Ascetic Ideology and the Satiric Mode in Piers Plowman

by Martin Leigh Harrison

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Galloway, Andrew Scott (Chairperson)

Hyams, Paul R (Minor Member)

Hill, Thomas Dana (Minor Member)
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Martin Leigh Harrison
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ASCETIC IDEOLOGY AND THE SATIRIC MODE IN PIERS PLOWMAN

Martin Leigh Harrison, Ph.D.
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William Langland’s Piers Plowman is a richly imaginative work keenly interested in human nature and the society of its day. Precisely because of those concerns, readers of this major fourteenth-century visionary poem have long investigated both its status as a satire and the character of the religious thought on which it draws. A detailed examination of how the work’s ascetic outlook shaped its satire has not been performed, however. This is surprising, because satire also centrally concerns itself with identifying flaws in the character and conduct of both individuals and groups. Moreover, ascetic thought greatly influenced the interpretation and writing of satire well into the central medieval period. This study explores how Langland’s poem, although late-medieval and vernacular, makes thorough use of that long-standing connection.

Part I (chapters 1 and 2) identifies Piers Plowman’s loose participation in a formal “genre” of medieval satiric poetry: one characterized by ambiguity and, throughout the Middle Ages, by hybridity. Chapters 3 through 5 (part II) move beyond discussions of genre (an historically contingent set of formal characteristics) to the work’s use of the satiric mode (a particular descriptive stance). Scholars have recognized the influence of ascetic “contempt of the world” (contemptus mundi) in the poem—but this principle needs to be examined in conjunction with fellow “walls” in the so-called “cloister of the soul.” These influence the poem’s narratorial self-criticism, social criticism, and views on judging others. Part III (chapters 6 and 7) considers Langland’s prophetic ideal, suggests an audience that could have appreciated it, and traces a posterity that increasingly did not.
BIOGRAFICAL SKETCH

M. Leigh Harrison was born on February 27, 1981 in Danville, Virginia, to W. Robert Harrison (an English professor) and Carolyn B. Harrison, R.N. Along with his two older siblings, Chad (now a newspaper publisher) and Martha-Lynn (a children’s librarian), he was raised on his maternal grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ tobacco farm in Pittsylvania County.

Leigh was educated in private and public schools in Danville and Pittsylvania County before attending The College of William & Mary in Virginia in 1999. He served on the poetry staff of the William & Mary Review during his first two years at the College and was named editor-in-chief in his third. An English major enthralled by the history of language, he chose to minor in Medieval and Renaissance Studies because no minor in linguistics was available: this happy accident led him to become much more deeply acquainted with medieval thought and culture. He received high honors for a thesis titled “Dreams, Prognostication, and the Vision of True History in Laȝamon’s Hystoria Brutonum,” was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated magna cum laude in 2002.

Leigh entered Cornell’s Medieval Studies Program in the fall of 2003, where he was a Jacob K. Javits Fellow. He received his M.A. in January of 2007 and receives his Ph.D. in August, 2010. He is married to his college sweetheart, Caroline Dolive (also from Virginia), who has been an exchange student in Russia, a Peace Corps Volunteer in Turkmenistan, and an evaluator for Save the Children in Kyrgyzstan. She holds an M.A. in international education from The George Washington University, specializing in international exchange administration, and currently works for the Hubert H. Humphrey Program at the Institute of International Education in Washington, D.C.
For Carrie, от Души:
Alþouȝ it be sour to suffre, þer comeþ swete after
as on a walyote wipoute is a bitter barke,
and after þat bitter bark, be þe shelle awayne,
is a kernel of confort kynde to restore
(B.11.259-262)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Pis were a wikkede wey but whoso hadde a gyde*.... Fortunately, I have been helped by several guides along the way.

In the first place I would like to recognize my father, Robert, who introduced me to great music as well as great literature at a very early age—and whom I never hope to beat at chess. His appreciation and pride for my work, especially on Langland, has been a powerful validation. My mother, Carolyn, whose resilience is our family’s saving grace, has inspired me with her resolve. No difficulty dulls her bright demeanor; nothing dents her perseverance: “I have *too much Irish* in me!” she says—and she reminds me that I do, too.

I am guided irrevocably by the memory of my humble, wise paternal grandfather, whose name I share, and his brilliant siblings Charles Trawick Harrison and Caroline Harrison Moore; my late maternal grandmother, *née* Gertrude Frances Carter, shapes my life still—a profound influence, and as solid as old iron rock, which I value more than gold.

Compared to these family figures, and almost only, my debt to my committee seems manageable. My director, Andy Galloway, has proven the foil to “contempt of the world”—the enduring “dignity of man”—both in the quality of his character and the true nobility of his mind. He has seen me through every stage in my growth as a scholar, and has never been content to allow that growth to stall; thanks to him are these fruits, and growth that will surely continue. The other members of my committee are, errors and omissions excepted, broadly responsible for the dissertation’s contents. To Thomas D. Hill, a fount of inspiration, I owe my interest in medieval religious thought and my pedagogical ideal—to say nothing of Old Norse. Anyone who has read C. S. Lewis’s account of “Northerness” will appreciate the vast realms at his command, in which I felt lucky to sojourn for a while. I would owe nothing to either
professor were it not for Paul Hyams, fellow traveler in the long twelfth century, who first welcomed me to Cornell in his capacity as program director. His careful reading of this study has significantly improved it, and I am grateful always for the incisive intellect and good humor that shines forth from him both in person and on the page.

To innumerable others, I owe innumerable debts. Thanks to Charles Brittain, I learned good Latin—and, what is hard to put in more words, a way of seeing myself in the university. He introduced me to the Department of Classics, too: *de facto*, albeit not *de iure*, my home in Goldwin Smith Hall. Carol Kaske and Alice Colby-Hall, with unfailing *cortoisie*, inspired some of my happiest hours of study early on; of true scholarly community, no less than depth of knowledge, they represent the Platonic ideal. Dianne Ferriss, program administrator, always paired an Amen-minute rescue with a friendly word. My friends came from several programs and departments, and I am grateful for their companionship, though I cannot list them all. Nicole Marafioti and Misty Urban are still beloved colleagues, far away; Rebecca Skreslet (of Georgetown), Erik Kenyon, Carin Ruff, and Andrew Chignell have all been especially close and provided essential aid. I am, finally, grateful to the United States Department of Education for awarding me a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship from 2004 to 2008: key funding for my research off campus, primarily at the Library of Congress.

I feel the deepest gratitude, by far, toward my brilliant and intrepid wife, Carrie. She supported this project when it presented only difficulties—understood its importance when all others did not—gave me strength when my will faltered—and sometimes did all these from quite different trials in Central Asia. No one better knows the long journey I have traced, and no one can better appreciate the completion of this stage. With no one else would I more gladly share my life; to no one else, I dedicate this dissertation.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELH: English Literary History
MÆ: Medium Ævum
MLN: Modern Language Notes
N&Q: Notes & Queries
PL: Patrologia Latina
RES: Review of English Studies
YLS: Yearbook of Langland Studies
PREFACE
MORBIDITY VERSUS "CONTEMPT"

In a journal entry for New Year's Eve of 1872, concluded on New Year's Day of 1873, the famous antiquarian Sir Frederic Madden (Feb. 6, 1801—March 8, 1873) was seized by disquiet thoughts:

Tuesday 31st. Very bad night. Cough incessant and stomach very uncomfortable. Peste veil [sic] de l'homme! [...] I kept in bed all the day, and made myself as warm as possible. Read a little by lamplight. And so the miserable year is brought to an end. I cannot say Thank God for it! My bitter enemy is still alive, and well; and consequently Planchette, which in 1869 predicted his death in 1872, is found to be a lie, a deception, and a sham.

And now, having fully determined to bring to a conclusion this long series of Journals, filling 43 vols I commenced 1 Jan. 1819 and continued uninterruptedly day by day to the present 31 Dec. 1872, I shall cease to record my daily life. Indeed I am too ill to do so, and have no strength or energy left. I feel I am only a short distance from the grave, and my poor dear wife is dying visibly, slowly but surely. When I cast a rapid glance over all I have done and suffered during the last 54 years, I feel that I have been a very ill-used man, both by Fate (or Providence) and by people in office. And of the hundreds I have laid under obligation, scarcely one ever showed any gratitude. But I cannot dwell on such minor miseries.

There is (of course) a large proportion of matter merely personal in these Journals, and much that is trivial, but also there is a large mass of valuable information on Paleographical, Antiquarian, and Literary subjects. Had my children manifested the slightest interest in these volumes, I might probably have bequeathed them to their care, but as this is not the case it is my wish that these Journals, from 1819 to 1872 inclusive, together with other books and Papers should be placed together in a box properly secured, and after my death offered to the Bodleian Library, on the condition that the Box shall not be opened till the 1st January, 1920—at which time no offence can be given by remarks made (often in extreme bitterness of spirit) on [sic] any individual. If the curators of the Bodleian Library should refuse to accept the bequest, under such conditions, then I direct the same offer to be made to the Chatham [sic] Library, Manchester, and if another refusal is given, then I leave the volumes to my Executor or Executors, to destroy or keep as he or they may think proper.

And these are the last words I shall ever write in the volume before me.

F. Madden
1st January, 1873. 1

No doubt the weather ("black and gloomy" on Sunday the 29th, continuing colder) contributed something to Madden's bad feelings, as did both his and his wife's unfortunate ill health—but Madden also, clearly, had more than the present weighing on his mind. His life, seen in retrospect, disappointed him bitterly; though entries stretching back half a century testify to a mind profoundly gifted for the study of ancient languages and the leisure to pursue that study, resulting in pioneering editions of Middle English texts—and knighthood at age 32—these had failed to leave him content. Although he declares a desire not to "dwell on such minor miseries" as had afflicted him over the years, he also seems unable to keep from doing so.

Perhaps not surprisingly, neither Madden's last entries nor his earliest have been published. The only ones to appear so far in print comprise a slim volume of "extracts" focused expressly on the scholar's years at the University of Cambridge, edited by T. D. Rogers, even though a quick look at the earliest and latest entries will show that for Madden scholarship was not confined to one life stage. Rogers' choice, however, indicates a probable desire to preserve the dignity of Madden's private life, and to take at his word that his entries could provide much non-personal material still valid for a university's institutional history and others' scholarly use. Robert and Gretchen Ackerman provided more personal information about Madden in a book published one year before Rogers', but this "biographical sketch and bibliography" preserves discretion with a necessarily cursory essay.

We can likely ascribe much of Madden's dissatisfaction to depression, but it is poignantly ironic that he should have felt this way. At a time when the ranks of Middle English editors were filled with sometimes-dilettantish amateurs, Madden

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distinguished himself for exceptionally deep learning, editorial consistency, and rigor. His knowledge of literary and intellectual culture, however, appears not to have matched his facility with languages and texts: the span from the twelfth to the fourteenth century on which Madden devoted much of his scholarly attention was rich with reflections, as it happens, on how to age peacefully to arrive at a contented end.

Madden might not have taken to heart the profusion of later-medieval texts about the art of aging, so often written as elegy, because of the literary and intellectual culture surrounding him. In a way alien to and discredited by scholarship in the latter twentieth century, the proverb-laden lyrics and elegies that make up so much of the early Middle English poetic corpus were interpreted as not literally about death so much as about the Conquest—reflections of wounded national pride felt over a century later, attesting to the disarray of the English spirit and the dissolution of its tongue.\(^4\) Madden himself seemed content to focus a focus on editorial and paleographical matters.

Nationalism set aside, these elegies appear (at least through our own lenses) as evidence for another reforming spirit: not lamentations concerning political conquest (as Madden’s compatriots might have claimed), but miniature guidebooks on living wisely.\(^5\) By depicting figures’ overreliance on youth and care for transitory glories, or their dying unprepared, such poems could promote the opposite ideal. Proverbs and messages spoken by well-regarded figures from the distant past, including King Alfred

\[^4\text{The idea that the English language had suffered in this way would be initiated by E. A. Freeman in the fifth volume of his}\ History of the Norman Conquest: its Causes and its Results (6 vols [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1873-1879]) published three years later, though Freeman and some compatriots seem to have been influenced by a German philosopher named Max Müller (1823-1900). Freeman’s most extended meditation on the matter—really a jeremiad—may be found under the subheading “Evil result of the Conquest on language” in the 90-page 25th chapter of volume five, esp. pp. 547-48.}\]

\[^5\text{See for example the}\ accessus\text{ on the elegies of Maximianus, a medieval school text, which I translate from R. B. C. Huygens, ed.,}\ Accessus ad Auctores: édition critique (Brussels: Latomus, 1954), a 25: “In this book he excoriates old age for its wretchedness and praises the delights of youth. [...] The usefulness of the book is to understand the desires of the fool, avoidance of old age. It can be categorized under ethics, because its subject is behavior.”}\]
and Bede, could provide inspiration as well.\textsuperscript{6} The curious figure of Tremulous Hand, an evidently disabled monk contemporary to Laʒamon (whose Brut Madden edited in 1847), appears to have copied Anglo-Saxon texts at Worcester Cathedral with such lessons in mind.\textsuperscript{7} Debates between body and soul, reflections on the joys of heaven vis-à-vis the confining grave: these promote not bitter depression over vanished happiness but, instead, “contempt of the world” (\textit{contemptus mundi})—a term often misunderstood as signifying active hatred but more properly referring to a withdrawal of concern for worldly things. This sense survives in the legal phrase “contempt of court.”\textsuperscript{8}

The interest in learning to live well, largely in order to die well, naturally extended past the literary and into actual life. As Robert Bartlett has shown, Norman and Angevin-era England saw a rise in the popularity of cloistered religious life both cenobitic (communal life behind the walls of a monastery) and eremitic (as a hermit, alone). In the process of anchoritic immuration, a solitary hermit—often female—would be sealed within the walls of her “cell” attached to a church in a ceremony closely borrowing on the mass for the dead. While such practices may seem morbid or depressing, it is important to acknowledge the somewhat paradoxical freedom this sort of religious life afforded—perhaps especially for women; by succeeding with her goal of becoming an anchoress despite heavy family opposition, for example, Christina of

\textsuperscript{6} A sampling of such texts nearly contemporary with Madden, if not in the best edition, may be found in Richard Morris’s \textit{Old English Miscellany: containing a bestiary, Kentish sermons, proverbs of Alfred, religious poems of the thirteenth century from manuscripts in the British Museum, Bodleian Library, Jesus College Library, etc.}, EETS o.s. 49 (London: N. Trübner for the Early English Text Society, 1872; repr. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997).

\textsuperscript{7} On this enigmatic figure and the probably congenital reason for his namesake tremor, see Christine Franzen, \textit{The Tremulous Hand of Worcester: a Study of Old English in the Thirteenth Century} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

\textsuperscript{8} Simo Knuuttila’s \textit{Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) does not explicitly observe but nonetheless makes clear in its discussions that “contempt” in the sense of hatred is very different from medieval religious “contempt.” I am grateful to Alan Perreiah for first referring me to Knuuttila’s book and for providing me with a copy of his forthcoming review.
Markyate was able to avoid entrapment in a marriage she did not want. After the Norman Conquest, religious enclosure also helped women from high-status English families maintain their former prestige.9

The apparent popularity of literal enclaustration accompanied an interest in figurative enclaustration: the cloister without walls. Not all could conduct the rest of their lives in an abbey or cathedral, let alone sealed within the walls of a parish church, and high-medieval religious thought increasingly recognized external *habitus* for its role in shaping interior disposition.10 The phenomenon of the Order of Friars Minor, initiated by Francis of Assisi c. 1209, is well known for its role in encouraging religious life of marked austerity outside of the literal cloister.11 About half a century before that, the idea was explored more theoretically in writing by Hugo de Folieto, a canon regular, in a treatise “on the cloister of the soul.”12 In his treatise, Hugh contrasts the various “abuses” attendant upon literal cloistered life with the interior virtues an internalized cloister might help to promote. Although Hugh likely intended his treatise originally for those like himself in religious orders, its influence extended much more broadly. By the close of the Middle Ages in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as Christiana Whitehead has shown, it even inspired literature intended for the laity.13

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11 David Knowles contrasts the organizational development of the religious orders from Late Antiquity to the early modern period in *From Pachomius to Ignatius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).
12 *De claustro animae*, *PL* 176, coll. 1017-1181.
The development of a “cloister of the soul” arose from the conflict between real and ideal inherent in Christian ascetic thought, a conflict present in classical Stoicism as well. One might expect continual disappointment, unhappiness, and “extreme bitterness of spirit” (such as suffered by Madden) to follow from ascetic critiques of actual experience in light of a higher and perhaps unachievable ideal. True to its Stoic roots’ ideal of apatheia, however, instead criticized reality as a means of promoting detachment from it—or in order to surpass it. To consider death and the grave, for the medieval ascetic, was to prioritize the eternal. This being the case, it may not be surprising that satire was also prevalent in the literature of the Latin West during the later medieval period. Such satire also professes dissatisfaction with what actually occurs in light of an ideal situation that doesn’t occur. It, too, accordingly moves in the direction of ever-greater schematization and abstraction—highlighting, even exaggerating flaws in order more solidly to critique them. It is always difficult to make convincing assessments of a writer’s ‘tone,’ since tone depends on a reader or hearer’s subjective affective response. It therefore lies out of our reach to refer to medieval satire’s decreased humor thanks to ascetic thought. Yet we can say that, under the influence of asceticism, medieval satires broadened in their “affective intent”: the range of emotional reactions they bid to summon up.

In the introduction below, I describe the extent to which medieval ascetic ideology influenced medieval satire. Their discourses were similar, after all, and not merely in the ways I have already indicated. Both were also, for example, deeply concerned with the proper occasion for silence and the authority of speech. The Greeks used the term parrhesia and the Romans either libertas or licentia for the boldness that Stoics and later Christians were to use in their satire, a boldness which

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14 See the reference to Barbara Rosenwein (Emotional Communities), Jean Daniélou (Platonisme et Théologie Mystique), Thomas D. Hill (“The Unchanging Hero”), and François Vandenbroucke (Moines: Pourquoi?) in the introduction below.
came from the speaker’s authoritative position outside of, beyond, and above the individuals and social systems he criticized.15 This authority, at least in the later medieval Latin West, gave the words of ascetic satirists an affinity with both sermonizers and prophets—not least because medieval writers often seemed more earnest in satire, and more serious, than their classical forebears had been.16 This is not to say that all medieval satire was ascetic; certainly the comic verses of the “Goliards” prove otherwise. In fact, comic satire often criticized self-styled ascetics for hypocritical excess. All the same, the correlation between asceticism and satire was robust in the Middle Ages. It suggests that all ascetic discourse is also satiric in some way, to the extent that it promotes reform by drawing attention to human weakness.17

Written satire works verbally much in the same way that visual caricatures work pictorially, both relying on schematization, so it is perhaps not surprising that satire’s theoretical relationship with asceticism might be understood pictorially as well. This is true today, as satiric covers for the New Yorker magazine show. But instruction of a schematizing and thereby satiric sort could be conveyed through medieval visual art as well, as Paul R. Hyams has for instance shown.18 A 1624 portrait by Alonso Cano (1601-1667) of Francis Borgia (1510-1572)—the only

15 See my references in the introduction to Braund, “Libertas or Licentia?”
16 Seneca, in his Apocolocyntosis (see e.g. the edition listed in the bibliography) makes bold statements about his authority for recounting events “as he saw them”—but he does so with obvious humorous intent. Even Seneca’s De Ira has been suspected of being merely parodic: see William E. Wycislo, Seneca’s Epistolar Responsum: the De Ira as Parody (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2001). In the introduction, with reference to Thomas Habinek’s article on Roman satire as “Aristocratic Play,” I provide further discussion of classical satire’s humorous aspect.
17 In L’Ascèse Bénédictine au Moyen Âge (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1927), Ursmar Berlière defines asceticism in a way that does not contradict with my view: “L’ascèse est cet ensemble de moyens par lesquels, avec l’aide de la grâce de Dieu, on travaille à se purifier des vices et des imperfections, à se dépouiller de l’homme naturel pour revêtir l’homme nouveau selon le Christ, à acquérir les vertus qui sont la conséquence et l’expression extérieure de cette transformation intérieure, afin d’arriver par la pratique de la charité à l’union avec Dieu.” (1)
member of that notorious family to be named a saint—illustrates the affinities particularly well.

An imposing work depicting its subject nearly in life size (at 73¼ by 47½ inches), the painting presents a black-clad Borgia, his hair closely cropped into a tonsure, standing alone in the middle of a dark and half-ruined setting. He bears a crowned skull in his left hand. While a bright sun shines through the sooty clouds behind him, he holds up his right hand in a gesture of warding off. The object of this gesture, a large red cardinal’s hat, lies rumpled at his feet. A standard reading of the scene, reproduced in the “Sacred Made Real” exhibition catalogue for the National Gallery of Art, observes that the painting represents scenes from the saint’s life. The crowned skull represents Empress Isabella of Portugal, the interpretation holds, because the sight of her decaying body allegedly impelled him to live ascetically.\textsuperscript{19} The cardinal’s hat, which Borgia rejects while contemplating the skull, refers to a prestigious position that Borgia actually refused.

\textsuperscript{19} A common trope in medieval religious writing contrasts the earthly beauty of potentates with their future corpses’ (or romantic partners’ corpses’) putridity and decay, so this episode in Borgia’s life—even if true—has ample literary precedent. The online notes to the exhibition (and a free brochure) acknowledge this in so far as they call the crowned skull merely “a symbol of worldly vanity.”
Alonso Cano, *San Francisco de Borja (Saint Francis Borgia)*, c. 1624: oil on canvas, 189 x 123 cm., Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla, Spain; on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. for “The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture, 1600-1700” (Feb. 28 to May 31, 2010). Public-domain image obtained online.
There is certainly nothing invalid with this historicizing interpretation, given that it reflects episodes held true of its subject’s life, though certain tropes of ascetic piety deserve recognition as tropes. In any case, the painting’s outsized focus on just a few spare elements, whether historical or conventional, helps to convey that piety in terms closely analogous to written “ascetic satire.” Its lavish attention on Borgia the individual presents him as a model for society. He is illuminated by the sun (bearing the “I.H.S.” monogram associated with Christ) shining at his back; the darkness of the landscape around him shows that a similar brightness has failed to illuminate the rest of the world, wrapped in its own brown and threatening clouds. The cardinal’s hat, flattened, indicates the base emptiness—vanitas—of its associated position. The crowned skull registers the impartiality of death.

Even as they convey a critical, “satiric” view of the powers of this world, the spare elements of Cano’s portrait suggest a means for overcoming the problematic issues they highlight; the painting’s ascetic program suggests the sermonic mode as well. The way to stand, it indicates, is to study the vanity of dead kings (or empresses like Isabella, as the case may be). One might then learn to reject honors similar to those represented by the cardinal’s hat. By taking on the tonsure one might take on a more lasting nobility, symbolized here by a halo; black clothes, consonant with the dominant colors of the landscape, find their foil in the halo and brighter sunlight.

The portrait’s suggestion of a high status for Francis Borgia, a certain nobility entirely alien to the vain and mortal world he ignores, underpins the prophetic aspect of its message—a stark one: that heaven-clouding worldly honors not only cannot

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20 The curators at the National Gallery present Cano’s painting of Borgia with a life-sized sculpture of the saint, made in the same year (1624), by Juan Martinez Montañés (1568–1649) and Francisco Pacheco (1564–1644). A companion statue of Ignatius of Loyola depicts that figure with tears streaming down his cheeks—a fact that goes without remark in the exhibition catalogue, though this characteristic likely refers to the role of weeping in the saint’s “spiritual exercises.” On these see for example Jean-Joseph Navatel, “La Dévotion Sensible, les Larmes, et les Exercices de Saint Ignace,” Collection de la Bibliothèque des Exercices de Saint Ignace 64 (1920), pp. 3-19.
prevent death, they might actually lead to it. In order to mitigate the decidedly bad politics of such a message, the painting imbues its prophet—Francis Borgia—with an authority greater than the ones that he warns. His source of authority is the “sun,” which shines behind him and illumines him in the scene. He stands at a level above the monarch’s skull; the cardinal’s hat is quite literally at his feet. He is outside of, and so able to speak frankly to, worldly powers.

Taken as a whole, Alonso Cano’s portrait of Francis Borgia illustrates not only the affinity satire increasingly enjoyed with sermons and with prophecy in the medieval period but also, just as much, the constructive role medieval (and slightly later) thinkers ascribed to asceticism. The painting draws heavily on tropes associated with medieval “contempt of the world” while clearly finding such asceticism salutary. It offers an invitation—one that Madden refused—to look past fortune’s uncertainty and life’s “minor miseries.” If Madden’s bitterness, depression, and morbidity were destructive, medieval asceticism was literally edifying: contempt of self, contempt of the world, love of one’s neighbor, and the defense of Truth were understood in fact to be the very walls that made up the “cloister of the soul.”

21 How these ideals influenced one late medieval poet’s satire, written in the vernacular for clergy and laity alike, will be the subject of this dissertation.

21 Peter Damian at one point uses “Veritatis defensio” where other writers use “amor Dei.” I do not wish to claim that Langland was indebted to that particular text when mentioning “Veritatis defensio,” however. I use it simply because it keys in nicely to the concern with Truth (Veritas) in Langland’s poem and also—with its verb, “defense”—indicates how for a medieval Christian writer the love of God could have found expression through satiric judgment.
CHAPTER I
TWO TYPES OF AMBIGUITY:
INGENUITY, AUTHORITY, AND THE DANGERS OF CRITICAL SPEECH

In a work expressly devoted to the topic of justice, book Five of Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene, the (just) knight Arthegall encounters a disturbing display of punishment on his way to the court of Queen Mercilla (who symbolizes mercy):22

ix.
Thereas they entred at the Scriene, they saw some one, whose tongue was for his trespasse vyle nayled to a post, adiudged so by law: for that therewith he falsely did reuyle, and foule blaspheme that Queene for23 forged guyle, both with bold speaches, which he blazed had, and with lewd poems, which he did compyle: for the bold title of a Poet bad he on himselfe had ta’en, and rayling rymes had sprad.

Thus there he stood, whylest high ouer his head, there written was the purport of his sin, in cyphers strange, that few could rightly read Bon Font: but bon, that once had written bin, was raced out, and Mal was now put in. So now Malfont was plainly to be read; eyther for th’euil, which he did therein, or that he likened was to a welhead of euill words, and wicked sclaunders by him shed.24

The most striking aspect of the scene, apart from the vicious creativity it ascribes to the hand of mercy, is that the object of punishment shares Spenser’s occupation: he is a poet, and a satiric one at that.25 The passage might even sympathize with the condemned poet a little. It draws attention by reference to the word “Bon,” now in

23 i.e. through, according to Alfred B. Gough, “Who Was Spenser’s Bon Font?” MLR 12.2 (1917), pp. 140-45.
24 Gough points out that these last two lines offer two alternate interpretations of BonMalfont’s name: “they do evil” or “fount of evil.”
25 Some might question whether the spreader of “rayling rymes” (hardly subtle) can be called a satirist—a valid concern to have. I certainly beg the question by giving both Spenser and this poet the same label, but I do so here because both types of writer (satirist and composer of “rayling rymes”) risk punishment for writing that others have the power to deem intemperate criticism (Spenser elsewhere shows himself to have been acutely conscious of these risks, as in the Letter to Raleigh). For more on Spenser as a satiric poet, see the concluding chapter, below.
“cyphers strange, that few could rightly read,” to the fact that Ben Mal Font had once enjoyed regard and favor for his verse—but that the queen who has punished him has made this hard to see. (“Bon” is hard to read “rightly,” whereas “Mal” is “plainly to be read.”) The passage also describes nearly the same grisly fate as Cicero, another writer who found himself on the wrong side of the law.26

But how much sympathy for Ben Mal Font does Spenser’s vignette really show? To decide requires considering Spenser’s source for the character (the Ulpian Fulwell whose name inspired the passage’s last two lines) and some consideration that Spenser—though he brings up the figure to indicate the dangers of satire—is satirizing him. Ulpian doubtless did not get his tongue “nayled to a post” for libeling Queen Elizabeth, though Ben Mal Font has. The severity of this poetic punishment suggests the enormity of his poetry’s offense, reminding readers that words do matter and can bear weighty consequences. On the one hand, then, the passage’s sympathy lies with the wronged Mercilla and (thereby) with the real-life queen. On the other hand, Spenser’s picture here does not necessarily show that he condones Fulwell’s real-life punishment, whatever that might have been.27 Its portrayal as excessive (similar to Cicero’s, although meted out by “Mercy”) suggests the view that punishment other than censorship is excessive. In that view, Spenser reminds the reader that words don’t matter—at least, not enough to merit outrage. Spenser thus manages to make Fulwell emblematic and exemplary in a way that warns poets against spreading “rayling rymes,” even as its apparent eager agreement with a bad poet’s fate at the hands of a

26 As I have discussed in the context of another episode in the Faerie Queene, involving the character of Florimell and the magical girdle she wears, the word “adijudged” in Spenser can refer to decisions simultaneously authoritative and flawed. Perhaps those connotations apply here. I do not intend to embark on a digression concerning the death of Cicero here. I do not know what Spenser thought about it, either, but I do feel justified in assuming that Spenser—like so many of his contemporaries—held the orator in high regard.

27 Noting that Fulwell simply disappears from the record, some years after the publication of his works, Gough suggests that Spenser’s depiction was motivated by ill will. In any case, we cannot imagine Ben Mal Font’s fate being visited upon even the most obnoxious Elizabethan poets.
blameless queen exaggerates that into a monstrosity. The very act of renaming \textit{Ben} \textsuperscript{MAL} Font for his “blasphemy” attributes a godlike power to the queen, one which should encourage detractors to temper their criticism \textit{and} encourage her to stay her hand. The portrait might promote some ethically reformist end for either party, taken in context. Here, however, it simply raises questions—does not suggest a specific course of action—regarding those parties’ behavior. Its topicality attracts notice but almost immediately cedes attention to larger (non-topical) issues, in a way that \textit{Ben} \textsuperscript{MAL} Font himself probably did not do.

In sum, Spenser outweights his degree of mute sympathy with a grim understanding that writing satiric poetry requires caution. The image of \textit{Ben} \textsuperscript{MAL} Font before the court of Mercilla serves as a reminder for Spenser of how quickly a poet’s fortune can turn, how dependent writers of social criticism can be upon the political and cultural climate in which they write. Since Mercilla’s court possesses the authority of a divine rather than a human institution, the poet being punished has been charged beyond defamation or libel. We read that the sign over his head proclaims “the purport of his sin,” namely that he “did foul blaspheme” the crown. And with this, Spenser shows, the role of poet might not be enough by itself to ensure a poet’s preservation: sometimes, even for a satirist, holding one’s tongue is better than the chance of losing it.

Spenser was by no means the first poet to understand the risks inherent in using literature to criticize others. Satiric poetry, which provides an important laboratory or testing-ground for the limits of free speech, is inherently confrontational by virtue of being critical. Satire is always problematic speech: it does few favors to its (often influential) targets, yet it draws attention to itself; it is “free speech” to the extent that someone has been able to create it, but it still groans at being left unheard. The poet’s subordinate social position almost assures that he will end up criticizing
someone greater than himself in influence and prestige. Therefore, just as it behooves a would-be satirist to be critical, it also behooves such a poet to take care regarding what and whom to criticize. He needs to judge, but to avoid punitive reprisal—to treat general situations relevant to individuals and groups (identities, conflicts, and relationships) rather than specific topical circumstances. He must use terms that his satire’s addressees can understand, a demand which might invite topicality, and he might draw inspiration from events happening in real life—but he must prevent primary attention from lingering on real-life specifics. He mustn’t exhaustively assess objectively presented details, and he must also avoid the appearance of doing so.

As such, it will usually be unclear whether the satirist has presented a topically relevant situation expressive of wider truths or a generally relevant situation immediately applicable. The former type of satire will be safer because, even though it presents an immediate situation, it defuses its critique suggesting that matters have always stood that way. The latter type of satire is not unsafe, though, because the trick of presenting general situations that comment on specific ones requires characters and settings far removed (outside their general qualities and relationships) from what they comment on. I call the satirist’s vital limiting uncertainty “ambiguity.” The satirist maintains this ambiguity through caricature: a representational style whose emphases and suppressions deny his claim to objectivity, leaving his take on specific facts unknown.

Ambiguity negotiates a tension between the pressures for “speech” and “silence” that lies at the heart of satire—a tension to which a memorable phrase from Walter Map’s Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum gives voice: “loqui prohibeor, et tacere non possum.” One can imagine that this conflict lies at the heart of any critical

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28 George Orwell’s Animal Farm comes to mind.
utterance, for that matter, no matter how lacking in verbal artistry, but explorations of this tension elsewhere have been increasingly hard to find. Despite the grandiose claims of Burckhardt that modernity helped to foster the development of “the individual” (that problematic term), the story of the past century and more has actually been the development of the group. But as a result, with today’s critical voices emboldened by the assurance of coverage on the Internet or by other media, we rarely encounter the image of a comparatively weak individual employing his wits against powerful controlling interests. The group of signatures on a petition—the army arrayed under the banner of a talking point—has become the typical vehicle for written complaint, with the unfortunate result that (outside the courts) the boundaries between speech and silence are not thoroughly explored, and certain issues central to what it means to speak freely are ever less frequently entertained.

Satire deserves attention then, partly because it presents an individual relying on his own abilities to point an ungrateful finger at powerful interests—an individual who has every reason to turn to the toolbox of rhetoric and poetry. With these tools he can emphasize the quality of his mind, entertain, soften certain blows that might fall on his closest benefactors and by anticipating deflect other reprisals that otherwise might rain down on him. Satire is especially interesting as critical speech because it models for us (when reality will not provide) a picture of the risks, defenses, and rewards an individual must face, set up, and hope to gain when challenging powerfully entrenched corruptions in his world, upon which he might at the same time depend.

31 À propos of free speech and the courts, a recent ruling by the United States Supreme Court in favor of a group called “Citizens United” has renewed discussion in this area. See Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 558 U.S. 50 (2010).
Satire represents issues central to any debate concerning speech, but it is also
decidedly literary. Even its central dynamic of crafty individual against a powerful
status quo has often been a kind of fiction. In the works of the classical satirists, the
“persona” which bear the poets’ names have been shown—recently by Catherine C.
Keane, among others—to be elaborate constructions.\(^\text{32}\) Moreover, as Thomas Habinek
has indicated, the satirists’ cozy relationship to what we might call the Roman “power
elite” implicates them as jaded partakers in the injustices of their social system rather
than clear-eyed outsiders outright.\(^\text{33}\) In other words, satirists often write critically only
when they know they can. Yet despite such artifice, if not because of it, the classical
satirists place the problem of their poems’ problematic speech at the forefront, in
effect raising our awareness of the high stakes involved. They might do this so as to
appear even braver and more forthright, to appear driven on by a compulsion to “call it
like it is,” like Juvenal in the first line of his poems: “Semper ego auditore tantum?
munquam ne reponam?”\(^\text{34}\) Regardless of motivation, however, satirists’ choice to
portray themselves as voices crying out in a wilderness of fraud and abuse means that
they absolutely must consider possible limits to and defenses for their speech.\(^\text{35}\)

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\(^\text{32}\) On classical satiric persona, a rich field, see Catherine C. Keane’s discussions of how narrators
present and construct themselves in *Classical and Modern Literature* 22.2 (2002), pp. 1-5 (introduction
to the issue) and pp. 215-31 (“The Critical Contexts of Satiric Discourse”). See also Keane’s “Satiric
31. I am grateful to Keane for mailing me offprints of these pieces and for her interest in this project.
Susanna Morton Braund discusses the divergent and developing narratorial persona of Horace, Persius,
11-24.

\(^\text{33}\) Habinek covers the poets’ at-least avowed lack of serious reformist purpose in “Satire as Aristocratic
University Press, 2005), pp. 177-91; Juvenal explores his place in the social hierarchy (not the lowest)
in his fifth satire, set at a dinner party.

\(^\text{34}\) Juvenal 1, line 1 (Braud, *Juvenal and Persius*, p. 130-131, translates: “Shall I always be stuck in the
audience? never retaliate[...?”]).

\(^\text{35}\) I discuss the threat of censorship in late fourteenth-century England in the next chapter, but this was a
perennial problem. As Braund notes, Persius’ literary executor Cornutus took care to “[replace] line 121
in Satire 1, allegedly ‘King Midas has donkey’s ears,’ with ‘Is there anyone who does not have
donkey’s ears?’ to avoid the risk of insulting Nero” (*Juvenal and Persius*, lines 14-15).
Americans would identify “freedom of speech” as the core principle facing satirists such as I’ve just described, and without a doubt satire presents itself most luxuriously—to Americans—as the expression of that ideal. The words to the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights to the United States Constitution, which declare that “Congress shall make no law […] abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press” need to be read in the context of the main Preamble’s assertion that the document exists “in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Freedom of speech comes across as a foundational ideal for Americans, especially when exercised against the government who insures it—a circumstance that introduces complexities if not tensions since, even in America, some types of expression are not allowed.

Not surprisingly, Americans’ most ardent critical examinations and defenses of satire, to say nothing of their own employments of it, often feature criticism of the State: consider Jon Stewart’s Daily Show, the Colbert Report, The Onion, and several novels by Christopher Buckley, or—as Susanna Morton Braund does—lyrics to the song “White America” by the rapper Eminem.36 While this political focus may seem inevitable, however, the opposition between private truthsayer and powerful élite fails to suggest another way in which satiric speech was viewed as problematic in the ancient world, quite apart from its potential to call attention to the failings of the powerful: it can also criticize fellow human beings, even outside the corridors of power, risking outrage almost by design and without clear motive (patriotic or otherwise). Satire is therefore, in fact, problematic speech even when the State is not involved.

The word the Greeks used to describe the speech exercised by satirists—still of critical interest, as the focus of Michel Foucault’s famous last lectures to the Collège de France—was *parrhesia*: a word that denoted frank, bold, and even coarse critical statements about others. To the Romans, the term translated in two ways: as *libertas*, (“liberty” or “freedom”) always to be compared to and distinguished from *licentia*, (offensive “license”). As Susannah Morton Braund has argued, satirists constantly need to negotiate the line between “liberty” and “license” in their speech, or in other words to prove to their potential detractors that they speak virtuously rather than out of vice. Braund’s reading of a few lines from Eminem’s “White America” nicely lays out the artist’s negotiation of this tension between “speaking the often unpalatable truth about society” (liberty) and “exploiting [the] platform to give offense” (license), which “dynamic tension [...] the satirists exploit by reviving the threat of *licentia* in order to assert their exercise of *libertas*.” This quite essential tension sets the stage for ambiguity.

After consciously exploiting the tension between bracingly salutary truth-telling and needlessly offensive attack, satirists need to avoid the punitive retribution of “censorship or censure,” which Braund defines as “legal coercion and social coercion.” Braund makes the interesting claim that, for this reason, the classical Roman satirists Horace, Persius, and Juvenal developed in “programmatic” poems commenting on their own reasons for writing satire—the following pattern or sequence of statements:

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38 Braund, “*Libertas or Licentia*?” p. 410.

39 Braund, “*Libertas or Licentia*?” p. 409.
1. The satirist makes a challenging statement, in bombastic or defiant terms, of his mission in writing satire
2. [An] interlocutor warns him of the risks of satire
3. The satirist appeals to the precedent of Lucilius[, the first Roman satirist whose works survive in fragments]
4. The interlocutor renews his warning in different terms
5. The satirist evades the issue.

As Braund observes, Horace’s “evasion” involves humor. Juvenal and Persius, while not exactly employing humor, also manage to “evade” the issue of satire’s risks by suggesting facetiously how harmless their verse will be (Juvenal pledges only to speak of the dead, while Persius promises to confine his criticism to a veritable hole in the ground—his little book). Such evasions continue, as Braund takes care to show, even in the bold and Constitutionally protected realm inhabited by Eminem. In crying out imprecations against political heavyweights with “the free-est of speech this [D]ivided [S]tates of [E]mbarrassment will allow [him] to have,” as Braund notes, Eminem “does not tell us” how to interpret his statement. “[T]o destabilize everything further,” she adds, “he finishes the track with the spoken flourish: ‘I’m just kiddin America, you know I love you.’”

Horace’s evasion in Satires 2.1 particularly highlights the seriousness of the risks the satirists seemed to face, as well as their sometimes monumental frivolity in facing the same, and all the more because the exchange in which this evasion takes place serves as a nice interpretive gloss to Spenser’s depiction of the poet Bon\textsuperscript{Mal} font with which this chapter opened: told that “bad (\textit{sc. evil}) poems” (\textit{mala carmina}) will undoubtedly lead to a criminal trial, Horace saucily asks what will happen if he writes “good poems” (\textit{bona carmina}), whereupon his interlocutor admits that all charges

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\textsuperscript{40} Braund sees this pattern hold for Horace Bk. 2 sat. 1, Persius 1, and Juvenal 1 (“\textit{Libertas or Licentia}?” p. 419).
\textsuperscript{41} Specifically, it uses a pun I will discuss in a moment.
\textsuperscript{42} Juvenal 1, lines 170-171; Persius 1, lines 100-123. See the discussion in Braund, “\textit{Libertas or Licentia}?” pp. 420-21.
\textsuperscript{43} Braund, “\textit{Libertas or Licentia}?” p. 412. Such “destabiliz[ation],” and the many ways writers could achieve it in the Middle Ages—which I have called “ambiguity”—is the main topic of this chapter.
would be dropped in laughter. As Spenser’s scene more soberly points out, though, no *soi disant* “good poet” need feel quite so carefree as Horace seems to, here; it’s not really up to the poet to say whether his poems are good or bad, full of vice or replete with virtue, in the eyes of those who “adjudge” him. That *Bon M* A Font had “on himself [taken]” the “bold title of a Poet bad” might not have been entirely his own doing, in other words. The performative evaluation of his superiors could have compelled him to bear that title along with the rest of his punishment.45

Perhaps the classical satirists’ best defense lay not in their purported avoidance of vice or embrace of virtue, their exercise of liberty too easily confused with license, but their frequently pervasive (indeed sometimes utter) lack of consistent moral conviction. Braund approvingly quotes the conclusion to an unpublished paper by Ralph Rosen, which supports this point about what she calls “the slipperiness of satirists”:

> Few satirists—from the Greek iambographers to Howard Stern[—]ever display a consistent moral position, despite the complex rhetoric of self-righteousness that defines the genre, and most flirt with didacticism only to undermine it with their own brand of *improbitas.*

The way the classical satirists and later writers as well authorize their critical speech and deflect criticism from it often involves postures that tacitly self-dismantle, often through an unsustainable exaggeration of flaws and inflated judgmental claims: caricature.

As the “artifice” responsible for creating ambiguity, caricature helps the satirist maintain the limits of his speech.47 It thus needs to be seen as a defining characteristic.

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44 Braund, “Libertas or Licentia?” p. 419.
45 Fortunately, as I shall at length suggest, William Langland provided Spenser a different model for writing satire than the poems of Ulpian Fulwell (the real-life individual on whom, as Gough noted, *Bon M* A font was based).
46 Braund, “Libertas or Licentia?” p. 424 n. 24
47 cf. Braund, “Libertas or Licentia?”: “[L]ike Eminem’s lyrics, satire continually concerns itself with limits. Most obviously, satire polices the boundaries of acceptable behavior by criticizing those who
And since it is frequently comic, it also tends to make people laugh. The Roman satirists understood this: despite their poems’ frequent displays of crudity, harshness, and rage, there can be no doubt that their works were considered funny as well. When Persius depicts a typical patron begging him for an uncharitable depiction, for example, we can see the aspect of Roman satire characterized by Thomas Habinek as “aristocratic play.” Early literary theorists on satire also recognized the satiric embrace of humor. Isidore of Seville compared it to comic drama; before him, in the fourth century, the grammarian Diomedes wrote of satire as writing in which “things laughable and shameful are said” (ridiculae res pudendaeque dicuntur). In general, according to a definition I discuss below, the style of satire was understood to range widely “on a scale from severity to humour.” It will not surprise modern readers to hear that humor was common—as Horace asks, what’s the harm in laughing while telling the truth?—but medieval authors often took another view. This “other view” provides the “harm” about which Horace asked, and it makes understanding the historical and theoretical place for satiric humor very important to trace.

Our difficulty in ascertaining a satire’s true ratio of “ridicule” to art, insult to entertainment, passion to hyperbole, which stems from the fact that satiric ends and means are often inextricably entwined, exemplifies the uncertainty scholars face when attempting to classify literary works. Definitions of satire both antique and medieval commonly describe such writing in terms of fullness, hybridity, variety, and polysemy.

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49 See Paul Scott Miller, “The Medieval Literary Theory of Satire and its Relevance to the Works of Gower, Langland, and Chaucer,” Ph.D. diss., Queen’s University Belfast, 1982, p. 47 and circa. I refer here to Miller’s definition for satire: “that type of ethical verse, ranging in tone between bitter indignation, mocking irony, and witty humour, which in forthright, unadorned terms censures and corrects vices in society and advocates virtues, eschewing slander of individuals but sparing no guilty party, not even the poet himself” (171).
50 “Ridentem dicere verum, quid vetat?” (Bk. 1, sat. 1, line 24)
Satires are said to jump from matter to matter like a dancer (*saltatrix*), wild like a satyr (*satyra*); to offer a heaping dinnerplate of targets as well as critiques (*lanx satura*); to say several things at once like a complex law (*lex satura*). Marked by intense irony, referentiality, and hybridity, satires require caution, even downright suspicion, to interpret.\(^{51}\) As Wyatt Mason has observed of contemporary satires, “they revel in, and trade on, knowingness.”\(^{52}\)

If anything can be called “straightforward” about the satiric mode, as Mason indicates, that would be its general technique, which takes common critical observations and transforms them into literally remarkable ones. “Yes, as it happens,” Mason goes on to note,

>Parker, Bierce, and Twain are making timeless points: love, often unlovely; conversation, frequently dull; war, not exalting. No one, though, would needlepoint these revelations onto pillows—they’re old news. In the hands of an adept satirist, however, the ‘old news’ satire brings becomes a special report.\(^{53}\)

Like newspaper caricaturists, whose weird drawings the brain has been found to recognize more readily than their originals, satirists like to depict people and situations in highly unrealistic, schematic, compressed portraits that, strongly emphasizing their subjects’ differences from us, decrease our sympathy for them—more or less. As Braund has noted, satire is notoriously hard to characterize or define; she approvingly takes as a starting point a certain Feinberg’s definition, though, that satire is “the

\(^{51}\) For the history of these etymologies see Miller, “Mediæval Literary Theory” and Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). They draw on Diomedes—with Miller noting that the “satyr” etymology is not exactly typical but does appear on occasion.

\(^{52}\) Wyatt Mason, “My Satirical Self” (*New York Times Magazine*, September 17th, 2006): “All these various entertainments—human emanations on the Web, on television, at the movies and between hardcovers (whatever their differences in ambition, conception and achievement)—are attuned to the ridiculous in modern life. They are all, in other words, satirical: they revel in, and trade on, knowingness.” I thank George Saunders for providing me with this reference.

\(^{53}\) Id. (op. cit., n. pag.)
playfully critical distortion of the familiar.”\textsuperscript{54} This distortion makes us feel relieved and self-satisfied (in a word, proud) that we aren’t subject to the same problems, vices, and other faults as they are.\textsuperscript{55}

Satire amounts not \textit{just} to criticism, then, though invariably it is critical. Nor is humor necessary, as we shall see, though satire can inspire laughter. This study will focus not on satire as a genre, then, since in both the medieval period and today the satiric stance is not reserved to one set genre of verbal or visual art. Even the pervasive assumption that satires appear in verse seems the result of general observation rather than deep thought about the inherent poetics of satire as a genre: satire may appear in verse, but rather only in the way that we expect textbooks to be written in prose.\textsuperscript{56} I will instead consider satire in terms of what various scholars have simply called the satiric “mode.”\textsuperscript{57} Mason’s remark that satire “trade[s] on knowingness,” moreover, suggests an affinity with Feinberg’s definition—the “playfully creative distortion of the familiar.” As I have suggested, though of course it stands to reason, this “creative distortion” affects the brain in much the same way as a visual caricature does. I therefore have called this aspect of satire simply “caricature.”

This understanding of the satiric mode helps to explain why the Roman satirists brought up serious issues regarding the limits and propriety of “free speech,” only to avoid would-be censure through deflection. The poets want to avoid retribution, certainly—but their defenses also indicate the natural limits of satiric

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Juvenal and Persius}, p. 1. On the pictorial phenomenon see Gillian Rhodes, \textit{Superportraits: Caricatures and Recognition}, Psychology Press, 1997. On the connection between similarity and sympathy one might see “Names that Match Form a Bond on the Internet,” \textit{New York Times} (April 12, 2008). Jeannine Horowitz and Sophia Menache write in \textit{L’Humour en Chaire}, p. 114, of the lowering of sympathy that laughter furthers, which they see as potentially helpful (however mean) for the correction or reformation of character; see below.

\textsuperscript{55} I intend “pride” here as akin less to medieval \textit{superbia} than to the modern U.S. English sense of the word (as in the phrase “pride in a job well done”).


\textsuperscript{57} This term, associated with Northrop Frye, is used in a different way.
critique, which goes only so far and intends to go only so far. In exchange for the license to schematize a range of possible targets—himself, others, and he wider social world—the satirist foregoes the opportunity to claim objectively accurate description (what to the visual arts is known as “photo-” or “optical” realism). Satire knows it can never substitute for policy (e.g. public policy) and has no standing to provide it.

As Spenser’s anecdote of Ben Font indicates, the line between being “good” (or at least tolerated) and “bad” (causing enough outrage to trigger severe retribution) can be a fine one. The infamous recent controversy regarding a Danish cartoonist’s allegedly satirical depictions of the prophet Muhammad also argues this point. Moreover, even though satire provides a simplified, distorted and so theoretically not actionable depiction of its targets, it often delivers truly barbed critique. Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” for instance—although not a genuine public policy suggestion—nonetheless draws attention to the plight of the Irish whom that “proposal” concerns. A definition of the satiric mode, therefore, must acknowledge its ambiguously self-limiting selectivity in even the most incisive satiric critiques. I will call it a descriptive stance that identifies and focuses on the flaws of individuals or groups to suggest its targets’ departure from some ideal or normative state while ambiguously deferring the power to effect reform,58 foregrounding its reliance on impressionistic assessment through the use of caricaturing bias.59

58 Here my definition refers to satire unaffected by the satiric mode, though I shall soon introduce ascetic thought as a complicating factor. To allude to the old stew-etymology behind “satire,” ascetic and satiric criticism differ the way a cook’s experience of a dish differs from a diner’s. Ascetic thought criticizes particular situations as a way of pushing across a wider thesis about what specifically is wrong with humanity, which implies a belief that something specific can be done to repair it. The “pure” satirist focuses on a given situation as just another example of the complications to which humanity is prone.

59 As my use of the term “caricature” so far has shown, I mean something different from what Norton-Smith must mean when he claims that “there is hardly an instance of identifiable caricatura in Langland’s satiric presentation[...].” For Norton-Smith does later refer to Piers Plowman’s use of what I call caricature: “If the object viewed by the poet appears ‘distorted,’” he writes, “[Langland] usually manages to convey the impression that it is the vice which has already caused the distortion, not the medium of poetic rendering.” (William Langland, p. 49) Alvin B. Kernan has also written in seeming
I have suggested in the preface that this mode can also influence visual art, where one target of the critique in Cano’s portrait is represented by a flattened hat on the ground. Even so, Cano’s portrait is not a perfect analogue to satire as I have just defined it. The scene’s “satirist,” Borgia, has been invested with far more authority than any of the other satirists here mentioned ever accord to their persona. The satire also seems much more tightly related to the discursive modes of preachers and of prophets. Nothing prevents this connection or a claim to such authority (we shall see medieval poets making it all the time), since observing a flaw often leads inexorably to stating how to correct it and then noting the consequences of action or inaction. Nevertheless, as my definition for the satiric mode indicates, “pure” satire typically declines to offer solutions to the general problems it observes. What solutions it suggests, and what consequences it imagines to follow, often respond only to the very specific situation depicted in a given satire and appeal to a social morality that prioritizes one’s standing in others’ (human) eyes. A “selfless” morality not as closely

contradiction of my claim, observing that “the major tendency in western satire has been toward the creation of an illusion of objectivity, and therefore of implied truthfulness,” but he refers mainly to the decline of narratorial persona in favor of increasingly omniscient third-person narration (128). More problematic for my and other medievalists’ views is his observation just preceding, that “authors of satire consistently make an effort to persuade their readers that their works, no matter how bizarre or grotesque, are plain, straightforward literal descriptions of the world as it really is if men would only see it in their ‘steel glass.’ To buttress these claims,” he continues, “satirists regularly disclaim being poets and present themselves as simple truth-tellers; they call attention to the plain, everyday language they use; and they make elaborate, though ludicrous, attempts at specificity and verisimilitude, naming streets, drawing maps, providing graphs.” (128) But Kernan argues as much because he accepts it as a “requirement” that “aggression is allowable only if the charges leveled at the target are true” (127)—and his use of the word “ludicrous” in the account of how they establish this “tone of veracity” points, again, to the ambiguity from caricature that his reading would deny. (128) See “Aggression and Satire: Art Considered as a Form of Biological Aggression,” in Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt, edd. Frank Brady, John Palmer, and Martin Price (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 115-29.

This comparison raises the question of narratorial persona in the painting: is Borgia somehow Cano’s persona here?
tied to material concerns need not be rejected by satire—but satirists do doubt its presence, let alone its efficacy, again and again.\textsuperscript{61}

The sermonic and prophetic messages that I identified in the Borgia portrait, however, \textit{depend} on the existence and efficacy of this more general “selfless morality.” They are figurative, like satire, yes—but nothing in the portrait’s sermonic “discourse” forsweares the hope of guiding specific behavior, or that its prophecy will not provide an earnest and honest report. The close relationship of the sermonic and prophetic modes to the portrait’s satire suggests that the satiric mode is somehow altered here instead, shot through with or animated by a system of thought that would combine it with sermon and with prophecy. This “system,” namely ascetic ideology, explains the portrait’s tightly trimodal pronouncements—as well as a further mystery. For while the pronouncements I cite are immensely authoritative, they are also neither rash nor impatient. On the contrary, Borgia hardly seems to look at the cardinal’s hat that he refuses. He ignores it, staring instead at the skull that he holds, reminded of what happens even to those who accept crowns.

One might say that Cano paints Borgia looking inward, attempting to change himself as a model for the world. Yet satire (as I’ve defined it) looks \textit{outward}; it intends to describe its targets, not to change them. Even Juvenal suggests no plan to transform the emotional variety his poetry concerns; and I contend that all “pure” satire forbids itself truly reformist aspiration.\textsuperscript{62} That reformist aspiration appears

\textsuperscript{61} Swift’s “Modest Proposal: nicely models this sense of morality. After enumerating all of the various economic and civil benefits to be won by his idea, the speaker suggests reforms tied to a selfless (even religious) morality only to deny them. And why? Because he feels certain they will not work: “Therefore I repeat,” he writes, “let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, ‘till he hath at least some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice.” (emphasis mine)

\textsuperscript{62} See Juvenal 1, ll. 85-87: “[Q]uidquid agunt homines, votum, timor, ira, voluptas, / gaudia, discursus, nostri farrago libelli est. / Et quando uberior vitiorum copia? [...]” Braund, \textit{Juvenal and Persius}, translates: “All human activity—prayers, fears, anger, pleasure, joys, hustle and bustle—this is the mishmash of my little book. And when was the supply of vices richer?” (138-39)
centrally, however, not only in Cano’s painting but also in one of the most heavily social-critical poems from the Middle Ages: *Piers Plowman*, by the writer known as William Langland. How and why does ascetic ideology influence its use of the satiric mode?

**Critical History and the Question of Definitions**

The question of whether or not *Piers Plowman* is a satire at all, let alone to what extent, is important—in part because it has met with a variety of answers. Critical consensus has moved from a strongly unqualified (if unexamined) “yes” to an only slightly qualified “no” between the fourteenth century and the twenty-first, with judgments hinging upon what definition of satire we might choose to apply. The poem’s early modern critics seem not to have had a carefully theorized definition for satire in mind and, content with the idea of poetic social criticism identifying satire, could well call *Piers Plowman* such a poem. (Not incidentally, they seem not to have considered humor a characteristic of the genre, though, a fact of more than incidental importance; that Langland rebuked “wittyly,” in Crowley’s formulation, seems merely a further reason to praise the satire in the poem.)

By the early twentieth century, the poem was “a” satire only marginally at best. Tucker recognized its *visio* as wholly sufficient for understanding satire in the poem; as a result he only briefly, and even then not helpfully, categorized the rest.63 This omission signals evidence that it did not fit into the literary history that Tucker

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63 See Samuel Marion Tucker, *Verse Satire in England before the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908): “The second part of *The Vision*—Do wel, Do Bet, and Do Best—is rather a tedious piece of work, the good qualities of which all appear in *The Vision* itself. For our present purpose it may safely be disregarded.” (79, n. 105) As Middleton notes in the Alford *Companion*, Tucker and his contemporaries conceived of satire as “a potent and destructive attack on the social fabric.” This is not completely out of keeping with Crowley and Puttenham’s views.
attempted to draw, and, on the evidence, it did not: references to the *vita* are uncommon in early reception of *Piers Plowman* and the early criticism on it. Decades later, John Peter’s *Complaint and Satire in Medieval England* would still express uneasiness about according the title of satirist to Langland, whose unsubtly moralized types were inconsistent with both classical and Chaucerian personification: despite a modified quotation of the line “*cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator,*” Juvenal 10.22, Peter maintains that “[Langland] obviously made no effort in *Piers Plowman* to approximate his own style of writing to Roman precedent.” As Middleton notes, literary critics subsequently rejected the idea of “complaint” as a way to describe *Piers*. Complaint or *planctus* in the Middle Ages meant for the reader to sympathize with the narrator, not to be informed of flaws. These reactions attest to the problem of accounting for medieval satire purely on the basis of classical and early modern models, from whose shared practices it diverged.

Literary criticism ultimately came to reference what John A. Yunck and Jan M. Ziolkowski simply have called the satiric “mode,” instead of a fixed poetic genre.66

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64 *Complaint,* p. 108. The line becomes *Piers Plowman* B.14.307, “Cantabit paupertas coram latrone viator.”

65 Middleton, *Companion,* citing Miller at pp. 9-10: “According to [medieval] teachings, the purpose of complaint was to excite pity for the speaker, not to effect reform in the reader, a fundamental objective of medieval satire.” The extent to which medieval satire might or might not have held readerly reform to be a “fundamental objective” is my subject in the larger study, of course, but I quote Middleton here simply to register the definition of “complaint” she uses. This genre, *planctus,* should be contrasted to the quasi-legalesque literature of “clamour” treated by Wendy Sease’s recent book, *Literature and Complaint in England, 1272-1553* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). As Ralph Hanna has observed in his review of *Literature and Complaint* (in RES n.s. 59.238 [2008], pp. 137-38), the literature that Sease discusses has very little to do with *planctus* as medieval Latin poets understood it. I would claim, nevertheless, that the book’s willingness to move beyond much older ideas of complaint as bootless lament, and into an examination of how such writing attempted to engage with society and to provide a voice protected from censure, is strong and interesting indeed. It improves on the too-simple dichotomy proposed by Thomas J. Elliott in “Middle English Complaints against the Times: to Contemn the World or to Reform it?” (Annuaire Medievale 14 [1973], pp. 22-34), notably, and I hope that its sense of such texts’ active rhetoricality (especially through appropriations of and allusions to official discourse) will find an echo here.

66 See John A. Yunck, Chapter 5: “Satire,” in the Alford *Companion,* pp. 135-54, especially at p. 135: “Admittedly, medieval satire tended to shade into comedy and grotesquerie in one direction or sermonizing and lament—‘complaint’—in the other. In the vernaculars it usually functioned as a
Even this, however, has not seemed to fit entirely with *Piers Plowman*. S. T. (not to be confused with Charles) Knight argued that critics should consider more of *Piers* as satire than they had been accustomed to anyway, despite these divergences. “*Piers Plowman* is in totality a satire,” he claimed, “but Langland has extended the nature of satire and has set a new standard.”  

Knight, for whom Langland’s sometimes cosmic sweep of vision makes his work satirical, as well as *Piers*’ concern with speaking against cynical moral standards and other bad behavior, called this a “mode” as well. Yet his essay explicitly denies that this mode can concern matters other than “human affairs within their own terms,” pairing satire to a fuzzier “theological mode” in which Langland also wrote. Knight acknowledged the poem’s innovations with satire, that is, but also refrained from calling some of that “satiric.”

John Norton-Smith perceptively suggested that Langland’s technique as a satirist is similar to Henry of Huntingdon’s in the latter’s *Satira Communis*, “where the victims belong to all the estates of the realm and the display of vices is large and generalized.” As John A. Alford made clear, however, Norton-Smith’s general avoidance of engaging *Piers Plowman* scholarship harmed the reception of his points. Ultimately it was to be a student of Norton-Smith’s, Paul Scott Miller, who would exert the widest influence yet on critics’ understanding of satire in the poem.

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68 Knight, “Satire in *Piers Plowman*,” p. 279.
Drawing on the evidence of medieval satires *soi disants* as well as the powerful postclassical tradition of medieval literary theory—*accessūs* and commentaries on noted authors produced for curricular use—Miller’s dissertation took on the task of uncovering the medieval sense of satire. Before what he saw as a broad but necessarily shallow concluding conspectus of Langland, Chaucer, and Gower, he presents the following definition:71

that type of mediæval ethical verse, ranging in tone between bitter indignation, mocking irony, and witty humour, which in forthright, unadorned terms censures and corrects vices in society and advocates virtues, eschewing slander of individuals but sparing no guilty party, not even the poet himself.72

This is certainly a well-supported and carefully constructed definition of what medieval writers would generally have agreed applied to their own satires, and it allows Miller to consider *Piers Plowman* in terms of those views.73 Its many offerings need to be compared with my definition of satire’s “mode.”

