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"Of beggeris and of bidderis what best be to doone?": The Problem of Poverty in *Piers Plowman*

Dina Bevin Hess
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Dina Bevin Hess entitled "'Of beggeris and of bidderis what best be to doone?": The Problem of Poverty in *Piers Plowman*." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Thomas Heffernan, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Laura Howes, Joseph Trahern, Thomas Burman

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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“Of beggeris and of bidderis what best be to doone?”:
The Problem of Poverty in Piers Plowman

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dina Bevin Hess
August 2008

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To my family

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine William Langland's continual wrestling with issues of poverty, both voluntary and involuntary, in Piers Plowman. The poem raises a multitude of questions, but to each question a multitude of contradictory answers is proposed, none of which is long permitted to remain unchallenged. The initially bewildering complexity of the representation of poverty found within the poem, however, may be clarified through the recognition of two fundamental underlying themes: *caritas* and *justitia*. Langland relies throughout the poem upon well-established tenets of medieval theology; what sets Piers apart is not that the central tenets of the poem's theology are unorthodox, but the indefatigable rigor with which the poet explores their implications for day-to-day life within the temporal world and his adamant rejection of popularly-accepted practices which, when subjected to close scrutiny, are shown to be incompatible with the full scope of Christian teaching. The resulting text is notable both for its complexity and for its unrelenting insistence on the responsibility of both individuals and society to reshape themselves and reform their lives accordingly – an adamant insistence on the necessity for belief to be borne out in action, for the theological ideal to be put into daily practice. With poverty as my focus, then, this study examines the essential role played by Langland's rigorous understanding of divine law as difficult theological, ethical, and social questions are raised throughout the poem. Langland's persistent probing of the issue of poverty leads both Will and the reader far beyond superficial answers, culminating in a deeper understanding of charity, justice, and, ultimately, the path to redemption.

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Introduction

William Langland's continual wrestling with issues of poverty, both voluntary and involuntary, appears throughout all three versions of Piers Plowman: the poem raises a multitude of questions, and to each question a multitude of contradictory answers is proposed, none of which is long permitted to remain unchallenged. Like any great work of literature, Piers Plowman compels new insights with every reading. The initially bewildering complexity of the representation of poverty found within the poem, however, may be clarified through the recognition of two fundamental underlying themes: *caritas* and *justitia*. Langland relies throughout the poem upon well-established tenets of medieval theology, teachings intensely examined and elucidated in great detail by no lesser authorities than the Church Fathers themselves; what sets Piers apart is not that the central tenets of the poem's theology are unorthodox – for indeed, they are not – but the indefatigable rigor with which the poet explores their implications for day-to-day life within the temporal world and his adamant rejection of popularly-accepted practices which, when subjected to close scrutiny, are shown to be incompatible with the full scope of Christian teaching. The resulting text is notable both for the dazzling complexity of Langland's vision and for its unrelenting insistence on the responsibility of both individuals and society to reshape themselves and reform their lives accordingly – an adamant insistence on the necessity for belief to be borne out in action, for the theological ideal to be

put into daily practice. With poverty as my focus, then, this study examines the essential role played by Langland's rigorous understanding of divine law as difficult theological, ethical, and social questions are raised throughout the poem; numerous simple and static answers are offered in response, but each is persistently tested and rejected in turn in favor of a deeper understanding of both the spiritual and the temporal demands of the Christian faith. Langland's persistent probing of the issue of poverty thus leads both Will and the reader far beyond superficial answers, culminating in a deeper understanding of charity, justice, and, ultimately, the path to redemption.

Any study of Piers Plowman must begin, of course, with the selection of which text of the poem to use as the foundation for further inquiry. While Skeat's parallel-text edition of 1886¹ was seminal and remained the standard text for Piers scholarship for nearly a century, it has been largely superseded by more recent editions. As I have based my analysis of the poem upon the B-text, there were two primary critical editions from which to choose: Kane-Donaldson² and Schmidt,³ both based upon the same manuscript, Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17. I have elected to utilize Schmidt because it remains overall more faithful to the manuscript readings, whereas the Kane-Donaldson edition is heavily, albeit intelligently, emended. For those few passages relevant to my arguments which appear in C but not in B, or when I wish to compare variations

¹ The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redeless. 2 volumes. London: Oxford University Press, 1886. Repr. 1954.

² Piers Plowman: The B Version, Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Revised edition. London: Athlone Press, 1988.

³ The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17. 2nd Edition. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995.

between the B and C texts, I have relied upon Pearsall's edition of C,⁴ based upon Huntington Library MS HM 143 with corrections based upon British Library MS Additional 35157.

Langland's extensive use of Scriptural and patristic material, cited in abundance and even more abundantly informing his thought, presents its own textual challenges. As Alford notes, we do not know what Langland's Bible looked like, since the Biblical text existed in a variety of forms in the 14th century, and we therefore cannot safely draw inferences regarding the "accuracy" of Langland's Biblical quotations: "Beneath [critical] notices of Langland's "misquotations" from Scripture...lies the assumption that there was only one correct reading during the Middle Ages and that we can find it simply by consulting a printed Vulgate. When Skeat remarks that the quotation at C.14.134a (Ezekiel 33:11) is "inexact," what he really means is that it differs from the Clementine edition of the Vulgate published two centuries later" (Guide 17). It is clearly evident, moreover, that Langland drew upon numerous intermediary sources from which he may have gleaned his specific phrasing or word choices. When discussing the poem's Latin Scriptural citations, I have therefore made no attempt to "correct" Langland's citations to conform with the Vulgate reading, but have instead taken care to base my commentary upon the specific wording used within the poem. Where he paraphrases the Bible, however, or in providing general Scriptural references, it has of course been necessary to select a text from which to work; for those instances I have chosen to use the Authorized King

⁴ Piers Plowman: The C-Text. 2nd edition. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994.

James Version as the most commonly familiar English translation. Citations from the deuterio-canonical books are likewise taken from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate, as the most readily familiar English version of those texts.

My discussion is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1, “Poverty in Piers Plowman: The Roles of Charity and Justice,” establishes the groundwork for my later arguments. These two fundamental injunctions, to fulfill the demands of charity and justice, lie at the heart of Langland’s examination of poverty, both voluntary and involuntary, and it is therefore necessary to begin with a detailed examination of the ideals upon which so much of the poem rests. The most fundamental principle of Truth, reaffirmed throughout the poem, is *caritas*; because “*Deus caritas est*,” it is the most fundamental tenet of the Christian faith both in belief and in practice, the law which shapes all other law. It is through love that the Christian may become “ylik to Oure Lorde” (BI.90), and “*Qui manet in caritate, in Deo manet*”⁵ – “he that abides in charity abides in God” – is therefore a principle which reappears constantly throughout the poem. Bound up within the practice of *caritas*, however, is also the practice of *justitia*: the two virtues are inextricably intertwined within the poem, for as both love and justice are in perfect unity within God’s nature, so they are fundamentally inseparable in the carrying out of God’s law. The concept of justice is established as the means by which divinely ordained order must be established and maintained within the

⁵ I John 4:16. The verse is cited by both Repentaunce (B.V.487) and Wit (B.IX.64).

fallen world, for in order to “werchen His wille” (B.I.82), one must live according to His law. Because his focus is upon each individual’s personal responsibility for faithful adherence to divine law, Langland consistently advocates generous and indiscriminate aid to all who claim to be in need, emphasizing the necessity of recognizing and rendering what one owes, through both love and justice, to one’s neighbor; in this he departs sharply from the general consensus of his time, which heavily favored discrimination in who should and should not be assisted with alms, particularly to the exclusion of able-bodied beggars. The poem’s insistence on the crucial role of the active practice of charity is accompanied, moreover, by an equally intense scrutiny of the giver’s internal motivations; adamantly insisting that nothing less than full submission to God’s will may serve, Langland consistently rejects the possibility that spiritual merit may be gained through external actions alone, without true internal reformation.

Chapter 2, “Piers Plowman and The Problem of the Wastours,” explores in greater detail the application of the principles of charity and justice to Langland’s understanding of both the faults and the necessary Christian response to the wastours: those who could earn a living through their own labor but refuse to do so. While *caritas* and *justitia* are emphasized throughout the poem as the virtues most central to the understanding of God’s law, they are likewise the very virtues which the wastours most tangibly reject; the poet’s vehement criticism of the wastours is based upon his stringent adherence to Scriptural ideals, with a particular emphasis upon one’s tangible duties toward both God and one’s fellow man. They do not render what they owe either to God or to others, but instead live as leeches upon the honest,

hard-working members of society, stealing from both those who give them alms and the truly desperate poor who would have received the aid which they have taken inappropriately; in so doing they endanger not only their own souls, but the well-being of their entire society. Having exhaustively established the tremendous threat to society posed by the wastours, however, Langland's examination of the issue seems to hang at loose ends: their reform is clearly essential, but how is that goal to be achieved? The answer to this crucial but intractable dilemma appears to remain unclear; numerous solutions are advanced, but each in turn is shown to be inadequate, and none of the poem's allegorical figures ever succeed in satisfactorily resolving the issue. None of the social policies which are proposed to combat the problem, all of which rely on some kind of external enforcement, can suffice; not only are they ineffective, but they also fail when measured against the demands of charity and justice upon the enforcer, and for Langland the obligation to act fully in accordance with God's law always far outweighs any other consideration. It does not follow, however, that no solution is presented, for the poem does come to an unequivocal moral resolution. Here, as throughout the poem, the only sufficient answer to the otherwise insurmountable failures of the human will is shown to be to sublimate it to the divine; ultimately, inevitably, the focus therefore returns to individual moral responsibility for reformation. Piers Plowman's solution to the problem of the wastours is ultimately identical to its central theme, the individual's search for Truth: true change can come only from within the individual, guided and aided by the grace of God.

Chapter 3, “*Ne solliciti sitis*”: Piers Plowman and the Mendicants,” examines the poem’s representation of the mendicant orders. While Piers explicitly embraces the ideal of voluntary poverty, criticism of the mendicants abounds within the poem; Langland represents their lives as deeply infected by the very solicitude they profess to have eschewed. Through their attachment to temporal gain and their resulting infidelity to the service of God, they wreak havoc upon the Church. Rather than sowing Christian belief and the cardinal virtues in the hearts of the people, they instead sow doubt, discord, and lack of faith; furthermore, and most crucially, cupidity and covetousness lead them to deliberately distort Scripture and abuse the sacrament of penance for their own profit. Through their “glosyng” they encourage those who rely upon them for guidance to disregard the consequences of sin and eschew true repentance and reformation, thereby leaving them mired in error and impeding their spiritual progress toward Truth. The catastrophic consequences of the friars’ flattery and subterfuge are addressed with increasing urgency throughout the poem. Their corruption is not irreversible, however. Kynde and Conscience call upon them to return to their first ordinance: the rejection of solicitude in the pursuit of *caritas*. For if the brothers were to return to the true and stringent *vita apostolica*, the absence of solicitude exemplified by Christ and the apostles, the love and charity enjoined by Scripture, then the effect of their regeneration would be not only their personal reformation, but the reformation of Church and society as well. They would thereby be empowered to lead the Church and the laity no longer in deadly error, lulled into complacency with a comfortably effortless and superficial

simulacrum of the Christian faith, but in the necessary radical transformation of hearts, minds, and spirits in the service of God.

My final chapter, “Poverty and the Attainment of Redemption in Piers Plowman,” examines the poem’s complex representation of the role of poverty in the pursuit of salvation. Although a great deal of attention is given to the value of the purgatory the poor endure on earth and Scriptural promises of the eternal rewards due to those who patiently suffer temporal want, Langland emphatically does not simply equate poverty – an external condition – with virtue, for the rigorous understanding of Christianity upon which he insists urgently demands a focus upon the inward spiritual condition rather than mere externals alone. Poverty in and of itself, therefore, is clearly established as no guarantee of either spiritual growth or ultimate redemption: it bears salvific virtue only insofar as it directs one’s steps toward God, aiding the individual’s progress in the spiritual journey to the Tower of Truth. The poor, like the rich, must actively embrace the inward reformation necessary in order to conform their own will to God’s will and thereby conduct their lives in accordance with God’s laws. The poem’s representation of the redemptive power of poverty therefore focuses not upon external poverty but internal: a poverty not of body alone, but of spirit, dependent not upon one’s earthly condition but upon the internal renunciation of solicitude and unequivocal submission to the divine will.

Without relinquishing the broader scope of theology, Langland relentlessly insists upon the essential requirements of faith borne out in daily life: works and actions undiverted by worldly considerations, governed always by

divine law. To that end, the text of Piers Plowman continually propagates distinctions which resist any convenient but ultimately inadequate oversimplifications, unsettling any simple programmatic view and challenging the Dreamer and reader alike to instead pursue more diligently the road to Truth. In my analysis of the poem's representation of poverty, it has been my hope and intent never to underplay the complexities which are so essential to Langland's poetic methods, but to more fully illuminate them through the examination of their full subtlety and depth.

Chapter 1

Poverty in *Piers Plowman*: The Roles of Charity and Justice

Throughout *Piers Plowman*, poverty plays a significant role in illuminating what it means to “wel werchen” in this life: in short, what is required both in will and in action in order to live a life grounded in the fundamental tenets of charity, justice, and true faith. As Elizabeth Kirk and Judith Anderson have observed, however, *Piers Plowman* “is not the sort of allegory we find in the fifteenth-century play *Everyman*, where personifications seem intended to reduce moral and religious ideas that would otherwise be abstract or difficult to something simple and plain. Quite the contrary: it uses allegory to make the reader think harder and face more problems.”¹ Quite the contrary, indeed: throughout the poem, numerous simple and static answers are offered in response to the difficult theological, ethical, and social questions which are raised, but those simple answers are persistently tested and rejected. William Langland’s continual wrestling with issues of poverty, both voluntary and involuntary, appears throughout all three versions of *Piers Plowman*; the poem raises a multitude of questions, and to each question a multitude of contradictory answers is proposed, none of which is long permitted to remain unchallenged. Instead Langland probes each one deeply and relentlessly, uncompromisingly examining the assumptions and ideologies on which it rests, searching out the shortcomings

¹ Elizabeth Kirk and Judith Anderson, Introduction to *Piers Plowman: An Alliterative Verse Translation* by E. Talbot Donaldson. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990, p. ix.

of each in turn. Although essential moral and theological tenets are revealed as fundamentally simple, clearly revealed within Scripture and particularly within the example of Christ, their application within the fallen world is presented as bewilderingly contradictory. As Bloomfield notes, in Piers Plowman “the difficulty lies, not in the nature of what is to be communicated, but in the multiplicity of conflicting answers” (38). By relentlessly examining and subsequently rejecting each of the temptingly simple but ultimately inadequate conceptions about poverty and the poor which were prevalent in the popular thought of his time, instead continually pursuing a deeper understanding of both the spiritual and temporal demands of the Christian faith, Langland’s persistent probing of the issue of poverty leads far beyond superficial answers, culminating in a deeper understanding of charity, justice, and, ultimately, the path to redemption.

Two fundamental injunctions, to fulfill the demands of charity and justice, are at the heart of Langland’s examination of poverty, both voluntary and involuntary, and in this chapter I will examine these ideals upon which so much of the poem rests. It is crucial to note at the outset that Langland’s fundamental theological premises are remarkably orthodox. Though relatively little is known about the details of Langland’s life, it is widely accepted that he “had a thorough theological education and was securely grounded in the western theological tradition” (Harbert 150). As Robertson and Huppé explain, “the Bible did not exist alone in the Middle Ages. It was surrounded by a nexus of traditional interpretation which was the source of the homiletic and liturgical offices by means of which the

ordinary Christian learned the Catholic doctrine. Biblical exegesis was at the same time the culmination of all scholastic exercises....It is to this nexus of interpretation that the poet directs us when he tells the reader to consult the “glose” (2). The poem is both intellectually and theologically firmly grounded within this exegetical tradition, and Langland relied heavily on canonical discourse in his understanding of charity, justice, and their application to the problems of poverty. Direct references to both Scripture itself and to the commentaries of patristic authorities reappear extensively throughout the poem; in fact, the quotations are so extensive and so fundamental that Alford argues that Langland “*began* with the quotations, and from them, using the standard aids of a medieval preacher, derived the substance of the poem” (“Role of the Quotations” 82).² E. Talbot Donaldson aptly describes Langland’s materials as “nothing less than the history of Christianity as it unfolds both in the world of the Old and New Testaments and in the heart of the individual Christian – two seemingly distinct realms between which the poem’s allegory moves with dizzying rapidity.”³

Langland uses the numerous Biblical and patristic texts he quotes as “pillars of

² Since I am concerned here with Langland’s overall familiarity with Scriptural and exegetical tradition, the specific immediate sources for Langland’s quotations need not concern us at this juncture. A great wealth of critical material exists, however, tracing the influence of specific compendia, sermons, and other texts on Langland’s poem. Such research can be greatly productive in the interpretation of specific passages within the poem because, as Alford and Allen in particular argue, Langland’s quotations should not be examined in isolation, but within the context of the larger passage which Langland was reading and interpreting, lest we, like Lady Mede, fail to turn the leaf and follow the line of thought to its end. On some of Langland’s possible sources see particularly Alford Guide to the Quotations, Allen “Langland’s Reading and Writing,” Bloomfield Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse 161-169, Kaske “*Ex vi transicionis*,” Owst “Angel,” Robertson and Huppé Scriptural Tradition, Schmidt B-Text, B.H. Smith Traditional Imagery of Charity, Wenzel “Medieval Sermons,” and Wittig “Design.”

³ Donaldson’s introduction to Piers Plowman in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume I, p. 274. Ed. M.H. Abrams, Donaldson, et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 1968.

support” as he “reaches out after truth, the whole truth, which in abstract form the Bible and the Fathers give him” (Bloomfield 40).

Theology in the abstract, however, while it serves as the foundation of the poem’s explorations, is not an end in and of itself. What separates Langland from most of his contemporaries is not the simple fact of his use of well-established tenets of medieval theology, teachings intensely examined and elucidated in great detail by no lesser authorities than the Church Fathers themselves, but the rigor with which he explores their implications for day-to-day life within the temporal world and his refusal to accept popularly-accepted simple answers which, when subjected to close scrutiny, are shown to be incompatible with the full scope of Christian teaching. As Allen notes, “Piers Plowman constantly raises its question in the singular only to have it answered in the plural” (Ethical Poetic 40). The resulting text is notable both for the dazzling complexity of Langland’s vision and for its unrelenting insistence on the responsibility of both individuals and society to reshape themselves and reform their lives accordingly – an adamant insistence on the necessity for belief to be borne out in action, for the theological ideal to be put into daily practice, because there is no value in the external form without the substance. As Higgs observes, “At the center of the theology in Piers Plowman is the necessity of aligning one’s will with God’s in order for good to be accomplished” (126). That good cannot be accomplished by “feith withouten feet,” which is “feblere than nought / And as deed as a dorenail but if the dedes folwe” (B.I.186-7)⁴: spiritual understanding must be followed by its practical application within daily life.

⁴ James 2:26.

For the Christian, life should be ‘a journey into faith and into wisdom,’ a journey made by obeying the commandments, not merely hearing them (Proverbs 1:7)” (Davlin “Wisdom” 25). The quest is not for knowledge for its own sake, but for the spiritual knowledge necessary to transform both the individual and society, and for an understanding of how what is learned must be applied within the temporal world in order to effect that transformation.

Throughout the poem, and particularly in its examination of poverty, the value of temporal “tresor” versus spiritual “tresor” plays a central role, and the degree to which temporal desires may distract mankind from Truth is made evident from the outset. Between two towers, the Dreamer (not yet identified as Will, though his name will prove to be of crucial importance as the poem advances) sees a vision of “a fair feeld ful of folk...alle manere of men, the meene and the riche, werchyng and wandryng as the world asketh” (B.Prol.17-19). The emphasis is definitely on “as the world asketh”: it quickly becomes apparent that most of the people are caught up in the temporal, leading lives grossly out of alignment with the divinely ordained ideal. Some “putten hem to pride, apparailled hem therafter, / In contenaunce of clothyng comen disguised” (ll. 23-25), others go on pilgrimages only so that they might tell tall tales about their adventures all their lives after (ll. 46-52), and sergeants-at-law who are more concerned with monetary gain than justice “pleteden for penyes and poundes the lawe, / And noght for love of Oure Lorde unlose hire lippes ones” (ll. 212-214). Some “putten hem to the plough, pleiden ful selde, / In settyng and sowynge swonken ful harde” (ll. 20-21), faithfully carrying out their responsibilities, but

others “with glotonye destrueyeth” the fruits of the workers’ labors (l. 22), and many of those who “han wit at wille to werken if they sholde” instead “feynen hem fantasies, and fooles hem maketh” and “faiteden for hire foode,” and then “in glotonye...go thei to bedde, and risen with ribaudie...Sleep and sory sleuthe seweth hem evere” (ll. 36-45.) Likewise, some devoted hermits and anchorites “for love of Oure Lord lyveden ful streyte” and “holden hem in hire selles/ Coveiten noght in contree to cairen aboute / For no likerous liflode hire likame to plese” (ll. 25-30), but they seem to be greatly outnumbered by those falsely claiming to adhere to the religious life in order to feed their temporal appetites. “Heremytes on an heep...wenten to Walsyngham – and hire wenches after...and shopen hem heremytes hire ese to have” (ll. 53-57), and friars of all four orders travel about the countryside preaching “for profit of [the] wombe” and glossing the Gospel however they please “for coveitise of copes” (ll. 55-63). The pardoner, bearing a bull carrying the seals of the bishop himself, beguiles the populace with promises of easy absolution, and the parish priest allows him to do so in return for a share of the silver “that the povere peple of the parissche sholde have if they ne were” (ll. 68-82). Parsons and parish priests leave their parishes shepherdless while they live in London, even during Lent, and “syngen ther for symonie, for silver is swete” (ll. 83-91) or serve as stewards and accountants for the nobility (ll. 92-98); they “han cure under Crist” and “sholden shryven hire parisschens, prechen and praye for hem, and the povere fede” (ll. 88-90), but instead they have abandoned their divine responsibilities in pursuit of temporal gain.

I shall examine both the lay wastours and the false clergy in greater detail in later chapters; what is crucial at this juncture, however, is the fundamental disorder presented here, and the degree to which it arises from allowing the temptations of this world to displace obedience to God's commandments. Rather than being ruled as God ordained by *caritas*, love of God and one's neighbor, the majority of people allow themselves to be led by its precise opposite, *cupiditas*, love of the self and the temporal world. Having no concern for anything beyond the temporal, they are lost in "a mass of self-absorbed social practices in which there is no consciousness of any coherent order...let alone a divine one. The participants...appear to be discrete members of a mobile, fragmenting society revelling in processes of consumption and production which are an end in themselves" (Aers Creative Imagination 5). Spiritually blinded by the false treasures of the temporal world, they are "corrupted by gluttony, concern for material rather than spiritual food and drink; by pride in clothing, the hollow pretense to status to whose ideals they do not adhere; by desire for money, representative of the world's treasure rather than the treasure of Truth; and they glose their shortcomings in the mockery of false speech. They have forgotten the admonition, *Non potestis Deo servire et mammonae*"⁵ (Robertson and Huppé 25). As Holy Church soon explains,

...Sestow this peple –

How bisie they ben aboute the maze?

⁵ "You cannot serve God and wealth." Matthew 6:24b. The first half of the verse is also relevant: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other."

The mooste partie of this peple that passeth on this erthe,
Have thei worship in this worlde, thei wilne no bettre;
Of oother hevene than here holde thei no tale....

(B.I.5-9)

They eschew God's law, preferring "hire likame to plese," but

It is nought al good to the goost that the gut asketh,
Ne liflode to the likame that leef is to the soule.
Leve nought thi likame, for a liere hym techeth –
That is the wrecced world, wolde thee bitraye.
For the fend and thi flessch folwen togidere.

(B.I.36-40)

The cupidity in which they revel "is the end of human failing, descending from the love of the world and a love of the flesh....Against the love of God stands the love of one's self, Augustine's *amor sui*.⁶ In the ignorance of conscience and the weakness of intellect, the misguided will turns inward on its own desires so that it is filled with cupidity" (Robertson and Huppé 13). It is for this reason that Holy Church, in explaining the significance of what the Dreamer has seen, first emphasizes moderation and warns the Dreamer not to trust his bodily appetites: "for the liar world teaches it to betray him, and the devil and the flesh combine to destroy his soul....the world, the flesh and the devil are the three sources of temptation" (Dunning Interpretation 34). Like the rats in the Prologue's fable of

⁶ De Civitate Dei XIV.28.

the cat⁷, fallen men must realize that they cannot “wel werchen” when they allow themselves to be controlled by nothing beyond their own bodily appetites. As the one mouse “that mucche good kouthe” (B.Prol.182) observes, they would run amok and completely destroy all order, “For hadde ye rattes youre wille, ye kouthe noght rule yowselfe” (l. 201). Men must not rely upon their own errant will, “for a liere hym techeth”: they need the guidance of God’s law.

But how may one living within the fallen and misleading world comprehend Truth and thus learn how to live a life in accordance with divine law? As the would-be pilgrims complain to Piers, “This were a wikkede wey but whoso hadde a gyde” (B.VI.1). A great multitude of spiritual advisors present themselves over the course of the poem; none, however, prove to be final and definitive, and indeed the search for and lack of trustworthy guides is an ongoing theme. Even Holy Church herself disappears after only a brief episode in Passus I; Bloomfield suggests that “perhaps it was because [Langland] felt that the voice of the true Church was so hard to hear in his time that he makes of her a minor character in his search for spiritual instruction” (21). What she has to say is of crucial importance, however, and its significance and application continue to be worked out throughout the remainder of the poem.

⁷ Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester, used the same fable in a sermon probably given on May 18, 1376, at a convocation held during the Good Parliament. It is possible that Brinton was Langland’s source, although Brinton drew a different point from the story. For further discussion of this possibility, see Hanna Langland 13, Kellogg “Bishop Brunton,” Owst “Angel,” Owst Literature and Pulpit 579-586, and Schmidt B-Text 403 n. 146. For Brinton’s complete sermon see Devlin Sermons of Thomas Brinton Sermon 69, vol. 2, 315-321. The fable alone, translated from Devlin’s edition by Stephen H.A. Shepherd, is reprinted in Robertson and Shepherd Piers Plowman, 488-489.

First and foremost, the Christian's infallible guide must ultimately be Truth: Holy Church repeats three times that "Whan alle tresors arn tried, Truthe is the best" (B.I.85, 135, and 207). It is worthwhile to pause to consider the verbal alchemy taking place in Holy Church's use of this crucially fundamental term. She initially uses "Truthe" simply as a name for God, the "fader of feith" who "formed yow alle" (B.I.14), and the same usage appears later in the passage as well, such as when she speaks of heaven: "Ther Treuthe is in Trinitee and troneth hem alle" (ll.132-133). Elsewhere, however, she uses the same term differently – for instance, in response to the Dreamer's query about how he may save his soul.

‘Whan alle tresors arn tried,’ quod she, ‘treuthe is the beste.

I do it on *Deus caritas*⁸ to deme the sothe;

It is as dereworthe a drury as deere God hymselven.

For whoso is trewe of his tonge and telleth noon oother,

And dooth the werkes therwith and wilneth no man ille,

He is a god by the Gospel, aground and olofte,

And ylik to Oure Lorde, by Seint Lukes wordes.’⁹

(B.I.85-93)

As Murtaugh notes, "'Truth' now does not seem to mean 'God' but something else...It is no longer transcendant, but is in each man who 'is trewe of his tonge' and lives a moral life....His good works resound in heaven because they are the expression of Truth, at once the principle of moral action and heaven's King" (6).

⁸ "God is love." I John 4:8.

⁹ Alford notes that the reference does not appear to actually be to Luke, but to John 10:34, which in turn quotes Psalms 81:6: "I have said: You are gods and all of you the sons of the most high" ("Unidentified Quotations" 392).

Truth, therefore, is both “transcendant and immanent, God Himself and the inner principle of man’s moral actions” (8). In following the principles ordained by God for his guidance, the Christian may become more like God, in whose image he was created, and thus become “a god by the Gospel...ylik to Oure Lorde.” Truth, in both senses, is the fundamental guide which must underlie all others, for “the rightness of a thing consists in the conformity of the direction of its specific activity with the mind of God, ‘whose infinite and self-subsisting truth is the norm and measure of all things’” (Harwood Belief 36). Time and time again, throughout the poem, this emphasis on Truth is reaffirmed, and repeatedly it proves to be the fundamental yardstick by which both individuals and their actions may be measured: to what extent do word, will, and deed conform with the law of Truth?

The most fundamental principle of Truth, both according to Holy Church and as is reaffirmed throughout the poem, is *caritas*; ¹⁰ it is the most fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, both in belief and in practice. Because “*Deus caritas*,” love is the highest law of all, the law which shapes all other law. In this emphasis Langland carries the entire weight of the western theological tradition behind him: as Robertson and Huppé have observed, “The most fundamental doctrine of medieval Christianity is that the end of all Biblical study is the promotion of *caritas*, the love of God and one’s neighbor. As perfect charity is the end of Christian behavior, so it was felt to be the ultimate *sentence* of the Bible....What was not in accord with charity was automatically erroneous” (12).

¹⁰ “Wrong,” in direct opposition to “Truth,” is identified as “lettere of love” (B.I.69).

It is through love that one may become “ylik to Oure Lorde,” and “*Qui manet in caritate, in Deo manet*”¹¹ – “he that abides in charity abides in God” – is therefore a principle which reappears constantly throughout the poem. Langland follows Augustine¹² and Aquinas¹³ in emphasizing *caritas* as the virtue which most closely unites mankind with God and stressing the degree to which charity is inextricably connected with other moral virtues; both ideas play crucial roles throughout the poem. Love is “leche of lif and next Oure Lord selve, / And also the graithe gate that goth into hevene” (B.I.204-205); it is, in short, “the supreme factor in the attainment of salvation” (Carnegy 4). As “Poul in his pistle” wrote, “*Fides, spes, caritas, et maior horum...* / “Feith, hope, and charitee – alle ben goode, / And saven men sondry times, ac noon so soone as charite” (B.XII.28-31).¹⁴

Caritas may be understood “kyndely,” for “it comseth by myghte,¹⁵ / And in the herte, there is the heed and the heighe welle” (B.I.163-4), and it also learned through Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New. Through love God ordained all of creation, and through love all law is guided, as Holy Church further instructs the Dreamer:

...Alle his werkes he wroughte with love as hym liste,
 And lered it Moyses for the leveste thyng and moost lik to heven....
 Forthi is love ledere of the Lordes folk of hevene,

¹¹ I John 4:16. The verse is quoted multiple times in the poem: by Conscience (C.III.403), Repentaunce (B.V.487), and Wit (B.IX.64).

¹² *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* cc. 13-15.

¹³ *Summa Theologica* II.II.q.23.

¹⁴ I Corinthians 13:13.

¹⁵ The power of God revealing Truth innately, within the human mind and soul.

And a meene, as the mair is, inmidde the kynge and the commune;
Right so is love a ledere and the law shapeth.

(B.I.150-51,159-61)

By faithfully following the law of *caritas* the Christian may be sure he will err against no other divine law, because love is the law which perfects all others: “Thus witnesseth his word; werche thow thereafter. / For Truthe telleth that love is triacle of hevne: / May no synne be on hym seen that that spice useth” (B.I.147-149). As both the Dreamer and the reader are gradually brought to understand, God’s whole law is encompassed in the law of *caritas*:

Dilige Deum et proximum tuum...

The glose was gloriously writen with a gilt penne:

*In hiis duobus pendet tota lex et prophetia.*¹⁶

‘Is here alle thi lordes lawes?’ quod I? ‘Ye, leve me,’ he seide.

‘And whoso wercheth after this writ, I wol undertaken,

Shal nevere devel hym dere, ne deeth in soul greve.’

(B.XVII.12-17)

It is for this reason that throughout the poem, despite the Dreamer’s uncertainty as he searches for a more complete understanding of Truth, the principle of *caritas* may serve as a guide by which both he and the reader may measure the many conflicting answers which he encounters along the way: they are inadequate unless they prove to be fully in accordance with the law of love.

¹⁶ “Thou shalt love God and thy neighbor...On these two depend the entire law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40.

As both this passage and Holy Church explain, God's first commandment is to love Him "levere than thiselve" (B.I.143), and inextricably contained within that commandment is the further injunction to love one's neighbor: "*Date, et dabitur vobis*"¹⁷ – for I deele yow alle / And that is the lok of love that leteth out my grace" (B.I.201-202). Love is the reason that God grants grace freely, without measure, to mankind, and each individual correspondingly owes love in return to both God and to neighbor. As Evans notes, "The commandment to love is in two parts, love God and love man, but the emphasis in Piers Plowman is on realizing the former through the latter...in Langland's work the emphasis is... an imitation of Christ, an imitation of the dealings of God *as man* with other men" (251). Holy Church furthermore makes a crucial distinction, providing the Dreamer with another tenet which plays a pivotal role throughout the poem: to truly love is not an abstraction, but demands concrete action. Without action, love is love in name only, and the form without the substance holds no merit. Langland, like the Apostle Paul in Corinthians, insists that "without the spirit of love, even the sacraments and the virtues do not lead men to God" (Ames 51):

...feith withouten feet is feblere than nought,

And as deed as a dorenail but if the dedes folwe:

*Fides sine operibus mortua est...*¹⁸

Forthi chastitie withouten charite worth cheyned in helle;

It is as lewed as a lampe that no light is inne.

¹⁷ "Give, and it shall be given to you." Luke 6:38. The same verse is cited again at B.XII.54.

¹⁸ "Faith without works is dead." James 2:26.

Ironically, despite her own insistence on love carried out in action, Holy Church herself manifests love only in words, not works. She appears only long enough to explain the Dreamer's vision and a few basic tenets of faith, and rather impatiently at that: "Thow doted daffe!," she says when he confesses his lack of understanding, "dulle are thi wittes" (B.I.140). Although her advice is of fundamental importance, the Dreamer is left nearly as bewildered when she vanishes as he was before she appeared. This is not merely a rhetorical device, without which the remainder of the poem might seem superfluous: as the allegorical embodiment of the teaching of the Church in the abstract, she herself is incomplete, the theory without the practice. She has provided the guiding tenets, but the advice she dispenses into must be put into practice by each individual Christian. It is the Dreamer's task – and the reader's – to diligently seek after a better understanding of the implications of the spiritual knowledge she offers and to then to transform that understanding into day-to-day practice, for true spiritual knowledge "is not merely an activity of the soul locked in itself; it is *charitas* which must be extended to God and neighbor alike' (Wittig "Design" 215).

As Dame Study later notes, many men "carpen of God faste" and "have hym muche in hire mouthe" but not in their hearts (B.X.69-70), and thus they do not "werche...in werk" what they proclaim to believe (B.X.254). Here, as repeatedly throughout the poem, *caritas* is most concretely manifested through one's treatment of the poor. She rails against those who not only refuse aid to the poor suffering outside their gates, but "hoen on hym as a hound" and command

him to go away: “Litel loveth he that Lord that lent hym al that blisse, / That thus parteth with the povere a parcel whan hym nedeth!” (B.X.61-63). Just as he that abides in charity abides in God, he who does not abide in charity clearly does not abide in God. If men’s words are not confirmed by their works – specifically by concrete acts of *caritas*, particularly toward the poor – then they do not love in truth:

For Seint Johan seide it, and sothe am hise wordes:

*Qui non diligit manet in morte.*¹⁹

Whoso loveth noght, leve me, he lyveth in deeth deyinge....

Whoso leneth noght, he loveth noght, Oure Lorde woot the sothe.

(B.XI.173-179)

The Christian must “conformen hym to love,” reforming his heart as God commands and then acting accordingly. “The nedy and the naked, nymeth hede how thei liggeth, / And casteth hem clothes, for so comaundeth Truthe” (B.VI.15-16); those in need are our “bloody bretheren, for God boughte us alle. / Truthe taughte me ones to loven hem ech one / And to helpen hem of alle thyng, ay as hem nedeth” (B.VI.207-209). They are to be aided generously and compassionately for the sake of *caritas*, following the example of Christ, who taught that “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). As Adams observes, “Situations requiring love of neighbors, or loyalty (= *trupe*), present tests of our love of God and our accord with Truth....serving...is a means and not an end”

¹⁹ “He that loves not abides in death.” I John 3:14. See also I John 2:3-4.

(“Theology” 89). “In the apparaille of a povere man and pilgrymes liknesse /
Many tyme God hath ben met among nedy peple” (B.XI.241-2):

For oure joy and oure juele, Jesu Crist of hevene,
In a povere mannes apparaille pursueth us evere,
And loketh on us in hir liknesse and that with lovely chere,
To knowne us by our kynde herete and castynge of our eighen,
Wheither we love the lordes here bfore oure Lord of blisse.

(B.X.176-188)

“*Date, et dabitur vobis*” is a mandate of justice as well as love, however:
although her first focus is upon *caritas*, Holy Church also addresses justice as
fundamentally essential to the pursuit of Truth. When, upon discovering who she
is, the Dreamer falls on his knees and pleads with her to

...kenne me kyndely on Crist to bileve,
That I myghte werchen His wille that wroghte me to manne:
‘Teche me to no tresor, but tel me this ilke –
How I may save my soul...

(B.I.81-84)

her abrupt shift to the justice kings and knights are obligated to “kepen...by
reson” (l. 93) may initially seem like an irrelevant digression from the requested
information. For Langland, however, “individual salvation is inextricably bound
up with the attempt to live a life that embodies the virtue of justice” (Aers
“Justice” 167). In the Prologue, in Holy Church’s teachings, and throughout the
poem, the concept of justice is established as the means by which divinely

ordained order must be established and maintained within the fallen world; in order to “werchen His wille,” one must live according to His law. As Conscience warns, “Save thow lyve by loore of *Spiritus Iusticie*, / The chief seed that Piers sew, ysaved worstow nevere” (B.XIX.409-410). Bloomfield eloquently notes, “It has often been said that the main point of *Piers* is love, and no one can deny the importance of this theme throughout the poem. It is less frequently, if ever, said that justice is Langland’s theme, but it is certainly true that Langland values justice just as much as love....Justice without love is deficient, but love without justice is equally deficient” (130). The two virtues are, in fact, inextricably intertwined within the poem, for to live in accordance with *caritas* is presented as inseparable from living in accordance with *justitia*; as both love and justice are in perfect unity in God’s nature, so they are fundamentally inseparable in the carrying out of God’s law.

At the heart of Langland’s understanding of justice is a sense of the principle of equivalence required by the very nature of God as Truth.²⁰ At its most fundamental level, justice requires a perfectly measured balance between desert and reward; sow such grain as you wish to reap.²¹ This principle is first proclaimed by the angel in the prologue, speaking to the king: “*Qualia vis metere,*

²⁰ Goldsmith notes that in church Latin Jesus was often called *sol justitiae*, “sun of justice” (6). The expression was “taken from the Messianic prophecies of Malachios 4:2 and well known as a name for Christ” (*Image* 93).

