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**DECORATIVE READING:
SOME IMPLICATIONS OF *ORDINATIO* IN *PIERS
PLOWMAN****

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Critical analysis of *Piers Plowman* frequently rests on two assumptions—the theory of bipartition (the division of the poem into *visio* and *vita*) and the related theory of segmentation of the *vita* into the triad: *dowel*, *dobet*, and *dobest*. These theories have resulted in readings of the poem invariably quadripartite and triadic and, in my view, have obscured the *dominant* of *Piers Plowman*—the dream vision genre. Bipartition and segmentation inevitably mask the B-text's unique arrangement of a sequence of dream visions (each with its distinctive generic markers of prologue, vision, and epilogue) and cloud any structural grouping of those visions. The *visio* section, for example, combines dream visions one and two (B. Prol., Passus 1–7), and any structural configuration which extends beyond this theoretical boundary seems untenable—perhaps even unthinkable—given the critical tradition of the poem. That critical tradition, however, rests on past editorial decisions and involves to some extent the suppression and misrepresentation of manuscript evidence of disagreement with, challenge to, and uncertainty regarding bipartition and segmentation. Some manuscripts foster suggestions of an alternative grouping of dream visions within *Piers Plowman*, suggestions that emerge from the *ordinatio*.

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A manuscript's *ordinatio* includes rubrication, as well as illuminations, writing styles or scripts, decoration of letters, drawings, pointers, paraphs, capitulum marks, and annotations.¹ I want to narrow my focus and isolate "decoration," in particular decorated initials, as *ordinatio*. My basis for such a study evolves mainly from the work of M.B. Parkes and A.I. Doyle on *ordinatio* and *compilatio*. Parkes observes that "[l]ayout and decoration function like punctuation: they are part of the presentation of a text which facilitates its use by a reader" ("Production" 224). From the thirteenth century on, he continues, layout and decoration become more important and more functional in relation to the text: "they not only facilitated use by readers but also interpreted the text transmitted to the scribe" (224). *Compilatio*, we might say, manages *ordinatio* by dividing existing materials into clearer divisions: "[t]he compiler adds no matter of his own," rearranging existing materials into "a new *ordinatio*" (Parkes, "*Ordinatio*" 59). Parkes contends that *compilatio* evolved into "a form of writing and . . . a means of making material easily accessible" (58). Parkes and Doyle significantly illustrate how management of layout functions as an interpretative tool for modern readers: "The *ordinatio* of the Ellesmere manuscript interprets the *Canterbury Tales* as a *compilatio* in that it emphasizes the role of the tales as repositories of *auctoritates* — *sententiae* and aphorisms on different topics which are indicated by the marginal headings" ("Production" 228). Manuscript layout or *ordinatio*, in other words, represents a signifying arrangement of the text, which not only facilitates (our) reading but connects us with medieval reception of texts.²

I wish to concentrate on the implications of decoration in five manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*: British Library MS Harley 6041 (an AC version — H²); Bodleian MS Digby 145 (also an AC version — K); Bodleian MS Rawlinson Poetry 137 (an A MS — R); Bodleian MS Eng.Poet.a.1 (an A-version — V — the Vernon MS) and Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17 (a B-version — W). These manuscripts represent all three versions of the poem,³ and while their decorative schemes may be more or less individual, they function within a general context of challenge to bipartition and segmentation of the majority of the surviving manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*. Decorative "subversion," in this sense, represents, not an aberration but a scribal response of scepticism for bipartition and segmentation typical of rubrication in the manuscripts.

No doubt Schmidt is right when he attributes modern theories of bipartition and segmentation to the editorial intervention of Skeat, who imposed the rubrication of some A-version (and perhaps C-version) manuscripts onto

the B-text in his influential edition (Schmidt xxx-xxx). Skeat's selection of rubrication reflects neither the A, B, nor later C manuscript traditions accurately, for it obscures the uncertainty of rubrication expressed not only in the codices of the other textual traditions but also in the A-version itself.⁴ Bloomfield pointed out years ago the weakness of segmentation; it had little internal support and relied too heavily, if not entirely, on rubrication: "references to the triad, if manuscript rubrics are omitted, occur only in Do-wel, and nowhere else, and that there the three Do's are defined in six or seven different ways" (116). Robert Adams demonstrated the unreliability of the rubrics of the B-text manuscripts in 1986 and has recently extended his argument with his examination to the C-text manuscripts. He concludes: "The status of the tetradic markers remains too much open to question to allow them to function as validation for anyone's reading of the poem" ("Langland's *Ordinatio*" 65).⁵

