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THE ABBESS'S ABC¹

Josephine Koster Tarners

IN PASSUS 7 of the B text of *Piers Plowman*, lines 107-41,² Piers takes his newly purchased pardon to a priest for interpretation. When told that it is worthless, he tears up the document and vows to pray and do penance for the rest of his life, to change his work from *laborare to orare* in accordance with the teaching of St. Luke and others. In patronizing tones, the priest asks Piers where he became "tettered a litel . . . [and] lerned . . . on boke." In reply Piers asserts:

"Abstynence þe Abbesse myn a b c me tauȝte,
And Conscience cam after and kenned me bettre."

(137-39)

His reply sparks a violent debate with the priest about Piers's supposed usurpation of priestly authority. A modern reader may well be puzzled over the nature of this dispute. What kind of credentials are they fighting about? What kind of education does Langland mean by that alliteratively empha-

sized *abc*? The *Middle English Dictionary* lists four possible meanings under *abec*; the citation from *Piers* is third earliest, following only uses in Robert of Gloucesters's *Chronicle* and the *Ayenbite of Inwyt*. The early date for such a term immediately offers the possibility of fluidity of meaning; a new word is necessarily a hard word, one that readers must aggressively attempt to interpret. Beyond this there is the possibility of assonantic word play, as Huppé pointed out many years ago (1950), and of a traditional meaning established by biblical commentary and glosses. Each of these meanings alone

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the session "Langland and Lexicography" at the 22nd International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, May 1987).
2. All citations from *Piers Plowman* will be taken from the B text, edited by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson.

might provide adequate glossing for Langland's line. But each alone also has its drawbacks, leaving crucial questions about the text's meaning unanswered.

To define this term, then, we must first establish who the Abbess is. Judson Allen's suggestion that she personifies *Abstinencia*, the first topic in many medieval collections of *distinctiones*, is a plausible beginning (355). That she also personifies those books themselves, the kinds of books to which Langland himself resorted, is also possible, if less likely. But she must also represent Abstinence as an element of desirable conduct, as the preceding context makes clear. (Piers has just resolved to forgo "bely ioye" for God's provision—in other words, to adopt a life of abstinence and *mesure*, self-restraint.) Finally, Abstinence may be a poetic convenience; the alliteration requires a vocalic stave. All of these possibilities are present simultaneously as we interpret *abece*.

The first meaning of this term offered by the *MED*, the 22-letter alphabet, is the obvious one. As Eileen Power points out, while nunneries did not provide as large a part of medieval schooling as is commonly believed, an abbess might well have taught a schoolboy his letters; such dame school instruction was common in England at that time, and nuns commonly served as teachers (80–82). A generation after Langland's poem was written the guild records for Boston list a *magistra scolorum* Maria Mereflete (Adamson 59; Orme 55); and among the Lollards, many women were teachers (Cross; Aston). Nevertheless, such a meaning seems too understated for this crucial point in the text. Piers seems to have learned rather more than his alphabet from his instructor.

This is also the case with the second meaning in the *MED*, a primer or textbook (the gloss favored by the *MED*). The primer was the standard textbook in dame schools; it contained the *Pater Noster*, the *Ave Maria*, the *Credo*, occasionally some moral extracts in the vernacular, and some of the Psalter. Most children learned its contents around the ages of three or four; and nearly any literate person could teach its contents. But again, the critical situation of the poem suggests that this gloss alone is too simple to account for the word in its local context.

The third meaning cited by the *MED*, the generalized rudiments or fundamentals of a subject, may be more apt. In this sense, Abstinence, the faculty of personal and moral restraint, is an appropriate teacher of the fundamentals in a course of instruction to be concluded by Conscience, the faculty of moral judgment. The local context of the passage indicates that the academic "subject" in question is the restraint of "bely ioye" and the promotion of self-discipline. Here a related meaning not cited by the

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MED may provide clarification. In at least one Middle English text, *abecce* means "an exemplar for study or imitation." *The Fests and the Passoun of oure Lord Ihesus Christ* (Bodley MS. Holkham Misc. 41) reminds readers:

... a Pater Noster [is] the most principal prece of alle other preitis, which is an Abce, and former of alle other orisons. (fol. 2v)

If we combine this meaning, exemplar or best model, with the notions of fundamentals, the contents of the primer, and an emphasis on self-governance, then we get a closer sense of what *abc* may have meant to Langland here: the fundamentals of Christian belief, as taught in the primer and applied to the lives of women and men.