²¹ For a particularly detailed examination of this principle of justice, see Stokes *Justice and Mercy* pp. 1-11.

talía grana sere...Si seritur pietas, de pietate metas” (B.Prol.133-135).²² Holy Church repeats the same tenet:

Forthi I rede yow riche, haveth ruthe on the povere,
Though ye be myghty to mote, beeth meke in youre werkes,
For the same mesure that ye mete, amys outhur ellis,
Ye shulle ben weyen therwith whan ye wenden hennes:
*Eadem mensura qua mensi fueritis remecietur vobis.*²³

(B.I.175-178)

Applied to individual action, the fundamental mandate of justice is *redde quod debes*: pay what you owe, both to God and to others. As justice itself is the means by which divinely ordained order may be established and maintained within the fallen world, so *redde quod debes* is the means by which the ideal of justice is transformed into action within daily life. It is an exceedingly wide-ranging mandate, firmly grounded in Scripture,²⁴ encompassing not only one’s financial and legal obligations, but moral obligations as well; it is God’s law in action. “Go to the Gospel,” Holy Church instructs the dreamer, “that God seide hymselfen: ‘*Reddite Cesari,*’ quod God, ‘That *Cesari* befalleth / *Et que sunt Deo*, or ellis ye

²² “Sow such grain as you wish to reap...If goodness is sown (by you), may you reap goodness” – Schmidt’s translation. His commentary on the passage is also relevant: “Langland contrasts law as a human institution subject to the will of earthly rulers, and law as a reflex of divine justice. The Christian ruler...must...rule *religiously*, i.e. with an abiding sense of what is owed to God by his earthly deputy....Justice is to be seen as ‘law administered with Christian goodness’” (B-Text 412).

²³ “For with the same measure that you shall mete withal it shall be measured to you again.” Luke 6:38; see also Matthew 7:2 and Mark 4:24. The same verse is cited again in Passus XI, line 228.

²⁴ For an excellent summary of relevant Scriptural passages, see Rydzeski *Radical Nostalgia* 136, note 2.

don ille” (B.I.46-53).²⁵ As Jordan of Saxony, a contemporary of Langland wrote, “*Redde quod debes*, because the completing...of Christianity consists in rendering each his due as the apostle in Romans XIII [:7] says: *Reddite omnibus debita*.”²⁶ Even the risen Christ himself “stresses that the powers of forgiveness and mercy he bestows upon Piers are conditional upon *redde quod debes* (XIX.182-87), a condition confirmed, not surprisingly, by Grace (XIX.258-61)” (Aers “Wage-Labor” 170). Likewise, in his discourse with Lucifer Christ emphasizes that his redemption of sinners is in no way a violation of justice: he redeemed fallen man justly through his sacrifice, paying the debt for their sins.

*Dentem pro dente et oculum pro oculo.*²⁷

Ergo soule shal soule quyte and synne to synne wende,

And all that man mysdo, I man, wole amende it....

So leve it noght, Lucifer, ayein the lawe I fecche hem,

But by right and by reson raunsone here my liges:

*Non veni solvere legem set adimplere.*²⁸

(B.XVIII.341-351)

In order to receive the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice, however, each individual must himself fulfill his obligations to the utmost extent that he may. Mercy “wol

²⁵ “‘Render to Caesar,’ said God, ‘the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.’” Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17, and Luke 20:25.

²⁶ “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour”: Romans 13.7. Jordan of Saxony’s commentary on the verse is found in the preface to *Tractatus de vitiis et virtutibus*, printed in *Liber vitasfratum*, ed. R. Arbesmann and W. Hümpfner, Cassiacciaco I (American Series) New York, 1943, pp. xxxiv-xxxv. The passage is cited and translated by Bloomfield (132).

²⁷ “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Exodus 21:24.

²⁸ “I am come not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.” Matthew 5:17.

maken good the remenaunt” explicitly for those who “rufully repenten and restitution make / In as much as thei mowen amenden and paien” (B.XVII.235-239), and at the final judgment, Christ will “rewarde hym right wel that *reddit quod debet* -- / Paieth parfitly, as pure truthe wolde,” but “what persone paieth it nough, punyssh he thenketh, / And demen hem at domesday” (XIX.194-197). “*Quia reddit unicuique iuxta opera sua*” (B.XII.212): “For he renders to every man according to his works.”²⁹

As I noted earlier in this chapter, Langland’s fundamental theological premises are consistently orthodox. The understanding of justice which plays such a crucial role in Piers Plowman is firmly grounded in patristic teaching; as with his emphasis upon the primacy of love, Langland again has the entire weight of the western theological tradition behind him. *Redde quod debes* was frequently used in medieval definitions of justice, and it is from within this tradition Langland is speaking when he makes *redde quod debes* “one of the most prominent refrains throughout the poem” (Aers “Wage-Labor” 170). His understanding of the comprehensive role of justice mirrors that found in the Summa Theologica, in which Aquinas in turn drew heavily from Aristotle: “It would seem that justice, as a general virtue, is essentially the same as all virtue.... There must be one supreme virtue essentially distinct from every other virtue, which directs all the virtues to the common good; and this virtue

²⁹ Psalms 61:130.

is...justice.”³⁰ Furthermore, *justitia* is a necessary corollary of *caritas*, for until justice is established, “love or grace cannot fully manifest itself. Justice involves the proper ordering of society so that the self may be properly ordered. A true spiritual and social balance has to be re-established” (Bloomfield 132).

Because it plays such a fundamental role in *Piers*, both in its examination of poverty and elsewhere, an understanding of the vast extent of the ideal of justice as Langland conceives it is essential to the poem’s interpretation. It encompasses obedience to God and the fulfillment of His law to the greatest extent possible; it is for this reason that the primary thrust of the poem is not toward salvation alone, despite the dreamer’s early question to Holy Church, but toward an ever-increasing understanding of God’s will and, in turn, the more complete submission of one’s individual will to His divine will. The Christian is called upon to follow God as fully as fallible human nature will allow: to be God’s faithful servant and “serven hym for evere” (B.V.540), like Piers himself, who has faithfully “ysowen his seed and suwed hise beestes, / Withinne and withouten waited his profit” (B.V.543-544). In regard to others, one owes whatever is justly theirs, an extremely comprehensive category encompassing the moral as well as the financial and legal; to the poor, for instance, one owes the compassion due to one’s “bloody brethren” as well as material aid. Yet another

³⁰ *Summa Theologica*, II.II.q.58.a6. Ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920. Compare to the following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “In justice is every virtue comprehended. And it is complete virtue in its fullest sense, because it is the actual exercise of complete virtue....Justice in this sense then is not part of virtue but virtue entire.” V.I.1129-1130. Ed. and tr. W.D. Ross, Oxford, 1925. Aquinas cites Aristotle frequently throughout his examination of justice.

aspect of justice is the due and exact repayment of debt, both temporal and divine. It would be a violation of justice to either receive no reward for work one has performed in the service of another, or to be rewarded twice for the same work; justice therefore requires that God will in Heaven reward those who have labored on His behalf, but only if they have not already received their reward within the temporal world. Furthermore, when justice is violated both divine and temporal debt is incurred, and in order for that debt to be absolved restitution must be made; thus restitution is a necessary component of the sacrament of absolution. Finally, justice also establishes the right relationship between classes; “law and leaute” were shaped “ech lif to knowe his owene” (B.Prol.122). Society as God ordained it depends on the members of each order performing their reciprocal duties to the best of their abilities, and thus part of what one owes to others is “feithful labour” to properly fulfill the work required by one’s station:³¹ “Kynde Wit wolde that ech a wight wroghte, /Or in dichynge or in delvyng or travailyng in preieres – Contemplatif lif or actif lif, Crist wolde men wroghte” (B.VI.246-248).

³¹ This principle is also established early on. “For profit of al the peple” plowmen are ordained “to tilie and to travaille as trewe lif asketh” (B.Prol.119-120), to produce the food and other necessities upon which the entire society relies, and those who “han cure under Crist” bear the responsibility to “shryven hire parissshens, / Prechen and praye for hem, and the povere feed” (88-90). Likewise, the king and his knights are responsible for maintaining justice in temporal society. As “al the commune” proclaim, the word of the king is law: “*Precepta Regis sunt nobis vincula legis!*” (ll. 143-145). But as the angel reminds the king, he owes a duty to both God and to the people he rules: he must rule justly, in accordance with divine law. He is a king in name only, without the substance, unless he fulfills that responsibility (ll. 140-142). Similarly, Fletcher notes that the terms of Truth’s pardon are defined as applying to representatives of all three estates, “on condition that they uphold the mutual...obligations which bond them, and hence the ideal society” (“Social Trinity” 346).

What, then, does justice say is owed to the poor? As Tierney notes, “it is possible to extract from the canonistic works³² a whole legal philosophy which related the claims of the poor to a coherent theory of natural law and property” (“Decretists” 361). It is unknown whether Langland received this tradition directly through the *Corpus iuris canonici* or indirectly through sources such as the *Glossa ordinaria* and Scriptural concordances (Scott Piers 43), but either way it is evident that he was familiar with its teachings. Most concretely, medieval theologians agreed that one owes the poor a just portion of the basic necessities of life, which were created “in commune” (B.I.20) and therefore “every man has an inalienable right to food, drink, and clothing in so far as he needs them to maintain the body so that the soul can fulfill the purpose for which it was created” (Kean “Love, Law, and Lewte” 242). As Holy Church explains, God

...highte the erthe to helpe yow echone
 Of wollene, of lynnene, of liflode at nede...
 And comaunded of his courtesie in commune three thynges:
 Are none nedfulle but tho...
 That oon is vesture from chele thee to save,
 And mete at meel for mysese of thiselve,
 And drynke whan thow driest – ac do noght out of reson.

(B.I.17-25)

³² Tierney’s focus in this specific article is particularly upon “the Decretists who produced their *summae* and glosses on the Decretum of Gratian in the first half century after its publication (c. 1140-1190), whose arguments on the point at issue were to be decisive for the rest of the Middle Ages” (361).

Thus Aquinas wrote that “The temporal goods which God grants us, are ours as to the ownership, but as to the use of them, they belong not to us alone but also to such others as we are able to succor out of what we have over and above our needs.”³³ The line is an almost literal translation from Aristotle’s Politics (Jarrett 82), but it was Christianized and disseminated through patristic teachings, and as Dunning notes, references to individual ownership in conjunction with common use are to be found everywhere in the literature of the medieval period, “in almost the same terms as Langland here uses” (Interpretation 55). Under this understanding of natural and divine law, those who possess goods must always remember that they are simply stewards of what God has chosen to bestow upon them; for Langland, as for Aquinas and other patristic authorities, “the Christian is but the administrator of what he possesses” (Mollat 22). Chrysostom framed failure to aid the poor as theft: “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs.”³⁴ Gregory the Great followed in the same vein, writing that “When we administer necessities of any kind to the indigent, we do not bestow our own, but render them what is theirs; we rather pay a debt of justice than accomplish works of mercy.”³⁵ Langholm provides an excellent summary of the commentaries of the decretists on this issue: “He who denies the poor a share in his riches may be

³³ Summa Theologica II.II.32.a5. Ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

³⁴ Homilia in Lazarum 2, 5: Patrologia Greca 48, 992. Trans. Catechism of the Catholic Church (London, 1994): III.ii.ii.7.2446. While the volumes edited by Migne are largely superseded by more modern critical editions, they nonetheless suffice for the ancillary use I have had to make of them.

³⁵ Regula Pastoralis 3, 21: Patrologia Latina 77: 87. Trans. Catechism of the Catholic Church (London, 1994): III.ii.ii.7.2446.

in his right according to the civil law, but according to natural law he is not in the right but in the wrong. The unanimity and consistency of the great patristic teachers on this point is very striking. St. Basil asks, “Is he worthy of any name but a thief, who will not clothe the naked?”³⁶ St. Augustine: “Those who possess superfluities, possess alien goods.”³⁷ St. Ambrose: “You do not bestow upon the poor of your own goods, but return what is his.”³⁸ St Gregory the Great: “When we supply necessities to the poor, we return what is theirs.”³⁹ In the subsequent tradition of Gratian’s Decretum this principle crystallized in the famous dictum cited at one place or another by most scholastic economists, *In necessitate omnia sunt communia* (In necessity everything is common)” (Langholm 75-76).

To provide necessities to the poor, then, is simply to give them what is rightfully theirs, by both natural law and God’s law: this understanding of justice as it relates to poverty reappears throughout the poem nearly as frequently as the injunction to love. Anima, for instance, cites Jerome’s comment that it is sacrilege not to give to the poor what is theirs: “*Quia sacrilegium est res pauperum non pauperibus dare*” (B.XV.342).⁴⁰ Mann observes that, following patristic tradition, Langland recognized that “the principle of need points in two directions at once – towards justice, and towards mercy” (21): thus, to give to the poor is can be an act of *caritas*, but it is also fundamentally an act of *justitia*. The degree to which the two principles are interrelated is superbly evident in this

³⁶ Homily in Luke 12, 18, 7: Patrologia Graeca 31: 277. Langholm’s translation here and below.

³⁷ Enarratio in Psalmum 147, 12: Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 40, 2148.

³⁸ De Nabuthae 12, 53: Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 32:2, 498.

³⁹ Liber regulae pastoralis 3, 2: Patrologia Latina 77: 87.

⁴⁰ Alford identifies this line as Peter Cantor, ch. 47, quoting St. Jerome, Epistle 66, sec. 8 (Guide 96).

particular matter. As Mathew notes, “there is only one force strong enough to preserve justice and that is charity. For charity is the love of others as well as the love of God. It is the motive force of justice as covetousness is that of injustice. For it is fired with the desire to give to each that which is his due. It is perfect charity, ‘Do-best,’ that enables man to ‘redde quod debbes’” (363).

This understanding of natural law also underlies the poem’s admonitions against superfluity. As Holy Church warned the Dreamer, one must not consume the material necessities of life “out of reson.... / Mesure is medicine, though thow muchel yerne” (B.I.25, 35). Natural law requires moderation and temperance: one should consume only what one needs, and no more. “*Temporalia* are given by God, not to promote *amor sui*, but for the worship of God. To use them in this way, the will must be guided by the principle of moderation” (Robertson and Huppé 48), which is established by both justice and charity. Worldly goods must always be used “for the purpose for which they have been created – as a means to an end, not as an end in themselves” (Dunning Interpretation 36). It is superfluity which causes dearth; as Patience explains to Haukyn and the Dreamer, “If men lyvede as mesure wolde, sholde never moore be defaute / Amonges Cristene creatures, if Cristes wordes ben trewe. / Ac unkyndenesse *caristia* maketh amonges Cristes peple” (B.XIV.70-73). In this, as before, Langland again follows patristic tradition. Like Aquinas, he believes that “One man cannot overabound in external riches without another man lacking them, for temporal goods cannot be

possessed by many at the same time.”⁴¹ Therefore the Christian must not fall prey to the temptation to indulge in worldly delights, but constantly take note of his neighbors’ needs and give generously insofar as he is capable: “And of that ech man may forbere, amende there it nedeth” (B.X.209).

Finally, Langland further noted that under the law of justice, less tangible necessities are also due to the poor, such as just wages for their labor and just prices for the goods they purchase. For instance, mayors and mace-bearers are called up on to punish those who charge prices “ayeins reson” (B.III.92) to those who can least afford it: “For thise are men on this molde that moost harm wercheth /To the povere peple that parcelmele buggen” (B.III.80-81).⁴² Langland was particularly concerned, however, about the poor being denied justice within the courts of law; the poem repeatedly insists that all are entitled to legal representation and justice whether or not they possess the means to pay, just as inherently as they are entitled to the basic necessities of food, drink, and clothing. In addition to expressing concern at great length about the degree in general to which Mede “lith ayene the lawe” so that “feith may not have his forth, hire floryns go so thikke,” and as a result “fouleth Truth” and “ledeth the lawe as hire list” (B.III.154-158), Piers specifically addresses the effect such corruption has on

⁴¹ Summa Theologica II.II.q.118,a.1. Ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

⁴² The Statutes of Laborers of 1349 made an identical provision: “all...Sellers of all manner of Victual shall be bound to sell the... Victual for a reasonable price...so that the same Sellers have moderate Gains, and not excessive,” or be required to repay doubly what was illegally charged. Moreover, if the mayors and bailiffs were negligent in enforcing this law, then they are bound to make restitution to the injured party or parties of treble the amount illegally charged. Statutes of the Realm 23 Edward III. London: G. Eyre and A. Strahan, 1810-1828. Reprinted Buffalo: W.S. Hein, 1993. I.307-309. The parallel translation used in this edition was taken primarily from the 1751 Cay edition, with corrections and additions made as necessary (xlii-xliii).

the poor: “The maze for a mene man, though he mote evere!..../ Withouten presents or pens, [Lawe] pleseth ful fewe” (B.III.160-162).⁴³ Lawyers who demand payment from the poor in need of legal justice shall receive little mercy themselves from God: “His pardon is ful petit at his partyng hennes / That any mede of mene men for hir motyng taketh” (B.VII.57-58). In Langland’s view, justice within the courts of law clearly “is something which is the due of every man, and to withhold this due until payment should be produced is...comparable to withholding a man’s daily bread” (Kean “Love, Law, and Lewte” 248): “Ac to bugge water, ne wynd, ne wit⁴⁴, ne fir the ferthe / Thise foure the Fader of Hevene made to this foold in commune: / Thise ben Truthes tresores trewe folk to helpe” (B.VII.53-55).

These two fundamental injunctions, then, to fulfill the law of love and the law of justice, are at the heart of Langland’s examination of poverty, both voluntary and involuntary. His focus is twofold: first, upon how the individual Christian may acquire a more complete understanding of the fundamental principles of God’s law, and secondly, what those principles demand, both in word and deed, in order to bring the errant individual will into alignment with God’s will. The Dreamer and the reader are incessantly called to faithfully adhere

⁴³ Here, also, Langland was not alone in his concern. Thomas Wimbledon, for instance, made a very similar complaint in his famous 1388 sermon “Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue” at St. Paul’s Cross, London: “What abusyon is þer among officeres of here boþe lawes nowadays. Ȝif a gret man plete wiþ a pore to haue owt he holdeþ, euerich officer schal be redy...and...þe riche man myȝt haue suche an ende as he desireþ. But Ȝif a pore man plede wiþ a riche man, þan þer schal be so many delayes þat, þouȝ þe pore mannes riȝt be open to al þe comite, for pure faute of spendyng he shal be glad to cese. Scirreues and ballies wollep retorne pore mennes writis wiþ *tarde venit* but þey felen mede in her handes.” Lines 355-372, ed. Knight, 1967.

⁴⁴ “To class ‘knowledge,’ ‘intelligence’ as an elemental gift of God is to argue analogically that it belongs to men in common and cannot be bought or sold” (Schmidt B-Text 435).

to Christ's teachings, to put aside their own errant wills in favor of following God's will, and in so doing become more God-like. "Only when it is filled with love will the soul really know what goodness is and what is meant by living well [*juste*]" (Goldsmith Image 16). Just as God has granted us grace beyond measure, so we are called to love our "bloody brethren." God's law permits nothing less than to act purely in accordance with *caritas* and *justitia*, upholding those ideals in every act of daily life: in short, to love one's neighbor as Love taught, "With wordes and with werkes...and wil of thyn herte" (B.XIII.141), without judgment or self-interest.

Consider, for instance, the poem's insistence that aid be given freely to all who ask. In this Langland departs sharply from the general consensus of his time, which heavily favored discrimination in who should and should not be assisted with alms, particularly to the exclusion of able-bodied beggars. The Bible clearly commands freely given charity: Christ extended his compassion and mercy to all, even those typically deemed unworthy by society, such as the woman accused of adultery (John 8:1-11), and he commanded those who would follow him to "Give to every one that asketh thee" (Luke 6:30). Although the ideal is clear, however, its application within the fallen temporal world was a topic of great contention during the medieval period. The early patristic authorities themselves were divided about whether aid should be given freely and equally to all who ask or whether some kind of discrimination in almsgiving was morally appropriate, a

disjunction which provoked great debate among later theologians.⁴⁵ The later canonists' debate relied primarily upon Gratian's citations in the Decretum from three of the early church Fathers, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine (Tierney Poor Law 54-55); Chrysostom was cited in support of openhanded generosity to everyone in need,⁴⁶ and Ambrose and Augustine as the advocates of careful discrimination.⁴⁷ The practical application of discrimination, of course, furthermore raised the questions of how to determine who was most deserving of aid and whether the giving of aid should be used as a tool in an effort to reform those seeking relief. Augustine, for instance, who insisted on the necessity of discretion in what is to be given to whom, expressly prohibited charitable contributions to those who could work but chose not to and those who led evil lives, on the grounds that aiding them would "encourage future wickedness by making possible an idle and vicious way of life" (Tierney Poor Law 61): "One who spares is not always a friend, nor one who strikes a foe. It is better to love with severity than to deceive with lenience. It is more useful to take bread away from a hungry man, if when he was sure of food he neglected justice, than to give bread to him so that, being led astray, he may rejoice in injustice."⁴⁸

Giving to those so enmeshed in sin was morally acceptable if they were in such

⁴⁵ Tierney comments that medieval canonists "discussed the problem of discrimination in charity on innumerable occasions, in great detail, and with a full realization that they were debating an issue of major importance. There is probably more writing in canonistic sources on this particular point than on any other problem in the field of poor relief" (Poor Law 54).

⁴⁶ Decretum D.42.

⁴⁷ Decretum D.86.

⁴⁸ Epistle 48, "*ad Vincentium contra Donatist. de vi coercendis hæreticis*": Decretum C.5 q.5.c.2. "*Non omnis qui parcat amicus est, nec omnis qui verberat inimicus....Melius est cum severitate diligere quam cum lenitate decipere. Utilius esurienti panis tollitur, si de cibo securus iustitiam negligebat quam esurienti panis frangitur ut iniustitiae seductus acquiescat.*" Tierney's translation (Poor Law 58).

extreme need that aid was necessary in order to sustain life, but otherwise it would only serve to encourage them in their sinfulness and thus would not be in the recipient's ultimate best interests. Likewise, Ambrose wrote that it is not an act of kindness to give aid which will be used for the pursuit of evil ends, such as persisting in adultery, living extravagantly, plotting against one's country, or attacking the Church.⁴⁹ He did not specifically prohibit aiding anyone, but did recommend an order of preference for rendering aid when the available resources could not meet the demand; he advocated preference being given particularly to faithful Christians, those who were unable to work because of age or sickness, those who were victims of misfortune, and those who were ashamed to beg publicly for alms.⁵⁰ He also held that *caritas ordinata* required an order of preference: one must love God first, then one's parents, then one's children, then those of one's own household, and finally strangers,⁵¹ an argument which, although it was not incorporated into the Decretum, proved highly influential to subsequent discussion (Tierney "Decretists" 364). Chrysostom, on the other hand, admonished all Christians to give without question to all who require assistance: "Let us have no more of this ridiculous, diabolical, peremptory prying," because "in hospitality there ought not to be discrimination between people, but we must act hospitably without difference to anyone however we can."⁵² In the same vein, Jerome argued that aid must be given indiscriminately

⁴⁹ De Officiis, I.30.144.

⁵⁰ De Officiis I.30: Decretum D.86, cc. 14-18.

⁵¹ Commentarius in Cantica Canticorum II.4: Patrologia Latina 15: 1851-1962.

⁵² Epistola ad Ebreos: Homilium XI. ad c. 6. circ. fin.: Decretum 42, cc 1-2. "*In hospitalitate autem non est habendus delectus personarum, sed indifferenter quibuscumque sufficimus*"

and judgment must be left to God, lest one violate Christ's law.⁵³ Langland refers to this problem of whether or not discrimination in rendering aid is morally acceptable directly in Passus VII, although he cites Cato rather than patristic authorities in favor of discrimination in almsgiving: Gregory "bad us gyven alle / That asketh...*Non eligas cui miserearis, ne forte pretereas illum qui meretur accipere; quia incertum est pro quo Deo magis placeas*"⁵⁴ (B:VII.74-75), but

Caton kenneth men thus, and the Clerc of the Stories;⁵⁵

*Cui des, videto*⁵⁶ is Catons techyng;

And in the Stories he techeth to bistowe thyn almesse:

*Sit elemosina tua in manu tua donec studes cui des.*⁵⁷

(B.VII.71-73)

On the one hand, discrimination makes sense, pragmatically: should one not give first to the sick rather than the healthy, the just before the unjust, to those

hospitales nos exhibere debemus....Quiescamus ab hac absurda curiositate, et diabolica, et peremptoria." Rubin's translation (68).

⁵³ Commentary on Ecclesiastes 11:6: Patrologia Latina 23:1103. For more detailed examinations of the positions taken by medieval theologians on this topic, see particularly Rubin Charity and Community pp. 68-71, Tierney Poor Law 54-62, and Tierney "Decretists."

⁵⁴ "Do not choose (for yourself) whom to take mercy upon, for it may be that you will pass over someone who deserves to receive (your alms); for it is not certain for which (act) you may please God more [sc. Giving to the deserving or the undeserving]." Schmidt's translation. He also notes that although Langland attributes the quotation to Gregory, it is actually from Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes 11:6 (Patrologia Latina 23:1103) (B-Text 435). See also Scase New Anticlericalism 72-73 on the use of this quotation in the antimendicant controversy.

⁵⁵ The reference is to the *historiae* of the Historica scholastica by Peter Comestor (d. 1179), a retelling of sacred history (Patrologia Latina 148: 1049-7722). "Together with Cato, it provides a prudent, 'this-worldly' view of charity as alms. The quotation is a variant of a common proverb found in penitential and canonical sources" (Schmidt B-Text 435). Alford notes, however, that although Langland attributes the saying to the "clerk of the stories," Peter Comestor, it has not been found in the Historica Scholastica. (Guide 54).

⁵⁶ "Take heed whom you give [alms] to." Schmidt's translation. Prologue to Distichia, sent 17. See Scase New Anticlericalism 72-73 for a discussion of late medieval uses of this and the following quotation.

⁵⁷ "Let your alms remain in your hand until you have taken pains to find out whom you should give to." Schmidt's translation.

shamed by asking rather than aggressive beggars? Under the changing economic circumstances of Langland's time, such discrimination was increasingly appealing.⁵⁸ Communities had, in the past, generally supported their own poor with relative generosity, and the poor were even to some degree, a socially desirable minority; in 14th century England, however, the poor were no longer spread through communities which were socially and economically prepared to sustain and relieve them (Pearsall "Poverty" 171). Particularly great increases in the numbers of the vagrant and urban poor provoked unease and hostility as their numbers became more unmanageable, resulting in a trend which Aers refers to as the "desacralization" of poverty ("Culture in Transition" 9). Because of their rootlessness and their sheer numbers, they were no longer socially desirable, but rather a threat to their communities' health. It was still universally acknowledged that the Christian faith required pity for the poor and generous almsgiving to mitigate their sufferings, but more and more frequently, both legal and religious authorities insisted that aid was to be reserved only for the most helpless of the poor, such as widows and orphans,⁵⁹ never those who might with industry provide for themselves. Many also stressed, as Augustine did, that helping idlers could be detrimental to their own good, by encouraging them to persist in their idleness (Gilchrist 81).

⁵⁸ For detailed examinations of this shift in attitude, see particularly Aers "Culture in Transition," Lis and Soly Poverty and Capitalism, McIntosh Controlling Misbehavior, Mollat The Poor in the Middle Ages, and Rubin Charity and Community.

⁵⁹ Some characters provide detailed lists of those who should always be aided without question, such as widows, orphans, those who "wanteth wyt," and those who are unable to work because of age, illness, or disablement; B.VII-98-101 is a good example of such a list, although it is only one of several.

The canonists had recognized that some individuals would abuse charity and therefore advised caution in giving, but on the whole they regarded these cases as “abnormalities, associated with a special type of moral perversity” (Tierney Poor Law 62); overall, they agreed that it was better to do too much than too little, and for the most part, their discrimination was positive in intent, aimed toward ensuring that the deserving were aided and avoiding doing more harm than good to recipients by encouraging them in sin. Although they advised caution in the dissemination of large sums, they generally encouraged open-handedness in day-to-day almsgiving, excluding only those individuals already known to be prone to abuse it. In particular, they did not endorse the idea that “all charitable activity should be regulated as though its principal purpose was to exclude the undeserving rather than to help the deserving” (Tierney Poor Law 62). During the fourteenth century, however, this latter principle became the defining characteristic of charitable discrimination. “Like the notions of work and poverty, the traditional ideal of charity was challenged in the late fourteenth century by mounting social and economic pressures....As a result, charitable impulses were entangled yet divided between the impossible task of giving to all who were needy and the powerful desire to suppress vagrancy, to classify those “rebellious” poor as undeserving of alms” (Hewett-Smith “Allegory” 14). This approach to poverty is reflected clearly in the Defensio Curatorum, written in 1357 by Richard FitzRalph, Archbishop of Armagh, a precise contemporary of Langland’s: in addressing Christ’s teaching that ‘Whanne þou makest a feest clepe þou þerto pore men, halt & blynde, & þou schalt be blessed, for þei haueþ nouȝt wherof

pei mowe quyte hit to þee,”⁶⁰ for instance, he interprets the passage as drawing a clear distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving: “pore men þat beþ stalworþe and stronge schulde nouȝt be cleped to þe feeste of beggars, for þei mowe quyte hit wiþ her trauail....Poul seiþ: ‘Who þat wole nouȝt trauaile schal nouȝt ete’”⁶¹ (88:4-89:11, 19).⁶²

It was this fundamentally shifted understanding of moral law as it applies to charitable giving which justified the injunctions in the Statutes of Laborers against giving alms to sturdy beggars: on pain of imprisonment the Statutes of 1349, for instance, forbid anyone from aiding “under the colour of pity or alms” to those who are sound of body, assuming all such “valiant beggars” are unworthy idlers who “refuse to labour, giving themselves to Idleness and Vice, and sometime to Theft and other Abominations.”⁶³ Sound-bodied beggars who refused to labor could be put in the stocks or imprisoned until they were willing to work. By refusing them alms so that “thereby they may be compelled to labour for their necessary Living,”⁶⁴ it seemed to the late fourteenth-century mind that potential givers would be only obeying positive law but the will of God (Aers

⁶⁰ Luke 14:12-14: “Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.”

⁶¹ 2 Thessalonians 3:10: “This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.”

⁶² Defensio Curatorum, delivered by FitzRalph in Avignon on November 8, 1357. The quotation is taken from John Trevisa’s Middle English translation, ed. Perry, EETS vol. 167, 1925.

⁶³ The Statute of Labourers of 1349. Statutes of the Realm 23 Edward III. London: G. Eyre and A. Strahan, 1810-1828. Reprinted Buffalo: W.S. Hein, 1993. 1307-309. The parallel translation used in this edition was taken primarily from the 1751 Cay edition, with corrections and additions made as necessary (xlii-xliii).

⁶⁴ Statute of Labourers 1349.

“Culture in Transition” 9). Hunger’s solution to the problem of the wastours (B.VI.212-24 and 230-52) neatly summarizes this approach to charitable giving: one should help the “deserving” poor generously, but give those who could work for their living only the lowest quality of food, “houndes breed and horse breed” (B.VI.213), and just enough of that to keep them from starving. Hunger even cites Scriptural justifications, from both the Old and New testaments, including Jesus’ parable of the good and wicked servants (Luke 19:12ff, B.VI.237-46), to support his argument. On its surface, the proposal seems both reasonable and scripturally sound, but Langland, ever concerned with adherence to the ideal of *caritas* as well as *justitia*, clearly is not satisfied with this solution. His concerns are vividly evident in Piers’s pointed questioning of Hunger: “‘I wolde noght greve God,’ quod Piers, ‘for al the good one ground! / Might I synnlees do as thow seist?’” (B.VI.228-229).

The poem returns to this question repeatedly, from a number of directions, but ultimately, Langland’s conclusion is that no, one cannot. He is painfully aware of the moral implications of such a policy and is greatly unsatisfied with it. Discrimination in giving as he saw it practiced was overtly inconsistent with *caritas*, and although it did bear some claims to the preservation of *justitia*, he recognized that in practice it all too easily becomes nothing more than a facile excuse givers may fall back on to justify failure to follow God’s law themselves: it quickly ceases to be positively motivated by concern for the recipients, as the Church Fathers advocated, and instead becomes motivated by cupidity, conveniently serving as “a brief for denying alms” to the majority of the needy

(Clark "Responses to Begging" 449). To discriminate in giving undermines seeing the poor as one's "bloody brethren," depersonalizing and demonizing them and justifying lack of charity toward them; rather than encouraging the generous giving mandated by God's law, it instead encourage potential givers to "restrain openness and sympathy towards able-bodied but indigent people," promotes "self-righteous suspicion towards them," and "confirms convenient stereotypes which legitimate both the material position of the possessing classes and their hostility to vagrant, "undisciplined" poor" (Aers "Culture in Transition" 12). Hunger's solution is undeniably appealing in some aspects, particularly in its emphasis on preserving resources for those in the greatest need, but Langland, with keen insight into the many ways by which men are led astray from God's will, realizes that to encourage discrimination in giving produces precisely the kind of "chilling of charity" which concerned him so greatly: "And charite þat chield is now sholde chaufen of hymself/ And conforte alle cristene, wolde holy church amende" (C.XVII.48-50).⁶⁵ Indiscriminate giving is therefore the only way to avoid lack of *caritas* under the guise of prudence: "For ech man subileth a sleighte synne to hide, / And coloureth it for a konnyng and a clene lyvyng" (B.XIX.461-462). Would-be givers, like recipients, bear their own individual moral responsibility, and for Langland, the obligation to act fully in accordance with God's law far outweighs any other consideration.

⁶⁵ Tavormina notes that this line is a probable allusion to Matthew 24:12: "And for wickidnesse schal be plenteuouse, the charite of manye schal wexe coold" ("Chilling of Charity" 52).

This is not to say that Langland dismisses the problems posed by the wastours, by any means. As I will examine in detail in the next chapter, he is very deeply frustrated by them and vehemently condemns their behavior. They do not render what they owe either to God or to others, but instead live as leeches upon the honest, hard-working members of society, stealing from both those who give them alms and the truly desperate poor who would have received the aid which they have taken inappropriately: “For he that beggeth or bit, but if he have nede, / He is fals with the feend and defraudeth the nedy” (B.VII.64-65). The behavior of the wastours on Piers’s half-acre is, of course, precisely the kind of thing that led Augustine to conclude that aid should not be given to those who would abuse it. Nevertheless, Langland insists that God’s law commands that one give freely even to such as these, even “if conscience carpe therayein, or kynde wit eyther” (B.XVII.136). To live in accordance with God’s law, one must, like Piers, “pursueth God in doynge” and give indiscriminately, as God gives to mankind: “*Qui pluit super iustos et iniustos*”⁶⁶ at ones, / And sent the sonne to save a cursed mannes tilthe / As brighte as to the beste man or to the beste womman” (B.XIX.434-436). The wastours are harshly condemned, and yet the poem consistently repeats that the Christian must love “alle manere of men”: “Love hem and lakke hem noghte... / Theigh thei doon yvele,” and “lat God take the vengeance” (B.VI.224-225). Truth furthermore assures us that “in hym that taketh is the trecherie, if any treson walke” (B.VII.77). Although the wastours are explicitly excluded from the pardon Truth sends to Piers, the obligation for the individual

⁶⁶ “Who rains upon the just and unjust.” Matthew 5:45.

Christian remains: he is obligated to exercise charity without discrimination. It is God's place to judge, and the undeniable fact that many beggars may not be worthy should never stay the hand of the almsgiver. Because of his focus is upon each individual's personal responsibility for faithful adherence to the ideals of *caritas* and *justitia*, Langland consistently advocates generous aid to all who claim to be in need; he constantly reminds readers of what is demanded of them by God's law even as he continues to struggle with the problems posed by the wastours.

In his insistence on openhanded giving, Langland is reacting not only against discrimination against true wastours, but also against a trend he found particularly abhorrent: the stigmatization of poverty and the poor in general, as the trend of "desacralization" gained strength and the association of poverty with evil and sin increased. Richard FitzRalph, for instance, argued in the Defensio Curatorum that that "pouert is euel" and the "effect of synne" (80:12-27), and that "Holy Write seiþ þat þe pore schal be hated of his neighbore [Proverbs 14:20]; miche more a begger schal be hated of his neighbore...for skilfullich euereche man schal raþer help hym-silf þan anoþer" (83:1-3, 11-12).⁶⁷ As Aers dryly comments, "This would have surprised St. Francis and most "traditional"

⁶⁷. Though FitzRalph's primary objective in this sermon was opposition to the mendicant orders, his disparagement of poverty was general: "Riches is good hauyng & worþi to be loued of God, for he is richest of alle, & pouert is contrarie & is priuacioun of riches; þan pouert is euel" (80:21-23). His argument draws heavily on Scripture; he cites verses from throughout the Bible, such as Solomon's prayer that God give him "what is nedip to my liflode" lest he be tempted to sin (Ecclesiasticus 27:1), but most extensively he relies upon the example of Christ. "Man is y-bore to trauail...& begging is contrarie to þe lawe of þe first ordynauns" (90:4-7), and therefore Christ himself "wolde raþer vse miracles þan he wolde begge" (90:8-10). Nowhere in Scripture, FitzRalph argues, is poverty enjoined or even praised, but it is instead decried, for "Defaute & nede dryueþ a man liytlich to do amys" (92:7-9, citing Ecclesiasticus 27:1), and therefore "hit is better be ded þan nedy" (91:5-6, citing Ecclesiasticus 40:29). Quotes are taken from John Trevisa's Middle English translation, ed. Perry, EETS, 1925.

Christian moralists, but FitzRalph is unembarrassed” (“Culture in Transition” 9). Mollat tells us that “no one challenged the idea that poverty was an evil, a consequence of original sin” (255); perhaps it was inevitable, given the economic and social crises of the 14th century, that such an understanding of the fundamental roots of poverty should lead to the discrediting of the poor in general, the prevalent popular suspicion that poverty, unless clearly attributable to some innocent misfortune, was likely deserved. Although in the traditional canonistic view the existence of poverty had been attributed primarily to superfluity and lack of charity among those who possessed worldly goods, the writers of the later medieval period demonstrated a greatly increased tendency to assume that the poor themselves were to blame for their neediness and thus to view those in need with intense suspicion and hostility. Phillipe de Maizières, for instance, in a treatise written by in approximately 1378, comments that “When one sees a man asking publicly for alms, one fears that he has come to such misery by his own guilt.”⁶⁸ Likewise Jean Bruyant in the Chemin de Povreté et Richesse, a popular narrative poem written around 1342, in the course of emphasizing the necessity of prudent action and diligent labor advises that the poor are to be viewed first and foremost with skepticism, not compassion: “In truth one should have / Little pity for such people/....It is right to be suspicious of them.”⁶⁹ From this point of view, “beggary is somehow obscene....Beggars are parasites upon and enemies and betrayers of society, the dangerous drones

⁶⁸ Le Songe du Vergier. Mollatt’s translation (Poor in the Middle Ages 253).

