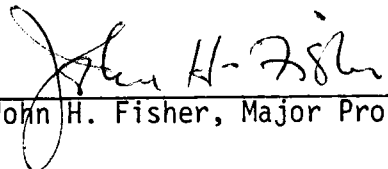
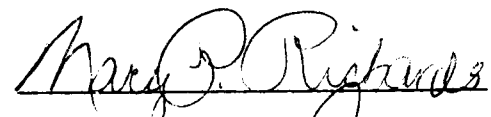


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Claire Clements entitled "The Treatment of Women in the C-Text of Piers Plowman." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


John H. Fisher, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:




Accepted for the Council:


Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN THE
C-TEXT OF PIERS PLOWMAN

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Claire Clements

June 1981

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CRANESEST CREST

DEDICATION

To Jerry

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the female characters in William Langland's Piers Plowman to determine what his treatment of these characters was and how it fit in with the medieval view of women. Piers Plowman has three different texts; for the purpose of this study the last, the C-text, was used because it includes some female characters who do not appear in the other two texts.

The treatment of women in Piers Plowman owes a great deal to an allegorical tradition in which virtues of wisdom and strength were usually personified as women. This tradition began with classical mythology and continued in the works of Prudentius, Martianus Capella, Boethius, and Alanus de Insulis. Boethius' Consolatio Philosophiae evidently had the greatest influence on Langland, for his Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede are a balanced pair of characters representing good and evil, or the Mary-Eve dichotomy, very much like Boethius' Lady Philosophy and Dame Fortune.

Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede are the two major female characters of Piers Plowman. They appear only in the first section of the poem, but they play important roles in these few passus. Lady Holychurche acts as a guide for Will as well as assuming a motherly role toward him. She advises, encourages, and sometimes scolds him. Like many of her literary ancestors, she is a source of knowledge who is halfway between humanity and divinity. Her opposite is Lady Mede,

who represents bribery and reward. While Lady Holychurche is like a saint or folk heroine because she often takes the initiative, Lady Mede is more like a romance heroine because she is the motive for other people's action rather than being an actor herself. Holychurche and Mede also represent charity and cupidity, the Augustinian dichotomy. Holychurche tells Will repeatedly that charity is necessary for salvation, while Mede encourages men to be greedy, soothing their consciences by representing herself as just reward rather than bribery.

Many other female characters appear in the poem, but most of them are only mentioned briefly and do not participate in the action. Some of these women are mentioned by the Seven Deadly Sins in their confessions; one, Pride, is herself one of the sins. Others represent virtues and vices, and two, Kytte and Kalote, were apparently real women, the wife and daughter of the poet. Two of the more significant women are Dame Studie and Scripture. Most of the women in the poem, like the men, are not completely or realistically characterized. Langland makes some general comments about women, especially poor women, which indicate that he had sympathy for their plight.

Although Langland could not be described as "profeminist," his poem displays none of the antifeminist sentiments of his time. He seems to have made no real distinctions between "male" and "female" characteristics, but personified virtues and vices as both male and female. Langland is more clearly sympathetic toward women than other medieval authors such as Chaucer.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The women's liberation movement of the last two decades has produced, among other things, a new kind of literary criticism, feminist criticism. Feminist critics attempt to discover an author's attitude toward women by examining the female characters in his works; this attitude is further evaluated in terms of what the author's age is thought to have perceived to be the role of women. Feminist critics have discussed many English and American authors of various periods, and they have shown a special interest in the works of medieval authors. This recent interest in the treatment of women in medieval literature has been paralleled by an interest shown by medieval historians in the actual role of women in medieval society.

Chaucer has been the subject of most of the feminist criticism of medieval literature. Literary critics as well as historians have long relied on Chaucer's suggestive descriptions of the Canterbury pilgrims for information about medieval life. Feminist criticism of Chaucer has come under attack by some critics but is hotly defended by others:

An examination of Chaucer inspired by feminist concerns is not an historical perversity to be equated with wondering what he thought about the Copernican system, but a very natural way of approaching him, given the

lively, even obsessive interest the later Middle Ages took in the problems of female nature.¹

It might be easier, however, for critics to agree on what Chaucer (or any other medieval author) thought of the Copernican system than to come to any sort of agreement on the subject of his literary treatment of women and how well it reflects the period in which he lived.

Although Chaucer has received much attention from feminist critics, his important contemporary, William Langland, has been ignored. Several explanations are possible for this lack of feminist interest in Langland, the author of what C. S. Lewis has called the "greatest English allegory"² and a medieval poet considered by many critics to be second only to Chaucer. Perhaps the allegorical nature of the poem has discouraged critics from examining the female characters of Piers Plowman from the feminist point of view. Allegorical characters, after all, are not meant to represent actual people, and some allegorists apparently made no attempt to endow their characters with recognizably human qualities. Langland, however, used the vehicle of allegory to create some "lively and distinctive characters"³ whom we can treat as though they were simply fictional characters in addition to recognizing the concepts which they personify.

¹Arlyn Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," in The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), pp. 60-1.

²The Allegory of Love (London: Oxford University Press, 1936; rpt. 1959), p. 158.

³Jeanne Krochalis and Edward Peters, trans. and eds., The World of Piers Plowman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. xii.

The more probable reason for the lack of attention paid to Piers Plowman by feminist critics is the poem's lack of popularity today. The Canterbury Tales continue to be read, studied, and written about; Piers Plowman is treated as a sort of ugly duckling even by some medievalists. This "huge, sprawling poem,"⁴ in fact, ranks behind the works of Chaucer and the Pearl poet in the critical attention it receives.

Despite the lack of feminist criticism of the poem, medieval historians have frequently made use of Piers Plowman to give them clues about medieval society. Langland left many such clues for the social historian, even considering the fact that

at the end of the Middle Ages, as in many periods,
historical reality and the contemporary versions of
that reality as presented in imaginative literature
did not necessarily coincide.⁵

Langland's poem, however, because it represents the concerns of the middle and lower classes, "reflects the day-to-day values of its society" more accurately than does much other medieval literature.⁶ But however accurate or inaccurate the depiction of women in medieval literature may be, it is virtually all that the historian has to rely on, for no record exists of the majority of medieval women except

⁴Constance Hieatt, The Realism of Dream Visions (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967), p. 88.

⁵Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," p. 61.

⁶Shirley Marchalonis, "Above Rubies: Popular Views of Medieval Women," Journal of Popular Culture, 14 (1980), p. 88.

indirectly in public records.⁷ Medieval English women, most of whom were illiterate, left no evidence written by their own hands; we must, therefore, depend on the writings of their male contemporaries to tell us how medieval women were treated by their age. Looking at these women through masculine spectacles presents some difficulties, as it is almost impossible to determine what degree of distortion is produced. Reading this masculine-written and dominated evidence, we "can too easily forget that there were large groups of people for whom the great medieval structures were not comforting but oppressive."⁸

But were all women oppressed by medieval society? The literature of the period presents us with a paradoxical view of women, the dichotomy between Mary and Eve. While the courtly and hagiographic literature reflects the view of women as the daughters of Mary--good, virginal, and man's salvation--antifeminist authors picture women as the daughters of Eve--wicked, lustful, and man's downfall. Medieval women, if the literature of their time can be believed, "found themselves perpetually oscillating between a pit and a pedestal"⁹; they were alternately praised and blamed for the state of mankind. These two kinds of treatment present us with two extremes between which reality undoubtedly existed. The determination of exactly what that

⁷Ann S. Haskell, "The Portrayal of Women by Chaucer and His Age," in What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 3.

⁸Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," p. 62.

⁹Eileen Power, "The Position of Women," in The Legacy of the Middle Ages, ed. C. G. Crump and E. F. Jacob (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 401.

reality was is important to historians, for civilizations can be judged by the "test point" of the role women played in them, but in the case of the Middle Ages, "the test remains one which is extraordinarily difficult to apply, because of the difficulty of determining what it is that constituted the position of women."¹⁰

The one conclusion about the position of medieval women that can be drawn from the study of the available evidence is obvious: life was very different for women of different classes. Critics tend to lose sight of this fact. Some medieval historians treat "medieval women" as a category without subdivisions, while some feminists feel that oppression is oppression whether it occurs in a castle or a cottage. To ignore the class structure in this manner leads to a misunderstanding of the Middle Ages; it is important to recognize the "outward trappings of an inward reality"¹¹ in the study of any culture. Women in either case are firmly fixed in a hierarchy as is made clear by Langland and Chaucer, as well as by other medieval authors and by the public records. There was a particularly marked difference between aristocratic women and the women of the lower and middle classes, a difference that went much deeper than such superficial points of comparison as worldly goods and social status. That difference was their relationship to their men.

The first class, aristocratic ladies, is depicted in medieval literature as always being beautiful, good, and charming. Their role

¹⁰Loc. cit.

