
Robert Adams’ *Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman* is both a welcome addition to the ‘Dublin Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature’ series and a volume which deftly fulfils the aim of the series to provide ‘revaluations of major aspects of the literature of the period as well as original studies which break new ground or offer fresh approaches to familiar subjects’.

In this study — a book whose relative slightness belies the scope of its historical research — Adams presents a fascinating history of Langland’s assumed paternal family, an account which both validates and expands upon some aspects of Oscar Cargill’s early (and, in Adams’s view, unjustifiably ignored) research in this area, and suggests an intriguing (if, in part, necessarily speculative) new context for readings of *Piers Plowman*.

Adams frames his research into the Rokeles with a preemptive and somewhat disarming response to the question which immediately springs to mind: ‘Why bother to compile a history of Langland’s paternal family [when] we know nothing with certainty about the actual life of William Langland himself?’ (11). As he points out in his provocative and entertaining introduction, ‘the same is technically true of [Langland’s] poetic contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer’ (11) [emphasis mine] whose poetic, as opposed to bureaucratic, activities receive no mention whatsoever in the copious contemporary material compiled by Crow and Olson in *Chaucer Life Records*. This, Adams observes, leaves open the possibility (implausible though it is) that ‘Chaucer the poet’ and ‘Chaucer the royal servant’ were, in fact, two different people. Indeed, as Adams notes, the famous memorandum of Dublin, Trinity College MS 212 provides ‘ironically, exactly one more piece of direct attestation for
[Langland’s] identity than we have for “Geoffrey Chaucer the poet” (13) — a point reiterated in Michael Bennett’s recent article on Langland’s identity in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies, 26* (2012), although Bennett suggests a rather different argument as to the poet’s identity:

One might wish to argue that there are perhaps technicalities and ‘technicalities’, but nevertheless, Adams’s rhetorical point is a valid one and, he somewhat polemically suggests, one that has had far-reaching implications for modern critics’ interpretations of the work of both poets. Whilst idiosyncratic readings of Chaucer are not, in Adams’s view, hard to find, they have however — unlike those of Langland’s poem — been circumscribed by a critical consensus as to the likely biography of their author:

‘Chaucer’s hypothesized public life has always continued to function, in the background, as an unobtrusive boundary of sanity, a trench-line of historical probabilities, separating interpretations of his poetry that sound merely elliptical from readings tinged with genuine lunacy.

No such public boundary marker has ever existed for Langland; his poem’s only protection against being distorted by critical ‘updating’ has been its general difficulty and the relatively small modern audience equipped linguistically and culturally even to misunderstand it’ [emphasis original] (Bennett, p. 14)

Rejecting, on grounds of ‘timidity and exclusivity’ (16), responses to the question of Langland’s identity which either ‘take at face value, and [are] content with, the attenuated, stereotyped autobiography provided by the B and C versions of the poem’ or which ‘adopt an affected agnosticism about the author’s real circumstances’ (16) — a perceived dichotomy which is, perhaps, open to challenge — Adams’s aim in this book is to demonstrate, firstly, the plausibility, and secondly, the implications, of Langland’s membership of the Rokele family.

To this end, the first chapter, ‘Some preliminary details’, offers a concise and thorough appraisal of the extant evidence for associating the author of *Piers Plowman* with the Rokele family. Most celebrated, of
course, is the memorandum of Dublin, Trinity College MS 212 [c.1400] mentioned above, which explicitly identifies ‘William de Langlond’ as the author of ‘Perys Ploughman’ and ‘Stacy de Rokayle’ as his father. Perhaps equally well-known is John Bale’s [†1563] note on the front pastedown of San Marion, Huntington Library MS Hm 128, which identifies the author of Piers Plowman as ‘Robertus Langland’ and specifies his place of birth as ‘Cleobury Mortimer’. This oddly specific reference to the poet’s birthplace seems vindicated by the records of deeds and grants made by various Langlands in the area over almost two hundred years, and Adams concurs with, amongst others, Ralph Hanna and George Kane in assuming that these relate to the poet’s mother’s family. (The confusion over his baptismal name, as George Kane has latterly argued in his 2004 Dictionary of National Biography entry on Langland, arose from a ‘mistaken inference from a scribal error’).

Re-enforcing the plausibility of this suggestion are the activities of various members of the Rokayle family in this area of Shropshire, as evidenced in legal records of their deeds and grants in lands within a twenty-five-mile radius of Cleobury Mortimer. Adams also summarizes the evidence found in the many extant Oxfordshire records relating to Eustace (‘Stacy’) de Rokayle, which indicate that the man assumed to be Langland’s father ‘was a prominent Shipton man’ (23) and reviews the important yet largely unpublished research, carried out in the 1990s by Lister Matheson and John Alford, pertaining to Stacy de Rokayle’s father, Peter de Rokayle, and their discovery that a certain ‘William Rokele’ was given the first tonsure c. 1339, probably at Bredon, Worcestershire. Although this William Rokele would be ‘of the right age and place’ (24) to be the future author of Piers Plowman, nothing more certain is known or can reasonably be inferred, although at the very least, a family connection to the poet is suggested.
The final section of the opening chapter surveys the evidence which suggests a longstanding relationship between a major Eastern branch of the Rokele family prominent in Easthorpe, Essex and Norwich and the powerful Norfolk family, the Butts — a relationship all the more intriguing in light of the fact that all three of the extant A-text MSS which contain the famous ‘John But’ coda are of eastern county provenance; and reviews the evidence in the register of papal letters for the parish transfer arranged in 1353 for an ordained cleric by the name of ‘William de Rokele’, a transfer, Adams argues, which never actually took place.