⁶⁹ Mollatt’s translation (Poor in the Middle Ages 255).

who...should be nipped out of the busy commonwealth of bees and destroyed utterly” (Shepherd 173).⁷⁰ In the emerging ethos championed by writers such as FitzRalph and Bruyant, disciplined work for the accumulation of worldly goods was presented as so pleasing to God that it would inevitably be rewarded even among the reprobate (Aers “Culture in Transition” 9). It was but a short step to further conclude, as so many did, that if God so values diligent labor, then all those who are physically capable of work but still impoverished must necessarily be “wastours”: they must either be either too morally corrupt for God to choose to help them, or simply too slothful to earn a living for themselves. It is from this perspective that the Spanish Dominican Cardinal Johannes de Turrecremata, in his commentary on the Decretum, “dismissed the central problem of the able-bodied poor in a curt couple of lines; a man who could work was not to be numbered among the poor, he wrote, but rather was to be rebuked as a defrauder of the poor if he sought alms”⁷¹ (Tierney Poor Law 110).

I believe it is significant that Langland’s characters never once, however, embrace this point of view, although throughout the poem many other ideas have been temporarily endorsed and then shown to be in error. I believe that his avoidance of this particular argument is an indication of just how mistaken and dangerous he felt it was. It would have been quite natural for either Truth or Piers to make such an argument at the end of B.VII, since both have insisted that God will provide for all of his faithful, but they do not: they back off as soon as their

⁷⁰ See Mum and the Sothsegger, ll. 1025-1087. Ed. Mabel Day and R. Steele for EETS (1936): 57-58.

⁷¹ Repertorium ad Disticha 42 c.2, I.fol.245va.

logic begins to suggest that conclusion. Langland is all too aware of the fact that economic circumstances could crush even those honest laborers who work as hard as they possibly can; simple experience proves that not only the unfaithful or lazy are ever in desperate straits. The following passage from the C-text, part of a substantial addition to the poem contrasting the dissolution of dishonest beggars with the true need of the honest poor,⁷² is a vivid example of Langland's awareness of the harsh reality of the misery endured by hard-working but nevertheless impoverished members of the lowest classes:

Ȓat they with spynnyng may spare, spenen hit on house-hyre,
Both in mylke and in mele, to make with papelotes
To aglotye with here gurles that greden after fode.
And hemsulue also soffre mucche hunger,
And wo in wynter-tymes, and wakyng on nyhtes
To rise to þe reule to rokke þe cradel,
Both to carde and to kembe, to cloute and to wasche...

(C.IX.74-80)

As Pearsall notes, the poem here “describes in precise and minute detail the lives of those who are employed in the most menial part-time and piece-work jobs – scraping flax, peeling rushes, carding and combing, patching and washing clothes – and who, though employed, can barely scrape together a living” (“Lunatyk Lollares” 166). As landless laborers with no option but to rely on whatever employment they can find, they are working as hard as they possibly can, but their low wages and the demands

⁷² In the C-text, this passage is found in Passus IX; it corresponds to Passus VII in the B-text.

they must meet “leave them and their children on the dangerous margins of subsistence” (Aers Signs 108). Langland recognizes the economic reality that even those working as hard as they can may not be able to earn enough to feed and house their families, although society may deny that possibility and they themselves may be reluctant to admit that they need help. After multiple outbreaks of the plague, many families had lost the fathers and sons they had relied on to farm the land; many elderly were bereft of heirs to care for them in their old age; and many simply did not possess adequate resources to do anything more than live hand-to-mouth on a daily basis (Dyer Changing Society 350). Like the canonists themselves, who showed “no disposition at all to regard a state of poverty as itself implying a moral defect in the individual concerned” (Tierney “Decretists” 368), Langland refuses to oversimplify the issue by stigmatizing all poor, or even all able-bodied poor, as wastours; he instead emphatically reserves that title for those who clearly earn it for themselves.

Langland also stresses the necessity of giving grounded in *caritas* and *justitia*, rather than in self-interest. Here again, he viewed popular practice as thoroughly out of step with the ideal. He does not doubt that showing charity to one’s neighbor bears spiritual value for the giver, as was taught by the Church Fathers, but as with the issue of discrimination in giving, the emphasis of society in general diverged sharply from that of the theologians. Charitable giving had been in popular thought reduced to almost a sense of purchasing salvation: almsgiving was like “a bill of exchange drawn on Heaven” (Mollatt 259). As Scott observes, “Within the medieval economy of salvation, the function of the

poor was neatly encapsulated in the corporal works of mercy: the poor were available so that the rest of society could practice charity, without which sin cannot be forgiven” (“Value of Poverty” 144). The deserving poor, in particular, “belong to that group of people medieval Catholics viewed as one of God’s main contributions to the salvation of the rich....The poverty of the poor is given to elicit charity from others, to catalyze sanctification in those who possess the dangerous goods of the world” (Aers Signs 111). Thus the unknown author of the sixteenth sermon found in MS. Royal 18 B.xxiii wrote that “God biddeþ vs...to ȝeue almes and all oþur verkes of mercye to doo....for...þei shall be þe meenes and þe cause, and...we shall com þorowe hem to þe blisse of heven.”⁷³

Likewise, the influential Dominican friar John Bromyard explained in his Summa Praedicatorum that God ordained the privation of the poor “so that the rich could show their charity,”⁷⁴ and Thomas Brinton, the Bishop of Rochester, made a similar argument in a sermon given in 1377: “Thus the rich exist on account of the poor and the poor on account of the rich. The rich must offer alms, and the poor must pray....As scripture says, ‘Conceal charity in the bosom of a poor man,

⁷³ MS. British Museum Royal 18 B.xxiii, 96/15-21, ed. Ross, EETS vol. 209, 1940. Another relevant sermon found in the same manuscript (Sermon 30, 151/31-153/2) utilizes a well-known and often-repeated fable originating with Petrus Telonarius, “Vita Sancti Joannis Ellemosynarii,” in Vitae Patrum (Patrologia Latina LXXIII, 356): a habitually uncharitable rich man wished to throw a stone at a beggar, but finding no stone at hand, he instead threw a loaf of bread at him. He then fell deathly ill and dreamed that he was brought before Christ “for to yeld rekenynge,” and the single loaf, though given “aȝeynes is will and wrathfully,” counterbalanced all of his evil deeds. Therefore, the author concludes, “Take ensampull at þis man to fede þe pore man...for itt shall be ȝeldit to you dowbull and trebull in heven.” The precise date of composition is uncertain for either sermon, but it is likely that the sermons compiled in the manuscript range in date from approximately 1378 to 1417 (Ross xxxviii).

⁷⁴ Summa Praedicatorum, “Paupertas.” Bromyard likely began writing the treatise, an expansion of his earlier Opus Trivium, around 1327-1328 and completed it in the summer of 1348 (Boyle “Date of the Summa Praedicatorum” 535-537). Antwerp, 1614, pp. 243-244. There is no modern edition of the Summa Praedicatorum. The quotation is taken from Rubin’s translation (Charity and Community 85).

and the act itself will pray for you’⁷⁵....A hand opened in charity to the poor will not corporally perish....We ought to do good things for them in expectation of a reward from God.”⁷⁶ Popular practice was thus focused much more upon the presumed spiritual rewards being tallied up for the giver than upon recognizing and rendering what one owes, in love and in justice, to those in need. “The most common criticism of medieval charity is that it hardly concerned itself with this question at all....the whole orientation of medieval ethics, with their emphasis on almsgiving as atonement for sin and as a way of winning a reward in the next world, militated against any serious consideration of the real needs and deserts of the beggar” (Tierney “Decretists” 361).

Langland, however, felt strongly that labor in the service of God should be given as a matter of *caritas* and *justitia*, not hire. Grace and salvation are not commodities, to be reduced to a matter of *quid pro quo* exchange; they are emphatically not for sale. As Scott observes, Langland does to some degree present generous giving to the poor “as a *sine qua non* for salvation. His text repeatedly declares that failure to pass on God’s gifts to the needy negates the spiritual effects of prayer (B.7.190-95, B.11.179-83, C.13.65-77)” (“Value of Poverty” 143). As the Samaritan tells the Dreamer,

Be unkynde to thyn evenecristene, and al that thow kanst bidde –
Delen and do penaunce day and nyght evere,
And purchase al the pardon of Pampilon and Rome...

⁷⁵ Ecclesiastes 29:15.

⁷⁶ Sermon 44, “Simul in Unum, dives et pauper,” probably delivered July 17, 1377, as part of the coronation festivities for Richard II. Latin text ed. Devlin, The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, London, 1954. Transl. Krochalis and Peters, The World of Piers Plowman, Philadelphia, 1975.

The Holy Goost hereth thee noght, ne helpe may thee by reson,
For unkyndenesse quencheth hym, that he kan noght shyne....

Poul the Apostel preveth wher I lye:

*Si linguis hominum loquar...*⁷⁷

....

Thus is unkyndenesse the contrarie that quencheth, as it were,
The grace of the Holy Goost, Goddes owene kynde.

(B.XVII.251-259, 271-272)

It is crucial to note, however, that the poet's emphasis upon charitable giving is grounded specifically within the understanding that love is the necessary road to grace. As Schmidt notes, "The wind of *unkyndnesse*, 'uncharitableness,' which blows out God's flame of love is the absolute negation of *Goddes owene kynde*, because 'God is love,' I John 4:8. Langland sees charity, like gratitude, as due to others in return for God's showing mercy toward us" (B-Text 477), but his insistence on the crucial role of active charity is accompanied by an equally intense scrutiny of the giver's *reasons* for giving. Although generosity to the poor is a prerequisite for salvation, it is not sufficient, for one's motivation is of crucial importance as well; charity without love is the form without the substance and holds no merit. It is only "charite withouten chalangynge" which "unchargeth the soule / And many a prison fram purgatorie...delivereth" (B.XV.344-345). As Ames comments, "Langland rages against those who observe forms while

⁷⁷ "Though I speak with the tongues of men [and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal]." I Corinthians 13:1.

ignoring the essence of the law....It is love that fulfills the law, and nothing less will serve” (51). If the foundation is ‘fals,’ then nothing which follows from it can be of merit:

Ellis is al on ydel, al that evere we wroghten –
Paternostres and penaunce and pilgrimage to Rome,
But oure spences and our spendynge sprynge of a trewe welle;
Ellis is al oure labour lost – lo, how men writeth
In fenestres at the freres! – if fals be the foundement.

(B.XIV.194-200)

Like the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13, Langland emphasizes that “Kynde love coueiteth noght, no catel but speche” (B.XIII.150); it “does not seek its own,” but is devoid of self-interest. Although one’s motivations may be only imperfectly known by others, “God knoweth thi conscience and thi kynde wille” (B.III.67) and will reward the giver accordingly: “*Et vidit Deus cogitaciones eorum*” (B.XV.199-201).⁷⁸

For the same reason that charity given in self-interest holds no merit, neither does charity given for the sake of pride; it is only the form without the substance. This Langland makes particularly clear in the episode of Mede, when she offers to give generously to the friars to roof the church, build a cloister, have the walls whitewashed, and have stained glass windows put in, provided that they “do peynten and portraie who paid for the makynge, / That every segge shall see I am suster of

⁷⁸ “And God saw their thoughts.” Luke 11:17.

your house” (B.III.60-63).⁷⁹ God forbids such self-serving “gravynge,” the poem warns, “an aventure pride be peynted there, and pomp of this world” (B.III.66). Instead, “Lat noght thi left half.../ Wite what thow werchest with thi right syde -- / For thus the Gospel bit goode men do hir almesse” (B.III.73-75).⁸⁰ No spiritual merit is gained if a temporal reward is received; therefore givers should deliberately seek to avoid temporal recognition, lest “ye have youre hire here and youre hevene also” (B.III.72). Furthermore, as Piers later warns, one must also beware of pride in good deeds after the fact, lest “the boldnesse of thi bienfetes maketh thee blynd thanne / And so worstow dryven out as dew, and the dore closed.../ Thus myght thow lesen his love, to lete wel by thiselve” (B.V.613-616). The poem also continually insists that the greatest spiritual merit is gained when gifts are given to those who are most in need of aid, and therefore giving to the already well-endowed religious orders is particularly disparaged. It makes no sense to give “charity” to “swiche as ben riche” already, rather than those who are truly in need:

Right so ye riche – ye robeth that ben riche,
And helpeth hem that helpeth yow, and yeveth ther no nede is;
As whoso filled a tonne ful of a fressh ryver,
And wente forth with that water to woke with Themes.

(B.XV.335-338)

⁷⁹ Owst refers to this passage in commenting that such gifts were “a common conceit of the wealthy” and notes several interesting examples of such ostentatious personal vanity extending even to the pulpits themselves: for instance, a pulpit in Burnham Norton, in Norfolk, on which the figures of the donors, John and Catherine Goldalle, “share its panels with the four great doctors of Latin Christianity, in equal dimensions” (*Preaching* 162-164).

⁸⁰ “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.” Matthew 6:3.

Furthermore, Langland consistently rejects the possibility that spiritual merit may be acquired through external actions alone, without true internal reformation. Moe observes that “Langland’s poem did not mention, as payments that would be effective for salvation, any of the most usual gifts designed, in his day, to provide for the repose of donor’s souls. In wholly Catholic England, he did not specify that prayers for the dead, the saying of masses, the maintenance of lamps and tapers before altars would be effective to send the donor’s souls to the saints in joy” (373). He instead repeatedly emphasizes corporal works of mercy to those truly in need, and he particularly questions the effectiveness of relying on pardons and indulgences rather than consistently living in accordance with God’s laws. The priest examining Piers’s pardon

...demed that Dowel indulgences passed,
Biennals ans triennals and bisshopes lettres,
And how Dowel at the day of dome is digneliche underfongen,
And passeth al the pardon of Seint Petres cherche.

(B.VII.169-172)

As Adams notes, “Despite the acknowledged papal authority to remit temporal debt...according to sins, all sacramental power is meaningless unless the mortal debt...has been removed through the penitence and ethical cooperation (ie, dowel) of the sinner” (R. Adams “Pardon” 413). Through “no gilt of the Pope,” the efficacy of pardons may fail if “men ben noght worthi to have the grace of God... / For may no blessynge doon us boote but if we wile amende”

(B.XIII.256-258). At the final judgment, therefore, when each individual has to account for “how thou didest day by day,”

A pokeful of pardon there, ne provincials lettres,
Theigh ye be founde in the fraternite of alle the fyve ordres
And have indulgences doublefold – but Dowel yow helpe,
I sette youre patentis and youre pardon at one piec hele!

(B.VII.188-202)

Langland’s persistent probing of the issue of poverty throughout the poem leads far beyond superficial answers, culminating in a deeper understanding of not only *caritas* and *justitia*, but also, ultimately, the path to redemption. His focus is twofold: first, upon how the individual Christian may acquire a more complete understanding of the fundamental principles of God’s law, and secondly, what those principles demand, both in word and in deed, in order to bring the errant individual will into accordance with the infallible divine will, for the outward form of faith without the substance is of no spiritual value. As Anima instructs the Dreamer, “*Beatus est...qui scripturas legit / Et verba vertit in opera* fulliche to his power” (B.XV.60-61).⁸¹ Those who truly seek to be servants of God are called upon live in strict accordance with His word and to give His will precedence over their own; they must live as fully as they may in accordance with the laws of *caritas* and *justitia*, as God’s law demands, and not be misled by attachment to temporal wealth, comforts, or rationalizations, “For where your

⁸¹ “Blessed is the man who reads the Scriptures and turns its words into works to the greatest degree he is capable of doing so.” St. Bernard *Tractatus de ordine vitae* (*Patrologia Latina* 184:566).

treasure is, there will your heart be also”⁸² (B.XIII.399). Throughout the poem, the focus returns constantly to personal responsibility for reformation, rich and poor alike: relentlessly pressing the Dreamer and the reader toward the development of a deeper understanding of both the spiritual and the temporal demands of the Christian faith.

⁸² Matthew 6:21.

Chapter 2

Piers Plowman and The Problem of the Wastours

Despite Langland's unflagging emphasis on the fundamental role of *caritas* and *justitia* and the obligation they impose to exercise charity without discrimination, Piers also reflects Langland's great concern about the threat to society posed by the "wastours": those who could earn a living with their own work but refuse to do so. His vehement censure of such idle parasites is manifest throughout the poem, starting with the very beginning, when one of the first sights the Dreamer sees when he views the Fair Field of Folk is an infestation of slothful, gluttonous beggars:

Bidderes and beggeres faste aboute yede
Til hire bely and hire bagge were bredful ycrammed;
Faiteden for hire foode, foughten at the ale.
In glotonye, God woot, go thei to bedde,
And risen with ribaudie, tho Roberdes knaves;
Sleep and sory sleuthe seweth hem evere.

(B.Prologue.40-45)

These "beggars with bags" will appear repeatedly throughout the poem, emblematic of those who beg for more than they actually require for their daily needs; although they may be poor, they are not truly in need, but slothful and greedy "faitours" demanding more than nature requires and often, as in this passage, squandering what they receive in gluttony and ribaldry. As we have already seen, Langland is adamant

that it is God's place to render judgment, not man's; to live in accordance with God's law, Christians must, like Piers, "pursueth God in doynge" and give aid indiscriminately, as God gives to mankind: "*Qui pluit super iustos et iniustos*"¹ at ones, / And sent the sonne to save a cursed mannes tilthe / As brighte as to the beste man or to the beste womman" (B.XIX.434-436). He also recognizes, however, the threat posed by such wastours; society depends on the reciprocal contributions of all its members, and its limited resources should not be stolen and wasted by idlers who not only refuse to contribute their share of productive labor, but furthermore live as leeches upon those who do, thereby becoming a drain upon society's limited resources.

Langland offers no easy answers to this dilemma, but instead probes the problem deeply and sensitively; as Tierney describes the complexity of medieval poor law, "one plucks at some strand of doctrine and a whole skein of tangled and interdependent theories begins to unwind" (Poor Law ix). Such an unraveling of implications is key to Langland's poetic method; his discourse "is fundamentally exploratory, one in which conclusions are risked, tested out, and often shown to be premature, one-sided, or mistaken; assumptions [are] made, brought to light and later rejected or developed in fresh perspectives" (Aers "Culture in Transition" 5). It is a process he utilizes throughout the poem, but perhaps nowhere so extensively as in addressing the quandary posed by the wastours. The multiplicity of answers presented and the rejection of each in turn has led some critics of the poem to believe that its author was unable to resolve the problem at all; as Adams has observed, it is

¹ "Who rains upon the just and unjust." Matthew 5:45.

easy to come to the conclusion that “Langland appears to lose himself in a forest of casuistry and enigma” (“Need” 274). Such a conclusion does not take into account, however, the fact that the poem does come to an unequivocal moral resolution. It is unquestionably true that all external solutions to the problem of the wastours are shown to be fundamentally inadequate; none of the social policies which are proposed to combat the problem, all of which rely on some kind of external enforcement of moral rules, can suffice. Not only are they ineffective, but they also fail when measured against the demands of justice and charity upon the enforcer. It does not follow, however, that no solution is presented. Here, as throughout the poem, the only sufficient answer to the otherwise insurmountable failures of the human will is to sublimate it to the divine: ultimately, inevitably, the focus returns to individual moral responsibility for reformation.

As we have seen, *caritas* and *justitia* are emphasized throughout the poem as the virtues most central to the understanding of God’s law; they are likewise the very virtues which the wastours most tangibly reject. Their offenses against both, as Piers himself complains, are manifold. Holding no regard for either secular or divine law, they flout the obligations of both charity and justice: Truth excludes them from His pardon explicitly because “thei lyve in no love, ne no lawe holde” (B.VII.88). They “apeireth” Truth’s “werkmen,” against whom they are directly opposed, for they “wasten that men wynnen with travaille and with tene” (B.VI.133), living “in lecherie and in losengerie... and in sleuthe” (B.VI.143); they are wolfish destroyers, “wastours wolveskynnes,” which “maketh this worlde deere”/ ‘For tho wasten and wynnen noght, and that while ilke / Worth nevere plentee among the peple the while

my plowgh liggeth” (B.VI.161-163).² They live as “parasites upon and enemies and betrayers of society” (Shepherd 173); by failing to work as productive members of the community, but instead living “in idelnesse and in ese and by otheres trauayle” (C.IX.152),³ they shirk their responsibility under God’s law: an abuse which carries repercussions far beyond their own individual well-being, since society depends on the reciprocal contributions of all its members for economic as well as social stability. Furthermore, in addition to failing to contribute to the production of the “liflode” on which the community depends, they compound the problem by begging alms. By doing so in the absence of legitimate need, they are “fals with the feend” and “defraudeth the nedy” (B.VII.64-65), thus further eschewing the demands of charity as well as justice: they are not rendering aid to those who are destitute by circumstance rather than choice, but instead competing with them for it. In so doing, they imperil their souls by continually racking up moral debt, which justice requires they must repay after death if not before. Finally, their slothfulness also provides occasion for them to fall into further error, compounding sin upon sin. As charity and justice are presented as the virtues which underlie all other virtues, so *acedia* is singled out as a capital vice, “one which easily gives rise to others as

² A similar argument is found in the mid-14th century poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*, in which Wynnere accuses Wastoure of causing the shortages that lead to the suffering of the poor through his gambling, extravagance, gluttony, and lack of productivity: “With thi sturte and thi stryffe thou stroyeste up my gudes.../ In owtrage, in unthrifte, in angarte pryde” (ll. 265-267). Should Wastoure not reform, Wynnere predicts, his punishment will be twofold: in this world he will likely become the victim of the shortages he has caused, suffering “firste the faylynge of fode” as a result of famine, and after death he will suffer the inevitable repercussions of divine justice, “to brene the alle at a birre for thi bale dedis” (ll. 291-292).

³ This line is part of a substantial addition to the B-text version, elaborating upon the abuse of charity by the wastours.

being their final cause.”⁴ For Langland, as for Aquinas, sloth is far more than simple laziness; it is a spiritual phenomenon, an aversion against the divine good that should be the object of man’s greatest efforts.⁵

Piers’s insistence on diligent work in accordance with one’s station, by contrast, is precisely in keeping with Holy Church’s instructions to the Dreamer in Passus I. Throughout the poem Langland consistently emphasizes that men are obligated to “travaille as Truthe wolde” (B.VI.139): “Kynde Wit wolde that ech a wight wroghte, / Or in dichynge or in delvyng or travaillynge in preieres – / Contemplatif lif or actif lif, Crist wolde men wroghte” (B.VI.246-248).⁶ It is significant that the palmer, although he has “walked ful wide” to visit holy places and bears hundreds of emblems upon his clothing to show where he has been and which saints he has sought, not only has no idea how to direct the would-be pilgrims to Truth, but even says he has never heard anyone ask after him before (B.V.516-536). The guidance the pilgrims seek is instead provided by Piers the Plowman: his appearance at this particular moment, “the replacement of a worldly traveller by a spiritual travailer” (Kasten 141), underlines the significance of the instructions he gives. Piers, the embodiment within the poem of the ideals

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II.II.q.35.a.4. Ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

⁵ Quaestio disputata de malo q. 2 and Summa Theologica II.II.q.35, particularly a.2. Aquinas’s examination of *acedia* is characteristic of that of the Scholastic theologians as a group; see particularly the *summae* of the 13th century scholars Guillaume d’Auxerre, Alexander of Hales, and Albert the Great. For an excellent examination of the representation of *acedia* in medieval thought and literature, see Wenzel The Sin of Sloth.

⁶ I shall examine Langland’s position on the legitimacy of the contemplative life in more detail in Chapter 3; for now, it will suffice to observe that he consistently acknowledges that its work – such as “travaillynge in preieres” – is just as valid as manual labor. The poem’s extensive satire against the mendicant orders and other false religious does not deny the validity of spiritual labor, but is instead directed against individuals’ failure to properly fulfil the responsibilities of their vocations.

modeled in the life of Christ, is an ideal laborer both within the temporal world and in the pursuit of salvation. When he instructs the would-be pilgrims to do the same, he speaks with the voice of a lifetime's experience, for he has been Truth's "olde hyne" (B.VI.131), faithfully laboring in God's service, for forty years. As he explains to those who wish to seek out Truth,

Conscience and Kynde Wit kened me to his place
And diden me suren hym sitthen sikerly to serven hym for evere,
Both to sowe and to sette the while I swynke myghte.
I have ben his folwere al this fourty winter –
Both ysowen his seed and suwed his beestes,
Withinne and withouten awaited his profit.

(B.VI.539-544)

As Chambers observes, "The way to Truth, on which Piers can guide the pilgrims, is the way of honest labour. Piers's guidance of the pilgrims actually consists in setting them all to work" ("Authorship" 13). The pardon later sent by Truthe himself confirms the same principle: "Alle libbynge laborers.../ That troweliche taken and troweliche wynnyn, / And lyven in love and in lawe.../ Haveth the same absolucion that sent was to Piers" (B.VII.60-63). Those who decline to even consider following Piers's instructions are, notably, those who openly admit that they have no desire to exert themselves in the pursuit of Truth: a cutpurse, an ape-keeper, and a wafer-seller who demur on the grounds that they "have no kyn" in Truth's castle, and a pardoner and a prostitute who would rather rely on the pardoner's "brevettes and a bulle with

bisshopes lettres” (B.V.630-642) than the long and arduous road recommended by Piers.

In his emphasis upon labor as a fundamental mandate of God’s law, Langland is firmly in concordance with both Biblical authority and his contemporaries. As the anonymous author of the eighth sermon found in MS. Royal 18 B.xxiii wrote, and Langland certainly would have agreed, every man necessarily owes multiple debts before God: “dette of seruage of þe goodes þat we haue of God, and of oure bodie, þat he shope, and of oure soule, þat he made. Þus, þan...euery man is detour to God” (Ross 42/6-9).⁷ Thus Will, as he begins to gain more spiritual understanding midway through the poem, describes the Christian’s debt to God in terms of a bondsman. Like a servant, he is required to meet his obligations to his master:

For may no cherl chartre make, ne his chatel selle
Withouten leue of his lord – no law wol it graunte.
Ac he may renne in arerage and rome from home...
Ac reson shal rekene with hym and rebuken hym at the last...
And putten hym after in prison in purgatorie to brenne.

(B.XI.128-134)

In traditional orthodoxy work “was commanded to fallen men by God...and its ends were to avoid idleness, to provide self-discipline and to procure necessities” (Aers “Culture in Transition” 6). To refuse to work is to violate God’s law and

⁷ Sermon no. 8, for the 22nd Sunday after Trinity, MS. British Museum Royal 18 B.xxiii. Ed. Ross, EETS vol. 209, 1940. The precise date of composition is uncertain, but it is likely that the sermons compiled in the manuscript range in date from approximately 1378 to 1417 (Ross Middle English Sermons xxxviii).

hence to sin. Hunger, following this tradition, defends the permissibility of denying alms to the wastours by extensively citing Scriptural passages dealing with the obligation to labor; out of the twenty-three lines which comprise his response to Piers's objection, in fact, all but four are explicitly citing the Bible. He begins with citations taken from Genesis and Proverbs:

Go to Genesis the geaunt, the engendroure of us alle:

"In sudore and swynke thou shalt eat thy bread,"

And labour for thy life, and so Oure Lord highte.

And Sapience seith the same – I seigh it in the Bible:

"Piger pro frigore non comedet panem suum" –

And therefore he shall beg and bidde, and no man bete his hunger."

(B.VI.231-236)

Next he repeats Jesus' parable of the servants entrusted with their master's money in his absence;¹⁰ the wicked servant who "he wolde werche" had his share taken away from him, and "he hadde maugree of his maister for evermore after" (B.VI.237-245). Finally, he closes his argument with a citation from the Psalms: "The freke that fedeth himself with his faithful labour, / He is blessed by the book in body and in soule: / *Labores manuum tuarum...*" (B.VI.250-252).¹¹ As Wenzel observes, all four of these passages are "standard companions of *acedia* in the handbooks for preachers" (*Acedia* 142). Additional Scriptural passages

⁸ "In the sweat [of thy face shalt thou eat bread]." Genesis 3:19.

⁹ "Because of the cold, the sluggard [would not plough]." Proverbs 20:4.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-27.

¹¹ "For [thou shalt eat] the labours of thy hands." Psalms 128:2. The last citation is taken, in fact, from one of the same Psalms which the personification of Sleuth confessed that he could not "construe clausemele and kenne it to my parishens" (B.V.420).

commonly cited in medieval sermons on sloth included the example of the apostles as related by Paul in II Thessalonians 3, particularly verse 10 (“This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat”) and Christ’s parable of the workers in the vineyard,¹² in which the lord repeatedly returns to the marketplace, asks those standing there, “Why stand ye here all the day idle?,” and sets them to work. The latter passage is cited explicitly by Anima later in the poem: “*Ite vos in vineam meam*”¹³ (B.XV.499). Piers’s half-acre is of course a field, not a vineyard, but the relevance of both passages is clear.

Parallels to Langland’s representations of both the obligation to labor and the offenses of those who fail to fulfill that mandate are plentiful in medieval sermon literature. For instance, an anonymous sermon found in MS. Royal 18 B.xxiii explains that “Man for is vnryghtwisnes falleþ often tymes in many gret myscheves, for þan he beleveþ not trewly ne trayveyls not as he shuld do. And þer-for seis þe prophete, “*In labore hominum non sunt et cum hominibus non flagellabuntur* – in þe labour of men þei be not, but lyven in synne and ydell liff; and þer-fore þei shall not be scourged with men but with feendes in hell”¹⁴ (Ross 123/35-124/4).¹⁵ Likewise Richard FitzRalph, Archbishop of Armagh, a precise contemporary of Langland’s, preached in his Defensio Curatorum that “in þe first ordynaunce of man God ordeyned hym so that anoon as man was made, God

¹² Matthew 20:1-16.

¹³ “Go you also into my vineyard.” Matthew 20:4.

¹⁴ Psalms 72:5.

¹⁵ Sermon #21, for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, MS. British Museum Royal 18 B.xxiii. Ed. Ross Middle English Sermons, EETS vol. 209, 1940. As for sermon #8 cited above, the precise date of composition is uncertain, but it is likely that the sermons compiled in the manuscript range in date from approximately 1378 to 1417 (Ross xxxviii).

put hym in Paradys for he schuld worche & kepe Paradys....And herto acordeþ
Hooly Writ in anoþer place & seith: ‘Man is y-bore to trauail...’¹⁶ (71:15-24).
Later in the same sermon, he furthermore reminded his audience that “Poul seiþ:
‘Who þat wole nouȝt trauaile schal nouȝt ete’& þere he spekiþ of hym silf in
þis maner: ‘Ȝe knoweþ Ȝowre silf...we ete noon ydel brede þat we hadde of eny
man, but we trauailede bisiliche & wrouȝt day & nyȝt, for we wolde greue noon
of Ȝou alle....but we wolde Ȝeue Ȝou ensauple in vs silf how Ȝe schulde folowe
us’” (88:19-89:3).¹⁷ Thomas Wimbledon, in his famous late-14th century sermon
“Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue,”¹⁸ warned that he who does not render his
debt of labor to God will lack his ‘penny’ hereafter: “Whanne þe day of his
rekenyng comeþ þat is þe ende of þis lif, ryȝt as he lyuede here wiþouten
trauaile, so he shal þere lacke þe reward of þe peny, þat is endeles ioye of
heuene. And as he was here lyuyng aftir noon staat ne ordre, so he shal be put
þanne ‘in þat place þat noon ordre is inne’¹⁹ ...and sorwe þat is in helle” (ll. 91-
97).²⁰ The influential Dominican friar John Bromyard likewise commented,
“God has ordained three classes of men... [they who] maintain their own status
are of the family of God. The Devil, however, finds a certain class, namely, the

¹⁶ Job 5:7.

¹⁷ 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10. *Defensio Curatorum*, delivered by FitzRalph in Avignon on November 8, 1357. The quotation is taken from John Trevisa’s Middle English translation, ed. Perry, EETS vol. 167, 1925.

¹⁸ An early edition of the sermon, published in London in 1635 by Thomas Coates, describes its matter as “no lesse fruitfull, then famous. Preached at Pauls Crosse, on the Sunday of quinquagesima, by R. Wimbleton, in the reigne of K. Henry the fourth, in the yeere of our Lord God, 1388.”

¹⁹ Job 10:22: “A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness.”

²⁰ The sermon is extant in thirteen English and two Latin manuscripts; the citation used here is taken from the Knight edition (1967).

slothful, who belong to no Order.”²¹ The latter two passages are particularly reminiscent of B.VII.88, in which Piers complains that the wastours “lyve in no love, ne no lawe holde,” contrasting them against those who “treweliche taken and treweliche wynnen, / And lyven in love and in lawe” (B.VII.60-61). “For profit of al the peple” they are ordained “to tilie and to travaille as trewe lif asketh” (B.Prol.119-120), to produce the food and other necessities upon which the entire society relies, but instead choose to live in direct opposition to God’s mandates.

The first passage in which Langland deals extensively with the problems raised by the wastours is in Passus VI, the Plowing of the Half-Acre, the allegorical establishment of the ideal social order. As always, his emphasis is not upon abstract theology, but upon what theological principles demand in day-to-day practice; as George Kane observes, Piers is “a living text with a content of direct concern” (115). Langland’s objections to the wastours are based upon his stringent adherence to Scriptural ideals, with a particular emphasis upon one’s tangible duties toward both God and one’s fellow man. *Redde quod debes* is God’s law in action, and part of what one owes to both God and to others is “feithful labour” to properly fulfill the work required by one’s station, for society as God ordained it depends on the members of each order performing their reciprocal duties to the best of their abilities. When the normally mild and patient Piers the Plowman loses his temper with the slothful laborers who have worked

²¹ Summa Praedicatorum, “Accidia.” Bromyard likely began writing the treatise, an expansion of his earlier Opus Trivium, around 1327-1328 and completed it in the summer of 1348 (Boyle “Date of the Summa Praedicatorum” 535-537). There is no modern edition of the Summa Praedicatorum. The quotation is taken from Owst’s Literature and Pulpit (554).

only briefly, if at all, before they sit down with their ale and “holpen ere his half acre with ‘How trolly lolly!’ (B.VI.115-116), we see none of his characteristic Christian compassion, but pure fury against those who presume to live as leeches upon the honest, hard-working members of society:

“Now, by the peril of my soule!” quod Piers al in pure tene,
“But ye arise the rather and rape yow to werche,
Shal no greyn that here groweth glade yow at nede,
And though ye deye for doel, the devel have that recche!”

(B.VI.117-20)

Piers’s threat is notably more extreme than even those among the Church Fathers who advocated discrimination in almsgiving would have endorsed: he claims that he is willing to actually let the wastours “deye for doel.” His anger is startling in this scene, given his mildness and compassion elsewhere, but it is a righteous anger consistent with the Biblical teachings he embodies;²² Bowers, for instance, compares his outburst to Moses’ smashing of the Ten Commandments when he finds the Israelites worshipping the golden calf (127),²³ and Scott finds it reminiscent of Christ’s righteous anger against the “den of thieves” plying their trades in the temple (Piers 91).²⁴ Both comparisons are apt, given Piers’s emphasis upon God’s law as it was laid out first in the Ten Commandments and

²² The phrase recurs at VII.115 and XVI.86, both times again in reference to Piers. See also Gregory the Great’s discussion of *ira per zelum* in Moralia, ch. 45 (Patrologia Latina 75:726) and Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II.II.c.158.a.2 and, particularly, III.c.15.a9, which specifically addresses Christ’s righteous anger.

²³ Exodus 32.

²⁴ Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46, and John 2:13-16; Christ’s words echo Jeremiah 7:11.

then in the life and teachings of Christ. As Coghill comments, “Vexation or petulance seem scarcely appropriate impulses in a character such as that of Piers” (“Character” 117), but this is something else entirely. Piers’s “pure tene” is not for his own sake, but for the society dependent on the Half-Acre: he recognizes that faithful and productive labor is not optional, but essential. The wastours, who “reject labour discipline and any form of regular work ethic” (Aers “Culture in Transition” 11), are not only failing to do their share to support the society, but are also draining that society’s hard-earned resources. They quite literally prey upon their communities, with no regard for either *caritas* or *justitia*.

Tierney observes that through a combination of family, neighbors, guilds, and, when necessary, public relief through parochial funds and organized charities, 14th century societal structures constituted “a kind of primitive ‘social security’” (Poor Law 64-68) for those unable to support themselves due to age, illness, or circumstances; “much of the destitution arising in the ordinary course of village life” was relieved through the contributions of the immediate communities of the needy (Poor Law 97). Such a structure can only be sustained, however, when the majority of the members of the community are productive. As Scott comments, “The wasters and the labourers have the same obligation as the wealthy to care for the needy....Piers is acutely conscious of the perils of not making the land yield sufficiently – the poorest will be the first to suffer” (Piers 91). Langland therefore insists that all who are able should work, that each may be able to support the other:

“*Alter alterius onera portate*” (B.VI.222).²⁵ He clearly links charity to an ethos of work, eloquently defending the poor in general and calling for generous aid to relieve their suffering, yet equally fervently denouncing those who could support themselves but instead choose to squander their lives and live at the expense of the rest of society.

The economic threat posed by the wastours was far from an abstraction to Langland and his audience; hunger and starvation were familiar and menacing facts of life in the 14th century.²⁶ Piers’ promise to plow the land in order to support the poor, to “lenen hem liflode, but if the londe faille” (B.VI.17), would have been charged with immediate significance for his contemporary audience; the ravages of the famines of 1353-54, 1362, and 1369-70²⁷ were likely within immediate memory, and the horrific famine of 1315-1317, in which ten percent or more of the population had died (Kershaw 93-98),²⁸ was doubtless far from forgotten. “Even the words

²⁵ “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:2. The same verse is cited again at B.XI.211.

²⁶ On this topic, see particularly Frank “Agricultural Crisis,” Kershaw, and Pearsall “Poverty” 170-172.