¹¹Walter C. Curry, Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), p. ix.

in medieval society was "simply to exist"¹²; they were not actors, but rather motives for action. Although noblewomen are seen in literature as reaping the benefits of the chivalric institutions of Marian worship and courtly love, quite a different situation probably arose from these two allegedly pro-feminine institutions, for

the Virgin was exalted at the expense of all other women, chivalric aid was extended to strange damsels and other men's wives rather than one's own, and in courtly love the woman served . . . to assist the male possibilities for elevation or debasement.¹³

In other words, the very institutions which are popularly thought to have idealized women and elevated their position in society actually did little to counteract the effects of antifeminism and most likely indirectly aided the antifeminist cause. In this paradoxical situation, women were seen as simultaneously superior and inferior to men.

The medieval lady had more material goods and a higher social position than her poorer female contemporaries did, but poorer women, oddly enough, seem to have achieved a more truly equal status with men. While antifeminist views were usual among all classes, and women were considered to be physically, mentally, and morally inferior to men, on a day-to-day basis these prejudices seem to have been more theoretical than real. It is probable that

in daily life the position occupied by woman was one neither of inferiority nor of superiority, but of a certain rough-and-ready equality.¹⁴

¹²Haskell, "The Position of Women," p. 7.

¹³Maureen Fries, "Images of Women in Middle English Literature," College English, 35 (1974), p. 852.

¹⁴Power, "The Position of Women," p. 410.

Women of the middle and lower classes frequently had closer, more equal relationships with their husbands and were in a better legal position than were women of the aristocracy. In real life, married women of the middle and lower classes "shared much of their husbands' lives and work"¹⁵ and sometimes, because of illness, death, war, or absence, the women had to substitute for their men in business or farming. A similar situation occurred in the upper class when the chatelaine had to run the castle and the estate in her husband's absence. These women played active and sometimes important roles in medieval society, having a "much wider sphere of action than we might realize."¹⁶ In literature, it is these women, not the courtly ladies, who are most often believable, three-dimensional characters.

A final "class" of women in the Middle Ages consists of members of religious orders. Convents were guilty of the same corruptions as the monasteries and therefore received similar satirical treatment at the hands of poets like Langland and Chaucer. The main objects of this satire were the relative luxury in which nuns lived and the high social position which they imagined themselves to occupy. Chaucer's Prioress is a famous example of this kind of nun; he says of her that she

. . . was of greet desport,
And ful plesaunt, and amyable to port,
And peyned hire to countrefete cheere

¹⁵Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," p. 62.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 61.

Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
And to ben holden digne of reverence.¹⁷

In addition to their comfortable lives, the female members of religious orders had another advantage over their secular sisters--longer lives. The nuns had a longer life expectancy than married women did mainly because they were free from the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, a common cause of early death among medieval women of all classes.¹⁸

Despite the prejudices against women displayed by both church and state, women apparently fared better in medieval England than is commonly supposed. It is no easy matter to determine exactly what the situation of the women of each class was, for the subject

defies an easy summary. The Middle Ages imposed heavy burdens upon women and formed deep prejudices against them. On the other hand, this long chapter in Western history added a few years to their lives and a little to their dignity.¹⁹

Since history fails to provide us with this "easy summary," we must turn back to the literature of the period for impressions, if not facts. Piers Plowman is particularly appropriate for this kind of study, for women of all medieval social classes appear as characters in the poem. Some of the female characters are members of the

¹⁷John H. Fisher, ed., The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 12, lines 137-41.

¹⁸Kathleen Casey, "The Cheshire Cat: Reconstructing the Experience of Medieval Woman," in Liberating Women's History, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 240.

¹⁹David Herlihy, Women in Medieval Society (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1971), p. 14.

aristocracy, others are associated with the clergy, and the rest are middle- or lower-class women. Some of the women are semi-divine, while others more closely resemble real women. Ranging from Lady Holychurche to the poet's own wife and daughter, the women of Piers Plowman represent all of the medieval classes and conditions.

Langland's poem is also an appropriate object for various other kinds of medieval studies because of its vivid glimpses of medieval life, especially among the middle and lower classes. Piers Plowman has been described as "one of the most fascinating, and also one of the most difficult, of fourteenth-century poems."²⁰ Some of the poem's fascinations and difficulties arise from the existence of three distinctly different texts. The fifty-one manuscripts which survive have been divided into three groups, possibly representing the stages of revision which the poem underwent; these three groups are known as versions A, B, and C. The A-text, the shortest, was probably written in the first few years of the 1360's, and the B-text, over twice as long as the A-text, is thought to have been composed several years later. The final version of the poem, the C-text, is only slightly longer than the B-text and is dated considerably later than the other two texts, probably as late as the last years of the fourteenth century. Although the B-text is generally used for literary purposes because of its poetic superiority to the other two texts, the C-text will be the basis for this study of the poem because it introduces

²⁰A. C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, Ltd., 1972), p. 107.

two female character, Kit and Kalote, who do not appear in the two other versions. Of course, the C-text does not exclude any of the women included in the A- or B-texts.

In addition to textual problems, biographical puzzled add to the difficulties of a study of Piers Plowman. Only recently has the theory of single authorship of the poem gained favor over the multiple authorship theory with which it had competed for many years. Clues in the manuscripts indicate that this author was William Langland, a native of Shropshire, who was the illegitimate son of Stacy de Rokayle. The reliability of this information is questionable, but it is all that is currently available. In any case, this information gives us a name to assign to the author of Piers Plowman, a highly personal poem which makes us unwilling to call its author simply "the Piers poet."

The personal tone of the poem, however, has caused a problem for both the biographer and the critic; this problem

created by the strong sense of the author's personality in the poetry of . . . Langland extends beyond biography into criticism, where attempts to explain this salient circumstance of [his] poetry have resulted in a variety of perplexed and conflicting propositions.²¹

The dangers in responding to the personal tone of Piers Plowman are two-fold. First, the critic may be led into making unfounded biographical assumptions because of the tone, and second, he may attempt to use these assumptions to provide him with a new, if not entirely valid, interpretation of the poem. For the purposes of this

²¹George Kane, The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies (London: H. K. Lewis & Co., Ltd., 1965), p. 9.

non-biographical study, Langland will be assumed to be the sole author of Piers Plowman, and the attitudes of the speaker in the poem, especially toward women, will be assumed to be Langland's own since unlike Chaucer, he evidently does not use a persona whose views are clearly different from the author's.

In addition to the poem's biographical and textual interest, Piers Plowman continues to claim critical attention for its own sake. But whatever its critical reputation today may be, there is no doubt that it was popular in its own time. The relatively large number of manuscripts extant attests to this fact. The poem was popular both in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and later poets, including Spenser and Milton, also thought highly of Langland's poem. Moreover, Piers Plowman, unlike some other alliterative poems of the Old and Middle English periods, has "at no time disappeared from the English literary scene."²² In its own day, the poem was most popular "among clergy and pious laypeople,"²³ and the name of Piers became a catchword during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 even though most of the rebels were illiterate and could not have read the poem themselves. Langland did not write for, nor does his work seem to have found favor with, "the court audience of Chaucer and Gower . . . (or) the learned magnatial audience of such contemporary works as Sir Gawain and the

²²J. A. Burrow, Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain Poet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 5.

²³Krochalis and Peters, The World of Piers Plowman, p. ix.

Green Knight."24 Rather, Langland's poem was popular with the lower classes and the clergy, for whom he served as a kind of spokesman.

Whatever political and social significance it may have, Piers Plowman is primarily important as a work of literature and more particularly as an allegory which has earned its place in a long allegorical tradition. The women in the poem, because almost all of them are allegorical characters, are easier to understand and discuss once their place in this tradition has been established.

24Ibid., p. x.

CHAPTER II

THE ALLEGORICAL TRADITION

Allegory, closely associated with the medieval period in which it flourished, was popular long before the Middle Ages. As C. S. Lewis says, it properly

belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even mind, in general. It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms.¹

Allegory has sometimes been divided into two categories--classical and medieval. In classical allegory, the "allegorical meaning is on a single level and . . . there is a constant and exact relationship between literal detail and the meaning it points to."² Classical allegory, then, is basically a lucid genre which does not need to be "interpreted"; there is almost a one-to-one correspondence between allegory and meaning. Medieval allegory, on the other hand, is more obscure. Several critics agree that Piers Plowman is a mixture of both kinds of allegory.

Medieval allegories were frequently religious, and like other religious literature of the time, allegories could be violently anti-feminist. Non-religious allegories, such as Jean de Meun's part of the

¹The Allegory of Love, p. 44.

²Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Tale of Melibee," Chaucer Review, 7 (1963), p. 275.

Roman de la Rose, were also sometimes antifeminist. The antifeminist nature of the personifications is obvious--qualities such as vices or weaknesses of the body or spirit were often represented by female characters, while virtues (physical, mental, or moral) were often represented by male characters. However, one medieval allegorist, Christine de Pisan, wrote decidedly profeminist allegories in which women, following classical precedent, represent reason and justice. The author's own gender no doubt influenced the nature of her allegory; it is not surprising to find a female author, even during the medieval period, writing a work in which women are glorified.