If segmentation falters, so does bipartition. Triadic segmentation and visio/vita bipartition define one another in a curious way, for the segmental triad (dowel/dobet/dobest) delineates the *vita* as it disengages from the *visio*. The uncertainty that plagues segmentation applies doubly for bipartition, for while most manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* show "some sort of major division" (Adams 62),⁶ that division is invariably undercut. The rubricators of neither the B-MSS nor the C-MSS employ the word "*vita*," and their application of the term "*visio*" (as in "*de visione*") frequently extends well beyond the old A-text demarcation of "*visio*" in both traditions (Weldon, "*Ordinatio*" 164).⁷ The extension of "*de visione*" into the rubrication of the dowel triad virtually eliminates the bipartition as well as blurs the function of segmentation, thus undermining it and calling it into question. Despite the segmentation of the *vita* into dowel/dobet/dobest which appears in all C-MSS and some B-MSS, this extension of "*visio*" suggests that scribes, cognizant of manuscript history with its erratic divisions yet unwilling to sever ties with tradition, "problematized" the issue.⁸ At any rate, the extension of *visio* into the *vita* section bridges the gap of bipartition (and therefore cancels the effect of segmentation) and introduces a note of structural uncertainty into the rubrication of both B- and C-MSS traditions. It is within this environment of scribal uncertainty that I now wish to place the decoration in the five manuscripts I cited above.

Decoration of letters in the *Piers Plowman* manuscripts ranges from the very simple (colouration, underlining, boxing) to the more complex, decorated initials with elaborated borders. In his discussion of the Vernon manuscript, Ian Doyle distinguishes several levels of decorated initials, the

functions of which vary from a kind of elevated punctuation⁹ to thematic and structural initials of larger, varying size. The larger structural and thematic initials begin secondary divisions of texts or Latin quotations, indicate primary divisions (single legends or miracles, chapters within a work), and finally, "the highest level, of varying numbers of lines," mark items and parts of the volume (7). Adjusting Doyle's descriptions slightly, I wish to distinguish structural initials from thematic and decorative ones. In *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, structural initials for the most part begin passus and rubrics, whereas thematic initials highlight passages judged significant by scribe or patron; decorative initials merely embellish the manuscript and serve no discernible thematic or structural function.

One of the sites of ornamental emphasis in some manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* occurs at B.8, the outset of the *vita* section according to the bipartite theory of the text. Here the emphasis falls upon B.8.62, where the initial "T" or "A" is significantly decorated within the decorative scheme of the particular manuscript.¹⁰ In itself, the line seems quite unremarkable: "And thus I wente widewher, walking myn one."¹¹ Mere embellishment, while plausible for manuscripts such as Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17, are wholly implausible for a plain manuscript such as Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Digby 145, and so the category of decorative initial seems unable to explain this instance of ornamentation. Thematic decoration also seems unlikely. Speaking of annotation in *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, Uhart observes that the seven deadly sins (B.5) "form the most consistently rubricated part of the text with the exception of the passus headings" (76), and Pearsall extends her list: "Other favourite subjects are the *distinctio paupertatis*, the ten commandments, the appearances of Piers (especially his testament), prophecies, the definitions of dowel, and the names of personae, especially the friars and other clerics" (xxiv). The subjects listed by Uhart and Pearsall that attract annotation in the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* are frequently those that receive ornamental highlighting by means of decorated initials. Thematic decoration in *Piers Plowman*, then, consists of decorated or ornamental initials not structural in function that highlight recognizable and popular moral themes and personae.

When we distinguish the various functions of decoration, the motivation underlying decoration at B.8.62 acquires a new perspective. The moral or thematic import of B.8.62 seems lacking, but the line itself begins a landscape description:

And thus I wente widewher, walking myn one,
By a wilde wilderness and by a wode side;

Blisse of the briddes abide me made,
 And under lynde upon a launde lened I a stounde
 To lythe the layes that the lovely foweles made.
 Murthe of hire mouthes made me ther to slepe;
 The merveillouseste metels mette me thanne
 That ever [wight dremed] in world, as I wene. (B.8.62-69)

This landscape continues the opening motif of wandering at the beginning of B.8:

Thus yrobed in russet I romed aboute
 Al a somer seson for to seke Dowel,
 And frayned ful ofte of folk that I mette
 If any wight wiste wher Dowel was at inne,
 And what man he myghte be of many man I asked. (B.8.1-5)

These two passages together form the non-narrative or landscape prologue material for Dream Vision 3 and circumscribe the dreamer's dialogue with the friars minor, forming a "split" prologue to the dream vision. In the first place, the location of the "Malverne Hilles" (B.Prol.5) established in the poem's Prologue remains by implication the designated actual locus of the conventional May/Summer setting.¹² In the prologue to Dream Vision 2, the wandering motif serves to make the dreamer's travels relative to the opening setting: he has his second dream "er I hadde faren a furlong" (B.5.5); that is, he has only moved a short distance within the opening landscape. In Pegasus 8, his "russet" clothing (B.8.1) recalls his rustic "shroudes" (B.Prol.2) and the "somer seson" (B.8.2) echoes the opening "somer seson" (B.Prol.1), as does the suggestive connective "thus" at B.8.1 with its overtones of continuations and logical connection. And this sense of interlinking prologue connections carries over to the reiterated wandering motif and landscape of B.8.62, "And thus I wente widewher," where the landscape description of B.8.62-69 picks up the key motifs from previous dream vision prologues, especially those of the Prologue. In these elaborated descriptions, the wanderer stops to rest in a conventional spring landscape; he "lenes" in both (B. Prol.9, B.8.65) to hear sweet sounds; and he dreams a "merveillous swevene" (B.Prol.11) and "the merveillouseste metels" (B.8.68). In this way, the first three dream vision prologues become linked, and the structural significance of these echoes and repetitions emerges all the more forcefully when we realize that their connecting motifs distinguish them as a specific group in the poem, radically distinct from its other dream vision prologues. These generic markers, with their identifying features of wonders, wandering, the world, and landscape, "concord" the first three dream visions and structure

the poem beyond the limits established by bipartition. Ornamental initials, then, which highlight B.8.62 move away from the rhetorical role of thematic emphasis to the generic function of structural significance.¹³