As the title of his study suggests, Miller’s definition presents satire in terms of its formal characteristics as understood from classical precedent. It suggests that satire during the Middle Ages should be viewed as a distinct genre marked as verse, for

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71 For a defense of the shallowness of the overview, see Miller’s preface to “Mediaeval Literary Theory”: “It would require a lifetime’s work to classify and describe every example of satire (by medieval definition) which was written between 1050 and 1500. Similarly, as Jill Mann’s work on Chaucer and John Yunck’s study of Langland have shown, it is possible to devote a whole book to the influence of the satirical tradition on one small part of a work by one of the great fourteenth-century English poets. I therefore consider my study of the medieval satirical tradition and its effect on the works of Gower, Langland, and Chaucer to be a general survey of an area requiring extensive further investigation.” (vi)

72 The definition appears in Miller’s glossary in multiple places, such as p. 171, and p. 208.

instance, just as Roman satire had been.\textsuperscript{74} The definition also notes that satire plainly and directly makes its critiques, using “forthright, unadorned terms”: the evidence Miller draws on for this element speaks to the Roman satirists’ “low style” of diction\textsuperscript{75} as well as to the medieval scholarly position that these poets were not to be interpreted allegorically.\textsuperscript{76}

Miller’s stipulation that satiric verse be “forthright and unadorned” deserves special attention, I think, for highlighting a conflict between medieval satire in theory and in practice. Although the words “forthright” and “unadorned” do lend the opposite impression, Miller points out that medieval satirists “frequently had recourse” to such techniques as “irony; parody; the use of puns, etymologies, and acrostics; and the appropriation of Scripture, maxims, proverbs, and epigrams,” \textit{inter alia}.\textsuperscript{77} He notes that such techniques are \textit{optional}, which partially explains their absence from his definition, whereas we have just seen his commentary evidence for a plain style’s being essential.\textsuperscript{78} That evidence from the commentary tradition partially explains the plain style’s inclusion in his definition—but not entirely, in the face of so much contrary evidence. Fortunately, Miller himself explains his assumption in favor of “forthright and unadorned,” indicating that, to him, these various ways in which satirists presented their criticism was a secondary element. Miller referred to these methods of presentation as (optional) “disclaimers” on the satire’s (essential)

\textsuperscript{74} See Miller, “\textit{Media\ae vel Literary Theory},” pp. 110-111. Miller likely did not further specify such poetry’s formal features for the reason that these varied a great deal.

\textsuperscript{75} Miller, “\textit{Media\ae vel Literary Theory},” p. 167.

\textsuperscript{76} Miller, “\textit{Media\ae vel Literary Theory},” p. 165. Miller probably does not insist upon the latter here for the obvious reason that a poet cannot (apart from suggestions and warnings) control how his words will be interpreted.

\textsuperscript{77} Miller, “\textit{Media\ae vel Literary Theory},” p. 234.

\textsuperscript{78} Note for instance satire’s description in the commentaries as “naked” (nuda): as Miller quotes on p. 165 of “\textit{Media\ae vel Literary Theory}” (from the Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Auct. F. 6. 9. accessus to Juvenal) “Satira est nuda, quemadmodum [satyrí] sunt nudi, <scilicet> quia nude, & aperte, & clare, & <sine> ambagibus, & circuccionibus, & sine integimento romanorum uicia reprehendit.” On the other hand, as I have just pointed out, medieval satire can often be marked by a great deal more circumspection in practice than Roman satire was or seems to have been.
“voicing”: simply a way of escaping the threat of punitive coercion for the authorial message they conveyed.

Miller’s claim about the disclaimers in satiric voicing, disassociating clever medium and frank message, enabled Miller to reconcile medieval interpretations of the Roman satirists with a lush profusion of very different later satires. It moreover helps to explain Miller’s claim that satire had a range of tones “between bitter indignation, mocking irony, and witty humour.” This list—including the non-tone of irony instead of “ironic mocking”—once more pits theory against practice, resolving their dispute by relegating what appears in practice to a range of only secondary effects. It declares that “voicing” is essential when it comes to the matter of tone, as both theory and practice attest: there must be some authorial voice! At the same time, though, the definition must allow for a great variation in examples. And since irony seems fundamental—but does not appear in every commentator’s works or every written satire—Miller places irony in this tonal range as more than a modifier (like “witty” or “bitter”) but also only one of several options.

A similar dynamic manifests itself when Miller’s definition notes that satire “censures and corrects vices in society and advocates virtues.” As Miller firmly pronounces elsewhere, satires as he understands them are not sermons since they confine their focus purely to the realm of the here and now (what we might call the realm of “civil” or “social” morality). But non-medieval satires do not always “correct” vices, and medieval satires’ vices and virtues are not always purely civil ones. As for what accounts for the innovation, Miller provides a clue with his last

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79 His insistence that satire is verse might indicate a deference to the medieval commentary tradition over satire in practice, which (again) stands to reason given his study’s aims.

80 Miller, “Medieval Literary Theory,” p. 235. Miller’s assertion here aligns well with S. T. Knight’s view already quoted above. I would agree when speaking of pure, transhistorical satire, and do so when providing my own definition, but I consider medieval satire at least sometimes—as in Piers—a different case.
major definitional block: one which also harmonizes between classical satire in medieval theory and medieval satire in hard-to-classify practice. This final block’s major claim that satire “eschew[s] slander of individuals” barely requires defense, in so far as not to eschew slander or libel (as Miller himself observes) marks the difference between satire and invective.  

Satire’s “sparing no guilty party” also reflects a universally recognized tendency of satirists to make comprehensive analyses of their targets’ flaws. Miller’s real contribution regarding medieval satire, then, lies in the last few words of the definition: “not even the poet himself.” As I will discuss below in chapter 3, narratorial self-criticism is nothing new to medieval satire. Even the Roman satirists criticized themselves. Some medieval satirists, however, make an elaborate point of marking their narrators’ complicity in the vices they criticize. And this innovation is significant.

As with its correction of social vices and espousal of virtues, which indicates closeness to the modes of sermon and of prophecy, medieval satire’s narratorial self-criticism can be understood in light of the intellectual and religious communities in which medieval commentaries on the Roman satirists would circulate. Even if we choose to see medieval satire’s often close affinity with these other modes the way Miller might, as an appropriation meant to supply “disclaimers” on satiric “authorial voice” in order to protect it—we are nonetheless left with a range of such disclaimers, a range expanded from what the Roman satirists’ works themselves provide. We then have every reason to search for their impetus in the history of religious thought. And yet Miller’s use of the term irony casts doubt on the idea that “disclaimer” is a quality subordinate to “voicing,” when it comes to satire: both are equally necessary, as the two are intertwined.  

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81 Miller says as much regarding invective in “Medieval Literary Theory,” *loc. cit.*
82 Miller’s example of “direct authorial assertion,” i.e. without disclaimer, does not use irony but accomplishes the same deflection we might expect irony or humor to produce. It disavows harmful
This necessity of disclaimer, finally, makes sense as a reflection of ambiguity—the focus of this chapter. Medieval satire’s greater “range” of non-comic and self-implicating “tones” speaks to a dissatisfaction with the easiest and most effective means of producing satiric ambiguity: one frequently and persistently associated with laughter.\textsuperscript{83} No definition can narrate the history we need to understand this development, though Miller’s at least points toward it.

Miller’s definition of satire has been gratefully cited and employed over the past three decades. Anne Middleton cites his study approvingly, in “The Critical Heritage”;\textsuperscript{84} Wendy Scase offers his definition word for word in an encyclopedia entry;\textsuperscript{85} Vincent Gillespie, drawing from Miller’s dissertation as a whole, quotes Miller’s similar definition of the satirist (as informed by medieval \textit{scholìa});\textsuperscript{86} and Ralph Hanna, Tony Hunt, R. G. Keightley, Alastair Minnis, and Nigel F. Palmer as \textit{a body} pronounce Miller’s definition to represent “the critical consensus” regarding medieval satire.\textsuperscript{87} Yet despite so many scholars’ profit from Miller’s definition, and more importantly from the study of commentaries and \textit{accessus} that lies behind it, no true “critical consensus” on the satire in \textit{Piers Plowman} has been reached.

\textsuperscript{83}See John of Garland’s brief description of satire in the \textit{Morale scolarium}, which Miller helpfully cites on p. 193 of “Medieval Literary Theory”: “Hec est lex satirae: vitiis ridere, salire, / mores excire, quæ feda latent aperire” (“This is the law of satire: to laugh at vices, to leap, / to incite good behavior, to reveal vile things that are hidden”). “To laugh” \textit{[ridere]} reveals itself here as shorthand for the ambiguity with which satire expresses its critiques and the sense of incongruity such ambiguity elicits. (In so stating I acknowledge a debt to Hermann Hesse’s \textit{Steppenwolf}, which presents laughter as a pressure-releasing escape from the world’s various unfairnesses and contradictions.)

\textsuperscript{84}Middleton, “The Critical Heritage,” pp. 9-10: “[T]he medieval theory and practice of satire [was] founded upon a consensus of the early glossators of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal, and transmitted in the teaching of these \textit{auctores} in medieval schools. […] (Miller).”


\textsuperscript{86}Gillespie, “Twelfth Century to c. 1450,” pp. 223-25.

In the absence of true “critical consensus” (about satire in *Piers*, at least) the “state of the question” has best been suggested, and advanced, by Anne Middleton’s 1997 essay titled “Acts of Vagrancy.” Middleton focuses there on the C.5 “autobiographical” passage, which she claims could have been Langland’s last completed revision to *Piers*, in which Will defends himself from the charge of idleness and vagrancy by appeal to clerical privilege and his poetic métier. In the course of making that self-defense, Will directly appropriates the narratorial persona for medieval “Goliardic” satire, which using the label of “gyrovague satire” Middleton defines by appeal (“especially”) to its technique of castigating the vices and sociopolitical perversions of clergy and court through the voice and rhetorical posture of one deeply implicated in them—and hence a voice that in effect positions both itself and its audience rhetorically within the slippery and treacherous moral and semantic universe it represents.89

Such poetry indulged heavily in comic effects, both in its frequent recourse to a type of parody—of Scripture, of liturgy—and to what Jill Mann has identified as intriguingly inverse descriptions whose libelous nature did not endear Goliardic writings, at least officially, to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.90

Middleton suggests that Will’s C.5 self-defense “mim[es]” a “satiric tirade [...] [with] the classic topics, and in the classic voice and rhetorical mode, of goliardic art,” in which “the speaker of such satire discloses his implication in the pleasures, temptations, and intrigues [...] of the world against which he rails.”91 It is a “reminder that [satire] everywhere pervades [*Piers Plowman*], albeit to [...] unpredictable and

90 I discuss the Goliards further in chapter 3, below.
indeterminate effects.” Specifically, Langland’s unstable fusion in Will of (comic) Goliardic persona and (non-comic) “apostolic” aspiration has been “invoked in a more sustained and detailed fashion [...] than in any previous version of the poem,” she writes. It manages to “concentrate and force into systemic articulation and judgment the implications of Will’s intermittent and scattered self-characterization throughout earlier forms of [Piers Plowman].” Middleton explains satire’s “more volatile” nature here in terms of a Latin satiric tradition whose evasions of censure are often comic, cross-pollinated here with a vernacular tradition of what she calls “evil-times complaint.” She leaves the reasons for this cross-pollination unclear, even so, especially in so far as the “evil times complaint” she refers to also existed in Latin. “Acts of Vagrancy” nevertheless accounts better than any other modern scholarly assessment for the diffusion of satiric mode throughout all of Langland’s poem, which Middleton notes owes much to sermonic and prophetic stances as well. Certainly the poem seems possessed of a real but self-undercutting power of judgment throughout, one which not only implicates the narrator but compels him not to deflect, and instead to endure, a program of introspection: one that even risks despair.

The systematic view of human behavior that motivates even Langland’s comedy will be clearer if we understand that satire’s affinity with sermons and with prophecy is not only theoretical but also historical. Medieval satire owes its very existence to ascetic communities and was interpreted within the framework of ascetic thought.

95 Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy,” pp. 257, 258. Middleton’s definition of “complaint” here is not the same to which she would hold John Peter.
**Quid Rides? Satiric Laughter and Ascetic Thought**

Even though laughter has a long tradition of presenting itself as a natural response to satiric writing, as much as pride, some medieval satirists were not regularly concerned with cultivating amusement. The complete satirical works of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal were cherished in the Middle Ages not for humor but instead for criticizing pagan society—evoking not laughter but fear and shame, as Juvenal imagined of Lucilius at the end of his first satire:

ense velut stricto quotiens Lucilius ardens
infruemuit, rubet auditor cui frigida mens est
criminibus, tacita sudant præcordia culpa.
inde ira et lacrimae. tecum prius ergo voluta
hæc animo ante tubus [...].

But whenever Lucilius blazes and roars as with drawn sword, the hearer whose mind is chilled with crime goes red and his heartstrings sweat with silent guilt. Then come rage and tears. So turn all this over in your mind before the trumpets sound [...].

Employed by medieval Christians for edification rather than “aristocratic play,” the classical satirists’ humorous aspect was, of necessity, even further downplayed. This in turn only served to heighten the Stoicism inherent in classical satirists. It thus made of their writing a vehicle for the related and yet more intense ideology of

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97 An anonymous commentator on Juvenal writing in the twelfth century wrote, according to Miller’s “Medieval Literary Theory,” that “Satire is naked [...] because it censures the vices of the Romans nakedly, and openly, and clearly, and without circumlocution and periphrasis, and without an *integumentum*” (27). On the strength of such an understanding we can see how medieval satirists might not have known or cared to be “hilarious.” Thus when John D. Peter dismissed much non-Chaucerian medieval satire as “complaint” in his *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), he ignored not only the existence and integrity of the medieval genre of *planctus*, which more properly deserves the label, but the principal requirement of the medieval satiric mode: that, like the provision-laden laws, stuffed sausages, lavish feasts and half-humans from which the word “*satira*” was said to derive, it should criticize its targets with a mixture of the possible forms, quotations, stereotypes, conventions and *topoi* that lay at its disposal.
98 For more on Roman satirists’ *actual* debt to Stoicism, as opposed to what medieval readers thought, see chapter 3: “The Satirists” in Marcia L. Colish’s *Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 159-224.
"contempt of the world" (and related concepts) whose relationship to satire I will focus on. Made influential thanks in part to Peter Damian and other champions of monastic reform (as Robert Bultot has shown in the most thorough investigation of this topic) contempt of the world appears throughout the writings of religious and educational communities during the high medieval period—especially of monks, who both read and wrote a lot of satire.99

It’s important to recognize that there was actually very little place for humor in the Benedictine worldview, at least in theory. No fewer than two of the so-called "instruments of good works" in the Rule of Saint Benedict specifically discourage laughter: monks are “not to speak vain words or such as move to laughter,” the Rule states and “not to love much or violent laughter.”100 Degrees ten and eleven of the twelve "degrees of humility" follow in the same vein: “the tenth degree of humility,” we read, “is that [a monk] be not ready and prompt to laughter, for it is written, The fool [raises] up his voice in laughter; the eleventh degree of humility is that a monk, when he speaks, do so gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, in few and sensible words, and without clamor [...].”101 Instead, as Conrad Leyser suggests,


100 “Verba vana aut risui apta non loqui; risum multum aut excussum non amare.” (Quotations from the Rule come from Justin McCann, ed. & trans., The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English. [Westminster: Newman Press, 1952]).

101 “Decimus humiliatis gradus est, si non sit facilis ac promptus in risu, quia scriptum est: Stultus in risu exaltat vocem suam. Undecimus humiliatis gradus est, si cum loquitur monachus, leniter et sine risu, humiliatus cum gravitate, vel paucus verba et rationabilia loquitur, et non sit clamosus in voce; sicut scriptum est: Sapiens verbis innotescit paucis” (McCann, 46). While that last proverb has been attributed specifically to the so-called “Sentences of Sextus,” which many medieval monks might not have recognized, the sentiment behind it appears commonly in other medieval proverbs, maxims, and sententia. Delatte’s Commentaire sur la Règle de S. Benoît attempts to make the restriction against
silence for Benedict as for other early monastic legislators served as “a figurative cloister keeping the ears and mouth inviolate to all speech save God’s.” 102 In his discussion of whether or not monks might be allowed to preach or conduct pastoral care, Rupert of Deutz begins by noting that “the monk is dead to the world,” and that “the outstanding [precipuus] doctor of the church Jerome has said that ‘the monk has no business of teaching, merely mourning,’” non docentis, sed lugentis. 103 Gerhard Schmitz recounts the story of a monk asking one of his brethren, What am I supposed to do,” Quid facio?, to which the other monk responded, Flere semper dehemos, “We always ought to be weeping.” 104

These pronouncements against laughter in favor of a life of more than usual dolor make clear contemptus mundi’s debt to Stoicism, at least as taken up by the Desert Fathers and later ascetic communities in the church, for whom laughter could
indicate an excess of levity.  

In order to achieve the perfect equanimity necessarily for the blessed life, or apatheia, a subject would have to repress such emotional extremes. Saints like Martin of Tours were accordingly honored for their impassivity: “No one ever saw him angry, agitated, mourning, laughing,” Sulpicius Severus would write. “He was always one and the same, a hint of celestial joy showing forth on his face, seeming beyond the nature of man.”

Alcuin, in a famous letter to Higbald of Lindisfarne, would counsel that “the voices of readers ought to be heard in [monastic] dwelling places” (the practice of mealtime lectio) “not the noise of [monks’] laughter in the streets.”

Centuries later, Alan of Lille’s discussion of spiritual grieving in the Summa de Arte Prædicatoria picks up the same message,

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105 Barbara Rosenwein notes religious communities’ debt to Stoicism in Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), but it is interesting that at least in the twelfth century Stoicism and contempt of the world were recognized to have very different characters, as witness John of Salisbury’s poems against Stoicism (and for contempt of the world) in the Entheticus. I give a full citation below in chapter 4.


107 “Nemo umquam illum vidit iratum, nemo commotum, nemo maerentem, nemo ridentem: unusidemque fuit semper, celestem quodammodo leititiam nullius praefers extra naturam hominis videbatur.” Quoted in Schmitz, “…quod rident homines,” p. 6 n. 16.

108 Alcuin, Ep. 124 (797), line 25: “Voces legentium audire in domibus suis, non ridentium turbam in plateis.” Bullough’s translation, quoted on page 92 of the Norton Critical Edition of Beowulf, reads “The voices of readers should be heard in your dwellings, not the laughing rabble in the courtyards.” We can see that the notion that laughter might be useful for counteracting tristitia or tedium or despair, yet it appears little to have been thus contemplated by monastic legislators, who nevertheless had to contend with the dissemination of entertaining stories and songs by monks who presumably did want to draw a distinction between types of laughter. As potentially hard to maintain as such a distinction could be (in theory), it would prove (in practice) impossible to ignore.
citing authorities from the Bible to Gregory the Great on the inadvisability of laughter and the benefit, even necessity, of grief.\(^\text{109}\) Contempt of the world went much further than Stoicism in this respect, restricting an emotional expression long deemed a defining characteristic of humanity in favor of penitential tears.\(^\text{110}\)

An apparent hypocrisy—which monks tried to resolve—follows from comparing actual literary practice with the pronouncements I’ve just mentioned.\(^\text{111}\) The same directions used to promote humility among monks—such as the eleventh “degree of humility,” with its requirement that a monk speak “without laughter” (\textit{sine risu}), “humbly and seriously” (\textit{humiliter cum gravitate}) and without clamor (\textit{non [...] clamosus in voce})—should have discouraged harsh criticism. The Rule’s “instruments of good works” also proscribe and even forbid (\textit{damnamus}) jests (\textit{scurrilitates}), idle words (\textit{verba otiosa}), intentionally humorous sentiments (\textit{risum moventia}), and all other such speech (\textit{talia eloquia}) “with an eternal ban in all places” (\textit{eterna clausura in omnibus locis}).

Comedy, especially when mixed with criticism as in classical satire, seems distinctly unwelcome in this context. And yet satires were written all the same. The


\(^{110}\) As John D. Peter recounts in \textit{Complaint and Satire}, Jerome famously wrote a letter in which he declined to “name names” since he did not intend to write satire—which, as it had been understood classically, could be destrucive and demeaning, and of which he had in another situation been accused. For more information see David S. Wiesen, \textit{St. Jerome as a Satirist: a Study in Christian Latin Thought and Letters} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964). For the influence of Jerome’s ascetic outlook on his polemical writing see also Elizabeth A. Clark, “Dissuading from Marriage: Jerome and the Asceticization of Satire,” in \textit{Satire Advice on Women and Marriage: from Plautus to Chaucer}, ed. Warren S. Smith (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 154-81.
importance of group cohesion, and the often explicit plans to shore up community pride, combined with a writer’s desire to give a vehicle to his learning and rhetorical skill, seem to have meant that under the rubric of “contempt of the world” could be admitted very harsh criticism of other humans indeed—at least, so long as their ways were sufficiently degenerate or even secular. We can see a prime example in the De Contemnu Mundi of Bernard of Morlaix (or Cluny), a Cluniac monk during the abbacy of Peter the Venerable. Subtitled earlier in the last century by the editor H. C. Hoskier as a “bitter satirical poem of 3000 lines” on the evils of the age, the poem explicitly identifies itself with satire about halfway through.\textsuperscript{112} As Ronald Pepin has pointed out, Bernard’s poem is a poetic tour-de-force, a sustained exercise carried over three long sections of verses in tripartiti dactylici caudati, “a hexameter line with both internal and tailed rhyme, a form”—Pepin informs us—”[that] very few of Bernard’s contemporaries attempted.”\textsuperscript{113} The poet also seems to have been indebted to classical satire. Pepin observes that it “[salutes] Horace, Persius, Juvenal, [and] even Lucilius, by name.” It shows familiarity with Vergil and a hodgepodge of biblical books as well.\textsuperscript{114}

Given its monastic context, Bernard’s poem quite understandably steers clear of humor even when most vociferously taking up satire, opting for much different feelings with its affective intent: alertness, outrage, shame, repentance, and fear. “Evils abide but justice lies low, and thus a wide way is open to satire,” Bernard writes. “Much that follows is indecent [sc. for me to mention], yet my concern is to

\textsuperscript{112} De Contemnu Mundi: a Bitter Satirical Poem of 3000 Lines upon the Morals of the XIth Century (London: Quaritch, 1929).
\textsuperscript{114} Pepin, Scorn, xii.
prevent wicked deeds and to encourage virtuous deeds. [...] Here I follow satire.”

The jeremiad that follows happens to bleed into prophecy—but, as it does so, the poem reminds us of the very porous boundaries between sermonic, satiric, and prophetic discourses.

We can see a similar focus on rejection of the world and tearful repentence in Johannes de Hauvilla’s also very grand and learned Architrenius, or “Archweeper,” whose protagonist battles with human weakness and, in so doing, incessantly bewails his inability to live as perfectly as he intends. “Traversing the world with wandering steps,” as the prose prologue has it in Wetherbee’s translation, “he encounters [...] all those forms of worldly prostitution which seize a man with their many-stranded rope and make him long to know the unlawful embrace of temporal things. [...] Therefore, read on,” it continues. “If you are curious about the author, suffice it to say that his name is John.”

With this final reference to the name of the poet, about whom apparently we need only know that he shares a name with John the Baptist and the author of Revelation apparently, the prologue alerts us to the work’s monitory and even prophetic role. In this poem though, even more than in Bernard’s, the wisdom dispensed often comes from the classical world. The Architrenius ends with long speeches by the likes of Persius, Diogenes, Socrates, Cicero, Pythagoras, and others, for instance. It concludes with the marriage of the poem’s hero to Moderation, that classical virtue, herself.

However striking such learning and poetic virtuosity, few contemporaries of either Bernard or Johannes would have found it strange to see Roman poets’ works

115 Pepin, Scorn, Bk. 2, ll. 123-25, on pp. 82-83: “Stant mala, jus latet, hinc satiræ patet area lata. / Parce, modestia, multa sequentia sunt inhonestæ, / cura tamen mea facta vetat rea, suadet honesta. / Da veniam precor; hic satiram sequor [...].”

(least of all their satires) re-tuned to comment on the vanity of the world. In fact, classical poets and writers were routinely cited by high-medieval poems to illustrate the vanity of *temporalia* and the necessity of introspection. Their poems were used in schools as important, authoritative, texts. Alan of Lille suggests the first line of Persius’ first satire, despite what he recognizes as the author’s “comic” style, as a proper quotation for preachers to use who wish to inspire a sense of the vanity of human ingenuity.\(^{117}\) Juvenal’s tenth satire was in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries used widely to illustrate contempt of the world as well.\(^{118}\) These and others also appear quoted in the *Vagantenstrophe* ‘cum auctoritate’ as used by Walter of Châtillon, sometimes to illustrate the same ascetic ideal.\(^{119}\) At least nine lines of Horace appear to do so in the *Moralium dogma philosophorum*, and John of Salisbury’s *Entheticus de dogmate philosophorum* devotes original verses to the philosophical project of

\(^{117}\) *Summa Magistri Alani Doctoris Universalis de Arte Predictoria*, PL 210, cols. 144D-115A: “Si Prædictor vult invitare auditores ad mundi contemptum, in medium hanc afferat auctoritatem: Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas, etc. (Eccle. I.) Quæ enim auctoritas ita insinuat mundanum rerum vanitatem, et hominum vitia tum, omnia esse lubrica, et nulla stabilia, sicut auctoritas ista? Juxta hanc auctoritatem, debet distinguere triplicem mundi vanitatem. Est enim vanitas mutabilitatis, vanitas curiositatis, et vanitas falsitatis. Vanitas mutabilitatis est, secundum quam naturaliter omnia mutabilitati subjacent: de qua Apostolus: Omnis creatura vanitati subjecta est (Rom. VIII). Vanitas curiositatis est, secundum quam homo expendit omnem curam suam in mundanis. Unde: Dominus dissipat cogitationes hominum quoniam vanæ sunt (Psal. XClII; I Cor. III). De qua Persius comites ait: O curas hominum, o quantum in rebus inane!” (Braund, *Juvenal and Persius*, surmises that this line in Persius is a quotation from Lucilius, and of course Alan would not have known this, but the fact of the quotation illustrates the intense referentiality of satire even among its Roman originators.)


cultivating proper contempt for worldly things, though not all of these can be called satires. Other examples could be multiplied.

Ascetic thought was influential on satirists outside the monastery, too, fairly early on. Robert Bultot observes that Henry of Huntingdon both exemplifies and alludes to the academic currency of such sentiments in his own letter De contemptu mundi (appended to his History of the English People) when recalling how in earlier years, dazzled by life at the household of Robert Bloet, he completely ignored the advice of those who taught the contempt of the world in schools. That dire-sounding curriculum fits well with a definition for philosophy offered by Hugh of St. Victor in his Didascalicon, namely that “Philosophy [...] is a medit[ation] upon death, a pursuit of especial fitness for Christians, who, spurning the solicitations of this world, live subject to discipline in a manner resembling the life of their future home.”

120 On this work see Rodney Thomson, “What is the Entheticus?” repr. in The World of John of Salisbury, ed. Michael Wilks, Studies in Church History Subsidia 3 (London: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 287-301. For an example, see poem 47 in Jan van Laarhoven, ed. and trans., John of Salisbury’s Entheticus Major and Minor, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters XVII, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1987), part II, section “J.” Laarhoven writes of the Entheticus that “[it] is indeed a storehouse of warnings, admonitions, and exhortations, in the forms of satire, didactical exposés, and polemic diatribes. If all the genres are present, they serve but one purpose: to teach one how to be wise” (24).


122 Quoted from Bultot, “Chartula,” p. 788: “Cum igitur omnes, et ipsi etiam qui de mundi contemptu legebant in scholis, ei obsequentur, et ipse, quasi pater et deus omnium aestimatus, mundum valde diliget et amplexaretur, si quis tunc mihi hae pulcherrime que omnes admirabantur contemnedam diceret, quo vulto, quo animo ferrem! Insaniorum Oreste, importuniorem Thersite judicassem!” (Bultot’s emphasis)

and letters was deeply indebted to, and darkly tinctured by, the readings and the
requirements of its high-medieval religious context. This is not to say that such
introspection was unknown to the classical satirists themselves, of course: it appears
for instance in Persius, albeit in a complicatedly ironic and dialogic fashion. Yet in
Henry of Huntingdon’s first surviving book of epigrams, by contrast, such contempt of
self appears regularly, and deeply, in earnest.

Henry also wrote love poems and could boast of a sense of wit: a fact that
reminds us that conditions for literary production were much freer outside the
cloister—even for a typically grave archdeacon. For that matter, even monks appear
sometimes to have infused their satires with humor: the Benedictine monk Nigel of
Longchamps’ intensely comical Speculum Stultorum, a “mirror for fools” makes for
perhaps the best example, recounting the travels and mishaps of Burnellus the Ass in
search of a longer tail. Nigel’s surprising introduction, though, rather wrenchingly

love of that wisdom which, wanting in nothing, is a living Mind and the sole primordial Idea or Pattern
of things.” (61)
124 On disciplina and the educational-formative aims of the school of St. Victor, see C. Stephen Jaeger,
“Humanism and Ethics at the School of St. Victor in the Early Twelfth Century,” Scholars and
Courtiers: Intellectuals and Society in the Medieval West, Variorum Collected Studies Series, CS 753
(Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), item III, pp. 51-79. The twin definitions of philosophy by Alcuin, quoted
by Jaeger, “Humanism and Ethics,” p. 60, seem comparable to Hugh’s: “Philosophia est naturarum
inquisitio, rerum humanarum divinarumque cognitio. […] Est quoque philosophia honestas vitae,
studium bene vivendi, meditatio mortis, contemptus seculorum.” (emphasis mine)
125 Persius 3, e.g., trans. Braund, Juvenal and Persius.
126 E.g. Henry’s “In Seipsum,” quoted here from the introduction to Wright’s Anglo-Latin Satirical
Henrice, tibi versus bene culti, / et bene cultura domus, et bene cultus aeger. / Et bene sunt thalami, bene
sunt pomeria culta, / hortus centimodis cultibus ecce nitet. / O jam culta tibi bene sunt, sed tu male
cultus; / se quicumque caret, dic mihi, die quid habet?” Wright opines on the same page that “[t]he style
and character of Henry’s epigrams show an attentive and not unsuccessful study of the classical
models.” (p. xix, emphasis mine) Greenway provides a translation of this and other poems in her edition
127 See Greenway, pp. exii-iii at “Lost Poetry.” There is some speculation, Greenway notes, that Henry
might have destroyed some of the lighter works in his old age. For Henry’s boasting about his wit, see
the introduction to the eleventh book of the Historia: “Abiecta ergo leuitate seriissque complexis, quem
ridiculosum stupueras religiosum stupescas [Levity, then, has been cast aside and sobriety embraced:
you wondered at my wit, now wonder at my piety]” (pp. 778-79).
128 The Isengrimus would be another example of humorous satire, what Mozley and Raymo call
“burlesque” as opposed to “invective” satire. It might also be monastic, although such a conclusion is
spins all the poem’s humor back to the stern didacticism we’ve just seen, explaining that Burnellus represents the monk or any man of religion not content to remain in his cloister where he belongs. A dedicatory letter to William of Longchamps explains, further, that though the “text and title [of the book] appear laughable [ridiculosus],” it is intended for instruction.

Should we ignore Nigel’s comments on his own work, treating them as obvious excuses, or accept them as a plausible rationale? If we choose the latter, we can find ample precedent for Nigel’s shaming, didactic use of humor in the exempla of medieval preachers, who understood what Jeannine Horowitz and Sophia Menache have called the corrosive aspect of corrective laughter [...]. This humor is very far from drollery,” they write. “Instead, it [...] aims to scare one away from a vice by making other people laugh in a complicity from which the guilty party is excluded [...].” In Nigel’s somewhat more charitable words, it’s easier to heal some illnesses

much less easy to come arrive at with security: see John H. Mozley and Robert R. Raymo, edd. Speculum stultorum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). Jill Mann points out several strange aspects of that poem in the opening to her essay, “‘Luditur Illusor’: the Cartoon World of the Ysengrimus,” Neophilologus 61.4 (1977), pp. 495-509. In general, for Mann, “[t]he Ysengrimus is one of the most difficult texts of the Latin [M]iddle [A]ges. This is not only due to its length and the intricacy of its language, but also to the reader’s difficulty in defining either its subject matter or the author’s standpoint in relation to it” (495). In deference to these difficulties, I do not treat that poem at any length here.

129 See Wright, Satirical Poets, p. xxi. and p. 4: “Introducitur autem asinus, animal seilicet stolidum, volens caudam aliam et ampliorum quam natura contulerat contra naturam sibi inseri [...]. Asinus iste monachus est, aut vir quilibet religiousus in claustro positus, qui, tantquam asinus ad onera portanda Domini servitio est mancipatus, qui non contentus conditione sua [...] amplius affectat [...].”

130 J. H. Mozley, trans. A Mirror for Fools: the Book of Burnel the Ass (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. xvi. Jan Ziolkowski argues on p. 25 in his “Humour of Logic,” cited above, that “Nigel’s decision to name the donkey dunces of [his] poem after the Burnel of philosophical jargon [...] tells us that the donkey will be not just any donkey, but an individual representative of a species, an individual who will make an ass of himself in an individual fashion, but who will simultaneously exemplify the failings of an entire group.” This being so strengthens the case that Nigel’s prologue was not simply tacked on as a justificatory afterthought.

with ointment than with a cautery iron. Even that use goes against the very explicit constraints in the Benedictine Rule, however, which as earlier noted “condemn[ed] [such words] everywhere with a perpetual ban.”

Even high-medieval monastic satire could be “funny,” then, but it often entertained without the intention of amusing, clinging to an expressed intent (at least) to edify. The more ascetic satirists downplayed the role and importance of laughter because their literary antecedents seemed to do so, and equally as much because laughter was officially valued little in the “emotional communities” in which such satire spread. Still, this suppression of humor was not easy: as my early and brief allusion to satire as literary caricature aimed to show, the distorting and sympathy-reducing emphasis on difference provided by satiric description should almost always go hand in hand with humor, much as with identity affirming pride in the face of the satirically emphasized “Other.”

To accomplish the feat of avoiding laughter, high medieval ascetic satirists had to draw heavily on two closely related discourses, those of preachers and of prophets. And when they did allow their caricatures to be funny, it is not surprising that medieval poets took a very different view of textual authority, a phenomenon specially clear in the verses of the so-called Goliardic poets whose influence Anne Middleton detected (albeit with modifications) in Piers Plowman. This type of Latin satire, whose origins Rodney Thomson found in the dissatisfaction and impotence of university students, would become in that sense the forerunners of satire today.133

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132 Wright, Satirical Poets, p. 10: “Multa enim genera morborum sunt quæ utilius unguentum quam cauterium ad medelam admissum.”

133 See Thomson, “The Origins of Latin Satire in Twelfth-Century Europe,” Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch 13 (1978), pp. 73-83. Perhaps Nigel’s comedy best represents the influence of secular poetry on the future course of satire, then—the same sort being cultivated at just the universities the Speculum Stultorum pokes fun at, which I haven’t discussed here (but see the note above).
Ambiguity and Constraint

This chapter has so far suggested that all satire is—must be—ambiguous, because of the satiric mode’s very definition: “a descriptive stance that identifies and focuses on the flaws of individuals or groups to suggest its targets’ departure from some ideal or normative state while ambiguously deferring the power to effect reform, foregrounding its reliance on impressionistic assessment through the use of caricaturing bias.” Because satire needed to criticize without confusing itself with other types of criticism, it early on found indispensable the appropriation of comedy (the use of which would limit the force of a satirist’s critiques and protect them from the charge of untoward “license”). Bénédicte Delignon, ascribing this appropriation of comedy to Horace, notes that such poetry is characterized by ambiguity—on a variety of fronts:

[a]mbiguïté des sources, ambiguïté des lectures possibles, ambiguïté du propos moral et du propos politique [...] les terrains de l’ambiguïté sont multiples, au point qu’il nous paraîtra possible de parler d’une ‘poétique de l’ambiguïté,’ poétique au cœur de laquelle se trouve précisément le genre comique, caractérisé lui aussi par certaines formes d’ambiguïté.

The influence of an ascetic Christian ideology helps to explain the decreased and clearly more careful recourse to comedy by such satirists in the Middle Ages, despite their continued need for satiric ambiguity.

134 Bénédicte Delignon, Les Satires d’Horace et la Comédie Gréco-Latine: une poétique de l’ambiguïté, Bibliothèque d’Études Classiques 49, gen. ed. J. Dangel and P.-M. Martin (Louvain: Editions Peeters, 2006), p. 23. Alvin B. Kernan, in “Aggression and Satire,” speaks to the subject of ambiguity when he writes that, “[t]o be true satire, verbal aggression must, we seem to believe, be artfully managed, witty, indirect [...] to require[es] a high degree of stylization in the attack” (118). Yet he also notes that satire “persistent[ly] refus[es] to be bled off into tragedy’s compassionate awareness of the inevitability of error and suffering, or comedy’s joyous sense that life always finally outwits folly” (loc. cit.). Whatever one might think about Kernan’s definitions of tragedy and comedy, his location of satire outside these realms points agreeably to satire’s intertwining of nonetheless distinct modes.
Even in the late fourteenth century, whether comedic in their assertions of artifice or not, poets certainly had every reason to lean on their ambiguity. The fate that Horace’s interlocutor predicted for *mala carmina*, which Spenser would later so incisively depict via *Ben* Mal-Font, sets a warning to satirists of every place and time—and, concerning late fourteenth-century England particularly, the early years of *Piers Plowman*’s circulation saw the development of what James Simpson would memorably label “constraints on satire.” We might understand the “constraints on satire” more precisely as constraints on the types of critical speech and writing that satire *could resemble*, and from which, in fact, it can sometimes be very difficult to distinguish it.

As evidence for the power of such constraint on *Piers*, Simpson first observes its reticent “unwillingness to conclude, to drive home a point”—especially in the opening passūs. The narrator declares for instance that he “kan and kan nought of court speke moore,” which Simpson’s article has pointed out plays on two senses of “ken” in Middle English: the narrator might be *able* to tell us more about the court, but it is not licit for him to do so. Similarly, as Simpson notes, the conclusion to the fable of rats belling the cat ends with a refusal to interpret: “What thise metels bymeneth [...] divine ye, for I dar not!” Conscience’s parable about Saul and “mede measureless” fails to put two and two together, likewise, because “so is this world went with hem that han power,” it would be foolish for him to do so.

As these examples make clear, some of Langland’s ambiguity stems not merely from an admiration for debate but from a sense of the real political danger

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136 Simpson, p. 13, on B.prol.111.
137 Simpson, p. 13, on B.prol.209-210. “Here [...] the narratorial reticence is the result of fear (or so it is declared, at any rate): he does not *dare* to speak.”
138 Simpson, p. 13, on B.3.280-83.
faced by satirists against the court at the time of his writing the B-text. Statutes promulgated during the reign of Richard II in 1378, taking up and making more explicit material from just over a century earlier during the reign of Edward I, forbade (and punished with imprisonment) the circulation of “false lies” and news against the king and his council and other officers.\textsuperscript{139} That said, Langland seems to have enjoyed skirting the edges of these prohibitions more than he actually feared them—as the fable of the rats belling the cat shows best. For while the story clearly points out the danger inherent in irking the “great [man] of the Realm” himself, its scriptural Latin tag (\textit{Ve terre vbi puer Rex est!}) moves in for the kill. That Latin pouncingly suggests,

\textsuperscript{139} Simpson, p. 13. As mentioned by Simpson see for example Anno 2 Ric. II, Stat. 1, cap. V (1378)—which reads as follows: “\textit{I}tem de controvresies de fauxes novelz et countours des horribles et fauxes mensonges des prelatz ducz countez barons \\ \\
& autres nobles \\ & grantz de roialme \\ & auxiunt del chaunceller tresorer clerk de prive seal seneschal del hostel nostre seignur le Roi justices del un bank \\ & del autre \\ & dautres grantz officers du roialme des choses qe par les ditz prelatz seignurs nobles \\ & officers avandits par on debats \\ & descordes purroient sourdre parentre les dits seignurs ou parentre les seignurs \\ & communes qe Dieu ne veulle \\ & dont grant peril \\ & meschief purruoit avenir a tout le roialme \\ & legerement subversion \\ & destruction del roialme avandit si duremede ny fuisse nys est defendus estroitement \\ & sur grief peine pur eschuser les damages \\ & perils avandis qe desore nul soit si hardi de controver dire ou counter ascune fauxe novelle mensonge ou autre tuel fauxe choses des prelatz seignurs \\
& les autres desusdits dont descord ou esclamurdre aucune puisse fourdr deins mesme le roialme et qi le frat eit & encourage la paine atreisoit ent ordenes par estatut de Westm’ primer qe voet qil soit pres \\ & emprisones jeqes a tant qil eit ilvres celluy dont la parole serra mooves.” See Danby Pickering, ed., \textit{The Statutes at Large, from the Fifteenth Year of King Edward III to the Thirteenth Year of King Henry IV} inclusive, vol. 2 (15 Edw. 3 to 13 Hen. 4) (Cambridge: Joseph Bentham, 1762), p. 222. [Pickering’s translation: \textit{Item, of devisors of false news and of horrible and false lyes, of prelates, dukes, earls, barons, and other nobles and great men of the realm, and also of the chancellor, treasurer, clerk of the privy seal, steward of the King’s house, justices of the one bench or of the other, and of other great officers of the realm, of things which by the said prelates, lords, nobles, and officers aforesaid, were never spoken, done, nor thought, in great slander of the said prelates, lords, nobles, and officers, whereby debates and discords might arise betwixt the said lords, or between the lords and the commons (which God forbid) and whereof great peril and mischief might come to all the realm, and quick subversion and destruction of the said realm, if due remedy be not provided: it is straitly defended upon grievous pain, for to eschew the said damages and perils, that from hence forth none by so hardy to devise, speak, or to tell any false news, lyes, or other such false things, of prelates, lords, and of other aforesaid, whereof discord or any slander might rise within the same realm; and he that doth the same shall incur and have the pain another time ordained thereof by the statute of Westminster the first, which will, that he be taken and imprisoned till he have found him of whom the word was moved.] Simpson further indicates that “[T]he statute is repeated, though reinforced, in 1388, where it is [ordained] that the reporter of false speech against the great men of the realm be imprisoned and punished by the advice of the King’s Council when he cannot find the first mover of the news.” To this I would add Anno 5 Ric. II, stat. 2, cap. V (1382), though it is a non-statute—“the commons never assenting thereto”—on certain dangerous “preachers.”
for a literate audience different from the listening “men that ben murye” addressed by
the tale, exactly the sort of criticism that could be made—and thus, poetically at least,
bells the “kitoun” after all.\footnote{Langland’s introduction of the Latin tag shows his caution, referring to the line as “holy writ” and also observing that it will not be read by everyone. In C, the phrase “whoso wole it rede” is replaced by the even more cautious “whoso kan rede,” making clearer that the tag’s Latinity makes it safe from the wrong eyes.}

Importantly, though, these constraints on satire reflected in the B-text were not
only political; some were religious and involved the proscription of theological
“errors.” Simpson divides this into “two unequal categorizes […] \textit{viz.} a small amount
of legislation against a collection of heterodox (though non-Wycliffite) theological
doctrines, including many Pelagian conclusions, and on the other a huge amount of
anti-Wycliffite legislation,” which, according to Simpson, “receives much more
banned positions to portions of \textit{Piers Plowman} cannot be denied and thus must
account for some of the elliptical cageyness that on occasion appears in the poem, the
real name of whose author is probably unknown (after all) and whose Latin often
dares what his English protests “dare not.”

Simpson claims that Langland’s avowed reticence out of political
consideration either ecclesiastical or secular pales in comparison to the hesitancy he at
least claims to indulge out of “moral discretion,” though the morality responsible for
that discretion is not his essay’s focus.\footnote{Such “discretion” is something we don’t see in \textit{Mum and the Sothsegger}, where Mum is clearly on the wrong side of matters and sothsegging should be appreciated more. For more outspoken satire
dating from about the same period, see J. R. Maddicott, “Poems of Social Protest in Early Fourteenth-Century England”; James McMurrin Dean, \textit{Six Ecclesiastical Satires} (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute}
of political constraints is important, because these would continue in later decades. Pronouncements against speech potentially damaging to a ruling elite, “hem that han power,” would increase in the aftermath of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt; shortly thereafter, the fifteenth century would see the arrival of what Simpson calls “the extremely repressive and exacting Constitutions of Archbishop Arundel drafted in 1407 [...]”143 It stands to reason that, by grappling with restrictions like these, the poem would provide a potential model that later writers facing similar (or worse) repression could follow.144 In light of what Simpson uncovered about “constraints,” it is pertinent to consider what J. R. Maddicott called early fourteenth-century “poems of social protest.” Satire in England had for centuries been direct—when it was in Latin. “The novelty lies,” as Maddicott writes, “in the conjunction of such traditional complaints with new grievances [...] and the voicing of both [...] in English and in verse which has some claim to be popular.”145 It stands to reason that veiled and

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143 Simpson, p. 16. Of special note are constitutions such as the one (number three in the edition cited below) demanding that a “predicador conformet se auditorio, aliter puniatur”: “Insuper, sicut bonus paterfamilias triticum spargit in terram ad hoc dispositam, ut fructum plus affert; volumus et mandamus, ut predicador verbi Dei veniens juxta formam superius annotam, in predicando clero sive populo, secundum materiam subjectam se honeste habeat, spargendo semen secundum conventiam subjecti auditorii; clero preservem predicans de vitis pullulantibus inter eos, et laicis de peccatis inter eos communiter usitatis, et non e contra; alioquin sic predicans secundum qualitatem deficiut, per loci ordinarium canonice et acriter puniatur” (emphasis mine). The text of the Constitutions I have quoted (dated 1408) may be accessed online, transcribed by Katherine Zieman from Fiedera, conventiones, littere, et cujuscumque generis acta publica inter reges Anglie et alios quosvis imperatores, reges, pontifices, principes, vel communitates (1101-1654), ed. Thomas Rymer (London, 1704-35). On the later repercussions of Arundel’s prohibitions see Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” Speculum 70 (1995), pp. 822-64.

144 Simpson points to a later poem much indebted to Piers Plowman, Mum and the Sothsegger, to indicate that this did indeed happen (see James McMurrin Dean, Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger [Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 2000]). He goes on to observe that later poets such as the author of Mum seem to have used Piers Plowman as justification for a satirist’s voice standing outside the conventional authoritative institutions of ethical regulation in society, though Langland himself seems to shy away from this view.

cautious topicality would be more important to vernacular satirists than it had been for satirists using Latin for their critiques.

Surprisingly, however, Maddicott also notes that early fourteenth-century English “poems of social protest” were hardly veiled. Although written in the vernacular, they are directly—sometimes unambiguously—topical, naming actual individuals and giving voice to specific, datable, grievances. Maddicott’s proposed rationale for this unexpected topicality is that the works in question, despite their vernacularity, circulated only in educated circles. They could well have been written by clerical figures such as William of Pagula who, sensitive to injustice and “heirs to the whole pastoral, moral, and homiletic tradition of the thirteenth-century Church, [were] the natural propagators of complaint.”146 After all, he notes,

The popular literature most likely to have a wide circulation is the literature of public entertainment. Yet our ‘protest’ poems seem hardly to fall into this category, simply because they must so signal have failed to entertain. They are not like the Robin Hood ballads, which we know to have circulated widely in oral form: they have no heroes, no action and no story. Pieces like the ‘Song of the Husbandman’ are simply laments about injustice. The one poem which does have a story and a hero of a kind, the ‘Outlaw’s Song of Trailbaston’, is nevertheless cast very much in the language of artifice and in a form which can hardly have been popular. Professor Legge has written that ‘it cries out for a tune and to be sung’; yet its rarified style and its use of the conventions of romance hardly suggest that it was made to be sung to an unsophisticated audience. When the supposed outlaw talks of ‘the beautiful shade. . . in the forest of Belregard, where the jay flies and the nightingale always sings without ceasing’, we know that we are, as it were, in the world of Schubert’s Lieder and not of the Top Twenty.147

As Maddicott later observes, those “poems of social protest” that were more widely circulated (according to manuscripts) rely much more heavily on satiric convention.

The Fate of Estates Stereotypes

Limited circulation and static recycling of satiric commonplace manifestly did not appeal to Chaucer, Gower, and Langland. R. F. Yeager has written that Gower and Chaucer’s project was to ennoble English verse to a standard worthy of the ages, forging a new and illustrious vernacular literature for English: a project which encouraged far more conscious belles-lettrism, more open use of classical and continental literary convention, than Langland entertained; and he asks us to recall the position occupied by Gower and Chaucer in their time. Each of them was, in his own way, remaking the face of English poetry [...] setting standards for English letters [...] claim[ing] new territory. They showed Englishmen capable of writing complex verse, intellectually and aesthetically challenging verse [...] The salient point is that every poem of Gower’s pen and Chaucer’s had successively—until the next one came along to raise the ante—little competition for the best poetry produced in England in the memories of its audience. As [E.V. Gordon] has remarked, when Chaucer and Gower were born, “the tradition of verbal art had been debased, and poets were often too easily satisfied.” When they died, it was a different country altogether.148

Langland does not so utterly re-align English verse with a prestigious continental and classical tradition. On the contrary, he has seemed atavistic (conservative at least) in using the alliterative line.149 Nevertheless, manifestly, he also responds to a call for poetic innovation.

These poets’ innovation also extended to their satire, preserving the mode’s essential ambiguity—the reliance on “‘artifice,’ through which the satirist maintains the limits of his speech”—by using caricature and stereotype to new effect.

149 Though it might seem otiose to mention it, literary critics once viewed Langland’s alliterative style as a consciously nationalistic return to long-forgotten Pre-Conquest verse form; see Sir Israel Gollancz’s depiction of Langland as a sort of prophet, patriotically drawing his people back to their earlier heritage in “The Middle Ages in the Lineage of English Poetry,” printed lecture (London: Harrap & Co., 1920). The same observations could never be made of Gower or of Chaucer.

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Caricature, or a dramatic simplification of elements and exaggeration of flaws, may be inherent to the satiric mode: “a descriptive stance that identifies and focuses on the flaws of individuals or groups to suggest its targets’ departure from some ideal or normative state while ambiguously deferring the power to effect reform, foregrounding its reliance on impressionistic assessment through the use of caricaturing bias.” Stereotype, the either direct or ironical attribution to a figure of faults deemed particular to his group, is merely a caricaturist’s technique.

In the Middle Ages both caricature and stereotype were frequently combined in the genre of estates satire, and this too became a site of late fourteenth-century poetic innovation. Not out of necessity but in practice, estates satire’s diagnosis almost invariably ascribes the ills affecting society to one particular vice (e.g. venality) or a group of vices (e.g. the “seven deadly sins”) treated *seriatim*; these in turn might be blamed on one particular group (such as friars or women) or a number of groups treated *seriatim*. Miller observes a common imagery of disease in estates satire, usually expressed through the maxim “*si caput dolet, membra dolent*” (if the head ails, so do the members) but, disease imagery or not, the satiric argument almost always goes in the same way: a good king, a good pope, a good bishop; good knights, good women, good merchants—any group of sufficient weight in society, were it only to give up its particular vice or vices, would effect a cure.\footnote{As we shall see, Langland does not hew very closely to this standard view that certain groups have specific, inherent flaws.}

It is easy to see the continued viability of this option in shorter, more cautious, poetry; and if one grants that, then its unsuitability for ambitious longer poems by Langland and his coevals will readily be admitted. Gower is the exception, using estates stereotypes quite freely in his works, but even he does not unthinkingly follow this tradition. He draws heavily on lines from Ovid in his Latin *Vox Clamantis*, for

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150 As we shall see, Langland does not hew very closely to this standard view that certain groups have specific, inherent flaws.
example, using the classical authority as a buttress for his topicality, but he employs this critique as much as to entertain a powerful élite. This use of convention should not be attributed to sycophancy, as Frank Grady has admonished.\textsuperscript{151} Instead, Gower was a deft manipulator of exemplary narrative and estates stereotypes—conventional means of describing society in terms of schematized ideals (which were relatively safe, because traditional and non-topical)—using them to draw attention to matters of immediate and controversial concern without suggesting unwelcome public policy. In the poem “In Praise of Peace,” Gower identifies flaws by praising virtues that (as the poem’s \textit{exempla} quietly demonstrate), may not be there. (His poetic in this instance is in the manner of a guilt trip.\textsuperscript{152}) And in the Middle English \textit{Confessio Amantis}, more to the point, Amans and his confessor use this exemplary narrative partly to comment on contemporary social “division”—tellingly setting up “a world of identifiable faults and of specific agents of correction,” in which “the punishment is limited to this world,” with a clear significance for political behavior.\textsuperscript{153} The \textit{Confessio}’s prologue ambiguously limits its outright claim to social topicality here, too, however, with its initial premise: that all the problems in the world owe their existence to the human heart.

Gower’s characterization in the \textit{Confessio Amantis} similarly bends convention to new effects. Amans and Genius are presented as stereotypes instead of the society

\textsuperscript{151} Writing about Gower’s “In Praise of Peace,” Grady quotes the rhetorical question of John Fisher—“Has there ever been a greater sycophant in the history of English literature?”—and provides evidence to the contrary. See “The Lancastrian Gower and the Limits of Exemplarity,” \textit{Speculum} 70.3 (1995), pp. 552-75.

\textsuperscript{152} Whatever qualms we might entertain about these satiric means, the frivous and perilous Lancastrian context in which Gower wrote “In Praise” suggests their usefulness and even necessity. It inspires the thought that \textit{Piers Plowman} could not have been written much later than it was, even if Langland had been longer lived. That said, the last page of Grady’s essay indicates that the \textit{intent} to write satire was missing from “In Praise of Peace”—not that we can know authorial intent—leading him to label it, instead, a “statist apolog[y]” (575).

their discussion inevitably entails, with Amans resembling every narrator of a chanson d'amour and Genius possessed of an equally apparent (if less common) literary-historical background. Gower is careful, moreover, to prevent these characters—they are the frame’s only characters—from carrying excessive weight. He lights the fuse with Genius early, naming him a priest of Venus rather than the Christian deity. And at the end of the poem, Amans too is unmasked: he is a blind old man, John Gower implicating himself, whose senectitude (as the prologue promised) mirrors the decline of the wider world. 

Yet even as Gower sets these characters firmly in a “moral universe” both literary and “self-contained,” isolating them in the frame they nearly fill, their confessional dialogue’s triangulation presents Amans as a far more realistic human being than initial impressions might suggest. He makes this “stereotype” the representative neither of all humanity (as might Langland) nor entirely sui generis (like Chaucer) but plots Amans onto a very close set of coordinates that reveal him as “typical” and yet no simple “type.” His presence indicates the very wide range of choices that all individuals must make, despite very similar circumstances, relative to Nature, love, the exercise of reason, and all ethics.

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154 On the history of such imagery in Middle English poetry see James M. Dean, The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1997).
155 Nicholson, “The Lover,” p. 85, who goes on to add that the tales “complement one another and […] transcend the limitations of the moral frame.”
156 Nicholson explains in “The Lover” that “Amans is a garden-variety sinner, as opposed to the hothouse species in [the Confessio’s] exempla. As such, he is not just more correctable than the sinful characters: he provides an ordinary point of reference, someone more like ourselves, for each of Genius’ lessons, a point of intersection between the comprehensiveness of Genius’ scheme and ordinary experience. […] ‘Realism’ is always a relative term, but it applies in a precise context here, to the relation between Amans’ accounts of himself and the stories that Genius offers for his instruction.” (100)
157 Nicholson offers that “[Amans] is there as a reminder that moral choices must be made by real people inhabiting a real world, with all that that implies, both about their necessity and about their difficulty” (“The Lover,” p. 101). Nicholson unpacks Gower’s complex sense of the relationship of love to reason and Nature—revealing it as more morally rigorous than provided by the Confessio’s literary sources, and Gower’s means of exploring wider issues of ethics and morality even outside the amatory sphere—in “An Ethics of Love” (Love and Ethics in Gower’s Confessio Amantis, pp. 41-68).
Chaucerian satiric ambiguity positively depends on stereotype in the General Prologue, as Jill Mann has best shown. Far from limiting stereotype to just one or two characters, as Gower does in the frame to the Confessio Amantis, the frame to the Canterbury Tales contains a profusion of estates stereotypes. Chaucer in fact adds to the traditionally recognized catalog of estates, creating stereotypes for some that (at least in known literature) did not yet exist. Chaucer’s project with these stereotypes, as Mann notes, is to suggest that all the Prologue’s characters are individuals—with the result that, just as with real individuals, we do not quite know how to judge them. In fact, as Mann goes on to point out, Chaucer’s estates portraits “consistent[ly] remov[e] the possibility of moral judgment.” Vice, let alone specific vices, can have no permanent home in the Prologue’s reckoning. Chaucer’s “ambiguities”—Mann’s term as well as mine—stem from the fact that every impression we gain may be countered by another one: we simply cannot know another’s situation. In the General Prologue, Chaucer explodes the estates model, partitioning not merely every estate but also every human heart and every frame of moral reference into individualized, tiny boxes.

The situation could not be more different for Langland, for whom the idea of individuating through stereotypes is only a ruse—albeit a useful one. As Mann remarks, Chaucer (unlike Langland) “has no systematic platform for moral values, not even an implicit one, in the Prologue”—with its “ethic of this world”—but in fact

158 Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: the Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), e.g. at p. 196. This is eminently sensible, and explains why—as Thomas Farrell has reported in a recent article—literary critics differ widely on whether or not, for instance, Chaucer approves or disapproves of his non-monastic Monk in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. See Farrell’s “Hybrid Discourse in the General Prologue Portraits,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 30 (2008), pp. 39-93.

159 Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, p. 197.

160 Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, loc. cit. “This I take to be the essence of Chaucer’s satire,” she writes. “It does not depend on wit and verbal pyrotechnic, but on an attitude which cannot be pinned down, which is always escaping to another view of things […].”

161 Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, p. 192.
this is not all. In actuality, Langland’s grounds are very systematic indeed and draw on an ethic to which “the world” is opposed. Where Chaucer could preserve ambiguity by putting everyone into individualized boxes, then, Langland preserves ambiguity by placing everyone into one giant (and well-labeled) box. His “ambiguity” consists in observing that what is true for his targets is at least potentially true for all equally—including his narrator, for whom he suggests the same detailed program of reform. The way the prophet Nathan reveals to David his injustice towards Uriah closely approximates Langland’s method of identifying vice.\textsuperscript{163} Readers, other addressees, even the narrator’s persona—all are encouraged to castigate problems they then learn are their own. \textit{Piers Plowman} only truly has one great stereotype, \textit{viz.} all of human nature, which it receives and critiques in accordance with ascetic thought. Langland is not a misanthrope, as we shall see. He acknowledges human potential and believes in a long-range future for human progress, though he sees the means to this perfected end as introspective, restrained, and penitential: a program of religious discipline meant to reorient individuals’ relationship to themselves, to others, and to the wider world. This view shines clearly in one of the poem’s Latin tags: “I, poor, rejoice, while you, O rich man, brood.”\textsuperscript{164}

\textit{Morality, Religious and Satiric}

I have suggested above that Langland’s asceticism shapes and carries the poem’s necessary “ambiguity,” since its detailed and authoritative critique—allying closely with sermonic and prophetic modes—implicates all of society, including the

\textsuperscript{162} Mann, \textit{Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire}, p. 200.
\textsuperscript{163} See 2 Samuel 12.
\textsuperscript{164} “\textit{Pauper ego ludum dum tu dives meditaris},” B.11.269a. It also appears in Alexander of Villa-Dei’s thirteenth-century \textit{Doctrinale}, a leading grammar textbook in verse, line 1091.
narrator, towards a constructive end. That said, I think it important to recognize that Langland’s satiric poetic did not have to owe its existence to asceticism. Nigel of Longchamps and Henry of Huntingdon all claimed an ascetic outlook, and similarly criticized human vice in their satire, but any sweeping moral worldview could have encouraged social analysis of this sort.

The best example of Langlandian ambiguity being used without the backing of specifically ascetic thought is probably Wynnere and Wastoure, a debate between the forces of miserliness and profligacy quite possibly written earlier than Piers Plowman. The poem shares many characteristics with Piers, including a dreaming narrator who observes all of society arranged on a broad field. It undermines stereotype much in the way that Langland does, albeit with a twist, placing whole armies of estates stereotypes under the leadership of either “Wynnere” (who will not spend his money) or “Wastoure” (who cannot keep his)—neither of whom appears a clear victor in their debate. The end of the poem is missing in the unique mid-fifteenth-century miscellany in which it appears, but nothing present in the work suggests a conclusion biased towards either party. On the ever more central issue of poverty, for example, the poet of Wynnere and Wastoure gives us effectively two distinct satires blaming poverty on the bad practices of one spending pattern or another. This double satire cancels itself out, leaving the adjudicating king, who never needed to take part in the quarrel in the first place, as the only possible victor.

Wynnere and Wastoure’s opening lines prominently include prophecy: a detail which, in concert with several others, shows a debt to religious thought. Nothing at all in Wynnere and Wastoure, however, indicates a thoroughgoing application of ascetic ideals to the problems it discusses. Had the poem opened on Langland’s “fair field,” we don’t know where “winning” and “wasting” would have appeared upon it. The poem is instead dialectic, and amoral to that extent. This dialectic quality should not
be surprising, though, since the poem takes the form of a debate. To modern-day writers and readers, the idea that two opposing views could ever stand on equal footing with each other seems deeply discomfiting. Yet audiences in the Middle Ages, somewhat more comfortable with paradox and obviously better disposed to oral entertainment, relished the debate form for its small-force dramatic possibilities and its capacity as a vehicle for perceptive, often witty, analysis.