Unlike most other medieval allegories, Piers Plowman displays an absence of sexual bias which is rarely seen in medieval literature. The absence of misogyny in Langland's poem has been commented on but not explored by feminist critics.³ Why does Langland not display the antifeminist attitudes of his age when writing in a mode that was by convention addressed to the expression of these beliefs? A partial explanation may be Langland's social class. He was obviously not a member of the upper class but belonged to the middle-to-lower class in which a sort of equality between the sexes was practiced if not preached. Interestingly, in Chaucer's General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales the only wives who are mentioned are those of the pilgrims of this social class. Langland's own concept of women, since he belonged to this class, may have been less biased than that of his

³Maureen Fries announces that she will deal with this subject in an upcoming book.

clerical and aristocratic contemporaries. Even more importantly, Langland was probably influenced greatly in his portrayal of women by earlier Christian and pagan writers of personification allegories such as Prudentius, Martianus Capella, Alanus de Insulis,⁴ and Boethius. In the works of these authors, women "appear as forces for good as well as for evil--often in balanced pairs."⁵ In other words, the Mary-Eve dichotomy appears in these works. The Mary-like characters are good and wise, but more importantly, they act as intercessors between God and man, Mary's most important role in the Middle Ages. The characters who are like Eve are immoral women who are agents of Satan because they tempt man away from God. This balancing of Mary against Eve occurs also in Piers Plowman.

Whether pagan or Christian, the earlier allegorists were influenced by classical tradition when they used female characters to represent abstractions. This tradition goes back to classical mythology, in which such attributes as wisdom and strength (which later were considered to be "male" qualities) were represented by goddesses rather than gods. Pallas Athena, for example, is the war goddess of the Iliad, in which she is the fierce protector of the state. This goddess, Zeus's favorite child, is in later poetry the representation of wisdom and reason--she sprang, after all, full-grown and motherless from her father's head. Another goddess with "male"

⁴Alanus de Insulis is also known as Alan de Lille.

⁵Maureen Fries, "Feminae Populi: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature," Journal of Popular Culture, 14 (1980), p. 81.

attributes is Artemis, goddess of the moon and the gods' huntsman-in-chief, "an odd office for a woman."⁶ She is represented both as the strong but gentle protector of youth and a harsh goddess who in the Iliad demands that the maiden Iphigenia be sacrificed to her before she will allow the Greek fleet to set sail for Troy.

Women are further associated with learning and art through the representation of the nine Muses, who were at first not distinguished from each other but later became "specialized," each having her own field: Clio, history; Urania, astronomy; Melpomene, tragedy; Thalia, comedy; Terpsichore, dance; Calliope, eopic poetry; Erato, love poetry; Polyhymnia, songs to the gods; and Euterpe, lyric poetry. The Muses inspired men to create great works in the arts and sciences, but although each had her own field, they were never given separate personalities as were the other deities: "they incarnate a purely intellectual principle, which could be dissociated from the Greco-Roman pantheon."⁷ This classical association of women with strength and intellect is most likely what influenced later Christian allegorists to represent "abstract ideas as usually feminine,"⁸ especially intellectual concepts. Langland, who as a member of the clergy would have had some education, would have been familiar with this tradition.

⁶Edith Hamilton, Mythology (New York: The New American Library, 1940), p. 31.

⁷Ernst Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1953), p. 229.

⁸Fries, "Feminae Populi," p. 80.

The first of these earlier allegorists, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, a native of Spain who lived in the second half of the fourth century and in the first years of the fifth, has been called the "first great Christian poet."⁹ His personification allegory, Psychomachia, is important for two reasons. First, the work is the "first sustained personification allegory, one notable for its powerful influence upon medieval and Renaissance culture."¹⁰ Second, virtually all the characters are women. They personify such virtues as righteousness and honesty, and such vices as deceit, greed, and indulgence. Whether these allegorical characters are admirable or despicable depends not on their sex but on the particular characteristics which they personify. Thus, the work is without sexual bias; women represent, in approximately equal proportion, both good and evil, both Mary and Eve.

The plot of Psychomachia, like the plots of most early allegories, is not particularly important. What is significant for the understanding of the female characters in Piers Plowman is that Prudentius chose to represent the warriors of the armies of the virtues and the vices as female. After several battles, the virtues are victorious and build a holy city around a temple of a female ruler, Wisdom. Despite its wooden characters and the predictable outcome of the plot, Psychomachia is nevertheless "manifestly original,

⁹Curtius, p. 22.

¹⁰Macklin Smith, Prudentius' Psychomachia: A Reexamination (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 3.

and it is revolutionary in its impact, being the major source of a rich allegorical tradition extending through the Middle Ages and into the eighteenth century."¹¹ Its chief contribution is its personification of the virtues and vices, a personification used by Langland in Piers Plowman. At the end of Psychomachia, the final vision is of Wisdom, who "sits enthroned and from her high court sets in order all the government of her realm, meditating in her heart laws to safeguard mankind."¹²

Prudentius' pagan contemporary, Martianus Capella, who flourished slightly later than his Christian counterpart, likewise made "rich use of allegorical figures."¹³ His most famous work is De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii, in which he makes use of female characters to embody abstract concepts, particularly those related to knowledge. This work had a great influence on medieval authors, in whose works the Nuptiis's figures and themes are frequently revived, including its description of the seven liberal arts.¹⁴

In the Nuptiis, written between 410 and 439, Mercury is searching for a bride because the other gods consider marriage essential for happiness. Mercury "ardently desired Wisdom [as his bride], because she was prudent and holy, and purer and fairer than the other maidens. However, she was his sister's [Athena] foster

¹¹Smith, Prudentius, p. 6.

¹²Psychomachia, p. 341.

¹³Curtius, p. 39.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 38.

sister," and had vowed to remain chaste.¹⁵ The search continues, with many of the gods and goddesses giving Mercury advice. Finally Apollo suggests that he marry Philology, "a maiden of ancient lineage, highly educated and well acquainted with Parnassus . . . [and] indeed, very often she has rights over us, impelling gods under compulsion to obey her decrees."¹⁶ Her betrothal to Mercury pleases everyone, as she "embraces all knowledge."¹⁷ She is taken to heaven by the young men Labor and Amor and two maidens, Epimelia (application) and Agrypnia (the night labor and lost sleep of the intellectual worker). When she reaches heaven, she is given as wedding gifts the seven liberal arts: Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, and Harmony. Martianus follows the two books dealing with the betrothal and marriage of Philology and Mercury with books devoted to each of the seven liberal arts, who "in accordance with the taste of the period . . . are personified as women, and distinguished by their clothing, implements, and the manner in which their hair is worn."¹⁸ Unlike the classical Muses, the medieval liberal arts are carefully distinguished from each other, even in such minor details as coiffure. These allegorical figures frequently appear in the

¹⁵William Harris Stahl, et al., Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971 (Vol. I), 1977 (Vol. II)), p. 6.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁷Curtius, p. 38.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 39.

literature and art of the Middle Ages, bearing witness to Martianus' continuing influence.

One later allegorist whose style has often been compared to Martianus' is the poet and philosopher Alanus de Insulis, who was born at Lille in about 1128 and died in 1202. Alanus, known as the Universal Doctor, was "one of the most significant figures of the twelfth century; a poet with a prodigious power of expression; a speculative theologian who tapped fresh springs."¹⁹ Both Chaucer and Jean de Meun were familiar with his poetry, which was informed by his philosophy, influenced by the Platonism associated with the twelfth-century cathedral school of Chartres.²⁰

De planctu Naturae is one of Alanus' most famous works. In this work, the main character, "a female personification of Nature . . . leads the narrator both physically and intellectually towards his goal. She takes the initiative, interposing herself between the searcher and the exterior world, and serves as his guide, companion, and teacher."²¹ Natura acts as an intermediate between God and man, and though she submits humbly to God's will, she is superior to man, including the narrator. Although she represents nature, she is not the "Mother Earth" of both earlier and later works, but rather a

¹⁹Ibid., p. 117.

²⁰James I. Wimsatt, Allegory and Mirror (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 102.

²¹Caroline D. Eckhardt, "Woman as Mediator in Middle English Romances," Journal of Popular Culture, 14 (1980), p. 101.

"modest maiden"²² very much like Martianus' Philology. Natura is described with the same kind of detail that Martianus uses to describe his female characters, but Alanus uses even more descriptive details than does Martianus. At the beginning of the work, many pages are devoted to Natura's physical appearance. In addition to the influence of Martianus, De planctu Naturae, it is generally agreed, owes much to Boethius because of the similarity of Nature to Lady Philosophy.

Natura is also the major character in Alanus' even more important poem Anticlaudianus de Antirufino. In this work, Natura plans the creation of the perfect man, one who will be both human and divine. She asks for the assistance of her sisters: Concord, Abundance, Favor, Youth, Laughter, Modesty, Discretion, Reason, Chastity, Adornment, Prudence, Piety, Faith, Liberality, and Nobility. At the suggestion of Reason, Wisdom is also called upon for help. She arrives attended by seven maidens who are very much like Martianus' seven liberal arts. Together these divine maidens build a vehicle to take Wisdom to heaven so that she can ask for God's help, the creation of a perfect soul to inhabit the perfect body created by Natura. God agrees, and the perfect man comes to life. The Vices are unhappy that such perfection exists, and they attack the Virtues, led by Natura, in a battle much like the one in Prudentius' Psychomachia. As in that work, the Virtues triumph and the perfect man they helped to create is saved.

²²Curtius, p. 119.