Nor can we forget the fourth lexicographic meaning, the literary form called an *abc*, such as the *ABC of Aristotle*. According to the *MED*, the two earliest surviving examples of English literary *abc*s are Chaucer's poem to the Virgin and one referred to in the Wycliffite Bible Prologue to Jeremiab. And both bear some resemblance to the scene in passus 7: Chaucer's translation from Deguileville incorporates prayerful, tearful penitence, and the resolution to amend sinful behavior. The Wycliffite example refers to the "fourfold" lamentations over the destruction of the city "folden to the mesure of metre and vers." In the "metre and vers" of the B-text passage examined here, Piers has asserted his intention to "wepen whan [he] sholde werche" (125). If lamentation and repentance were considered acceptable elements of this literary form in the late fourteenth century, this meaning also carries weight as a possible gloss. Of course, some other literary acrostics did not carry penitential emphasis, such as those from the Psalms; these lessen but do not exclude the possibility of a contributory element from this meaning.

Langland's keen sense of wordplay must also be taken into account. As Huppé so neatly put it, "To play with the etymology or the sound of a word until it revealed an image, a symbol, or a moral, was to move on the high road to Truth. . . . [There is] a consistent use in the poem of word play involving consonance, rhyme, and vowel harmony. Even clearer is the poets use of play with homonyms" (165-66). The paronomastic repetition of the first three sounds of the alphabet in *Abstinence* and *abc* reinforces the association of moral restraint with fundamental belief. James Simpson has recently contended that this punning repetition establishes a very real distinction between moral practice and moral theory: "The very structure of the words themselves, 'Abstinence,' 'Abbesse' and 'a. b. c.,' contain the argument that the real, moral a. b. c. lies not in school-education, but in hard-ship and discipline" (51). Langland's demonstrated use of wordplay as an

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element of meaning forces us to consider the possibilities suggested by paronomasia and assonance in establishing the meaning of this line.

The exact association of *abc* with glossed Bibles and collections of *distinctiones* is impossible to establish; it may represent a term in and of itself, or be a convenient piece of terminology used in other definitions. It is worth noting that in the Liverpool University Library MS. F.4.8 of *Piers*, *abc* is entered in red ink, in the same manner as are Latin scholastic terms and quotations from authorities. While the precise nature of this association remains as yet unclear, at least one scribe of the poem associated *abc* with the tradition of Latin learning.

None of the meanings cited by the *MED* alone seems to account for all the circumstances in the text: the identity of the Abbess, the nature of the instruction conveyed, and the local context of Piers's resolve to move from the active to the penitential life. But if we take elements of all the meanings together, we may construct a gloss that begins to suggest the complexity of Langland's meaning: "Abstinence first taught me the rudiments of Christianity—the *Pater*, *Ave*, and *Credo*—as a model for my life, and showed me how to conduct myself with *mesure*. Then the faculty of moral judgment gave me more advanced instruction about the implications of the superior penitential life I've now taken up."³

Such a polysemous gloss of *abc* seems the only way to approximate Langland's meaning, and to understand why the priest, a *detractor*, accuses Piers of setting himself up as a "diuinour in diuinite, wiþ *Dixit insipiens* to [his] teme" (141). Piers claims a far superior moral education than what such priests provided most lay people; given the incomplete education of most of the clergy in Langland's day, he may well have had a valid claim. Many of the more than 7,000 lines in the text require similar polysemous glossing to cope with their complexities. This line provides an object lesson in the lexicography of Langland: his text is often most complex, his meaning most tantalizing, when his words are as simple as *abc*.

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3. For a similarly multi-faceted reading of these lines, see Schmidt 86-87.

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