Of course I don’t want to leave the impression that the popularity of the debate form in the Middle Ages points to the existence of an endemic moral relativism heretofore unsuspected in medieval society. On the contrary, many medieval debates have notably lower stakes than the debates one may observe in Piers Plowman, or even Wymere and Wastoure. Are women good or bad? (Neither answer will encourage a change in the rights or privileges accorded to them.) Which of many possible types of wines is superior? (See the Bataille des Vins by Henry d’Andeli.) Should a damned sinner blame his body, primarily, or his soul for his predicament? (The latter is an interesting example given that what was arguably an address only later transformed into a debate during the Middle Ages.) Here as in other examples one can perceive the influence of scholasticism, which as any reader of medieval philosophy knows made the form a refined dialectical tool for weighing the relative strengths of philosophical arguments. Wymere and Wastoure collapses stereotypes into just two giant ones, but its reliance upon debate makes it “dialectic” as well—even more openly than Chaucer’s prologue. That “dialectic” quality appears

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166 See J. Justin Brent, “From Address to Debate: Generic Considerations in the Debate between Soul and Body,” Comitatus 32 (2001), pp. 1–18
167 Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, p. 190: “The method of the work is not additive, but dialectic; the tales modify and even contradict each other, exploring subjects in a way that emphasises their different and opposed implications.”
pervasively throughout later fourteenth-century English satire, regardless of how its different poets made use of debate convention or indeed of stereotype. Dialectic being inherently amoral, the adoption of a “big box” or “small boxes” strategy says nothing about a satirist’s actual morality, let alone his religion.168

A different dynamic of suspended judgment asserts itself in Piers Plowman than in Chaucer, we have seen and will see, where judgment is not so much suspended as held in check by the danger of self-implication; it is interesting to find that dynamic at work, before Langland, in influential Latin poems such as Johannes de Hauvilla’s learned Architreniuss. The Architrenius seems intent upon criticizing the developing university world from which its author arose, according to Wetherbee, and in which a good portion of it takes place. This was an unstable social context of exactly the sort I have suggested Langland faced; maintaining appropriate ambiguity in criticizing it required seeing the humanity behind its fluid estates.169 Despite the encyclopedic scope attested by its title of “archweeper,” the marriage with Moderation that concludes the Architreniuss urges a mean between extremes. Its solutions neither drown in the hero’s tears nor sink beneath the flux of dialectic; the poem simply

168 The poet of Wynere and Wastoure clearly finds the problem of poverty interesting, but shows no sympathy beyond that, as if wealth’s failure to help the needy were an intellectual puzzle. Gower’s very moral and expressly Christian worldview seems at times to have a secular political edge. Although noting the General Prologue’s ethic “of this world,” Mann hastens to add that “[its] comic irony ensures that the reader does not identify with this ethic” (200-201).
169 As Wetherbee notes in his translation’s introduction, “The bureaucratization of government and administration in Church and state had opened new avenues for social advancement and created new functions for educated men. At the same time higher education in the liberal arts had become increasingly the province of cathedral schools located in urban centers. Out of the growing organization and specialization of students and masters was evolving the institution of the university, one of many indications of a new sense of identity associated with the possession of knowledge. The intellectual had emerged as a social type, a professional class increasingly defined by its role in a secular society, alert to the opportunities for advancement that education made possible, and possessed of the artistic skill to express its new social awareness in a range of new literary forms. [...] In a bewildering range of Latin poetry, ranging from adaptations of vernacular animal fable to the most sophisticated imitations of classical models, they maintained a steady barrage of satire, aimed not only at the venality and greed of the rich and powerful, but at the avarice and ambition of men whose training and horizons were often essentially their own. It is largely for and about such ‘new men’ that the Architrenius was written [...]” (ix-x)
doubts their practical implementation, instead. This especially, seeming to combine a
daring sense of moral purpose with a desire for poetic innovation, is a rhetorical
position one also recognizes in Langland’s poem.

For despite what Simpson’s article might suggest, Langland does not indulge
in poetic obfuscation solely from fear of “constraint,” which influences every satirist:
his religious ideology also plays a role in what Simpson rightly notes is a prevailing
“moral discretion.” In fact, Langland shows himself at his most anti-political by not
being cautious enough—for caring very little, ultimately, for satiric politics as usual.
Throughout, Langland uses the discourse of debate to his own ends, showing multiple
sides of arguments to indicate not their equivalency but rather the difficulty of finding
a solution.170

The Present Study

How much should we care about ascetic ideology—so often transmitted via
monastic and academic discourse—even if it is prevalent in the literary record? What
role do high-medieval monks have in the history of the emotions—and, by extension,
in the history of emotions literarily expressed—let alone in the history of Langland’s
poem? The monastic view of satire was by no means the only one in the Middle Ages,
and monastic restrictions against humor were overturned in literary practice even
when “ascetic satire” was at its most influential. The idea that asceticism could so
strongly have affected a poem as late and widely read as Langland’s thus remains
something of a mystery, given the popularity of humor and frivolity in much late-
medieval satire—and solving that mystery will take time.

170 Again, Langland’s choice to end his poem with an apparent lack of resolution stems more from his
finding the solution impractical than to finding no solution at all.
Langland’s indebtedness to monastic thought, without a doubt, is as quietly expressed as it is profound. Indeed, the poem’s frequently muted appropriations serve as evidence for Pearsall’s view that Langland’s “knowledge of devotional and contemplative writing is revealed at several points, but [that] he makes his own use of what he knows[, rejecting] unworldly and élitist spirituality [while] absorbing much of the language and idiom of devotional writing into his own search for a full Christian life which will be every Christian’s.”¹⁷¹ This is an apposite remark; Pearsall also usefully notes that “[t]he intellectualism that [some] scholars try to thrust upon the poem often seems the very thing Langland was trying to avoid.”¹⁷² Our fullest appreciation of Langland’s “trying to avoid” a set of texts lies, however, in our being aware that he is “trying to avoid” it. Likewise, the urgency of the poet’s search to represent the way to a “full Christian life that will be every Christian’s life” impresses itself more strongly on a reader aware of the apparent boundlessness—and openness to adapting tradition—of that search. Although Robert Bultot and Jean Delumeau might be a bit sensational in saying that literary contempt of the world directly created “Western Guilt culture” and caused today’s “divorce between the church and the modern world,” such writings certainly did give literary expression (and a whole array of topoi) to common anxieties over sin and death.¹⁷³

Perhaps such topoi, in the end, were simply topoi—literary equivalents of culturally imposed “emotives,” expressions of the feelings one thinks that one should have and thus express in a particular community.¹⁷⁴ This must remain uncertain, because the relationship between literary practice and the besetting problems of a

¹⁷² Pearsall, C-text, 2008, p. 8.
¹⁷³ See Bultot, most conveniently “Aux Sources du Divorce” and other writings mentioned in a note to chapter 4, below; see also Jean Delumeau, Sin and Fear (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990; trans. of La Peur en Occident, 1978).
¹⁷⁴ See Rosenwein, Emotional Communities, pp. 18-19.
contemporary society is not always proportional or direct—perhaps least of all in satire. Still, as Barbara Rosenwein reminds us, “[t]he representation and discussion of emotion in any source ought to be grist for the historian’s mill, since all texts are social productions, reflect certain norms, and presumably have impact on at least some groups.”175 We can say about works like the Architrenius and De Contemptu Mundi that, in them, learned and religious groups managed to continue down the same highly textual routes by which their ideology, after all, had been transmitted to them. In that regard, finally, these curiously un-funny satires remind us of that transmission and change among literary texts of even limited circulation and specialist concern mark the transmission and change of intellectual communities, emotional communities, even of broader culture. Moreover, recognizing and exploring in detail the indebtedness of Langland’s ascetic thought can help us to explain not only the problematic status of free speech in Piers but also the influence of ascetic thought on issues related to speech in distantly later periods.

To provide as full as possible an understanding of how “ascetic ideology” affects the “satiric mode” in Langland’s great poem, this study considers several aspects of their close and subtle relationship. It is divided into three parts. Part I, including this and the following chapter, notes Piers Plowman’s loose participation in

175 Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” American Historical Review 107 (202), n. 84. See also Emotional Communities, pp. 27-29: “Written texts present numerous problems. [...] But the historian of emotion is immediately confronted with somewhat different and as yet largely unmet challenges. Already long ago we realized that our sources are ‘interested,’ often ‘insincere.’ What should we make of them when they purport to tell us about emotions? Further, as composed texts, are they not very far from ‘real’ emotions, communicating them (at best) via a distorting ‘second hand’? Then, too, do not genres dictate the ‘emotional tenor’ that a text will have, quite independently from any supposed community? Finally, are texts not full of topoi, repeated commonplaces derived from other places, sources, and eras? When can topoi tell us about real feeling? [...] The rules of genre were not, however, ironclad. They themselves were ‘social products’—elaborated by people under certain conditions and with certain goals in mind—and they could be drawn upon and manipulated with some freedom. Like Isen and Diamond’s ‘automatic habits,’ they shaped emotional expressions even as they themselves were used and bent so as to be emotionally expressive.” Rosenwein’s remarks here refer to Alice M. Isen and Gregory Andrade Diamond. “Affect and Automaticity,” in Unintended Thought, edd. James S. Uleman and John A. Bargh (New York: Guilford, 1989), pp. 124-52.
a formal “genre” of medieval satiric poetry: one characterized in the late fourteenth century by ambiguity and, throughout the Middle Ages, by hybridity. Part II explores the poem’s critiques of self, others, and society—sites for the satiric “mode”—and what Langland’s critiques owe to ascetic thought. Although Langland’s satire identifies several flaws with actual ecclesiastical institutions, his interest in promoting the building-up of an internal “house of prayer” (domus oracionis) seems genuine. Part III explores Langland’s prophetic ideal, suggests an audience that could have appreciated it, and traces a posterity that increasingly did not.

The several chapters’ arguments ally closely with this larger threefold division. I have suggested in the current chapter that Langland’s choice to move away from stereotype when promoting “ambiguity,” a necessary feature both limiting and preserving satiric freedom of speech, stems not only from religious conviction but also poetic dissatisfaction with satire based on “estates.” Langland instead uses ascetic circumspection to reinforce his poem’s ambiguity, instead, highlighting that acceptable and flawed individuals—exactly like wheat and tares—resist distinction in every circumstance.

The second chapter appeals to the medieval tradition of commentary on classical satire in order explain one of the most confusing aspects of Piers Plowman: its occasionally patchwork, hodgepodge, digressive and shifting nature. This makes sense, I argue, as a manifestation of the “hybridity” accorded to satire by medieval theory, which I divide into “formal” and “conceptual” types. Langland’s use of the latter, especially, seems to have had analogues in medieval devotional practices related to reading and composition in addition to the precedent of secular poetry. Moreover, as these discursive appropriations invariably help to convey the poem’s critiques, they thus deserve to be associated with its satire. Here Piers Plowman’s frequent quotations from and references to ascetic figures and writings from the patristic period and high
Middle Ages suggest that Langland placed a priority on ascetic discourse and thus might well have been deeply familiar with ascetic thought.

In Part II, chapters three through six use the medieval conceit of the so-called “interior cloister” or “cloister of the soul” to explore satire’s outwardly radiating levels of critique. Chapter 3 uses the figures of Haukyn and Anima to revise the long-standing scholarly assumption that Will is a so-called “Goliardic narrator.” Drawing on the work of J. S. Wittig and others who have explored what Wittig called “monastic psychology,” I argue that the Goliardic figure of Haukyn represents the “old” or “outer” man (exterior or vetus homo) in contrast to the so-called “inner man” of Anima (the interior homo). My chapter suggests that these episodes promote the ascetic virtue of “contempt of self” (contemptus sui)—one of the “walls” in the interior cloister, and a discipline designed to nourish the “inner man”—as a model for self-critique.

Chapter 4 takes up the issue of medieval estates satire most thoroughly explored by Jill Mann’s research into the Canterbury Tales’ famous General Prologue, and suggests that Langland’s modifications of estates convention uncover his rationale for social critique. The poem’s social criticism instead borrows heavily on the ascetic ideal of “contempt of the world” or contemptus mundi, which it refers to via delicate references perhaps opaque to present-day readers but distinctly identifiable upon comparison with medieval devotional texts and pastoralia. This disciplinary “wall” in the cloister of the soul was at the time being formulated for practice by the laity, and Langland seems to have much the same uncloistered audience in mind. Many of the problems the poem ascribes to society derive from self-serving claims to titles and prerogatives, too unaccommodating and short-sighted a pursuit.
Chapter 5 discusses the tension between charitable “love of neighbor” (amor proximi) and righteous love for God (amor Dei, sometimes called Veritatis defensio or “defense of Truth”), and in so doing attempts to explain how Piers Plowman can at all indulge in satiric criticism when the poem’s narrator is repeatedly admonished by his interlocutors to stay silent. Its methods should be read in light of Edwin Craun’s work—most recently Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing—in which Craun has continued to draw scholarly attention to the textual evidence, literary and institutional, for the “social practice” of critique. This chapter attempts a similar investigation on a distinctly narrower scale. Although medieval canon law did allow for clerics throughout the Church hierarchy to make complaints at times and to speak out against corruption in their sermons, as I find, monastic thought heavily prioritized silence as a way of developing humility, obedience, and greater love of neighbor. The chapter thus treats the subject of religious silence at great length, finding the ascetic arguments for it made repeatedly (and for the same reasons) in Piers.

In Part III, chapters six and seven focus on Piers Plowman’s audience and later influence. Chapter 6 considers the poem’s blend of references to (Christian) “biblical” and more learned (pagan) “literary” prophecy. It suggests that an audience receptive to both types of prophecy and the poem’s clever referentiality might have resembled the learned friar John Erghome (O.E.S.A.) professor of theology at Oxford in late fourteenth-century England. In that case, Piers Plowman’s quotations deserve all the more to be read “florilegially,” as Erghome’s books might have been. More importantly, the poem’s satiric ideal could be the same as the fraternal idea of redemptio mundi, renewal or “redemption” of the world through the imitation of

Christ. This potential target audience might help to explain the deep ambivalence about friars evident from the poem’s final passus.

Chapter 7 begins an assessment of “ascetic satire” after Langland, differentiating Langland’s knowledge of ascetic thought from the ascetic discourse one finds occasionally in works by the far more famous Geoffrey Chaucer. It suggests that Langland’s influence on later vernacular English satire can be traced—for instance in Spenser’s Faerie Queene—as a viable way for poets to avoid the dangers of both speech and silence. Langland’s subtle and religiously authoritative criticism would continue to inspire later writers, such as the early seventeenth century “epigrammatist” William Goddard, although this was filtered and distorted by works in the Piers Plowman “tradition” (sometimes, ironically, attributed to Chaucer). With the poet’s asceticism growing ever further out of reach for early modern readers and writers, intent on easy laughs and quick sales rather than personal edification or transformative social change, humor began to assert itself once more as the standard satiric approach.
A strange persuasion came upon me that, save for the grossness of the line, the grotesqueness of the forms, I had here before me the whole balance of human life in miniature, the whole interplay of instinct, reason, and fate, in its simplest form.\textsuperscript{177}

In addition to its convincingly rendered atmosphere of suspicion (and resultant suspense) H. G. Wells’ ability to tap into the human mind’s natural disgust for things that it cannot easily classify makes for one of the most brilliantly chilling qualities of his \textit{Island of Doctor Moreau}. The work’s narrator uses the terms “Beast People” and “monsters manufactured” for the unclassified and perhaps unclassifiable entities—are they human or animal?—that populate the island. We might, less pejoratively, call these “triumphs of vivisection” hybrids. As such, considering them might help us think about one of the most significant—and strange—qualities ascribed in the Middle Ages to literary satire.

But why call hybridity “strange”? What makes the creatures’ hybridity horrify, or constitutes the problem with departures from the standard issue? In \textit{The Island of Doctor Moreau}, part of the sense of fright that afflicts the narrator (and, by extension, the reader) has to do with the sense that categories have been violated: the perception of unlawfulness in Moreau’s creative cruelty, to say nothing of Moreau’s pride. He has wrenched the animals into new shapes, ignoring the torturous pain the process entails, with the unsettling result that they worship him. His insult to established categories has made him both a dictator and a god to a helpless population of “experiments.”

The sense that Moreau’s pride exceeds the natural order drives the plot. Moreau claims no desire to make animals out of humans (though obviously even an

elementary interpretation allows that, by conducting his experiments, he has become an animal himself); instead, he communicates a desire to impart human glory to simple creatures—or, in other words, to aggrandize his subjects, too. Nevertheless, he fails to convince for at least two reasons. First, the subjects for Moreau’s experimentation are definitely not willing participants: Wells’ narrator takes great heed, as Wells’ doctor certainly does not, to the unspeakable suffering wrought on the animals during Moreau’s surgery and afterwards in their quasi-religious servitude. Second, the force of “civilization” quickly makes itself known among the hybrids. The narrator’s presence triggers a cascade of events that forces everyone on the island to choose one aspet of his nature or the other—man or beast—beginning with Moreau’s most trusted servant. This forced choice precipitates a conclusion in utter chaos. Hybridity quickly becomes a threshold situation pressured to end by a closing door.

As Wells suggests here, breaking categories into ambiguity only defers their restitution; Moreau’s impudence vanquished, Nature will have won. But the work concludes by denying that what is “human,” violently mixed with what is “animal,” can simply settle out of emulsion. The part-bestial narrator takes recourse to a therapist, one of Moreau’s former colleagues, to tinker with his mind: a desperate course of treatment that at book’s close has not yet fully met with success. In so doing, Wells reveals the ultimate horror of hybridity to be stability itself: that modulation will become a new norm that perpetuates, trapped by inertia on the path to entropy.

Wells’ musings over how animal hybrids unsettle us can be applied to books. It may be that only academic readers feel a keen urge to classify written texts, and yet classifications persist: in general, readers want a sense of what to appreciate or expect from what they read. In a world of trans-cultural genres extending from haiku to epic, from fable to short story to novella to novel to tome (a line of descent or evolution perhaps culminating at the “three-volume novel” hailed so amusingly in The
Importance of Being Ernest)—in poetry and in prose, those categories so rarely escaped—any work mixing classification will stand out. It can draw appreciation and interest, but it can also confuse and annoy.

Not surprisingly, therefore, readers of Piers Plowman have been known to complain about the poem’s variety of focuses and indeterminacy of genre. Though he was a brilliant modern scholar of the poem, writing in the mid-twentieth century, Morton Bloomfield felt impelled to write that the poem reads like “a book which is seven-eighths footnotes” and “a commentary on an unknown text.”178 His contemporary Ethelbert Talbot Donaldson (who co-edited the poem’s central B-text with George Kane) marveled in the preface to his own translation at the “truly dreamlike abruptness” with which its characters appear and disappear.179 Elizabeth Kirk even stated that no one should have to read Piers Plowman for the first time.180 What seems to discomfit these critics, as well as the readers whose qualms they feel obliged to anticipate and address, seems to have a lot to do with the poem’s shifting focus—a matter that, not insignificantly I think, also appears to have been on the mind of the author himself. The poem’s narrator, Will, expresses repeated confusion over the changing identities and natures of his interlocutors, over the settings in which he finds himself, and over the terms of the debates in which he joins. One of Will’s instructors, perhaps channeling the author at this point, exclaims with annoyance over

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178 These famous remarks appear in Bloomfield, Apocalypse, pp. 31 and 32.
180 This remark of Kirk’s, which might be anecdotal, appears on a Piers Plowman syllabus by Elizabeth A. Robertson for a course titled “Social Poetics: Piers Plowman and Fourteenth-Century England” at the University of Colorado (ENGL 7019-001). Robertson goes on to explain: “It is a difficult poem, but once the barrier of the first reading is passed, it is endlessly rewarding as a passionate poetic engagement with the most pressing social issues of the late fourteenth century.” I am grateful for Robertson for distributing this syllabus, which I obtained when attending a roundtable on teaching Piers Plowman during an International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo.
catapulting himself into a digression from his main theme (“This lokynge on lewed preestes haŋ don me lepe from poverte,” B.11.318).

As this chapter will demonstrate, much of the shifting in Langland’s narrative may be ascribed to its full and enthusiastic recourse to the hybridity that medieval theorists often ascribed to satire. Satire could display hybridity by varying formal elements or by drawing on a wide range of possible component discourses. By more carefully attending to the latter, we can better make sense of the intellectual traditions in which Piers Plowman participates. One important tradition, central among this dissertation’s focuses, is asceticism.181

*The Hybridity of Medieval Satiric Literature*

What makes medieval satire inherently hybrid, and of what does this hybridity consist? To answer the question requires recourse to the literary theory available to medieval scholars and poets, based upon medieval commentaries to satire from the classical era medieval scholars would comment on.182 Much of the earliest and most important literary theory of satire, as it happens, dates from the Late Antique period: in part because this was an age of commentary writing, and in part because no earlier literary criticism may be found of the sort that would answer certain basic questions one might have about these works. Classical satirists from Lucilius to Juvenal were not entirely mindless in their writing—undoubtedly, they held certain assumptions about the kind of poetry they composed and the ends to which they might put it to best use. Horace in particular, occasionally writing satires with the propriety of satire itself

181 Its contours will be the subject for the second section of this dissertation (chapters three through five, on satire’s modal aspects) and its possible home audience will be a topic for chapter 6.
182 In much that follows I am deeply and expressly indebted to Miller, “Medieval Literary Theory.” My view of medieval satiric hybridity and its implications is much broader than his, however, and I do not rely at all on his reading of Piers Plowman in the analysis that follows.
as a prime subject, gives a number of clues as to what he thinks the limits of critique for a satirist should be.\(^{183}\) All the same, it is hard to shake the impression that these poets viewed satire as subject to current Roman fashion (Quintilian would write, proudly, that satire belonged “entirely to us” \(\text{[tota nostra est]}\)) rather than an entirely set formal genre weighted down with precedent.\(^{184}\)

If anything, the satirists’ attempts at providing their own literary history could confuse: since Horace admired the Old Comedy and wrote at one point that the Greeks added to yet their dramatic tradition of competing for a goat by introducing a satyr who would provide the audience with scurrilous entertainment—producing the “satyr drama”—later writers assumed that the satirist was also in some way writing of the historical development of satire (a similar word).\(^{185}\) This may explain why Persius, who wrote half a century after Horace, considered the censoriousness in Old Comedy a proper model for the satirist to follow.\(^{186}\) It might also account for the fanciful literary history of satire provided by the not very influential \textit{De fabula} of Evanthius in the fourth century, which Miller notes was written “two hundred years after the canon

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\(^{183}\) That said, Horace’s assumptions do not always square with those of Persius or Juvenal.

\(^{184}\) Compare for instance what Gothic fiction looked like to its innovators in Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century: not as a genre unto itself perhaps so much as a currently fashionable type of story in prose of the sort that had long been written with different themes. Mary Shelley’s \textit{Frankenstein} had as its germ the challenge of writing a “ghost story”; surely we would say “Gothic tale” better fits the bill, but only in the broad elaboration from previous “Gothic” conventions by this and other later works does a sense of how the “Gothic” might be defined and even theorized become clear. On the genesis of \textit{Frankenstein}, see Stephen Robert Van Luchene, chapter 5: “\textit{Frankenstein},” in “Essays in Gothic Fiction: from Horace Walpole to Mary Shelley,” Ph.D. diss, University of Notre Dame, 1973, pp. 149-221, esp. at p. 151.

\(^{185}\) Miller, “Mediaeval Literary Theory,” p. 76.

\(^{186}\) Miller, “Mediaeval Literary Theory,” states that “[n]o examples of poetic satire written between the time of Horace’s death (8 B.C.) and the time of Nero’s enthronement (A.D. 54) survived antiquity,” though he immediately adds that an early commentary does mention some poets who flourished at this time (37). It should be clear by now however that the poets and dramatists seen as comprising a “literary tradition” for classical satire were spread out—sometimes at great temporal distance from one another—and that in effect each new writer had to construct the tradition leading up to his own work. On this phenomenon see the enlightening essay by Borges, “Kafka and his Precursors,” trans. J. E. Irby, in \textit{Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings}, aug. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 199-201.
of classical satire recognised in the Middle Ages had been completed.” Writing of
drama, Evanthius states that the Old Comedy was beneficial to public morality
because it censured specific individuals for their deeds by name. When it became too
harsh, though, criticizing others by name was made illegal and replaced by coarse and
irreverent satyra:

Rejecting other etymologies as false, Evanthius insists that satyra was
named from the satyrs, the gods who indulged in frolics and
impudence. Satyra was verse (carmen) which, although it employed
harsh, uncultured jokes about the vices of the citizens (“duro et uelut
agresti ioco de uitiis ciuium”), nevertheless did not name specific
individuals (“sineullo proprii nominis titulo”).

Since those in power saw through such writing, they banned it as well; New Comedy,
Evanthius explains, was developed as a result.187

Evanthius’ account in the De fabula probably bears very little relation to actual
literary history: as previously stated, the poets’ own references to literature they
admired could confuse later writers attempting to account for their place in literary
history as well as their poetic practice. Nevertheless, I think Evanthius’ discussion
deserves citation here for two reasons. First, it connects the poetics of satire via
etymology to satyrs specifically; secondly, as Miller goes on to state, it “represents
satyra as a kind of ‘Middle Comedy.’”188 Miller is interested in the representation of
satirists as comic poets, but I am interested in how already satire seems to be hybrid:
something between Old Comedy and New, modeled on divine figures half goat and
half man. Satire thus receives its identification as hybrid—but not in any specific,
defined, way—as early as Late Antiquity.

For the fourth-century grammarian Diomedes, as indeed for the classical
satirists (and even Evanthius), the equation of satire with satyrs had everything to do

188 op. cit., loc. cit., specifically p. 45.
with the bawdiness and rough rusticity of the satyr and nothing to do with the satyr’s half-bestial nature. Satires might derive their name from satyrs, Diomedes writes, because in them “ridiculae res pudendaeque dicuntur” (laughable and shameful things are said)—not because they appear mixed like the creations of Dr. Moreau. Other etymologies proposed by Diomedes do however suggest the quality that I have chosen to call satiric hybridity. One of the etymologies, to lanx satura, refers to a dish piled high with a variety of fine foods presented as an offering to the gods, so named from its “copia ac saturitate.” Diomedes also describes satire in terms of a type of vegetarian stuffing (or “farcimen”) also known—apparently—as satura, containing dried fruits and barley flavored with mead. Finally, satire could derive its name from a type of omnibus law containing a multitude of provisions—the lex satura, which his authorities perhaps more accurately call lex per saturam—all at the same time. So, too, satire can be comprised of several shorter poems.

Diomedes’ definitions through etymology for satire achieved much wider circulation thanks to their having been transmitted indirectly in the Etymologiae of Isidore of Seville, the most widely influential work of one of the most influential authorities for the medieval period. Isidore, too, focused most of the attention in his etymologies to satire’s relation to fullness or copiousness—and surely this quality, satire’s being able to comprehend several different types of discourses and messages at once, must remain our best guide to medieval ideas of satiric hybridity. At the same time, though, the idea that “satire” took its derivation from “satyr” (a word whose root is unrelated to that for the more commonly attested satur) remained influential.

According to Miller, [m]ediæval commentators displayed considerable ingenuity in their investigations of the satyri-etymology [and] selected descriptive nouns and adjectives—usually six in number—to establish the close
correspondence between the characteristics of the satyrs and the
distinguishing features of satire.189

Manuscripts of medieval commentaries on Juvenal and Persius describe both as
“lenes, mudi, dicaces, saltatores, cachimones, capripedes [light, naked, witty, leaping,
jeering, goat-footed]”: exactly six attributes of satyrs.190 Of these, the saltator label
has the greatest relevance to the idea of satyr hybridity, for in describing both satyrs
and satires as “dancers” the non-linear and catchall qualities of satiric poetry make
themselves evident, “[q]uia <satiri> quemadmodum de loco ad locum saltando
incedunt non gradatim passibus pedum [...].”191 The connection between satire and the
noun saltatrix that appears in medieval accessūs but not in the earlier vulgate
commentaries, as Miller goes on to point out, “assert[s] that a satire may lack both
thematic and rhythmic continuity.” This itself “suggest[s] the spontaneity and energy
with which satire treats a variety of subjects, varying style and thematic focus as the
opportunity arises.”192

Notably, then, influential etymologies circulating in the medieval period
describe the poetry of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal and their lesser-known successors
hardly as unified or stable but rather multifarious in content and operating with a
profusion of different techniques despite a predominately critical stance. Both the
satur and “satyr” etymologies for satire suggest that satire not only can but indeed

189 Miller, “Mediaeval Literary Theory,” p. 164.
190 This list occurs, according to Miller, “Mediaeval Literary Theory,” in “an early manuscript of
Commentary 2 on Juvenal (London, British Library Royal MS. 15 B XVII [s. X-XI], fol. 73r)” and
while perhaps a later, glossed addition to that manuscript also appears in a Juvenal commentary from
the twelfth century (Miller cites Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Auct. F. 6. 9. [s. XII], fol. 1r), other
manuscripts of Commentary 2, and “at least two manuscripts containing commentaries on Persius:
Bern, Burgerbibliothek MS. 539 [s. XIII]; and Erlangen, Universitätsbibliothek MS 434 (s. XIII-
191 “Because satires leap, as it were, from place to place rather than proceeding step by step on foot.”
From the Bern MS, with Miller adding in a note that it also declares that “saltansque debet esse satira,
quod non habet continuam materiam, sic ut non habet continuum carmen” and that B.L. Add. MS
33795 “calls satire saltatrix because it hardly ever keeps to the same subject, but runs to and from
vice to vice.” Miller, “Mediaeval Literary Theory,” p. 166.
must attempt to do and be several things at once—even in rapid succession. The etymologies demand hybridity.193

Hybridity in Two Types

Satiric hybridity was clearly acknowledged, but just as clearly realized in two main different ways, in the high to later Middle Ages. Some hybridity seems to have been purely formal, the best example of which showing up in the poems of the “Goliards” and of Walter of Châtillon. The so-called Vagantenstrophe ‘cum auctoritate’ used by such poets consists of a number of lines of (normally accentual) Latin verse original to the poet followed by a line (usually in dactylic hexameter) by a classical Latin “authority.” Virgil’s Aeneid was one well-exploited mine for satiric hexameter tags. The verse of the Goliardic poets exhibits the ironic turn some such uses of the stanza could have—an irony rather dependent on one’s knowledge of the classical line in its original context—but it bears remembering that some poets, such as Walter, might not have been ironic when they imputed Christianity to their Roman forebears. The same effect also extended to parodic centos in prose, such as the “Gospel of Silver Mark,” and to prosimetra modeled on originally Greek “Menippean satire” like the De Planctu Naturæ of Alan of Lille—with its inherent allusions to the De Consolatio of Boethius—or the “chantefable” (forever flirting with and trivializing romance convention) of Aucassin et Nicolette. Whether the intention to allude to earlier, more authoritative works is to blame for these works’ borrowing of earlier forms, or whether an intent to borrow from earlier forms results in the allusions we

193 It could be that Diomedes and company were talking about the shifting in approach from one poem to another in a book of satire, but that hardly seems to be how later writers interpreted them.
see, can for the moment be set aside. These “satiric” works all indulge in admixtures of the formal characteristics of other types of literature.

It is of course not hard to find evidence of formal hybridity in later fourteenth-century English satire, either. Tags from Ovid pepper John Gower’s Latin *Vox clamantis*, a poem whose concern with portraying renegade peasants in animalistic terms seems to theorize hybrid appearance as a sort of visual index to immorality just as much if not more than any early conception of satire vis-à-vis satyrs. Gower’s better-known poem (in English), the *Confessio Amantis*, gets a great deal of its energy by melding the “genres” of love poetry and confession. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* blossoms with appropriations of several genres often taken up parodically, such as in *bob & wheel* romance in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*; the anonymously composed *Wynmere and Wastoure* (as we have seen) blends both dream vision and debate poetry.

Are we supposed to take it for a coincidence that these poems which appropriate the largest variety of genres also indulge in satire? It might seem that a blending of genres is not the same thing as the blending of forms or even texts that one encounters in Menippean satires, centos, and *chantefables*, since if the essence of the satiric mode is criticism it is hard to see criticism expressed through form. Yet the juxtapositions of genre wrought in medieval satire allow their poets to comment on the limitations and assumptions inherent in those genres thanks to their shifting forms, and the unsettling of expectations provided by shifting genres can also make a satire’s ambiguity more acute.

Medieval satiric poets perhaps understood hybridity as a quality of satire not only because literary theory dictated that this was so, but also since one could exceed the typical limits of censure in one genre by even briefly appropriating another one. The best example of this generic appropriation comes in the case of political prophecy.

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194 *Cf.* my comments above about characterization and about ambiguity.
Prophecy was possessed of an inherent authority to make sweeping judgments entirely too excessive in other types of written work, and so a work calling itself prophetic could afford such pronouncements. Yet political prophecy also often took on the form of riddles or puzzles, as if to indicate that its critical message was safe from unlearned eyes and less important than the mental exercise it encouraged. Medieval satire was not just formally hybrid as a vestigial generic trait, then, looking back to the “satyr drama”: borrowing the forms of different genres (“formal hybridity”) could also actually work to enhance and veil satiric criticism, in ways that remain to be explored, for many of the works I’ve already mentioned.

Satyric hybridity also seems to evince itself on the conceptual level, still borrowing from other genres in order to make itself hybrid, as I’ve just suggested, but doing so by taking up their typical utterances and discursive terms as opposed to any specifically formal characteristics of meter or division. This is “discursive hybridity,” rather than formal hybridity, but I choose to call it “conceptual hybridity” below in order to avoid confusion with “hybrid discourse” (a term signifying the fusing of narratorial and character perspective, whose role in Chaucer’s General Prologue has been explored by Thomas Farrell).195 The De contemptu mundi of Bernard of Cluny impresses the reader as a work of forbidding and relentless formal perfection, each of its lines constrained to the almost “Gothic” complexity of meter that is the tripartite and tailed dactylic hexameter. This is very uniform throughout. Yet despite this formal unity, the poem’s topics vary over a wide range. The poem does bear the title of Scorn for the World (as Pepin’s translation puts it) and the world of necessity consists of many things, so such a range is not entirely surprising. Yet when the poem is at its most avowedly satiric, it seems consciously to have the ideal of variety—especially the ideal of satire as, like the Satyr, saltatrix, leaping from topic to topic—in mind.

195 Farrell, “Hybrid Discourse.”
The *Entheticus* (*maior: de Dogmate Philosophorum*) by the twelfth-century scholar John of Salisbury also provides a good example of satire’s conceptual hybridity, for while the long series of poems obviously stands alone as one work it is hard to tell what genre it might be said to take part in and its variety of subjects treated is quite wide. The following statement by the editor and translator Jan van Laarhoven (in a chapter titled “valuations” and a section called “confrontations”) deserves quoting in this regard:

The ‘lyrical explosion’ of Latin love poetry in the eleventh and twelfth century, in particular has been a striking example of the force of revitalized Latin culture. But if you seek that kind of poetry, you should not read the *Entheticus*. Better, in that case, to be ‘carried away’ by Waddel’s “wandering scholars,” or to rejoice again in the well-known anthologies of Langosch, Kusch, or Dronke. We do not know, alas, whether John, who was after all a student for twelve years—and in Paris at that!—did in fact love this kind of ‘new’ poetry; the one occasion on which he quoted—with approval—two lines of the *Carmina Burana*, cannot be taken as an answer in the affirmative (moreover, it was a distich). In fact, the poetry of the *Entheticus maior* and *minor* [the latter appearing in the *Politicus*] is of another sort. It does not betray any trace of the ‘modern’ experiments with rhyme and rhythm which John’s contemporaries loved so much. There is no trace of Goliardic poetry as there is in Abelard, nor of the Leonine verses of Bernard of Morlas, nor of rhythmical variations in even lines as there is in Bernard Silvestris, nor of the pleasure in rhyme and *auctoritas*-quotations which his friend Walter of Châtillon took. All we have is one continuous stream of over two thousand classical hexameters and pentameters.196

Into this stream of “over two thousand classical hexameters and pentameters” however appear biting portraits, critiques of philosophy, religious reflections, and reflections on society (as Laarhoven’s judicious editorial division of the poem into separate sections and pieces helps in large part to make clear). It is not at all surprising that perhaps the most influential piece of scholarship on the work is an article titled “What is the *Entheticus*?”—but it is also quite apt that the answer is, in large part, “satire.”197

197 Thomson, “What is the *Entheticus*?” p. 287: “John of Salisbury’s *Entheticus de Dogmate Philosophorum* (the so-called ‘longer Entheticus’ [or Laarhoven’s *Entheticus maior*]) is a philosophical
Other twelfth-century Latin poetry was equally hybrid in its borrowings, and thereby eclectically inventive. The *Architrenius*, which probably no one has ever doubted was intended to be a satire, could scarcely differ more from classical satires in form and still remain hexameter verse: it is long, consisting of nine books stretched over thousands of lines, and often narrated in the third person. Despite such divergences from classical satire, however, its indebtedness to such poetry is unmistakable. It owes its nine-book structure not to any logic of its episodes—which often break between books without any acknowledgement of the transition (most notably in the description of a girl between books one and two)—to Alan of Lille’s then-well-known Menippean satire on sexual deviance, the *De Planctu Naturae*. And while readers are assured of its narrative plot in a reliable (if not authorial) prose preface, actual narration in the *Architrenius* only rarely appears. One instead sometimes reads disdainful descriptions provided by the narrator looking through his hero’s eyes, and at other times the outbursts of that hero (the Architrenius himself or “arch weeper”) as he encounters vice on a quest to interrogate Nature concerning her failure to govern man. Speeches deploring human frailty and providing instruction for amendment, delivered by learned authorities from the classical world and by Nature herself, proliferate. The poem’s epic swagger—its sometimes-excessive detail in high register, as in the cap. 14 “description of the girl”—seems both to mock Alan for the pretensions of scope in the *De Planctu* and also to draw respectfully on the tissue of epic references underlying occasional mock heroism in classical satirists such as Juvenal. 198 Here formal features cue readers to conceptual borrowings as well.

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Though overall the *Architrenius* might seem perpetually to look back, it actually stands as a harbinger of relative literary modernity that would be a known text late into the fourteenth century and beyond. Johannes de Hauvilla, wrote from and spoke to the concerns of the nascent and flourishing universities rather than the court or church, and the poem stands self-consciously both as a monument to and stinging indictment of learned ambition—for both of which purposes the work’s familiarity with and changes to classical precedent prove to Johannes indispensable. The work achieves the state of satire in the highest and truest sense—interrogation of set frameworks and assumptions—by leaning on a hodgepodge of earlier satiric writings’ ways of making sense of the world and attempting to apply those models to its own changed circumstances. The most obvious example of the poem’s conceptual hybridity appears in the speeches on morality and vice that proliferate near its end. As I have tried to show, however, it conveys a new sense of mixing earlier viewpoints (as well as styles) throughout.

Like Johannes de Hauvilla, Langland and his contemporaries faced changed circumstances which standard literary models failed to match. Nevertheless, they also recognized the benefit of interrogating these situations through satire on a shifting profusion of topics. Satire against the “estates” (as Jill Mann has conceived the tradition) made an important foundation on which Chaucer and Gower would build. Yet, if these writers would not achieve the same dissatisfaction with estates satire as Langland, they nonetheless use models of estates as flexible guide lines and starting points for their depictions of society rather than rigid frameworks. With each poet there are of course differences of emphasis: the *Canterbury Tales* operate as an expansion of estates satire horizontally, incorporating more of both sexes and the

199 See the quotation from Wetherbee’s introduction provided above, to which we might add here the assertion that “Johannes is the poet par excellence of the [new] capitalist-careerist mentality” (xvi) and Wetherbee’s introduction’s section on the poem’s later “Fortune,” pp. xxvii-xxix.
merchant class, while Gower expands his vision of estates vertically to discourse critically about matters as celestial as the pagan gods (and the baser human passions they reflect). For the *Confessio Amantis*, the estates model of society implicit in Gower’s narratives of both national and domestic governance has been successfully combined with the psychological speculations inherent in the sacrament of confession so as to suggest the way that microcosm—the human heart—can have an effect even upon the cosmos. Without the fusion of confessional discourse and satire of the estates, the work’s most searching insights would hardly be as possible. Chaucer’s non-satiric *Parson’s Tale* proves the fluency with which the estates model works for Chaucer, since this long and earnest criticism of human folly acts with extreme order and linearity, providing a taxonomy of the vices and their remedies so pedestrian as to render the rest of the poem positively acrobatic in its treatment of the same subjects by comparison: the Wife of Bath, by contrast, at once tissue of stereotype and inquisitor of facile convention in her prologue, owes her very existence to generic and conceptual hybridity.

**Piers Plowman’s Appropriations**

Hybridity, both formal and conceptual, contributes even more noticeably to Langland’s own poetic practice—yet *Piers*’ formal hybridity probably stands out the most. However one chooses to genealogize the Latin in *Piers Plowman*, whether as a descendant of the stanzas of Walter of Châtillon or as a vernacular reflex of the commentary tradition, the poem’s macaronic form is its most obvious example of formal hybridity. That said, the fact that the Latin quotations in the poem often act as *lemmata* for the poem’s characters’ action and their discussions neither vitiates nor justifies their consideration as an important part of the poem’s satire, since we can
observe that many literary works are hybrid in some way formally without expressing any other satiric qualities. Yet these quotations are indeed often authoritative, critical, or ironic commentary on the action of the poem they help to motivate. They are inseparable as well from Langland’s Middle English verse. Thus macaronicity acts as an important vehicle for Langland’s satiric message.

Langland’s conceptual hybridity is even more apparent, first of all in terms of its sheer scope. Piers Plowman has been at times compared to a drama, and may consciously draw such a comparison from readers, but far from observing the old Aristotelian command for unity of setting it seems to want to investigate (and, so far as the dream vision conceit allows, take place on) as many levels as possible of human experience. Such investigation lends Piers Plowman a cosmic scope, and since it touches regularly on the antithesis of Truth and Wrong with which the poem opens it invites reflection on both life and afterlife. If it does not quite reach the abstracted, pseudo-Dionysian heights of Bernardus Silvestris or Alan of Lille, its sense of and interest in this realm is nonetheless quite comparable to Gower’s in the prologue to the Confessio Amantis or Chaucer’s in the end of Troilus & Criseyde. But Piers Plowman also operates on a local level, inspecting the relationships that tie individuals to one another and their groups to society. Finally and most thoroughgoing the poem investigates the human person itself. Even here, however, it attends (as Philosophy urges Boethius to do in the Consolatio) to a perception of reality parallel to normal lived experience. Such a broad purview does more than signify the poetic ambition of Piers. It also aligns the poem with concerns of medieval Christian religious philosophy (on which see particularly chapter 3 below), a discourse that would

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200 See also such multi-media environments as the virtual front page (not normally given to satire) of the online New York Times.

201 These more intimate settings probably account for most of the poem’s work as “a satire.”
seem—at least a first glance—quite separate from the typically more “mondaine” concerns of the classical poets.

Yet despite this first-glance foreignness of medieval theology to the classical tradition of satire, Langland’s incorporation of the former’s concerns actually builds on and expands from earlier classical precedent, much in the way that the pseudo-epic elements in Johannes de Hauvilla’s *Architrenius* build on and expand from pseudo-epic gestures in Juvenal. Observing this filiation is important, since it helps to preempt any fear that medieval satire is somehow not as subtle or poetically well conceived as classical satire; more to the point of the present argument, a demonstration that philosophical speculation can coexist with satire allays concern that a work like *Piers*, deeply concerned with matters of religion, cannot *ipso facto* be a satiric work. Fortunately, such an objection is easily laid to rest. Something of the philosophical aspirations of the classical satirists makes itself apparent in the *Sermones* by Horace, which praise self-sufficient moderation: the very first of the poems considers the futile aspirations of humanity in the face of fixed bonds set by nature and the gods.²⁰²

Medieval authors’ more extensive speculation than their classical forebears into matters of theology stands out especially from the first line of the first satire of Persius, a quotation from the innovator Lucilius that I have also discussed above: “*O curas hominum! o quantum est in rebus inane!*” Daniel M. Hooley makes the case for the seriousness of the sentiment—both Stoic and as it were literary theoretical—behind Persius’ use of the quotation:

Satire’s focus is immediately, and permanently, bifocal: that *inane* is meant to gloss *curas hominum* as well as *rebus* [the world], so that human responses to pressures from without come under as much scrutiny as any absurdity “out there.” Yet *rebus* doesn’t just mean “things” or the stuff of material existence, but the world as seen and conceived by people; it entails society, what we broadly call culture, and the movements of human history. Crucially, therefore, satire is less

²⁰² See for example the first satire of Horace.
about particular things or situations than about how we are connected, plugged into the Zeitgeist. 203

Yet in the poem itself, a dialogue, Persius’ interlocutor’s response is swift and cutting: “who’ll read that?” in Braund’s translation. The poet thus undercuts himself. We have already seen that Alan of Lille, on the other hand, in his summa on the art of preaching, earnestly takes this same line as one of several mostly scriptural authorities advocating contempt of the world.

The level of irony or humor with which classical and medieval writers take philosophical sentiments does not strike me as being nearly so important as both classical and medieval openness to those sentiments’ being voiced. In any case, the objection that medieval writers such as Alan of Lille take the Stoic idea too seriously and therefore did not understand the satiric context in which the “curas hominum” exclamation was voiced will not hold water. Alan specifically writes that Persius (he did not know about Lucilius) writes in a “comic” way—to use the translator Gillian Evans’ word—but he valued the sentiment nonetheless. By according satire the place of authority next to scripture, of course, Alan also suggests that satire can be authoritatively serious—that satire of his own era could indulge in exactly the sort of in-depth philosophical or theological speculation that Persius’ quotation only flirted with. This tightened embrace of un-ironic philosophical reflection thus constitutes an advance by medieval writers, even if founded on some misconceptions.

Just as Alan of Lille could quote satire from Persius as an authority while also understanding that Persius wrote for particular “comic” ends, rather than a learned lament redolent of contempt of the world in which the line seemed to fit, so too Langland’s satire should not be viewed only as sermonizing even when his writings seem appropriate sermonic discourse and mimic its effects. What might seem

sermonic in *Piers Plowman* might advance some satiric message, and vice versa. In fact, the close relationship in some medieval writing between satiric and sermonic modes, at least, can be corroborated by the similarity of medieval satiric “leaping about” to the trajectories of medieval sermons. Kirk’s *aperçu* refers most obviously to its constant shifting of subject matter and approach. Speeches on one topic swerve suddenly, howbeit on the pivot of a single word, to another just as nimbly as any satyr might leap. The labors of John Alford among others have made it clear that Langland has as an organizational principle of frequent if not continuous resort collections of “*distinctiones,*” guides used in the Middle Ages for the composition of sermons.²⁰⁴ It seems important to point out that these distinction collections are merely a later, purely textual replacement for a type of associative thinking. In fact, while the time in which Langland’s poem was written makes it likely that Langland did have recourse to written distinction collections, it is equally true that any cleric (broadly) who had spent a significant portion of his life in service of the Church would have developed a kind of interior distinction system.

Regardless of its mental or textual vehicle, such associative thinking lends itself to changing of subjects and a sort of “jumping about” that earlier in this chapter I had referred to as satiric. Monks composed by means of this type of thought. As Jean Leclercq writes, “It is this deep impregnation with the words of Scripture that explains the extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in the sacred books.”²⁰⁵ While Leclercq refers to high-medieval monastic reminiscence

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based on and inspiring of *ruminatio*, rather than later distinction collections or similar preachers’ aids made up of written text, his description of the process and its effects seems plausibly representative of all:

Each word is like a hook, so to speak; it catches hold of one or several others which become linked together and make up the fabric of the exposé. This accounts for the difficulty of what is called today research into sources: are the monks quoting older versions of Scripture or are they modifying them? Most frequently, it would seem, they are quoting from memory; quotations by means of the “hook-words,” group themselves together in their minds and under their pen, like variations on the same theme. [...] As it had for the Fathers, reminiscence on the part of the monastic authors of the Middle Ages had a profound effect on their literary composition. The mere fact of hearing certain words, which happen to be similar in sound to certain other words, sets up a kind of chain reaction of associations which will bring together words that have no more than a chance connection, purely external, with one another. But since the verse or passage which contains this word comes to mind, why not comment on it here? [...] The plan really follows a psychological development, determined by the plan of associations, and one digression may lead on to another or even to several others. Thus, in the *Sermons on the Canticles*, in connection with these words of the second verse of the Canticle: “Thy very name spoken soothes the heart like flow of oil,” Bernard spoke at length on the perfumes of the Bride when suddenly he pauses to insert a discourse on the praises of humility. Had he lost the trend of his sermon? By no means. He realizes that he has gotten away from the Canticle and he does not regret it. He takes up again the verse where he had left off. But now Psalm 75 proclaims “that in Israel the name of God is extolled” and Bernard introduces a discourse on the Synagogue and the Church, devoting an entire sermon to it. In the following sermon, he chants the praise of the name of Jesus, and while on the subject of the individuals of the Old Testament who bore that name, he expounds the Prophets. He compares them to the staff which Elisha sends to the sun of the Sunamite before coming to raise him from the dead. Coming back to life, the child yawns *seven* times; thereupon, after a long introduction on the meaning of the allegories of the Old Testament, Bernard gives a sermon on the *seven* phases of conversion, and this makes him think of the gifts of the Holy Ghost: a new direction in which he willingly follows. This brings his mind back, little by little, to the second verse of the Canticle. Now, this series of digressions has taken up six complete sermons.206

Associative writing, then, preëminently the sermon, wandered by following associative simple reminiscence. Langland’s poem obviously does something similar, and so to observe that *Piers Plowman* owes a lot to the sermon genre and sermon discourse is very apt. Nevertheless, Langland’s poem attends to different—less

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206 *Love of Learning*, pp. 91-93.
expository, more critical—ends. The satiric and the sermonic modes there are very close. For while both the narrator and Will’s interlocutors in the poem often seem to be playing exactly the role of preachers, even their hardest held convictions about how man or society might achieve better inner health fail in the larger context of the poem to be more than tentative. They are questioned by Will, and they are undone by other later pronouncements, and they pose paradoxes not easily resolved which ensure that even unquestioned recommendations will not always find an easy implementation.207

Langland might have composed with written preachers’ aids, or he might have composed based on sheer memory in the way of the old monastic writers—but, again, his use of preacherly techniques and materials represents an appropriation of means rather than a replication of final object. But as with sermons, so too with other forms of expression: for Piers Plowman actually seems to draw on several genres, religious as well as secular. Some critical readings of Piers Plowman produced in the not-too-distant past owe themselves in part to an acceptance by late- and “post-” modern academic culture of this characteristic feature (once deemed puzzling) of the work’s literary technique, namely its leaping not merely from topic to topic but from genre to genre as well: its associative movement through complex and dense networks of previous text, quoting and re-juxtaposing those materials via a sort of bricolage—a term that Derrida has explained:

The bricoleur, says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposal around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous—and so forth.208

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207 This will appear to be particularly true in the case of silence and judgment of others, to be discussed in chapter 5.
This technique achieves a different sort of message and instruction, often much more open-ended and thoroughly dialogic in its new narrative setting than it had been in its constituent parts.\textsuperscript{209} As a corollary, having grown increasingly aware of (and now more conversant with) the poem’s pastiche of content, scholarship has also viewed Langland’s poem as a pastiche of genres transmitted alongside (sometimes independently of or over) that content.\textsuperscript{210}

One important thread of work both past and present on the poem has asked what \textit{Piers Plowman} gains from any particular genre, where examples of it appear in the larger poem and develop along with Langland’s revisions of the work, and how this genre imprints itself as well on the poem’s larger shape. The medieval sermon, again, appears cited within \textit{Piers Plowman}; and sermon structure also gives us a guide to the structure of the poem.\textsuperscript{211} In addition to the sermon (as in Holichurch’s speech

\textsuperscript{209} On this point see the widely referenced work of John Alford, e.g. “The Role of the Quotations,” in \textit{Piers Plowman}, \textit{Speculum} 52 (1977), pp. 80-99, which makes the claim that in \textit{Piers Plowman} “[t]he poetry is structurally contingent upon the quotations,” from which “the English radiates outward, like ripples.” (89) Alford surveys prior claims about Langland’s lack of literary structure on pages 96-99 of that article and concludes (against an early article by George Kane) that “[t]he evidence of thequotations, in both their nature and their function, is against the view that Langland ‘speaks, as he thinks, impetuously’ and that his writing was ‘governed more by imagination than by intellect.’ On the contrary, the picture that emerges is that of a man eking out his poem slowly, even tediously, while poring over a variety of commentaries and preachers’ aids—and this picture is entirely consistent with the practice of countless of his contemporaries, with the structure of the poem itself, and with the fact that he was a tireless reviser.” (99)

\textsuperscript{210} For a sense of the contributions made by several genres to \textit{Piers Plowman} see essays devoted to a number of them in the \textit{Alford Companion} and also, e.g., Steven Justice, “The Genres of \textit{Piers Plowman},” \textit{Viator} 19 (1988), pp. 291-306. Justice argues that the Visio’s pilgrimage to Truth is the search for a genre that will accommodate an authority neither abusive nor idiosyncratic” (290), noting that Judson Boyce Allen and Alford’s studies have clarified for us “the conceptual and even narrative structure of particular episodes, but not how they emerge into the larger rhetorical structures of the poem” (291), finding the “episodic form” and concomitant lack of apparent narrative contiguity pointed out by Middleton problematic enough to call for “a vocabulary” that can both acknowledge the narrative disruptions endemic to \textit{Piers Plowman} and ascribe to the poem a progression or unity—something that readers can make sense of—even so (291, loc. cit. n. 8). Justice finds such unity in “a sequence not of narrated actions, but of narrated genres,” declaring that “Langland’s shifting generic commitments form the real plot of the Visio” (291).

\textsuperscript{211} Alford observes that Langland would have “borrowed” both the “method of the preachers of his day” and “their tools as well”—such as John Bromyard’s \textit{Summa Prædicantium} and other distinction collections—to create his citational pastiche (“The Role of the Quotations,” 99).
and Reason’s recounted sermon and Anima’s diatribe), the poem also contains drama
or nods to it (as at the trial of Lady Mede and in almost all of Passus 19). *Exempla*, as
from sermons, appear on their own (as in the friar’s *exemplum* about the saved man
protected from the sea of sin by a boat) as well as riddles and prophecies (see the
hardly exhaustive treatment below in chapter 6). The appearance of Holichurch in the
introduction to the poem has reminded at least one critic of Boethius’ *De consolatione*,
while Anne Middleton has detected strong reflexes of the *chanson d'aventure* in the
structure of *Piers*.212 Curtis R.-H. Jirsa has developed the observation even further in
his examination of the genre of lyric, which similarly informs how *Piers Plowman*
unfolds and indicates that *Piers Plowman* might be read and appreciated as itself a
kind of lyric—a work at least whose lyricality suits it to the critical practices that have
often most fruitfully engaged this type of poem.213

All studies of generic affiliation within the poem have not been uniformly
successful, however. Studying the work in relation to the medieval sermon, as has
already been remarked, G. R. Owst famously opined that it represented the
“quintessence” of that discourse or genre; in so doing, however, he foreclosed
discussion of the ways in which *Piers Plowman* is manifestly not a sermon, no matter
how much it should happen to borrow from the homiletic practice of its day.214 The
identification between *Piers Plowman* and lyric, on the other hand, has had a history

212 On Boethius (when referring to or quoting from *De Cons. Phil.*, I use the Loeb edition given in the
bibliography), see Justice, “The Genres of *Piers Plowman*.” On the *chanson d'aventure* and analogues,
see Anne Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*,” in
D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications of Western Michigan
University, 1982), pp. 91-122.
213 See Curtis Robets-Holt Jirsa, “*Piers Plowman* and the Invention of the Lyric in the Middle Ages,”
Ph.D. diss, Cornell University, 2008.
214 Total identification of *Piers Plowman* with medieval sermon writing is easy to make, harder to
follow through. For an outline of much more recent and nuanced appreciations of the generic affinity
between *Piers Plowman* and the sermon after Owst, see Siegfried Wenzel’s chapter 6: “Sermons,” in
the Alford *Companion*, pp. 155-72.
differently instructional. Lyric had been identified in Langland’s opus here and there, in individual quotations, but *Piers Plowman* dwarfs any lyric in form and scale; as a result, despite the poem’s lyric quotations, its overall *lyricism* escaped attention. (Or rather, since “lyricism” suggests only tone, its “lyricality” went unheard.) Langland’s generic borrowings, we can now see, often occur as borrowings of literary *mode*—of stances particular to given genres (e.g. “lyricality”)—rather than explicit literary form (e.g. “lyric”). The poem’s largest frame, of course, is the dream vision; but its main utility for Langland, as I’ve previously suggested, seems to lie in its capacious accommodations for all the rest. In and of themselves, as with Langland’s use of quotations, these generic appropriations may not always be parodic or transparently satiric. Instead their profusion directs us to look beyond genres. Langland seems to use all of them as conveyers of the critical investigations that indicate an overarching satiric mode.

*Discursive Penetration*

Lastly, and most importantly for this chapter, is the question of *Piers Plowman*’s seemingly hybrid worldview, a natural consequence of its free borrowing from and adaptation of so many types of written and spoken discourse. The worldview of the poem, by which I mean the set of its values and priorities and the most important filter through which it evaluates the experiences it claims to recount, seems sometimes to come from the world of secular commerce, sometimes from various elements within the Christian church, sometimes from civil government and at other

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215 It shows us however that lyric in *Piers Plowman* differs from such writing’s more familiar nineteenth-century variety, that the “horizons of expectation” Jaussians might identify in both have significantly changed, and that Piers’s lyricality should thus be read in its own (or at least its own era’s) terms.
times from philosophical allegory or even love lyric. One does not want to be reductive here: what Langland takes from each of these spheres, as even the interactions between those views, contributes in a telling way to the overall perspective of the poem.

Some discursive borrowings, however, may have played a more directly informative role than others in Langland’s satire. Even if we assume an overarching Christian worldview that would influence Langland’s satire as surely as his cosmology and ethics, which sounds plausible if not unquestionable, it remains to ask which Christianity influenced the poem. Here, the monolithic idea of MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY might convince one that the case here is open-and-shut. In fact, however—as Langland’s poem itself best teaches us—such Christianity (even if we ignore the simply unorthodox, the heretical movements, and the Christianity of the East) transmitted itself to different groups among laity and clergy alike in different ways and even then in varying hues. John Van Engen calls “delusory” and “vain” any attempt to recognize a single and unified medieval Christendom.216 The problem we still face is how to distinguish between its varieties, despite the apparent ease of identifying Christianity as the engine for Langland’s poetic ethic.

I suggest that Langland’s hybrid employment of so many genres, forms, and rhetorics—his poem’s drawing on the texts of varied disciplines or discourses—helps us to understand what Anthony Giddens most usefully has labeled “discursive penetration.”217 This topic has not been discussed much by scholars of satire, to my

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best understanding, but it seems fruitful to me. The idea operating behind the term has for decades now been taken as a given in humanistic studies, namely that human beings are in large part formed by sets of conventions dictated by the discourses of various social spheres to which those individuals belong (e.g. by birth). The talk of a group becomes the inner life (not just the talk) of its members. This idea may not seem to account for individuality apart from what is dictated by genetics, save that as a consequence of being alive one gradually becomes influenced, in differing degrees, by the discourses of different spheres. One articulates one’s individuality by, in a word, “penetrating” these discourse shells—an issue I will return to after some background.

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* provides a good description of the effect exerted by the power structures of discourse-guarding institutions on personal formation, at least for a comparatively more modern period—and some attention to his view helps to make comprehensible the medieval vogue for, and common appearance of, indirect institutional criticism such as satire.218 In the Middle Ages, these “power structures” would have been formed based on access to or ability to interpret a limited common stock of material that could be changed, if at all, by very few: holy writ, for example, or either sort of law. Punishment before the modern era’s “birth of the prison” pronounced forcefully those powers to whom or which one was subject. It would also have made clear the danger one could face by disregarding the common consensus of the law (or at least doing this so openly as to be caught). For the most part, a system of constant surveillance to ensure the following of rigorously codified statutes was still far in the future. In the contemporary era, an individual (by default, allowed to associate) might join a group if he approves of the texts it focuses on (the discourses it produces and to which it ascribes) and how it interprets them. This is

quite common in the West. These individual freedoms applied more obviously to groups in the Middle Ages. This is not to set the birth of the individual to the sixteenth century, importantly, but rather to suggest the importance of institutional labels on individuals by emerging bureaucracies: a governing body with limited surveillance capacity has to pay more attention to groups than to individuals, and so it is no surprise at all that society should be conceived of (by medieval thinkers at least) not as groups of individuals but more as groups of groups.219

The medieval model of the estates, in so far as this simplifying literary construct reflected different social roles, indicates that discourses were not evenly distributed or evenly available in the Middle Ages. Literacy, for instance, was not expected for all groups in society. Moreover, the type of informative or entertaining literature approved—or even available—differed sharply between groups.220 This made a small canon of texts in free circulation smaller still. The Church obviously had a role in enforcing these distinctions, but it also provided an escape from them. While not to be confused with a bona fide meritocracy, it allowed sons of high and low estate to receive broad education in several subjects. Canon law legislated for clerks in major orders knowledge of, if not delight in, secular letters.221

219 For an example of how much group affiliation mattered in this period, even to the point of showing up in legislation, see for example 37 Ed. III, cap. VIII-XV (sumptuary laws on the clothing appurtenant to the various estates, “for the outrageous and excessive apparel of divers people, against their estate and degree, to the great destruction and impoverishment of the land” [164]) in Statutes of the Realm. The chapter headings, provided by Pickering’s translation as cited above, are as follows. Cap. VIII, “The diet and apparel of Servants”; Cap. IX, “The apparel of handicraftsmen and yeomen, and of their wives and children”; Cap. X, “What apparel gentlemen under the estate of knights, and what esquires of two hundred mark-land, &c. may wear, and what their wives and children”; Cap. XI, “The apparel of merchants, citizens, burgesses, and handicraftsmen”; Cap. XII, “The apparel of knights which have lands within the yearly value of two hundred marks, and of knights and ladies which have four hundred mark land”; Cap. XIII, “The apparel of several sorts of clerks”; Cap. XIV, “The apparel of ploughmen, and other of mean estate[,] and the forfeitures of offenders against this ordinance.” (164-66)
220 A later chapter discusses the character of Piers and the types of reading he suggests are suitable for the different estates.
221 A good priest was to be “peritus in litteris secularibus”—to an extent. See the discussion in a later chapter, below.
It may be a cliché, and to invoke an anachronism at that, to speak here of “self-realization.” But there can be no doubt that increased literacy and social mobility accompany increased and more in-depth exposure to written discourse, as well as greater autonomy for appropriating that discourse for oneself. One is always astonished at the way in which certain well-regarded medieval monastic figures could forbid to their subordinates, and in the most stirring terms at that, exactly the type of freedoms they evidently felt able to accord unto themselves. The relatively well-traveled Anselm, as Robert Bultot noted, was able to forbid to one of his charges travel outside of the walls of his cloister—even when matters of grave importance to the monk’s family required his presence for resolution.\textsuperscript{222} Alcuin wrote a letter dissuading a young monk from reading too much Virgil, as Leclercq recounts, while quoting Virgil repeatedly \textit{in the very same letter}.\textsuperscript{223} Both occasions attest to an understanding that certain modes of expression or privileges belonged only to those who had somehow merited them by station or achieved degree.\textsuperscript{224}

Hand in hand with knowledge of literary discourses will come production of letters both sacred and secular. In the fourteenth century this was not the clergy’s prerogative alone, as the example of Chaucer shows.\textsuperscript{225} The famed portrait of the monk in the \textit{Canterbury Tales’} general prologue works successfully as satire precisely because the narrator obviously is fully aware of the ways in which the monk violates the letter and the spirit of his calling, despite his avowed hearty approval of him. The

\textsuperscript{222} See Bultot, \textit{Christianisme} 4.2, p. 113-114.
\textsuperscript{223} This anecdote regarding Alcuin is cited in Leclercq’s \textit{Amour des Lettres} (the French original) at page 109. On Alcuin and monasticism, see e.g. Mary Alberi, “‘The Better Paths of Wisdom’: Alcuin’s Monastic ‘True Philosophy’ and the Worldly Court,” \textit{Speculum} 76.4 (2001), pp. 896-910.
\textsuperscript{224} Anselm’s elevation to the archbishop’s seat at Canterbury is said to have happened almost against his will and by pressure from above: the humility \textit{topos} just behind this account defends against the discrepancy I’ve identified: Alcuin might not have been a monk and certainly held a position of greater authority than the monk to whom he wrote, but was involved in the monastic world.
\textsuperscript{225} Gower’s \textit{Confessio} makes only parodic use of the confessional model, and the exact clerical status of the Pearl Poet and Langland is not presently known.
portrait, that is to say, not only shows Chaucer’s familiarity with the supposed norm of monastic life by portraying the monk’s actions as being directly contrary to it in every respect: it also knowledgeably alludes to the patristic writings and monastic legislation that codify the monastic life. In his description, Chaucer appropriates knowledge that we otherwise would have called “clerical.” Chaucer’s astonishing Parson’s Tale also betrays “clerical” knowledge, and of course examples could be multiplied.