Probably the most famous allegory in which female characters play a leading role is Boethius' Consolatio Philosophiae. Chronologically, Boethius, who was born about 480 and died in 524, comes after Martianus and considerably before Alanus. The significance of the Consolatio to the Middle Ages can hardly be overestimated, for in this period "the wisdom of Boethius was on every man's tongue, and the allegory of the Consolation on every writer's pen."²³ It has been called a "basic book for the entire Middle Ages,"²⁴ so Langland almost certainly was familiar with it even though he never refers to it directly.

The major allegorical character in the Consolatio, Lady Philosophy, acts as a Mary-like intercessor between God and man, a female role which "extends in an unbroken line from the fourth century to the fourteenth century and onwards."²⁵ Similar figures appear in the Pearl and Dante's Commedia as "the means through which an understanding of immortality is achieved."²⁶ Lady Philosophy performs this function for Boethius, comforting him in prison and leading him to greater wisdom. Boethius does not overwhelm the reader with lengthy physical descriptions of his wise lady as do Martianus and Alanus, but a clear characterization of Lady Philosophy as a "woman at once

²³Wimsatt, p. 113.

²⁴Curtius, p. 209.

²⁵Eckhardt, p. 102.

²⁶Loc. cit.

comforting and commanding"²⁷ emerges from the allegory. She became a model for later authors and reinforced the bond between the concepts of women and knowledge. In Piers Plowman and other works, "descendants of Lady Philosophy multiply and become involved in more complex psychological allegories."²⁸

The other significant female character in the Consolatio is Dame Fortune, Lady Philosophy's opposite. Fortune has many ancestors; first she was a Roman goddess and later she appears as a character in many works. Her main characteristic in the Consolatio, as in other works, is her dual nature: she can bring good or evil to man. She is also fickle, showing her favor to many men and leaving each man abruptly for another. In Boethius, she has two faces and is blind, representing her disregard for merit.²⁹ Although she has potential for good, her fickleness causes her to be more evil than good. In that respect, she is clearly the ancestor of Langland's Lady Mede, also a dual character.

Chronologically, then, a line can be drawn from classical authors through Prudentius to Martianus to Boethius to Alanus, all of whom use female characters in allegory. Although each poet modifies the allegorical treatment of these women, the tradition of personifying intellectual concepts as women was continuous, along with the portrayal

²⁷Eckhardt, p. 101.

²⁸Wimsatt, p. 98.

²⁹Howard R. Patch, The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927), p. 44.

of both vices and virtues as women. In Langland's poem, the "thriving tradition of female potential for good and for evil continues in the figures of Lady Holichurch and Lady Mede, and may help to explain the striking paucity of misogyny in Langland's work."³⁰ These two personifications provide the most obvious link between the early allegories and Piers Plowman--the balancing of good and evil, or Mary and Eve, in female allegorical figures.

³⁰Fries, "Feminae Populi," p. 81.

CHAPTER III

LADY HOLYCHURCHE AND LADY MEDE: CHARITY AND CUPIDITY

Although many female characters appear in Piers Plowman, only two, Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede, can be considered to be major characters. Lady Holychurche, like Lady Philosophy and her other "ancestors," represents good, and she, like the others, leads the major male character to wisdom. She is balanced by Lady Mede, who represents corruption through the taking of bribes. But more specifically than representing good and evil, Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede symbolize charity and cupidity, which according to St. Augustine are the greatest good and evil. During the Middle Ages, literary allegory became closely associated with Scriptural allegorical interpretation, and this sort of association is found in Piers Plowman. D. W. Robertson, Jr. and B. F. Huppé in Piers Plowman and the Scriptural Tradition propose that exegetical interpretation be applied to the criticism of Piers Plowman. Although they discussed charity and cupidity, Robertson and Huppé never applied the concept to the female characters of Piers Plowman. But clearly Lady Holychurche is a personification of charity, while Lady Mede represents cupidity. Thus these two characters are nearly perfect personifications of the fundamental Augustinian dichotomy.

Both Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede appear only in the first part of the poem, "The Vision of Piers Plowman." Neither appears in

the remaining three sections (the lives of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest), although Holychurche is mentioned occasionally later in the poem by other characters. However, the focus of the first section is entirely on Mede and Holychurche; three passus are devoted to the former and one to the latter.

The passus devoted to Holychurche is C:II.¹ After Will's vision of the "fair feld, ful of folke"² and the fable of the cat and the rats in Passus I, Will sees a "loueliche lady of lere · in lynnen y-clothid" (II. 3) who addresses him by name. She chides him for sleeping and dreaming while men work in the fields. He is afraid of her, "thauh hue faire were" (II. 10), but is brave enough to ask her what she means. She points to a tower upon the hill which she says is the dwelling of Truth, and she advises him to follow Truth's teaching, for he "is fader of faith · and formour of alle;/To be faithful to hym · he 3aue 3ow fyue wittes/For to worshepen hym therewith" (II. 14-16). She further tells him that Truth has given man three blessings, which are the only things necessary in life: clothes, food, and drink. She especially warns him against excessive drinking, urging moderation in all things.

Will tells Holychurche that he is delighted by her words, but he asks what the true wealth of the world is and how he can find it.

¹As was explained in Chapter I, the C-text will be used in this study.

²Walter W. Skeat, ed., The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman (in three parallel texts) Together with Richard the Redeless, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1886; rpt. 1954). All further references are to this text.

She refers him to Scriptures (from which she herself frequently quotes) as a source of wealth and tells him that Common Wit guards the world's treasure. She then points out the Castle of Care, the home of Wrong, who is responsible for all the evil in the world. Will again expresses his appreciation for her wise words and finally asks her name. She tells him that her name is Holychurche, but says, "'Thow oghtest me to knowe'" (II. 72), because she has saved him and has taught him faith. He kisses the ground in a gesture of submission, begs her forgiveness, and asks her to teach him how to save his soul. She speaks to him at length about Truth as the source of salvation, but he says that he does not know how to find Truth. She reprimands him sternly: "'Thow dotede daffe,' quath hue · 'dulle aren thy wittes,/Ich leue thow lernedist to lyte · latyn in thy gowthe'" (II. 139-40). She tells him about the importance of love, especially love of God and charity toward the poor. Holychurche stresses the absolute necessity of charity, saying that a kind of passive goodness is not sufficient for the salvation of the soul and that "'chastite with-oute charite · worth cheynid in helle'" (II. 186). She is especially scornful of clergymen who are chaste but avaricious, since avarice or cupidity is in her estimation the greatest sin. She leaves him at the end of Passus II with more advice about the importance of truth and love.

As Passus III opens, Will begs Lady Holychurche to teach him to recognize falsehood. She points to the characters Fals (falsehood), Fauel (flattery), and Lyere (lies), who are attended by many people,

and he notices among these people a richly dressed woman and asks Holychurche who this woman is. She is Lady Mede, and Holychurche leaves Will to dream of Mede after warning him against Mede's temptations. After this last advice, Holychurche does not appear again.

The role of Lady Holychurche in Passus II and the beginning of Passus III, then, is to answer Will's questions and start him out on his long pilgrimage toward Truth and away from Mede. As personification, she is completely wise and good. She condemns the corrupt members of the clergy who are guilty of cupidity rather than practicing the charity she so frequently praises as the highest good. She is motherly in her treatment of Will, offering him help and support but also scolding him, first because he does not recognize her and later because he is ignorant. In her role as intercessor, she is like Philology, Natura, and Lady Philosophy who are better than human but not divine, so that they can serve effectively as "go-betweens" between God and man. Langland does not employ Martianus' technique of exhaustive physical description of his allegorical lady, but rather, like Boethius, concentrates on developing her character through actions and words. The only details the poet gives of Holychurche's appearance are that she is very beautiful and wears linen clothes.

Lady Holychurche is not completely humanized, nor would we expect her to be since she is obviously not intended to represent a real woman. However, as the personification of the church itself, she is less wooden than she might be. Her treatment of Will is what makes her seem most human; she is not as "saintly" as her name

implies and even loses her temper with him and calls him a "dotede daffe" (II. 139). Also, she is more active than many of the other women in the poem, taking the initiative in leading Will through part of his dream and then disappearing when she feels that she has done enough for him. She is herself an actor, in contrast to others of the women who are only motives for action, and thus is much like a folk heroine or a saint instead of a romance heroine. She herself is not seen practicing charity in the poem, unless her guidance of Will can be considered charitable, but she speaks of it so often that she can easily be seen as representative of the concept of charity as well as the church.