H² (British Library MS Harley 6041) and K (Bodleian MS Digby 145) are very plain witnesses of the hybrid version (AC) of the poem.¹⁴ H² has two systems of structural decoration: the *visio* portion marks passus breaks with a large plain red capital P three lines deep to begin the word “passus”; the *vita* section instead, while occasionally decorating the rubric, consistently distinguishes breaks by means of decorated (red) initials, ranging in depth from one to two lines, for the opening lines of each passus. Regardless, decoration in this manuscript functions to highlight visually the structure of the poem, the enlarged red capitals signalling the passus breaks and the *visio/vita* division in this manuscript. Thematic decoration consists mostly of highlighting the Latin quotations with an enlarged red capital, the text itself written in the same black ink as the rest of the manuscript.¹⁵ Thematic, too, is the red colouration of black initials beginning lines isolated by the scribe for emphasis.¹⁶ Touched up as well is the non-thematic and, in my view, structural, line: “[T]hus I wente wyde/ wher do wel to seken/ And so I wente be a wode/ walkyng myn one” (fol. 31^r) (emphasis mine).

K (Bodleian MS Digby 145) is even plainer; both the text and the rubrics are inscribed in the same black ink. Latin quotations appear slightly larger, but they, too, are written in black ink and in the same style as the text hand. Although no colouration or ornamentation adorns K, it would be incorrect to assume a complete lack of regard for visual presentation. The opening rubrics have black underlining, and darker or heavier black ink highlights the opening initial of each line of a new passus (not at Passus 10, 11, 14, 16).¹⁷ What is notable about this manuscript is that there is *no thematic decoration*, only “structural” decoration: the “T” in “[T]hus I went wyde were. dowell to sechen” (fol. 44^v) carries the same heavier, darker inking as the opening text of the passus: “[T]hus I robyd. . . .” (fol. 43^v), where the darker letters link the structurally significant prologue material mentioned above.

R (Bodleian MS Rawlinson Poetry 137), an A MS, has four plain red initials used for thematic emphasis.¹⁸ It also has red structural initials that differ in size from thematic initials; throughout the manuscript the first letter of the new passus causes two lines of textual indentation,¹⁹ whereas thematic initials characteristically cause only one line of text indentation.²⁰ The thematic initials draw visual attention to Piers (fols. 6^v, 22^r), Glutton (fol. 20^r), and Cutpurse (fol. 23^v), giving emphasis to the titular “hero” of the poem, to one of the sins, and to a reprobate whose despair leads to his

sense of exclusion from the divine process of salvation: "I haue no kyn þere" (fol. 23^v). The highlighted initial at fol. 30^r "[T]hus I we[n]te widewher.dowel to seche," while conforming to the size of the thematic initial (one line of text indented rather than two) performs here what we have seen is a structural function. This line carries none of the moral force of the other lines or passages highlighted by thematic initials in this manuscript—no sins, no Piers, and no reprobate. It serves only to echo the opening of the prologue to Dream Vision 3, "[T]hus, y robid in russet, I rombide aboute/Al a somer sesoun for to seke dowel" (fol. 29^v A.9.1-2),²¹ structurally grouping Dream Visions 1, 2, and 3.

These manuscripts in my view display different levels of structuring. H² employs colouration, K, heavier ink, and R, red initials. Whatever their poverty as "display copy" manuscripts, they indicate some scribal structuring, and in manuscripts where thematic decoration is at a minimum, it is all the more striking that we see in them structural decoration at B.8.62.

Bodleian MS Eng. Poet.a.1 (V—the Vernon MS) contains perhaps the most decorated version of *Piers Plowman*, and although the manuscript has illuminations elsewhere, there are no illuminations in the *Piers* section (fols. 394^v–401^v). Unlike most, this is a beautiful display copy with variations of gold, crimson, and blue decorated initials. There are no rubrics for this version except at Passus 9 (Passus B.8). Here one has to distinguish carefully between structuring initials, thematic initials, and merely decorative initials, for the majority of elaborated initials do not seem to have any systematic emphasis. Where many manuscripts highlight the seven deadly sins (A. Passus 5), for example, V decorates only the initial that introduces Gloton (A.5.146–fol. 398^r); other decorated initials in this passus mark the entrance of Repentance at A.5.43 (fol. 397^v), Clement the Cobbler's casting off of his cloak in the tavern scene with Gloton (A.5.168–fol. 398^r), and the vow of Gloton to observe fasting (A.5.210–fol. 398^r). Repentance and Gloton seem to be the focus of decoration here, to the exclusion of the other sins or figures, and this narrow if not arbitrary focus of decoration in Passus 5 typifies "thematic" ornamentation in Vernon. Does this represent the illuminator and/or patron's special interests or is the choice of ornamentation merely arbitrary, serving an unmotivated decorative impulse?

