

Piers Plowman

A Modern Verse Translation



William Langland

Translated by Peter Sutton

Piers Plowman

This page intentionally left blank

Piers Plowman

A Modern Verse Translation

WILLIAM LANGLAND

Translated by Peter Sutton



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Langland, William, 1330?-1400?
[Piers Plowman]

Piers Plowman : a modern verse translation /
William Langland ; translated by Peter Sutton.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-9503-0 (softcover : acid free paper) 

ISBN 978-1-4766-1817-3 (ebook)

1. Christian pilgrims and pilgrimages—Poetry.
2. Christian poetry, English (Middle) I. Sutton, Peter,
1946 February 20— translator. II. Title.

PR2013.S88 2014
821'.1—dc23

2014033734

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

© 2014 Peter Sutton. All rights reserved

*No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying
or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.*

Printed in the United States of America

*McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com*

Acknowledgments

I am indebted first of all to Gwen Appleby, who revived my interest in Langland by taking a group of local writers some ten years ago to the precise point on the Malvern Hills where she believed he had his vision. I am equally indebted to Peter Smith, founder and artistic director of the Autumn in Malvern Festival, who subsequently invited me to write about Langland. For their help in that process and in the making of this translation I am grateful to Bromyard and District Local History Society and Local History Centre, Cleobury Mortimer History Society, Colwall Village Society, the Wychwoods Local History Society (Oxfordshire), Herefordshire Archive Service and the Victoria County History Trust for Herefordshire, Shropshire County Archives and Worcestershire Record Office, as well as to the librarians of Great Malvern Library, Westminster Abbey and Worcester Cathedral Libraries. I thank the poet Jim Denning for his kind words about the translation, and my son and my wife, a former proofreader for the European Commission, for their painstaking reading of the text. I owe a debt to all the authors cited in the bibliography, and most especially to Carl Schmidt for his very generous encouragement and permission to consult his work.

This page intentionally left blank

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments v

Introduction 1

The Identity of the Author 13

Prologue	21	Step XI	122
Step I	28	Step XII	136
Step II	35	Step XIII	146
Step III	42	Step XIV	161
Step IV	53	Step XV	175
Step V	59	Step XVI	194
Step VI	78	Step XVII	203
Step VII	88	Step XVIII	214
Step VIII	96	Step XIX	228
Step IX	100	Step XX	242
Step X	107		

Selected Bibliography 253

Index 257

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

The Poem and the Translation

The medieval English poem known as *Piers Plowman* is a moving, disturbing and often amusing commentary on corruption and greed that is still apposite today. Conscience, Fidelity, Gluttony, Pride and the other human strengths and weaknesses named as characters in the poem are timeless, and are recognizable as our present-day politicians and celebrities, friends and neighbors. Merchants, bankers, brewers and judges, scholars, sheriffs, bishops and priests come tumbling out of the text alongside wastrels and vagabonds, thieves and fraudsters, drunkards and whores. The poem gives a vivid insight into the social attitudes and everyday concerns of England in the fourteenth century as well as into contemporary religious beliefs, and it is this mixture of the sublime and the familiar, the coarse and the spiritual, that gives the poem its unique strength.

From the historical references in the poem it is thought that the author, William Langland, wrote the earliest version in the mid-1360s, and longer, revised versions in the late 1370s and the mid-1380s. This was a period of political and religious upheaval and of burgeoning literary activity, when the French of the Norman elite and the Old English of the Anglo-Saxon lower classes had only recently been melded into one language, now termed Middle English. The best-known English writer of the time is Geoffrey Chaucer, author of works including the *Canterbury Tales*, although numerous love poems, histories, scientific treatises, plays, songs, romances, moral philosophies, travelogues and religious commentaries were composed and written by other writers too, in both English and Latin.

Piers Plowman revolves around the narrator's quest for how to live a good Christian life that combines practical activity with spiritual reflection. Every reading of the poem reveals new layers of meaning, but the English of the text is so far removed from today's language that it cannot be read without assistance. The aim of this translation is to provide a version that retains the energy,

alliteration, imagery and intentions of the original and can be read with pleasure for its own sake by anyone interested in poetry, history or literature. It is not intended primarily as a crib, although it can also be used as an introduction to the original, which well rewards deeper study.

The translation grows out of a dramatic presentation about Langland given during the 2012 Autumn in Malvern Festival. I have therefore come at the task not as a literary historian but as a playwright, making use of my earlier experience as a translator working in the fields of education, law and the arts. The work would have been impossible without the background material listed in the Selected Bibliography, although I am aware that I have only skimmed the surface of the vast and richly productive sea of medieval scholarship.

Structure and Synopsis

When the poem was first printed, it was given the overall Latin title *Liber de Petro Plowman* or “Book of Peter the Plowman,” and it was divided into two sections, the Vision of Piers the Plowman, and the Life of Do-well, Do-better and Do-best. There is no evidence that Langland intended such a division, but it reflects the difference in mood which occurs at the beginning of Step VIII, when the narrator sets out to discover what doing well means, having seen plenty of ill-doing in his initial dreams. The whole poem can indeed be seen as a journey, each of the 20 chapters that follow the Prologue being called a *passus*, the Latin for “step,” which is the term adopted here.

The use of dreams was a conventional literary device,¹ but *Piers Plowman* is unusual in containing not one dream sequence but eight, and two more “dreams within dreams.” This is not surprising, given the huge scope of the poem, which not only explores Christian mysticism and morality, but also examines the role and duties of government, the papacy, the clergy and the different social classes, and considers economic relations, criminal justice, welfare, diet, food shortages, finance, taxation, trade, war and peace, heredity, medicine, the natural world, marital relations, child-rearing and the limits of academic learning. To borrow an appropriate image, it is “like many a church in the Middle Ages, so crowded with tombs and rood-screens, chantries and side-altars, that the total effect is a most curious blending of order and confusion.”²

Despite the many diversions, the narrator does nevertheless progress from

¹Dreams were used, for example, by Chaucer in *The Romaunt of the Rose* and *The Boke of the Duchesse*.

²Henry W. Wells, “The Construction of Piers Plowman,” in Edward Vasta, ed., *Middle English Survey* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 168.

puzzlement to resolution, finally moving from “contrition and confession and satisfaction through patience and poverty to faith, hope and charity [and] the Cardinal Virtues.”³ The poem closes with a plea for society as a whole to adopt these virtues of prudence, tolerance, justice and fortitude and to follow Christ’s two great commandments, to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

The poem opens with the narrator falling asleep on the Malvern Hills, a prominent ridge to the west of the River Severn in the English West Midlands, and seeing his first dream of a “fair field full of folk” caught between heaven and hell. A rowdy wedding is about to take place between Money and Falsehood, but Theology steps in to refer the matter to the King, and the crowd of revelers sets off for Westminster. The King threatens to arrest Falsehood and his friends, who flee, and he asks Conscience to marry Miss Money instead. Conscience refuses, and Reason supports him. The King undertakes to be guided by them in future.

In his next dream, the narrator sees the Seven Deadly Sins make their confession, which incites the people to set out in search of Truth. Piers the honest Plowman offers to lead them once he has finished the harvest, but he has to call up Hunger to punish the carousing idlers who decline to work. The quest for Truth nevertheless leads to a dead end when Piers is offered a written pardon for those who help him. He tears it up, arguing that what matters is not a scrap of parchment but to “do well,” and preferably to “do better” or “do best.”

In the second part of the poem the narrator seeks to discover what this means. In his dreams he consults Thought and Intelligence, Study, Learning and Scripture, but finds their obscurantism frustrating. He idly follows Fortune for a time, but eventually meets Fidelity, Nature, Imagination and Patience, who teach him the merits of poverty and the wonders of creation. He sees further visions of greed and the self-serving nature of social engagement, in the figure of a master tradesman. At length he is relieved to meet his guide Piers again, and encounters Faith, Hope and Charity.

The high point of the poem is reached in Step XVIII, when the narrator dreams of the terrifying Harrowing of Hell, which releases the souls of the penitent, including the heathen, from the clutches of the devil. But then the forces of Antichrist gather, against whom the only defense is true Christian values. Conscience and Grace seek to withstand the onslaught of Sloth, Covetousness and Falsehood, but Courtesy finally causes them to admit a fraudulent friar, who brings corruption to the very heart of the Church. Conscience sets off in despair to seek the help of Piers once more, and the narrator awakes

³T.P. Dunning, “Structure of the B Text of Piers Plowman,” in Edward Vasta, ed. *Interpretations of Piers Plowman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 261.

for the last time. The ending is sudden, but the journey has come to the end of the road.

The poem is thus full of religious symbolism and allegory, but it is also infused with humanity. The narrator repeatedly reveals his confusion, his anger against corruption, and details of his personal life, while constantly carrying before him the image of the honest plowman, the Piers of the title, whom he eventually identifies with Christ in all his glory.

The Sources of the Text

Some fifty-two early manuscript copies of the poem are still extant, an exceptionally large number which attests to the poem's popularity. There are also copies of the four printed editions which appeared about a hundred and fifty years after the author died. These versions differ markedly in length, content and structure, and were divided in the nineteenth century into three main groups, representing successive revisions of the work, termed A, B and C, by the first modern scholar to study the poem in depth, the Rev. Walter W. Skeat. He was a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge University and a founder member of the Early English Text Society, which continues to publish works. Through the Society Skeat issued a comprehensively annotated edition of all three consolidated texts of *Piers Plowman* in the original Middle English in the 1860s, and an edition based on this was published by Oxford University Press in 1886 and remained in print for over a century.⁴

This translation was made initially from that Skeat edition, and lines from it were used in the presentation given at Little Malvern Priory as part of the 2012 Autumn in Malvern Festival. With the kind permission of Dr. A.V.C. Schmidt, emeritus fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, the translation was then compared with his 1995 Everyman edition of the B text, which can be recommended to general readers wishing to consult the original.⁵ In consequence, some alternative readings have been adopted, and in a dozen instances, lines have been deleted, changed or added. Where the sense or the modern sentence structure requires, I have also transposed or rearranged a few lines on my own initiative. Attention is called in the footnotes to significant variations, "Schmidt" referring to the Everyman edition unless otherwise stated. Dr. Schmidt has

⁴W.W. Skeat, ed. *William Langland, The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redeless*, Vol. I: Text; Vol. II: Notes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886, 10th ed., 1923, latest reprint 2001). Editions of individual versions of the poem had been published by T.D. Whitaker in 1813 and T. Wright in 1856.

⁵A.V.C. Schmidt, ed. *William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, 2d ed. (London: J.M. Dent Everyman, and North Clarendon, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995).

also issued a revised and newly annotated parallel-text edition of the A, B and C texts, with the addition of a fourth, earlier version termed Z, and this has replaced Skeat as the standard scholarly edition.⁶ Other revised editions of the B text are by Kane and Donaldson, and by Robertson and Shepherd,⁷ and texts are becoming available online.⁸

The B text of the late 1370s, which was chosen for this translation, contains the liveliest narration and the sharpest social criticism. The A version of the 1360s is shorter, ending around Step XI of the B text, perhaps because Langland could not yet see the way ahead. The later C text of the 1380s recasts the poem in a less abrasive form, probably in response to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, when prominent Londoners including the Archbishop of Canterbury were murdered along with merchants and passers-by, and much property was stolen or destroyed. The leaders were appeased and then arrested, and most of the propositions put forward by the dissident cleric John Wyclif, many of which echo Langland's criticism of the clergy, were subsequently condemned as heretical.

Despite its political caution, the C version does contain some striking new images, such as a brewer negligently setting fire to his house (Skeat C IV, Schmidt III 104) and the King threatening to lock up Miss Money in solitary confinement in Corfe Castle (Skeat C IV, Schmidt III 140–141).⁹ It was tempting to incorporate these in the translation, but that would have been to take editorial license too far. However, three sections of the C version that are of particular interest are included, separated from the remainder of the text by indentation and the suspension of line numbering. Two are placed at the point where they appear in the C text, the first demonstrating Langland's sympathy for the hard-working poor (Step VII), and the second adding detail to the scene in hell (Step XVIII). The third section comprises so-called "autobiographical" lines and is placed at the end of Step XIV, where it fits conveniently.

The bulk of the footnotes are taken from Skeat, with the addition of

⁶A.V.C. Schmidt, ed. *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions* revised edition in 3 vols. (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute, 2011). Vol. I London: Longman, 1995, Vol. II Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2008.

⁷George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds. *Piers Plowman: The B Version—Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best: An Edition in the Form of Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17, Corrected and Restored from the Known Evidence, with Variant Readings*, rev. ed. (London and Los Angeles: Continuum, 2002); Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H.A. Shepherd, eds., *William Langland, Piers Plowman* (London and New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

⁸For example, through web.archive.org, the University of Virginia Piers Plowman Electronic Archive (www.piers.iath.virginia.edu) and the University of Michigan hosting of the Oxford Text Archive *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*.

⁹The Schmidt C numbers are taken from his 1995 Longman edition.

some valuable insights from the notes to the Schmidt editions, and some explanatory remarks of my own. Lastly, again with his generous permission, a few points in the text that remained unclear were checked against Dr. Schmidt's very lucid recent prose translation.¹⁰ Any errors and mistranslations are none the less entirely my own.

Verse Form

Chaucer uses the kind of end-rhyme (e.g., "A knight there was, and that a worthy *man* / That from the time that he firste *began*") which is familiar to the modern reader. It was well established in England by the beginning of the fourteenth century and had long been practiced in France and Italy. Langland, on the other hand, is at the forefront of a "fourteenth-century revival of alliterative verse in the West Midlands and North-West England."¹¹

The best-known poem of the revival is now *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*, and three shorter poems on morality are thought to be by the same unknown author: *Pearl*, *Purity* and *Patience*. There is no evidence that Langland knew these, but he would probably have been familiar with some of the so-called *Harley Lyrics* (British Library ms. Harley 2253). This collection contains a mixture of English, French and Latin texts that includes alliterative verse and was probably compiled in Herefordshire, Langland's home territory. It is thought that he also knew the alliterative poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*, written by an unknown author some time between 1350 and 1370, which shares some of the content of *Piers Plowman*.¹² He may also have encountered *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, which likewise has features in common. In turn, although some of the dates of composition are unclear, *Piers Plowman* almost certainly influenced alliterative poems such as *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, *The Plowman's Tale* and *Jack Upland*, which appear to build on its popularity. There is a huge body of literature on the Alliterative Revival and the extensive poetry of the period, which should be consulted for a full discussion of the literary context.¹³

¹⁰A.V.C. Schmidt, trans. *Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹R.W.V. Elliott, "The Langland Country," in S.S. Hussey, ed., *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (London: Methuen, 1969), 228.

¹²See *inter alia*: Stephanie Trigg, "The Rhetoric of Excess in Winner and Waster," in John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds. *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society* Vol. 3. (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1989), 91–108.

¹³See, for example: Helen Barr, ed. *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: J.M. Dent Everyman, 1993); T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: Brewer, and Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977).

In alliterative verse, instead of a rhyme at the *end* of a word, a number of stressed syllables or words in each line *begin* with the same sound, an enduring feature of English which finds echoes in poetry today and is preserved in everyday speech, in couplings such as “heart and hand” and “mind over matter.”

The other main feature of alliterative verse is the caesura or break that occurs at the mid-point of each line. It should be placed between grammatical structures, or in other words, it should be natural to pause at that point when reading the line.

Normally, there are four stresses per line, the first three of which should alliterate, but Langland “pushes the flexibility of the verse to its limits.”¹⁴ There is little consistency in where his alliteration falls. Sometimes it is on a stressed syllable, but sometimes it is on the unstressed first syllable of a word or on a completely unstressed word: perhaps Langland might have argued that it is acceptable to rhyme the first word in a foot, rather than the stressed syllable. Moreover, some lines contain only two alliterating syllables, not three. There is therefore much discussion of the degree to which these variations are intentional, and of the part played by scribal error.¹⁵

The number of unstressed syllables in a line also varies considerably, although some rules can be inferred¹⁶:

1. A line may begin with between zero and three unstressed syllables.
2. The “dip” between the stressed syllables consists of two or three unstressed syllables, although four are permissible in the first half of a line.
3. Four unstressed syllables are not permissible where one of these is a significant noun, verb, adverb or adjective that would normally be stressed.
4. The line should end either in the fourth stressed syllable (a “masculine ending”) or in no more than one unstressed syllable (a “feminine ending”), which is the norm.

To these can be added four more principles based on Langland’s practice:

5. Where the rhyme letter is a vowel, any vowel is acceptable.

¹⁴T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, 59.

¹⁵See, for example: John Burrow, “An Alliterative Pattern in *Piers Plowman* B,” in Andrew Cole, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 25 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 117–129.

¹⁶See Noriko Inoue and Myra Stokes, “Restrictions on Dip Length in the Alliterative Line: The A-Verse and the B-Verse,” in Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 26 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012), 231–260.

6. A sounded H may be either disregarded or treated as a consonant and rhymed with other Hs.
7. Lines may contain a subsidiary repeated sound.
8. Alliteration may roll over from one line to the next.

The Approach to the Translation

It has not been possible to keep to Langland's exact sound pattern because many of his words are obsolete. A line of the original may use W as its rhyme letter, for instance, while the same line in the translation may have to use R or F. However, alliteration is carried over from one line to another, subsidiary sounds are included, the caesura is broadly maintained, and the apparent rules for unstressed syllables are observed. Both masculine and feminine endings are used, but the former is now more usual because of changes in grammar and pronunciation.

In the interest of fluidity, the translation uses alliteration between any three out of the four stressed syllables in each line. Also, much use is made of pairs of alliterating syllables since it would have looked like incompetence to place only two alliterating syllables in a line. This results in the patterns *abab*, *abba* and *aabb*, rather than Langland's occasional *axay* and *xaay*, where *x* and *y* do not alliterate with anything. Furthermore, the rhyme letter is placed consistently on stressed syllables, although stress patterns may vary from reader to reader. V and F are treated as rhyming, as are T and TH, S, X, SH and soft C, and Q, K and hard C. The division into paragraphs is mine.

The names of the abstract characters presented some problems. The lady here called "Money" was originally "Meed," which means "reward," either a deserved recognition of work well done, or an undeserved bribe: "Money" now fulfills much the same role. "Kynde Wit" is translated as "Native Wit," but "Wit" on its own is translated as "Intelligence," while "Waryn Wisdom" and his friend "Witty" have become "Warren Witwell" and "Wily." I capitalize these abstract qualities only when they are clearly personified, not necessarily always as the same character or with the same gender. "Truth" is capitalized throughout when it is a synonym for God.

The poem contains over 300 Latin quotations, the vast majority from the *Vulgate*, the Latin Bible of the Catholic Church, and references to chapter and verse are given in the footnotes. Many of these would have been familiar to readers and listeners from church services, even if they did not grasp every word, and they were often left incomplete in the original text. Here, they are given in full, and in order to reproduce a mixture of familiarity and alienation, the earliest possible English translation of the *Vulgate* is used, the so-called

Douay-Rheims Bible.¹⁷ This differs at many points from the “Authorized” or “King James Version” (KJV) commissioned for the Church of England in 1611, and footnotes point to these differences.

In the original, longer biblical quotations (whether accurate or not) are generally treated as asides, and are excluded from the line numbering, while shorter quotations and non-biblical, proverbial and unattributed quotations are often integrated into the text, sometimes mixing Latin and English within so-called “macaronic” lines. The translation is more consistent than the original in this practice, non-biblical and non-liturgical Latin quotations being freshly translated and incorporated into the text in order to give some feel of the macaronic original. For that reason, and because of the moving of some lines and the omission of repetitions, especially English explanations of Latin quotations, the line numbering differs in places from the Middle English editions.

Langland sometimes plays on the fact that his Latin will not be fully understood, and at two points where a Latin insert runs to several lines (in the Prologue and Step XIV), this effect is imitated in the translation by the use of a jumble of Latin, French and high-flown English.

No attempt is made to soften three aspects of the poem that may trouble the modern reader. The first is the intolerance shown toward the Jews (see especially XVIII 92 ff), who are seen as rightly excluded from society. The second is the belief that Mohammed was a lapsed Christian (XV 397 ff). In order to stress that this is a medieval myth, the spelling of the names Mahomet and Mahon has not been changed. The third is the repugnant tale of Agag (III 255 ff), taken from the Old Testament, in which Saul is punished for not obeying God’s command to slaughter King Agag along with his entire people. Instead of pointing out how this differs from the Christian message of love, Langland uses the story to warn of the dangers of greed. Some readers may also be disturbed by a fourth point, the frequent use of the word “men” to mean “people.” However, the poem belongs to its era, and the translator has the duty to be faithful.

The Imagery of the Poem

The imagery in the poem is extremely rich. It includes numerous triads such as the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Three Wise Men

¹⁷The New Testament was completed in Rheims in 1582, and the Old Testament in Douai (as it is usually spelled) in 1609, both being revised by Bishop Challoner from 1749 to 1752. The edition used here is *The Holy Bible translated from the Latin Vulgate* (London: Baronius, 2012), a reproduction of the 1899 edition published by the John Murphy Company of Baltimore under the imprimatur of Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore.

and their three gifts, the three days of Christ's Easter Passion, and the faith, hope and charity of Saint Paul, which are matched by the threefold division of society into knights, laborers and clergy, itself subdivided into lay clerics, priests and bishops. Three props support the Tree of Charity in Step XVI, with its three fruits—marriage, widowed continence and virginity—while several attempts are made at identifying the meaning of Do-well, Do-better and Do-best. In Step XVII the three defects that may force a man to leave home—a nagging wife, rain and smoke—are bizarre symbols of the flesh, sickness and avarice. In the same Step, the Trinity is explained through the extended analogy of a hand, with its fist, fingers and palm, and of a torch with its wax, wick and flame.

Much of the imagery is allegorical and would have been understood at three levels: the superficial or literal meaning, the deeper moral implications, and the underlying spiritual truth. It was commonly said, for example, that the tree of the cross on which Christ was crucified had grown from the seeds of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden (XVIII 140). This is not literally true, but it is true in the sense that Christ died on the cross because of the evil done by people, from which they should desist, and that by dying, he redeemed them through the mystery of his divine love. Similarly, Langland does not literally mean that a single judge will one day sit in a combined court, but that a single set of principles will be adopted, based on honesty ("True-tongue," III 318).¹⁸ The most complex image is that of Piers himself, who is plowman, prophet, saint, the Church, and finally Christ, and the most puzzling is the tearing of the pardon (Step VII).¹⁹ Perhaps for that reason, the pardon was cut out of the C version, and the appearances of Piers were much reduced.

Reflections of spiritual reality were also seen in physical phenomena such as trees upturned, light and darkness, flood, fire, famine and disease, and even in topography. The tower that Langland glimpses on the hill at the start of the poem becomes in his mind the home of God in heaven, and the house with the moat down below becomes the dwelling of the devil, between which poles people live out their lives. God is associated with light, the tower therefore being in the east, and the devil with darkness and death, and his dungeon is therefore in the west.

¹⁸For a discussion of Langland's imagery and the meaning of the poem see, *inter alia*: Priscilla Martin, *Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower* (London: Macmillan, 1979); A.V.C. Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things: Collected Essays on Piers Plowman* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012).

¹⁹For a discussion of the pardon see, *inter alia*: Myra Stokes, *Justice and Mercy in Piers Plowman: A Reading of the B Text Visio* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Rosemary Woolf, "The Tearing of the Pardon," in S.S. Hussey, ed., *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (London: Methuen, 1969), 50–75.

Langland did not invent most of his images. The wind beating at the tree of Charity (XVI 27 ff) can be traced to the early Church Fathers, for example,²⁰ while the fall of Lucifer and the naming of Longinus, the Roman centurion who acknowledges Christ on the cross, occur in the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus.²¹ Langland adds his own variations, however, turning Longinus into a Jewish knight who jousts with Jesus, just as Jesus jousts for mankind in a deadly tournament (XVI 163, XVIII 22 ff) to which he rides in the person of the Good Samaritan (XVII 51). But the Samaritan is also the embodiment of Charity, one of the many abstract qualities in the poem that slip in and out of human shape.

Images are thus not only plentiful, but also intertwined, shifting and cross-referenced, and each carries a wealth of connotations. I hope that readers enjoy discovering and reflecting on them.

²⁰Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 408.

²¹Nicodemus is named as one of those taking Christ's body for burial in John xix 39.

This page intentionally left blank

The Identity of the Author

There are three well-known sources for the identity of the author. One is a note appended in Latin to an early manuscript of the poem held in Trinity College Library, Dublin. This states that the father of “Willielmus de Langlond” was Stacy de Rokayle, a gentleman who held land in Oxfordshire from the Despensers. The second is the 1550 printed edition, the preface to which says that the author was “Roberte Langelande, born in Cleybirie about viii miles from Malverne hilles,” although the name Robert stems from a misreading of the poem, and Cleobury Mortimer, as the town is now known, is 28 rather than eight miles from Malvern.

The third source is the poem itself, in which the narrator says he is called Will—often punning on the name—places his opening vision on the Malvern Hills (Prologue 5), refers to himself as a poet (XII 16) who is no respecter of persons (XV 5–9), names his wife and daughter (XVIII 431), describes himself as balding (XX 186), and may imply in Step XI that he once led a dissolute life. From his descriptions of the Seven Deadly Sins (Step V), the demons in hell (XVIII 263 ff) and old age (XX 185 ff), he has a lively sense of humor, which has echoes of the comic sections of the miracle plays performed by townsmen up and down the country. However, he can also be self-righteous and prudish in his dismissal of popular songs, ribaldry and vulgar “japes” (especially Steps V, VI, XIII).

He has much to say about trade, learnt presumably from observation, and he has some knowledge of the law. He opens a charter (II 74) and a reprieve (XIV 190) with legalistic terminology, he understands the distinction between secular courts and clerical courts, which he accuses of simony (Steps II and III), and he hints that he is acquainted with the practices of legal scribes (XI 290 ff). He may also know French, since he complains that students no longer learn any language other than English and Latin (XV 377), although his two French quotations (X 437, XI 370–371) are merely proverbial sayings and he pokes fun at the pretentiousness of using French words (VI 308).

Steps VIII, XIII and XV suggest that he has undertaken a physical as well

as a spiritual journey, and in the “autobiographical” passage from the C version (here at the end of Step XIV) he speaks of his later life in London, living humbly with his wife and singing offices for the sick and the dead. He says that his father and friends paid for his early education and that he has always had a clerical occupation, and he suggests that he is tall and ungainly. From the dating of the B version of the poem to the late 1370s, and the statements that Lovely-to-look-at and Imagination have accompanied him for 45 years (XI 47, XII 3) and that Piers has followed Truth for forty-something (V 543), it can be inferred that he was born between 1330 and 1332, although the number forty may well be notional and there is no guarantee that the author of the poem is identical to its narrator.

There is a strong local tradition that he was born and educated in Shropshire or in the Malvern area, on the borders of Worcestershire and Herefordshire, and the dialect of the poem confirms the author’s western origin. In Shropshire, Cleobury Mortimer parish church, which dates to the twelfth century, boasts a large stained-glass window installed in 1875 to celebrate Langland and his poem. It shows heaven at the top, flanked by hope and faith, Christ in glory in the second tier flanked by peasants and gentry, the Passion and biblical miracles lower down, and Langland, flanked by Truth and Falsehood, lying at the foot with the Malvern Hills in the background. In support of the town’s claim to Langland, it is argued that the Latin abbreviation *pat* in the Dublin manuscript stands for *patronus* (patron) rather than *pater* (father), and that he came from a “Longelond” family living in nearby Kinlet.¹ A Shropshire website states unequivocally: “His father owned some land and William, the second son, was destined to be a clerk. He was sent to the Austin Friars at the Woodhouses to be educated.”²

This parentage seems unlikely since *pater* is the normal meaning of *pat*.³ However, the belief that he was a pupil at the Augustinian Priory outside Cleobury is rather more persuasive in view of his frequent allusions to “hermits,” a term applied particularly to the Augustinians, and less commonly to other religious orders to this day.

As for Malvern, Great Malvern Priory, which was a remote daughter house of Westminster Abbey in Langland’s day and is now the parish church, displays a recent poem by Patric Dickinson suggesting that he was educated

¹John Corbett, “William Langland—Poet and Hermit,” *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society* lvii (1961–64): 224–230; Gwyneth Nair and David Poyner, “Concerning the Langland Family of Kinlet,” *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society*, lxxxiv (2009): 15–20.

²www.shropshire-promotions.co.uk

³Adriano Hoepli, *Dizionario di Abbreviature Latine ed Italiane* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1973).

there. However, the display in Malvern Museum, located in the fifteenth-century gatehouse to the Priory, states that he was probably educated at Little Malvern Priory, three miles farther south. This was a dependency of Worcester Priory at the time, to which recalcitrant monks were allegedly sent. The belief that Langland had his schooling there is reinforced by four features of Little Malvern Priory identified by R.E. Kaske. First, a carving of two sows that can still be seen is thought to have inspired one of the lines about Gluttony (V 341). Secondly, there was until 1967 “over the nave entrance door a small wooden figure of an angel ... and it is suggested that Langland had this in mind when he wrote of the ‘angel of heaven stooping down’” (Prologue 148), while “the stone carving of a lion ... bears a resemblance to the curious description of the personification of *Anima*,” here translated as “Soul” (XV 13). And finally, Saint Giles, whose legend is recounted in the poem (XV 272 ff), was the Patron Saint of Little Malvern Priory.⁴ Much of the Priory church was demolished in the Reformation, but the remainder still functions and displays three stained-glass roundels commemorating Langland.

It has also been argued that he was born in the Malvern area, taking his name from a section of land that is still known as “Longland” and lies to the west of the Malvern Hills, between Colwall and Ledbury. The sixteenth-century reference to “Cleybirie” is said to be a misspelling of “Ledbury,” which is indeed “about viii miles from Malverne.”⁵ However, it seems more likely that “viii miles” is the scribal error, especially as medieval miles were not standardized and there is no shortage of “Longlands.”

A further claim that Langland was ordained an acolyte in Bromyard, about ten miles west of the Hills, on December 20, 1348, is yet more dubious, even though the Bishop’s records confirm that a William of Colwall was ordained on that date.⁶ Nine out of 65 ordinands were called William, which was the commonest name of the day.⁷

The author who made these claims in the 1920s, A.H. Bright, whose family had occupied a house below the Malvern Hills for generations, is more convincing in his identification of a point on the Hills which fits the topography of the opening vision.⁸ From here, where one of many springs issues from the

⁴Ronald Bryer, *Not the Least: The Story of Little Malvern* (Hanley Swan, Worcs: Self-Publishing Association, 1993), 24, citing an earlier work by W.J.C. Berington, owner of the neighboring Little Malvern Court.

⁵A.H. Bright, *New Light on Piers Plowman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928).

⁶Joseph Henry Parry, ed., *The Register of John de Trillek, Bishop of Hereford (AD 1344–1361)*, vols. I & II (Hereford: Wilson and Phillips, 1910), Vol. II, 475–6.

⁷Joe Hillaby, *Ledbury: A Medieval Borough* (Ledbury, Herefs.: Ledbury and District Society Trust in assoc. with Logaston, 2005), 43.

⁸See also Bruce Osborne and Cora Weaver, *Celebrated Springs of the Malvern Hills* (Andover, Hampshire: Phillimore, 2012), 69–71, “The Pewtriss Spring, also known as Primeswell.”

Hills, it is possible to look up on a “morning in May” to the summit of the Herefordshire Beacon, albeit more to the south than the east, where a Norman fortification once stood, and down toward houses in the west which retain some suggestion of a “Moat,” according to local maps. Even though Langland’s description need not be taken literally, this view may have been in his mind.

It is generally supposed that William called himself Langland either to disguise his identity or because he was illegitimate, in which case the opprobrium that he heaps on the illegitimate is explained by the emotional need to overcompensate. Even if illegitimate, he might nevertheless have been acknowledged by members of the Rokayle or Rokele family, various branches of which were major landholders in half a dozen English counties and in Ireland. Their offices included justices of the peace, a bailiff to the Queen, and a sheriff of London, as described in Robert Adams’ book.⁹ One of the holdings of their feudal superiors, the Despensers, was Hanley, close to Little Malvern Priory, and it may be that the Despensers paid for Langland’s education. They owed a debt to the Rokayles because Peter Rokayle, Stacy’s father and therefore William’s putative grandfather, had been involved in a plot to rescue King Edward II, who was accused of having a gay relationship with Hugh Despenser and was imprisoned by the Queen’s lover Earl Mortimer in Berkeley Castle, a short way down the Severn.¹⁰ One beneficial consequence of a religious education would have been that minor holy orders subjected William to clerical rather than to royal or feudal criminal courts, an important consideration given these dangerous associations.

Professor Adams suggests that Langland went on to take full vows, and he identifies him with a priest named William de la Rokele, who held a number of prominent public offices, was legitimate, and was accepted in high society. The main difficulty with this theory is the likelihood that Langland was married. That problem can be overcome if he completed his vows after the death of his wife, but she is still mentioned in the “autobiographical” lines of the late C version of the poem. If these lines are to be believed, his education was interrupted by “the death of my friends,” presumably chiefly his Despenser patron, who probably succumbed to the Plague of 1348–49 when Langland was aged about seventeen. The same outbreak may have accounted for his father as well.

Estimates of how he spent his time between leaving the Priory and arriving in London vary from years spent as a peasant farmer, according to the Colwall Village Society,¹¹ to further study at University, although possibly without

⁹Robert Adams, *Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2013). See also British History online, www.british-history.ac.uk.

¹⁰Adams, 67. See also www.edwardthesecond.blogspot.com.

¹¹*Colwall History Map* (Colwall, Herefordshire: Colwall Village Society, 2000). See also A.H. Bright, *New Light on Piers Plowman*.

completing a degree.¹² He certainly knew Latin and had a grounding in religious education, but the only direct evidence again comes from the poem, and it is inconclusive. Aside from the Bible and books of prayer and the liturgy, he repeatedly cites the “four doctors” of the Church, Saints Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory and Jerome, who, according to a former Dean of Worcester Cathedral, “not uncommonly appear on medieval screens and pulpits.”¹³ He also names Peter Comestor, the twelfth-century “Master of Histories,” the late sixth-century Saint Isidore of Seville, and the writer known as Saint John Chrysostom. He appeals to the authority of the conventional founders of monasticism, he mentions Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, and he quotes from Boethius, the sixth-century Roman philosopher.

His knowledge of earlier Greek and Roman literature is confined to the few names that were common currency (Aristotle, Plato, Seneca, Trajan, Hippocrates, Virgil and Alexander). The only exception is the collection of moral proverbs attributed to the third-century Dionysius Cato, who was confused in many minds, perhaps including Langland’s, with the earlier politicians and writers Cato the Elder and Cato the Younger. Langland quotes Dionysius Cato on eight occasions, and it is therefore likely that whoever taught Langland Latin in his youth used Cato’s *Distichs* as a text.

Moreover, his quotations are sometimes vague: “As the Bible sensibly says” (XI 379), or “As Scripture describes” (XIV 62). He makes no distinction between Pope Gregory I and Pope Gregory IX, or between Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Augustine of Canterbury, and he fails to name some of the other authorities whom he quotes: the twelfth-century French theologian Peter Cantor, Pope Innocent III of the early thirteenth century, and his own contemporary, Bishop Brinton of Rochester.

However, some texts, including “Lives of the Saints,” were so well known that there was no need to name the author, and many quotations would have become proverbial, such as those traced to John of Bridlington (IX 185–186), Alexander of Villedieu (XI 260) and Godfrey of Winchester (XII 50). Allowance must also be made for the shortage of books before the age of printing and the need to memorize or note down quotations from a range of sources.

There is nevertheless speculation that he knew the work of a few Christian authors at first hand, including Saint Augustine of Hippo,¹⁴ the prolific

¹²Anna Baldwin, *A Guidebook to Piers Plowman* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5–6.

¹³R.L.P. Milburn, *Saints and Their Emblems in English Churches* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 15.

¹⁴David Lawton, “The Subject of Piers Plowman,” in John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds., *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society* vol. 1 (East Lansing, MI: Colleague, 1987), 10.

twelfth-century theologian Alan of Lille,¹⁵ and perhaps the thirteenth century John of Hoveden, who also wrote in Latin.¹⁶ He may have taken some of his righteous indignation from manuals on morals,¹⁷ and his style may have been influenced by the prose of Saint Bernard¹⁸ and by Latin hexameter versification,¹⁹ both learned in school.

Whether this means that he attended the university is another matter, as he may have relied, after his initial education, on sermons from pulpits and preaching crosses, reading and conversation.²⁰ A large number of anthologies of religious, scientific and historical knowledge were in circulation, including two compiled by an early fourteenth-century prior of Little Malvern, copies of which may have been preserved there.²¹

The poem refers to a number of historical events: the campaign of Edward III in France in 1346–47 (III 186 ff), the attempt to restrict wages in the wake of the Plague of 1348–49 and the collapse of the bonded labor system (VI 309), the destructive storm of January 1362 (V 14), the famine of 1370 when Chichester was Lord Mayor of London (XIII 271), which was one of a series of bad harvests, the sermon preached by Bishop Brinton in 1376 and the associated parliamentary debates (Prologue 166 ff), the disputed election of a pope in 1378 (Prologue 110 and XIII 176), the difficulty of making peace with France in the 1370s (XIII 177), and the murder of Edward II (III 124 and 184) before Langland was born. It has also been suggested that the learned Doctor at the banquet (Step XIII) may refer to an actual person, Friar William Jordan.²²

This awareness not only of natural events but also of political affairs suggests that Langland moved in relatively high social circles, and a further pos-

¹⁵A.V.C. Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things: Collected Essays on Piers Plowman* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 63–67.

¹⁶Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things*, 79–81.

¹⁷G.R. Owst, “A Literary Echo of the Social Gospel,” in Edward Vasta, ed. *Interpretations of Piers Plowman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 22–53; Rosemary Woolf, “The Tearing of the Pardon,” in S.S. Hussey, ed., *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (London: Methuen, 1969), 50–75, esp. 58.

¹⁸Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things*, 69.

¹⁹Traugott Lawler, “Langland Versificator,” in Andrew Cole, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 25 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 37–76.

²⁰E. Talbot. Donaldson, “Piers Plowman: The Religious Allegory of the C Text,” in Edward Vasta, ed., *Interpretations of Piers Plowman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 133.

²¹Brian Smith, *A History of Malvern* 2d ed. (Malvern: Alan Sutton and the Malvern Bookshop, 1978), 100.

²²Anne Middleton, “The Passion of Saint Averoy: ‘Deuyning’ and Divinity in the Banquet Scene,” in John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds., *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society* vol. 1 (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1987), 31–40.

sible sighting of the poet in such company has come to light recently. Michael Bennett has identified someone referred to as “William called Long Will” (*Willelmus vocatus Longewille*) in a list of persons named as accessories to a murder committed in 1385 in the north of England by the half-brother of the King.²³ The odd soubriquet stands out because all the other accused bear conventional forenames and surnames. Despite his apparent poverty and clerical allegiance, did Langland perhaps occupy a privileged status in disaffected noble households because of his prowess as a poet, saying things about the government that few others dared to utter? This role would neatly coincide with the description of his life in London, with the overall tenor of the poem, and with the revisions made to the C version.

It is not known when he died, although the period 1385–87 is likely from a reference in a poem by John But to the death of the author of *Piers Plowman*, But himself having died in 1387.²⁴

In the absence of firmer evidence, the figure that emerges from the shadows is thus that of a tall, awkward son of the minor nobility who was born about 1330 in Cleobury, Shropshire, and was sent to school, perhaps at first at a local Augustinian priory, and then about thirty miles away at Little Malvern Priory, at the expense of Sir Hugh Despenser of nearby Hanley Castle. After Sir Hugh died in the Plague of 1348–49, he spent some time wandering the country observing life, and arrived in London in the 1360s. There he made a living as a poet, copyist for lawyers and “chantry priest” in minor orders. This enabled him to marry, and his poetic skill allowed him eventually to move in elevated social circles opposed to the government, even though he still lived very modestly. He probably began the earliest version of the poem around 1360, gave it up around 1365, returned to it in the 1370s, and produced a final version in the 1380s, by which time the poem was well known and, in his view, misunderstood by rebels attacking the structure of the state and organized religion.

Nothing is definite, however, and Langland’s autobiographical statements may be as allegorical as much of the poem. No other writing has been definitively attributed to him, although there are indications that he wrote other work before *Piers*, including a translation from French of the poem *William of Palerne*.²⁵ All that can be said with certainty is that he was a caustic critic of pretension and corruption among clerics, courtiers, merchants and lawyers—and a gifted poet.

²³Michael Bennett, “William Called Long Will,” in Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 26 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012), 1–25.

²⁴See, for example, the Introduction to Schmidt’s 1995 Everyman edition, xxiii.

²⁵Lawrence Warner, *The Myth of Piers Plowman. Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22ff.

This page intentionally left blank

Prologue

In which I fall asleep on the Malvern Hills and see in my first dream all manner of folk caught between a tower and a dungeon: beggars and burghers, priests and pilgrims, lawyers and laborers, tradesmen and tramps, knights and their king. A parliament of rats and mice meets to discuss belling the cruel cat from court, but I dare not say who the cat is.

One summer season when the sun was still soft,
I set off like a sheep in a shaggy woolen smock,
The unholy habit of a wandering hermit,¹
And went seeking wonders in the wide, wide world.

5 And one morning in May on the Malvern Hills
I witnessed a wonder which I warrant was magic.

Quite weary with walking I wanted to rest
On a broad grassy bank beside a small brook.
As I lay down I leant and looked in the water,
10 Which babbled so sweetly I soon fell asleep.
And sleeping I saw the strangest of dreams:
That I wandered a wilderness, not knowing where,
And high in the east, looking up at the sun,
Saw a tower on a toft, built sturdy and true²;
15 To the west, further down, were a dale and a dungeon
With deep, dark ditches that I gazed on with dread.

Between them I found a fair field full of folk,
All manner of men, both moneyed and poor,
Either walking or working at what the world wants.

¹Friars were sometimes known as “hermits,” and Langland’s poor opinion of them is a recurrent theme of the poem. Skeat believes that the preceding line means “like a shepherd,” not a sheep.

²A toft is a small hill.

20 Some were pushing a plow with no time for play,
And were sweating as they scattered and sowed the seed
And gathered the grain that the greedy would squander;
Some were pouting like popinjays, strutting with pride,
Bedecked in dandified, elegant dress;
25 And many were practicing penitence and prayer,
Living soberly and strictly for the sake of our Lord
In the hope that they'd have their reward in heaven,
Such as anchorites, hermits who aren't seen abroad
And don't go roistering round the roads
30 Or lead lives of luxury, lechery and lust.

And some were making their money as merchants,
Successfully it seemed from what I could see,
And others as minstrels, through music and mirth,
Not sinning but singing amusing songs,
35 While japing jackasses, Judas's children,
Feigned uncouth fancies and foolish affronts
Yet well had the wit to work if they would.
I will not repeat Saint Paul's great reproof;
*He who speaks slander is Satan's slave.*³

40 Beggars and tramps were bustling about,
Their bellies and bags crammed to bursting with bread,
Telling falsehoods for food, fighting in taverns
And going to bed as gorged as gluttons,
Then rising like vagabonds, ribald as rogues,
45 Pursued as ever by slumber and sloth.

There were pilgrims and palmers pledging to go
Conjointly on journeys to Rome and Saint James,⁴
Which would let them tell lies for the rest of their lives,
And some were saying they'd already seen shrines
50 And were citing wise stories they said they had heard.
But the way that they spoke showed their stories were slim
And their tongues were attuned not to truth but to lies.

³Source not known. Saint Paul's reproof may refer to Ephesians v 3–4: "Let it not so much as be named among you ... obscenity, or foolish talking, or scurrility."

⁴Palmers carried palm leaves supposedly brought back from the Holy Land. Saint James is the shrine of that saint in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where he is said to have been martyred in AD 44.

A whole army of “hermits” with hook-ended staves
 Were walking to Walsingham with wenches in tow.⁵
 55 They were great tall lummocks who disliked hard labor⁶
 And dodged hard work by donning strange dress,
 Hooded long habits that made them look holy.

And further, I saw all four schools of friars
 Preaching to people to make a fat profit,
 60 Construing the Gospel to suit themselves,
 Giving it meanings to go with their greed
 And clad in unclerical clothes that matched
 The money they made from their merchandise.
 The strangest signs have been seen ever since
 65 They’ve chosen to be chaplains: their charity is dead
 And the vilest misfortune on earth will befall us
 If the friars and the Church do not finish their feud.

A pardoner was preaching as if ordained priest,
 Brandishing a bull with a bishop’s seals⁷
 70 And saying he could safely bestow absolution
 For falsely breaking both fasts and vows.
 The unlearned believed him and liked what he said,
 And came on their knees to kiss the false claim.
 He bamboozled and blinded and baffled them with it,
 75 Reaping with his rigmarole their brooches and rings,
 Garnering gold from the gullible to feed
 An unholy humbug who hungered for pleasure.
 If the bishop were blessed with both his ears,
 He’d not send his seal to deceive people so.
 80 Though he had not appointed the pardoner to preach,
 The priest and the pardoner were splitting the proceeds
 That ought to have helped the hungry and poor.

Parish priests and parsons were complaining to bishops
 That their parishes were poor since the time of the Plague
 85 And begging for license to live up in London

⁵The Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham, Norfolk, was built in the eleventh century as a replica of the house in Nazareth where the Annunciation occurred.

⁶A lummock is a clumsy, stupid person.

⁷A pardoner was licensed to sell written indulgences, guaranteeing forgiveness for sins. A bull is an edict to which a leaden seal or bull is attached.

- And sing the psalms for the sweet sound of money.
And abundant bishops and bachelors and masters
And doctors of divinity, who should feed poor folk
And should preach and confess and pray for their people,
90 And are tonsured in token of these tasks under Christ,
Already were living in London—in Lent!—
Some serving the King and counting his cash
In exchequer and chancery, checking the takings
From the sale of strays, court sessions and wardships;
95 And some were enlisted by lords and ladies
To sit as their stewards and settle disputes,
Saying Matins and Mass and most other rites
With such insincerity that when they de cease,
Christ and his court may keep the gates closed.
- 100 I perceived how power had been passed to Peter
To bind and unbind, as the Bible recounts.⁸
As our Lord had wished, Peter lovingly left it
To four vital virtues, the finest of all,
The cardinal hinges on which heaven's gates hang,
105 To enclose the kingdom of Christ, to stay shut
Or to open and offer the bliss of heaven.
I will not comment on the cardinals at court
Who appropriate the name and the power of Peter,
Improperly appointing the Pope of Rome.
- 110 His election requires both learning and love:
I could but I cannot say more on the case.⁹
- A king then came, accompanied by knights,
And crowned by assent of the commons besides.
Native Wit named some people who were knowing
115 To counsel the King and to safeguard the commons.
And the King and his company of counselors and knights
Decreed that folk should provide them with food,
So Native Wit showed them what skills to establish.
They appointed plowmen for the profit of all,
120 To till and to toil as honesty dictates,
And the King, Native Wit and the commons as well
Made laws that were fit for all levels of folk.

⁸Matthew xvi 19.

⁹A bitterly disputed papal election took place in 1378.

- But beside them a hundred silk-hooded men hovered,
 Barristers-at-law who were busy debating,
 125 Pressing for payment to plead in court,
 Never opening their lips for the love of our Lord.
 You could sooner measure the mist on the Malverns
 Than persuade them to speak unless paid in silver.
- Barons and burgesses and bondsmen too
 130 I saw in the assembly, as soon you shall hear,
 Bakers and brewers and butchers by the dozen,
 Weavers of wool and weavers of linen,
 Tailors and tinkers and toll-collectors,
 Masons and miners and many more trades;
 135 And common laborers, of all characters and kinds,
 Such as ditchers and diggers who don't do a stroke
 And spend all day simpering, "Save you, Dame Emma!"
 And cooks and their corner-boys crying "Hot pies!
 Good geese and pork, come and get it, it's good!"
 140 And tavern-keepers too who were touting their wares,
 "Come whet your palate with white and red wine,
 A Rochelle with your roast, a Gascon or Rhine."¹⁰
- And suddenly a madman, a scrawny scarecrow,
 Knelt to the king and quaintly declared,
 145 "Christ keep you, sire King, and protect your kingdom.
 May you lead your land so that justice will love you
 And heaven reward you for wielding power well!"
- Then high in the air an angel of heaven
 Bowed down to say a sentence or so
 150 On behalf of the artless who have no Latin
 To speak for themselves but must suffer and serve:
*"Sum Rex, sum Princeps—I am King, I am Prince,
 Though Christus now is called by that name.
 O Princes, be pious in justitia and just,
 155 For justitia principis is pietas in practice.
 And sow the seed that you seek to reap,
 For justice stripped bare rebounds in judgment;
 Pietas sown is pietas received!"*¹¹

¹⁰In the original, lines 123–142 are placed after the madman, the angel and the Parliament of Rats.

¹¹Throughout the text, the words in italics were originally in Latin. Lines 152–158, 161–162 and 165 illustrate the difficulty facing those with little education.

- A boastful blatherer who was bursting with words
160 Echoed the angel on high as follows:
*“Though a king is rex because rex means ruler,
Sine justitia the title’s not true.”*
- So everyone started to spout Latin sayings—
Everyone who could—to the King and his council:
165 *“The precepta regis are our principles of practice.”*
A ragtag rabble of rats then ran out,
A thousand or more, with mice among them,
And they gathered together for the common good,
For a cat kept coming when he fancied from court
170 To leap on them lazily and seize which he liked,
Pushing them about in pitiless play.
- “We’re so scared,” one said, “that we scarcely dare look,
For if we complain we are painfully punished.
He catches us, scratches us, clutches and claws us,
175 Won’t leave us alone till our lives are past bearing.
We must find a feasible means of defense,
And then we can live easy lives like lords.”
- A rat of some standing, a skillful speaker,
Proposed a plan that he thought was perfect.
180 “I’ve seen men,” he said, “in the city of London,
Wearing carefully crafted collars and chains
And wandering at will off the leash over warrens
And wastes and wild land, I believe, as well.
By Christ, if a bell were clipped to their collars,
185 Then folk could fly when they found they were close!
I reason therefore,” said the ruminant rat,
“That we buy a brass bell, or better, bright silver,
And clip it to a collar to keep us from harm,
And collar the cat to proclaim when he’s coming,
190 When he’s resting or riding or running about.
We can sneak a brief squint if he’s feeling skittish
And stay in his sight as long as it’s safe,
But should he be angry, we’ll skip to one side.”
- The rabble of rats agreed this was right,
195 But as soon as the bell was strung on safely,
No rat in the rabble throughout the whole realm
Would clasp the collar around the said cat,

Not for all the treasure to be had in England.
 Thus the plan was a failure and they felt like fools,
 200 Having squandered their time in senseless scheming.
 A mouse who seemed more sensible than some
 Strode forth sternly and stood before them all,
 Berating as follows the rabble of rats:
 “If we killed the cat, another would come
 205 To catch us and ours, wherever we hid.
 So I counsel the commons to forget the cat,
 And not be so bold as to bother him with bells.
 When he’s carving his venison or catching poor coney
 He leaves us alone, and our losses are less
 210 Than the endless horrors we’d have if we crossed him;
 We’d be rid of a tyrant, but have turmoil and trouble.
 As my father kept saying, these seven years since,
 ‘If the cat is a kitten, the court is a mess,’
 For no wretch can then rest for the rats in the night.
 215 If you read Holy Writ you’ll realize it’s true:
 *Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child.*¹²
 If the cat from the court could not claw us at will
 We mice would lay waste to many men’s malt
 And you rats would ransack and ruin men’s clothes:
 If you rats ran the roost, your rule would be wretched
 220 And it’s certain there’d be,” the mouse said, “much sorrow.
 So my counsel is to grieve neither cat nor kitten
 By carrying on about the collar I declined.
 And had I proposed it, I’d hold my peace!
 So let us allow him to do as he likes,
 225 To catch what he can, whether collared or free.
 My word to the wise is: Keep watch on your own!”
 These sights I saw, and seven times more.
 But by dear God in heaven I dare not write down
 What my rat dream may signify—solve that yourselves!

¹²Ecclesiastes x 16. The fable of the rats was cited in a widely quoted sermon by Bishop Brinton of Rochester in 1376. Edward III was infirm and his son, the renowned “Black Prince,” had just died, leaving his grandson, the future Richard II—the kitten—under the tutelage of his uncle, John of Gaunt—the cat. The rats and mice may refer to members of parliament.

Step I

In which I dream of a lady, Holy Church, explaining that the tower is the home of Truth, who is God, and that the dungeon is the dwelling of the devil, who fled from heaven with other wicked angels. When I ask how to acquire Truth, she is surprised at my simplicity and tells me that our deliverance lies in love.

- What the mountain means, and the murky dale,
And the field full of folk, I shall now reveal.
A lovely lady dressed in linen
Came from the castle and graciously called me
5 And said, "Are you sleeping? Do you see the people
Who are briskly going about their business?
For most men and women who wander this world
Hold that heaven is the here and now
And seek success in the realm they can see."
- 10 Though her face was fair, I felt afraid.
"Good madam," I said, "what may it all mean?"
"In the tower on the toft," she said, "lives Truth,
Who wishes you to follow the way of his word;
He's the father of faith, he formed you all,
15 Your faces, your skin and your five good senses
With which to worship him while you're on earth,
To which end he ordained that the earth should offer
Both wool and linen and what else you want
To live in a modest and moderate manner.
20 Of his grace he gave you three good things in common
To meet all your needs, and I'll name them to you
One by one; repeat them if you will.
The first is clothing, to keep you from cold,
The second is food, to succor and sustain you,

- 25 And the third is drink, though don't drink till you're drunk
 Or the worse for wear when you ought to be working,
 Remember that Lot so liked his liquor
 That he did with his daughters most devious things,
 Drinking such draughts to the devil's delight
- 30 That lust waylaid him and he lay with them both,
 And blamed what he did on indulgence in drink:
*Come, let us make him drunk with wine, and let us lie with him,
 that we may preserve seed of our father.*¹
- He was quite overwhelmed by women and wine
 And in his excess sired sons that proved surly.
 So do not indulge in delectable drink:
- 35 Caution's the cup when you crave for more.
 What serves your soul may not satisfy your belly,
 But your belly may beg what is bad for your soul.
 Don't trust your body for it's taught by a tempter:
 The world is wicked and will want to betray you,
- 40 And the devil and the flesh will join forces to defeat you;
 Your soul understands it and says it in your heart,
 And I warn you too, to be wary and aware.”
- “Thank you,” I said, “I see what you're saying.
 But tell me, Madam, the money that men
 45 Amass on earth—who owns it, whose is it?”
- “Go to the Gospel,” she said, “and ask God,
 For when people proffered a penny in the Temple,
 Wondering whether they should worship Caesar,
 God asked what sort of inscription they saw
 50 And whose was the image that was on the coin.
 ‘Caesar’s,’ they said, ‘we each can see him.’
 ‘Then *render to Caesar*,’ God said, ‘what is Caesar’s,
 And *to God what is God’s*, if you want to do good.’²
 For rightful Reason should rule you all:
- 55 Let the warden of your wealth be your Native Wit,
 To guard and give out your gold as required,
 And to keep both caution and thrift in your thoughts.”
- Then by him who made her I asked her to answer:
 “That dungeon in the dale which I gazed on with dread,

¹Genesis xix 32.²Matthew xxii 21.

60 What may that place mean, good madam, I pray you?”

“That place,” she declared, “is the Castle of Care.
If you set foot inside you’ll be sorry you were born
For the house is the realm of a wretch called Wrong,
The father of falsehood who founded and built it.

65 Adam and Eve he enticed to do evil,
And he counseled Cain to kill his brother;
Judas he ensnared and incited with silver,
And hanged him after from an elder tree.³
He’s the hater of love and the lover of lies,
70 And soonest betrays those who trust in his treasure.”

Perplexed, I puzzled what person it was
Who spoke with such sense the words of Scripture,
And besought her to say by the sacred name
What woman she was who advised me so wisely.

75 “You know my name: I’m none but the Church.
I took you to me and taught you the faith,
And your godparents bound you to obey my bidding
And to love me loyally throughout your life.”

I commended myself to her mercy for my sins,
80 Pleading on my knees for her prayers for God’s pity,
Entreating her to teach me to turn to Christ,
And to do as my Maker might command:
“Don’t tell me of treasure but teach me simply,
Since you are saintly, how to save my soul.”

85 “When all treasures are tried,” she said, “Truth is the best,
For *God is charity*, as the Gospel agrees.⁴
It’s as priceless a precept as God is in person.
If your tongue is true and you tell no lies,
Act by that axiom and wish no one harm,
90 Then the Gospel grants that you will be godly
And like our dear Lord, as Saint Luke has said.⁵
The wise who understand should spread that wisdom,
Which is claimed in common by Christians and heathens.

³It was believed that Judas, having betrayed Jesus, hanged himself out of remorse.

⁴1 John iv 8.

⁵Such a statement cannot be found in Saint Luke’s Gospel, although both Matthew and Luke refer to treasure in heaven.