Langland devotes a few more lines to a physical description of Lady Mede than he does to Lady Holychurche. Lady Holychurche points Mede out to Will at the beginning of Passus III, and he describes her as a woman who is:

. . . wonderliche riche clothed.
 Hue was purfild with peloure · non purere in erthe,
 And coroned with a corone · the kyng hath no betere;
 On alle hure fyue fyngres · rycheliche yrynged,
 And ther-on rede rubies · and other riche stones.
 Hure robe was ryccher · than ich rede couthe,
 For to telle of hure atyre · no tyme haue ich nouth.
 Hure a-raye with hure rychesse · rauesshede myn herte.
 (III. 9-16)

In contrast to the simplicity of Holychurche's linen garment, Mede is richly dressed and wears many jewels. Even so, this description of Mede is very sketchy compared to the descriptions of Martianus and Alanus; Langland has the speaker claim that he does not have enough time to describe Mede's appearance completely. Her rich attire makes

him wonder who she is, and to whom she is married. Holychurche tells him that she is Mede, a maiden who has often wronged her, and she tells him of Mede's sins. Mede has told lies about Loyalty, has tried to mislead lawmakers, and has visited the pope's palace as frequently as Holychurche has. Holychurche also dislikes Mede because she is so much like her father, Fauel (flattery). Holychurche complains that she should be considered more important than Mede since Holychurche is the daughter of God, the "duchesse of heuene" (III. 33), and Mede is a bastard. Finally, Holychurche tells Will that Mede will marry Fals Faithles, a "mansed wrecche" (III. 41), the next day. Holychurche warns Will against love of Mede and leaves him to his dream of Mede's marriage, the subject of Passus III, IV, and V.

Mede's marriage is attended by multitudes of people from every class and position, showing Mede's widespread popularity. Her father gives her a dowry, saying that "'Mede ys y-maried · more for hure richesse/Than for holynesse other hendenesse · other for hye kynde" (III. 80-1). The dowry he offers consists of the Seven Deadly Sins, which seems to be a parody of the gods' wedding gift of the Seven Liberal Arts to Philology in Martianus' De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii. The giving of this dowry makes Theologye angry, and he scolds Symonye for his part in arranging the marriage, reminding him that Mede is the daughter of Amendes and so could be led in the direction of Truth rather than Fals. Theologye says that Mede cannot be married without the consent of her mother, who has promised her to Truth. He further objects to the marriage of Mede and Fals because

Mede is a maiden who "myghte cusse the kynge · as for hus kynswomman" (III. 146), while Fals is a bastard. At the beginning of this passus, Holychurche has said that Mede too is a bastard, which Theologye must know but perhaps feels is unimportant because of Mede's superior position as the daughter of Amendes.

Theologye finally suggests that Mede be taken to London so that the lawyers can determine whom Mede should marry. Several of the members of the party are unwilling to go but are persuaded by the money that Mede's father gives them. Mede does not offer her opinion about the proposed journey--in fact, she says nothing at all in Passus III--but some of the people with her say that they have easily persuaded her to accompany them. Like a romance heroine, Mede is here not an actor but remains a passive motive for men's action. This aspect of her character is directly opposed to Holychurche's frequent initiation of action. Mede's willingness to do whatever she is told is the first indication of the nature of her character, which is "always agreeable, compliant."³ When the group arrives at the king's palace, the king threatens them with death or imprisonment, which causes them to run away. Only Mede remains, and the king orders that she be brought to him. Mede is frightened, but nevertheless she makes no attempt to run away with the others, probably because of her compliant nature. Like Guenevere and other romance heroines, Mede will not take action even to save herself from possible harm.

³A. G. Mitchell, "Lady Meed and the Art of Piers Plowman," in Style and Symbolism in Piers Plowman, ed. Robert Blanch (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1969), p. 191.

The fourth and fifth passus treat Mede at the king's court. The king says that he will decide who should marry Mede and that he will forgive her for all of her wrongdoing if she will marry the man he chooses. The king orders a clerk to take Mede away and make her comfortable, and the clerk brings her to a chamber where she is comforted by many members of the court. She welcomes them all with typical lack of discrimination and gives them gifts. She even makes a confession to a false confessor who promises, as do many of the others, to try to persuade the king to allow her to marry whomever she chooses. He says that he will be her follower even though he knows of all her sins, including her promiscuity: "'lered men and lewede · had layen by the bothe'" (IV. 40). This aspect of Mede's character is important because it symbolizes "the truism that money will take up with anyone."⁴ It also may illustrate the medieval male distrust of the constancy of women. In the course of the conversation between Mede and the false confessor, she talks about the sin of lechery, which she says is the least of the Seven Deadly Sins. She tells him that she will be his friend as long as he "'louyeth thuse lordes · that lecherye hauten,/And lackieth noȝt thuse ladies · that louethe the same'" (IV. 57-8). Rather than seeing women as either evil temptresses or innocent victims of lechery, Mede acknowledges that both women and men are guilty of lechery, although she implies that men are mostly responsible for this sin.

⁴Wimsatt, Allegory and Mirror, p. 54.

The king, finished with his council, finally calls Mede to him to give her his decision. He wants her to marry Conscience, one of his knights, and she quickly agrees, as always eager to do what anyone tells her. When Conscience arrives, however, he refuses to marry her, saying of her that

. . . hue ys freel of hure faith . and fikel of hure speche,
 And maketh men mys-do . meny score tymes.
 In trist of hure tresour . hue teneth ful menye;
 Wyues and wodewes . wantownesse hue techeth,
 And lereth hem to lecherie . that louyeth here 3yftes.
 (IV. 158-62)

His major objection to her is that she is a temptress, a woman who "maketh men mys-do." He also objects to marrying her because of the many times she has followed Fals and offended Truth. He continues to list her sins until finally Mede asks to be allowed to speak in her own defense.

Mede claims that she has done more to help the king than Conscience has ever done. The hope of having her has kept the army loyal during hard times. She makes the king beloved of everyone and gives him greater power. Mede defends the giving of money, pointing out that money is often given as a deserved reward. The king is persuaded by the logic of Mede's argument, but Conscience protests. He says that there are two kinds of meed: the kind granted by God to good men on earth and the kind sought by greedy men. He continues his argument by describing the kind of life that men should live, and he predicts that one day Reason will rule the world. In a world ruled by Reason, Mede will no longer have mastery over the lives of men, for there will be no need for her services. Mede tries to defend herself

by quoting the Bible, although she admits to having only a little knowledge of Latin (the symbol of an educated person). Conscience tells her that she is only quoting part of a passage, and that this part taken out of context does seem to support her point. However, the rest of the passage dealing with the giving and taking of meed says that although the giver of gifts may achieve honor through them, the recipient of gifts from Mede (bribes) commits a sin. The passus ends with this statement by Conscience.

Passus V, the last passus in which Mede appears, begins with the king, apparently at the end of his patience with Conscience and Mede, ordering the two of them to kiss and reconcile their differences. Conscience refuses, and the king quickly orders him to ride and summon Reason to court to help the king decide whom Mede should marry. Conscience is glad to go; he finds Reason, who agrees to return to court with him. Along the way, they discuss their mutual distrust of Mede. Two of Mede's followers, Waryn Wysman and Wylyman (Wisdom and Wit), try to ride along with them, but Conscience tells Reason to have nothing to do with these two because they are greedy and do not love God. Perhaps the association between Mede and the two men, who would seem to be too wise to be seduced by Mede, is made to show once again that Mede's power is universal. Scorning the company of her two followers, Conscience and Reason ride on to court, where the king welcomes Reason. They conduct some court business concerning Wrong, Mede and her marriage apparently forgotten. During this business, Reason finally triumphs over Mede, who loses the control she has had over the court:

Loue let lyght of Mede . and Leaute 3ut lasse,
 And cryed vp-on Conscience . the kyng hit myghte yhure,
 'Who so sylneth hure to wyue . for welthe of hure goodes,
 Bote he be knowe for cokewold . kut of my nose!'

Mede mornede tho . and made heuy cheere,
 For the comune called hure . queynte comun hore.
 A sysour and a somner tho . softeliche forth 3eden
 With Mede the mayde . out of the mot-halle.

(V. 156-63)

Thus, Mede falls quickly from the favor she had stood in with almost everyone at the king's court. The last time she is mentioned is by the king, who predicts that she will one day have to deal with Reason and receive the fate she deserves.

Many critics have pointed out that the character of Mede has a "mixed nature . . . (which is) not something that confuses the portrayal, but something insisted upon by Langland himself."⁵ She is not entirely good or evil, since she can represent either bribery or reward, but like Dame Fortune the positive aspects of her character are outweighed by the negative. While Lady Holychurche leads men to salvation, Lady Mede leads men to damnation through their own cupidity. Mede herself does not seem to be greedy, but she causes men of all kinds to be greedy. As Holychurche complains, Mede has as much power and influence as she herself has, even in such places as the king's court and the pope's palace. Mede has also been said to illustrate "the power an unscrupulous woman might exercise in higher spheres of life"⁶; more specifically, she has been traditionally

⁵Mitchell, p. 175.

⁶D. Chadwick, Social Life in the Days of Piers Plowman (Folcroft, Pa.: The Folcroft Press, Inc., 1922; rpt. 1969), p. 101.

associated with Alice Perrers. Although this interpretation is interesting, Mede is more significant as a personification of bribery and reward than as a representation of a specific woman.

Although Mede is responsible for a great deal of the evil in the world, she is not a typical villainess. She views herself as a good person who is being wronged by others, as do many other romance heroines, and she is surprised when other characters accuse her of her sins. Apparently she is not aware that she plays a significant part in leading men to evil; she thinks that she has been very helpful to mankind, including the king and Conscience. She is almost justified in her claim to innocence, for used correctly by men she could represent honest reward rather than bribery. Another important aspect of Mede's character is her unfaithfulness. She is capable of quick changes of allegiance, possibly because she "is almost morally neutral. She has no secure attachments and not antipathies that are dictated by moral principles."⁷ Mede, in other words, is amoral rather than immoral, which is another characteristic of the romance heroine. She is ready to use her power for good or evil to help anyone.

