

Robert Adams. *Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman*.

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Scholars have long been aware of two persistently useful and, at least in some ways, verifiable documents concerning the life of the author of the late fourteenth-century allegorical poem, or poems, *Piers Plowman*. Sound as both documents have proven to be in many respects, the label “life records” is hardly suitable: neither document is from the poet’s lifetime, and one almost certainly gets his name wrong. An early fifteenth-century copy of *Piers Plowman* includes a colophon naming William Langland as both the author of *Piers Plowman* and the son of Eustace de Rokele, living in Shipton under Whychwood in Oxfordshire; the sixteenth-century bishop John Bale noted that Robert (*sic*) Langland was born in Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire, near Malvern Hills, where the narrator repeatedly situates himself.

These precious scraps have, however, hardly been the main bases for pondering the poet’s life, since his literary self-depictions are so evocative and in some sense compellingly real, though they have led to a host of discrepant assumptions about who he really was: from an indigent, revolutionary, or odd-job vagrant cleric to a learned theologian or even a bishop. More recent work, especially a 2003 *ODNB* article by the late George Kane (using, like Adams, unpublished research by John Alford and the late Lister Matheson), has opened up the question of tracing the Rokeles, including one of the several Williams of that family, this one taking first tonsure in Worcester in ca. 1341.

This still seems meager, and has not fundamentally changed how we read the poem. Adams, however, has now excavated deeply and expertly the history of the Rokeles, especially uncovering their ties with more powerful figures even as the family declined in wealth and position, while retaining a sense of former dignity. Adams’s achievement is not only to lay out a terse history of the Rokeles (in two branches that may have been initially unrelated but that conformed a sense of a single far-flung family: a major and generally more noble branch, and a cadet and generally more commercial branch), but also to track other families and notables with whom Rokeles maintained associations. Most stunningly, he reveals the likely long-term protection by the Beauchamp family of a sometime priest of Redgrave in Essex, William de Rokele, the recipient of that Worcester tonsure, whom Adams plausibly argues was the “Long Will” of the poem and who here gains at least one important new life record.

Chapters on the history of the Rokeles are followed by a chapter mainly exploring how the former Redgrave priest’s career might fit the poet’s disrupted life, then a chapter sampling the political and social implications for the poem that this connection might produce. Relevant passages from the poem appear in an appendix; a too-small map helps guide the intricate and recursive discussion of various local places. A family tree would help more.

Adams is wise in archival skills and medieval politics, and convincing in positing clan loyalty among the disparate Rokeles as well as their tradition of legal expertise, with a streak of baronial violence that, he aptly notes, the poem does not always condemn. The inquiry into William de Rokele is brilliant (though the idea that the poet's wife died young is contradicted by how frustrated the narrator's wife is when Elde leaves him impotent). Readings of a few passages offer some new local political resonances. But most of the book's literary methods are blunter: they stress the gentry or feudal outlook of a member of an elite world, where laborers should keep to their tasks and social bounding is repellent. Adams's squibs against the "theory" sought by "English graduate students" (14), and against anyone who uses the thought or at least the names of Marx and Foucault — thereby, in Adams's view, regarding the past as merely a mirror displaying "distorted images of ourselves" (15) — may sharpen the emphasis on the major discoveries Adams presents. In many ways this is the breakthrough study of the poet's life that many have hoped for. But there must be better ways of framing all this than making biographical criticism seem like a limiting and narrowing tool, against which other frameworks are "futile or comical" (15), and in which even the poet must occasionally be denied any "odor of [medieval] theorizing" (132). In fact, Adams's categories for analyzing social outlooks are themselves indebted to Marxist traditions (he even uses the anachronistic word "class" [128]), while his hints at how malleably the poet figures his vagrant persona and diverse ways of knowing have parallels to Foucault's ideas, which might indeed inspire others to take such analyses into further and not necessarily less useful scope. As most of this book demonstrates, a new world of biographical Langland-Rokele criticism is a liberating opportunity for reassessing not only the local, but also the major issues of late medieval culture, in the conflicting and irresolute ways to which those who love *Piers Plowman* are so drawn.

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