One might even call it common, then, for the sufficiently educated to draw in both their reading and writing on discourses both sacred and secular. For this reason we cannot definitively label Langland as a clerk or totally secular member of the laity based on the use of “popular” and religious discourses in Piers Plowman alone (though that is probably all we have); it is on other evidence that we suspect him to have had some education and clerical training in his earlier years. It is indisputable however that Langland’s education enabled him to draw on discourses from both the religious and secular spheres, and this is in turn important because Langland’s ability to imagine himself both within and outside of the confining discursive boundaries of multiple groups enables the friction-charged search for a perfect life out of several available (yet flawed) options. While one cringes to describe Langland with such dated corporate phraseology as “thinking outside the box,” the poet’s freedom to enact his own self-definition remains one of the strikingly “modern” aspects of the poem. But in the terms of what discourse community does Langland define himself, or Will? Put another way, what discourses seem most important to Langland for his own reformed self-definition and his suggestions for the reform of others? These discourses derive from asceticism.
Up to this point, this chapter has argued that *Piers Plowman* derives much of what has confused its readers about it from its appropriations of a wide variety of discourses and an associative organization familiar from preachers’ aids, commentaries, and theological writings inspired by *ruminatio*. The hybridity that results thus gives *Piers* one of the hallmarks of satire as understood in the Middle Ages. That it really was satire (as opposed to, say, a sermon) seems clear thanks to the poem’s critical interrogations of man and society. These might themselves appear to be sermonic, but medieval literary theorists ascribed a great deal of philosophical and in its way theological inquiry to the classical satirists. Medieval satirists went even further and were even more comfortable discoursing on matters divine. Since sermons and satires arguably exist on a continuum (with prophecy), one cannot deny utterly *Piers*’ identity as a sort of “sermon in verse.” But its expositions on Christian history serve to remind rather than to convert or comfort—they “preach to the choir” as it were—and its guidance into behavior more often serves to further delimit and complicate a problem than to resolve it.

I have suggested that even though medieval thinkers liked to think in terms of social groups (and of individuals in terms of relationships based on office or role) it is wrong to claim that medieval satirists were devoid of individuality because they chose not to speak of individuals. Thinking in terms of groups was simply more convenient—even more so than it is today. Moreover, not only is criticism in satire of specific individuals politically dangerous, it is also a bad way to give an example unless the narrator’s *persona* as well (as it appears in relationship to others and God) works as a foil or complement in the form of a typical human, *simul justus et peccator*. Without belaboring the point, I certainly hope that it will be clear that a poet’s choice
of discourses, to the extent that he has had a choice, indicates choices made by an individual.

That point granted, one must further concede that the choices presented by a text indicate priorities; therefore, does the poet’s choice of a given discourse in Piers Plowman suggest a lens through which we might understand the poem’s satire? Naturally this is not necessarily the case if certain discourses are borrowed in ways that do not bear authority. Yet when a poem’s authoritative characters and its narrator support a given discourse’s claims, that discourse seems important to the author. If the poem also narrates the undoing of characters who do not take those claims to heart, then such appropriation has even more authority. And when that discourse identifies and makes claims about the provenance of problems with self, relationships, and society, then it most certainly does arguably act as a lens for satire—an ideology animating a critical perspective or mode.

When one looks for signs of a dominant ideology in the texts from which Piers Plowman draws, one sees immediately that it must be Christian. In the first place, as has long been clear to Langlandians, the Bible and the Church Fathers act as the scaffolding on which the poem builds up its narrative structure. Given what was said just above about Chaucer’s familiarity with clerical texts (and the rather limited discourse options available), though, their presence is not a huge surprise. How Langland uses the Bible, rather than that he uses it, tells us what we still need to know about how to situate him religiously. What sort of Christianity do the poem’s varied borrowings suggest?

Some quotations in the poem are what one might expect, taken from texts prevalent and popular at the time. These are not necessarily biblical or patristic in their origin or nature, in other words, though they may express more or less religious ideas. Examples include the Latin verse of the angel and Goliard in the first passus of the
poem, occasional quotations in French, selections from the *Distichs of Cato*, an epigram by Godfrey of Winchester. These and reminiscences or allusions to secular poetry (e.g. a whole host of anti-venality satire that Yunck identified behind Lady Mede, or the *Roman de Fauvel* and the *Roman de la Rose* likewise hinted at) also indicate Langland’s reading and would seem to locate his literary culture in an urban, university setting—in an upper class, multilingual circle fond of lighthearted, learned satire. Langland’s one classical quotation (B.14.307, “*Cantabit paupertas coram latrone viator*”) comes from Juvenal’s tenth satire—and is also quoted by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath.\(^{226}\)

Other quotations, to a degree not seen in for instance the writings of Gower and Chaucer, bear markedly the perspective of religious orders—one which often works to color the rest. The Juvenal tag was a favored one for authors of texts espousing a monastic detachment from material things, as Pepin has pointed out; and upon further examination one finds that Langland quotes other texts, less commonly in circulation, in order to espouse similar ideas.\(^{227}\)

In other words, the quotation one finds in *Piers* from Juvenal is no fortuitous accident but one *scintilla* in a whole sea of data pointing to the influence on the poem’s satire of ascetic ideology. The C-text of *Piers Plowman* provides an example in passus 17 (the speech of Liberum Arbitrium):

\[
\text{Iop the parfite patriarke his prouerbe wroet and tauhte to make men louye mesure pat monkes ben and freres:}
\]
\[
\text{“Numquam,” dicit Iob, “rugiet onager cum habuerit herbam, aut mugiet bos cum ante plenum presepe steterit?”}
\]
\[
\text{Brutorum animalium natura te condempnat, qua cum eis pabulum commune sufficiat. Ex adipe prodiit iniquitas tua.}
\]
\[
\text{Yf lewede men knewe this Latyn a litel they wolden auysen hem ar they amorteyesd eny more for monkes or for chanouns.}
\]
\[
\text{Allas! lordes and ladyes, lewede consayle haue 3e to feffe suche and fede that founded ben to the fulle}
\]

\(^{226}\) The original (Juvenal 10.22) has “vacuus” for “paupertas,” as I observed in chapter 1 above.

\(^{227}\) See Pepin, “Juvenal X.”
This passage quotes from the Latin Bible—specifically, the commandment to honor one’s parents in the Decalogue—as well as from a letter by the important high-medieval figure Peter of Blois, itself apparently quoting from the works of Hugh of St. Victor.\(^\text{228}\) Neither Hugh nor Peter was a Benedictine monk, of course, but their portrayal of man’s nature well suits monastic thought.\(^\text{229}\) Langland’s quotation indicates the continued currency of such thought in the later medieval period as well as what we might call an “ideological antiquarianism”: his interest in religious thought of a high level somewhat outside the main stream of what passed for standard devotional fare for the laity in his day. The word “parfit” to describe Job isn’t just a throwaway adjective but a modifier. It connects Job’s suffering with the quest for perfection, and posits that biblical forefather as an early model for the religious orders.\(^\text{230}\)

It is based on such evidence supporting ascetic ideology’s prominence within the poem that the next chapters aim to examine some tenets of the monastic worldview and how they might influence Langland’s appropriation of the “satric mode”—how the poet schematizes the wider world to note faults in the social order.\(^\text{231}\) It makes for a

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\(^\text{228}\) The Latin appears in Peter’s letters—as noted by Pearsall’s edition—as well as in writing by Hugh.\(^\text{229}\) Hugh of St. Victor, as a regular canon like Hugo de Folieto, is nearly a monk and fully capable of writing from we may call a “practitioner’s” perspective about asceticism.\(^\text{230}\) In chapter 6 I take a stab at describing how I believe Langland would have encountered quotations such as Peter’s, both by reading florilegia and reading texts in general florilegially. See also Robert Adams, chapter 3: “Langland’s Theology,” in the Alford Companion, pp. 87-114.\(^\text{231}\) In the first chapter, I defined “satric mode” as “a descriptive stance that identifies and focuses on the flaws of individuals or groups to suggest its targets’ departure from some ideal or normative state while ambiguously deferring the power to effect reform, foregrounding its reliance on impressionistic assessment through the use of caricaturing bias.”
reasonable hypothesis to assume that if a satiric poem conceives of the world in religious terms that are broadly monastic, then it owes important aspects of its satire to monastic ideology. It is also obvious, all the same, that one cannot uncover the ideology of Christian asceticism merely by paying attention to isolated quotations. This study will accordingly use the quotations just mentioned as invitations to examine this ascetic ideology—in both the quoted and other, related, texts. It will then consider how such a worldview is supported and affects the poem itself.

Simply observing asceticism’s place in *Piers* makes for nothing new; it has been made before and can be made in different ways. Scholars usually have been content to speak of “contemptus mundi” as the main ascetic impulse in the poem, in part because one need not necessarily make an involved study of monasticism to identify it: D. R. Howard found it in the writings of Chaucer and other fourteenth-century secular poets, too, making an undeniable case for its presence in the spirit of the times; another scholar’s dissertation understood *contemptus mundi* to have such wide currency because of biblical roots (specifically in the words of Qoheleth, a.k.a. Ecclesiastes, declaring that “all is vanity”). Morton Bloomfield understood the monastic background to Langland’s *contemptus mundi* to be especially important, but he did not do much with this idea and left other scholars to carry the proper investigation out.

The next three chapters, comprising part II of the dissertation, will expand on Bloomfield’s idea by considering in much greater detail the influence of ascetic

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233 Noteworthy contributions other than Howard’s, whether expressly indebted to Bloomfield or not, are Eric Jon Eliason, “‘Vanitas vanitatum’: Piers Plowman, Ecclesiastes, and Contempt of the World.” Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1989.
concepts on the levels of criticism (self-criticism, social criticism, judgment of others) in the poem. It will advance existing scholarship most importantly by placing *contemptus mundi* in context as only one component wall in a whole complex of medieval ascetic ideology upon which Langland’s satire drew. Yet as the argument of this study posits, Langland’s poem envisions an *exclaustration* of monastic ideology, a reform of broader society based on ascetic thought. Fourteenth-century England witnessed an efflorescence in hybrid ways of living Christianity, in fact—forms of living neither entirely in nor out of the so-called “world.” As a result of these concerns, the poem conceives of traditional cloistered life as a special status: one it takes pains *not* to promote, in favor of guidance to “men þat on þis moolde lyuen.”

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235 B.11.275. For an example, see B.11.255a—glossed as promoting poverty, instead of the usual (monastic) contemplative life. For more on active and contemplative lives, see chapter 3 below. See also the end of note 392 below for one subtle fourteenth-century devaluation of the cloister.
CHAPTER 3

“COR CONTRITUM ET HUMILIATUM, DEUS NON DESPIECIES...”:

NARRATORIAL GUISES AND CONTEMPTUS SUI

Lex iubet, ut timeas, sed despare timeas timentem non sint, hoc omni crimen maius habet.

Omnem cum solvat confessio pura reatum,
et lavet internus criminum cuantum dolor,
hoc scelerus excludit ventiam, poenamque meretur,
quam prece vel pretio flectere nemo potest.

Crimina criminibus cumulat, male gesta fateri
negligit, absorbet vota precesque timorum,
clementem negat esse Deum, nec parecere pronum
culpis, sed cupidum sanguinis esse putat. [...] Proficit ergo bonis inquis meditatio mortis,
unde perit stultus, qui timet absque modo.

Est maiestati gratus modus ille timendi,
crimina qui vitat omnia, spemque foveat.
qui veritus iustum recolit pietatis, et inde
indiciis agnoscit nomen et inde patris;
quique potestatis sic iram vitat, ut instet
dulcis obsequis promeruisse patrem.

(John of Salisbury, “Despair and Fear”)236

This chapter begins part II of “Ascetic Ideology and the Satiric Mode in Piers Plowman.” In it, my inspection of Piers Plowman’s satire moves away from generic hallmarks—ambiguity and hybridity. It moves toward an investigation of how ascetic ideology informs the satiric mode. As a mode, satire pronounces criticism on a range of levels radiating outwards to the cosmic, to the eschatological—hence satire’s frequent affinity with prophecy. But that critique starts much further in, on an individual level, before branching out to wider spheres. As it proves difficult to assess a poet’s vision of where humanity fails and needs reform without some sense of where he sees his own failings or weaknesses to lie, the examination here will begin with satire’s critique at the individual, narratorial, even personal level.

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236 Laarhoven, Entheticus, II.H. 34, pp. 136-37. Laarhoven’s translation follows unilineated, my emendations in brackets: “The law commands that you should fear, but [it] does not allow the man who fears to despair; it holds this a greater crime than all others. While a pure confession absolves every guilt, and inner grief washes away every crime, this offense excludes pardon and deserves punishment, which no one can turn away by prayer or payment. [sc. This] fear <recte Despair> piles guilt on guilt, neglects to confess evil deeds, absorbs vows and prayers; it denies that God is merciful and thinks Him not inclined to spare guilty but to be eager of blood. [...] [Yet] the constant meditation of death benefits the good men, through [which] the fool who fears without moderation perishes. Pleasing to the majesty is that manner of fear which avoids all crimes and cherishes hope; which in fear commemorates again the justice of piety and thence acknowledges his name of judge and thence of father; and which avoids the wrath of the power in this way, so that he may strain to have deserved the father by pleasant obedience.”

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Some of a satirist’s most penetrating critical insight into the weaknesses of the human condition is often, if not always, directed towards his own narratorial persona. Such a practice enables the satirist to make very clear that, at times, even he has been unable to escape the faults he criticizes. Obviously, one reason for the satiric narrator’s self critique might be more political than programmatic; offering a captatio benevolentiae, extending some good will to the targets of the satiric critique (who often hold positions of some power and authority) and thereby reducing the “psychological noise” that might prevent a serious message from being heard may prove more important to a poet than the systematic analysis of all levels of human existence that the layout of these chapters may imply the author of Piers Plowman to have had in mind.237 In any of these cases, a multivalent analysis of the human condition can result. Criticism on multiple levels definitely occurs in Piers Plowman, and an analysis of its narratorial self-criticism is therefore in order.

The present chapter will begin with some consideration of satiric narrators in general. It will question the usual taxonomy of “Horatian” versus “Juvenalian” narrators, at least insofar as narrators Horatian and Juvenalian diverge in their presentation of narratorial self-criticism. The discussion will move in a new section to what Larry Scanlon (for one, in line with many another scholar) calls the humorous “begging persona” of the author of Piers Plowman: a persona often identified with the narrators of parodic, “Goliardic” satire of the Middle Ages.238 This I will show to be a fairly accurate assessment of the evidence. The next stage of the my argument, however, will go on to show the incompleteness of the Will-as-Goliard view. I will

237 Similar political considerations might lie behind the satira communis as well—the idea being that to criticize everyone can favor no one.
238 See Scanlon’s essay “The King’s Two Voices: Narrative and Power in Hoccleve’s Regement of Princes,” in Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 216-47 at p. 236, which mentions Piers Plowman as a “powerful cultural precedent” for “the independent moral authority beggars can possess.”
show that the B-text’s presentation of the character of Haukyn—himself something of a Goliard!—functions, despite Haukyn’s apparent separate identity, as the poem’s most profound instance of narratorial self-criticism.

Langland’s treatment of Haukyn, and of a closely attendant foil in the character of Anima, opposes Will’s “outer man” or “old man” with his “inner man,” to use the terminology of medieval spiritual writings to which Langland might well have had access. Such terminology might seem to muddy the waters even further, defining an unknown with something even less known, but more clarity ultimately results regarding Piers Plowman’s sense of self-reform if we think of the flaws Langland associates with the self as worldly and external in explicit tension with other (religion-minded, internal) elements. It is also helpful to see Anima and Haukyn as not only somehow related to Will but actually both aspects of Will existing simultaneously and somehow affecting each other—an interaction which I think the “old man” versus “inner man” distinction quite nicely allows. Ultimately, it will appear that Langland’s mid-poem meditation on the need for proper self-reform (starting with self-criticism) draws on that aspect of ascetic ideology known as contemptus sui or “contempt of self.” The poem takes pains not to confuse contemptus sui with the dangerous sin of wanhope, or despair.

**Will, Goliardy, and the Types of Satiric Narrator**

No type of poetry that survives from the Middle Ages inspires such easy recognition as so-called “Goliardic” verse, nor may any other lay claim to so wide an appeal. Irreverent, iconoclastic, and ironic—briefly and wittily countering our worst

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impressions of the era from which they come—the narratives of Goliardic poems make for easy, ephemeral fun. The plots stick to the well-known humoristic themes of inebriation, seduction, and life on the open road. The poems’ heroes, as well as their satiric targets, tend to be lapsed or even completely immoral figures associated with the church (as opposed to the knightly or lordly narrators of the *pastourelle*, for instance).

Goliardic verse enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages, as we can attest from its survival, but why or how did such poetry survive? A great deal of the medieval entertainment that we would call in one sense or another “popular” after all (whether “from the people” or “very much enjoyed”) was, we know, transmitted almost exclusively via oral performance; it was not customarily written down. Why then were these poems written? We also understand that unrepentently vicious living or distortion of Church doctrines, was (naturally) deemed unacceptable by ecclesiastical authorities. Why then was this verse, so invested with the parody and caricature of the Church and Church authorities, passed along? A ready explanation for any controversial medieval writing’s persistence in the written record holds it to have been transmitted through so many manuscripts that, even assuming a huge percentage of them to have been destroyed by outraged defenders of various faiths or the ravages of time, several still remain. Yet a better explanation, which helps to account for Goliardic poetry having been committed to writing in the first place, takes into account that persons associated with the Church (and therefore literate) had composed and transmitted them, themselves. Certainly the level of literacy enjoyed by

Goliardic authors is not under any dispute: their allusions, as well as the spheres of culture with which they affect or betray familiarity, point to a level of education by their authors which would include skill with writing; as corroboration, Rodney Thomson finds these and other satires more and more prevalent with the rise of the university in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.240

Given that composition in clerical circles seems to have prevented Goliardic poems’ censure from the clerical establishment, it seems that Goliardic poems benefited from what we might loosely call the “I may pick on my brother mercilessly but you may not” ethic that governs so many other types of critical utterance as well. Those affiliated with the church could indulge in writing and hearing or reading even the worst parodies, being already forever affiliated with the church and familiar enough with its customs to recognize poetic distortions. For all that some of these works appear ideal for recitation or performance in crowded bars, the university-town taverns in which they were belted out likely catered to a clientele of similarly literate, educated, religiously affiliated men. Given the era’s constant commerce between clerical and lay spheres, it could be that no one would be seriously at risk for misapprehending the church from encountering such poems; this general cultural familiarity would also help render even the sharpest of Goliardic satires mostly harmless.

For his part, as we’ve seen already from the first chapter of this dissertation, Langland certainly would have had reason to tread carefully in administering satiric rebuke and critique in *Piers Plowman*. The strategies the “Goliards” used that rendered their verse impervious to censure would thus likely have been of considerable interest to Langland, especially as he appears to have felt at least a loose professional affiliation with the church and had received at least some education.

240 See Thomson’s “Origins of Latin Satire.”
pertaining to a member of the wider clergy. In order to more fully appreciate the ways in which Langland takes on the attributes of a Goliardic narrator with his narratorial persona, though, we cannot begin from the premise that Will simply is a Goliardic narrator. Instead, it will be necessary to consider other established narratorial types, locating Will on a continuum between those somewhat imaginary poles.241

Literary critics on satire have broadly recognized two main types of satiric narrator, namely the Horatian and the Juvenalian. Horatian narrators act slyly and wittily, often imputing to themselves a measure of the faults they see in others.242

According to M. H. Abrams’ handy *Glossary of Literary Terms*:

[the Horatian narrator] manifests the character of an urbane, witty, and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more often to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, and who uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke from readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities—sometimes including his own.243

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241 Of course, there is no need to attempt to fit *Piers Plowman* on the Procrustean Bed of modern critical taxonomies in order to carry this task of narratorial type-comparison out, though the very existence of such taxonomies (such as M. H. Abrams’ very convenient *Glossary of Literary Terms*, with Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 9th ed. [Boston: Wadsworth Cengage, 2009]) tempts one to do so: is the poem a “formal” satire? if so, is it “Horatian” or “Juvenalian”? Is it “indirect” satire? If so—’Menippian (or Varronian)?’ As we can see, *Piers Plowman* from time to time takes on elements of each of these, including (although especially in the C-text) prose. Further, as we are only too aware, contemporary critical understandings of satire often arise inductively from evidence overwhelmingly classical and early Modern, making the enterprise of trying to read a medieval satire rigidly in those terms even more questionable. Given the almost inherently mixed character of satire, and of much medieval satire especially—given satire’s fascinating resistance to unequivocal, ironclad definition, that is—it seems most advisable to sift through the whole range of possibilities on offer by such a compendium as Abrams’, taking care to separate the inevitable compound of chaff and wheat. For more on medieval satiric narrators, see in addition to works already quoted J.-C. Mühlethaler, “Les Masques du Clerc pour Parler aux Puissants; fonctions du narrateur dans la satire et la littérature ‘engagée’ aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles,” *Le Moyen Âge: revue d'histoire et de philologie* 96 (1990), pp. 265-86 and, for some thoughts about the difficulty of categorizing non-Goliardic satire from the Middle Ages, specially referencing John of Salisbury, Thérèse Ballet Lynn’s *Recherches sur l'Ambiguïté et la Satire au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Nizet, 1977).

242 This is not to say that Horace was so charming that he did not have to worry about censors. See in addition to Braund’s “*Libertas or Licentia?*” Catherine M. Schlegel, *Satire and the Threat of Speech: Horace’s Satires, Book 1* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

Narrators classified as Juvenalian, on the other hand, are far more given over to rage, attacking other people’s failures with more cruelty. Braund observes that Juvenal had numerous precedents for his trademark “savage indignation,” and that he was, even so, “continually developing and modifying his satiric persona.” Nevertheless, Abrams puts it,

[the Juvenalian narrator is] a serious moralist who uses a dignified and public style of utterance to decry modes of vice and error which are no less dangerous because they are ridiculous, and who undertakes to evoke from readers contempt, moral indignation, or an unillusioned sadness at the aberrations of humanity. [...] In its most denunciatory instances this mode of satire resembles the jeremiad, whose model is not Roman but Hebraic.

Leaving aside for the moment that surely neither Juvenal nor Horace’s poems can ever be called in aggregate purely Juvenalian or Horatian—in these terms (and how should we classify Persius?)—we can see that Langland, in criticizing others, possesses elements of both. More interesting, in any case for the purposes of this chapter, is how these narratorial subtypes are said to express self-criticism, and how Piers Plowman’s narrator aligns himself in relation to these.

Of these two types of narrator, the Juvenalian seems most relevant to some medieval monastic satire but least relevant to Langland’s self-questioning enterprise as Will. Susannah Braund, in her Loeb edition and translation of Juvenal and Persius’ poems, has in fact begged the question whether we can speak self-criticism in Juvenalian narrators at all—at least, when that narrator himself, in one of Juvenal’s poems, is Juvenal: the customary bluster and forthrightness of the Juvenalian narrator would seem to emanate from a locus of such intense self confidence, to possess such outward aggression that it seems almost impossible to think of this attacker turning his

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244 Braund, *Juvenal and Persius*, p. 20.
246 Braund, *Juvenal and Persius*, notes that “[o]f the many personae of Roman satire, it was Juvenal’s articulation of indignatio that exercised the strongest influence on subsequent satire,” p. 24.
own guns on himself, yet Braund draws our attention past these initial perceptions to
the irony with which Juvenal invests his narratorial bravado—a surety as ill founded
as his targets possess about themselves, and so equally worthy of reproach. Moreover, the advice Juvenal’s narrators dispense in the name of correction can prove harmful, or so idealistic as to betray a poor knowledge of human nature. In the later satires, as Braund notes, “Juvenal [...] has set up a tension between his first-person approach, which tends to draw the audience into sympathy with the opinions expressed, and the audience’s realisation that the things they are assenting to are morally dubious or even reprehensible.” Juvenalian narrators can thus express self-criticism by showcasing their human failure as instruments for correction, juxtaposing that failure with the satires’ messages too authoritative and exacting to be uttered by anyone but a hypocrite (or a prophet). Without criticizing himself openly, then, Juvenal reminds his readers of the vanity of even his own narratorial wishes and of how, as a medieval Christian might have thought it, “all flesh is grass.”

Horatian narrators are much easier to speak of in terms of self-criticism, as the quotation from Abrams’ *Glossary* clearly shows. The message in Horace and Juvenal

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247 These remarks apply especially well to the earlier works of Juvenal: “Juvenal’s satiric mask or persona in Books One and Two is essentially that of an extremist and a chauvinist who sees every issue in stark black and white and who becomes passionate in his condemnation of those who offend his simplistic morality. Juvenal indicates the limitations of this character by exposing the contradictions between his view of himself as a morally pure and superior being and the more objective view of him as a narrow-minded bigot” (Braund, *Juvenal and Persius*, p. 22).


249 Isaiah 40:6-8: “The voice of one, saying: Cry. And I said: What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of the field. The grass is withered, and the flower is fallen, because the spirit of the Lord hath blown upon it. Indeed the people is grass: The grass is withered, and the flower is fallen: but the word of our Lord endureth for ever.” See also 1 Peter 1:24, “For all flesh is as grass; and all the glory thereof as the flower of grass. The grass is withered, and the flower thereof is fallen away.” In this last sense Langland’s narratorial stance—even toward himself—sometimes approaches the Juvenalian: Langland might be considered Juvenalian, that is, in so far as he appropriates at times the voice of prophecy and in so far as Juvenal sometimes comes across as a prophet without a God. Langlandian prophecy has more and greater masters, though, than Juvenal, and so comparison between Langland and Juvenal’s narratorial self-criticism must end here. Some consideration of Langland in the guise or persona of the prophet will appear later, however, especially in chapter 6.
might be the same—that all flesh is grass, as I indicated—but with different manner and sequence. And so where Juvenal (like the Hebrew prophet of old, but without the same recourse to authority external to and also above himself) sounds out that message in angry, minatory terms, Horace does a better job openly of admitting at the same time that he too has his faults, perhaps amusing potential targets into seeing the flaws in others before bringing the news that they smirk at themselves. Perhaps the most iconic case, in Horace or elsewhere, appears in the first of that Roman poet’s *Sermones*: “What are you laughing about?” Horace asks. “Just change the name, and this story’s about you.” A finer example of Horatian self-criticism appears in Horace’s second book: there, eager to please his critics, he agrees that he probably should not write any more satiric poems except that otherwise he could not fall asleep, and that he lacks the nerve for other pursuits.

The “Goliardic narrator” makes self-criticism an indispensable weapon in its satiric arsenal, not merely an incidental one. Heavily invested in parody, Goliardic satire often builds up a strong case for its narrator’s (often amusing or shocking) fallenness and corruption, sometimes only obliquely following this up with a reminder of the rest of humanity’s own failures. As Anne Middleton has noted, it “castigat[es] the vices and sociopolitical perversions of clergy and court through the voice and rhetorical posture of one deeply implicated in them.” Yet while this central dynamic usually comes across as humorous, it is not only interesting but important to note that the literary historical antecedents for this sort of character are not humorous at all; that the Goliard is, in effect, the *gyrovagus* of longstanding monastic stricture, widened

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250 *Quid rides? Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur* (*Satura*, I.1.69).
251 This is the same poem in which, as Braund notes in “*Libertas or Licentia?*,” Horace observes the utility of humor for defense against censorship and censure.
into all types of corrupt members in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, made laughable and harmless through the softening distortions of caricature.\(^{253}\)

The delightful inversion of holiness in a Goliardic satire’s narratorial main character helps to explain the satire’s heavy reliance on parody. The parody’s blatant being “only in jest” may well help to give a voice to marginalized and excluded positions drowned out by the dominant discourse.\(^{254}\) There is certainly something delicious in the useful and moral social commentary provided by the professedly lapsed Goliardic poets. Further, the very obvious self-parody present in a Goliardic satire has the authoritative defense at its disposal of just being a fiction (one reason for Thomson’s and similar possible hypotheses about the voices of the unempowered): as just a joke that cannot be taken seriously, by a character professedly unworthy to serve as role model or advisor to anyone, its offenses are absolved even before their commission. Remember that I am an immoral fiction, it declares; how do you propose to defend yourself from the judgments proper to your own sins?

Because of the instructive character of his faults, Will in Piers Plowman has been considered a Goliardic figure with far more frequency and regularity than he has been though of as Horatian or Juvenalian. Steven Justice, in his essay on “the genres of Piers Plowman,” shows how generic interpenetration may account for some of the divergences in normal procedure, or standard procedure, in the poem.\(^{255}\) As noted earlier, Anne Middleton has pointed out very cogently that satire “everywhere pervades” the poem, especially in its complex presentation of Will qua gyrovague.

\(^{253}\) On gyrovagues and their ilk, see in addition to the description in the Rule of St. Benedict a discussion in the helpful Libellus de Diversis Ordinibus et Professionibus qui sunt in Ecclesia, edd. and trans. Giles Constable and Bernard S. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). Conrad Leyser explains in Authority and Asceticism that, in the Late Antique legislative tradition upon which Benedict drew, this “deliriously misguided monk […] embodies evagatio mentis, the wandering state of attention that results from failure to observe a proper occupatio mentis” (119).

\(^{254}\) So, at least, it is claimed in Thomson’s “Origins of Latin Satire.”

Wendy Scase has noted how the figure of the Goliard is not only used as a literary persona or topoi-collection for entertainment purposes but in fact as the self-questioning site of some of the poem’s most profound misgivings about society. Ralph Hanna, moreover, has in a touch of puckishness suggested that Will represents a type of sui generis holy man, with that sort of personification, whose zeal coupled with lack of conventional credentials (like Richard Rolle) creates profound difficulties for the questioning of the characters of Reason and Conscience—not just comedy, in other words. All told, Will’s Goliardic persona accomplishes—or at least is necessary for—a great deal of the action in the poem.

Will’s first foray into Goliardy appears at the very beginning of the poem, when—“wery forandred”—Will falls asleep to find himself surveying the various orders of society as an outsider. Will is not only a vagrant outsider either, we learn, but also one with an apparent place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. We may assume so, at least, in so far as corruption within the church becomes the subject of some of his most strenuous criticism and some of his most detailed observations in it. More directly, Holichurch herself claims Will as one of her own—but Will, suffering typical ignorance, goes on to inspire not her confidence but rather exasperated rebuke. Will’s mix here of intense identification with the church but lack of a fully legitimate place within it from which to reform it—an ability to point out his religion’s faults, hampered by an inability to live by its best precepts—is fully consonant with Goliardy.

259 B.18.4, “wery of the world.”
260 Will shows the same mix of characteristics throughout the poem, infuriating or bemusing a whole panoply of authoritative interlocutors by turns.
**Goliardic Narration and Langland’s Contemporaries**

Since a great deal of self-criticism accompanies the Goliardic persona, and since Goliards are sometimes hardly more than liminally (and always imperfectly) Christian, one might well ask if “Geffrey,” Chaucer’s persona in the *Canterbury Tales*, can also be called Goliardic. He is not, to the extent that he holds no clerical role. Most of the poem’s satiric criticism hinges on other characters’ discrepancies, moreover, not his. “No.” One might say the same for Gower in the *Confessio Amantis*, despite the fact that neither his main persona of Amans nor the character of Genius can be called a conventional penitent or priest. I would like for the moment at least to hypothesize that this might be because of those narratorial stances in relationship to the agents and actions in the rest of their poems, *Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis* respectively. Rather than operating as comic figures apart from the societies in which they themselves act, as Will, they are comic figures within those societies. Geffrey is one of Chaucer’s pilgrims, Amans a willing listener to Genius’ stories. Genius himself might be said to possess a Goliardic mix of clerical and morally suspect qualities (in his role of pseudo-Christian confessor and self-implicating pseudo-priest of Venus) but he is hardly the poet’s own narratorial persona even if he does most of the talking. The end of *Confessio Amantis*, in which Amans declares that his real name is “John Gower,” makes clear Gower’s identification with the lover rather than with Genius. Similarly, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* might contain Goliardic narrators, but Geffrey is not one of them. To say that Geffrey and Amans act within the rules set by their societies is not to say that Chaucer and Gower were powerless to see flaws in that society, just as Will’s outsider perspective does not preclude Langland’s possible intense devotion to his contemporary Church. Obviously
Chaucer and Gower both write poetry that can be called “Goliardic”—but their narrators, as a rule, do not match the Goliardic narratorial profile.

On the level of character, it bears noting, all three authors do manage a great deal of narratorial self-deprecation. Chaucer and Gower’s self-deprecation via Geffrey and Amans rests with their inability to perform in an exemplary secular way—telling good tales, romancing with success—while Langland’s self-deprecation through the persona of Will stems instead from Will’s unwitting adherence to secular *mores* even as he denounces and questions other characters for why they follow worldly ways as much as they do.261 Will is the would-be ascetic surrounded by revelers in a tavern, drink in hand; Amans and Geffrey would-be revelers hindered too much by reserve and insufficient charisma to win great romantic success.

Setting Gower aside—neither Genius nor Amans actually engages with the outer world during the *Confessio*—the difference between Will and Geffrey becomes clearest when we compare their attitudes to secular poetry in comparison to their poems. Here the differences between Chaucer and Langland can be noticed immediately, despite the fact that these near contemporaries both wrote satire in Middle English. Nevertheless, even though the *fact* of the difference between the two is noticeable, the quality or character of their difference is complex; it cannot be reduced wholly successfully into just a few remarks. Generally, as *Troilus & Criseyde* makes most clear, Chaucer puts a premium on rhetorical virtuosity (from diction to syntax) when writing poetry, and has the greatest possible reverence for poets foreign and classical (who provide him with much of his material). While a metrical and (as far as language-choice goes) a linguistic innovator, Chaucer shows a great respect for past rhetoricians regarding how a poem might be structured as well.262

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261 See for example the waking scene at the beginning of passus 15.
262 In particular, as a reminiscence in *Troilus & Criseyde* makes very clear (Bk. 1, lines 1065-71), Chaucer was familiar with Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* (editions provided in the bibliography).
It may be, as suggested by A. C. Spearing, that some psychological block impeded Chaucer from realizing the grand edifices he blueprinted for his verse, but those plans are very telling.\footnote{Spearing made this suggestion in a roundtable on the “afterlife of the Canterbury Tales” at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, 2008.} He wished to apply a high finish, worthy of his models, to his poetry. For Langland, however, standing in a relation to Chaucer that John Bowers has recently labeled “antagonistic,” almost the reverse scenario seems to apply.\footnote{John M. Bowers, Chaucer and Langland: the Antagonistic Tradition (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 2007).} Langland’s poetic or rhetorical models are whatever will enable him to justify his procedure, regardless of the status of particular examples—satire and vision are among the most capacious of genres and modes. As defensive and even tortured as his poem’s discussions of the worthiness of verse can get, he probably did not write for connoisseurs of poetic style. Where Chaucer stylistically innovates on borrowed designer material, Langland’s poem uses a consciously archaising (if not actually age-old) “vintage” verse form to bring across stunningly original meditations. In other words, Langland’s medium takes second place to the message. Partisans of Langland and Chaucer both would probably agree that these differences between the two poets lie more in degree than in kind, obviously, but they point out how—fundamentally—Chaucer sees poetry in terms of artifice (as at best a monument and at worst a bagatelle), while Langland sees poetry in terms of ethical formation (at best a prophetic vision but most likely, at worst, a distraction and a sin).

Langland’s distrusting view of poetry by turns creeps and rushes in when the poem’s attention turns to the Goliardic poets, with which Will so often has been identified. \textit{Piers Plowman} in this way takes up one of the common themes of Goliardic poetry—that the poet is fallen and morally suspect—far more than

Chaucer’s rather parodic Sir Thopas ever could. In most of Piers Plowman, it is true, there is a curious disjunction or detachment in the way these critiques are voiced: often of Will by other characters, or of other characters by Will. But what of Will subjecting himself to the same treatment? The instances in which Will criticizes himself occur less frequently than one might think, given our foregoing description of Will in league with the lightly self-mocking personae of Horace and the Goliards. One moderately successful rejoinder to the qualm could appeal to the nature of the characters who question or criticize Will throughout the poem, or who meet with questioning and criticism by him: they are on occasion aspects of Will himself, and he reflects on his encounters with them afterwards—often in a somewhat tendentiously introspective manner, as at the discouraged beginning of passus 13.265

At any rate, solidly identifying where Will lies on a continuum between “Horatian” and “Juvenalian” narrators is not difficult. Langland does not fail to portray himself, through Will, as fallible. Moreover, many of the instances in which Will criticizes himself or receives criticism from his several interlocutors (often aspects of himself) showcase wit, even humor. These factors both merit his classification as more Horatian than Juvenalian, like Geffrey in the Canterbury Tales. Further, when we consider how Langland portrays Will as a character—a somewhat lapsed religious figure, wandering through the world criticizing others with his

265 "And I awaked þerwip, witleses nerhande, / and as a freke þat fay were forþ gan I walke / in manere of a mendynaunt many yer after. / And of þis metynge many tyme mucche þouȝt I hadde, / first how Fortune me failed at my mooste nede; / and how þat Elke manaced me—myȝte we euere mete— / and how þat freres folwed folk þat was riche / and peple þat was pouere at litel pris þei sette, / and no corps in hir kirkþerd ne in hir kirk was buryed / but quik he biquelþ hem auȝt of sholde helpe quyte hir dettes; / and how þis Coueitise ouercom clerkes and preestes; / and how þat lewed men ben lad, but oure lord hem helpe, / thorȝ uȝkonnyngþe curatours to incurable peyynes; / ad how þat Ymaginatif in dreymes me tolde / of kynde and of his konnyng; and how curteis he is to bestes, / and how louynge he is to eech lif on londe and on watre— / lenþ þe no lif laasse ne moore— / for alle creatures þat crepen or walken of kynde ben engendred; / and sîþen how ymaginatif seide 'vix salubritur instus.' / and when he hadde seid so, how sodeynliche he passed. / I lay doun longe in þis þouȝt and at þe laste I slepte, / and as crist wolde þer com Conscience to conforte me þat tyme[...].” (1-22, slightly repunctuated)
verse—we must agree with the general literary critical consensus that Langland drew on common literary conventions of the gyro vagus or Goliardus in doing so. The critics who call Will a type of Goliard are right.

Yet we should bear in mind the obvious fact: no one who reads Piers Plowman finishes it with the impression that Will matches up with the typical Goliard in every respect, or even most respects—hence my writing, just above, that “Langland drew on common literary conventions of the gyro vagus or Goliardus in [his portrayal of Will]”; he did not appropriate those conventions wholesale. At times, in fact, one gets the impression that conventional forms of satiric criticism, which appear steadily in the poem, coexist with some rarer element, evanescent but transformative, flashing in and out of detection at the very corners of our vision. Unyielding anger at sin and fear of damnation, not forgiving amusement and laughter at corruption and frivolity, tincture the entire poem from beginning to end and bubble up regularly throughout it. The intense, less humoristic vision of humanity that makes itself known at these times cannot be chalked up with satisfactory precision simply as the fruit of “didactic traditions.” After all, which didactic traditions contribute to it? And why does this type of criticism appear at the very moments in which the poem’s characters are at their most belaboringly schoolmarmish, working against them to strike pat conclusions down? The next sections of the chapter will attempt to shed light on the issue.

Haukyn

Most of Langland’s narratorial self-criticism, as we’ve seen, has been explicable in light of the Goliardic poetry whose themes and characters it takes on. Sometimes, though, what we would expect to see from Langland’s use of Goliardic convention has very little resemblance to the narratorial self-criticism that we do see at
work in his poem. In order to explore divergences in this respect from the conventions of Goliardy, I want here to focus on a portion of the B-text that I consider the most striking instance of Will’s narratorial self-criticism, one of the poem’s most interesting and profound. Will’s encounter with “Haukyn, the Actif Man.” Interestingly, although Will subjects Haukyn to an analysis so detailed and probing that its energy drives the episode, Will fails to realize that Haukyn also represents an important aspect of himself.

Haukyn’s entry into the narrative of *Piers Plowman* comes as the result of a decision made at the end of the episode just preceding it. The episode’s drama unfolds in the setting of a dinner party of sorts, which Will, Conscience, Patience, Clergie, and a highly educated friar—a “doctour of divinitee” known to preach at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, attend.\(^\text{266}\) At the end of the dinner, which lays bare the inequality and hypocrisy of the friar’s luxurious lifestyle, Conscience (and by extension Will) must decide if he would like to continue his travels with Clergie or with Patience in search of the mysterious “Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest” that Will has been referred to; the question amounts to whether one can best profit from abstract learning or practical experience as a guide for doing well in life. Conscience chooses Patience, and they meet Haukyn immediately thereafter.

To the problem or puzzle of Haukyn, Langland characteristically poses a solution in the form of another puzzle: the character of Anima, the main figure in the poem’s next lengthy episode. Given that the fraction of *Piers Plowman* devoted first to Haukyn and then to Anima is a relatively large one and, moreover, a multifariously complex one, stretching over three passūs and involving the wide-ranging discussions of characters who while ostensibly separate from Will are actually aspects of Will in a

\(^{266}\) This is the episode into which passus 13 ultimately opens: “[...] as crist wolde þer com Conscience to conforte me þat tyme / and bad me come to his court, wip clergie sholde I dyne” (22-23).
"dream within a dream," the exposition that I feel compelled to provide here can only touch on certain especially salient points and will have to glide silently by others. I want primarily to establish the way in which Haukyn might be considered a Goliard, then the way in which (not merely through his Goliardy) he can be considered an aspect of Will: Will’s “outer man.” In the ensuing discussion of Anima—whom I identify as Will’s “inner man”—I intend to show how Anima’s lecture constitutes a lesson in hindsight on how Will might avoid Haukyn’s failure properly to reform.

Naturally, before we dive too deeply into the problem of how the character of Haukyn reflects that of Will, and how the entire episode involving (and even following) Haukyn amounts to an example of this chapter’s focus—the oft-mentioned narratorial self-criticism—it would be helpful to consider the character of Haukyn in his own right, namely how we know him and in what guises he appears. These are, respectively, Haukyn as the “Actif Man”; Haukyn as Goliard; and Haukyn as sinner. The discussion will then move to Haukyn as an aspect of Will himself, the “outer man.”

**Haukyn as Contemplatiua vita**

Haukyn presents himself first as “*Contemplatiua vita*” (later “the Actif Man”); B.16.2) a title of considerable significance given the events of the poem just prior to his introduction. In the sense in which Langland uses it, “actif” does not refer to a quality of being always on the go, though Haukyn (as *Contemplatiua vita*) clearly alludes to this sense in line 225, “Al ydel ich hatie, for of Actif is my name”; *Activa vita*, literally “the active life,” is instead the life of the Christian in the secular world, the life which Will and Conscience would naturally encounter first after casting their lot not with spiritual learning (Clergie) but with experience (Patience). One gains
salvation in the active life by the performance of good works—or, put another way, because ultimately salvation is believed to come through grace and not on account of sufficient merit (as the intrinsic merit of any postlapsarian human is not held to be sufficient by itself), the work that Christians in the active life are to do in their pursuit of salvation consists of doing good. These good works include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and so forth.

The active life is usually contrasted to the contemplative life, a form of living charged with “work” of a much more abstract and meditative sort (usually, during the Middle Ages, associated with the prayer and offices of the cloistered religious orders); and the distinction between lives active and contemplative was commonly illustrated by the Gospel Story of Jesus’ visit to the home of the sisters Mary and Martha in the Gospels (Luke 10:38-42). Martha in that story runs around busily preparing and serving food, picking up the house, and otherwise providing for Jesus’ comfort while Mary merely sits at Jesus’ feet and listens to him teach. Jesus by no means condemns Martha for her solicitude, but he does give extra praise to Mary for having chosen “the better part” of the deal. Thanks to Langland’s associating Haukyn with the active life of Martha, then, as opposed to the contemplative life of Mary, Haukyn comes across as a standard and theoretically worthwhile model of Christian behavior, but, also, as potentially too worldly and therefore an inferior one.

Haukyn will turn out to be a problematic figure. Langland’s identification of him to the active life conspires to show that, sometimes, we can only appreciate Langland’s satire from the vantage of later episodes. Conscience’s rebuke of Clergie had made what seemed to be a valid and imitatable rejection of the clerical scholarship

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267 It might be useful to observe that this is an idea that has undergone a certain amount of change over time. Jean Séguy observes that Protestants do not indulge in asceticism to be saved, but because they are saved, for instance. See “L’Ascèse dans les Sectes d’Origine Protestante,” Archives de Sociologie des Religions 9.18 (1964), pp. 55-70.

268 In chapter 4 of the Benedictine Rule, for example, is a list of the “instruments of good works.”
that Clergie represents: did not Conscience, whom we have by passus 13 long seen as a sympathetic figure, hiss “in clergies ere” that “Me were leuere, by oure lord, and I lyue sholde, / haue pacience parfitliche þan half þi pak of bokes”? Yet Haukyn’s role as Actiua vita implicitly questions his choice. Given that experiential Patience introduces Actiua vita, we may assume that remaining with Clergie would have led Conscience to encounter the theoretically superior Contemplatiua vita (avoiding Haukyn and his problems entirely). Yet while a comparison of active and contemplative lives demands that Actiua vita cede all claims for being the model life to a not-yet-encountered Contemplatiua vita, nowhere here does Langland explicitly observe the contemplative life’s superiority over the active; he doesn’t even mention the contemplative life Fhere at all, in fact!

Langland’s critique here is implicit to the point of being absurd, belatedly shoring up Clergie’s validity by identifying Haukyn (whose faults are predictable in the theory the poem alludes to but slow to sound at full volume) with Conscience’s choice. It sets up a pattern for Langland’s satire, however, in the rest of the episode and beyond. Throughout Piers Plowman, as here, tags and allusions to commonly held (if scholarly) ideas voice a ringing critique only to the ears of those who can fully assess their incompatibility with the action in the narratives on which they depend. To whose who cannot confidently grasp the irony of these juxtapositions, though, there is little more to notice than the babble of simultaneously presented contrasting positions. One might compare Langland’s criticism at such junctures to a radio kit—all the component parts are there, but they need to be put together—as opposed to the store-bought radio we encounter with other satiric writing (which needs only to be “plugged in” and “tuned to the right frequency” to play). But however one chooses to think of Langland’s procedure for setting out elements first and preventing a reader’s connecting them until later, it would be a mistake to consider that procedure somehow
unintended or the result of poor planning. Langland’s characters (especially, even explicitly, Will) go through the same process of revising earlier assessments that attentive readers must: Will and his compatriots recognize the unsavory character of Haukyn only after they take the time to inspect him, not immediately, for instance; and while all the clues are there to tell us that Haukyn and Will are really one and the same being, Will recognizes this only very late.

Precisely because we have been led to believe that Patience should be preferred to Clergie and (by extension) the active life to the contemplative life, Haukyn’s identification with the active life works well as satire. One is predisposed, especially if one really does live the active life (as a secular priest or mendicant friar would) to see Haukyn as a positive exemplar. Precedent encourages this impression as well, since with rare exceptions the characters who stand before Will giving instructional or self-explanatory speeches command respect and have good advice to give. Langland fully intends to show the weaknesses in the active life, that is, but only after his audience has had a chance to identify themselves with it, boasting along with Haukyn of its greatness. And even then, Langland chooses to criticize obliquely. The episode’s ultimate target may well be the prideful clerks like the “doctour of divinitee,” as Anima’s later tirade in passus 15 will reveal. But Langland first presents Haukyn, like Will, rather anomalously as a Goliard.

Haukyn as Goliard

It requires no stretch of the imagination to see Haukyn as a fairly conventional Goliardic figure. Haukyn describes himself as a kind of minstrel, even before giving his name of “Contemplativa vita” to Conscience and Patience; and “a Mynstral, as me þo thoughte,” is how he appears to Will even before this:
‘I am a Mynstrall,’ quod ū man, ‘my name is Contemplatina vita. Al ydel ich hatie for of Actif is my name. A wafrer,wol ye wite, and serue manye lordes, ac fewe robes I fonge or furrede gownes. Coupe I ly and do men laufē, ðanne lacchen I sholde ouper mantel or moneie amonges lordes Mynstrals. ac for I kan neipêr taboure ne trompe ne telle no gestes, farten ne fîbelen at frestes ne harpen, iape ne logele ne gentilliche pipe, ne neipêr saile ne sautrie ne synge wiþ ðe gyterne, I haue no goode gifts of þise grete lordes for no breed þat I brynge forþ, saue a benyson on þe sonday whan þe þe preest preieþ þe peple hir Paternoster to bidde for Piers þe Plowman and þat hym profit waiten. (B.13.224-37)

Haukyn’s main preoccupation seems to be procuring the fruits of favor, such as fine robes, from his patrons (though his words suggest that he also likes to be associated with the the holy Piers). Yet the wish is never to be realized, it seems. Despite his, self-designation as a minstrel, Haukyn has apparently no (but sc. insufficient) skills at entertainment. He can neither sing, nor dance, nor play any musical instrument for his profit.

Despite a dearth of specialized experience that might seem to doom employment prospects, Haukyn also works as a “wafer” (a maker of what are essentially crepes) and manages to turn a profit by selling his wafers to the “grete lorde”—often figures associated with the church—he encounters:

And þat am I, Actif, þat ydnelnes hatie, for alle trewe trauailours and tiliers of þe erþe fro Mighmesse to Mighmesse I fynde hem wiþ wafres. Beggeris and bidderis of my breed crauen, faitours and freres and folk wiþ brode crownes. I fynde payn for þe pope and prouendre for his palfrey. (B.13.238-44)

It is of course hard to see why exactly Langland would make Haukyn a wafer when he could have given him any other minstrellish task to perform.269 Certainly, Haukyn’s

269 We don’t question the role of minstrel, because it quite nicely stands in for any sort of life that caters to the whims of others without edifying them or concretely benefitting society; even hermits—like whom Haukyn is “yhabited”—repaired roads; see B.13.284. For more on Haukyn’s role, see Malcolm
disavowal of skill in all of these *seriatim* begs the question strongly enough to show that Langland considered his choice of Haukyn’s profession with some care. Yet even if the poet leaves us to guess the reasons for this choice, the next few lines of Haukyn’s speech establish that Langland might have made Haukyn a waferer to show Haukyn’s audience very literally *consuming* his secular entertainments (guitar music and dancing can be ignored and can’t be eaten). Moreover, by Haukyn’s own unwitting admission, these entertainments impede his patrons’ further moral development: “for may no blessynge doon vs boote but if we wile amende, / ne mannes masse make pees among cristene peple / til pride be pureliche fordo, and þat þorúþ payn defeute,” he notes to explain why the pope cannot simply write a document to cure the Bubonic plague (B.13.257-59). By making his wafers he of course prevents “payn defeute” from occurring among even the most dissolute.

An idle entertainer, sycophantically latching on to the established systems of the Church for pay yet paying its doctrines no heed, certainly fits the bill of Goliard. The identification is sealed immediately hereafter, when Will inspects Haukyn’s sullied “cote of cristendome” and describes in distasteful terms an only superficially holy man of pronouncedly vain and wastrellish living (who seems, though he obviously does not recognize it, quite like himself):

> I took greet kepe, by crist! and Conscience bope, of haukyn þe Actif man and how he was ycloþed. He hadde a cote of crisendom as holy kirke bileueþ, ac it was moled in many places wiþ manye sondry plottes, of pride here a plot, and þere a plot of vnbxom speche, of scornyng and of scofflyng and of vnskilful berynge; as in apparaill and in porte proude amonges þe peple; ooperwise þan he haþ wiþ herte or siþe shewynge hym; willyng þat alle men wende he were þat he is noþt, for why he bosteþ and braggeþ wiþ manye bolde ôpes; and inobedient to ben vndernome of any lif lyuynge; and so singular by hymself as to siþe of þe peple

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was noon swich as hymself, ne noon so pope holy;
yhabited as an heremyte, an ordre by hymselue,
religioun saunȝ rule and resonable obedience;
lakkynge lettrede men and lewed men bope;
in likynge of lele lif and a liere in soule;
wip Inwit and wip outwit ymagynen and studie
as best for his body be to haue a bold name;
and entremetten hym ouer al þer he hap noȝt to doone;
willynge þat men wende his wit were þe beste,
or for hys crafty konnynge or of clerkes þe wisest,
or strengest on stede, or styuest vnder girdel,
and louelokest to loken on and lelest of werkes,
and noon so holy as he ne of lif clennere,
or feirst of feitures of forme and of shafte,
and most sotil of song þer sleyest of hondes,
and large to lene, loos þerby to cacche.
and if he gyueþ ouȝt to pouere gomes, telle what he deleþ;
pouere of possession in purs and in cofre;
and as a lyoun on to loke and lordliche of speche;
boldest of beggeris; a bostere þat noȝt hap,
in townel and in Tauernes tales to telle
and sege þyng þat he neuere seiȝ and for soþe sweren it;
of dedes þat he neuere dile demen and bosten;
and of werkes þat he wel did witnesse and siggen,
‘Lo! if ye leue me noȝt, or þat I lye wenen,
aseþ at hym or at hym and he yow kan telle
what I suffrede and seiȝ and somtymes hadde,
and what I kouþe and knew and what kyn I com of.’
Al he wolde þat men wiste of werkes and wordes
which myȝte plese þe peple and preisen hymselfue:
\textit{Si hominibus placerem, Christi seruus non esset; Et alibi, Nemo potest duobus dominis servire.} (B.13.271-312a)

In short, Haukyn’s character has become threadbare from his hypocrisy: his choice to
exalt himself by pointing out others’ vices while steadfastly choosing to ignore his
own. Readers familiar with the numerous Goliardic poems about the preciousness of
their narrators’ cloaks will appreciate Langland’s delicate irony here. Haukyn, too, has
a precious cloak donated to him—his “clove of Christendom,” whose symbolic
significance such critics as Alford and Watson have pinpointed—but he decidedly
important point: that Langland concerns himself with the question of ascetic perfection in fallible
The foregoing passage, one of the most remarkable in all of *Piers Plowman* for its psychological acuity, will deserve further comment shortly as evidence for Haukyn’s coterminous identity with Will. Here, we need only notice that in its final tag it confirms that perhaps the greatest contributor to Haukyn’s “Goliardic” status—other than his clothing—is his intensely divided loyalty between God and Mammon.271 Following the pattern for the satire of retrospection that I had identified earlier as operating consistently in the episode, we can see adumbrations of this divided loyalty as early as the first few lines of Haukyn’s introduction, in the confident and upbeat claim by the minstrel that he “serves many lords.” If in the careening catalog of Haukyn’s faults just quoted anything stands out as its grounding theme, Haukyn’s desire for public acclaim certainly does: before its concluding tag of “*Si hominibus placerem, &c.*,,” the passage tells us of Haukyn’s concern for the approval of “men” or “peple” at least six times.272 Yet while Haukyn’s impossible attempt to serve two masters and concern for outward show might lie at the root of his troubles, the poem will go much further in analyzing Haukyn’s status as a sinner.

*Haukyn as Sinner*

Haukyn’s words and actions conflict so intensely that his introduction of himself has barely passed before we see him exposed as an audacious sinner, his soiled coat’s discolorations and patches rendering testimony to a whole panoply of sins. Despite their enormity (or rather because of them, it may be) Haukyn seems

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272 The count goes higher if one accepts other references to public opinion in the passage, such as “at hym or at hym” or “pouere gomes.”
resistant to change course even to save his soul. In fact, when Conscience declares in horror that ("Bi crist!") Haukyn’s “beste cote [...] hap manye moles and spottes; it must be ywasshe,” the minstrel all but shrugs (B.13.313-14). Any garment worn all the time and not replaced with better trappings will deteriorate, he implies; anyone who takes extreme care in scrutinizing others all over will no doubt find something to criticize in them, after all—and so he claims.273 Here especially, Haukyn comes across as overly critical, never willing to receive recommendations from others, “saunz rule and resonable obedience” or inherently inobedient.274

Even further self exposition from the minstrel will show that Haukyn’s resistance to reform rises up from the twin springs of jadedness and inconsistency. Haukyn can neither keep with any regimen or regulation in his life for long, as we learn;275 he also fails to see how any of the confession and penance recommended him by Confession and Patience can possibly prevent his coat from becoming dirty again:

In haly daies at holy chirche whan ich herde masse
hadde I neuer wille, woot god, witterly to biseche
mercy for my mysdedes, pat I ne moorned moore
for losse of good, leue me, pan for likames giltes;
as if I hadde dedly synne doon I drede noȝt pat so soore
as whan I lened and leued it lost or longe er it were paied.

Miȝte neuer me conforte in þe mene tyme
neþer masse ne matynes, ne none maner siȝtes;
ne neuer penaunce parfourned ne Paternoster seide
that my mynde ne was moore on my good in a doute
than in þe grace of god and his grete helpes:
* * * * * * * * * * * *

Vbi thesaurus tuus ibi & cor tuum. (B.13.383-88, 394-98a)

Nevertheless, Haukyn proves himself to be quite ready to indulge in self-criticism as well (enough to bring about his ultimate downfall at the end of passus 14)—or, as he

273 "Ye, whoso toke hede," he answers, "bilynde and bifore, / what on bak, and what on body half, and by þe two sides, / men sholde fynde many frounces and manye foule plottes" (B.13.315-17).
274 B.13.285. I use the word “inobedient” as opposed to “disobedient” to emphasize Haukyn’s endemic lack of the virtue “obedience” rather than his failure to obey particular commands.
275 B.13.331; “Ther is no lif þat me loute þastynge any while.”
puts it, to “frete [him]selue wipInne” even while he “as a shepsteres shere ysherewed [his] euencristen.” (B.13.329-30)

Haukyn as Will

But can we really consider the self-criticism of Haukyn, who is not literally the same being as Will, narratorial self-criticism on Langland’s part? Yes, we can, on several counts. First there is the matter of Haukyn’s ontology as a character in a dream (allegedly by the poet) featuring such interlocutors as the poet-narrator’s Conscience: shouldn’t he be considered an aspect of the narrator, too? It is true that other characters appear in the poem that are not psychological faculties, but even these (Holichurch or Dame Study) represent aspects of life with which he has deep familiarity. Even the King, figuring early on in Piers Plowman, could be said to represent lived experience with government rather than any specific king. In any case, Haukyn appears notably in that section of the poem known as the “inward journey,” in a “dream within a dream” the format of which clearly allows increased focus on psychology (as opposed to the external world)—of allowing the irreality that the episode will flaunt (as early as passus 15, with its impossible description of Will’s next teacher). Still, if Haukyn represents anyone, he represents Will.

And the reason that we can claim that Haukyn represents Will is that Haukyn so greatly resembles Will.276 While of course no law of poetics dictates that characters who resemble each other have to be each other, it is nonetheless also true that Haukyn and Will bear quite extraordinary resemblances to each other and that the poem makes no attempt to explain these away as unimportant coincidences. Passus 13’s expose of the flaws in the previously well-presenting Haukyn make him look like any normal

276 A. V. C. Schmidt’s notes indicate that other scholars have observed this, too.
sinful Christian, and are no doubt meant to speak to the spiritual considerations of a wider audience, true; others, especially those that peg the speaker as a Goliard, seem to speak especially well to the experiences of Will as a reflection of the author of Piers Plowman. Examples include Haukyn’s ambiguous, *sui generis* state as a man of religion; the falseness of his poetry; the trenchancy of his criticism of others as well as of himself. Further, of course, there is the matter of a sort of mind-meld between the various principals in this episode, such that the characters looking on Haukyn’s coat know exactly what sins are represented by which spots. Will takes these initial observations even further, actually being capable of narrating the exact circumstances behind the sins that so disfigure Haukyn’s garment. Langland’s effect here, which is attractive, perhaps purposely makes it difficult to separate instances in which the coat, or Will, or Haukyn, explains one of the coat’s spots: throughout the passus, a character’s observation of a place on the garment will ease seamlessly into Will’s/the narrator’s explanation of the circumstances giving rise to it, as I’ve noted. This explanation then simply becomes, with no transition at all, Haukyn’s speech about it.

It cannot be disputed anyway that Will’s encounter with Haukyn has a profound effect on Will, as the transition from passus 14 to 15 makes clear. As the curtain falls on passus 14, Haukyn weeps in bitter despair and confusion over his sins, unable to see a way out of them; as it rises on passus 15, Will seems to have fallen into a similar confusion:

Ac after my wakyng it was wonder longe
er I koude kyndely knowe what was Dowel,
and so my wit weex, and wanyed til I a fool weere.
and some lakked my lif—allowed it fewe—
and lete me for a lorel and loop to reuerencen
lordes or ladies or any lif ellis,
as persons in pelure wiþ pendauntʒ of siluer,
to sergeauntʒ ne to swiche seide noʒt ones,
‘God loke yow, lordes,’ ne loutede faire,
that folk helden me a fool; and in þat folie I raued [...] (B.15.1-10)
But then why does Langland bother to make Haukyn and Will seem like completely separate characters if they are meant to represent the same person? I think that, in part, Langland wants to show the disconnect often achieved by those ignoring their own faults and pointing out those of others. Given that readers of the poem will have come to identify at least a little with Piers Plowman’s narrator by the time he appears, Haukyn’s covert mirroring of Will enables readers to experience that same disconnect themselves. By detaching Haukyn both from the character of Will, as if the two were separate, and by giving Haukyn only the most evanescent and inspecific identity as a minstrel and man of religion, Langland can allow his poem to perform its most intense analysis of character, an analysis from which no one is shielded because almost anyone can see himself in the subject of that inspection. No potential readership can fail to identify somewhat with Haukyn, but, because he always seems to be representing someone else as well, no one will immediately identify with Haukyn, either (just as Will does not). Langland instinctively if not intellectually understood that criticism is always harshest if directed at someone else, and he used this psychological fact to produce the intensest possible self-criticism in the poem.