As a character, Mede, like Holychurche, is not merely a wooden allegorical figure. She is too much like a romance heroine to be believable as a real woman, but she is more psychologically complex than many earlier allegorical characters. She is not well-educated, but she has power over men who are far more intelligent than she. She has a great need for love which causes her to be willing to

⁷Mitchell, p. 191.

associate with anyone, and she is happiest at the king's court surrounded by admirers. Her submissiveness and lack of initiative put her in the same category as other medieval romance heroines: Guenevere, Isolde, Criseyde, and others. This stock characterization of Mede is probably what causes her character to be rather "flat"; who could tell Guenevere from Isolde or Isolde from Criseyde if he had to judge only from their actions and words? All of these women are motives for action, and Mede is distinguished from them mainly because she leads men to greedy rather than noble actions.

In presenting this balanced pair of female characters, Langland places himself in the tradition of Prudentius, Martianus, Alanus, and Boethius, with Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede most closely resembling Boethius' Lady Philosophy and Dame Fortune. Like Lady Philosophy, Lady Holychurche serves as a guide who is supernaturally wise. The concepts they personify are closely related. Lady Philosophy, like Lady Holychurche, has an opposite, and those two opposites are also similar. Boethius' Dame Fortune and Langland's Lady Mede are alike in several ways. Both are temptresses who are associated with money, and both have dual natures, bringing either good or evil to men. Also, both are very fickle and are not discriminating about the company they keep. While other allegorical characters exist who are similar to one or the other of Langland's major female characters, Boethius' balanced pair are most like Langland's.

CHAPTER IV

OTHER WOMEN

The other female characters in Piers Plowman do not play as significant a role as Lady Holychurche and Lady Mede; in fact, many of them are merely mentioned and do not participate in the action of the poem. Almost all of them, like Mede and Holychurche, are archetypal characters, and the most important of these are Dame Studie, the wife of Wit, and Scripture, the wife of Clergie. In addition to the other less important allegorical characters, the poet mentions two apparently real women, his wife and daughter, and makes some general remarks which are significant in studying his literary treatment of women.

The two real women mentioned in the poem, Kytte and Kalote, are commonly believed to be Langland's wife and daughter, respectively. Following his dream of Dobet, Will says, "'With that ich awakede,/And kallyd Kytte my wyf · and Kalote my doughter'" (XXI. 472-3). Then he tells them to pray, and the passus ends. Although Kytte and Kalote do not speak or perform any action in the poem, the mention of their names is important because of the biographical clue it seems to provide about a poet of whom very little is known.

Several of the other minor female characters are associated with the Seven Deadly Sins. The first of these women is Pruyde (also called Purnele Proute-herte), the first of the sins to confess. She

has a counterpart called Superbia in Prudentius' works; in fact, Morton Bloomfield in The Seven Deadly Sins indicates that pride is not uncommonly personified as a woman.¹ Pryde confesses to vanity, boasting, and other similar sins. She also has been disobedient to Holychurche and used her wit to lead others away from Holychurche. The only physical description of her is the fact that she is richly dressed. Another female character is mentioned by Wratthe in his confession. He tells a story of his aunt, an abbess, who "wer leuere swouny other swelte · than suffry eny payne" (VII. 129). He worked in the convent's kitchen, and there he observed many of the nuns' wrongdoings. In fact, he was responsible for many of them by causing fights among the nuns. Because of him, he says, the nuns accused each other of lying and fought each other in an unsisterly fashion. The picture he paints of convent life is not flattering to the sisters, who are not distinguished from each other. Another female character associated with the Seven Deadly Sins is Rose, the wife of Couetyse, who mentions her in his confession. She is a weaver and shares her husband's sin of short-changing customers, something at which she excels because she has been practicing for eleven years. He says after he confesses that he will take his wife away and that they will no longer practice their unfair business dealings. Also mentioned in Couetyse's confession is Latro, Lucifer's aunt. One of the sins of Roberd the robber is that he slept with her, but she is not described.

¹Morton Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (n.p.: Michigan State College Press, 1952).

Several women are included in the confession of Gloton. The first is Betone, a brewster who stops him on his way to church and confession. She asks him where he is going, and he piously replies, "'To holy church . . . for to hure masse,/And sitthen sitte and be yshriven · and syne namore'" (V. 355-6). However, he quickly loses his religious fervour the moment Betone offers him ale. She is a sort of temptress, luring him away from church, but he is not difficult to persuade. Although it is early in the morning, he drinks a great deal of ale and remains at the tavern until late evening, when he is taken home and put to bed by his wife and daughter, "with al the wo of the worlde" (VII. 415). This incident illustrates the motherly duties a wife, and even a daughter, was expected to perform for her husband. The next morning when he awakens he is confronted with his sins by his wife and Conscience. This association of ideas is probably not accidental; in consideration of the kind of life Gloton leads, his wife is probably the closest thing to a conscience he has. Traditionally, women were expected to be moderate as well as motherly. The last female character mentioned in Gloton's confession is his aunt, Abstinence, whom he swears to obey now even though he says, "'And ȝut haue ich hated hure · al my lyf-tyme'" (VII. 441). This antipathy between Gloton and Abstinence is understandable; what is surprising is that the two are presented as being close blood relatives. In light of Lady Holychurche's repeated advice to Will on the virtue of moderation, however, this relationship between two extreme kinds of behavior seems more natural.

In addition to the women who are connected with the Seven Deadly Sins, other women are briefly mentioned throughout the poem. One is Malkyn, who, according to Lady Holychurche, has a "'maidenhod · wham no man desireth'" (II. 181). She is used by Holychurche as a comparison with people who lead good lives but are not charitable. These people, Holychurche says, will gain no more grace by their prayers and churchgoing than the undesirable Malkyn will by her chastity. Her state of virginity is hardly a matter of choice; since no man desires her, she cannot but be chaste. Her virtue does not represent an active decision to be good, but rather a lack of opportunity to sin. Similarly, the people who merely go to church and pray and commit no sins have a kind of "negative" virtue; they are not truly good, but instead not "not good." This analogy is particularly effective in making Holychurche's point about the extreme importance of charity, but of further interest is the attitude taken toward female chastity. Langland makes a clear distinction between the woman who is chaste because she is virtuous and the woman who is chaste because she has no alternative.

Several women are named as the victims of rape by Wrong in the last passus in which Mede is at the king's court. Pees comes to the court to issue a formal complaint against Wrong, telling the court that Wrong "wilffullich · hadde hus wif for-leyen,/And how he rauyschede Rose · the riche wydewe, by nyghte,/And Margarete of here maidenhod · as he mette hure late" (V. 46-8). Thus, Wrong has raped a married woman, a widow, and a virgin, who represent the three conditions of women and therefore all women. The representation of these three

conditions seems to be intentional, for in the A-text Rose is called "reynaldes lemmon" (IV. 36) and in the B-text she is called "Reginoldes loue" (IV. 49). Only in the last of the three texts has she been changed to a widow. That Wrong has raped these women indicates that they are his victims rather than his followers. Since women are singled out as the victims of Wrong, speculations about the feminist significance of these lines are tempting, but they are difficult to substantiate.

Just as the poet mentions his own wife and daughter, so does he briefly describe Piers' family. In addition to a son, Piers has a daughter named Do-ryght-so-other-thy-damme-shal-the-bete. His wife is called Worche-when-tyme-is. Of his family, Piers says only that after his death: "'My wyf shal haue of that ich wan · with treuthe, and no more,/And dele hit among my doutres · and my dere children'" (IX. 105-6). This reading agrees with that of the B-text, but in the A-text Piers wills his possessions to his "'frendes · and [his] deore children'" (VII. 90). This substitution may have been made for poetic purposes, since "douhtres" adds to the line's alliteration, rather than to single out Piers' daughters as his heirs.

Another group of women who are named in the poem are the seven sisters who serve Truth. They are much like the seven cardinal virtues--fortitude, prudence, temperance, justice, faith, hope, and charity--and so are the counterparts of the Seven Deadly Sins. They act as "porters at posternes · that to the place [Truth's castle] longen" (VIII. 271), and their names are Abstinence, Humilite, Charite, Chastite, Pacience, Pees, and Largenesse. Two of these,

Charite and Chastite, are called Truth's chief maidens. Piers warns people that although the seven sisters are kind and helpful, no one who is not "sib to these seuene" (VIII. 280) will be able to enter the gates. Although some of these female characters have names which are used before and after this passus, they do not seem to be exactly the same characters throughout the poem. Pees, for example, is a male character in an earlier passus but is one of the seven sisters here. Although this kind of apparent sex change seems to be an inconsistency of the sort for which the poem has been criticized, in a case such as Pees the entire character, not just the sex, has been changed. Rather than having absentmindedly changed the sex of characters from one passus to the next, Langland simply gives the same name to two completely different characters. His willingness to personify the same concept as first male then female is an indication that he had no clear-cut stereotypes of male and female characteristics.

