



# Conscience and the Composition of Piers Plowman (Oxford English Monographs)

*Sarah Wood*

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*Conscience and the Composition of Piers Plowman* provides a detailed account of one of the central personified figures in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Previous critical accounts of Conscience either focus on discussions of the faculty conscience in scholastic discourse, or eschew personification allegory as a useful category in order to argue for the figure's development or education as a character during the poem. But Conscience only appears to develop as he is re-presented, in the course of *Piers Plowman*, within a series of different literary modes. And he changes not only during the composition of the various episodes in different modes that make up the single version, but also during the composition of the poem as a series of three different versions. The versions of *Piers Plowman* form, this book argues, a single continuous narrative or argument, in which revisions to Conscience's role in one version are predicated upon his cumulative 'experiences' in the earlier versions. Drawing on a variety of materials in both Middle English and Latin, Sarah Wood illustrates the wide range of contemporary discourses Langland employed as he composed Conscience in the three versions of the poem. By showing how Langland transformed Conscience as he composed the A, B and C texts, *Conscience and the Composition of Piers Plowman* offers a new approach to reading the serial versions of the poem. While the versions of *Piers Plowman* have customarily been presented and read in parallel-text formats, Wood shows that Langland's revisions are newly comprehensible if the three versions are read in sequence.

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