Structuring initials, however, differ, and those which mark passus breaks are invariably the most visually outstanding on the folio.²² The *visio/vita* split occurs at Passus 9, folio 400^r (see Fig. 1), where V's only rubric occurs: "Incipit hic. Dowel. Dobet. and Dobest."²³ It is not red letter, nor does it differ from the *anglicana* of the text. The scribe appears to have made an

error, for a space has been left for a decorated thorn, but it has not been filled in; it also appears to have been a rather small structural initial, only a depth of three lines. The interesting feature here is the large decorated initial that distinguishes the A-text's equivalent of B.8.62-63 on folio 400^v (see Fig. 2). A large thorn 6 lines deep with thick leafy flourishing sets this letter and paragraph apart from all other decorative initials—it differs both in size and substance with its fleshy tendrils (others are thin and wispy). This letter so relatively ornate on the manuscript page attracts visual attention to the lines: “[D]us I wente wyden wher Dowel to seche/And as I wente in a wode walkyng myn one.” In the Vernon MS, the rubric, with its omission of *vita* and plain execution, does not divide the text; rather, it sits in the text innocuously. The omission of the structuring initial at Passus 9, too, de-emphasizes bipartition, and even if the scribe had filled it in, its relatively smaller size would have been visually unremarkable. The elaborate initial beginning landscape paragraph, “[D]us I wente wyden wher . . . ,” emphasizes the connective tissue between Dream Visions 1, 2, and 3, and not their division, thereby “structuring” or reading the text.

Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17 also has several levels of decoration. All the passus breaks, for example, have large, decorated initials mostly 5-6 lines deep. Structuring initials together with rubrics set off separate passus. Folio top lines have elaborate ascenders, some touched with red, and some initials larger than usual.²⁴ This type of “structuring” initial, however, is of a different order than the other, because it is decorative more than functional, marking a new page only.

This manuscript has only eight decorated initials in addition to the structuring initials so described above, and they either attest to the perplexity of knowing or they give emphasis to dreams and dreaming, with one exception. At folio 10^v a large T marks B.2.115, at the point where Theology interrupts the marriage of Mede and demands that she be taken before the king in London to stand trial: “[T]hanne tened hym Theologie. . . .” This is a significant passage, of course, deserving emphatic “thematic” decoration.

The rest, however, deserve more comment. Four clearly emphasize dreams:²⁵

fol. 4^v large blue W, red flourishing

“[W]hat þis metels bymeneþ. ye men þ[a]t ben murye
deuyne ye. for I ne dar. by deere god in heuene”

(B.Prol.209-10— at the end of the mice and rats fable)

- fol. 43^v large blue M, red flourishing
 “[M](a)ny tyme þis metels. haþ maked me to studie
 Of þat I seiz slepyng. if it so be myȝte”
 (B.7.144–45—the end of Dream Vision 2)
- fol. 65^v large blue A, red flourishing
 “[A]c muche moore in metyng þus. wiþ me gan oon dispute
 And slepyng I seiz al þis. and siþen cam kynde”
 (B.11.319–320—the end of the first part of the inner dream,
 beginning the vision of Kynde)
- fol. 124^v large blue W, red flourishing
 “[W]han nede haþ vndernome me þus. anoon I fil aslepe
 and mette ful m[er]ueillously. þat in mannes forme. . . .”
 (B.20.51–52)

All of these decorated initials emphasize lines having the words “metels,” “slepyng,” or “metyng.” They either close and draw attention to dream-like passages the narrator puzzles over and finds difficult to interpret (the fable of the rats, the whole of the *visio* section), or they open new visions (Kynde’s vision, the coming of Antichrist).

The decorated initials at folios 65^v and 124^v perhaps function in two capacities: thematically, to emphasize “dreams,” and structurally, to set off the prologue to Dream Vision 8 and begin the vision proper of that passus. Dream Vision 8, of course, has its distinct prologue, vision, and epilogue, as do all *Piers*’s dream visions, and its prologue resembles that of Dream Vision 3. Both have “split” prologues, where intervening narrative material separates the beginning of the prologue from the end; in Dream Vision 3 (B.8) the Dreamer’s dialogue with the Friars interrupts the prologue, whereas in Dream Vision 8 (B.20), the Dreamer’s dialogue with Need interrupts the prologue. The scribe here provides a decorated initial in each case to foreground the connective prologue tissue:

- 124^v large blue W, red flourishing
 “[W]han nede haþ vndernome me þus. anoon I fil aslepe
 and mette ful m[er]ueillously. þat in mannes forme”
 (B.20.51–52)
- 46^r large blue A, red flourishing
 “[A]nd þus I wente wide wher. walkyng myn one
 By a wilde wilderness. and by a wodes side.” (Fig. 3)

With the decorated initial at fol. 46^r, we see once again scribal emphasis of the structurally connective “landscape” passage beginning at B.8.62.