Another set of sisters who represent virtues are Treuthe, Pees, Mercy, and Ryghtwisnesse. These sisters participate in an important scene in Passus XXI. First Will sees Mercy, whom he describes as:

. . . a wenche, as me thouhte,
 Cam walkyng in the way · to-helleward hue lokede.
 Mercy hihte that mayde · a mylde thyng with-alle,
 And a ful benygne burde · and buxum of speche.
 (XXI. 118-21)

She comes from the west as her sister Treuthe walks toward her from the east. She is called "a comely creature and clene" (XXI. 124), and also "brave," which in this context could mean either courageous or finely dressed. The two sisters meet and ask each other about the

strange events which are taking place on earth and in hell as a result of the crucifixion of Christ. Mercy explains to her sister what is happening, telling her briefly the story of Christ's birth to a virgin mother. Treuthe is not persuaded by Mercy's explanation, her major objection being to Mercy's claim that the light at the gates of hell means that Christ will rescue men from hell. Treuthe says that no one can be rescued from hell, and since the two cannot agree on this point, they decide to ask the opinion of their elder sister Ryghtwysnesse, who is approaching them from the north, and their other sister Pees, who is coming from the south. Ryghtwysnesse is not described, but Pees is "in pacience yclothed" (XXI. 176). She is also described as being the sweetheart of Loue. Pees says that the reason for her rich clothing and her joy is that she is going to greet those spirits who have been released from hell by Christ.

Pees claims that Loue has sent her letters telling her that God has decided that she and Mercy are man's salvation. Her speech provokes another disagreement, this time started by Ryghtwysnesse, who agrees with Treuthe that man cannot be saved from hell. She apparently has no sympathy for man, for she feels that he is responsible for his own unhappiness. The disagreement about hell ends when Treuthe hears a voice speaking to those in hell. The sisters watch the harrowing of hell, after which they kiss each other and agree to stop quarrelling. They dance together until dawn. It is significant that Pees and Mercy are chosen by God to be man's salvation rather than Treuthe and Ryghtwysnesse. The first two are kinder and more human

than the last two, who are inflexible. Langland gives a more complete description of Pees and Mercy than he does of the other two sisters. Once again, it is important that Langland chose to personify virtues as female.

Another important female character in the poem is Anima, the soul. She is the sweetheart of Kynde (Nature), in whose castle she lives, and she is described as "a lemman that he loueth wel · like to hym-selue" (XI. 132). Anima is hated by Enuye, but Kynde protects her from him. She serves Dobet, the daughter of Dowel, and she follows the teachings of Dobest. In the absence of Kynde, she is guarded by the castle's constable, Conscience, and his five sons. Although she lives in the castle, her true home is the heart of man. Anima is only discussed by other characters in the poem and does not speak or act, but she is significant because of the parallel between Kynde and her, and Alanus' Natura and the perfect man she helps to create. Natura and Kynde represent similar concepts as creators. Natura creates the perfect body to be inhabited by the perfect soul God creates; Kynde has built a castle, representing the body, in which he keeps Anima, representing the soul. Like Natura's perfect man, Anima must be carefully guarded against those who wish to do her harm.

Fortune and her maidens also make a brief appearance in the poem. Will dreams what he calls a wonderful dream in which Fortune comes to take him to the "londe of longynge" (XII. 169). She is followed by two beautiful young women, Concupiscentia-carnis and Couetyse-of-eyen, who represent lust of the flesh and of the eyes.

Concupiscentia-carnis comforts Will with the thought that he has many years to live and love ladies. Couetyse-of-eyen tells him that she will follow him always if Fortune will allow her. Fortune replies that she will be his friend, adding, "'That man that me lyketh helpe · myghte nat myshappe'" (XII. 187), showing that she, too, is a temptress like Mede who offers men much more than she plans to give. Old Age and Looseness enter and argue over whether Will should follow Fortune, until he finally decides that Fortune is his enemy. A character named Fortune appears in Boethius' works as well as that of many other authors, so the lack of information that Langland gives us about his Fortune is probably caused by his certainty that his audience is familiar with her characteristics.

A more important female character is Dame Studie, the wife of Wit. According to Will, she "ful lene lokede · and lif-holy semede" (XII. 2). She also seems to be somewhat shrewish, for in the first words she speaks she severely scolds her husband for teaching Will. She says that he should not waste his wisdom on "'eny fol other flaterere · other to frentik puple'" (XII. 6). She further complains about his unfortunate willingness to cast pearls before swine and is especially angry that he gives his wisdom to those:

. . . that shewen by here werkus,
Thei loueth lond and lordship · and lykyng of body more
Than holynesse other hendenesse · other al that seintes techeth.
(XII. 11-13)

In a speech of about 130 lines, she continues to inveigh against worldly people. She, like Holychurche, preaches the importance of charity and complains that even members of religious orders "'ne

parteth with the poure · as pure charyte wolde'" (XII. 65). Studie's husband is amazed by the wisdom of her words and refuses to teach Will any more, signalling that he should go to Studie for further instruction. Will bows before Studie and promises to be her servant if she will teach him to know Dowel. Although Studie had been scornful of Will just moments before his plea to her, his flattery apparently mollifies her for she replies,

For thi meeknesse . . . and for thi mylde speche,
 Ich shal the kenne to Clergie · my cosyn, that knoweth
 All kyne konnynges · and comsynges of Dowel,
 Of Dobet and Dobest · for doctor he is yknowe.

(XII. 93-6)

Studie also tells him about Scripture, Clergie's wife and her sister. Scripture, she says, is also related to the Seven Liberal Arts, and Scripture and her husband are also in agreement with Studie's teaching. Studie shows him the way to the home of Scripture and Clergie and gives him a message of good wishes for her sister, of whom she says:

. . . ich wrot hure a byble,
 And sette hure to Sapience · and to the sauter glosed.
 Logyk ich lerede hure · and al the lawe after,
 Alle the musons in musyk · ich made hure to knowe.
 Plato the poete · ich putte hym ferst to booke,
 Aristotile and othere · to arguen ich tauhte.

(XII. 117-22)

Thus, although Studie acknowledges that Scripture and her husband are better suited to teach Will than she herself is, she is vain enough to boast to Will that she taught Scripture everything and taught many men as well, including Plato and Aristotile.

Studie fits into the classical tradition of associating women with intellectual concepts, but Langland's characterization of her is unique. She is one of the most human of the female characters, for even though she personifies a purely intellectual idea, she has some human failings: she is domineering, vain, and impatient with those who have inferior minds or too many earthly concerns. After scolding her husband for teaching Will, whom she sees as merely another slow-witted pupil, she turns her attention to his instruction as soon as he humbles himself before her and flatters her. She even seems to feel a sisterly competitiveness toward Scripture. But while Studie is capable of this kind of behavior in her personal relationships, she refuses to be petty about larger concerns; she will not quibble with Will over the fine distinctions among Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, but simply tells him to lead the best life he possibly can. This advice and the directions to her sister's home are the only help she gives Will, who sets out on what Studie has warned him will be a long and difficult journey.

When Will arrives at Scripture's home, she and Clergie welcome him warmly because he has come from Studie. Scripture says very little during most of the discussion between her husband and Will. She says even less in the C-text than she does in the other two texts, in which she occasionally quotes from the Bible or corrects Will's misconceptions about Biblical teachings. Will says that after she listens to the discussion between the two men:

Thanne Scripture scorned me • and many skyles shewede,
And contynauce made to Clergie • to congie me, hit semede,
And lakkede me in Latyn • and lyght by me sette,

And seide, "multi multa sapiunt, et seipsos nesciunt."
 Tho wepte ich for wo · and wrathed of here wordes.
 (XII. 163-6)

Will is once again scolded for his ignorance, but this time he is so upset that he cries and falls asleep to dream of Fortune, who comforts him as Scripture will not.

The character of Scripture is not nearly as fully developed as that of her sister. Langland does not describe her physically, nor in the C-text does she speak often enough for one to be able to have an idea of what kind of person she is. She is, however, important because of the concept she personifies and because she so frequently is mentioned by the other characters as being a source of wisdom and salvation. She also acts as yet another female character to give Will not false comfort, but the promise of eventual salvation after many difficulties. Like her sister, she treats Will very harshly, a treatment which he seems to feel is justified but painful. Scripture and Studie are also significant because they are the only two female characters, other than briefly mentioned and unimportant wives of male characters, who are depicted as married women. The marriage of Studie to Wit and Scripture to Clergie, first of all, simply illustrates the close relationship, by choice rather than accident of birth, of these concepts. Also, one might expect such serious concepts as Studie and Scripture to be personified as settled married women rather than gay maidens. These two women, because of the ideas they represent, are more steadfast than characters such as Mede and Fortune, both of whom are too fickle to be married to one man.

Finally, the personification of these concepts as married women makes them in a sense more realistic than many of the other female characters: Holychurche, Anima, and others seem to have no earthly concerns, but Studie and Scripture have homes and husbands. Both of them, because they take initiative, are more like Holychurche than any of the other female characters; it is their married state that makes them most different from Holychurche.

