

Comments on Arthur Versluis, “*Piers Plowman*, Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies”¹

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1. On pp. 104-5 Versluis gives a short characterization of the A-, B- and C-texts of *Piers Plowman* in which they are called “the most exoteric” (A), “the more esoteric” (C) and “the most esoteric” (B) “of religious truths.” This can hardly convince: the terms are new to *Piers Plowman* scholarship and a mere reference, in a note, to a work the reader cannot be supposed to know is of little help here.

2. To prepare the reader for his analysis, Versluis wonders whether the B-text’s opening line “In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne” might not give us a first hint that the alliteration has an extra significance in the poem. He argues this on the basis of the combination “somer seson,” in which “clearly,” Versluis says, the word *seson* “is included for its assonance, not for its use” (105). This, in my view, does not immediately convince. In the first place the opening is highly conventional. In the notes to this line in his edition of the Prologue and Passus I-VII, J. A. W. Bennett points out that a similar opening may be found in a number of alliterative poems of more or less the same period. By way of illustration I quote the opening lines of two of them:

Somer Soneday

Opon a somer soneday se I þe sonne
Erly risinde in þe est ende,
Day dawep ouer doune, derknes is donne,
I warp on my wedes, to wode wolde I wende. (1-4)

The Parlement of the Thre Ages

In the monethe of Maye when mirthes bene fele,
And the sesone of somere when softe bene the wedres,
As I went to the wodde my werdes to dreghe, . . . (1-3)²

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As to the interpretation of the opening line one might equally well argue as follows. By means of the phrase “somer seson” the poet wants to indicate that this particular, pleasant day fell when it was no longer winter (there can be nice and sunny days in the winter too); in other words, he wants to make clear that it was the summer, not the winter season (with all its symbolic implications).

3. As Versluis says in n. 7, the line numbering of the texts is not identical. What he does not add is that the uncertainty which this reflects is due to the enormous diversity in the manuscript tradition. It is therefore a most unscholarly procedure to decide to use not the standard edition by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, but that by A. V. C. Schmidt, merely because the line numbers happen to lend support to Versluis’ analysis (B.VII.133 is 132 in Skeats’ edition, 138 in Kane and Donaldson). Due to this methodological flaw any interpretation which involves line numbers is questionable.

4. If Versluis’ analysis of B.VII.133-34 (pp. 105-6) is correct, it means that Langland must have worked it into the B-version while revising it from the A-text as an new idea, for the latter text has the same lines (A.VIII.119-20), without giving rise to critical comment by Versluis (the lines are lacking in C).

5. There are not three “C-sounds,” as Versluis wrongly calls them (p. 106), in B.VII.134—they are all three pronounced as [k]. It is true that *conscience* and *cam* are practically always spelled with a *c* in Middle English, but *kenned* never is. And since C and K, unlike I/J or U/V, occupy two different places in the medieval alphabet, they cannot be taken to represent the same number here.

6. L (p. 106) is not the twelfth letter of the Middle English alphabet—as appears from the second number poem quoted by Versluis on p. 103, in which S equals 18 and U 20. Of course, this objection would lose its validity if there were no such thing as a (reasonably) fixed alphabet order. However, if there were no such thing poems as quoted by Versluis could and would never have been written, because they would be

pointless, and so would be the kind of interpretation that Versluis presents. Hence I do not contend the numerical approach, but the mistakes that are made in its application. It seems at least careless at one point to quote a Middle English poem which gives as number=letter combinations 8=H, 9=I, 18=S and 20=U, and at another to say that in the ME poem *Piers Plowman* L=12, for the first series must necessarily lead to the conclusion that L=11 (this is because, as said above, I and J together occupy one place). Immediately related to this is what Versluis says about the letter M. As all readers of Middle English poetry know, the letter M and the number 12 are significantly linked in the poem *Pearl*. If the letters F and G, and their corresponding numbers 6 and 7, are so important in *Piers Plowman*, then why is there no use for the combination M and its number? Is it because Versluis thinks (wrongly, as I have shown) that M=13?

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NOTES

¹*Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 103-39.

²Both quoted from Thorlac Turville-Petre's anthology *Alliterative Poetry of the Later Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1989).