Two of the decorated initials in particular are interesting. At folio 99^v a large I in the style typical of the manuscript introduces Faith: “[I] am feiþ quod þat freke. it falleþ noȝt to lye/ and of abrahames hous.an her- aud of armes” (B.16.176-77). Is this a matter of mere ornamentation? Of thematic interest? Or is it structural in function? The passage so marked begins a new narrative section following the conclusion of the inner dream at Passus 16.176-77, where the Dreamer has just encountered Piers and the Tree of Charity. He awakes, searching for Piers, and his wandering leads him to an unidentified Abraham. The dreamer inquires about his identity, and the decorated initial marks his reply, but it also signals the end of the inner dream and resumption of the external dream. In other words, the decorated initial at B.16.176 may be structural.

The final decorated initial I wish to consider occurs at folio 58^r, where a large T marks the text (Fig. 4). From one point of view this passage seems thematic, emphasizing the dreamer’s perplexity over Scripture’s explanation of what is required for salvation:

[T]his is a long lesson quod I.and litel am I þe wiser
Where do wel is or do bet. derkliche ye shewen
Manye tales ye tellen. þ[a]t Theologie lerneþ. (B.10.369-71)

Why this passage? The Dreamer’s perplexities have not caught the attention of the scribe before, although they are numerous. Perhaps the mention of Theology has caught his eye, corresponding to the similar thematic foregrounding of Theology we have seen before at B.2.115? If so, this emphasis is not consistent, for the scribe has missed Dame Study’s provocative dismissal of Theology at B.10.182: “Theologie hath tened me ten score tymes,” where the folio (54^v) has no emphasis, no annotation. Or the scribe could simply be, like so many scribes, arbitrary and inattentive. A more likely interpretation is that the subject has not been decorated according to a thematic scheme. Until this point the scribe has shown little interest thematically in *dowel* or *dobet*. No thematic initials emphasize discussions of *dowel* or *dobet*.

Throughout this manuscript, however, the scribe (one hand throughout) has been groping with the rubrication. There is no *visio/vita* bipartition in this manuscript, the word “vita” does not occur, and the expression “*de visione*” appears in the rubrics for Passus 9 and Passus 10.²⁶ Segmentation into *dowel*, *dobet*, and *dobest* does not begin until Passus 8, 9, and 10, where concurrent numbering features coexist together with new sequential numbering, so that Passus 8 “*de visione*” is also Passus 1 of *dowel*. This situation only continues to Passus 10, however. The rubrics to Passus 11, 12, 13, and

14 have concurrent Passus numbering only. Starting at Passus 15, *dobet* begins, and the rubrics display both concurrent and sequential numbering throughout the section until Passus 20, where *dobest* begins: "passus xx.[us]. de visione et prim[us] de Dobest" the rubric reads at folio 124^r. There are inconsistencies here—only part of the manuscript shows segmentation. The first passus of *dobest* is the only passus of *dobest*, and one wonders why the passus heading requires "primus." More to the point is the confusion within segmentation. Passus 8's rubrication reads: "Passus viij[us] de visione & primus de Dowel" (fol. 45^r). But Passus 9 contains an error: "Passus ix[us] de visione vt supra & primus de Dobet" (fol. 47^r). The rubrication for the next passus, Passus 10, corrects the segmentation heading, so that *dowel* is substituted for *dobet*, but now it has the sequential number of 2 instead of the expected 3: "Passus x[us] de visione et ij[us] de Dowel" (fol. 51^r). No wonder the scribe at this point returned to concurrent numbering at Passus 11, 12, 13, and 14! It should be pointed out, too, that the rubrication beginning segmentation at Passus 8 seems to be an afterthought. The text and the space for the decorated initial leave no room for rubrication; the decorated initial has been filled in, and the elaborated ascenders added, so that the rubrication is squeezed in at the top of the folio. It is under these confusing conditions that the lines emphasized by decorated initial at folio 58^r occur: "[T]his is a long lesson quod I.and litel am I be wiser/Where do wel is or do bet. derkliche ye shewen," in which case we now see them perhaps as structural after all, commenting obliquely on what Robert Adams calls the unreliability of the rubrics of the B-text.

If we pay attention to W's decorative scheme, we notice that of the eight decorative initials, seven provide "commentary" on dream vision genre. Four highlight dreams and dreaming (at fols. 4^v, 43^v, 65^v and 124^v); one provides closure to an inner dream and signals continuation of an "external" dream (fol. 99^v); one links prologues structurally (fol. 46^r); and one signals frustration with the problematic structures of inherited rubrication (fol. 58^r). Within the rather closed system of scribal decoration in the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, this represents a remarkable concentration of decorative effort. It is, in effect, a reading by means of decorated initials. Scribal *ordinatio* provides an emphasis on dreams and dream vision structure, a "decorative reading" of the poem in terms of genre.