_Haukyn as Old or Outer Man_

But if we are going to identify Haukyn with any sort of aspect of Will—what would that aspect be? As I’ve already indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Haukyn acts as a manifestation of Will’s self focused externally, his “outer man.” Haukyn’s superficiality, his intense connection to the point of identification with a very dirty and neglected ethical cloak, shows him to represent not just a type of person

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277 The strategy I am attempting to describe in this paragraph is the same used by the prophet Nathan when confronting David about Uriah and Bathsheba: see 2 Samuel 12:1-15.
(a Goliard like his alter ego, Will) but also a *topos*: the “old” and “outer” man.\textsuperscript{278} If my thesis is correct about Haukyn as Will’s outer man, then what the poem wishes to emphasize is the character’s prideful selfishness, a self-centeredness ironic in that, to the omniscient reproving gaze of the narrator, it centers around nothing—a fascination with external show that allows the one constant garment of the wearer, his “cote of cristendom,” to be utterly worn through and disfigured with spots and stains.

Langland’s focus on Haukyn’s cloak is not unusual. Medieval satire often focuses on its targets’ clothing as markers of social status and affiliations familiar or professional. In *Wynmere and Wastoure*, for just one example, the character of each group fighting for either title character is described in terms of clothing. In the tradition of philosophical allegory, in Menippean satire descending back to Boethius’ *De consolatione Philosophiae* and taken up brilliantly by authors such as Bernardus Sylvestris and Alan of Lille in medieval Latin literature, generally benevolent and powerful females of great beauty are distinguished from one another by their names but also by their raiment, with clothing providing something of a nonnarrative treatise in the powers and spheres of influence and capabilities or domains of those figures.\textsuperscript{279} And in Middle English literature of the fourteenth century such detailed descriptions are applied to human characters as well (e.g. Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) such that clothing might be said to define or even create literary character for such works.\textsuperscript{280}

\textsuperscript{278} The term comes from the Bible, though it was elaborated by medieval theologians. This idea is perhaps best borne out by consideration that the next main speaker in the poem to Will is so very early on an (and, I will argue, the) inner man—Anima. Joseph S. Wittig’s article, “*Piers Plowman* B, Passus IX-XII: Elements in the Design of the Inward Journey,” *Traditio* 28 (1972), pp. 211-280, in fact shows how Langland might have known the idea of the *vetus homo*.

\textsuperscript{279} Here, too, the literature is extensive, but see for example Laura Fulkerson Hodges, *Chaucer and Clothing: Clerical and Academic Costume in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

\textsuperscript{280} My reference to twelfth-century and even Late Antique works will indicate that the focus on clothing that characterizes much medieval satire is not new in late fourteenth-century England. Nevertheless,
We first come to know the superficiality of Chaucer’s Pardoner by his dress, in large part, and we know the liminal gyrovagic character of Langland’s Will by his as well, but Haukyn’s lack of solicitude for his coat achieves its best irony when we consider just how very much Haukyn wants to look good in others’ eyes. Chaucer’s description of the Parson in his *Canterbury Tales*, which takes pains not to describe the parson’s clothing in detail, shows well why Langland should lavish such detail on Haukyn’s all-important coat. To normal sight, a cloak as a sign of household or professional status—as uniform or livery—would be very visible and also very important to the mind of someone so materialistic as Haukyn. Haukyn himself admits this to us in his opening speech, claiming (as it turns out, incorrectly) that only the pious simplicity of his work prevents him from receiving the “furred gowns” of other minstrels that indicate that advancement in the world. We can match Haukyn’s sentiments here with Envye’s, later on in *Piers Plowman*, or the Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—characters nothing if not couture-conscious.281

When Haukyn refers with disdain of the gifts of clothing that other minstrels have received, then, we should not see him as a pious, linen-clothed Holichurch scowling in disapproval at the elaborate ornamentation of a Lady Mede. Haukyn is in Mede’s camp, so he scowls in patent jealousy; caring deeply about outer appearance, he wants the ornamentation for which he claims not to care. The revelation to Conscience, Patience, and Will of Haukyn’s true slovenliness occurs on another level, at which external appearance does not matter—the level at which the clothing of Chaucer’s Parson is overlooked, indeed: the ethical level at which God sees, for, as the

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281 Chaucer’s description of the Wife of Bath’s ostentatious raiment and carriage at church, in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, is justly famous (lines 445-57). Compare Envye’s confession in B.5.110-14: “Awey fro þe Auter turne I myne eiræn / and biholde how Heyne hæf a newe coat; / thanne I wisshe it were myn and al þe web æfter. / And of his lesynge lauræ, it līþe þe myn herte; ac of his wynynge I wepe and waille þe tyme.”
Bible points out, “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7) For Will and his traveling companions to see with this Godlike acuity underscores just how atypical and innovative Langland’s satire really is, for two reasons. First, Will et al. see at the level of psychological abstraction because they themselves are psychological abstractions (even if that is not all they are). Second, such vision shows that, despite his concern to provide sharp and detailed self-criticism, Langland sees his role as satirist as a very authoritative one and even prophetic.

The remainder of passus 13 details other flaws of Haukyn’s, of which the most salient to my argument involve his fickle obduracy to the teachings of the Church:

In haly daies at holy chirche whan ich herde masse
hadde I neuere wille, woot god, witterly to biseche
mercy for my mysdedes, þat I ne mornede moore
for lose of good, leue me, þan for likames giltes,
as if I hadde dedly synne doon I dredde noȝt þat so soore
as when I lened and leued it lost or longe er it were paied.
so if I kidde any kyndenesse my euencristen to helpe
upon a cruwel coueitise my conscience gan hange.
And if I sente ouer see my servaunte to Brugges,
or into Prucelond my Prentis my profit to waiten,
to marchaunden wiþ my moneie and maken here eschaunges,
miȝte neuere me conforte in þe mene tym
ne þer masse ne matynes, ne none maner siȝtes;
ne neuere penaunce parfournede ne Paternoster seide
that my mynde ne was moore on my good in a doute
than in þe grace of god and his grete helpes:
Vbi thesaurus tuus ibi & cor tuum. (B.13.383-398a)

Only sickness of body seems able to corrupt Haukyn to truly deplore his sinning, but then the sharp knives of his wit turn around on himself and he cannot make amends, “that into wanhope he [worþ] and wende noght to be saved / the which is sleuþe, so þat may not sличtes [= clergie?] help it / ne no mercy amenden the man that so deieþ.” (B.13.407-409) Haukyn has moved almost completely now from the object of
wonder and entertainment to the object of pity and remorse, a man who has fallen all
too easily into an almost inescapable downward spiral.

The end of passus 13 suggests the learned, the poor, and the disabled to
counter the examples of avaricious “fool sages, flateres, and lyeris,” like Haukyn,
whose example leads to wanhope. But of the virtues espoused at this point in the
poem, poverty is clearly the one most focused on—the virtue most often contrasted to
Haukyn. As the tags applied to the episode make clear, Langland does not oppose
poverty and Haukyn because he possesses great temporal wealth. Instead, the desire
for fame and influence associated with Haukyn stems from a pride and worldliness
antithetical to poverty. One could just as easily point out that the character lacks
wisdom and puts too much stock in his own comeliness and physical prowess, but
these are not as much emphasized.

Haukyn’s focus on externalities and vice make him Will’s “outer man,” yet it
bears keeping in mind that, as other critics have noticed, Haukyn’s episode in Piers
Plowman serves principally to shed light on an aspect of psychology. Haukyn’s
psychology in turn sheds more light on the “Wastoure” figures that had been so
bitterly railed against by Piers in the poem’s second vision. It is not unfitting, I think,
that the poem’s most external character should provide its most profound
psychological insight: in a graceful chiasmus, the poem’s most internal character will
follow and provide some of the poem’s most trenchant criticism of hypocritical,
Haukyn-like, externally minded opportunists. That character is Anima.

Anima

The character of Anima appears to Will at a moment of intense and almost
unresolvable crisis brought on by Will’s encounter with the despair-riven minstrel
Haukyn. Langland introduces Anima, I think, in order to suggest, a different way for Will to examine himself towards possible self-reform. For the purposes of my argument here, it is most important to recognize Anima both as a part of Will and as the opposite of Haukyn (facts which require little demonstration). By virtue of the name Anima and this character’s knowledge of Will, we can accept an identification of Anima with Will’s “soul,” among other interior aspects; since, weirdly, Anima has neither tongue nor teeth and appears as altogether “a sotil thing,” the character reads as an almost invisible interiority whose very nature prevents it from even remotely resembling the loud, jangling, externally focused and fame-famished Haukyn.

Just as certain connections are apparent between Anima and Will, so too several contrasts can be noted between Haukyn and Anima. First of all, while both are to some extent “Will,” Anima and Haukyn come to Will’s attention from very different places. Whereas Haukyn appears to Will and Conscience on the open road as they accept the guidance of Patience, Anima appears from within the narrator himself. Moreover Haukyn (like Will) is taught and receives knowledge passively, while Anima rather passionately teaches with authority. Haukyn receives, and Anima imparts, much the same lesson: evidence that suggests that these two very different characters are meant to be contrasted. Yet while Will’s experience teaches him that the poverty’s value comes from trading in earthly happiness for possible future glory—the lesson of poverty as “a good, yet a hateful one”—Anima teaches the necessity of giving unto others, even sacrificially, for their sake, with charity (B.14.276 et seq.). Moreover, just as Haukyn and Anima are set opposite one another in appearance and status, notably, the episodes treating them in passus 14 and 15 respectively also touch on obverse and reverse of essentially the same message. The difference in the two characters’ presentation of this message, and even between the characters themselves,
stems ultimately from a difference in how they display the benefits, drawbacks, scope, and rationale for self-criticism.

_Anima as Interior Homo_

Anima and Haukyn’s approach to self-criticism reflects itself most strikingly of all with their appearance; where the distracted and splintered Haukyn appears to read as unitary and very much the character of a ‘real person,’ steady and patient Anima comes in so many guises as hardly to appear human at all. Consider Anima’s strange appearance as “a sotil thing withalle / oon withouten tongue and teeth” (B.15.12-13). What must such an anomalous creature look like? Could it be described as tongueless and toothless because of its immateriality? Is the description merely meant as an explanation of Anima’s quiet speaking—perhaps as a “still, small voice” as in 1 Kings 19:12? Could Anima’s face be something like a mask? While many of these explanations seem plausible on their face (as it were), and might contribute to what the image of a tongueless and toothless interlocutor communicates, I think that Langland’s poem intends the description primarily as a way to contrast Anima with the sharp and biting Haukyn, who in passus 13 that “wiþ myȝt of mouȝ or þorȝ mannes strengþe / auenge[d] [him] fele tymes, oþer frete [him]selue wiþInne / as a shepsteres shere,” this followed by a Latin tag describing a man “cuius maledicccione os plenum est et amaritundine,” &c. (B.13.330a). Neither the biblical verses nor Haukyn’s self description actually mean to describe someone who truly does have scissor blades or a sword in place of a tongue, and by the same token Anima’s lack of

282 For the idea that Anima might even represent a _vagina dentata, non-dentata_, see James Paxson, “ _Piers Plowman_ : the Copula(tion)s of Figures in Medieval Allegory,” in _The Erotics of Rhetorical Copulas, Archaic to Early Modern_, special issue of the _Rhetoric Society Quarterly_ [= 29.3] (1999), pp. 21-29 at p. 25.
even teeth should not necessarily require us to imagine a creature actually tongueless and toothless.

Given their reflection of each other, it is not difficult to see Anima and Haukyn reflecting different aspects of the self, though Langland never spells out how these two very different entities coexist. When we learn from Will of the base desires and sinful psychological drives motivating the minstrel Haukyn’s sometimes apparently virtuous behavior, we have to assume that they cannot all stem from the body or the flesh (traditionally opposed to the soul) but, being what modern researchers would call psychological, pertain more to Haukyn’s spiritual side. They must be “inner.” Yet Haukyn’s secret inner motivations in no way reflect Anima, who strongly opposes them. Anima even looks, as I’ve indeed just noted, like the very negative of Haukyn. If Haukyn represents an eternally focused psychological aspect of Will (the old or outer man), Anima thus seems to represent a spiritual aspect. I contend, in fact, that Anima represents some quiet, innate, even prelapsarian aspect of Will—the “interior homo” or “inner man”—that must be cultivated and heeded.

References to the interior homo appear in the biblical letters of saint Paul, closely linking the term with ideals of self-reform, even self perfection, and at least of self realization.283 To understand the “inner man” was to understand the self, an activity commanded by ancient precept (γνῶθι σεαυτόν or nosce teipsum). As such, Paul’s references drew on, and contributed to, a broader philosophical history.284 Epictetus wrote that every man carries inside himself a god to be nourished and

283 See for example 2 Corinthians 4:16, frequently quoted by medieval Latin prose writers: “[T]hough our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.”
stretched; Marcus Aurelius wrote that every man carries inside him the source of
good. Saint Augustine called for each sinner to:

come back, come back, within your heart [...] because the image of God
is in your heart. Indeed, Jesus Christ lives within the ‘interior man’;
that is, within the interior man you may renew the image of God, and
thus know God in its image.285

For Saint Bernard—I translate from de Bazelaire—“understanding of the self consists
of three things: first to know what one has done, then to know what one has merited,
and then to know what one has lost.” He continues: “What therefore does it mean to
know oneself? Essentially, to become aware of a divine image disfigured.” In other
words, the “self-knowledge” thought to “renew” the inner man happened as a process
instead of an event. Yet though this “becom[ing] aware” might happen slowly, it was
necessary for maintaining—let alone surpassing—human nature. In his 12th sermon,
“De diversis,” Bernard writes:

Since you were created in the image and resemblance of God, and are
now become like unto the beasts in losing your likeness, your life is
still a sort of image. If therefore, as long as you were in grand estate,
you did not understand that you were the dust of the earth, at least take
notice—now that you are surrounded by the dust of the abyss—and do
not ignore that you are the image of God. And blush to have taken on a
foreign likeness. Remind yourself of your nobility, and be ashamed of
such a defection. Do not ignore your beauty, so that you might be even
more confounded by your hideousness.286

Further, as de Bazelaire writes, Bernard and others make humility the basis for
knowledge of the self. “Humilitas est virtus quâ homo verissima sui cognitione sibi
ipsi vilescit.”287

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285 de Bazelaire lists the source as In Joan. 17.10. I translate from the Dictionnaire’s translation.
286 de Bazelaire, whom I translate, cites PL 183, col. 571.
287 My translation: “The most genuine humility is the virtue through which, thanks to self
understanding, man might set himself at little worth.” de Bazelaire gives the source here as Bernard’s
De grad. hum. 1.1 (PL 182, coll. 941-942).
The concept of an “interior homo” or “inner man” appears at least peripherally over the ages, as I have just suggested, so there is no reason for Langland not to have heard of it. The evidence suggests, however, that Langland also encountered more detailed discussions of the term. In his “Inward Journey” studies, Wittig makes reference to the Meditationes piisimae as the text with whose incipit Scripture hurtes Will into his “inner dreams.” According to the Patrologia Latina, the treatise was known by many manuscripts as a work “de interiori homini” specifically. Wittig also discusses a somewhat similar treatise to the Meditationes piisimae, the Liber de Spiritu et Anima, with whose material Langland might also have been familiar. This work also discusses the interior homo, describing it, as a sort of mirror by which one might evaluate and improve one’s life. Moreover, some evidence suggests that Langland could have known the writings of Richard of St. Victor, who also composed a treatise on the subject. Scholarship on the interior homo as it specifically relates to Piers Plowman has only advanced slowly since Wittig’s efforts. It is heartening to note, however, that the term has received very recent attention from students of the texts on which Langland and contemporaries drew. Ineke van ’t Spijker, for instance, has discussed how the sense of inner life such discourse seems to shed light on differs from early modern and later literary ideas concerning interiority:

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288 “Si mulieres speculum suum, in quo facies inspiciunt, cum amiserint, diligenter querunt, et curiose tergunt a pulvere et a sorde: multo amplius speculum interioris hominis debemus et invenire et tergere et inspicere; ut in eo totam turpitudinem nostram valeamus deprehendere, et ita per cognitionem nostram ad cognitionem Dei pervenire” (PL vol. 40, coll. 779-832, quoted at col. 818). This is a particularly telling image, since literary critics have recognized the importance of mirrors as a psychological metaphor in Langland's poem. In addition to Wittig, who admirably covers the place of mirrors in medieval religious thought, see Steven F. Kruger’s reflections on what the mirrors might say about Langland’s poetry—both human and aspirationally something greater—in “Mirrors and the Trajectory of Vision in Piers Plowman,” Speculum 66.1 (1991), pp. 74-95.

“Inner life” means different things in different times and contexts. Different ages have employed different conceptual tools to contemplate this inner life, and the inner life has had varying importance at different times. The *homo interior* of Peter Damian, and of eleventh- and twelfth-century monasticism, is of course not the same as Descartes’s “disengaged subject,” who takes the empirical self as something external, that is in contrast to a transcendental inner self, or Montaigne’s self-scrutinizing inner man, or Cervantes’s “knights of the sad countenance, whose outward adventures establish the novelistic complement to the philosophical project of modernity’s subjectivity. It, the *homo interior*, is even further from Freudian or other twentieth-century concepts of the psyche. Peter [Damian]’s *homo interior* is defined by monastic anthropology and traditions, in which, among other things, and echo can be heard of the Pauline *homo interior* [...].

With special reference to the treatises of Richard of St. Victor, moreover, Spijker has provided careful readings of the way that the “inner man” was thought to be nourished and developed through contemplative reading practices in the regular orders. She shows there more fully what her article on Peter Damian had also claimed, namely how, according to this medieval religious thought, “meditating on Scripture can help to compose the inner man, as one composes a text.” Susan R. Kramer has written a dissertation on the *interior homo* and with Caroline Walker Bynum has co-published an essay on the sense of self this concept reveals. Finally, Bridget Balint has most recently drawn attention to the ways that such views of inner life inform twelfth-century literary representations of the self and its power to refer to itself.

Anima tells Will “whider I sholde, / and wherof I cam & of what kynde” or in other words to understand himself exactly in this way. (B.15.13-14) But of course Will

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292 Spijker, “Peter Damian and the *Homo Interior*,” p. 471.
must first attempt to understand Anima, who at even a glance seems very resistant indeed to comprehension. Haukyn has a rather perplexingly composite nature, himself, but this is nothing to prepare us for the multiplicity of names, titles, even sexes (or grammatical genders) ascribed to Anima: *Anima, Animus, Mens, Memoria, Racio, Consciencia, Amor,* and *Spiritus,* with separate roles for each separate name. These names and titles draw an implicit contrast between Haukyn and Will (who aspire to promotion and influence), and Anima (who claims to have achieved it).

*Anima and the Pursuit of Knowledge*

As understanding the self is necessary for reform, it is not surprising that Anima—who attempts to teach Will of himself—also attempts to improve him. Perhaps oddly, however, Anima first suggests reform by disparaging Will’s desire for knowledge. Despite claiming to be a member of a royal court (Christ’s) and despite apparently holding on to a large number of titles and honorifics—these both being Haukyn’s great desire—Anima wastes little time in criticizing Will for wanting not only “the cause of alle [bisshoppes] names / and of [Anima’s]” but of “alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile craftes [...] kyndelych in [hys] herte.” (B.15.45-49) This expressed desire for “kynde knowing” of everything causes Anima to call Will “inparfit” in line 50, the choice of which word obviously adds weight to my suggestion that the way to perfect oneself lies at the heart of the discussion (and indeed the episode). When in the next breath Anima compares Will to “oon of pruydes knyghtes,” like the fallen angel Lucifer, with the tag of “*Ponam pedem meam in aquilone & similis ero altissimo,*” line 51a) we might well hark back to the first time

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295 Alford’s *Guide to the Quotations,* p. 92, identifies this series of names as coming from Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologie,* 11.1.13.
in which that tag appears, in passus 1: there, Holy Church tells Will of Treuth as a “kyndes knowing that kenneth in thin herte” (line 142).

In both passages the question of what to know, addressed to Will, becomes an address to a wider audience. In passus 1, Holy Church had declared Truth the only thing worth knowing, calling it “the beste” of treasures. In passus 14, Anima makes nods to “englisse men” (line 56) “freres and fele oþere maистres” (line 70) “grete clerkes” (line 82) and onwards. But if Holy Church commends Truth to the clerical estate (through the ambiguously clerical Will) as the “trieste” of worthy things, Anima’s address berates the same groups for their desire to know anything further. Anima compares a superfluity of knowledge (even of the sort pertaining to bishops presumably) with not only Lucifer but also to honey, as if to the devil’s illicit delights or to the very apple that caused the Fall in Eden. Too much knowledge, like too much honey, as Anima says, “engleymeþ the mawe”:

‘It were ayeins kynde,’ quod he, ‘and alle kynnes reson that any creature sholde konne al except crist oone.
Ayein swiche Salomon spekeþ and despiseþ hir wittes and seþ. *Sicut qui mel comedit multum non est ei bonum, Sic qui scrutator est maiestatis opprimitur a gloria.*
To englishhe men þis is to mene, þat mowen speke and here, the man þat muche hony etþ, his mawe it engleymeþ, and þe moore þat a man of good matere hereþ,
But he do þerafter, it doþ hym double scape.
‘Beatus est,’ seþ Seint Bernard, ‘*qui scripturas legit et verba vertit in opera* fulliche to his power.’
Coueitise to konne and to knowe science
Adam and Eue putte out of Paradis: 
*Sciencie appetitus hominem immortalitatis gloriam spoliciuit.*
And riþt as hony is yuel to defie and engleymeþ þe mawe,
right so þat þoruþ reson wolde þe roote knowe
of god and of his grete myþtes, hise graces it letteþ.
(B.15.52-66)

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296 line 135, followed by “lereþ it thus, lewed men, for letted it knoweth / that Treuþe is tresor þe trieste on erþe.”
In sum, Anima’s speech bears a message common in ascetic writings, albeit here in a wider context embracing all of clerical society: that it is indeed possible to know too much.297

As Anima’s attention turns to wider clerisy and its corruptions, the clerical hoarding and ostentatious display of knowledge comes to seem of a piece with other kinds of hoarding and display, to which Anima ultimately opposes (inter alia) “parfit charite” (B.15.148) Will’s asking about this echoes Haukyn’s exchange earlier with Pacience (B.15.149 et seq.).298 The following exposition will demonstrate that does not work as an idea for Haukyn to follow, because Haukyn thinks of charity as a means of avoiding the hardship imposed by poverty: he contrasts “richesse riȝtfulliche wonne and resonably despended” with “paciencye pouerte,” in fact (B.14.102-103). Anima teaches Will that charity must needs oppose the hoarding of wealth and knowledge to which he and other clerics are inclined. The next subsections will discuss Will, Haukyn, and Anima’s varying understandings of and experiences with the virtue of charity.

The Promotion of Charity

As I’ve already noted above, Haukyn’s initial reaction to hearing praise of charity is to express skepticism that it can be found outside of the realm of ideas. He

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297 The quotation which follows, attributed elsewhere to Augustine, drives the point home: Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere.

298 B.14.98-104, to which one should compare this, begins with an asservation—“Where wonyeCharite?” quod Haukyn; “I wiste neuere in my lyue / wye hat wiȝ hym spak, as wide as I haue passed”—quite similar to Will’s “Where sholde men fynde swich a frend wiȝ so fre an herte? / I haue lyued in londe [...], my name is longe wille, / and fond I neuere ful charite, bifoire ne bihynde.” Certainly to continue comparing the lessons that Haukyn and Will receive about charity in every single particular would cast more smoke than light on the point that I want to make, yet comparing them broadly seems helpful and even necessary for illustrating not only the telling similarities between Will and Haukyn but also Anima and Patience’s divergent emphases.
inquires as to its dwelling place rather abruptly of Patience, even recklessly:

moderation, though one of Patience’s main subjects, is a difficult matter for the 
excessive Haukyn to grasp. It does not seem possible to Haukyn that Conscience and 
Patience could be telling him the truth when they suggest—indeed, promise—that a 
renunciation of the coveitise that so marks his cloak could ever result in the better 
roles and higher status they have seemed to promise him (14.11). The moderation or 
“mesure” Pacience hails sounds rather too much like a program that must instead lead 
to life-threatening destitution:

‘I shall kenne ṣee,’ quod Conscience, ‘of Contricion to make 
that shal clawe ṣi cote of alle kynnes filpe: 
*Cordis contricio, &c.*
Dowel shal washen it and wryngen it ṣoruʒ a wis confessour: 
*Oris confessio &c.*
Dobet shal beten it and bouken it as bright as any scarlet 
and engreynen it wi propulsion good wille and goddes grace to amende ṣe, 
and sibben sende ṣee to Satisfaccion for to sonnen it after: 
*Satisfaction.*
Dobest shal kepe it clene from vnkynde werkes. 
Shal neuere myx bymolen it, ne mope after biten it, 
ne fend ne fals man defoulen it in ṣi lyue. 
Shal noon heraud ne harpoure haue a fairer garnement 
than Haukyn ṣe Actif man, and ṣhow do by my techynng, 
ne no Mynstrall be moore worþ amonges pouere and riche 
than Haukyn wil ṣe wafre, which is *Contemplatiua vita.*’

‘And I shall purueie ṣee paas,’ quod Pacience, ‘ḥouʒ no plouʒ erye, 
and flour to fede folk wi propulsion as best be for ṣe soule; 
thouʒ neuere greyn grewed, ne grape vpon vyne, 
all ṣat lyeuŋ and lokeuŋ liflode wolde I fynde 
and ṣat ynoŋ; shall noon faille of ṣyng ṣat hem nedep: 
*Ne solitici sitis &c.; Volucreces celi deus pascit &c.; paciences vincunt* 
&c.’

Thanne laughed haukyn a litel and lightly gan swerye; 
‘Whoso leueŋ yow, byoure lord! I leue noʒt he be blessed.’
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But I listned and lokede what liflode it was 
that pacience so preisede, and of his poke hente 
a pece of ṣe Paternoster and profrede vs alle; 
and ṣanne was it *fiat voluntas tua* sholde fynde vs alle. 
‘Haue, haukyn,’ quod Pacience, ‘and et ṣis whan ṣe hungreŋ 
or whan ṣow clomseset for cold or clyngest for drye. 
Shul neuere gyues ṣee greue ne gret lordes wrape, 
prison ne payne, for *pacientes vincunt.*
By so ṣat ṣow be sobre of siʒte and of tonge,
in ondynge and in handlynge and in alle þi fyue wittes, 
darstow neuere care for corn ne cloþ ne for drynke, 
ne deþ drede, ne deuel, but deye as god likeþ 
or þoruþ hunger or þoruþ hethe, at his wille be it; 
for if þow lyue after his loore, þe shorter lif þe bëtre: 
Siquis amat christum, mundum non diligit istum.299
(B.14.16-35, 47-60a)

With surprisingly sharp sociological insight, Patience does go on to admit that 
inequitable resource allocation lies at fault for the division of mankind into rich and 
poor with little in between. Only moderation or “mesure” can prevent the suffering 
that comes of having not enough or the exulting pride that results from (even 
momentarily) having too much:

And if men lyuied as mesure wolde sholde neuere moore be defaute 
amonges cristene creatures, if cristes wordes ben trewe. 
Ac vnyndenesse caristiam makeþ amonges cristen peple, 
opere plenteþ makeþ pryde amonges poore and riche. 
Ac mesure is so muche worþ it may no3t be to deere. 
For þe meschief and þe meschaunce amonges men of Sodom 
weez þoruþ plenteþ of payn and of pure sleþe: 
Ociositas & habundancia panis peccatum turpissimum nutritiut,300
for men measured no3t himself of mete and of drynke, 
diden dedly synne þat þe deuel liked, 
vengeaunce fil vpon hem for hir vile synnes; 
so thei sonken into helle, þe Citees echone.301
Forþi mesure we vs wel and make we feþ oure sheltrom; 
and þoruþ feþ comþ contricion, consciente woot wel, 
which dryueþ awey dedly synne and doþþ it to be venial. 
(B.14.71-84)

299 The Latin line here is obviously relevant to this dissertation, but to my knowledge the source for it is 
unknown and I have been unable to identify it either.
300 Had the passage stayed with this explanation it would have been orthodox enough; a strong tradition 
in Christianity, and indeed in the ascetic practices of other religions, maintains that the body is less 
prone to sin when deprived of an excess of food or sleep—just as the quotation about “[o]ciosistas & 
habundancia panis” here declares; see also the brief career of Lechery in the second vision, mentioned 
in chapter 4. But Patience goes beyond this biological justification of “mesure” to arrive at a moral one 
as well. Living by faith, Patience argues, produces faith; faith itself inspires contrition; contrition, of 
course, creates a desire for confession, which leads to healing penance that “driveth away dedly sin and 
dooth it to be venial,” reforming Haukyn’s life. Incidentally, this section of passus 14 also vividly 
illustrates Langland’s reliance upon distinction collections for the structure of his poem. The word 
“charity” does not appear any earlier in the passus, but “caristia,” which precedes it alphabetically, 
appears only a few lines before Haukyn asks about charity.
301 The mention of “þe Citees echone” here aligns with what Ludo Milis has identified as a negative 
view of urban life common to monasticism and not necessarily shared by canons or friars. See “Monks, 
Canons, and the City: a Barren Relationship?” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 32 (2002), pp. 667- 
88.
It is unsurprising in this light that Haukyn, faithlessly standing at a crossroads between *caristia* (or lack) and his wonted pursuit of excesses, should express skepticism regarding charity. Could it be, he wonders anxiously, that “patient poverty” is really no better than “richness rightfully dispended”? Yet as we have already seen, and as Patience goes on further to explain, salvation can very easily elude the wealthy; wealth, like the waters of a river, needs replenishment not to dry up and thus encourages the acquisition of more wealth than it does the desire that such wealth be “dispended” on the needy.\(^{302}\) Not because of its own inferiority, then, but rather because of Haukyn’s selfish desire to practice it from a position of wealth and excess, charity takes a back seat to poverty in Patience’s following lines: so much so that Haukyn is struck by the praise and asks to learn more about what such “remocio curarum” (as Patience goes on to label it) might mean.\(^{303}\)

Tragically, however, Haukyn fails seriously to consider the life reliant on faith that poverty represents. He breaks down in the face of his sins as Patience finishes explaining how poverty can be a virtue in many respects—pushed unto despair when he realizes he cannot take it on, in a spectacular conclusion to passus 14:

‘Allas,’ quod Haukyn þe Actif man þo, ‘þat after my cristendom I ne hadde be deed and doluen for Dowelis sake! So hard it is,’ quod haukyn, ‘to lyue and to do synne. Synne seweþ vs euere,’ quod he, and sory gan wexe, and wepte water wiþ hiske eighen and weyled þe tyme that euere he dide dede þat deere god displesed; swouned and sobbed and siked ful ofte that euere he hadde lond ouþer lordshipes lasse ouþer moore,

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\(^{302}\) On banishing need with plenty, see Boethius, *De Cons. Phil.*, Bk. II prose V, lines 63-seq. ‘You want, I think, to banish need with plenty.’ See also the *New York Times* op-ed on the sham of perpetual foundations like the one recently set up for the late Leona Helmsley’s dog: Ray D. Madoff, “Dog Eat your Taxes?” (July 9, 2008).

or maistrie ouer any man mo þan of hymselue.
‘I were noȝt worþi, woot god,’ quod haukyn, ‘to werien any cloþes,
e ne neiper sherte ne shoon, saue for shame one
to couere my careyne,’ quod he, and cride mercy faste
and wepte and wailed, and þerwiþ I awakede. (B.14.323-35)

Haukyn’s meltdown helps to account for Anima’s different promotion of charitable practice to Will.

Will and Charity

In passus 15, Will asks Anima about the location of charity in words similar to Haukyn’s, as I have reported—and, when he does so, it is clear that his solipsism has not been dislodged by Anima’s opening harangue. Told that charity as a “childissh thyng” possesses not immaturity but a child’s “fre liberal wille,” Will thinks of charity as a potentially perfect patron but laments that he has yet to meet anyone who doesn’t also look out for his own interests when exercising so-called charity:

‘Where sholde men fynde swich a frend wiþ so fre an herte?
I haue lyued in londe,’ quod I, ‘my name is longe wille,
And fond I neuere ful charite, bifore ne bihynde.
Men beþ merciable to mendainautþ and to pore,
And wollen lene þer þei leue lelly to be paied.
Ac charite þat Poul preiseþ best, and moost plesaunt to oure Saueour—
Non inflatur, non est ambiçiosa, non querit que sua sunt—
I seiþ neuere swich a man, so me god helpe,
That he ne wolde aske after his, and ouþerwhile coueite
Thyng þat neded hym noȝt and nyme it if he myȝte.
Clerkes kenne me þat crist is in alle places
Ac I seiþ hym neuere soþly but as myself in a Mirour:
Hic in enimate, tune facie ad faciem.
And so I trowe trewely, by þat men telleþ of it,
Charite is noȝt chaumpions fight ne chaffare as I trowe.’
(B.15.151-64)

He has never found “full” charity. (153) When Will goes on to conclude that charity must have next to nothing to do with “champiouns fight” in tournements or “chaffare” of marketplaces, he acknowledges the presence of bellicosity and acquisitiveness as
inescapable contaminants to generosity that would otherwise remain pure. Yet the “And so” that leads to this conclusion just after Will’s reference to charity as himself in a mirror implies that, even though Will recognizes his own imperfection he still sees that Christly ideal as reflected most accurately in himself. This identification holds, moreover, no matter how distance-distorted an image Will may produce. As a result (since Will is neither much of a fighter nor involved in a business or trade) he may conclude Charity’s lack of these aspects as well. It is important to recognize Langland’s intentional satire against his persona here: Will did not recognize himself in Haukyn when the two were face to face. but now, albeit through a glass darkly, he sees God.

Rather than rebuke Will for his obduracy, Anima replies (one might say charitably) in terms that show how Charity, who “ne chaffarep noȝt, ne chalangep, ne craepe” does fit Will’s solipsistic understanding (B.15.165). Later, however, Anima further gives a description of what Charity is not—

For þer are pure proude herted men, pacient of tonge
And buxome as of berynge to burgeises and to lordes,
And to poore peple han pepir in þe nose,
And as a lyoun he lokeþ þer men lakken his werkes.
For þer are beggeris and bidderes, bedemen as it were,
Loken as lambren and semen liþhol
Ac is it moore to haue hir mete on swich an esy manere
Than for penaunce and parfitnesse, þe pouerte þat swiche takeþ.
(B.15.201-08)

It more than a little resembles Will’s withering portrayal of Haukyn.³⁰⁴ Like Haukyn and other “Goliards,” these are gyrovagues and wastrels obsessed with pleasing the powerful. They set as life goals advancement not of soul but of status. While hardly known for their largesse, they loudly draw attention to works to win more praise. They ally themselves nominally with the clerical estate only to benefit from the perks of

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³⁰⁴ See again B.13.271-312.
religion (as we shall see the Wastoures do in the second vision). The satire is entirely in keeping with Langland’s practice, which I noted above also aligns with the prophet Nathan’s rebuke of David concerning Uriah: what seems to be a criticism that the target can join in and agree with turns out to be a criticism against the target himself.

Anima’s charity too begins with moderation, as did Patience’s poverty, and the two seem almost to work as a team. Where Patience drew his examples of immoderation from the secular world, Anima’s examples of moderation are all clerks. This distinction is especially interesting in light of Anima and Haukyn’s inverse reflection of each other—and all the more since Will and Haukyn both are Goliardic figures, partly “clerical” and partly secular. Anima’s Bernardine admonition that “[b]eatus est qui scripturas legit, et verba vertit in opera” allows us to see, behind the general critique, the precept to “docere verbo et exemplo” that Carolyn Walker Bynum has found notable in twelfth-century discourse concerning religious life. Rather than focusing on the integrity of their actions, Anima notes, clerics often spend their time enchanted by riches and the rich. But since all that will come to nothing after their deaths, the exercise of charity would suit them better.

Again, though, and more than Will, Anima’s image of proper Charity resembles a reformed Haukyn. Haukyn had flitted from occupation to occupation out of a wasteful restlessness, with “no lif hat [hym] loue[...] lastynge any while” (B.13.331) Charity however takes on any number of roles but never fails to help others, never feeling the slightest pressure of want or need. The self-sufficiency Anima speaks of

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306 See also B.12.40-58, in which Charity is described as an amalgam of obedience and moderation or temperance. Wealthy and wise men throughout history, the passage notes, have fallen because of their wealth and wisdom—“catel and kynde wit was combrunce to hem alle,” since they did not “loue [...] asoure lord bit [...] Date & dabitur vobis.”
clearly surprises Will, who asks if Charity “haþ [...] any rentes or richesse or any riche frendes,” but Anima declares that Charity has none of these:

Of rentes ne of richesse rekkeþ he neuere,
for a frend þat fyndeþ hym failed hym neuere at nedee:
Fiat voluntas tua fynt hym eueremoore,
and if he souþeþ eteþ but a sop of Spera in deo.
He kan portreye wel þe Paternoster and peyneþ it with Aues
and ouþer while he is woned to wenden on pilgrymages
ther poore men and prisons liggeþ, hir pardon to haue;
thou þ he bere hem no breed he bereþ hem swetter liflode;
louþeþ hem as oure lord biddeþ and lokeþ how þei fare,
and whan he is wery of þat werk þan wole he som tyme
laboureþ in a lauendrye wel þe leaþe of a Mile,
and yerne into youþe and yepeliche seche
pride wiþ þe appuretenances, and pakken hem togideres,
and bouken hem at his brest and beten hem clene,
and leggen on lange wiþ Laboraui in gemitu meo,
and wiþ warme water at his þeyn washen hem after.
thanne he synþeþ þhan he döþ so, and som tyme wepynge,
Cor contritum & humilitatum deus non despicies.
(B.15.177-194)

Anima thus portrays Charity as an ideal solution to the problem of poverty that Haukyn and Patience had uncovered earlier—the problem that those who cling to more than sufficient earthly wealth doom those reliant on charity to caristia (dearth) and possibly death because of it.

Much the rest of Anima’s speech to Will in passus 15 makes the case for the reallocation of resources that following true Charity would bring about. It brings up several examples, a few of them contrasting the Franciscan eremitic ideal to the four orders’ more recent behavior. In so doing, Anima further “toothlessly” satirizes the clerical estate by contrasting typical critics—figures directly reminiscent of Haukyn—with the ideal Christian way, charity, to encounter others’ failings.307 As a practice of moderation, Charity can belong to anyone who has any resources at all to give:

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307 Anima declares that “[þ]er are pure proude herted men, pacient of tonge / and buxome as of berynge to burgeises and to lordes, / and to poore peple hand þeþir in þe nose, / and as a lyoun he lokeþ þer men lakken hise werkes. / For þer are beggeris and bidderis, bedemen as it were, / loken as lambren and semen lif holy, / ac it is moore to haue hir mete on swich an esy mnere / than for penaunce and
For I haue seyen hym in silk and som tyme in russet, bode in grey and in gris and in gilt harneis, and as gladliche he it gaf to gomes þat it neded. Edmond and Edward, eiper were kynges and seintes yset; stille charite hem folwede. I haue ysseyen charite also syngen and reden, riden and rennen in raggede wedes, ac bidding as beggeris biheld I hym neuere. (B.15.220-27)

Notably, most of Anima’s examples of proper charity concern not only friars but anchorites, hermits, and monks proper who follow in some way the “monastic” ideal of solitude and prayer. Paul, Anthony, Giles, and Mary Magdalene: all, according to Anima, lived on the most meager of resources and placed all their faith in God, receiving sustenance miraculously as a result, “in menynge þat meke þyng mylde þyng sholde fede.” (B.15.306) By the same token, argues Anima, wealthy laypersons should give of their fortunes not to maintain their fellows (as described in B.15.336-37) but rather “lawefulle men to lif holy men liflode brynge.” (B.15.307)

As Anima counsels, Religious groups that have already received good fortune “sholde raþer feeste beggeris / than burgeises þat riche ben as þe book techeþ,” so as to escape the corruption that comes from too much wealth (15.342-343). The poem appends a lengthy Latin quotation:

Quia sacrilegium est res pauperum non pauperibus dare. Item, peccatoribus dare est demonibus immolare. Item, monache, si indiges & accipis pocius das quam accipis, si autem non eges & accipis rapis. Porro non indiget monachus si habeat quod nature sufficit (343a).

[Because it is sacrilege not to give to the poor what should be theirs. Again: to give to sinners is to render burnt offerings to demons. Again: O monk, if you are in need and take alms, you give more than you receive; if however you are not in need and take alms, then you steal. A monk is not in need if he has what nature deems enough.]308

parfitnesse, þe pouerte þat swiche takeþ” (B.15.202-208). Haukyn, too, is “as a lyoun on to loke and lordliche of speche, / boldest of beggeris” while suffering from the rest of the flaws that Anima mentions (B.13.301-302).

308 The phrase “what nature deems enough” here seems to quote from Boethius, De Cons. Phil, Bk. 2. proseII. Prose V, line 42.
Overreliance on the collection of worldly knowledge and material wealth has weakened the clergy, Anima explains, and that weakens all of Christendom. The major example that follows amounts to a small *vita* of Muhammad ("Makometh"), here again portrayed as a Christian frustrated in his bid for the papacy when, “þorȝ wiles of his wit and a whit Dowue” that he tamed “in mysbileue men and wommen broughȝte / þat lered þere and lewed ȝit leeuen on his lawes.” (B.15.409-11) Now “for drede of þe deþ I dar noȝt telle truȝe / how englisshe clerkes a coluere fede þat coueitise hiȝte,” Anima adds, with disingenuously periphrastic self-censorship, continuing in a similar vein until the end of the passus against the avarice of the clergy.

Anima’s shifting lines of attack against now the worldly knowledge, now the worldly striving after wealth of corrupt clergy (and corrupt laity) can generate some confusion. The discussion sometimes seems to divert from general self-reform towards how to remedy that love of money which is the root of all evil. Haukyn’s problems were any number of sins, after all, not just avarice—and yet that seems to be the focus here. The avarice Anima decries is not wholly avarice for money, however, nor is the charity Anima espouses completely pecuniary charity. Money is merely a convenient way of expressing all the *temporalia* these wayward figures seek. The subject has not changed from self-reform after all.

The well-regulated and almost cyclical life Anima ascribes to Charity—with its periodic cleansings of soul with weeping and with singing—need not be said to represent any one type of life, as we have seen. Nevertheless, its fittingness as a representation of monastic life, entered around the divine office, stands out. Anima’s connection of ideal monastic life with perfect charity also suggests that Anima opposes Haukyn’s slip towards despair by proposing a different practice of self-reform, known (especially in the context of monasticism) as *contemptus sui*.
Contemptus Sui

Anima’s discussion of charity to Will goes further, completing an argumentative arc or turn of thought that had begun at the close of the second vision, but it seems to me that we can pause here, as the portrayal of Charity just presented brings to the forefront the main mystery underlying self-criticism in the poem: namely, how far is it supposed to go? To the casual observer, a comparison of Haukyn at the end of passus 14 with Anima’s charity here in passus 15 would not allow for much contrast at all. Both figures bewail their sin, and both cry. From a subtler theological standpoint—of the sort Langland would readily have apprehended, if not Will—there are important differences on display between the two, even in this apparently common activity. Charity acts out of well-regulated ascetic introspection, the “contemptus sui” I have mentioned above and shall turn to soon below; the prideful Haukyn, however, has run aground on the shoals of wanhope, or despair.

As medieval writers understood it, despair or wanhope was a danger arising from the sin of acedia or sloth. Acedia, a term first invented by the Desert Fathers of early eremitic monasticism, was also known as the “noonday demon.” And Crislip has traced the history of the term, beginning with its early depiction as both an actual demon and chief of demonic thoughts in the fourth-century writings of Evagrius of Pontus.\(^{309}\) As Crislip notes, however, its similarity with a range of modern, non-religious afflictions has made it valuable to historians of emotion. Andrew Solomon, for instance, reads acedia in terms almost purely of what we would now call depression.\(^{310}\) Though it provides the title of his book, he sees it almost entirely as a


much earlier era’s attempt to understand a complexly manifested disease. Rainer Jehl, on the other hand, finds acedia’s similarity with contemporary “burnout syndrome” to be telling—and his dwelling on the comparison is valuable, in so far as early techniques to battle it might help to inspire ways to treat “burnout” now. Still other scholars have focused on its medieval instantiations. Alexander Murray, for example, considers desperatio in relation to medieval thought about suicide. Jean-Charles Nault, thinking of contemporary Christians, uses medieval and modern theology to examine not the negative thoughts themselves but the divine sense of calling they refuse. He labels acedia the “enemy of spiritual joy” because this word—meaning “the lack of care for one’s salvation”—represents a paralyzed, intensely self-preoccupied refusal to accept anything less than the perfect happiness of heaven while simultaneously feeling barred from it. Murray’s view is probably too narrow, and Nault’s certainly too capacious, adequately to describe the vice depicted in Langland’s poem. Then again, these scholars have not had Langland specifically in mind. Siegfried Wenzel, who has considered Piers Plowman, does perhaps the best service Langlandians when he describes sloth in terms of incommensurability: the feeling that one could never possibly make up for all of one’s earlier shortcomings.

While at first the apparent impossibility of the task of making amends for one’s sins might appear to inspire a jaunty, flippant jadedness (for which Haukyn is Langland’s exhibit A), that defensive reaction only allows problems to grow worse; when they are faced, if they are faced, the reaction turns into an impossibly depressed

bleakness. The very word, “wanhope” signifying more doubt than certainty about an individual’s ability to counter sin, was not this poet’s own invention. Nevertheless, Langland uses the word with etymological sensitivity. The warning in passus 7 to Sloth—“Ware thee fro Wanhope, wolde thee betraye” (B.5.444, emphasis mine)—associates with the affliction a verb very much in keeping with this sense of doubtful jadedness rather than full-blown suicidal tailspin we might expect. Nevertheless, one does lead towards the other. To draw on a famous image from Book One of Spenser’s Faerie Queene, Despayre with his rusty knife lies at the end of the process for Langland, in which self defense treasonously ushers in its opposite, self-contempt.

G. K. Chesterton once strikingly observed that the apparent self-hatred of the would-be suicide is actually hatred (and despair for the improvement of) everything else in the world.315 For this reason, to speak of “self-contempt” rather quickly brings to mind figures like Alcyon, the dubious antihero of Spenser’s Daphnaida.316 As passus 14 ends, Haukyn is frozen on the brink of just that sort of self-contempt. (Will, waking up from his vision of Haukyn’s descent toward despair, seems to experience a reaction to the dream less pronounced but more active as well—he has not lost hope so much as respect for the virtue of others and, weirdly, the propriety of conventional societal rules.) Infelicities of translation bring it about that Anima’s preferred alternate path for self-criticism, one which leads to heights instead of depths, can also translate as “self-contempt” despite its difference in practice, so I will render it here as “contempt of self.”

315 Chesterton writes that “[t]he suicide is ignoble because he has not this link with being: he is a mere destroyer; spiritually, he destroys the universe”—in chapter 5: “The Flag of the World,” Orthodoxy (New York: John Lane, 1908), pp. 119-47 at p. 133.
316 See, for example, lines 414-20 of that poem: “I hate to speake, my voyce is spent with crying: / I hate to heare, lowd plaints haue duld mine eares: / I hate to tast, for food withholds my dying: / I hate to see, mine eyes are dimd with teares: / I hate to smell, no sweet on earth is left: / I hate to feele, my flesh is numbd with teares: / So all my senses from me are bereft.”
Contempt of self or *contemptus sui* is, alas, alarmingly difficult to research except in its monastic context and in relation to other practices (*contemptus mundi*, for example). Brian Stock helpfully provides a view of the background on literary self-introspection out of which *contemptus sui* would develop, though he does not use the term. The paradoxically self-edificatory effects of *contemptus sui* appear from Richard of St. Victor’s *De exterminatione mali et promotione boni* (with extended discussions of *contemptus sui*); in a later treatise possibly by Jodl von Kastl titled *De adhærendo Deo*, the fifteenth chapter is devoted to the question of “*Contemptus sui, qualiter causetur in homine, et quam utilis sit?*” Susan R. Kramer and Caroline Walker Bynum attempt to show how a sense of “selfhood” was shored up by the practices no less than the doctrines of religious life, with *amor proximi* causing the “*interior homo* itself [to be] a stimulus of the *interior homo* of neighbor.” Though they mention the “inner man” and the Christian ideal of “*amor proximi,*” however, they do not mention contempt of self alone.

Even so, the term’s bothersome connectedness tells us something. First, it is an idea *almost* (but as we shall see not entirely) inseparable from monasticism. Second, contempt of self forms part of a complex of ideas and shares their ultimate goals. Whereas slothful wanhope stems from a sort of pride, *contemptus sui* distinguishes itself as an antidote to pride, being in theory the way an ascetic avoids exulting in his own righteousness and discipline. Along with “contempt of the world” and “love of neighbor,” it was often held to stand as one of the columns in what has variously been

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318 Richard’s *De exterminatione* is PL 196, col. 1073C-1088A; the *De adhærendo Deo*, print publication information unknown, has been transcribed for online access by Éulogos IntraText® (2007). The *De adhærendo* faintly echoes discourse on the “inner man” by stating that weeping and other practices of denying self-worth “day by day” (*de die in die*) make the soul more precious to God. The greater importance it ascribes to weeping as a key to contempt of self indicates, however, that its sense of psychology may be less sophisticated than what one finds in other texts cited here.

319 Quoted from “Revisiting the Twelfth-Century Individual,” p. 85.
called the spiritual edifice or the cloister of the soul, the very terms of which sugest strongly their morally formative, constructive, indeed “edifying” and sheltering roles.

Contempt of self could appear to be a species of _contemptus mundi_, since it is often referred to right alongside contempt of the world, but it also deserves to be considered as distinct from the latter practice. As the term implies, its main area of application is the _self_. Human beings are inherently social creatures, and even professedly urban poets like Langland and Chaucer admitted in their writings to the corrupting influence of people in groups together. But while it might seem useful to consider _contemptus sui_ an antisocial goal—since what better way to show yourself-contempt than by withdrawing from friends and family?—presence as well as absence factors in. Contempt of self concerns things embraced as well as cast aside. The very idea of _contemptus sui_ being monastic, after all, it was traditionally or originally understood to flourish in monastic _communities_.

The monastic community, however, as anyone even remotely familiar with the concept of monasticism knows, is not a normal social arrangement. Or rather, although the coördination of men in the monastery is no different from other types of societal order (someone needs to prepare food, someone needs to dispose of waste) it pushes at the bounds of normality by putting any usual, everyday human interactions at an absolute minimum (so far as practical reality will allow). The organization in typical cenobitic (or communal) establishments has been described as top-down, with orders and authority deriving from God through the person of the abbot, each working at a particular task to ensure the community’s continued health and solvency—rather in the manner of a beehive. In this organizational perspective, the monastic community also resembles the military, with the important difference that the military usually encourages its members to lead normal lives when not in the direct service of its (temporary and changeable) mission goals. The monastery asks its denizens to
forswear many aspects of normal life forever—too many for listing—in the service of a mission and goals that remain unchanged. These are the “dura et aspera per quae itur ad Deum.”

What of the self in such situations? What of normal human drives and dreams for property, status to impress others, a supportive and socially occupying life with other human beings? The monasteries of the most reformed communities, such as the Carthusians or the Benedictine St. Romuald’s Camaldolese, answer with their very architecture: while nominally cenobitic, denizens of these monasteries spend their nonworking hours in private cells, or hermitages, around the main monastery church. With the self’s usual props taken away, the monk can work on the purification of his being—its purgation from sin, and from the desire for constant commerce with other people.

What really distinguishes the monastery, then, and allows for contempt of self there, is a radically different sense of what it means to be a human being—a radically different anthropology, to use the theological term favored by Robert Bultot. This anthropology is the anthropology of angels, not of men—the bios angelikos, or “angelic life,” inerrantly pure, unmoved by the material world, obediently hierarchical. John Freccero has provided the backstory for this monastic aspiration, mentioned throughout the works of Robert Bultot as the goal of becoming perfect in order to replace prehistorically fallen angels. Yet as both Jean Leclercq and Karl Suso Frank

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320 The dura et aspera are mentioned in chapter 58 of the Rule, in which a newcomer intent upon joining a given monastery should be informed of all of the difficulties that lie in store.
321 For more on this system of organization see Knowles, Pachomius to Ignatius.
322 A tablet set prominently on the church sanctuary floor at the Camaldolese Bielany Klasztor on the “Silver Mount” outside of Krakow, Poland, avoids the plural even in the monastery’s only communal place: “Commissa Mea Pavesco * Et Ante Te Erubesco * Dum Veneris Iudicare: * Domine, Noli Me Condemnare.”
influentially have noted, monks’ desire to live like angels was gratified in this life, too, motivating their behavior of individual monks in every respect and even the placement of their communities (frequently on mountains).\textsuperscript{324} This is not to say that the angelic life was uncontroversial or unproblematic. Ellen Muehlberger has pointed out that the disembodiment of angels vexed early Christian ascetics, whose angelic piety had to be embodied.\textsuperscript{325} Ludo Milis, moreover, has argued that the pursuit of the \textit{bios angelikos} made monks attempt—and sometimes succeed—at being irrelevant to the rest of the secular world.\textsuperscript{326} It is safe to conclude, then, that the angelic life’s glowing ideal contributed to its staying power in the medieval ascetic imagination far more than its pursuit on earth—always already flawed—ever could. The often-severe \textit{Meditationes piisimae}, which scholars assume that Langland would have known, contains a glowingly apocalyptic vision of humans joining the ranks of angels at the end of time.\textsuperscript{327}

As with contempt of self and other aspects of ascetic ideology this dissertation will explore, the theory of the angelic life so indelibly tinctured the ascetic experience that Langland, whose angels often seem more like pieces of stage machinery rather than starry messengers, need not have been specifically aware of the theory in order to draw on it in his poem. Still, it is my opinion that Langland did indeed draw upon this theory. To do so he would only have needed to desire to present a monastic ideal as an ideal applicable for all lives—and it seems amply likely that he did at least so much. Even Haukyn’s name of \textit{Activa vita} implies the existence of a \textit{Vita contemplativa}, as I


\textsuperscript{326} See \textit{Angelic Monks and Earthly Men: Monasticism and its Meaning to Medieval Society} (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999).

\textsuperscript{327} “Fulgebìt sicut sol humanitas glorificata: quieta erit et concors carnis et spiritus societas. Angelorum et hominum erit gaudium unum, unum colloquium, unum convivium” (col. 493C).
have already noted—and, as I have already pointed out as well, the flaws in the one (experienced after Conscience casts his lot with Patience) imply the soundness of the other (reached through Clergie). After all, the form of living practiced by monks was seen as an example of the contemplative life *par excellence*. Therefore, in so far as the Haukyn episode centers on the issue of self-criticism and finds the way in which Haukyn criticizes himself a thing to be avoided, it sets up the self-critical procedures of the *Vita contemplativa* as its natural ideal: an ideal of contempt of self.

That said—that contempt of self appears healthier and more admirable than despair—does not make the practice of *contemptus sui* at all pleasant. As a form of self-criticism its narrow purpose is to make a sinner mindful of his faults, not to isolate him from the judgment and corrective sight of others.328 In so far as all humans are fallen, moreover, it presupposes that the sinner will have many flaws to be mindful of. The “misery of the human condition,” about which Cardinal Lothario dei Segni wrote his famous treatise before becoming Pope Innocent III, is recognized to have the roots of its corruption within the fallen human self.329 Focusing on the dignity of man, about which Lothario apparently wished to write a second treatise, doesn’t figure into the equation by that reckoning. That man was created “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5) is not cause for celebration and hope, but rather mourning that the short distance between the two should be so hard for mortal man to scale.

Contempt of self begins with not only a recognition but an *exaggeration* of the distance between man and angel, in fact—and in the illusion that the sins of the sinner in question are almost immeasurably greater than his neighbor’s sins. The example of

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328 See above on the *interior homo*, which *contemptus sui* seems designed to nourish and form.
the Apostle Paul’s letters take a prominent role here.\textsuperscript{330} Paul considers himself “the least of all the saints” in Ephesians 3:8, who in his laments over the conflict between his (outer) body and “inward man” attest to Jesus’ remark in Mark 14:38 that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”\textsuperscript{331} As far back as the psalter, in point of fact, the sinner declares that he “is a worm, and no man”\textsuperscript{332} Seeing his very nature from conception onwards to partake of the lowest and most revolting substances—blood, decay, slime—inspires a poor assessment of the physical world and his body’s participation in it. If one cannot completely realize the \textit{bios angelikos} in life one can at least aspire to it, and one was meant to nourish such aspirations with images such as these.

Contempt of self might have helped to suppress an ascetic’s pride in being able to live away from community, but it cannot be denied that the same practice could bring on, encourage, and even exaggerate symptoms of what we would recognize as depression. It is commonly understood increased exposure to negative ideas and images increases the risk of depression, and researchers currently believe that dwelling on negative phenomena—or “ruminating”—makes depression worse. The risk for depression also rises with increased focus on the self: poets who use the first person singular pronoun a great deal die sooner, more susceptible to suicide, than those who lean more on the second and third persons and do \textit{not} dwell on their own

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{330} Paul’s letters comprise the earliest books of the New Testament, though this was not known during the Middle Ages.
\textsuperscript{331} Romans 7:21-25: “I find then a law, that when I have a will to do good, evil is present with me. For I am delighted with the law of God, \textit{according to the inward man}: But I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members. Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God, by Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, I myself, \textit{with the mind} serve the law of God; but with the flesh, the law of sin” (emphasis mine).
\textsuperscript{332} Psalm 21:7, “But I am a worm, and no man: the reproach of men, and the outcast of the people”; cf. Job 25:4-6: “Can man be justified compared with God, or he that is born of a woman appear clean? Behold even the moon doth not shine, and the stars are not pure in his sight. How much less man that is rottenness and the son of man who is a worm?”
\end{footnotesize}
misfortunes. At the same time, the viability of monasticism as a way of life would have been severely hampered were the contempt of self it promoted to have led inexorably to mental illness of this sort. Though to plumb the issue adequately would require a (very interesting) study in its own right, a dangerous overindulgence in ascetic discipline seems to have been strenuously guarded against in the regular orders’ typical practice. The Benedictine Rule dictates that a monk should live in a community and achieve a sufficient level of spiritual fitness before going out alone as a hermit, for instance; a would-be anchorite who had not previously been affiliated with a cenobitic community required the permission of a bishop.

It also bears remembering that the point of contemptus sui’s sometimes gruesome attendant meditations on the vileness of the material self and the sins to which it is prone is or was not impotent, self-destructive rage at a condition that could not be bettered, but rather mourning for one’s fallen humanity. It amounted to a shifting of solicitude towards the immortal part of one’s makeup, and the zeal to take upon oneself the disciplines necessary to foster that immortal part—the inner man. In that way, one could pursue perfection (at least so far as possible in this life). While wanhope (as Langland’s poem tells us) derives from sloth and is marked by unwillingness and then inability to take proper self-reforming action, the practices

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334 Moreover, practiced with all due precaution, ascetic contempt of self might well have been of some psychological advantage. A recent and fascinating article discusses the “analytic-rumination hypothesis” recently developed Andrew Thomson and Paul Andrews. According to this idea, the brooding or dwelling that characterizes one particular strain of depression could help to focus the mind on finding solutions to problems otherwise unsolved: an important finding, if true, because the great prevalence of a disorder that can strike at any age and yet has seemed to have no evolutionary benefit at all has so far confounded researchers. It bears noticing that monks used the word ruminatio to describe one of their most typical reading practices. Contemptus sui and its attendant meditations—also characterized by repeated return to sometimes-somber ideas—seem to present a stylized version of the depressive behavior here described, one designed to reap its benefits while escaping its pathology. See Jonah Lehrer, “Depression’s Upside” (New York Times Magazine, February 25, 2010), pp. 38-[44?].
ideally nourished by contemptus sui constitute very purposeful and constructive action like that of Charity.

To the historian of satire, what payoff does the promotion of contemptus sui at this point in the poem give us? Is it even correct to say that Langland writes in terms of contemptus sui rather than conventional confession and penance? In addition to the foregoing points, it should be plain to see that Langland does not advocate confession and penance alone for self-reform, or rather that his ideal goes further. (Confession and penance—non-public and repeatable—derive at any rate from monastic practices, as Alan Thacker among others has pointed out, and so it is not surprising that late-medieval writers found monastic expositions on these issues compelling.335) Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale, for instance, which could not hew closer to the pastoral concerns of the secular clergy, quotes repeatedly from St. Bernard of Clairvaux. As Haukyn’s (and, elsewhere, Sloth’s) jadedness shows, Langland does not portray confession and penance alone as a solution for human sinfulness, because living the active life entails the risk of succumbing to wanhope—of suffering a jadedness about sin that can make conventional opportunities and calls for restitution powerless.

Still, though Langland’s ideal for self-reform comes somehow from the cloister, he obviously does not set up claustral living as a practical solution for human sinning, any more than he suggests universal kingship (a role also ascribed, metaphorically, to Charity). Instead, Charity appears to be a virtue that may be practiced by anyone disposed to do so. And alongside Charity, Langland’s poem sets regularity of life, if not all out Regular living. Constantly exercising charity, indeed, leads to “welhope” (B.13.453). That this can be experienced in the active life, at very

least among those who choose Patience as their travel partner, becomes quite clear from the tag “Paciences vincent” to describe ascetics and martyrs not formally monastic throughout Anima’s passus 15 speech. These embrace poverty not to snare for themselves remocio curarum but rather out of self-sacrificial love.