In addition to these characters, Langland also makes several comments on the situation of women which indicate that he has sympathy for them. He is especially sympathetic toward poor women, whose poverty forces them to work very hard in order to keep their children fed and clothed. He mentions the subject of marriage several times, suggesting that frequently women are forced to marry for money rather than love and that they are also occasionally forced to marry men much older than themselves. He is opposed to these loveless or "unnatural" marriages partly because they seem to him to be unfair to women. He also says that women are capable of and should be working rather than leading a leisurely existence, and he is scornful of women as well as men who do not work.

Some of Langland's minor female characters are not admirable people, but this fact is caused by the kind of concept they personify rather than their sex. In fact, more of the disagreeable characters, such as most of the Seven Deadly Sins, are male than female, but of course the same is true of virtuous characters. However, the good and evil female characters are fairly evenly balanced against each other.

While some of the female characters are mentioned so briefly that judging them as effective characters is impossible, others demonstrate the poet's superior allegorical technique by being less "wooden," if less exhaustively described, than the characters of earlier allegorists.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Langland's treatment of women is more properly considered in terms of his own age than that of the twentieth century. Langland displays none of the extreme antifeminism which dominates much of the clerical writing of his time, but how does he compare to his literary contemporaries in his portrayal of female characters? A complete answer to that question would fill a book, but perhaps a partial answer can be found by comparing his female characters with some of the female characters of Geoffrey Chaucer, his most famous contemporary. A comparison between Chaucer and Langland reveals, among other more obvious differences, that Chaucer is not so clearly sympathetic toward women as Langland is. This fact could be accounted for by a number of reasons, including Chaucer's higher social class and cosmopolitan outlook on life, both of which would have prevented him from noticing the hard lives led by the poor women for whom Langland has much pity. Because of Chaucer's ability to hide behind his pilgrims' masks, it is very difficult to discover what he actually thought of women; his poetry is much less personal than Langland's. Although a complete comparison between these two authors is not possible here, three of Chaucer's female characters--Prudence in the Tale of Melibee, Criseyde, and the Wife of Bath--have received enough feminist critical attention to make them suitable for the purpose of this study.

H. R. Patch compared Piers Plowman and Chaucer's work when he said that in Langland's poem "there is sometimes a dramatic quality, sometimes a bit of quoted speech. It is only necessary to set them going with personal names and freer action in order to have something like the human comedy of the Canterbury Tales."¹ The characterization of Prudence in Melibee's story comes close to fulfilling these requirements; although Prudence is the name of a virtue, it is also a more probable name for a woman than Mede or Scripture, and Prudence in the tale has more freedom of action than do many of Langland's women. As an allegorical character, Prudence is also the Chaucerian woman who most closely is related to Langland's women. The virtue of prudence, in fact, is personified in Piers Plowman and was commonly represented in the Middle Ages as a woman.

In the long prose tale, the Tale of Melibee, Prudence is the wife of Melibee, a wealthy and powerful man. One day he returns home to find that his wife and daughter have been beaten by his enemies. He wants to make war on them, but Prudence insists on acting as an intermediary. She meets with his enemies, convinces them that they have done wrong, and calls her friends and relatives to hear the case. Everyone agrees with Prudence that peace is the best solution, and Melibee forgives his enemies after they have confessed their guilt. Throughout the tale, Prudence displays only virtuous qualities: she is kind, forgiving, and intelligent, as well as being a perfect wife and mother.

¹Howard R. Patch, "Characters in Medieval Literature," Modern Language Notes, 40 (1925), p. 11.

Although the character of Prudence is allowed greater freedom of movement (through her activity in reconciling her husband and his enemies) than many of Langland's allegorical women, she is not much more believable than they are as real women. Charles A. Owen, Jr. argues that her allegorical nature is what makes her an unbelievable character,² but this placing of the blame on the nature of allegory is an oversimplification of the matter. Not all allegorical characters are as one-dimensional as Prudence; characters such as Langland's *Studie* are endowed with enough human qualities to make them somewhat realistic. Elizabeth Lunz, on the other hand, says in a later article that Prudence is more believable as a woman than Owen gives her credit for being, and she says moreover that "Chaucer introduced Prudence as an ideal of human virtue, offered specifically as a model to women for their roles in medieval marriage and society."³ Her two points are somewhat contradictory, for one does not expect an ideal to be completely lifelike; most ideals, such as Prudence, are simply too virtuous to be effective when represented as real human beings. Chaucer, furthermore, did not create this character but closely followed a source. Whether, as Lunz claims, Chaucer meant to teach women how to behave by using Prudence as an example is questionable. In any case, Prudence is like many of Langland's women in that she has

²Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Tale of Melibee," Chaucer Review, 7 (1963), p. 268.

³"Chaucer's Prudence as the Ideal of the Virtuous Woman," Essays in Literature (Illinois), 4 (1977), p. 4.

wisdom as one of her major characteristics. She, like Studie and Scripture, is respected by men, especially her husband, who is willing to take her advice on important matters. Prudence is not by any means an antifeminist character; her flaw is that she is one-dimensional and therefore not a believable representation of a woman.

Another of Chaucer's much-discussed female characters is Criseyde. Throughout much of the work in which she appears, she is, like Prudence, an ideal woman. More particularly, Criseyde is depicted as the ideal courtly lady. This portrayal has troubled some critics, who do not see how such a perfect woman could betray her lover. Many see this transformation as an inconsistency in Criseyde's character. On the other hand, Robert B. Bechtel argues that by this shift in character Chaucer intended to make Criseyde "the finger pointing in accusation against the code of courtly love."⁴ Another critic, Matthew Corrigan, claims that Chaucer himself was probably unable to explain the change in Criseyde's character. He further says:

Chaucer's conception of woman is as blurred as the image medieval man has of her. Criseyde in fact is a magnificent exemplum of medieval woman: she is at once angel and devil: and man--Chaucer--is unsure what accounts for the transition.⁵

In other words, Corrigan is saying that Chaucer created in Criseyde the embodiment of what his age thought of woman and that he had no more understanding or sympathy for women than any other man of his time.

⁴Robert B. Bechtel, "The Problem of Criseide's Character," Susquehanna University Studies, 7 (1963), p. 116.

⁵Matthew Corrigan, "Chaucer's Failure with Woman: The Inadequacy of Criseyde," Western Humanities Review, 23 (1969), pp. 118-19.

Perhaps Corrigan's idea is partially correct, for Criseyde's character is easier to understand if one views her as the creation of a medieval author who superimposes the characteristics of his own age upon the earlier time of which he writes. Criseyde is a romance heroine, like Medea, and so a possible explanation for her betrayal of Troilus is her extreme malleability. Criseyde seems willing, from the very beginning of the work, to be led by anyone around her: first Pandarus and Troilus and later her father and Diomedes. She is almost as agreeable as Lady Medea, and the two share other characteristics as well. Criseyde has come to symbolize the unfaithful woman, and one of Medea's major characteristics is fickleness. Neither one is an actor, even when she is in danger. Both are dual in nature, at times good and at times bad. In the works in which they appear, both last appear not quite as villainesses but at least out of favor. This treatment of Medea seems to be justified, for she does personify a basically evil concept. Criseyde, however, is no more sympathetically portrayed, and she is the heroine of the work in which she appears.

Perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most colorful of Chaucer's women is the Wife of Bath. Critical reaction to her ranges from enthusiasm to contempt; some critics believe that she is a mindless mouthpiece of the antifeminist ideas of her time while others feel that Chaucer uses her for a subtler feminist purpose.

The tale which the Wife tells combines elements of courtly love and antifeminist beliefs. The fact that she tells a tale which involves such antifeminist ideas is often pointed to as evidence of her own, and possibly Chaucer's, antifeminism. Chaucer's ability to

create an antifeminist female character, however, hardly constitutes proof of his own antifeminism. The Wife of Bath is like none of Langland's female characters. She is as outspoken as Holychurch and Studie, but they speak of more spiritual subjects than she does. The Wife of Bath is a vivid character, but she does not display Chaucer's sympathy for women. She enjoys life and seems to have no real concerns of the kind that trouble Langland's women. What her character implies is that women's most serious problem is how to gain control over their husbands by trickery. The married couples in Piers Plowman do not play this kind of game; Wit seems to be dominated by his wife, Studie, but she dominates him because of her apparently superior mind rather than trickery.

Although he is far from being an antifeminist, nowhere in his works does Chaucer display any real sympathy for women. Langland, then, occupies a unique position among medieval authors. His attitude toward women borders on the profeminist, although the role and plight of women does not seem to be his major concern. One could hardly expect it to be, considering the age in which he lived. Most of the credit for his attitude toward his female characters belongs, however, not to his own age but to an earlier one. In this respect, Langland was both ahead of and behind his time.

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VITA

Claire Clements was born in Morgan City, Louisiana on November 1, 1956. She attended parochial and public schools there and in several other Louisiana cities. She was graduated from South Terrebonne High School in Bourg, Louisiana in May 1974. She entered Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana in August 1975 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in December 1978 with a major in English and a minor in history.

She accepted a graduate assistantship and entered the Master's program at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in September 1979. In the summer of 1980 she was promoted to Teaching Assistant. She received the Master of Arts degree in June 1981.

She plans to enter the doctoral program at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, following graduation.