Bipartition and its corollary segmentation have remained potent critical forces in *Piers Plowman* scholarship ever since Walter Skeat imposed an A-text division onto the B-text in his influential edition. So powerful is the bipartition theory that even so notable a scholar and editor as Derek

Pearsall in the introduction to his 1992 facsimile edition of MS Douce 104 can refer to the "vita" section of a manuscript where the term "vita" in the rubrics is absent (xvi). Early examinations of the structure of dream visions in *Piers Plowman* understandably concluded that the first two dream visions (Prologue, Passus 1-7) formed a distinct unit coincident with the *visio* section, a perspective that denies on the basis of bipartition any structure based on groupings of the dream visions themselves. Consequently, John Burrow's recent book, *Langland's Fictions*, with its genre-fragmenting concentration on endings and continuations, overlooks dream vision structure, while James Simpson's *Introduction to Piers Plowman B* continues the traditional division of the poem into dreams and waking moments, disintegrating the sequence of dream visions Langland so carefully creates in the B-text. However, several manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* give us reason to pause. The manuscripts I have brought into focus here exhibit traces of defiance to what may have already become editorial divisions of bipartition and segmentation. The consistency with which B.8.62 receives decorative emphasis suggests concern for dream vision structure, and, in this, these manuscripts join a number of other manuscripts that place importance on dream visions rather than bipartition — or perhaps despite it. One of these manuscripts, Trinity College, Cambridge, MS B.15.17, not only illustrates the fullest structural commentary by means of its decoration but also has remained a key text for critical editions, forming the basis for both the Schmidt and Kane-Donaldson editions. Yet it has never to my knowledge been "read" in terms of its *ordinatio*. Reading the *ordinatio* places us in contact with medieval reception of the text, with medieval readers and their responses, scribal readers who provide "contemporary" reactions to genre, and perhaps to interfering editorial *compilatio*. Manuscripts are not neutral witnesses to literary texts;²⁷ they are necessarily embedded in manuscript *ordinatio*, so that separating text from *ordinatio* is highly problematic, for the text as presented is always "read" to some extent. Moreover, "decorative" reading in the five witnesses above at the very least offers a (perhaps critically valid) medieval response to *Piers Plowman*.

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NOTES

¹ Only two manuscripts have illuminations, the single enclosed dreamer of Corpus Christi College, Oxford MS 201 (B-version) and more numerous illustrations in Bodleian MS Douce 104 (C-version). Marginal drawings are not unusual. The Yates Thompson MS at Newnham College, Cambridge (a B MS), marks a quadripartite structure with four drawings of what seems to be a bird of prey with outstretched wings standing on a patch of green in the bottom margins; it has a red L on its breast. British Library MS Harley 875 (an A MS) has three naked women drawn in margins. British Library MS Harley 6041 (an AC MS) has a number of shields with heraldic signs. A heron or crane appears at the end of Corpus Christi College, Oxford MS 201. And so on. By "pointers" I refer to devices such as the frequent use of sketched hands with fingers pointing to lines or passages in the text. Annotations frequently belong to later ages, but perhaps not always, and a thorough examination of marginalia in the manuscripts would be useful.

² Of course, more work on the identification of scribal hands and styles of ornamentation in the *Piers Plowman* manuscripts would contribute significantly to our understanding of reception and convention. Excellent work in this field has already been initiated by Hanna, Scott, Doyle, and Parkes.

³ The Z-text is not represented in the manuscripts itemized above, but, according to its editors, it reflects a precursor of the A-text coupled with a C-text. See the introduction to the Z-text by Rigg and Brewer.

⁴ See Skeat's title page and the title of his edition. The nature of the subsegmentation together with the phrase "secundum wit et resoun" comes from the A-tradition of the poem.

⁵ Tetradic markers refer to rubrication schemes which divide the poem into four parts: a *visio* and a tripartite *vita* consisting of *dowel*, *dobet*, and *dobest*. See Clopper for a defence of a quadripartite view.

⁶ Adams points to the division at A.8/9. The equivalent divisions in the B- and C-versions appear at B.7/8 and C.9/10.

⁷ The one exception is Cambridge University Library MS Ll.4.14 (a B-version) where the rubric at Passus 8 reads: "passus octauus de visione/ Explicit visio Willelmi de petro plowman et sequitur vita de dowel." This is written in a later hand, however. Chambers feels that this rubric recalls A-text rubrication so strongly that he suspects contamination (n.1, 313). See also my "*Ordinatio*" notes 16 and 17, pp. 172-73.

⁸ The strong case Adams makes for the unreliability of B MSS rubrication is further reinforced with his examination of the C MSS, and in particular the disagreement in C MSS over the location of "dobet" at C.17 or C18 (B.15 or B.16), which introduces an unusual rupture in passus division between the B and C texts ("Langland's *Ordinatio*" 63-64). I might add that this disagreement over the location of *dobet* in C introduces a real uncertainty about the authority of segmentation in the C MSS. If "dobet" begins at C. 18, then the "tree of charity" episode (B.16) becomes grouped with the equivalent of B. Passus 17 (dream vision 6) and not, as in the B-tradition, an inner dream connected with B.15 (dream vision 5). Thus the C-version resectioning of *dobet* at C.18 represents a fundamental dislocation of *dobet*.

