 Accuracy

As mentioned before, the LALME localises the entire of William Langlands' *Piers Plowman* to Ely, specifically to linguistic profile 673, which is a level of accuracy that is not reachable with the given 34 lines.

A primary difficulty was reaching a East-West localisation. Many spelling differences are indicative of Northern-, or Southern-English, with plenty of gradation, as can also be seen in the results above. Few variations allow for a separation between Eastern-, and Western- English, in this case between Anglia and the Midlands. Further difficulty came in separating indicative spellings from other sources of variation, such as simple misspellings. Finally, there is the difficulty addressed at length in the foregoing section, of the incompatibility between the Midland-Anglia profile and the Northern one.

Altogether then the localisation put forth in this paper does not disagree with the localisation to Ely, as Cambridgeshire is within the rather large area of the Anglia-Midland profile. However, this does not necessarily mean that the 34 line excerpt is fitting with linguistic profile 673. For instance the spelling of “she” in said profile is “sche” while “sho” is used in the 34 lines analysed for this paper. Interestingly, this is also one of the spellings which would indicate northern origins. The absence therefore of this variation in the full text explains the lack of consideration of Northern origins by the LALME.

4 Conclusion

The tentative conclusion given in the results section – that the scribe and source manuscript originated from different places, one from the Midlands or Anglia and one from the North – has to be adjusted to two major variables. First is the fact that no such consideration is present in the LALME localisation, as no such indications are significant when looking at the entire text. Second is the absolute frequency of indicators. If we look at those, we notice a total of four spellings in three words which would indicate non Midland/Anglian origins.

I included my theory on on the separate origins because of the limited number of lines. Four words is not a lot, though since the most frequent word occurred only 18 times, with subsequent words dropping rapidly in absolute frequency, the limited number of Northern spellings may nevertheless have

been significant. This went paired with the fact that the two exclusively Northern spellings present in the text are considered highly indicative by the LALME.

Despite these factors however, I must – in light of the full text localisation – disregard the indicators of profile two, and write them off as non-indicative variations such as misspellings.

In conclusion, based on the 34 line extract of Willian Langlands' *Piers Plowman*, I am localising the text to somewhere within the Midlands or Anglia. This localisation agrees with the LALME's decision to localise this text to Ely in Cambridgeshire, though this extract does not conform to linguistic profile 673.

Figure 1: Visualisation of the profiles
Profile one in pink, Profile two in blue, Profile three in yellow