Having assessed the evidence for associating the author of Piers Plowman with the Rokele family and found it convincing, Adams devotes the next two chapters of his study (‘The Rokeles’ and ‘Prominent Rokeles of the fourteenth century’) to an examination of the Rokele family from the mid-twelfth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, with a view to supporting his assertion that Langland’s social and political outlook was influenced by the poet’s awareness of the standing of his father’s extended family.

Two important caveats are appended to this survey. Firstly, given the nature of the historical and legal records to which Adams refers, the personal identity of individual Rokeles cannot always be established beyond doubt, ‘even when someone mentioned in a surviving document occurs in the correct generation and has a name perfectly matching what we are searching for’ (28). Secondly, there is an implicit assumption that a shared surname, often in variant spellings, is sufficient evidence of a familial relationship. Adams counters the first objection as irrelevant: ‘what I intend to emphasize here are not primarily the hypothetical life records of the mysterious poet but rather the readily available and salient facts about his extended family, looking back through approximately eight generations (28). The second objection he addresses directly, with reference to geneticist Bryan Sykes’s research into the surprisingly high correlation between shared surnames (amongst men of
British ancestry) and shared Y-chromosomes. The correlation between name and kinship which is demonstrated in Sykes’s studies is, Adams suggests, likely to increase markedly in the context of late medieval England, and he presents a number of case studies in which documentary evidence would seem to support the view that various Rokeles, although geographically widespread throughout the country, at the very least, considered themselves to be related.

In these chapters Adams explores the history of the Rokele family; their holdings, both in London and beyond; and their involvement (as witnessed in extant legal records) in various arguments and legal tussles. The picture which emerges is of a prominent, wealthy, and influential clan (both in England and, in the early period at least, also in Ireland) — albeit one whose heyday perhaps predated Langland — who occupied a class position just below that of heritable titles. Adams’s research shows that the family’s original holdings appear to have centered on lands now in the eastern suburbs of London, and there is evidence also of substantial early holdings beyond this, including lands in Wiltshire, Buckinghamshire, East Anglia and the West Midlands. This information is helpfully summarized on a useful map of the major Rokele family sites from the twelfth century onwards (58). Adams demonstrates a fine command of local and family history as he documents the activities of the Rokele family over a two-hundred-year period, although readers less adept than he is at mentally juggling the family relationships and permutations of various similarly named members of the Rokele family over the course of eight generations might long for the inclusion of a family tree, however sparse, provisional or speculative!, as an aid to keeping track of who is who.

In his fourth chapter, ‘Problems with the “Langland” biography’, Adams moves from his survey of the Rokele family (in particular, the Rokele family in the fourteenth century) to a consideration of the
implications of findings for the critical history of *Piers Plowman*, and especially to Langland's assumed, if uncertain, biography. He focuses on four specific aspects: the Papal nominations; the seeming disappearance from public life of the 'William de Rokele' mentioned in the 1353 papal letters; the Beauchamp affinity; and the question of Will's marriage; and challenges, modifies or justifies some of the common critical assumptions made in Langland scholarship.

Thus, for example, Adams shows that despite the existence of 1353 papal mandate authorizing to 'William de Rokele' a benefice in the gift of the abbot of Peterborough (so long as the same William resigned from his leaving at Easthorpe, Essex), this transfer of parishes never actually took place. More interestingly, perhaps, Adams demonstrates the implications of the mysterious set of transactions in the records which led him to this conclusion: that of 'William’s extraordinary social connections and his sophisticated grasp of political realities' (80). In terms of William de Rokele's mysterious disappearance from the public records (a disappearance perhaps less mysterious when one considers the vagaries of document transmission and survival), Adams presents a plausible, if hypothetical case, for the former parson of Easthorpe taking up a position as a private secretary and/or domestic chaplain with a wealthy family on the outskirts of London. Such a family may perhaps have formed part of a wider network of sponsors or patrons willing to protect the author of a work containing trenchant spiritual and ethical criticism against potential ecclesiastical retribution. As for the question of Will’s marriage, Adams contends that the Dreamer’s ‘auto-biographical’ references on the subject should, on balance, be taken at face value, reconciling the existence of the Dreamer’s wife and child with the known facts of William de Rokele’s actual clerical life with an elegant simplicity: ‘How, then, can William also have become a priest? Just as easily, and canonically, then as now. All it would require that his wife had died,
allowing him to return to his original career path and take major orders’ (121).

In this chapter, no less than elsewhere, Adams’s speculations are plausible, provocative and thought-provoking, and they are contextualized throughout by reference to a very wide range of *Piers Plowman* scholarship, both established and recent, reflecting the highly detailed knowledge of both the poem and its critics that one would expect from a Langlandian scholar of Adams’s renown.

In the author’s view then, critical readings of Langland’s poem can no longer hope for ‘a cloak of cozy authorial anonymity to shield eccentric readings of *Piers Plowman* from stark historical scrutiny’. (125) If the authorship attribution in Trinity College MS 212 is to be believed (and there are various solid reasons for thinking it should be), Langland belonged ‘to a cadet branch of an old family with a broad horizontal line’. (126) In Adams’s reading, the poem’s authorial voicing of social and political opinion accords with that which might be expected of ‘the feudal worldview and honour code of a proud gentry family’ (127) and, he argues, is evidence of the ‘profound social chasm’ (17) that would have separated ‘William de la Rokele’ from poetic contemporaries or near contemporaries such as Chaucer, Gower, or the Gawain poet.

Whether or not one accepts in their entirety Adams’s lines of argument in this study, his latest book provides a rich and provocative context for thinking about the author of *Piers Plowman*, and as such this volume will be of great interest both to Langlandian scholars and to scholars of Middle English literature more generally.

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