⁹ For example, one-line initials after single-coloured paraphs become "the next level up of the punctuation" (Doyle 6).

¹⁰ B.8.62 in the Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17 begins "And thus . . .," so that the decorated initial is an "A"; the other manuscripts I discuss omit the "and," so that the decorated initial is a "T."

¹¹ All references to the B-text are to Schmidt's edition unless otherwise noted.

¹² The terminology is confusing. The term "prologue" refers to a generic structural unit of the dream vision poem, a highly significant structural unit in that it introduces the poem *as* dream vision and introduces the second structural unit, the vision proper. Each dream vision in *Piers Plowman* has its specific prologue, whereas the "Prologue" refers to the opening passus of *Piers Plowman*.

¹³ For a more detailed exploration of this kind of dream structuring, see my "Structure of Dream Visions."

¹⁴ H² has inconsistent structuring. Structuring initials in the A-portion for the most part consist of large plain red capital P's for "[P]assus," indenting the rubric and one line of text, the size and colour marking the passus break visually in the manuscript. Thus *incipits* structure the text by dividing it into passus; the *visio* section ends with the only *explicit* in the A-portion, with a relatively more elaborate decorated initial, a red "E" (fol. 30^r). The *vita* section unfolds differently, sometimes highlighting the first initial of the rubric with a large red 3-line capital, sometimes highlighting the rubric with a single-line plain red capital, and sometimes omitting colour differentiation altogether. Unlike the *visio* section, the first letter of the passus (*text*) in the *vita* is red and enlarged, varying from 2-line to a 1-line capital. Except for the prologue (H².prol.fol. 1^r), which has no rubrication, and Passus 1 (H².1.fol. 2^v), which has a plain red capital W, with black flourishing, indenting two lines of text ("[W]hat the monteyne be meneth . . ."), the A-portion of H² has structural decoration only.

¹⁵ I describe the ink as black. Often it is not easy to distinguish whether the ink in the manuscripts is faded black or faded dark brown.

¹⁶ As for example, at 27^v: "Than wer[e] many merchants meri/ many lepte for joyze" (my underlining).

¹⁷ At times, these heavier, darker capitals show degrees of elaboration (for example, elaborate at Passus 18; larger at Passus 19 and 21; and elaborate and heavy at Passus 20). The degrees of elaboration may be owing to scribal inattention. Heavier inking in this manuscript, however, functions as decoration, whatever the degree of elaboration intended by the scribe.

¹⁸ This requires some qualification. The entire line beginning "Now is pers and þe pilrmys. to þe plow . . ." (B.6.105), partly missing because of a hole in the manuscript, is, like the rubrics, written in red ink (fol. 6^v). Although the initial itself is not "thematic," one might argue that the entire line is, and so I count it as one of the four instances of thematic decoration in the manuscript. This line, of course, is erroneously positioned in R's Passus 1.

¹⁹ There is obviously a scribal error at the beginning of Passus 2. The rubric, in a slightly larger more formal style than the text, appears in red: "Passus secundus de visione" (8^r), but the first line begins simply: "3nt kneed I . . ." without the customary colour or indentation. A marginal note to the right repeats the rubric, but the scribe, responsible for the formal red ink style of rubrication as well as structural and thematic initials, forgot the initial once he had completed the rubrication. This is the only instance in the manuscript of this kind of "structural" error.

²⁰ Rubrics in R are red-inked, and usually the first letter of the first line of the passus is red. The intention clearly is to mark structurally the poem's divisions. Sometimes the scribe has forgotten to ink such letters in red (fol. 8^r), and the first line of the poem seems highlighted for special decoration (fol. 1^r), which again the scribe has forgotten to complete.

²¹ Kane's edition; all further references to the A-version will be to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

²² They are usually the largest — Prologue, Passus 1, Passus 3, Passus 4, Passus 8, and Passus 11, but even where they are not the largest there are other attributes which render them visually foregrounded — a brighter, more clearly defined border and /or a position foregrounded by spills into the margin. Folio 401^r — a slightly larger thorn with a lighter, more clearly defined border introduces the passus break at Passus 11.

²³ Although Vernon has only the one rubric for *Piers*, the scribe has left spaces separating the passus, however, suggesting that further rubrics were to be inserted, which for some reason were omitted. This in turn suggests that the Vernon manuscript was copied from a manuscript or manuscripts that had in place a system of rubrication. But which system? The scribe has also omitted to fill in a letter — see below.

²⁴ An example is a very large N at the top of folio 27^v, “[N]ay sobly he seide.sauē in my youþe” (B.5.237 — Covetise).

²⁵ The readings here and below are those of Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17; to facilitate easy perusal, I include references to Schmidt's text in parentheses.

²⁶ “Visio,” in other words, extends well into the *Vita*, blurring if not eliminating bipartition.