- “Kings and knights should keep to that course,
 95 Riding to arrest in surrounding lands
 Offenders and felons and tying them fast
 Till Truth can determine the toll of their wrongs.
 For David in his day, when he dubbed his knights,
 Had them swear on their swords to serve the Truth.⁶
- 100 Such pastimes are proper and appropriate for knights,
 Not fasting on Fridays every five score winters,
 But protecting the people who testify to Truth
 And letting neither love nor money delude them—
 And knights who lapse should lose their knighthood.
- 105 “Christ King of Kings dubbed knights of ten kinds,
 Cherubim, seraphim, and seven or eight besides.⁷
 It pleased him in his glory to give them the power
 To act as archangels over his household.
 He taught them the Trinity and thereby the Truth,
- 110 And to do as he urged was all that he asked.
 Lucifer, whose light was second to our Lord’s,⁸
 Thus learnt with his legions to be loyal to heaven,
 But abandoned obedience and was cast out from bliss,
 Falling from fellowship in the form of a devil
- 115 To inhabit for ever a deep dark hell.
 And many, many more, a multitude of thousands,
 Leapt out with Lucifer in loathsome shape,
 Believing the lies of the angel who misled them:
 I will ascend above the height of the clouds; I will be like the most
 *High.*⁹
- Heaven could not hold those who hoped he was right.
- 120 In devils’ guise they dropped for nine days
 Till God in his goodness stopped their giddy glide
 And stood the heavens still in absolute silence.
 When those angels fled, they fell in such a fashion
 That some stayed in the air while others sank to earth
- 125 Or landed deep in hell, where Lucifer lies lowest,
 His peerless pride being endlessly punished.

⁶In Skeat, lines 98–99 are placed before line 104.

⁷There were said to be nine orders of angels, the tenth having at first been superior and headed by Lucifer, the “bearer of light.”

⁸This line is not in Skeat.

⁹Isaiah xiv 14.

- “Folk who do wrong shall follow in his footsteps
 And dwell with that devil after they die.
 But they that do right, as we read in Holy Writ,
 130 And are true to the Truth, which is tried and found best,
 May be sure that their souls will ascend to heaven,
 Where Truth in his Trinity will enthrone them all.
 And so, with the Scripture, I say as before,
 When all treasures are tried, Truth is the best,
 135 And the learned should teach what they long ago learnt,
 That the treasure of Truth is the truest on earth.”
- “But tell me,” I said, “for I still don’t understand,
 By what force Truth can enter my feeble frame.”
- “You simpleton,” she said, “you lack common sense;
 140 You learned too little Latin in your youth, my lad:
 ‘*Alas that I led such a wasted young life!*’¹⁰
 From the innate awareness that’s inherent in your heart
 You must learn to love more your Lord than yourself
 And to die far sooner than to do deadly sins:
 145 You should live by that lesson unless you’re taught better
 By someone who’s wiser, whose word you may spread,
 For that is God’s word, by which you should work,
 And Truth has testified that taking a tincture
 Of love will ensure that no sin can besmirch you.
- 150 “What Truth has worked, he has worked with love,
 The divinest of virtues revealed to Moses
 And finest, most precious plant of peace.
 But love was so heavy that heaven could not hold it;
 It descended to us sinners and consumed the earth.
 155 Having fed in our fields on flesh and on blood,
 It was none the less lighter than a leaf on a linden,
 More piercing and potent than the point of a needle,
 So that armor and walls gave way to its weight.¹¹
 That love is now leader of the Lord’s folk in heaven,
 160 As a mayor is the mouthpiece for monarch and commons,
 And love takes the lead in shaping the law
 And imposing penalties on punishable acts.

¹⁰A familiar proverb.

¹¹Love is here equated, first, with the commandments revealed to Moses, and then with Christ, who came down to earth and became flesh and blood.

- “Love is placed in our person by the power of God;
 Our heart is the center where we sense it most strongly.
 165 Our native knowledge is therefore innate
 And conferred by the father who fashioned and formed us,
 Who looked down with love and let his son die
 To redeem us meekly for our dark misdeeds.
 While wishing no ill to the wounding world,
 170 His mouth asked mildly for mercy and forgiveness
 And pity for the people who put him to death.
 You see in him the sovereign example:
 He was mighty and meek and merciful to those
 Who hanged him on high and pierced his heart.
- 175 “So the rich, I propose, should pity the poor,
 And though mighty at court, should be meek and modest.
 For the deeds that you do, both damnable and good,
 Are the weights by which you’ll be weighed in the scales:
*In what measure you shall mete, it shall be measured to you
 again.*¹²
 Your speech may be innocent, your earnings may be honest,
 180 You may be as chaste as a child in church,
 But unless you show love and relieve the poor,
 And share out the gifts that God has granted,
 You derive no more merit from the Mass or from Matins
 Than Malkin from her maidenhood that men don’t desire.¹³
- 185 For the gentle James judged in his *Epistle*
 That faith without fact is not worth a farthing.
 Unless followed by deeds it’s as dead as a door-nail:
*Faith without works is dead.*¹⁴
 Thus uncharitable chastity stays chained up in hell,
 Of as little use as a lamp with no light.
- 190 Many chaplains are chaste but their charity is naught,
 They are greedy and grasping when gaining advancement,
 They’re unkind to their kin and to all other Christians,
 And they misuse their charity and moan for still more.
 Such uncharitable chastity will choke deep in hell!
- 195 “Many parish priests appear to be pure,
 But cannot slough off their covetous crust,

¹²Mark iv 24, cf. Luke vi 38.

¹³Malkin was the name commonly given to a plain servant-girl.

¹⁴James ii 26.

So surely and shamefully are they shackled to greed,
Not the truth of the Trinity but the treachery of hell,
So that lesser men learn to give less of their goods.
200 That is why these words of the Gospel are wise:
'Give, and it shall be given you for I give to you all¹⁵;
It is love that unlocks and releases my grace
To comfort the careworn encumbered with sin.'
For love is closest, most loyal to our Lord,
205 Love is life's healer, the highway to heaven;
I say therefore as I said from the Scripture,
When all treasures are tried, Truth is the best.
And now I have told you what Truth is, what treasure,
I shall linger no longer; God love and protect you!"

¹⁵Luke vi 38.

Step II

In which the lady leaves me and I dream of the impending marriage of Miss Money to False Fickle-tongue, surrounded by clerics, lawyers and court officials. Theology intervenes, persuading them to seek approval for the marriage from the court at Westminster, where the King threatens to arrest the entire dishonest gang, who flee, leaving Miss Money alone.

I stayed on my knees beseeching her and said,
“Madam, a moment! For the love of Mary
Who bore the blessed babe that bought our redemption,
Teach me some test to tell true from false.”

5 “Look to your left where they lurk,” she said,
“Falsehood and Flattery and their favored friends!”

I looked to my left as the lady told me,
Aware of a woman in wealthy attire
That was trimmed with fur, the finest to be found,
10 And crowned with a coronet to rival a king.
Her fingers were flush with fine gold rings
Refulgent with rubies as red as fire,
With dearest diamonds and deep blue gems,
Preservative sapphires both sea-blue and Turkish.¹

15 Her robe was dyed scarlet, of richest red,
And set with gold thread and sparkling stones;
Her dress was dazzling, I’d not seen such adornment.
I wondered who she was, whose wife she might be.
“What,” I inquired, “is this well-clad woman?”

20 “The mischievous minx,” Lady Church said, “called Money,
Who disdains Fidelity, my dearest love,

¹It was believed that sapphires offered protection from poison.

And lies about him to the lords of the law.
 She is privileged like me in the palace of the Pope,
 Though she's base and a bastard and Truth tries to ban her.
 25 For her father was false and a fickle talker,
 Who has told no truth since the time he was born,
 And Miss Money has inherited his morals and manners:
*Like father, like son. Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, and
 the evil tree bringeth forth evil fruit.²*

“I ought to have precedence, my parenthood is pure:
 My father is God, the groundswell of grace,
 30 I'm the goodly daughter of God without beginning,
 Whose majesty has granted me Mercy in marriage:
 I shall love as my lord in the heights of heaven
 Any man who is merciful and loyally loves me,
 But I'll wager the man who marries Miss Money
 35 Will exchange his charity for the chance of her love.
 For did not King David say in the psalms
 That those who speak truth shall truly be saved,
 But not the men who are moved by money?
Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle?³

“Miss Money now means to marry a rogue
 40 Called False Fickle-Tongue, whose father was a fiend.
 It was fast-talking Flattery who persuaded folk,
 And Liar who led them to allow the match.
 Tomorrow's the moment the marriage takes place,
 So you can, if you care to, discover what kind
 45 Of motley admirers consort with Money.
 Inspect them for sure, but stay well clear
 And keep disapproval and reproaches private
 Till Fidelity's empowered to punish and reprove them.
 I commend you to Christ and his immaculate mother.
 50 Don't covet Miss Money lest your conscience accuse you.”

The lady then left me, lying asleep,
 And I dreamt of Miss Money's marriage next morning,

²Matthew vii 17.

³Psalms xiv 1 (KJV Psalm xv 1).

How the ruling rich, the retinue of Falsehood,
 Were bidden to join the bridegroom and bride
 55 With a welter of others to witness the wedding:
 All kinds of people, both prosperous and poor,
 Both knights and clerics and the coarser commons,
 Jurymen and summoners, and sheriffs and their staff,⁴
 Beadles and bailiffs and brokers of goods,
 60 Provisioners and victualers, and clerical counsel—
 I can't count the crowd that clustered round Money,
 Though Simony and Civil-Law and assize-court jurors⁵
 Were most intimate allies of all with the maid.

 It was Flattery who fetched her first from her lodging
 65 And brought her as broker to be bound to Falsehood,
 And when Simony and Civil-Law saw how things stood,
 They consented for a fee to proceed as prescribed.

 Then Liar cried loudly, "Look, here's a charter
 That graceless Guile has sworn to give them,"
 70 And he asked both Simony and Civil-Law to scan it.
 So these senior scholars stepped forth together
 And unfolded the text that Falsehood had fashioned,
 And announced and gave notice of the following news:
 "*Be it known to all people both present and in prospect,*
 75 Let the world be aware and witness herewith,
 That Miss Money is married much more for her wealth
 Than her virtue or fairness or freedom of birth.
 Falsehood desires her for her fabled fortune,
 And fickle-tongued Flattery herewith confers
 80 The right to be proud, deriding the poor,
 And to backbite, be boastful and bear false witness,
 To scorn and to scold and to slander at will,
 And to tear to tatters the Ten Commandments.

 "And the Earldom of Envy and Anger together
 85 With the Stronghold of Strife, Senseless Chatter,
 The County of Covetousness, the neighboring coast
 Called Usury and Avarice—I yield them all,
 With Bargainville and Brokertown, the Borough of Theft
 And the Lordship of Lust, its length and its breadth,

⁴Summoners were the officers who summoned people to appear in court.

⁵Simony is the purchase of clerical appointments and benefits. See Acts viii 18–19.

- 90 With its wants and its words and its wandering glances,
 Its eyeings and idols and idle thoughts,
 And its fantasizing and its failure to perform.”
- Gluttony and Swearing were granted besides,
 With permission to drink all day in dives
- 95 And to jest there and joke and judge fellow Christians
 And on fast-days to feed before it was allowed,
 And to sit and to swill till slumber assailed them,
 To fall into bed and to fornicate like beasts
 Till sloth and sleep should slacken their limbs,
- 100 Then to wake in despair, persuaded it was senseless
 To reform before they died, being done with and damned:
 “For they and their heirs are to have and to hold
 A dwelling with the devil in eternal perdition,
 In the punishment of Purgatory and pains of hell,
- 105 To yield up after their year of expiation
 Their souls to Satan to suffer in sorrow
 And agony with him, not with God in heaven.”
- The text was extolled and attested by Wrong,
 By Peter the Pardoner of the Pauline Order,
- 110 By Bart the Beadle of Buckinghamshire,
 By Ronald the Reeve of the Soke of Rutland,
 By Mutch the Miller and many, many more:
 “In this year of the devil this deed I endorse
 In the sight of Sir Simony, by Civil-Law signed.”
- 115 Theology was horrified, hearing this humbug,
 And he spoke out to Civil-Law, saying, “You will suffer
 For making matches that mortify Truth,
 And woe betide you if you witness this wedding!
 For Money’s legitimate, her mother’s Amends.
- 120 God matched the maid to a man who was honest,
 And you’ve spliced her to deceit, God give you sorrow!
 It’s unseemly, Truth knows, for as Scripture says,
The laborer is worthy the wages for his work⁶
 And through legal footwork you’ve fettered her to Falsehood!
- 125 You live by lying and indulging in lust,
 Yourself and Simony, you shame Holy Church,

⁶Luke x 7.

- Like the noxious notaries who do nothing for folk—
 By God you'll pay the price for your malpractice!
 "You deceivers must see, unless you've gone soft,
 130 That Falsehood is faithless and slippery and fly.
 He's Beelzebub's brat and a bastard born
 While Money's a maiden who might do much good;
 She could kiss the King as a cousin if she cared to.
 So proceed as wisdom and sense prescribe,
 135 And lead her to London to let the law check
 Whether letting her lie with Falsehood is lawful.
 But even if justices judge them conjoined
 You had still better stop it for Truth is astute
 And is counseled by Conscience, who'll catch you both out.
 140 And if he should find you're as fickle as Falsehood
 Your souls will be certain to suffer hereafter."
 Civil-Law assented but Simony would not
 Till he'd seen his fee settled and the notaries consented.
 So Flattery flung down enough gold florins
 145 And said to Guile, "Go and give out the gold,
 To the notaries especially to seal their support,
 With a fistful of florins as well for False-Witness
 Since he'll persuade Money to act as I ask."
 When the gold had been given, how grateful they were
 150 To Falsehood and Flattery for fulsome rewards.
 They came to encourage and comfort Falsehood,
 Saying, "Certainly, sir, we'll unceasingly work
 To make Money your wife through our wisdom and wiles.
 She likes us, she laughs out loud at our jokes,
 155 And already she's agreed to go with good grace
 To London to look if the law will adjudge
 You both justly conjoined for ever in joy."
 So Falsehood and Flattery felt reassured,
 And summoned the people from several shires,
 160 Bidding them make ready, both ragged and rich,
 To come and witness the Westminster wedding.
 They hunted for horses to help with the journey,
 And Flattery found some mounts with two feet:
 He set Miss Money on a sheriff newly shod,
 165 While a juryman jogged along gently with Falsehood
 And a flatterer was Flattery's fashionable ride.

- The notaries were annoyed that they had none,
And that Simony and Civil-Law were equally served.
The unscrupulous pair swore they'd have steeds,
170 Saying summoners should be saddled as suitable mounts.
"We'll have papal appointees caparisoned like horses.
Sir Simony," said Civil-Law, "shall sit on their backs,
And you deans and sub-deans, you archdeacons as well,
Your officials and registrars, form a phalanx
175 And we'll saddle you with silver to ignore our sins
Of adultery, divorce and dubious finance,
And to tout about bishops on tours of visitation.
For myself I shall pick a Pauline who can plead
The most secret cases in consistory courts.
180 And a clerical commissioner shall be coupled to a cart,
To fetch from fornicators victuals that are seized,
And Liar shall lead with a heavy great load
Of fraudsters and fiddlers who are quick on their feet."
- Thus Falsehood and Flattery advanced together,
185 With Money in the middle and many straggling after.
I have no time to tell of all the trail
Of folk who followed them from near and far,
With Guile at their head to guide the host.
- But Honesty saw them. He said not a sound
190 But pricked on his palfrey and passed them by
And came and told Conscience about them at court,
And Conscience carried the news to the King.
- "By Christ," the King cried, "if I could but catch
Falsehood and Flattery and their fellow defrauders,
195 I'd be rid of the wretches that wreak such ill.
I'd hang them on high and their helpers beside them.
No surety, bail or swearing should save them,
The force of the law should fall without favor."
- He called for a constable and quickly sent him
200 To capture the culprits, whatever the cost,
To bind fast Falsehood, rebuffing all bribes,
And to strike off Guile's head on the spot, where he stood.
"Bring Money to me, no matter what they say,
And if you catch Liar, look you don't lose him:
205 Put him in the pillory despite his protests."

- At the door stood Dread, who overheard what was done,
How the King instructed his constables and sergeants
To fetter and bind Falsehood and his fellows.
So off Dread went to warn them at once,
210 So that Falsehood and his friends could fly for their lives.
- Falsehood sped off and fell in with friars,
And Guile was aghast and glad to go too,
But merchants met him and made him remain
And shut him in their shop to show off their wares
215 In apprentice's apparel to passing clients.
- And light-footed Liar leapt away too,
Lurking through lanes belabored by many
And welcomed not once for his wicked tall tales,
Everywhere scouted and screamed at and shunned,
220 Till pardoners had pity and pulled him indoors
And washed him and wiped him and wound him in rags
And sent him with seals on Sundays to church
Selling pardons for pence, making pounds at a time.
- Then physicians sent letters soliciting Liar
225 To live with them peering at potfuls of piss,
And spicers bespoke him to inspect their wares,
Being versed in their affairs and proficient in gums;
And minstrels and messengers met with him too
And held him a hostage a half year and more,
230 Till finally some friars, finding he could sell things,
Caught him by flattery and clothed him in a cope,
Allowing him leave to come and go as he liked,
But welcome to be with them whenever he wished.
- Thus the whole crowd fled out of fear and fright,
235 And none dared remain save Money the Maid,
And truly to tell she trembled with terror,
Distraught and in tears when she saw she was taken.

Step III

In which I am shocked to see Miss Money colluding with corrupt courtiers and a friar. The King asks Conscience to marry Miss Money, but Conscience refuses. The two of them argue, quoting and counter-quoting from the Bible. Miss Money says that she can help in time of need and in forging friendships, and while Conscience admits that money has two sides, he foretells a time when Money will not rule.

- Thus among the many it was only Miss Money
Who was brought to the King by beadles and bailiffs.
The King called a clerk, whose name is unknown,
To accord Miss Money some comfort and care.
- 5 “I shall test her myself, and try to determine
What manner of man she might most love.
If she’s willing to follow my wisdom and wishes
I’ll forgive her her guilt, as God is my helper!”
- The courteous clerk fulfilled the request.
- 10 With his arm round Miss Money, he modestly moved her
To a place of amusement, with minstrels and music.
The Westminster regulars welcomed her warmly,
And genteel judges came gleefully to join her,
To see the salon where the strange bird lived
- 15 And to comfort her with kindness by Clergy’s consent.
They said, “Don’t be sad or downcast or sorry,
We will go to the King and gain his agreement
To your wedding whom you wish wherever you want,
Overcoming the tricks of crafty Conscience!”
- 20 Miss Money was grateful and graciously gave them
Thanks for their care and accorded them kindly
Golden bowls and bright silver beakers,

- Rings with rubies and many more riches,
 And even a coin for the commonest clerk,
 25 And the lords thanked Money and left her alone.
- Then learned men likewise looked in to cheer her,
 Begging her to smile, and saying, “We’re your servants,
 We’ll do as you ordain all the days of your life.”
- She sweetly promised to serve them the same:
 30 “I shall love you loyally and make you lords,
 And see you’re accepted in consistory courts.
 No lack of learning can impede those I like
 For I’m known and advance the friends that I favor,
 While cleverer clerics are left in the cold.”
- There followed a confessor, coped as a friar.
 He whispered these words to winsome Miss Money
 As if confessing her, and fondly confiding:
 “Though you’ve lain, it’s clear, with commoners and clerics,
 And been friendly with Falsehood for fifty-odd years,
 40 I’ll absolve you myself for a sackload of wheat
 And pray for you daily and do all the damage
 I can to the conscience of clerics and knights.”
- So Miss Money knelt to admit she was immodest,
 And confessed her shameless and frequent faults,
 45 Telling him a tale and tipping him a coin
 To act as her private emissary and priest.
- He summarily absolved her and swiftly added,
 “We are putting in a window that’s proving pricey:
 If you’ll glaze the gable and engrave your name,
 50 Your soul will be certain to soar up to heaven.”
- “If that’s guaranteed, I’ll be glad,” she agreed,
 “To be friends for ever, unfailing and faithful,
 As long as you leave men some lecherous license,
 And don’t blame ladies who long for some lust.
 55 It’s the frailty of the flesh, as you’ll find in your books,
 And it’s hardly unnatural, it’s how we’re all here;
 If a scandal’s avoided, it’s soon all resolved,
 And the soonest forgiven of the Seven Deadly Sins.
 So have mercy” said Money, “on men with the itch,
 60 And I’ll rebuild and roof your run-down church,

Whitewash the walls and glaze the windows,
 And pay for painting the patron's portrait,
 Till nobody knows I'm not one of your nuns."

- But God forbids the good to engrave
 65 On windows the details of deeds they have done
 Lest pride and pomp are what they depict,
 For God knows the giver's conscience and greed
 And the covetous cause and the cost of the gift.
 I advise you, my lords, to avoid such ventures
 70 As writing on windows what you've done well.
 And when you give alms don't ask for reward
 Lest your only reward is on earth, not in heaven:
*Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth.*¹
 That's how the Gospel says good men should give.

- And mayors and their mace-bearers, men in between
 75 The King and the commons who keep the law,
 Should put in the pillory and punishment stools
 Brewers and bakers and butchers and cooks,
 For these are the traders who treat most unfairly
 The poor who must purchase portion by portion.
 80 They repeatedly poison poor people by stealth,
 Enriching themselves from retailing, rents
 And property purchased with the food of the poor.
 If they're honest, how come their houses are so high,
 And how do they buy large blocks of buildings?

- But mischievous Miss Money persuades many mayors
 To pocket the payments from pestering traders
 And presents in kind such as pieces of plate,
 And such treasures as rings to protect retail trade.
 "For my sake," she says, "do see they're well served,
 90 And let them impose their preposterous prices."

But Solomon the Wise once said in a sermon
 That was meant for mayors and the men of the law
 Some words of warning that are well worth repeating:
*For the congregation of the hypocrite is barren, and fire shall
 devour their tabernacles, who love to take bribes.*²

¹Matthew vi 3. Two lines are then omitted to avoid repetition.

²Not Solomon but Job xv 34.

- In simple English his argument is
 95 That fire shall fall and blaze and burn
 The houses and homes of any who solicit
 Hand-outs or honors by virtue of office.
- Coming from his council, the King called Miss Money
 And sent out sergeants to escort her to see him.
 100 They found her and fetched her, inflamed with her charms.
 The King then started to speak to her softly,
 Saying quite mildly to Miss Money the maid:
 “You have often enough done unwise acts,
 But by far the most foolish was accepting Falsehood.
 105 I’ll forgive your mistake and grant you my grace
 But do no more deeds that are false till you die!
 I’ve a knight named Conscience who has come to the court:
 If he’s willing to wed you, will you accept him?”
- “I shall,” she said. “God forbid that I shouldn’t!
 110 I am in your hands, sire. Hang me if not!”
- So Conscience was called to come and appear
 Before the King and his council and clerks,
 And kneeling Conscience inquired of the King
 What he might wish and what he must do.
- 115 “Will you wed this woman?” asked the King, “if I will it?
 She is keen to become your comrade and wife.”
- But Conscience told the King, “May Christ forfend!
 For woe betide me if I wed such a wife!
 Her faith is frail and her speech is fickle,
 120 She makes men do immoral misdeeds,
 And trusting in her treasures betrays folk by thousands.
 She teaches wantonness to wives and widows,
 And encourages incontinence with gifts for the greedy.
- “She finished your father with promises that were false,³
 125 And she’s poisoned popes and impaired Holy Church.
 By my Maker above, you’ll meet with no madam
 Who’s a bigger bawd between heaven and hell.

³Edward III reigned when the poem was begun, so that this refers to the behavior of Edward II, who was accused of sodomy and was murdered. The Despensers, Langland’s likely patrons, nevertheless supported the royal party at the time. See “The Identity of the Author.”

- Her tail wags for twopence and her tongue for nothing;
 She's as common as a cart-track to the meanest carter,
- 130 To monks and minstrels and mud-caked lepers,
 Though jurors and summoners swear she is splendid
 And sheriffs of shires would go short without her,
 For men give their lands and their lives for her love.
- “She free scores of prisoners by paying their price,
 135 Tipping the turn-keys whatever it takes
 To unfetter offenders, who flee where they will,
 And she takes by the hair the harmless and honest,
 Holding them fast and hanging them in hate.
 She cares not a curse for excommunication
- 140 For she clothes the Church courts and the bishops' clerks.
 She can buy absolution when she likes with a bribe,
 And has means to achieve as much in a month
 As the Privy Seal patently completes in four.
 She controls the Pope and appoints whom she pleases
- 145 For she and Sir Simony seal the appointments.
 She blesses bishops who can't read a book,
 And puts up the funds for parsons and priests
 To maintain mistresses and live-in molls
 And infringe their vows by fathering children.
- 150 “The kingdom suffers if she's close to the King
 Since she favors the false and frustrates the true.
 By Jesus, she corrupts even judges with her jewels!
 She lies in the law-courts and locks justice out,
 Scattering silver to smother good faith,
- 155 And in local disputes twists the law as she likes,
 Robbing the plaintiffs of remedies and rights,
 For the law is a maze to most humble men
 With its endless arguments and high-flown language,
 And they lose unless they can bribe the bench.
- 160 Thus Money causes bother to burgesses and barons,
 And common folk too who try to live truly;
 Why, she's coupled the clergy to covetous greed!
 That's the life of this lady, may the Lord bring her sorrow;
 May God see she suffers with the scum who assist her!
- 165 For Money so masters the people of means
 That the poor have no power to complain when they're wronged.”

- Miss Money looked crushed but called for the King
To allow her to answer the alleged delicts,
And with good will and grace he granted her leave:
170 “If possible, prove you’re not guilty,” he replied,
“Or Conscience demands I dismiss you this minute.”
- “My lord,” said the lady, “you’ll believe him the less
When you realize who’s right and who is wrong,
For Money can help when hard times happen.
175 I did not come to accuse you, Conscience,
Or to put you down out of pride or pique.
If you told the truth you’d maintain for a fact
That often in the past you’ve held out your hand
And dipped in my purse and dispensed what you pleased,
180 So I cannot conceive why you’re so incensed.
I could if I wanted overwhelm you with wealth
And serve you in a style you can scarcely imagine.
- “Before our sovereign you have slandered me sadly.
I’ve never killed a king or counseled such a crime,
185 Nor accomplished what you claim, I swear by the King,
Whom I never abandoned in the Normandy battles,
While shamefully several times you deserted,
Creeping into cottages because you were cold,
Wishing that winter would stop the whole war,
190 Dreading you would die when the clouds grew dark,
And hurrying home because you were hungry.⁴
- “You showed no pity in pillaging the poor
And carried off their copperware to sell it at Calais,
While I stayed with my liege-lord, preserving his life.
195 I made men forget their misery through mirth,
Slapped them on the back to stir up their spirits,
And they danced with pleasure at the prospect of pickings.
By Mary, had I been commanding his men,
I wager my life that we should have won,
200 And the length and breadth of the land would belong
To our King and his kingdom, while all of his kin,
Both distant and near, would now be ennobled.
But Conscience, you coward, you counseled retreat.

⁴These battles were fought in France by Edward III. See also Note 3 above.

- For a sackful of silver you sold the King's claim
 205 To the richest realm on which rain ever fell!
- “It is right when a king is the ruler of a kingdom
 That respectful servants receive fair reward.
 And friendships are forged with foreigners through gifts,
 Which foster esteem for the sovereign's skill.
- 210 Emperors and earls and all kinds of lords
 Recompose their runners and riders with gifts.
 The Pope and prelates all receive presents
 And pay the people who apply their decrees.
 So surely you see that servants should accept
- 215 The pence they are paid by their patrons and masters?
 What do beggars with bags beg for but money?
 Minstrels want money for making folk laugh,
 The King takes cash for keeping the peace,
 The men who teach children demand their money,
- 220 The priests who preach that people should do good
 Receive money for Masses and to buy their meals,
 While a tradesman takes payment for preparing an apprentice:
 Merchants and money simply must go together;
 Not a solitary soul can exist without money.”
- 225 The King said to Conscience, “By Christ, I reckon,
 That Money's a worthy and well-deserved winner!”
- But Conscience declared as he knelt to the King:
 “Sire, I can see two sides to Money.
 The side that is good God gracefully grants
- 230 For work that's done well in this mortal world,
 As the prophet preached and put in the psalms:
*Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle?*⁵
 For King David asked, ‘Who shall dwell in your hills?
 In your sanctuary, Lord, who shall sit with your saints?’
 And the psalmist himself responded and said,
*‘He that walketh without blemish, and worketh justice,*⁶
- 235 Those of single intent who have stayed unsullied,
 Whose acts were ruled by right and reason,
 Who used no usury the length of their lives,

⁵Psalm xiv 1 (KJV Psalm xv 1).⁶Psalm xiv 2 (KJV Psalm xv 2).

Who taught the poor and trusted to Truth,
*He that hath not put out his money to usury, nor taken bribes
 against the innocent,*⁷

Who helped the innocent and upheld the righteous,
 240 Who did right without recompense and reinforced Truth.⁷
 Such are the men, my master, who will meet
 With God's good grace when they go from this world.

“But then there is money amassed without measure
 To support the miscreants people employ.
 245 As it says in the Psalter at the end of a psalm,
*In whose hands are iniquities; their right hand is filled with gifts.*⁸
 Unless Scripture lies, those who like hoarding silver
 Will grievously regret it and grimly repent!
 Even priests and parsons who seek out pleasure,
 And demand sums of money for chanting Masses,
 250 Are rewarded in this world, as Matthew warns,
*Amen I say unto you, they have received their reward.*⁹

“The pence that peasants and laborers are paid
 Are a reasonable wage, not unwarranted reward,
 And the money that merchants make may be fair
 If a penny is paid for a pennyworth of goods.
 255 But Miss Money, you must, I imagine, know *Kings*
 And the vengeance that descended on Saul and his seed?¹⁰
 God sent word to Saul through his servant Samuel,
 That Agag the Amalechite and all his masses
 Should die for a deed their ancestors did.
 260 ‘Therefore,’ said Samuel, ‘God instructs you, Saul,
 To abide by his bidding and obey his command:
 Take your army to Amalec and uproot it all,
 Butcher and burn both men and beasts,
 Widows and wives, women and children,
 265 Their movable, immovable property and more.
 Whatever it's worth, don't take it away,
 But destroy it and do not preserve a denier;
 Be oppressive and pitiless and you shall prosper.’

⁷Psalm xiv 5 (KJV Psalm xv 5).

⁸Psalm xxv 10 (KJV Psalm xxvi 10).

⁹Matthew vi 5.

¹⁰1 Kings (KJV 1 Samuel) xv.

“But Scripture says Saul then spared the king
270 And gathered his goods and his beasts out of greed,
Opposing the prophet’s express command.
So God said to Samuel that Saul should die
With all his seed for his shameful sin.
Thus misuse of money made misery for Saul,
275 And he and his heirs were hated by God.
From the case you may come to your own conclusion;
I shall say no more lest I suffer by speaking,
For the people with power now rule so supreme
That telling the truth is to tempt repercussions.

280 “Native Wit tells me, and I know it is true,
That one day Reason shall rule every realm
And that some shall suffer the same as Agag:
Samuel shall slay him and Saul shall be blamed,
And David shall be crowned and conquer every kingdom,
285 A sole Christian sovereign holding sway over all.
Money shall be master no more as now,
But loyal fidelity and lowliness and love
Shall prevail and flourish and favor true men,
While the law of fidelity shall duly condemn
290 Those betraying the truth and taking bribes.
No advocate then shall have a silk hood
Or a fur-trimmed cloak for quarreling in court.

“But Money now makes many miscreants lords,
Who believe they’re above and have bought the law,
295 But I, Conscience, shall come with love of mankind
To make Law a laborer, and such love shall arise,
And such peace among people and perfect truth,
That Jews shall rejoice and believe with joy
That Moses has been sent or the merciful Messiah,
300 And will ask how it is that men are so honest.

“All bearers of blades, broadswords and lances,
Of axes and hatchets, other weapons or arms,
Shall face sudden death or fashion them afresh
Into sickles and scythes, and plowshares and spades;
*They shall turn their swords into plowshares.*¹¹

¹¹Isaiah ii 4.

- 305 Each person shall ply plow, pick-axe or spade,
Spread muck or spin, or be sunk in sloth.
“Priests and parsons shall hunt with their prayers,
And wrestle with psalms from sunrise to sunset,
For if they go hunting with hawks or with hounds
310 They shall lose their living and leave their abode.
No king or constable, magistrate or mayor
Shall impose demands that oppress the people
Or summon them to swear and serve as jurors;
A single sentence shall decide each case,
315 Whether merciful or merciless, as Truth shall demand.
The King’s and the common court, the clerical and chapter,
Shall be combined with a single judge sitting,
The trustworthy True-tongue, who never betrayed me.
There shall be no more battles, no arms shall be borne:
320 Should a man make a sword, with the sword he’ll be slain,
*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation.*¹²
“Before this is attained there’ll be terrible times:
Six suns and a ship, and a half-sheaf of arrows,
Shall be seen in the sky with a moon at full circle;
Then the Jews and the Saracens shall sing out the *Sanctus*.¹³
325 And Mahomet and Money shall howl and moan,
For A good name is better than great riches.”¹⁴
Miss Money grew wild as the whirling wind.
“I know no Latin, I leave that to the learned,
But see,” she said, “what Solomon says,
That victory is gained by the giving of gifts,
330 Which honors the giver; as Holy Writ has it:
He that maketh presents shall purchase victory and honor.”¹⁵
“I accept what you say from Scripture,” Conscience said,
“But you’re like a lady who once read a lesson,
And was pleased by the passage, ‘*Prove all things.*’
But the phrase is found at the foot of a page;
335 If she’d taken the trouble to turn the page

¹²Isaiah ii 4.¹³The term “Saracens” was applied not only to the forces opposing Christian Crusaders in the Holy Land but by extension to all Muslims.¹⁴Proverbs xxii 1.¹⁵Proverbs xxii 9. KJV omits this line.

She'd have found the following more frightening words:

'Hold fast,' God affirms, to *'that which is good.'*¹⁶

That is what happened, for the half of it was hidden.

When sitting in your study you consulted *Proverbs*

340 And saw the passage that supports those in power,

But you lacked the learning to turn the leaf!

If you glance at it again you'll be greeted with this,

A terrifying text for takers of bribes:

*But he carrieth away the souls of the receivers.*¹⁷

That's the tag at the tail of the text that you saw:

345 Though victory and honor may outwardly be ours,

The soul is imprisoned by the sums it receives."

¹⁶1 Thessalonians v 21.

¹⁷Proverbs xxii 9. KJV omits this line.

Step IV

In which the King tells Conscience to summon Reason to resolve the disagreement. When Wrong is accused by Peace of rape, murder and theft and asks his friends Witwell and Wily to buy his freedom, the court splits. Reason pleads for justice, but the lawyers abandon Reason for Miss Money, and the King asks Conscience and Reason to be his counselors for ever.

“Stop,” the King said, “I shall suffer this no longer.
You shall both obey me and bury your dissent,
And I order you, Conscience, to kiss her kindly.”

5 “Not me,” said Conscience, “dismiss me if you must,
But I’d rather die unless Reason says it’s right!”

“Then Conscience, I command you,” the King declared,
“To ride without rest to Reason and tell him
To come here at once to weigh up my words.
He shall rule in this realm and advise me rightly
10 In matters such as Money and what man she shall marry,¹
And consult you, Conscience, and decide on some scheme
To enlighten my people, both unlettered and learned.”

Conscience agreed. “I shall go and gladly,”
And he rode to Reason and rapidly whispered
15 What the King had ordered, and was anxious to be off.

“Take a rest,” said Reason, “till I’m ready to ride,”
And he called to Cato, his courtly servant,
And also Tom True-tongue-tell-me-no-tales-
No-fatuuous-laughter-that’s-far-from-funny.
20 “Pray set my saddle on Suffer-till-it’s-time,
And strap on safely a girth of good sense,

¹In Skeat, this line is only found in the C version.

And hold down his head with a bridle that's heavy,
Or he'll whinny too wildly along the way."

25 On his courser, Conscience then cantered away
With Reason beside him, considering softly
The ways in which Money had mastered the world.

But Warren Witwell and his friend known as Wily
Pursued them swiftly to settle some complaint
In Exchequer and Chancery with which they were charged.
30 They reckoned that Reason was the right man to help:
For a fee he might save them much shame and concern.

But Conscience, who knew they were covetous creatures,
Told Reason to shun them and spur on swiftly.
"They are seldom sincere; they consort with Money,
35 And rake in their profit from wrangling and wrath,
Disdaining fidelity and indifferent to love:

Destruction and misery in their ways.

And they give not a goose wing for God and his truth:

*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*²

They will drudge all day for a dozen capons
But will labor far less for our Lord and his saints.
40 So we'll let those rich men ride on alone
For they are not acquainted with Conscience or Christ."

Then hurriedly Reason rode straight ahead
As Conscience told him till they came to the court,
Where the King accorded him a courteous welcome
45 And seated him between himself and his son
For a lengthy meeting on matters of moment.

Then Peace came to Parliament, carrying a plea,
Saying Wrong had robbed him of his rightful wife
And had ravished young Rose, who was Reggie's beloved,
50 And had snatched Maggie's maidenhood, scorning resistance.
"His gangsters have grabbed my geese and my pigs,
And I'm far too frightened to fight or protest.
He hasn't brought back the bay that he borrowed,
And has paid not a penny despite my complaint.
55 He stirs up his men to murder mine,

²Romans iii 16–18.

He fixes the market and fights at fairs,
He breaks down my barn door and bears off my wheat,
He tosses me a tally-stick for ten sacks of oats,
And he beds my servant-girl and beats me so badly
60 That I haven't the courage to counter or cross him."

These claims were correct, for the King knew from Conscience
That Wrong was a scoundrel who spread much sorrow.
But Wrong was unruffled and ran to Witwell
To make his peace by proffering money.
65 "Provided the cash makes the King my friend,
Who cares whether Peace and his people complain!"

When Warren Witwell and Wily, his friend,
Both heard that Wrong had heinously behaved,
They wisely warned him to watch what he did:
70 "You wake folk's wrath when you want your own way.
We can see you upset them, and so should you,
And unless you can mend these matters with money,
You could find you lose your life or your land."

At that Wrong was worried, and he worked on Witwell
75 To pay the right bribes to purchase his peace,
And Witwell and Wily went off together
With Money and her purse to plead for his pardon.

But Peace put his hand to his injured head:
"As God knows, I got this wound without guilt."
80 Both the commons and Conscience confirmed his claim,
So Witwell and Wily went about winning
The King to their cause if they could with cash.
But the King swore both by Christ and his crown
That Wrong should rue the mischief he'd wreaked,
85 And he called to a constable to cast him in irons:
"For seven years set him with his feet in the stocks."

"Good heavens," said Witwell, "wouldn't it be wiser
To release him on license and let him repent
By pledging a sum to pay compensation,
90 Thus making amends for his mischief for good?"

And Wily conspired to say much the same:
"It is surely right to recompense wrongs
Rather than punish without payment of a penny."

Then meekly Miss Money recommended mercy,
 95 And proffered pure gold as a present to Peace.
 “Accept this sum in settlement,” she said,
 “For I guarantee Wrong will give no more grief.”

And soft-hearted Peace himself then besought
 The King to have mercy on the miserable man.
 100 “He has paid me plenty, as Witwell proposed,
 And I gladly forgive him his guilty forays;
 If my sovereign assents I can say no better,
 For Money has made me generous amends.”

“No,” said the King, “by Christ, I cannot!
 105 For first I must hear his offense more fully,
 Since he’ll laugh if released too lightly and be likely
 To beat my servants. So he’ll sit in my stocks
 For the rest of his life unless Reason relents
 Or Humility presents some surety of substance.”

110 Some people then pestered Reason to have pity,
 And to counsel the King and Conscience as well
 To accept the amount submitted by Miss Money.

“Don’t plead,” said Reason, “for pardon or pity
 Till lords and their ladies have learnt to love Truth
 115 And are loath to utter or listen to lewdness;
 Till pride-filled Pru has put off her furs;
 Till cheeky children are chastised, not spoiled;
 Till the holiness of harlots is held to be false;
 Till priests take pride in caring for the poor;
 120 Till mendicant clergy keep to their cloisters
 As bidden by Benedict and Bernard and Francis,³
 And preachers preach what they practice themselves;
 Till the King’s state council serves the commons;
 Till bishops sell their horses and hawks and hounds
 125 To buy help for the homeless and hungry clerics;
 Till pilgrims head only for a place I appoint,
 Not going to Spain unless going for good⁴;
 Till no travelers run to the robbers of Rome
 With bullion, gold bars or strips of silver,

³Franciscans were in fact expressly instructed to go out into society. See Step V, Note 3.

⁴i.e., Santiago de Compostela.

130 Or coins that bear the badge of the King,
 And till funds that are found at Dover are forfeit,⁵
 Save on merchants and their men, or messengers with letters,
 Or penitents or priests holding papal appointments.

“By the cross, no pardon or pity shall be proffered
 135 While Money still masters this meeting of council.
 I can show you examples I have seen,” Reason said.

“And as for me, if some miracle made me
 A king with a crown and a country to rule,
 If I’d power to prosecute, on peril of my soul,

140 I could never consciously excuse a crime
 And nor, by God, would gifts buy forgiveness!
 Only meekness, not Money, would win my mercy!
 The *man of innocence* would meet with no mischief
 But *the man of guilt would meet what he merits*.⁶

145 Now sire, if the same is said by your confessors
 And you put it into practice, I’ll pledge my ears
 That Law will then labor spreading muck on the land
 And Love will rule in your realm, as is right!”

The King’s confessors conferred on this advice,
 150 Construing it to suit the sovereign’s advantage
 But ignoring his subjects and the safety of his soul,
 While languidly Miss Money looked with longing at the lawyers,
 Who ran from Reason and rallied to her laughing.
 I witnessed Witwell wink at her and whisper:

155 “Good Madam, I’m your man, no matter what I say,
 And I lose my voice if I’m fed a few florins.”

But the right-thinking reckoned that Reason was right.
 Native Wit said so, and seconded his stance,
 And most of those present and many of the mighty
 160 Said Humility was good and Money was immoral.

Love deemed her a hussy, and Fidelity said a harlot.
 He spoke so audibly that the whole hall heard:

⁵There was resentment at the taxes remitted to the papacy, and Dover was the only port of departure permitted to pilgrims..

⁶The original Latin terms *nullum malum* and *nullum bonum* (*no evil* and *no good*, here “man of innocence” and “man of guilt”) are taken from Pope Innocent III, *De contemptu mundi* Book iii Chapter 15.

“If anyone unwise enough to wed her for her wealth
Isn’t cuckolded quickly, you can cut off my nose!”

- 165 Miss Money looked beaten, embarrassed and bitter
When the commoners in court thus called her a whore.
But a summoner and a juryman stood by her side
With a sheriff’s clerk, and they cursed the commons.
“I’ve been kind to you in court,” said the clerk, “many times,
170 But I’ve never been paid a paltry penny piece.”

The King called for counsel from Conscience and Reason,
And ruled that Reason had argued aright.
He eyed Miss Money with haughty anger
And reprimanded Law for allowing corruption.

- 175 “The law, I believe, has lost me a fortune;
It’s distorted by Money, which twists the truth.
But while I am monarch you’ll meet what you merit:
A rightful reckoning with Reason’s wrath;
And Money won’t help you, by Mary in heaven!
180 In law I’ll have honesty, however you hate it;
Most people will be pleased that Wrong is punished.”

But Conscience told the King, “If the commons don’t agree,
I’ll bet it will be hard to bring this about,
To prevail on folk to follow your lead.”

- 185 “By Christ on the cross,” Reason cried to the King,
“Cut out my guts if I can’t rule your kingdom!
If you long for just law, then lend me your power!”

“I consent,” the King said, “by our sacred Lady.
When my council of clerics and earls has come,

- 190 Reason shall stay and shall not be spurned,
And never shall leave me as long as I live.”

“I am ready to stay as you say,” Reason said,
“Provided that Conscience is kept in your council.”

- “God forbid else. I agree that together
195 We’ll live out our lives,” said the King, “while they last.”

Step V

In which I awake briefly before seeing my second dream, of Reason preaching to the people about honest work. The Seven Deadly Sins confess their idle selfishness and gross behavior among friars, merchants, money-lenders and drunkards. Repentance persuades them and the people to repent and seek out Truth, and a plowman called Piers gives them directions. A few rogues think these too onerous.

The King and his court then came to church
In the morning to hear both Matins and Mass.
But I woke, still wishing I had witnessed more
And were still fast asleep and seeing dreams,
5 And before I had gone a furlong on foot,
I could venture no further and felt faint again.
So I sat down softly to say my Creed
And recite my rosary, which sent me to sleep.

This time I saw more scenes than I've told:
10 The field full of folk the same as before,
But with Reason preparing to preach to the people.
Clutching a cross, he stood by the King
To explain the Plague as the penalty for sin,
And the southwest wind on Saturday since
15 As a parable to people to leave off pride.¹
“Pears and plum-trees came purling to earth
As a message to men to mend their ways,
And beeches and oaks were blown right over
And turned up their tails in token of dread
20 That by Doomsday sin will have dragged people down.”
I could easily dilate on this lesson at length
But shall solely say what I saw, God save me!

¹An allusion to the storm of Saturday, January 15, 1362.

Pointedly Reason was preaching to the people,
 Telling Wastrel to work at what he did best,
 25 To earn by some skill the sums that he spent,
 And proud-hearted Pru to put off her furs
 And keep them in a closet in case of need.
 Felicity the scold, he said, should be smacked
 By her spouse Tom Stowe as soon as she was ducked,
 30 Walt he warned that his wife shouldn't wear
 A half a mark hat while his hood was worth halfpence,
 And Bert should cut a stout cane, he decreed,
 And wallop young Betsy till she went off and worked.
 He charged that merchants should chastise their children:
 35 "Don't spoil them with senseless, excessive spending
 Even during the Plague with its depredations.
 My father informed me, and my mother confirmed,
 That the more a child's loved, the more he is lectured,
 And Solomon said the same in his *Wisdom*:
 He that spareth the rod hateth his son."²

40 Then Reason prompted prelates and priests
 To practice themselves what they preached to the people:
 "To do well yourselves you should do good deeds,
 For people will believe if you practice what you preach."
 He cautioned the cloistered to keep to their Rule³

45 "Lest the King and his council cut your provisions
 And regulate your houses till they're run correctly."
 He counseled the King to love the commons:
 "For those who are true are your treasure in trouble."
 He appealed to the Pope to have pity on the Church,
 50 And to govern himself before giving out grants.
 "And lawmen, look that you long for the Truth,
 Not for gold or gifts, if you wish to please God,
 For the Gospel tells you, if you take against Truth:
 Amen I say to you, I know you not."⁴
 And seekers after saints in Spain and Rome

²Not the Wisdom of Solomon but Proverbs xiii 24. Two lines are then omitted to avoid repetition.

³The "Rule" governing monastic life was laid down by Saint Benedict in the sixth century and is the basis for the later orders of Augustinians (eleventh century), Bernardine Cistercians (twelfth century), Carmelites ("White Friars," twelfth century), and Franciscans and Dominicans ("Grey Friars" and "Black Friars," early thirteenth).

⁴Matthew xxv 12.

55 Should seek Truth instead, for Truth will save you.
 Now may peace be among and remain with the people
 Who observe my sermon,” Reason said.

Then Repentance appeared and repeated the message,
 So that Will’s eyes watered and wept with a will.⁵
 60 Prunella Proudheart fell prostrate and prone,
 And lay a long time, till she looked up at last.
 “Have mercy, Lord,” she moaned to our Maker,
 “I’ll unstitch my shift and put on a hair shirt
 To scarify my skin, so fiercely I’ve sinned.
 65 My heart shall be humble and haughty no more,
 And I’ll suffer in silence base insults and slander,
 And be meek and modest and beg for mercy
 For all the hatred that has been in my heart.”

Then “Alas,” cried Lust and implored our Lady
 70 To intercede for his soul and seek pardon for his sins,
 Swearing that on Saturdays for seven years hence
 He’d drink what ducks drink and dine only once.⁶

With heavy heart Envy confessed to his errors.
 He cried *mea culpa* with a countenance of woe,
 75 He was pale as limestone and appeared to be palsied,
 And was clothed in some stuff I can scarcely describe,
 A simple rough shirt with a knife at his side
 And a coat with wide sleeves that was cut from a cope.
 With his sunken cheeks and his somber scowl
 80 He looked like a leek left too long in the sun.
 He was bursting with bile and was biting his lip
 And flexing his fists as he figured how vengeance
 Could some day be won through words or deeds.
 Every syllable he spoke was soused in venom,
 85 And he lived on sarcasm, slander and sneers,
 Back-biting, baiting and bearing false witness:
 Such was his style wherever he was seen.

“I should seek to be shriven if it weren’t so shaming,
 But by God I smile more if Gil comes to grief
 90 Than if I take home a handsome Essex cheese!

⁵Langland appears to be referring to himself.

⁶“Lust” has the general meaning of dissipation.

- There's a nearby neighbor I've often annoyed;
 I've denounced him to nobles, who've seized his possessions,
 And by false accusations made foes of his friends,
 For I'm sorry to see him succeed or in luck.
- 95 I sow such dissension between estates
 That it leads to much loss both of life and of limb.
 When I meet at market the man I most hate
 I hail him heartily as an honored friend—
 I daren't do differently as he's definitely stronger—
- 100 But heaven help him if I have him in my power.
 When I come to church and should crawl to the cross
 And pray for the people as the priest directs,
 For pilgrims and palmers and everyone else,
 I beg on my knees for a bane on the blighters
- 105 Who stole an old bowl and a sheet that's in shreds,
 And I turn my eyes from the holy altar
 And behold Dame Ellen in an outfit that's new,
 And covet the costume or simply the cloth.
 I like it and laugh when folk make a loss,
- 110 And I weep when they win and bewail the fact.
 I say folk are wicked though what I do's worse,
 I hate for ever any person who reproves me,
 I assume that everyone ought to serve me,
 And I'm angered by anyone wealthier than I.
- 115 "Thus I live without love like a dog running loose,
 My body all bloated with bitter gall.
 For years I have fussed and fiddled with my food,
 Finding envy and hatred hard to digest.
 Must they scour my insides, or can the swelling be eased
- 120 With a sugary sweetmeat that unseats it from my heart,
 Some soothing syrup of contrition or shame?"
 Repentance replied that he had such a potion:
 "Sorrow for your sins is salvation for your soul."
 "Sorrow?" Envy said. "I'm seldom not sorry
- 125 For I'm wasting away for want of revenge.
 When I lived in London with leading merchants
 I appointed Backbite to disparage other produce,
 And if I sold nothing and others sold out,
 I defamed them and vilified their various goods.
- 130 But now through God's power I propose to repent."

- Then Anger awoke with his white eyes wide,
 And a dripping nose and a drooping neck.
 “I’m Anger,” he affirmed. “I was formerly a friar,
 A gardener growing and grafting lies
 135 On to brothers who begged and brothers who preached
 Till their leaves bent low to flatter great lords,
 While in boudoirs they flourished on flighty confessions.
 The fruit of my grafting is that folk now prefer
 Confiding in a friar to confessing to a priest.
 140 So the priests who find that friars are favored
 Revile and reproach them when they preach from the pulpit,
 And the friars’ defense is to find fault with priests
 In the sermons they recite as they stroll about,
 While I steal beside them and incite them from books.
 145 Thus each speaks of the spirit but despises the other,
 Which is how it will be till I’ve beggared them all.
 Even should they get rich and ride I won’t rest
 For my fate is to follow these scoundrelly folk.
- “I’ve an aunt in orders, an abbess in fact,
 150 Who would sooner starve than suffer indigestion.
 I served as the cook in her convent kitchen
 For many long months, and for monks as well.
 I made soups for the sisters and other poor souls,
 And broths full of bilge, saying Joan was a bastard,
 155 Clarissa the kid of a cuckolded count,
 And Pru was not prioress thanks to the priest,
 Since the chapter all knew of their cherry-time child.
 In anger I stewed up such scandalous stuff
 That the sisters screamed ‘Lies’ and ‘Liar’ and the like
 160 And soundly slapped and smacked each other;
 By Christ they’d have killed if they’d carried knives.
 I approve of Saint Gregory’s prescript as Pope⁷
 To appoint no prioress a priest for she’d prattle
 Confessional secrets and set off more fights.
- 165 “That said, among monks I am seldom seen,
 Since many of them watch for the mischief I make,
 Priors, sub-priors and the Abbot in person,

⁷This is the thirteenth-century Pope Gregory IX, not Gregory I, who appears elsewhere in the poem.

- And if I tell tales they talk it over
 And force me on Fridays to fast on dry bread;
 170 I am charged like a child in the chapter-house
 And they beat my bare buttocks with my breeches down!
 So I don't much like to live with those lads,
 Where the food is fish and the ale is feeble,
 And the once in a while that there's wine with supper,
 175 For five days following I spout out filth,
 Spilling the beans about brothers' abuses
 All round the house till everyone's heard it."
- "Now repent," said Repentance, "and never repeat
 What you've learnt through luck by a word or a look.
 180 Don't drink too deeply or delicately either
 Lest it rouse your temper and turn it to tantrums.
Be prudent," he said, and soon absolved me,⁸
 Suggesting I weep at my wicked ways.
- Then Covetousness stood there. I can scarcely describe
 185 How hungry and hollow Sir Harvey looked.⁹
 He had beetling brows and bloated lips,
 And oozing eyes and hanging cheeks
 That sagged and swung like pendulous purses,
 And a beard bespattered with bacon like a scullion,
 190 With a hood and a hat that were home to lice
 And a twelve-year-old tabard, Welsh flannel that was tattered
 And so threadbare no louse could have lived there for long;
 The lice that were left must have landed by chance.
- "I have been covetous," said the culprit, "I declare.
 195 For some time I served Master Sim at the Stile,
 As apprentice appointed to push up his profits.
 I learnt a few lessons about telling lies,
 And the first I perfected was to falsify weights.
 Then I went to Weyhill and Winchester fairs
 200 As my master commanded, with all manner of goods
 That would seldom have sold at all, God save us,
 If I hadn't used ruses to be rid of the rubbish.

⁸1 Peter iv 7. Again Langland, as the narrator, seems to refer to himself.

⁹The term Avarice or Greed is more usually applied to this Deadly Sin, but Langland sees avarice as a quality of covetousness, which is the word he prefers.

Then I drifted into drapery and learnt such dodges
 As stretching the selvage till it seems far longer,
 205 And they taught me the trick of taking striped cloth
 And pricking and plaiting the precious stuff together,
 Putting it in a press and applying such pressure
 That ten or twelve yards are turned to thirteen.

“My wife is a weaver who works in wool.
 210 When she settles with the spinners who spin the thread,
 The pound weight she pays by is appreciably more
 Than my steelyard weighs when I sell things straight.
 I buy her barley that she brews for sale,
 Thoroughly mixing up thick ale with thin
 215 For laborers and lowly folk drinking alone,
 While the pure ale is put in the parlor or bedroom
 So that those who taste it are tempted to buy
 At a groat a gallon, by God, no less,
 Though it comes by the cupful, the crafty woman!
 220 Racketeer Rosie is really her name;
 She’s been diddling and dealing for a decade and more.
 But now I swear I shall cease my sinning
 And withdraw from cheating and dishonest dealing.
 I’ll go to Walsingham, my wife as well,
 225 And the Cross of Bromholm, to beg forbearance.”¹⁰

“Have you proffered restitution or proper repentance?”

“For sure,” he said, “I shared once with merchants,
 And I bounced up and burgled their bags in the night.”

“But that was theft, not making restitution.
 230 You ought to be hanged,” Repentance answered,
 “For that and the things you’ve already told.”

“I thought ‘restitution’ was the same thing as taking;
 I know no French except nonsense from Norfolk.”¹¹

“Have you profited from usury,” asked Repentance, “in the past?”
 235 “No sir,” he said, “not since my youth

¹⁰The cross at Bromholm Priory in Norfolk was said to be made from wood from the cross of the crucifixion.

¹¹“Restitution” is a French word, and for all Covetousness knows, they speak French in Norfolk.

- When I learnt other lessons from Lombards and Jews:
 Chicanery in clipping and weighing coins,¹²
 And lending for love of the cross—not our Lord’s
 But on coins and accounts for the sureties I keep.
- 240 I’ve amassed more manors and money from arrears
 Than I might ever make from showing mercy.
 I’ve lent out goods to lords and ladies
 And bought them back at bargain prices;
 When exchanging currency I keep a good cut,
- 245 And I lend rather less than the loan contract says;
 And I take gold bars abroad for bankers
 But in Rome I deliver less than full loads.”
- “Have you loaned cash to lords to look on you kindly?”
- “I’ve lent to lords, but they surely don’t love me.
 250 For many poor knights I’ve made into merchants,
 And they paid not a penny in apprenticeship fees!”
- “Have you pity on poor men compelled to borrow?”
- “I pity the poor as a pedlar does cats:
 He catches and kills them if he can for their skins.”
- 255 “Do you favor neighbors with food and refreshment?”
- “In the kitchen,” said Covetousness, “‘greedy cur’
 Is the name my neighbors know me by.”
- “Then unless you repent,” said Repentance, “I pray
 That God will deny you the grace to leave goods
 260 You’ve gathered egregiously through greed to your heirs,
 Nor permit your executors to manage your money
 But will see that it’s spent by similar rogues.
 For if I were a friar in an honest house,
 I’d refuse your funds for my clothes or the fabric,
- 265 Nor take a penny to improve my pittance
 Or for burnished gold leaves to embellish a book—
 Not if I knew you were as you’ve announced.
*You’ll be others’ servant if you’re served rich sweetmeats;
 You’ll serve but yourself if you’re satisfied with bread.*¹³

¹²Slivers of precious metal were clipped from the edges of coins, which were already irregular in shape.