Understanding contemptus sui, as this chapter has shown, can allow us to differentiate between Haukyn’s bleak tears in the grip of wanhope and the more regularly occurring yet constructive tears said to accompany Charity (in Anima’s speech). That in turn helps us to see how the rather bizarre-looking figure of Anima serves as a foil to Haukyn, acting as the wise and steadfast “inner man” to the wildly disruptive folly prone “outer man” of Haukyn. Although Conscience and Patience’s advice for Haukyn to embrace poverty is not misguided, it also fails to move him. His concluding outburst stems from his inability to consider self-improvement through changed behavior remotely possible. Anima’s encouragement of charity changes the emphasis enough to suggest that even a king may reap the benefits of the life of the

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336 On the healing power of tears in medieval religious thought, and the “compunction” meant to inspire them, much of interest has been written and a number of works have already been cited in this study including those by Piroska Nagy. Jean Leclercq provides a brief sketch of the history and valences of this idea in his Amour des Lettres, which sheds considerable light upon the course of action recommended for Haukyn: “Le premier résultat de cette expérience de la misère de l’homme, pour le chrétien qui sait l’interpréter, c’est l’humilité, autrement dit le détachement du monde et de nous-mêmes, et de notre péché, la conscience du besoin où nous sommes de Dieu. Telle est la compunction, sous le double aspect qu’elle revêt: compunction de crainte, compunction de désir. Primitivement le mot compunctio est, dans l’usage profane, un terme de médecine: il désigne les éclaboussures d’une douleur aiguë, d’un mal physique. Mais il a surtout été employé dans le vocabulaire chrétien avec un sens qui, sans perdre contact avec ses origines, est cependant plus riche et beaucoup plus élevé. La compunction devient une douleur de l’âme, une douleur qui a, simultanément, deux principes: d’une part le fait du péché et de notre tendance au péché—compunctio penitentiae, timoris, formidinis—d’une autre part le fait de notre désir de Dieu, et déjà de notre possession de Dieu. S. Grégoire, plus que d’autres, a mis l’accent sur ce dernier aspect: possession obscure, dont la conscience ne dure pas, et dont, par conséquent, naissent le regret de la voir disparaître et le désir de la retrouver. La ‘compunction du cœur,’ ‘de l’âme’—compunctio cordis, animi—tend donc toujours à devenir une ‘compunction d’amour,’ ‘de dilection’ et ‘de contemplation’—compunctio amoris, dilectionis, contemplationis. La compunction est une action de Dieu en nous, un acte par lequel Dieu nous réveille, un choc, un coup, une ‘piqûre,’ une sorte de brûlure. Dieu nous excite comme par un aiguillon: il nous ‘point’ avec insistance (cum-pungere), comme pour nous transpercer. L’amour du monde nous endort; mais comme par un coup de tonnerre, l’âme est rappelée à l’attention à Dieu.” (34-35).
poor, however; it depicts poverty not as a way to stay out of trouble, but as a way for one’s troubles to do one some good. This change, which Anima presents less in terms of different behavior than in terms of psychological readjustment, is *contemptus sui*.

We have already seen that, in the ascetic ideological framework, self-criticism plays an important role. Langland’s self-criticism, though critics have associated it with Goliardic models, occurs most deeply when Will sees “himself” as a Goliard (Haukyn). The encounter moves past light self-parody, typical of Goliardic verse, and toward an ascetically minded meditation on the rewards of *contemptus sui* versus the dangers of wanhope or despair. Patience urges Haukyn—Will’s “outer man”—to repent of his flaws by letting go of exterior things, unwittingly triggering his despair. In response, Anima (Will’s “inner man”) shows Will how to recognize and attend to his intrinsic spiritual worth, following an ideal of charity.

One of the hallmarks of *Piers Plowman* as a satire, as the passūs featuring Haukyn and Anima show, is that it tends not to criticize particular ways of life (e.g., minstrelsy) as much particular sins or errors in thought (e.g., avarice). As we shall see abundantly the next chapter, ascetic ideology provides the rationale for this restraint. Although the next chapter will focus more on the way in which Langland attempts to revitalize society with “contempt of the world” or *contemptus mundi*, *contemptus sui* cannot be left behind. That ideal demands that the criticism in the poem balance its assessments of others with criticism of the self.
Like many writers before and after him, including fellow poets in fourteenth-century England, William Langland found it useful to connect self and world by analogy, presenting reform of one as key to the reform of the other. This statement implies that Langland’s use of ascetic thought as a model for critique of the self would be matched by an equally ascetic portrayal of, and set of prescriptions for, society—but “contempt of the self” or contemptus sui is one thing, contemptus mundi or “contempt of the world” quite another. The idea of man as microcosm linking the self and the world informed even cosmography in the Middle Ages, and the discipline of maintaining the sobriety of the self was available for acceptance by all; the idea and discipline of contemptus mundi, on the other hand, guided the cloistered life of “regular” religious alone.\(^\text{338}\) For how could the message to reject and denounce the

\(^{337}\) ‘Therefore, even though the world may promise during this life health of the body, length of life, good fortune, and an opportunity to do penance, you will yet find it to be false and deceitful. By experience we see every day that bodily health turns into sickness, a long life into a short while, good fortune into bad, the opportunity to do penance into evil impenitence, and so forth. Therefore, in his sermon on this wretched life Augustinus speaks of the world’s falsehood as follows: ‘O present life,’ <he says,> ‘this is not the true way you show to us, because for some you are long, only to ruin them; for others short, so that when they want to repent of their sins, you do not let them; for some you are wide, so that they may do what they want; and for others you are narrow, so that they cannot do good.’ <So Augustinus.> Thus it is manifest that the world with his avarice is a chief enemy to man.” Siegfried Wenzel, ed. & trans Fasciculus Morum: a Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s Handbook (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), IV.iii., p. 326.

\(^{338}\) Monastic reformers such as Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Damian viewed contemptus mundi and monasticism as inseparable—a matter I touch on below. See also the vast panoply of relevant works by Robert Bultot mentioned earlier, especially what exists of his vast and unfinished Christianisme et
ways of the secular world contribute to the secular world’s improvement? *Contemptus mundi* could not—and cannot, in fact—be lived in “the world” with the hope of having any benefit to it (at least, not literally). I will focus in this chapter on the striking way that Langland more figuratively conceives it to apply to all groups in secular society, especially the laity.

I aim to center my discussion of how Langland proposes *contemptus mundi* as a means of social reform in passās 5-7 of the B-version of *Piers Plowman*, with occasional reference to important variants in the C-version of *Piers*. (These passās constitute the narrator’s second dream, which scholars commonly refer to as the poem’s second “vision.”) To be sure, several of the estates (or groups in the social order) appear prominently very early on in the work; in fact, its opening vision of human activity on the “fair field full of folk” constitutes a survey of these estates. While that first broad social purview merely identifies social problems before giving way to other expository matter, the second vision offers an important sustained examination of how the estates not only (imperfectionly) do but even how they (ideally) should work together. Moreover, the second vision frames its treatment of current disorder in relation to prospects for future harmony by drawing attention to the link between society and self, the micro-to-macrocosmic relationship that mandates personal correction as the prerequisite for social change.

This second vision first presents a sermon *ad status*, or to the assembled estates, preached publicly by the character of Reason (who had begun this poem in the role of a king’s officer but here takes on an ecclesiastical persona). After this sermon, and inspired by it, the poem describes a general confession of sins—or rather, by the sins, made up for the most part (strikingly) by the apparently self-nullifying

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confessions of the individual sins themselves. The character of ‘Repentaunce’ then inspires the people assembled for the occasion to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Truth, as Reason’s sermon had encouraged. No one knows how to find the shrine, however, except Piers: a humble plowman who enters the narrative in this scene, Piers, a long-time employee in St. Truth’s hire who offers detailed directions to the shrine (no doubt the same tower in which Truth was seen to dwell at the very opening vision of the poem). Unfortunately, the would-be pilgrims find these directions far too complicated to follow without further assistance—and Piers courteously offers to take the pilgrims to the shrine, himself. He only needs to finish plowing a half-acre in his care, he says, and then will be ready to go.

At the offer of assistance from the collected pilgrims, so that they can make their way sooner, Piers suggests several tasks. In return, he promises to provide the workers with food and other material support. A considerable number of workers refuse to labor for him, though, and instead attempt to extort continued wages. Piers finds himself unable to maintain order after this provocation and calls on the help of Hunger to coerce the pilgrims into honest and productive work. When Hunger leaves at harvest time, called off at Piers’ behest lest the famished pilgrims starve to death, a pardon arrives from Truth: the plowing of the half-acre, however imperfectly and almost tragically realized, amounts to a pilgrimage for those who had honestly labored. Piers and a priest dispute the meaning of the pardon from Truth as the vision ends.

Taken serially, these events can strike readers as motivated less by compelling narrative logic than the accretive chaos familiar from scriptural commentaries and dreams (and indeed the poem does owe much of its structure and inspiration to exegetical material and literary “dream vision” convention). Nevertheless, as John Burrow has shown, the second vision’s episodes do reasonably cohere: while Burrow
allows that its details tend to obscure the second vision’s structure, it follows the familiar pattern of sermon—confession—repentance—pilgrimage—pardon.339 Keeping that narrative arc in mind, we can now look rather more closely at its components, especially at how the imagery in the sermon that initiates the vision provides essential guidance for interpreting the sections that follow.

The Arboreal Iconography of Contempt

According to Alan of Lille’s influential Summa de Arte Prædicatoria, preaching may be defined as “open and public instruction in faith and behavior, whose purpose is the forming of men; it derives from the path of reason (ex ratione semita) and from the fountainhead of the ‘authorities.’”340 Though Langland may not have had this precise definition in his mind when writing Piers Plowman, Reason does deliver the sermon that begins the second vision and seems to do an exemplary job with that delivery. Like many preachers, Reason begins with a reference to current events. He expounds the moral significance of plagues and tempests that had affected England in recent times, including an image of one storm’s aftermath that I find centrally important for the entire vision:

He preued þat þise pestilences were for pure synne, and þe Southwestrene wynd on Saterday at euen was pertliche for pride and for no point ellis. Pyries and Plumtrees were puffed to þe erþe in ensample, segges, þat ye sholden do þe bettre; beches and brode okes were blowen to þe grounde and turned vpward hire tail in tokenynge of drede that dedly synne er domesday shal fordoon hem alle.


In part because the image appears merely to transmit a short topical, historical reference to the so-called Great Wind of 1362, commentators have focused on how these lines provide a *terminus a quo* for the A-text in which they first appear.\(^{341}\) The passage has also likely failed to receive much critical scrutiny because the poem itself scurries past it so quickly: though Will observes his next breath that of such things he could “mamelen wel longe,” he nonetheless hastens onwards, in a breezy synopsis of the rest of the sermon, to matters allegedly more deserving of attention. The effect here thus more than a little resembles that of video footage presented in advance of the 11 p.m. television news, in which a smattering of directly recorded conversation or public address (presented at first unmediated on tape) quickly fades behind an anchor or reporter’s commentary.

\(^{341}\) Beginning sometime in the evening of January 15th, 1362, the south of England was ravaged by a giant windstorm—a tempest that some accounts tell us lasted for as long as five days. The wind’s merely being recorded in chronicles tells us something of its strength; all the more does one commentator’s note that it knocked the steeple off of Norwich cathedral. Further testimony to the wind’s power comes from its survival in popular memory, one John Richesdale recounting the event secondhand in one of his sermons (he was not alive at the time to witness it himself but had heard vivid accounts). Those who did witness or hear about the Great Wind of 1362, obviously, wanted to know its cause. A contemporary interpretation held that the wind had originally swept up from Africa to do its damage—understandable given that it emanated in any case from somewhere to Great Britain’s south—and for that reason it is tempting to see in the 1362 tempest a hoary ancestor to another great windstorm that occurred in our lifetimes, one which knocked down a great many of the trees in the gardens at Versailles. Thus the chronicles of Walsingham (“nothus Auster Africus”) and Murimuth (“ventus vehemens notus Australis Africus tanta rabie”). For these references and more see Oscar Cargill, “The Date of the A-text of Piers Ploughman,” *PMLA* 47 (1932), pp. 354-62. For the contemporary storm at Versailles, see Suzanne Daley, “Storm Kills 62 in France, Switzerland and Germany” (*New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1999) and “An Ill Wind Gives Versailles the Push it Needs” (*New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2000). Meteorological reflections on the storm were not so common in fourteenth-century England, notably, as were theological ones. See here particularly Thomas Brinton, sermon 41 (1374), ed. Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin in The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester: “Secundo nos excitat ad timorem Dei excellencia diuine pietatis, que in finali iudicio male iudicata reiudicat et scrutatur. Si timor fuit magnus nobis Anglicis paucis annis elapsis vidisse per ventum arbusta crui, domos opprimi, pinnacula et ecclesias dirui […] quomodo in iudicio non erit maior timor quando ‘Arescent homines pre timore que superuenient vniuerso orbi’ (Luce 21)” (I.184).
Using that modern analogy, Reason’s quoted remarks here amount to little more than scene-setting local color. Yet any sustained examination of the passage reveals the disingenuousness of Will’s so quickly passing over it. In general Langland is not known for the lexical ornamentations and rhetorical excesses of his fellow poets in the so-called “alliterative revival,” such as we find abundantly in the works of the dazzling Pearl Poet, but we do hear precisely those highly artificial and attention-grabbing effects in these lines. In an essay devoted to Langland’s poetic style in comparison to that of his contemporaries, Burrow has identified several common features of typical “alliterative revival” style—all of which this exceptional passage displays.342 Even an archaizing and high-styled synonym for men, “segges,” makes an appearance.343 The passage thus uses not merely local color but also rhetorical highlighting, working to impress readers with Reason’s skill at sermonizing while also subtly underscoring (even theorizing) the rationale for its call to repent.

For just as evident to certain fourteenth-century persons encountering the lines, if equally overlookable to literary critics today, would have been their intellectual history. Reason’s brief but poetically show-stopping reference to wind-felled trees alone has roots firmly planted in the rich loam of medieval literary imagery, theology, and social theory. As a result, these lines become deeply imbued with associations concerning the nature of human beings, the world, sin, productivity, and final judgment. We might ask just what about a fruit tree’s death signals the necessity for a human being’s improvement; how could “pieries and plumtrees [...] puffed to the erthe” serve at all “in ensaumple” to “segges”? Yet in the Gospels, the failure of a fruitbearing tree actually to bear fruit (generally figs) serves as an index of its failure

343 This is not to suggest that Langland’s passage here can rival the refulgent Pearl Poet at the latter’s stylistic full throttle; ten or so other synonyms for “man” that one will find easily in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, for instance, do not appear in Piers.
to do the work for which it had been planted. In that case, the offending tree usually is
cut down (and in one Gospel case, is cursed and withers away).

The fate of the fruit trees metaphorically standing in for humans in Matthew 3
and Luke 3 seems most immediately viable as Langland’s source, here—especially
verses 8 and 10 of Luke 3, quoting the preaching of John the Baptist: “Bring forth
fruits worthy of penance […] For now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree
therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit, shall be cut down and cast into the fire.”
Likewise, in his terrifying first meditation, St. Anselm applies these verses comparing
soon-to-be-cut-down trees to sinful humans. I present a modern translation of the
Anselmian passage below, but a Middle English version appears in the fourteenth-
century Middle English religious didactic poem par excellence, the Pricke of
Conscience:

Barren tree, where is your fruit? You deserve to be cut down and burnt,
cut up and put on the fire; where is your fruit? At least you bear the
sharp and bitter thorns of sins. Would that they might prick you to
repentance that they might be broken, or become so bitter that they
might disappear. Perhaps you think of some sin as small? Would that
the strict judge would regard any sin as small. But, alas for me, surely
all sin dishonours God because it disobeys his laws? Where then is the
sinner who dares to call any sin small? To dishonour God: how small a
thing is that? Barren and useless wood, deserving eternal burning, what
reply will you make in that day when at the twinkling of an eye an

344 “Facite ergo fructus dignos penitentiae […]. Iam enim securis ad radicem arborum posita est: omnis
ergo arbor non faciens fructum exciditur, et in ignem mittitur” (Luke 3:8-9). This passage should also
be read in terms of the epistle of James 3:12, Luke 6:43-44, Matthew 12:33, and perhaps even Romans
11 on the goodness of a tree being indexed by the quality of its fruit; cf. the cursing of the tree in Mark
11. Langland was certainly familiar with the passage from James 3, among these, and its Gospel
sources, as he quotes it later in the second vision.
345 Middle English didactic literature often quotes “Anselme” as if he had invented this type of ascetic
thought, but its pedigree (like its currency) was obviously more extensive.
346 Importantly, the Pricke survives in far more manuscripts even than Piers Plowman. For a sense of
the literary historical context in which such a work appeared, see especially Leonard E. Boyle, “The
Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology” in The Popular Literature of Medieval
England, ed. Thomas Heffernan, Tennessee Studies in Literature 28 (Knoxville: University of
Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 30-43. For a sense of the writings transmitting technical instruction (as
in relevant canon law and its interpretation) to parish priests, see Boyle’s essay on “The Oculus Sacerdotis
and Some Other Works of William of Pagula” in Pastoral Care, Clerical Education, and Canon Law,
account is demanded of you for all the time that has been dealt out to you? How have you expended it? Whatever then is found in you that has not been directed according to the will of God, whether in work or leisure, speech or silence, to the smallest thought, even all your living, will be condemned. How many sins will then rush forward as from an ambush, which at present you do not see at all. They are surely many, and probably more terrible than those that you do not see.

No axe lies at the root of the trees that Reason describes in Piers Plowman, as it so vividly does in Anselm’s treatment. Nevertheless, the wind that knocks the trees over—simply viewed on the literal level, as sent “pertly for pruyde and no poynt ellis”—does represent divine punishment of the sort that threatens humankind.

While the trees cited in the biblical passages and in Anselm’s meditation arguably represent human beings, Reason’s reference to “beeches and broad oaks” turning up their “tails” out of “dread” also very likely draws on a more thoroughgoing anthropomorphism of trees (or perhaps an arborification of human beings) current in

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347 The Anselmian passage’s original Latin is not given in Pricke’s text however (on which see below) and is at any rate merely paraphrased from its source, presumably because including the entire work would halt the motion of the poem: a formal breakdown even shorter quotations risk. For the text it paraphrases, though, see the translation by Benedicta Ward in The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), pp. 221-4 (quoted at p. 222).

348 For one thing, powerful winds that knock down everything in their path are one of the so-called “XV signs before doomsday.” On the history behind the XV signs, and the Old French intermediary version of the portents lying behind most allusions to them in Middle English, see William W. Heist, The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1952). Heist mentions the sermon in Piers, which he sees as a possible reference to the signs but one that puzzles him as well. “[Langland] does not, of course, specifically mention the legend or say that the storm precedes the Judgment by any particular interval,” Heist writes. “It is all very vague—just a general sign of terror, though pretty clearly influenced, in the descriptive details, by the legend. So it seems unlikely that the author thought the tempest and the uprooted trees were an actual and immediate sign of Doom, in the sense of the legend. After all, more than the time allotted by the legend must have passed after the date of the storm before he got around to writing this passage, which also, whether by the same author or by another reviser or revisers, was allowed to stand in the later forms of the poem. Perhaps the legend was regarded even in the fourteenth century as more picturesque than probable” (189-90). I am very grateful to Thomas D. Hill for this and other references to the XV signs. The interpretation I will offer below helps to explain away some of what perplexed Heist about Langland’s usage of the passage: if Langland were using the image of the wind-blown trees to refer to man as an arbor inversa, then no “time stamp” on the tempest—or its concurrence with the previous five or six “signs”—would be necessary. It also seems probable that Langland draws on a common symbolism, showing up later in Piers in fact, of the secular world as a “wikked wynd. See Maxwell Luria and Richard Lester Hoffman, eds. Middle English Lyrics (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), 1974, at #166 (c. 1500—but traditional material—in Oxford, MS Bodl. 7683), on p. 238.
the Middle Ages: the idea of sinful man as an “inverted tree” that appears in the treatise “On the Wretchedness of the Human Condition” (De miseria humanae condicionis) of Cardinal Lothario dei Segni (later Pope Innocent III). It appears in the Pricke of Conscience, too—a text so thoroughly monitory in both tone and approach that a Bodleian Library MS of the Pricke, no doubt alluding to Innocent’s text, titles it “On the Wretchedness of the Human Race” (De miseria humani generis).

It may seem surprising that the Pricke’s imagery should draw so heavily from terrifying works like Innocent’s De miseria, meant to awe and amaze, but Langland and his contemporaries also drew on such works. Chaucer himself translated Innocent’s treatise, he claimed in the Prologue to his Legend of Good Women, and used it as a source for his Man of Law’s Tale. Gower, noting in the Prologue to his Confessio Amantis that “now stant the crop under the rote” (line 119), might also hark back to a long intellectual history for the idea. A similar image of cosmological

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349 The De miseria appears most conveniently in Donald R. Howard, ed., and Mary Dietz, trans. On the Misery of the Human Condition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969). Much of the De miseria humanae condicionis seems similar to the pseudo-Bernardine Meditationes piisime de cognitione humanae condicionis, a matter especially interesting in light of the fact that, just as the former work was known by Chaucer, the latter seems indisputably to have been known to Langland: Joseph S. Wittig identifies the Meditationes piisime as the “treatise whose incept ‘Scripture’ quotes at the beginning of B, Passus XI, and whose popularity is attested by the fact that there are, for example, three copies of it preserved in the Chapter Library of Worcester Cathedral.” See Wittig’s “Witte and ‘Wikked Will’: the Role of Affectus in Spiritual Ascent,” ch. 1 of “Piers Plowman B, passus IX-XII: Elements in the Design of the Inward Journey,” Ph.D. diss. Cornell University (1969), p. 5.

350 A long work covering “some 9,624+ lines in Morris’s [EEETS] edition,” it aims to describe the wretchedness of man’s life from conception onward, the instability of the world, death, purgatory, Judgment Day, the pains of hell and the joys of heaven; it devotes one of its seven books to each. Information on the manuscripts of The Pricke of Conscience comes from Robert E. Lewis and Angus McIntosh, A Descriptive Guide to the Manuscripts of Prick of Conscience, M.E Monographs, n.s. 12. (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediæval Languages and Literature, 1982). As Morris prints The Pricke of Conscience in his edition, the Pricke looks Langlandian in its use of interpolated Latin. Nowhere does the Pricke incorporate Latin as seamlessly as Langland does, though, or interpret it with so much license. This impression is confirmed by several manuscripts’ practice of separating the quotations from the main text as marginal glosses. The Pricke of Conscience rhymes, sometimes irregularly and often in metrically uneven couplets: a jarring effect that Langland’s versification avoids.

351 The image also has classical antecedents. See A.B. Chambers, “‘I was but an inverted tree’: Notes toward the History of an Idea,” Studies in the Renaissance 8 (1961), pp. 291-99.
inversion appears in the twelfth-century “Mirror for Fools” (*Speculum stultorum*), to name just one satire known in the fourteenth century. The concept was no doubt wide spread. Nevertheless, the Ricardian poets would have most easily have found the image of man as an inverted tree in the Latin *De miseria*—possibly mediated by this passage from the even more readily available *Pricke*:

A man es a tre, þat standes noght harde,  
of whilk þe crop es turned donward, [662]  
and the rote to-ward þe firmament, [663]  
als says þe grete clerk Innocent:  

*Quid est homo, secundum formam, nisi quedam arbor eversa, cujus radices sunt crines; trunci est caput cum collo; stipis est pectus cum alvo, rami sunt ulna cum tibis; frondes sunt digitum articulis; hoc est folium quod a ven-
to rapitur, et stipula a sole siccatur.*

He says, “what es man in shap bot a tre  
turned up þat es doun, als men may se,  
of whilk þe rotes þat of it springes,  
er þe hares þat on þe heved hynges;  
þe stok nest þe rot growand  
es þe heved with nek folowand;  
þe body of þat tre þar-by  
es þe brest with þe bely;  
þe bughes er þe armes with þe handes  
and þe legges with þe fete þat standes:  
þe braunches men may by skille call  
þe tas and þe fyngers alle;  
þis is þe leef þat hanges noght faste,  
þat es blawen away thurgh a wynd blaste,  
and þe body alswa of þe tre,  
þat thurgh þe son may dried be.”

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352 “Nil cum praeterito praesens mihi tempus habere / cernitur, in caudam veritutur omne caput. / Fit de nocte dies, tenebrae de luce serena, / de stulto sapiens, de sapientie nihil.” (lines 19-22) This work, by Nigel of Longchamps, is the “Book of Daun Burrel the Asse” mentioned by Chaucer. I use the edition mentioned in the bibliography.

353 This passage in Gower precisely echoes the diction of *Pricke* 662-63, but then again “crop and roote” (uninverted) was a common idiom; see for example Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* II.348. The ability to grow trees upside down is one of the so-called “miracles of the Antichrist” sometimes conflated with the XV signs by the fourteenth century. I am also obliged to Thomas D. Hill for a number of references to this effect, among which *Piers Plowman* B.20.51-57 (noted by Barney’s commentary *ad loc.*), where the Antichrist’s inversion of non-symbolic trees also speaks to a universe out of harmony with divine order.

Langland, whose only other nod to Innocent III’s writings may not actually be one, \(^{355}\) strikingly echoes this passage. Its concern with fragility aside, the image’s moral force is somewhat implicit. \(^{356}\) Only because we know that the treatise speaks of the human condition’s sinful wretchedness do we understand in moral terms a comparison writers also made on the basis of shape (\textit{secundam formam}) alone. Yet Reason’s image of “beches and brode okes” that “turned vpward here tayl in tokenyng of drede / that dedly synne ar domesday shal fordom hem alle” would to Langland’s readers necessarily have signified sinful man, the inverted tree whose deadly sin of unfruitfulness will consign him to hell. \(^{357}\) Certain manuscripts of \textit{Piers Plowman} make the moralizing link between Reason’s doomed trees and his sermon’s flawed human auditors even stronger, substituting the more emphatically moralizing “us” (\textit{ous}) for “them” (\textit{hem}) in the phrase “dedly synne er domesday shal fordoon hem all.” \(^{358}\)

As allusions in the \textit{Speculum stultiorum} and \textit{Confessio amantis} prologues imply, the image of an inverted tree could be used as a commentary on the effect of microcosmic man’s indissoluble but broken link to nature, the erstwhile master of all creation’s distortion of the very nature of the universe thanks to the enormity of his

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\(^{356}\) It would be fascinating to know if Innocent were aware of the passage in Peter Damian’s works comparing the righteous man of religion to a leaf \textit{not} blown away by the wind (quoted in Spijker, “Peter Damian and the \textit{Homo Interior}”).

\(^{357}\) For the way in which Innocent would reference human “unfruitfulness,” see the passage in the \textit{De miseria} just preceding the one quoted by the \textit{Pricke}, all under the heading “What Kind of Fruit a Man Produces” (c. VIII): “O vile indignity of the human condition, O undignified condition of man’s wileness! Look at the plants and the trees—they produce flowers, foliage, and fruit; you produce nits, lice, and tapeworms. They pour forth oil, wine, and balsam; you give off spit, urine, and dung. They breathe forth a sweet odor; you give off a dreadful stench. As the tree is, so is the fruit, for the bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit, nor the good tree bad fruit” (\textit{On the Misery}, 11-12; for its scriptural allusions see Luke 6:44 \textit{et sim.}, cited elsewhere in \textit{Piers}). Innocent’s tree does not reference the fruit of works, then—that comparison, if not Langland’s alone, appears in a pseudo-Bonaventuran analogue I must needs leave for later—but relates to the body itself.

\(^{358}\) B.5.13. “Hem,” as the \textit{lectio difficilior}, more common reading, and the best describer of why trees would want to quiver anyway, stands in the Kane-Donaldson B-text and the Kane-Russell C-text; but two MSS of B (FH) read “vs.” Not far from half the C-text manuscripts (P\text{PERMVAQSFKGN}) read “ous.”
Moreover, just as the image of the inverted tree in ascetic discourse implies a direct relationship between mankind and nature, it also very usefully sets forth a means by which one of the most misanthropic of ideologies (by appearances) could discuss and even suggest corrections for the relationship of human individuals to larger human society. As this chapter will go on to show, *Piers Plowman* uses the ideology of “contempt of the world” (*contemptus mundi*) in its attempt to assess and counsel society in a roundabout, indirect way. The poetic fireworks set off during the sermon’s discussion of the felling of trees by the Great Wind constitute the first inkling we have that Langland will attempt such a *rapprochement* between claustral (“cloister-related,” or monastic) and secular ways of thinking in the second vision.

*Avoiding Estates Satire*

Reason’s admonishment to the assembled masses that they, like so many “piries and plumtrees [...] beeches and brode okes,” will meet with destruction at the last judgment unless they change quickly gives way to what Reason would have his hearers actually *do* for their reform. Interestingly, when the poem shows us *how* pertly afore the people to preche gan Reason,” it describes not Reason’s counseling his audience or congregation as individuals, but rather focusing his address to those people as groups. It obviously makes sense that a preacher would not focus on individual circumstances pertaining to each listener in a very public sermon delivered before a massive gathering, but Langland did not have to depict Reason as a preacher. That he nevertheless *did* suggests that Langland found societal groups to form a good intermediary level between person and society, therefore a good locus for promoting the individual virtues that might lead to societal reform—and the rest of the vision bears this suggestion out.
In a summary as brief as he had given for Reason’s sermon-prologue (or prohemium) on the plague and the Great Wind, Will recounts Reason’s message to these various societal groups:

He bad Wastoure go werche what he best koupe
and wynnen his wastyng wiþ som maner crafte.
and preide Pernele hir purfil to leue
and kepe it in hire cofre for catel at nede.
Tomme Stowue he tau3te to take two staues
and feche Felice hom fro wyuen pyne.
He warnede watte his wif was to blame
that hire heed was wor}a marc & his hood noþt a grote.
He bad Bette kutte a bou3 ouþer tweye
and bete Beton þerwith but if she wolde werche.
He chargede Chapmen to chastijen hir children:
‘Late no wynnyng forwanye hem while þei be yonge,
ne for no pouste of pestilence plese hem noþt out of reson.
my sire seide to me, and so dide my dame,
“Lo, þe leuere child þe moore loore bihoueþ”;
_Qui parcit virge odit filium:_
whoso spareþ þe spryng spilleþ hise children.’
And siþen he preide prelates and preestes togideres,
‘That ye prechen þe people, preue it yowselue,
and doþ it in dede, it shal drawe yow to goode.
Lyue as ye leren vs; we shul leue yow þe bettre.’
And siþen he radde Religion hir rule to holde
‘Lest þe kyng and his conseil youre comunes aþeire
and be Styward of youre stede til ye be stewed bettre.’
And siþen he counseiled þe kyng his commune to louye:
‘It is þi tresor if tresen ne were, and tryacle at þy nede.’
And siþen he preide þe pope haue pite on holy chirche,
and er he gyue any grace gourne first hymselue.
‘And ye þat han lawes to loke, lat truþe þe youre couetise
moore þan gold ouþer gifts if ye wold god plese;
for whoso contrarieþ truþe, he telleþ in þe gospel,
_Amen dico vobis nescio vos._
And ye þat seke Seynt Iames and Seyntes at Rome,
sekeþ Seynt Truþe, for he may saue yow alle.
_Qui cum patre & filio; þat faire hem bifalle
that seweb my sermon’; and þus seyde Resoun.
(B.4.24-59)

Beginning with the estate of commons or laborers: to non-workers, represented by “Wastouer,” he encourages gainful employment (a self-negatory reform that will be the hallmark of the vision’s next section); to married folk who already work, women
and men generally, Reason encourages industry and thrift; merchants, as he goes on to specify, should be careful not to spoil their children for any reason. Next, Reason addresses the clerical estate, urging priests to live according to their teaching and for the religious orders to better manage themselves, while the pope should concern himself first and foremost with his own affairs. Third, the noble and governing classes should strive for righteousness rather than gold and bribes, and, finally, anyone interested in going on a pilgrimage should seek “Saint Truth” before all other far-off shrines.

In all this estates-based instruction, though, estates satire is conspicuously lacking. True, Reason does provide advice based on commonly held assumptions about the proclivities and weaknesses of the various social orders, the basis of that genre.\(^{359}\) But Reason seems content only to offer advice that applies generally and often overlaps, not taking the satirist’s essential next step of explaining how specific unreformed groups have ruined the world for everyone else. For all estates could benefit from increased thrift and industry, just as no estate should lavish excessive money on clothing and just as no estate should spoil its children. All estates should not only teach but live as good examples for others, striving for proper management of their affairs before attempting to manage others’. No estate should put its private interests and desires for gain above what is lawful or right. Reason enjoins pilgrims to “sek[e] Seynt Truþ” more than “Seynt Iames and Seyntes at Rome,” but, in theory, pilgrims could be members of any estate (B.5.56-57).

In the general confession guided by Repentance that follows, Langland continues to focus on separate sins as opposed to the social groups that might best

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\(^{359}\) A classic text for the discussion of fourteenth-century estates satire, such as that exemplified in Chaucer’s *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, is Jill Mann’s *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*. Her most major contribution is to show that Chaucer, not content with earlier conventions, modifies them. In so doing, she shows, he creates characters who seem more like “real people” than the stereotypes upon which they build.
exemplify them, an approach that becomes evident from the confessions of Pernele (representing pride or *superbia*) and Lechour (representing lust or *luxuria*) that go first.  

Pernele, said to suffer from the “proude herte” that might afflict anyone enamored of “purfil,” decides to love her finery less. Lechour chooses to abstain from most food and drink every Saturday for seven years—a penance that tells us nothing of his place in society, either. With vanity about physical appearance persisting as a misogynist stereotype about women even in the present day, and lechery a stereotype still associated with men, Pernele and Lechour could even now stand in for just about any man or woman in all society.

By this point in *Piers Plowman*, a reader is to be forgiven for feeling not very surprised or puzzled over anything at all—but even the most jaded reader must pause

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360 The passus 5 confession of the sins has appeared to contain some of the most successful and entertaining satire in the poem, despite certain anomalies this chapter will also go on to point out, possibly because the grotesqueness of its caricatures and the misinterpretations of Repentance’s words give it a sort of humor that other instances of satire in Langland do not always provide. Giving clues to character by describing traits of clothing and physiognomy (which the fuller version of this chapter describes in more detail) is of course exactly Chaucer’s technique in the *General Prologue* to his *Canterbury Tales*, in which the vices and affections of nearly every character are blazoned on them—perhaps for the narrator to ignore, or for him not to understand, but for us quite clearly to see. (I discussed Langland’s use of this technique for describing Haityn in chapter 3.) As Jill Mann shows in her *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, such portraits develop in accordance with the medieval satiric tradition of *satira communis*, general satire, in which people in each of the “estates” or every order in society come under censure for the wickedness of their ways (see a typical, if early, example among Henry of Huntingdon’s epigrams under the appropriate title of “Satira Communis” in Diana Greenway, ed. and trans. *Historia Anglorum*, also referenced vis-à-vis *Piers Plowman* by Norton-Smith). Langland’s sins may seem less human, more indirect, and less mordantly witty by comparison with Chaucer’s rich depictions—but also more vivid, somewhat more even-handed, and more to the point in terms of their social analysis. And while Langland’s personified sins might not fit the standards that we apply to contemporary satire, they more than exceed the level of description offered by what John D. Peter (*Complaint and Satire*) rather misleadingly labeled medieval “complaint” (indeed, Peter was compelled from the outset to allow the portrait of Sloth as “closer to Satire than is [Langland’s] wont” [6]).

361 The penance that Lechour vows to undertake may seem ludicrously excessive, to “drink but mid the duck and dyne but ones”—and thus entirely comic. Yet fasting and avoidance of alcohol were considered standard remedies for unchecked yearnings of the flesh (as various earlier medieval writings *de jejunio* and even the fourteenth-century *Fasciculus morum* contemporary to Langland make very clear).
at the “Confession of the Sins.” What, exactly, can this episode possibly mean? One explanation might read the confession as an authorial joke made at Reason’s expense: Reason had heretofore proven extremely idealistic, and now, with Repentance encouraging the sins to confess themselves following the sermon, Reason’s idealism wins its (impossible) crown. Yet this interpretation introduces further difficulties. First, Repentance has not yet appeared in Piers; we have no reason to accept him as the target of mockery by the poet. Second, even more importantly, insulting Reason’s aspirations clearly has no merit. Third, even if Langland did want to paint Reason in a bad light—for example because Langland was secretly a Satanist—it’s hard to imagine how having his call so thoroughly succeed would achieve the intended goal.

If we persist in looking for a “target” to the sins’ strange self-abnegating confession, as I think we must, then we will find it in the sins themselves rather than in Reason or Repentance. Langland makes the vices’ humanity clear, as we have already seen in the case of Lechour and of Pernele, but at the same time gives all but Pernele the name of a capital sin. By denying human names to human characters, Langland suggests a general humanity depraved to the point of becoming indistinguishable from its errors; notably, his descriptive portraits better illustrate the nature of the sins in question than their characters’ particular estates.

Langland did not eschew estate identification altogether in describing the sins, of course. Envy’s cloak has the “foresleves” of a friar’s frock, Wrath hangs about the

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362 As Burrow notes on pp. 209-10 in “The Action of Langland’s Second Vision,” cited above, the second vision very confidently narrates a series of events whose connection does not seem immediately apparent to a contemporary reader: “A well-constructed plot,’ [according to Aristotle,] ‘cannot either begin or end at any point one likes.’ But an action which begins with a confession, proceeds with a ploughing and ends with a pardon can hardly be called usual or natural, let alone necessary. On the contrary, it seems quite arbitrary. One feels one could extend it indefinitely, with masses, sea-voyages, community singing and the like, ‘beginning or ending at any point one likes.’”

363 This theory was actually alleged by a speaker in a Piers Plowman session at the 2008 International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo.
houses of religious orders when stirring up his trouble, and Coveitise very obviously works as a merchant of some sort. Still, Langland’s associations between sins and estates cannot be called ironclad identifications, and his estate identifications themselves do not appear programmatic. As with Pernele and Lechour, we cannot tell which estate some sins might belong to. With Gluttony, for instance, the choice seems arbitrary: the confession portrays him distinctively as a friend of off-hours laborers (quite in line with the revelers that fete the character Hunger later on in the vision, during harvest), but passus 12’s dinner scene featuring the fraternal “doctor of divinity” (mentioned above, ch. 3) shows gluttony in a more upper-caste context as well. The portrayal of Sloth, finally, draws on depictions of multiple estates rather than clearly on one, from ignorant layman to priest, merchant to noble. Sloth finally decides to be a pilgrim, but any of his possible social classes could go on pilgrimage and in fact the collective audience of Reason’s sermon does.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ When Sloth cannot stay awake even long enough to finish the least part of his confession unaided, Langland clues us in to the torpid essence of the sin, and we can see its hypocrisy when Sloth declares not to know the Paternoster but to be deeply familiar with “rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre / ac neither of Oure Lord ne of Oure Lady the leeste that evere was maked” (B.5.395-97) as if Sloth were some minor country nobleman. Yet when Sloth follows this to say that “I have be preeste and person passynge thirty wynter, / yet kan I neyther solve ne syge ne seyntes lyves rede [...] / ac in Canoun ne in the Decretals [...] rede a lyne” in lines 415-21, he appears to be some particularly undeserving member of the clerical estate. When we see Sloth admit to keeping very poor records of his financial transactions, especially his debts and past-due payment to his workers, he appears to have a place in the commercial world. My focusing on the elements of numerous ways of life indicated by Sloth’s confession should not necessarily deny Sloth’s unity as a person. Just because Sloth’s confession presents him as a nobleman, a businessman, and a parson does not mean that Langland intended him to be three entirely separate individuals rolled up into one (though how he can say that he doesn’t know the Paternoster and tends only to arrive at church at the mass’s concluding words, yet can also claim to have been a priest for thirty years, rather escapes me). Just as likely, Langland portrays Sloth on the model of someone who, while technically “preest and person,” also commands a sizeable household and workforce and frequently borrows money from others. But although a real human being can exist in three different spheres simultaneously, they are nonetheless different spheres. It is true of course that a common gambit of medieval estates satire decries members of a given estate for encroaching upon the identity and activities of another in order to take on some of that second estate’s advantages without its normally attendant responsibilities. But Langland’s Sloth depicts three separate enroachments of this sort at once, all going in different directions. Langland uses the same technique in describing Wrath: he is former gardener for a convent of friars, and the nephew of an abbess, usually unwilling to visit monasteries but known to do so on occasion.
The way that the confession scene treats the psychological faculty of “will” (not properly a sin but, of course, connected to sinning) clearly shows that Langland recognizes how any number of vices might affect a person in society. Will, after all—most obviously—is the name of the poem’s narratorial persona. When Repentance’s exhortations cause “wille to wepe water wiþ his eyen” as the confession of sins commences, though, “will” pretty clearly represents the *voluntas* that can cause so many of these sins to come about. The poem does not mention the *voluntas* in each of the sins’ confessions, but it appears in enough of them to make a noticable *leitmotiv* in the scene. Will is next mentioned as faulty and in need of correction in the confession of Envy, where the vice complains that his appetite has been ruined “[f]or enuye and yuel wil is yuel to defie” (B.5.122). Sloth also confesses fear of how he shall be judged as an employer “whan we shul rede acountes: / so wiþ wikked wil and wraþe my werkmen I paye.” (B.5.427-28) The most interesting depiction of Will/will in the episode occurs at the end of the confession of Wrath himself, in which both the narrator and the faculty of *voluntas* momentarily seem fused:

‘Now repente,’ quod Repentance, ‘and reherce neuere
Counsel þat þow knowest by countenaunce ne by speche;
and drynk nat ouer delicatly, ne to depe neiþer,
that þi wille ne þi wit to wraþe myȝte turne:
Esto sobrius!’ he seide, and assoiled me after,
and bad me wilne to wepe my wikkednesse to amende.
(B.5.87-182)

“Wilne,” in the last line quoted above, is not a noun but an infinitive verb, “to want to.” Nevertheless, because the narrator’s name is Will and because Repentance turns to him just after admonishing the sin of Wrath against drinking that might turn his will into wrath, it is impossible to disagree entirely with the reading in the Cr and (corrected) M witnesses of the B-text, “And bad him Wyl to wepe his wikkednesse to amende” (B.5.183). In that case, judging from the logic of the lines, it would appear
that Reason’s almost magical command to “be sober”—“Esto sobrius!”—has changed drunken wrath back into sober Will. Here, Will especially invites comparison with the narratorial persona (given the similarity between Repentance’s instructions here with Holichurch’s admonishment not to drink and later characters’ injunctions to be quiet), creating a fascinating self-identification of Langland the satirist and the most discordant of deadly sins.\footnote{Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the poem’s uneasy tension between the criticisms launched by its satire and the Christian imperative (forever alluded to and directly cited by Langland) not to judge others.}

Langland’s references to the will throughout the Confession of the Sins, and especially his self portrait as Wrath, inspire us to look for representations of the narrator elsewhere in the scene as well. One of the most promising candidates, a certain “Roberd the Robbere,” closes the scene just as a generic personified “wille” opened it—with tears. There is no mention of “wille” specifically here, and it could be that in the case of Envy’s confession “wille” has no important role either, yet in opening the entire confession with a weeping \textit{voluntas}, then featuring a sin midway through that seems to conflate both this \textit{voluntas} and the narrator, and in ending the confession with the tears of an outlaw—estateless but becoming, as persons from any estate can, a pilgrim (like the similarly multi-status Sloth)—Langland implies (or we may infer) that Reason’s earlier allusion to the dire fate meeting unfruitful trees here meets its most poignant human referent so far. Robert, who more realistically than the self-abnegating sins cannot “wene to wynne wiþ craft þat [he] oweþ[,]” helps to establish two of the greater poem’s most important themes. First, no human can ever fully reform without Grace, an idea I will deal with more fully by discussing Langland’s prophetically conveyed “satiric norm” (and eschatological ideal). Second, \textit{Piers Plowman} does not blame the estates as failed systems so much as he blames flawed individuals for the unregulated and unfruitful estates: a theme that finds further
corroboration in the scene of plowing and pilgrimage that follows. In the next section of this chapter, I intend to show that Langland suggests the ideology of contempt of the world (contemptus mundi) as a way to reform dysfunctional society’s self-absorption and lack of productivity.

**The Regulation of Estates**

_Possumne te absolvere? Ab excommunicacione bene possum te absolvere, sed ab irregularitate non._

As I have already shown, the arboreal image that appears in Reason’s sermon in passus 5 (at the beginning of _Piers Plowman’s_ second “vision”) identified perverted, unfaithful human nature as the most pressing problem facing humanity. Subsequently, in the Confession of the Sins, Langland seems more interested in blaming problems with society on individual sins rather than on estates as would have been typical. Langland even suggests perversion of the will as a cause for some of these sins, which implies narratorial self-criticism as well. The motif of weeping used by Langland throughout the confession scene—first of the will, then of Robert the Robber for an inability to repair his fallen humanity or to become a more fruitful member of society—underscores Langland’s emphasis on the role of the invididual in either bringing about or healing society’s fallen state.

Even so, although it emphasizes the role of the individual will, the Confession of the Sins also shows that individual sinning is frequently aided and abetted by the secular society that it harms. About halfway through the Confession scene, the lengthy narrative concerning Gluttony makes that much clear. While Gluttony hastens

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to the church so that he might be properly shriven, an alehouse offering rich foods with heavy spices tempts him to sin again. Langland continually juxtaposes the wild conviviality of Glutton and his fellows with the regular hours of the church office during the scene, going to great lengths satirically to caricature this lover of fine foods and friendly company as a human factory for swill and waste so foul that no dog would ever eat it. The line that Glutton “pissed a potel in a Paternoster while” has been seen as evidence of a quintessentially vernacular Christian understanding of time, as if Langland really were wholly interested in the actions of Glutton and his fellows and knew only Church-inspired phrases to mete out the time of day (on which view, Piers Plowman’s narrative about Gluttony goes on at such length because the poet found the subject matter especially entertaining). Yet a more productive understanding of the scene attributes more artistry to Langland. In the time it takes for someone to pray the Our Father and thereby produce some real “fruit” of repentance, Gluttony has produced only a potful of urine. He has failed to empty himself of wickedness—and Langland has endeavored to inspire in his readers an edifying disgust, as a result, at his secular failure to be ruled.

In the Confession of Wrath, Langland also purposefully contrasts the regular life of the church with the haphazard life of the sins. Recounting his days in the employ of varied religious communities, Wrath points out that most places he would visit fostered him all too gladly. Only Benedictine monasteries put a damper on him, chastizing Wrath severely. I do not at all mean to claim that the Benedictines come across here as ideal. All the same, it seems unambiguously noteworthy that at least one type of regular, religious society should be able to stamp out one of the sins. Langland’s (relative) gentleness in his critique of monks during the confession of Wrath does not come about accidentally, then, I propose, but rather follows naturally from what we have seen elsewhere in the passus: that the sins are fostered by their
social networks’ unethical—because unregulated—life. As Repentance (true to
the etymology of his name) makes clear in his denunciations of Coveitise and Gluttony,
the poem suggests that giving up a sin involves not only a change of behavior but a
changeover to a more structured—again, regulated—social context. Although
Langland may have reservations about its practical application, he clearly considers
ascetic practice not only a viable method for criticizing the self but also a way to live
in the world as a Christian.\footnote{Here, as elsewhere, I describe the ideology I see Langland’s satire drawing on as “ascetic” rather than
“monastic.” The monastery is often understood to be where Christian ascetic practice sees its purest
possible realization and its most perfect form, but since all Christianity upheld ascetic ideals to some
extent it would be impossible in this space to make the case that Langland had gotten all of his ascetic
ideas from monasticism. Even granting that monks were responsible for an impressive number of
opuscula from which Langland would draw, the poet need not necessarily have encountered these in a
monastery as a monk. Moreover, as Piers Plowman itself makes clear, Langland would try to promote
this ideology as a possible help to other groups in society who were not monks: friars, secular clergy,
and, of course, the laity. Since Langland does not suggest that these groups give up their wonted lives to
begin anew as monks, “ascetic” seems much the better term for describing what the poem does suggest
they do. The claim that Langland owes his understanding of ascetic ideology to high-medieval written
exemplars requires defense, I think, but fortunately may be justified easily on three grounds. First, the
high-medieval monastic ideal of contempt of the world or contemptus mundi became widely influential,
even in its own age, outside the cloister. Second, these texts enjoyed popularity in the later Middle Ages
as well, and are in fact drawn on in subtle ways and even quoted throughout Piers Plowman. Third,
while changing circumstances naturally inspired change in how contemptus mundi was viewed in late
medieval England, these are best seen as innovations and thus best viewed alongside earlier
formulations of that particular ideal.}

\textit{A Brief History of “The World”: the Roots of Langlandian Contempt}

But why “contemn” something so multifaceted as “the world”? Contemptus
mundi, like its neighbors contemptus sui and amor proximi, occupies a space between
pure ideology and lived practice. It is a virtue, commanded by precept to be cultivated,
which cannot be expressed in just one way but a cluster of ways—just as telling
someone to conserve the environment expects more than his merely installing
fluorescent lightbulbs, or merely recycling, so too the precept for someone to contemn
the world expects him to do more than lock himself away from human society. Certainly the “world” is a complicated place, and as John Van Engen has noted the term and medieval Christians’ relationships to it both require further study.\textsuperscript{368} Seen from Langland’s medieval, Christian perspective, it causes multitudes of problems for the Christian; depending on the extent to which one is ensnared by or enamored of it, it can foster any one or several of a multitude of sins (as we’ve seen).

In intellectual-historical terms, contempt of the world has been traced back to the classical philosophy of Stoicism. While it no doubt shares in Stoicism’s legacy, however, by the Middle Ages the two could be considered sufficiently different to deserve two different names. Stoicism properly so called was pagan, even nontheistic, and philosophical. Contempt of the world though was explicitly Christian. And while one can imagine anyone embracing Stoic ideals, contempt of the world, developed in the Stoicism-influenced ascetic “communities” of Christianity’s early Desert Fathers seems to have found its best and fullest possible expression in the rigorous, regulated life of hermits, anchorites, canons, and (most obviously) monks.

According to the preêminent twentieth-century scholar on \textit{contemptus mundi}, Robert Bultot, influential thinkers such as Saint Anselm of Canterbury encouraged \textit{contemptus mundi} for all estates—but only as realized in the strictly cloistered life of monasticism. Bultot recounts Anselm’s visions, seen “au cours d’une maladie,” when the saint “était moine depuis peu”:

\begin{quote}
L’image qu’Anselme se fait du monde est extrêmement sombre; elle baigne dans l’horreur et le dégoût. Il était moine depuis peu qu’au cours d’une maladie, une vision vint l’arracher à lui-même. Il vit un fleuve impétueux où se déversaient les immondices de toutes les rivières et les lavures de l’univers entier; son eau impure tourbillonnait, charriant d’horribles détritus. Tout ce qu’il pouvait atteindre, ce fleuve l’emportait avec lui, roulant pèle-mêle hommes et femmes, riches et pauvres. Pris de pitié à ce spectacle hideux, Anselme s’enquit d’où ces gens pouvaient tirer de quoi vivre et étancher leur soif. On lui répondit
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{368} See John Van Engen, “The Future,” at pp. 509-512 for perspicacious remarks.
Afterwards, as Bultot quotes another scholar remarking, “peu de saints ont pratiqué au même degré le Compelle intrare.” We can quibble with the extent to which Bultot’s analysis views Anselm’s and other thinkers’ discussions of contemptus mundi as accurately representing their “horror” and “disgust” at the saeculum. It seems just as likely that, especially allowing for the amplifying powers of rhetoric reported secondhand (here by Eadmer), these negative feelings have been exaggerated from principled dislike to active and viscerally experienced “contempt.” Anselm’s utterances on contempt of the world helped to create for his subordinates and others influenced by him the emotional code according to which other monks could pattern their own expressions of “contempt.”

Piroksa Nagy’s essay on monastic tears and their apparent subjectivity provides a window on how the practices of contemptus sui gave rise, paradoxically, to increased attention on the effects of such an emotional code. As she writes,

L’individualité se révèle et s’affirme donc par les larmes. Mais d’un autre côté, il faut bien ces jaillissements ‘soudains’ et ‘incontrôlés’ qui

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369 Bultot, Christianisme 4.2, p. 84-85.
370 Bultot, Christianisme 4.2, p. 105.
‘s’échappent,’ pour l’expression du soi, car l’émotion—comme la réflexivité—‘se cache’ derrière une maîtrise ‘raisonnée,’ la figure sociale. [...] Les pleurs semblent être d’un côté une expression de l’intériorité, de ce, qu’on a de plus authentique et individuel en nous, ce qui définit le plus profondément notre identité personnelle; de l’autre côté les pratiques des pleurs, comme celles du rire ou de l’amour, ou comme les formes que prennent l’angoisse et la peur à telle ou telle époque, se constituent en système et semblent avoir des explications et des significations en termes sociaux, des implications sur la représentation de la personne même. [...] [L]’individu est prisonnier de son époque jusqu’aux termes mêmes dans lesquels il formule tant son identité que son malaise.  

Therefore, just as it presumably was not only his own innate or God-given sensibility that led Anselm to “hate the world” but rather the influential discussions or discourses of others (despite his visions), so too we should read Anselm’s and others’ statements on contemptus mundi in part as expressions of what Barbara Rosenwein claims that one William Reddy has called “emotives,” or the set of statements a given “emotional community” (Rosenwein’s term) or social group more generally allows as acceptable for the expression of feelings. Rosenwein likes the characterization of “emotives” as emotional “rough drafts,” a term which underscores the very rhetoricality of these as well as the mediated nature of (indeed) all texts. Though Anselm’s actual hatred of

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372 I have already made reference to this term in the introduction, citing Rosenwein’s Emotional Communities, pp. 18-19.

373 François Vandenbroucke, in Pourquoi?, accounts for the ideology’s later-medieval influence in a variety of ways: first by asserting character flaws peculiar to famous expositors of the idea (such as Romuald, Peter Damian, and Joachim of Fiore), then by quoting Bulot to the effect that everyone in the Middle Ages practiced contempt of the world (“une foule obscure de petits et de sans grade l’ont partagé” [53]); then by observing that, in “certaines périodes sombres de l’histoire” (suspiciously the eleventh and twelfth, then fourteenth through sixteenth, centuries), “l’univers chrétien, et surtout celui d’Occident, a médité avec effroi et gémissement sur les maux de temps.” (53) His next suggestion accords (despite certain choices of phrasing) best with my own: that “la vocation des moines les mettait en contact avec l’idéal chrétien dans toute sa pureté, et, en face, ils ne trouvaient souvent que des contrefaçons, des compromis, le péché sous ses formes les moins nobles. [...] [E]n dépeignant et en stigmatisant les mœurs de leur temps, ils en sont venus à dépasser leurs propos et à poser des affirmations de principe [avec] excès de langage que, de notre point de vue actuel, nous pouvons regretter dans leurs prises de position.” (54-55) Vandenbroucke then offers the exceptionally interesting idea, though one I would consider difficult to prove, that in attempting to escape the empty hierarchies
the extramural world cannot be certain, then, we can be certain at least of the
association here between monasticism and contemptus mundi that his works imply—
an association that would weaken and secularize, of course, even as both remained
well represented in medieval religious life. It is most interesting that John of
Salisbury’s poems in the Entheticus Maior make Stoicism the object of satire—along
with Epicureanism and sophistry—and contemptus mundi the object of praise.374

To return to Langland and to begin with the process of considering Piers’
recommendations of contempt of the world for the estates, I want first to observe that
expressions of “contempt of the world” occur earlier than the pilgrimage that follows
the general confession in that poem. (Because this study focuses on Piers Plowman B,
discussion of these C-version additions—and thus, as it happens, most of the way that
Langland promotes contemptus mundi for the clerical estate—will be discussed last in
terms of revision from B to C.) Where it does appear, contemptus mundi usually
comes across as a virtue to be cultivated by individuals for individual ends, while
because of the nature of the characters in the vision it amounts to a fix for social ills.

The contempt of the world promoted by the monastic reforms had two distinct
characteristics that deserve remarking upon. First, it emphasized separation from
secular activities; originally, as in Late Antiquity, this separation was understood to be

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374 See Laarhoven, Entheticus, poems 33 (“Stoicism and fear of death”), 36 (“Stoicism and
Providence”), and 47 (“Deceiving world and true love”) in Part II, section H.
quite literal. According to the medieval ascetic Christian worldview, believers should actively fight the “three foes” of the world, the flesh, and the devil while fearing the terrors of the Last Judgment. Meditations on man as an inverted tree or bag of slime, in so far as they focus not only on the vileness of the self (proper realm of contemptus sui) but also the sinful nature of worldly life, fit perfectly within this long literary and intellectual heritage.

The message of contemptus mundi writings (and as a result the essential hallmarks of contemptus mundi) remained unchanged even as the context became more laicized, vernacularized—in a word, secularized. As we have seen, for instance, the enormously popular Pricke of Conscience quotes approvingly from Anselm’s


376 I refer again to the poems on Stoicism and on contempt of the world in John of Salisbury’s Enthetica. Both a medieval monk and a classical Stoic could express detachment or separation from all manner of temporal things—except in law, after all, the contemporary term for this sort of behavior, is not “being contemptuous” but “being philosophical.” Still, the monk would more likely express his separation and detachment more literally (through enclaustration and refusal of worldly goods, like meat). A Stoic, on the other hand, would recognize that he does not really need the temporal goods he still (perhaps moderately) continues to enjoy; being suddenly deprived of them, albeit not his intent, would inspire neither happiness nor sadness on his part but rather continued equanimity or apatheia. Stoic apatheia, of course, can hardly label properly the wide emotional range deemed suitable in the central Middle Ages for one practicing contemptus mundi.

377 On the “three foes” see Donald R. Howard’s works—notably The Three Temptations. For more on Piers and the eschaton, please refer to this dissertation’s chapter 6.
meditations without any expectation whatsoever on the part of its readers to take up monastic life. *Piers Plowman*, too, takes up the message of *contemptus mundi* writings in the second vision, while allowing for changes in the ideology’s application. The promotion of *contemptus mundi* to non-clerical estates by Piers in the second vision is not overly subtle—one can see it there—but it defies immediate identification as contempt of the world in the way described thus far.\(^{378}\) Most obviously, its difference stems from the fact that its would-be practitioners are not at all monastic. They will not be and are not cloistered, so the way in which they might flee the world cannot be literal either. Just as importantly, the reason that we might not immediately see contempt of the world being recommended in the second vision has to do with what else happens in the episode, since much of the vision investigates other estates that were not under heavy consideration in the Confession of the Sins. In its central “plowing scene,” the second vision turns more fully to the wider range of estates to examine how the various groups in society function and interrelate. As it does so, it draws on contempt of the world.

The “plowing scene,” initiated by passus 6, revises the opening scene of the poem sowing the irregular, self-serving interests seen on the “fair field full of folk” in a new and productive arrangement. Piers has by this point agreed to help the newly confessed pilgrims to the shrine of St. Truth, claiming to know the location as well as a “clerk knows his books”; told to wait while he finishes working his half acre, they

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volunteer to provide him with their aid. Though impatience alone might have inspired them, it seems, Piers nevertheless soon finds that many of the pilgrims are willing to work for him; he accordingly promises them both food and pay in return.

In order for his work on the half acre to be maximally productive, Piers provides overlapping, mutually reinforcing tasks for the other estates—a call for cooperation between the estates especially noteworthy in Piers’ instructions to the knight:

Curteisly þe knyt conseuyed þise wordes:
‘By my power, Piers, I pliske þee my troupe to fulleste þis forward þouȝ I fiȝte sholde.
Als longe as I lyue I shal þee maytene.’
‘Ye, and yet a point,’ quod Piers, ‘I preye þee of moore:
Loke þow tene no tenuant but true þole assente, and þouȝ þow mowe amercy hem lat mercy be taxour and mekenesse þi maister maugree Medes chekes; and þouȝ pouere men profre þee presenta and ȝiftes nyme it noȝt an aventure þow mowe it noȝt deserue. For þow shalt yelde it ayein at one yeres ende in a wel perilous place þat Purgatorie hatte. And mysbede noȝt þi bondeman, þe bettre shalt þow sped; thouȝ he be þyn vnderlyng here wel may happene in heuene that he worþ worþier set and wiþ moore blisse: 
Amice, ascende superius.
For in Charnel at chirche cherles ben yuel to knowe, or a knyȝt from a knau; knowe þis in þyn herte.
* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
‘I assente, by Seint Iame,’ seide þe knyȝt þanne, ‘for to werche by þi word while my lif dureþ.’
(B.6.33-49, 55-56)

But even though Piers envisions a social world of interlocking powers and responsibilities of the most pragmatic sort, the justification he gives for this new order comes straight out of the discourse of contemptus mundi.

The Fasciculus morum, in an exhortation to contempt of the world in its book on avarice (a vice that also lies at the heart of social problems in this scene) offers a striking analogue to Piers’ remark about the “Charnel at chirche” and its dissolution of estates:
Thus, in order to quench worldly glory we must always hold our death before the eyes of our mind. Whence Augustine says beautifully on his book *On True Innocence*, in the last chapter: “O greedy man, you blossom with riches and boast of the nobility of your elders; you exult in your country, the beauty of your body, and the honors that are bestowed on you by others. Look at yourself, that you are mortal and dust and will go to dust. Look around you, at those who once shone in like splendor before you. Where then are the civil powers you strove for, where are the unsurpassable orators, the leaders, the tyrants? Is not all this dust and ashes, is not all their memory contained in a few verses?” And he continues: “Look, then, at their graves and see which is lord and which is slave, which is poor and which is rich; tell, if you can, the defeated from the king, the strong from the weak, the beautiful from the ugly. Keep this in mind, then, that you may not become proud. You will remember it once you have looked at yourself.” “Remember, therefore, your last end, and you will never sin.” For his end comes upon man quickly and unexpectedly like a thief.\(^{379}\)

Piers’ own actions can be read as the sort of preparation one would normally make for an upcoming pilgrimage, but, in the passage, his disdainful commentary on wealth stands out along with his reflections on impending death. One reason that pilgrims drew up wills before going on their journeys seems to have been the likelihood of unforseen fatal disaster. Piers prefaced his own will by declaring that he has grown old and that upon his death his (parish) church will have his bones and that the money he leaves behind will be used to pay his debts before going to his wife.

This also closely matches discussion of *contemptus mundi* provided by the *Fasciculus morum*, which declares that healthy contempt of the world, “uprooter of avarice, consists of three things: memory of the Lord’s passion, meditation on the

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certainty of death, and love of voluntary poverty. [...] Therefore, Blessed Jerome says: ‘He who reflects that he will die and leave to the world all the goods that were granted to him, easily scorns everything.’ Whence Job exclaims: ‘My days will be shortened, and only the grave remains for me.’ Piers practices, and suggests that the knight also practice, the same essential characteristics of contemptus mundi (namely negative reflection on corrupting worldly goods and a dose of anxious preparation for the afterlife) without, however, taking up the cloistered monastic life one would expect from “classic” high-medieval treatments of the theme.