²⁷ In 1353 was “þe grete derþe of vitales, þe wiche was clepid þe dere somer” (Brut 304; see also Capgrave’s Abbreuiacion of Cronicles 168), and the following year, there was a major drought: “þer fel no rayne into þe erþe; wherefore al fruttys, sedis and erbis, for þe more part was lost; in defaute wherof þer come...grete desis of men and bestes, & derþe of vetailes in Engeland” (Brut 304). In 1362 another famine struck as the result of first another major drought, then a destructive rain at harvest time (Brut 313), and in 1369 “by grete falling of wateres...þer fill grete hyndryng & destroyeng of corn,” so that the price of wheat rose uncontrollably (Brut 321). The last of the three is the famine to which Haukyn refers when he says that “it is noght longe ypassed / There was a careful commune whan no cart com to towne / With bake breed fro Stratford; tho gonnen beggeris wepe, / And werkmen were agast a lite – this wole be thoughte longe; / In the date of Oure Drighte, in a drye Aprill, / A thousand and thre hundred, twies thrity and tene” (B.XIII.266-270). See also B.XV.255-69: Anima’s lament that in the past “the lond was so trewe,” but “now faileth the folk of the flood and of the lond bothe.”

²⁸ Johannis de Trokelowe recorded that at the height of the famine, “bread did not have its usual nourishing power and strength because the grain was not nourished by the warmth of summer sunshine. Hence those who ate it, even in large quantities, were hungry again after a little while. There can be no doubt that the poor wasted away when even the rich were constantly hungry.” It seemed that “the prophecy of Jeremiah is fulfilled in the English people: ‘If I go forth into the

‘hunger,’ ‘drought,’ or ‘famine’ might themselves be enough, decades after the event, to spark a train of bitter recall” (D. Arnold 13). Furthermore, when famine did strike, it was the poor who suffered most; as Postan and Titow observe, those already poised on the edge of subsistence suffered from the failure of harvests twice over, first through the failure of their own produce and secondly through the high prices they had to pay for any food they purchased (172). The emphasis on the harvest is therefore not about producing surplus for the sake of profit, but simply producing enough to meet the needs of the populace. Thus the relationship of labor to *caritas* as well as *justitia* becomes evident: for Langland and for Piers, material sustenance is a matter of reliance on God, but also on man’s best possible efforts. When the wastours eschew their obligation to labor, their sin endangers not only their own souls, but the wellbeing of their entire society.

For the same reason, despite Langland’s pervasive concern for the situation of the industrious poor he has no patience with what he sees as the selfish disobedience of laborers who demand more than justice requires. Among the wastours are those who theoretically will accept work, but demand more than customary wages in return:

Laborers that have no land to lyve on but hire handes

fields, behold those slain with the sword, and if I enter into the city behold them that are consumed with famine" (Jeremiah 14:18).” Servants were turned out, and monastic communities withdrew their usual support of the poor; many people were forced to turn to vagrancy. Disease was rampant, and physicians found themselves helpless to treat it. The sick and the dead could be seen lying neglected both in the villages and alongside the roads; there were scarcely enough living to bury them. Livestock, similarly affected, died en masse as well. The famine was so severe that “according to many reports, men and women in many places secretly ate their own children” (*Annales Johannis de Trokelowe* 92-98, trans. Tierney, *Medieval Source Book*, 1996). See also Frank “Agricultural Crisis” 96-97. Postan and Titow comment that “but for the Black Death itself, these years might well have their mark in historical records and popular memory as the years of highest mortality in the Middle Ages” (“Heriots and Prices” 169).

Deyned noght to dyne aday nyght-olde wortes
 May no peny ale hem paie, ne no pece of bacoun,
 But if it be fressh flessch outhur fish fryded outhur ybake...
 And but if he be heighliche hyred, ellis wole he chide –
 And that he was werkmen wrought warie the tyme...
 He greveth hym ageyn God and gruccheth ageyn Reson.

(B.VI.306-314)

Langland's allegory here reflects the newly emerging problems posed by vagrant laborers who wandered about in search of higher wages in the latter half of the 14th century, taking advantage of changing economic circumstances after the plague had created massive labor shortages. Henry Knighton, an Augustinian canon at the abbey of St. Mary of the Meadows, described the situation thus following the plague of 1349: "The king sent word into every shire that mowers and other workmen should not take more than they had before, under the penalties laid down in the order, and thereupon made a statute."²⁹ Nevertheless the workmen were so puffed up and contrary-minded that they did not heed the king's decree, and if anyone wanted to hire them he had to pay what they asked: either his fruit

²⁹ The Ordinance of Laborers of 18 June, 1349, which was followed by the Statute of Laborers in 1351. "Parliament being unable to meet on account of the pestilence, the responsibility of dealing with the emergency fell on the king's council....The continuance of the seriousness of the labour problem is given as one of the reasons for summoning, for February, 1351, of the first parliament that sat after the plague; the statement of the commons that the council's decree is not obeyed is met by the statute of laborers, not as a re-enactment of the ordinance, but as a supplement to it" (Putnam Enforcement 2). Both decrees focused upon fixing the rate of wages to pre-plague levels and prohibiting the departure of laborers from their accustomed service in search of higher pay, because "many seeing the Necessity of Masters, and great Scarcity of Servants, will not serve unless they may receive excessive Wages" (introduction to the decree of 1349.) Statutes of the Realm I.307-309, 23 Edward III. London: G. Eyre and A. Strahan, 1810-1828. Reprinted Buffalo: W.S. Hein, 1993. The translation used in this edition was taken primarily from the 1751 Cay edition, with corrections and additions made as necessary (xlii-xliii).

and crops rotted, or he had to give in to the workmen's arrogant and greedy demands" (102).³⁰ As Pearsall observes, Langland is "keenly aware of and deeply engaged with....the threat posed to...stability by the landless and workless labourers who have left their villages in search of better-paid wage labour....Langland has no sympathy for the labourers who demand higher wages and prefer fresh meat and fish...to salt bacon and warmed-up vegetables (C.VIII.330-2): like those who framed the Statutes of Labourers, he regards wage-claims as selfish and wilful wickedness on the part of labourers, and an attempt to disturb a divinely ordained hierarchy" ("Poverty" 175). Like those who simply refuse to work at all, they "myghte travaille as Truthe wolde and take mete and hyre" (B.VI.139); by instead refusing to work unless they are paid out of measure, they fail to render the debt they owe to support society and thus become, by definition, wastours. In selfishly considering only their own profit, they eschew the demands of both charity and justice, since society depends so greatly upon the labor they should provide.

It is with reference to the continual threat of dearth that Piers vows that he "wol worshipe...Truthe by my lyve, / And ben His pilgrim atte plow for povere mennes sake" (B.VI.101-102). Even in good years, when the better-off had sufficient food, the poor walked a razor's edge between survival and starvation; as Pearsall notes, "The existence of the poorest classes of society had been a precarious subsistence at best...perhaps as much as half of the rural population...lived at or even

³⁰ Chronicon Henrici Knighton vel Cnitthon Monachi Leycestrensis. Ed. with facing page transl. by G. H. Martin, The Chronicle of Henry Knighton, 1995.

under subsistence minima” (“Poverty” 170). Numerous passages within Piers reflect the harsh reality of the well-documented “hungry gap,” the annual scarcity when the previous year’s stocks are beginning to run out, weeks or months before the next harvest, and even the hardest-working among the poor suffer from a lack of sustenance. Patience prays, for instance, for God to comfort “poore peple...that muche care suffren / Thorugh derthe.../ And in somer tyme selde soupem to the fulle” (B.XIV.174-178). Piers himself notes the scarce contents of his larder and comments that “by this liflode” his family must live “til Lammasse tyme,” early August, when the harvest comes in (B.VI.279-289), and the lines which follow describe in detail the meager offerings with which the poor attempt to appease Hunger until “it neighed neer harvest and newe corn cam to chepyng” (B.VI.291-298). As Scott comments, Piers “is concerned that people should work productively to provide surplus, so that need can be overcome....The presence of able-bodied wanderers choosing leisure rather than work jeopardizes the success of the ploughing venture which depends on the efforts of all to ward off dearth and provide a surplus” (Piers 89). Furthermore, Frank perceptively notes, “though Piers summons Hunger to drive the rebellious idlers to work, the summons is an unnecessary fiction. Hunger would have come uncalled for, did come regularly, had come often and stayed much too long” (“Agricultural Crisis” 97). Thus Passus VI, the episode of the Wastours, ends with a dire prediction, riddling to modern ears but, for Langland and his contemporaries, firmly grounded in recent history:

I warne yow werkmen – wynneth whil ye mowe,
For Hunger hiderward hasteth faste!

He shal awake thorough water, wastours to chaste,
Er five yer be fulfilled swich famyn shal aryse:
Thorough flodes and thorough foule wedres, fruytes shul faille...
Then shal deeth withdrawe and derthe be justice,
And Dawe the Dykere deye for hunger –
But if God of his goodnesse graunte us a trewe.

(B.VI.319-329)

As Frank concludes in his examination of this passage, “The probable wordplay embodied in the juxtaposition of “deeth-derthe” makes the two one and the same...famine *is* death itself” (“Agricultural Crisis” 95).

Furthermore, the ultimate explanation Langland offers for dearth of such magnitude is that it is a punishment for mankind’s sinfulness: the wastours are therefore responsible for causing the scarcity of food both overtly, by not aiding in its production, and also through their wickedness. Patience warns, for instance, that the wastours make the same mistake as the people of Sodom, whose “mischief and...meschaunce” arose through “pure sleuthe”: “so vengeaunce fil upon hem for hir vile synnes, / Thei sonken into helle, the citees echone” (B.XIV.75-80). The wastours are able to “travaille as Truthe wolde,” (B.VI.139), supporting both themselves and their society as God ordained, but as Piers complains, instead “in lecherie and losengerie ye lyven, and in sleuthe” (B.VI.143). They are thus traitors to both God and temporal society, and if they have not yet been punished for their sinfulness it is only through God’s forbearance thus far: “And al is through suffraunce that vengeaunce yow ne taketh!” (B.VI.144-145). As Schmidt observes,

Langland plainly agrees with many among his contemporaries in “seeing the plague and similar natural disasters as a divine punishment for the sins of the people” (B-Text 424).³¹ Similar arguments are made, for instance, by the Dominican friar John Bromyard,³² the canon Simon of Couvin,³³ and the Bishop of Rochester Thomas Brinton.³⁴ Brinton, in particular, was extremely outspoken regarding the cause and effect of sin and natural disaster, addressing the topic frequently over the course of many years. In a sermon given before the clergy at Cobham College on the Feast of St. Mary Magdelene (July 22) in either 1382 or 1383, for instance, he draws a direct comparison between the recent famines, mortality, and storms which have plagued England and the Scriptural account of God’s vengeance against Ninevah; the people of Ninevah, he notes, at least had the sense to “humble themselves under God’s chastisements” and repent, whereas the English people have yet to do so, and thus their punishment continues.³⁵ The

³¹ On this point see also Friedman “Simon of Couvin,” particularly pp. 13-14.

³² Summa Praedicatorum, “Tribulatio,” which according to Boyle was likely written during the summer of 1348 (“Date of the Summa Praedicatorum” 537). No readily available edition of the Summa Praedicatorum currently exists (the most recent was printed in Antwerp in 1614), but Boyle describes the passage in some depth (536-537).

³³ De Iudicio Solis in Conviviis Saturni, a lengthy poem specifically about the onslaught of the plague in 1348, completed in approximately 1350. Couvin, unlike Brinton, considered planetary alignment to be a factor – albeit specifically as the agent of an angry God. Prayer and repentance were therefore the best remedy: “*Nulla potest medicina dari securior ista /Saucia peccatis, contritio corde fidei, / Cum sanctis precibus lacrimas fundendo salutis. /Flectite, mortales, prece supplice iudicis iram*” (ll. 237-238).

³⁴ In a sermon dating from approximately 1375, for instance, Brinton spoke out vehemently against those who attributed the plague and other disasters to the influences of the stars or the planets, preaching that “the designs of wickedness are greater today than in Noah’s time – for a thousand forms of vice are practiced today which did not exist then – let us not impute the scourges of God to planets, but to our sins” (Sermon #70 in the Devlin ed.; transl. Friedman “Simon of Couvin” 14). In the same vein, in a sermon given in May 1381 on the Sunday after the Feast of Ascension, he predicts God’s punishment upon the nation in retribution for the murder of Archbishop Sudbury committed during the course of the Peasants’ Revolt (Sermon #100 in the Devlin ed.; see also Devlin “Brinton” 334-335 and Gasquet “Forgotten English Preacher” 93).

³⁵ Sermon #101 in the Devlin ed.; see also Devlin “Brinton” 342-343 and Gasquet “Forgotten English Preacher” 93-94. Gasquet’s translation. Brinton plaintively laments the lack of reform

most extensive example of this rationale within Piers is found in Reason's sermon before the king and all of the people; he "preved that thise pestilences was for pure synne / ...in tokenynge of drede / That dedly synne er domesday shal fordoon hem alle" (B.V.13-20). The great "south-west wynd on Saterdag at even" (B.V.15) which he describes in detail, vividly reminiscent of the destructive winds described in the chronicles as contributing to the onslaughts of the famines, is both a specific historical reference³⁶ and a divine portent, in the tradition of Old Testament scriptures such as Psalms 48:8,³⁷ Isaiah 28:2,³⁸ and Ezekiel 13:13.³⁹ Reason makes a number of specific admonitions for correction of the wickedness which has brought down God's wrath. He does not spare to criticize the clergy or the ruling elite as well as the commons, but his very first rebuke is against the personification of the wastours: "He bad Wastour go werche what he best kouthe / And wynnen his wasting with som maner crafte" (B.V.24-25).

In addition to identifying the dual roles the wastours play in causing famine, Langland's poem also emphasizes the additional drain they impose upon society by

his warnings have effected: "I say it with tears, I have preached for ten years continuously against the sins rife in my diocese, and still I cannot see that anyone has risen effectually from his evil life....When they hear good exhortations, they move their heads, but do not cast off their sins." Dame Study's complaint in Passus X is strikingly similar to Brinton's lamentation. "Preieres have no power thise pestilences to lette," she says, but "God is deaf nowadays and deyneth noght us to here," for the people disregard the divine chastisement which should call them to contrition: "the wrecches of this world is noon ywar by oother, / Ne for drede of the deeth withdrawe noght hir pride," but instead continue to carry on "in gaynesse and in glotonye" with no concern for reformation (B.X.75-84).

³⁶ Schmidt's note: "a memorable tempest on 15 January 1362, a Saturday, which occurred during the second plague and lasted five days" (B-Text 424). The Brut says that the wind blew "wiþ such a fersnes, that he brast & blewe down to ground hye houses, & strong byldynges, toures, churches, & steeples" (315).

³⁷ "Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfill his word."

³⁸ "Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which as a tempest of hail and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand."

³⁹ "Therefore thus saith the Lord God; I will even rend it with a stormy wind in my fury; and there shall be an overflowing shower in mine anger, and great hailstones in my fury to consume it."

begging for alms. By doing so in the absence of legitimate need, they are “fals with the feend” and “defraudeth the nedy” (B.VII.64-65), thus further eschewing the demands of charity as well as justice: not only are they not rendering aid to those who are destitute by circumstance rather than as a result of sloth, they are instead doing precisely the opposite by competing with them for alms. Furthermore, they are “glotons glubberes” (B.IX.60), all too often squandering what they receive in gluttony and waste. Langland links sloth with gluttony in four out of the five passages which present the seven deadly sins,⁴⁰ as well as in many of the passages which address sloth in general or the wastours specifically; see the lines from the prologue cited at the opening of this chapter, for instance, and Passus V, in which Glutton’s drinking bout was so intemperate that “after al this excesse he had an accidie, / That he sleep Saterdag and Sondag, till sonne yede to reste” (B.V.360-361).⁴¹ In drawing this connection he was, once again, fully in concordance with this contemporaries; as Wenzel observes, “in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sermons and didactic works the two sins were often linked together” (Acedia 140). Langland furthermore consistently connects sloth with the waste of worldly goods, the superfluity which is vehemently condemned throughout the poem. Along with those who possess plentiful resources but consume out of “mesure” rather than sharing generously with the less fortunate, the wastours are the root cause of

⁴⁰ B.II.80-101 (Mede’s bridal charter), B.V.71-461 (the deadly sins’ confessions to Repentance), B.XIII.320-421 (Haukyn’s “foule beflobered” coat), and B.XIV.202-257 (Patience’s discourse on how poverty protects man from deadly sin). The fifth passage, which presents the seven deadly sins but does not explicitly connect sloth with gluttony, is B.XX.106-375 (the Antichrist’s assault on Conscience). Wenzel observes that Langland’s consistent connection between sloth and gluttony is clearly more than a prosodic feature, since the terms do not alliterate (Acedia 141).

⁴¹ This passage is reminiscent of the description of Wastoure in the ale-house in Fitt II of Wynnere and Wastour, particularly lines 277-82.

dearth,” for “if men lyvede as mesure wolde, sholde never moore be defaute.../ But unkyndenesse *caristia* maketh amonges Cristen peple” (B.XIV.70-72). As Scott comments, “When able-bodied beggars...take alms they do not need they are exhibiting the same gluttony, waste, and unnaturalness as the selfish rich and creating an injustice toward those incapable of work who depend upon the alms for their ‘liflode’” (Piers 89).

Finally, the wastours furthermore threaten the wellbeing of the legitimate poor by provoking skepticism and confusion in would-be donors. As Middleton observes, fraudulent beggars corrode the community’s “shared premise of mutuality in charity....A false assertion of need both depends on and parodies social good faith” (“Acts of Vagrancy” 242). In Passus VI, for instance, when Piers turns on the wastours in anger and demands that they work, many of them feign disability:

Tho... faitours...feyned hem blynde;
Somme leide hir legges aliry, as swiche losels konneth,
And made hir pleynt to Piers and preide hym of grace:
‘For we have no lymes to laboure with, lord, ygraced be ye!
....We may neither swynke nor swete, swiche siknesse us eyleth.’

(B.VI.121-128)

Even Piers himself is uncertain how to deal with the challenge to charity posed by such fraud. “If it be sooth,” he tells them, he will of course aid them generously, but he already knows that it is not: “Ye ben wastours, I woot wel” (B.VI.129-130). Passus VII paints an even more disturbing picture of the exploitation of

society's trust; here the faitours do not limit themselves to feigning disability, but go so far as to deliberately break the bones of their children so that they may "goon and faiten with hire fauntes for everemoore after": as a result of their degeneracy, "ther is moore mysshapen amonges thise beggeres / Than of alle othere manere men that on this moolde walketh" (B.VII.93-95).⁴² Again, Langland was not alone in his concerns; the potential abuse of charity, as we have seen, provoked Augustine, Ambrose, and others to advocate cautious discrimination in almsgiving. Whereas the Church Fathers viewed such cases as aberrations, however, 14th century writers presented them as endemic. Jacob's Well (ca. 1440), for instance, a treatise on the cleansing of the conscience, warns against "faytours, that getyn mete and monye of piteous folk with wyles, as to maken hem seme crokyd, blynde, syke, or mysellys, and are noȝt so."⁴³ Although Langland advocates openhanded generosity to all who ask, without any attempt to pass judgment on the recipient's worthiness, he recognizes that the obvious abuse of such generosity readily leads potential givers to restrain their sympathy and therefore their giving, and thus constitutes yet another threat to the wellbeing of the genuinely needy. Those who beg without legitimate need "are especially harmful...to the other poor whose unavoidable suffering they ape, whose alms they divert and whose honesty they taint....False beggars destroy the trust that should exist between the almsgiver and the needy person" (Scott Piers 79).

⁴² This passage is further expanded in Passus IX of the C-text revision, with a yet more extensive picture drawn of both the legitimate poor and the fraudulent beggars.

⁴³ Chapter 20, "De cupiditate," 134:13-15. The quotation is taken from the Brandeis edition, EETS vol. 115 (London, 1900).

It is because of their numerous offenses against both charity and justice that the wastours are singled out for some of the poem's most vehement criticism; only the false clergy, whose sins are likewise magnified due to the impact they have on others, are condemned as vigorously. Caring only for their own temporal desires, the wastours are continually shown to eschew the demands of charity as well as justice; they center their lives entirely upon themselves, rather than upon God, with no regard for their fellow men. Having so exhaustively established the tremendous threat to society posed by the wastours, however, Langland's examination of the issue seems to hang at loose ends: their reform is clearly essential, but how is that goal to be achieved? The answer to this crucial but intractable dilemma appears to remain unclear; various solutions are advanced, but each in turn is shown to be inadequate, and none of the poem's allegorical figures ever succeed in satisfactorily resolving the issue. None of the social policies which are proposed to combat the problem, all of which rely on some kind of external enforcement, can suffice; not only are they ineffective, but they also fail when measured against the demands of charity and justice upon the enforcer.

When the faitours feign disablement to avoid work, for instance, and, in the personification of Wastour, become angry with Piers for refusing to support them in their idleness, Piers first calls in the assistance of the knight, the traditional upholder of society's rules and protector of honest citizens. This is, of course, the solution attempted by the Statutes of Laborers: able-bodied idlers who "as long as they may live of begging, do refuse to labor, giving themselves to Idleness and Vice, and

sometimes to Theft and other Abominations,”⁴⁴ must be forced back to work. To that end, they are threatened with the stocks or incarceration, as are those who might otherwise be inclined to aid them: “None upon the said Pain of Imprisonment shall, under the colour of Pity or Alms, give anything to such, which may labour, or presume to favor them in their idleness.”⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, however, Wastour and his companions refuse to submit to the law or its representative: instead they defy both Piers and the knight “rudely and with impunity” (Frank “Agricultural Crisis” 101):

A Bretoner, a braggere, abosted Piers also
And bad hym go pissen with his plowgh, forpynede sherewe!
‘Wiltow or neltow, we wol have oure wille,
And of thi flour and of thi flesshe fecce whanne us liketh,
And maken us murye thermyde, maugree thi chekes.’
.....
[Wastour] leet light of the lawe, and lasse of the knyghte,
And sette Piers at a pese, and his plowgh bothe,
And manaced Piers and his men if thei mette eftsoone.

(B.VI.154-158, 168-70)

As Dunning comments, “the failure of the Knight’s intervention to aid Piers is no doubt a melancholy comment on the state of the times” (Interpretation 135). The labor laws do seem to be a nuisance to the wastours – they “corseth...the Kyng and al

⁴⁴ The Statute of Labourers of 1349, Statutes of the Realm 23 Edward III.

⁴⁵ Statute of Labourers of 1349.

his Counseil after/ Swiche lawes to loke, laborers to greve” (B.VI.315-316) – but they clearly do not constitute a sufficient solution. The limited effectiveness of the Statutes is clearly indicated in historical records; the labor cases found in records of proceedings before justices of the peace, for instance, frequently mention reluctant laborers, as well as the sheriffs and constables who found it impossible to secure their obedience,⁴⁶ and the numerous re-enactments of the Statutes furthermore suggest that they were less than fully effective. Putnam notes that not only did individuals ignore the requirements of the statutes, but “there is proof, too, of concerted and organized attempts to break the laws” (Proceedings cxxiii). As the 1377 reiteration of the Statutes complains, the wastours “will not suffer any Distress or other Justice to be made upon them,” but just as Wastour and his companions “manace” Piers and the knight, they “menace the Ministers of their Lords of Life and Member and....gather themselves together in great Routs...that every one shall aid other to resist their Lords with strong Hand; and much other harm they do in sundry Manner.”⁴⁷ Just as negative societal opinions and even strict laws passed against able-bodied beggars and vagrant laborers failed to solve the problem of the wastours in Langland’s England, so they fail to work for Piers.

In anger and frustration, Piers next retaliates against Wastour and his crowd of faitours by calling in the ultimate ally against sloth, Hunger, who violently beats them into submission. Having witnessed this,

Faitours for fere herof flowen into berns

⁴⁶ On this topic, see particularly Putnam Enforcement and Proceedings cxxi-cxxxvi.

⁴⁷ Statutes of the Realm II.2: I Richard II 2 c.vi.

And flapted on with flailes fro morwe til even,
That Hunger was noght hardy on hem for to loke....
Blynde and bedreden were bootned a thousand,
That seten to begge silver, soone were thei heeled...
And many a beggere for benes buxom was to swynke.

(B.VI.183-194)

Hunger's solution to the problem of the wastours (B.VI.212-224 and 230-252) is at least temporarily effective, and in terms of attempts to reform the wastours, it neatly summarizes two more of the solutions most popular among Langland's contemporaries: one should help the "deserving" poor generously, but either deny aid altogether to "bolde beggeris...that mowe hir breed biswynke," as the Statutes required, or else give them only the lowest quality of food, "houndes breed and horse breed," and just enough of that to sustain life (B.VI.212-214). To that end, he recommends that Piers "Abye hem with benes, for bollynge of hir wombe; / And if the gromes grucche, bid hem go and swynke, / And he shal soupe swetter whan he it hath deserved" (B.VI.215-217); as discussed above, he even cites numerous Scriptural justifications, both Old and New Testament. As Pearsall has observed, however, "The scene in which scores of "faitours" scatter their crutches and fall eagerly to work is as ugly as well as a comic one" ("Poverty" 175). On the surface Hunger's proposal appears to be both logical and scripturally sound, but Piers, concerned with mercy and love as well as justice, clearly is not satisfied with this solution. His concerns are vividly evident in his pointed questioning of Hunger: "'I wolde noght greve God,' quod Piers, 'for al the good on ground!/ Might I synneles

do as thou seist?” (B.VI.228-229). As his question reveals, Piers’s conscience is simply not comfortable with treating his “bloody bretheren” with such strict justice. His hesitation reflects his creator’s acknowledgment of the complexity of the problem: Langland seems painfully aware of the moral implications of such a policy and is greatly unsatisfied with it. He realizes that he must reappraise Hunger’s conception of justice in the light of the *lex Christi*: all men, even the wastours, are “my bloody brethren, for God boughte us alle,” and “Truthe taughte me...to loven hem ech one” (B.VI.207-208).

Hunger’s proposed solution, furthermore, contains multiple serious practical flaws as well as dangerous moral shortcomings, as Piers soon discovers. First, as we have already seen, the scarcity and henceforth the suffering caused by the wastours affects not them alone, but the entire community, including the hard-working poor. Furthermore, such community-wide dearth does not readily withdraw when bidden, a point poignantly dramatized in Passus VI: Hunger will not depart after Piers courteously thanks him for his assistance and asks him to “wende now...whan thou wolt” (B.VI.276; see also his similar request at lines 199-200), but instead remains ravenously insatiable despite the best efforts of Piers and the “povere folk” who strive to appease him (B.VI.275-300). Because the wastours’ lack of productivity is in itself a root cause of scarcity, hunger is, in short, a weapon which cannot readily be controlled. Not only is it pragmatically problematic, however; as Piers quickly realizes it is ultimately ineffective as well. The wastours’ reformation lasts only as long as their hunger does, and once it is relieved, they immediately resume their old ways with as much insolence as before. “I am wel awroke of wastours thorough thy

myghte,” he tells Hunger, but he recognizes that their reformation is only temporary: “For I woot wel, be thou went, thei wol werche ful ille; / Meschief it maketh thei be so meke nouthe, / And for defaute of hir foode this folk is at my wille” (B.VI.201-206). His prediction proves to be correct: as soon as Hunger is sufficiently fed to fall asleep, “Tho wolde Wastour noght werche, but wandren aboute” (B.VI.301). He and his followers resume their old ways with even more insolence than before, wandering about the Half-Acre, refusing to work, demanding better food, and grumbling against God, Reason, and the implementers of the Statutes (B.VI.301-318). Piers, like the reader, is left with his quandary unresolved: what, he asks, is to be done? How may he “amaistren hem and make hem to werche” (B.VI.211)? The wastours hold no respect for either divine or secular law, and Hunger, albeit temporarily effective, provides an insufficient incentive for anything more than superficial, short-lived obedience; how, then, can the wastours be induced toward true, permanent reformation, the transformation necessary to induce them to lead righteous lives in accordance with God’s will?

The reworking and expansion of this passage found in the C-text provides a crucial key to Langland’s understanding of the problem: in the B-text, Piers asks simply “how I myghte amaistren hem and make hem to werche” (B.VI.210), but as so often in Piers, Langland continued to refine and clarify his meaning in further revisions. In the latter version, the passage runs thus:

“Hit is nat for loue, leue hit, thei labore thus faste

But for fere of famyn, in faythe,” sayde Piers.

“Ther is no filial loue with this folk, for al hire fayre speche.”

....Now wolde I wyte...what were þe beste,
How I myghte amayster hem to louye and to labory
For here lyflode...

(C.VIII.214-222)

Note that the question in Langland's mind is not simply how the wastours may be induced to labor, but more fundamentally, upon how they may be induced to love. "Ther is no filial loue with this folk": they do not labor as they should because they do not love as they should. The root of the problem is not simple physical sloth, but a much deeper failure, the lack of *caritas*; and as the transgression itself is ultimately spiritual, not merely physical, thus the solution must also be. The wastours, in short, must learn to love: only when they both understand and seek to live in accordance with God's law will permanent reformation be achieved.

For Langland, as for Aquinas, the fundamental nature of sloth extends far beyond simple laziness. It is an aversion against the divine good that should be the object of man's greatest efforts, "on account of the flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit," and therefore lies at the root of every vice and predisposes the soul toward other mortal sins. In its essence, it is no less than the negation of *caritas* itself, the greatest of the Christian virtues.⁴⁸ "In this analysis the theological vice is thus very intimately linked to the deepest roots of man's affective and volitive life" (Wenzel *Acedia* 55). Because sloth weakens the spiritual defenses and thereby leads the soul into further error, the 6th century

⁴⁸ *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* q. 2 and *Summa Theologica* II.II.q.35, particularly a.2; the quotation is taken from a.3. *Quaestiones* ed. and trans. Davies and Regan, 2001. *Summa Theologica* ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920. Aquinas's examination of *acedia* is characteristic of that of the Scholastic theologians as a group.

ascetic Evagrius referred to it as the most dangerous and most oppressive of all temptations:⁴⁹ an analysis with which Langland surely would have agreed. It makes sense, therefore, that spiritual *acedia* lies at the heart of the externally apparent offenses of the wastours. As Dunning observes, “Sloth, carrying with it, as St. Thomas points out, a disgust for work, drives the slothful man to obtain the necessities and comforts of life unlawfully” (Interpretation 84). In Langland’s representation of the wastours, therefore, “sloth means negligence both in man’s relations with God and in his dealings with his fellow man and society, particularly in the common laborer’s attitude toward his work and his duty of providing the necessities of life” (Wenzel Acedia 142). Langland makes the connection between physical and spiritual sloth explicitly in multiple passages, as in the following passage from the episode of Haukyn:⁵⁰

Ac whiche ben the braunches that bringen a man to sleuthe?

Is whan a man moorneth noght for his mysdedes, ne maketh no

sorwe,

Ac penaunce that the preest enjoyneth parfourneth yvele,

Dooth non almesdede, dred hym of no synne,

Lyveth ayein the bileve and no lawe holdeth.

Ech day is halyday with hym or an heigh feyre....

⁴⁹ De octo vitiosis cogitationibus 7 (Patrologia Graeca 40: 1273). Wenzel (Acedia 206, n. 4) notes that a similar description is also found in De octo spiritibus malitiae 13-14 (Patrologia Graeca 79: 1456-1460), which is attributed to Nilus but actually consists of excerpts from Evagrius and Cassian as well as Nilus; see also Antiochus of Sabia, Homilia 26, “De Acedia” (Patrologia Graeca 89:1513), which is based on De octo spiritibus malitiae.

⁵⁰ In the C-text, this passage has been moved; rather than appearing in the Haukyn episode, it instead follows Sleuth's confession to Repentaunce at C.VII.70-81.

The allegorical figure of Sleuthe himself, likewise, confesses to Repentaunce that he habitually fails to render what he owes to either God or his fellow men (B.V.386-442). He does not keep his vows, perform the penance enjoined upon him by the priest, repent of his sins, or pray as he should, but instead occupies every day, workdays and holy days alike, “With ydel tales at the ale and outhurwhile in chirches” (B.V.404); furthermore, he adds, he would rather divert himself with games, storytelling, or lying in bed with his lover than performing acts of *caritas* or devotion (B.V.406-414). Placing himself squarely amongst the numbers of the wastours, he ends by confessing, “I yarn aboute in youthe, and yaf me naught to lerne / And evere sitthe beggere be be my foule sleuthe: / *Heu michi quod sterilem vitam duxi iuvenilem!*”⁵¹ (B.V.440-442).

As in the cases of both Haukyn and Sleuthe, the many errors of the wastours are most obviously manifested within their external temporal actions, but their essential failure is at its root clearly spiritual. Rather than being ruled by *caritas* as God ordained, they instead allow themselves to be led by its precise opposite, *cupiditas*, love of the self and the temporal world, and are therefore unconcerned by anything beyond their immediate desires, seeking only their “bely joie.” To “amaistren hem and make hem to werche,” as Piers seeks to do, is therefore to seek not merely their external reformation, but the cure for their spiritual malaise. Langland’s solution to the problem of the wastours,

⁵¹ “Alas, what a fruitless life I led in my youth!” Schmidt’s translation; Schmidt (B-Text 84) and Alford (Guide 35) both identify the quotation as proverbial (Walther 6232, 10736b). The quotation also appears at B.I.141.

consequently, is not external, but is instead the same solution espoused for all of the failures of the human will explored throughout the poem: bringing the errant will into alignment with God's will. Ultimately, inevitably, the focus returns once again to individual moral reformation and regeneration. The external manifestation, in the case of the wastours, may be one and the same: in the struggle against *acedia*, manual labor was "the great external remedy practiced and taught by all the experienced fathers" (Wenzel Acedia 5). Unlike the Statues of Laborers, however, which focus solely upon the practical needs of society rather than the internal reformation of errant individuals and therefore deal only with "the immediate symptoms of idleness, errancy and dishonesty," Langland is "committed to helping those on the half-acre to understand their moral obligations in charity" (Scott Piers 104). Though as Pearsall dryly observes, "The government...had no interest in any such debate" ("Poverty" 176), such an emphasis is consistent with Langland's focus throughout the poem. As Scott notes, Christ's disciples "judged the clamorous beggars to be a nuisance and wanted to get rid of them; instead, Jesus healed them of their blindness"⁵² (Piers 103). Likewise, Langland seeks to "heal" the wastours of their spiritual blindness, so that they may turn and follow Christ.

⁵² "Behold, two blind men sitting by the way side, when they heard that Jesus passed by, cried out, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David. And the multitude rebuked them, because they should hold their peace: but they cried the more, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David. And the multitude rebuked them, because they should hold their peace: but they cried the more, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David....So Jesus had compassion on them, and touched their eyes: and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed him." Matthew 20:30-34.

There are furthermore at least two more essential differences between Langland's fundamental understanding of the problem of the wastours, as revealed when the ethos of the poem is taken as a whole, and the dominant assumptions underlying the Statutes. First, "by launching a war of words that portrayed laborers as transgressors... the government defined the problem of the "begging poor" as a problem of justice; able-bodied beggars were in the wrong and should be punished. This kind of rhetoric blurred distinctions between migrant laborers, shirkers, and cheats, leaving the impression that all rejected the work ethic of honest, common folk....The label 'undeserving poor'...was applied indiscriminately to all manner of people: drifters, the homeless, petty thieves, prostitutes, masterless servants, the seasonally unemployed" (Clark "Responses to Begging" 462). This is the kind of comfortably circumscribed understanding of poverty under which the Spanish Dominican Cardinal Johannes de Turrecremata "dismissed the central problem of the able-bodied poor in a curt couple of lines; a man who could work was not to be numbered among the poor, he wrote, but rather was to be rebuked as a defrauder of the poor if he sought alms"⁵³ (Tierney Poor Law 118). By contrast, however, Langland refuses to oversimplify the issue by stigmatizing all poor, or even all able-bodied vagrants, as wastours; as noted in chapter 1, he instead goes to great lengths to acknowledge the fact that even the most industrious and honest can be reduced to poverty. Throughout the poem "much space is devoted to [Piers's] need to distinguish between those who, through their

⁵³ Repertorium ad Disticha 42 c.2, I. fol. 245va.

real infirmity, are in need of...support, and the “perverse wills” who are trying to waste without doing their share of winning” (Kean “Love, Law, and Lewte” 258), and his criticism of the wastours is emphatically reserved for those who clearly earn it for themselves. As Scott notes, “with its careful distinctions...supported by reference to the authorities of Scripture, the Fathers and the glossators, [Piers] reads like a scholastic commentary that evaluates and distinguishes all aspects of the question” (“Value of Poverty” 150).

Aers is surely correct in identifying the vehement language of Langland’s satire against the wastours as closely akin to the condemnatory language found in the Statutes of Labor and many other works struggling to deal with the implications of the labor crises of the late 14th century.⁵⁴ As Shepherd notes, Langland often speaks of wastours as harshly as any of his contemporaries did, particularly within the context of false begging; he clearly believes that “making a trade out of poverty is one of the clearest symptoms of...social disease” (171). While the criticism of the wastours found within the poem is certainly in keeping with the language of the Statutes, however, “the poem portrays aberrations, not as the whole picture of poor people, but as their sins...while the language here is in the same vein as that of the statutes its spirit is different” (Scott Piers 79). As is so frequently the case throughout the poem, it is to the ideals of the Church Fathers and

⁵⁴ He writes, for instance, that the “ruling elites” of the late 14th century “passed the first national legislation on wages and their own control of laborers; they sought to enforce it through the existing coercive apparatus; and they evolved a rhetoric of abuse in which those who resisted this self-interested legislation were identified as able-bodied mendicants, dangerous vagrants, idle parasites with endless sums of money to spend in the ale-houses of England, and, in the language of the poet’s contribution to this assault, wasters, embodiments of injustice and lawlessness” (“Justice” 171). See also “Poverty, Work, and Community” 47-49 and “Culture in Transition” 12-14.

the canonists that Langland here returns. Although, as we have seen, many of them did advocate careful discrimination in giving, an enormous gap existed between the theologians' understanding of poverty and the basic assumptions of poor law as practiced in the 14th century, in which need among the able-bodied was so often considered an indication of a defect in moral character. Writing early in the 13th century Joannes Teutonicus, for instance, citing Ambrose, explicitly cautioned that "*Paupertas non est de numero malorum*": "Poverty is not among the number of things evil,"⁵⁵ "that is, things criminal or morally reprehensible" (Tierney Poor Law 13). Likewise Johannes Andraea, the author of the Glossa Ordinaria to the Liber Sextus, a century later modified his predecessor's comment with "a phrase that has almost the ring of a challenge thrown down in advance to all the subsequent centuries of punitive and deterrent poor law" (Tierney Poor Law 12). "*Paupertas non est de genere malorum*," he wrote: "Poverty is not a kind of crime."⁵⁶

Furthermore, in an even more crucial departure from the assumptions of the Statutes, Langland refuses to accept the pervasively popular idea that charity should be wielded as a reformatory weapon. "Keenly aware of the need for justice in the affairs of men, Langland insists also on the need for mercy in the hearts of men" (Ames 65). Whereas the Statutes sought to exclude those capable of labor from all alms, so that "thereby they may be compelled to labour for their necessary

⁵⁵ Glossa Ordinaria ad. c.2 q.1 c.14. Tierney's translation here and below.