¹³A familiar proverb.

- 270 You're an unnatural scoundrel and I shall not absolve you
 Till you make restitution and return what you've taken,
 Every single penny of the sums that you stole,
 And they're registered by Reason in the record of heaven:
*Restitution must go before grace and forgiveness.*¹⁴
- 275 And those who've enjoyed your generous gestures
 Are enjoined in justice, as God is my judge,
 To restore those sums; if in doubt, see the psalms:
Have mercy on me if my mouth speaks the truth,
*For behold, thou hast loved truth.*¹⁵
 For no workman in the world should profit from your wealth:
*With the holy, thou wilt be holy; and with the perverse thou wilt
 be perverted.*¹⁶
- 280 Then the wretch felt so rueful he was ready to hang,
 Till Repentance had pity and proffered this solace:
 "Remember God's mercy and meekly beseech it,
 For his mercy is more than his many other works:
*His tender mercies are over all his works.*¹⁷
 All malice, when measured by the mercy of God,
 285 All iniquity, is equal to a spark in the sea.¹⁸
 So reflect on mercy and no more on the market,
 And earn with your hands or beg what you eat.
 For the goods you have garnered were gained by guile
 And are borrowed until you take them back.
- 290 And if you're not sure from whom you had them,
 Then hand them to the bishop and ask for his help
 In bestowing them as best will serve your soul.
 For on the Day of Doom he shall do his duty
 And answer for you and for hundreds of others,
 295 And shall tell then truly what he taught you in Lent
 And what grace he gave you in forgiving your sins."
- Then Gluttony too began to feel guilty
 And decided to seek absolution for his sins,

¹⁴Saint Augustine, *Epistles* cliii Section 20.

¹⁵Psalm l (50) 1 and 8 (KJV Psalm li 1 and 6, "Behold, thou desirest truth"). Saint Augustine supplied a commentary linking these lines.

¹⁶Psalm xvii 26 and 27 (KJV Psalm xviii 26).

¹⁷Psalm cxliv 9 (KJV Psalm cxlv 9).

¹⁸An image attributed to Saint Augustine by contemporary authors, including Chaucer. The original additional line in Latin is omitted.

- But he bumped on the way into Betty the Brewer,
300 Who wondered where he was off to and why.
“To church,” he chortled, “to be cheered by the Mass
And shriven and absolved, and to sin no more.”
“I’ve got in some ale, friend Gluttony, that’s good.”
“Have you any hot spices besides?” he said.
- 305 “I’ve pepper and peony and a pound of garlic,
And a farthing of fennel for the Friday fish.”
- So Gluttony agreed to go with Swearing
To the tavern where Sissy the Shoemaker sat
With Wat the Warrener and his rabbiting wife,
310 With Tim the Tinker and two of his mates,
Hick the Hackneyman and Haberdasher Hugh,¹⁹
Cock-riding Clarrie and the Clerk from the church,
Peter the Priest and Pru from Flanders,
Davy the Ditcher and a dozen more types—
315 A roper, a ratcatcher, Rose who sold dishes,
A fiddler, a foot-soldier, a forager from Cheapside,
Godfrey from Garlickhithe and Griffith the Welshman,
And an army of junk-dealers, out quite early,
Greeting Gluttony with a good pint of ale.
- 320 Clem the Cobbler cast off his cloak
And said he might swap it for something better.
Hick the Hackneyman tossed down his hood,
Asking Bert the Butcher to back his bid.
So dealers were picked to put a fair price
325 On the hood and the cloak and how they worked out.
They got together in a gaggle apart
To weigh up what each item was worth.
They cursed and they swore, but the quotes weren’t the same²⁰
And they could not in conscience come to a deal
- 330 Till Robin the Roper rowed in as well
To act as umpire and end the debate.
Then Hick the Hackneyman was to have the cloak
On condition that Clem would fill up the cup

¹⁹A hackneyman hired out horses.

²⁰In Skeat, this line is only in the C version.

And was happy to have the hood from Hick,
 335 And if either quibbled he'd have to offer
 Sir Gluttony a gallon of golden ale.
 There was laughing and larking and "Let go the cup!"
 And swigging and swilling and settling of deals,²¹
 And they sat on till Evensong, singing some snatches,
 340 Till Gluttony'd glugged down a gallon and more
 And his guts started grunting with greed like two sows.
 He pissed an Our Father's worth, pot after pot
 And blew such a blast from his bloated behind
 That all hearing his hornpipe held their noses
 345 And wished it were wiped with a wisp of sharp furze.
 He could scarcely stand till he'd picked up his stick,
 Then he bade them farewell like a busker's bitch,
 Tottering to this side, then to that
 Like a setter of lines to snare shelduck or snipe,
 350 And he misjudged by miles when he made it to the door,
 Catching his foot and crashing to the floor.

Clem the Cobbler caught him round the waist
 To lift him, with luck, at least to his knees,
 But Gluttony was heavy and hard to handle
 355 And threw up thoroughly all over Clem's thighs;
 The hungriest hound in Hertfordshire
 Wouldn't touch such unsavory, stinking slime.

His wife and his servant-girl struggled and strove
 To haul him to bed and heave-ho him in.
 360 Then after his outing he wouldn't get up:
 He slept through Saturday and Sunday till sundown,
 And when he awoke and wiped his gummed eyes
 The first thing he said was, "Fetch me a flagon."

His wife told him off for his horrible antics
 365 And Repentance tried reason, remonstrating rightly:
 "You've lived a lamentable, dissolute life.
 Now say you're ashamed and confess and be shriven."

"I'm a glutton," he said, "and agree that I'm guilty.
 I've said things I shouldn't on scores of occasions.
 370 I've sworn by saints' relics, God's soul and his sides

²¹This line is not in Skeat.

Some nine hundred times with no real need,
 I've indulged at dinner and indulged then at supper
 And within a mile I've heaved it all up
 And wasted what would have done well for the hungry.
 375 I've stuffed myself silly and been drunk on saints' days,
 And sometimes I've sat till I slept while I ate.
 I've lingered in taverns to listen to tales,
 And fed on fast-days before it's allowed."

"You've said you're sorry, which is something," said Repentance.

380 Then Gluttony wept and woefully bewailed
 The looseness of the life he had always led,
 And he firmly vowed to fast on Fridays,
 To touch not a thimble though thirsty and hungry,
 "Until Aunt Abstinence tells me it's time—
 385 For all that I've hated the drab all my days!"

Then Sloth came, beslobbered with his slimy two eyes.
 "I must sit," he said, "or I'll fall fast asleep;
 I can't stand, I can't stoop, I can't kneel with no stool.
 If I'm tucked up in bed, unless bothered by my bowels,
 390 No ringing will rouse me till I'm ready to dine."
 He babbled "*Benedicite*," belched, beat his breast,
 And stretched and yawned and started to snore.

"Wake up," snapped Repentance, "and pray for a pardon."

"What, chant the *Our Father* like a chaplain in church?
 395 No, I shan't," said Sloth, "though I drop dead today.
 You could have 'Robin Hood' or 'The Earl of Chester'
 But I don't know a line of 'Our Lord' or 'Our Lady.'
 I've made forty-odd vows and forgotten all forty.
 I've never done a penance imposed by a priest
 400 Or sincerely felt sorry for the sins I've performed.
 If I rattle through my rosary, unless I'm irate,
 My mind is two miles from the words of my mouth.
 I'm occupied daily, on holy days and others,
 With tavern tittle-tattle, and I talk all through church,
 405 Not caring to contemplate Christ or his Passion.
 I don't visit the poorly or people in prison
 For I'd sooner hear smut or a shoemakers' pageant,
 Or laugh and tell lies and belittle my neighbors,

- Than listen to Luke or Matthew or Mark,
 410 Or John, and I funk all your vigils and fasts.
 I lie abed in Lent, with my lover in my arms,
 And remember it's Matins or Mass when it's over
 And reckon I'm all right if I rush in at the end.
 If I feel a bit fragile or sick I'll confess,
 415 Inventing some foolery or fable once a year.
 "I passed some thirty as the priest of a parish,
 Though I couldn't read the stories of the saints or sing.
 I could find a hare in a field or a furrow
 More swiftly than a solitary verse of the psalms
 420 Or explain from the pulpit to people what they mean.
 I can sort out settlements and stewards' accounts
 But I can't read a line of Canon Law.
 If I'm lent a few coins, unless clearly listed,
 I forget it at once and if I should be asked
 425 Six times or seven, I simply deny it.
 That's how I invariably defraud the fair.
 "Sometimes my servants get their salaries late.
 And it's pitiful to hear their complaints over pay
 For I pay with ill grace and begrudge every groat.
 430 If anyone helps me when I happen to be broke,
 My response is surly for I don't understand;
 I behave like a hawk that's not lured by love
 But by tidbits held in the hawker's hand.
 Time after time I entirely ignore them
 435 And am silent or say not a syllable of thanks
 For the generous kindnesses Christians accord me.
 I have frequently wasted food such as fish,
 And meat and milk and cheese and more,
 And butter and bread that I've left to go bad.
 440 I lolled in my youth, too lazy to learn
 And have been ever since a bone-idle beggar.
Alas that I led such a wasted young life!"
 Repentance was appalled: "Do you not repent?"
 But Sloth was sliding into slumber again,
 445 Till Watchfulness woke him with water in his face
 And said, "You beware of deceitful despair
 And say to yourself, 'I'm sorry for my sins,'

And beat your breast and beg for God's grace,
For his goodness is greater than the whole world's guilt."

- 450 Then Sloth sat up straight and crossed himself
And swore to God to shrug off his sloth.
"Before sunrise each Sunday for seven whole years
You'll see me in church, save when I'm sick,
To hear Matins and Mass as if I were a monk,
455 And Evensong also, my oath on the cross,
Instead of sitting and swilling after dinner.
And if I still have it I'll give everything back
Acquired by means that were criminal or crooked,
And what else I owe to anyone, I promise
460 To pay back in full though I perish a pauper.
With the coins I still carry, by the Cross of Chester,²²
I shall try to find Truth before traipsing to Rome."

- Then Robert the Robber thought of "*Render their dues*,"²³
And wept for want of the wherewithal to pay.
465 Yet still that sinner said to himself,
"Christ who at Calvary died on the cross,
Have mercy on me for remembrance's sake,
Since you pitied Dismas, who pleaded for pardon.²⁴
I cannot restore the sums that I stole
470 But I call to you craving your incomparable mercy:
I pray you, don't damn me at Doomsday for my deeds!"

- What became of this criminal I cannot say,
Though I know he acknowledged his enormity once more,
Having lain with Larceny, Lucifer's aunt.
475 He copiously wept and cried to Christ
That he'd polish his pikestaff called Penitence afresh
And lean on it walking the length of the land.²⁵

- Then Repentance took pity and impelled all to kneel.
"I'll beseech our Savior on behalf of sinners
480 To amend our mischief and have mercy on us all.

²²This octagonal stone cross still stands, although its statues of saints are lost.

²³Romans xiii 7.

²⁴According to the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, Dismas was the name of the penitent thief who died alongside Christ.

²⁵Lines 472–477 are rearranged.

O God, who began the world in your goodness
 And made it and molded man in your image,
 You suffered man to sin, which brought us sickness,
 Though despite the Scriptures that sin was for the best:

*O happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam!*²⁶

485 For because of that sin you sent us your son
 And made him a man through a human maiden,
 Becoming a sinner to save mankind:

*Let us make man to our image and likeness,*²⁷ and

*He that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him.*²⁸

You died for us dressed in our flesh on Good Friday,
 Yourself in your son, for our sake at noon,

490 Feeling no sorrow for yourself or your son,
 But suffering through him for the sorrow in us,
 And determinedly *taking captivity captive.*²⁹
 Out of sadness the sun was not seen for a time
 But it shone at its summit with a meal for the saints

495 When you fed our forebears with the brightness of your blood:

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.*³⁰

Lucifer was blinded by your lustrous light,
 Which blew all the blessed to heavenly bliss!

“The third day following, in our flesh you stepped forth
 And the sinful Mary saw you sooner than your mother

500 For so you devised as a solace for sinners:

*I am not come to call the just, but sinners.*³¹

And you did in our flesh your doughtiest deeds
 Remembered in Matthew, and Mark, Luke and John:

*The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.*³²

We beg you therefore, our father and brother,
 If it should be your will, to show to us sinners

505 Your gracious forgiveness, to grant us your mercy,
 For we piteously repent that we caused you displeasure
 And condemn what we did in thought, word and deed!”

²⁶From the Canticle for Easter Saturday.

²⁷Genesis i 26.

²⁸1 John iv 16.

²⁹Ephesians iv 8.

³⁰Isaiah ix 2.

³¹Matthew ix 13.

³²John i 14.

Then Hope seized a horn of *Thou-shalt-turn-us-back-to-life*,³³
Blowing *Blessed-are-they-whose-iniquities-are-forgiven*³⁴

510 And the saints in heaven sang out the psalm:

*Men and beasts thou wilt preserve; O how hast thou multiplied thy
mercy, O God!*³⁵

A throng of a thousand gathered together
And cried to Christ and his immaculate mother
To grant them grace to go and seek Truth,
But no one knew the nearest way

515 And they stumbled and strayed like sheep on the hills
Till they'd done a good distance, when late in the day
They saw a stranger like a Saracen in dress.
He carried a staff with a colorful cloth
That was bound about it like spiraling bindweed.

520 He bore at his side a bowl and a bag,
And a hundred mementos hung from his hat,
Signs of Sinai and Galician shells,
With the keys of Rome across his cloak
And Veronica's kerchief proclaiming his calling³⁶

525 As a permanent pilgrim to places with shrines.

The first thing that folk said was, "Where are you from?"

"From the sacred Sepulchre and Sinai," he said,
"From Bethlehem and Babylon, I've been in both,
And Armenia, Alexandria, and many, many more.

530 You can see from the signs that are stitched to my hat
That I've walked a long way in the wet and the dry
And sought out saints for the sake of my soul."

"Have you seen a good saint," they said, "called Truth?
Can you point out the path to the place where he lives?"

535 "Not me, never met him," the man riposted.

"No pilgrim or palmer with pikestaff and bundle
Has ever asked me for anyone like him."

A plowman appeared. "By Saint Peter, with Truth

³³Cf. Psalm lxx 20 (KJV Psalm lxxi 20).

³⁴Psalm xxxi 1 (KJV Psalm xxxii 1).

³⁵Psalm xxxv 7 (KJV Psalm xxxvi 6–7).

³⁶Veronica was the name given to one of the women cured by Christ, her kerchief being miraculously impressed with his image.

I'm as closely acquainted as a cleric with his books!
 540 I came to know him through Native Wit and Conscience,
 And I swore that I'd serve him sincerely for ever,
 That I'd sow and plant seeds," he said, "while I live.
 I've followed him faithfully for forty-something years,
 Sowing his seed and seeing to his beasts
 545 Indoors and out to improve his income.
 I dig and I delve and I do as he asks,
 So sometimes I sow and sometimes I thresh,
 And I tailor and tinker as Truth instructs me,
 And wind yarn and weave it, whatever Truth wants.
 550 Though I say it myself, he is pleased with my service
 And he pays me properly, a penny or two more;
 He's the promptest payer a poor man could want,
 Awarding his workmen their wages each night.
 He's as meek as a lamb and modest in manner,
 555 And if you are asking the way to his house,
 I can point out the path to the place where it is."
 "Yes please, dear Piers," the people cried,
 And they offered him payment, but Piers repined.
 "By Saint Thomas, I'll take not a farthing in thanks
 560 For I'd lose the long-lasting love of Truth.
 But the straightest way by which you should walk
 Is the way of Humility for men and their wives,
 Till you come to Conscience, from which Christ can tell
 That your greatest love is love of the Lord,
 565 And your neighbor next, whom you'd never harm
 But will treat as you wish to be treated in turn.
 You skirt then a stream called 'Be-mild-of-speech'
 Till you find a ford called 'Honor-your-father,'
*Honor thy father and thy mother,*³⁷
 Where you wade in the water and wash yourself well,
 570 And your step will be lighter as long as you live.
 You'll see next 'Swear-not-except-in-need-
 And-never-name-idly-the-name-of-God.'³⁸
 "Then you'll come to a croft but keep away:
 It is called 'Do-not-covet-other-people's-property-

³⁷Exodus xx 12: Piers begins his interpretation of six of the Ten Commandments.

³⁸Exodus xx 7.

- 575 Or-wives-or-servants-and-see-you-respect-them³⁹;
 And unless they belong to you, break off no boughs.
 Two stumps you'll see standing, but do not stay:
 They are 'Steal-not' and 'Slay-not,' so strike on past both⁴⁰
 And leave them on your left and look straight ahead,
- 580 And honor all holy days honestly till evening.
 Then branch off by a barrow, 'Bear-no-false-witness,'⁴¹
 Which is fringed with florins and fees of all kinds,
 So pick no plants there on peril of your soul.
- "Then you'll see 'Tell-the-truth-don't-swerve-a-scintilla-
- 585 At-anyone's-demand-but-maintain-and-mean-it,'
 And you'll come to a castle that shines like the sun,
 A manor surrounded by a moat of Mercy,
 With walls to ward off Willfulness through Wisdom;
 The casemates are Christendom, which will save mankind,
- 590 Strengthened with 'Believe-for-so-you'll-be-saved,'
 And the place is well roofed, every parlor and passage,
 Not by lead but by love and 'Brotherly-language,'
 The drawbridge is 'Pray-and-you'll-presently-prosper,'
 Each pillar is a penance and a prayer to the saints,
- 595 And the gates are hung on hinges of alms.
- "The gatekeeper's Grace, a good man for sure;
 His assistant is Mend-your-ways, a man known to many.
 Tell him this password, that 'Truth knows truly
 I performed the penance imposed by a priest
- 600 And am sorry for my sins and shall be for ever,
 And would be, were I a wayward pope!'
 Then ask if Mend-your-ways will meekly beg his master
 To open up the gate that Eve closed off
 When she and Adam ate the sour-tasting apples:
- 605 *What Eve closed to all has been opened again*⁴²
By the Virgin Mary, for the fortress is defended
 By Grace, who keeps the key for the King.
 If he then unlocks and allows you to enter,
 You will see Truth sitting in your heart itself

³⁹Exodus xx 17.⁴⁰Exodus xx 15 and 13.⁴¹Exodus xx 16.⁴²Source not known.

- 610 On a chain of charity, and as if you were a child
 You must follow your Father and obey without fail.
 But beware of Sudden-anger, that wicked piece of work,
 Who is envious of him who sits in your heart
 And will push you toward Pride and praise of yourself.
- 615 If your beneficial deeds and your bounty then blind you,
 You'll be driven out like dew and the door will shut⁴³
 And be bolted and barred to forbid you entry
 Perhaps for a hundred humbling winters,
 And you'll lose his love by loving yourself,
- 620 And only through his grace will you go in again.
 "Seven sisters besides are servants of Truth,
 And are porters at the posterns that belong to the place.
 Humility and Abstinence are among the maidens,
 And Charity and Chastity are the chiefest sisters,
- 625 With Patience and Peace, who help many people,
 And Madam Largesse, who admits many more
 And has freed a good thousand from infernal confinement.
 The siblings of these seven are certain and sure
 To be wonderfully welcome and willingly received,
- 630 But siblings of none of those sisters, despair,
 For I swear by my head it is hard for such
 To gain admittance but by more of God's grace."
 "By Christ," cried a cutpurse, "in there I've no kin."
 "Nor me," said a man with a monkey on a string,
- 635 And a wafer-seller said, "If we're sunk for certain,
 I'll go no further to hear friars holding forth."
 But Piers the Plowman pressed them to do good:
 "There's a maiden called Mercy who may let you in,
 For she and her son are cousins to sinners
- 640 And through their help—don't hope for any other—
 Grace may be granted; so go now swiftly."
 "By Saint Paul," said a pardoner, "I may pass for unknown;
 I'll bring my indulgences and bishop's bull."
 "I'll keep you company," a prostitute called,
- 645 "You can say I'm your sister." I can't say how they fared.

⁴³Cf. Osee (KJV Hosea) xiii 3.

Step VI

In which the people ask Piers to guide them to Truth. He agrees, once he has made his will and plowed his field. Those who help will share in the harvest, and he allocates tasks appropriately, but idlers refuse to work, even when threatened with the law. So Piers summons Hunger, who deprives everyone, but when the harvest is gathered, the idlers return to their old ways.

Then people complained that the path was too hard
Without following advice every foot from a guide.

“By Saint Peter of Rome,” said Piers the Plowman,
“Hard by the highway I’ve half an acre.

5 As soon as I’ve plowed and sown it with seed
I’m willing to walk with you, showing the way.”

“That’s a long delay,” said a lady in a veil.

“What work should we women be doing meanwhile?”

10 “Some can mend sacks,” Piers said, “for the wheat,
While lovely ladies with long refined fingers
Who have silk and sendal and time to sew them,¹
Make chasubles for chaplains to honor their churches,
And workaday wives and widows and their daughters
Spin flax and wool, the weft and the warp

15 Of coarser cloth, to cover and clothe
The needy and naked, as Truth intends.
And unless the land fails, I’ll provide them with food
Out of love for the Lord for as long as I live,
While the folk who need food and drink to survive

20 Shall in fairness help to furnish that food.”

¹Sendal probably means linen here, although it can also be a thin silk.

“By Christ,” a knight cried, “he’s clever is this one.
I’ve never been taught to tackle a team,
But teach me, by God, and I’ll give it a try.”

25 “By Saint Paul,” said Piers, “you put it so bravely
That I’ll sweat and I’ll strain and I’ll sow for us both,
And perform other labors for your love all my life
If you swear to safeguard the Church and myself
From wastrels and wantons who maltreat this world,
And to hunt down efficiently the hares and the foxes
30 And boars and bucks that break down my hedges,
And to breed up falcons to bring down the birds
That invade my fields and devour my wheat.”

The knight was complaisant, replying to Piers:
“By my power I pledge and make you a promise
35 To keep to our contract, through combat if needful;
As long as I live I shall loyally guard you.”

“There’s one more point,” said Piers, “if you please.
You should treat your tenants as Truth would wish
And should make your fines both merciful and fair:
40 Let humility have mastery, not the money.
And if poor men proffer you presents and gifts,
You may not merit them so you must not take them.
They may be returnable in twelve months’ time
In perilous Purgatory, that place of pain.
45 And you’d better not abuse your bonded workers;
They may be your underlings on earth, but in heaven
They may be above you in merit and bliss:

*Friend, go up higher.*²

For you can’t tell a churl in the charnel-house at church,
Or a knight from a knave, as you know in your heart.
50 When you speak, tell the truth and recite only stories
Of wisdom and sense that instruct your workers,
Rejecting the jests of salacious jokers.
Avoid such men, I admonish you, at meals
For vulgar folk are the voice of the devil.”

55 “By Saint James,” the knight said, “I certainly consent.
I’ll obey you as long as my life may last!”

²Luke xiv 10.

“Then I’ll put on,” said Piers, “a pilgrim’s apparel
 And travel on with you until we find Truth.”
 And he climbed into leggings to keep out the cold,
 60 Part holed and part whole, with mittens for his hands,
 And he heaved a haversack over his head.
 “Now bring me a bushel of corn for our bread.
 I’ll sow it and start very soon after that
 On the pilgrimage to beg for pardon like a palmer.
 65 And the people who help me to plow and prepare
 Shall enjoy the harvest, though others object,
 And shall glean the leavings by leave of our Lord.
 For I’ll find the food for the faithful and true
 Of all types and trades, positions and skills,
 70 Save Jack the Juggler and Janet from the Stews,
 And Danny the Dice-player, Dot the Madam,
 And the fraudulent Friar and the folk in his order,
 And Robin the Rhymer with his ribald ballads.
 For Truth once told me and instructed me to say:
 *Let them be blotted out of the book of the living.*³
 75 They are rightfully shunned and *not written with the righteous*,
 The Church will take no tithes from their tricks,
 And they’re fortunate, God help them, to evade a worse fate!”

 Piers’ wife was a woman called Work-while-you-may,
 His daughter was Do-right-or-do-get-a-beating,
 80 And his son was Suffer-your-seniors-to-be-right-
 Without-grumbling-or-groaning-or-you-may-regret-it-
 Let-God-have-his-way-as-his-word-says-as-well.
 “Now I’ll go with these people,” said Piers, “as a pilgrim,
 But before I set forth I shall frame a will
 85 For I’m old and gray and have goods I must give you.
 I make these commands *in the Lord’s name, amen*:
 My soul I present to him who deserves it,
 To defend from the devil as I doubt not he’ll do
 Till my reckoning is come, as the Creed declares,
 90 When my lot, I believe, shall be mercy and love.
 And the Church shall keep my carcass in care
 For it took a tithe of my corn and my takings,
 And I paid up promptly for the peril of my soul,

³Psalm lxxviii 29 (KJV Psalm lxxix 28).

- Expecting the priest to include me in his prayers,
 95 With a mention in the Mass when remembering all Christians.
 My wife shall have only what I honestly earned
 To share as she should with my sons and daughters;
 If I die today my debts are all paid
 And by bed-time what's borrowed will be returned.
- 100 With the little that's left, by the Cross of Lucca,⁴
 I shall worship Truth while I wait in this world,
 And shall be his pilgrim, plowing for the poor,
 With my plow as my pikestaff to pare the roots
 For my coulter to cleave and cleanse the furrows.”
- 105 Then Piers and his pilgrims took up the plow,
 Many hands thus helping to plow the half-acre.
 Diggers and ditchers dug around headlands,
 And Piers was pleased, and praised what they did.
 More workmen weighed in willingly as well,
- 110 Each one of them taking and tackling a task
 Such as pricking out weeds to the Plowman's pleasure,
 Till Piers stopped plowing at the noon hour for prayer
 To see for himself who sweated the hardest,
 Thinking to hire them when harvest was at hand.
- 115 But some were sozzled, sat drinking and singing,
 Helping plow the half-acre with “Ho trolli-holli!”
 “On peril of my soul,” said Piers, turning puce,
 “Unless you leap up and lend me your labor,
 You'll not have a grain that's been grown in this ground.
- 120 You can die in a ditch and the devil can take you.”
- The scoundrels were scared but said they were blind
 Or tried the old trick of pretending to be crippled,
 Whining to Piers and pleading for pity:
 “For look, we've no limbs to labor with, lord,
 125 But we'll pray for you, Piers, and for your plowing,
 That God of his grace will increase your grain
 To pay for the alms that you offer to us,
 But we're far too sick to sweat and to strain.”
- “I'll soon tell whether you can walk and can see,

⁴This cross in Lucca, Italy, which depicts the face of Christ, was said to have been sculpted by Nicodemus with the help of an angel.

- 130 Though I'm certain, like Truth," Piers said, "that you're skivers,
 For I'm an old hand, and my errand is to warn him
 Of wastrels who harm the workers of this world
 And waste what others have won through hard work.
 So Truth will teach you to drive his team,
- 135 Or your bread will be barley and your drink a brook.
 If you're blind or crippled or kept behind bars,
 You shall sup on wheat-bread the same as myself,
 Till God in his goodness grants better days.
 But if, as Truth wants, you can work for wages,
- 140 Caring for cattle or shoing them from corn,
 Digging or ditching or doing the threshing,
 Or spreading the muck or mixing up mortar,
 Yet live by lechery and lying and sloth,
 You'll be fortunate not to face God's vengeance.
- 145 "My alms will go to feed anchorites and hermits
 Who eat no more than a mid-day meal,
 And to clothe those with cloisters and churches to keep.
 And strolling preachers shall receive bread and soup
 If their power to preach is properly given,
- 150 Since alms should be offered to religious orders,
 But Robert the Rover can rove somewhere else."
 Then Wastrel grew wild and walked up to Piers
 And furiously flung down his glove for a fight:
 A boastful Breton, a braggart who said
- 155 That Piers could go and piss on his plow.
 "Despite you we'll say and we'll do as we decide.
 We'll filch your food and your drink if we fancy
 And lark about and laugh all we like."
- Piers nodded to the knight, who was standing near him,
- 160 To guard him as agreed from grievous wretches
 And wolfish wastrels who sponge on the world:
 "For until they stop taking and contributing nothing,
 There'll never be enough when I'm not there plowing."
- The knight spoke kindly, according to his nature,
- 165 Warning Wastrel to mend his ways,
 "Or you'll pay a stiff price by the power of my office."
 "I have never worked," said Wastrel, "and won't."
 He made light of the law and still less of the knight,

- Set Piers and his plow at the price of a pea,
 170 And menaced his men if they met once again.
- “By my soul, I shall see you are punished,” Piers said,
 And he hollered for Hunger, who heard him at once.
 “Avenge me on wastrels, those wens on the world,”
 Piers said to Hunger, who seized the man’s stomach
 175 And wrung the rogue roundly until his eyes ran.
 He buffeted the Breton about his fat cheeks
 So hard he grew lean as a lantern for life.
 He beat all the braggarts till their guts nearly burst,
 And if Piers had not proffered a pease loaf to Hunger
 180 And begged him to stop they’d have starved and been buried.
- “Please leave them alive to eat with the hogs,
 Or have bread,” Piers said, “made from beans and from bran.”
- Loafers and loungers fled in alarm
 And flapped hard with flails from first light till last,
 185 Till Hunger relented and left them alone
 With the potful of pease that Piers had made.
- An army of “hermits” looked hastily for tools,
 And cut down their habits to make countrymen’s capes,
 And set to with spades and workmanlike shovels,
 190 And dug and delved to drive away Hunger.
 The bed-ridden and blind were cured by the cartload,
 And sprawling beggars sprang up quite sound.
 To the hungry, horse-mash was milk and honey,
 Many beggars were content with the bean-and-bran bread,
 195 And poor men with pease for the pains of their hunger,
 Seizing like sparrowhawks on tasks that Piers set.
 So Piers felt proud as he put them to work
 And provided the food and the wages that were fair.
- Then he pitied the people and begged Hunger to depart,
 200 To return to his home and his hearth for ever:
 “For thanks to your efforts I am even with these idlers.
 But give me your advice before you go:
 What’s the best thing to do with bothersome beggars
 Who are certain to slacken as soon as you’ve gone?
 205 It’s only misery that makes them so meek
 And willing to work for me, wanting their food.

- Yet they're brothers who were bought by God with his blood,
 And Truth once taught me to love all types
 And always to help when any are in trouble.
 210 So now I would know what needs to be done
 To manage them and make them remain at work.”
- “Hear me,” said Hunger, “and heed what I say:
 The bread of beggars who are fit yet bold
 Should only be horse-cake and biscuits for hounds.
 215 Fill them with beans, which inflate their bellies,
 And if they start whining, warn them to work,
 For they'll sup all the sweeter for deserving the meal.
 But such fellows as you find mistreated by fortune
 Or sucked dry by swindlers, seek their acquaintance.
 220 For Christ's sake share with them comfort and kindness,
 Love and relief, as is natural in law:
*Bear ye one another's burdens.*⁵
 All manner of folk that you may some time meet
 And are penniless, proffer them part of your wealth.
 They may have committed a crime or done malice,
 225 But love them and leave the lashes to God.
*Vengeance belongeth to me, and I will repay.*⁶
 If you wish to gain the grace of God,
 Live by his Gospel and be loved by the lowly:
Make unto you friends of the mammon of iniquity.”⁷
- “I wouldn't grieve God for the wealth of the world.
 May I do what you say without sinning?” Piers said.
 230 “Such behavior is honored in the Bible,” said Hunger.
 “In *Genesis* justly our progenitor says
 That bread shall be baked ‘*in the sweat of thy brow.*’⁸
 For our Lord commanded that you labor for your living,
 And *Wisdom* says the self-same story:
*Because of the cold the sluggard would not plow; he shall beg there-
 fore in the summer, and it shall not be given him.*⁹
- 235 “And Saint Matthew, whose sign is a man, remarks

⁵Galatians vi 2.⁶Hebrews x 30, cf. Romans xii 19.⁷Luke xvi 9.⁸Genesis iii 19.⁹Not *Wisdom* but *Proverbs* xx 4.

- On the servant whose talent was interred and not traded
 And who earned the anger for ever of his master,
 Who took back the talent from his torpid servant
 And handed it to him who had ten already,
 240 Asserting so that the assembly should hear:
 ‘He who has shall have, and find help in need,
 And he who has not shall not then have;
 What he thinks he has, I shall take even that.’¹⁰
 For Native Wit knows that no one should skive,
 245 But should lead a life of active labor
 Or of contemplation, as Christ decreed.
 The psalmist observes in *Blessed are they*
 That the man who lives from his loyal labor
 Is blessed by the Bible in body and soul:
*Thou shalt eat the labors of thy hands.*¹¹
- 250 “I pray you, if you practice a modicum of medicine,
 Please let me learn it a little,” said Piers,
 “For some of my servants and myself as well
 Haven’t worked for a week, and our bellies hurt badly.”
 “I can see,” Hunger said, “what makes you sick.
 255 Your guts will groan if you guzzle too much,
 So it would be wise, if you want to get well,
 Never to indulge in drink before dinner.
 And you ought to eat nothing till Hunger asks you
 And sends his sauce for your lips to savor.
 260 And save some till supper-time, sit not too long
 And stand up before you are sated and stuffed.
 Don’t let Sir Surfeit sit at your side,
 For he is a liar that likes rich living,
 A greedy gourmand who’ll go on regardless.
 265 If you eat as I ask I’ll wager my ears
 That Sir Physic will have to forfeit his fur
 And his gold-tasseled cloak for a good bowl of gruel,
 And will find himself forced to abandon his profession
 And to learn to live from work on the land.
 270 For deceitful physicians are assassins, God help them!
 Folk die from their drugs before destiny wills it.”

¹⁰Matthew xxv 14–30.¹¹Psalm cxxvii 2 (KJV Psalm cxxviii 2).

“By Saint Paul,” said Piers, “these are profitable words!
Live well now, Hunger, be away when you will,
And the Lord reward your enlightening lesson.”

275 “Ah no,” said Hunger, “I’m not going now,
Not till I’ve dined and drunk a fair drop.”

“But I haven’t a penny,” said Piers, “to buy pullets
Or a pig, goose or chicken, just a pair of fresh cheeses,
A few curds and cream and some oaten cakes,
280 And bean-and-bran bread that was baked for my children.
I swear by my soul there’s no salted bacon,
Nor eggs, by Christ, to offer you either.
I have plenty of plants such as parsley and leeks,
And a cow and a calf, and cabbage, and a cart-horse
285 To draw the dung-cart during the drought,
But must struggle on so till summer and Lammas,¹²
By when I hope to have harvest home,
And then I can do you a prodigious dinner.”

The poor people came to help Piers with peascods,
290 Baked apples and beans which they brought in their aprons,
Spring onions and chervils and champion cherries
That they offered to Piers to entertain Hunger.

But Hunger ate everything and asked for yet more.
Out of fear folk fed him their very last food,
295 Praying he’d be poisoned by their green leeks and peas.
But then harvest-time came and they carried home corn
From market and were merry and made Hunger huge meals
With stoups of good ale that sent him to sleep.

But Wastrel still wandered and would not work,
300 And beggars declined to eat bread made from beans
And wanted wheat flour that was fine and white,
And they jibbed at humble halfpenny ale,
Demanding the best and brownest of brews,
While laborers who had no land to live on
305 Wouldn’t deign to dine on the day before’s greens,
Nor did penny ale please them as payment, nor bacon,
But they fancied fresh meat, or fried or baked fish
That was *chaud* or *plus chaud* lest their stomachs be chilled.

¹²Lammas (or loaf-mass) is August 1, when first-fruits were traditionally offered.

Workmen complained and wanted more wages,
310 Bemoaning their way of life and their work,
And refusing Cato's well-founded advice:
*Bear the burden of poverty bravely.*¹³
They were grieved with God and groused against Reason,
And cursed the King and his council besides
315 For allowing the oppression of laborers in law,
But when Hunger was master, not a man of them moaned
Or resisted his statutes, so stern was his look.

So I warn you, workmen, draw wages while you may
For here comes Hunger, hurrying fast,
320 To overwhelm all wastrels with water.
Before five years are up, such famine shall be faced
Through floods and foul weather that fruit shall fail.
So says Saturn, which is sent you as a warning:
When the sun looks strange and you see two monks' heads,
325 And a maid has mastery, with a multiple of eight,
Then Death shall withdraw and Dearth shall be judge.
And Davy the Ditcher shall die of hunger,
Unless God in his goodness grants us a truce.¹⁴

¹³Dionysius Cato, *Distich* i 21.

¹⁴Although his warning of famine is serious, Langland may be parodying the fashion for prophecies.

Step VII

In which Truth gives Piers a pardon for their sins for all who live honestly—which rules out beggars and lawyers. All the pardon says is that those who do good go to heaven, and those who do ill go to hell. A priest complains that this is too simplistic, and Piers tears it apart in anger. As the two of them argue I awake and conclude that salvation lies in doing well and begging God’s mercy, rather than in relying on the saying of Masses for our souls.

Now Truth heard tell of Piers and told him
To take his team and till the earth,
And granted him a pardon *from punishment and guilt*,
For him and his successors for ever after,
5 Desiring him to stay and see to his land.
He promised a pardon as well to people
Who assisted Piers to plow it and plant it,
Or offered him help in other professions.
Knights and kings who cared for and nourished
10 The Church and ruled their realms correctly
Were pardoned the pain of Purgatory too,
And in Paradise would join the patriarchs and prophets.
And consecrated bishops who kept to their calling,
Were learned in lay and in holy law,
15 And taught and attempted to transform sinners,
Would be peers of the apostles, the pardon showed,
And at Doomsday would have the highest honor.
Truth also mentioned remission for merchants,
Though not a complete free papal pardon
20 Since they seldom observe prescribed holy days
And they swear by “my soul” and “as God may save me”
When selling their stock, which is scarcely honest.

But the pardon had a secretly sealed concession
 Allowing them leave to purchase what they liked
 25 And to make their money reselling in the market,
 Provided they aided homes for the infirm,
 Properly repaired the roads that were poor,
 Rebuilt any bridges that were broken down,
 Helped maidens to marry or made them nuns,
 30 Provided for prisoners and fed the poor,
 Subsidized schoolboys or sent them to a trade,
 And allotted religious allowances and endowments.
 “Behave as I ask and the Archangel Michael
 Shall be sent to save you from despair at your death
 35 And to see that your souls join my saints in joy,
 And no devil will dare to do you harm.”
 Then merchants made merry, and many of them wept
 As they praised Piers the Plowman for procuring the pardon.

But lawyers received the least relief,
 40 For the Psalter says that those paid to plead
 Who take gifts from the guiltless forgo salvation:
*Nor taken bribes against the innocent.*¹
 Advocates should aid the innocent for nothing,
 And princes and prelates should pay for such help:
*By kings and princes they shall be paid.*²
 But it’s generally agreed that judges and jurors
 45 Work harder for miscreants than heavenly mercy.

Those who practice, however, without pay and appear
 For the poor that are honest and harmless and humble,
 Who lend such folk help for the love of our Lord
 And work without wanting a rich reward
 50 Shall be in no danger from the devil when they die.
 Their souls shall be saved, as the psalmist confirms:
*Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle?*³
 For the Father of heaven freely provides
 His treasures of Truth for folk who are true—
 Both water and wind, wisdom and fire—
 55 And they wax and they wane by the will of God,

¹Psalm xiv 5 (KJV Psalm xv 5).

²No known biblical source.

³Psalm xiv 1 (KJV Psalm xv 1).

While those who take fees from folk for advice
 Shall plead in vain for pardon at their parting
 When they draw near to death and ask for indulgence.
 Lawyers may look at Saint Matthew for more:

*Whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them.*⁴

- 60 Laborers who live from the labor of their hands,
 Who honestly earn their wages and wealth,
 And humbly live by love and the law,
 Shall have the same pardon apportioned to Piers,
 But beggars and tramps are debarred from such blessing
- 65 Unless obliged by debility to beg.
 For to beg and to cadge without conscionable cause
 Is a devilish practice that deprives the poor
 And beguiles the giver against his will,
 Who would help out others in greater hardship
- 70 If he knew the beggar were not in need.
 Both Cato and Comestor caution discretion,
 For Cato says to “*Take care who receives,*”⁵
 And Comestor’s stories say the same:
*See who will receive before handing out alms.*⁶
- 75 Yet the good Saint Gregory says we should give
 To all who ask since God gives his all:
*Do not pick whom to pity lest you pass by a person
 Who merits your pity and pleases God more.*⁷

The most needy are our neighbors if we care to notice,⁸
 Prisoners in pits and poor folk in hovels
 With children to their charge and landlords-in-chief.
 What they save from spinning they spend on rent
 And on milk and meal to make oat porridge
 To feed their offspring who are howling for food.
 They suffer themselves from serious hunger,
 And in winter they worry when awake at night
 As they rock the cradle in its cramped little corner

⁴Matthew vii 12.

⁵Dionysius Cato, *Breves Sententiae* 23.

⁶Peter Comestor, the author of the *Scholarly Histories*. The quotation is not exact.

⁷Not Saint Gregory but Jerome’s Commentary on Ecclesiastes xi 6.

⁸This block of 27 un-numbered lines is taken from the C version of the poem (Skeat X, Schmidt IX 71–97).

And card and comb and patch their clothes
And wash and work at winding the yarn
And at making rushlights; I really can't write
Of the sorrows suffered by women in shacks.
Their men-folk truly have their troubles too,
Outwardly happy but hungry and thirsty,
Too abashed to beg or unburden themselves
To neighbors of their needs both at noon and at night.
I have seen for myself from studying this world
The privations that are faced by folk with many children
And nothing but their craft to clothe and keep them,
Who make little money to fill their many mouths.
Bread and penny ale are a blissful banquet,
Cold meat is venison and fish is fine fare,
And on Fridays and fast-days a farthing-worth of mussels
Or of cockles is a feast to such famished folk.
It's a good deed to help them and offer them alms,
To relieve those who live thus, the lame and the blind.

For only God knows who is in need
80 And deceit, if any, resides in the receiver,
Since the giver, having paid, can prepare to meet God⁹
While the beggar or borrower is bound by a debt
Which he'll owe to God with the interest added
And must duly redeem in full when he dies:
*Why then didst thou not give my money into the bank, that at my
coming, I might have exacted it with usury?*¹⁰

85 So you beggars, don't beg without burdensome need
For *if you can buy your bread*, says the book,
You have money enough and can meet your needs.¹¹
Seek solace in consulting the lives of the saints
And the Bible, which bans the practice of begging:
*I have been young, and now am old; and have not seen the just for-
saken, nor his seed seeking bread.*¹²

90 For beggars show no love nor live by the law,
And many won't marry the women they mate with,

⁹Proverbs xix 17: "He that hath mercy on the poor, lendeth to the Lord; and he will repay him."

¹⁰Luke xix 23.

¹¹Saint Jerome, *Epistles* cxxxv.

¹²Psalms xxxvii 25.

- Behaving like animals, shouting “Wahay!”
 And bringing forth bairns whom folk call bastards,
 Whose bones or backs they break while they’re small,
 95 And moan then for money for the children they’ve maimed.
 There are many more bodies that are mangled and bent
 Among you beggars than the mass of men,
 And those who perform such feats shall revile
 The hour they were born when they have to go hence.
- 100 But old men whose sometime strength is spent,
 And women with child who are wise not to work,
 The bed-ridden, blind, and the broken-limbed
 Who patiently put up with pain, such as lepers
 Have as plenary a pardon as the Plowman himself.
 105 For love of their humility our Lord allows them
 To pass through their penance and Purgatory on earth.
 “Piers,” said a priest, “let me read your pardon
 To spell out the sense of each sentence for you.”
 So Piers unfolded the pardon for the priest,
 110 And standing behind them I saw what it said.
 It was merely two lines, not a morsel more,
 That testified in terms to the following truth:
*And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and
 they that have done evil into everlasting fire.*¹³
- “Piers” cried the priest, “I can find no pardon.
 It simply says that your soul goes to God
 115 If you do well and work well, but do wicked works
 And your soul will be seized by the devil when you die!”
 Then Piers in a passion tore the pardon in two:
*Though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will
 fear no evils, for thou art with me.*¹⁴
 “I shall cease my sowing and stop working hard
 And studying,” Piers said, “how to stuff my belly!”
 120 From now on I’ll plow only prayers and penance
 And weep when I should sleep, though the wheat is unsown.
 For the prophet ate his bread in penitence and pain,
 And others did the same, as the psalmist says,

¹³Athanasian Creed, from Matthew xxv 46.¹⁴Psalm xxii 4 (KJV Psalm xxiii 4).

- Because your living is secure if you love the Lord:
*My tears have been my bread day and night.*¹⁵
- 125 Unless Luke is a lie, we should learn to be fools
 And not to bother about the world's bliss:
*What shall we eat: or what shall we drink?*¹⁶
 We have the example of how to behave:
 Who finds winter food for birds in the fields?
 They store no grain but are given it by God.”
- 130 “Well,” said the priest to Piers, “it appears
 You have learnt to read your letters a little!”
 “The Abbess Abstinence taught abc
 Before Conscience came,” said Piers, “and coached me.”
 “If you were a priest you could preach then, Piers,
 135 On subjects such as ‘*The fool hath said.*’”¹⁷
 “You stuck-up so-and-so,” Piers answered. “It’s seldom
 You’ve studied the Bible or the sayings of Solomon:
Cast out the scoffer, and contention shall go out.”¹⁸
 The priest and Piers started angrily disputing,
 And their wrangling roused me and I looked around,
 140 And saw that the sun now sat in the south.
 On the Malvern Hills with no meal and no money
 I mused on my vision as I ventured forth.
 I have frequently reflected on this dream-like vision.
 Was there substance to what I saw while I slept?
 145 What of Piers the Plowman with his pensive ways,
 And the pardon he was promised for people who do well,
 And the priest who responded that it seemed too simple?
 But I see no sense in deciphering dreams.
 For as Cato and masters in Canon Law proclaim:
 150 *Take no notice of dreams* for dreams show nonsense.¹⁹
 But the Bible offers the opposite instance
 Of Daniel addressing the dreams of a king
 Whose name is given as Nebuchadnezzar.²⁰

¹⁵Psalm xli 4 (KJV Psalm xlii 3).

¹⁶Not Luke but Matthew vi 31.

¹⁷Psalms xliii 1 and lii 1 (KJV Psalms xiv 1 and liii 1).

¹⁸Proverbs xxiii 10.

¹⁹Dionysius Cato, *Distich* ii 31.

²⁰Daniel iii.

“Sire,” said Daniel, “I deduce your dreams
 155 Mean hot-blooded horsemen wreak havoc in your kingdom,
 Dividing the land with lesser lords.”
 It fell out indeed as Daniel predicted:
 The king lost his power to petty princes.

And young Joseph saw eleven stars and the sun
 160 And the moon bow down in a dumbfounding dream,
 Which Jacob the father of Joseph judged
 To convey the following: “In time of famine
 Myself and my sons shall seek out your aid.”
 It fell out as forecast when Pharaoh was king
 165 In Egypt and Joseph was his high-ranking judge,
 For his family fled from famine to find him.

It makes me reflect in my mind on the vision
 Of the priest disapproving of a pardon for Do-well.²¹
 Do-well can do without such indulgence,
 170 Or a bull from a bishop or the benefit of Masses,
 For Do-well shall be seated in dignity at Doomsday,
 Surpassing all the pardons of Saint Peter’s Church.

The Pope has power to grant pardons to people
 To enter heaven without undergoing penance.
 175 That is our belief, which we’ve learnt from the learned:
*Whatever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in
 heaven.*²²

And I loyally believe (Lord forbid else!)
 That pardon and penance and prayers may save
 Those souls who commit the Seven Deadly Sins,
 But to trust for remission to three-yearly Masses
 180 Is surely not as safe for the soul as good deeds.

For that reason I suggest to the rich of this realm
 Who have money for remembrance in Requiem Masses
 That they be not so bold as to break the ten laws—
 Most of all judges, ministers and mayors,
 185 Who are held to be wise and wield the world’s wealth
 And can purchase a patent or a bull from the Pope.

²¹The “do well” of the pardon, and “Do-better” and “Do-best,” are treated henceforward both as persons and as injunctions, and “Do-well” sometimes as God.

²²Matthew xvi 19.

- At the dreadful doom when the dead shall arise
You will come before Christ to render account
How you led your lives and lived by his laws.
- 190 What you did day by day will then be adduced,
And no pocketful of pardons or letters from prelates
Or formal allegiance to all four schools of friars
Or double indulgences will do any good,
For your pardons and patents won't amount to a pie.
- 195 So I counsel all Christians to cry God mercy,
And Mary his mother who mediates for us.
May God grant us grace before going to our graves
To do such deeds while dwelling on earth
That at Doomsday after the day of our death
- 200 Do-well will deem that we did as he asked.

Step VIII

In which I set out on my quest for how to do well. I meet a pair of friars, who tell me that Do-well lives with them and that avoiding sin is as hard as standing still in a rocking boat. To the sound of bird-song I fall asleep again, and in my third dream I see Thought, who has always been with me, trying to explain Do-well, Do-better and Do-best. Still mystified, I ask Intelligence to tell me the difference between them.

- Thus robed in cheap russet I roamed about
For a summer season to seek out Do-well.
I frequently confronted folk to find out
If they had an idea where Do-well might dwell
5 And what manner of man he might perhaps be.
But wherever I went, no one was aware
Where the fellow I sought might finally be found,
Till one Friday I encountered a couple of friars,
Franciscan scholars who studied the divine.
10 I greeted them graciously, as I knew was good,
And before they went on I asked them to answer
Whether they had come in their travels to a country
Or a land where Do-well was likely to live,
For they walked more miles than most other men
15 And had seen more countries and courts of all kinds,
Both princely palaces and poor men's hovels,
And doubtless the dwellings of Do-well and Do-ill.
But their dictum was that Do-well "dwells among us
And always has, and I hope always will."
20 I replied like a scholar by disputing the statement.
"‘*A just man slips up and sins,*’ the book says,¹

¹Proverbs xxiv 16: "For a just man shall fall seven times and shall rise again."

- ‘Seven times daily,’ and in doing those sins
 He must certainly do ill,” I said, “and it’s accepted
 That Do-well and Do-ill cannot dwell together.
 25 *Ergo* Do-well is frequently found not with friars,
 But further afield teaching folk not to sin.”
- “I shall show you, my son,” the friar responded,
 “How seven times daily a saintly man sins
 By painting a picture as a parable to teach you.
 30 Say the man is sailing on a seething sea;
 The wind and the waves, and the wallowing craft
 May cause him to tumble time after time,
 For as straight as he stands, he slips if he moves,
 Though he’s safe if he stays as he is, which he should.
 35 But if he should reach out and wrench the rudder,
 The storm and the swell will swallow the boat
 And his life will be lost through his own foolish lapse.
 And thus,” said the friar, “it fares with folk.
 The water waxes and wanes like the world,
 40 And the wealth of the world is like the great waves
 That well up and fall with the wind and the weather.
 The boat is our body, brittle and frail
 Which the fiend and the flesh and the fickle world
 Seven times daily incite to do sin.
 45 But the sin is not deadly where Do-well dwells,
 For Charity, his champion, challenges sin,
 And strengthens us so that we steer our souls.
 Thus though our body bobs about like the boat,
 Our soul is safe unless we ourselves
 50 Decide to do sin and to drown our soul.
 God will not stop us if so we decide,
 For he gave us the gifts to govern ourselves:
 Free will and intelligence to work as we wish.
 Even birds and beasts and fish have both
 55 But man has the most and is most to blame
 If he does ill despite them and disobeys Do-well.”
- “I don’t understand,” I said, “all you say,
 But I’ll try to learn if allowed to live.”
- “Then be counseled by Christ on his cross,” said the friar.
 60 “May he save you also,” I answered, “from evil,
 And give you the grace to be good men on earth.”

- Then on I went, wandering on my own
 Through a heath that was wild, till walking by a wood
 I was startled by the sound of birds that were singing,
 65 And I stopped and leant on a linden tree to listen
 For a time to the song that the sweet birds sang.
 But the merry little sound soon sent me to sleep,
 And I dreamt the oddest, most disconcerting dream
 That anyone ever experienced on earth.
- 70 A large man who looked just like myself
 Accosted me and called out my Christian name.
 “Who are you,” I asked, “that you know who I am?”
 “You know well enough,” he announced. “None better.”
 “I do?” “I dare say you do for I’m Thought,
 75 And you’ve seen me beside you for years, I’m sure.”
 “If you’re Thought,” I said, “you can certainly say
 Where Do-well lives, which I’d love to learn.”
 “Do-well, Do-better and Do-best besides,
 Are three fine virtues, not far to find:
 80 If you tell the truth and toil with your hands
 And live from your labor or work your land,
 If you keep true accounts and claim what is due,
 Are not drunk or disdainful, you do well enough.
 “Do-better manages to do that and more.
 85 He’s meek and modest and never foul-mouthed,
 He meets people’s needs as much as he may,
 He bursts right open the bags and the bundles
 That the Earl of Avarice and his heirs hold tight,
 And he makes good friends with Mammon and his money.
 90 He clarifies the Bible to cloistered clergy
 And preaches to people the words of Saint Paul:
*You gladly suffer the foolish; whereas yourselves are wise.*²
 “And Do-best the bishop is above them both;
 His cross has a hook to hoist men from hell,
 And a pointed end to poke down the pests
 95 Who plot misdeeds that dishonor Do-well.
 And Do-well and Do-better between them have ordained

²2 Corinthians xi 19. Two lines are then omitted to avoid repetition.

- That a king should be crowned to hold court over both.
Should Do-well or Do-better do down Do-best,
The king will then come and cast them in prison
100 For life unless Do-best solicits release.
Thus Do-well, Do-better and Do-best besides
Have crowned a king to keep the peace
And to rule the realm as the three of them reason,
And only to act if he has their consent.”
- 105 I said thank you to Thought for teaching me thus,
Though I still wasn’t satisfied by what he said.
“I’d like to be enlightened a little bit more:
What do Do-well, Do-better and Do-best do?”
- “Intelligence can tell you,” said Thought, “where they live.
110 I know of no one who knows more than he.”
- So for three days then I walked on with Thought,
Enlarging on Do-well, day after day,
Until Intelligence overtook us by chance.
He was long and lean and like no one else,
115 Neither proud in apparel nor excessively poor,
And so solemn and grave and softly spoken
That I dared not touch on contentious topics,
And I said that Thought should speak instead
On a theme that would test Intelligence’s wits:
120 How Do-well and Do-better differed from Do-best.
- So Thought spoke for me the following phrase:
“Here’s Will wants to tell if Intelligence can teach him
Where Do-well, Do-better and Do-best may live,
And if they are found in human form,
125 For his aim is to act like all of the three.”

Step IX

In which Intelligence tells me of the castle of Flesh crafted by Nature and guarded by Mind and his sons, the five senses, where Lady Life is watched over by Do-well and his daughter, Do-better, under the eye of Do-best. Intelligence explains what each is, cautions me against misuse of body and mind, and points to the importance of marrying wisely.

- “Sir Do-well dwells not a day from here,”
Intelligence told us, “in a castle that’s crafted
By Nature from the elements earth and air,
Both well combined with wind and water.
5 And within the castle, carefully enclosed,
Nature has lodged a beloved who is like him.
She’s the lady called Life who is loathed by Envy,¹
A proud French prancer, a ‘*prince of this world*’;²
Who wishes he could woo her away with his wiles.
- 10 “But Nature is wary and warned and watches,
And has delegated Do-well, the Duke of these Marches,³
With his daughter Do-better, who acts as her damsel,
Loyally to look to her needs in life,
With Do-best above them, to be like a bishop
15 And rule them rightly: they do as he directs,
And the lady called Life acts as he asks.
- “The constable of the castle, who keeps good watch,
Is a knowing knight whose name is Mind.

¹The original name of the lady is *Anima*, but she is clearly distinct from the character of that name who appears in Step XV.

²John xii 31.

³Langland may be thinking of the Welsh Marches, the borderlands west of the Malvern Hills.

- He fathered by his first wife five fine sons,
 20 Sir See-well, Sir Say-well, the civil Sir Hear-well,
 The hale and hearty Sir Work-well-with-your-hands,
 And Sir Godfrey Go-well, who's as great as the rest.
 Their task is to protect the tender Lady Life
 Till Nature comes and calls her to his keeping.”
- 25 “What kind of creature is Nature?” I inquired.
 “Nature,” said Intelligence, “contrived all things,
 He's the father who formed every facet of life,
 The God so great that he had no beginning,
 God of light and life, of pleasure and pain,
 30 And angels and all things are at his will,
 Though man most resembles him in stature and shape.
 “The beasts all sprang from the sentence he spoke:
 *He commanded, and they were created.*⁴
 Yet man he made to be most like himself,
 And Eve from man's rib without other aid.
 35 As the solitary source he said, ‘*Let us make,*⁵
 But aware that it wanted more than his word,
 Added that, ‘My strength must assist my speech,’
 Like a lord writing letters who has plenty of parchment
 But lacking a pen, though his pen-work is perfect,
 40 Is unable to deliver his lordly letters.
 So it seems to have been, as the Bible says,
 That God needed to work with his wits as well,
 And molded man using all of his might
 To live a life that would last for ever
 45 By bestowing a spirit from the sanctity of heaven.
 Thus his grace was so great that he granted to man
 Everlasting life, to his lineage as well,
 And man and his soul amount to as much
 As the fortress called Flesh that was fashioned by Nature
 50 And was made by the majesty of God Almighty,
 The work of his word and the work of his wits.
 “Both Mind and the senses are sealed inside
 For love of the lady who is known as Life

⁴Psalm cxlviii 4 (KJV Psalm cxlviii 5).