Most importantly, Langland’s espousal of contempt of the world in the second vision helps us to understand his general satiric practice. Thus far in the plowing of the half acre episode we have witnessed very little that looks like satire—though the episode’s highly schematic characterization does match expectations. We have instead observed instructions for proper societal interaction that happen to be founded upon contemporary treatments of contempt of the world. Moreover, after asking Piers how they might help him and then readily acceding to his advice, the women, knight, and other pilgrims do little worthy of mockery or rebuke. Not everyone, however, will follow Piers’ advice as readily agreed: Langland’s satire focuses on these characters, appearing across the estates, and labels these as “wasters.”

In addition to bearing striking resemblance to gyro vague or Goliard figures (mentioned already in chapter 3 above), Langland’s “wastours” have a pedigree in earlier satire and debate. Whereas the other work’s eponymous Wastoure stands out as representing a viable (if not entirely respectable) way of conducting secular life, however, the wastours that crop up on Piers’ half acre merit blame for the upheaval

and disunity of society itself. Significantly, as Piers points out multiple times, wastours ruin the “world”—and, for that, they merit Piers’ intense and even apocalyptic furor. Their comically bad attempts to get out of work also provide a very interesting thematic echo to the image of fruit trees blown untimely to the ground at the beginning of passus 5, since the wasters—doomed to perdition at the last Judgment—are also unproductive, and unfruitful, inversions of what they would claim to be (holy men). Langland himself seems to draw the parallel, as Piers’ forcing them to work by calling down the wrath of Hunger on them does lead to productivity—and, ultimately, even harvest time. In using contemptus mundi ideas in the B-version of Piers Plowman, Langland thus places special emphasis on coöperative productivity.

Langland saw, however, that the solution to the societal problems so ably sketched out in the plowing scene lay not merely in productivity. Enforced labor does not achieve all the objectives that Langland would see fostered in society, in large part because it brings about results that can only be temporary from unwilling actors under pressure of duress. Langland therefore promotes a revision of mindset, not just practice, in the would-be pilgrims. We have already seen that this mindset and practice, as originally promoted by Piers, are both consonant with some contemporary (late fourteenth-century) treatments of contemptus mundi. Furthermore, as I shall suggest, this new light on the second vision’s intellectual history suggests Langland’s view of how plausible secular contempt of the world might be and helps to refine the way we might interpret one of its key episodes.

*Metaphoric Landscape and Literal Sense*

As we saw in examining the second vision’s Confession of the Sins, Langland often satirizes society by showing various groups or people completely willing to take
on reforms and generally perform tasks for which they prove completely unfit. The C-text of the poem adds an instructive example of the same thing happening with the knight, who agrees to help to enforce Piers’ rules for working on the half acre but then fails to prevent the wastours present from lazing about anyway. For whatever reason—the poem leaves it up to us to decide—the knight will not prosecute such loafers. The B-version does not really hold the knight accountable for this lack of enforcement, interestingly, focusing instead on the incorrigibility of the offending wastours. In the C-version, on the other hand, the knight seems much more worthy of blame. To judge from the small addition here, “for the knyght wil nat,” the poem blames the knight’s inaction on willful (and criminal) laziness.

The C-version draws further attention to the knight’s inaction by introducing a little-noticed pun. There, the knight swears not by St. Truth to do all that he can to help Piers with his plowing, but by “St. Gyle.” St. Gyle refers to Saint Giles, who in fact had a shrine local to Langland’s Malvern Hills. But “gyle” also means “guile,” a fact a medieval reader would have been able to appreciate—especially in a satire. The interchangeability of the two very different senses here, of a knight who will help Piers out of pious devotion to Truth and a knight who promises to defend Piers only out of guile nicely shows how powerful a satiric instrument for Langland an ambiguously abstract or concrete noun may become.

Throughout the second vision, characters’ tendency to understand conflicting senses of the same term sparks much of the poem’s satire—a matter anticipated, characteristically for Langland, by Reason’s opening speech. Reason’s instructions

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382 See the title of the medieval “Gospel of (Silver) Mark” for a similar style of pun.
there could apply equally well to almost any social group, given that all the addressees of the sermon are human beings rather heavily encumbered by sin. As I have argued, the confession of the sins focuses more on the socially harmful and self-corrupting nature of the sins’ unregulated secular life than the wickedness of any particular estate. (That is, Coveitise appears in the guise of a bad merchant, but all merchants in the poem do not merely represent the sin of greed.) Nevertheless, the terminology of estates completely occupies the second vision’s characters, who busy themselves trying to maximize their privileges. Piers’ famous call for help to Hunger, especially in the C-version, comes about in response to the pilgrims’ clinging to privilege and unwillingness to take on the discipline of labor.

The wasters who so alarm Piers spend their days gambling and dice playing but would present themselves to Piers as congenitally disabled, or exempt from travail by virtue of their (clerical) estate, or otherwise entitled to skip work; the knight with whom Piers so explicitly negotiates a social contract before the plowing begins “wil nat” come to Piers’ defense in the C-version (C.8.170)—and in the B-text apparently cannot help Piers. The knight does “curteisliche” accede to Piers’ request and threaten Wastoure to “abigge by þe lawe, by þe ordre þat I bere!” (B.6.164, -66) In response, though, Wastoure “leet liȝt of þe lawe and lasse of þe knyȝte” (B.6.168) The key to understanding such a puzzling interchange lies with the backing the knight gives to his threat: not fear of force but respect for some authority inherent in the order of knighthood.384 The beginning of the pilgrimage to Truth provides an even better illustration of how spectacularly the second vision’s characters err in interpreting the instructions given to them by Piers and Reason, and of how readily they agree to

384 On this reading, the C-version’s phrase “for the knight wil nat,” while blunter than its counterpart in the B-text, could have been inserted by a revisor sensitive to the implications of the 1381 peasants’ revolt: better that Wastoure not be brought to heel because the knight has failed to exert his power than to call into question whether aristocratic power even exists.
challenges they are altogether unprepared to meet. The poem describes them proceeding forward not in any holy, earnest, devout manner, even if Robert’s confession had caused us to expect that of them. Instead, the would-be pilgrims “blustreden forth as beasts over bacches and hilles / til late and longe,” becoming exhausted and lost (B.5.514-15).

The poem underscores the insufficiency of the pilgrims’ physical search for the shrie of St. Truth by concluding it with the appearance of a real, professional pilgrim whose attire (including a hat encrusted with pilgrims’ badges) the poem terrifically lampoons. This palmer or professional pilgrim, claiming to have visited shrines for his “soule hele”—but really, we suspect, for profit—would not be out of place in the Canterbury Tales. But he also fits easily into one of the major inquiries of the vision. Do the “signes that sitten on [his] hatte” (B.5.529) matter at all? Does winning them, even after legitimate travel, constitute any accomplishment for the soul? Certainly not in this particular instance. The professional pilgrim’s (honest) admission that he cannot tell the pilgrims the way to Truth, his reason being the richly rewarding observation that no pilgrim attired as a pilgrim “with pyke ne with scrippe” had ever before asked to see Truth, makes the point mordantly well (B.5.538).

The immediate subsequent arrival in the narrative of Piers the Plowman himself drives the point home. As his name suggests, he is not attired like a pilgrim at all. Nor does he even present his role as one of pilgrimage. He therefore appears at once more “real” and “down to earth” than the professional pilgrim, and yet unlike that well-travelled palmer he also claims to know Truth and can teach the way there, at once, with no payment needed at all. Readers of Piers Plowman will have noted the juxtaposition of literal and figurative landscapes before, but I think that it is especially important to point out their coexistence as a tool of Langland’s satire—not just of the

385 I discuss this passage in The Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage, pp. 480-483, s.v. “Palmer.”
pilgrims’ apparent blockheaded attempt to reach “saint Truth” by physical travel but, more broadly, of their overall worldview.

The pilgrimage scene in *Piers Plowman* is so famous, and so central, that critics who have found the sequence of events leading up to it rather bizarre never question whether or not it actually exists. John Burrow, for instance, rightly explains the sermon and confession that begin the second vision as fit preludes to a pilgrimage; his suggestion that the pilgrimage represents an especially “tough” penance necessary for the granting of the pardon, which concludes the second vision, definitely has merit. But other forms of tough penance would also have been possible, as the poem’s subsequent metamorphosis of pilgrimage to plowing itself attests. Elizabeth Salter comes closest to explaining the pilgrimage in *Piers* by equating it with the interior, mystic pilgrimages written about by Langland’s literary predecessors and contemporaries. Nevertheless, since the second vision also concerns itself with non-spiritual comportment (following the laws, for instance, and laboring as the needs of society dictate despite even legitimate claims to clerical exception) the issue of how to see the world, of how to read reality, becomes even more central to these scenes.

How to “read reality” is a matter Augustine had discussed in the *De doctrina christiana*, which uses the imagery of a journey in a famous section of Book I’s chapter 34:

> Consider that although Truth itself, and that Word through whom all things were made, was made flesh that it might dwell among us; the Apostle yet says, ‘[i]f we have known Christ according to the flesh, [now] we know him so no longer.’ [...] Thus the Apostle, although he was still walking on the road and following God who was calling him to the glory of his Heavenly vocation, yet ‘forgetting the things that are behind and stretching forth to those that are before,’ he had already passed the beginning of his ways. That is, he was no longer in need of that which is an approach and a setting out on the journey to all those

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who wish to arrive at [T]ruth and to rest in eternal life. [...] Thus it may be understood that nothing should hold us on the road, for the Lord Himself, although He saw fit to become our road, did not wish to hold us upon it, but wished that we pass on, lest we cling in infirmity to temporal things, even though He took them up and wore them for our salvation. Rather let us run through them quickly that we may be worthy to approach and to reach Him who freed our nature from temporal things and made a place for it on the right hand of the Father.\^387

Neither Augustine, nor, I trust, Langland would deny that the call for spiritual development itself requires a sort of inner pilgrimage of the type that Salter suggests; even on the metaphysical, metaphoric level on which he speaks, Piers still sets forth an itinerary towards the pilgrims' destination. But in order to arrive at Truth, as Langland and Augustine both make clear, one must arrive at the figurative level first. Visible reality itself is something to be worked, and passed, through.

The conflict between literal and figurative ways of seeing comes to a head in the action of passus 7, the so-called “pardon passus.” After Piers and his followers have succeeded in bringing in the harvest, and by consequence bidding farewell to Hunger (whom Piers had called down to force their labor out of desperation at lazy wasters), Truth decides to reward Piers and anyone who might wish to help him with yet more plowing—this time, of the whole earth. The exact applications of the pardon do not need much discussion, I think, though we should note that the more professional and urban social groups inspire the greatest attention here: merchants,

\^387 D. W. Robertson, trans., *Saint Augustine: on Christian Doctrine* (New York: MacMillan, 1958; repr. Prentice-Hall, 1997), pp. 29-30. The Latin appears in *PL* 34, cap. 34, coll. 33-34: “Vide quemadmodum cum ipsa Veritas, et Verbum per quod facta sunt omnia, caro factum esset, ut habitaret in nobis (Joan. III, 3, 14), tamen ait Apostolus: Et si noveramus Christum secundum carinem, sed jam non novimus (II Cor. 5, 16). [...] Apostolus igitur quamvis adhuc ambularet in via, et ad palmam supernae vocationis sequeretur vocantem Deum, tamen ea quae retro sunt obliviscens, et in ea quae ante sunt extensus (Philipp. III, 12-14), jam princepiuam viaron transierat; hoc est, eo non indigebat, a quo tamen agrediendum et exordiendum iter est omnibus qui ad veritatem pervenire, et in vita aeterna permanere desiderant. [...] Ex quo intelligitur quam nulla res in via tenere nos debeat, quando nec ipse Dominus, in quantum via nostra esse dignatus est, tenere nos voluerit, sed transire: ne rebus temporalibus, quamvis ab illo pro salute nostra suspectis et gestis, horeamus infirmiter, sed per eam potius curramus alacriter, ut [col. 34] ad eum ipsum, qui nostram naturam a temporalibus liberavit, et collocavit ad dexteram Patris, provehi atque pervehi.”
lawyers, and beggars, groups that the earlier vision largely ignores in its treatment of the estates. What *does* require comment, however, is the opposition between Piers and priest that suddenly develops when Piers has finished explaining the document’s contents to the several estates.

The crisis of the section comes as the priest demands to read the pardon and “construe” it for Piers in English; with Will looking on, Piers shows the priest the pardon, only to hear him declare that there is no pardon at all—just two lines taken from the Athanasian Creed. One could probably contrast Piers’ and the priest’s stances here as “the letter” versus “the spirit,” with the words of Paul hanging over all of it that “the Spirit giveth life, but the Letter killeth.” It might be closer to the truth to claim though that Langland has in mind here a slightly emended verse, namely that “the spirit giveth life—*letters* kill.” For by questioning the status of the document from Truth, and especially the ability of Piers (a straightforward vernacular Christian) to interpret it, the priest essentially nullifies Piers’ teaching, prioritizes “real” pardons, and offers nothing as an alternative but more cynical reliance upon the system of confessors and indulgences and all manner else that the vision previously had condemned.

Such faithless elitism triggers Piers’ anger, but the surprising quotations from the Bible with which he expresses it meet with only a snide rebuke from the priest. While it may not make *much* sense on one level for Piers to speak in Latin—and that would be the literal level represented by the priest—on a spiritual level, Piers’ Latin does make abundant sense as a signifier that he authoritatively *knows* the Bible. When Piers famously rips the pardon in two out of consuming anger—“for pure tene” (B.7.119)—then, we have not only a signal that paper pardons by themselves are
useless, as other scholars have argued, but also that the very presence of a literal level at all is confusing and misleading.\textsuperscript{388}

I find further support for this interpretation in Piers’ actions just following the tearing of the pardon, when Piers gives up plowing to concentrate—rather ascetically—on the betterment of his soul:

\begin{quote}
‘I shal cessen of my sowyn,’ quod Piers, ‘& swynke noȝt so harde, ne aboute my bilyue so bisy be na moore; of preieres and of penaunce my plouȝ shal ben herafter, and wepen whan I sholde werche þouȝ whete breed me faille. The prophete his payn eet in penaunce and in sorwe by þat þe Sauter vs seith, and so dide othere manye. That loueþ god lelly his liflode is ful esy:\textit{Fuerunt michi lacrime mee panes die ac nocte}. (B.7.121-28a)
\end{quote}

Piers’ use of Latin here and in subsequent lines arouses the suspicious rebuke of a priest, with whom he wrangles. They continue to argue angrily after this, and the passus itself will continue with the narrator’s musings at sunset over the possible meaning of his dream—but Piers’ disavowal of plowing here effectively marks the end of the second vision’s grand experiment in secular contempt of the world. To achieve true \textit{contemptus mundi} and regularity of life, Piers must separate from the disorderliness of the system of estates; finally admitting the pilgrims’ tragic failure “to bear fruits worthy of repentance,” he announces his decision to retire from literal reality altogether. He will not appear in the poem as a normal, mortal plowman again.

CHAPTER 5

AMOR PROXIMI, VERITATIS DEFENSIO:
THE PROMOTION OF SILENCE AND THE CHALLENGE OF JUDGMENT

God in he gospel grymly repreuep
alle þat lakkep any lif and lakkes han hemselue.

(B.10.267-268 [Clergie])

Anyone considering the binary commonly made composed of “self” and “world” would be forgiven for thinking it leaves an element out. Contemptus sui and contemptus mundi presuppose even for solitaries that some supportive community be somehow extant to assure success to the ascetic contemner of self and world.\(^{389}\)

The level of others or neighbor lies somewhere between the self and the world, and like both of these it poses its own challenges or even problems.

The largest problem posed by other human beings, only exacerbated by secularity, is that it is by no means easy to tell if another should be part of one’s special inner circle or subset of society. It is after all fairly safe to assume that inherently separated ascetic religious life sets up strong obstacles and Shibboleths that will keep someone not of pronounced devotion and sincerity of character well and firmly out. A default inclusivity holds sway in secular life, on the other hand (at least by comparison), which might lie behind contemptus mundi. It certainly lies at the basis of Piers’ own critique of wastours and other nonlaborers of dubious validity during Piers Plowman’s second vision: how is anyone supposed accurately to assess whether claims of clerical privilege, let alone physical disability, are legitimate or not? Should these claims be honored during times of hardship?

\(^{389}\) Note back in chapter 3 the discussion of how solitary life for any Christian required “vetting” and approval from higher up; there is also extensive evidence on the patronage welcomed if not actively sought after—of monarchs, for example—by solitaries: see Ann K. Warren, Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Consider also that oft-touted landmark of early Middle English prose, the Ancrene Riwle: while indubitably enclosed in the walls of a church, the addressees of this text also have servants to take care of them and the occasional (albeit discouraged) visit from locals, family, and friends.
The flip side to this problem of others also comes in passus 7, in the second vision, when Truth—pardoning good workers openly through the agency of Piers—sends a message under secret seal to merchants:

Treu'pe herde telle herof, and to Piers sente
to taken his teme and tilien þe erpe,
and purchased hym a pardoun a pena & a culpa
for hym and for hishe heires eueremoore after.
And bad hym holde hym at home and erien hishe leyes,
and alle þat holpen to eyme or to sowe,
or any maner mestier þat myȝte Piers helpe,
pardon wiþ Piers Plowman trúpe hap ygraunted.

Marchauntʒ in þe margyne hadde manye yeres,
ac noon A pena & a culpa þe pope wolde hem graunte
for þei holde noȝt hir halidayes as holy chirche techþp
and for þei swere by hir soule and so god moste hem helpe
eyein clene Conscience hir catel to selle.
Ac vnder his secret seel trúpe sente hem a lettre,
and bad hem buggen bboldely what hem best liked
and sîbenes selle it ayein and saue þe wynnyng,
and make Mesondieux þerwiþ myseise to helpe,
wikkede weyes wightly amende
and þynde brugges aboute þat tobroke were,
marien maydenes or maken hem Nonnes,
pouere peple bedredene and prisons in stokkes
fynden swiche hir foode for oure lordes loute of heuene,
sete scolors to scole or to som kynnes craftes,
releue Religion and renten hem bettre.
“And I shal sende myselue Seint Michel myn angel
that no deuel shall yow dere ne in youre deying fere yow,
and witen yow fro wanhope, if ye wol þus werche,
and sende youre soules in saufe to my Seintes in ioye.”
Thanne were Marchauntʒ murie; manye wepten for ioye
and preiseden Piers þe Plowman þat purchaced þis bulle.
(B.7.1-8, 18-39)

Having made this special provision for merchants, the poem then turns to members of the legal profession. Though their constant quest for profit might come across as immoral, the poet suggests, the use of incoming profits not for personal enrichment but for improving the lives of others will merit Truth’s approval and reward. As with the coexistence-induced conflict in the second vision between literal and spiritual ways of seeing, then, so too the dangerous indistinguishability between self-
abnegating ascetic and self-serving secular ways of life. This issue has not been resolved by the end of the second vision, merely had its contours traced.

This chapter will focus on what the rest of Piers Plowman, the so-called “vita de Dowel, Dobet, et Dobest” does both further to explore and resolve the problems posed by others to the larger project of self perfection and of world reform. The first section of the chapter will provide a long reading of the vita, mainly considering when it is appropriate to criticize others, given our lack of perfect knowledge of others’ intents. In the second section I will explore the relevance of canon law and conventional scriptural interpretation to the issue, arguing that the poem urges silence even where criticism or rebuke might seem most warranted by custom and good sense. In the chapter’s third section I will explain how silence instead of rebuke was considered among theorists of monastic asceticism to help foster both humility and obedience—important contributors to amor proximi, or love of neighbor, in contrast to a desire for Veritatis defensio also pursued in the poem. A conclusion will attempt to assess the implications of my argument for Langland’s poem as a satire and as the product of a writer in a specific social circle or community.

Rebuke and the Problem of Insufficient Knowledge

As the last chapter noted, the second vision of Piers Plowman—and in effect the entire visio—ends with an odd, contentious exchange between Piers Plowman himself (as a character) and an unnamed priest. I have already explored some of the implications of what light Piers’ rebuke might be able to shed on the poem’s conception of the “world” (in all that word’s simultaneous literal and figural,
metaphorical, spiritual, or metaphysical senses). But if the scene is shocking and notable at all, it gains these qualifies not from the ways of seeing that it juxtaposes so much as from the “territorial” conflict between estates that Piers and the priest embody. It does not seem right for a priest to be challenged on the proper interpretation of a religious document by a plowman, and certainly not for the challenge to be a successful one.

Piers’ conflict with the priest ends the so-called *visio*, and it introduces to the *vita*, which follows, evidence that the larger poem differs from much didactic literature of the Middle Ages by sincerely questioning the reliability of the very sources of authority it cites in the manner of debate. Although this debate element adds enormously to *Piers Plowman*’s richness as a critique of society, it also makes any exposition of these episodes exceptionally hard to follow. As such, I will follow my usual practice of providing a brief and rather schematic synopsis of the relevant episodes while paying attention to problems of limited knowledge—and the possibility of improper judgment—on which those episodes shed light.

The *vita* section of *Piers Plowman* begins as a clean break from the preceding poem by depicting Will as awake, a fact that gains renewed and increased significance when we consider both the length of this waking episode and its juxtaposition with the end of the preceding second vision (in which the narrator “muses” a long time on the significance, whether prophetic or misleading, of dreams). The episode begins expressly with the narrator’s quasi-autobiographical assertion that he was searching for “Dowel,” and the *vita* itself begins with Will searching for Dowel in exactly the literal reality so disparaged by Piers in the passus just before this one.

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390 On these many, many senses—from world as mass of land to world as giant chessgame—see the long entry in Bromyard’s *Summa Predicantium* (edition listed in bibliography), s.v. “Mundus.”
391 Debate is common, of course, but deconstructing one’s own bases of knowledge in this way less so.
That Will’s search for “Dowel” begins while Will is awake, in the “literal reality” aforementioned, strikes me as important because that fact prepares us to recognize the “worldliness” of the search—and thus the “worldliness” of the answers Will’s questioning at first receives. The literalness of the situation does not depend solely on its waking setting but is rather corroborated by it: Will searches the land for Dowel, just as the pilgrims of passus 5 had equally searched for the shrine of St. Truth, and he meets with a comparable lack of success. Thinking much like those earlier pilgrims, Will finally thinks that he will find directions for his quest when he meets with a pair of Friars Minor—representatives, like the professional palmer encountered by the pilgrims, of a religiously sanctioned mode of life whose distinctive characteristic is to wander over the earth. Hailing the friars using his best behavior, Will asks if they might have encountered Dowel anywhere: a pauper’s hovel? a king’s court? somewhere in between? Where does “do evil” dwell, for that matter? Will is being especially literalistic here, when assuming that Dowel and Doyuel could have physical coordinates—indeed, “dwell” on the earth—and when he assumes that the answer to the question must lie with religious authorities.

The friars’ response to Will sheds light on both Will’s and the friars’ error, which concerns the propriety of whether special communities of knowledge can lay claim to a correspondingly more blessed life. “Mary,” they reply, “amonges vs [Dowel] dwelleth / and ever hath, as I hope, and euere shal heraftter” (18-19); Dowel “dwells,” if anywhere, abstractly with them. (Therefore Will is mistaken to regard Dowel as being located in any one visible place.) On the other hand, as Will promptly points out with a cry of “contra” (the word traditionally signaling an opposing view in scholastic philosophical debate), the obvious fact that even a truly holy person (the “sadde man”) sins continually according to scripture renders spurious their claim constantly to be assisted by Dowel (B.8.20). The truth of the fraternal position,
though, one friar explains, can be easily demonstrated by a “forbisne” of a man in a boat, buffeted by winds yet not pitched into the sea:

‘I shal seye þee, my sone,’ seide þe frere þanne,
‘how seuen siþes þe sadde man synne þe on þe day.
By a forbisne,’ quod þe frere, ‘I shal þee faire shewe.
Lat brynge a man in a boot amydde a brood watre;
the wynd and þe water and þe waggyng of þe boot
make þe man many tyme to falle and to stonde.
For stonde he neuer so stif, he stumblþ in þe waggyng,
ac yet is he saaf and sound, and so hym bihouþ,
for if he ne arise þe raper and raþte þe steere
the wynd wolde wiþ þe water þe boot ouerrowe.
There were þe mannes lif lost for lachesse of hymselue.
Riþ þus it fareþ,’ quod þe frere, ‘by folk here on erþe.
The water is likned to þe world þat wanyeþ and wexeþ;
the goodes of þis grounde arn like þe grete wawes,
that as wyndes and watres walkeþ aboute;
the boot is likned to þe body þat brotel is of kynde,
that þoruþ þe fend and þe flessh and þe false worlde
synne þe sadde man seuen siþes a day.
Ac dedly synne dop he noþt for dowel hym helþeþ,
that is charite þe champion, chief help ayein synne.
For he strengþeþ þee to stonde and steereþ þi soule
that, þoruþ þi body bowe as boot dopþ in þe watre,
ay is þi soule saaf but þow þiselue wole
folwe þi flesshes wille and þe fendes after,
and do deedly synne and drench þiselue.
God wole suffre we þi sleþeþ if þiselþ likeþ,
for he yaf þee to yeresþyue to yeme we þiselue
wit and þre wil, to euery wíþþ a porcion,
to fleynge foweles, to fisshes and to beestes.
Ac man haþ moost þeroft and moost is to blame
but if he werche weþ þerwþþ as dowel hym techeþ.’
(B.8.26-56)

With Dowel as the boat protecting the man inside from the sea of the world (an old image dating back in Christian writings to Late Antiquity), winds and waves may knock him down or toss him about but he will still be preserved from drowning. Only giving into the flesh and the devil—effectively leaping out of the boat into the maelstrom waiting outside—will seal one’s fate for sure.
Certainly Will’s tepid answer makes for one of the most perplexing aspects of the discussion here, and an important one for us to consider on the subject of judging others. Will listens to the “forbisne” answering his vigorous objection without further interruption, but at the moment one might have expected him to accede to the soundness of the point he only demurs instead, claiming “no kynde knowyng” of what the friars say before politely excusing himself from them to continue his search elsewhere (B.8.57 et seq.). What could possibly merit the weakness of this reply? On the one hand, Will’s answer here is anything but impolite—hardly in keeping with the vigorous “contra” he had challenged the friars with just a few lines earlier. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a simpler and more vivid “forbisne” of the ubiquity of Dowel—even in the presence of sin—that the friar’s illustration of a man challenged by ocean storms in a boat. Nor does the friar here appear to promote the dangerous complacence, the unhealthy desire for ease, that marks out more clearly sinful friars in the poem. Instead, as he points out, God will very contently “suffer wel [...] sleuthe,” since he gave humankind free will, but will hold a sinner greatly accountable at the last if he does not “werche wel [...] as Dowel hym techeth.” This friar hardly sounds corrupt, though it should be noted that this explanation does not back down very far from the earlier implicit claim to increased holiness from specialized knowledge.

Will’s response to the fraternal “forbisne” would doubtless make more sense to Piers Plowman’s interpreters, had they only the benefit of some direct analogue to the “forbisne” with which to contextualize the scene. As improbable as the assessment is when applied to any medieval poet, especially this one, A. V. C. Schmidt’s edition of the B-text declares that the image of a man in a boat protected by Dowel is an invention mostly original to Langland.392 An analogue of sorts may be found,

392 Schmidt, p. 438: “The application of the ‘boat’ to the friars themselves is attacked in a Wycliffite sermon on Mt 24; but L. develops his image in a way that seems independent and original here.”
however, whose differences from what shows up in Piers Plowman may help Langland’s technique (in so far as we must consider it satirical, especially) to be explained—and Langland himself might have encountered at least one example of this analogue, appearing as it does in one of the sermons of famous thirteenth-century canonist and preacher Thomas of Chobham. Here Chobham fuses those two old commonplaces, the “sea of the world” and the “ship of the church,” in order to imply that a good Christian—not, in other words, a particular type of Christian—may escape “shipwreck” if he stays within the protective vessel of his faith.

Stulti ergo sunt qui in predicta naue explorant gaudia mundi, quia semper ad ultimum patietur naufragium illa nauiis, et numquam peruenient ad portum. Set intremus nauem Simonis, que etsi sepe fluctuet numquam tamen mergitur. Et in ea est malus crux Christi, in quam aperditur et expanditur uelum sacre Scripture, quia per crucem Christi uelum templi scissum est, ut Mathei XXVII, id est sacra Scriptura aperta et manifestata est. [...] Qui autem in hac nau in est, numquam transibit mare huius mundi sine naufragio. Set quia in hac nau Dominus est, qui in illa permanserit non potest ei tempestas maris nocere. 393

393 See sermon XIX in Thomas of Chobham’s Sermones, ed. F. Morenzoni (CM 82A, 1993, accessed online via the CLCT database). The sermon’s shipwreck imagery not surprisingly is echoed in Bromyard’s Summa Predicantium, s.v. “Peccatum,” but there the life of a religious order is interpreted as a possible danger. “Propter huiusmodi pericula, ut venialia causamus: Primo nos hortatur Cesarius Homelia 6. ad monachos, dicens: ‘Certi sumus carissimi: nisi caneamus, & nisi quotidiem nostras [necemus] passiones, & in bonus operibus viriliter desudemus: deteriores nos efficimur, quam in seculo fiinum: ita vi fiant extrema nostra peiora prioribus. Et infra: Homil. 3. Quomodo nauis postquam pelagi fluctus euasit: si in portu sentina integra non fuerit, de minimis guttis impletur, & mergitur. Sic & monachus victus & superatus, huius mundi criminibus: quod periculosos fluctibus cum ad portum monasterij venerit: si tepide & remisse operatus fuerit, & negligentem vixerit, & minima & quotidianae peccata de anima sua sentina haurire neglexerit: in portu naufragij crimen incurrit.” On account of such perils, that we might beware of venial sins, in the first place Caesarius exhorts us in his sixth homily, to monks, saying “We are certain, beloved: unless we take care, and unless we daily (restrain) our passions and manfully exert ourselves in doing good works, we will be made worse than we were before in the world, so that our ends become worse than our beginnings.” And further, in Homily 3, “just like a ship after it escapes the waves of the sea, if its hull will not be whole in port, it will fill from the smallest leaks, and sink—just so the monk, conquered and overcome by the errors of this world, if when he comes to the port of the monastery from the perilous waves: if laxly and remissly he should do his work, and neglectfully live, and should fail to bail out the hull of his soul from small sins committed every day, he will suffer the shipwreck of vice while still in port.” This view is not exceptionally favorable to cloistered religious life, which Bromyard seems to be suggesting as a risky last resort for the sinner. For some corroboration of that reading, see the same work in Article 7, s.v. “Mundus”: “Contra tam multas mundi infatuationes, & poenas, & pericula tria sunt remedia, seu documenta, que docent, mundi contenta esse fugienda, ne ab eis infatuetur, & penas quis incurrat &
This analogue, if Langland expected readers to have encountered something like it more commonly than the friars’ analogy, explains Will’s “Contra!” quite well: readers can see that the fraternal answer here is too insular and secure, not only dubiously clever, since it posits Dowel just with friars and not in Christianity writ large. The friars have a point, of course, in their claim that Dowel and Doyuel may be found everywhere. In that, they usefully instruct Will. But Will has a point as well, solid grounds for disagreement with their explanation as presented to him.

As the Chobham analogue strongly indicates, Will’s uneasy interchange in passus 8 with representatives of the Order of Friars Minor introduces to the poem’s vita a matter first touched on during Piers’ wrangling with the priest: the claim of specialized communities of knowledge, status, or discourse to a monopoloy on doing well or living the best of all possible lives. Can any learned knowledge ever be a match for “kinde knowing”? Can any group, any behavior, any set of beliefs or practices by itself ensure the presence of “Dowel”? The answer the poem seems to posit for this major question of whether any community can teach one how to do well appears to be “No.”

This interpretation unfolds iteratively, following the structure of the Vita itself. Before the poem’s clamorous last few passus and catastrophic final commingling of wheat and tares at the barn of “Unity,” the poem presents a pattern of interlocutors for Will who start out quite concretely human and external to the narrator but grow progressively more interior and more abstract. The next personage to speak to Will after he parts with the friars, after all, Thought, seems to the narrator “a muchel man as

pericula. Quorum primum est in interiori contemplatione. Secundum in exteriori custodia, seu refrenatione. Tertium in fuga & elongatione.” [Against so many infatuations, and punishments, and perils there are three remedies or teachings when teach that the happiness of the world should be fled lest one become infatuated by them and incur their punishments and perils, the first of which consists of interior contemplation, the second in exterior guardianship or restraint, and the third in flight and removal (from the world).]
me [...] like to myselfe” (B.8.70); one of the last characters to speak to Will in this series, Anima, is “a sotil thyng withalle [...] oon withouten tongue or teeth” (B.15.12-13). Each speaker in the progression from Thought to anima has his or her own particular angle from which to see the issues just before described, especially that of how other people might help one to lead a more virtuous life, but consistent messages do emerge from the *vita’s* succession of debates. This progression of speakers accompanies a deepening of the dream that constitutes the poem’s central fiction as well, featuring at least two “dreams within the dream” that require discussion now.

In the poem’s unfolding toward and into its central “inner dreams,” Langland ties the problem of knowledge—when do we have enough? where do we come about it?—to the politics of rebuke. The first message that Langland enables us to extract from the string of interlocutors featured in the *vita* is that pure cleverness, of the sort that one might find in or read from books, is to be avoided. This “problem of knowledge” and Langland’s desire to test its bounds might deserve interpretation as part of what Andrew Galloway has called “a contemporary context of discussion about the decadent nature of contemporary uses of knowledge.”

In describing Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest to Will, Thought gives attention to all three as exemplifying a life distinguished by not cleverness or boastfulness but rather a congruence of honest, faithful labor with honest, faithful words. Dobet, according to Thought, follows Paul’s sentence—“Libenter suffertis insipientes cum sitis ipsi sapientes” (B.8.93). He is charitable to the “vnwise” but does not necessarily attempt to rescue them from their lack of wisdom. Wit, the next speaker, continues the theme, declaring *inter alia* that those who live well help each other, support each other, and lead lives whose apparent fruitfulness and wholesomeness is matched by real integrity: again, not cleverness for its own sake.

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Wit perhaps most famously locates Dowel in the human body—the “castle of Caro,” built by God to house his beloved soul—and focuses in that portion of his speech on the interaction and cooperations between the soul and the senses, the faculties and grades of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest (the last of whom acts as a tutor to Anima). Later, Wit also speaks of interactions between humans, drawing attention to the history of marriage as a illustration of how both humans and God are best served by mutual aid, law-following, and charitable intent. Interestingly, the very collaborative nature of an ideal society as described by Wit seems to regard knowledge almost as unimportant so long as works and deeds inspired by that knowledge are performed in consonance with each other and in accordance with God’s law. The Castle of Caro, for instance, is “as muche to mene as man with a soule / that he wro3te with werk and with word bothe.”

Regarding marriage and the raising of children, an odd illustration which follows, the message from the second vision comes through again with the Scriptural tag that “munquam colligunt de spinis uvas nec de tribulis ficas.”

As the vita goes on, however, the content of knowledge—even disciplinary boundaries between Theology and the other arts—becomes ever more pressingly interrogated. The next character to speak to Will, Wit’s wife “Dame Study,” strongly rebukes her husband for having any instructive words about the nature and purpose of man to a figure she considers unworthy to merit that knowledge. Dame Study’s identity as Wit’s wife, as bears observing, is part of Langland’s satire: human intelligence desires to know and express as much as it can, while the study whose action constitutes the pursuit of that knowledge presents itself forefully as an activity only for the deserving few. Another reason that Study should be presented as a “dame”

395 B.9.52; cf. lines 44-46, with a stress (resonating with the last line of passus 8) on the goodness inherent in matching words and deeds.

396 B.9.155a; Matthew 7:16.
and as Wit’s wife might also stem from Langland’s sense that her opening sentiments, a worry taken from the parables of Jesus that hogs would merely “dravel upon” pearls given to them, display a stereotypically feminine hyperbole and care for delicate things; the injunction not to throw pearls to swine, though, comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 7. It was in high-medieval theological writings often invoked at the beginning of a work to signify its intended appreciation only fully by a closed few cognoscenti. Study is, moreover, harsh (as anyone who has ever attempted studies of any sort should know)—another good reason for the poem’s satiric caricature of the figure as a shrewish wife. Dame Study’s long rebuke of Wit contains the impressive pedal point of “wilneþ nevere to wite” at the end, as she quotes and then rails against the impertinent theological disputation of untrained and undiscerning laity:

“Why sholde we þat now ben for þe werkes of Adam roten and torende? Reson wolde it neuere!
Vinquisque portabit omus suum, &c.”
Swiche motyues þei meue, þise maistres in hir glorie,

397 See also D.43 c.2 in Gratian’s Decretum, quoting Origen: “[...] Solliciti enim esse debemus, ne margaritas nostras mittamus ante porcos. Sed ob alias causas utile est uiri huius me habere noticiam. Si enim sciam, quia in his, de quibus non potest dubitari quod bona sint, emendatus est et inculpabilis (hoc est, si sobrius, si misericors, si iustus, si mitis, et humanus est, que utique bona nullus ambigit), tune consequens uidebitur, ut ei, qui obtinet bona uirtutum, etiam quod deest fidei et scientiae conferatur, et in quibus maculari eius uita uidetur, quem est in reliquis probabilis, emendetur. Si turo in his, quæ palam sunt, pecatis inuolutos perametet et inquinatur, non me oportet aliquid de secreternibus et remotis diuinae sententiae proloqui, sed magis protestari, et conversi eum, ut peccare desinat et actu suos a uiciis emendet. [...]” We cannot know, of course, if Langland had this particular injunction not to throw pearls before swine in mind when writing Piers. Nevertheless, the differentiation between the inwardly virtuous man and a man “inuolutos” (clothed) in sin provided in this portion of the Decretum has a striking resonance with Will’s later self-confrontation in the persona of Haukyn. Both types of men—virtuous and sin-enveloped—require further “emendation” (the same verb in both cases) before being committed with the “secretionibus et remotis diuinae sententiae.” In whatever the virtuous man appears “maculari,” “emendetur.” And the sinful man should be enjoined (protestari) “ut peccare desinat et actu suos a uiciis emendet.”

and maken men in mysbileue þat muse on hire wordes. Ymaginatif hereafterward shal answere to youre purpos. Austin to swiche Arghueres he telleþ þis teme: *Non plus sapere quam oportet.*

Wilnep neure to wite why þat god wolde suffre Sathan his seed to bigile, ac bileueþ lelly in þe loore of holy chirche, and preie hym of pardon and penance in þi lyue, and for his muche mercy to amende vs here. For alle þat wilnep to wite þe whyes of god almyþty, I wolde his eiʒe were in his ers and his hele after, that euere eft wilnep to wite why þat god wolde suffre Sathan his seed to bigile, or Iudas þe lew lesu bitraye.

Al was as he wolde—lord, yworshiped be þow, and al worþ as þow wolt whatso we dispute—and þo þat vseþ þise hauylons for to blende mennes wittes, what is dowel fro dobet, now deef mote he worþe, sipþe he wilnep to wite whiche þei ben alle. But he lyue in þe leeste degre þat longeþ to dowel I dar ben his bolde borgh þat dobet wolde he neuere, theiʒ dobest drawe on hym day after ooper.’

(B.10.115-39, emphases mine)

The rebuke also cleverly dramatizes the oppressive effect too much can appear to have on the intelligence: hearing Study’s declamation against learning, Wit “bicom so confus he kouthe noʒt mele / and as doumb as a dore drough him aside,” and refuses to respond to Will’s entreaties (B.X.140-42).

Langland’s presentation of Study as married to yet abusive to the intelligence suggests that the question of what learning might be appropriate to a given Christian depends quite strongly on that person’s character, his intent, and the community of discourse or discipline in which he would like to be bound. These requirements become very clear after dame Study’s opening harangue, as Will swears allegiance to her. (Wit, vanquished before Study’s verbal onslaught, has signalled to Will that he should do this.) Accepting his deference, Study goes on to tell Will just how he might gain the knowledge that he seeks. In so doing, she admits him ever deeper to a specialized community of knowledge.
What comes across as most striking, when one inspects Study’s instructions, is that the very clerical knowledge viewed so skeptically elsewhere in the poem appears as the truest and best sort of knowledge of all. It is hard not to associate Clergie even with Truth, here, in fact, since Study’s directions to her “cosyn,” direct Will along a landscape just as metaphysical as in Piers’ directions to the shrine of Truth:

‘For þi mekenesse, man,’ quod she, “and for þi mylde speche
I shal kenne þee to my Cosyn þat Clergie is hoten.
He heþ wedded a wif wiþInne þise woukes sixe,
is sib to þe seuen artʃ, þat Scripture is nempned.
They two, as I hope, after my bisechyng
shullen wissen þee to dowel, I dar wel vndertake.’
* * * * * * * *
‘Aske þe heighe wey,’ quod she, ‘hennes to Suffre-
Bope-wele-and-wo if þat þow wolt lerne;
and ryd forþ by richesse, ac rest þow noþt þerInne,
for if þow couple þee wiþ hym, to clergie comest þow neuere;
and also þe longe launde þat lecherie hatte,
leue hym on þi left half a large myle or moore
til þow come to a court, kepe-wel-bi-tunge-
Thanne shalow se Sobretee and Sympletee-of-speche,
that ech wight be in wille his wit þee to shewe.
So shalow come to Clergie þat kan manye wittes.
(B.10.152-57, 62-72)

The reason for the poem’s somewhat puzzling recommendation of Clergie here, I think, appears between the lines of Study’s directions: true clerical knowledge can come only to the student prepared properly by (an essentially ascetic) self-abnegating self-reform. Moreover, part of this life preparation for attaining clergie reeques the abandonment of many other types of knowledge in favor of Clergie’s spouse, Scripture—disciplines Study claims to have created “folk to deceyve,” distracting unworthy inquirers into the secrets of God from the path that would take them there. (B.10.221) These were, Study tells Will, “sotiled and ordeyned” by Study herself; but such tools will prove useless, she indicates, for anyone interested in learning the
knowledge of Theologie to which Clergie can lead (B.10.220).\textsuperscript{399} Theology operates only according to the rules of love, she notes, and runs counter to the logic of ever other discipline in “ten score” ways (B.10.185-91).

Study’s distinction between Theology (to be prized) and other disciplines (to be avoided) prepares the dispute that Will will have about the value of book learning with Clergie and, especially, Scripture. Although Clergie and Scripture welcome Will to their house and show themselves to be on very good terms with Wit and Studie, Clergie nonetheless tells Will that much of the practice of his discipline consists in believing certain articles of faith passed down as law after their initial inspired delivery, for which Clergie gives as an example the writings of St. Augustine

\begin{verbatim}
  Austin þe olde herof made bokes,
  and hymself ordeyned to sadde vs in bileue.
  Who was his Auctour? alle þe foure Evangelistes.
  And Crist cleped hymself so, þe scripture bereþ witnesse:
  \textit{Ego in patre et pater in me est, et qui videt me videt et patrem meum.}
  Alle þe clerkes vnder crist ne koude þis asoille,
  but þus it bilongeþ to bileue to lewed þat willen dowel.\textsuperscript{400}
\end{verbatim}

Much of what constitutes the proper exercise of Clergie, as it happens, consists of discipline not unlike that which led Will from Study to Clergie in the first place, with the difference that Clergie’s discipline calls upon the student to receive and follow the precepts of holy writ rather unquestioningly.

Clergie also seems to limit Will (or indeed \textit{the} will) by forbidding him from using his knowledge towards the assessment of and correction of others. Instead, Clergie instructs Will as earlier interlocutors had as well, telling him to live with a congruity of words and works, “appearing to be as [he is] and being as [he] appears.”\textsuperscript{401} This in and of itself should be reward enough, Clergie contends, as

\begin{footnotes}
\item[399] Here, as shall be quoted later, D.37 c.10, where “queritur an saecularibus litteris oporteat eos esse eruditos,” provides a useful gloss.
\item[400] B.10.249-54. In the C-text, this is stronger.
\item[401] B.10.260-63: \textit{Appare quod es vel esto quod appare} is line 261a.
\end{footnotes}
thriving life comes from one’s living as one is called to and death from any life otherwise, the prime example here being formal, regular, religious life shaken by corruption in recent years:

Amonges riȝtful religious þis rule sholde be holde. Gregorie þe grete clerk and þe goode pope of religion þe rule reherseþ in his morales, and seþ þat in ensample þat þei sholde do þerafter: whan físshes faillé þe flood or þe freshe water thei deyen for drouȝte, whan þei drie lenge; riȝt so by religion, it roilþe and stereþ that out of couent and cloistre coueiten to libbe. For if heuene be on þis erþe, and ese to any soule, it is in cloistre or in scole, by manye skiles I fynde. For in cloistre comeþ no man to carpe ne to fîȝte but al is buxomnesse þere and bokes, to rede and to lerne. In scole þere is scorn but if a clerk wol lerne, and great loue and likyng for ech loveþ hym to oþer. Ac now is Religion a rydere, a rennere by streses, a leedere of lounedayes and a lond buggere, a prikere on a palfrey fro place to Manere, an heþ of houndes at his ers as he a lord were, and but if his knaue knele þat shal his coppe brynge he louþe on hym and lakkeþ hym: who lered hym curteisie? Litel hadde lordeþ doon to ȝyue lond from hire heires to Religiouse þat han no rouþe þouȝþ it reyne on hir Auters. (B.10.297-318)

For religious to live as their rule instructs them to, with obedient leaning that does not stray out into the wider word, is “hevene [...] on þis erþe,” equalled only by the similar scholarly solicitude and removal from too worldly affairs afforded to “religious” in university settings as well. Parish priests, nuns, monks, canons, and friars who use their exalted status and learning to oppress others and advance themselves will merit punishment from the secular government into whose affairs they have so impiously strayed, Clergie continues, finishing with a famous prophecy to that effect.402

402 B.10.319-35. The reforming king mentioned by the prophecy was interpreted by early modern readers as a clear reference to Henry VIII—on which see Derek Pearsall’s brief discussion in, “Langland and Lollardy,” YLS 17 (2003), pp. 7-23. Further reception of Langland into the early modern
The rather restrained lifestyle that Clergie seems to prescribe for the various members of the clerical estate must strike Will as too weak and lacking in splendor to constitute the most proper way of living possible. So it seems, at least, as Will follows Clergie’s awed and forbidding reference to the powers of secular nobility by asking if perhaps the powers of that estate constitute “Dowell.” Scripture intercedes to explain to Will how this cannot be so, noting that the wealth that accompanies “dominus and knighthode” prevents easy entry into heaven, even makes it “impossible” (B.10.336, 341).

But this is learning that Will cannot abide. Aren’t all those baptized, no matter what their status, worthy of heaven? When Scripture denies this, ascribing the privilege of such saving by baptism only to cases “in extremis,” such as converts from other religions—observing that Christians have a responsibility to follow Christ’s law of taking care of their brethren—Will can take no more. “Manye tales ye telleth that Theologie lerep,” he complains, lashing out (B.10.379), “and litel am I þe wiser” (B.10.377). In so doing, he betrays his lack of charity towards his own brethren:

That Salomon seip I trowe be sooþ and certein of vs alle:
Sunt iusti atque sapientes, & opera eorum in manu dei sunt, &c.
ther are wity and wel libbynge ac hire werkes ben yhudden
in þe hondes of almyȝty god, and he woot þe sóþe
wher, for loue, a man wurþ allowed þere and hise lele werkes,
or ellis for his yuel wille and enuye of herte,
and be allowed as he lyued so; for by luþere men knoweþ þe goode.
And wherby wiste men which is whit if alle þyng blak were,
and who were a good man but if þer were som sherewe?
Forþi lyue we forþ wiþ liþere men; I leuefewe ben goode,
For quant ‘opertel’ vient en place il nyad que ‘pati.’
And he þat may al amende haue mercy on vs alle,
for soþest word þat euer god seide was þo he seide Nemo bonus.
(B.10.436-447)


403 “Thanne is Dowel and Dobet,” quod I, “dominus and knythode?” (B.10.336)
404 “Contra!” quod I, “by crist! þat kan I wipseye, / and preuen it by þe pistel þat Peter is nempned: / that is baptizéd þep saaf, þe he riche or pouere” (B.10.349-51).
Will seems capable of admitting his own faults, this outcry reveals, but unwilling to attribute goodness to other people. He will merely tolerate other humans, in so far as their badness will enable him to know the good, recognizing the utility of falseness for understanding what is true in a way that might bring to mind his urgent entreaty to Holy Church at the beginning of passus 2. He still does not yet recognize merit outside of himself. From philosophers to farm workers, Will understands those who have won sainthood and glory only to have done so via special exception—certainly not avoidance of sin or mastery of doctrine. This view motivates uncharitable ignorance of others’ good deeds. Will’s despairing disdain for the learning he so far has accrued, his complaint that Scripture’s teachings seem eminently self-contradictory and unhelpful, ends passus 10.

Undoubtedly, Will’s outcry is too complex to cover completely here. It goes a long way towards dismantling itself, for example, by using examples from the Bible to demonstrate clerical knowledge’s uselessness. Its importance is clear, all the same, as it ends the A-version of the poem. And at least three important facts stand out by the passage’s conclusion. First, Will’s overarching concern is how to come by Dowel, Dobet, Dobest—the happy and blessed life—with all his attention on that salvation and none for the inherent merit of the methods suggested to him for achieving this. Parish priests, he cautions, should conform their words and deeds when discharging their responsibilities to the faithful. Why? Because not to do so would lead to damnation. Second, because clerical knowledge hardly leads to an understanding of God’s ways, it should probably be avoided altogether. Will’s main example here comes from contrasting the lives of such wise men as Solomon and Aristotle with Saints Mary Magdalene and Paul, not to mention Saint Augustine and even Jesus

405 “Yet kneled I on my knees and cried hire of grace, / and seide, ‘mercy, madame, for Marie loue of heuene, / that bar þe blisshed barn þat boursie vs on þe Rode, / kenne me by some craft to knowe þe false’” (B.2.1-4).
himself. *Third*, the complaint of Will to Scripture cues us in to Will’s social vision at this point, in which most of humanity is wicked and should be merely tolerated for its instructional value as to what goodness is *not*. As we have seen, Will here makes a dig at the theological knowledge provided by Scripture; there is, he suggests, no good life—only blessed ignorance—such that only God may choose to save or damn and will do so arbitrarily.

Will’s renunciation of clerical knowledge and scriptural authority, combined with his denial of inherent goodness in any ministry, makes for a brash argument. Will’s basing this argument on Scripture itself seems an especially devastating deconstruction of his previous interlocutors’ claims. It quite notably fails to move Scripture, however, as the beginning to passus 11 shows:

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Thanne Scripture scorned me and a skile tolde,  
and lakke me in latyn and liȝt by me sette,  
and seide, “*Multi multa sciunt et seipsos nesciunt.*”  
Tho wepte I for wo and wraþe of hir speche  
and in a wynkynge worþp til I weex aslepe. (B.11.1-4)
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Will had already been instructed by Dame Studie to abandon the book learning of the sciences in favor of Clergie; now, abandoning clerical learning because of Theology’s apparent inconsistency and complexity—indeed, apparently abandoning the authority of all types of learning and the merits of his fellow human beings along with it—he has no one to rely on at all but himself. Will has doomed himself, at least at this point, to being a total outsider.

As the quotation from the beginning of passus 11 above shows, the poem takes a surprising shift here and causes Will not to wake up but in fact to fall asleep even more deeply than before. The two “inner dreams” or “dreams within a dream” that follow, signalled by what Wittig identified as a quotation from a high-medieval,
pseudo-Bernardine treatise on contempt of self and of the world called the *Meditationes piisimae de cognitione humanae condicionis*, initiate Will’s progress in learning to recognize himself and how he might learn properly to live—a process that will conclude with the vision of charity gestured to by Anima some passūs on. I believe that the inner dreams also add something important to the overall poem’s treatment of how others should be treated and their knowledge employed, despite these inner dreams’ focus (well attested by Wittig, Schmidt, and Simpson among others) on Will’s psychology.\(^{406}\) After all, the “inner dreams” help Will to establish how he should use his own knowledge in making judgments and, as Scripture’s tag from the *Meditationes* suggests, self-knowledge and self-reform should precede the reform of others and even of the world at large.

The first inner dream, coming so closely on the heels of Will’s rather lengthy rebuke of Scripture and concomitant renunciation of all specialized knowledge (especially that of Clergie), quite understandably returns Will to the path he had not taken on the road to Clergie and Scripture’s house. Study had earlier forbidden Will to travel on “the long londe that lecherie hatte,” with its pun on “Langland”; Will recounts that now, however, Fortune has “rauyshed” him into the “lond of longyng” (11.7-8). There, “in a Mirour that hiȝte middelerpe” (B.11.9), Will is allowed to see the sort of life that he could have lived had he not devoted himself so carefully to study, namely a life in which all his desires might receive instant gratification. Fortune’s two daughters, meanwhile, *Concupiscencia carnis* and Coveitise of Eyes, cling to him rather wantonly and promise to stay with him forever (as long, that is, as

\(^{406}\) Wittig’s “Inward Journey” studies are important texts for understanding the role of the inner dreams in the poem’s treatment of Will’s psychology (which Wittig calls “monastic psychology”); see also A. V. C. Schmidt, “The Inner Dreams in *Piers Plowman*,” *M.E. 55* 1 (1986), pp. 24-40. James Simpson’s essay, “From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*,” *M.E 55* 1 (1986), pp.1-23, is also worthwhile for a sense of how Langland’s sense of psychology informs his poetics.
Fortune favors his youth: B.11.12-33). A more enigmatic figure in attendance with these, Will’s “pride of parfit living,” urges Will to think nothing more of the learning he once had sought (11.15-16).

The kind of life of pleasure offered to Will in this first dream seems perfectly nice at first, but as the dream develops it becomes more sinister. Elde, or old age, warns that Fortune and her daughters will one day forsake Will, and with a character named Holynesse mourns that Will should waste his life on ruinous pleasures. Will, too, begins to notice the superficiality of the company he had begun to keep, and criticizes the friar to whom (in lieu of a parish priest) he had been instructed to confess his sins. At this point the dream-narrative shifts again and, with the reintroduction of Scripture and the sudden arrival of the posthumously saved Roman emperor Trajan to the scene, focuses anew on just those questions of salvation and right living that had occasioned Will’s break with authority in the first place. Here a consensus develops that the path through the thickets of apparently conflicting theological lore is love; that books may be useful, but only so long as they have that interpretive key—and only so long as their knowledge leads primarily to the reform of the self. A quotation attributed to pope Gregory the Great (“Melius est scrutari scelera nostra quam naturas rerum”) nicely sums up this central idea, that contempt of self should go before disdain for others (B.11.231). Unlike in the later Haukyn episode, though, the emphasis here is not so much on the self for its own sake as on the self as an alternative to other subjects of knowledge. The first inner dream focuses on showing Will his own weakness for this reason, that he might have some idea of spiritual authority’s proper strength and aims.

The second inner dream, by a fitting contrast, shows Will a view diametrically opposed to his solipsistic view in Fortune’s mirror. If that first vision had exulted in Will’s youth, the blessings of Fortune, the pleasures of lust, and the mastery over all
things accorded to him by virtue of perfect living, this next inner dream approaches in detail and scope the learned panoramas of twelfth-century philosophical poetry and their depictions of all nature as inspired and moved by a divine Ratio incomparably greater in reach than mortal man;

Ac much moore in metynge þus wiþ me gan oon dispute,
and slepynge I seiþ al þis, and sîpen cam kynde
and nempned me by my name and bad me nymen hede,
and þoruþ þe wondres of þis world wit for to take.
And on a mountaigne þat myddelerþe hiȝte, as me þo þouȝte,
I was fet forþ by forbisenes to knowe
thorough ech a creature kynde my creatour to louye.
I seiþ þe sonne and þe see and þe sond after,
and where þat briddes and beestes by hir make þei yeden,
wilde wormes in wodes, and wonderful foweles
wiþ fleckede þeþeres and of fele colours.
Man and his make I myȝte se boþe.
Pouerte and plentee, boþe pees and werre,
blisse and bale boþe I seiþ at ones,
and how men token Mede and Mercy refused.
Reson I seiþ sooþly Mede and in engendrynge of kynde. (B.11.320-336)

The vision continues, enchanting Will with the resplendent marvels of nature that it shows him. Will’s view of the regularity of the earth sours, however, when he notices how Reason carefully orders the life of every other living thing—“rewarded and ruled alle beestes”—but does not moderate the actions of human beings. “[M]any tyme me þouȝte,” he admits, that “no Reson hem ruled, neiþer riche ne pouere” (B.11.370-72).

Like many other observations in the vita, this hardly qualifies as a new one—even, that is, for the narrator. Very early on in the vita, Will had been told that the free will of human beings gave freedom of a sort that no other animal could enjoy. Here, however, Will sees the downside of the disparity. Like the archweeper of Johannes de Hauvilla’s poem, Will could be said to regret his own inability to live according to the divine Ratio. From an ascetic vantage point, one might say that Will regrets himself, or more precisely regrets that the natural world (animals lacking voluntas being not
subject to the will) seems to function so well. I do not think allusion to the
Architrenius or ironic reference to Will’s name beyond Langland’s capacity by any
means, but I also think that the passage’s most important criticism is something else
entirely. The satiric “edge” to Will’s dissatisfaction here is that Will does not weep
over or chastise himself (as ascetic thought would dictate that he should) but instead
chastises Reason and God for making it difficult to be human and to support and learn
on other human beings in turn.

Memorably, of course, and importantly for this chapter, Reason knocks Will
flat for his vain insolence in making that criticism, or indeed any criticism of others,
since Will himself remains so ill-informed:

Thanne I rebukede Reson and riȝt til hym I seyde,
‘I haue wonder in my wit, þat witty art holden,
why þow ne sewest man and his make þat no mysfeet hem folwe.’
And Reson arated me and seide, ‘recche þee neuere
why I suffre or noȝt suffre; þisylf hast noȝt to doone.
Amende þow, if þow myȝt, for my tyme is to abide.
Suffraunce is a souerayn vertue, and a swift vengeaunce.
Who suffreþ moore þan gode?’ quod he, ‘no gome, as I leeue.
He myȝt amende in a Minute while al þat mysstandeþ,
ac he suffreþ for som mannes goode, and so isoure bettre.
Holy writ,’ quod þat wye, ‘wisseþ men to suffre:
Propter deum subjecti estote omni creature.
Frenche men and fre men affaiþe þus hire children:
Bele vertue est suffraunce; mal dire est petite vengeaunce.
Bien dire et bien suffrir fait lui suffrable a bien venir.
Forþi I rede,’ quod reson, ‘þow rule þi tonge bettre,
and er þow lakke my lif loke þyn be to preise.
For is no creature vnder crist can formen hymseluen,
and if a man myȝte make laklees hymself
ech a lif wolde be laklees, leue þow noon oþer.
Ne þow shalt fynde but fewe fayne wolde heere
of hire defeutes foule bfore hem reherced.
The wise and þe witty wroþ þus in þe bible:
De re que te non molestat noli certare.
For be a man fair or foul it falleþ noȝt to lakke
that shap ne þe shaft þat god shoop hymselue,
for al þat he wrouȝt was wel ydo, as holy writ witnesseþ:
Et vidit deus cuncta que fecerat & erant valde bona.
Euery creature in his kynde encresse he bad
al to murþe wip man þat moste wo þolie,
As he considers this rebuke with shame, waking up with a start, Will considers himself to have learned the proper lesson: to “se muche and suffre moore” (B.11.412). But if God may see all, and no one suffer more than He, that still does not entirely answer for Will, really, what Dowel really means—and that had been the motivating search behind all the previous activity in the vita. Dowel, after all, as a term, implies doing. Will’s encounter with yet one more interlocutor, Ymaginatif, provides the answer.

As a mental faculty, “Ymaginatif” was apparently understood in Langland’s era to possess the power of combining images and memories in hindsight. 407 Therefore, not surprisingly, Ymaginatif focuses his remarks on the episode with Reason that had gone immediately before, offering some suggestions to Will on what really was at stake in the dream that occasioned Reason’s rebuke. As Ymaginatif goes on to explain, Will is especially wrong to judge any of his targets so far (Scripture, God, or Reason) negatively based on misunderstanding. Despite serial speakers’ frequent calls for contiguity between inner intentions and outwardly visible actions based on the injunction of “Appare quod es, vel esto quod appareas,” as at B.10.261a, the intentions of others often cannot be known. Ymaginatif proves to be especially critical, as well—as the poem is throughout—of empty appeals to clerical privilege by those who would shirk their proper duties in society. The knowledge often reached

after by clerics, Ymaginatif cautions, amounts to no more than “sapiencia huius mundi”: the wisdom of this world, which is “foolishness to God” (B.12.138a).

A stunning conceit based on the image of a peacock drives home Ymaginatif’s point in passus 12:

Kynde knoweþ whi he dide so, ac no clerk ellis.  
Ac of briddles and of beestes men by olde tyme  
ensamples token and termes, as telleþ þise poetes,  
and þat þe faireste fowele foulest engendreþ,  
and feblest fowele of fliȝt is þat fleeþ or swymmeþ.  
And þat is þe pecok, & þe Pehen wiþ hir proude þeþeres  
biteknew riȝt riche men þat reigne here on erbe.  
For pursue a pecok or a pheyn to cacche,  
they may noȝt flee fer ne ful heȝe neþer;  
for þe trailynge of his tail ouertaken is he soone.  
And his fleȝsh is fowl fleȝsh and his feet boþe,  
and vnlouelich of ledene and loop for to here.  
Right so þe riche, if he his richesse kepe  
and deleþ it noȝt til his deep day, þe taille is al of sorwe.  
Riȝt as þe pennes of þe pecok peyneþ hym in his fliȝt,  
so is possession peyne of pens and of nobles  
to alle hem þat it holdeþ til hir tail be plukked.  
And þouȝ þe riche repente þanne and birewe þe tyme  
that euere he gadered so grete and gaf þerof so litel,  
þhouȝ he crye to crist þanne wiþ kene wil, I leue  
his ledene be in oure lordes ere lik a pies chiteryng,  
and when his caroyne shal come in caue to be buryed  
I leue it flawme ful foule þe fold al aboute,  
and alle þe opere þer it lith enuenymeþ þoruȝ his attre.  
By þe po feete is vnderstande, as I haue lerned in Auynet,  
executours, false frendes, þat fulfille noȝt his Willie  
that was writen, and þei witnesse to werche as it wolde.  
Thus þe Poete preueþ þe pecok for hisse þeþeres;  
so is þe riche reuerenced by reson of hisse goodes. (B.12.235-63)

The wealthy may gain ‘reverence’ because of their ‘goodes,’ but those same goods will prevent their flight just as the peacock’s tail prevents it, too, taking flight. At the end of life, the cries of the rich man for God’s mercy will be little more than the

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408 This statement seems to be a reverse of the proverb, which Langland quotes earlier and in fact uses to conclude his A version, that a “breuis oratio penetrat celum.” For that and other parœmiological analogues see Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi: Lexicon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters, edd. Samuel Singer et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), bd. 4, p. 255 s.v. “Gebet” at 4.2.1.
chattering of a magpie—or, indeed, the hoarse cries of a real peacock, whose calls Ymaginatif recollects a few lines earlier than the passage quoted here. The wretched, ugly feet of the peacock are interpreted here much as feet would occasionally be interpreted by certain medieval religious writers: the ugly feet indicate the inability for the rich man to carry out any plans for his spiritual advance through good deeds thanks to the falseness of those who work as his executors.  