⁵⁶ Glossa Ordinaria ad Sextus 1.3.11.

Living,”⁵⁷ Langland consistently returns to the fact that God’s law commands that one give freely even to such as these, even “if conscience carpe therayein, or kynde wit eyther” (B.XVII.136):

Conforte hem with thi catel for Cristes love of hevene;
Love hem and lene hem, for so lawe of kynde wolde:
*Alter alterius onera portate.*⁵⁸
And alle manere of men that thow myght asprie
That nedy ben and noughty, norisse hem with thi goodes.
Love hem and lakke hem noght – lat God take the vengeance;
Theigh thei doon yvele, lat thow God yworthe:
*Michi vindictam et ego retribuam.*⁵⁹

(B.VI.220-226)

It is clear that Langland would have agreed wholeheartedly with Richard FitzRalph’s comment in the Defensio Curatorum that “A man may nouȝt lawfulliche breke Goodes heest for eny cause þat he hym-silf wole fynde” (57:21).⁶⁰ The Statutes of Laborers were framed specifically to deal with the political problems raised by an increasingly mobile and demanding workforce; Langland’s poem demands adherence to a higher law, however. Laborers must do as they are ordained to do, labor for the good of society; even if they do not,

⁵⁷ Statute of Labourers of 1349, Statutes of the Realm 23 Edward III.

⁵⁸ “Bear one another’s burdens [and so fulfill the law of Christ].” Galatians 6:2. The same verse is cited again at B.XI.210.

⁵⁹ “Vengeance is mine and I will repay.” Deuteronomy 32:35, and quoted in Romans 12:19 and Hebrews 10:30. Schmidt notes that “the Old Testament text is present here partly through the influence of Galatians 6:1, which urges *not* condemning others’ faults, through remembering one’s own” (B-Text 433).

⁶⁰ The citation is taken from John Trevisa’s Middle English translation, ed. Perry, EETS, 1925.

however, God's law supersedes all other law and demands that charity must be given freely, *ex caritatis*. As Gratian wrote at the opening of the Concordia Discorantium Canonum, "Natural law is that which is contained in the Law and the Gospels....natural law holds primacy over all others in time and in dignity, for it commenced from the beginning....nor does it vary with time, but remains immutable."⁶¹

In his rejection of the use of charity as a weapon of reform, Langland's ideology is once again consistent with canonical teaching. While they consistently condemned idleness, "it hardly ever occurred to the canonists that the law should seek to "deter" men from falling into poverty. Want was its own deterrent...and it never occurred to them at all that poverty was a vice which could be stamped out by punitive measures" (Tierney Poor Law 12). Despite their extensive discourse upon the alleviation of poverty, therefore, they "did not reach the conclusion that deterrent and punitive measures were either necessary or desirable" (Tierney Poor Law 62). Pearsall comments, "Thus Langland responded...to the gospel injunction to give to all who ask, including the wicked or 'naughty,' and sets charity higher than economic expedience or social justice" ("Poverty" 177). I would argue, on the contrary, that although he unquestionably does place the injunction to exercise charity above economic expedience, social justice is precisely what Langland has in mind: true justice cannot be attained through the exercise of injustice, that is, through failing to follow God's mandate to share with those in need regardless of the degree to which they deserve aid.

⁶¹ Dist. 5 ante c.1. Tierney's translation (Poor Law 29).

“Piers, in describing the way to Truth, first shows that Truth can only be reached by an observance of the entire Christian moral law” (Dunning Interpretation 121). He deliberately turns away from the question of who is worthy to be aided to focus upon what is always, for him, the most crucial question: how each individual soul may attain salvation.

I by no means wish to suggest that Langland is oblivious to the drain upon society posed by the predations of the wastours; on the contrary, as we have seen, he acknowledges it thoroughly and at great length. His extensive examination of the problem, however, only lends more emphasis to his adamant rejection of the withholding of charity under the guise of prudence. He insists that open liberality is the only appropriate Christian response to the needy *even though* he acknowledges that there will still be those who take advantage of that generosity and waste the resources upon which society depends. The only way to stop their waste without compromising Christian charity is for them to change from within, repenting of their sins and amending their own behavior. Thus Langland abandons the pursuit of answers about how to give alms freely without encouraging the wasters and instead focuses on reformation of both almsgivers and takers, both by giving positive examples and by warning of the impending judgment which God will make against those who persist in their disobedience. In his ideal model of society, everyone will work according to their proper place in society and obey the dictates of God; if every Christian acts in good faith according to the dictates of a sound social conscience, not only will those who are in need always be cared for, but those who are not in need will cease to prey upon society by claiming that they are needy.

It cannot be overemphasized, of course, that Langland was of course well aware that radical society-wide spiritual reformation, although it might be an ideal solution, was far from his contemporary reality; his insight into human nature was far too keen to fail to recognize that fact. As Adams observes, “societies as well as individuals stand in need of regeneration, but only a remnant of any society will consent to more than a temporary reformation of manners....the poet is concerned with something else as well, something more fundamental....the destinations of souls, not of societies....the necessary means by which individual pilgrims advance on their way to the Heavenly City” (“Theology” 88-89). Redemption of society as a whole may be unrealistic, but redemption of the individual is well within reach, and it is this redemption which is the focus of the poem: the individual’s spiritual progress. To see only the lack of an answer which would solve the problem of the wastours for society as a whole, therefore, would be to fall short of understanding the poem. The poem comes to grips with the reality that the problem of the wastours can never be eliminated within the temporal world, at least not until the perfection following Christ’s ultimate return is attained; human nature simply will not cooperate. But individuals can nevertheless choose to live their own lives consistently within the bounds of God’s law, in charity and justice. Those who take alms unrighteously are responsible for their own choices; the economic damages they cause do not change God’s law. Likewise, by giving generously to all who claim to be in need without presuming to pass judgment, the Christian who gives to the poor can be certain of acting in perfect charity, acting as God

commands, and thus appropriately continuing his own moral journey towards Truth.

Faced with complex problems which arise from the failures of human nature, Langland consistently rejects superficial solutions and argues instead that change must come from within. The ultimate solutions to the temporal world's neglect of charity and justice are shown to lie beyond the power and authority of the individual; his only responsibility is to correct those faults in his own actions. What is necessary, furthermore, is not mere outward conformity imposed by society's expectations, but true inner reformation: "if the commons are to be turned to the highway of Truth, so that Reason and Love may reign in the kingdom, each individual must prepare the field of his own heart for the building of the tabernacle there" (Robertson and Huppé 80). Piers Plowman's solution to the problem of the wastours is ultimately identical to its central theme, the individual's search for Truth: true change can come only from within the individual, guided and aided by the grace of God.

Chapter 3

“*Ne solliciti sitis*”: Piers Plowman and the Mendicants

A fuller understanding of the poet's overarching concern with the individual's search for Truth also aids in the illumination of one of the details most frequently noted by readers: only the corrupted clergy, whose sins are likewise magnified due to the impact they have on others, are condemned as vigorously as the wastours. It has been extensively noted that much of Langland's most scathing criticism is directed toward false ecclesiastics: those who claim to adhere to the religious life but are ultimately only interested in exploiting their supposed piety for the sake of sloth, greed, and other sin. As in the case of the wastours, the heart of the matter lies in their rejection of *caritas*. They do not live as they should because they do not love as they should: “Ye ben enblaunched with *bele paroles* and with clothes / Ac youre werkes and wordes therunder aren ful wolveliche”¹ (B.XV.115-116). The poem is populated by numerous such individuals, including false mendicants who go about with bags collecting more than they need, priests who abandon their parishes to take more lucrative appointments elsewhere, regular and secular clergy alike living like lords upon Christ's patrimony, and venal confessors who require only payment and not true contrition, restitution, or even abstention from further sin. False friars, in particular, play a central role from the outset of the poem; among the first details

¹ See Matthew 7:15: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.”

of temporal degeneration confronted by the dreamer are the corruption of the Church in general and the friars in particular:

I fond þere freres, alle þe foure orders,
Prechyng þe peple for profit of þe wombe:
Glosed þe gospel as hem good liked;
For couetise of copes construwed it as þei wolde.

(B.Prol.56-60)

These corrupt “servants of God” are doubly reprehensible because not only are they breaking natural and divine law themselves, they are also at best neglecting and more often directly misleading those who rely on them for spiritual guidance.

Langland’s foremost concern is, as always, not the temporal consequences of sin alone but, more crucially, the inward condition of souls: in the case of the mendicants, therefore, his primary focus is upon the spiritual damage they wreak upon the Church as a whole through their attachment to temporal gain and their resulting infidelity to the service of God. As Fletcher observes, “the social fallout from their culpable preaching had at once a spiritual dimension: charity and contrition dried up, and the people fell into doubt” (Preaching 208). When the Gospel is distorted for personal gain, the people do not receive spiritual sustenance; instead of sowing Christian belief and the cardinal virtues in the hearts of the people, like Piers, the false friars sow instead doubt, discord, and lack of faith; furthermore, and most crucially, cupidity and covetousness lead them to distort Scripture and abuse the sacrament of penance for their own profit. Thus “*Dum cecus ducit cecum, ambo in foveam cadunt*” (B.X.276): “The blind

lead the blind, and both fall into the pit.”² Whereas Piers “nourishes the folk with spiritual food, checks their inclinations toward the world, and prepares his flock for the Day of Judgment” (Robertson and Huppé 90), the false prelates do precisely the opposite: nourishing their own temporal appetites rather than the spiritual health of their flocks, wasting the temporal sustenance of the populace in gluttony and superfluity, encouraging inclination toward the world through the poor example they set, and through their “glosyng” encouraging those who rely upon them for guidance to disregard the consequences of sin, thereby leaving them mired in error and impeding their spiritual progress toward Truth. As Anima warns,

...persons and preestes and prechours of Holi Chirche
Is the roote of the right feith to rule the peple,
Ac ther the roote is roten, reson woot the sothe,
Shal nevere flour ne fruyt, ne fair leef be grene.

(B.XV.99-102)

It is crucial to note from the outset that Langland’s criticism of the clergy in general and the mendicant orders in particular is specifically directed toward those who abuse their vocation: “Religion saunz rule and reasonable obedience; / ...In likyng of lele lif and a liere in soule” (B.XIII.286-288). The role of poverty in the pursuit of spiritual perfection served as a focal point for the raging debate between the secular clergy and the friars throughout the 13th and 14th centuries, and the plentiful criticism Langland levels against the friars undeniably bears a

² Matthew 15:14.

great deal in common with much of the fundamentally antifraternel literature arising from that debate. It is therefore understandable that critics have traditionally tended to read the poem as essentially antifraternel. Unlike the intrinsically antifraternel polemicists to whom he has often been compared, however, such as William of St. Amour and Richard FitzRalph,³ Langland's criticism is not of the legitimacy of mendicancy itself, but of venal mendicancy – not against the legitimacy of the ideal of voluntary poverty, but against the travesty committed when it is not rightly observed. Although criticism of the friars undeniably abounds within Piers, it is within the context of a poem which explicitly embraces the ideal of voluntary poverty in the pursuit of Truth and *caritas*.

That ideal was succinctly stated by Pope John XXII in his “Ad Conditorem Canonum” of 1322: “The perfection of Christian life principally and essentially consists in charity – which the Apostle calls the bond of perfection, which unites or in some measure joins man, while on the way [i.e., in this life], to his end. Contempt of temporal goods and renunciation of ownership of them opens the way to this perfection especially because the solicitude that acquiring, preserving and dispensing temporal things requires, which commonly impedes the

³ On Langland's demonstrated familiarity with the arguments of his antimendicant contemporaries, see particularly R. Adams “Nature of Need,” Clopper Songs of Rechelesnesse, Sease Anticlericalism, Szitty Antifraternel Tradition, and von Nolcken “Piers Plowman, the Wycliffites, and Pierce the Plowman's Crede.” Caution should be exercised, however, in drawing a direct connection between Wycliffite antifraternelism and the criticism of the friars found within Piers; such comparisons are tempting, but as von Nolcken points out, chronologically problematic. “Readers have been enthusiastic...about trying to show that Langland had Wycliffite sympathies” (73), but while it is demonstrable that many Wycliffite texts drew directly upon Piers – see, for instance, “Jack Upland's Rejoinder” and “Pierce the Plowman's Creed” – it is much less certain that the reverse is true.

act of charity, is cut off.”⁴ Religious poverty was, ideally, “a holy way of life...associated with the yearning for transcendence of this world” (Kim 132): to live, as Conscience explains, “in longynge to ben hennes / In poverté and in pacience” (B.XIX.249-250). Ascetic renunciation, stripping oneself of all earthly impediments, was coupled by the mendicant orders with the call to devote one’s life completely and absolutely to God’s service, to the exclusion of all temporal concerns: to follow the example of Christ not in outward signs alone but in spirit, in keeping with the words of Christ in Matthew, “*Ubi thesaurus tuus, ibi et cor tuum*” (B.XIII.399): “For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also” (Matthew 6:21). No lesser authority than Piers himself repeats Christ’s teaching that “We sholde noght be to bisy aboute the worldes blisse: / *Ne solliciti sitis*,⁵ he seith in the Gospel, / And sheweth us by ensamples us selve to wisse” (B.VII.126-128); when he declares his intention to “swynke noght so harde / Ne aboute my bely joye so bisy be na more” (B.VII.118-119), it is not to the abusive leisure of the wastours that he turns, but to the rejection of solicitude which will permit him to focus upon making provision for the soul rather than for the body alone. The renunciation of temporal possessions is merely the external manifestation of the inward lack of solicitude those who would follow Christ are called upon to practice in the pursuit of apostolic perfection, but as the manifestation of that ideal it is echoed repeatedly throughout the poem in lines such as B.XI.274-275: “Men that on this moolde lyven, / Whoso wole be pure parfit moot possession forsake.”

⁴ Sec. 3, “Ad Conditoem Canonum,” a papal document specifically addressing Franciscan poverty, 1322. Trans. Kilcullen and Scott, 1998.

⁵ “Be not solicitous.” Luke 12:22; see also Matthew 6:25.

“For love lafte thei lordshipe, bothe lond and scole – / Frere Fraunceys and Domynyk – for love to be holye” (B.XX.251-252), Conscience says, and the poem repeatedly calls for the friars to follow in the footsteps of their founders, renouncing not only material goods, but, more importantly, personal solicitude, in the pursuit of unfettered *caritas*.

The difficulty of resisting the corrupting nature of temporal desires is, as we have seen, a recurrent theme throughout the poem, from the worldly preoccupations of the folk of the field to the blandishments of Friar Flaterere in the poem’s final passus. As Holy Church explained early in the poem, the majority of people are guided not by *caritas*, love of God and one’s neighbor, but by *cupiditas*, love of the self and the temporal world. As Ymaginatif instructs Will, “What made Lucifer to lese the heighe hevene, / Or Salomon his strengthe? / ...Catel and kynde wit was combraunce to hem alle” (B.XII.40-45). The mendicant orders therefore turned to the renunciation of temporal possession and status as a means by which to avoid the corrupting influence of solicitude and thereby more perfectly pursue Christ and the early apostles in charity which, as Anima teaches, “Ne chaffareth noght, ne chalangeth, ne craveth” (B.XV.165), but “leneth and loveth alle that Oure Lorde made” (l. 170): “Coveiteth he noon erthly good but hevenriche blisse.... / Of rentes ne of richnesse ne rekketh he nevere.... / *Fiat-voluntas-tua*⁶ fynt hym everemoore” (B.XV.175-179). Patient poverty is praised throughout the poem as a means to achieving that end, especially when deliberately chosen, because “in poverte ther pacience is, Pride hath no myghte, /

⁶ “Thy will be done.” Matthew 6:10.

Ne none of the seven synnes sitten ne mowe ther long” (B.XIV.218-220).

Poverty is “a sorwe of hymself,” but “a solace to the soule” (B.XIV.283) because it serves as a temporal penance which brings “pure spiritual helthe” (l. 285):

...Al poore that pacient is, may asken and cleymen,
After hir endynge here, hevenriche blisse.
Much hardier may he asken, that here myghte have his wille
In londe and in lordshipe and likynge of bodie,
And for Goddes love leveth al and lyveth as a beggere.
....
So it fareth by ech a persone that possession forsaketh
And put hym to be pacient, and poverte weddeth,⁷
The which is sib to God himself, and so neigh is poverte.

(B.XIV.260-264, 271-273)

Therefore those who willingly reject personal solicitude in pursuit of *caritas* become, as as a result, “children of charite” like the “patriarkes and prophetes and apostles” (B.XVI.197-198): they are “peeren to Apostles thorough hire parfit lyvyng” (B.XV.416).

As Clopper notes, “Reform after reform, especially in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, sought to express outwardly the poverty in which the church had begun. The mendicant orders attempted to refound the apostolic life....In the dialogue between the bishops and mendicants and other

⁷ Schmidt notes that ll. 262-273 “perhaps allude to St. Francis, a ‘rich young man’ who did ‘marry’ Poverty” (B-Text 465). St. Francis is also referred to with admiration by Anima, B.XV.230-232, although he adds that “in that secte sithhe to selde hath [Charite] ben knowen” (232)

orders...there was always the issue of what the apostolic life had been and what duties and obligations still pertained to it” (Rechelesnesse 263).⁸ From roughly the middle of the 13th century onwards, however, all four of the major mendicant orders progressively and significantly modified their strict observance of poverty. The Carmelites, Austin Friars, and Dominicans “developed a working compromise in the interests of expediency” (Dolan “Mendicant Problem” 37), primarily through eschewing private ownership but permitting the ownership of property and goods in common.⁹ The goal was to accommodate the responsibilities of their extensive ministries while continuing to emulate the example set by Christ and his apostles,¹⁰ but in practice the ownership of property in common also resulted in a level of maintenance for the friars themselves far more secure and more comfortable than that they had originally embraced, particularly in comparison the grinding need endured by the involuntarily poor. The Franciscans alone claimed to maintain a vow of absolute poverty. Although they theoretically renounced all dominion over property in common as well as individually, however, in keeping with Francis’s strict admonition that “the friars

⁸ For detailed examinations of the significance of poverty among the mendicant orders, see also Gwynn Austin Friars, Knowles Religious Orders, Lambert Franciscan Poverty, and Mollatt The Poor in the Middle Ages 119-134.

⁹ Pope Alexander IV mitigated the Carmelites’ vow of absolute poverty in 1257, so they were allowed to own property in common. For the Austin friars, “mendicancy was permissive not obligatory....and the corporate possession of necessities was permitted” (Knowles 1:200). The Dominicans, likewise, eschewed private ownership of poverty but owned their houses in common.

¹⁰ The nature of this example was, of course, a key part of the debate: the Franciscans insisted on the utter and absolute poverty of Christ, whereas the other orders argued that Scripture revealed that Christ, His apostles, and the early church owned property in common. As Mollatt further notes, “The proponents of the notion of “poor usage” and “moderate” ownership held that the possession of some resources, and even of some reserves, was indispensable for the charitable mission” of the friars, particularly their service to the involuntarily poor (131); St. Bonaventura (De Paupertate) and St. Thomas Aquinas (Summa Contra Gentiles II:132-136), among others, took this position.

are to appropriate nothing for themselves, neither a house, nor a place, nor anything else” (Rule of 1223 c. 6),¹¹ in actual practice they also enjoyed what amounted to financial security. With Nicholas III their possessions were vested in the name of the pope in an attempt to stifle the accusations of their critics,¹² although that legal technicality was rejected just 43 years later by Pope John XXII, who famously observed that the arrangement had in fact made the order neither poorer nor less solicitous, and therefore could not be claimed to contribute to the pursuit of perfection. “If the same solicitude persists after such divestment of ownership as existed before it, such divestment can contribute nothing to such perfection. But it is certain that after the above ordinance the Brothers were no less solicitous in acquiring and preserving those goods...than they had been before it, or than other mendicant religious who have some things in common.”¹³ However well-intentioned such accommodations to the exigencies of their daily needs and evangelical ministry may have been initially, the mendicant orders quickly became so wealthy that their purported “poverty” soon existed in name alone, which naturally led to renewed calls for reform. As Scott observes, “When Langland was writing, one hundred and fifty years after the foundation of the mendicant orders, their pristine ideals of living in actual poverty had been

¹¹ Ed. and transl. Benen Fahy in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 57-73, ed. Habig, 1973. Francis was adamant in his rejection of all *dominium*: “We must be firmly convinced that we have nothing of our own, except our vices and sins” (Rule of 1223, Ch. 17, “Preachers.”)

¹² “Exiit Qui Seminavit,” 1279.

¹³ Sec. 3, “Ad Conditorem Canonum,” 1322. Trans. Kilcullen and Scott, 1998. Langland surely would have agreed with the pope’s further observation that the professed members of the orders “should claim for themselves...the prerogative of a more perfect state and a higher poverty not in words only, and not in pretended actions, but by clear works, supported by truth” (sec. 8).

lost...Langland's poem is written in the climate of reform that sought to reestablish and redefine ideals of religious poverty" (Piers 54).

As R. Adams cautions, "the poverty quarrel's complexity prevents us from hazarding casual generalizations about Langland versus the friars" ("Nature of Need" 280). Conflicting viewpoints on the exact nature and degree of the poverty embraced by Christ and the apostles or obligatory for those who would emulate them arose not only between the secular and the regular clergy, nor even between the distinct mendicant orders, but within the orders themselves as well; within the Franciscan order, for instance, for whom the doctrine of the absolute poverty of Christ was a bedrock axiom, the Spirituals and the Conventuals clashed over the degree of poverty which they should practice. While Piers's overarching focus upon the corrupting influence of solicitude reflects the same fundamental concerns which underlay the rigorous practice of evangelical poverty emphasized by Francis, however, little is known about Langland himself, despite critics' ongoing efforts to tease out potentially autobiographical elements and other circumstantial evidence from the poem. Clopper in particular has made a convincing argument that the poem's representation of poverty is highly influenced by Franciscan positions and that Langland's rhetoric is consistent with the ideologies of internal Franciscan reformists,¹⁴ and yet it remains impossible to

¹⁴ In addition to the points Clopper makes, it is also worth noting that Langland consistently emphasizes the primacy of the will rather than the primacy of reason, a position characteristic of the Franciscan critics of Dominican intellectualism. John Duns Scotus, for instance, the famous "Doctor Subtilis" of the Franciscans, argued that the end of existence is the Good, which is reached by will; intelligence and reason are instrumental as the servants of action, but God is first and most supremely grasped through the active practice of charity, rather than through contemplative cognition and intellect. For an excellent overview of the Augustinian voluntarism

say for certain whether Langland was himself a Franciscan. That unanswerable question need not impede analysis of the criticism of the friars found within the poem, however. Characteristically, Langland's key concern lies not in the fine distinctions of temporal *dominium* so exhaustively taken up in the poverty debates, but upon the inward condition of souls, the spiritual decay which accompanies attachment to temporal gain and the resulting infidelity to the service of God. He is therefore less concerned with the specific degree of physical renunciation than with the extent to which the mendicant orders have been corrupted by the very solicitude which they claim to eschew and the danger their corruption subsequently poses to the Church as a whole: "For sith charite hap ben chapman and chief to shryue lordes... The mooste mischief on molde is mountynge up faste" (B.Prol.64-67).

As we have seen, the shiftless and slothful wastours among the laity, those social parasites feigning disability or distress in order to live as leeches off of the rest of society, pose a tremendous threat to society's temporal health. The lay wastours certainly have their direct parallels among the purportedly religious, many of whom seem to have no inclination toward the spiritual labor their vocation should entail, putting on the outward semblance of religious devotion simply "hire ese to haue" (B.Prol.56), devoted not to holiness but to the avoidance of any actual work: "Ther are beggeris and bidderis, bedemen as it were, / Loken as lambren and semen lif-holy – / Ac it is moore to have hir mete on swich an esy

preferred by the Franciscans versus the Aristotelian/Thomistic rationalism preferred by the Dominicans, see particularly Nauta "The Scholastic Context of the Boethius Commentary by Nicholas Trevet" 58-60.

manere, / Than for penaunce and parfitnesse, the poverté that swiche taketh” (B.XV.205-208). Will himself appears to be among their number throughout much of the poem: the poem begins with the Dreamer’s confession that he dressed himself “in a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne” “as an heremite unholy of werkes” and “wente wide in this world wondres to here” (B.Prol.1-4). It should be noted that the poem does not question the legitimacy of spiritual labor faithfully undertaken, but indeed explicitly affirms it, a matter in which Langland was fully in concordance with his contemporaries; as Aers observes, “Prayer, liturgical activities, spiritual works in general were habitually seen as achieving the ends of work in a higher mode” (“Culture in Transition” 6).¹⁵ There is an analogy clearly suggested, however, between secular and spiritual wastours. Those who do real work “are juxtaposed with the vagrants of the spiritual world, the sham pilgrims and hermits, who do no real devotional labor, and for whom shrines and the garb of a recluse are merely an excuse for leading a vagabond and shiftless existence” (Stokes 59). These wastours among the religious, like the

¹⁵ On the legitimacy of spiritual labor, see for instance Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II.III.187:3: the necessity of labor is a basic precept of natural law, but “not everyone sins that works not with his hands, because those precepts of the natural law which regard the good of the many are not binding on each individual, but it suffices that one person apply himself to this business and another to that; for instance, that some be craftsmen, others husbandmen, others judges, and others teachers, and so forth, according to the words of the Apostle (1 Corinthians 12:17), ‘If the whole body were the eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were the hearing, where would be the smelling?’” Ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920. For a particularly detailed contemporary example, see Bishop Thomas Brinton’s sermon no. 20 (ed. Devlin 83), in which the labor of the contemplative life – praying, holding vigils, preaching, and hearing the divine office – is represented as the direct equivalent of physical labor such as digging, plowing, sowing, and reaping, with the further warning that idlers deprive themselves of the kingdom of God, which shall be given instead to those who “bring forth the fruits thereof.”

wastours in the field, are a dangerous drain upon the temporal “liflode” of the community.

The lay wastours, however, imperil primarily the temporal wellbeing of society; the hypocrisy and cupidity of the mendicant orders pose a far greater threat. As R. Adams reminds us, social criticism in Piers must not be mistaken as an end in itself: “the poet is concerned with something else as well, something more fundamental....The hypocrisy and worldliness of the clergy...derive their importance from their destructive impact on the lives of countless individual souls wandering between the “tour” of Truth and the “dungeon” of Care” (“Theology” 88-89). It is for this reason that the perfidy of the corrupt friars becomes such a central theme within the poem: the provision of spiritual sustenance is presented within the poem as a labor complementary to but ultimately even more essential than the production of physical “liflode,” because men’s salvation, not their temporal well-being alone, depends upon their faithful efforts.¹⁶ The false friars of the poem, however, are shamelessly venal, steeped in the very solicitude they claim to eschew; they “sheweth by hir werkes / That hem were levere lond and lordshipe on erthe, / Or richesse or rentes and reste at hir wille / Than alle the sooth sawes that Salamon seide evere” (B.X.13-16). They generally “do not stand against the ploughmen quite as wasters against winners” (Stokes 58), for they are certainly laboring with great diligence, but toward the wrong ends: they are pursuing not the service of God, but service of self. They therefore preach one

¹⁶ Spiritual husbandry is addressed through the language of temporal husbandry throughout the poem: see, for instance, B.VII.120, B.XV.125, and especially the extended passage relating Piers’ sowing of the cardinal virtues at B.XIX.260-337.

thing and act another; despite their pretensions to holiness and the rejection of solicitude in imitation of the life of Christ, they are neither devout nor detached from the world; they covet both worldly possessions and temporal status, and are led not by *caritas*, but *cupiditas*. As a result, they mislead the souls which rely upon them for guidance, both indirectly through their example and directly through the perversion of their responsibilities within the Church to serve themselves rather than God; due to their neglect and misguidance the people “are noght fermed in the feith, ne free of hir goodes / Ne sory for hire synnes” (B.X.74-75). The misrepresentation of Truth by corrupted friars wreaks havoc among the people, ultimately permitting the agents of Antichrist admittance to the very stronghold of Unity; they compromise the inward soundness of not only their own souls, but the Church itself, and, as exemplified in the final passus, will if left unchecked render Unity itself untenable.

It is evident that, as Shepherd notes, “The degree of commitment to holy poverty strikes Langland as everywhere uncertain; for everybody is enclosed in that acquisitive context described in the first Passus....Possessiveness deeply infects lives of professed poverty” (179). Like the wastours, they offend against both *caritas* and *justitia* by begging in the absence of necessity and indulging their own temporal appetites rather than rendering assistance to those legitimately in need. A sharp contrast is drawn between the evangelical perfection of the early apostles and saints and the current state of degeneration:

It is ruthe to rede how rihtwise men lyvede –

How they defouled hir flesh, forsoke hir owene wille...

Baddely ybedded, no book but conscience,
 Ne no richesse but the roode to rejoisse hem inne.

 And now is routhe to rede how the rede noble
 Is reverenced er the roode, received for the worthier
 Than Cristes cros that overcame deeth and dedly synne.

(B.XV.532-540)¹⁷

As Erickson observes, “Given the friars’ seeming devotion to poverty, they were remarkably wealthy. Their rental and other income, combined with a steady stream of donations, made the begging they continued to do largely superfluous....in fact they grew wealthy on donations and continued to amass more and more” (II.109), a violation of charity which is clearly represented within the theology of the poem as a form of theft.¹⁸ As Anima advises Will in

¹⁷ The passage goes on to explain that the people now suffer war and woe “for coveitise after cros; the croune stant in golde. / Both riche and religious, that roode thei honoure / That in grotes is ygrave and in gold nobles” (II. 542-543). As Schmidt notes, “they seek a ‘corruptible’ crown (I Corinthians 9:25) not the ‘crown of justice’ (II Timothy 4:8)...the obverse of the noble and groat showed a crowned king’s head...there may be a futher pun here on the croune ‘tonsure’ of clerics, a symbol of forsaking possession (XI 274), not seeking it” (B-Text 470).

¹⁸ The critics of the friars often complained, for instance, of the extravagance the supposed “poor” mendicants embraced in their buildings, and history provides abundant support for that complaint. The fullest information relates to Greyfriars in London: enlarged in the 14th century, it measured 300’ by 90, with pillars and floors of marble and thirty-six stained glass windows (Erickson I.119); cf. the poem’s references to the friars’ fine buildings: the stained glass window the friar asks Mede to fund – “We have a wyndow a-werchyng, wole stonden us ful hye” (B.III.47), and Patience’s comment later: “lo, how men writeth / In fenestres at the freres!” (B.XIV.199-200). The friars also received considerable income through the celebration of masses for the dead, as both Langland and his contemporaries noted; one anonymous poem dating from approximately 1382 remarks, “Such annuels has made thes frers / So wely and so gay / That ther may no possessioners / Mayntene thair array” (“Song Against the Friars” from MS Cotton Cleopatra B.ii.62, Wright 267). Contributions of both land and money to the Franciscans were abundant in the later half of the 14th century, resulting in the friars acquiring a great deal of wealth individually as well as collectively. See A.G. Little *Studies* 78-84 for several examples from the 1370s and 1380s; Friar William of Appleton, for instance, who served John of Gaunt as a physician, was according to the register to receive 40 marks per year for life, with an additional 40 marks per year

addressing the legitimacy of begging, “*si indiges et accipis, potius das quam accipis; / Si autem non eges et accipis, rapis*” (B.XV.342).¹⁹ In their lust for material satisfaction, they live as lords among the laity and neglect the charity that should be their vocation, placing their own comfort and greed above their vows to renounce solicitude in pursuit of God’s work:

...now is Religion a rydere, a romere by stretes,

granted in wartime, plus livery for four horses and wages for two grooms (John of Gaunt’s Register 836; Little 79). Pope Clement V in “*Exivi de paradiso*” (1312), seeking to reign in some of the friars’ more egregious practices – including annual revenues such as those that just noted – furthermore observed that “they do not merely tolerate, but seek, that they be made heirs; also, that they sometimes receive annual revenues in such notable quantity that the Convents having them live wholly from them... also, that in some places they have not only excessive gardens, but also great vineyards, from which they gather for sale much of both olives and of wine; also, that at times of harvest or vintage, so copiously are grain and wine collected by the Brothers, by begging or buying from elsewhere, and stored in cellars and granaries, that they can spend their lives for the rest of the year without begging for them; also, that they make or take care to have made churches or other buildings notably excessive in quantity, curiosity of shape and form and in sumptuousness, so that they seem to be the habitations not of paupers but of magnates. Also in many places they have so many and such remarkably precious church furnishings that they exceed in these respects the great cathedral churches. Moreover, they accept indiscriminately horses and arms offered to them at funerals” (ed. and trans. Kilcullen and Scott, 1996). Compare also Richard FitzRalph’s memorable complaint in his sermon “*Nemo vos seducat inanibus verbis*,” which he preached in condensed form at St. Paul’s Cross on March 12, 1357 for the third Sunday in Lent and afterward issued in fuller detail in writing: the friars preach and profess poverty, and yet they themselves live in luxurious splendor. “They have churches finer than cathedrals, their cellars are full of good wine, they have ornaments more splendid than those of any prelate in the world, save only our Lord Pope. They have more books, and finer books, than any prelate or doctor; their belfries are more costly; they have double cloisters in which armed knights could do battle with lances erect; they wear finer raiment than any prelates in the world” (Bodleian MS 144 fol. 112-127; excerpt taken from Gwynn “FitzRalph” 5:59).

¹⁹ “If you are in need and receive, you are giving rather than receiving: but if you do not need and yet accept, you are stealing.” Schmidt’s translation. Peter Cantor, ch. 48, following Jerome. Patrologia Latina 205:152. On the legitimacy of begging, a matter which naturally gained even greater controversy as it concerned the mendicant orders, Langland makes an insistent distinction between those who beg out of “gret nede” (B.XII.83) – a high bar, since Truth teaches that “He hath ynough that hath breed ynough, though he have noght ellis” (B.VII.84) – and those who beg sinfully. The C-text further sharpens this emphasis, adding an extended passage contrasting dishonest mendicants, “beggares with bagges” (C.IX.98), with those who actually go forth like the apostles “without bagge and bred” (C.IX.120) as Christ directed. In speaking of beggars with bags, “Langland is referring...to a dominant theme in the Franciscan idealization of poverty: to have a bag is to betray Christ (Judas ‘was a thief, and had a bag,’ John 12:6); to renounce it is to join him. Judas’s bag is an image of all care for the world: *tanto magis sibi loculos ad periculum anime componen*” (Pearsall “Poverty” 178). Cf. the Franciscan Rule of 1221, Ch. 8, forbidding the friars from keeping purses or collecting money, and C.V.52, in which Will defends his own begging by saying that he went forth “without bagge or botel but for my wombe one.”

A ledere of lovedayes and a lond buggere,
 A prikere up on a palfrey fro manere to manere,
 An heep of houndes at his ers as he a lord were....
 Of the povere have thei no pite – and that is hir pure charite,
 Ac thei leten hem as lordes, hir lond lith so brode.

(B.X.305-309, 314-315)

As we have seen, Langland emphasizes throughout Piers that all Christians are called to live lives grounded in *caritas* in imitation of the example of Christ; to that end, those who have taken vows under Christ should “as mirours ben to amenden oure defautes, / And lederes for lewed men and for lettred both” (B.XII.95-96). Anima makes this point at length, citing Chrysostom: if the clergy possesses integrity and lives in accordance with their teachings, the whole Church flourishes, but if it is corrupt, the whole church withers accordingly.²⁰ They “Goddess salt sholde be, to save mannes soule” (B.XV.441),²¹ but as food is hindered by a lack of salt, “So is mannes soul, smoothly, that seeth no good ensample / Of hem of Holi Chirche that the heighe way sholde teche / And be

²⁰ The passage is worth repeating in full because it is so crucial: “*Sicut de templo omne bonum progreditur, sic de templo omne malum procedit. Si sacerdotium integrum fuerit, tota floret ecclesia; si autem corruptum fuerit, omnium fides marcida est. Si sacerdotium fuerit in peccatis, totus populus convertitur ad peccandum. Sicut cum videris arborem pallidam et marcidam, intelligis quod viciū habet in radice, ita cum videris populum indisciplinatum et irreligiosum, sine dubio sacerdotum eius non est sanum*” (B.XV.118). “Just as all good comes out of the temple, so does all evil. If the priesthood has integrity, the whole Church flourishes; but if it is corrupt, the faithful as a whole wither up. If the priests live in sin, the whole people turns to sin. Just as, when you see a tree pale and drooping, you know it has a diseased root, so when you see a people undisciplined and irreligious, you can be sure their priests are diseased.” Schmidt’s translation. Pseudo-Chrysostom, Homily 38 on St. Matthew (Patrologia Latina 56:839), glossing Matthew 23:12ff. See particularly verse 13: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men.”

²¹ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt hath lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?” Matthew 5:13. The verse is cited directly in line 431: “*Et sis al evanuerit, in quo salietur?*”

gide, and go bfore as a good banyer, / And hardie hem that bihynde ben, and
 yyve hem good evidence” (B.XV.433-436).²² “Grace sholde growe and be grene
 thorough hir goode lyvyng” (B.XV.422), and if they did as they should, he says,
 the whole earth should be converted: “Ellevene holy men al the world tornede /
 Into lele bileve; the lightloker, me thynketh, sholde alle maner men, we han so
 many maistres” (B.XV.437-439). Instead, however, they “a colvere fede that
 Coveitise highte...that no man useth trouthe” (B.XV.414-415). Whereas Francis
 lived in abject poverty and eschewed lordship in every form, the corrupt friars of
 the poem live in lavishly appointed churches and abuse the cure of souls to yet
 further increase their material wealth. Rather than living lives grounded in *caritas*
 in the service of God and Truth, they serve only themselves, despite their
 extravagant pretensions to holiness, to the detriment of all those who look to them
 as an example:

Lothe were lewed men but thei youre loore folwede
 And amenden hem that they mysdoon, moore for youre ensaumples
 Thank for to prechen and preven it noght – ypocrisie it semeth!
 For in Latin ypocrise is likned to a dongehill
 That were bisnewed with snowe, and snakes withinne....

²² Cf. the similar complaint found in an anonymous sermon recorded in MS. Royal 18 B.xxiii:
 “We ben to meche yeven to þe world and to worldly occupacions, and we ben to slowe aboute
 Goddes serves. And þe more harme is, lordes and commoners take hede of oure lyuyng, how we
 be so slowe in Goddes serves...so þat and we lyved wel and occupied vs in Goddes serves, þan
 vold lordes and commoners do þe same.” The citation is taken from sermon no. 9 (Ross 53),
 written for St. Nicholas’s Day (Dec. 6th) on the text “*Vigilate et orate*,” “Remain awake and
 pray,” Matthew 26:41. Ed. Ross *Medieval English Sermons*, EETS vol. 209, 1940. The precise
 date of composition is uncertain, but it is likely that the sermons compiled in the manuscript range
 in date from approximately 1378 to 1417 (Ross xxxviii).