⁵Genesis i 26.

- And who roams the body, all its recondite reaches,
 55 Though the heart is her home and her harbor of rest,⁶
 While Mind in the head, managing the heart,
 Approves the plans and the purposes of Life.
- “Of God’s gifts the greatest after grace is the mind,
 And misery afflicts those who misuse their minds,
 60 Such as gobbling gluttons *whose God is their belly.*⁷
 They are servants of Satan, who shall seize their souls,
 For sinners have souls that resemble him,⁸
 While the good have souls like the God of grace:
*He that abideth in charity, abideth in God.*⁹
 Gluttony negates redemption by God,
 65 Who forsakes those conceived in his shape if they’re drunk:
Amen I say to you, I know you not, and
*I let them go according to the desires of their heart.*¹⁰
 But folk merely foolish and fatherless children,
 And madmen and maidens who are meant to be helped,
 And others who are mindless and have to be minded,
 And widows who want the wherewithal for food,
 70 Are fostered and fed by the Church, as is fair.¹¹
 I might say much more about this matter
 And cite the sayings of the saintly four doctors,¹²
 Or rely on Luke to show it’s no lie,¹³
 For a godparent seeing their godchild in grief,
 75 In anguish or misery, will offer some aid
 Or else in Purgatory will pay the price,
 Since looking after children too little to know law
 Means not just giving them names that mean nothing.
- “No Christian creature would sit crying at the gate

⁶Cf. Proverbs iv 23.

⁷Philippians iii 19.

⁸Cf. 1 John iii 8.

⁹1 John iv 16.

¹⁰Matthew xxv 12 and Psalm lxxx 12 (KJV Psalm lxxxi 12).

¹¹Lines 66–70 are rearranged.

¹²Saint Ambrose was Bishop of Milan in the late fourth century, Augustine was Bishop of Hippo (in North Africa) at the same time, Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin in the fourth to fifth century, and Gregory was elected Pope at the end of the sixth century. All wrote doctrinal works.

¹³Not in Luke, but the general duty to care for the fatherless and widows is referred to in James i 27.

- 80 For bread or pottage if prelates were pious.
 A Jew will not see a Jew go starving
 For the wealth of the world if he can help it:
 Why cannot then Christians care for each other?
 The Jews whom we judge to be Judas's fellows
- 85 Will help each other when any is in need.
 It is shameful if Christians cannot be as kind
 And as gentle as the Jews, like whom we should behave;
 I foresee that such stinginess will make us all suffer.
- “Even bishops should be blamed if they mistreat beggars;
- 90 It is worse than Judas to be generous to jokers
 And to drive away beggars when they're dirtily dressed:
*A prelate too greedy to give out Christ's goods
 Betrays him like Judas; to take unjustly
 A pauper's pittance is just as depraved.*¹⁴
- 95 Such reprehensible behavior is wrong
 And insults the Lord and what Solomon says:
*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*¹⁵
- “To fear God is good, but there's far more virtue
 In loving the Lord than in fearing his vengeance;
 And to do best betokens attempting all the time
- 100 To waste not a word and to use that time wisely:
*Who offends in one point, is guilty of all.*¹⁶
 For ill use of time, as Truth will tell,
 Is hated most heartily by God in heaven;
 And the squandering of speech comes second since speech
 Is a song that has sprung from the grace of God.
- 105 Shall the Father find his fiddle untuned
 And his minstrels mocking his music in taverns?
 By God's good grace, all goodly men
 Can everywhere and always earn a living
 If they want to work and are willing and true:
*They that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.*¹⁷
- 110 “And folk truly wedded do well in this world
 For they sweat and they strive to keep and sustain it,

¹⁴Both quotations are from Peter Cantor's *Compendium* Chapter xlvii.

¹⁵Proverbs i 7 and ix 10.

¹⁶James ii 10.

¹⁷Psalms xxxiv 10.

- And from that very stock have sprung up confessors,
 Knights and clergy, commoners and kings,
 Maidens and martyrs, who all come from one man,
 115 And the woman is the way that such work has progressed.
 Hence marriages are made by some mediating person
 With advice from the fathers and then from good friends,
 And the willing consent of the spouses themselves,
 Since marriage was made by God Almighty,
 120 Who witnessed that heaven can be here on earth.¹⁸
 But folk who are false and faithless or thief,
 And swindlers and scroungers, are conceived out of wedlock,
 At an uncouth hour, I conclude, like Cain,
 For the psalmist says of such sinful scoundrels,
*He hath conceived sorrow, and brought forth iniquity.*¹⁹
- 125 “Those coming from Cain reach evil ends.
 For God sent to Seth and said through an angel,
 ‘I order your descendants to wed your descendants
 And not to couple with the kindred of Cain.’
 But some would not heed that edict of heaven
 130 And consorted in sin with descendants of Cain
 Until God grew angry at their insolent antics,
 Which made him regret the making of man:
*It repented him that he had made man.*²⁰
 He hastened to Noah and urged him to hurry:
 ‘You must build a ship out of beams and boards
 135 For yourself and three sons, and your wives besides.
 Go aboard the boat and bide your time
 For forty days till the flood has fallen
 And washed away Cain and his wicked clan.
 All the animals also shall heavily curse
 140 The coming of Cain which will cause them to die
 In the dales and the hills for his damnable deeds:
 Every beast, every bird that flies up above,
 Excluding one couple of every kind,
 Which shall be preserved in your shingled ship.’

¹⁸Cf. Genesis i 28 and John ii 2: God created marriage, and Jesus was a witness at a marriage.

¹⁹Psalm vii 15 (KJV Psalm vii 14).

²⁰Genesis vi 6.

- 145 “Thus folk had to pay for their forefathers’ faults
 And suffered as a sequel to their ancestor’s sin,
 Though the Gospel, I grant, seems to disagree:
*The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, and the father
 shall not bear the iniquity of the son.*²¹
 But I find, if the father is false and a rogue,
 That the son will have some of his father’s spots.
- 150 Graft an apple on an elder, and how can it be
 That the apple is sweet? And the same with a scoundrel,
 Who brings forth bairns that are bound to be bad,
 For offspring inherit the flavor of the father:
*Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?*²²
- “Thus accursed Cain caused the misery that came
 155 Because folk were flouting God’s will when they wed.
 To marry off children in so mindless a manner
 Can only bring sorrow, and I’ve seen for myself
 That when marriages are made in quest of money,
 The progeny cause such permanent pain
- 160 As befell the folk I referred to before.
 The good should wed good, though they may lack gold,
 For Christ can advance such folk as he favors:
*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*²³
 And to countenance matching a maid to a man
 Who’s decrepit, by Christ, is far from comely,
- 165 And so is wedding a widow for her wealth
 When her belly can no longer bear a man bairns.
 Since the Plague many pairs have plunged into marriage,
 But their offspring have only been angry words,
 Jealousy, joylessness, joint disaffection,
- 170 Querulous quibbling and quarrels in bed.
 If they went to Dunmow they would not win
 The famous flitch unless their oath were false
 Or they had the help of the devil himself.²⁴
- “So I counsel all Christians not to conclude
 175 A marriage that’s made for money or wealth.

²¹Ezekiel (KJV Ezekiel) xviii 20.²²Matthew vii 16.²³John xiv 6.²⁴A side of bacon was awarded by the town to any couple who could take an oath after their first year of marriage that they had never quarreled.

- Bachelors should seek out spinsters as spouses,
 And widowers and widows should walk the same path,
 Looking that they wed not for land but for love,
 Thus gaining God's grace and enough worldly goods.
- 180 Any layman who cannot be continent for life²⁵
 Should marry sensibly and stay free of sin,
 For lecherous living will lead him to hell.
 So while you are young and your weapon's unwieldy,
 Wear it out wiving if you want to do well:
- 185 *While you have your strength, don't spend it with strumpets,
 For a harlot's hallway is the highway of death.*²⁶
- “And when you've a wife, be aware of the time,
 Unlike Adam and Eve when Cain was first caused.
 At determined times betwixt man and wife
- 190 There should be no bedding; nor should they combine
 Save when their lives and souls are spotless
 And their charity is perfect and their persons are pure.
 It will please the Lord if they lead such lives,
 For marriage was made by God Almighty:
*For fear of fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let
 every woman have her own husband.*²⁷
- 195 Those born out of wedlock are wont to be wastrels,
 False folk, foundlings, fraudsters and liars,
 Who lack the grace to win love or a living
 But wander and squander such stuff as they scavenge.
 They serve the devil, disdainful Do-well
- 200 And after their deaths they shall dwell with the devil
 Unless God grants them the grace to do good.
- “To do well is to do as the law ordains,
 But believe me, friend, to love friend and foe
 Is better, and best is to aid and to help
- 205 Both young and old with healing and alms.
 A Do-well will dread God, a Do-better suffers,
 And a Do-best does both and brings within bounds
 The wayward will that thwarts good works
 And drives out Do-well through deadly sins.”

²⁵“Layman” includes the secular clergy, i.e. priests who have not taken final vows.

²⁶Latin verses by the miracle-working monk and Langland's contemporary, John of Bridlington.

²⁷1 Corinthians vii 2.

Step X

In which Dame Study, Intelligence's wife, tells him he is wasting his breath on a fool like me, but grudgingly directs me to her cousin Learning and his wife Scripture, warning me of pitfalls on the way. Learning gives a different explanation of Do-well, Do-better and Do-best, pointing out that all in holy orders should behave well lest their cloisters are sequestrated. Scripture speaks at length of those who may be saved, and of the limitations of learning.

Intelligence had a spouse, a certain Dame Study.
She was sharp in the face and slender of frame
And was furious Intelligence should teach me such things.
She gave him a glare and grimly pronounced,
5 “Well, you’re a wise one to waste your wisdom
On flatterers and fools that have feathers for brains.”
She took him to task and told him to stop
“Offering words of wisdom to witless buffoons;
So pray *noli mittere* your priceless pearls
10 Before swine who only eat hips and haws.
They cannot appreciate Paradise and pearls
And would sooner satisfy their hunger with swill.¹
I mean the many people who make it plain
By their actions they would rather have riches and rents
15 And lordships and land and ease upon earth
Than all of the sayings of Solomon the sage.
Intelligence and wisdom are worth not a wit
These days unless combed into covetous cloth.
It is those who contrive to twist the truth,
20 Who dodge and weave and do others down
In the settlement of suits, whose counsel is sought,
And their lies mislead both judges and lords.

¹Cf. Matthew vii 6.

- “Job says in his story,” Dame Study continued,
 “That wicked men wield the wealth of this world,
 25 Ignoring and neglecting the letter of the law:
*Why then do the wicked live? Why is it well with all them that
 transgress, and do wickedly?*²
- The psalms say the same of such that do ill:
*Behold these are sinners; and yet abounding in the world they have
 obtained riches.*³
- Holy Scripture says, ‘Lo! How lordly they look,
 The miserly and mean who have most from God
 Yet care the least for the common comfort:
*They have destroyed the things which thou hast made: but what
 has the just man done?*⁴
- 30 Jokers and japesters are paid for their jests,
 For their rudeness, ribaldry and riotous songs,
 But those who speak of the sacred Scriptures,
 Of the tales of Tobit and the twelve apostles,
 And preach of the sentence that Pilate imposed
- 35 On gentle Jesus whom the Jews abused,
 Are little liked or loved for such lessons,
 Nor rewarded or welcomed, as God is my witness!
- “Those loud-mouths who live by bragging and lies,
 And flout our Lord’s law with foolery and falsehood,
 40 Who spit and spew out speech that is foul,
 Who slurp and slobber and seek attention,
 Making fun of those folk who won’t finance their pranks,
 Know as much about music that makes men’s hearts glad
 As Mutch the Miller about psalms and the Mass,
- 45 And but for their smut and licentious stories,
 No king or count or canon of Saint Paul’s
 Would give them a groat to greet the New Year!
 But nowadays minstrelsy and mirth among men
 Are flattery, filth, and vulgar stories
- 50 Of the sort that satisfy Gluttony and Swearing.
- “When the singing stops and they speak of Christ
 In their cups, the coarse and the cultivated too

²The first sentence is from Job xxi 7, the second from Jeremiah xii 1.

³Psalms lxxiii 12.

⁴Psalms x 4 (KJV Psalm xi 3: “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?”)

- Betray the Trinity by talking baloney,
 Bleating balderdash and misquoting Saint Bernard,
 55 Saying two of the Trinity murdered the third,
 As if they had some knowledge of heaven,
 Chewing at God when their guts are gorged,
 While the careworn clamor and cry at the gate,
 Famished and frozen and fainting with thirst.
- 60 They won't take them in or offer them help;
 But they shun them and shout and shoo them like dogs.
 Those sharing so shabbily their plenty with the poor
 Cannot love the Lord who allowed them so much,
 For without the mercy of modester men
 65 Beggars would go empty-bellied to bed.
 God is much in the mouths of these great masters
 But his mercy is met with in humbler men,
 And so say the psalms," Dame Study observed.
 *"Behold we have heard of it in Ephrata: we have found it in the
 fields of the wood."⁵*
- Clergy and their kind are keen to quote God;
 70 They have him in their mouths, but the humble in their hearts.
 "Friars and fraudsters have fashioned excuses
 That pander to the proud since the time of the Plague.
 Now they preach at Saint Paul's as rivals to priests
 So that folk have lost faith, are not free with their goods
 75 Nor are sorry for their sins; indeed pride has so spread
 Among clergy and laity, lordly and lowly,
 That prayers have no power to halt the Plague!
 For God is now deaf and does not deign
 To hear us but slaughters us sinners for our sins.⁶
- 80 Yet these worldly wastrels still heed no warning,
 Nor does dread of death reduce their pride
 Or induce them to do their charitable duty.
 Out of gluttony they gaily consume their own goods,
 Giving nothing to beggars, as they're bid in the Bible:
 *Deal thy bread to the hungry, and bring the needy and the harbor-
 less into thy house; when thou shalt see one naked, cover him.⁷*
- 85 And the more they amass, the more money and wealth,

⁵Psalm cxxxi 6 (KJV Psalm cxxxii 6).

⁶In Skeat, this and the preceding line are only in the C version.

⁷Isaiah lviii 7.

The more land and lordships, the less they give out.
 The wealthy should weigh up the words of Tobit,
 Who says in Scripture in straightforward terms:
*If thou have much, give abundantly: if thou have little, take care
 even so to bestow willingly a little.*⁸

- Those with much give much, those with little, give little,
 90 For no law lays down how long we shall live.
 If only lords would learn from such lessons,
 And ponder how best to support their people
 Instead of feasting like fiddlers or friars
 In other men's houses and neglecting their own!
 95 If the master and mistress are always missing
 The dining hall becomes both dismal and drear.
 Moreover the rich now eat on their own
 In private parlors out of 'pity for the poor,'
 In heated chambers with chimneys and hearths
 100 Removed from the hall that was made for meals,
 To ensure, they say, that no spending is wasted.

- "And I've heard the haughty eating at table,
 Discussing Christ as if they were clerics,
 Finding fault with the Father who formed us all
 105 And carping and quibbling at clerical teaching—
 'Why on earth did our Savior suffer the serpent
 To deceive so swiftly the woman and her spouse,
 Through his subtlety sending them straight to hell,
 And why must their descendants suffer for their sin?'
 110 And then they maintain that the Bible's untrue.
 'For Christ declared in Scripture,' they assert,
*'The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.'*⁹
 So why should we be racked and ruined
 For the deed Adam did? It's ridiculous and wrong:
*For every one shall bear his own burden.*¹⁰

- "The proposals they put, these powerful persons,
 115 Make the men who mull on them misbelieve,
 But Imagination has the answer,

⁸Tobias iv 9 (KJV Apocrypha Tobit iv 8). Two lines are then condensed into one to avoid repetition.

⁹Ezekiel (KJV Ezekiel) xviii 20.

¹⁰Galatians vi 5.

The good reply that is given by Augustine:
*Know no more than is meet to know.*¹¹

- Never look to learn why God allowed
120 The serpent Satan to seduce his seed,
But loyally believe in the lore of the Church
And pray to God for penance and pardon,
For mercy to mend your ways while you may.
Any person who expects to work out God's plan
125 Deserves to have his eyeball shoved up his arse
And his finger after for asking for answers
Why God let Satan succeed in his scheming
Or why Judas betrayed Lord Jesus to the Jews.
All was as God wanted, we worship him for it,
130 And however we argue, it always will be.

- “And those who think up confusing theories
How Do-better differs from Do-well somehow,
I hope they go deaf for they have no idea.
Unless they live the life of a Do-well
135 I'll willingly wager they won't Do-better,
However much Do-best may urge them on.”

- When Intelligence took in the tale his wife told
He was so disconcerted he could not respond
And he drew back in silence as dumb as death,
140 And nothing I could say, though I knelt on my knees,
Could persuade him to speak a syllable of sense.
He glanced at Dame Study and smiled and shrugged,
Seeming to say I must seek her good grace.

- So when I realized what he wanted
145 I bowed and said, “Madam, I beg you mercy.
Your man I'll remain as long as I live
And I'll always act as you tell me I ought
If you'll please explain what Do-well implies.”

- Dame Study responded, “For your meekness and mildness
150 I'll let you take lessons from my cousin called Learning.¹²
Within these six months he has married a mistress

¹¹Cf. Saint Augustine, *De Baptismo, contra Donatistas* Book 2 Chapter 5.

¹²Learning is called “Clergy” in the original, which means both the clerical profession and book-learning.

- Of all seven arts, the scholarly Dame Scripture.¹³
 I trust that these two will do as I tell them
 And will promptly point out the path to Do-well.”
- 155 That made me as merry as a minstrel paid money
 Or a bird in the blue on a blissful morning,
 And I begged for the best way to Learning’s abode
 And a word of greeting, for I wanted to go.
- 160 “First seek out the highway,” she said, “to Suffer-
 Both-well-and-woe-if-you-wish-to-learn,
 Then ride on past Riches but do not rest:
 If you linger too long you’ll never reach Learning.
 And leave on your left the land of Loose Living,
 Make sure it’s removed by a mile or more.
- 165 Then you’ll come to a court called Keep-well-your-tongue-
 From-lying-and-license-and-liquorous-drinks.
 Then you’ll see Soberness and Simplicity-of-speech,
 Where everyone is eager to open their mind,
 Which will lead you to Learning that’s truly enlightened.
- 170 “As a sign you may say that I sent him to school.
 And greet his wife too for I gave her the gifts
 To set down the psalms and Solomon’s *Wisdom*.
 I lectured her in logic and the whole of the law,
 And I made her familiar with musical modes.
- 175 I taught first principles to Plato the poet,
 And Aristotle and others I taught to argue.
 I began the first grammar for girls and boys,
 And I beat them relentlessly unless they would learn.
 I contrived the tools for crafts of all types,
- 180 For carpentry and carving, and compasses for masons,
 And level and line, though I lack their keen sight.
- “But theology has trumped me time after time:
 The more I muse on it, the mistier it seems
 And the deeper I delve the darker I find it;
- 185 It is not a science for subtle disquisition
 And is empty and hollow if love is lacking.
 But I love it best when love is its lodestone,

¹³The seven arts are the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music, geography, astronomy).

- And grace never lacks where love takes the lead.
If you're looking for Do-well, be loyal to love
190 For Do-better and Do-best are endowed with love.
- “In un-Christian philosophy, Cato proclaims:
Where sweet words are spoken but the speaker is false
*Use similar art to outsmart and deceive.*¹⁴
That is the course that is counseled by Cato,
195 But to those who take heed theology offers
An opposite argument that we ought to be
Like brothers and pray for people who abuse us,
To love those who lie and relieve their needs,
To give back good, says God, for evil:
Therefore, whilst we have time, let us work good to all men, but
*especially to those who are of the household of the faith.*¹⁵
- 200 Saint Paul, who loved purity, preached that people
Should show love of God and do good by giving
To needy folk who follow our faith.
And our Lord also taught us to love our belittlers
And not to hurt any who injure or harm us:
*Vengeance belongeth to me, and I will repay.*¹⁶
- 205 Therefore look that you love as long as you live:
There is no study so sovereign for the soul.
- “For astronomy is niggling and not worth knowing;
Geometry and geomancy are just as hazy,
Producing little profit for people who explore them
210 Since sorcery supplies the chief source of their study.
But the subject that's especially slippery and unsafe
Is the fraud of alchemy, which befuddles and is false:
If you want to do well, keep away from that.
I invented these sciences and their subtleties myself,
215 For the simple purpose of deceiving people.
Go and say what I've said to Learning and Scripture,
And request them kindly to make Do-well clear.”
- I saluted the lady and left her with thanks
And went on my way at once without stopping
220 Or respite or rest till I reached Master Learning.

¹⁴Dionysius Cato, *Distich* i 26. Two lines are then omitted to avoid repetition.

¹⁵Galatians vi 10.

¹⁶Hebrews x 30.

- When I got there I greeted the good old man
 And his wife as well, and I bowed to them both
 And told them the tale that I had been taught.
 No warmer welcome since God made the world
 225 Was afforded a visitor than the friendship I found.
 They set me at ease as soon as I said
 I had tramped the highway from Intelligence's house
 And was sent by Dame Study to seek their advice
 And to learn about Do-well, Do-better and Do-best.
- 230 "To do well," said Learning, "and lead a good life,
 Whether learned or not, means believing loyally
 In all the articles of faith that there are,
 In the great Lord God who had no beginning,
 And the sole true Son who saved mankind
 235 From the darkness of death and the power of the devil
 With the aid and the help of the Holy Ghost,
 Which proceeds from them both, the same yet separate,
 Being one single God, yet God three in one,
God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost,
 240 The maker of man and the maker of beasts.
- "Saint Augustine wrote glosses on the point long ago
 To confirm us fully in our faith, and he took
 The four Evangelists as his firm foundation,
 With Christ himself, who says in Scripture:
I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and
*He that seeth me seeth the Father also.*¹⁷
 245 That cannot be explained by the cleverest of clergy,
 And yet for the laity it belongs to belief,
 For no one has the intellect and knowledge that are needed,
 And faith would be facile if easily fathomed:
Faith has no merit where demands are made
 250 *For positive proof from people's past.*¹⁸
- "To do better is to suffer for the sake of your soul
 The torments and trials you are told by the Church,
 And to beg while you may for God's measureless mercy,
 By showing in your deeds what you say in your speech
 255 And proving by your actions you're the person you appear—

¹⁷John xiv 10 and xiv 9.¹⁸From the *Homilies* of Saint Gregory.

*Both be what you seem and seem what you be—*¹⁹
 So that no one is hoodwinked by how you behave
 And you are in your soul what you seem at first sight.

“Doing best means bringing the guilty to book,
 260 Once you can see that your soul is unsullied.
 But cast no blame if you could be accused:
Before you accuse, take care you are faultless,
*In case your own guilt will cause you discredit.*²⁰

For God in the Gospel grimly reproves
 265 Accusers who cannot claim to be clean:
*And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye; and seest
 not the beam that is in thy own eye?
 Cast out first the beam out of thy own eye, and then shalt thou see
 to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.*²¹

Every blundering blind man had best cure himself,
 Such as priests and parsons who ought to preach
 And teach other men to make amends.
 So before you start, as these verses aver,

270 It is safest to check you are such as you say.
 For preach as you will, God’s word still applies
 And is clear to you clerics, if not to the commons.
 But from what can be seen it certainly seems
 That the way God’s word is now put to work

275 Is the manner remarked on in the Gospel of Mark:
*Can the blind lead the blind? Do they not both fall into the
 ditch?*²²

Yet simple folk surely can see the beam
 In the eyes of priests, whose perfidy has put
 The mote in the eyes of all manner of others.

“The Bible reports the price that was paid
 280 By the folk of Israel for Ophni and Phinees,
 Two impious priests whose avarice ended
 In the forfeit of the Ark and the fall of their father.”²³

¹⁹From the *Homilies* of Saint Gregory.

²⁰A Latin couplet of unknown origin.

²¹Matthew vii 3 and 5.

²²Luke vi 39.

²³1 Kings (KJV 1 Samuel iv). The death of the promiscuous Ophni and Phinees (KJV Hophni and Phinehas) is predicted in an earlier chapter, but Heli (KJV Eli) still stumbles when he is told of his sons’ demise, and his neck is broken.

So before you reproach other folk, reflect
 And study the psalms, so that you can say:
*Thou thoughtest unjustly that I should be like to thee: but I will
 reprove thee.*²⁴

285 Then the hedgerow hecklers will be humbled and silenced,
 No longer accusing and calling you curs:
*Dumb dogs not able to bark.*²⁵
 They will fear to refute your faith and your works,
 And will come for a blessing even quicker than cash.

“So if you’d be holy keep that in your hearts.
 290 For in holy orders you should hold to the Rule
 Of the good Pope Gregory, Gregory the Great,
 Who proclaims the right course in his commentary on *Morals*,
 Offering this image of how to behave:
 ‘When fresh water fails and the flood recedes,
 295 The fish are left dry and die of drought,
 Like monks and friars who fancy their freedom
 And wander away from the cloister walls.’²⁶

“For if there is a heaven on earth
 And ease for the soul, it is surely in school
 300 And cloister, where no one comes to quarrel
 But to be obedient and to learn from books.
 In school there is scorn if a scholar is idle,
 But failing that love and affection are found.
 Yet you ride about now, roaming the roads,
 305 Presiding at settlements and buying estates,
 Trotting your mounts from manor to manor
 With hounds at your heels like high-born lords,
 And frowning at fellows who fail to kneel:
 ‘What tramp can have taught them to tender a cup?’
 310 Landlords should leave their land to their heirs,
 Not to callous clergy who claim the roof leaks.
 For frequently priests treat their parishes like playthings
 Displaying no charity or pity for the poor,
 And enlarging their lands and behaving like lords.
 315 “But a king shall come and require their confession

²⁴Psalm il (=49) 21 (KJV Psalm l 21).

²⁵Isaiah lvi 10.

²⁶This cannot be found in the writings of Pope Gregory I.

- And beat them with the Bible for breaking their Rule,
 And shall mend the manners of monks and nuns
 And impose a penance till they *reinstate the Rule*.
 And barons and earls will take back their birthright
 320 For their sons and daughters, and will cite the psalm:
 *Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: They are bound, and
 have fallen.*²⁷
- Then friars will find in their friaries a key
 To Constantine's coffers enclosing the wealth
 That Gregory's god-sons vaingloriously wasted,
 And the king will cause an incurable wound
 325 To the Abbot of Abingdon and all his issue.²⁸
 Those who study the Bible will see this is so:
 *How is the oppressor come to nothing, the tribute hath ceased; The
 Lord hath broken the staff of the wicked, the rod of the rulers.*²⁹
- But the king will not come until Cain has woken
 And Do-well destroys him and strikes down his strength.”
 “Then Do-well and Do-better are nobles?” I deduced.
- 330 “I see no reason to be scornful,” said Scripture,
 “But unless scribes are liars, it looks to me
 That money and monarchy and knighthood are millstones,
 Not helping by a hair's breadth admission to heaven.
 As Saint Paul asserts, they seriously obstruct it,
 335 And Solomon says much the same about wealth:
 *There is not a more wicked thing than to love money.*³⁰
- Even Cato cautions that money needs care:
*Value money but don't value its form.*³¹
 And patriarchs and prophets and poets as well
 Have written to warn against wishing for wealth,
 340 And in praise of poverty that is borne with patience;
 The apostles say the poor may pass into heaven
 By right, but the moneyed by remission and mercy.”
 “By Christ,” I cried, “I can contradict that,
 For the baptized are saved, as is said by the Saints,

²⁷Psalm xix 8–9 (KJV Psalm xx 7–8: “They are brought down and fallen”).

²⁸i.e., all monastic houses since Abingdon was thought to be the first established in England.

²⁹Isaiah xiv 4–5.

³⁰Ecclesiasticus x 10. (Ecclesiasticus is regarded as Apocryphal in KJV.)

³¹Dionysius Cato, *Distich* iv 4.

- 345 Both Peter and Paul, be they rich or poor!”
 “That is so,” Scripture said. “Even Saracens and Jews
 May themselves, we are sure, be baptized *in extremis*.
 In agony a heathen may christen a heathen,
 And like a Christian, for his loyal belief
- 350 He’ll go to heaven when his own life ends.
 But for Christians christening cannot suffice
 Since Christ died for Christians and proclaimed the condition
 That those craving resurrection with Christ must be kind:
 *If you be risen with Christ, seek the things that are above.*³²
 They must give and must love, and must live by this law:
- 355 ‘Thou shalt loyally love the Lord thy God,
 And secondly all Christian creatures in common.’³³
 If you seek to be saved, the sole route is love;
 If we do not have that, at the day of our doom
 Our money and mountain of moth-eaten clothes
- 360 And our wine and our wild fowl will weigh against us
 If we know of need and let beggars go naked,
 For every Christian should be kind to others
 And should help the heathen in the hope they’ll convert.
 “God also commands that the mighty and modest
- 365 Not harm or kill any creature that carries
 His likeness unless he allows it expressly.
 ‘*Thou shalt not kill*’ means to suffer in silence:
 *Vengeance belongeth to me, and I will repay.*³⁴
 ‘I shall punish in Purgatory or the pit of hell
 Each man’s misdeeds not remitted by mercy.’”
- 370 “Your lecture was long but I’m little the wiser,
 And I’m still in the dark about Do-better and Do-well.
 You’ve recited theology instead,” I insisted,
 “And affirmed I was found before I was born
 On a list of the blessed in the Book of Life,
- 375 Or else left out on account of some evil:
 *No man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended from
 heaven.*³⁵

³²Colossians iii 1.³³Cf. Luke x 27.³⁴Hebrews x 30.³⁵John iii 13.

- I believe it all loyally, I swear by our Lord,
 But what of Solomon, that well of wisdom,
 Whose gifts were given by God's good grace,
 With which to rule and enrich his realm,
 380 And who judged with such sense, as Scripture says?
 He and Aristotle are hailed as great teachers,
 And the godly savants who instruct us in sermons
 Tell us those two were the wisest of their time.
 Yet the Church disdains them and deems them both damned!
- 385 I would surely be stupid, whatever you say,
 To hope for heaven by imitating them,
 For they pine in the pit for their wisdom and pains.”
- “I'm scarcely astonished,” said Scripture. “Some folk³⁶
 Have souls that incense and dissatisfy God,
 390 For many on this earth are much more moved
 By wealth than God and want God's grace,
 Which will not be granted when they give up the ghost.
 Even sages,” she said, “such as Solomon himself
 Behaved most hatefully, as Holy Writ says,
 395 For the learned and lettered with wit and wisdom
 Seldom do as they say themselves:
- The Scribes and the Pharisees have sitten on the chair of Moses. All
 things therefore whatsoever they shall say to you, observe and
 do: but according to their works do ye not; for they say and do
 not.*³⁷
- And we've heard what happened in the age of Noah,
 When he built his ship out of beams and boards.
 Not a single craftsman who constructed it was saved,
 400 Nor any other worker at all,
 Only birds and beasts and the blessed Noah,
 And his wife with his sons and with their wives.
 God grant such a fate does not fall on the folk
 Who teach faith in the Church, which should cherish and defend us
- 405 And shield us from shame as the ship did the beasts
 While the folk that fashioned it drowned in the flood!

³⁶In the original, lines 388–474 seem to be spoken by the narrator, but in the C version some of them are given to the character called Recklessness. Since the next Step refers to Scripture's “long speech” and the lines contain frequent quotations from the Bible, lines 388–411 and 428–474 are here given, perhaps controversially, to Scripture.

³⁷Matthew xxiii 2–3.

The purpose of this point is to warn that priests
Should be carving a church for the creatures of Christ:

*Men and beasts thou wilt preserve.*³⁸

So I'd counsel the carpenters, the craftsmen of the Church,

410 To act as they're urged lest they are not aboard
When at Doomsday a deluge of fire and death falls."

"But we find on Good Friday," I said, "that a felon
Who had lived all his life by lying and theft
Was saved because he cried out to Christ.

415 He was sooner saved than a saint, John the Baptist,
Or Adam or Isaiah or any of the prophets
Who had languished with Lucifer for long, long years.
A robber was ransomed rather than they
And by-passed Purgatory to perpetual bliss.

420 And what of Mary Magdalene, what woman did worse?
And David who did Uriah to death?

Or Paul the Apostle who had no pity
In condemning dozens of Christians to death?

425 Although their behavior on earth was evil,
While writers of rows of works of wisdom
Suffer instead with souls that are damned."

"What Solomon said must be true," Scripture said:

*"There are just men and wise men, and their works are in the
hand of God."*³⁹

Only God knows whether the works of the wise

430 And of those who seem loving and lead faithful lives
Will merit his mercy and admittance to heaven,

Or their malice and envy will mean they're dismissed
As examples of sin that will set off the good.

If the world were all black, how would we know white,

435 Or a good man save for the scoundrels and sinners?
We must live with the villains and the few who are fair
For *Patience is all when we have no option*,⁴⁰

And may he who mends all have mercy upon us!

'None is good' is the greatest of truths said by God.⁴¹

³⁸Psalm xxxv 7 (KJV Psalm xxxvi 6).

³⁹Ecclesiastes ix 1.

⁴⁰A popular French saying: "Quant Oportet vient en place, il ny ad que Pati."

⁴¹Cf. Matthew xix 17.

- 440 “Christ prized learning poorly when speaking to Saint Peter,
 And he clearly declared to his closest disciples,
‘Though you come before kings and clerks of the law,
 You should take no thought for the things you shall speak;
 In time I shall will you the wit and the wisdom
- 445 To discomfit those claiming Christian understanding.’⁴²
- “David too says that no sovereign succeeded
 In defeating his assertions by subtlety of speech,
 For wisdom and wit will not win a dispute
 Except when they’re stiffened and strengthened by grace.
- 450 The greatest of the four most famous divines,
 That untiring interpreter of the Trinity, Augustine,
 Once said in a sermon which I have seen:
The ignorant can force an entry to heaven,
*While we, with our wisdom, fall headlong to hell,*⁴³
- 455 Which must surely mean, no more and no less:
 None are sooner led astray from their strict belief
 Than cultured clerics who are learned and clever;
 None are sooner saved nor sterner of belief
 Than plowmen, herdsmen and people who are poor,
- 460 Shepherds and shoemakers, simple good folk,
 Who enter heaven with a humble *Our Father*
 And need do no penance in Purgatory at their parting
 But pass on to Paradise for their pureness of faith,
 Though their lives are little and their knowledge still less.
- 465 “You have come across clergy who have cursed the time
 They studied more subjects than the simple Creed
 Or have wished their faith went no further than *Our Father*.
 I have seen for myself, and so have others,
 That servants seldom descend into debt
- 470 Unlike the more senior stewards of estates.
 And likewise the men of little learning
 Seldom descend so far into sin
 As clergy whose task is to care for Christ’s treasure
 By saving men’s souls. As God says in the Gospel:
Go you also into my vineyard.”⁴⁴

⁴²Cf. Mark xiii 9–11. The Latin original is omitted to avoid repetition.

⁴³Saint Augustine, *Confessions* Book viii Chapter 8.

⁴⁴Matthew xx 4.

Step XI

In which, in a dream within a dream, Fortune indulges my fleshly desires for many years, but she and the friars desert me in old age. Fidelity urges me to expose falsehood, and Scripture lectures me on the difficulty of achieving salvation. The heathen Emperor Trajan comforts me, saying he has been saved by good deeds, but Scripture continues her harangue, until Nature suggests I look at the Reason in natural wonders. My inner dream ends, and another voice warns me against wanting to know too much.

Then Scripture started another long speech,
Scolding me sharply and saying in Latin,
“Many know much but don’t master themselves.”

I was so upset at the sound of her voice
5 That I soon shut my eyes and so fell asleep.

And musing I met with a marvelous dream:
I was wafted by Fortune from where I was
To the Land of Longing and found myself looking¹
In a magic mirror called Middle Earth.

10 Dame Fortune said, “You’ll see astonishing sights.
You’ll delight in and learn of your life-long desires.”

Two fair young women followed after Fortune:
Fleshly-fancy, who was fuller in years,
And Lovely-to-look-at, who was younger and lissom.

15 Pride-in-perfection followed the pair,
Saying looks would bring me more laughter than learning.
Then Fleshly-fancy fondled me and said,
“You are young as yet and have years enough
To live and to love many ladies still,

¹Langland may be punning on his name in “Land of Longing.”

- 20 And the mirror will show you many amusements,
Pastimes that promise the sweetest pleasure.”
The second said the same: “I shall serve your desires,
And if Fortune favors you I’ll be your fellow
Until you’re a lord with a title and land.”
- 25 “He shall find me his friend,” Dame Fortune replied.
“If you follow your fortune, your luck can’t fail.”
But a humorless fellow, Old Age, chipped in.
“When you meet me,” he muttered, “by Mary in heaven,
You’ll find that Fortune will fail when you need her,
- 30 And Fleshly-fancy will vanish away.
You’ll groan with grief and regret and will curse
The moment you looked on Lovely-to-look-at,
And Pride-in-perfection’s perilous ploys.”
Raggedy Recklessness raised his voice.
- 35 “Fiddlesticks!” he said. “You follow your fortune,
You’ve a while to bide till you’re bald and bent.”
“*Man proposes,*” said a poet called Plato,
“And *God disposes,* so God can dispose.
If Truth says it’s fine to follow your fortune,
- 40 Fleshly-fancy and Lovely-to-look-at
Won’t cheat or chasten you unless it’s your choice.”
And Childishness chuckled, “Come on then, chuck,”
And filled my days full of Fleshly-fancy.
Old Age and Holiness answered, “Alas
45 That Will should lose his wits to lust!”²
But Lovely-to-look-at lent me comfort
And followed me faithfully for forty-five years.
I did not dwell on Do-better or Do-well,
Not troubling to pay them token attention.
- 50 For Lovely-to-look-at was more in my mind
In my daily round than doing good deeds.
She constantly kept reassuring me, saying,
“Don’t worry your head about how you get wealthy.
Confess to some friar your faults and your sins,

²Again Langland appears to be referring to himself.

- 55 For friars will love you while Fortune's your friend.
 They'll invite you to be their brother and will beg
 A pardon for you from the prior of the province.
 If you've money, each mendicant will mention you in prayer.”
- I was easily wooed by the warmness of her words,
 60 Though *penance can't be purchased for spiritual sins*,³
 Till I left youth behind and entered old age,
 When Fortune forsook me despite what she'd said,
 And poverty plagued me and pulled me right down,
 And friars took offense and refused to see me
 65 Because for the burial of my corpse I declared
 I preferred my family church to the friary.
 For once I had heard Conscience point out
 That a body should be buried where that body was christened.
 When the friars were informed, they called me a fool
 70 And their friendship cooled on account of my candor.
 “Friar, by my faith,” I snapped at my confessor,
 Who said he was a scholar, “you behave like scoundrels
 Who marry widows to gain mastery of money;
 You were never bothered where my body might be buried
 75 As long as you could count on acquiring my cash,
 And I am astonished, like scores of others,
 That you far prefer to confess and to bury
 Than to christen and catechize Christian children.
 Baptism and burial, both are needed,
 80 But baptism must bring much more merit,
 For a man who is christened, you clergy claim,
 Can enter heaven if honestly contrite—
Only contrition blots out sin—⁴
 While a bairn without baptism finds his way barred:
Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he can-
*not enter into the kingdom of God.*⁵
 You scholars, search, and see if I lie.”
- 85 Fidelity regarded me, and I gave him a glower.
 “Why frown?” he asked, fixing me fiercely.
 “Because I'd be keen to recount this dream!”

³A saying of unknown origin.⁴Source not known.⁵John iii 5.

“Saints Peter and Paul would approve,” he said:

*“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; Them that sin
reprove before all.”⁶*

“But clerics will respond,” I said, “with the saying

Judge not, that you may not be judged.”⁷

90 “Our religion means little,” said Fidelity, “unless
It exposes wrongs, as the apostle pleaded:

Thou shalt not hate thy brother.”⁸

And David himself says in the psalms:

*Thou thoughtest unjustly that I should be like to thee: but I will
reprove thee.”⁹*

Less learned men too may tell the truth

If they like, for the law gives that liberty to all

95 Except parsons and priests and prelates of the Church,
Who may not tell tales of what’s told to them

Though the tale be true and concern some sin.

When aware of some thing unwarranted or wicked,

Discuss it of course, thereby combating sin,

100 But never be first to refer to a fault:

Be sorry you see it but say no more

And never make public problems that are private:

Be sparing in praise and sparser in censure.”¹⁰

“Just so,” said Scripture, jumping up with a sermon,

105 But the more of it they’d mastered, the less, I believe,

The unlearned would have liked the faith of our Lord

Professed by scholars and stated by Scripture.

I took good note of her theme, which was this:

“Many folk were invited to a generous feast.

110 When the people appeared, the porter at the gate

Admitted a few but dismissed many more!”

My heart started trembling at the tale she told;

It filled with doubt and I fretted with fear

As to whether I were chosen: had the Church in fact cheated

115 When it welcomed me with water as one of the baptized?

⁶Leviticus xix 17 combined with 1 Timothy v 20.

⁷Matthew vii 1.

⁸Such wording is not found in Saint Paul’s Epistles.

⁹Psalms i (=49) 21 (KJV Psalm l 21).

¹⁰Source unknown. The preceding line is omitted to avoid repetition.

Surely Christ called us all if we cared to come,
Heathens and heretics, and even the Jews:

*All you that thirst, come to the waters.*¹¹

Sinners, he said, should suck at his breast,
And anyone who did so would have his pain eased.

120 “So all Christians,” I exclaimed, “may claim admission
For he bought us with his blood if we’ve been baptized:

*He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved.*¹²

And a Christian who craves to cast off his faith
Cannot legally decline it or lawfully discard it,
For unless his lord says so, no servant may sell

125 Or give away his goods or sign an agreement.
If he runs up a debt he may roam the roads
Like a feckless felon far from home,

But Reason at length will reckon with the wretch,
And Conscience will catch him and settle accounts

130 And imprison him in Purgatory to burn in payment
For the debt he owes till the Day of Doom

Unless he talks with truth of contrition
Or it enters his heart and he aches for mercy.”

“That is so,” said Scripture. “No sin is so gross

135 That humility and mercy may not amend it,
For the books say that both abound in God’s works:

*His tender mercies are over all his works.*¹³

“Blow your books!” cried a body called Trajan,
Who had been an emperor and had broken out of hell.

“As a pope will endorse, I was dead and condemned

140 To terror and torment for not being baptized,
And all the clerics under Christ could not help.

But Saint Gregory consented to save my soul
And freed me for my fairness, charity and good faith,
Simply for the decency of the deeds that I did.

145 And when he had wept for me, wishing me grace,
It was granted and given without groveling or prayer.
I was saved, as you see, without singing of Masses;
It was love and his learning of my honest living,

¹¹Isaiah lv 1.

¹²Mark xvi 16.

¹³Psalms cxlv 9 (KJV Psalm cxlv 9).

Not prayer, that released me from punishing pain.”

- 150 “As you hear,” said Scripture, “an unbaptized emperor
Of Rome was freed, as writers confirm
And Saint Gregory agrees, by good faith and fairness,
By purity and not by the prayers of a pope,
And justices should look to and learn from this lesson
155 And imitate his honesty and be upright with people.
This may seem a mystery, but men of the Church
Can study and see from the *Lives of the Saints*¹⁴
How fidelity in life and love released
From the pains of Purgatory a pagan of Rome.
160 Blessed be Truth that broke hell’s bars
And saved the heathen from Satan’s sway,
Which learning could not, nor knowing the law.
You should look to fidelity and rely on love,
For they bring to the Bible both bliss and joy,
165 The book that God’s finger fashioned and formed
And commended to all through Moses on the mount.”

“Law without love,” Trajan said, “is time lost.
So are scholarly science and the seven learned arts,
Unless they are learnt for the love of our Lord.

- 170 Their proper employment is for God and the people,
Rather than riches or rank or prestige.”

“Saint John is just in his judgment,” said Scripture¹⁵:
“*He that loveth not, abideth in death.*”¹⁶

For he asked that we all, both enemies and friends,
Should aid and love one another as ourselves

- 175 Since to love is to give, as our Lord relates,
Requiring each creature to love and to care
For poor folk first, followed by their foes.
If we love those who hate us our harvest is honor;
If we aid the poor, their prayers will support us.
180 Our joy and our jewel, gentle Jesus in heaven
Appears to us always in poor man’s apparel,

¹⁴Langland is probably thinking of the best-known compilation, the thirteenth-century *Legenda aureum* (*Golden Legend*) by Jacobus or Giacomo de Voragine.

¹⁵It is again not clear who speaks lines 172–304. In the C version, Recklessness is once more the speaker, but it is more logical that Scripture should continue the argument.

¹⁶1 John iii 14. A line is then omitted to avoid repetition.

- Looking on us lovingly and seeking to learn
 From the cast of our eyes and our kindness of heart
 If we love earthly lords, or our Lord in heaven.
- 185 In the Gospel he exhorts us in opening our homes—
*When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor
 thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen, nor thy neighbors who are
 rich—*¹⁷
- To call the careworn, the crooked and poor,
 ‘For your friends will feed you and find occasions
 To invite you in return for your feast and benefactions,
 But I shall requite the kindness of folk
- 190 Who affectionately feed and give funds to the poor.’
 “But virtue is found among folk of all sorts,
 And because all are creatures of Christ all are rich,
 Being brothers in his blood, both beggars and earls,
 For on Calvary Christendom cascaded from his blood.
- 195 We became blood brothers, bought by one body,
 All *newborn babes* who are noble knights,¹⁸
 Not paupers except as the sequel to sin:
*Whosoever committeth sin, is the servant of sin.*¹⁹
 In the old dispensation,” Scripture persisted,
 “We were styled the sons of men as descendants
- 200 Of Adam and Eve, but the resurrection
 Of the man–God Redeemer who died has made us
 His brothers who are bought by his blessed blood.
 Therefore lordly or lowly, let us laugh and love
 And help one another for we all are mortal:
*Bear ye one another’s burdens.*²⁰
- 205 So do not be selfish with skills and possessions
 For no one knows how near he is to death.
 And do not belittle those learned in Latin,
 Or vilify the faulty for none is faultless,
 For whatever the creed of the Christian clergy,
- 210 Christ said to a prostitute at a public repast
 That her faith would save her and absolve her of sin.

¹⁷Luke xiv 12. A preceding line is omitted to avoid repetition.¹⁸Newborn babes: 1 Peter ii 2.¹⁹John viii 34.²⁰Galatians vi 2.

- “We are helped much less by philosophy than belief,
 And the *Lives of the Saints* think little of law
 Or logic unless belief lends support.
 215 For the arguments it offers are airy and long,
 And law is loath to show love save for money.
 So I counsel all Christians to cling to neither
 Philosophy nor law if they hope to shun lies.
 As Saint John bears witness in words of wisdom
 220 And faith that have saved many sinners for sure:
 *For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged.*²¹
 Therefore learn the law that is love, as our Lord
 And Saint Gregory prescribed for the sake of your souls:
 *Study your sins sooner than science.*²²
- “It is chiefly for the poor that I point to this passage,
 225 For frequently our Lord was looked on in their likeness:
 For instance his advent in Emmaus at Easter,
 When Cleophas had no inkling he was Christ
 In his poor apparel and his pilgrim’s garb
 Till he blessed and broke the bread that they ate:
 230 They judged he was Jesus from his gestures and actions,
 But not from his attire or the topics he talked of.
 And this was an example to show us sinners
 That our manners and speech should be moderate and modest,
 And our apparel not proud for we all are pilgrims.
- 235 “God has often been at home among the hungry²³
 But has never sought refuge in the ranks of the rich.
 Saint John and other saints weren’t seen in silks,
 And they prayed for alms like impoverished pilgrims.
 The Jewish gentlewoman, the mother of Jesus
 240 Was pure but poor like her penniless spouse,
 And Martha complained about Mary Magdalene
 And said to our Savior himself these words:
 *Lord, hast thou no care that my sister hath left me alone to serve?*²⁴
 And promptly he replied and praised both sisters,
 Both Martha and Mary, as Matthew bears witness,

²¹Not John but Matthew vii 2.

²²Not known among Saint Gregory’s works.

²³Here a line almost identical to Line 228 is omitted.

²⁴Luke x 40.

- 245 But poverty he put in the higher place:
*Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away
 from her.*²⁵
- “And from what I have heard, all the wise men in the world
 Have praised poverty that is borne with patience
 As bound to be better and more blessed than wealth:
 Though suffering is sour, sweetness comes after,
- 250 For while a walnut has bitter walls,
 When shorn of its shell, sheltering inside,
 You’ll find a kernel of comforting kindness.
 So it is with poverty and penitent patience,
 Which make a man to be mindful of God
- 255 And willing to wait and to weep for mercy.
 Christ is that kernel which comforts the soul,
 And a person who is poor sleeps more soundly
 And dreads both death and thieves in the dark
 Less than the prosperous, as is perfectly plain:
- 260 *A pauper plays but a rich man ponders.*²⁶
- “Although Solomon asserts,” Scripture said, “in the Bible,
*Give me neither beggary, nor riches,*²⁷
 Those wiser than Solomon have borne witness and said
 That perfect poverty means forsaking possessions,
 As Luke says, leading the life that God loves:
*If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor,
 and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.*²⁸
- 265 For those who serve God sincerely shall suffer
 No shortage or want, as the psalmist says:
*Trust in the Lord, and thou shalt be fed.*²⁹
 They shall not be harmed or hurt by hardship—
*Because no word shall be impossible with God—*³⁰
 Nor lack for a livelihood, woolens or linen:
*They that seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good.*³¹
 So priests would be wise not to pocket a penny

²⁵Not Matthew but Luke x 42.

²⁶A saying from the twelfth-century Alexander of Villedieu (Schmidt p. 179).

²⁷Proverbs xxx 8.

²⁸Not Luke but Matthew xix 21. Four subsequent lines are omitted to avoid repetition.

²⁹Psalm xxxvi 3 (KJV Psalm xxxvii 3). This quotation is only in Skeat.

³⁰Luke i 37, cf. Matthew xvii 19 (KJV Matthew xvii 20).

³¹Psalm xxxiii 11 (KJV Psalm xxxiv 10).

- 270 For Masses or Matins, for meals or for clothes
 From usurers, though crying and quaking with cold.
 For *Hope in God* means not hoping for goods
 But toiling truly and trusting in God.
 If they did their duty, they could then say like David:
*Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is
 not holy.*³²
- 275 “The title that you take betokens ordination
 So you need no payment for repeating prayers.
 If you merit the money, the man who ordained you
 Or the bishop who blessed you should bear your wages.
 For no king would accredit a knight but decline
- 280 To apportion property and payment for his office;
 A knight without lands or lineage or laurels
 Is a risible wretch, and the king a rascal.
 And I say that the same applies to priests
 With no breeding or brains, just a tonsure that’s bald,
- 285 A status and title to stop you from starving.
 You count on your cloth for a curacy appointment
 Rather than learning or salubrious living,
 And I wonder why and for what any bishop
 Can appoint such priests to betray the people.”
- 290 “A cheapskate charter can be challenged,” I agreed.³³
 “It flouts the law if a phrase is false Latin,
 If items are added or clauses left out,
 And the scribes who scribble such stuff are all gowks.
 And so are the gowks who garble the Gospel
- 295 Or make mistakes in the Mass or in Matins:
*Whosoever shall keep the whole law, but offend in one point, is
 become guilty of all.*³⁴
 To the skippers of lines, David says in the psalms:
*Sing praises to our God, sing ye; For God is the King of all the
 earth: sing ye wisely.*³⁵
 Bishops will be brought before God and blamed,
 I do believe, for ordaining duffers

³²Psalm xlii 1 (KJV Psalm xliiii 1). A line very similar to line 268 is omitted.

³³Since Langland refers later to his continuing debate with Scripture it is reasonable to give these lines to the narrator.

³⁴James ii 10.

³⁵Psalm xlvi 7–8 (KJV Psalm xlvii 6–7).

Who simply can't sing or make sense of the Latin."

- 300 "The priests and the bishop are both to blame
For *each is ignorant*," Scripture responded,
"Which excuses neither bishops nor clownish parish clerks.
But complaining of priests interrupted my plaudit
For poverty with patience, which I praise more than wealth."
- 305 I saw all this while soundly asleep,³⁶
And more besides that I spoke of with Scripture.
But Nature then called me by name and announced
I should seek for wisdom in the wonders of the world.
On the mountain I remember as Middle Earth
- 310 I was set to study every species in nature,
And I learnt to love their loving Creator.
I saw both the sun, the sea and the shore,
And the birds and the beasts go about with their mates,
Wild serpents in woods, and the striking shades
- 315 Of profuse flocks of birds with variegated feathers.
I made out man and his mate as well
In poverty and plenty, in peace and in war,
In merriment and misery muddled together,
Amassing money and refusing mercy.
- 320 I realized the animals were ruled by Reason
In feeding and drinking and fecundation,
For right after rutting and riding their mates
They paid no more heed to each other at all.
Both morning and night the males were removed
- 325 From the females and mingled and mixed with males.
No cow with calf, no creature with young
Then bellowed for a bull, nor a boar for a sow;
Neither horses nor hounds nor any other beasts
Interfered with females in foal or with pup.
- 330 I beheld the birds that were building in bushes
Nests which we want the wit to weave,
And I marveled who taught the magpies to make
Their homes of tied and twisted twigs,
For no carpenter could clamp them so cleanly together,
- 335 No mason could mold them except by magic.

³⁶He wakes from his dream within a dream, but is still sleeping.

I marveled yet more at the many more birds
That cunningly covered and kept their eggs hidden
In marshes and moors to disguise them from men,
And protected them well when they went away
340 From hunting wild beasts and hovering hawks.
And some birds I saw squatting on their mates
And having their offspring high in the trees,
And some that conceived through the bill with their breath,
And I puzzled at the peacock's implacable trampling,³⁷
345 And I asked myself how and from whom the birds learnt
To take to the trees to protect their young
Well clear of the clutches of creatures and men.

Then I looked on the sea and stared at the stars
And witnessed wonders I will not tell now.
350 I saw flowers in the forest with their feast of colors,
And the hues that grow in the green of the grass,
Some sour and some sweet; a miracle, it seemed,
For I cannot describe all their colors and kinds.

But what moved me the most and changed my mood
355 Was that Reason ruled and recompensed beasts,
Save man and his mate, who many times and oft,
Both the rich and the poor, repudiated Reason.
So I scolded Reason and said to him straight,
“It's strange that you, who are said to have sense,
360 Don't watch people warily to see they act wisely.”

But Reason rebuffed and rebutted me bluntly:
“What I let happen is a matter for me;
Be wise if you will, but my task is to wait,
For vengeance is swift, and to suffer a virtue.
365 Who suffers more than God? Not a single soul!
He could mend in a moment every mischief there is
But he suffers for our sins, and so is our better.
And from Scripture,” said Reason, “we see we must suffer:
*Be ye subject therefore to every human creature for God's sake.*³⁸
And the French and our freemen teach children this refrain:

³⁷It was believed that the peacock destroyed even his own fertilized eggs in order to continue indulging his lust. The notion of conception through the bill goes back to Aristotle.

³⁸1 Peter ii 13.

370 *Bele vertue est soffrance mal dire est petyt veniance,
Bien dire et bien soffrir fait lui soffrant a bien venir.*³⁹

“So I recommend ruling your tongue,” said Reason,
“And before you point fingers, make sure you’ve no faults!
For men lack the mastery to make their own selves,

375 But if they rewarded their own supposed worth,
They’d find themselves free of every fault!
You’ll find but few who are fain to hear
Their faults rehearsed before their fellows.
As the Bible sensibly says on this subject:

*Strive not in a matter which doth not concern thee.*⁴⁰

380 For however handsome or ugly a man,
We should not shame his God-given shape;
For all that God fashioned was fair and well-favored:

*And God saw all the things that he had made, and they were very
good.*⁴¹

And he bade every creature increase in its kind
For the pleasure and profit of man, who is plagued

385 By fleshly fancies and the devil’s falsehoods.
For man is made of such a matter
That he’s sometimes constrained to pursue his urges;
And Cato too finds ‘*no one free of offense.*’⁴²

I awoke feeling worried and very unworthy,
390 Blushing and embarrassed, bowed with shame
And lamenting that I might have learnt more from my dreams.

I swore to myself and sarcastically said,
“It’s plain as a pikestaff what Do-well implies!”

But as I looked up I heard someone ask

395 If I knew what it signified. “Sir,” I said,
“It means seeing much and suffering more!”

“Had you truly suffered,” the voice said, “though sleeping,
You’d have realized what Learning can reach through Reason,
For Reason sheds light on the lessons of Learning.

400 But because you kept carping you were left in the cold:

³⁹“Suffering is a virtue, swearing is small vengeance; gentle speech and suffering bring future rewards.” French was still spoken in polite society.