²⁷ For a recent study and articulation of manuscript “reading,” see Huot 2–15.

The first part of the page contains several lines of text, some of which are written in a larger, decorative hand. The text is arranged in a column and includes various words and phrases, some of which are underlined or otherwise highlighted. The handwriting is dense and somewhat difficult to read due to the cursive style and the presence of many small letters and flourishes.

The text begins with a large initial letter, possibly 'A', followed by several lines of text. The words are written in a compact, cursive script. There are several lines that appear to be headings or section markers, written in a slightly larger hand than the main text. The overall appearance is that of a medieval manuscript page, with a focus on the visual arrangement of the text.

The text continues down the page, with some lines being more widely spaced than others. The handwriting remains consistent throughout, with some variations in the size and style of the letters. The page is filled with text, leaving very little white space between the lines.

The bottom of the page contains a few more lines of text, which appear to be the end of a section or a chapter. The text is written in the same cursive hand as the rest of the page, and is arranged in a similar columnar format.

The second part of the page contains several lines of text, similar to the first part. The text is written in a cursive hand and is arranged in a column. There are several lines that appear to be headings or section markers, written in a slightly larger hand than the main text. The overall appearance is that of a medieval manuscript page, with a focus on the visual arrangement of the text.

The text begins with a large initial letter, possibly 'A', followed by several lines of text. The words are written in a compact, cursive script. There are several lines that appear to be headings or section markers, written in a slightly larger hand than the main text. The overall appearance is that of a medieval manuscript page, with a focus on the visual arrangement of the text.

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The bottom of the page contains a few more lines of text, which appear to be the end of a section or a chapter. The text is written in the same cursive hand as the rest of the page, and is arranged in a similar columnar format.

Fig. 1: The Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng.Poet.a.1 Folio 400f

And I seide þe same . same yolk fro my name
 And zyne yolk ge on þis grounde . good men to hope

This þus q weite weide wey . walking myn one
 by a weilde weidnesse . and by a weide weide
 weide of þe weides . þouzte me as þe f

And weide a weide wey on a weide . denes q a stonde
 To þe weide weide . so donch fweles made
 weide of weide weides . made me wey to weide .
 The weide weide weide . mette me weide
 That wey weide wey . ni weide as q weide

A weide man as me weide . and lik to my weide
 weide and called me . by my weide name

What weide quod q we . þe weide my name knowest

What weide weide weide quod he . and no weide weide

Weide q weide weide weide . weide weide he weide
 q weide weide weide weide . weide weide me no weide

Fig. 3: Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17 Folio 46^r

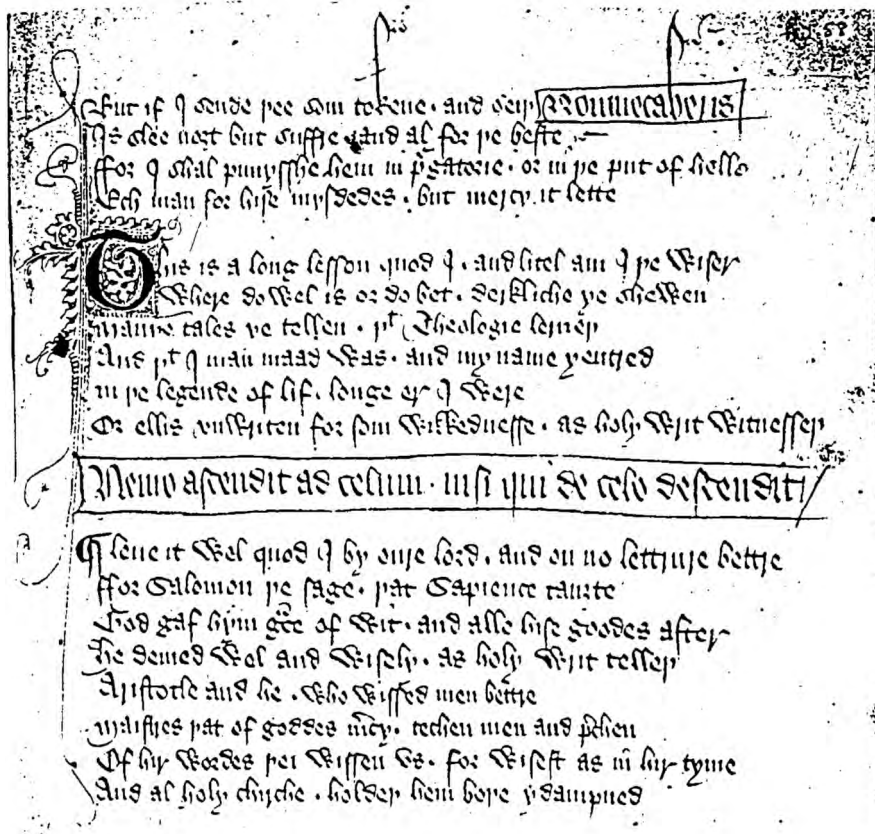


Fig. 4: Trinity College, Cambridge MS B.15.17 Folio 58r

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