Ye ben enblaunched with *bele paroles* and with clothes²³

Ac youre werkes and wordes therunder aren ful wolveliche.²⁴

(B.XV.108-116)

The corrupt friars' hypocrisy, furthermore, stands in direct contradiction to the holiness and charity they claim to embrace, thereby undermining faith and fomenting doubt and skepticism among the people, as Reason makes clear in his own sermon: "That ye prechen to the peple, preve it on yowselve..../ If ye leven as ye leren us, we shul leve yow the bettre" (B.V.41-44). Fletcher observes that the damage wreaked by preachers who do not live in accordance with their own teaching was not only a matter frequently addressed by late-14th century authors,²⁵ but was certainly well-established well before then (Preaching 203). Late medieval writers frequently quoted, for example, St. Gregory's comment that "*cuius vita dispicitur, restat ut predicacio eius contempnatur*": "it follows that the

²³ "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." Matthew 23:27-28.

²⁴ See Matthew 7:15: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

²⁵ Note Chaucer's emphasis, for instance, on this same issue in his highly positive portrait of the Parson: "Cristes loore and his apostles twelve / He taught, but first he folwed it hymselfe" (Riverside Chaucer, ed. Benson, 31:527-528). An appropriate correspondence between word and works was an issue which greatly occupied the attention of the Wycliffites, as well. See, for instance, "Te Deum Laudamus": we are told that John the Baptist "forsook þe world and castiside his flesch...and helde þe staat of innocence in deseert placis," whereas by contrast, "oure religiouse þat seien þei suen him...lyven contrarye liif...instide of greet penaunce aftir þe staat of innocence þei han chosen lustful liif for to feede hir flesch." Their hypocrisy and deception pose a grave danger to the laity: "þus þei maken a wey to þe prince of þis world...and maken redy his wey to resseyven hise servauntis....In þes ordris ben feyned manye holynessis for a fals eende, to disseyve þe peple and to souke her blood for feynyng of her heelp... Liknes of holy men disseyveþ myche folk" (Arnold 59-60).

preaching of a man whose life is despised is held in contempt.”²⁶ It is a problem treated within the poem with extreme urgency, as the venality and cupidity of the friars is placed in explicit contrast to the faith in practice of the apostles and early saints of the Church who “lyveden...for Oure Lordes love many long yeres” (B.XV.298), whom they purport to follow: Augustine, for instance, who “the feith taughte.../ As wel thorough his werkes as with his hole wordes / And fourmed what...feith was to mene” (B.XV.447-449). Stokes notes that the poem repeatedly expresses concern regarding the danger of inducing scandal: in the medieval signification of the word, to give occasion of sin to others through doing or saying something that might cause them morally to stumble (*scandalum* = stumbling block).²⁷ Generally used to refer to words or behavior that exposed authority to criticism, in *Piers* it gains added significance because it is the clergy themselves who are creating the scandal which risks leading the laity to scorn their message. At B.XI.86, for instance, Will tells Lewtee that he wonders if he dares relate his dream concerning the vices of the friars. “A modern reader could be forgiven for experiencing some amazement at these lines; whatever may be Langland’s faults, timidity is not one of them, and he himself admits elsewhere to having denied his betters the reverence they were probably accustomed to” (Stokes 77). Lewtee’s reply, however, resolves the apparent contradiction: “it is *licitum* for lewed men to segge the sothe” (B.XI.96), and there can be no danger

²⁶ 12th homily on the Gospels, commenting on Matthew 25:1-13; *Patrologia Latina* 76:119. Fletcher’s translation.

²⁷ See, for instance, the narrator’s stated reluctance to interpret his dream in B.Prol. 209-210 – “What this metels bemyneth.../Devyne ye, for I ne dar!,” and the retreat to untranslated Latin at B.XIII.69-73: “Poul in his Pistle to al the peple tolde – / ‘*Periculum est in falsis fratribus!*’ / ...I wol noght write it here / In Englissh, on aventure it sholde be reherced to ofte.”

in denouncing faults which are already generally known, a conclusion with which Scripture emphatically agrees. As the poem makes quite clear, it is the clergy themselves who are most responsible for the widespread skepticism among the laity, due to their own blatant hypocrisy which fuels suspicion of and insubordination to their spiritual teachings. It is for this reason that Ymaginatif, in his extended defense of the necessity of clergy, counsels Will to “ne countreplede clerks” (B.XII.98): “I conseil le alle creatures no clergie to dispise, / Ne sette short by hir science, whatso thei don hemselve” (B.XII. 121-122) – a separation of the message from the messenger which the poet clearly represents as a spiritual necessity.

This point is particularly notably addressed in Will’s encounter with Clergie in the court of Conscience. As Schmidt observes, “Will’s eagerness [to meet the Doctor] is the fruit of Ymaginatif’s instruction, which has reversed the hostility displayed in his long diatribe in X 371-475. But after meeting the Doctor he will have many of his earlier misgivings shockingly confirmed” (B-Text 458). “For Conscience of Clergie spak, I com wel the rather” (B.XIII.24), Will says; the Maister “lowe louted and loveliche to Scripture” (l. 26), and “Conscience knew hym wel and welcomed hym faire” (l. 27). It quickly becomes apparent, however, that this Doctor of Divinity’s inauthentic Christianity is precisely the sort which concerns Langland throughout the poem, clearly identified here as insidiously dangerous specifically because of the leadership role which he should play within the Church. His gluttony and ostentatious self-righteousness stand in particularly sharp contrast to Patience’s physical and spiritual austerity and quiet

but immovable adherence to Truth. As Gasse notes, the Doctor “may preach/prescribe a healthy diet of fasting and abstinence for others, but he himself gorges on expensive food and drink oblivious to those outside doing without. Intellectual indigestion (hypocrisy, heresy, and a weakened faith) is the primary result of such a poor diet” (182).

Although Patience is likely correct in predicting that the Doctor “shal have a penaunce in his paunche” (B.XIII.88) as a result of his overindulgence, it is clear that the ill effects of his failure to follow his own prescription rebound even more immediately upon his audience than upon himself. Will immediately notes the glaring gap between the Maister’s rhetoric and the reality of his own actions, and that blatant hypocrisy quickly quenches his fragile beginnings of spiritual growth and willingness to learn. “Pacience...made hym murthe with his mete; ac I mornede evere” (B.XIII.59-62), Will says, because the Doctor feasted so excessively upon wine and rich dishes – “many sondry metes, mortrews and puddynges, / Wombe cloutes and wilde brawen and egges with grece yfryed,” among others – while he and Patience “no morsel hadde” of such luxuries, but instead dined sparingly upon the food of penitents (ll. 60-112). Despite having just preached before the Dean of St. Paul’s in praise of penance, Will therefore complains to his dinner companion, “this Goddes gloton²⁸ ...with hise grete chekes...parfourneth yvele / That he precheth, and preveth noght” (B.XIII.78-80). His attention thus preoccupied, he completely fails to recognize the spiritual value

²⁸ The line echoes Wit’s reference earlier in the poem to “glotons glubberes,” whose “God is hire wombe: / *Quorum deus venter est*” (B.IX.59-63). The citation is from Philippians 3:19: ““Whose god is their belly [and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things].”

of the food served to him by Scripture.²⁹ Although Patience and Conscience are clearly correct in advising Will to hold his tongue and let them lead the way in questioning the Doctor further, the egregious gap between the Maister's rhetoric and his practice makes it difficult not to sympathize with Will's peevish comment: "I wolde permute my penaunce with youre – for I am in pointe to Dowel" (B.XIII.111). As this passage suggests, the hypocrisy of the clergy is so dangerous in part because of its corrosive effect upon the faith of those who can least sustain it: those, like Will, whose spiritual progress is tentative and fragile, their potential reformation easily derailed by every excuse and distraction which presents itself. At the end of the encounter, Conscience reports that the "wil of the wye and the wil of folk here / hath meved my mood to moorne for my synnes," but this positive reaction seems to be despite the Doctor's teaching rather than because of it; he resolves to join Patience as a pilgrim in search of Truth against the Doctor's objections, explaining "Me were levere...have pacience parfitliche than half thi pak of bokes!" (B.XIII.191-202).³⁰ Will, by contrast, is

²⁹ "He sette a sour loof tofor us and seide, "*agite penitenciam*,"/ And siththe he drough us drynke: "*Dia perseverans* –/....And he brought us of *Beati quorum* of *Beatus virres* makynge,/ And thanne he broughte us forth a mees of oother mete, of *Miserere mei, Deus, / Et quorum tecta sunt peccata*/ In a dish of derne shrifte, *Dixi* and *Confitebor tibi*" (B.XIII.48-54). Most of the quotations in this passage are taken from the penitential psalms: see particularly Psalms 31:1-2 ("Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven: and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man [unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile"), 31:5 ("I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin"), and 50:1 ("Have mercy on me, O God"). Alford observes that the phrase "*agite penitenciam*" appears in numerous Biblical passages: Job 21:2, Ezekiel 18:30, Matthew 3:2 (transposed: "*penitenciam agite*"), Acts 2:38, and (in the singular) Revelations 2:5, 2:16, 3:3, and 3:19 (*Guide* 82).

³⁰ The Doctor's egregiously misplaced priorities are furthermore made evident in his incredulous response to this declaration: "'What!' quod Clergie to Conscience, 'Are ye coveitous nouth / After yereseves or yiftes, or yernen to rede redels?'" (B.XIII.185-186).

moved only to “jangle” (B.XIII.84) with the clergy, reverting to the antagonism Imaginatyf had labored so extensively to reverse.

Will’s self-righteous indignation regarding the Doctor’s failure to have “pite on us povere” (B.XIII.79) is misplaced from a temporal point of view; he is clearly identified elsewhere within the poem as capable of work and therefore of earning his own sustenance, and in any case, he has indeed been fed, albeit not to his liking. The spiritual guidance provided by the Doctor, however, is indubitably lacking. His putative piety is self-serving, his understanding of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest seems to be muddled at best – despite Conscience’s polite deference to him in asserting that “ye devynours knoweth” such things (B.XIII.125) – and, as Patience confides to Will, his specious arguments are not to be trusted, because his teachings are steeped in self-interest. To justify his egregious self-indulgence, for instance, “he wol devyne soone / And preven.../ That neither bacon ne braun ne blancmanger ne mortrews / Is neither fish ne flessch but fode for penaunts,” following which he will “testifie of a trinite” and “what he fond in a forel” concerning how friars should live: “And but if the first leef be lesyng, leve me nevere after!” (B.XIII.90-96). That his words are to be held suspect is furthermore made evident in his misrepresentation of the poem’s central spiritual authority, Piers:

Piers the Plowman hath impugned us alle,
And set alle sciences at a sop save love one
And no text ne taketh to maytene his cause

But *Dilige Deum*³¹ and *Domine quis habitabit*,³²

And seith that Dowel and Dobet arn two infinites,

Which infinites with a feith fynden out Dobest,

Which shal save manne's soule.

(B.XIII.124-130)

Conscience's reply is telling: "I kan noght heron...ac I knowe wel Piers. / He wol noght ayein Holy Writ speken, I dar wel undertake" (B.XIII.131-132). Piers does not, in fact, "impugn" the masters of divinity nor even study per se, though his emphasis is upon faith in practice rather than theory; on the contrary, learning and teaching are represented throughout the poem as essential in the pursuit of Truth (Schmidt B-Text 460). The key to their proper roles, however, lies within the practice of *caritas*, the essence of God's law. Both Piers' theology and practice are, indeed, sharply in contrast with the Doctor's, but it is Piers who has the right of it. He takes from Scripture not the opportunity for social advancement, but guidance upon the path to Truth, and he makes no attempt to justify actions out of context with God's law, but instead simplifies that law to its absolute kernel: if one loves God and wishes to dwell in His tabernacle, then the object of one's efforts will not be to seek out loopholes in the letter of the law while neglecting its substance, but finding salvation via the "infinites" of Dowel and Dobet, through the exercise of *caritas*. Piers' demanding but simple instruction to those in need of guidance is clearly grounded in the pursuit of Truth in the service of God,

³¹ "Thou shalt love [the Lord thy] God." Matthew 22:37.

³² "Lord, who shall dwell [in thy tabernacle]?" Psalms 14.1.

whereas the Doctor's teaching is opaque and self-serving, as the poem represents so much of the teaching of the false friars. The words of Isaiah 5:21 recalled by line 62 neatly summarize the poem's representation of the Maister: "Woe to you that are wise in your own eyes and prudent in your own conceits," and in their self-absorption consequently neglect Truth.

Thus in addition to undermining the faith of the laity indirectly through their hypocritical example, the false friars like the Doctor mislead directly through the perversion of their responsibilities within the Church, serving themselves rather than God. Piers "represents the tradition and ideal of the good plowmen, the producers of spiritual food: the patriarchs, the prophets, Christ, St. Peter, the apostles, the disciples, and those of their followers who actually fulfill the ideal of the prelatical life. He, like the disciples, has heeded Christ's call for workers in the spiritual harvest" (Robertson and Huppé 75). His example stands in direct contrast to the solicitous mendicants of the poem who are interested in the cure of souls only for the temporal harvest they might reap, as evidenced by their covetousness for burying, preaching, and hearing confessions while neglecting less materially rewarding service such as baptizing infants or ministering to the spiritual needs of the poor: as Will muses, "peple that was povere at litel pris thei sette, / And no corps in hir kirkyerd ne in hir kirk was buryed / But quik he biquethe hem aught" (B.XIII.8-10). When they do not stand to gain a temporal profit they have little regard for their responsibilities, as Will complains in a different passage when, as a direct result of Fortune forsaking him, he finds his former confessor "flittyng" "ayeins oure first forward": "By my feith, frere!....Ye

fares lik this woweris / That wedde none widwes but for to welden hir goodes” (B.XI.63-64, 71-72).³³ Given the displacement of *caritas* by cupidity attributed to the friars throughout the poem, however, it comes as no particular surprise that Will is abandoned “by the particularly mercenary domain of the Church he had hoped would help him in his current despair, aging, poverty, and spiritual need” (Aers Signs 40).

Clopper notes that “FitzRalph, Wyclif and other external critics always attacked mendicant claims to three specific privileges granted to them by the papacy: the right of sepulture, the right to hear confession, and the right to preach” (Rechelesnesse 10).³⁴ While Piers addresses all three matters, however, Langland’s primary focus lies as always in the pursuit of Truth and the spiritual damage wreaked when it is displaced by worldly temptations. The poem’s treatment of the friars’ importunate seeking after burial privileges is therefore brief compared to its examination of their culpable preaching and confessing: the destination of the body after death is of little importance compared to the destination of the soul, and the latter is clearly threatened by the lack of guidance – or worse, outright misguidance – provided by mercenary friars.

³³These passages call to mind Chaucer’s humorous but nonetheless caustic description of the Friar in the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales: “*ther as profit sholde arise, / Curteis he was and lowly of serveyse*” (l. 250, italics mine).

³⁴ All three, one might note, were potential sources of revenue; the ongoing controversy between the mendicants and their external critics was arguably rooted far more in temporal concerns than in pure theology, despite claims on both sides to the contrary. Although the mendicant orders naturally defended their rights to all three privileges, however, it is worth noting that the same concerns were frequently debated as a matter of internal reform. In condemnation of the friars’ avidity in pursuing burial privileges, for instance, see Ubertino of Casale (Rotulus 112), St. Bonaventure (Epistolae officiales 8:469-470), and Petrus Iohannes Olivi (“Tria Scripta” 378-380).

It is this overarching concern which guides the poem's objections to the mendicants' preaching, particularly the focus upon the spiritual damage wreaked by those who use their sermons as opportunities for ostentatious intellectualism – “to plesse with proude men” or “for pure envye of clerkes” (B.X.72-73) – rather than teaching the simple and necessary tenets of faith. When they enmesh themselves in the subtleties of abstract theological debate as a result of their desire for worldly profit and status they not only fail to advance, but actually hinder what should be their primary mission: to provide their listeners with the spiritual teaching required for repentance and reformation. Their obfuscation of Truth in quest of temporal gain is completely at odds with the responsibility they have undertaken by laying claim to the right to preach. As Imaginatyf explains to Will, God “gaf [the clergy] wittes / To wissen us weyes therwith, that wisshen to be saved” (B.XII.269-270): they were granted their wits and their vocation not to waste their time in vain temporal pursuits, “moore for pompe than for pure charite” (B.XV.79), but so that they might teach the laity what they must do to receive Christ's gift of salvation. Although “God is mucche in the gorge of thise grete maistres” (B.X.66), they permit their pride and their pursuit of both temporal status and financial gain to direct their teaching, to the detriment of those who look to them for guidance. They have thereby fallen prey to precisely the error against which Clergie's “cosyn” Dame Studie warned: rather than teaching such that their listeners are “fermed in the feith” (B.X.74), they instead “maken men in mysbyleve that muse mucche on hir wordes” (B.X.116).

The Doctor's inclination to "testifie of a trinitee" (B.XIII.94), for instance, calls to mind a host of passages within the poem which warn against precisely such teaching. Piers himself warns Will against prying into the mystery of the Trinity (B.XIV.63-64), for instance, and Anima further explains the dangers of such a pursuit: when the clergy "moeven materes unmesurables to tellen of the Trinite," "oftetymes the lewed peple of hir bileve doute" (B.XV.70-71).³⁵ It is far better, he says, to abandon such abstract speculation and instead teach the essential elements of the faith: "tellen men the ten comaundements, and touchen the sevene synnes, / And of the braunches that burjoneth of hem and bryngen men to helle, / And how that folk in folies mysspenden hir fyve wittes" (B.XV.76-78). As Dame Studie explains,

Theologie hath tened me ten score tymes:
The moore I muse therinne, the mystier it semeth,
And the depper I devyne, the derker me it thynketh.
It is no science, forsothe, for to sotle inne.

(B.X.182-185)

The distinction between appropriate teaching, that which leads the people to *caritas* and grace, and counterproductive teaching, that which obscures the essentials of the faith, is crucial to understanding Langland's criticism of the friars' preaching. As St. Francis taught, sermons "should aim only at the advantage and spiritual good of their listeners, telling them briefly about vice and virtue,

³⁵ The corresponding line in the C-text is emended slightly but significantly: "bothe lewed and lered of here belueue douten" (C.XVI.230).

punishment and glory”³⁶ – their purpose should not be to seek after temporal status, to demonstrate their wit and learning, or to joust with the secular clergy, but to call souls to repentance and reformation, for “prechours of Goddes wordes / Saven thorough hir sermon mannes soule fro helle” (B.XIII.429). Theology can be confusing, disorienting, and even misleading when abused; like astronomy, it is a “hard thyng, and yvel for to knowe” (B.X.209). Most importantly, it cannot be properly “known” through intellect alone, and its study is therefore empty when it is pursued without love, which opens the door to grace.³⁷ As Imaginatyf explains, “Sapience, seith the Bok, swelleth a mannes soule / *Sapiencia inflat*³⁸ ... / Ac grace is a gras therefore, tho grevaunces to abate” (B.XII.56-59). The friars are called, therefore, to “Leve logik; and lerneth for to lovye!” (B.XX.250), that in so doing they may in turn lead those who look to them for guidance in the way of Truth. “Forthi loke thow lovye as longe as thow durest, / For is no science under sonne so sovereyn for the soule” (B.X.207-208), Dame Studie tells Will; the “infinetes” of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest – of which the Doctor can say so little – “ben of loves kennyng” (B.X.190).

The most treacherous manifestation of the friars’ solicitude, however, lies in their deliberate subversion of spiritual truth for the sake of temporal gain.

³⁶ Rule of 1223, Chapter 9, “Of Preachers.” Ed. and transl. Benen Fahy in St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies, 57-64, ed. Habig, 1973. Francis advises that the friars be “brief” because Christ himself kept his words short on earth (“*quia verbum abbreviatum fecit Dominus super terram*”), a phrase later echoed by Archbishop of Canterbury John Pecham (Exposito super regulam fratrum minorum 9.12).

³⁷ On the poem’s representation of the proper role of the intellect – and the abuses of it manifested within the poem – see particularly Carruthers St. Truth 102-104, Kasten Kynde Knowynge, and Wittig “Design.”

³⁸ “Knowledge puffeth up; [but charity edifieth].” I Corinthians 8:1.

Remember that when the would-be pilgrims “profred hym huyre,” Piers, the faithful servant of Truth, refused to take even a farthing: “Nay, by the peril of my soule!....Truthe wolde love me the lasse a long tym after” (B.V.556-559).

Throughout the poem it is made evident, however, that in direct contravention of their vocation the friars have heeded the offer of temporal reward. They “taken hire mede here as Mathew us techeth: / *Amen, Amen, receperunt mercedem suam*”³⁹ (B.III.252-254); in so doing they have departed from the service of Truth altogether, with catastrophic consequences. “Antecrist cam...and al the crop of truthe / Torned it tid up-so-down, and overtilte the roote, / And made fals sprynge and sprede and spede mennes nedes”: rather than oppose him, however, “Freres folwed that fend, for he gaf hem copes” (B.XX.53-58). Langland makes it clear that the spiritual and moral welfare of society hangs upon the faithful teaching of God’s law, for the laity are utterly dependent upon the clergy to teach them and to bring them to salvation: without guidance, the folks of the field “blustreden forþ as beestes” (B.V.512). As Imaginatyf explains, “The lewed lith stille and loketh after Lente, / And hath no contricion er he come to shrifte – and thanne kan he litel telle, / But as his loresman lereth hym bileveth and troweth” (B.XII.182). The corrupted friars, however, not only fail to lead the way to Truth, but actively misguide the people who depend upon them, both exemplifying and encouraging an “utterly frivolous” attitude toward the consequences of sin (Aers Signs 116). When “prechours after silver” (B.XV.131) thus subvert Truth for their own ends,

³⁹ “Amen, Amen, they have received their reward.” Matthew 6:5.

“lewed men ben lad, but Oure Lord hem help...through unkonnyng curatours to incurable peynes” (B.XIII.11-12).

Their mercenary exploitation of the sacrament of penance, in particular, “constitutes spiritual murder” (Clopper Rechelesnesse 33), for through their avarice they short-circuit both contrition and restitution, leaving the sinner with only the hollow semblance of having fulfilled their obligations to either God’s justice or those they have wronged. As Stokes observes, “by commuting penalties to money payments, by making absolution conditional, not on restitution or penance, but on “*pryve paiement*” (B.XVIII.365) in the form of donations to their orders, the friars paradoxically prevent the true payment of the debt of sin. By paying in money, the penitents are not paying the penitential penalty at all, but rather buying themselves off it – or they think they are. For the real perniciousness of such practices rests in the fact that they lull the Christian community into a false spiritual security, allowing them to appease their consciences by assuming that God’s justice can be bribed, that Christianity is less demanding than it really is” (16). Such lax spirituality is naturally readily embraced by the laity, but it is in truth only an empty imitation of the “lechecraft of Oure Lorde” Christianity prescribes – merely the delusive promise of spiritual charlatans, “a glazene howve” (B.XX.172) which leaves sinners comfortably but perilously ensnared in slothful delusion, “plastred so esily hii drede no synne” (B.XX.380). “Those who bargain for *bona spiritualia* with needy Christians, as the friars do, display the most pernicious avarice; they demand money for a corrupted version of what they should eagerly and freely share. By slickly selling

formal ‘pardons,’ they create the really ‘poor,’ the poor mired in sin” (Wittig “Design” 260).

Through their avarice, first and foremost, the friars lead those who depend upon them for guidance to circumvent the vital elements of contrition – both true inward sorrow for the sin committed, and the resolve to sin no more. Langland’s representation of this point is fully in concordance with orthodox Catholic doctrine regarding the sacrament of penance, which teaches that the effect of a sacrament comes *ex opere operato*, by the very fact of being administered, regardless of the personal holiness of the priest administering it; a recipient’s own lack of proper disposition to receive the grace conveyed, however, can block its effectiveness.⁴⁰ In order for the sacrament to be valid the penitent must do more than simply confess his known mortal sins; he must also be truly sorry for each of the sins he committed and have a firm intention not to commit them again. “All sacramental power is meaningless unless the mortal debt...has been removed through the penitence and ethical cooperation...of the sinner” (R. Adams “Piers’s Pardon” 431). As Patience explains, man must “be ynliche contrite” (B.XIV.89) in order for deadly sin to be “dryveth down” (B.XIV.92). It is precisely through short-circuiting this process that the friars are at their most dangerous. They allow sinners to think they have received pardon without the “sharp salves” (B.XX.307) of contrition, resolve to amend, and penance which God requires, but without true sorrow for sin it cannot be remitted. Although his understanding is still poor and his motive is still primarily to “jangle” with the clergy while

⁴⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church II.1.2 para. 1128.

evading significant personal reformation, Will is more correct than he realizes when he rebukes a friar for his avarice midway through the poem with the words “*Sola contritio delet peccatum*” (B.XI.82): “contrition alone can blot out sin.”⁴¹

It is a basic maxim of canon law, moreover, that “*Pena pecuniaria non sufficit pro spiritualibus delictis*” (B.XI.58): “Pecuniary penance does not suffice for spiritual faults.”⁴² As John of Salisbury wrote in the mid-12th century, to sell absolution is “in fraud of the justice of God.... corrupting the Word of God, they preach a new gospel, which they proclaim by living not for grace but for a price, for pleasure and not for the truth....If this is the path to Christ, then vain and false indeed is the doctrine of the Fathers which has shown that straight and narrow is the way which leads a man to life.”⁴³ Despite the friars’ assurances to the contrary, monetary payment alone does not constitute contrition. Conveniently forgetting that no one may legitimately “gete...grace thorough giftes.../ Ne for no mede have mercy, but mekenesse it made” (B.IV.141-142), the friars notoriously encouraged almsgiving for their own profit,⁴⁴ using the same injunctions in

⁴¹ Schmidt’s translation. Alford comments that the phrase was “a common saying in the long controversy concerning the importance of oral confession in the sacrament of penance” (*Guide* 72), but see also Gray’s dissenting opinion that although the doctrine itself was frequently repeated, no exact earlier or contemporary parallel for Langland’s simple phrase has yet been discovered (56). The exact phrase Langland uses is repeated twice in *Jacob’s Well*, however: ch. xxv, 172:27-28, and ch. xxvi, 174:3. The treatise “belongs to that numerous class of manuals...whose object it was to condense the whole penitential lore of the time” (Brandeis vi), and its composition is dated fairly certainly to the first quarter of the 15th century (xiii): “Perhaps this shows the influence of *Piers* itself; or perhaps the two texts had a common source” (Gray 56).

⁴² Schmidt’s translation. Cf. Lyndwood *Provinciale: Constitutio Domini Othoboni*: “*Et quia non sufficit pecuniaria poena, ubi est Spirituale delictum*” (tit. 10). The friars (and their customers) disregard this detail at their own peril.

⁴³ *Policraticus*, Ch. XXI, “Of hypocrites who seek to hide the stain of ambition under a false pretence of religion.” Ed. and transl. Dickinson, 1927.

⁴⁴ Langland was certainly not alone in satirizing the blatantly self-interested nature of the friars’ teaching regarding contrition. See, for instance, Chaucer’s memorable portrait of Friar Huberd: Ful sweetly herde he confessioun

support of charity found throughout theological doctrine.⁴⁵ Laboring in the service of Truth in semblance alone while actually “prechyng þe peple for profit of þe wombe” (B.Prol.56), they “glosed þe gospel as hem good liked; / For couetise of copes construed it as þei wolde” (B.Prol.59-60): as Fletcher notes, “muzzling it with exegesis contrived to haul any potentially inconvenient sense tractably along at the heels of their self-interest” (Preaching 205). Their “glosyng” is represented throughout the poem as perniciously manipulative, motivated by and often distorted by their pursuit of temporal gain,⁴⁶ thus giving rise to “textual perversions and misreadings” (Fletcher 205): not illuminating God’s word, as do the glosses of the patristic authorities cited so prolifically throughout the poem, but misrepresenting it to serve their own ends. Their false promises of the remission of sin through pecuniary penance alone are particularly insidious because they are so clearly based upon Scriptural truths often repeated in medieval sermon literature; the anonymous author of MS Royal 18 B.xxiii Sermon no. 34 wrote, for instance, that “Almesdede may qwenche all maner of synne, as wittenesse holy writte: “Quia sicut aqua extinguit ignem, ita elemosina

And plesaunt was his absolucion:
 He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
 Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
 For unto a povre ordre for to yive
 Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
 For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
 He wiste that a man was repentaunt;
 For many a man so hard is of his herte,
 He may not wepe, although hym soore smerte.
 Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyer
 Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.

(Canterbury Tales A 221-232)

⁴⁵ As Pearsall wryly observes, “the friars’ . . . recommendation to discrimination in charity was . . . precise and pointed: it should go to them” (“Poverty” 174).

⁴⁶ See likewise the assault of Coveiteise himself upon Unite Holy Chirche in the final passus: “His wepne was al wiles . . . / With glosynges and gabbynges he giled the peple” (B.XX.124-125).

extinguit peccatum.” Þat is, ‘Right as water quenchis þe fyre, so almesdede fordop synne” (Ross 185/22-26).⁴⁷ In the words of Piers himself, “of almesdedes are the hokes that the gates hangen on” which open into the castle of Truth (B.V.594). But Langland insists that almsgiving leads to the remission of sin only when done for the right reasons: in true repentance and contrition, including a will to sin no more, rather than as Mede presents it, a *quid pro quo* exchange which purportedly satisfies God’s requirements, excusing one from any more substantial effort.

Mede is without shame; she “shroue hire of hire sherewednesses shamelesse” (B.III.44). As Dolan observes, “the absence of shame when confessing to a friar was a major criticism of the friars’ administration of the sacrament of Penance” (“Shame on Meed” 81). Imaginatyf explains, “Nevere chalangynge ne chidyng chaste a man so soone / As shal shame, and shenden hym, and shape hym to amende” (B.XI.423-424); he himself has pursued Will for forty-five years (B.XII.2) and has many times moved him to think on his end (B.XII.4), but it is only when Will has been moved by shame that Imaginatyf can finally lead him to understanding. It was widely recognized that penitents often turned to the friars for confession rather than to their parish priests partially to evade the very shame the rite was meant to encourage: Pope Innocent IV, for instance, noted that the degree of shame the sinner experiences upon confessing is likely mitigated by the simple act of confessing to an itinerant friar as opposed to

⁴⁷ Sermon no. 34, for Sexagesima Sunday, MS. British Museum Royal 18 B.xxiii. Ed. Ross Medieval English Sermons, EETS vol. 209, 1940. The precise date of composition is uncertain, but it is likely that the sermons compiled in the manuscript range in date from approximately 1378 to 1417 (Ross xxxviii).

one's local parish priest, who knows the sinner intimately and encounters him on a regular basis.⁴⁸ Langland precisely identifies this dynamic in Passus XX:

Yevele is this yholde in parishes of Engelsonde;
For persons and parish preestes, that sholde the peple shryve,
Ben curators called to knowe and to hele
Alle that ben hir parissshens penaunces enjoigne,
And be ashamed in hir shrift; ac shame maketh hem wende
And fleen to the frers.

(B.XX.280-285)

The notoriously effortless absolution offered by the friars, moreover, furthermore shortcircuits the shame which might otherwise lead men to grace and true absolution: Mede's shameless confession follows her confessor's shamelessly mercenary offer to absolve her of fifty years' wrongdoing for "a seem of whete" (B.III.40). He is clearly more interested in the temporal rewards she can offer than in his responsibility to lead her to the repentance, restitution, and reformation which would enable true absolution – in fact, he volunteers to be "hire bedeman and hire brocour" to help her continue to corrupt knights and clerks (B.III.35-42). Thus the venal friars deceive the mind with the appearance of having made satisfaction without the substance; "atonement in their hands is no atonement at

⁴⁸ "*Verum etiam erubescencia, quae est magna pars poenitentiae, tollitur, dum quis non proprio sacerdoti quem habet continuum et praesentem, sed alieno et aliquando transeunti, ad quem difficilis et aliquando impossibilis est recursus, sua crimina confitetur*": "But shame, which is a great part of penance, is removed if someone confesses his crimes, not to his own regular priest whom he has on a permanent and regular basis as a confessor, but to another visiting confessor to whom it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to go back to again." *Bullarium Franciscanum*, Epitome et Supplementum, ed. C. Eubel (260a). Transl. Dolan "Shame on Meed" 82. See also Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II.ii.144 a.3.

all, but their victims are oblivious to this, sunk in a pleasing torpor, insensible to shame or desire to amend, not realizing that the painless Christianity the friars are hawking is a sham, *nomen sin re*, and that the penitential payment they believe themselves to be making for their sins is merely formal, and retains none of the essence of true penance” (Stokes 18). In claiming to reduce the requirements of absolution to a simple financial exchange, they encourage a lack of recognition of the significance of sin and thereby undermine the inward sorrow essential to true contrition.

It is, furthermore, the gateward “Amende-yow” who “hath the keye and the cliket” to “wayven up the wicket” shut by Adam and Eve’s sin (B.V.595-604); the second vital part of contrition is the firm intention not to sin again. Mede’s clear conviction to the contrary, pecuniary payment – however lavish – does not constitute a license to continue egregiously sinning. The same error is repeated by the pair of Friars Menour Will meets later in the poem, and Coveitise of Eighes, likewise, encourages Will to continue in sin and simply confess to friars: “Have no conscience how thow come to goode./ Go confesse thee to som frere and shewe hym thi synnes” (B.XI.54-58). As Aers observes, “The mendicants assume that falling into sin, seven times a day, leaves one with an unequivocally ‘fre wil and fre wit’ always able to repent and rise up from sin....But the intractability and effects of sin figured forth in the poem so far give the lie to this comfortable picture....This model accords with the brilliant account of the

gradual enchainments of the sinning will in Augustine's Confessions.⁴⁹ But the friars confidently ignore this understanding of the consequences of sins" (Signs 116-117).⁵⁰ As Pride predicts, their deceit is ultimately his most powerful weapon: "Confession and Contricion, and youre carte the Bileeve, / Shul be coloured so queyntely and covered under our sophistrie" that Truth may no longer be recognized (XIX.346), and thus the door is opened for Antichrist and his allies to rally against Piers, maiming the roots of his crop of Cardinal Virtues and threatening to destroy "Conscience and alle Cristene" (B.XIX.340).

Coveitise of Eighes' advice to Will to "have no conscience how thow come to goode," furthermore, underlines yet another pitfall inherent in the friars' self-interested administration of the sacrament of penance: their acceptance of

⁴⁹ See, for instance, VIII.5.10-12: "The enemy held fast my will, and had made of it a chain, and had bound me tight with it. For out of the perverse will came lust, and the service of lust ended in habit, and habit, not resisted, became necessity....habit had become an armed enemy against me, because I had willingly come to be what I unwillingly found myself to be." Cf. also VIII.8.19-9.21. Ed. and transl. Outler, 1955. Wittig notes, "Augustine's confusion of an intellectual quest with reform rooted in the *affectus*, his confrontation of the perversity of his own will, and his subsequent humble shame which prepares him for conversion seem to illuminate most clearly the situation of Langland's dreamer.... Whether [Langland] is writing with the Confessions in mind, or merely in the moral tradition which Augustine did so much to shape, Langland certainly adapts the psychology of Augustine's self-confrontation to his own narrative framework. Such confrontation is the indispensable prerequisite for any true conversion" ("Design" 247-248).

⁵⁰ The dismissal of sin as a matter of no major consequence was one of the primary complaints of the Wycliffites against the friars. See, for instance, the tract "De Blasphemia, Contra Fratres": "No mon shulde yif occasioun to his broþer for to be deceived in salvacioun of his soule. Bot mony, for sikernesse of merite of þese freris, ben to negligent in hor owne werkes, and dreden not to do injurie to hor breþer. Ffor siþ þei may be asoyled lightly of freris...who wolde drede to do his wille for a litel money? And þis is þo welle wherwiþ þo fende blyndes þo puple, and gendres wronges in þis worlde....To bye þus heven and broþerhed of Crist, hit semes chaffere of Lucifer, and withouten grounde" (Arnold 3:422; it should be noted, however, that despite Arnold's attribution of the text to Wycliffe himself the tract is more likely the work of one of his followers). Langland, like the Wycliffites, also harbored serious doubts about the value of letters of fraternity; they are referred to with skepticism at least three times within the poem (B.VII.188-195, B.XI.54-58, and B.XX.363-368). Merit clearly must be acquired through one's own pursuit of virtue, not through the purported purchase of that which is not legitimately for sale; it is furthermore patently questionable whether the friars possess any treasury of spiritual merit upon which their followers could theoretically draw.

goods unjustly gained not only undermines contrition, but also circumvents the third element essential for absolution, the payment of restitution. The patristic authorities were unanimous in agreeing that ill-earned money should never be accepted by the Church, but instead must be restored to those from whom it was wrongfully taken; if that is not possible, then it must be distributed amongst the poor. It is for this reason that Repentaunce says that he cannot absolve Coveitise until he has made restitution: “*Non dimittitur peccatum donec restituatur ablatum*.”⁵¹ / For all that han of thi good... /Is haldyng at the heighe doom to helpe thee to restitue” (B.V.272-274). As Anima explains, “lif-holy” men should take their support only from the “rightfulle” and “lawfulle”: “Thanne wolde lordes and ladies be looth to agulte... / Founde thei that freres wolde forsake hir almesse / And bidden hem bere it there it hath ben yborwed” (B.XV.307-312), and Scripture further warns that if “thei hir devoir dide, as David seith in the Sauter” they would not accept such payment, “ne neither kirtel ne cote, theigh thei for cold sholde deye” (B.XI.282-284). The friars, however, eagerly accept and even encourage sinners to render them gifts of goods gained illegitimately, thus encouraging continued sinfulness rather than amendment: “Of that men myswonne thei made hem wel at ese” (B.XIII.40-42).

....Ye forsaketh no mannes almesse –

Of usurers, of hoores, of avarouse chapmen –

And louten to thise lordes that mowen lene yow nobles

⁵¹ “The sin is not forgiven until the stolen goods are returned.” Schmidt’s translation. Augustine, Epistle 153, sect. 20 (*Patrologia Latina* 2:662). The concept was frequently repeated as a basic maxim of canon law; see Alford *Guide* 46 for several examples from both Latin canonical texts and Middle English vernacular literature.

Ayein youre rule and religion....