⁴⁰Ecclesiasticus xi 9. (Ecclesiasticus is regarded as Apocryphal in KJV.)

⁴¹Genesis i 31.

⁴²Dionysius Cato, *Distich* i 5.

*A philosopher listens and stays silent.*⁴³

When Adam kept his peace, his Paradise was perfect,
But as soon as he fussed about food and aspired
To know God's purpose he was put out and punished.

405 You wanted to be wiser than Reason as well,
Putting questions and quibbles that were quite inept,
So that Reason decided to cease his instruction.
Now you'll keep the company most probably of Pride
And Presumption instead of pursuing Learning.

410 "But no chiding or challenging will chasten a man
Or persuade him to change as swiftly as shame.
If a drunken dolt falls into a ditch
Leave him to rot till he's ready to rise.

There's no point in reproach for he won't reply
415 To lectures or lessons from Learning or Reason,
And to blame him or beat him would be but a sin.
But once he's aware and worried he may die,
He cleans up his clothes and his shins out of shame,
And he sees how stupid his swilling has been."

420 "That makes sense," I said, "for I've seen
Nothing stings so smartly or smells so sour
As a show of shame, which everyone shuns!
You were right to reproach me for my rudeness to Reason."

"Just so," he said, and he started to go,
425 But I jumped up and hurried after him in haste,
Requesting him kindly to declare his name.

⁴³Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* Book 2 Prosa 7.

Step XII

In which the voice, my own Imagination, explains Do-well, Do-better and Do-best as living humbly at home, avoiding riches and respecting true learning rather than pursuing speculation, for there are some things that only Nature can know. God will grant grace to the meek, although the penitent thief will still sit lower in heaven than the saint. All one can do is live by God's law. I try to argue, but Imagination vanishes.

“My name,” he announced, “is Imagination.

I have sat by myself in sickness and in health

For forty-five winters, waking and watching,

And have often exhorted you to think on your end,

5 On the many years gone, the meager few remaining,

And your wanton wildness when you were young,

Which you ought to amend in your middle age

Before you are old and too fragile and feeble

To pray or put up with poverty and penance:

*And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch...*¹

10 You've been warned to mend your ways while you may

By outbreaks of Plague, and poverty and pain:

God chides his children with these chafing rods:

*Such as I love, I rebuke and chasten.*²

“Yet the psalmist says of such that love Jesus,

*Thy rod and thy staff, they have comforted me*³:

‘You may strike me with a staff, a stick or a rod,

15 And I laugh for it salves and strengthens my soul.’

¹Luke xii 38.

²Apocalypse (KJV Revelation) iii 19.

³Psalms xxii 4 (KJV Psalm xxiii 4).

But you play at poetry when you could be praying
 For the bakers of bread or saying your psalms.
 There are dozens of books about Do-this and Do-that,
 And plenty of friars to explain finer points.”

- 20 I saw that he spoke the truth and said
 To excuse myself that the scholarly Cato
 Wrote poetry to solace his son and prescribed:
*Stop toiling and play from time to time.*⁴
 “That’s how I behave, and I’ve heard holy men
- 25 Are far more effective if they have some fun.
 But if someone can discern the secrets of Do-well
 And endeavor to explain to me Do-better and Do-best,
 I’ll cease my scribbling and skulk in the church,
 Unless sleeping or eating, reciting the psalms.”
- 30 “Saint Paul explains in his *Epistle*,” he said,
*“And now there remain faith, hope and charity, these three: but the
 greatest of these is charity.”*⁵
 Thus to do well is to do as fidelity ordains;
 If you’re married, this means you should love your mate
 And you both should live your lives by the law,
 If in holy orders, the highway to heaven
- 35 Is to be obedient and abide by your Rule,
 Not to run off to Rome or Rocamadour,⁶
 And if you’re still single and decide to stay so,
 For your soul’s sake don’t go to seek out more saints.
 See how Lucifer lost his lordly position,
- 40 Solomon his wisdom and Sampson his strength,
 And Job the Jew paid dearly for his joy!
 Aristotle and others, Hippocrates, Virgil,
 And the Great Alexander ended in grief;
 Wealth and native wit merely served to destroy them.
- 45 “Felicia’s loveliness led to disgrace,
 And Rosamund wrongly and wretchedly abused
 The beauty of her body and disposed of it badly.”⁷

⁴Dionysius Cato, *Distich* iii 7.

⁵1 Corinthians xiii 13. Two lines are then omitted to avoid repetition.

⁶Rocamadour, in France, has a sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin, surrounded by 17 rock-hewn chapels.

⁷Felicia (Felice) and Rosamund were characters in popular stories.

- I could mention many such men and women,
Whose words were wise but their actions wicked—
50 *There are folk who are vile yet speak well of virtue—*⁸
The rich especially, scrimping and saving
So that people they hate can inherit their hoard,
And they lose their souls because seeing folk suffer
They do not love them as our Lord ordained:
*Give, and it shall be given to you.*⁹
- 55 Intelligence and riches bring regular ruin,
Harming who has them unless he's alert:
*That servant who knew the will of his lord, and prepared not him-
self, and did not according to his will, shall be beaten with many
stripes.*¹⁰
- Scripture says knowledge can swell a man's soul:
*Knowledge puffeth up; but charity edifieth.*¹¹
And riches are the same, unless righteously rooted.
- “Grace is a herb that can heal these hurts,
60 But it only grows in the hearts of the humble.
Patience and poverty are the place where it grows,
In lives that are upright and honest and holy,
Through the gift, says the Gospel, of the Holy Ghost:
*The Spirit breatheth where he will.*¹²
- As the Bible says, both seeing and instruction
65 Are needed for knowledge and native wit:
*We speak what we know, and we testify what we have seen.*¹³
But grace springs from love and is given by God,
For no natural or scholarly understanding can say
*Whence he cometh, and whither he goeth.*¹⁴
- “None the less, native wit and learning should be lauded
Where the root of learning is love of the Lord.
70 God laid down his laws to enlighten the Jews
As Moses recounts, according to which code
An adulterous woman, whether wealthy or in want,

⁸An epigram from the twelfth-century Godfrey of Winchester (Schmidt p. 191).

⁹Luke vi 38.

¹⁰Luke xii 47. A line is then omitted to avoid repetition.

¹¹1 Corinthians viii 1.

¹²John iii 8.

¹³John iii 11. Two lines are then omitted to avoid repetition.

¹⁴John iii 8.

Was subject to stoning to death for her sin.
 But we find one woman convicted of that fault,
 75 Whom Christ in his kindness excused through learning
 By stooping to write a sentence in the sand
 Which said that the Jews were sinners themselves
 And their guilt before God was greater than hers.
 Christ's learning released her, and they left in shame,
 80 And the Church knows for sure that her sin was absolved.

“Thus learning is a palliative to people who repent,
 But a curse at their end to unshriven outcasts,
 Since but for learning the bread would be bread,
 Not the body of God, which brings grace to the good
 85 And endless damnation to any who die evil.
 As the sentence of Christ both succored the sinner
 Whom he sought to save and showed up her guilt—
Judge not, that you may not be judged—¹⁵
 So brothers, God's body, unless taken with truth
 Will condemn us like Jews at the Day of Doom.

90 “So for Christ's sake look that you love true learning
 For native wit and learning are related to our Lord,
 The closest of cousins and kindred of Christ,
 Mirrors to realize our wrongdoing and right it,
 Laying down guidance for learned and lay.
 95 So let's not belittle philosophy or law
 Or question their customs or arcane conclusions.
 As a man cannot see if his sight is missing,
 His learning is lacking unless he reads books,
 For the people who pen them are apprenticed to God;
 100 What they say is inspired by the Holy Spirit.
 As sight serves a man to see down the street,
 So literacy leads the unlettered toward reason:
 A blind man in battle who bears good weapons
 Will hit out in vain at his enemy with his axe,
 105 So a man of intelligence trips without teaching,
 And cannot be saved despite his good sense.

“The keys to Christ's coffer are kept by the Church
 To unlock as it likes and to grant to laymen

¹⁵Matthew vii 1.

- Mercy for faults if folk demand it
 110 With sincere subservience in search of grace.
 The Old Law allowed that the Levites kept the Ark¹⁶;
 No layman had leave to lay a hand upon it,
 Only priests and their sons, patriarchs and prophets.
 So when Saul made a sacrifice sorrow befell him
 115 And his sons also suffered for the sin he committed.
 Many others as well who walked with the Ark
 In worship and wonder but were not Levites
 Lost their lives when they lifted it up.
 I advise all folk to defer to the clergy,
 120 To admire their learning, no matter how they live,
 And give weight to their words for their witness is true.
 We may not meddle or move them to anger
 Lest arguments incite us to harm one another:
*Touch not my anointed.*¹⁷
- “Clergy are the keepers under Christ of heaven,
 125 And learning is needed and relied on by knights,
 While native wit stems from all sorts of sights,
 From birds and beasts, from bliss and sorrow,
 From fragments of experience, both factual and false.
 Before us folk marked the immeasurable marvels
 130 They saw in order to school their sons
 And held it high science to discern the source,
 But their science never saved a single soul,
 And no one was brought to bliss by their books,
 And their science only stemmed from the things they saw.
 135 Patriarchs and prophets disputed their conclusions
 And said that their words and their worldly wisdom
 Were crumbs by contrast to the learning of Christ,
*For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.*¹⁸
- “The Holy Ghost shall open the heavens on high
 And love shall be loosed and shall leap down to earth
 140 To pastors and priests, and the pure at heart:
*The shepherds said one to another: Let us go over to Bethlehem.*¹⁹
 Neither clever nor rich men occur in that account,

¹⁶The Old Law refers to the law of Moses, to be superseded by the New Law of Christ.

¹⁷1 Paralipomenon xvi 22 and Psalm civ 15 (KJV 1 Chronicles xvi 22 and Psalm cv 15).

¹⁸1 Corinthians iii 19.

¹⁹Luke ii 15.

- Nor illiterate lords, but the truly learned:
*There came wise men from the east.*²⁰
 And five shillings says no friar was found there!
 Nor was the babe born in a beggarly barn
 145 In Bethlehem but in a burges's house:
*Because there was no room for them in the inn, and
 A pauper has no inn.*²¹
 The angel appeared to pastors and poets
 Bidding them witness God's Bethlehem birth
 And singing with gladness, *Glory to God!*
 Rich men were snoring and sleeping soundly
 150 While a shower of bliss shone on those shepherds,
 And wise men had heard of the happening and hastened
 With presents to pay due homage and honor.
- "I have told you all this because it took my attention
 That you contradicted Learning crassly and crossly,
 155 Alleging the unlettered were more likely to be saved
 Than Christians who are clever or the learned clergy.
 That is true of some, but consider this example:
 Take two strong men and toss them in the Thames,
 Both naked as a needle and neither one stronger.
 160 The one is wise and has studied swimming;
 The other is ignorant and has not learnt.
 Of the two in the Thames, which trembles the more:
 The one who is ignorant and unable to swim,
 Or the confident swimmer who can strike out safely
 165 While his fellow is wafted by the waves where they will
 And dreads the prospect of dying by drowning?"
- "The one who can't swim, for sure," I said.
 "Just so," the voice said. "It stands to reason.
 The learned can sooner surface from sin
 170 And be saved if they want than the simple unschooled,
 Though they frequently fall and commit an offense.
 For a scholar well knows the significance of sin
 And can understand the solace for his soul
 Afforded by contrition, even free of confession.
 175 As the psalms say, contrition strips away sin:

²⁰Matthew ii 1.²¹Luke ii 7. The source of "A pauper has no inn" is unknown.

*Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.*²²

- It relieves the learned and lifts them from despair,
That slough in which Satan tries men most sorely,
Where the witless wallow while they're waiting to admit
A few trifles each Lent without tasting contrition,²³
- 180 Trusting to the pardon promised by their teachers,
Such as parish priests and parsons who may not be proper
To instruct the unlettered, as Luke relates:
*If the blind lead the blind, both fall into the pit.*²⁴
- It is misery to trudge through the mire with the untutored,
And children with books should bless those who bought them,
- 185 For literate living will save life and soul!
*The Lord is the portion of my inheritance.*²⁵
- It has taken from Tyburn twenty bold thieves:
See how they're saved while others have swung!²⁶
- “God granted his grace on Good Friday to the felon
Who confessed his faith in Christ on the cross
- 190 And begged for that grace, which God will grant
To the meek who are willing to mend their ways.
But the felon is found not so high in heaven
As deserving saints such as Saint John.
In the same way I may be served a supper
- 195 And may be fed more than I need yet remain
Below the lords and selected guests,
On the floor with my food like a beggar at the feast.
So it fares with the felon who was saved on Good Friday:
He sits not with Simon, Saint Jude or Saint John,
- 200 Nor with maidens or martyrs, monks or widows,
But singly and served by himself on the ground.
For a person who has thieved is at permanent peril
Of the law, which may let him live or die:
*Be not without fear about sin forgiven, and add not sin upon sin.*²⁷

²²Psalm xxxi 1 (KJV Psalm xxxii 1).

²³Sins should be confessed at least once a year, and Lent is the traditional time for this.

²⁴Not Luke but Matthew xv 14.

²⁵Psalm xv 5 (KJV Psalm xvi 5).

²⁶The ability to read Latin showed that the accused should have been tried by an ecclesiastical court and must therefore be released. The London gallows were at Tyburn.

²⁷Ecclesiasticus v 5. (Ecclesiasticus is regarded as Apocryphal in KJV.)

- And to serve the same both a saint and a thief
 205 Would run against reason and not be right.
 The true knight Trajan did not toil deep in hell,
 Which allowed our Lord to release him lightly:
 So I think that the thief in heaven hovers
 At its lowest level, as Church law allows:
*Then will he render to every man according to his works.*²⁸
- 210 “You may ask why one felon confessed his faith
 While the other did not, but no one can know;
 The question discomfits every Christian scholar:
*Why did it please him? Because it was his will!*²⁹
 I say that to you, who aspire to understand
 The answers to everything, arguing with Reason,
- 215 Questioning how birds and beasts may breed,
 Why some are below and some are aloft,
 Wondering how flowers in woods and fields
 Came by their colors so clear and bright,
 Asking how it is that animals are wise,
- 220 And studying stones and the stars, where even
 Native wit and learning are left at a loss
 Because none but Nature knows the cause.
 He’s the magpies’ master and murmurs in their ear
 Where the thorn is thickest to build and to breed;
- 225 Nature taught the peacock to pair without pity
 And pointed out to Adam his privy parts
 And to him and to Eve how to hide them with leaves.
 The ignorant may ask the erudite and learned
 Why Adam chose to hide his organs not his mouth,
- 230 Which ate the apple, but the answer again
 Is that Nature knows and no one else.
- “The birds and the beasts way back in the past
 Were taken as models for moral tales:
 The most beautiful birds give birth to the basest
 235 And the feeblest in flight of all that fly:
 The peacock and peahen, with their riches and pride,
 Which are soon pursued, overtaken and seized

²⁸Matthew xvi 27.²⁹Not a biblical quotation, but cf. Psalm cxxxiv 6: “Whatsoever the Lord pleased he hath done.”

- Since their trailing tails frustrate their flight.
 But their flesh is foul, and their feet are too,
 240 And their cry is crude and coarse on the ear.
 “The rich are the same if they store up silver
 And die without ever handing out alms.
 Like the peacock’s feathers that prevent his flying,
 Sovereigns and shillings bring sorrow behind them
 245 To people with plenty till their tails are plucked.
 They may then repent and mourn and bemoan
 That they gathered so much and gave so meanly.
 They can cry to Christ with the keenest of wills,
 But their song will sound to our Lord like a screech.
 250 When their bodies are brought to be buried in the tomb,
 I think the whole cemetery will thoroughly stink
 And their venom will infect every corpse in the vault.
 “The peacock’s feet that we find in the fable
 Are the false executors who fail to fulfill
 255 Or observe as was wished the will that they witnessed,
 And the peacock depicted by the poet is praised
 For his feathers as the rich are revered for their fortune.
 But the lark, which is smaller and sings more sweetly,
 Can fly much further and faster than a peacock,
 260 And is fatter and fleshier and far more delicious,
 Resembling the simple with their straightforward lives.
 The teacher Aristotle tells such tales,
 Likening the lowly to the lark in his *Logic*.
 But no scripture or learning can say for certain
 265 Whether he and Socrates and Solomon are saved,
 Though since God is good and gave them the sense
 To instruct in their books those who seek to be saved,
 We beg that God in his grace will grant them
 Rest for their souls, especially as scholars
 270 Would be lost unless they had learnt from their books.”
 “But Christian clerics claim in their sermons
 That salvation requires every creature to be christened,
 Both us,” I rejoined, “and heathens and Jews.”
 Imagination was not of my mind.
 275 “*If the just man shall scarcely be saved,*” he said,³⁰

³⁰1 Peter iv 18.

“As Scripture asserts, then he is in fact saved.
Trajan was true though unbaptized;
Hence the books say he’s saved, and his soul is in bliss,
For baptism can be by water or blood,
280 Or baptism by fire, which confirms our faith:
*The divine fire comes not to burn but bring light.*³¹
A true man who never trespassed or betrayed
But lived by God’s law and believed none better,
Though willing if there were such to change his ways,
Must be favored for his faith by a faithful God.
285 The faithful most fervently hope that in fairness
Fidelity will find God’s favor after death,
For GOD means *Grants the Obedient Deliverance*³²:
*Yea, though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I
will fear no evils.*³³
These words surely warrant that truth will be rewarded,
While wisdom and intelligence were once the wealth
290 Considered essential for rulers and the source
Of human happiness.” And instantly, he vanished.

³¹From a Pentecost antiphon (Schmidt 203), cf. Matthew iii 11.

³²“GOD” is the translation of the Latin used by Langland, “DEUS.” Schmidt (p. 390) credits Professor J.A. Burrow with revealing that this stands for *Dans Eternam Vitam Suis* (Giving Eternal Life to His Own).

³³Psalm xxii 4 (KJV Psalm xxiii 4).

Step XIII

In which I wake and wander in uncertainty for years before my fourth dream, of a dinner where Patience and I eat humbly while a learned Doctor gorges himself. I ask him and Learning to explain Do-well, Do-better and Do-best. They both attempt answers, but Patience shows simply that they mean the love of Christ. The Doctor ridicules him, but Conscience sets off with Patience and me to seek proof. We meet Haukin, a merchant who thinks he does well, but whose coat is spotted with sin.

Therewith I awoke with my mind in a whirl,
And year upon year I wandered the world,
Ill-fortuned and fated to beg for food
And frequently reflecting on the folk I had seen:
5 How Fortune failed me when I needed her and vanished;
How Old Age menaced remorse when I met him;
How friars court favor with folk who are rich
And set little score by people who are poor,
And bar the burial in their churchyard or church
10 Of people unless a legacy is left;
How priests are as guilty of gluttony and greed;
How the humble are led, unless our Lord helps,
To everlasting agony by ignorant clergy;
How Imagination made me marvel in my mind
15 At Nature and his knowledge and benevolence to beasts,
Loving none less and loving none more,
But loving all living on land and sea,
Even creatures that creep being Nature's kin;
How Imagination said the man was still saved,
20 And suddenly vanished as soon as he said it.

I lay for a long time thinking but at last
I slept and Christ sent Conscience with comfort.

The latter requested that I come to his court
 To dine with Learning, which I did with delight.
 25 I saw there a Doctor, a scholarly stranger
 Who bowed to Scripture with seemly assurance.
 Conscience was acquainted and welcomed him kindly,
 And they washed and dried and went in to dinner.
 But Patience stood back, appareled like a pilgrim
 30 Appealing for alms as a penniless hermit.
 Conscience called him and courteously said,
 “Welcome, please wash, there’s no need to wait.”

The Doctor was put with the important people,
 With Conscience and Learning a little below them,
 35 But Patience and I were placed as a pair
 At a table on the side, sitting by ourselves.
 Then Conscience called, and Scripture came
 And offered us helpings of Augustine and Ambrose
 And the four Evangelists in flavorsome slices:

*Eating and drinking such things as they have.*¹

40 But the Doctor and his servant would not sup on such stuff
 And consumed other soups and stews that were rich,
 Gorging on dishes that were gained by guile.
 But their sauce would be sour and unsavory in taste
 When pounded in a post-mortem mortar of pain
 45 Unless they repented and prayed for pardon:

*Ye who feast on the sins of men, unless ye shed tears and prayers for
 them, shall vomit up in torment that which ye ate with delight.*²

Then Conscience kindly requested Scripture
 To bring me and Patience a piece of bread.
 She placed a sour portion before us. “*Do Penance*³
And drink Perseverance,” she devoutly avowed,
 50 “As long as your life and body shall last!”

“No prince is served better,” said Patience. “This is priceless.”
 Then more food came: *Have-mercy-on-me*,⁴
 And *Blessed-is-the-man* and *Blessed-are-they-
 Whose-sins-are-covered* in a salver that was called

¹Luke x 7.

²Source unknown.

³Matthew iii 2.

⁴Psalms xxx 10 and l (=50) 1 (KJV Psalms xxxi 9 and li 1).

- 55 *I-will-confess-against-myself-my-injustice-to-the-Lord!*⁵
 “Another course for Patience,” said Conscience quietly,
 And Patience was brought a second portion of bread:
*For this shall every one that is holy pray to thee.*⁶
 Then Conscience encouraged us with comforting words:
*A contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*⁷
- Patience was proud that he was plied with good food
 60 And was totally content, but I was disturbed
 That the Doctor on the dais was drinking too much:
*Woe to you that rise up early in the morning to follow drunkenness,
 and to drink till the evening, to be inflamed with wine.*⁸
 He was shoveling down steak and stews and tripe,
 Fried eggs and pork brawn and plenty of puddings.
 I spoke to myself but the sound reached Patience:
- 65 “Not four days since this fellow held forth
 On Pauline penance before the Dean of Saint Paul’s:
*Five times did I receive forty stripes, save one. Thrice was I beaten
 with rods; in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness.*⁹
 But such sermons always seem not to see a word
 That was put in his *Epistle* expressly by Paul,
 That *fratres* who are false are *founts of danger*.¹⁰
- 70 This ‘*fratres*’ refers of course to friars,
 Though I will not whisper the warning too loud
 Lest people repeat it and slander the pure.¹¹
 But I never met a friar who referred to this phrase
 In straightforward English when reciting a sermon,
- 75 Though they preach of the penance which profits the soul
 And the misery and martyrdom Christ suffered for man.
 Now this God-chopping glutton with his great fat cheeks
 Has no pity for the poor and is perpetrating evil.
 He should practice what he preaches,” I observed to Patience,
- 80 And I wished with a will that the devil were waiting

⁵Psalm xxxi 1–2 and 5 (KJV Psalm xxxii 1–2 and 5).

⁶Psalm xxxi 6 (KJV Psalm xxxii 6).

⁷Psalm l (=50) 19 (KJV Psalm li 17).

⁸Isaiah v 11.

⁹2 Corinthians xi 24–27.

¹⁰2 Corinthians xi 26.

¹¹In the original, Langland conveys the whole warning in Latin so that only scholars will understand it.

In the dishes and dainties before the Doctor
 To turn them to molten metal in his mouth.
 “I shall ask this guzzler with his great huge guts
 To explain the penance he was preaching about.”

- 85 But Patience saw my purpose and signed me to be still.
 “Wait and see,” he said, “what happens when he’s sated.
 His paunch will punish him and he’ll puff at every word.
 He’ll yawn and his guts will grumble and groan,
 And he’s drunk so deeply that he’ll try to contend
 90 That bacon and brawn, chicken puddings and pies
 Are not flesh or fish but a penitent’s food,
 And to prove it he’ll parrot the Apocalypse of Gluttons,
 And the story of Saint Avery succored with sweetmeats.¹²
 Then he’ll talk about threes and tell his neighbor
 95 Of a book about friars that he found in a box,
 Though never believe me unless it’s all nonsense.
 That will be the time to take him to task
 About Do-well, Do-better, Do-best and penance.”

I stayed still as he said, and soon the Doctor
 100 Rubbed his cheeks that were as ruddy as a rose,
 Coughed and cast us a glance while Conscience
 Was taking the three-cornered Trinity as his text.
 I addressed him: “Doctor, what is Do-well? Is it penance?”

“Do-well?” said the Doctor, and took the cup and drank.
 105 “Not hurting fellow Christians if you can help it.”

“Then Doctor,” I said, “you are certainly not Do-well
 For you’ve hurt both of us by eating the chicken
 And steak and stews while we haven’t supped.
 If the food in your infirmary is as filling as that
 110 There’ll be battles, not charity, and the boys there will brawl.
 Since I’m desperate to do well, why don’t we swap places?”

Conscience pulled a face and kindly requested
 Patience to persuade me to sit in silence,
 But said himself, “Do please describe

¹²The *Apocalypse of Gluttons* was a parody on the Revelation of Saint John written by Walter Mapes. Saint Avery (“Avereys” in the original) does not exist. The name looks rather like “Averroes,” the twelfth-century Muslim scholar, but it may also refer to Saint Aurea or Saint Advisa. The original one line is here expanded into two.

115 What are Do-well and Do-better. Doctors must know.”

“Do-well,” said the Doctor, “is to do what clerics say,
Do-better is teaching, at least trying to teach,
And Do-best does what he says folk should do:

*He that shall do and teach, he shall be called great in the kingdom
of heaven.*”¹³

Then Conscience requested Learning to comment.

120 “My seven sons serve,” Learning said, “in a castle,
Where they learn about Do-well from the Lord of Life,
But defining what is Do-well would be foolish before
I have seen my sons and resolved it with them.
For Piers the Plowman has impugned us all

125 And unseated all sciences save only love,
And the sole texts he cites to strengthen his case
*Are Love thy God and Lord, who shall dwell?*¹⁴
He deems that Do-well and Do-better aren’t finite,
But converge and foster Do-best through faith,

130 Which saves the soul, Piers the Plowman says.”

“I cannot express an opinion,” said Conscience,
“But Piers wouldn’t speak against Scripture, I’m sure.
Let’s see how he shows we should act when he’s here,
Though the much-traveled Patience may know more,

135 For as Christ declared: *The patient shall conquer.*”¹⁵

“I’ll reply,” said Patience, “if it won’t displease you.

First *Learn, Teach* later, then *Love your foes*.

Do-well learns, Do-better gives lessons

And Do-best loves, I was led to believe

140 By a lady I loved whose name was Love.

‘You should love your soul,’ she said, ‘all your life,

In words and works with a willing heart,

And should learn to love, for the sake of our Lord,

Your enemy sincerely the same as yourself.

145 Overwhelm him with words of affection and warmth,

Claim his devotion with kindness and care,

¹³Matthew v 19.

¹⁴Matthew xxiii 37 and Psalm xiv 1 (KJV Psalm xv 1): “Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle?”

¹⁵A proverb cited also by John Bromyard (Warner, *The Myth of Piers Plowman*, 66).

- And show him such love that at last he must laugh.
Such measures will melt him or he must be blind!
But it's senseless to proceed the same with your friends
- 150 For true love awaits and wants no reward.
Natural love longs for acknowledgement alone,
Expressed in the power of the Paschal words.”
- He showed us a seal round his neck and said,
“I bear those about me, embracing Do-well
- 155 In this seal of Saturday, the holiest sabbath,
With the wisdom of the Wednesday in the week that followed,
And the might of all Easter at the mid-point of the moon.
With this amulet I'm welcome wherever I am.”¹⁶
- “Undo it,” said Conscience. “Let the Doctor declare
- 160 Whether Do-well is in it; for by heaven if he is,
No mischance or mischief, no malice in speech,
No cold or care or company of thieves,
No heat or hail, no demon from hell,
No fire or flood of fear of your foes
- 165 Can harm you whenever you have it upon you:
*Perfect charity casteth out fear.*¹⁷
God save my soul, if you sought such power,
The might of that seal would make you the master
Of emperors and empresses, earls and kings,
And would place in your power both patriarchs and popes,
- 170 Through wisdom, not witchcraft, and were you to wish it,
Would cause kings and queens and all the commons
To give you to guard all the goods they can give
And to do as you ordain for the rest of their days:
The patient shall conquer.”
- “Such a story is absurd,” the Doctor said.
- 175 “All the wisdom in the world and the might of monarchs
Cannot patch up a peace between the Pope and his foes,
Nor can they between two Christian kings,

¹⁶The Paschal words are those of Easter week, embodying charity and love. The mid-point of the lunar cycle determines the date of Easter, and the reading for the Wednesday calls for faith and repentance, qualities also required to do well. As for Easter Saturday, Skeat argues that it marked the end of the first week after the Creation and acquired new significance at Easter. The explanatory line 153 has been added.

¹⁷1 John iv 18.

- Not that will profit both people,” he opined.
And he leant back, declaring to Conscience and Learning
180 That Patience should depart, saying pilgrims were liars.
- But Conscience dissented and civilly said,
“Then farewell, my friends” and spoke fairly to Learning:
“If God gives me grace I will go with this man,
With this pilgrim called Patience, and see what transpires.”
- 185 “You what?” Learning gasped. “Are you greedy for gifts
Or are you after the answers to riddles?
I can bring you a Bible, the book of Old Law,
And tell you from that a thing or two
That Patience the pilgrim can never explain.”
- 190 “No, by Christ,” said Conscience, “may God requite you!
I take no pride in what Patience pretends,
But his will and the will of the witnesses here
Have so moved my mood that I mourn for my sins.
No wealth is worth as much as good will,
195 And true will’s a treasure no bounty can buy.
Mary Magdalene was honored far more for her ointment¹⁸
Than Zacchaeus who declared he would *give away his goods*,¹⁹
And the poor widow more for her pair of mites
Than the rich for their tribute to the treasury in tax.”²⁰
- 200 Thus decorously Conscience addressed the Doctor,
And then softly he spoke another sentence to Learning:
“By our Lord I should like much more, if I live,
To have perfect patience than your parcel of books!”
- Learning was loath to take leave of Conscience
205 And said very soberly, “You’ll see the time
When you’re weary with walking and want to consult me.”
- “That may be so,” Conscience said, “God save me!
But if Patience is our fellow and faithful friend,
We can mend every misery and mischief in the world,
210 Bring peace between kings and countries in conflict,

¹⁸Cf. Mark xiv 3.

¹⁹Cf. Luke xix 8.

²⁰Cf. Luke xxi 2.

And persuade all Saracens, Syrians and Jews,
All heathens, to follow the one true faith.”

“I accept what you say for sure,” Learning said,
“And shall do my duty as I have been doing,

215 Forming children and confirming folk
Till Patience has proved you and made you perfect.”

So Conscience and Patience departed like pilgrims,
Patience with a pilgrim’s food in his pocket,
Simple speech, soberness and steadfast belief

220 To comfort him and Conscience when they came to countries
Where covetous unkindness would cause them to hunger.

As they went they wondered at what Do-well was,
Till they met with a man who looked like a minstrel.

So Patience spoke and besought him to say

225 What profession he followed and what route he favored.

“I acknowledge I’m a minstrel,” he announced, “and my name
Is *Active Life* for I loathe to be idle,

A wafer-seller working for a wealth of masters

But earning few fripperies or foppish furs.

230 If I lied and larked to make men laugh

I’d have clothes and cash like a jester at court,

But I tell no tall tales, play no tabor or trumpet

Or harp or fiddle, I won’t fart for fun,

Or tell japes or juggle or jig or tumble

235 Or play the pipe or sing to the cittern,

So the only gift that grandees will give me

For the bread that I bake is a blessing on Sundays

When the priest asks the people to repeat the *Our Father*

For Piers the Plowman and those who support him.

240 I’m the Active Man and I am never idle,

And from Michaelmas to Michaelmas I make the wafers

For those who toil and till the earth.

Beggars and tramps all bid for my bread,

Vagabonds and friars, all the folk with tonsures.

245 “I’m appointed to the Pope, and supply his horse,

But God save us, I swear I have never received

Patronage or food as a present from the Pope,

Just a pardon sealed with a pair of saints.

If I possessed a scribe I’d scribble a dispatch

- 250 Beseeching him to send me a salve for the Plague
 And a blessing and bulls to banish the pox:
*In my name they shall cast out devils; They shall lay their hands
 upon the sick, and they shall recover.*²¹
- And then I'd be pleased to make pastry for people,
 Be obedient and busy with bread and with drink
 For the Pope and his people if his pardon were proved
- 255 To heal as it ought, for he has the power
 That was passed to Saint Peter with the pot of ointment:
*Silver and gold I have none; but what I have I give thee: in the
 name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise, and walk.*²²
- “But if miracles fail, then men do not merit
 The grace of God, and the Pope bears no guilt,
 For his blessing will work only when we are worthy,
- 260 Nor will prayers make peace between Christian peoples
 Till pride is put off, which will happen through hunger.
 For before I make bread for folk or have flour,
 I must mightily sweat on many cold mornings,
 So that wafers are made with much worrisome work.
- 265 But all Londoners, I believe, like my wafers
 And scowl when they're scarce, for not long since
 One parish was in panic when bread disappeared.
 No cart brought a stock to the city from Stratford,²³
 So that beggars wept and workmen worried.
- 270 It was thirteen-seventy when the scarcity struck,
 While Chichester was mayor, and the memory remains
 Of the dearth of bread in the dry April drought.”
- I carefully examined, and so did Conscience,
 The Active Man Haukin and how he was dressed.
- 275 His coat was his christening in Christian faith,
 But it was spattered and stained with numerous spots,
 A splash or two of pride, of licentious speech,
 Of scoffing and scorn, and unseemly bearing.
 Too proud in apparel and with pompous deportment,
- 280 He was seeking to be seen as something he was not
 In humor or behavior or indeed in his heart,

²¹Mark xvi 17–18.²²Acts iii 6.²³This is the Stratford a few miles east of the city of London.

- For he boasted and bragged and blasphemed badly,
 And hated to be mocked by anyone at all,
 Wanting to appear superior to people,
 285 Peerless and unparalleled, as holy as the Pope.
- He was dressed as a hermit, in an order of his own
 Without rightful obedience to rules or the Rule,
 A liar who pretended to be telling the truth
 But belittled the faithful, both learned and lowly.
 290 He considered and speculated, studied and observed
 How best to be known for his boldness of body,
 And he interfered everywhere in others' affairs,
 Hoping they would hold that he knew best
 In matters of learning and commercial life.
- 295 He was the strongest mount with the stiffest member,
 The most handsome to behold, the most honest in dealings,
 And the most religious, and his life was most moral.
 He was fairest in features, in form and in shape,
 The subtlest singer, the slickest with his hands,
 300 And the largest lender who expected to be lauded.
 He wanted folk aware of when he gave alms,
 Though his purse was poor and his savings were paltry.
 He had leonine looks and was lordly of speech,
 The boldest of beggars, a bragger with nothing.
- 305 In the town and in taverns he told tall stories,
 Swore he had seen things he's never had sight of,
 Boasted of doings that were done in his dreams,
 Gloried in his goodness and gloated on it, saying,
 "If you're reluctant to believe me or think that I'm lying,
 310 Ask this man or that and then you'll discover
 What I've suffered and seen and sometimes owned,
 What I've known and performed and what family I'm from."
 He wanted folk to know of works and words
 That appealed to people and would praise himself:
*If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ, and
 No man can serve two masters.*²⁴
- 315 "By Christ," said Conscience, "your coat, friend Haukin,
 Should be sent to the wash as it's spotted and stained."
 "Just so," Haukin said. "If you observe it closely

²⁴Galatians i 10 and Matthew vi 24.

- And inspect front and back, and examine the sides,
You'll see that it's crumpled and covered in spots.”
- 320 And he twirled around and I realized he was right:
It was filthier by far than at first it had seemed.
It was addled with anger and ill-will and envy,
Fouled with slander and incitements to fight,
With lying, belittling and looseness of tongue,
- 325 For he broadcast anything bad that he heard
And abused men horribly behind their backs
And wished they would fail, and he whispered to Wat
What he found out from Will, and *vice versa*,
Making foes of his friends through his false reports.
- 330 “I must seek revenge through vicious slander
Or physical strength or I fret inside,
Tearing and swearing like a tailor with his shears.
*His mouth is full of cursing, and of bitterness, and of deceit; under
his tongue are labor and sorrow, and
The sons of men, whose teeth are weapons and arrows, and their
tongue a sharp sword.*²⁵
- No love or relationship ever lasts long
Since no one trusts me for the tales that I tell.
- 335 When I cannot be kingpin I feel melancholic,
And catch the cramps or cardiac spasms
Or fearsome rheumatics or a frightful fever
That takes me a twelve-month, and then I turn
From the wisdom of our Lord and run wheezing to a witch,
- 340 To the Southwark Shoemaker or Emma of Shoreditch,²⁶
Proclaiming that Christ and the doctors can't cure me,
That the word of God is no good as a guide,
That health and chances come chiefly from charms!”
- I looked more sharply and saw his coat soiled
- 345 With liking of lust, and leery his eye,
For each maid that he met, he made her a sign
That spoke of sinning, and sometimes he tasted
Her lips or lecherously groped her below
Till their willingness waxed and to work they would go.
- 350 On feast days and Fridays, and times when it's frowned on,

²⁵Psalms x (“according to the Hebrews”) 7 and lvi 4 (KJV Psalms x 7 and lvii 4).

²⁶These were probably known people. Southwark and Shoreditch had dubious reputations, being outside the city of London and therefore free from rigorous oversight.

- In Lent they were lustful, all seasons alike,
 They were on it and at it again and again
 Till they lay back exhausted and in hoary old age
 Could tell of how lechers laughed and made love,
 355 Tales of harlotry, whoredom and having their way.
- Then Patience pointed out parts of the coat
 That were moldy with money and misplaced greed,
 For he gave his attention to goods, not to God,
 And he pondered how possible it was to profit
 360 From false information or fraudulent measure.
 He made loans that were harsh and looked for loop-holes
 To keep the property that people had pledged,
 And he mixed up commodities to make a good show:
 “Being smart, I place the poor stuff inside.
 365 If my neighbor has a hard-working animal or hireling
 More profitable than mine I plot and I plan
 How to get my hands on him all for my own,
 And if all else fails, I finally filch him,
 Or I pick the man’s locks and his purse in private.
 370 By night and by day I’m dodging and dealing
 To gather through guile the goods that I have.
- “If plying the plow, I will push so far over
 That I fetch in a furrow or foot of land,
 Grabbing and grasping my neighbor’s ground,
 375 And when I am reaping I reckon my reapers
 Should snatch with their scythes what others have sown.
 And if anyone borrows he has to buy
 More time with presents or to pay more in private.
 In that way I gain from the game regardless,
 380 And to kith and to kin I am just as unkind.
 I complain unless people who purchase my goods
 Are prepared to pay a penny or two
 More than their value while fiercely avowing
 The price that I paid was appreciably more.
 385 If I happen to hear the Mass on high days,
 It never ever enters my head
 To ask for mercy for I mourn much more
 The loss of my goods than my guilt against God,
 So I do not dread my deadly sins
 390 As dearly as loans that are long overdue,

And if I show kindness to comfort fellow Christians,
In my heart I calculate the cash I may acquire.

“If I send my servants overseas to Bruges
Or apprentices to Prussia to bring back my profits,
395 To market my merchandise and change my money,
Neither Masses nor Matins nor any amusements,
No *Our Father* performed or penance fulfilled,
Can comfort me while I am worrying and waiting
For my mind is more on my merchandise abroad
400 Than the grace of God and the help that he gives:
For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also.”²⁷

This glutton had similarly soiled and besmirched
And bespattered his garment with slatternly speech.
He took God’s name when he needed not
And splattered his outfit with oath after oath,
405 And he ate and drank more than anyone could handle—
“Sometimes my surfeits have made me fall sick,
And I’ve dreaded to die in deadly sin”—
Till despairing, he gave up seeking to be saved.
For when sloth is so strong that nothing can shake it,
410 No prospect of mercy can prompt true penance.
What circumstance sucks a man down into sloth?
When he does not regret or grieve for misdeeds,
When he scorns the penance imposed by a priest,
When he fails in his faith and fears no sin,
415 When he hands out no alms and holds to no law;
When each day is a feast day for fairgrounds and fun,
And all that he’s after is cheap-jack humor,
And he hates to hear and detests those who talk
Of Christ and the cross and cleanness of soul,
420 Of penance or poor men or Passions of saints:
Such are the things preceding despair.
So you lords and ladies, and legates of the Church,
Who foster fools and flatterers and liars,
And feed them and fête them, refusing the poor,
425 And like to laugh and to listen to their jokes:
*Woe to you that now laugh: for you shall mourn and weep.*²⁸

²⁷Matthew vi 21.

²⁸Luke vi 25.

I dread to think that the day you die,
 Those flatterers and fools and liars will be finished
 For *abettors of wrong face as bad retribution*.²⁹

- 430 Patriarchs and prophets and preachers of God's word
 Save men's souls from hell through their sermons,
 But flatterers and fools are followers of evil
 And their tales entice men to tawdry sin.
 Clerics should declaim what the Bible makes clear
 And say to lords what it says in the psalms:
 *He that worketh pride shall not dwell in the midst of my house:
 he that speaketh unjust things did not prosper before my
 eyes.*³⁰
- 435 No impostor should be heard in public or in private
 Where wise men consort, as Scripture says,
 Nor conceit or smugness be suffered among lords.
- Out of love for the King, the learned and lordly
 Still listen politely to his minstrels at meals,
- 440 But rich men should rather make their revels with beggars,
 The minstrels of God, for John's Gospel remarks:
 *He that despiseth you, despiseth me.*³¹
 My advice to the rich when arranging revels
 Is to soothe your souls with the song of such minstrels,
 To put a pauper in the place of the fool,
- 445 To listen to a lesson on the suffering of our Lord
 And to forgo flattery and hear on the fiddle
 The story of Good Friday, and be safe from Satan
 With the banter of a blind man or bed-ridden woman
 Who will praise you and pray to our Lord for your pardon!
- 450 These minstrels of need will make a man merry,
 And do him great comfort at the day of his death
 If he loved to listen to them during his life.
 They will solace his soul with the certain hope
 That soon he will sit in the midst of the saints.
- 455 But the filthy words of flatterers and fools
 Are Lucifer's song that leads to sorrow

²⁹Not a quotation but a legal principle.

³⁰Psalms c 7 (KJV Psalm ci 7: "He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight.")

³¹Not John but Luke x 16.

And a feast of turpitude, torture and torment.

Thus the Active Man Haukin had soiled his outfit,
And Conscience inquired in a courteous manner

460 Why it was not washed or wiped or brushed.

Step XIV

In which Conscience tells Haukin how to keep clean through true belief and penitence. Patience explains the many advantages of poverty, which can overcome sin, and how the rich, who have their heaven on earth, can still be saved through charity. Haukin begs for mercy, and I awake, finding myself in London. Reason upbraids me for the idleness of my life there.

“I possess but a single coat,” Haukin said,
“So its soiling is simple: I sleep in it too.
My spouse has her say, and my servants and children—
*I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come—*¹

And they sometimes besmirch it despite my rebukes!
5 It’s been washed all the while, in Lent as well,
With the soap of sickness that soaks right in,
And with loss of possessions, yet still I don’t say
That God is to blame or good folk are guilty.

“I’ve been pardoned by a priest, who imposed for my sins
10 A penance of patience and feeding the poor
To keep it clean and remain a Christian.
Yet I could not keep it clean for an hour
But soiled it with something that I saw or I said,
Either words or works or the will of my heart,
15 And I dirtied it wickedly from dawn to dusk.”

“I shall teach you contrition,” Conscience retorted,
“Which will claw from your coat all kinds of filth:
Contrition of heart.
Then Do-well shall douse it in due confession:
Confession of mouth.

¹Luke xiv 20.

And Do-better shall pull it to pieces and pound it
 20 And dye it again with good will and grace,
 And Do-best shall darn it and sew it with deeds:
 *Satisfaction of deed.*²
 No lice or moths shall then lurk to mar it,
 Nor the devil nor false men foul it henceforth.
 Behave as I say and no herald or harpist
 25 Shall have finer clothes than the Active Man Haukin,
 No minstrel more praise from both powerful and poor
 Than Haukin the Active, the waferer, shall have.”

“I shall furnish you with dough even during a drought,
 And the flour that is finest for souls,” Patience said,
 30 “Though grain has not grown, nor grapes on the vine.
 I shall find the food for all beings that breathe,
 And I never shall fail to have enough for their needs.
 For we should not fret where our food comes from:
 *Be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat; Behold the birds
 of the air: your heavenly Father feedeth them; The patient shall
 conquer.*”³

Haukin laughed a little and said, “By our Lord,
 35 To be pampered by you wouldn’t promise much pleasure!”

“Not so,” said Patience, and he pulled from his pocket
 Victuals that can feed many forms of life,
 Saying, “Faithful belief can provide a feast!
 For life is not sent but there’s sustenance besides,
 40 Purveying the food wherefrom to live:
 For the wild worm first that feeds beneath fields,
 For the fish in the flood and the cricket in fire,
 For the clean-fleshed curlew in country air,⁴
 And for creatures that graze on grass, roots and grain.
 45 And people can likewise live from belief
 And love alone, as God relates:

*Whatsoever you shall ask the Father in my name, that will I do,
 and*

²Penitence is threefold: the sinner is expected to be contrite at heart, to express that sorrow through confession, and to make amends by offering satisfaction through restitution or penance.

³Matthew vi 25 and 26; the proverbial refrain that runs through the rest of the poem.

⁴It was believed that crickets lived in fire and that curlews lived on air.

*Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.*⁵

- I surveyed the food that Patience invoked
 And found *Thy will be done* from the *Our Father*.
 “Eat this, Haukin, when you’re hungry,” said Patience,
 50 “When you’re cringing with cold or crying with thirst.
 Fetters shall not hurt you nor the anger of the haughty,
 Nor prison nor pain, for *The patient shall conquer*.
 So be sober of sight and sober in speech,
 In your senses, your diet and the deeds that you do.
 55 Then die without dread as God ordained,
 From hunger or heat as God will have it,
 Without care for your clothes, or corn or drink.
 If you live by his law, the less life-time the better:
*To love Christ well is to loathe the world.*⁶
- 60 “His breath made the beasts that wander abroad:
*He commanded, and they were created.*⁷
 His breath therefore moves both men and beasts,
 As Scripture describes when the grace is said:
*Thou openest thy hand, and fillest with blessing every living creature.*⁸
- For forty years folk survived without tilling
 And drank from the spring that sprang from the stone.
 65 The heavens were locked in the age of Elijah:
 No rain arrived, yet we read in books
 That the people prospered for years without plowing:
 The Seven Sleepers for seven hundred years
 Survived without food and finally awoke,⁹
 70 And if men would live well-measured lives,
 As Christ says, no Christian would have cause to starve.
 For dearth among Christians is occasioned by unkindness.
 Over-plenty makes poor and rich alike proud,
 And no price is too steep to pay for restraint,

⁵John xiv 13 and Matthew iv 4.

⁶Cf. Luke xiv 26.

⁷Psalm cxlviii 5.

⁸Psalm cxliv 16 (KJV Psalm cxlv 16). This is the grace said after meals.

⁹The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus appears in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (see the Old Testament Book of Numbers).

- 75 For the misery amongst the men of Sodom
 Came from too much bread and too much torpor:
*Idleness and abundance of bread nourished the vilest sin.*¹⁰
 They over-ate and they over-drank
 And they sinned to Satan's satisfaction,
 So that vengeance befell them for their vile performance
- 80 And they sank into hell, those cities of sin.¹¹
 "So we should be restrained and sheltered by faith,
 For as Conscience could tell you, contrition that's true
 Ensures that our sins are venial sins.
 It can save even sinners who decide to stay silent
- 85 And bring them to bliss if their faith confirms
 They believed when alive in the lore of the Church.
 Even failing confession, faith is still Do-well
 When tied to conscience and true contrition,
 But contrition with confession is far more effective,
- 90 Destroying and slaying even deadly sin,
 While contrition only tempers the tenor of that sin.
 As the psalmist says, you should speak to a priest:
*Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven.*¹²
 Satisfaction goes furthest by finding the root
 Of the deadly sin and excising it so
- 95 That the wound is healed and the hurt is away."¹³
 "How about Charity?" said Haukin. "I'm hanged
 If I've spoken to a soul who's ever seen him."
 "Perfect truth, patient tongue and poor heart are the home
 Of Charity," said Patience, "God's chamberlain of choice."
- 100 "Is patient poverty more pleasing to God
 Than wealth spent well?" Haukin wondered.
 "Point to that man and *we'll praise him,*" said Patience.¹⁴
 "We could argue for ever and ever about wealth,
 But I've met no one rich at the moment when it mattered
- 105 Who did not dread his death and then die
 Immersed in the deepest, direful debt,

¹⁰Cf. Ezekiel (KJV Ezekiel) xvi 49.

¹¹Sodom and Gomorrah.

¹²Psalm xxxi 1 (KJV Psalm xxxii 1).

¹³The three elements of penitence are thus equated with doing well, better and best.

¹⁴Ecclesiasticus xxxi 9. (Ecclesiasticus is regarded as Apocryphal in KJV.)

- While the poor may plead by pure common sense
 For allowance from the Lord and may claim in law
 From the judge who is just the joy they never had,
 110 Saying, ‘To birds and beasts which know no bliss
 And to sylvan snakes which must suffer in winter
 And are tempted by hunger to be timid and tame,
 You send the summer as their sovereign joy
 And a welcome reward for both wild and tame.’
- 115 Thus beggars like beasts may await a boon
 Since they’ve lived their lives in lasting want
 And Nature must surely insist they are sent
 Some ease by God on earth or in heaven
 For to have no joy at all is abhorrent.
- 120 “Angels in hell once had their joy,
 Like Dives who dallied with *la dolce vita*,¹⁵
 And we recognize surely that the rich have relished
 A life of luxury along with their women.
 But it’s greatly disturbing that God can grant
 125 So much before it is merited to many.
 It seems a shame that the rich are spoiled
 For they have their heaven here on earth
 And the leisure to live without bodily labor
 Yet are disallowed when they die, says King David:
*They have slept their sleep; and all the men of riches have found
 nothing in their hands, and
 As the dream of them that awake, O Lord; so in thy city thou shalt
 bring their image to nothing.*¹⁶
- 130 Alas! That riches should wreck folk and rob
 Their souls of the love of our Lord at the last!
 For servants who receive their salary in advance
 Are permanently penniless, and people who dine
 Before doing their duty seldom die out of debt.
- 135 People can tell when a task is well tackled
 And worth the wages of the workman who’s done it,
 Who is not paid first for fear he will fail.
 So I warn the wealthy to be well aware
 That they cannot be happy both on earth and in heaven.
- 140 Like the servant whose salary is settled in advance,

¹⁵Cf. Luke xi 19. “Dives” means “rich” in Latin.

¹⁶Psalms lxxv 5 and lxxii 20 (KJV Psalms lxxvi 5 and lxxiii 20).

They'll receive what they deserve if they seek to claim twice.
From the message in Matthew, that must be the case:

*It is difficult to dance from delight to delight.*¹⁷

- “Yet the rich who repent and support the poor,
And live by the law and are loyal to all,
145 Will be offered comfort by Christ in his kindness
And be paid twice the price if their hearts show pity,
In the same way a servant receives a reward
Besides his salary if the work is done well.
That could be a coat, but Christ will give heaven
150 To the rich and the poor who show pity and repent,
And double the wages if they do their duty,
And a pardon for their sins and Paradise at passing.
- “But it's seldom seen, as the saints have written,
That God twice rewards or welcomes the wealthy,
155 For the rich can frolic in furs with good food
Like beasts that are merry in the month of May
And stay in high spirits till the summer is past,
While from mid-summer beggars lack bread with their broth,
And winter is worse for their feet are wet
160 And they're hungry and thirsty, hatefully treated
And shamefully berated by the ruthless rich.
Lord, send them summer and some sort of luck,
Some heaven after death, for who helped them here?
- “You could have created all creatures as equals,
165 All witty and wise if that was your wish.
So pity the rich without pity for the poor,
Who are often ungrateful for the goods that you give,
For no dearth or drought or flood can undo them,
No hail or heat if they have their health,
170 And they want for nothing they require or wish:
In your goodness grant them the grace to repent.
And comfort your creatures who cruelly suffer
From dearth and drought all the days of their lives,
The poor, your prisoners in the pit of distress.
175 In winter they want for warming clothes,
And in summer they seldom sup till they're full.

¹⁷This is a gloss on Matthew xix 23.

Comfort the careworn, Christ in your riches,
 For Scripture recounts your kindness and care:

*Be converted to me, and you shall be saved.*¹⁸

- “Being gentle in nature, Jesus, you enjoined
 180 Both robbers and renegades, rich and poor,
 Whores and harlots, and all mankind,¹⁹
 To be christened in the Trinity, baptized in the Truth,
 And cleansed of all kinds of copious faults,
 And should we through folly slide into sin,
 185 To confess and avow and fall on your mercy,
 Which permits us amendment as often as it must.
 And if Satan seeks to appeal to our senses,
 You will swiftly set your reprieve in his sight
 And drive out the devil and show we are saved
 190 *‘By the power of these presents through the Passion of our Lord.’*
 “Poverty has pride of place in the reprieve,
 With purity of patience and perfect belief.
 There is no approval of pomp or pride
 But chiefly of people who are poor in heart.
 195 All other exemptions are empty as air,
 Such as prayer and penance and pilgrimage to Rome,
 And our labor is lost unless our spending
 Springs from good faith. Just see how men set
 Their names in glory on donations of glass
 200 For friary windows; wealth should be wielded
 In common by Christians, coveting nothing.
 “There are seven sins that always assail us.
 The devil pursues them and seeks to assist them,
 And reaps his richest reward through wealth,
 205 For where riches reign, reverence follows,
 Causing Pride to prosper in both rich and poor.
 While the rich are revered by reason of their riches,
 The poor are dismissed though they may have more
 Intelligence and wisdom, which are way more welcome
 210 And honored in heaven than rank or riches.
 For the rich are encumbered and must climb with caution
 The highway to heaven that is hindered by wealth—

¹⁸Isaiah xlv 22.

¹⁹This line is not in Skeat.

- A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven—*²⁰
 While the poor press ahead with their paltry packs—
*Their works follow them—*²¹
 And boldly and busily cry like beggars
- 215 For perpetual bliss for their poverty and patience:
*Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*²²
- “Pride reigns in the rich rather than the poor,
 Though it may be found in both master and man,
 But it’s powerless where poverty is combined with patience,
 And so are the others of the Seven Deadly Sins,
- 220 Which linger not long and go limping away.
 The poor can’t be proud when imploring the rich
 And obeying their bidding for their few bits of bread,
 And obedience and arrogance are always at odds,
 Each hating the other in every way.
- 225 “If a poor man and Anger are at issue and argue,
 The latter will lose if they go to law,
 For a poor man sees it is senseless to be strident:
 He has to be humble in behavior and speech
 If he’s always asking for food and alms.
- 230 “And Gluttony will gain not a grain from a pauper,
 Whose funds won’t stretch to fancy food,
 And however much he may hanker for ale,
 His bed is still cold and his crown is still bare
 And he’s curled up on straw instead of on sheets.
- 235 So Gluttony and Sloth bring grief, not gain,
 When he wakes and weeps for cold and woe—
 Or sometimes his sins—and his merrier moments
 Will be mixed with misery and melancholy too.
- “If Covetousness catches the poor in a clinch,
- 240 Then neither can pin his opponent by the neck.
 Covetousness is keen and may crave a fight,
 And his hands and arms are as long as you like,
 But Poverty is puny, scarce passing his navel,
 And a poorly matched pair are not pretty to watch.

²⁰Matthew xix 23.²¹Apocalypse (KJV Revelation) xiv 13.²²Luke vi 20.

- 245 “And if Avarice goes angling for the poor, what’s the point?²³
 For Poverty puts his belongings in his pockets
 While Avarice has cupboards and iron-bound coffers.
 And which attracts more attention from thieves:
 A beggar’s bag or a brim-full chest?
- 250 “Lust dislikes him for he’s little to spend,
 And nor does he drink or dine on dainties.
 And brothels would be abandoned and roofless
 If the poor were the only paying patrons!
- “And though Sloth may persuade the poor man to slacken,
 255 He is mired in misery, which makes him reflect
 That God is his only and greatest help
 And he serves, as he says, as the servant of God.
 However he behaves, his appearance is humble,
 In which semblance our Savior saved mankind.
- 260 Thus the patient poor have the patent to claim
 Heavenly bliss at their unhappy end.
- “Yet a man who leaves his life of leisure,
 His lands and lordship for love of the Lord
 And abides as a beggar has a claim that is better,
 265 Much like a maid who forsakes her mother,
 Her father and friends to follow her lover.
 That lover will love such a lass much more
 Than a girl who is gained through negotiation,
 Through the parties’ approval and the passing of money,
 270 Through fondness for goods, not feelings of affection.
 It’s the same with people who forsake possessions
 And put on patience and poverty as well,
 The sibling of God himself and his saints.”
- “Good God,” Haukin groaned, “if poverty is so great,
 275 Will you please explain what such poverty implies?”
- “Poverty,” said Patience, “*is a painful property,
 The casting off of cares, possession sans question,
 The donum Dei and mater sanitatis;
 The safe way sans dolor, the dompter of sapience,
 280 Negotium mercatorium but sine damnatione,*

²³Avarice, which is little different from Covetousness, appears to replace Envy here (cf. Step V).