(B.XV.84-87)⁵²

Restitution, however, “is of the essence of justice; for by its means, balance is restored after temperance has become intemperance and measure, immeasure” (Bloomfield 104). FitzRalph wrote that “a man cannot repent for having deceived another and...still have his goods”⁵³; it is a theological absurdity to suppose that he could purchase absolution for his misdeeds with the stolen wealth. As Alford observes, however, the friars presumed to treat restitution as within their judgment and release offenders from that obligation, over which in fact they had no authority – and worse, to convert to their own gain the compensation which should in justice have been restored to the injured parties (“Repentance” 15). As a bill of complaints against the friars delivered to the Convocation of Canterbury in May 1356 declaimed, “being the confessors of such noble lords and ladies, nay rather the betrayers and notorious deceivers of their souls, they convert to their own gain the compensation for wrong-doing which by earthly and heavenly law ought to be restored to the injured parties, and a pillow of flattery is put under the sinner’s head as he sleeps in his sin.”⁵⁴ Those who pay the friars in exchange for supposed absolution are, therefore, not actually making

⁵² The poem gives a great deal of attention to this point: in addition to the passages cited above, see for instance B.III.67-68, B.V.263-269, and B.XV.418-423.

⁵³ “*Non enim potest homo penitere quod alium decepit et eius bona sic habuit.*” MS Bodley 144 f.1v. Both the original Latin and the translation are taken from Scase (39).

⁵⁴ “*Et quod flebilis est, huiusmodi dominorum et dominarum nobilium confessores, quin potius proditores et animarum deceptores notorii, emendaciones peccatorum soli et poli iure levis restituendas convertunt eisdem in predam, ac posito pulvillo blandiendi sub capite peccatoris quiescentis in peccato.*” “*Billa liberata in consilio Cantuariensi provinciali contra fratres mendicantes,*” Selby Register 42/8, fol. 79v: letter-book of Geoffrey de Gaddesby, Abbot of Selby, 1342-1364. Ed. and transl. Pantin, 1955: 159-160, 267.

amends, but merely buying off their own consciences – at an immeasurable cost.

As the narrator warns, however, “God knoweth thi conscience and thi kynde wille, / Thi cost and thi coveitise and who the catel oughte” (B.III.67-68). Like false borrowers who fail to repay their debts, preferring instead to “maken hym murie with oother mennes goodes,”

...Thei shul yyve the freres

A parcel to preye for hem, and pleyen hem murye

With the residue and the remenaunt that othere renkes biswonke,

And suffre the dede in dette to the day of doome.

(B.XX.291-294)

The catastrophic consequences of the friars’ flattery and subterfuge are addressed with increasing urgency throughout the poem, culminating in the crisis of the final passus. Owing in no small part to their perfidy, “Antecrist hadde thus soone hundreds at his baner” (B.XX.69) and “hadden almost Unitee and holynesse adoun” (B.XX.227), and many of the defenders are sorely wounded: therefore

Conscience called a leche, that koude wel shryve,

To go salve tho that sike were and thorough synne ywounded.

Shrift shoop sharp salve, and made men do penaunce

For hire mysdedes that thei wrought hadde,

And that Piers pardon were ypayed, *redde quod debes*.

(B.XX.305-309)

But naturally “some liked noght this leche” (B.XX.310), for “the plastres...ben to soore” (B.XX.360), and thus the rigor of true satisfaction and restitution is readily set aside in favor of the softer option offered by the friars: when the people plead with Conscience to grant admission to “Frere Flaterere” (B.XX.316) with his “softer” and “fairer” plasters, he protests only weakly, readily succumbing to their behest and granting the silver-tongued Frere Flatere admittance. “Thus thorough Hende-Speche entred the frere / And cam in to Conscience and curteisly hym grette” (B.XX.355-356).⁵⁵ The inadvisability of recruiting a “leche” for the soul’s health from among the Antichrist’s forces and inviting him into the stronghold of Unitee would seem to be apparent, particularly given the poem’s painstaking examination thus far of the threat posed by friars such as Frere Flaterere, and unsurprisingly, the ill consequences manifest immediately. He predictably

...gooth, gropeth Contricion and gaf hym a plaster
 Of “a pryvee paiement, and I shal praye for yow...
 And make yow and my Lady in masse and in matins
 As freres of oure fraternytee for a litel silver.”
 Thus he gooth and gadereth, and gloseth there he shryveth –
 Til Contricion hadde clene foryeten to crye and to wepe,
 And wake for his wikked werkes as he was wont to doone.
 For confort of his confessour, contricion he lafte,

⁵⁵ Schmidt perceptively notes that “Hende Speche” in this context suggests not only the politeness incumbent on Christians, but also the “glib and oily art” of the mendicants themselves. “The word *curteisly* 356 succinctly indicates that the friars win men’s confidence through their persuasive talk” (B-Text 492).

That is the soverayneste salve for alle kynne synnes.

(B.XX.360-373)

Upon seeing what has happened, Sleuthe and Pryde “with a kene wille” assail Conscience, who cries out for help. But no help is at hand: for as a result of the friar’s easy “absolution,” Contricion now “lith adreynt and dremeth...and so do manye othere; / The frere with his phisyk this folk hath enchaunted, / And plastred hem so esily hii drede no synne!” (B.XX.378-380). The poem thus ends on a note of apocalyptic uncertainty, the fate of Holy Church hanging in the balance as Conscience resolves that he must go forth as a pilgrim in search of Piers the Plowman and Grace. As Stokes comments, “The Church has...granted official ‘admission’ to practices so essentially contrary to Christian principle that it and Christian conscience can no longer give each other mutual support, without danger of compromise of the latter, which can now look only to the elusive figures of Piers and Grace....a Christian church in which Christian conscience is not present truly *nomen habet sine re* (B.Prol.142) – has the name without the substance” (12).

Conscience’s final call is for the freres to receive “a fyndyng” so that they will no longer “for nede flateren / And countrepledeþ me, Conscience” (B.XX.384-385). Taken in conjunction with the numerous abuses which the poem has so thoroughly examined, his words have usually been interpreted as a simple statement that if the friars receive an ecclesiastical endowment, they will no longer be corrupted by need. Frank writes, for instance, that “if need makes the friars dangerous, if need leads them to transform the sacrament of penance

into a meaningless mockery, then the need must be removed” (Scheme of Salvation 116), and Schmidt comments in a similar vein that “They require some formal endowment to live on, since in reality they cannot live on *chietiffee*, *poverte* (236) but resort to corrupt means of livelihood” (B-Text 492).⁵⁶ The allegorical figure of Need, in fact, encourages such an understanding himself, saying that the friars flatter “for thei are povere...for patrymonye hem faileth” (B.XX.234). Such an appealingly simple solution, however, upon closer examination proves to be fully satisfactory neither within the framework established by the poem nor with regard the historical reality within which it was written. As we have seen, the wealth of the fraternal orders was well-established during the late medieval period and was in fact a matter of frequent comment by both their external and internal critics. St. Bonaventure, for instance, who served as minister general of the Franciscans, complained that the pearl of poverty was cast before swine when the friars pursued sumptuousness in their buildings, vestments, books, and liturgical vessels.⁵⁷ The friars of the poem are by no means motivated by true need; they already possess far more than is truly necessary, as is emphasized throughout the poem. They have, in fact, already found the key to Constantine’s coffers, and have hence been “apoisoned” through the “venym” of temporal possession no less than were the “monyals, monkes and chanons” who preceded them (B.X.556-560). They dress themselves finely, indulge

⁵⁶ He makes a similar argument earlier in his commentary, as well: “if friars have a share in ecclesiastical... wealth they will have no need to beg, with the evils that brings” (B-Text 447).

⁵⁷ Epistle 2, Epistolae official (1266), 8:470-741. Clopper notes that his letters to other members of the order detail a great number of abuses which he felt were detrimental to the order and precipitated many of the complaints against it. “Their avidity profanes evangelical poverty” (Rechelesnesse 48).

gluttonously in extravagant food and drink, and possess fine churches for which they solicit stained glass windows. They are motivated, clearly, not by need but by covetousness: by the very solicitude, in fact, which they profess to have renounced in the pursuit of *caritas*.

Love, in short, is the fundamental ideal from which the friars have fallen away. When Conscience forsakes the friars “for thei kouthe noght wel hir craft” (B.XX.231) and hence hinder rather than aid his efforts against Antichrist’s forces, love is clearly the craft which they lack, and Peace later attempts to turn Friar Flaterere away at the gate of Unity for the same reason (B.XX.343). It was Envy, not Love, who sent the friars to school (B.XX.273, 296), and as Trajan warned midway through the poem, “But thei ben lerned for Oure Lordes love, lost is al the tyme, / For no cause to cache silver therby, ne to be called a maister, / But al for love of Oure Lord and the bet to love the peple” (B.XI.172-174). But their corruption is not irreversible; Kynde and Conscience call upon them to return to their first ordinance:

Holdeth yow in unitee, and haveth noon envye

To lered ne to lewed, but lyveth after youre reule,

And I will be your borugh....

...Yow shal no thyng lakke,

With that ye leve logic; and lerneth for to lovy!

(B.XX.246-250)

If they are motivated by love, rather than solicitude, they will no longer labor to undermine souls, but rather to save them. They have been called, like Piers, to

sow and to cultivate the seeds of the Christian faith and the cardinal virtues, to provide men with spiritual sustenance, and ultimately to guide men to the Tower of Truth; to that end the “fyndynge” which they require is nothing less than “the *liflode* of love according to the doctrine of patient poverty, *ne solliciti sitis*, and *fiat voluntas tua*” (Szitty 287).

As with the problem of the wastours, external solutions alone cannot suffice: what is necessary is nothing less than radical reformation from within. The “freres and faitours” (B.X.71) ⁵⁸ who so recklessly honor “moore tresor than trouthe” (B.XV.548) must reform and “by spiritualte libben” (B.V.150), in keeping with their first ordinance, following their unglossed rule and consequently teaching the word of God in substance, not in superficial pretense alone. The principles by which the friars are called to live and teach are precisely those which have been emphasized throughout the poem, and their reformation – their finding of the “fyndynge” of *caritas* – is crucial to the renewal of the Church. For if the brothers were to return to the true and stringent *vita apostolica*, the absence of solicitude exemplified by Christ and the apostles, the love and charity enjoined by Scripture, then the effect of their regeneration would be not only their personal reformation, but the reformation of Church and society as well. They would thereby be empowered to lead the Church and the laity no longer in deadly error, lulled into complacency with a comfortably effortless and

⁵⁸ The phrase calls to mind St. Francis’s comment that one who “cares more for his body than for his soul” is “a carnal person; he does not seem to be a real friar” (Rule of 1221, ch. 10).

superficial simulacrum of the Christian faith, but in the necessary radical transformation of hearts, minds, and spirits in the service of God.

Chapter 4

“Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam;

Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum”:

Poverty and the Attainment of Redemption in Piers Plowman

As we have seen thus far, Piers Plowman abounds with numerous representations of poverty and the poor, many of which may initially appear to be bewilderingly contradictory; the text continually propagates distinctions which resist any convenient but ultimately inadequate oversimplifications. Thus generous and indiscriminate almsgiving is consistently enjoined, and yet some of the poem's most scathing criticism is reserved for those who seek to depend upon the society rather than labor as God's law commands; likewise, while the ideal of voluntary poverty is embraced, the mendicants within the poem are largely represented as practicing and promoting the most dangerous corruptions to be found within the church. Nor are Langland's representations of the poor themselves formulaically simple or abstract. They are both the victims and the perpetrators of social evils, and as Kim observes, “unlike the overwhelming majority of medieval commentators on poverty, for whom such an issue was primarily an abstract one concerning ascetic discipline and holiness rather than

the squalid miseries of involuntary economic indigence, Langland's representations of poor people, both favorable and unfavorable, convey the immediacy of particular phenomena of social marginality, unsettling any simple programmatic view....They are not merely the symbols of moral degradation in a scholastic exercise, nor simply the epitome of ascetic discipline and transcendence idealized and worshiped in neo-Franciscan doctrine" (Kim 131-132). Furthermore, while the positive spiritual consequences of poverty are often advanced, the elevation of poverty as a benefit to the soul in no way diminishes the poet's detailed and unflinching acknowledgement of the bitter, raw reality of the miseries endured by the truly destitute or his insistence on the responsibility of all Christians to alleviate their suffering. Likewise, the patient endurance of poverty is consistently portrayed as a direct road to spiritual perfection, and yet poverty in and of itself is equally clearly established as no guarantee of either spiritual growth or ultimate redemption: it bears salvific virtue only insofar as it directs one's steps toward God, aiding the individual's progress in the spiritual journey to the Tower of Truth. Langland's discourse is neither static nor programmatic, but is instead consistently dynamic, complex, and painstakingly nuanced, and the reader's understanding, like Will's, thus evolves as the poem progresses. "Langland repeatedly takes his readers back over the same ground, but each time he gives them a more comprehensive perspective....Each new perspective rectifies, modifies, and amplifies those which precede it....The spiral structure of Piers Plowman requires a particularly active reader; he must

continually balance his understanding of the parts against his sense of the whole and vice versa” (Baker “Pardons” 471-472).

As we have seen thus far, for Langland the essence of Christianity is always to be found in the full observance of Christ’s law: “The human will must be directed in its pilgrimage by Peter, in our poem the plowman who sows in the human heart the seed of Scripture, the word of God” (Robertson and Huppé 15). Although it takes Will the entire poem to even begin to come to an adequate understanding of Holy Church’s directives, her reply to his initial query about how he may save his soul – that he must become “a god by the Gospel...ylik to Oure Lorde” (B.I.91) through the fulfillment of God’s commandments – remains a constant touchstone to which the poem’s authority figures continually return. The terms of the pardon Truth sends to Piers are simple but exacting: “*Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam; / Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum*”¹ (B.VII.110): as the priest translates it, “‘Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule,’ and ‘Do yvel and have yvel, and hope thow noon oother / That after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule!’” (ll. 112-114). To do well is furthermore clearly defined throughout the poem as to “serve God goodliche” (B.XI.278), to render to Him what is owed in unstinting measure, to the best of one’s ability; to do ill is to neglect to do so. Faith and works thus are integrated in the keeping of divine law. Each soul must “render God’s coin back to God by progressing in Christ-likeness” (Goldsmith Image 45), as Holy Church admonishes Will at the

¹ “And those who have done well shall go into eternal life; but those who (have done) evil (will go) into eternal fire.” Schmidt’s translation; 43rd clause of the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult*), echoing Matthew 25:46.

outset of the poem: “Go to the Gospel,” she instructs him, “that God seide hymselfen: ‘*Reddite Cesari,*’ quod God, ‘That *Cesari* befalleth / *Et que sunt Deo,* or ellis ye don ille” (B.I.46-53).² As Schmidt observes in his explication of the riddle Patience poses to the Doctor of Divinity,³ “to “undo” Dowel is to find *Caritas*” (B-Text 461): the central tenet of God’s law.

It is crucial to note, therefore, that although a great deal of attention is given to the value of the purgatory the poor endure on earth and Scriptural promises of the eternal rewards due to those who so suffer, Langland emphatically does not simply equate poverty – an external condition – with virtue. He makes this point most notably in reference to the wastours and the venal mendicants, but elsewhere as well; the poor, like the rich, must actively embrace the inward reformation necessary in order to conform their own will to God’s will and thereby conduct their lives in accordance with God’s laws. The poem’s central message revolves around the necessity of repentance, detachment from the things of the world, and faith carried out in practice, all central tenets of faith which every conscientious Christian is called upon to hear and embrace. “Whether rich or poor, individual Christians had to demonstrate to God that they valued their ties to the other world more than their ties to this one. Though a poor person may have had little to give up in the way of material attachments – so little, in fact, that it might not have been apparent to an outside observer that anything about the poor man’s life had changed upon his conversion –

² “‘Render to Caesar,’ said God, ‘the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.’” Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17, and Luke 20:25.

³ See B.XIII.158-164: Patience challenges the Doctor to “undo” a riddle and “se if Dowel be therinne.” The answer to the riddle, revealed in l. 164, is “*caritas*.”

God...would know, in his omniscience, whether that sacrifice had indeed been made....Considering this moral challenge from the perspective of an all-knowing God, the poor were the equal of the rich” (Wolf 84): in moral responsibility as well as in status. Rich and poor alike are therefore called to actively “do wel and have wel” – laboring faithfully to fulfill their obligations to God and to their neighbors, loving God above all else and thereby giving God’s commandments precedence over their own temporal desires – and likewise warned that to “do yvel” is to deprive themselves of the reward God promises to those who labor faithfully upon the path of Truth.

Although poverty is in itself no guarantee of virtue, however, the poem nevertheless does represent it as a potentially powerful spiritual advantage. Whereas the rich might easily become arrogant in their perceived self-sufficiency, poverty serves as a potent reminder of man’s dependency upon God: as Patience explains to Will, “Meschief is [the poor man’s] maister, and maketh hym to thynke / That God is his grettest help and no gome ellis” (B.XIV.255-256). Furthermore, he adds in response to Haukyn’s queries, poverty is “a fortune that florisseth the soule / With sobrette fram alle synne” and “afaiteth the flessch fram folies ful manye” (B.XIV.295-297): it may serve as an inherent protection against the seven deadly sins through both simple lack of opportunity and the avoidance of the powerful temptations exerted by worldly possessions.⁴ As Pearsall

⁴ Pearsall notes that “there are striking resemblances between this passage and the exposition of the virtues associated with poverty, and the corresponding sins associated with wealth, in the 8th *quaestio* of Peter Olivi’s *Quaestiones de perfectione evangelica*” (“Poverty” 183). For a detailed examination of Olivi’s treatment of voluntary poverty, see Burr “Poverty as a Constituent Element in Olivi’s Thought.”

observes, Patience's extended exposition upon this point is "dry, witty, comic, and full of that vitality and specificity that was equally the mark of Langland's deeply compassionate account of the sufferings of the poor: those sufferings are now the styptic to sin" ("Poverty" 183). Pride, for instance, "hath no myghte" (l. 218) amongst the poor, who must in their weakness embrace humility. Neither may the poor man readily indulge in gluttony, "for his rentes wol naught reche no riche metes to bigge" (l. 230), and the temptation to overindulge even in the ale he can afford is tempered by the knowledge that if he does so, he will "hath a greuous penaunce" to follow, lying cold on the floor with his head uncovered and nothing more than straw for his sheets (ll. 232-237). Likewise "Lecherie loveth hym noght, for he yyveth but litel silver" (l. 250): indeed, Patience adds, the brothels could not be sustained were they frequented only by the poor. Although the avoidance of sin through lack of opportunity is manifestly primarily a negative virtue – akin to Malkyn's preservation of her maidenhood "that no man desireth" (B.I.184), chaste not because she has resisted temptation but because she has not been tempted – the debt of sin accumulated by the poor is thereby minimized and thus the sooner remedied. Two centuries later another great theological poet, Milton, would unforgettably write that "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd,"⁵ but Patience clearly does precisely that, for from his perspective, material deprivation presents an impoverished Christian

⁵ *Areopagitica*, *The Works of John Milton* vol. IV: 311, ed. Frank Allen Patterson et al., New York: Columbia University Press, 1931.

with an inherent spiritual advantage over an affluent one: he simply has fewer occasions for sin.

Patience furthermore adds, quoting St. Jerome, that “*De deliciis ad delicias difficile est transire*” (B.XIV.144): “From delights to delights is a difficult crossing.”⁶ “Allas,” he cries, “that riches shal reve and robbe mannes soule / Fram the love of Oure Lorde at his laste ende!” (B.XIV.134). Redemption is not guaranteed to the poor man, but he at least faces fewer worldly temptations to hinder his reformation:

The riche hath mucche to rekene, and right softe walketh;

The heigh wey to hevene ofte riche letteth –

*Ita possibile diviti...*⁷

Ther the poore preeseth bifore, with a pak at his rugge ...

Batauntliche⁸ as beggeris doon, and boldeliche he craveth

For his poverté and his pacience a perpetuel blisse:

*Beati pauperes: quoniam ipsorum est regnum celorum.*⁹

(B.XIV.211-216)

The Scriptural reference in the third line of this passage constitutes an editorial crux: Schmidt’s editions of the B-text, based upon Trinity College Cambridge MS

⁶ “Difficile, imo impossibile est...ut de deliciis transeat ad delicias.” *Epistola ad Julianum* (*Patrologia Latina* 22:965). Schmidt’s translation.

⁷ “Thus it is (im)possible for a rich man [to enter into the kingdom of heaven].” See the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-24, particularly verses 23 and 24: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, ‘Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven...It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.’” Compare also Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27.

⁸ Woolf notes that this description “shows a striking fusion of literal observation with allegorical significance” (“Qualities” 123).

⁹ “Blessed are the poor; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Luke 6:20; cf. Matthew 5:3.

B.15.17, use “*possibile*” rather than the variant reading “*impossibile*,” which is found in several other manuscripts and preferred by Skeat.¹⁰ Alford, citing the Biblical antecedents for the passage, comments on the split manuscript evidence but follows Skeat in concluding that the latter reading is preferable (Guide 89).¹¹ The line could legitimately be read either way: it is *possible*, albeit exceedingly *difficult*, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven, or it is so extremely difficult that it is in all probability *impossible*. Note that all three of the scriptural antecedents for the line contain the same ambiguity: can something which is more difficult than putting a camel through the eye of a needle reasonably be considered “possible”? I would argue that the sense of the passage, however, remains the same, following the sense of the paradox as presented in the Gospels: temporal wealth is a nearly insurmountable hindrance to those who might otherwise follow Christ. It is with this sense in mind that in Passus X Scripture

¹⁰ According to Skeat (Parallel Texts vol. I p. 426, note 211), “*Impossibile*” is the reading found in Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 851, Cambridge University Library MS Dd. 1.17, Oxford Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poetry 38, Oxford Oriel College MS 79, and Oxford Bodleian Library Bodley 814.

¹¹ The precise wording found in the Vulgate for Matthew 19:23 is “*Iesus autem dixit discipulis suis amen dico vobis quia dives difficile intrabit in regnum caelorum*”; the possible/impossible crux does not appear in this verse, but in the subsequent reply Christ makes to his apostles’ consternation in verse 26: “*aspiciens autem Iesus dixit illis apud homines hoc impossibile est apud Deum autem omniaabilia sunt*.” The variations found in Mark and Luke follow the same pattern. Note, however, Alford’s cautions against taking the Vulgate text as Langland’s Scriptural source (Guide 17-19). “[Langland’s] deviations from the Vulgate text have led many critics to question the accuracy of his scriptural quotations, his knowledge of the Bible, even his ability to read it....Beneath the notices of Langland’s “misquotations” from Scripture...lies the assumption that there was only one correct reading during the Middle Ages and that we can find it simply by consulting a printed Vulgate. When Skeat remarks that the quotation at C.14.134a (Ezekiel 33:11) is “inexact,” what he really means is that it differs from the Clementine edition of the Vulgate published two centuries later” (Alford Guide 17).

asserts that “Poul preveth it impossible – riche men have hevene” (B.X.335),¹² and therefore “patriarkes and prophetes and poetes bothe / Writen to wissen us to wilne no richesse” (B.X.338-339); Imaginatyf likewise later warns that worldly possessions “acombreth ful manye” (B.XII.55). While Patience does affirm that redemption for the rich is possible if they “have ruthe, and rewarde wel the poore, / And lyven as law techeth, doon leaute to alle” (B.XIV.145-146), he clearly regards such an outcome as perilously unlikely: “Ac it is nys but selde yseien” (B.XIV.155).¹³

Patience’s reservations regarding material wealth are upheld throughout the poem; numerous passages similarly comment that the poor are more readily saved than the rich.¹⁴ It is crucial to note that the crux of the problem hinges not upon possession itself, but attachment to temporal things; not wealth alone, but *cupiditas*:¹⁵ “They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil” (I James 6:10). Langland follows Scriptural authority, however, in repeatedly emphasizing the nearly irresistible corrupting influence of the possession of wealth. As we saw in Chapter 1, the value of

¹² Cf. I Timothy 6:9: “they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil.”

¹³ On this point see particularly B.XIV.105-173, in which he mourns the lot of the rich because they “han hir hire heer, and hevene, as it were” (B.XIV.128). Although he qualifies his viewpoint with the suggestion that they may earn “double hire” if they “doon hir devoir wel” and “rewfulliche libbeth” (152-153), their worldly comforts render them unlikely to do so: “Hewen that han hir hire afore arn everemoore nedy; / And selden deyeth out of dette that dyneth er he deserve it” (134-135).

¹⁴ See, for instance, B.X.333-370, B.XII.40-58 and 235-255, and B.XIV.103-120, 134-179, 193-195, and 211-319.

¹⁵ Aquinas – and the Dominicans in general – emphasized this point in their opposition to the Franciscans.

temporal “tresor” versus spiritual “tresor” plays a central role throughout the poem, and the degree to which temporal desires tend to distract mankind from Truth is a constantly recurring theme:

The world is a wikked wynd to hem that willen truthe
Coveitise cometh of that wynd and crepeth among the leves
And forfreteth neigh the fruyt thorough many faire sightes....
The flessch is a fel wynd, and in flouryng tyme,
Thorough likyng and lustes so loude he gynneth blowe
That it norisseth....wikkede werkes therof, wormes of synne
And forbiteth the blosomes right to the bare leves.

(B.XVI.27-35)

We must recall that although Lady Mede is clearly thoroughly despicable in her practices, she is portrayed as beautiful, amicable, accommodating, and nearly irresistibly alluring to most of those who come in contact with her: she is, in short, “the gracious and attractive epiphany of venal worldliness” (Yunck 301). “Langland knows what he is about when he makes Meed so appealing to the reader” (Benson 197), for her seductiveness within the allegory of the poem is directly representative of her seductiveness within the context of the temporal world. Those who love God will be rewarded in heaven, the poet constantly assures us, while as Holy Church warns, those who love Mede lose a “lappe of caritatis” (B.II.36). The turning away from worldly treasures to those of the spirit, however, is not an easy process, and it is all the more difficult for those with much to give up. When Haukyn inquires “Wheither paciente poverté...be

moore plesaunt to Oure Drighthe / Than richesse rightfullliche wonne and resonably
yspended?”, Patience – while falling short of rejecting the possibility outright that
such a man might exist – is therefore palpably skeptical:

“Ye – *quis est ille?*” quod Pacience, “quik – *laudabimus eum!*”¹⁶

Though men rede of richesse right to the worldes ende,
I wist nevere renk that riche was, that when he rekene sholde,
Whan he drogh to his deeth day, that he ne dredde hym soore,
And that at the rekenyng in arerage fel, rather than out of dette.”

(B.XIV.103-107)¹⁷

Many keep themselves clean from other sin, but “ben acombred with
coveitise, thei konne noght out crepe / So harde hath avarice yhasped hem
togideres” (B.I.196-197), barring their way to charity, which as we have seen is
emphasized throughout the poem as “the lok of love that leteth out [God’s] grace”
(B.I.202). As Dame Studie notes, all too often “Thilke that God moost good
gyveth, God moost greveth – leest good thei deleth, / And moost unkynde to the
commune, that moost catel weldeth” (B.X.28-29). Among “meene men,” by
contrast, may sooner be found “his mercy and his werkes” (B.X.64-67), the
practice of which sets men firmly upon the path to Truth. The crux of the matter,

¹⁶ “Yes – who is that man? Quick, we will praise him!” Cf. Ecclesiasticus 31:9: “*Quis est hic? Et laudabimus eum.*” The preceding verse is cited at B.XV.234: “*Beatus est dives qui*” (“Blessed is the rich man [who is found without blemish, and that hath not gone after gold, nor put his trust in money nor in treasures].”)

¹⁷ Schmidt (B-Text 464) further links this passage to the spiritual condition of those corrupted by temporal wealth found in James 5:1-11. “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days.”

as always for Langland, lies not in external condition alone but in the internal disposition of the soul in question; yet he also, following Scripture, consistently emphasizes the crucial role that material wealth – or the lack thereof – can play in influencing the soul’s inclination either toward or away from the lure of *cupiditas*. By its very nature, the love of temporal things lies in direct opposition to the law of charity; as Augustine writes in his commentary on Psalms 120:6, “*Multum peregrinata est anima mea*,” “Lest thou shouldest understand bodily wandering, he hath said that the soul wandered. The body wandereth in places, the soul wandereth in its affections. If thou love the earth, thou wanderest from God: if thou lovest God, thou risest unto God. Let us be exercised in the love of God, and of our neighbour, that we may return unto charity. If we fall towards the earth, we wither and decay” (a. 7).¹⁸ The personification of Scripture assures Will that no degree of sin may hinder God’s mercy, which “may al amende, and mekenesse hir folwe,” for “*Misericordia eius super omnia opera eius*”: “His tender mercies are over all his works”¹⁹ (B.XI.138-139); likewise Trajan,²⁰ drawing upon Matthew

¹⁸ “*Ne peregrinationem corporalem intellegeres, animam dixit peregrinari. Corpus peregrinatur locis, anima peregrinatur affectibus. Si amaveris terram, peregrinaris a Deo: si amaveris Deum, ascendis ad Deum. In caritate Dei et proximi exerceamur, ut redeamus ad caritatem. Si cadamus in terram, marcescimus et putrescimus.*” Enarrationes in Psalmos 120:6, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 40.1785. Transl. is taken from Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917. See likewise the warning of Thomas Aquinas against an inordinate affection (“*inordinationem affectus*”) for temporal goods which leads men to accumulate more than they should, or to fail to assist others, in violation of the demands of charity: Summa Theologica II.ii. q. 185. a.7.

¹⁹ Psalms 144.9.

²⁰ The pagan emperor appears in Piers Plowman as a central figure in the poem’s emphasis upon the role of a life of truth in redemption: the just man shall be saved. “Troianus was a trewe knyghte and took nevere Cristendom,/ And he is saaf, so seith the book, and his soule in hevene /....Truthe that trespassed nevere ayeins his lawe, / But lyvede as his lawe taughte and leveth ther be no bettere, / (And if ther were, he wolde amende) and in swich wille deieth – / Ne wolde nevere trewe God but trewe truthe were allowed” (B.XII.280-287). For a particularly detailed

17:20 and Psalms 33:11, adds that “*Nichil impossible volenti... Inquirentes autem Dominum non minuentur omni bono*” (B.XI.279-280): “Nothing is impossible to him who wills it...they that seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good.”²¹

The key, however, lies precisely in the acquisition of that will to seek the Lord: a process which the poem repeatedly asserts is encouraged by poverty, but hindered by temporal riches.

Piers furthermore emphasizes that poverty, whether it is patiently borne by those who have no choice or voluntarily chosen and honestly embraced, may serve as a purgatory on earth and thus aid the soul in its quest for salvation. The poverty of necessity endured by many poor – neglected and subjected to “harrowing indignity” (Pearsall “Poverty” 184) by those who take no heed of God’s law²² – is represented as a grave social injustice, and yet also as the opportunity for spiritual wealth, for the poor who “al hir lif han lyved in languor and defaute” (B.XIV.117) may perhaps for having done so in justice “han eritage in hevene – and by trewe righte / Ther riche men no right may cleyme, but of ruthe and grace” (B.X.341-42):

examination of the role of Trajan in the poem, see Whatley “Notes on Language, Text, and Theology.”

²¹ Cf. Christ’s response to his disciples’ dismay in response to his words to the rich young man: “Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” Matthew 19:26; compare also Mark 10:27 and Luke 18:27.

²² See, for instance, B.X.58-61: “The carefulle may crie and carpen at the yate, / Both afyngred and afurste, and for chele quake; / Is non to nyme hym in, nor his noye amende, / But hoen on hym as an hound and hoten hym go thennes.” Langland was not alone in his concern regarding verbal abuse heaped upon the poor by the uncharitable wealthy; Thomas Brinton, for instance, famously preached against those who “even when they offer some modicum to the poor..first insult them with harsh words and condemn them...it would be better for the poor to be without alms than to receive them with such opprobrium.” Sermon 44, “Simul in Unum, dives et pauper,” likely delivered July 17, 1377 as part of the coronation festivities for Richard II. Latin text ed. Devlin, The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, London, 1954. Transl. Krochalis and Peters, The World of Piers Plowman, Philadelphia, 1975. Langland and Brinton both classify such treatment of the poor as ingratitude to God, as well as a blatant sin against the law of *caritas*.

Ther the poore dar plede, and preve by pure reson
 To have allowaunce of his lord; by the law he it cleymeth:
 Joye, that nevere joye hadde, of rightful jugge he asketh...
 But God sente hem som tyme som manere joye
 Outher here or elliswhere, kynde wolde it nevere;
 For to wrotherhele was he wroght that nevere was joye shapen!

(B.XIV.108-10, 118-120)

Like the sorrow of contrition, Patience explains, poverty therefore is "*cura animarum*" (B.XIV.286), "a guardian to the soul,"²³ and "*odibile bonum*" (l. 276), "a hateful good": "a sorwe of himself, and a solace to the soule, / So povertie properliche penaunce is to the body / And joye also to the soule, pure spiritual helthe" (ll. 283-285).²⁴ "They that taken this myschief mekeliche," therefore, "Han as pleyn pardon as the Plowman hymselfe, / For love of hir lowe hertes

²³ The Latin phrase is generally used in reference to clerical cure of souls, technically defined as "the exercise of a clerical office involving the instruction, by sermons and admonitions, and the sanctification, through the sacraments, of the faithful in a determined district, by a person legitimately appointed for the purpose" (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 4:572). Schmidt argues that the canonical sense of the phrase "is here not relevant" (B-Text 465), but I disagree: Langland appears to be directly playing upon the common usage of the phrase to describe the way in which both poverty and contrition provide inward spiritual guardianship of the soul. Cf. B.XX.233, in which the phrase is used within its usual canonical sense. The phrase was also well-established as a buzzword emerging from the reform movement instituted by the 4th Lateran Council of 1215; see Boyle "Fourth Lateran Council" 31-33 and Heffernan "Medieval Sermons" 188.

²⁴ This passage utilizes a popular definition of poverty attributed to Secundus Philosophus and quoted extensively: it is repeated by Vincent of Beauvais, John Bromyard, Hugh of St. Cher, and Chaucer, among others. Alford notes that St. Cher, like Langland, attributes part of the definition to Seneca. The fourth phrase in the definition, "*Donum dei*," is found at the opening of Augustine's *De Patiencia*, which Schmidt surmises that Langland likely knew directly: his representation of patience is in many ways similar to that of Augustine's, and he references Augustine ("Seynte Austyn") directly at the end of Passus XIV as the "lettred man" who first expounded upon the meaning of patient poverty (ll. 316-319). For more details on both the derivation and the subsequent citations of this passage, see Alford *Guide* 90 and "Unidentified Quotations" 396, Schmidt "Two Notes" 286, and Skeat *Parallel Text* 2:212-213.

Oure Lorde hath hem graunted / Hir penaunce and hir purgatorie upon this pure erthe” (B.VII.101-104).

The qualification that poverty must be accepted “mekeliche” in order to bear spiritual merit, however, is crucial: as Pearsall notes, “it is the patience and humility with which the distresses of poverty are endured that makes of it a form of spiritual purgation” (“Poverty” 181). While external poverty alone may reduce one’s opportunities for sin and help guard against temporal attachments which may hinder placing love of God above love of the world, it is only poverty *with patience* which serves as earthly penance and earns eternal reward: “Al poore *that pacient is*, may asken and cleyment, / After hir endynge here, hevenriche blisse” (B.XIV.260-261). The majority of the poem’s praise of the spiritual value of poverty, therefore, centers not on external poverty in and of itself, but poverty patiently endured. As Trajan explains, wise men

Preisen poverté for best lif, if paciencé it folwe,
And bothe bettre and blessedder by many fold than richesse.
Although it be sour to suffre, ther cometh swete after;
....poverté or penaunce paciencly ytake,
Maketh a man to have mynde in God and a gret wille
To wepe and to wel bidde, wherof wexeth mercy.

(B.XI.244-263)

Patience later adds that God clearly could have made no man rich or poor, had He so desired, but in His divine wisdom he ordained otherwise (B.XIV.166-167).

Rather than a curse, however, poverty is consistently represented within the poem

not as the mark of divine disfavor, but as an unparalleled blessing, should one have the faith to accept and utilize it.²⁵ “Humble acceptance of poverty as a manifestation of divine will...makes of it a spiritual benefit. The rich lack the opportunity for this exercise” (Pearsall “Poverty” 184). As Augustine wrote in De Civitate Dei, “the want of those things which are necessary for the support of the living, as food and clothing, though painful and trying, does not break down the fortitude and virtuous endurance of good men, nor eradicate piety from their souls, but rather renders it more fruitful.”²⁶ He who “greveth hym ageyn God and gruccheth ageyn Reson” (B.VI.306-314) in response to his temporal condition, on the contrary, harms himself doubly: in sinning against God through rejecting His will, and also in rejecting the spiritual rewards he would reap if he endured patiently, as God ordained.

It is within the context of patient poverty, moreover, that the poem’s praise of voluntary poverty must be placed; it is emphatically not the external “sute” of poverty alone which bears spiritual merit, although the poor wear the livery of Christ who “in that secte....saved al mankynde” (B.XIV.257), but rather it is through the exercise of patient poverty that spiritual merit may be fostered. The poet, as always, is concerned not with mere external observances, but with the inner condition of the soul; the outward renunciation of worldly dominion bears

²⁵ There is clearly an immeasurable chasm between such a representation of material poverty versus material wealth and that typical of the “desacralization” of poverty I addressed in my first chapter, such as Richard FitzRalph’s assertion that “Riches is good hauyng & worpi to be loued of God, for he is richest of alle, & pouert is contrarie & is priuacioun of riches; þan pouert is euel” (80:21-23). Defensio Curatorum, 1357; the quotation is taken from John Trevisa’s Middle English translation, ed. Perry, EETS, 1925.

²⁶ I:xiii. Ed. and transl. Dods, Oxford, 1847-1857.

no spiritual value in and of itself, but only when it is accompanied by the inward renunciation of the profoundly corrupting influence of temporal solicitude. The power the external condition may bear upon the internal, however, is consistently affirmed. It is notably not the *vita contemplativa* itself which the poet chooses to emphasize in his recounting of the dispute between Martha and Mary, for instance, but poverty: “Ac poverte God putte bfore, and preised it the better: / *Maria optimam partem elegit, que non auferetur ab ea*” (B.XI.252-253).²⁷ Both Martha and Mary sought to receive Christ, but by choosing to set aside all worldly concerns and focus instead entirely upon her Lord, Mary chose the best part. The primary virtue of poverty, both for the involuntary poor and those who voluntarily take upon themselves a life of holy poverty, lies wholly in this point: poverty patiently endured with gratitude to God facilitates the lack of solicitude so essential to properly ordering temporal life and actions, the means by which individual souls may advance in their spiritual journey toward redemption and grace.