*And in fortune sans certitude, felicitas sans sorrow.*²⁴

“Put it,” said Haukin, “in plain English, please.”

“In English,” said Patience, “it’s hard to explain,
But I’ll simplify it somehow if you’ll try to understand.

- 285 First, Poverty is the property that Pride hates the most,
And all that opposes Pride should be praised.
Just as Conscience is conscious that contrition brings comfort
And sorrow in itself and solace to the soul,
So Poverty is properly both physical penance
290 And a soothing source of spiritual health:
Hence, *Poverty can be a painful property.*

“Second, gentlemen only are judged fit as judges
And poor men seldom sit as assessors
Or mayors or ministers under the monarch
And they rarely impose a punishment on people.

- 295 Hence they’re spared the cares of the court and of council,
And Poverty and poor men apply the commandment
*Judge not, that you may not be judged.*²⁵

“Third, they rightfully inherit any riches as a rule,
Don’t fleece folk by fiddling with false weights and measures
Or borrow from neighbors with no paying back:
Hence, *Possession without question.*

- 300 “Fourth, Poverty is a fate that frees the soul to flourish
Safe from all sin, and does more besides.
It restrains the flesh from a full range of follies
And accords the comfort of Christ himself:
Hence, *Donum Dei, the gift of God.*

- 305 “Fifth, the source of health and a wholesome sweetheart,
A physician and a friend who defies tempting folly:
Hence, *Mater sanitatis, the mother of health.*

“Sixth, Poverty is a path that promises peace,
Even passing though Alton with pockets unpicked,²⁶
For where Poverty passes, peace goes with it,
And the less one carries, the less the disquiet:

²⁴Langland wrote these six (originally four) lines wholly in Latin.

²⁵Matthew vii 1.

²⁶Alton is a town on a highway west of London that was notorious for footpads.

Hence, *Poverty can walk on his way without worry,*
 310 And *can sing*, says Seneca, *when strolling with a thief*.²⁷

“Seventh, Poverty is the well of well-chosen wisdom,
 For lords scarcely listen and let him say little.
 He covets no treasure and his tongue tells the truth:
 Hence, *The dompter or tamer of sapient wisdom*.

“Eighth, Poverty labors most loyally and is loath
 315 To take more than he merits, and in mercantile matters
 Wins charity by not over-charging or cheating:
 Hence, *Doing deals without daring damnation*.

“Ninth, Poverty is sweeter than sugar to the soul,
 For the bread of Poverty is perfect patience
 And abstention his drink and succor in sickness.
 320 For love of our Lord I learnt from Augustine
 That a simple life blesses both body and soul:
 Hence, *Felicity without sorrow in uncertain fortune*.
 Now God, the giver of good things, grant rest
 To the saint who described friend Poverty so!”

“I wish,” Haukin wailed, “that when I was christened
 325 I’d died on the spot for Do-well’s sake.
 Oh, how I do hate to sin and do harm.
 But sin pursues us,” he said, and grew sorry.
 He wept and wept and bewailed the times
 When his actions injured or angered the Lord.
 330 He swooned and sighed and lamented with a sob
 That ever he’d owned a half inch of land
 Or been master of men besides himself:
 “I was not worthy to wear more clothes
 Than a single shirt and shoes out of shame
 335 To cover my carcass,” he said, and cried
 For mercy and wept, and therewith I awoke.

I landed in London, where I lived in a hovel²⁸
 In Cornhill with Kit, clothed like a tramp,
 Though disliked, believe me, by ignorant “hermits”
 And beggars for the rhymes that I wrote with good reason.

²⁷In fact from Juvenal, *Satire* 20.

²⁸This block of 88 un-numbered lines is taken from the C version of the poem (Skeat VI, Schmidt V, lines 1–5, 7–9, 11–83, 89–93, 105–107).

One hot day of harvest when I had my health
And limbs fit for labor but lazed instead,
Doing nothing but drink and dream and doze
And traipse about thinking, Reason grew testy:
“Can’t you serve or sing in a service at church,
Or heap up hay and heave it on to carts,
Or mow it and move it and make it into sheaves?
Or rise up early and direct the reaping,
Or be out in the open at night with a horn
To watch my cattle; can’t you keep the corn
In my croft from thieves, or make clothes or cobble,
Or hedge and harrow, keep sheep or herd
My pigs and geese—be employed to some purpose
To help out folk who are old and infirm?”

“God help me,” I said, “I’m sorry to say
I’m too weak to work with a sickle or scythe,
And I’m truly too tall to stoop and toil
For hours on end by hand at some task.”

“Then you’ve land to live off, or family funds,”
Reason responded, “for you seem a spendthrift
Who wastefully whiles his time away?
Or perhaps you hang around butteries begging
Or fetch up at churches on Fridays and feast-days,
Living by lying, which little will help
When justice awards men their just reward:

*Thou wilt render to every man according to his works.*²⁹

Or are you injured or lame in one limb,
Or maimed by some mischance, which might excuse you?”

“When years ago I was young,” I began,
“My father and friends financed my schooling
Till I understood the holy Scriptures
And knew what the books say is best for the body
And safest for the soul—provided it’s observed.
But in faith I’ve not found since the death of my friends
A career I care for that’s not in a cope.
So if I must labor to earn a living,
I should live by the labor that I actually learnt:

²⁹Psalm lxi 13 (KJV Psalm lxii 12).

*Let every man abide in the same calling in which he was called.*³⁰

“Hence I live in London, and I let London keep me;
The tools that I toil with and take everywhere
Are my *Pater noster*, *Placebo*, *Dirige* and primer,
And sometimes my Psalter and my seven psalms³¹
That I sing for the souls of the people who support me,
Afford me a welcome and feed me freely
When I make monthly visits or maybe more,
Now his house, now hers: that’s how I go begging,
With no bottle or bag but my belly alone.
And Reason, I reckon it’s wrong to force
A man in holy orders to heave and to haul,
For *Leviticus* says that the law of our Lord
Is that truly intelligent tonsured clergy
Should be spared sweating and serving on juries,
Fighting at the forefront and molesting folk:

*See that none render evil for evil.*³²

For the clerics of Christ in church and in choir,
Like all those ordained, are the heirs of heaven:

*The Lord is the portion of my inheritance, and Clemency
doth not constrain.*³³

It’s becoming for clergy to praise and serve Christ
And for lay folk to labor, to cart and to carry.
But ordination should only be for offspring
Of franklins and free men and folk truly wed,
So that bondsmen and bastards and beggars’ brats
Should sweat while the sons of nobles should serve
Either God or the good as suits their degree,
By singing the Mass or sitting as stewards,
Recording and advising on the fit use of funds.

“But bonded laborers’ boys are now bishops,
And bastards’ bairns are ordained archdeacons,

³⁰1 Corinthians vii 20.

³¹A primer is a collection of prayers, psalms and hymns in Latin and English. The *Placebo* and *Dirige* are antiphons taken from Psalms cxiv 9 (KJV cxvi 9) and v 9 (KJV v 8) used in the office for the dead. The seven penitential psalms are Nos. 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142 (KJV 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143), all appointed to be sung on Ash Wednesday.

³²1 Thessalonians v 15. The closest saying in *Leviticus* (xix 18) is “Seek not revenge, nor be mindful of the injury of thy citizens.”

³³Psalm xv 5 (KJV Psalm xvi 5); “Clemency” is unidentified.

And knighthoods are sold to soap-sellers' sons,
While lords' sons labor and must pawn their lands
To fight our foes and defend the realm,
Protecting and caring for the commons and the King.
And monks and nuns, who should maintain the needy,
Have acquired land from knights and ennobled their kin,
While the patrons of parishes, even popes, despise
True blood and install sons of Simony instead;
Holy living and charity have long since been lost
And will not be found till the world is reformed.
So I beg you, forbear to upbraid me, Reason,
For my conscience knows the course that Christ would have me
take."

But Conscience said, "By Christ, I can't accept that,
For begging in cities is no seemly existence
Unless it's approved by some prelate or prior."

"That is so," I said, "and now I do see
That I've wasted time in trivial tasks."
And I went at once to worship in church,
Beating my breast and bending my knees,
Sighing for my sins and saying the *Our Father*.

Step XV

In which, still puzzling over Do-well, I see in my fifth dream the disembodied Soul, who explains his attributes and warns me again not to seek to know everything. He explains the qualities of Charity, which can only be attained with the help of Piers the Plowman. In our present time of disorder we should leave it to God to provide for our needs, and clergy should return to the righteous life of the early Church. The titular bishops of the Holy Land should go there to preach to the misguided Mohammedans and Jews.

- I went on wondering for a long, long while
What Do-well was and what he might do.
My wits came and went as I worried at the question,
Till folk reviled me with few exceptions
5 And treated me as a tramp who would not kowtow
To anyone, let alone lords and ladies
Or people in pelts with pendants of silver,
And refused to say to officials and such-like,
“God save you, good sirs,” with a bow and a scrape.
10 Folk said I was a fool, and a fool I stayed
Until Reason rescued me and rocked me to sleep
And I saw as by sorcery the strangest of sights:
A being with no tongue or teeth who told
What I was, where I went and where I came from,
15 And I conjured him by Christ to declare if he were human.
“I’m a creature of Christ and a Christian,” he said,
“Kindred to Christ and well-known in his court.
Neither Peter the Porter nor Paul with his sword¹
Will lock me out whatever the hour,
20 Be it mid-day or midnight, for my voice is remembered

¹Saint Peter, who keeps the keys of heaven, and Saint Paul, martyred with the sword.

And the creatures at court all welcome me kindly.”

“What are you called in that court of Christians?”

“My simple appellation when I animate is *Soul*;
Self-will when I stand for the wishes and will;

25 When I think with the mind my title is *Thought*;

I am *Memory* when I moan and lament to God;

When I put into practice the teachings of Truth
And arrive at judgments and rulings I am *Reason*;

30 I am *Sensibility* when perceiving with my senses,
The source of understanding and skills and crafts;

When I choose or choose not to challenge or buy,

I am called *Conscience*, God’s notary and clerk;

When I love loyally both our Lord and all others,
My likeness is Love, or in Latin *Amor*;

35 When I flee the flesh and am free of the body

I am silent and speechless, and known as *Spirit*.

Isidore and Augustine set out these aspects,

And now that you know them, you may name me as you will.”²

“You’re as blessed with names as a bishop,” I bantered,

40 “For they’re entitled to a ton-weight of titles:

Metropolitan as well as *Pontifex* and *Prelate*,

Episcopus, *Pastor* and plenty besides.”

“That is so,” he said, “and from what you say

You are anxious to know why they’re known by those names

45 And to learn if you may what mine all mean.”

“Yes, sir. If it’s not too presumptuous,” I said,

“I would certainly like a solid understanding

Of all skills and sciences and crafts under the sun.”

“You’re a paragon of pride,” he said, “and imperfect.

50 Such longing for enlightenment caused Lucifer’s fall:

*I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most
High.*³

It is quite unconscionable and contrary to Nature

²The lines listing the attributes in Latin (*Anima, Animus, Mens, Memoria, Racio, Sensus, Consciencia, Amor, Spiritus*) are omitted. They are taken from Saint Isidore of Seville’s *Ety-mologies* Book xi Chapter 1.

³Isaiah xiv 14.

That anyone should understand everything save Christ.
Even Solomon is scathing of presuming too far:

*As it is not good for a man to eat much honey, so he that is a
searcher of majesty shall be overwhelmed by glory.*⁴

- A surfeit of honey sits heavy on the stomach,
55 And the more a man amasses knowledge,
The more problems it poses unless he applies it.
'Blessed is the man,' as Saint Bernard remarked,
'Who bases his works as well as his words
On construing Scripture,' for desire for knowledge
60 Expelled from Paradise Adam and Eve,
And *the immortality of all was ended*.⁵
Just as honey sits heavy and is hard to digest,
The desire to establish the secrets of God
And his primeval power impairs his grace,
65 For such a desire is a symbol of pride
And flouts the counsel of Christ and the clergy:
*Know no more than is meet to know.*⁶

"Friars and scholarly speakers whose sermons
Attempt to reflect on the Trinity flounder,
Often leading the unlettered to question their beliefs.

- 70 The learned should better abandon such lectures,
And speak of the Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins,
Of the conduct they cause which can carry men to hell,
And the folly of folk, including some friars,
In indulging their senses in decorative dress
75 And elaborate houses, and delighting in learning
Out of pride, not charity—it's plain to people,
For look at you creeping and crawling to lords
And flattering and fawning on those flush with money:
*Let them be all confounded that adore graven things, and
Why do you love vanity, and seek after lying?*⁷
You scholars, consult the commentaries on Scripture;
80 If I lie, may I burn for lack of learning!

"And it seems you accept any source of alms,

⁴Proverbs xxv 27. A line is then omitted to avoid repetition.

⁵Saint Bernard, *Epistle cci* Volume 1.

⁶Cf. Saint Augustine, *De Baptismo, contra Donatistas* Book 2 Chapter 5.

⁷Psalms xcvi 7 and iv 3 (KJV Psalms xcvi 7 and iv 2).

- Money-lenders, whores or avaricious merchants,
 And you bow to magnates who may lend you money,
 Not living by the laws of your Rule and religion:
- 85 *'Show no respect for persons,'* Jesus said.⁸
 I could lecture at length on this lesson but shall talk
 For Truth's sake purely about parish priests:
 Listen who will to a lesson from learning.
- “Just as holiness and honesty emanate from churchmen
- 90 Who lead pure lives and teach God's law,
 All evils spread out from the Holy Church
 When priests and preachers and teachers are impure.
 A simple example can be seen in the summer,
 When some branches of trees are barren and bare
- 95 And a sickness has struck at and sapped the root.
 So the priests and parsons and preachers of the Church
 Are the root of the faith by which folk should be ruled.
 But it stands to reason, when the root is rotten,
 That no fruit will flourish and no leaf be fair.
- 100 “So you clerics should fling off your fondness for furs
 And dispense Christ's goods to the poor, as is proper!
 Be true of your tongue and your genitals too.
 Don't listen to lust or allow your tithes
 To be falsely accounted or fraudulently farmed.
- 105 For folk cannot fail to follow your teaching
 And resolve to do better if they see your example
 And you put into practice what you now only preach.
 Such hypocrisy is compared in Latin proverbs
 To a snow-covered dunghill concealing snakes
- 110 Or a wall that is whitewashed but weak within,
 For priests and prelates and preachers are often
 Whitewashed with words and clothes that look well
 While within they are wolves in their words and their works.
- “John Chrysostom says much the same about clergy:
- 115 *If the priesthood is pure, the whole Church prospers,
 But corruption rots and wrecks people's faith.
 If the priesthood sins, the whole people will sin.
 When a tree starts to rot, it is rotten at the root,*

⁸Cf. James ii 1.

- So the priesthood is wrong if the people act wrongly.*⁹
- 120 If folk only followed this friendly advice
 And realized who wrote it, then rapidly, I reckon,
 Scores of priests would swap their swords
 And bangles for beads and Bibles and missals.
- “Friars Geoffrey and John have jeweled belts
 125 And silver-gilt swords and studded daggers,
 But refuse to till with the tools of their trade
 Or to say the psalms at all sincerely
 Unless they receive substantial sums:
 What fortunes they steal from foolish folk!
- 130 “A wise God wants no honest man to have
 What is wickedly won in such underhand ways,
 But priests and preachers still graft for profit;
 Executors, sub-deans, summoners and their molls
 Still gracelessly spend what is gained by guile
- 135 On joking japesters, harlots and whores,
 While God’s own people perish as paupers.
 But priests and clerics who pile up cash
 Lose it or leave it to light-fingered crooks
 Or die intestate and attract the attention
- 140 Of the bishop and his men who make merry with the money:
 ‘The man was a miser too mean to give a penny
 To friend or foe, confound him,’ they say.
 ‘His household was always empty-handed and cold,
 So we’ll laugh as we spend what he struggled to save.’
- 145 The lordly and lowly reluctant to spend
 All lose their goods once they give up the ghost,
 While the good are regretted and greatly lamented,
 And are missed and remembered for their generous meals
 In prayers and penances and charitable payments.”
- 150 “What is charity?” I asked. “It’s child’s play,” he answered:
*“Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the
 kingdom of heaven.”*¹⁰
 It’s the will to give freely without foolhardy folly.”

⁹The Latin quotation is taken from a set of *Homilies* by an unidentified author known as “Pseudo-Chrysostom.” Its opening line is omitted to avoid repetition.

¹⁰Matthew xviii 3.

- “Where can I find such a friend who gives freely?
 For as long I’ve lived in this land as Long Will,¹¹
 Nowhere I’ve known true charity meet needs.
- 155 People are compassionate to beggars and the poor
 And make loans if they’re likely to recover the lot,
 But I swear I’ve seen no charity of the sort
 That is pleasing to our Savior and was praised by Saint Paul:
*Charity is not puffed up; is not ambitious, seeketh not her own.*¹²
 For everyone I see, so help me, wants to have
- 160 Whatever is his and often desires
 What he scarcely requires but will steal if he can.
 Clerics may proclaim that Christ is universal,
 But I see him solely in the mirror as myself:
*We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to
 face.*¹³
- From the tales of Charity that are told I think
- 165 That his territory is neither tournaments nor trade.”
- “No, Charity doesn’t bargain or beat his breast,
 Is not covetous, is as proud of a penny as a pound,
 Is as glad of a gray as a gaudy coat,
 Of a woolen smock as of silks and scarlet,
- 170 Rejoices at joy and is generous to the wicked,
 And relieves and loves all those made by the Lord.
 He curses no creature and cannot bear wrath,
 Doesn’t laugh men to scorn or like to tell lies,
 He accepts what men say as the simple truth
- 175 And suffers all slights in silent forbearance
 For his only hope is for heavenly bliss.”
- “Has he rent from property or rich companions?”
 “He reckons nothing to rents and riches,
 For he’s never been failed by a friend when in need,
- 180 *Thy will be done*, which well meets his wants,¹⁴
 And he eats just a helping of *Hope in God*.¹⁵

¹¹Long Will suggests both perseverance and a physical description. “Long” combined with “land” is probably a pun on “Langland,” although “land” may be a misreading of “London.”

¹²1 Corinthians xiii 4–5.

¹³1 Corinthians xiii 12.

¹⁴Matthew vi 10 and the Lord’s Prayer.

¹⁵Psalms xli 6 (KJV Psalm xlii 5).

- He paints the Lord's Prayer with *Hail Mary* pigments,
 And his other pastime is to plead for pardons
 By making a pilgrimage to prisons and the poor,
 185 Though he brings not bread but a better food,
 The love and relief that our Lord enjoined.
 And when he is weary from doing such work,
 He labors in a laundry for as long as it takes
 And assiduously seeks in his sometime youth
 190 For pride and its properties and parcels them up
 And beats and bleaches them clean in his breast
 With *I have labored in my groanings* till the grime is gone,¹⁶
 Then he washes them with water that is warm from his eyes
 And sobs sometimes as he sings another psalm:
 *A contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*¹⁷
- 195 "By Christ," I cried, "I wish we were acquainted!"
 "That's impossible except through Piers the Plowman."
 "But the clergy," I said, "must surely have seen him."
 "The clergy only witness men's works and their words,
 But Piers," he replied, "penetrates deeper
 200 Into why people suffer and their secret wishes:
 *Jesus seeing their thoughts, said: Why do you think evil in your
 hearts?*¹⁸
- For proud-hearted people may talk genteelly
 And defer to figures of authority and finance,
 But they treat the poor with total contempt
 And counter their critics with the claws of a lion.
 205 And some beggars with beads who appear to be praying
 May look to be lambs who lead holy lives
 But they put on their penury to pick up their food,
 Not pining for purity or seeking for penance.
 So you will not spot Charity by what he wears,
 210 By his words or deeds or what his heart wills,
 Which no one can know, not even clerics,
 Only Piers the Plowman, *Peter, that is, Christ.*¹⁹

¹⁶Psalm vi 7 (KJV Psalm vi 6).

¹⁷Psalm I (=50) 19 (KJV Psalm li 17).

¹⁸Matthew ix 4, cf. Luke xi 17.

¹⁹Piers is a diminutive of Peter, Peter is the Rock, and the Rock is Christ: see Matthew xvi 18 and 1 Corinthians x 4.

- “He is not among idlers or ambling hermits
 Or anchorites holding out boxes for alms:
 215 Such deceivers and their sponsors deserve not a bean.
 Charity is God’s champion, a well-mannered child;
 His speech will sparkle when he sits at table,
 The love in his heart lending it lightness;
 He’s the comforting company that Christ desired:
 *Be not as the hypocrites, sad.*²⁰
- 220 I have seen him in silks as well as in smocks,
 In gray cloth and glad rags and gilded armor,
 Which he’ll give away gladly to regale the needy.
 “Kings Edward the Confessor and Edmund are famed
 And respected as saints for the charity they showed.
 225 I’ve seen Charity sing, recite lessons and psalms,
 I have seen him both ride and run about in rags,
 But nowhere and never have I known him to beg.
 He strolls abroad rather in robes that are rich,
 With short hair, skull cap and a shaven crown.
 230 He was formerly found in a friar’s habit,
 Far back in history in the age of Saint Francis,
 But since then he’s seldom been seen in such sects.
 Yet he honors the wealthy and welcomes their alms
 If the lives that they lead are honest and loyal:
 *Blessed is the rich man that is found without blemish.*²¹
- 235 “He comes quite often to the court of the King,
 Except when Covetousness sits in council,
 But is seldom seen in the society of jesters
 Who backbite, brawl and bear false witness.
 He is rarely encountered in the clerical courts,
 240 Where hearings are endless without heavy back-handers
 And marriages are made and unmade for money,
 The doctors of law indecently undoing
 What Conscience and Christ have concluded and sealed.
 “His abode was once with archbishops and bishops,
 245 And prelates of the Church, and his previous practice
 Was to parcel their patrimony out to the poor;

²⁰Matthew vi 16.²¹Ecclesiasticus xxxi 8. (Ecclesiasticus is regarded as Apocryphal in KJV.)

- Now Avarice has the keys and keeps it for his kin,
 His executors and servants, and some for their children.
 I don't say who's responsible, but O Lord, save us
 250 And give us the grace to make Charity our guide!
 "If you meet him, you'll note his remarkable manners,
 For he does not accuse or curse or acclaim
 Or boast or rebuke or flatter or frown,
 Or crave or covet or cry out for more:
*In peace in the self same I will sleep.*²²
- 255 To live he relies on the love of Christ's Passion,
 Neither begging nor borrowing nor embracing loans,
 Nor harming nor speaking ill of others.
 Christians should copy this gentle kindness,
 And hold in their hearts when they're harried by troubles
 260 That Christ suffered more than the misery they meet,
 And our Father prefers that we follow his example
 And avoid taking vengeance for falsehood on foes.
 We are well aware that unless God had willed it,
 Neither Judas nor the Jews would have crucified Jesus,
 265 Nor imprisoned and martyred Saints Peter and Paul.
 But he suffered to show us we should suffer as well,
 And to people in pain said, *The patient shall conquer.*
 "This is proved," said Soul, "by plenty of passages
 In the *Lives of the Saints*, who certainly suffered
 270 Both penance and poverty and searing pain,
 In hunger and heat, and awful affliction.
 Saints Antony and Giles and other holy hermits
 Dwelt with wild beasts in the dangerous desert,
 And monks and mendicants, men by themselves,
 275 Kept to their caves and caverns in silence.
 Neither Antony nor Giles nor the other hermits
 Would take their livelihood from leopards or lions
 But were fed, say the books, by the birds up above,
 Save that Giles met a hind, and unhurriedly and gently
 280 Sustained himself by supping her milk,
 Though solely from time to time, the book tells,
 Not taking too much from the mild-mannered mother.²³

²²Psalm iv 9 (KJV Psalm iv 8).

²³Saint Giles, possibly French or Greek, was a popular patron saint because of his association with forests and deer-hunting, important features of English life.

- “Saint Antony was brought his bread by a bird
 Every day about noon, and anon it was enough,
 285 By God’s grace, for a guest whom Antony greeted.²⁴
 Saint Paul, the first hermit, was so happily hidden
 By leaves and moss that he remained unremarked,
 Sustained by the birds season after season,
 Till he founded the fellowship of Austin Friars.²⁵
 290 Saint Paul made baskets when he paused in his preaching,²⁶
 And earned with his hands what his stomach asked;
 Peter fished for his food with his fellow Andrew,
 And they sold some, consumed some and so had enough;
 Mary Magdalene survived on divine devotion
 295 And endured eating roots and drinking the dew.²⁷
 It would take me a week to tell you of the total
 Of the hermits who lived by the love of our Lord,
 And no lion or leopard that roamed the land,
 No bear or boar or other wild beast,
 300 Failed to fall to its feet and to fawn upon them.
 And could they have spoken, by Christ, I declare
 They’d have fed those saints faster than the fowls,
 For they showed all the courtesy such creatures can
 And everywhere humbly licked the saints’ hands.
 305 “But God sent bread by the birds, not the beasts,
 To mean that the meek should feed the mild,
 And that law-abiding folk should feed the religious,
 And the righteous relieve those who lead holy lives.
 If they found that the friars refused their alms
 310 And begged them to take money back where it was borrowed,
 Then lords and ladies would be loath to offend
 By taking from their tenants more than is true.
 For we are God’s fowls and must wait to be fed
 On the vital food that the birds provide.
 315 If you have thick broth and bread and penny ale,

²⁴The third- to fourth-century Saint Antony was regarded as one of the founders of monasticism, having spent most of his long life in the Egyptian desert.

²⁵Not the Apostle Paul but the fourth-century Paul of Thebes, who was taken as their model by the Augustinian Friars.

²⁶The Apostle Paul was generally assumed to be a tent-maker. Paul of Thebes allegedly made baskets.

²⁷She supposedly settled in Provence toward the end of her life.

And you make a meal of them, you monks and friars,
 You already have enough, as we read in your Rule:
*Will the wild ass bray when he hath grass? Or will the ox low when
 he standeth before a full manger? and
 The nature of brute beasts condemneth thee, for with this common
 food they are content; and thine iniquity proceeds from plenty.*²⁸

If folk were schooled in this story, they would spend
 Some five or six days in finding advice

320 Before making over monies to monks and canons.
 You lords and ladies, you lack good counsel
 When disposing of property and depriving your heirs
 For the sake of prayers said by people who have plenty
 And are paid to pray for the souls of other patrons.

325 “Who still observes this salutary prophecy:
*He hath distributed, he hath given to the poor?*²⁹
 If anyone performs it, then it is these poor friars!
 They beg for funds which they devote to their buildings,
 To indulging themselves and spoiling their servants,
 Thus taking for the have-nots from those who have!

330 “You clerics and knights and commoners with cash
 Behave quite often as if you had a forest
 That was full of trees and you were trying to think
 Where to put and to plant yet more among them.
 For the rich give robes to those who are rich,
 335 Helping those who help them, funding those in no need,
 Like filling a barrel from a fast-flowing flood
 And then taking and tipping the water in the Thames,
 Cossetting the fortunate with food and clothes.³⁰

You clergy with cash should care more for beggars
 340 Than wealthy burghers, as the books will warn you:
*It is sacrilege to pocket the property of paupers;
 A dole given sinners is a sacrifice to demons;
 A poor monk dispenses less than he is proffered
 But he steals if he stores up more than essential*

345 *For a monk has no needs if he meets those of nature.*³¹

²⁸Job vi 5, followed by an unknown commentary.

²⁹Psalms cxi 9 (KJV Psalm cxii 9).

³⁰A line almost identical to line 334 is omitted here.

³¹From the writings of Peter Cantor.

Christians and Charity should come to an accord,
For Charity is certain to discharge the soul,
Freeing prisoners from Purgatory by the power of his prayers.
But the clergy are culpable and at fault, it is clear,
350 For the fact that folk are not firm in their faith.
A florin that is forged may look like a florin,
With the proper stamp, but the silver is soft.
Thus it fares with some folk who say what is fair
And are tonsured and have taken true holy orders,
355 But their metal, their soul, is melded with sin:
Both learned and lay folk are larded with sin,
And none loves his neighbor, none loves our Lord.

“Through wickedness and war, in weather that is strange,
Weather-wise sailors and widely read scholars
360 Lose faith in the firmament and findings of logic.
Folk who could fairly foretell the future
Now see their science and astronomy adrift,
While shipmen and shepherds, on ship and on shore,
Who once knew the future well from the welkin,
365 Warning men often of weather and winds,
And tillers of tilth who could tell their masters
By the seed that they sowed what they might sell,
What live by, what lend, so true was the land,
Now those shepherds and sailors and tillers can’t see
370 What course is correct, what quarter to steer,
While astronomers argue, unable to say
What causes the chaos in their calculations.
The grounding of grammar is greeted with stares
And no schoolchild I see can construct a letter
375 Or a satisfactory stanza of verse.
Not one per cent can make sense of a sentence
Or the letters of a language not Latin or English.
I’m totally certain that schools of all sorts
Are now guided by greed, by Guile and his friend
380 Called Flattery, his follower and fellow tutor,
While doctors and masters in different disciplines,
Who should understand all sorts of subjects,
Would fail a test, if truth were told,
In philosophical and physical science.
385 And it troubles me that priests have taken like those tutors

To skipping bits of services they ought to say.
 Yet even though they flounder, our faith will suffice;
 As the Corpus Christi song consolingly says,
Faith alone suffices to save simple folk.³²

- 390 “It’s a shame that scholars don’t live as they lecture,
 For folk would then fear to offend against God,
 And Saracens and Scribes and Jews might be saved,
 For Saracens believe much the same as ourselves,
 Loving and lauding the Lord God Almighty,
 395 So that we and they both worship the One,
 Christians, non–Christians acclaiming one God.

- “But Mahomet was a Christian whose creed was in error,
 Who deceived and misled the Saracens of Syria.
 Mahomet had been hoping to be hailed as Pope,
 400 And resorted to Syria when he failed, where subtly
 He tamed a dove and trained her to take
 Corn from his ear, and whenever he came
 To a place where he preached among the people,
 The dove would descend and stand on his shoulder
 405 In the way that he wanted, having bewitched her.
 Then folk would fall before him for he swore
 That the dove was a herald from heaven on high
 Bringing messages from God to be given to men.
 Through this telling trick with his tame white dove
 410 Mahomet thus introduced heresy in folk,
 And both learned and lowly now live by his laws.

- “Since our Savior suffered the Saracens to be duped
 By a Christian cleric whose soul is now cursed,
 For fear of death I dare not indict
 415 The dove of Covetousness kept by clergy
 In England which tells no more truth than Mahomet.
 Anchorites and hermits, and hooded monks and friars
 Are the peers of the apostles when their lives are pure,
 But the faithful Father would prefer his priests
 420 To take no alms from truthless tyrants,
 And to follow the bidding of Benedict and Bernard,

³²The thirteenth-century hymn *Pange, lingua, gloriosi corporis mysterium* (Sing out, my tongue, of the mystery of the glorious body) by Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Antony and Dominic and Francis, who first³³
 Taught them that their lodgings and lives should be lowly,
 And their alms-givers good, so that grace could grow
 425 And send out shoots and feed the sick,
 And save them body and soul through the psalms.
 If their prayers and penance were proper and sincere,
 They would usher in peace between people in dispute:
*Ask, and it shall be given you.*³⁴

“Housewives will say that salt preserves:
*You are the salt of the earth.*³⁵
 430 And the heads of the Church—if they were holy—
 Would be called the salt of souls by Christ.
*But if the salt lose its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?*³⁶
 When salt is deficient, then fresh meat and fish,
 Whether baked or boiled, both lack taste.
 So it is with the soul that is set no example
 435 By priests, who ought to be pointing out the path
 Like guides who go with a flag in front
 And are models for the many who are marching behind.
 If eleven disciples, as it seems, could persuade
 The entire population to turn to the Truth,
 440 It cannot be so hard when we have such hordes
 Of priests and preachers, and the Pope above them,
 Who should be the salt that saves men’s souls.

“The whole of England and Wales was heathen
 Till Saint Gregory dispatched his people to preach.
 445 Augustine at Canterbury christened the king,³⁷
 And through miracles, we find, converted the folk
 To Christ and Christendom, honoring the cross.
 He baptized them by fulling and taught them the Truth,
 Revealing its meaning as much and more
 450 Through what he did as through words of wisdom,
 Defining that fulling as cleansing through faith.

³³See Step V Note 3.

³⁴Matthew vii 7.

³⁵Matthew v 13.

³⁶Matthew v 13.

³⁷This Augustine is the missionary sent to England in AD 597, not Augustine of Hippo, who is cited elsewhere in the poem.

- “Cloth from the loom is uncomfortable and coarse
 Till it’s tempered by fulling and trodden under foot,
 Washed with water, carded and combed,
 455 Teased out with teasels and stretched by tailors.
 So a child is a heathen without hope of heaven
 Or care for the soul until christened in Christ
 And further confirmed in the faith by a bishop.
 The meaning of heathen is ‘hailing from a heath,’
 460 From a wilderness where the wild beasts wander,
 Rude and unreasoning, without bridle or rein.
- “You remember the man and the feast in Matthew,
 When the guests were fed neither venison nor pheasant
 But faithful fowls that followed when he whistled:
 *My beeves and fatlings are killed, and all things are ready?*³⁸
 465 And he fed the folk that he loved with veal,
 Which illustrates innocence and adherence to the law.
 As the cow feeds a calf on the milk of its kind,
 So love and good faith will feed the faithful,
 And as calves long for milk, so maidens and men
 470 Who are mild in manner seek mercy and Truth.
 The fowls who follow and are fed by hand
 Are like folk reluctant to love unless
 They are set an example, the same as those fowls
 That flocked to a whistle to find their food.
 475 So rude men who lack much learning and reason
 Can learn none the less to love and believe
 From how priests behave and how they speak,
 Hoping for heaven by heeding their call,
 Like fowls that flock to a whistle for food.
 480 The Almighty is the man who makes that feast,
 Who gives men bliss through his goodness and grace.
 Through storms and wonders he whistles to warn us
 Of what he wishes, and to show his good will
 And to tell us he’ll feed us and feast us henceforth.
- 485 “The folk who absent themselves from the feast,
 The heads of the Church who have all they hope for
 From laborers’ tithes that they take without toil,
 Will resent what I say, but I summon in support

³⁸Matthew xxii 4.

Matthew and Mark and *Remember David:*

*Behold we have heard of it in Ephratah.*³⁹

490 What pope or prelate now applies Christ's injunction:

*Go ye into the whole world, and preach the gospel?*⁴⁰

Alas that belief in Mahomet still lingers!

And that numerous prelates whom the Pope has appointed

To Nazareth, Nineveh, Nephthali, Damascus,

Don't go there and preach the Passion to people

495 Till their last hour comes, as Christ decreed,

If they pine for prestige as pastor and preacher:

*The good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep.*⁴¹

For as Christ then said, Saracens and others,

Baptized, unbaptized, could be saved by their teaching:

*Go you also into my vineyard.*⁴²

And since these Saracens, Scribes and Jews

500 Have a little of our belief, it looks to me simple

To teach them the Trinity and turn them to the Truth:

*Seek, and you shall find.*⁴³

“For these pagans all pray and perfectly believe

In God and ask him to grant them his grace,

Though hoping to hear his message through Mahomet.

505 Such folk have faith though the medium is false—

A great pity for the people who live there and are pure,

And a threat to the Pope and the prelates he appoints

To Bethlehem or Babylon as titular bishops.

“When the High King of heaven sent his son to earth,

510 He converted folk by performing wonders,

Showing by example that the way to be saved

Lay in gaining his grace and the mercy granted

Through penance and pain and perfect belief.

He was born of a maid and was made a man,

515 A bishop baptizing and blessing with his blood

Those who sought sincerely to accept the faith.

Many saints have since then suffered and died,

³⁹Psalm cxxxi 6 (KJV Psalm cxxxii 6).

⁴⁰Mark xvi 15.

⁴¹John x 11. Absentee bishops were appointed to these dioceses on the principle that the cities would one day be recovered for Christianity.

⁴²Matthew xx 4.

⁴³Matthew vii 7.

- Proclaiming and encouraging the faith in countries
 As scattered as India, Alexandria and Spain,
 520 Armenia and more, and many have been martyred.
 Saint Thomas à Becket was brutally butchered
 In a Christian country protecting the cause
 Of Christ and the law of all Christian lands.
 His heroism honors the Church in the highest,
 525 He's the best and the brightest model for bishops,
 Superior to the prelates appointed to Syria,
 Who hop about England blessing odd altars,
 Unofficially hearing confessions from folk:
*If thou go into thy friend's corn, thou mayest not reap with a
 sickle.*⁴⁴
- Many more were martyred among the Romans
 530 Before the cross of Christ was revered.⁴⁵
- "It is wretched to read how the righteous once lived,
 Scourging their flesh and forsaking their desires,
 Going clothed in rags far from kith and kin,
 With barely a bed and no book but their conscience,
 535 No wealth but the cross of Christ for comfort:
*God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord.*⁴⁶
 The poor and the rich then had plenty and peace,
 But currently we read that the cross on coins
 Is accorded more respect than the cross of Christ,
 Which subjugated death and deadly sin,
 540 And the reason why there is war and woe
 Is the greed for the cross engraved on gold crowns:
 Among both clergy and men with money
 The cross that is honored is only on coins.
 But the churchmen who crave and covet that cross
 545 Will soon be destroyed the same as the Templars.⁴⁷
 Have the erudite not heard how the Templars honored
 Not Truth but their treasure? I dare not give details,
 But the judgment was right and correctly reasoned.
 Before long you churchmen will likewise lose

⁴⁴Deuteronomy xxiii 25.⁴⁵This and the previous paragraph are placed later in Skeat, after the paragraph on Constantine.⁴⁶Galatians vi 14.⁴⁷The Order of the Knights Templar was suppressed in 1312.

- 550 Your pomp and place for your pride and greed:
*He hath put down the mighty from their seat.*⁴⁸
 If common conscience, you bishops, combines
 With native wit and knighthood, you soon will need
 To surrender your lordship of lands and live
 By the law like Levites, as the Lord proclaimed:
*From tithes and first-fruits.*⁴⁹
- 555 “When Constantine kindly accorded to the Church
 Lands and lordships and laborers and rents,
 An angel was heard on high in Rome
 Regretting that the gift was as good as venom
 And would poison the popes empowered by Saint Peter.
- 560 The right thing for prelates who should pray for peace
 Is for lords to relieve them of the lands they possess
 And to let them live on their tithes alone.
 For if property is poison and makes them impure,
 It would benefit the Church to unburden their backs
- 565 And to purge them of the poison and its lasting peril.
 If the priesthood were perfect, the people who despise
 And infringe Christ’s law would then fully reform.
- “Every bishop who bears a cross is obliged
 To be visible in person as he visits his flock,
- 570 And to teach them belief in the Trinity and Truth,
 To feed the starving and sustain them with the spirit.
 Isaiah and Hosea both speak of this, saying
 That a bishop should have and should offer to the hungry
 Both spiritual food and physical food:
*In my house there is no bread, nor clothing: make me not ruler of
 the people,*⁵⁰
- 575 And Hosea says of the sick and feeble:
*Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in
 my house.*⁵¹
- We Christian creatures who believe in the cross,
 Heaven forfend that our faith should then falter
 If the clergy were to keep us and our children constant!

⁴⁸Luke i 52.⁴⁹Deuteronomy xii 6.⁵⁰Isaiah iii 7.⁵¹Not Osee (KJV Hosea) but Malachias (KJV Malachi) iii 10.⁵²John xi 43.

- “The Jews also live by the law of the Lord,
 580 Who set it in stone to stand for ever:
Love God and your neighbor is a good Jewish notion,
 Which Moses was to spread, preceding the Messiah;
 They still keep to that code, which they count as the best.
 Yet they cannot deny they acknowledged Christ
 585 As a perfect prophet who cured many people
 Of assorted diseases, and often they saw
 His miracles and feats such as feeding two fish
 And five loaves to no less than five thousand folk,
 Which surely showed that he was the Messiah.
 590 He lifted up Lazarus, lying in his grave,
 Entombed and stinking, by telling him simply:
*Lazarus, come forth.*⁵²
 He raised and paraded him right before their eyes,
 But the Jews cried sorcery, swearing it was so,
 And studied to destroy him, but destroyed themselves,
 595 For his patience impeded and vanquished their power:
The patient shall conquer.

 “Daniel had already predicted their doom:
*When the holy of holies comes, ye shall cease to be anointed.*⁵³
 And still they consider him a *pseudo-prophet*,
 And scorn his teaching, saying it’s deceit,
 Still longing for a leader to deliver and release them,
 600 A Messiah or maybe Moses once more.
 Yet the Pharisees and Scribes, and Saracens besides,
 And the Greeks as well, worship one God,
 And since the Saracens and Jews can all say
 The very first clause of our profession of faith—
*I believe in God, the Father Almighty—*⁵⁴
 605 The prelates of Christian provinces should pair
 That clause with the second: *And in Jesus Christ his only Son*,
 And teach them little by little till they take
 To the third line also, *And in the Holy Ghost*,
 And further on to the *Forgiveness of sins*,
 610 And finally the *Resurrection of the body and the life everlasting*.
 Amen.”

⁵³Not a quotation, but referring to Daniel ix 24.

⁵⁴The first line of the Apostles’ Creed.

Step XVI

In which Soul speaks of Charity as a tree grown for Piers the Plowman, at the sound of whose name I sink into another dream within a dream. I see Piers himself explaining the meaning of the tree. The devil, waiting for the fruit to fall, can be overcome by free will, with the aid of Christ, whose Passion is described. Piers vanishes, my inner dream ends, and I see Faith, of the house of Abraham, who explains the Trinity. Although he has already welcomed God, he and the patriarchs clutched to his bosom are damned unless he finds Christ as well.

“On behalf of Haukin the Active Man
I’m indebted,” I said, “for so solid a survey,
Though what Charity means remains a muddle.”

5 “Charity is a tree,” Soul told me, “whose title
Is Humble Patience and Poor Simple Heart.
Its core is clemency, its flowers a fair visage,
And its root is mercy and mildness of manner.
Its leaves are loyalty and the law of the Church,
And its fruit can grow thanks to good men and God.”

10 “I would travel,” I told him, “two thousand miles
And forsake other food to feed on its fruit.
But can anyone hazard a guess where it grows?”

15 “It grows in a garden that God himself made,
For its roots lie right in the midst of man.
The heart is its bed, its home and its arbor,
And *Free Will* the gardener who furrows and forks
And plants and weeds it for Piers the Plowman.”

20 “Piers the Plowman,” I repeated, so ecstatic
That his name was referred to that I fell into a faint
And lay for long in a reverie till at last

It seemed as if Piers himself were signing
 To the tree and telling me to examine it exactly,
 And soon I perceived that three props sustained it.

“Piers,” I said, “what’s the purpose of the props?”

- 25 “To prevent it falling in the fury of the wind,
 Whose strength would strip it of flowers in the spring:
*When he shall fall, he shall not be bruised, for the Lord putteth his
 hand under him.*¹

The world is a wind that whips at the faithful,
 Allowing Covetousness to lick at the leaves
 And forage for the fruit with his promises of fortune,
 30 So the prop I first placed is the *Power of God*.

“The flesh blows a foul wind fiercely too
 When the tree is young, with tempting treats
 Of lechery, lust and lascivious sights,
 And sensuous words that are snakes of sin
 35 Which bite off the blossoms and leave the leaves bare.
 That is why I have wedged it with the *Wisdom of God*,
 Thus protecting the tree till the fruit have taken
 Through prayers and penance,” said Piers, “and reflection
 On the Passion and power of our princely Jesus.

- 40 “For Satan still seeks to destroy the fruit
 With his tricks and enticements, by tugging at the root
 And telling his cut-throats to attack the crop.
 They toss up brickbats and back-bite and brawl,
 And lean up ladders with rungs made of lies,
 45 And sometimes they steal the flowers in my sight.
 But *Free Will* I gave to foil and defeat him,
 The third prop I placed to protect the tree:

*But he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be for-
 given him, and*

*To sin through free will is not to strive against sin.*²

For when the devil makes one with the world
 And the flesh against me to fetch in the fruit,

- 50 *Free Will* can fight and vanquish the devil,

¹Psalm xxxvi 24 (KJV Psalm xxxvii 24).

²Matthew xii 32 and Hebrews xii 4: “For you have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”

- By seizing and swinging the third prop I set
Through the gift of grace and the Holy Ghost.”
- “I’m sincerely grateful,” I said, “that you describe
The purpose and power of the props so well,
55 But dear Piers, there are plenty of puzzles still,
Such as where they grow, in what kind of wood,
For they look all alike, all equal in length,
And they seem to have sprung from a single root,
And to have the same size and a similar hue.”
- 60 “It is probable that is the truth,” said Piers.
“You have truly been told the name of the tree,
Which betokens the Trinity, and now I shall name
The ground where it grows, which is known as Goodness.”
- He eyed me so keenly that I could not in conscience
65 Question him further but requested him kindly
To describe the swags of succulent fruit.
“At the bottom,” he said, “if I sense it’s essential,
Is the moist and emollient fruit called marriage.
Then higher up hang the hard Cailloux pears³
70 Of widowed continence, and closest to the crown
Is angelic virginity, which rapidly ripens,
Is sweet without swelling and never is sour.”
- I asked Piers if he pleased to pull down an apple
And allow me to test it and try how it tasted.
75 He tossed up a stick, which set the fruit screaming,
He wagged at widowhood, making it weep,
And marriage set up such a mournful lament
When Piers approached that I felt only pity.
But as fast as they fell, the devil would find them
- 80 And gather them together, the great and the small,
Adam and Abraham, and Isaiah the prophet,
The saint John the Baptist, and Samuel and Sampson,
And bear them off boldly, with nobody to block him,
And add them to his horde in the *limbo of hell*,
- 85 Which is dark and dreadful, and its master is the devil.
Then Piers, enraged, picked up a prop
And hit out heedless of what might happen.
With the *Son of the Father*, strengthened by the *Spirit*,

³A place in Normandy.

- He seized from Satan the fruit he had stolen.
 90 In the guise of Gabriel the *Holy Ghost* greeted
 A meek little maiden called Mary, and told her
 That the son of Justice, Jesus, would enjoy
 The protection of her womb till *the time was attained*.
 Then Piers' tree would flower and its fruit would fall,
 95 And Jesus the Just by judgment of arms
 Would decide whether Satan or he would receive it.
 The maid gave the messenger her modest consent
 And humbly answered, "I am his handmaid
 And am willing to work his will without sin":
*Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to
 thy word.*⁴
- 100 He was forty weeks in the womb of that wench,
 Then a child who studied the several subjects
 Required in due course to combat the devil.
 And Piers was apprised of the time of that trial,
 And instructed him in skills that would save his life
 105 By healing himself if his enemy hurt him,
 And told him to try out those skills on the sick,
 Improving his practice to prepare for the fight.
 So he sought out sinners and sick folk alike
 And cured them both, and the crippled and blind,
 110 And converted to virtue fallen women:
*They that are in health need not a physician, but they that are ill.*⁵
 He relieved many lepers and likewise the dumb
 And women with the flux, without fanfare or fuss,
 And then lifted up Lazarus, who had lain in the grave,
 And admitted to the miracle of making him walk
 115 After *four days dead*; though before he performed it,
 Folk saw that *he wept* and was *sorrowful and sad*.⁶
 Then some folk styled him "Physician of Life"
 And hailed him as the Lord of heaven on high,
 But the Jews objected and issued judgments
 120 Condemning him for witchcraft and dealing with the devil:
*Thou hast a devil; who seeketh to kill thee?*⁷

⁴Luke i 38.⁵Matthew ix 12.⁶John xi 35 and Matthew xxvi 37.⁷John vii 20.

- “Then you and your children are churls who have chosen
 Satan as your savior,” Jesus said, “for you’ve seen
 I have saved both you and your sons besides,
 And restored your bodies, and the blind, even beasts,
 125 And fed you a feast with two fish and five loaves,
 Leaving several baskets of scraps to be scavenged.”
 He rebuked them and threatened to beat and lambaste them
 With a knout in the Temple, overturning and tearing
 At the merchants’ and money-changers’ mercenary stalls,
 130 Proclaiming to all so that everyone could hear,
 “I shall tear down this temple, and three days hence
 I shall build it anew, more beautiful and better
 In every aspect than ever it was,
 And just as wide, which is why I warn you
 135 To call this a place of purity and prayer:
 My house shall be called the house of prayer.”⁸
- But the Jews were inhabited by ill-will and envy,
 And they plotted and planned and prepared to kill him,
 Watching and waiting, day after day,
 Till one Friday before the Passover feast.
- 140 On the Thursday he’d said to his assembled disciples,
 Sitting at the supper which he had then served,
 “Someone among you will sell me for silver
 And be sorry he sold his Savior for wealth.”
 When Judas objected, Jesus told him
- 145 The suspect was himself, for “*Thou hast spoken.*”⁹
- Then the wicked man went away to the Jews
 And arranged how to recognize Jesus and arrest him
 By a sign that is still often seen to this day,
 Kissing and callously seeming to smile,
 150 Which is just how Judas identified Jesus.
 “*Hail Rabbi,*” he said, going right to his side¹⁰
 And kissing him, letting him be captured and caught.
- Then Jesus said to both Judas and the Jews,
 “I can see deception in your soft-spoken speech,

⁸Matthew xxi 13.⁹Matthew xxvi 25.¹⁰Matthew xxvi 49.

- 155 And guile in your gladness and gall in your laughter.
 You'll be seen the world over as a symbol of deceit,
 And your evil will rebound on your heads for ever:
*For it must needs be that scandals come: but nevertheless woe to
 that man by whom the scandal cometh!*¹¹
 Though I'm taken by treason as you plainly intend,
 Permit my apostles to depart in peace.”
- 160 And thus on a Thursday in the threatening dusk,
 Jesus was seized by Judas and the Jews,
 And the Friday following in Jerusalem he fought,
 Generously jousting to bring us joy.
 Then he carried the battle to Calvary's cross,
 165 Destroying the strength of death and the devil,
 Not dying though dying, turning night into day.
- I was roused from my reverie, rubbed at my eyes
 And peered about for Piers the Plowman.
 Eastwards and westwards I went and wandered
 170 From place to place in my quest for Piers,
 Seeking and searching like a madman possessed,
 Till I met with a man, one mid-Lent Sunday,
 As hoary as hawthorn, Abraham by name.
 I asked first of all what area he came from,
 175 Where was his home and where he was heading.
- “I am Faith,” said the fellow, “so I'm loath to lie.
 I'm a herald of arms from Abraham's house,
 And I'm looking high and low for a lad I once saw,
 A bold young brave whose blazon I know.”
- 180 “What's depicted on his arms?” I asked, “if you please?”
 “Three men in one body, each broadly built
 And alike in length and likewise in strength.
 What each does, they all do, but each acts alone.
 The first is the Maker, immense and mighty,
 185 The primal person, properly called *Father*.
 The second is his *Son*, who is steadfast and true,
 Original, infinite, caring for all.
 The *Holy Ghost* is equally primordial,

¹¹Matthew xviii 7.

- The light of all life on land and in water,
 190 The consoler of beings and the source of all bliss.
- “Three things belong to a lord who claims lordship:
 Might and a means to make known the might
 Of himself and his servant, and the suffering of both.
 Thus God without beginning thought it was good
 195 To send out his Son at one time as his servant
 And to occupy him here till his offspring were born,
 The children of Charity and their mother, the Church:
 Patriarchs and prophets and then the apostles,
 Christendom and Christians and the Church of Christ.
- 200 He so let us see that God is single
 But appears when proper in three distinct persons.
- “That truth is portrayed to mankind in the trio
 Of wedlock and widowhood, virginity as well,
 Betokening the Trinity yet tracked to one source.
 205 For Adam was father of us all, while Eve
 Was taken from him, and they had joint issue,
 Three separate beings yet a single substance,
 Each bringing joy to the other on earth,
 Man having sprung from marriage, which mirrors
 210 The Trinity in heaven and the holy Truth.
- “Marriage has the might to multiply on earth
 And truly betokens, if I dare to tell it,
 The Father of heaven who formed us first.
 And the Son, dare I say, resembles the widow:
 *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*¹²
 215 That is, the Creator became his creation
 To learn what that meant, and there must have been marriage
 For a man or a woman to be widowed and weep.
 A mother was needed to make God a man,
 And marriage without offspring is of meager merit,
 *Accursed is the man who has not left seed in Israel.*¹³
- 220 In a perfect marriage three persons are present:
 Man and his mate, and the children they make,

¹²Matthew xxvii 46 and Mark xv 34.

¹³Not biblical, but something similar is said to Joachim in the Apocryphal Book of James and (Schmidt 474) is cited in a lesson for Saint Anne’s Day in the Hereford Breviary, Anne and Joachim being the parents of Mary.

Conjoined before Jesus by the generative act.
And so with the Father and the Son and the Spirit,
Which grants Free Will by the grace of God:
*The Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son.*¹⁴

- 225 “And sitting in my porch one summer I saw him.
I got up,” said Abraham, “and greeted him gravely.
But I welcomed not one but three men warmly.
I first washed their feet, and afterwards fed them
On calves’ flesh and cakes, and they discovered my thoughts:
230 I shall tell you some time of the covenant between us.
Then he tested my love and attachment by telling me
To slaughter for him my son called Isaac.
He saw my affection and will favor me for it,
I am certain in my soul, and so is my son.
235 Then I circumcised my older son for his sake,
And myself and my servants who were male all shed
Blood that was blessed for the love of the Lord.
I believe that fully and my faith is firm,
For he swore to me and to my descendants
240 Land and lordship and life without end,
And he granted yet more to me and to mine:
Mercy for our errors as often as we ask:
*As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.*¹⁵

- “Then he sent me instructions to sacrifice to him
And to worship him with bread as well as with wine,
245 Calling me the founder of his faith, which defends
And saves believers from Satan’s deceit.
I have been his herald both here and in hell,
Comforting the careworn who wait for his coming.
And now I seek him,” he said, “for it seems
250 That John the Baptist has just baptized Jesus,
Telling patriarchs and prophets and people in darkness
He has seen the Savior who will save us all:
*Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of
the world.*”¹⁶

¹⁴The Apostles’ Creed.

¹⁵Luke i 55.

¹⁶John i 29.

- I wondered at his words, and his wide flapping garments.
For he held in his arms some objects which he blessed.
- 255 I looked and I saw that what lay there was a leper,
Laughing and playing with patriarchs and prophets.
“What are you staring at so sharply?” he said.
“I’m eager to know what you hold in your arms.”
- He let me see. “Oh Lord,” I said,
260 “That’s a precious present! What prince are they for?”
“They’re precious indeed, but they’re pledged to the devil.
And so am I,” he said. “For no substance
Or ransom or power can rescue and prize us
From the danger of the devil and his dreadful pit
265 Until that Christ I acclaimed has come
To redeem us some day from the devil’s might,
And to offer much more than we men all merit,
His life for our life. These souls will lie
Lolling in my arms till the Lord is here.”
- 270 “Alas,” I said, “that sin so obstructs
God’s mercy that might bring remission to all!”
I wept at his words, but then witnessed another
Person run past, and pass on ahead.
I called to inquire from where he came,
275 Who he was, where he went, and he told me at once.

Step XVII

In which Hope, carrying Christ's two commandments, joins Abrahamitic Faith, and I hesitate between them. But we then meet Charity in the person of the Good Samaritan. He explains that Faith, Hope and Charity are all needed, as are all aspects of the Trinity, which he depicts as the parts of a hand. True repentance can evoke God's mercy for sins caused by the flesh or sickness, but sins against the Spirit are worse, murder is all but unforgivable, and there is no excuse for lack of charity. Then he too vanishes, and I awake again.

“I am *Hope*,” he said, “a scout who is seeking
A knight who on Sinai set me the assignment
Of ruling all realms with this writ that I bear.”

“Is it sealed?” I said. “Or may we see the wording?”

- 5 “That’s why I am seeking the possessor of the seal,
Which carries the image of Christ on the cross.
When it’s stamped and sealed, I’m certain,” he said,
“That Lucifer’s lordship will last no longer.”

“Let me look at the writ and learn of its law.”

- 10 So he pulled out a patent, a piece of hard rock,
On which were inscribed two simple sayings:
*Love thy God, and Love thy neighbor.*¹
This was truly the text; I took a good look,
And a gloss was added, in glorious gold:

*On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets.*²

“Is that all the law your lord allows?”

¹Matthew xxii 37 and 39.

²Matthew xxii 40.

15 “It is,” he said, “and whoever does it honor
Shall never be daunted by death or the devil.
Though I say it myself, I vouchsafe for certain,
With this statute I’ve saved many scores of thousands.”

Abraham the herald nodded his head.

20 “Believers in the law are lying in my arms,
Joshua and Judith, and Judas Maccabaeus.
There are sixty thousand more I could mention besides.”

“What the two of you claim is peculiar,” I declared.
“For the life of me I’d love to know which to believe.

25 Abraham has talked with the Trinity, he tells me,
Three several persons, seemingly separate,
Yet all one God, and he also argues
That he’s saved a large number who were sorry for their sins
And honored one God and are held in his arms.
30 So why should we welcome a new law as well
If the first sufficed for salvation and bliss?

“Yet here now is Hope, who hails this New Law
Of loving and believing in a Lord Almighty
And loving every sinner the same as oneself,
35 But where is the Trinity that dictated that text?
And someone who walks with one stick, I suspect,
Is fitter than those who totter with two,
And it stands to reason that it’s simpler to instruct
Most straightforward folk in an established system
40 Than to teach them two when one is quite testing.
Abraham’s faith is hard enough to fathom,
But it’s even harder to love someone evil!
The three different persons pose fewer problems
Than loving every sinner the same as oneself!
45 So be off with you, Hope! God help us,” I said,
“No one could live by your law for long!”

As we went on our way, exchanging words,
We saw a Samaritan sitting on a mule,
And jogging speedily the same way as ourselves,
50 Coming from Jericho, as that country is called,
And trotting to a tournament in Jerusalem town.
The herald and Hope and he came together
Where a traveler lay wounded, attacked by thieves.

- He was stripped and unable to help himself,
 55 Or to stand and proceed, and no aid was at hand.
 His limbs would not move and he looked half-alive.
- The herald called Abraham, or Faith, saw him first
 But refused to go nearer than nine plowed furrows.
 Then along came Hope, who had loudly alleged
 60 That he'd helped many men with the message of Moses,
 But he steered well clear when he saw the scene,
 Like a duck that is dodging a deadly falcon.
 Then soon the Samaritan caught sight of the man
 And leapt from his mount and led on the mule
 65 As he went to view the victim's wounds.
 He deduced from the pulse that death was a danger,
 And could tell at once that treatment was wanted.
 So he hastened to his bottles and opened both
 And washed the wounds with wine and oil,
 70 Bandaged him, bound up his head and brought him
 On the mule several miles to some houses near a market,
 A cluster that was new and was called the *Law of Christ*,
 Where he lodged him at an inn and alerted the landlord,
 Asking him to treat him until his return.
 75 "Here is money," he said, "for medicine for the man,
 And a few more coins for the cost of his keep.
 And should he cost more I will settle it soon,
 But I really cannot stay," he said, and swiftly
 He set off to ride the Jerusalem road.
- 80 Faith followed hastily, hoping to overhaul him,
 And Hope hurried after, as fast as he was able,
 Intending to catch him and talk as they traveled.
 Seeing that, I scurried on too without stopping,
 Pursuing the Samaritan who showed such pity
 85 And pleading for employment as his page or groom.
 "I fear not," he said, "but you'll find I'm your friend
 In time of need." So I thanked him and told him
 How Faith and Hope had fled full of fear
 When they saw the man and his sorrowful state.
- 90 "Excuse them," he answered. "They would hardly have helped
 For no medicine on earth could have mended the man,
 Neither Faith nor Hope, for his hurts had so festered,

Without blood from a bairn that was born of a maid,
 If baptized and bathed in that blessed blood,
 95 And patched with penance and the Passion of that babe,
 He'd be able to hobble, but he'll never be whole
 Till he's swallowed the bairn's sacred body and blood.

“No one wanders through the wilds of this world
 Without running into robbers, riding or on foot,
 100 Save a few such as Faith and his fellow, Hope,
 And myself and now you, and such as pursue
 Our ways and works, for the wood harbors outlaws
 Who lurk on the look-out for likely prospects,
 Checking who's on horseback, ahead or behind,
 105 Reckoning that riders are rougher prey.
 When the robber saw me, a Samaritan on a mule,
 Which is known as *Flesh* after fleshly human nature,
 Following Faith and his fellow he fled
 And he hid in hell, but within three days
 110 I can vouch that the felon will be fettered with chains
 And will trouble no travelers who take this road:
*O death, I will be thy death.*³

“Then Faith shall perform a forester's duties,
 Guiding those folk who are foreign to the forest
 And revealing the road to Jerusalem town.
 115 And Hope shall be ostler at the inn, healing victims
 And the feeble and faint whom Faith cannot teach,
 Leading them with love, by the law of his writ,
 Giving lodging and relief through belief in the Church,
 Till I come once again to this country with comfort
 120 And bring the salve that will save all the sick
 Who crave it, covet it and cry to be cured.
 Then the blood of the child in Bethlehem born
 Shall save those who follow the faith of his friends.”

“Sweet sir,” I said, “should I accept
 125 What Faith and his fellow have each affirmed?
 Three separate persons, prime and perpetual,
 Yet all one God, as Abraham argued,
 While Hope then urged and exhorted me to love

³Osee (KJV Hosea) xiii 14.

- One God above all and then everyone else
 130 The same as myself with all my strength?”
 “Fasten your faith and your firm belief
 On Abraham,” he said, “the herald of arms.
 And as Hope exhorted you, I urge you to love
 Fellow Christians as kindly as you care for yourself.
 135 If Native Wit or Conscience should carp or cavil,
 Or heretics should haggle, show them your hand,
 For the hand can exhibit the whole of God.
 “The Father was first, a fist with one finger
 Folded till he chose to unfold it fully
 140 To point out such places as he might appoint,
 And to open the palm, the heart of the hand,
 And extend the fingers, which affirm its force.
 The palm betokens, I truly contend,
 The Holy Ghost, which hails from heaven,
 145 And the fingers that are free to fold and to serve
 Are symbols of the Son who was sent to earth
 And tenderly touched, as taught by the palm,
 The Virgin Mary, who made him a man.
*Who was conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin
 Mary.*⁴
 “The Father is thus like a fist with fingers—
*I will draw all things to myself—*⁵
 150 Which touch what the palm determines they should touch.
 Yet they all are one, as if they were a hand,
 And are seen to be separate aspects of the same.
 The palm puts forth first fist, then fingers,
 As the Holy Ghost, it can easily be argued,
 155 Reveals the Father at first, then the Son.
 With the fingers firmly reinforcing the palm,
 And helped by the thumb, the hand can lay hold,
 As the Father and Son and the Spirit sustain
 The whole of the world within their hand,
 160 Both welkin and winds and water and earth,
 Both heaven and hell and all that is in them.
 Thus no one needs to question the notion

⁴From the Apostles’ Creed.⁵John xii 32.

That our Lord of heaven does have three aspects,
 Not separate although distinct in themselves,
 165 For a hand needs fingers to function fully.
 “As my fist is my hand with the fingers folded;
 So God is the Father, the fashioner and former,
 *The maker of all things,*⁶
 Who holds in him all creative force.
 The fingers have the power of depiction and painting,
 170 And the carpenter’s crafts of design and carving,
 And so the Son is the Father’s skills,
 But as fully and firmly God as the Father.
 And the palm is the hand with a power of its own,
 Distinct from the force of the fingers or fist,
 175 For the palm has the power to profile the joints,
 And unfurl the folded fingers and fist,
 And accept or refuse what the fingers then feel
 In response to whatever he senses they desire.
 Thus the Holy Ghost is God and as great
 180 As the Father and Son, and of similar strength.
 Yet they form one whole, as my fingers and hand
 Unfolded and folded, both fingers and fist,
 Still are one hand, however I turn it.
 “But a man who is hurt in the heart of the hand
 185 Can hold on to nothing, as is obvious to all,
 For the fingers that fold to make a fist
 Are powerless because of the pain in the palm
 To clasp and to clutch and to keep and to hold.
 Were the middle of my hand injured or maimed,
 190 I could hang on to nothing that I held in my hand,
 But should my fingers be stripped of skin,
 And the middle of my hand not hurt too much,
 I could still try to tackle some sorts of task,
 Repairing or pushing things with painful fingers.
 195 “Accordingly I conclude there is cause to think
 That a sin against the Spirit cannot be absolved,
 Either here or elsewhere, as I’ve already heard:
 *He that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost, shall never have
 forgiveness.*⁷

⁶From the Apostles’ Creed.

⁷Mark iii 29.

For the perpetrator pricks the Lord God in the palm.
God the Father is the fist, the Son the fingers,
200 And the Holy Ghost of heaven the palm of the hand,
So to sin against the Spirit must surely harm
The grip of God and extinguish his grace.

“For the Trinity is also like a torch or taper,
The wax and the wick being wedded together
205 With the flame of a fire that flares from both:
The wax and the wick and the warmth of the fire
Foster a flame that can light a fire.
And so with the Father and the Son and the Spirit,
Who foster in folk both love and belief,
210 Which cleanse from sin all Christian creatures.
As you sometimes see that suddenly a torch
Is extinguished while the wick continues with a trace
Of a glimmer or glow, so the Holy Ghost
Remains still God but is grace without mercy
215 For uncharitable sinners who seek to destroy
The love and the life that our Lord created.

“As a glimmer or glint will not gladden a workman
Who watches and works through the winter nights
Like a candle or bundle that burns up brightly,
220 The Father and Son and the Spirit will be sparing
In granting grace and forgiveness of sins
Till the Holy Ghost starts to gleam and glow.
He will go on guttering and glimmering weakly
Till a flurry of love that is faithful revives him.
225 Then he’ll flare with the fire of the Father and the Son,
And will melt their might into mercy, as in winter
The heat of the sun melts icicles on eaves
To water and mist in no more than a moment.
But that grace only melts their might into mercy
230 For those among us who merit such mercy.
Then as wax will blaze up brightly and burn
If it hits the heat of a hot glowing coal,
Those sitting in darkness will suddenly see.

“The Father pardons people with compassion
235 Who repent sincerely and seek to pay
Restitution and make what amends they may,

- And even if they have inadequate assets,
 Mercy will make up the remainder when they die.
 As the wick and the fire will forge a warm flame
 240 That delights all those who are looking for light,
 So Christ in his kindness, if we cry him mercy,
 Will forgive and forget and go to the Father
 Of heaven and ask him to offer us forgiveness.
 But if you spent four centuries striking a flint
 245 Without tinder or tow to take up the spark,
 Your lengthy labor would all be lost,
 For no flame makes fire without suitable fuel.
 Hence God the Holy Ghost is grace without mercy
 For uncharitable creatures, as Christ proclaimed:
*Amen I say to you, I know you not.*⁸
- 250 If you treat fellow Christians cruelly or unkindly,
 All your presents of alms and prayers and penance,
 The pardons you purchase at Pamplona and Rome,
 And all the indulgences you hoard will not help,
 For the Holy Ghost will not hear or heed you;
 255 He is quenched by unkindness and cannot shine
 Or burn or blaze but is blown right out,
 And the Apostle Paul proves my point:
*If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have
 not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling
 cymbal.*⁹
- “In their dealings with the world the wealthy should beware
 And see to their souls if they’re sensible and wise
 260 And be charitable and kind, and care for fellow Christians,
 For many rich men, it is murmured abroad,
 Can burn but not blaze, and are but blind beacons:
*Not every one that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the
 kingdom of heaven.*¹⁰
- Dives was damned when he died for his meanness
 With food and with funds toward folk in need.
 265 I recommend the rich to remember his demise
 And to give their goods to the God of grace.
 For such as lack charity deservedly spend

⁸Matthew xxv 12.⁹1 Corinthians xiii 1.¹⁰Matthew vii 21.

Their days without end where Dives dwells.
 Absence of charity is the absolute inverse
 270 Of God's own grace, his kin the Holy Ghost,
 For what charity achieves, lack of charity undoes,
 Like the covetous thieves who claim to be Christian
 But slay a man with slander or stab him for his goods,
 Heinously killing what the Holy Ghost upholds:
 275 The life and the love that are the light in man.

 "Every single good man may be said to resemble
 The Trinity in the form of a torch or taper,
 And a murderer must, I know in my mind,
 Put out the light that our Lord most loves.
 280 The Holy Ghost may be grieved in a great many ways,
 But a man's worst sin is committing a murder,
 A sin against the Spirit which destroys for greed
 A being whom Christ so bitterly bought.
 How may he ask mercy, or mercy be given
 285 To one who willingly and wickedly denies it?
 For innocence, God's most intimate ally,
 Will constantly cry out, 'Vengeance! Vengeance!'
 On the shedders of blood who shame human shape:
 *Revenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth!*¹¹
 Charity confirms that vengeance must fall,
 290 And since Charity and Church both make this charge,
 I believe our Lord will not look to forgive
 Or take pity on prayers when the plea is for murder."

 "Suppose," I said, "I had sinned so severely
 But am sorry when I die that I did the bloody deed
 295 And confess and fall on the grace of God,
 The merciful Almighty, might I not be saved?"

 "Yes," said the Samaritan, "you might if it means
 Your repentance is so genuine that judgment turns gentle.
 But it is seldom seen, as experience shows,
 300 That a criminal convicted before a court
 Is pardoned through repentance when punishment is just.
 For the party for a plaintiff will complain with such force
 That the King cannot compromise till both sides concur

¹¹Apocalypse (KJV Revelation) vi 10.

And equitably settle. As Holy Writ says:
*No forgiveness of sin without restitution.*¹²

- 305 “Thus it fares with folk who are false all their lives,
Never ceasing to sin till their end is in sight.
Then heavy-hearted hopelessness hinders grace,
And mercy cannot make its way into their minds,
And the hope that should help turns into despair.
- 310 God still has the power to pardon and repair
And mend what’s amiss, for his mercy is greater
Than all our evil, as Scripture says:
*His tender mercies are over all his works.*¹³
But some restitution is certainly essential,
Though for poor men, sorrow may replace a payment.
- 315 “As is found in the Bible, three factors may force
A man to walk out of his house and home.
The first is a wife who is wicked and willful,
And the fellow flees for fear of her tongue.
The second is rain through a ruinous roof,
- 320 When he drags his bed up and down to keep dry.
The third is smoke and smoldering smuts
That attack his eyes and trouble his throat,
And he coughs and curses the cur who failed
To blow a good blaze or who brought in wet wood.
- 325 “These three that I mention can be thought of thus:
The wife is our flesh that is willful and wicked,
For consistently its nature gainsays the soul,
And it blames its fall on frailty and affirms
That ‘The man who asks mercy and makes amends
- 330 Is soon forgiven and the grief forgotten.’
And the rain that soaks us and stops us sleeping
Is the sickness and sorrows that we often suffer.
But Paul the Apostle taught to the people:
*Power is made perfect in infirmity.*¹⁴
And although some people are impatient and complain
- 335 At their penance and pain, it is perfectly clear
That their sickness causes their querulous conduct.

¹²Saint Augustine, *Epistle cliii* Section 20.

¹³Psalm cxliv 9 (KJV Psalm cxlv 9).

¹⁴2 Corinthians xii 9.

At the end of their lives, our Lord will lightly
Have mercy on such as have suffered so much.
But the smoke and the smuts that assault our eyes
340 Are the lack of charity that chokes God's love,
For unkindness unquestionably quenches mercy:
No one is so sick or necessitous or sad
That he cannot show love and kindness if he cares to
Or give a good word with good will, or good wishes,
345 Or grant to all men his forgiveness and mercy
And love them like himself, and set right his life.
But I'm sorry," he said, "I can't stop," and spurred on.
He was off like the wind, at which I awoke.

Step XVIII

In which, in my sixth dream, I witness Christ's entry into Jerusalem, his Passion and death. The four sisters Mercy, Truth, Justice and Peace disagree over whether his sacrifice is enough to release souls from hell, before which a great light has appeared. The character Book insists that it will suffice, before the Lord appears and bursts open the bars of hell, chaining the devil, leaving the demons squabbling and releasing the souls of the righteous. The four sisters rejoice, and I awake and tell my wife and daughter to go to church and venerate the cross.

In a woolen shift with no shirt and no shoes,
Heedless of hardship, heartache or woe,
I wandered away, wasting my life,
Till weary of the world my wish was to sleep,
5 And at last, in Lent, I lazily slumbered
And snored till Palm Sunday, and saw in my dreams
The Passion and penance that Christ did for people.
A great many children sang *Glory to God*,
And the old folk sang *Hosanna* to the organ.
10 Then a man like the Samaritan, reminding me of Piers,
Was borne along barefoot on the back of a donkey,
Without spurs or a spear but pert and sprightly,
As if coming to court to be accorded a knighthood
And a smart pair of shoes with gilded spurs.
15 The voice of Faith rang forth from a window,
“*Hail, Son of David*,” like a herald of arms
Welcoming jousting, while the Jews sang for joy,
“*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*”¹

I asked Faith who the fuss and the fanfares were for,
Who was trotting to the tournament. “Jesus,” he told me,

¹The *Benedictus* of the Mass, from Matthew xxi 9.

- 20 “Who is destined to redeem Piers’ fruit from the devil.”
 “Is Piers here?” I wondered. He winked and replied,
 “This gentleman Jesus will joust in Piers’ arms,
 In his helmet and armor called *human shape*.
 He’ll appear in the coat of Piers the Plowman
- 25 Lest the *consummate deity* of Christ be discovered,
 While his *Father’s divinity* will fend off all harm.”
 “Who will joust against Jesus? The Jews or the Scribes?”
 “The devil,” said Faith, “for he’s falsely condemned.
 But though Death may claim to undo and bring down
- 30 All live things living on land and in water,
 Life says he lies, and will wager his life
 That Death will not daunt him, and within three days
 He will free Piers’ fruit from the devil’s fastness
 And release them where he likes, setting Lucifer in chains
- 35 And defeating and vanquishing affliction and Death:
O death, I will be thy death.”²
 Pilate came with a crowd to *sit in his courtroom*,
 To determine by trial whether Death would triumph.
 The Jews and the judges were all against Jesus,
 And the cry of “*Crucify!*” filled the courtroom.
- 40 They put him in a pillory before Pilate and said,
 “This Jesus joked about our temple of the Jews,
 Pretending he could topple it—there the mocker stands!—
 And in three days’ time he undertook once more
 To rebuild every brick as beautiful as before,
- 45 As high and as wide, in all aspects equal.”
 A sergeant cried, “*Crucify!* He’s a sorcerer, I swear!”
 “*Take him!*” cried another, and took some sharp thorns
 And criss-crossed them quickly, producing a crown
 Which he set on his head, and he said with envy,
- 50 “*Hail to the Rabbi!*” Then they hit him with a reed,³
 They nailed him naked to the cross with three nails,
 And put up poison on a pole to his lips,
 And told him to drink for his days were done.⁴

²Osee (KJV Hosea) xiii 14.

³See Matthew xxvii 29–30 and Mark xv 19.

⁴See Matthew xxvii 34: “wine mingled with gall.”

- “If you’re so skillful,” they said, “save yourself.
 55 Escape from the cross if you’re Christ, the King’s son.
 Then we’ll let you live and believe Life loves you.”
- “*It is finished*,” Christ said, and he slumped and swooned,
 As piteous and pale as a prisoner dying.
 The Lord of Life and of Light closed his eyes,
 60 And the daylight withdrew and the sun grew dark.
 The Temple wall tore, the whole world trembled
 And the dead were roused by the din and arose
 And told why the tempest still thundered and roared.
 “There’s a bitter battle,” the dead bodies proclaimed,
 65 “In enduring darkness between Life and Death,
 And no one will truly tell who’s triumphed
 Till sunrise on Sunday,” and they sank to their graves.
 Then some said the corpse was the Christ, God’s Son,
 *Indeed this was the Son of God,*⁵
 And some, he was a sorcerer: “So look and see
 70 If he’s dead or alive before lifting him down.”
- Two thieves suffered death at that same time
 In accordance with the law, crucified with Christ.
 A bailiff soon broke the legs of both
 And afterwards their arms to hasten their death,
 75 But no beggar was so bold as to touch God’s body,
 For they knew as from Nature that he was a knight
 And the son of a king, and they stood to one side.
- But near him was a knight by the name of Longinus,
 Standing by Pilate and the people with his spear.
 80 He had long lost his sight, so Scripture says,⁶
 Yet despite his demurrals was made by the men
 To joust and to jab at Jesus with his spear,
 For the others on horseback and on foot were afraid
 To touch or disturb him or take him from the cross.
 85 When this sightless stripling struck him through the heart
 He was bathed in Christ’s blood, which unbarred his eyes,
 And he groveled on the ground to seek forgiveness:
 “I have wounded you woefully, Lord, against my will!”

⁵Matthew xxvii 54.

⁶Longinus is the name given in the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus to the Roman soldier referred to in John xix 34.

- He sighed and wept for sorrow and said,
 90 “I beg your indulgence for the deed I have done.
 Make a gesture of mercy, gentle Jesus.”
- Then Faith began fiercely to revile the Jews,
 Calling them criminal and accursed for ever
 For their foul unbelief. “May vengeance befall you!
 95 It was base to oblige a blind man to spear
 A body that was bound, and ignoble to abuse
 A dead cadaver by day or by night.
 Yet the wickedly wounded Christ is the winner,
 For your champion challenger, your jousting in chief,
 100 Fell at Christ’s feet and confessed him the victor.
 When the darkness was done, Death was then vanquished,
 And you lubberly villains lost out to Life.
 The freedom you valued has faded to thralldom,
 And you and your children shall be churls with no chance
 105 Of tilling or attaining a title to land
 But shamefully living by usurious lending,
 A life that the Lord has condemned in all laws.
 Your good days are done, as Daniel predicted,
 Your supremacy supplanted by the Kingdom of Christ:
When the holy of holies shall come, ye shall cease to be anointed.”⁷
- 110 From these frightening events and the falseness of the Jews
 I withdrew in the darkness to the depths of hell,
 And saw there, I swear— *according to Scripture*—
 A young woman, as I thought, walking my way
 From out of the west, with her eyes set on hell,
 115 A meek young maid, whose name was Mercy,
 Well-meaning and modest in demeanor and speech.
 Then her sister, as it seemed, came softly toward her
 Out of the east with her eyes looking west,
 Devoid of fear on account of her virtue,
 120 A comely creature who was called the name Truth.
 When the maidens met, Mercy and Truth,
 They asked each other what the happenings meant,
 The lustrous light that lay before hell,
 The din and the darkness, and what dawn might bring.

⁷Not a quotation, but referring to Daniel ix 24.

- 125 “In faith I’m astonished at these sights,” Truth said,
 “And I must discover what this magic means.”
- “It means,” said Mercy, “not magic but joy.
 For a maiden called Mary is a mother who conceived
 Not from mortal seed but a sentence that was spoken
- 130 By the Holy Ghost through the gift of grace,
 And gave birth to a baby while free from blemish;
 God will attest to the truth of my tale.
 The baby was born some thirty years back,
 And today at mid-day he was put to death,
- 135 Causing this eclipse that has closed off the sun.
 And from darkness man shall be manumitted
 While Lucifer is blinded by the lustrous light,
 For patriarchs and prophets have often preached
 That a man shall save man through a maiden’s help,
- 140 That a tree shall retrieve what a tree once lost,⁸
 That a death shall restore what Death has undone.”
- But Truth said, “You’re talking total nonsense!
 For Adam and Eve and Abraham and others,
 And patriarchs and prophets who are lying in pain,
- 145 Will never be released, brought aloft by this light,
 But must huddle in hell. So hold your tongue, Mercy!
 My name is Truth and I’m telling the truth,
 Which is once you’re in hell, you’re always in hell.
 The prophet and patriarch Job provides proof:
He that shall go down to hell shall not come up.”⁹
- 150 Then Mercy mildly opened her mouth.
 “I hope,” she said, “that they shall be saved,
 For reason and experience show poison kills poison.
 The scorpion’s venom is the foulest and fiercest,
 No remedy assuages the scorpion’s sting
- 155 Till the scorpion perishes and its poison is applied
 To the place where the venom was first suffused.
 So I dare pledge my life that this death will undo
 What Death first did through the devil’s enticements.
 And as man was beguiled into guilt by guile,

⁸The trees are the cross of Christ’s crucifixion and the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

⁹Job vii 9.

160 So the grace which began the world will make good
And will *exercise art to deceive more art.*¹⁰

“Stop there,” Truth said, “for I seem to see,
From the frozen north, not far off, the figure
Of Justice come running; I suggest we rest

165 For she’s wiser and older than either of us.”

“That is so,” Mercy said, “and I see in the south
Peace coming playfully, dressed in patience.
For a long time Love has longed to see her
And has sent her a letter concerning the light

170 That hovers over hell; let us hear what she says.”

When Peace clad in patience approached the two,
Justice showed the reverence right for such robes
And asked where she was going and whom she hoped
To encounter in such elegant, becoming clothes.

175 “My wish,” said Peace, “is to welcome most warmly
Those sullied with sin whom I could not see
For many a month; but now Mercy shall free
Both Adam and Eve and Moses and more,

And I’ll dance with delight; so dance, Sister, too,

180 For Jesus has jousted, and joy has now dawned:

*In the evening weeping shall have place, and in the morning glad-
ness.*¹¹

And Love, who’s my lover, has sent me a letter
Saying man shall be saved by Mercy and me,
And that God’s forgiveness has granted us two,
Both Peace and Mercy, as permanent pledges.

185 Here’s the patent,” cried Peace, “which will prove to endure:

*In peace in the self same I will sleep, and I will rest.*¹²

“Are you off your head?” Justice asked, “Or just drunk?
You believe that this light can unlock hell’s might
And save men’s souls? Sister, that’s absurd!

In the beginning it was God and no other who gave

190 The sentence that Adam and Eve and their descendants

¹⁰From the sixth-century hymn *Pange, lingua, gloriosi proelium certaminis* (Sing out, my tongue, the battle in the glorious fight) by Venantius Fortunatus, sung on Good Friday.

¹¹Psalm xxix 6 (KJV Psalm xxx 5).

¹²Psalm iv 9 (KJV Psalm iv 8).

- Should die and be done with and dwell in torment
 If they touched the tree and tasted its fruit.
 And Adam defied that awful order
 And ate the fruit, foolishly flouting
- 195 The love of our Lord and the law he laid down,
 By doing the dictates of Eve and the devil.
 I, Justice, judge that Truth ruled justly
 That their pain be perpetual and no prayer be of help.
 They must chew as they chose, so let us not chafe
- 200 At the endless evil they bit off and ate.”
- “Yet I pray,” said Peace, “that their pain may end,
 And their misery turn to merriment in time.
 Then knowing of misery, they’ll know they are merry.
 For happiness means nothing without knowledge of none:
- 205 No one knows hunger who has never been hungry,
 If there were no night, then no one would know
 The meaning of day, and no misery would mock
 At the wealthy who wallow in waste at their ease
 If they did not know the dread of death,
- 210 And I’m sure that until we suffer from shortage
 We never can know the meaning of enough.
 For God in his goodness had given to Adam
 The things he needed for entire contentment,
 But allowed him subsequently sorrow and sin,
- 215 To learn the nature of delights he had lost.
- “Now with good will God, who began the world,
 Has become a man through a maid to save men,
 And accepted betrayal to suffer death’s sorrow,
 Healing our heartache and heralding rest.¹³
- 220 For God himself has assumed Adam’s shape
 To grasp the grief that a man undergoes.
 In heaven and on earth and now in hell,
 Well aware of joy he wants to know woe
 So that folk too will see from their folly and sin
- 225 Both the essence of anguish and endless bliss.
 Where peace is present, who appreciates war,
 Who can tell he’s content till he’s taught by distress?”

¹³Lines 216–219 were originally placed earlier, after line 209.

A figure then entered with outsized eyes,
 Venerable and vigorous, who bore the name Book.
 230 “God’s body,” said Book, “I bear good witness
 That there blazed such a star when the babe was born
 That the wise men of the world all were as one
 That the baby who was born in Bethlehem town
 Would save men’s souls and destroy all sin.
 235 And all the four elements echoed the message¹⁴
 That he was God, whose hand made the heavens.
 A comet was kindled by the upper air,
 Like a torch to hail his advent on earth,
 And its light alighted on the Lord below.
 240 The water then witnessed by letting him walk:
 The Apostle Peter saw him approaching
 Across the sea and called to him, saying,
 *Bid me come to thee upon the water.*¹⁵
 The sun has now shut off her shining fire
 At the sorrow of the maker of the sun and the sea,
 245 And the earth has quaked and cracked open chasms
 Like something alive on seeing him suffer!
 “His suffering has opened hell itself,
 And has let out the sons of Simeon to see it.¹⁶
 Now Lucifer shall believe, though little he may long to,
 250 For Jesus the giant has fashioned a device
 To batter and break those who bar his way.¹⁷
 May I, Book, be burnt if Jesus does not bring
 Joy to his mother as a man once more,
 And comfort to his kin when he comes back to life.
 255 He will cast down and crush the joy of the Jews,
 Who are lost unless they believe the New Law
 And rightly reverence his cross and resurrection!”
 “Let us stop,” Truth said, “for I see and hear
 A spirit who is speaking to hell and saying,
 ‘Lift up your gates, O ye princes.’”¹⁸

¹⁴The conventional elements are, as here, air, water, fire and earth.

¹⁵Matthew xiv 28.

¹⁶Simeon is referred to in Luke ii 25. According to the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, Simeon’s sons were released even as Christ hung dying on the cross.

¹⁷This probably refers to the giant Samson carrying off the gates of Gaza in Judges xvi 3, foreshadowing the power of Christ.

¹⁸Psalms xxiii 7 and 9 (KJV Psalm xxiv 7 and 9: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates.”)

- 260 To Lucifer a loud voice cried from the light,
 “Princes of this place, unbar the portal.
 Here comes with his crown the King of Glory!”
- Then looking at Lucifer in alarm, Satan said,
 “Such a light freed Lazarus without our leave,
- 265 So we’re bound to face trouble and terrible tumult.
 If this King should come he’ll unleash the whole crowd
 And lead them to Lazarus and lock me in chains.
 Patriarchs and prophets have promised for years
 That a lord and a light will lead mankind hence.
- “So Ragamuffin, bring me the bars that Belial,¹⁹
 Your grandfather, molded and made with your mother.
 I’ll cut off this lord and quell his light,
 And will bar the gates before brightness blinds us.
 We’ll discover and cover every chink and crack
 So that light cannot enter at louvers or loop-holes.
 And Astaroth, summon and send out our servants,
 Colting and his crew, to recover what’s ours.
 Boil up brimstone and pour it burning
 On the heads of any who head for the walls.
 Bring up the biggest cross-bows and cannon²⁰
 And fire off sufficient to blind his forces.
 Set Mahon at the mangonel to rain down mill-stones,
 And with hooks and with caltrops we’ll halt the whole host.”²¹
- 270 “Listen, said Lucifer, “a long time ago
 I knew this lord and his lustrous light.
 He can’t be undone by devilry or death,
 He goes where he will, but I warn him to beware:
 If he robs me of my rights, he must rob me by force
- 275 Since by right and by reason the ranks that are here,

¹⁹This block of 14 un-numbered lines is taken from the C version of the poem (Skeat XXI 283–296, Schmidt XX 281–294). Satan and Lucifer are different characters, the former being the Prince of Death, and the latter the Prince of Hell. Belial is a Hebrew name for the devil, Astaroth (or Astarte, Ishtar) was the Queen of Heaven worshipped by the Phoenicians, Babylonians and others, and Mahon or Mahound is a variant of Mahomet. Ragamuffin seems to be a name coined in the miracle plays, and Goblin (line 290) is an Anglo-Saxon familiar spirit. Colting is not found elsewhere.

²⁰This is one of the earliest references to cannon as a weapon.

²¹Caltrops are iron snares with four prongs, one of which always points upwards when they are placed on the ground. A mangonel is a heavy catapult.

- Well-meaning and mean, are body and soul mine.
 For he, King of heaven, he it was said
 That if Adam ate the apple, all should then die
 And dwell with us devils; so he ordained,
- 280 For that sentence was spoken by Truth himself.
 I have sat here as sovereign for seven thousand years
 And the law won't allow him to lightly unseat me.”
- “That is so,” Satan said, “but I'm strangely afraid,
 For you got them by guile, breaking into his garden.
- 285 You sat in the apple tree, shaped like a serpent
 To egg Eve on and entice her to eat.
 You told a tall tale, a treacherous lie:
 That's how you herded so many in here,
 And what's gained by guile is not fairly got.”
- 290 And Goblin agreed. “God won't be beguiled;
 They were damned by treachery and our title's not true.”
- “I fear,” said Satan, “that he's certain to free them,
 For he's paced about preaching to people for years.
 I've assailed him with sin and once even said,
 295 'Are you God or God's son?' but he gave me short shrift.
 Thirty-two, he was, when I went and warned
 The wife of Pilate what person he was
 In a dream that I sent when I saw her asleep.
 The Jews, who hated him, asked that he hang,
- 300 While I only longed to lengthen his life.
 When his body had bones he was bothersome and strove
 To save the sinful if sinners were willing,
 But his soul, once dead, would stop them from sinning.
 And see, here's a soul sailing toward us” said Satan.
- 305 “I suspect that it's God, and he's glowing in glory.
 My advice is to flee as fast as we may;
 We'd be better not born than bide till he sees us.
 Your lying, Lucifer, has lost us our prey:
 When we followed you first, we fell from heaven,
- 310 Believing your lies, all leaping together,
 And your latest lie has lost us Adam
 And our lordship, I believe, over land and water:
Now shall the prince of this world be cast out.”²²

²²John xii 31.

The light said again to Lucifer, “Unlock.”

“What lord says unlock?” called Lucifer. “Who are you?”

315 “The *King of Glory*,” came back the cry,
 “The *Master of Might* and all manner of Virtues,
 So dukes of this dungeon undo these gates,
 And hail the Christ, son of heaven’s King!”

With that hell broke, and Belial’s bars.

320 The gates grinned wide, overwhelming the warders,
 And the patriarchs and prophets and the *people in darkness*
 Sang out Saint John’s anthem, “*Behold the lamb of God.*”²³
 Lucifer was beaten and blinded by the brightness,
 While those who loved the Lord were led into the light.

325 And the Lord said to Satan, “See, here’s my soul
 In exchange for the sinners who deserve to be saved.
 They are mine and from me, and my claim has merit,
 For while reason and right and justice ruled
 That they all should die if they ate the apple,

330 I did not condemn them to hell for ever.
 Your deceit induced them to do as they did,
 And you gained them by guile, against all reason.
 In my palace of Paradise, in the person of an adder,
 You treacherously took the thing that I loved.

335 Just like a lizard with the face of a lady
 You robbed me wrongly, and the Old Law is right
 That deceivers themselves deserve to be deceived:
 *An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.*²⁴

“So a soul for a soul, and sin go to sin,
 And I will amend man’s mischief as a man.

340 A limb for a limb, a life for a life,
 The Old Law prescribed; by that statute I seize
 Adam and all his descendants hereafter.
 And my death shall undo what Death had brought them,
 Quickening and quitting what was quenched by sin,

345 Destroying deceit through unswerving grace.
 In releasing them, Lucifer, I break no law
 But ransom my subjects by reason and right:

²³John i 29.

²⁴Matthew v 38.

*I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.*²⁵

“You robbed from my realm against all reason,
Through falsehood and felony, but I’ve learnt from good faith
350 To get back my goods by ransom, not guile:
What you gained by guile is recovered by grace.
In the likeness, Lucifer, of a loathsome adder,
You gained by guile what was loved by God,
While I, Lord of heaven, in the likeness of a human,
355 Have graciously acquitted your guile with guile!
And as Adam and others were undone and died
Through a tree, a tree shall return them to life,
And deceit is deceived by its own deceit:
*He is fallen into the hole he made.*²⁶
For your guile has begun to turn against you,
360 While my grace grows, mightier and greater.

“You must broach the brew that you made so bitter
And drink your own draught, you doctor of Death!
For love is the drink of the Lord of Life,
And I died on earth today for that drink.
365 I have struggled so sorely for the soul of man
That my thirst is so strong no substance can slake it
Till the grapes are gathered in Jehoshaphat’s grove
And I relish the drink of *resurrection of the dead.*²⁷
Then I’ll come as a king crowned with angels
370 And have all the souls brought out from hell.

“Devils and demons shall be drawn up before me
And shall do as I bid and blindly obey,
Though my nature shall remind me to be merciful to man,
For we’re brothers in blood, though not all in baptism,
375 But the brothers in blood who are baptized too
Shall never be condemned to indefinite death:
*To thee only have I sinned.*²⁸
On earth a felon may be hanged once only,
Even a traitor who was tried for treason.

²⁵Matthew v 17.

²⁶Psalms vii 16 (KJV Psalm vii 15).

²⁷The valley of Jehoshaphat was expected to be the location of the Last Judgment: see Joel iii 12.

²⁸Psalms I (=50) 6 (KJV li 4).

- If the king of the country should happen to come
 380 And should see a subject who suffers that sentence,
 The law requires that the king grant his life.
 I, King of Kings, shall come without question
 When the wicked are damned and condemned to death;
 If the law allows me to look on them, it lies
 385 In my grace to let such delinquents live.
 Though their sins may be perilous, if they've paid the price,
 I may show mercy while remaining just.
- “Though Scripture says sinners should all have to suffer—
 The *man of innocence* will meet with no mischief
 390 And *the man of guilt will meet what he merits*—²⁹
 They'll be cleansed if required of their several sins
 In my prison of Purgatory till '*Enough!*' is pronounced.
 Then I'll manifest my mercy to many of my brothers,
 For blood may see blood be famished and frozen,
 395 But a brother feels the hurt if his blood brother bleeds:
 *I heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter.*³⁰
 My justice and judgments shall adjudicate hell,
 And my mercy shall be handed to man in heaven
 For it would be unkind if a king did not care
 For his kin at a time of trial and trouble:
 *Enter not into judgment with thy servant.*³¹
- 400 Thus by law,” said our Lord, “I will lead from hell
 The people I love who believed I would appear,
 While Lucifer, by lying you led on Eve
 And shall bear the burden”—and he bound him in chains.
 Astaroth and others hid themselves away,
 405 Not the lowliest daring to look on the Lord,
 And they let him release whomever he liked,
 While hundreds of angels plucked harps and sang,
*Flesh may sin but flesh will save,
 For God in flesh as God sets free.*³²
- 410 Then Peace began playing a song on her pipe:
Following cloud the sun shines clearer;

²⁹See Step IV Note 6.³⁰2 Corinthians xii 4.³¹Psalm cxlii 2 (KJV Psalm cxliii 2).³²From the Latin hymn sung on Ascension Day.

*Following conflict love is dearer.*³³

“After showers, the sun shines stronger,
No weather is warmer than when it has rained,
415 And no friends are dearer than following a fight,
When Love and Peace both prove supreme.
For no wickedness or war in this world is so bad
That Love cannot turn it to laughter if it likes,
Or Peace supplant its perils through patience.”

420 “You tell us the truth,” exclaimed Truth, “by God!
Let’s conclude a covenant, and kiss one another!”

“And let no one see that we squabbled,” Peace said,
“For the Almighty has the might to do all.”

“I consent,” Justice said, and solemnly kissed her,
425 And Peace kissed her, *for ever and ever.*

*Mercy and Truth have met each other; Justice and Peace have
kissed.*³⁴

Truth on her trumpet blew the *Te deum*,³⁵
And Love played loudly upon the lute,

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell
together in unity!*³⁶

Then those damsels danced till the dawn arrived,
When everyone ran to the resurrection,
430 And I woke and wakened my wife and daughter,
Kit and Colette, saying “Kiss the cross.
Kneel to do reverence to the resurrection,
To the jewel that bore God’s blessed body
And scares away Satan through the power of its shadow,
435 Driving every devil and demon to flight.”

³³A common proverb echoing Tobias (KJV Tobit) iii 22 and taken from the *Liber Parabolarum* or *Book of Parables* of Alan of Lille (Schmidt *Earthly Honest Things*, 66).

³⁴Psalm lxxxiv 11 (KJV Psalm lxxxv 10).

³⁵The song of praise composed in the fourth century by Ambrose of Milan, one of the “four doctors.”

³⁶Psalm cxxxii 1 (KJV Psalm cxxxiii 1).

Step XIX

In which I see, in my seventh dream, Christ dressed as Piers the Plowman enter carrying his cross. Conscience tells me that Jesus is called Christ because he comes as a conqueror, as Do-best, and he has given to Piers the power to absolve the sins of those who pay their debts. I kneel and see the grace of God, the Holy Spirit, descend. Grace shares out his gifts of human skills and of the doctrine of the Church. While sowing the Cardinal Virtues, Piers is beset by the army of Pride. Conscience calls on Christians to hold together, but some will not.

- While awake I recorded what I had witnessed.
Then, decorously dressed, I went down to the church
To hear the Mass and take Holy Communion.
In the midst of the Mass, while the offerings were made,
5 I slept once more and suddenly saw
That Piers the Plowman was painted all bloody.
He came before the people carrying a cross
Yet looked in every limb like Jesus our Lord.
I called to Conscience to tell me clearly,
10 “Is this Jesus the Joustler whom the Jews put to death
Or Piers the Plowman? And who painted him so red?”
On his knees Conscience answered. “Aren’t those Piers’ arms,
His coat and his colors? Though he who comes
Is Christ with his cross, the victor for Christians.”
15 “Why call him Christ when the Jews call him Jesus?
Patriarchs and prophets prophesied before
That every being should bow down and bend
The knee when the name of Jesus was pronounced.
No name therefore has the force of his name,
20 And no other name is needed but his,
For the devils of darkness dread to hear it

And sinners are solaced and saved by that name.
 So why do you want to call him Christ?
 Is Christ more impressive, more powerful and potent
 25 Than Jesu or Jesus, the source of our joy?"

"You certainly know," Conscience said, "and can see
 That a king may be called also conqueror and knight.
 Men kneel to a knight, so a knight is noble,
 And a king is nobler for he names men knights.
 30 To be called a conqueror requires special grace,
 Both courteous kindness and courage at heart,
 To make commoners lords in the lands that are conquered
 And vassals of freemen who infringe the new law.
 The Jews were once gentry but despised the Lord Jesus,
 35 His lessons and law, and have lost their rank.
 In the whole wide world they have all been humbled
 And must pay their toll of tribute and taxes.
 But the Jews who obey Saint John the Baptist
 Are cleansed by christening and in consequence free.
 40 They are gentry like Jesus, for Jesus was cleansed
 On the cross and crowned the King of the Jews.

"It becomes a king to defend his country,
 And a conqueror to lay down liberal laws.
 Jesus was just to the Jews and taught them
 45 The law of life that shall last for ever,
 And defended them from evil, from fever and the flux,
 From devils that dwelt in them and dubious beliefs.
 The Jews called him Jesus and gentle prophet
 And King of their kingdom, but they crowned him with thorns.
 50 Yet he nobly overcame them and conquered on the cross
 For no death could undo him or drag him down.
 He rose and reigned and ravished hell,
 And is called the 'conqueror' of the quick and the dead
 Since he gave bliss to Adam and Eve and others
 55 Who had languished as Lucifer's slaves for too long,
 And the loathsome Lucifer, lord of hell,
 He robustly bound in iron bonds.
 None is braver or bolder for he shed his blood
 To free all folk who follow his law,¹

¹In Skeat, lines 56–59 are only found in the C version.

- 60 And since he assures his loyal subjects
 A place in Paradise when they part from hence,
 It is proper to call him ‘conqueror,’ which is ‘Christ.’²
 And he comes with the cross of his Passion because
 He wants to encourage us to wield the cross
- 65 To protect us from sin when tried by temptation,
 And to see from his suffering that to seek and find joy
 Means putting ourselves through poverty and penance
 And accepting much sorrow and woe in this world.
- “But to come back to why he is called the name ‘Christ’:
- 70 To be fair, his first name in fact was Jesus;
 He was born in Bethlehem a human babe
 As the Bible recounts, and kings had come
 To reverence him royally with earthly riches.
 First angels from heaven bowed down singing hymns:
*Glory to God in the highest.*³
- 75 The kings then came; they craved no mercy
 And nothing in return but knelt to the newborn,
 Acknowledging him sovereign of the sun, land and sea,
 And giving their gifts, myrrh, incense and gold,
 Then returned to their thrones as the angels told them
- 80 And fulfilled the prophecy you voiced before:
*In the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in
 heaven, on earth, and under the earth.*⁴
- “All the angels of heaven bowed at his birth,
 And the kings, who carried all the wisdom of the world,
 Arrayed before Jesus reason and justice
 And pity, which is why the wise have awarded them
- 85 The magisterial title of *Magi*.
 Reason was offered him hidden in incense,
 And its golden sibling was presented second:
 Justice, as righteous and royal as reason,
 And likened to loyalty for it lasts like gold,
- 90 While reason is as rich as truth and right.
 And then the third king knelt to the newborn

²“Christ” comes from a Greek word meaning “anointed.” Conquerors are anointed when they are crowned.

³Luke ii 14.

⁴Philippians ii 10 (KJV: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.”)

And proffered him pity in a pot of myrrh,
For myrrh stands for mercy and mildness of speech.

- “Three objects of earthly value were offered
95 By kings of three countries who came on their knees.
But precious though their presents, our Prince, Lord Jesus,
Was not king or conqueror till he came of age
As a man who had mastered a multitude of crafts,
For a conqueror must acquire many kinds of skill,
100 And wisdom and wiles if he wishes to lead.
Had I time I would tell how he managed this task:
He sometimes suffered, and sometimes he hid,
He sometimes fought, and sometimes he fled,
And sometimes he gave both gifts and succor,
105 Restoring when he listed both life and limb,
Performing such feats like a conqueror for folk
Till he held in his hand those for whom he would bleed.

- “At a feast where Jews were rejoicing, young Jesus
Turned water to wine as witnessed in Scripture,
110 Beginning by his grace to be Do-well and God,
For wine can be likened to law and holy living.
Folk hated their enemies by leave of the law,
But Christ requested a change and required
Both learned and lowly to love them instead.
115 For the first time therefore at this feast he began
To show his grace and goodness as God,
And he came to be called both Christ and Jesus,
The astute and sharp-witted son of Mary.
He performed that miracle before his mother
120 So that she should be first to be firm in the faith
That he was begotten by grace, not a human.
It was no trick that he worked but his word:
By his nature he did that deed of Do-well.

- “When older, in the absence of his mother Mary,
125 He gave legs to the lame and light to the blind
And fed with two fish and five little loaves
Some five thousand folk or more who were famished.
He comforted the careworn and acquired the name
‘Do-better’ for doing such kindly deeds
130 As endowing with speech the deaf and the dumb
And healing and helping those who asked his grace.

Throughout the country the common folk called him
'Jesus Son of David' for the deeds that he did,
 For maidens still doted on the might of David:
*Saul slew his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*⁵

135 That is why *'Son of David'* was his widespread welcome.
 He was known to be from Nazareth and none was considered
 More capable or becoming to be King of Judea
 Or adjudged more suited to be justice over Jews.

“Out of envy Caiaphas and others worked hard,
 140 Preparing and plotting to put him to death.
 On Friday at Calvary they killed him on the cross,
 Then buried his body and gave orders to bar it
 By force of arms for fear that his friends

145 That the blessed body, though buried, would rise
 And would go to Galilee and gladden his apostles
 And his mother Mary—so men had believed.
 But the soldiers who guarded it said themselves

That angels and archangels entered by night
 150 And came on their knees to the corpse and cried,
'Christ is risen,' and the corpse then arose
 Absolutely alive and left with the angels.

“The Jews told the soldiers to be silent and say
 To the commons that a crowd of his followers had come
 155 And bewitched the watchers and stolen him away.

But Mary Magdalene met him on the road,
 Going toward Galilee as God and as man.
 He looked at her, alive, and she cried out aloud
 To each company she came across, *'Christ is risen!'*

160 The account thus spread that Christ had recovered:
*Thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead,
 the third day.*⁶

For what women have seen can seldom be concealed!

“Peter then learnt he was alive and went looking
 For Jesus with James and John and ten more
 Such as Thomas of India and Thaddeus too.⁷

⁵1 Kings (KJV 1 Samuel) xviii 7.

⁶Luke xxiv 46.

⁷The Apostle Thomas is said to have founded a Church in south India.

- 165 And when these wise folk were once more convened
 In a house that was blocked off and bolted and barred,
 Christ came through the door that was carefully closed
 To the apostles and Peter, saying ‘*Peace be with you!*’
 And taking then Thomas by the hand he told him
- 170 To feel with his fingers the wound in his flesh.
 So Thomas touched it and trembling said,
 ‘*My Lord, and my God.*’⁸
 I believe you’re my Lord, my Lord God Jesus!
 You suffered and died, and are suddenly restored
 To life everlasting and will judge us, O Lord.’
- 175 “Then Christ said kindly and courteously, ‘Thomas,
 For truly believing and trusting in this,
 You are to be blessed for ever and ever.
 And I love those who may not look on my limbs
 As you do and yet shall loyally believe,
- 180 And I bless them in both their body and soul:
 Blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed.”⁹
 “When this deed was done, he was finally Do-best,
 Giving power to Piers and granting him pardon,
 And forgiveness and mercy to all manner of men,
 For Piers could then pardon sins of all sorts
- 185 If folk confessed any *debts that were due*
 And paid them promptly to Piers the Plowman.
 Once the pardon was paid, Piers then had power
 To bind and unbind on earth and in heaven
 And absolve men of sins if no debts were outstanding.
- 190 “Christ ascended soon after, up into heaven,
 And resides there still but will descend at the last
 To duly reward those who do *pay their debts*
 In full as invited by faith and by truth,
 But will punish the people who fail to pay,
- 195 Both the quick and the dead, at Doomsday, conducting
 The good to the Godhead and greatest of joy,
 While eternal torment awaits the wicked.”
 Thus Conscience spoke about Christ and the cross,
 And said I should kneel, and I seemed to see

⁸John xx 28. Langland simplifies the story of Thomas.⁹John xx 29.

- 200 The *Paraclete* coming to the apostles and Piers,¹⁰
 Alighting upon them in the likeness of lightning
 And teaching them to know and to talk every tongue.
 I was frightened at the fierceness of the light and the fire
 For the Spirit soon spread at startling speed,
- 205 And I questioned Conscience what occurrence I was seeing.
 “It’s the messenger of Christ who comes,” said Conscience,
 “From the greatness of God, and Grace is his name.
 Welcome and worship him, kneeling on your knees,
 And sing if you can, ‘*Come, Creator Spirit!*’”¹¹
- 210 So I sang that song, and so did many hundreds,
 And we cried out to Conscience for the Grace of God.
 But Grace had gone with Piers the Plowman
 To counsel him and Conscience, and called to the people:
 “Today I will give out my gifts of grace
- 215 To all kinds of creature that are with their five wits:
 Treasures to live by the length of their lives,
 And weapons to fight with that will not fail.
 For the hordes of Antichrist will come bringing horror,
 And will crush you, Conscience, unless Christ gives you aid.¹²
- 220 Floods of false prophets and flatterers and frauds
 Will be seen to hold sway over sovereigns and earls,
 And Pride shall be Pope and the Prince of the Church,
 And its cardinals callous, mean and unkind.
 So before I go I will give you,” said Grace,
- 225 “The arms to combat Antichrist’s host.”
 Then he gave each man a grace as his guide,
 So that Idleness, Envy and Pride should not harm him:
*There are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit.*¹³
 To some he gave wisdom and a way with words,
 To meet the demands made by the world,
- 230 Such as legal apprentices and preachers and priests
 Who live by the labor of enlightened tongues

¹⁰The Paraclete is the consoling Holy Spirit. See Acts ii 1–4.

¹¹The hymn dating from around AD 800 and attributed to Rabanus Maurus which is sung at Pentecost and on other occasions when the Holy Spirit is invoked.

¹²The coming of Antichrist at the end of time is foretold in 1 John ii 18 and 22. See also the Apocalypse (KJV Revelation).

¹³1 Corinthians xii 4.

And teach those things that Grace taught them.
 And to some he gave the special gifts
 To buy and to sell, such skills as keen sight,
 235 And some learnt to labor on land and on water
 And to live honest lives from that loyal labor.
 He taught some to till, and to ditch and to thatch,
 To live by learning and toiling at these tasks,
 And to some he taught figures, to divine and divide,
 240 And to some skill with palette and paints and pictures,
 And to some skill to fathom and foretell the future,
 Both welcome and woeful, well in advance,
 Through philosophy and astronomy, abstruse science,
 And to some he gave power to impound stolen property,
 245 The right to ride out uncorrupted to rescue
 And take goods by force from false men and felons,
 While some learnt to live through longing to be hence,
 In poverty and penance to pray for all Christians.
 And he taught all love and loyalty alike,
 250 And forbade folk to bother whose skills might be better.
 “Some employments are pleasanter, as you see,” Grace said.
 “But whoever has them could have had far worse,
 And remember that grace is the gift I give you,
 So let you all love, not belittle, your brothers.
 255 Those who master most skills should be mildest in manner;
 Crown Conscience your king and Skill your steward:
 Let your skills decide what you sup on and wear.
 And Piers the Plowman I put in my place
 To receive the settlement of *debts that are due*.
 260 For Piers I appoint as my proxy on earth,
 My plowman whose team shall till the truth.”
 Four great strong oxen were given by Grace:
 One was Luke, reliable and large,
 Then Matthew and Mark, both mighty beasts,
 265 The three of them joined by John, the gentlest,
 And the pride of the team that pulls Piers’ plow.
 In his goodness Grace also gave to Piers
 Four horses to harrow what the oxen plowed.
 He harnessed Augustine, and also Ambrose,
 270 With Gregory the Great and the good Jerome.¹⁴

¹⁴i.e., the “four doctors.” See Step IX, Note 12.

These four were to follow and to teach the faith
 And they had in a handshake harrowed all Scripture
 With the harrows they had, the Old and the New,
 The *Testaments* entrusted to them by Grace,
 275 Who carefully conferred the Cardinal Virtues,
 Four seeds for Piers to sow in men's souls.

The seed first sown was the *Spirit of Prudence*,
 And any who ate it would foresee the outcome
 Of the deeds that they did before they did them:
 280 Look that you buy a long-handled ladle
 To catch and cream off the fat from a cauldron.

The *Spirit of Temperance* was second to be sown,
 And whoever ate it would have such a nature
 As not to be swollen by sickness or sweetmeats
 285 Or indulgence in drink, or be driven off course
 By scorn or scolding or sudden wealth
 Or idle insults or even by filth;
 No fancy fashions would adorn his frame,
 And no cook would serve him spicy suppers.

The *Spirit of Fortitude* followed in sequence,
 And any who ate it would have the resolve
 To suffer the sickness and trouble God sent.
 No lying or liars or loss of possessions
 Would dispirit or depress him for his soul would be smiling,
 295 Possessing the strength to pray with patience
 “*Preserve me, O Lord,*” to resist false smears¹⁵
 And to follow with courage the counsel of Cato:
*Be strong in the soul when unjustly slandered.*¹⁶

The seed last sown was the *Spirit of Justice*.
 300 Whoever ate it would always be loyal
 To God and be sorrowed solely by deceit,
 For deceit and guile are so subtle and secret
 That honesty can often be judged unjust.
 But the *Spirit of Justice* will steadfastly sentence
 305 Convicts to death and condemn a king
 Who commits a crime, for the courts ignore

¹⁵Psalm xv 1 (KJV Psalm xvi 1).

¹⁶Dionysius Cato, *Distich* ii 14.

- All royal wrath and death threats from rulers,
 And presents and pleas and letters from princes.
 It finds from facts without fear or favor,
 310 With equity for all, to the ends of its power.
- Piers sowed these four seeds and harrowed them staunchly
 With Old and New Law to allow growth of love
 Among the four virtues and to force out the vices.
 For commonly rest-harrow ruins the crops,
 315 A weed that grows together with grain,
 Just as vices invade and vitiate virtues.
 “The clever keep to the Cardinal Virtues
 And till,” Piers told me, “as the four doctors teach.”
- “You ought now to build a house for your harvest,
 320 Or your grain will have grown and be ripe,” said Grace.
 “Before you go, by God, you must give me
 Some timber,” said Piers, “and a plan for the place.”
- Grace cast down the cross with the crown of thorns
 That Christ bore on Calvary, loving mankind,
 325 And he mixed a mortar that was known as Mercy
 With the blood of baptism bled on the cross.
 He fashioned a foundation that was firm and was fenced
 With wattles of pain and walls of Passion,
 And he roofed the house with Holy Writ,
 330 A Church of Unity chartered and achieved.¹⁷
 When the venture was finished, Grace then devised
 A cart called Christendom to carry Piers’ sheaves,
 With the trusty Contrition and Confession in the traces
 And priests to steer them, and he set off himself
 335 To plow truth with Piers in the wider world,
 And to lay down belief and Holy Church law.
- But Pride caught sight of Piers as he was plowing
 And gathered together a gang to attack
 All Christians and Conscience and Cardinal Virtues,
 340 To batter them, break them and bite at their roots.
 He sent out Presumption, his sergeant-at-arms,

¹⁷Unity refers to the mystical unity of the body of the Church, as described in Ephesians iv 1–16 (Schmidt parallel-text edition Vol. II, 710). Ephesians iv 16 reads: “the whole body, being compacted and fitly joined together, by what every joint supplieth.”

And his slanderous spy called Spreader-of-rumors.
These two came to Conscience, accosted Christians
And told them, “We’ll tear up and toss out the seeds,
345 The vital virtues that Piers has fostered;
We’ll break up Unity and beat down his barn,
And we’ll cast out Conscience and the cart of belief,
And Confession and Contrition that tug the contraption.
We’ll cover the cart and the horses in the color
350 Of sophistry so that Conscience can’t see
From contrite confession who’s Christian, who’s false,
And no merchant who deals in money can measure
What profit is right or wrong or outrageous.”

Pride entered equipped in those colors of cant,
355 With a lecherous lord who lived by lust.
“We’ll live with such luxury and license,” said Pride,
“That the world will at once go completely to waste.”

Then Conscience told Christians, “My counsel is to hurry
And gather together in Unity for good,
360 And to pray for peace in Piers’ own barn,
For I’m certain we haven’t the strength to resist
Unless guided by Grace when we go against Pride.