It is for this reason that “parfit poverte” is presented as “lif moost likynge to God,” and “whoso wolde be pure parfit” must “possession forsake” (B.XI.271-274): that one might thereby more fully cast oneself wholly upon the will of God. Clopper identifies “parfit poverte” as a “peculiarly Franciscan” phrase: “we routinely find similar expressions about “perfect poverty”...in Franciscan defenses and discussions of poverty up to the time of John XXII’s *Cum inter nonnullos* (November 1323)....It represents the Franciscan understanding of

²⁷ “Mary has chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:42.

apostolic poverty in which the perfect renounce *dominium in proprio et in communi*” (*Rechelesnesse* 90).²⁸ He specifically compares Langland’s use of the phrase to that found in the commentary of the Four Masters upon the Franciscan Rule of 1223 (cap. 6),²⁹ Huge of Digne’s commentary on the same chapter,³⁰ Angelo da Clareno’s *Exposito regulae fratrum minorum* (174-176),³¹ and Ubertino of Casale’s *Rotulus* (114-115).³² The phrase can also be understood in a more general sense, however, and as such it seems to most clearly manifest throughout the poem: poverty becomes “perfect,” and thereby instrumental in the pursuit of Christian perfection, only when it is embraced within the context of Christ’s commandment *ne solliciti sitis*. As R. Adams notes, “the first proof-text cited by the Plowman – Matthew 22:37 – stipulates that fulfilling the Law requires a *total* commitment, loving God “with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind”....There is only one Christian life, a continuously renewed pilgrimage toward the perfect love of God and neighbor” (“Theology” 91).³³ Like Thomas Aquinas, therefore, Langland emphasizes the removal from the affections of whatever is contrary to *caritas*, hindering the

²⁸ Cf. also Clopper “Langland’s Persona” 151-152.

²⁹ *Expositio quatuor magistrorum super regulam fratrum minorum, 1241-1242*. Ed. P. Livarius Oliger. Rome: Edizioni di Storia et Letteratura, 1950.

³⁰ *Hugh of Digne’s Rule Commentary*. Ed. David Flood. Grottaferrata: College of St. Bonaventura, 1979.

³¹ Ed. P. Livarius Oliger. Quaracchi: College of St. Bonaventure, 1912.

³² Ed. Franz Ehrle. *Archiv für Literatur-und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters* 3 (1887): 93-137.

³³ Cf. also Frank *Scheme of Salvation* 7-8 and 34-39. As we saw in Chapter 1, God’s entire law is encompassed in the law of *caritas*. “*Dilige Deum et proximum tuum*’ / This was the texte trewely – I took ful good gome. / The glose was gloriously writen with a gilt penne: / ‘*In hiis duobus pendet tota lex et prophetia*.’ / ‘Is here alle thi lordes lawes?’ quod I? ‘Ye, leve me,’ he seide. / ‘And whoso wercheth after this writ, I wol undertaken, / Shal nevere devel hym dere, ne deeth in soul greve.’” (B.XVII.12-17). “Thou shalt love God and thy neighbor...On these two depend the entire law and the prophets”: Matthew 22:37-40.

mind's affections from tending wholly to God.³⁴ "God demands the gifts of the spirit; the soul must be filled with light, and the goods of this earth must be so handled so that they do not cloud the light of the soul"³⁵ (Robertson and Huppé 41). While the perfection of Christian life may not consist *solely* or even *essentially* in voluntary poverty, therefore, voluntary poverty fully observed – that is, *cum paupertate spiritus*,³⁶ not its external semblance alone – may contribute *instrumentally* to the pursuit of such perfection as is possible within the temptations posed by the fallen world.³⁷

This understanding of temporal privation as a potential wellspring of spiritual wealth also aids in the illumination of one of the more glaring apparent contradictions within the poem: the repeated insistence that those who reject solicitude will never lack for sustenance. The assertion first appears in a citation

³⁴ *Summa Theologica* II.ii q.184 a.3. Such perfection as is possible within the fallen world may be achieved "*Uno modo, inquantum ab affectu hominis excluditur omne illud quod caritati contrariatur...Alio modo, inquantum ab affectu hominis excluditur...omne illud quod impedit ne affectus mentis totaliter dirigatur ad Deum*": "First, by the removal from man's affections of all that is contrary to charity...Secondly, by the removal from man's affections...of whatever hinders the mind's affections from tending wholly to God." See likewise II.i. q. 109 a.8: "*Cum enim homo non habet cor suum firmatum in Deo, ut pro nullo bono consequendo vel malo vitando ab eo separari vellet; occurrunt multa propter quae consequenda vel vitanda homo recedit a Deo contemnendo praecepta ipsius, et ita peccat mortaliter*": "When man's heart is not so fixed on God as to be unwilling to be parted from Him for the sake of finding any good or avoiding any evil, many things happen for the achieving or avoiding of which a man strays from God and breaks his commandments." Transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

³⁵ The citation is paraphrased from Bede; see *Patrologia Latina* 92:85.

³⁶ "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:7). Cf. Bonaventure's comment "*Paupertas spiritus, quae includit paupertatem et humilitatem, est fundamentum perfectionis evangelicae et etiam consummatio eius*": "Poverty of spirit, which includes poverty and humility, is the foundation of evangelical perfection and also its consummation"). *Commentarius in evangelium S. Lucae, Opera omnia*, 7.175b; Clopper's translation ("Langland's Persona" 179 n. 35).

³⁷ Cf. *Summa Theologica* II.ii. q. 184 a. 3.1 and q. 185 a.6, particularly the latter: "*perfectio Christianae vitae non consistit essentialiter in voluntaria paupertate, sed voluntaria paupertas instrumentaliter operatur ad perfectionem vitae*": "the perfection of the Christian life does not essentially consist in voluntary poverty, but voluntary poverty conduces instrumentally to the perfection of life." Ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

from the Psalms – “*Iunior fui etenim senui, et non vidi iustum derelictum, nec semen eius querens panem*” (B.VII.86)³⁸ – and is soon repeated by no lesser authority than Piers himself, who vows that he will therefore “cessen of my sowyng...and swynke noght so hard” (B.VII.117):

That loveth God lelly, his liflode is ful esy:

*Fuerunt michi lacrimae mee panes die ac nocte.*³⁹

And but if Luc lye, he lereth us be fooles:

We sholde noght be to bisy aboute the worldes blisse:

Ne solliciti sitis,⁴⁰ he seith in the Gospel,

And sheweth us by ensamples us selve to wisse.

The fowles in the feld, who fynt hem mete at winter?

Have thei no garner to go to, but God fynt hem alle.

(B.VII.122-130)

The verse from the Psalms is referenced again in Passus XI: “Failed nevere man mete that myghtful God serveth, / As David seith in the Sauter” (B.XI.276).

Patience, likewise, citing the same Scriptural passage as Piers,⁴¹ claims that God will always provide sufficient sustenance for the faithful, “though no plough

³⁸ “I have been young, and now am old, and I have not seen the just forsaken, nor his seed seeking bread.” Psalms 36:25.

³⁹ “My tears have been my bread day and night.” Psalms 41:4.

⁴⁰ “Be not solicitous.” As Skeat comments in his note to this line, the specific quotation is actually found in Matthew 6:25-26, although Piers here attributes it to “Luc,” an understandable misattribution since Luke 12:22-24 repeats the same doctrine: “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.... Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.” Cf. Philippians 4:6: “Be careful for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.”

⁴¹ “*Ne solliciti sitis... Volucres celi Deus pascit*” (B.XIV.34): “Be not solicitous... God feeds the birds of the air.”

erye/...Though nevere greyn growed, ne grape upon vyne, / ...shal noon faille of thyng that hem nedeth” (B.XIV.31-33). The assurance that God would provide for the faithful was a commonplace of medieval Christian theology, and yet it seems strangely incongruent with the poem’s consistent recognition that many – emphatically including the just – do indeed suffer from a lack of sufficient physical “liflode,” as Haukyn’s incredulous reply reminds the reader. The claim that sufficient sustenance will be provided even if no one cultivates the earth, or if the harvests fail, appears particularly hopelessly unrealistic, especially given that Haukyn has just recently related his experiences regarding the lack of bread in famine time (B.XIII.265-271), a passage not merely fictional but specifically recalling the circumstances surrounding the famine of 1369-1370.⁴² The suggestion that human effort to provide sustenance is either unnecessary or superfluous – seemingly present both in Piers’s assertion and in Patience’s initial comments – moreover seems particularly baffling given the clear evidence presented to the contrary in the poem’s carefully-established case against the wastours.

The key to the puzzle is suggested by Piers’s citation from the Psalms, however, and then explicated in much greater detail by Patience. “I loked what liflode it was that Pacience so preisede, / And thanne was it a pece of the *Paternoster – Fiat voluntas tua*”⁴³ (B.XIV.48-49), Will says. Piers and Patience alike are speaking not of that “liflode” which provides for the needs of the physical body alone, but a sustenance of much greater significance: the provision

⁴² See above, Chapter 2 note 27.

⁴³ “Thy will be done,” part of the Lord’s Prayer, as Will observes, taken from Matthew 6:10: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” Cf. Luke 11:2. The same words reappear in B.XV.179, again within the context of the provision of spiritual sustenance.

of that which is needful for the soul, even in the presence of temporal dearth.

“Non in solo pane vivit homo, set in omni verbo quod procedit de ore Dei”

(B.XIV.47): “Man does not live by bread alone, but in every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.”⁴⁴ The promise is not, in short, that the temporal

“liflode” of those “that loveth God lelly” will be “ful esy,” but that their spiritual “liflode” is assured beyond doubt. The “vitailles of grete vertues” (l. 38)⁴⁵

provided and “so preisede” by Patience at the opening of B.XIV are a direct reference back to the “vitalles” we are told that he bears in his “poke” as he and Conscience set forth together as pilgrims following their dinner with the Doctor of Divinity: “Sobretee and symple speche and soothfaste bileve, / To conforte hym and Conscience if thei come in place / There unkyndenesse and coveitise is, hungry contrees both” (B.XIII.217-220). Like the penitential dishes served to Patience and Will in stark opposition to the gluttonous feasting of the Doctor, these “vitalles” are precisely what are needed to nourish the soul, albeit less than comfortable from a physical standpoint alone; they will provide spiritual sustenance even when men must live in temporal want because “unkyndenesse *caristia*⁴⁶ maketh amonges Cristes peple” (B.XIV.72). Patience therefore can

⁴⁴ Matthew 4:4: “But [Jesus] answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” The Old Testament verse referenced is Deuteronomy 8:3: “[God] humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.”

⁴⁵ Cf. the description of the “vitalles” in his “poke” at B.XIII.217, as he and Conscience set forth together as pilgrims: “Sobretee and symple speche and soothfaste bileve, / To conforte hym and Conscience if thei come in place / There unkyndenesse and coveitise is, hungry contrees both” (B.XIII.217-220).

⁴⁶ As Jordan notes, the term *caristia* was generally applied by medieval chroniclers to signify periods of high prices, including but not limited to periods of acute or chronic famine (11). Lines

confidently promise “Lo! Here liflode ynogh, if oure bileve be true / For lent
 nevere was ther lif but liflode were shapen, / Wherof or wherfore and wherby to
 live” (B.XIV.38-41); whereas the beasts of the field are nourished “by gras and by
 greyn and by grene rootes,” however, men are to “lyve thorough leel bileve and
 love, as God witnesseth” (l. 47). Note the play on words; as Clopper observes,
 “Langland uses “bileue” to refer both to material and to spiritual food (a
 conflation of ME *bileue* and *bileve*)” (Rechelesnesse 242).⁴⁷ “Leel bileve” will
 provide “bilyve,” the means by which man is to live: not ephemerally in the
 mortal world, but eternally. The “bileve” Patience urges Haukyn and Will to
 understand and rely upon is a recognition of both man’s utter dependence upon
 God and the perdurable strength of God’s promise to provide an imperishable
 “liflode” for those who labor faithfully in His service.

Note, moreover, that Patience does not simply disregard the possibility of
 suffering as a result of the lack of physical necessities, but on the contrary,
 actively emphasizes it:

“Have, Haukyn,” quod Pacience, “and et this whan the hungreth,
 Or whan thou clomsest for cold or clyngest for droughte;

 Tharstow nevere care for corn ne lynnyn cloth ne wollen,
 Ne for drynke, ne deeth drede, but deye as God liketh,

70-74 attribute *caristia* specifically to *over-plentee* (superfluity) as well as *unkyndnesse*, reinforcing the link with the “unkyndenesse and coveitise” of B.XIII.220.

⁴⁷ Compare, for instance, B.X.V.7 (where the term clearly refers to the Creed), B.XIX.236 and B.XX.7 (where it refers specifically to physical “liflode”), and B.XIII.217, which like Patience’s use in XIV plays upon both senses.

Or thorough hunger or thorough hete – at his wille be it.

For if thow lyvest after his loore, the shorter lif the bettre:

Si quis amat Christum mundum non diligit istum.”⁴⁸

(B.XIV.50-51, 56-59)

As Frank notes, “*Ne solliciti sitis* was for the poet the solution to a fundamental question: how to provide for the body without destroying the soul....It alone gives the soul the serenity and the power to love which is due man as God’s image, and which leads him to God” (Scheme of Salvation 32-33). Langland is fully in keeping with medieval theological tradition in emphasizing this doctrine as a means of avoiding being withdrawn from things eternal by temporal concerns, for the primary end of human efforts should always be the good of the soul; he here notably departs, however, from the common interpretation of it as a promise that corporeal as well as spiritual necessities will always be met.⁴⁹ To fully surrender concern for material security is thus emphasized as “an act of the highest faith, for one cannot surrender this whole world without possessing the highest faith in Christ’s teachings and counsels and in divine providence” (Burr 75). By

⁴⁸ “If a man cares for Christ, he will not cleave to this world.” Schmidt’s translation. The citation is the first line of a couplet from the Cartula, one of the texts of the Auctores Octo, printed as Carmen Paraneneticum ad Rainaldum in the Patrologia Latina (Auctores Octo sig. G^{v-b}, PL 184:1307); the second line continues “*sed quasi fetorem spernens illius amorem*,” “despising the love of it like a foul stench.” The basis of the passage is I John 2:15-16: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.”

⁴⁹ For a particularly detailed examination of the doctrine of *ne solliciti sitis* in the Old and New Testaments, in the works of Augustine, and in the work of later medieval thinkers, see Burdach 268-283, 308-310, and 351-358. Cf. Dunning: “God knows that that we need to be maintained in life to exercise virtue, therefore he will provide for our bodily needs” (Interpretation 150), comparing Langland’s lines particularly to the commentary of Thomas Aquinas upon Psalm 22 (the fifth verse of which was cited by Piers at B.VII.116-117).

presenting the doctrine of *ne solliciti sitis* directly in conjunction with acknowledgement of the reality of physical deprivation and even starvation, Langland underscores the point with added force. Inward “liflode” can only be acquired through faithful and full adherence to divine law, within which the injunction against solicitude is given full weight as an essential precept; and as we have seen throughout the poem, the commandments of God may not lawfully be set aside for any reason mankind might devise, regardless of temporal expediency. Only those with the faith to rely fully and solely upon the nonmaterial but fundamentally essential “vitalles” provided by Patience will be able follow Christ’s injunction in full, accounting all temporal things as of no consequence: even to the point of death.

It is upon this sense of inward sustenance surpassing the simple presence or lack of physical necessities that Anima plays in describing Charity’s chief sustenance and subsequent lack of concern for physical food and clothing in Passus XV:

Alle manere meschiefs in myldnesse he suffreth.

Coveiteth he noon erthely good but hevenriche blisse....

Of rentes ne of richesse ne rekketh he nevere,

For a frend that fynt hym, faileth hym nevere at nede:

Fiat-voluntas tua fynt hym everemoore,

And if he soupeth, eet but a sop of *Spera in Deo*.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ “Hope in God”: Cf. Psalms 42:5: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.”

....

The moost liflode that he lyveth by is love in Goddes passion.

(B.XV.174-180, 255)

As the recounting of that divine passion soon reminds both Will and the reader, Christ – the most perfect exemplar of *caritas* – for love of man left “all his grete joye goostliche” (B.XX.40) and “bicaam nedy” for the sake of men’s redemption. “Nede hath ynome me, that I moot nede abide / And suffre sorwes ful soure, that shal to joye torne” (B.XX.46-47).⁵¹ As Clopper notes, this passage at the opening of the final passus of the poem “dramatically brings the crucified Christ before Wille... Langland has Nede conjure up the powerful image of the naked, poor Christ at the moment of his greatest need in order to point to the absolute neediness that is to be Wille’s model” (*Rechelesnesse* 94). Those not ashamed “to bide and to be nedy” (B.XX.48) – fully recognizing their dependence upon God – will be sustained through the grace of divine providence, following in the footsteps of Christ himself, for “He that wroght al the world was wilfulliche nedy, / Ne nevere noon so nedy ne poverer deide” (B.XX.49-50).

As exemplified in the life of Christ, the rejection of concern for material sustenance so praised by Patience is by no means in conflict with the primary law

⁵¹ See Luke 9:58 for the Scriptural source of the words here attributed to Christ as he hung on the cross: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.” Skeat describes the change of context as “a singular mistake” (II.276), and Szittyá refers to it as a factual error that warns the reader against misplaced trust in Need’s words (272). Stephen Barney observes, however, “the general association of the “foxes have holes” passage with the Passion was in fact common” (*Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* 5:203), an association Alford attributes to the liturgy for Passion Sunday (*Guide* 23); Schmidt (“Crucifixion” 189-90) notes that the words are attributed to Christ on the cross in a number of 14th century texts and suggests that the original source of the connection might be Bonaventure’s *Vitis mystica seu tractatus de Passione Domini* (*Patrologia Latina* 184:638-339). Cf. Thomas Moser “And I Mon Waxe Wod: The Middle English “Foweles in the Frith,” *PMLA* 102.3 (1987): 332-333.

of *caritas*, but contained within it. As we have seen above, Langland follows both biblical and patristic tradition in his emphasis upon the degree to which temporal concerns may blunt or displace man's love for God and neighbor alike; to renounce solicitude is to remove that which most greatly hinders the pursuit of *caritas*. I can therefore not agree with those critics who find Patience's arguments to be unrealistic, naïve, or dismissive of the physical needs of the body, encompassing only an overly simplistic transcendence;⁵² it should be noted that, on the contrary, Patience recognizes the corporeal suffering of the temporally impoverished with great sympathy, thoroughly in keeping with the acute compassion for the suffering of the poor which permeates the poem's teachings on charity:⁵³

Ac beggeris aboute midsomer bredelees thei soupe,
 And yet is wynter for hem worse, for weetshoed they gange,
 Afurst soore and afyngred, and foule yrebuked
 And arated of riche men, that ruthe is to here.

(B.XIV.160-163)

⁵² See, for instance, Aers *Chaucer* 25-30 (the passage "may...indicate some fallaciousness in Patience's account of the recommended path...and poetic imagination does not sanction this part of Patience's claim"), Clutterbuck *Encounters* 94-95 ("Patience's response is...naïve....Langland's continual concern with the poor and how they are to be fed means that Patience's words strike a bizarre, unfeeling note"), and Jenkins 132-133 (Patience "is almost comically idealistic....Man does not live by bread alone, but that does not make bread as dispensable as Patience implies").

⁵³ See, for instance in addition to this passage B.X.,58-60, B.XIV.174-178, and particularly C.IX..71-87, an exceptionally vivid expansion regarding those "pat most neden." The harsh reality evoked by the last passage in particular is startling even now, but it is particularly unusual when compared to other descriptions of the poor which were written around the same time; Shepherd notes that this is possibly "the earliest passage in English which conveys the felt and inner bitterness of poverty" (172) in such painstaking detail.

As Baker cautions, the reader of Piers “must continually balance his understanding of the parts against his sense of the whole and vice versa” (“Pardons” 472). Patience’s emphasis upon transcendent acceptance of physical deprivation should not be taken out of context as dismissive of the miseries of the poor or, by any means, as a justification for failing to render them aid. The whole emphasis of Piers Plowman is upon the application of Truth to each individual’s spiritual journey: properly understood as an injunction to the individual soul regarding the necessary internal submission to God’s will, the doctrine of *ni solliciti sitis* – even to the startling extent it is preached by Patience – in no way obviates the repeatedly emphasized obligation to extend charity to one’s neighbor. It was perhaps to clarify this point that Langland changed a crucial detail in the characterization of Charity in the C-text revision of the poem: in the B-text we are told that the habit of Charity is “to wende on pilgrimages / Ther poore men and prisons liggeth... / Though he bere hem no breed, he bereth hem swetter liflode, / Loveth hem as Oure Lorde bit and loketh how they fare” (B.XIV.182-185). In the C-text revision of these lines, however, the emphasis is upon corporeal acts of mercy in addition to spiritual sustenance: he is said “to wynde in pilgrimages / There poor men and prisoners ben, and paye for here fode, / Clotheth hem and conforteth hem and of Crist precheth hem, / What sorwe he soffred in ensauple of vs alle / That pouerte and penaunce, patientlyche ytake, / Worthe moche meryte to þat man þat hit may soffre” (C.XVI.322-327). There is no mistaking the message for those who patiently endure the ravages of temporal necessity; it is “worthe moche meryte” to the soul, and in due time – God’s time – their “sorwes

ful soure” shall “to joy torne” (B.XX.47). The focus of Patience’s teaching, however, is by no means to cavalierly dismiss temporal affliction by platitudinously repeating the moral commonplace that earthly suffering can turn to heavenly good, but to make fully clear how little significance temporal things have in comparison to things eternal. The emphasis of his teaching taken as a whole is identical to the emphasis of the poem taken as a whole: the means by which each individual soul may find its way out of “the maze” of the world (B.I.6) and toward the Tower of Truth, an end which demands that the interests of the soul be given complete and unfettered precedence over the interests of the body. The radical submission to the divine will advanced both by Christ in the Gospels and Piers and Patience through their emphasis on *ni solliciti sitis* is not merely a means of dealing with temporal suffering, albeit it may indeed so serve – within the broader context of salvation, it is emphatically a means of emancipating the souls of rich and poor alike from the fetters of temporal concerns so that they may be freed to live more fully in accordance with God’s fundamental law of *caritas*.

And thus we come full circle once again to Holy Church’s original answer to the dreamer regarding how he might save his soul. God’s law is immutable, the same for every man, regardless of his temporal station; and heedless of temporal concerns, every Christian is called to do nothing less than live fully in accordance with divine law to the best of their efforts, and in so doing render to God what is owed, in full and unstinting measure. All alike are called to labor in Christ’s vineyard. Some may enjoy “mercymonye” (B.XIV.126) for their labors

in this world, others hereafter, and some blessed few in both this world and the next, but all shall be judged in accordance with nothing more nor less than the faithfulness of their service; in the words of Piers, “He shal have my soule that best hath deserved it” (B.VI.87).⁵⁴ Though the poet is insistent that poverty may place fewer obstacles along the path to Truth than riches, he is equally insistent that the poor are no more released from these obligations than are the wealthy. The imagery of heavenly reward as due wages is closely related to the poem’s understanding of divine justice; God is represented as a strict but just master who without fail rewards those who faithfully serve him to the best of their ability, as Piers assures the folk of the field, though he requires a strict accounting from those who refuse to fulfill their obligations. Faith and works thus are unified in the keeping of divine law. As Stokes notes, Langland’s emphasis on the imperative to repay one’s debts, including the debt incurred by sin insofar as one may, “is theologically neither inexplicable nor unorthodox,” for he possesses a strong and urgent conviction that God is equitable and just as well as merciful; therefore “the perfect equity of heaven can admit only those who have balanced their accounts” (15). Without relinquishing the broader scope of theology, then, Langland relentlessly insists upon the essential requirements of faith borne out in works and actions undiverted by worldly considerations, governed always by divine law.

⁵⁴ Cf. B.IX.60-66: “Muche wo worth that wight that mysruleth his Inwit, / And that ben glotons glubberes – hir God is hire wombe.... / For thei serven Sathan, hir soule shal he have: / That lyven synful lif here, hir soule is lich the devel.”

The terms of the pardon Truth sends to Piers, taken from the Athanasian Creed, are simple and yet exacting: “*Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam; / Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum*”⁵⁵ (B.VII.110): as the priest translates it, “‘Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule,’ and ‘Do yvel and have yvel, and hope thow noon oother / That after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule!’” (112-114). The priest can find no pardon there only because he is looking for the wrong kind of pardon, the kind of paltry substitute for the active and diligent pursuit of Truth which Langland consistently rejects. As R. Adams comments, “Medieval people were accustomed to hearing works preached. They knew that the way was narrow ‘that leadeth to life,’ but this message was usually tempered by the various antinomian means for placating God’s justice: such gestures of...religiosity as pilgrimages, the purchase of indulgences, and commemorative masses. What they were not so accustomed to hearing was the same message, untempered” (“Piers’s Pardon” 417). Piers, however, emphatically strips away all hollow substitutions for true effort, calling all – regardless of their external temporal station or condition – to *redde quod debes* through repentance and reformation. “May ne blessynge doon us boote but if we wile amende” (B.XIII.258-260). The means by which that end may be accomplished may indeed vary, but they are but different aspects of the same coinage: taking only what is truly needed, or giving generously and indiscriminately to all in need; laboring faithfully in God’s service, whether bodily or spiritually; enduring

⁵⁵ “And those who have done well shall go into eternal life; but those who (have done) evil (will go) into eternal fire.” Schmidt’s translation; 43rd clause of the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult*), echoing Matthew 25:46.

temporal suffering patiently, or looking beyond temporal comforts to recognize one's utter dependence on God. "The human vocations in which religious perfection is attainable are too rich and varied for so practical a poet to be tempted to legislate artificial restrictions. The mode of one's life is not the issue – the degree of effort is" (R. Adams "Theology" 90). Always, the focus is upon not external condition or observances alone, but upon the internal reformation necessary to bring the errant human will into alignment with the infallible will of God.

Recognition of the poem's constant emphasis upon the necessity for faith to be exercised through works and for each individual to extend the greatest possible effort in pursuit of Truth, however, is by no means to say that Langland doubts or underplays the salvific power of God's grace, which is affirmed throughout the poem.⁵⁶ God's mercy is continually represented as always available and always sufficient, extending even to the moment of death: even the thief on the cross was saved when "he yald him creaunt to Crist on the cros, and kneweliched hym gilty, / And grace asked of God, that graithe is hem evere / That buxomliche biddeth it, and ben in wille to amende hem" (B.XII.191-194).⁵⁷ The poem is beyond doubt very insistent, nevertheless, that God will grant forgiveness

⁵⁶ As R. Adams observes, Langland's theology of grace is one of the most significant matters of debate among *Piers Plowman* critics; "current opinion on the issue...is divided rather sharply between those who see Langland primarily as a moralist urging good works as a means to obtain grace...and those who argue for a more Augustinian Langland" ("Theology" 95-96). For the first point of view, see particularly Allen "Langland's Reading and Writing," R. Adams "Mede and Mercede," "Semi-Pelagianism" and "Theology," Gradon "Trajanus Redivivus," Whatley "Notes," and Wittig "Design,"; for the latter, see particularly Baker "Plowing to Penitence," Harwood "*Liberum-Arbitrium*," Sheneman "Grace Abounding," and Woolf "Pardon."

⁵⁷ See Luke 23:39-43. The same Scriptural passage is also referenced by Robert the Robbere in his own plea for mercy: "Dysmas my brother bisoughte thee of grace," and Christ "haddest mercy on that man for *Memento* sake" (B.V.466-467).

specifically to those who “wel werchen” in this life: those who “repenten and restitution make, / in as much as thei mowen amenden and paien,” although “if it suffise noght for assetz, that in swiche a wille deyeth, / Mercy for his mekenesse wol maken good the remenaunt” (B.XVII.236-39).⁵⁸ Strictly speaking, man cannot possibly earn redemption, since what is owed to God is nothing less than complete obedience and submission to the divine will, and simply repaying a debt due merits no reward, much less the “mesureless” reward of redemption. I concur with R. Adams, however, when he argues that Langland embraces the doctrine of divine *acceptatio* originally proposed by Duns Scotus, which had become “a standard solution to the problem of justification in Langland’s day”: God in his mercy has freely chosen to bestow merit upon good works. “Human works can merit eternal life, not because such works have inherent worth, but because God has freely bound himself to honor them *as though they did*” (“Semi-Pelagianism” 373-374).

The necessity of grace to bridge the final gap between what “mede” man can merit on his own and the reward God will give to the faithful by no means negates, however, the fundamental obligation to put forth one’s best efforts, for “feith withouten feet is feblere than nought/And as deed as a dorenail but if the

⁵⁸ Cf. the extended C-text addition on “mede” and “mercede” in Passus III, particularly ll. 347-350: God, as a just master, will reward the “leel laborer” for his service even if he fails to perform to the full extent of his obligations: “As a leel laborer byleueth þat his maister / In his pay and in his pite and in his puyr treuthe / To pay hym yf he parforme and haue pite yf he faileth / And take hym for his trauaile al þat treuthe wolde. / So of hol herte cometh hope.” Simpson draws a useful distinction between *meritum de condigno* and *meritum de congruo* which serves to illuminate Langland’s dual characterization of redemption as both due wages and a gracious gift above and beyond what is due: “*Meritum de condigno* is an absolute, strict merit, whereby men can be said justly and absolutely to merit reward. Congruent merit, on the other hand, is relative and conditional, whereby man receives reward out of the giver’s generosity. When we look to the images used by theologians to describe these two kinds of reward, we see that they describe condign reward as wages, whereas congruent reward is described as a gift” (Simpson 93-94).

dedes folwe” (B.I.186-87). What the poet fears is not that God’s grace is unavailable or potentially insufficient, but that persistence in sin may render souls incapable of asking for, and thus benefiting from, that infinite and omnipotent grace:

Drede of desperacion thanne dryueth away grace
That mercy in hir mynde may noght thanne falle;
Good hope, that helpe sholde, to wanhope troneth –
Noght of the nounpower of God, that he ne is myghtful
To amende al that amys is, and his mercy gretter
Than alle oure wikked werkes, as Holy Writ telleth –
Misericordia eius super omnia opera eius –⁵⁹
Ac er his rightwisnesse to ruthe torne, som restitution bihoveth:
His sorwe is satisfaccion for swiche that may noght paye.

(B.XVII.309-316)

As Clutterbuck observes, Langland shows a growing concern that “if the soul chooses, despite the gift of Redemption, to follow self-will rather than God’s will, God will respect the creature’s right to free will, even if that means the creature putting himself beyond the pale of God’s grace” (Encounters 71). “*Et dimisi eos secundum desideria eorum*” (B.IX.66): “So I let them go according to the desires of their heart.”⁶⁰ It is for each man to decide whether to serve God or his own temporal desires, and thus whether he will “wend” to the Tower of Truth or to the

⁵⁹ “His tender mercies are over all his works.” Psalms 144:9.

⁶⁰ Psalms 80:13.

Castle of Care (B.I. 12-70). The poet thus seeks to sear consciences into repentance, to jolt them out of complacency, toward a more rigorous understanding of the demands of the faith. As Clopper notes, Langland “was astute enough to know that the bare appeal, ‘Repent now, for the kingdom is at hand,’ would not suffice to bring about reformation of individuals or society. Merely to say that we are all covetous will not avail to make us less so. The trick was to force a confrontation of the self in order to bring about the kind of contrition that would lead to penance” (Rechelesnesse 2).

Thus, although poverty is represented throughout the poem as “a discipline which, when shaped by Patience, cultivates...Christian values and facilitates the avoidance of powerful temptations to set aside the life and teachings of Christ” (Aers Faith 124), Langland painstakingly makes it clear that one’s external bodily condition alone is insufficient for the attainment of redemption. The patient endurance of poverty is consistently portrayed as a direct road to spiritual perfection, and yet poverty in and of itself is equally clearly established as no guarantee of either spiritual growth or ultimate redemption: it bears salvific virtue only insofar as it directs one’s steps toward God, aiding the individual’s progress in the spiritual journey to the Tower of Truth. To claim external poverty alone as sufficient for grace would be to fall prey to the same favoring of form above substance against which Langland so rages throughout the poem; the rigorous understanding of Christianity embraced by the poet, however, urgently demands no less than one’s best efforts. Rich and poor alike are called, therefore, to “treweliche taken and treweliche wynnen / And lyven in love and in lawe,” so

that they may “for hir lowe herte” – a poverty not of body alone, but of spirit, dependent not upon one’s earthly condition but upon the internal relinquishing of solicitude and unequivocal submission to the divine will – receive “the same absolucion that sent was to Piers” (B.VII.61-63).

Conclusion

One of the primary challenges in writing about Piers Plowman is the very multivalency which is so essential to the poem's structure and meaning: no strand of thought in the poem can be considered in isolation, for from beginning to end they are all inextricably intertwined. The pursuit of Truth, the end of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, is represented as, like them, an infinite; it is, moreover, an end which the poet urgently insists cannot be advanced while that goal is perceived only as abstract and extrinsic, as the Dreamer stubbornly persists in understanding it initially, but only once it is recognized as requiring nothing less than radical inward transformation. In Piers we find no room for passivity or complacency, but a constant and uncompromising emphasis upon the necessity for faith to be both borne out by and borne up through concrete practice. Will and the reader alike are continually called to set aside all distractions, rationalizations, and comfortable but shallow interpretations which might seem to justify less than full adherence to divine law.

The pursuit of Truth is a spiritual end, but one which emphatically must be pursued within the context of the temporal. It is here, now, that the individual soul is called to labor in Christ's vineyard. The central structure of the poem revolves upon the evolution of spiritual understanding, exemplified in Will's inward journey not as a clear and simple path but as a twisting, arduous, frequently bewildering and painstakingly gradual ascent, easily stalled or

misdirected, characterized by both lack of clear progress for extended periods of time and the necessity of revisiting the same issues time and again: a process which is sustained and advanced, however, by each instance in which the conscience of the Dreamer is spurred beyond a merely conventional understanding of his faith toward a more profound comprehension of its most essential tenets. The tenor of the poem is not so much didactic as experiential, examining the process of finding Truth: a process which the poet continually insists is advanced not primarily through hearing, but through acting.

Over the course of the poem, then, Will gradually comes to the realization that the Christian faith requires not merely the recognition of its tenets in the abstract – *redde quod debes, ne solliciti sitis*, and above all else the injunction to *caritas*, the summation of all divine law – holding them safely at arms length, but instead ceaselessly and without reservation putting them into practice. To “do wel” is inescapably bound up in the concrete, such as the fulfillment of the responsibilities appropriate to one’s vocation, the rejection of superfluity, and giving generously and without judgment to all. It requires repentance not in word alone but through the action of true contrition, reformation not merely in external semblance but in internal reality, the transformation of the will to seek to fulfill not its own ends, but God’s ends. The word of Scripture must invariably be upheld as the final and overarching law, and nothing less than complete observance of that law will serve; no hollow substitutions are sufficient to fulfill it. It is an uncompromising understanding of faith set forth by an author who is never content to simply passively reflect received forms of thought, but who

instead has wrestled extensively with the implications of every aspect of his belief and calls upon his readers to do the same.

It is within this context that the poem insists that poverty must be understood, for it is inextricably intertwined with the entire substance of Christian doctrine, summarized in the overarching injunction for rich and poor alike to “do wel.” All, regardless of their temporal station, are alike called to live fully in accordance with divine law, both a fundamentally simple and a profoundly complex construct based upon nothing less than a distillation of the essence of Christianity, the *lex Christi* put fully into practice. As demonstrated in both the teachings and the actions of Christ, *caritas* lies at the heart of that law, for “*Qui manet in caritate, in Deo manet*”⁶¹ – “he who abides in charity abides in God” – and therefore the “infinites” of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest explicitly “ben of loves kennyng” (B.X.190). In the pursuit of *caritas* – love of God and love of neighbor, the entire substance of the law condensed into a single injunction – lies the key to the pursuit of Truth. Therefore the injunction to generous and indiscriminate almsgiving stands immutable despite the abuse of charity and justice perpetrated by the wastours, for to discriminate in giving would be no less of an offense against divine law; the wastours, however, are likewise called to turn from their sin and *redde quod debes* to both God and their fellow men. In the love of the world, likewise, lies the polar opposite of Christ-like *caritas*: that road leads inevitably never to Truth, but only to self-deception. Thus both rich and poor

⁶¹ I John 4:16. The verse is cited directly at B.V.487 and B.IX.64.

alike are called to relinquish solicitude, embracing an inward poverty dependent not upon one's earthly condition but upon unequivocal submission to the divine will, releasing the soul from the fetters of temporal concerns so that it may be freed to live more fully in accordance with *caritas*. Such an emphasis upon the spiritual ramifications of inward poverty versus the external condition of the body alone by no means constitutes an excuse for the neglect or mistreatment of the materially poor; the poem emphatically reaffirms, time and time again, the incontrovertible obligation each Christian bears to alleviate their sufferings. Nor is the emphasis upon the eternal reward due to those who patiently endure temporal poverty simply a moral platitude in Langland's hands, reassuring but hollow words to comfort those suffering from the pangs of want; within the context of the poem's careful distinctions, its grounds are instead painstakingly dissected and scrutinized. In every detail, Langland's examination of poverty seeks to imbue it with the full complexity of the theological significance it is given by no lesser authority than Scripture itself.

The multitude of perspectives by means of which poverty is examined throughout the poem reflect not inconsistency, but rather a radical consistency, grounded in the bedrock assumption that God's law mandates that each individual soul ultimately bears moral responsibility for its own choices. It would violate the poet's sense of both reason and justice to unconditionally equate external poverty alone with spiritual virtue; although the patient endurance of poverty plays a significant role throughout the poem in its examination of what it means to "wel werchen" in this life, poverty in and of itself is consistently represented as neither

obligatory nor sufficient for redemption. The external condition of the body is of significance, on the contrary, only insofar as it either advances or hinders the spiritual journey toward the Tower of Truth. Therefore the consistent praise of patient poverty as a straight road to spiritual perfection stands without conflict alongside the recognition that cupidity can corrupt not only the rich, but also both the involuntarily and the voluntarily poor: a point made explicit both in the poem's representation of the wastours and in the glaring conflict between the mendicants' ideals and their contemporary practices. As always in Piers, the external is of but minimal importance compared to the internal inclination of the soul either toward or away from Truth: each individual will must choose whether to wend toward either the Tower of Truth or the Tower of Care, and the outward temporal conditions and observances of the body alone bear no eternal significance in and of themselves, but only insofar as they either advance or hinder the soul in ascension toward God.

That ascension, of course, is the work of a lifetime, as Will's journey attests: the pursuit of Truth is not a finite end, but an ongoing process. It is fitting, then, that the poem ends not in clear-cut resolution, a circumscribed end which might invite the very sense of complacency which the poet has sought to unseat throughout the poem, but in the continuation of the journey, the necessity for Conscience to set forth in search of Piers and Grace. The necessity for reformation is not only the central theme of Piers, but its underlying purpose as well: the poet seeks to sear consciences into repentance, to jolt them out of placid superficial interpretations of divine law and impel them instead toward a more

rigorous understanding of the demands of the Christian faith. What is sought is nothing less than the transformation of the soul from its fallen state – that of a spiritual wastour – to the restoration of the *imago Dei*. To that end, the poet seeks to strip away every easy answer which might otherwise lull the soul into a false sense of complacency. Piers Plowman ends, therefore, much as it begins: with an urgent call to the pursuit of Truth.

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