Then Native Wit came to counsel Conscience
And clamorously called on all Christian folk
365 To dig around Unity a ditch that was deep,
To surround the Church with a ring of ramparts.
So Conscience proclaimed that all Christians should help
To construct a massive and mighty moat
To defend the Church, reinforcing her fighters.
370 All Christians repented, prostitutes apart,
Rejecting sin with that sole exception,
Not to speak of summoners and sworn jurors
Who were wittingly and willingly wedded to lies
And purposely perjured for pots of silver.
375 But save for such scoundrels, all sensible Christians
Who had their five wits hastened to help
To build up Unity bit by bit,
Some by pilgrimage and some by prayer,
Others by penance or dispensing alms,
380 And they wept for their sins, the water welling

And pouring in plenty from their penitent eyes.
 And the purity of the people, and the priests' pure lives
 Held up the home of the Holy Church.

“Now Pride can come; I don't care,” said Conscience.

385 “The Lord of Lust shall be barred this Lent,
 So come to the table, all Christian creatures
 Who have labored so loyally this Lent and dine.
 We have God's body in the bread that is blessed,
 For Grace has given through the word of God
 390 The power to Piers to bake the bread
 And to heal and to help all those who eat it
 Once every month or more if they want,
 If they've *paid their debts* to Piers for his pardon.”

“What?” said the people. “You propose that we pay
 395 Everything we owe before eating the bread?”

“My counsel,” said Conscience, “and a Cardinal Virtue,
 Is to follow the advice in the prayer *Our Father*—

*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against
 us—*

And to seek to be absolved before receiving Communion.”

“Yeah, bah!” cried a brewer, “I'm blowed if I'm ruled
 400 By Justice, by Jesus, for all of your jabber,
 Or Conscience, by Christ. If I clear a profit
 From dregs and draff both drawn from one tap,
 Both thick ale and thin, then that's what I'll do,
 Not hanker for holiness. Conscience, go hang!
 405 And the *Spirit of Justice* is just so much spittle!”

“You criminal,” said Conscience, “you cursed wretch!
 You're hopelessly lost unless God helps you
 And you strictly stand by the *Spirit of Justice*,
 The paramount seed that Piers has sown.

410 You must feed on Conscience and the Cardinal Virtues,
 Or you're lost, believe me, both life and soul.”

“Then plenty are lost,” said a poor-looking priest.
 As long as I've lived I've never lighted
 On a fellow who could fathom the Cardinal Virtues

415 Or fancied that Conscience counted for a feather.
 The cardinals I've encountered all come from the Pope,

And we priests must pay for their food when they visit,
 For their rascally followers, their finery and fodder.
 The people complain to each other, deploring
 420 The curse on the country when a cardinal comes,
 And the lechery that's rife where he lingers the longest.
 And so," the priest said, "I sincerely wish
 That no cardinals would come to visit common folk
 But would stay in their sanctuaries, in Avignon say,
 425 And be '*saints among saints*,' consorting with Jews,
 Or in Rome with their relics, as required by their Rule.¹⁸
 And Conscience, you should keep to the court of the King;
 Let your golden boy Grace give guidance to us priests
 And make Piers our prince with his plows Old and New.
 430 Make him emperor of everywhere, and everyone a Christian!

"For the Pope is not proper; he ought to support
 The people but sends men to slay them instead,
 While Piers the Plowman does his plowing for God,
 Whose gentle rain *falls on the just and unjust*.¹⁹
 435 He has sent us the sun to shine on the cursed
 As brightly as it beams on the fields of the best,
 And Piers the Plowman takes pains to plow
 For wenches in brothels and wastrels as well
 As himself and his servants—though he's first to be served—
 440 But he none the less toils and tills for traitors
 As hard as for honest and honorable folk.
 Let us worship the God who made wicked and good
 And suffers poor sinners who will some time repent.
 May he put right the Pope, who plunders the Church
 445 While claiming to be guardian of Christians and kings,
 Paying salaries to soldiers who shed Christian blood,
 Killing and robbing countless Christians,
 Glossing over the Old Law and ignoring the New:
 *Thou shalt not kill, and Vengeance belongeth to me.*²⁰
 As long as he satisfies his scurrilous self,
 450 He gives not a hang for anyone else.

¹⁸The Pope resided in Avignon between 1309 and 1376, after which rival popes sat in Avignon and Rome for a further forty years.

¹⁹Cf. Matthew v 45.

²⁰Exodus xx 13 (the sixth of the Ten Commandments) and Hebrews x 30.

“And may Christ save the cardinals out of his kindness
 And send them some wisdom and salvage their souls!
 For the common folk care,” the priest said, “not a scrap
 For advice from Conscience and the Cardinal Virtues
 455 Except when they sense there’s something to be gained,
 For they see nothing suspect in deception and lies.
 The *Spirit of Prudence* they assume means deceit,
 And they find the virtues to be vices instead.
 Everyone subtly distorts their own sin
 460 And presents it as shrewdness or spotless living.”
 Then a lord burst out laughing. “By this light,” he exclaimed,
 “I reckon it’s righteous and right for my agent
 To seize what my steward and accountant state
 In the clerical records and accounts that they keep.
 465 With the *Spirit of Intelligence* they search through the scrolls;
 With the *Spirit of Fortitude* they ferret out the funds.”
 A king then came and swore by his crown,
 “I am crowned a king to govern the commons
 And defend the Church and its folk from its foes,
 470 And the law allows me to seize what I lack
 From whoever has it since I’m head of the law
 And the people are its limbs on a level below.
 Yet being their head I look after their health
 As chief of the commons and I champion the Church
 475 And I take from them both entirely by the terms
 Of the *Spirit of Justice* since I sit as their judge.
 I may eat sacred bread for I only borrow
 Or confiscate what the crown requires.”
 “Provided,” said Conscience, “you faithfully defend
 480 Your realm and you rule both by truth and by reason
 And you take what the law entitles you to:
*All things are yours to protect, not to take!*²¹
 With a hearty farewell the priest headed for home,
 And I woke and set down the scenes I had seen.

²¹Presumably a familiar legal maxim.

Step XX

In which I meet Need, who argues the supremacy of bodily needs over even the Cardinal Virtues, as long as Temperance is observed. I sleep again and in my last dream see the coming of Antichrist with the Seven Deadly Sins. Nature, Old Age and Death join the fray, brushing against me too, but despite the efforts of Conscience, a false friar is admitted to the Church of Unity, undermining Contrition. Conscience goes to seek the help of Piers, and I awake.

Then having woken I went on my way
With an unhappy heart that was ailing and heavy,
Worrying where to find any food.
It was nearly high noon when I came upon Need,
5 Who greeted me gracelessly and called me a clod.
“Why could you not find an excuse like that king
For seizing essential sustenance and clothes?
The *Spirit of Temperance* teaches us to take
The items cried out for by urgent Need,
10 Who does not believe in the law or in debt
But will seize three things to sustain himself:
Food when refused for his want of funds
Or a friend who will pay, or a pledge to pawn—
In such a case he’s not scarred by sin
15 If he finds his food by subterfuge.
Second, if he snatches his clothes by deceit,
Need will bail him if he’s bankrupt or broke.
And lastly, the law of Nature will allow
Him to drink at each ditch if he’s dying of thirst.
20 So when necessary, Need may take and ignore
The counsel of Conscience and the Cardinal Virtues,
If the *Spirit of Temperance* is respected and observed.

“For that supreme spirit exceeds and transcends
 The virtues of Justice and Fortitude by far.
 25 The *Spirit of Fortitude* frequently falters
 And makes demands beyond all measure,
 Imposing a penalty too paltry or painful,
 And greater grief than good faith warrants.
 The *Spirit of Justice* often judges too simply
 30 At the King’s request and the commons’ demand.
 And the *Spirit of Prudence* depends in part
 On suppositions about future events,
 But suppositions are no substitute for wisdom:
*Man proposes and God disposes.*¹
 35 It is God who governs the goodly virtues,
 But Need, having nothing, is nearest to God
 And makes folk meek and mild as a lamb,
 For the needy have to be humble at heart.
 That is why philosophers once forsook wealth,
 40 Wishing to live in willful want.

 “And God himself left his spiritual state
 And was made a modest member of mankind,
 So needy, as Scripture unceasingly observes,
 That he said in sorrow when suffering on the cross,
 45 ‘Foxes have bolt holes, and birds can fly,
 And fish have fins and can flee away,
 But Need has nailed me and I needs must hang here
 And suffer these sorrows that soon will be joy.’²
 So don’t be abashed to beg for your bread,
 50 For the maker of the world forwent all wealth.
 No pauper was poorer or perished in more need.”

 When Need had thus scolded me I soon fell asleep
 And dreamt an odd dream of Antichrist’s entry
 Attired like a man, overturning Truth,
 55 Ruining the crop, ripping up the roots,
 Spreading false shoots to satisfy wants
 In each country he came to, cutting down Truth
 And sowing deceit in its stead like a god.

¹Attributed to Plato, as in Step XI line 37.

²Not said on the cross but earlier. See Matthew viii 20: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests: but the son of man hath not where to lay his head.”

He was followed by friars he provided with copes,
 60 And was hailed and honored by religious orders,
 Who rang their bells and bowed in obeisance,
 Cloisters standing empty as they came to acclaim him.
 Most folk too flocked to the tyrant and his fellows,
 Only fools standing firm, preferring to die
 65 Than to see Fidelity so dismally traduced.

Thus artful Antichrist reigned over all,
 Save the humble and holy who feared no harm
 And defied all falsehood and fraudulent liars,
 Cursing those kings and their counselors and lackeys
 70 Who marched with Antichrist, both masters and men.
 But hundreds soon hurried to the hateful banner,
 Which Pride was boldly brandishing about
 With the Lord of Libidinous Lechery and Lust,
 Who belabored Conscience, the keeper and carer
 75 Of Christian kind and the Cardinal Virtues.

“My advice,” said Conscience, “to folk is to find
 In the Church of Unity some charity and cheer
 And to plead with Nature to support the Plowman
 And defend us from the devil and his devious flock.
 80 Let’s appeal to the people to repair to the Church
 And abide there and battle against Belial’s children.”

Nature heeded Conscience and came from the cosmos
 And sent out his foragers, fevers and fluxes,
 Cardiac cramps and toothaches and coughs,
 85 Colds and sores and suppurating scabs,
 Boils and blotches and burning palsies,
 Fits and spasms and vile diseases,
 Which settled on people’s scalps and skins,
 Till a legion of sufferers lost their lives.
 90 “Help!” folk hollered. “Here comes Nature
 With dreadful Death to undo us all!”

The Lord of Lechery and Lust cried out
 For Comfort, his knight, to come to the colors.
 “To arms!” he shouted. “Each strike for himself!”
 95 And the massed ranks met before minstrels could signal
 Or heralds could announce the names of the nobles.

- Hoary Old Age was in the vanguard,
 Claiming the right to carry Death's colors.
 Nature came next with numerous sores,
 100 With poxes and plagues that disposed of many,
 Rotting their corpses with corrupting cankers.
 Then Death came driving in, dashing to dust
 Kings and commoners, simpletons and scholars,
 Earls and emperors, paupers and popes,
 105 Striking them down till they ceased to stir.
 Many lovely ladies, and the knights they loved,
 Swooned and died, reduced by Death.
- Out of kindness Conscience requested Nature
 To stop and consider whether some of the throng
 110 Would depart from Pride and be perfect Christians,
 So Nature stopped to see if it was so.
 But Fortune flattered the few left alive,
 Promising long life and releasing Lust
 Among the unmarried and married men too,
 115 Starting a second assault on Conscience.
 Lust was laughing as he laid about him
 With insinuations and licentious sayings,
 Armed with idleness and a haughty demeanor.
 He bore a great bow, and his broad-tipped arrows
 120 Were feathered with falsehoods and fair-seeming promise.
 His talk of temptations brought trouble to Conscience,
 Perturbing his team of teachers from the Church.
- Then Covetousness came, calculating how
 To conquer both Conscience and the Cardinal Virtues.
 125 He was armed with avarice and hungry greed,
 And his weapons were ways in which to hoard money,
 Perverting people with falsehoods and fables.
 Simony had sent him to assail Conscience,
 And he preached to the people and appointed prelates
 130 Who sided with Antichrist to safeguard their stipends.
 Then Antichrist came like a confident courtier
 And knelt to the King and Conscience in council.
 Good Faith soon fled but Falsehood remained,
 Brazenly undermining with mountains of money
 135 The worth and the wisdom of Westminster Hall.
 He would jog up to judges with "a tiny adjustment,"

- Driving a lance through the law of the land,
 Then canter to the Arches, the Archbishop's court,
 Making Civil-Law Simony by bribing who was sitting.
- 140 For a mantle of ermine he'd demolish a marriage,
 Which ought to be for ever, and provide a divorce.
- "I wish that Covetousness were Christian," said Conscience.
 "He's such a stalwart, by Christ, in combat,
 So bold and forbidding while his bag of gold lasts!"
- 145 But fashionable Life only laughed with delight,
 Arming in haste with humorous jibes,
 Making Holiness a joke and Gentleness a jest,
 Calling Liar adorable and Fidelity a drudge,
 Saying Conscience and his counsel were just so much cant.
- 150 Having made some money he mounted and rode
 In the forefront with Pride but no vestige of Virtue,
 Nor caring that Nature would come in due course
 To cull every creature on earth save Conscience.
- Then Life looked around for a likely lover,
 155 Saying, "Health and I and a heart full of fun
 Will dissipate dread of Death and Old Age
 And silence your worries about suffering and sin."
 Thus Life and his lover, Dame Fortune, both lived
 Until given in their glory the gift of a brat
- 160 Called Sloth, who would cause unceasing sorrow.
 He shot up so swiftly that he soon was of age
 And married Despair, a streetwalking strumpet.
 Her father was a juryman who falsified facts,
 One Thomas Two-tongues, often fined for contempt.
- 165 Sloth made a sling, being wary of war,
 And established a twelve-mile circle of Despair.
 But Conscience reacted by calling Old Age
 To the field to fight and frighten Despair.
 Old Age in haste left Death and chose Hope,
- 170 And struck down Despair but then struggled with Life,
 Who fled in fear to Physic for help.
 He asked for relief and was offered an ointment.
 He paid a high price that pleased the physician,
 Who added to the ointment a helmet of glass.³

³i.e., something useless.

- 175 But Life still had faith that Physic would avert
Old Age and Death with his draughts and his drugs.
But Old Age and Life were still hand to hand,
And finally Age felled a fur-clad physician,
Who dropped in a fit and was dead in three days.
- 180 “Now I see,” Life said, “that surgery and drugs
Are utterly hopeless at staving off Age.”
And in hope of some healing he leapt on Good Heart
And rode off to Revelry, the home of carousing,
The Comfort of Company, as sometimes it’s called.
- 185 Old Age chased after him, over my head,
And my brow was left bald and my crown quite bare,
A swingeing assault to be seen for ever.
“Hang you,” I said, “you ill-mannered Age.
Since when has your highway led over men’s heads?
- 190 If you had any manners you’d ask my permission!”
“Oh, sure,” he said, and assailed me again,
Clouting my ears to hamper my hearing,
Mauling my mouth to pull out my molars,
And ensuring I shuffled, shackled with gout.
- 195 My wife was sorry to see my poor state,
And wished I had waddled away to heaven,
For my limb that she loved and liked to feel,
Lying next to me naked at night in bed,
Was now listless and limp, with no life left in it,
- 200 So sorely had she and Old Age overstrained it.
As I sat feeling sorry I saw Nature come near.
Then Death stood beside me and I started to shake
And appealed to Nature to put paid to my pain.
“Hoary Old Age has visited me here;
- 205 I wish you’d whisk me away from his grasp.”
“You should seek out Unity and stop inside
Till I send you a summons if you want to escape.
But before you leave, you’d best learn how to live.”
“What skills must I study?” I said to Nature.
- 210 “You must learn to love and to leave all others.”
“And clothes and food?” I inquired. “And my keep?”

“If you love sincerely,” he said, “you won’t lack
For belongings or food as long as you live.”

215 So as Nature told me, I traveled via Contrition
And Confession to Unity, the fortress of faith,
Where Conscience was constable and sought to save Christians
But was sorely besieged by seven great giants,
Allies of Antichrist and enemies of Conscience.

220 Sloth with his sling made a serious assault,
Supported by scores of priests of Pride,
In cloaks of Covetousness, combating Conscience
With their fashionable dress and their dangling daggers.

An Irish priest muttered, “By Mary, it matters
What Conscience mumbles no more to me
225 Than the price of a pint if I pull in the money.”
And so said sixty from the same stretch of land.
They shot off a second great sheaf of oaths
And hook-headed arrows, “God’s heart” and “God’s nails,”
And Unity and Holiness had almost to yield.

230 Conscience called Learning to lend him his lance,
“Or these poisonous priests and prelates will kill me!”

Some friars heard him and hurried to help,
But Conscience ignored them for they knew next to nothing.
Need then drew near and announced to Conscience
235 That the friars were purely fishing for appointments.
“They’re probably poor and short of a patron,
So they flatter the rich for funds and food.
But since they have opted for humble habits,
They should chew as they chose, not chase after livings!

240 He who begs to live is more likely to lie
Than the laborer whose labor the beggar relies on.
So friars should leave off the luxuries of life,
And be like beggars, eating blessings like angels.”

But Conscience laughed at this critical account
245 And kindly comforted and called to the friars.
“You all have a home in the Holy Church,
In Unity, honestly, and all I ask you
Is to help that Unity, to harbor no envy
Of the learned or lowly, and to live by your Rule.

250 Then I warrant you will not want for a thing,

- Plenty of apparel and plenty of food,
 If you learn to love and stop chopping logic.
 Saints Francis and Dominic forfeited fortunes,
 Lands and lordships and schooling for love.
- 255 Don't pester for parishes, for Nature makes plain
 That all that God made is moderate and measured.
 He prescribed and established specific numbers
 And named things anew, and numbered the stars.⁴
 Monarchs and knights with dominion and might
- 260 Have only so many men at their command.
 They commission that many when marching to war,
 And surplus soldiers receive no pay;
 Other fighters on the field, no matter how fervent,
 Are spurned and seen as scavengers and crows.
- 265 Religious orders have a limited allowance
 Of regular members by right of their Rule,
 And a limit is laid down in law to the numbers
 Of the various classes of folk, except friars!
 So common sense tells me," Conscience concluded,
- 270 "It's improper to pay you lest your numbers expand!
 Even heaven is numbered, not endless like hell,
 So I wish you friars were fixed at some figure
 And notaries noted and wrote down your names."
- Envy heard this and exhorted the friars
- 275 To learn contemplation and logic and law,
 And to preach about Plato and Seneca's proposal
 That all things on earth should be held in common.
 But I think it is false to give folk such fancies
 For God's law on greed was given to Moses:
*Thou shalt not covet any thing that is thy neighbor's.*⁵
- 280 That edict's not applied in the parishes of England,
 Where parsons and priests should absolve the people,
 And be curates to care for and cure the souls
 Of parishioners, imposing penitence and penance,
 And shriving their sins. But instead, folk's shame
- 285 Sends them flying to friars, just like the fraudsters
 Who borrow to bribe the courts and beg

⁴Psalm cxlvi 4 (KJV Psalm cxlvii 4). The Latin original is omitted to avoid repetition.

⁵Exodus xx 17, the last of the Ten Commandments.

- Their friends to prolong or release them from loans,
Yet meanwhile in Westminster waste the money
Of others in amusements and making merry.
- 290 But the countless folk who confess to the friars,
Unscrupulous jurymen, executors and such,
Who misuse the money others' toil has made
And give presents to the friars to put them in their prayers,
Will die and be in debt till the Day of Doom.
- 295 But Envy hated the urgings of Conscience
And financed the friars to learn more logic,
While uncharitable Covetousness challenged Conscience
In the Church of Unity; but he yet would not yield,
Sending Peace the porter to padlock the gates
- 300 Against tellers of tales and idle tattlers.
Then Hypocrisy took part in the pitiless assault
And fought most fiercely before the gates,
Horribly injuring hundreds of teachers
Who accorded with Conscience and the Cardinal Virtues.
- 305 So Conscience called on a competent doctor
To salve those sick and wounded by sin.
The potion he proposed was bitter penance
For the wretched wrongs they had sinfully wrought,
And repayment to Piers of the *debts that were due*.
- 310 Some detested this treatment and asked to be tended
By surgeons who offered something sweeter.
Sir Lecherous Living lay there and groaned,
Fearing he would die from fasting on Friday.
“There’s a surgeon here somewhere whose treatment is softer,
- 315 By far more effective and friendly and nice:
A friar called Flatterer, physician and surgeon.”

Contrition said, “Tell him that Unity could use him,
For Hypocrisy has harmed a host of people.”

“No need,” said Conscience, “there’s no better cure
- 320 Than a penance imposed by a priest or a bishop,
Unless Piers the Plowman, who has power over all,
Will grant an indulgence if the debt’s not too dire.
But since you insist,” Conscience said, “I may send
To fetch Friar Flatterer to give physic to the sick.”

- 325 The friar heard this and hurried in haste
 To a lord for a letter giving leave to function
 As a priest in his parish, which he presently brought
 Boldly to a bishop, begging for a license
 To hear confessions wherever he fancied.
- 330 He advanced with his fellow to the fortress and knocked,
 And Peace, the porter, appeared at the gate
 And asked at once what it was they wanted.
 “In faith,” said the friar, “for his own advantage
 I would talk to Contrition, if that’s no trouble.”
- 335 “He’s sick,” Peace said, “and so are many others,
 So hurt by Hypocrisy it’s hard to heal them.”
 “Well, you see a physician and pharmacist before you.
 Conscience knows me and my competence at curing.”
- 340 “I pray you,” said Peace, “before I let you pass,
 Tell me your name, and don’t try to pretend.”
 “Brother *Foot-in-the-door*,” the friar’s fellow confided.
 “Then push off,” said Peace, “with your pills and your potions.
 I shan’t let you in without skills of some sort.
 Not eight years since, a similar scoundrel
- 345 Came clad in a cope to a court where I lived,
 And the lord and his lady let him attend them,
 And finally this friar, when the lord was afield,
 Spread a potion so potent two women fell pregnant!”
 But Courtesy countered his caution and said,
- 350 “Welcome the friar and his fellow fairly
 For under his influence while he is here
 Life may learn to leave off Pride
 And Covetousness too, and accord with Conscience
 And embrace him dearly in dread of death.”
- 355 Thus because of Courtesy the man was admitted,
 And he came and gave Conscience a gracious greeting.
 “Can you save the sick?” Conscience said. “If so, welcome.
 Here’s Contrition, my cousin, who has taken a tumble.
 Comfort him and see to his several sores.
- 360 The plasters and powders from the priest make him itch.
 He leaves them too long and is loath to change them,
 Letting them trouble him from Lent to Lent.”

“That’s far too long,” the friar confirmed.
He prodded Contrition and proffered a plaster
365 Of “A private payment and I’ll pray for you, sir,
And all you hold dear for the whole of my days.
For money I’ll make you and your lady both members
Of our mendicant order and remember you at Mass.”

Thus for money he dismissed and diminished folk’s sins,
370 Till Contrition forgot his tears of regret
And his worries about wickedness which kept him awake.
And he swapped feeling sorry, the sovereign remedy
For sins of all sorts, for swift absolution.

Then Sloth and Pride both saw the slackness
375 And came back keenly to assail Conscience,
Who summoned Learning to stand at his side
And told Contrition to protect the gates.

But Peace said, “He’s dreaming, like plenty of people,
For the friar has bewitched most folk with his physic
380 And treated them so tamely they’ve no terror of sin.”

“By Christ,” said Conscience, “I’ll become a pilgrim
And walk the whole width of this wide, wide world⁶
To seek Piers the Plowman, who will put down Pride,
And to find work for friars who flatter out of need
385 And no longer know me. So Nature, requite me
With health and good heart till I hail Piers the Plowman.”

He groaned then for Grace, and I gradually woke.

Here ends Piers the Plowman.

⁶This line brings the poem right back to its beginning.

Selected Bibliography

Source Texts and Translation Used

- Schmidt, A.V.C., ed. *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*. Vol. 1: Text. London: Longman, 1995.
- _____. *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, 3 vols., rev. ed., 2011. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute (Vol. I. London: Longman, 1995, vol. II. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2008).
- _____. *William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*. London: J.M. Dent Everyman, and North Clarendon, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 2d ed., 1995.
- Schmidt, A.V.C., trans. *Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Skeat, W.W., ed. William Langland. *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redeless*. Vol. I: Text; vol. II: Notes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886, 10th ed., 1923, reprinted 1968.

Other Editions of the B Text

- Kane, George, and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds. *Piers Plowman: The B-Version*. London and Los Angeles: Continuum, 1988. (first published London: Athlone Press).
- _____, and _____. *Piers Plowman: The B Version—Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best: An Edition in the Form of Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17, Corrected and Restored from the Known Evidence, with Variant Readings*, rev. ed. London and Los Angeles: Continuum, 2002.
- Robertson, Elizabeth, and Stephen H.A. Shepherd, eds. *William Langland, Piers Plowman*. London and New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

Editions of the Bible Used

- The Holy Bible Appointed to Be Read in Churches* (the "Authorized," or King James Version of 1611, KJV), various editions.
- The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate*. London: Baronius, 2012 (the "Douay-Rheims Bible").
- Rhodes James, Montague, trans. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924.

Principal Materials Consulted

Only the main titles of edited works are given unless authors are cited in footnotes.

- Adams, Robert. *Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2013.
- Alford, John A., and M. Teresa Taormina, eds. *Yearbooks of the International Piers Plowman Society*, esp. vols. 1–7. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1987–1993.
- Baldwin, Anna. *A Guidebook to Piers Plowman*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Barr, Helen, ed. *The Piers Plowman Tradition*. London: J.M. Dent Everyman, 1993.
- Bennett, Michael. “William Called Long Will.” In *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 26, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., 1–25. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012.
- Berington, W.J.C. *Little Malvern Court*. Malvern: Privately published, 1948.
- Brewer, C. *Editing Piers Plowman: The Evolution of the Text*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 28. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Bright, A.H. *New Light on Piers Plowman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928.
- British History*: www.british-history.ac.uk.
- Bryer, Ronald. *Not the Least: The Story of Little Malvern*. Hanley Swan, Worcs: Self-Publishing Association, 1993.
- Burrow, John. “An Alliterative Pattern in *Piers Plowman B*.” In *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 25, Andrew Cole, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., 117–129. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011.
- _____, ed. *English Verse 1300–1500*. Longman Annotated Anthologies of English Verse, vol. I. London and New York: Longman, 1977.
- Catholic Encyclopedia*: www.newadvent.org/cathen.
- Cawley, A.C., ed. *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*. London: J.M. Dent Everyman, 1956.
- Coghill, Nevill. *The Pardon of Piers Plowman*. Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture, British Academy, 1945. *Proceedings of the British Academy* Vol. XXXI. London: Geoffrey Cumberlege.
- Cole, Andrew, Fiona Somerset, and Lawrence Warner, eds. *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, vol. 25. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011.
- Colwall Village Society. *Colwall History Map*. Colwall, Herefordshire: Colwall Village Society, 2000.
- Corbett, John. “William Langland—Poet and Hermit.” *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society* lviii (1961–64): 224–230.
- Deane, Anthony Charles. *A Short Account of Great Malvern Priory Church*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914.
- Donaldson, E. Talbot. “Piers Plowman: The Religious Allegory of the C Text.” In *Interpretations of Piers Plowman*, Edward Vasta, ed. 130–189. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- Dugdale, Sir William. *Monasticon Anglicanum: A History of the Abbies and Other Monasteries, Hospitals, Frieries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches etc.* [First published in Latin]. London: Longman, et al., 1823, esp. vols. III and IV.
- Dunning, T.P. “Structure of the B Text of Piers Plowman.” In *Interpretations of Piers Plowman*, Edward Vasta, ed., 259–277. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- Elliott, R.W.V. “The Langland Country.” In *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, S.S. Hussey, ed., 226–244. London: Methuen, 1969.
- Ford, Boris, ed. *The Age of Chaucer: Volume I of the Pelican Guide to English Literature*. London: Penguin, 1959.
- Garrard, Rose. *A Malvern Treasury*. Malvern: Garrard Art, 2010.
- Gaut, R.C. *A History of Worcestershire Agriculture*. Worcester: Worcester County Council and Littlebury, 1939.
- Green, Valentine. *The History and Antiquities of the City and Suburbs of Worcester*, vol. I. London: W. Bulmer, et al., 1796.

- Harwood, Britton J. *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- Hillaby, Joe. *Ledbury: A Medieval Borough*. Ledbury, Herefordshire: Ledbury and District Society Trust in assoc. with Logaston, 2005.
- Hoepli, Adriano. *Dizionario di Abbreviature Latine ed Italiane*. Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1973.
- Hort, Greta. *Piers Plowman and Contemporary Religious Thought*. London: SPCK, 1938.
- Hurle, Pamela. *Hanley Castle: Heart of Malvern Chase*. London and Chichester: Phillimore, 1978.
- Hussey, S.S., ed. *Piers Plowman. Critical Approaches*. London: Methuen, 1969.
- Inge, W.R. *Christian Mysticism*. The Bampton Lectures. London: Methuen, 1899.
- Inoue, Noriko, and Myra Stokes. "Restrictions on Dip Length in the Alliterative Line: The A-Verse and the B-Verse." In *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 26, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., 231–260. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012.
- James, Stanley R. *Back to Langland*. London: Sands, n.d. [1935].
- Jusserand, J.J. *Piers Plowman: A Contribution to the History of English Mysticism*. Translated from the French by M.E.R. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894.
- Kane, George. *The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies*. The Chambers Memorial Lecture. London: H.K. Lewis for University College London, 1965.
- Lawler, Traugott. "Langland Versificator." In *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 25, Andrew Cole, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., 37–76. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011.
- Lawton, David. "The Subject of Piers Plowman." In *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society*, vol. 1, John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds. 1–30. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1987.
- Martin, Priscilla. *Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower*. London: Macmillan, 1979.
- Middleton, Anne. "The Passion of Saint Averoy: 'Deuynnyng' and Divinity in the Banquet Scene." In *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society* vol. 1, John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds., 31–40. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1987.
- Milburn, R.L.P. *Saints and Their Emblems in English Churches*. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Nair, Gwyneth, and David Poyner. "Concerning the Langland Family of Kinlet." *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society* lxxxiv (2009): 15–20.
- Osborne, Bruce, and Cora Weaver. *Celebrated Springs of the Malvern Hills*. Andover, Hampshire: Phillimore, 2012.
- Owst, G.R. "A Literary Echo of the Social Gospel." In *Interpretations of Piers Plowman*, Edward Vasta, ed., 22–53. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- Quiller-Couch, Sir A., ed. *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939 [First published 1900].
- Parry, Joseph Henry, ed. *The Register of John de Trillek, Bishop of Hereford (AD 1344–1361)*, vols. I and II. Hereford: Wilson and Phillips, 1910.
- Pollard, Alfred W., ed. *English Miracle Plays Moralities and Interludes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923.
- Robertson, D.W., Jr., and Bernard F. Huppé. *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951.
- Ross, James Bruce, and Mary Martin McLaughlin, eds. *The Portable Medieval Reader*. New York: Viking, 1949.
- Ryan, William M. *William Langland*. New York: Twayne, 1968.
- Salter, Elizabeth. *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962.
- Schmidt, A.V.C. *Earthly Honest Things: Collected Essays on Piers Plowman*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012.
- Shropshire Promotions: www.shropshire-promotions.co.uk.
- Simpson, James. *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 2d ed., Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007.
- Smith, Brian. *A History of Malvern*, 2d ed., Malvern: Alan Sutton and the Malvern Bookshop, 1978.

- Somerset, Fiona, and Lawrence Warner, eds. *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, vol. 26. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012.
- Spearing, A.C., and J.E. Spearing. *Poetry in the Age of Chaucer*. London: Edward Arnold, 1974, esp. "General Introduction" 1–40 and "Langland: Piers Plowman" 136–143.
- Stokes, Myra. *Justice and Mercy in Piers Plowman: A Reading of the B Text Visio*. London: Croom Helm, 1984.
- Stone, Brian, ed. and trans. *Medieval English Verse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
- Trigg, Stephanie. "The Rhetoric of Excess in Winner and Waster." In *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society*, vol. 3, John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds. 91–108. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1989.
- Turville-Petre, T. *The Alliterative Revival*. Cambridge: Brewer, and Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977.
- Vasta, Edward, ed. *Interpretations of Piers Plowman*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- _____. *Middle English Survey*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965.
- Warner, Lawrence. *The Myth of Piers Plowman. Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Wells, Henry W. "The Construction of Piers Plowman." In *Middle English Survey*, Edward Vasta, ed. 147–168. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965.
- Woolf, Rosemary. *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- _____. "The Tearing of the Pardon." In *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, S.S. Hussey, ed. 50–75. London: Methuen, 1969.

Index

The many abstract qualities that are capitalized (Abstinence, Anger, etc.) refer to the characters which personify them in the poem, although the qualities themselves may occur at other points. The Bible references in footnotes are not indexed.

- Abingdon 117
Abraham 196, 199–207, 218; *see also* Faith;
Isaac
Abstinence 70, 77, 93
Active Life *see* Haukin
Adam 30, 73, 76, 106, 110, 120, 128, 135,
143, 177, 196, 200, 218–220, 223–225, 229
Agag 9, 49–50
Age *see* Old Age
Alan of Lille 18, 227*n*33
alchemy 113
Alexander 17, 137
Alexander of Villedieu 17, 130*n*26
Alexandria 74, 191
alliteration in the poem 2, 6–8
alms 76, 84, 106, 113, 128–129, 144, 147,
155, 158, 168, 182, 210, 238; dishonest
begging 81–82, 90–91; improper giving
44, 177–178, 184, 187–188
Ambrose 17, 102*n*12, 147, 227*n*35, 235
Amends 38
Andrew 184
Anger 37, 63–64, 168
Anima 15, 100*n*1, 176*n*2
animals *see* beasts; birds
Antichrist 3, 234, 243–252
Antony 183–184, 188
Apocalypse of Gluttons 149
apostles 88, 108, 117, 187, 199, 200, 232–
234; *see also* by name of apostle
Aristotle 17, 112, 119, 133*n*37, 137, 144
Armenia 74, 191
Astaroth 222, 226
astrology *see* astronomy
astronomy and astrology 51, 87, 113, 143,
186, 235
Augustine of Canterbury 17, 188
Augustine of Hippo 17, 67*n*14, 67*n*15,
67*n*18, 102*n*12, 111, 114, 121, 147, 171, 176,
177*n*6, 212*n*12, 235
Augustinians 14, 19, 60*n*3, 184
Austin Friars *see* Augustinians
Avarice 37, 64*n*9, 98, 169, 183
Averroes 149*n*12
Avignon 240
Babylon 74, 190, 222*n*19
baptism 124–126, 145, 225, 237
bastards 36, 39, 63, 92, 106, 173
beasts: domestic 49–50, 74, 75; Noah's Ark
104, 119–120; wild 38, 97, 101, 132–133, 140,
143, 146, 162, 165–166, 183–185, 189, 198
Beelzebub 39; *see also* Belial; Lucifer; Satan
begging 22, 48, 63, 71, 81–86, 90–92, 130,
153–155, 165–169, 172–174, 181–183, 248
Belial 222, 224, 244; *see also* Lucifer; Satan
Benedict 56, 60*n*3, 187
Bernard 18, 56, 109, 177, 187
Bethlehem 74, 140–141, 190, 206, 221, 230–
231
Bible, versions of 9
birds 79, 93, 98, 132–133, 140, 143–144,
162, 165–166, 183–184, 243; Noah's Ark
104, 119–120
bishops 10, 23–24, 40, 67, 77, 88, 94, 103,
131–132, 176, 182, 250–251; Do-best 98–
100; of the Holy Land 175, 189–192;
impropriety of 46, 56, 173, 179

- Boethius 17, 135*n*43
 Book 221
 bribery 40, 44–46, 49, 50, 52, 55, 57–58,
 182, 245–246, 249
 Brinton, Bishop 17–18, 27*n*12
 Bromholm, Cross of 65
 Bruges 158
- Cain 30, 104–106, 117
 Calvary 72, 128, 199, 232, 237; *see also* Passion
 Canterbury 188; Archbishop of 5
 Cantor, Peter 17, 103*n*14, 185*n*31
 Cardinal Virtues 3, 24, 228, 236–245, 250
 cardinals 24, 234, 239–241
 Carmelites 60*n*3
 Cato, Dionysius 17, 87, 90, 93, 113, 117, 134,
 137, 236
 Charity 3, 11, 77, 97, 164, 179–197, 200,
 203–206, 211
 Chastity 77
 Chaucer, Geoffrey 1, 2*n*1, 6, 67*n*18
 Chester, Cross of 72
 Childishness 123
 Christ: meaning of name 228–234; *see also*
 commandments; miracles; nativity; para-
 bles; Passion; Piers; resurrection; Trinity
 Church *see* bishops; cardinals; friars; Lady
 Holy Church; monks; nuns; Piers; Pope;
 priests; Unity
 Cistercians 60*n*3
 Civil-Law 37–40, 246
 Cleobury Mortimer 13–14, 19
 Cleophas 129
 Clergy, synonym for Learning 42, 111*n*12;
see also priests
 Colette 227
 Colting 222
 Colwall 15–16
 Comestor, Peter 17, 90
 Comfort 244
 commandments (of Christ) 3, 75, 118, 127,
 193, 203
 confession 3, 24, 141, 142*n*23, 161, 162*n*2,
 164, 167, 191, 211, 233, 237–238, 248; of
 Deadly Sins 59–72; friars as confessors
 43–44, 63, 123–124, 249–252
 Conscience 1, 3, 75, 93, 124, 126, 170, 174,
 176, 182, 207; Conscience and Learning
 146–152; as guide to Christianity 228–
 233; and merchants 153–164; and Money
 39–58; opposing Antichrist 234–252
 Constantine 17, 117, 192
 contrition 3, 62, 124, 126, 141–142, 161,
 164, 170, 237–238, 242, 248–252
- Courtesy 3, 251
 Covetousness 3, 37, 64–67, 168, 182, 187,
 195, 245–246, 248–251
- Damascus 190
 Daniel 93–94, 193, 217
 David (King David) 31, 36, 48, 50, 120–121,
 125, 131, 165, 190, 214, 232
 Death 87, 215–218, 225, 242, 244–247
 demons 222–226; *see also* Beelzebub; Belial;
 Lucifer; Satan
 Despair 246
 Despensers 13, 16, 19, 45*n*3
 devil *see* Lucifer; Satan; Wrong
 Dismas 72
 Dives 165, 210–211
 Do-best 2, 10, 96–118, 136–137, 146–151,
 162, 228, 233
 Do-better 2, 10, 96–118, 123, 136–137, 146–
 151, 162, 231
 Do-well 2, 10, 94–118, 123, 134, 136–137,
 146–151, 153, 161, 164, 171, 175, 231
 Doctor, the learned 18, 146–152
 Dominic 188, 249
 Dominicans 60*n*3
 Doomsday 59, 67, 72, 88, 94–95, 118, 120,
 126, 139, 225–226, 233, 250
 Dover 57
 Dread 41
 dreams 2–3; Daniel and Joseph 93–94;
 dream I 21–59; dream II 59–93; dream III
 96–146, dream within dream 122–132;
 dream IV 146–171; dream V 175–213,
 dream within dream 194–199; dream VI
 214–227; dream VII 228–241; dream VIII
 243–252; dream sent by Satan 223
 Dunmow 105
- Easter 10, 73*n*26, 129, 151*n*16
 Eden *see* Garden
 editions of the poem 4–5
 Edmund, King 182
 Edward II 16, 18, 45*n*3
 Edward III 18, 27*n*12, 45*n*3, 47*n*4
 Edward the Confessor 182
 Elijah 163
 England 1, 6, 9, 19, 27, 117*n*28, 187, 188, 191,
 249
 Envy 37, 61–62, 100, 169*n*23, 234, 249–250
 Eve 30, 76, 101, 106, 128, 143, 177, 200,
 218–220, 223, 226, 229
- Faith 3, 199–206, 214–215; *see also* Abraham
 False Fickle-tongue *see* Falshood

- Falsehood 3, 14, 35–41, 43, 45, 245; *see also*
 Thomas Two-tongues
 Fidelity 1, 3, 35–36, 57, 124–125, 145, 244,
 246
 Flanders 68
 Flatterer, Friar 250–252
 Flattery 35–41, 186; *see also* Flatterer, Friar
 Fleshly-fancy 122–123
 Fortitude, Spirit of 236–243
 Fortune 3, 122–124, 146, 245–246
 France 6, 18, 47–48, 137*n*6
 Francis 56, 182, 188, 249
 Franciscans 56*n*3, 60*n*3, 96–97
 Free Will 194–195, 201
 French 1, 6, 9, 13, 65, 86, 100, 133–134
 friars: as confessors 23, 43–44, 63, 123–124,
 167, 249–252; four schools of 21; honesty
 of 66, 96–97, 137, 182, 184; impropriety of
 3, 41, 80, 109–110, 116–117, 141, 146, 148,
 153, 177–178, 185, 187, 242–252

 Gabriel 197
 Galicia 74
 Garden of Eden 10, 218*n*8, 223
 Gentleness 246
 Giles 15, 183
 Gluttony 1, 15, 38, 67–70, 102, 108, 168
 Goblin 223
 GOD (Grants the Obedient Deliverance) 145
 God *see* Holy Ghost; kings; Nature; Piers;
 Tree of Knowledge; Trinity; Truth
 Godfrey of Winchester 17, 138*n*8
 Good Faith 245
 Grace 3, 76–77, 228, 234–240, 252
 Great Malvern Priory 14
 Greeks 193
 Gregory I (Saint Gregory) 17, 90, 102*n*12,
 114*n*18, 115*n*19, 116, 117, 126–127, 129, 188,
 235
 Gregory IX 17, 63
 Guile 37–41, 186

 half-acre, plowing of the 78–83
 Haukin 153–171, 194
 heathens 3, 30, 118–119, 122, 126–127, 144,
 153, 188, 189
 hell, harrowing of 3, 217–227
 Herefordshire 6, 14–16
 hermits 14, 21–23, 82, 83, 147, 155, 171, 182–
 187
 Hippocrates 17, 137
 Holiness 123, 246–248
 Holy Ghost 124, 138, 140, 195–196, 197,
 211; *see also* Trinity

 Holy Spirit 139, 234*n*10; *see also* Holy
 Ghost; Trinity
 Honesty 40; *see also* Good Faith; True-
 tongue
 Hope 3, 74, 203–207, 246
 Hosea 192
 Humility 56–57, 75, 77
 Hunger 3, 78–87
 Hypocrisy 250–251

 Idleness 234
 illegitimacy *see* bastards
 imagery in the poem 2–4
 Imagination 3, 14, 110, 136–146
 India 191, 232
 indulgences 23*n*7, 77, 90, 94–95, 210, 250
 Innocent III, Pope 17, 57*n*6
 Intelligence 3, 8, 96, 99–107, 111, 114, 241
 Isaac, Abraham and 201
 Isaiah 120, 192, 196
 Isidore of Seville 17, 176
 Israel 115, 200

 James 33, 200*n*13, 232
 japes *see* jokers and japes
 Jehoshaphat 225
 Jericho 204
 Jerome 17, 90*n*7, 91*n*11, 102*n*12, 235
 Jerusalem 199, 204–206, 214
 jesters *see* jokers and japes; minstrels
 Jesus *see* commandments; miracles; nativity;
 parables; Passion; resurrection; Trinity
 Jews: dealings with Jesus 11, 108, 111, 183,
 197–199, 214–215, 223, 228–229, 231–232;
 generosity of 103; iniquity of 9, 66, 139,
 217, 229, 240; possible salvation of 50–51,
 118, 126, 144, 153, 187, 190, 193, 221; *see*
 also by name of Old Testament personage
 Job 108, 137, 218
 John Bromyard 150*n*15
 John Chrysostom 17, 178
 John of Bridlington 17, 106*n*26
 John of Gaunt 27*n*12
 John of Hoveden 18
 John the Baptist 120, 196, 201, 229
 John the Evangelist (and Apostle) 71, 73,
 127, 129, 142, 159, 224, 232, 235
 jokers and japes 13, 22, 69, 79–82, 103, 108,
 153, 158–159, 179, 246
 Jordan, William 18
 Joseph 94
 Joshua 204
 jousting 11, 199, 214–217, 219, 228
 Judas 22, 30, 103, 111, 183, 198–199

- Judas Maccabaeus 204
 Jude 142
 Judith 204
 Justice, sister of Mercy 219–227
 Justice, Spirit of 236–243
- kings: with Antichrist 244–245; duties of 24–27, 31, 44, 47–48, 51, 56–57, 60, 87, 89, 131, 151, 226, 229, 235, 241–242; God and Christ as kings 76, 131, 216, 222–226, 229–232; as judges 3, 5, 39–59, 99, 116–117, 182, 211; *see also* Agag; David; Edmund; Edward II; Edward III; Edward the Confessor; nativity; Nebuchadnezzar; Pharaoh; Richard II
- Kit 171, 227
- knights: duties of 31, 43, 79–82, 88, 100, 140; God and Christ as knights 203, 214–216; status of 10, 24, 45, 104, 128, 229, 244, 245, 249; wealth and poverty of 37, 66, 131, 174, 185; *see also* Longinus; Trajan
- Kynde Wit 8
- laborers 10, 25, 38, 49, 50, 65, 81, 86, 87, 90, 173, 189, 192, 235, 248
- Lady Holy Church 28–36
- Langland, William 1, 2, 5–11, 13–19; appearances in the poem 21, 61, 64*n*8, 99, 122–124, 136–137, 171–175, 180*n*11, 227, 247
- Larceny 72
- Largesse 77
- Latin: Langland's knowledge of 13, 17, 18; in the original text of the poem 57*n*6, 106*n*26, 115*n*20, 122, 145*n*32, 148*n*11, 170*n*24, 176*n*2, 179*n*9, 226*n*32; use of in England 25–26, 32, 51, 128, 131–132, 142*n*26, 173*n*31, 178, 186
- Law 57–58; *see also* bribery; lawyers; New Law; Old Law
- lawyers 25, 44–45, 46, 50, 57–58, 60, 89–90, 131, 182, 234, 245–246
- Lazarus 193, 197, 222
- Learning 3, 111–117, 134–135, 141, 147–153, 248, 252
- Lecherous Living 250; *see also* Lust
- Ledbury 15
- Levites 140, 192
- Liar 36–41, 246
- Life 100–102, 215–217, 246–247, 251
- literary context of the poem 1, 6, 17–19
- Little Malvern Priory 4, 15–19
- Lives of the Saints* 17, 127, 129, 183
- London 5, 23, 24, 26, 39, 62, 142*n*26, 154, 156*n*26; Langland in London 14–19, 171–174
- Longinus 11, 216–217
- Lor 29
- Love 57, 219, 227
- love, the divinest virtue 32–34, 113, 118, 127; *see also* commandments
- Lovely-to-look-at 14, 122–123
- Lucca, Cross of 81
- Lucifer 11, 31, 72, 73, 120, 137, 159, 176, 203, 215, 218, 221–226, 229
- Luke 30, 71, 73, 93, 102, 130, 142, 235
- Lust 37, 61, 169, 239, 244–245; *see also* Lecherous Living
- Mahomet 9, 51, 175, 187–190, 222
- Mahon *see* Mahomet
- Malvern 2, 3, 4, 11, 13–16, 21, 25, 93, 100*n*3; *see also* Great Malvern Priory; Little Malvern Priory
- Malvern Hills *see* Malvern
- Mark 71, 73, 115, 190, 235
- marriage 60, 89, 91–92, 100, 103–106, 137, 161, 212, 245, 246; Langland's marriage 16, 19, 171, 227, 247; mirroring the Trinity 10, 196, 200; for money 37, 58, 105, 124, 182; *see also* Money
- Martha 129–130
- Mary, Blessed Virgin *see* Virgin Mary
- Mary Magdalene 73, 120, 129–130, 152, 184, 232
- Matthew 49, 71, 73, 85, 90, 129, 166, 189, 190, 235
- Meed 8; *see also* Money
- merchants 22, 41, 44, 48, 49, 57, 60–62, 64–66, 88–89, 158, 178, 198, 238; *see also* Haukin
- Mercy 36, 77; sister of Truth 214, 217–227
- mice *see* rats
- Middle English 1, 4, 9
- Mind 100–102
- minstrels 22, 41, 42, 46, 48, 103, 108, 112, 153, 159, 162, 244
- miracle plays 13–14, 222*n*19
- miracles (of Jesus) 154, 188, 193, 197–198, 231–232; *see also* Lazarus
- Mohammed *see* Mahomet
- Money (Miss Money) 3, 5, 8, 35–58
- monks 15, 46, 63, 72, 116–117, 142, 174, 183, 185, 187
- Mortimer, Earl 16
- Moses 32, 50, 119, 127, 138, 140*n*16, 193, 205, 219, 249

- murder 54, 109, 118, 203, 211–212
 Muslims *see* Mahomet; Saracens
- Native Wit 8, 24, 29, 50, 57, 75, 85, 207, 238
 nativity (of Jesus) 221, 230–231; *see also*
 Bethlehem
- Nature 3, 100–101, 122, 132–133, 136, 143,
 146, 165, 176, 216, 242–252
- Nazareth 23*n*5, 154, 190, 232
- Nebuchadnezzar 93
- Need 242–243
- Nephtali 190
- New Law 140*n*16, 204, 221, 236–237, 240
- Nicodemus 11, 72*n*24, 81*n*4, 216*n*6, 221*n*16
- Nineveh 190
- Noah 104, 119
- nuns 44, 63, 89, 117, 174
- Old Age 123, 146, 245–247
- Old Law 140, 152, 224, 236–237, 240
- Oxfordshire 13
- palmer 22, 62, 74, 80
- Pamplona 210
- parables: of the fowls 189; of the talents 84–
 85; *see also* Samaritan
- Paraclete 234; *see also* Holy Spirit
- pardon, tearing of the 3, 88–95
- pardoners 23, 38, 41, 77
- Passion (of Christ) 73, 183, 195, 198–199,
 206, 214–217, 228–230, 232, 237
- Patience 3, 77, 147–171
- Paul (Apostle) 10, 22, 98, 113, 117, 118, 120,
 125, 137, 148, 175, 180, 183, 184*n*26, 210,
 212
- Paul of Thebes 184
- Peace 53–56, 77; porter at Church of Unity
 250–252; sister of Mercy 214, 219–227
- Peasants' Revolt 5
- penitence 22, 72, 92, 162*n*2, 164*n*13, 249;
see also contrition
- Peter 24, 94, 118, 121, 125, 154, 175, 181,
 183–184, 192, 221, 232–233
- Pharaoh 94
- Pharisees 119, 193
- Physic 85, 246–247
- physicians 41, 85, 170, 197, 246–247, 250–
 252
- Piers: as Christ (and God) 150, 153, 181,
 194–199, 214–215, 228; as the Church of
 Saint Peter 10, 233–240, 250–252; as
 plowman and guide 3–4, 10, 14, 74–93,
 199
- Pilate 108, 215–216, 223
- pilgrimage, places of *see* Alexandria; Arme-
 nia; Canterbury; Jerusalem; Pamplona;
 Rocamadour; Rome; Santiago; Sinai;
 Walsingham
- pilgrims 21–23, 56, 57*n*5, 62, 74, 80–81, 129,
 147, 152–153, 167, 181, 238, 252
- Plague 16, 18, 19, 23, 59, 60, 105, 109, 136,
 154
- Plato 17, 112, 123, 243*n*1, 249
- plowing of the half-acre *see* half-acre
- Pope, corruption of the 36, 45–46, 76, 174,
 192, 234, 240
- Pope Gregory *see* Gregory I; Gregory IX
- Pope Innocent *see* Innocent III
- poverty 44, 87, 90–91, 136, 183, 230, 235;
 merits of 117, 121, 130–132, 138, 164–171;
 poverty of Langland 19, 124, 171; *see also*
 begging; Need
- Presumption 135, 237
- Pride 1, 56, 60, 63, 77, 135, 167–170, 234,
 237–239, 244–252
- Pride-in-perfection 122–123
- priests 10, 140, 173; dispute with friars 23,
 63, 109; ignorance of 71, 115, 131–132,
 142, 146; impropriety of 23, 33, 46, 49, 51,
 63, 115–117, 121, 130, 146, 178–179, 186,
 187, 191–192, 248
- Pru *see* Pride
- Prudence, Spirit of 236–243
- Prunella Proudheart *see* Pride
- Prussia 158
- quadrivium 112*n*13
- Ragamuffin 222
- rats, parliament of 21, 26–27
- Reason 3, 29, 50, 53–61, 67, 87, 126, 132–
 135, 143, 172–176
- Recklessness 119*n*36, 123
- Repentance 61–73
- restitution 65–67, 209–212
- resurrection (of Christ) 118, 128, 193, 221,
 225, 227, 232–233
- Richard II 27*n*12
- Rocamadour 137
- Rokayle 13, 16
- Rokele *see* Rokayle
- Rome 22, 24, 56, 60, 66, 72, 74, 127, 137,
 167, 192, 210, 240
- Rule (of Saint Benedict) 60*n*3, 116–117, 137,
 155, 178, 185, 240, 248–249
- Saint... *see* name of saint
- Saint Paul's (Cathedral) 108–109, 148

- Samaritan 11, 203–214
 Sampson 137, 196
 Samuel 49–50, 196
 Santiago de Compostela 22, 56*n*4; *see also*
 Galicia; Spain
 Saracens 51, 74, 118, 153, 187, 190, 193
 Satan 22, 38, 102, 111, 127, 142, 159, 164,
 167, 195–198, 201, 222–224, 227
 satisfaction 3, 162, 164
 Saul 9, 49–50, 140, 232
 science 112–113, 127, 129, 140, 150, 176, 186,
 235
 Scribes 119, 187, 190, 193, 215
 Scripture 3, 112–132, 147, 150
 Seneca 17, 171, 249
 seven arts 112, 127
 Seven Deadly Sins 3, 13, 43, 61–72, 94, 167–
 169, 177, 244–252
 Seven Sleepers of Ephesus 163
 Shropshire 14, 19
 Simeon 221
 Simon 142
 Simony 37–40, 46, 174, 245–246
 Sinai 74, 203
 Skill 235
 Sloth 3, 70–72, 168–169, 246–248, 252; *see*
 also Idleness
 Socrates 144
 Sodom 164
 Solomon 44, 51, 60, 93, 103, 107, 112, 117,
 119–120, 130, 137, 144, 177
 Soul 15, 175–194
 sources of the text 4–5
 Spain 22*n*4, 56, 60, 191
 structure of the poem 2–4
 Study 3, 107–114
 Swearing 38, 68, 108
 symbolism in the poem *see* imagery
 synopsis of the poem 3–4
 Syria 153, 187, 191

 tearing of the pardon *see* pardon
 Temperance, Spirit of 236–243
 Templars 191
 Ten Commandments 32*n*11, 37, 75–76, 118,
 177, 240, 249
 Thaddeus 232
 Thames 141, 185
 Theology 3, 35, 38
 Thomas (Apostle) 232–233
 Thomas à Becket 191
 Thomas Aquinas 187*n*32
 Thomas Two-tongues 246
 Thought 3, 98–99, 176

 Tobias *see* Tobit
 Tobit 108, 110, 227*n*33
 traders *see* merchants
 Trajan 17, 122, 126–127, 143, 145
 tree (of Crucifixion) 10, 218, 225
 Tree of Charity 10–11, 194–197
 Tree of Knowledge 10, 218–220, 223, 225
 Trinity 9, 31–34, 109, 114, 121, 149, 167, 177,
 190, 192, 199–201; as Faith, Hope and
 Charity 203–206; as a hand 207–209; as
 marriage, widowhood and virginity 196,
 200–201; as a torch 209–211; as a tree
 194–196
 trivium 112*n*12
 True-tongue 10, 51, 53
 Truth: quest for 3, 59–80; sister of Mercy
 217–227; as synonym for God 8, 28–34,
 38–39, 51, 82, 88–89, 103, 127, 167, 220

 Unity, Church of 237–238, 244–250
 usury 37, 48–49, 65–66, 91, 217; *see also*
 alms; wealth

 verse form of the poem 6–8; *see also* allitera-
 tion
 versions of the poem 1, 4–5
 Virgil 17, 137
 Virgin Mary 37, 76, 95, 129, 197, 207, 218,
 231–232
 virginity 10, 196, 200
Vulgate 8

 Walsingham 23, 65
 Warren Witwell 8, 54–57
 Waryn Wisdom 8
 Wastrel 60, 81–87
 Watchfulness 71
 wealth: dangers of 67, 94, 97, 117, 119, 130,
 152, 164–168, 198, 210–211, 236; vulgarity
 of 108–110; wealth and clergy 46, 117, 185,
 191; *see also* alms; bribery; friars; marriage;
 Money; priests
 Westminster 3, 39, 42, 245, 250
 Westminster Abbey 14
 widowhood 10, 196, 200
 Will *see* Langland
 Wily 8, 54–55
 Wit 8
 Witty 8
 Worcestershire 14
 Wrong 30, 38, 54–58
 Wyclif, John 5

 Zacchaeus 152