This is not to say, however, as Ymaginatif also explains in this passus, that all clerical knowledge is bad or that pious simple-hearted rustics necessarily receive salvation more easily than avaricious cardinals and bishops. Christ was born poor, yes, but the angels who announced his birth announced it to all classes of society and bade all these to visit the child:

‘To pastours and to poetes appered þe Aungel
and bad hem go to Bethlem goddes burþe to honoure
and songe a song of solas, Gloria in excelsis deo.
Riche men rutte þo and in hir reste were
tho it shon to shepherdes, a shewer of blisse.
Clerkes knewen it wel and comen wiþ hir presentþ
and diden hir homage honurably to hym þat was almyty.
Why I haue told þee al þis, I took ful good hede
how þow contrariest clergie wiþ crabbede wordes,
how þat lewed men liȝtloker þan lettrede were saued,
than clerkes or kynde witted men of cristene peple.
And þow seist most somme, ac se in what manere.
Tak two stronge men and in Themese cast hem,
and boþe naked as a nedle, hir noon sadder þan oþer.
That oon kan konnynge and kan swyymmen and dyuen;
that oþer is lewed of þat labour, lerned neuere swyymme.
Which trowestow of þo two in Themese is in moost drede,
he þat neuere ne dyued ne noȝt kan of swyymmyng,
or þe swyymmere þat is saaf by so hymself like,
ther his felawe fleteþ fortþ as þe flood lykeþ
and is in drede to drenche, þat neuere dide swyymme?’
‘That swyymme kan noȝt,’ I seide, ‘it semþ to my wittes.’

410 See especially the apologia in favor of clerical learning at B.12.92-127. We therefore can see in Ymaginatif’s speech a partial answer to the dilemma over learning that concluded the A-text of Piers, passus 11, and to which the poet in B and C would with obvious dissatisfaction return.
This later image of two men cast naked into the Thames will most immediately remind
the reader of the friars’ earlier boat analogy, although (like the sermon from Thomas
of Chobham on which I have suggested Langland bases the friars’ exemplum) it saves
itself from criticism by discussing the Christian life generally and not the advantages
of being a member of any one particular order or rank. With this exemplum,
Ymaginatif cautions, Will should not scorn the trappings of high clerical status
reflexively, since there are advantages to being educated and ensconced in the
ecclesiastical hierarchy that might not readily appear to an outsider.

As I have attempted to show in this section of the chapter, the issue of how one
might best interact with “others” in society amounts, for Langland, to a question of
knowledge and more specifically communities of learning or of knowledge. Will’s
progress in the vita from interlocutor to interlocutor in his search for “kynde
knowinge” of Dowel, especially given the content of the episodes, suggests of course
that knowledge of how to live “well” (the blessed, proper life) must be grounded in
knowledge the self. Less clear, however, are the implications of such self-knowledge
on one’s interactions with others. Which “others,” one wonders, can provide one with
the best knowledge according to which one might organize one’s earthly life? How,
once one has achieved a special vantage point over society thanks to one’s acquisition
of specialized knowledge, should one use that knowledge to bring others criticism and
reform? As Will’s experience so far in the vita makes clear, to criticize others based
on one’s own authority and knowledge places one in a dangerous position.
To rebuke another based on one’s own assumptions of authority entails the risk of misjudging based on a misappropriation of another’s intentions or qualifications. For this reason, I think, the poem’s main satire in this section focuses on the peacock-like falseness of so many of the clerical estate, with their useless worldly wisdom. It juxtaposes these with Will’s expressions of the belief that he does not need or else completely transcends such knowledge. Dame Study’s rather boilerplate assertion that the true, best sort of knowing about man’s place in the universe should not be tossed like pearls before swine but also cannot be understood without love carries throughout the episode (even though Will seems not to get the message). It also helps us interpret even better Will’s rather strange attitude toward the two friars of passus 8: on the one hand, their lesson cannot entirely be scoffed at, since it leads one to Dowel; on the other hand, Dowel cannot really dwell with them unless they follow the precepts of love.\(^\text{411}\)

One certainly can’t escape the conclusion here that, human knowledge suffering from the weaknesses it does, \textit{Piers Plowman} should encourage Christians to exercise exceptional caution when judging others. As the next sections of this chapter will show, the poem urges far \textit{more} caution than canon law or conventional wisdom (so far as we know it) would have deemed appropriate.

\textit{Christianity and Judging Others: Some Institutional Evidence}

Surely it should not surprise anyone that \textit{Piers Plowman} suggests restraint in judging others, yet the poem’s identity as a work of \textit{satire} makes the question very interesting and worthy of exploration indeed: satire consists, after all, of judgments

\(^{411}\) Recall from Study’s assessment of theology in passus 10 that this highest of the “sciences” has a basis in love, wherefore “for it letep best bi loue I loue it þe bettre,” Study declares; “Loke þow loue lelly if þee likeþ Dowel, / for Dobet and Dobest ben drawen of loues scole” (190-93).
about others. The Bible notably states that human beings should be solicitous of one another even in Genesis, showing Cain’s monstrosity from his question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Later, in Leviticus, the command for humans to love their friends (one another) enters the law. This later command itself enters the Gospels at Matthew 5:38-48, when Jesus translates and builds on it for his followers. As we shall see, the sentiment behind such statements animates Langland’s treatment of the issue in *Piers Plowman*. All the same, Langland focuses on that root principle first (if not exclusively) by considering the issue of proper judgment so problematic for any satirist and especially for a Christian writer. The precise issue of how and when to judge would no doubt have been of some interest to Langland’s readers as well, not because they themselves were also satirists but rather because they would have been interested in the proper conduct of religious life as well. Since as we know episcopal authority regulated the activities of friars, the lives of the laity, and the conduct of priests, it seems suitable to begin with an overview of relevant canon law. It is all the more fitting, of course, given the early attested ownership of *Piers* by priests, to say nothing of evidence about the poet’s “circle” and intended audience internal to the poem.

The so-called *Distinctiones* in Gratian’s twelfth-century *concordia discordantium canonum*, or *Decretum*, seem most relevant to me out of all that monumental corpus of collected canon law, as these tend to focus on the knowledge and behavior proper to a cleric or other officially recognized (thus legislated) member of the church. What we learn here is not surprising, but nonetheless it does bear

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412 Leviticus 19:18: “Seek not revenge, nor be mindful of the injury of thy citizens. Thou shalt love thy friend as thyself. I am the Lord.”

413 My quotations of the *Glossa ordinaria* on Gratian and other front matter are derived from a copy of the Venice edition of 1600 located at the Library of Congress: *Decretvm Gratiani emendatvm, et notationibus ilustratvm, vna cvm glossis Gregorii XIII. Pont. Max. iussu editum, et nunc recens cum additionibus [...] Augustini Caruitæ [...]*. I am grateful to Meredith Shedd-Driskel, Law Curator at the
repeating, since in the Decretum’s discussion of how a cleric should behave it places its discussions along the same axes that Langland seems to in the vita, namely what knowledge a cleric should have and what his relationship to the ecclesiastical hierarchy should be.

The Decretum proves especially helpful for its discussion of clerical knowledge, which takes up a significant of part Gratian’s Distinctiones (DD) 36-43, specifically in the context of the work’s description of what qualities a would-be priest ought to have. These distinctiones, numbered 21 to 101, constitute the so-called “tractatus ordinandorum” or exposition of the rules governing clerical behavior.⁴¹⁴ I limit my inquiry to the small range represented by DD.36-43, which, as a metrical index to the Venice edition of 1600 describes it, imparts the following information (with each line number corresponding to a separate distinction):

36. Instruit hæc prudens quod debeat esse sacrandus.
37. Hæc prohibit legere gentilia metra sacratum.
38. Scripturas sacras sacrandus scire iubetur.
39. Vult hæc Pontifices callere negotia seclí
40. Internís pars dena quater virtutibus ornat.
41. Sit modis ingressu, cunctis, verboque, ciboque.
42. Clericus hospitij peregrinos collocet omnis.
43. Factis et verbis doctor sis, atque pudicus.
44. Vites ingluuiem conuiuia, siue tabernas.
45. Atque caue quenquam palma lingua ve serire.
46. Respuit hæc hominem, distinctio litigiosum.⁴¹⁵

One of the most interesting for examination vis-à-vis Piers Plowman must be D.37, studded with its pronouncements on the value of poetry to the clerical estate. D.37’s

—Law Library Collection Services Division, Law Library of Congress, for giving me access to and allowing me to photograph this material.

⁴¹⁴ This range seems most relevant to Langland’s poem, though we ought to recognize that distinction 35—which declares that a would-be priest must not be “uinolentus,” also echoes Piers Plowman. Holichurch, after all, begins her instructions to Will by reminding him not to overdrink; and, as the Decretum points out with reference Proverbs 20:1, “Lvxoriosa res uinum, & tumultuosa ebrietas, omnis, qui cum his miscetur, non erit sapiens.”

⁴¹⁵ I do not know what “ve serire” might mean in line 45, and I assume that there is a compositor’s error to blame. Carin Ruff has helpfully suggested “palma linguæ sævire,” “to vent one’s rage [...] by means of hand or tongue.”
discussion of education in general, at c.10, seems to trace a trajectory through the
various disciplines quite similar to Will’s in the 
*via*, training in grammar leads to the
ability to read scripture, here, just as (in Langland’s poem) study leads ultimately to an
ability to scrutinize the scriptures:

> Item Ieronimus super epistolam ad Titum. Si quis grammaticam artem
> nouit uel dialecticam, ut recte loquendi rationem habeat, et inter false et
> uera dijudicet, non improbamus. 1. Geometria autem et aritmetica et
> musica habent in sua scientia ueritatem, sed non est scientia illa scientia
> pietatis. Scientia autem pietatis est legere scripturas et intelligere
> prophetas, euangelio credere, apostolos non ignorare. 2. Gramaticorum
> autem doctrina potest proficere ad uitam, dum fuerit in meliores usus
> assumpta.

Just as in *Piers Plowman*, such disciplines as science and math provide instruction and
knowledge but not “scientia illa pietatis,” Theology.\(^{416}\)

The opening capitula of D.37 make several claims to the effect that secular
literature is not to be enjoyed by priests to the exclusion of sacred letters. As canon 2
declares in the words of Jerome, priests who “*omissis euangeliis et prophetcis uidemus*
comedias legere, amatoria bucolicorum uersuum uerba cantare, tenre [sic] Virgilium
[...] *crimen in se facere uoluptatis.*” Yet D.37 c.11 explains one way in which secular
knowledge might be approached by a priest. It refers to the biblical story of the
Hebrew prophet Daniel who, in the land of the Babylonians, like his fellow Jews, “de
mensa et uino regis nolunt comedere, ne polluantur [...]. *Discunt autem, non ut*
sequantur, *sed ut indicent atque convincent [...]*. D.37 ends with capitula (cc) 15 and

\(^{416}\) One might recall Study’s overview of the sciences and “sotil craftes” in opposition to Theology at
passus 11. D.37 c.10 in Gratian’s *Decretum* seems relevant to that passage: “Si quis artem grammatican
nouerit, vel dialecticam, ut rationem recte loquendi habeat, & inter falsa & vera dijudicet, non
improbamus. Geometria quoque, & aritmetica, & musica habent in sua scientia veritatem: sed non est
scientia illa, scientia pietatis. Scientia pietatis est noesse legem, intelligere prophetas, Euangelia credere,
Apostolos non ignorare. Gramaticorum autem doctrina etiam potest proficere ad vitam, dum fuerit in
meliores vsus assumpta.” The gloss clarifies that in its reference to geometry that “quadritiales scientiae
veritatem in se habent: sed non sunt scientie pietatis, & assumende. Sed vetus & nouum testimonia sunt
scientie pietatis, & assumende, & grammatica in bonos vsus assumpta proficere potest. De astronomia
non facet mentionem: quia hec abijt in desuetudinem, ut 26.q.2.5. his ita.”
16. The first presents a quotation attributed to Isidore of Seville in chapter 13 of his Sentences ("de summo bono"), arguing strongly that "prohibetur Christianus legere figmenta poetarum, quia per oblectamenta fabularum nimium mentem excitant ad incentiuina libidinum," to which Gratian responds with a dictum of presumably helpful intended synthesis:

Ut itaque ex premissis auctoritatibus apparat, inperitia sacerdotibus semper debet esse aduersa, quoniam, cum per ignorantium ceinati aliis ducatum prestare ceperint, ambo in foueam cadunt; unde dicitur in Psalmo: 'Obscurantur oculi eorum, neuideant, et dorsum eorum semper incurua.' Cum enim obscurantur illi, que preuent, ad ferenda onera peccatorum facile sequentes inclinatur. Elaborandum est itaque sacerdotibus, ut ignorantiam a se quasi quandam pestem abiciant. Licet enim seruus nesciens uoluntatem domini sui, et non faciens, dicatur uapulare paucis, non tamen hoc de omnibus generaliter intelligitur. Ut enim ait Apostolus 'Qui ignorant, ignorabitur.' Quod de eo intelligendum est, 'quo noluit intelligere, ut bene ageret.' [...]

Knowledge is, as D.38 will make clear, of the utmost importance to the priest. But Will’s interlocutors mainly express annoyance at ignorance of canons and liturgical books, familiarity with which the Decretum also finds most important. D.38 c.12 makes a point of urging scholars—"scolastici"—not to look down upon "ecclesiasticam simplicitatem"; but even here the "simplicitatem" absolutely must not refer to utter ignorance so much as a different culture of learning and dissemination of knowledge. D.38 c.10 quotes Gregory the Great’s Moralia in Job to claim that "Qui ea, que Dei sunt sapiunt, a Domino sapiuntur, et qui ea, que Dei sunt, nesciunt, a Domino nesciuntur."

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417 Apparently with great satisfaction after these and similar arguments, Gratian’s 39th distinctio turns to the issue of a cleric’s potential business (negotium) in the secular world by declaring, "ecce," that "plenarie monstratum est, quod sacerdotes oportet literarum tam sacrarum quam secularium esse peritos."

418 Paul Hyams informs me, in fact, that the admonition addresses twelfth-century scholarly sophisticates not to disdain canonically relevant writings from the ninth century. On the "culture of learning" and its varieties in the Middle Ages, cf. Jean Leclercq’s bright differentiation between scholastic and monastic writing at the beginning of L’Amour des Lettres and passim.
But statements such as these in D.38—and there are many more—only serve as a gloss on the great generalization that ends D.37 c.16, with its warning that “Non omnis ignorans est immunis a pena.” Rather, as the canon goes on to clarify, ignorance only provides an excuse (for it must, some time) where no opportunity to gain knowledge has been given. Those who have simply ignored putting into practice what they have had a chance to learn are liable. This statement (only in context solely applicable to clerics) obviously has extraordinary relevance to Piers Plowman, which, though it ended its A-version with a despairing claim that the simplest of Christians may “percen with a paternoster þe paleys of heuene,” launches in the B and C texts a wide-ranging exploration of how learning (though sometimes a rather bitter fruit) can lead to the salvation of Christian perfection rather than the ignominy of a prideful, Luciferian, fall.  

It follows at very least that Langland, if he did not make direct use of the Decretum, did concern himself with the problem of clerical knowledge not just from his own possibly idiosyncratic experience but also in line with the guidelines of ecclesiastical authority. And once we admit that the Decretum can provide worthwhile commentary on Langland’s views about clerical knowledge, it naturally follows that the Decretum’s pronouncements on clerical behavior based on specialized knowledge can usefully help to explain—or at least contextualize—Langland’s.  

After all, even if Langland were totally unfamiliar with the Decretum and happened to disagree with

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419 The reader is directed to the chapter’s opening synopsis, especially concerning Yimaginatif, above.  
420 Did Langland actually know Gratian? I would not make an unqualified claim. In the first place, the status of canonical works such as the Decretum in medieval England has been a matter of long debate; see for example Charles Donahue, “Roman Canon Law in the Medieval English Church: Stubbs vs. Maitland Re-Examined after 75 Years in the Light of some Records from the Church Courts” in Michigan Law Review 72 (1974), pp. 647-716. Donahue noted (even “after 75 years”) that “precisely how [papal collections] were authoritative [in the English ecclesiastical courts] may still be regarded as an open question”—a question that Stubbs himself had asked (653, emphasis mine). As such, would Langland have needed to know Gratian? And yet Kerby-Fulton, in her plenary lecture to the 2010 International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo, has observed in line with other scholars that Langland and other late-medieval poets in Middle English (most definitely Hoccleve) had been employed as clerks and scribes of texts including canon law.
all canonical wisdom (as we can see that he does not), the guidelines explained in its *tractatus ordinandorum* would have influenced the thought and behavior of many of his clerical contemporaries—certainly a major part of his intended audience (and so Lawlor and Vaughan, despite some differences, have agreed).\(^{421}\)

The *Decretum*’s rules according to which a cleric may go about (1) openly criticizing his superiors, (2) openly criticizing the church, and in (3) openly criticizing others are obviously of special interest here.\(^{422}\) In the limited range of *distinctiones* to which I have already drawn the reader’s attention in this chapter, D.40 makes the strongest claims relevant to the just use of ecclesiastical authority, pointing out that a priest’s office does not hold him above others so much as it holds him to a higher standard—a matter that Craun, among scholars of Middle English, has also explored.\(^{423}\) For this reason it seems apposite that *capitulum* 2 of the *distinctio* observes how “*non est facile stare in loco Petri et Pauli et tenere cathedram regnantium cum Christo.*” Indeed, as a host of following *capitula* claim, a priest or other ecclesiastical figure only gains authority by the rectitude of his life and not the


\(^{422}\) The *Decretum* discusses these matters in the closest practical detail in the series of “*Cause*” (a series of constructed hypothetical cases on which Gratian poses *questiones*) that make up the work’s second part (see for instance the first three *Causes*), but because of their practicality and the constraints of time they might not necessarily shed light on the current study; any in-depth investigation of these *vis-à-vis* *Piers Plowman*, in any case, will have to wait for later.

\(^{423}\) See e.g. c.1, “Offitium sacerdotii non confert, sed adimit [= takes away], licentiam delinquendi.” Edwin D. Craun’s work on “fraternal correction” as it appears in Langland and elsewhere has notably led the pack by drawing the attention of Middle English specialists on how a high-ranking cleric might respond to criticism from lower-status individuals. See Craun’s “‘5e by Peter and by Poull’: Lewte and the Practice of Fraternal Correction,” *YLS* 15 (2001), pp. 15-25 (with responses by David C. Fowler and Lawrence M. Clopper following on pp. 26-29 and 30-32 respectively)—and now also Craun’s book, *Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Gratian’s *Decretum* sheds light on his findings, too, with D.38 c.16 quoting a letter by Pope Clement to declare that “nullus episcopus propter obprobrium senectutis uel nobilitalatem generis a paraulis uel minimis eruditis, si quid forte est utilitatis aut salutis, inquirerere neglectat,” lest he be thought “rebeller.” At the same time, as D.42 c.3 declares, “verba predicitionis persecutoribus suis prelati non subtrahant.” This sort of teaching and admonishment obviously does not extend to actual litigation, as C.2 q.7 (*et sim.*) in the second part of the *Decretum* helps make clear.
status of his position, his wealth, or his birth; he should thus conduct his own life with moderation (c. 5 for instance) and treat others with equal hospitality—even the poor, with whom a bishop should not feel ashamed to dine (D.40 c. 7 and D.42 c. 1). His life and not his titles give him his place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as D.40 makes clear.424

All the above, it needs recognizing, need to be read in light of the much more general legal theory presented earlier in the Decretum. Starting especially at capitula 4, distinctio 21 declares in no uncertain terms that judgments are to pass from higher to lower figures in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and not the other way around.425 The Decretum further explains this top-down system in the next distinctio on analogy with the privileged status enjoyed by Rome among the author patriarchates (such as Constantinople): judgments cannot pass from lower to higher elements since authority, also, moves from the higher central portions of the hierarchy outward and downward.426 One refrains from passing judgment on one’s superiors or indeed the central administration of the Church because one lacks the authoritative standing to do so. Reproof in any case should be gentle, benevolent, non-injurious physically.427 And it should also be patient and delivered in moderation: a cleric placed in the position of critiquing others should not be “litigiosus” or think, modo rusticorum, “garrulitatem

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424 D. 40, esp. e. 12; see also C.2 q. 7, cc. 33-34. Cf. Langland’s B.11.290-317 and its discussion of dubious ordination—a digression for which the speaker apologizes.

425 For questions of judgments and complaints communicated between the clerical estate and various grades of the laity, one will have to refer to the Causa in the Decretum’s second part.

426 D.22; cf. D.21 cc 1-3. Though to my knowledge Gratian does not mention this, the angelic hierarchy was thought similarly to be disposed. See for one fascinating and edifying example Paul Rorem’s work on John Scotus Eriugena’s commentary and translation of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s work on the “celestial hierarchy,” the Expositiones in Ierarchiam celestem Iohannis Scoti Eriugena (Eriugena’s Commentary on the Dionysian Celestial hierarchy [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2005]).

427 D.45.
Will discovers the necessity for a would-be critic to rely on patient authority after his rebuke of Scripture launches him into the first of his “inner dreams.”

_Piers Plowman_ unquestionably recognizes basic premises (also set out in the _Decretum_) concerning the proper judgment of others—no matter how Langland might have encountered these. This fact explains the _vita_’s repeated calls to refrain from making aggressive verbal attacks about others’ ethical standing or sanctity in light of official hierarchies, precepts, and models for dispute. Yet the poem far more aggressively promotes the Bible’s “evangelical counsels” or “counsels of perfection”—to turn the other cheek—than to follow even the fairest, best-regimented process for seeking justice.429

Canonical statues, strictures, and other recommendations derive the authority of their opinions from various sources, such as collections of papal decretals, but one of the most primary sources of authority for such theory in every way must be the Bible. The Langland at least considers this to be so stands out clear fro the prominent place that Study accords to Scripture in the _vita_.430 Of biblical passages on the proper

428 D.46. I have not yet had a chance to consult the possibly related D.93, though the Venice edition of 1600 at least declares that it concerns “obeditia minorum erga maiores, & quod nullus debet communicare inimicis Romanae Ecclesiae.”

429 See Paul R Hyams, _Rancor & Reconciliation in Medieval England_ (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), which glosses the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Matthew 5:29-48. Hyams observes that “seeking justice through process of law,” in the *Glossa*, “is not more than a first step available to the uncultivated _rudes_ unable to reach beyond it to the fuller justice of the Gospels, whose goal is salvation and which dictate nonresistance to evil. All Christians, laymen included, should not only not retaliate against their enemies; they should bear their injuries patiently, as Christ and the saints had before them.” (45) He adds that “[t]his counsel of perfection permits _vindicta_ to be administered to wrongdoers for their correction by someone without anger in authority”—which strikes me as a loophole designed to admit action at court—but notes its limited success some pages later in commenting upon Thomas of Chobham’s “deep suspicion of litigation,” especially for “perfecti (monks, friars, and perhaps secular clergy too), held to a higher standard.” (55) As I note below, Langland’s Lewtee seems to acknowledge the one process of legal denunciation that Chobham did find admitted for _perfecti_—given sanction by the Gospels. But Langland seems uncertain about even this, at least for “persons and preestes and prelates of holy chirche” (B.11.98).

430 There, Scripture is possessed of an immense authority in the same base text for that highest service of theology, which it is important to recognize was the prestige discipline of the day in the way that
treatment of others that Langland could have known, the injunction from Luke 6:37—
to “judge not, and ye shall not be judged” (*nolite indicare, & non indicabimini*)—
holds pride of place together with “Judge not, that you may not be judged” (*nolite indicare, ut non judicemini*) in Matthew 7:1. As in Langland’s poem, this pronouncement or critique of others appears in connection with discussion of Christian knowledge in the Gospel chapter, too, which also contains the injunction so avidly cited by Study to not throw pearls before swine.432

Of course it is tempting to try to read every episode in light of the “*nolite indicare*” injunction, and I do not deny that to do so would be rewarding. I do worry that such an exercise would be tendentious and nearly interminable, however, and so wish here to reference quickly just a few cases that might be expanded upon later as necessity and clarity warrant. In the first, the figure of Lewtee lectures Will on the propriety of “fraternal correction” (the term Craun uses) citing “*nolite indicare*”; in the second, Patience bids Will to be quiet during his dinner with the “doctor of divinity”; in the third, Anima claims to “lakke no lif.” After touching on these, simply to show as transparently as possible how the issue of judgment gets developed by each in turn, I would like to return to Will’s conflicts with Scripture and Reason and the lessons of Ymaginatif.

Will’s interactions with Lewtee are probably most important here and so deserve their pride of place, as that character—appearing pivotally between Will’s “inner dreams” after Will’s dismissive outburst against and subsequent banishment by Scripture—provides a set of rules, as it were, for judgment of others. But Lewtee appears, unfortunately, as a dismayingly ambiguous figure whose exact nature and

“rocket science” proverbially is in ours (requiring the maximum amount of university training for a doctorate in it to be awarded).


432 Biblical commentaries, which I hope to explore more thoroughly at a later date, note that one should not judge others *temerarie* or “rashly.”
intellectual- or literary-historical resonances scholars are still attempting to trace.\textsuperscript{433} We can be certain at least that his appearance at the end of Will’s first “inner dream” comes about in response to Will’s disillusioned lecturing of a friar who had been attempting to serve as his confessor.\textsuperscript{434} Friars, Will had been declaiming, only care to hear confessions and to bury the dead in order to receive financial gain; baptism, still apparently a prerogative of the parish churches into whose territory friars insistently encroach, has more merit as a sacrament and forgives sins as well—yet because of its relative unprofitability has not been coveted by the friars nearly as much. This is a bold criticism of the friars, yet even as Will makes it Lewtee appears and comments on it:

And lewtee louȝ on me for I loued on þe frere;
‘Wherefore loureystow?’ quod lewtee, and loked on me harde.
‘If I dorste,’ quod I, ‘amonges men þis metels auowe!’
‘Sis, by Peter and by Poul!’ quod he and tok hem boþe to wîtesse:
\textit{Non oderis fratres secrete in corde set publice argue illos}.
‘They wolde aleggen also,’ quod I, ‘and by þe gospel preuen:
\textit{Nolite iudicare quemquam.}’
‘And whereoþ sereȝ lawe,’ quod lewtee, ‘if no lif vndertoke it Falsnesse ne faite reie? for somewhat þe Apostle seide
\textit{Non oderis fratrem.}
And in þe Sauter also seþ dauid þe prophete Existimasti inque quod ero tui similis &c.
It is \textit{licettum} for lewed men to legge þe soþe
If hem likeþ and lest; ech a lawe it graunteþ,
Excepte persons and preestes and prelates of holy chirche.
It falþe noȝt for þat folk no tales to telle
Thouȝ þe tale were trewe, and it toucht synne.
Þyng þat al þe world woot, wherefore sholdestow spare
To reden it in Retorik to arate dedly synne?
Ac be þow neueremoore þe firste þe defaute to blame;
Thouȝ þow se yuel seye it noȝt first; be sory it nere amended.
Thyng þat is pryue, publice þow it neuere;
Neþer for loue louue it noȝt ne lakke it for enuye:
\textit{Parum laude, vitupera parcius.} (B.11.84-106a)

\textsuperscript{433} I am aware that Conrad van Dijk of the University of Western Ontario has been doing work on this and related concepts (e.g. equity). Nicollette Zeeman also provides some helpful bibliography in her discussion. See “The Condition of Kynde,” in \textit{Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall}, ed. David Aers (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 1-30.

\textsuperscript{434} See B.10.61-83 for the episode, which follows Will’s abandonment by Fortune upon meeting with Elde.
It is hard at first reading, or even at third or fourth, to tell exactly what is at stake in Lewtee and Will’s exchange here. Obviously it regards the propriety of Will’s criticizing the friar, and the poet quite cleverly introduces quotations here that acknowledge that by playing between the narrow and wider senses of the word *frater* (Friar versus brother).\(^{435}\) But the passage’s wit extends even further, and to acknowledge that wit will probably aid in a better understanding of the exchange.

The primary engine of the wittiness that I’ve observed is the very situation that gives the dialogue rise: a debate, in a poem which by its very nature judges others, on whether or not judging others is ever right. Will has just been openly criticizing a friar and now stares glowering at him, when Lewtee appears with a laugh and asks him why he glowers. He has been wondering, we immediately learn, whether or not he should make his differences with the friar publicly known or not—but of course, being part of the poem already, the public’s knowledge has been assured! Lewtee, as Craun’s fine article has shown, argues for “fraternal correction” of the sort indicated by the first of the Scriptural tags, viz. “Do not revile *fratres* secretly in your heart, but publicly dispute with them” \(^{436}\) Will’s somewhat dour response is that the friars themselves would prefer not to be publicly disputed, and would rely on the precept to not judge “anyone” in order to press that case.\(^{437}\) But not judging anyone, as Lewtee’s rejoinder points out, utterly vitiates the whole purpose of law if carried to its

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\(^{435}\) Alfond notes in his *Guide to the Quotations*, p. 72, that Langland makes the original “fratrem” plural “to apply to the friars. The verse is commonplace in antumendicant writings,” he adds, as Scase’s study (on the poem and “the new anticlericalism”) shows. See *Piers Plowman: a Guide to the Quotations*. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies 77 (Binghamton: SUNY Binghamton, 1992), p. 72.

\(^{436}\) There was a process for this, outlined in canon law: the *demniciatio evangelica* (so named from its basis in Matthew 18:15-17. The process, which seems to have influenced English “equity” proceedings, is explained by Helmut Coing in “English Equity and the Demniciatio Evangelica of the Canon Law,” *Law Quarterly Review* 71 (1955), pp. 223-41. The development of the process finds a good exposition by Charles LeFebvre in the *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, vol. 5, coll. 557-69, s.v. “Evangelique (Dénonciation).”

\(^{437}\) *Quemquam* is not a direct quotation from the Gospel passage in question.
extreme; take away the ability to admonish and correct others, and what then do you have? It is true, Lewtee adds, that Paul had handed down the precept—but, Lewtee continues, “David the Prophet” also declared that it would be a mistake for anyone to believe that unjust acts might go unpunished.438

At this point, the problem of to what extent Will might judge (though of course for readers of the poem he has been judging plenty already) becomes more difficult with Lewtee’s explanation. Lewtee observes that “ech a lawe”—both laws, temporal (Roman) law and spiritual (capitula) law—allow non-clerics, “lewed” men, to “legge þe sope” or stand up for the truth (B.11.96). The poem had presented Will as something of a cleric, however, and in the past seemed to accord to clerics the sole status with lofty enough vantage to properly judge others. Holy Church’s first words to Will, overlooking the fair field, make that lofty status quite evident, but other interlocutors’ criticisms of Will’s judgments, as well as canon law as we have seen, have questioned it.

What Lewtee presents as useful clarification throws the entire structure into uncertainty of what the right path may be at exactly the moment in which Will most suffers from such doubt. Moreover, Lewtee’s judgment on judging others seems also to question the value of literature as a vehicle for such criticism—again, ironically to read in a poem. The passage seems to find fault not only with “persons and preestes and prelates of holy chirche” who challenge and attempt to correct others but also their doing so with “tales to telle.” Even if “þe tale were true”—even fiction that “touched synne”—why “reden it in Retorik?” These and the following injunctions to “persons and preestes and prelates” to keep mum about scandals that they might encounter,

438The line quoted, “Existimasti inique,” comes from Psalm 49:21, the first line of which—“these things didst thou do, and I was silent” might be important for what it could might indicate about Langland’s understanding of religious silence.
since “it falleþ noȝt for þat folk no tales to telle,” implicate Will as some sort of cleric himself.

Nevertheless, the poem does not conclude here with a shudder and blush of shame for being a poem containing satire. Lewtee’s last word on the propriety of fraternal correction is a Stoic-sounding quotation, attributed to Seneca, declaring that one should be sparing in praise and even more sparing in blame.\(^{439}\) When Scripture chimes in at this point with a leap of joy into the air out of agreement with Lewtee’s assessment that clerics should not judge, Will seems to cast himself again in the role of a “lewed” man, as much as agreeing with Scripture and Lewtee that clerics should be careful of what they allow the “lewed” to hear. But, again oddly, he does so by expressing his own misgivings about Scripture’s telling tales—this time a perfectly orthodox recounting of the parable at Matthew 22:14, which seems to indicate the arbitrariness of all these restrictions on judgment:

> ‘He seip soop,’ quod Scripture þo, and skipte an heiʒ and preched. 
> Ac þe matere þat she meued, it lewed men it knewe, 
> þe lasse, as I leue, louyen þei wolde 
> The bileue of oure lord þat lettred men tcheþ. 
> This was hir teme and hir text—I tok ful good hede— 
> ‘Multi to a mangerie and to þe mete were sompned, 
> And whan þe peple was plener comen þe porter vnpynnd þe yate 
> And plukked in Pauci pryueliche and feet þe remenaunt go rome.’ 
> Al for tene of hir text trembled myn herte, 
> And in a weer gan I wexe, and wiþ myself to dispute 
> Wheiþer I were chosen or noȝt chosen […] 
> (B.11.107-107)

In light of predestination, what does it matter who tells a tale or refrains from doing so? Moreover, Langland seems implicitly to argue, if Scripture can decrease faith by recounting Scripture in orthodox sermonic style (having a “teme” and “texte”) then perhaps poetry can increase faith even when it indulges in satire.

\(^{439}\) “parum lauda; vitupera parcius,” a variant of “laua parce, vitupera parcius” or “praise sparingly, and blame more rarely still” as I might translate it: B.11.106a.
That said, my reading of the scene must be contrasted to Nicolette Zeeman’s. It diverges significantly from mine, seemingly because Zeeman assumes that “Wil” [sic] does not enjoy any clerical status when he speaks. I agree that he has distanced himself from the ecclesiastical hierarchy enough to speak as an outsider both to the wider Church and to the religious orders. He speaks explicitly against the benefits said to derive from clerical learning, for instance. Moreover, he also reproves friars for being overly clever—for seeking to hear confessions, when it would be better for them to baptize. In speaking out against them, though, he exhibits his own clerical learning. This learning is presented as having come from thought, wit, and study. It has also increased under the tutelage of Clergie and Scripture. Certainly Will and Scripture have had a disagreement at this point. Nevertheless, Scripture’s disagreement with Will has not led her to banish Will from her presence entirely. Instead, with the incipit of an ascetic treatise often presented in manuscripts as a work “de interiori homini,” Scripture’s rebuke leads Will into further (inner) instructive dreams. Will’s squabble with friars appears there, and needs to be recognized in that context.

Zeeman writes, however, even though Will as narrator also continues to speak of the lewed as a demographic not his own, that Will “contrast[s] himself to the lettred [friars in B.11.83].” Moreover, she continues,

Wil [sic] draws support from natural sources, the non-theological virtue of lewte and the secular literary modes of satire. Influentially associated by Kean with loving adherence to the law and defined as ‘justice in a wide sense,’ Lewtee implies the accessibility of the law and the possibility of an accord between natural rectitude, natural observation, and the need for natural forthrightness of speech. Lewtee makes clear his affiliations with a secular literary tradition of moral satire and Retorik (B.11.96-102). Even Lewtee’s allusion to the requirement that priests keep confessions secret argues for lay people speaking out. Lewtee brings together the laity, kynde morality, kynde understanding, and kynde textuality. When at the end of the narrative Scripture makes a much more terrifying moral and eschatological proposition—in the kynde and accessible form of a biblical social
exemplum—Wil is ready to understand at least its moral implications and how they apply to himself. [...] [When hearing the exemplum.] Wil recognises the application of moral categories, first to others, then to himself.440

It could be that Lewte’s uncertain instructions to Wil—to act in one way if one of the “persons and preestes and prelates of holy chirche,” another way if he is plainly “lewed”—make best sense as more working-through of Will’s options, as a poet for instance, should he upon waking further embrace or reject a clerical career whose certainty of succeeding, according to R. B. Dobson and T. A. R. Evans, would have been a matter in the late fourteenth century for doubt.441 Ymaginatif alludes to Lewte in a way that accords with my interpretation here, describing how to “[do] as lewte techeb” might mean various things depending on one’s profession (B.12.32).

441 On the highly uncertain prospects for clerical employment in Langland’s era see for example R. B. Dobson, chapter 13: “The Religious Orders, 1370-1540,” in History of the University of Oxford, edd. J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans, vol. 2: Late Medieval Oxford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 539-79, detailing from pp. 567-69 the on-again-off-again variability of university study by members of the religious orders. “[F]ew of the late medieval religious now best remembered for their contributions to theological debate were able to become permanent figures on the Oxford scene,” he writes (568). As for the likelihood of obtaining ecclesiastical preferment instead of a scholarly position, T. A. R. Evans notes a severe shortage of “available benefices” from the late fourteenth century onward (537), such that “[t]he difficulties of scholars in finding benefices were echoed in the poems of Audelay and Hoccleve [and] of course voiced in particular by the clergy themselves” (534). Universities did make strong efforts to promote their graduates with letters, alumni outreach, and policymaking (533ff). They also created “minor positions [that] may have tided a man over while he was a student, or may perhaps have provided the first stage in the establishment of connections which could lead to more substantial preferment[,] though they must themselves have been [...] the ultimate destination in the careers of many university men. (536). In sum, “[m]en trained in the university were not guaranteed a place even as the rector of a parish, and competition for these benefices may have become stiffer in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (533), not least because “it was not until the later sixteenth or early seventeenth century that the parish clergy of England came to be trained predominantly in the universities” (538), corresponding with which facts “[p]reliminary investigations suggest that the number of men ordained priest in English dioceses fell dramatically in the second half of the fourteenth century” (537). “[I]t is possible,” Evans suggests, “that a rising proportion of men with a university education were seeking non-clerical careers” (538). In this situation, circumstances might well have compelled Langland to remain a poet—and to present his narrator, Wil, as only anomalously clerical. (Evans’ essay is chapter 12: “The Number, Origins, and Careers of Scholars” in the History of the University of Oxford 2, pp. 485-538.) On the actual lives of the beneficed clergy, as opposed to satric caricatures such as Langland’s in the portrait of Sloth, see Nicholas Bennett, “Pastors and Masters: the Beneficed Clergy of North-East Lincolnshire, 1290-1340,” in The Foundations of Medieval English Ecclesiastical History: Studies Presented to David Smith, edd. Philippa Hoskin, Christopher Brooke, and Barrie Dobson, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion 27 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), pp. 40-62.
Another rather central episode involving the propriety of judging others also occurs in relation to the friars, this time in passus 13 at Patience’s banquet with a prestigious fraternal “doctor of divinity”; and here, too, the poem contrasts preaching with open confrontation. The friar, Will knows, had been preaching even at Saint Paul’s in London about the necessity of deprivation and suffering for a Christian to be confident that he was faithfully following of the way of Christ—but here at this dinner, at which everyone else finds himself eating verses of penitential psalms and other rather gristly textual fare, the friar gluts himself on such real delicacies as “mortrewes and potages.” Will, empassioned more than ever before to anger, mutters to himself about the injustice just loudly enough for Patience to hear; Patience, especially true to the post-medieval meaning of his name, urges patience. Will continues to boil inside, despite this sound advice. He even wishes fervently that the fine dishes that so artlessly cram the friar’s mouth could at once transform to “molten lead in his mawe and Mahoun amyddes,” reserving to the friar a death similar to but more ignominious than the execution visited upon Crassus (B.13.83). Not surprisingly, then, Will does angrily address—but no sooner has he begun to do so than Patience restrains Will with a hard and significant glance. Will should not judge the friar, Patience ultimately explains, because the punishment stemming naturally from the friar’s overindulgence will visit itself upon him in due course with horrible (albeit rightful) indigestion. That punishment will likely prove more instructive than any chastizing words, Patience suggests.

442 For the menu, see B.13.34-63. As Gratian points out at D.41 c.2, “non cibus, sed appetitus in culpa est.” The doctor’s drinking heartily mid-sentence, and the indigestion he will feel thereafter according to Patience, shows though that “appetitus” is also an issue here. Langland’s depiction of the two different meals served at the dinner also appears to allude to how “cibus” might reflect the diner’s social status—in an interesting recollection of classical dinner satires, such as Juvenal 5 and Horace Bk. 2, satire 8.
Two conclusions follow from Will’s interlocutors’ urging him not to judge.
Unlike in canon law, in which certain social and hierarchical arrangements—
arrangements of polity—need to be observed, Will is urged to “lakke no lif”
(B.11.210). Anima also, at 15.249, also claims to “lakke no lif.” No one should
begrudge the division of society into various groups, these characters say. Instead, one
should if anything scrutinize how each member of a social group comports himself.
The second conclusion, drawing on an exemplum Langland’s poem also quotes
approvingly, is that it is far better to allow individuals to discover the error of their
own ways: a drunk, fallen into a ditch, will learn more from waking up in the ditch
than from being dragged away from it just before he would have fallen in. Here, too,
the poem displays a cunning awareness of its likely but not necessarily clerical
audience, with the narrator coyly interlarding his scriptural tags against false
“brethren” (in the manner, even, of William of St. Amour) with a feigned care not to
reveal to the “lewed” his indulgence in this most common type of anticlerical (inter-
clerical) satire.443

Another interesting test case for how one should or should not judge others in
the poem occurs at passus 15, in Anima’s speech, a major portion of which concerns
the limitation of worldly learning proper to a cleric. With a long quotation from
[pseudo-] John Chrysostom, provided untranslated in Latin, it ostentatiously and
firmly closes off some of its most trenchant interclerical criticism from uneducated
ears. The problem that Anima points to, of course, is exactly what triggers that long
speech—first to Will, but soon cycling out into a lecture against the entire clerical
establishment: the hypocritical disjunction of outer sanctity and inner sin presented
earlier by Haukyn (thereby Will). But while the authoritative quotation from

443 On the legacy of William of St. Amour, see most prominently Penn R. Szütya’s Antifraternal
Chrysostom arises out of and folds back into comical and even biting criticism against “preestes” and their ilk for such hypocrisy, its uncompromising depiction of the entire Church as unhealthy and dying because of these clerics cannot be seen by the entire Church. What comes across without the Latin is a criticism vivid but not authoritative, instead: an almost comical depiction of clerical fops who care for beer more than breviaries. (B.15.110-28)

Throughout the vita, the poem sets up as a major problem the danger that criticism might be voiced where unnecessary or even harmful, urging a discretion purely in line with scriptural and canonical teachings. These scriptural and canonical teachings do, as earlier indicated, allow for clerical figures to be aware of secular writings of all sorts—of the good, to take them up as part of the “spoils of the Egyptians,” and of the bad to know what to avoid. They also constrain criticism between leaders in the ecclesiastical hierarchy such as bishops and the people (clerical and lay) under their charge to regulated channels.

But Gratian’s Decretum, for one, cannot explain the emphasis on absolute silence we so often find in Piers, since the silence urged in the Decretum is silence maintained almost solely out of respect for higher authorities. It is telling, I think, that in the one clear place that the Decretum urges a cleric to be quite vocal about the corruption of his brethren outside of preaching (and urges him certainly not to be “a bono taciturnus,” which can be of greater harm) it refers to a figure who has no temporal overlords.444 Not to praise the good or blame the bad leads untold legions of

444 See D.40 c.6, according to which “Dampnatur Apostolicus, qui suæ et fraternæ salutis est negligens”: “Si Papa suæ et fraternæ salutis negligens reprehenditur inutilis et remissus in operibus suis, et insuper a bono taciturnus, quod magis officit sibi et omnibus, nichilominus innumerabiles populos ceteratim secum ducit, primo mancipio gehennæ cum ipso plagis multis in eternum uapulaturus. Huius culpas istic redarguere presumit mortalium nullus, quia cunctos ipse indicaturus a nemine est iudicandus, nisi reprehendatur a fide deuius; pro cuius perpetuo statu universitas fidelium tanto instantius orat, quanto suam salutem post Deum ex illius incolumitate animaduertunt propensius pendere.”
people towards hell as with a chain. It is true that, where the question of judging or correcting one’s equals or subordinates comes into play, even the Decretum urges a cleric to make use of words of reproof (and not to change his message out of fear of secular persecution, according to D.40 c.3). Yet silence is most useful and even lavishly to be praised for lesser clerics to employ, as the long first capitula of distinctio 43 argues. Nevertheless, this silence will not work if the (e.g.) priest being silent does not also—however discretely and cautiously—make use of corrective words. I provide the Latin for the passage followed directly by a translation, because its length forbids either from being placed in footnote form:


Unde Gregorius in XV. capitulo [Part. II.] sui Pastoralis [c. 4.] ait:

C. I. De discretionem predicationis, et silentii.

Sit rector discretus in silentio, utilis in uerbo, ne aut tacenda proferat, aut proferenda reticescat. Nam sicut incauta locutio in errorem pertrahit, ita indiscretum silentium hos, qui erudi fuerint, in errorem derogat. Sepe narmque rectores improprii, humanam amittere gratiam formidantes, loqui libere recta pertimescent, et iuxta seriatam uocem nequaquam iam gregis custodiæ pastorum studio, sed merce uerba non deseriunt, quia ueniente lupo fugiunt, dum se sub silentio abscondunt. Hinc namque eos per Prophetam Dominus increpans ait in Ysaia: “Canes muti, non ualentes latrare.” Hinc rursus queritur dicens in Ezechiele: “Non ascendistis ex aduero, neque opposuitis murum pro domo Israel, ut stareis in prelio in die Domini.” Ex aduero quippe ascendere est pro defendione gregis uoce libera huius mundi potestatibus contraire. Et in die Domini in prelio stare est pruus decertantibus ex iustitiae amore resistere. Pastori enim recta timuisse dicere, quid est alius quam tacendo terga prebuisse? qui nimirum, si pro grege se obicit, murum pro domo Israel hostibus opponit. Hinc rursus delinquenti populo dicitur in Hieremia: “Prophetæ tui uiderunt tibi falsa et stultæ, nec aperiebant inquietatem tuam, ut te ad penitentiam prouocarent.” Prophetæ quippe in sacro eloquio nonnunquam doctores uocantur, qui dum fugiuis esse presentia indicant, que sunt uentura manifestant; quos diuinus sermo falsa uidere redarguit, quia, dum culpas corripere metuunt, incassum delinquentibus promissa securitate blandiuntur, qui inquietatem peccantium nequaquam aperiunt, quia ab


1. Proudendum quoque est sollicita intentione rectoribus, ut ab eis nullo modo non solum praua, sed nec recta quidem nomine et inordinate proferantur, quia sepe dictorum uirtus perditur, cum apud corda audientium locuacitatis incautæ inopportunitate leugatur, et auctorem suum hec eadem locuacitas inquinat, que seruire auditoribus ad usum profectus ignorat. Unde bene per Moyses dicitur in Leutico: “Vir, qui fluxum seminis patitur, inmundus erit.” In mente quippe audientium semen secutæ cogitationis est audita equalitas locutionis, quia, dum per aurem sermo concipitur cogitatio in mente generatur. Unde ab huius mundi sapientibus in Actibus Apostolorum predicatur egregius semiuerbiu uocatus est. Qui ego fluxum seminis sustinet, inmundus assertur, quia multiloquio subditus ex eo se inquinat; quod si ordinate promeret, prolem
rectæ cogitationis edere in audientium corde potuisset, dumque incautus per
loquacitatem diffìuit, non ad usum generis, sed ad inmundiciam semen fundit.
Unde Paulus quoque, cum de instancia predicationis discipulum admoneret,
díxit ad Timotheum Ep. II.: “Testificor coram Deo et Christo Iesu, qui
judicaturus est uiuos et mortuos et aduentum ipsius et regnum eius, predica
uerbum, insta oportune, inportune.” Dícturus: “inportune,” premísit:
oportune,” quía scilícet apud auditoris mentem ipse sua uilitate se destruit, si
habere inportunitas oportunitatem nescit.

[Part 1. A priest also ought to be virtuous [pudicus], so that both by his actions
and by his words he might ceaselessly exhibit virtue—for which reason in the
Song of Songs the eyes [genæ; also “cheeks”] of the bride, that is preachers,
are compared to turtledoves.

1] He ought also to have a willingness to teach, because, as Jerome says:
“Upright behavior performed without words may be harmed by silence as
much as it may be advanced by example. For wolves are kept away with a
stick and the barking of a dog.” But in the same teaching the rectòr ought to be
careful lest he promote things best left unspoken of or keep silent about things
that should be talked about.

Whence Gregory in the 15th chapter (part 2) of his work on Pastoral Care (ch.
4) says:

Canon 1. Of the Discretion of a Preacher, and of Silence

[For the following, I use the translation by Henry Davis for the Ancient
Christian Writers series.445]

The ruler [rector] should be discreet in keeping silence and profitable in
speech, lest he utter what should be kept secret, or keep secret what should be
uttered. For just as incautious speech leads men into error, so, too,
unseasonable silence leaves in error those who might have been instructed.
Often, indeed, incautious rulers, being afraid of losing human favor, fear to
speak freely of what is right, and, in the words of the Truth, do not exercise the
zeal of shepherds caring for the flock, but serve the role of mercenaries; for
when the wolf appears, they flee and hide themselves in silence. Wherefore,
the Lord reproves them thorough the Prophet, saying: They are dumb dogs, not
able to bark.

Again, He complains of them, saying: You have not gone up to face the enemy,
nor have you set up a wall for the house of Israel, to stand in battle in the day
of the Lord. Now, to rise up against the enemy is to oppose worldly powers
with candid speech in defence of the flock. To stand in battle in the day of the
Lord is to resist from love of justice evil men who contend against us. For if a
shepherd feared to say what is right, what else is that but to have turned his
back by not speaking? But when one places himself in front of the flock to

445 See Henry Davis, trans., Gregory the Great: Pastoral Care. Ancient Christian Writers 11
defend them, he obviously is opposing a wall for the house of Israel against the enemy.

Hence again, it is said to the sinful people: Thy Prophets have seen false and foolish things for thee, and they have not laid open thy iniquity to excite thee to penance. Now, teachers are sometimes called Prophets of Sacred Scripture, in that they point out the fleeting nature of the present and disclose the future. Here they are accused by the divine utterance of seeing what is false, because, by fearing to reprove faults, they vainly flatter evil-doers by promising them immunity. They fail to disclose the wickedness of sinners by refraining from words of reproof.

Indeed, the word of reproof is the key of detection, since reproof discloses the sin of which frequently even the doer is unaware. Wherefore, Paul says: . . . that he may be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to convince the gainsayers. So by Malachias it is said: The lips of the priest have knowledge, and they shall seek the law at his mouth, because he is the Angel of the Lord of Hosts.

Wherefore, through Isaia the Lord admonishes, saying:

Cry, cease not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet. He who enters on the priesthood undertakes the office of a herald, so that he cries out and precedes the coming of the Judge, who follows with terrible mien. If, then, the priest does not know how to preach, what vocal sound is this mute herald likely to give?

For this reason, then, the Holy Spirit settled on the first Pastors in the form of tongues; for to those whom He fills, He instantly gives His own eloquence. Therefore, Moses is enjoined to see that when the priest enters the Tabernacle, he should be encompassed with little bells, a sign that he must be endowed with utterance for preaching, lest by silence he provoke the judgement of Him who sees from on high. For it is written: . . . that the sound may be heard when he goeth in and cometh out by the sanctuary in the sight of the Lord, and that he may not die. The priest going in or coming out dies if not sound is heard from him: that is to say, he arouses the wrath of the hidden Judge against him if he goes without the utterance of preaching.

The little bells are fittingly described as fixed to the vesture; and indeed, what else is to be understood by the priest’s vestments but his righteous works? The Prophet witnesses to this when he says: Let thy priests be clothed with justice. Therefore, little bells are fixed to the vesture, that even the works of the priest should loudly proclaim his way of life in the sound of his speech.

But when the ruler prepares to speak, he must bear in mind to exercise a studious caution in his speech, for if his discourse, hastily given, be ill-ordered, the hearts of his hearers may be stricken with the wound of error, and when, perhaps, he wishes to appear wise, he will by his lack of wisdom sever the bond of unity. For this reason the Truth says: Have salt in you, and have peace among you. By salt the wisdom of speech is indicated. He, then, who strives to speak wisely, should greatly fear lest by his words the unity of his hearers be confounded. Wherefore, Paul says: Not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety.
Hence in the vesture of the priest, in accordance with the divine word, pomegranates are added to the little bells. What else is symbolized by pomegranates but the unity of faith? For as in the pomegranate many seeds within are protected by one outer rind, so, unity in faith comprehends numberless people of Holy Church, who, though varying in merits, are retained within her. Therefore, lest the ruler rush into careless speech, what we have said is proclaimed by the Truth to His disciples: Have salt in you, and have peace among you—as though He should say in employing the symbol of the vesture of the priest: “Join pomegranates to the little bells, so that in all that you say you may guardedly and cautiously maintain the unity of the faith.”

Rulers must also see to it with careful concern that not only should nothing evil proceed from their lips, but that not even what is proper be said in excess or in a slovenly manner. Often the force of what is said is wasted, when it is enfeebled in the hearts of the hearers by a careless and offensive torrent of words. Indeed, this sort of loquacity defiles the speaker himself, inasmuch as it takes no notice of the practical needs of the audience. Wherefore, Moses aptly said: The man that hath an issue of seed shall be unclean. For in the mind of the hearers the seed of their subsequent thought depends on the nature of what they have heard, since with the reception of speech through the medium of hearing the thought is begotten in the mind. Hence the great preacher was called by the philosophers of this world a “word-sower.” He, then, who suffers an issue of seed is said to be unclean, because, given as he is to much speaking, he defiles himself by the fact that if he had been orderly in his speech, he could have produced a progeny of righteous thought in the hearts of his hearers; as it is, by spreading himself out in immoderate worldliness, he has an issue of seed not for the purpose of progeny, but to serve defilement.

Wherefore, Paul also, admonishing his disciple to be instant in preaching, said: I charge thee before God and Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead, by His coming and His Kingdom: preach the word, be instant in season, out of season. When he was about to say “out of season,” he premised, “in season,” for if being in season is not combined with being out of season, the preaching destroys itself in the mind of the hearer by its worthlessness.

This is a subtle take on the benefit of silence among those subject to canon law, given that “unseasonable silence leaves in error those who might have been instructed.” Throughout the Decretum, in fact, Gratian recognizes a tension between a preacher’s responsibility for teaching—even to administer reproof—and his need as the member of a complex hierarchical body not to speak out of turn or improperly question those placed in positions above him.446 It should be obvious by now that this set of

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446 These forces press against each other—politely but with intense pressure—in D.43 c.5 (“Eternæ damnationis penam incurrit predator, qui semen diuini uerbi non spargit”) in which the Decretum attempts to acknowledge the necessity for discretion and the demand for outspokenness. It begins with an excerpt from “Nicolaus Papa” urging that failing to sow the seeds of divine wisdom is far more
counterbalanced prompts toward clerical speech and silence differs quite strikingly from the absolute prescriptions that Will encounters in the vita—and I will discuss why the prescriptions are so absolute in the next section of this chapter. I believe that it also can be explained by a consideration of monastic thought on the issue of one’s relationship to one’s fellow human beings: a relationship in which the humblest possible silence is of paramount importance.

**Ascetic Silence and Amor Proximi**

What theory lies behind Piers Plowman’s heavy emphasis on the benefit of silence? The preceding section of this chapter began with the observation that, despite the caution Will’s interlocutors urge for Will when he might wish to criticize others, canon law and scripture do allow for some judgment to take place. Langland would have been aware of these provisions, I contend, since the poem frames the discussion of proper judgment in some of the same terms and based on some of the same key scriptural texts: in terms of the behavior best befitting a “cleric” (possessed of or striving after “clergie”), with respect to the proper types of learning and knowledge such a figure might have and in relation to where that figure stands in (or outside of) the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Yet that section of the chapter ended with the observation dangerous than failing to observe an appropriate silence: “Dispensatio est nobis celestis seminis intueta; ’ue si non sparserimus, ’ue si taeuerimus.’ Quod cum electionis uas formidine et clamet, quanto magis cuilibet metuendum est? Proinde, sicut non leue discernit pontificibus, si luisse quod congruit, ita his (quo absit) non medioere periculum est, qui cum debeat parere, despiciunt.” To this Gratan adds the following (politically fastidious) remarks: “Paritet quoque obscurare debet sacerdos, ne indignis et non intelligentibus secreta mysteria sua predicatione rererare incipiat. Qui enim ea docet, que ab auditoribus intelligi non ulent, non eorum utilitatem, sed sui ostentationem facit. Unde in expositione: ‘Beati immaculati,’ dicitur: ‘Vicium animi est, indignis secreta uulgare, quod fit uel loquacitate incuta, dum sine judicio uolat irreuocable urbum, uel adulatione, ut ei placeat, cui secreta reuelat, uel iactatione scientiae, ut plura scire uidentur.’ In quibus omnibus profecto datur intelligi, quanta debeat esse discretio in predicatione sacerdotis, qua si forte caruerit, tanquam torto naso, sacerdotalis offitii iudicatur indignus.”

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that the poem’s conclusions, especially with Reason and Ymaginatif, seem to take a far harder line on the question of when one might judge his fellows than either canon law or scriptural commentary would suggest.

Reason’s rebuke to Will, that Will should not meddle with judging the affairs of others without first becoming “lakless” himself—that Will should “suffre” God to “suffre” not only because God is superior to him in the great hierarchy of all beings but also because to imitate God’s “suffering” is an important goal—makes of silence not just an inconvenience to be endured or a helpful political skill to cultivate but in fact a virtue to be pursued. This leads me now to locate the ideal of silence in ascetic ideology. The chapter will then consider the relationship of silence-holding to interactions with others according to ascetic thought before concluding with some thoughts about how this aspect of the satiric ideal in Piers can possibly square with the poem’s project as a satire.

The first clue presented to us that Piers Plowman considers silence something more important than respectful restraint is that Will’s interlocutors seem to value silence as a badge not just of deference but of wisdom—a wisdom that goes beyond mere circumspection. What is spoken might be knowledge, even clerical, but what’s not spoken for fear of misconstrual might well be more profound: Theology. It is for this reason, presumably, that Study tells her husband not to speak: the knowledge she fears Wit will share too openly belongs to this guarded and misunderstandable realm. Her reference to not casting pearls before swine corroborates this interpretation, appearing as it does with such regularity in theological treatises such as Alan of Lille’s Quoniam homines (which itself gestures towards descriptions of theology in works
such as pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystica Theologia*: a text that, as Igino Cecchetti has noted, speaks of wisdom being born out of silence itself.\(^{447}\)

Likewise, when Scripture rebukes Will for his quite lengthy backlash at her, her admonition seems to imply that Will’s knowledge of “many things” (*multa*) has incited him; if he had only known himself, he would have stayed properly quiet. Indeed, as Ymaginatif goes on to observe in passus 12, knowledge in abundance left unmatched by virtuous behavior stemming from that knowledge “swelleþ a mannes soule” (B.12.57). Of course the most obvious connection made between silence and wisdom in Ymaginatif’s speech or elsewhere is the tag, familiar to Boethius and most widely known through Cato that “*philosophus esses, si tacuisses.*” Speaking based on a presumption of sufficient knowledge, as context makes clear, shuts off the opportunity to gain more knowledge. It opens the speaker to rebuke for overreaching, as Scripture and Reason’s rebukes of Will’s talking back both prove.

In addition to impeding wisdom, speaking seems to be associated with the loss of paradise. Ymaginatif quite strikingly recasts the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden in this light:

 Adam, whiles he spak no3t, hadde paradis at wille,  
ac whan he mamelede aboute mete, and entremetede to knowe  
the wisedom and be wit of god, he was put fram blisse. (B.11.417-19)

Two matters regarding speech here seem pertinent. First, Adam lost paradise by “mameling aboute mete,” or talking about his food (B.11.418). I do not think that the

Book of Genesis makes as much of Adam’s discussion of the apple as Ymaginatyf indicates, but it is true that first Eve (with the serpent) and then Adam (with Eve) allow themselves to discuss the subtle meanings of God’s earlier prohibition against the forbidden fruit and therefore are fatally swayed in the course of the story. Second, with far greater scriptural backing, Adam is held here to have wanted to know the “wisdom and wit of God” when he ate the apple.

This desire to know is not, in and of itself, tantamount to actual speech. Nevertheless, Adam’s action of taking the apple and eating it does amount to an oral if not literally vocal vote against the Edenic status quo, for which “speech” Adam forfeited such the access to God’s wisdom as he had earlier enjoyed. Nor is Ymaginatif’s reference to the Adam and Eve story here just a random exemplum, as Ymaginatif’s return to the same figures later on makes clear:

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Kynde kenned Adam to knowe hise pryue membres,
and tauȝte hym and Eve to helien hem wiȝ leues.
Lewed men many tymes maistres þei apposen
why Adam hiled nɔȝt first his mouȝ þat eet þe Appul
raþer þan his likame alogh; lewed asken þus clerkes.
Kynde knoveþ whi he diðe so, ac no clerk ellis. (B.12.230-35)
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Here, again, speech loses Paradise. Even the “lewed” are said to understand intuitively that the actions of Adam’s mouth were primarily to blame for the first man’s default. It is hard to imagine them actually asking the question here ascribed to them here, moreover, which Langland thus probably inserts tendentiously to advance his point.

A somewhat anomalous third case appears a few passus later on, specifically passus 16, in the poem’s vision of the (apple-)tree of Charity. In this episode, the tree and the blossoms and fruit on it are constantly running the risk of falling down and are supported by staves set up to brace the tree against the opposing winds. The

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448 See Genesis 3 for the narrative.
449 Penn Szitty, drawing a comparison with the trees Wrath grafted (B.5.139-41), agrees that the tree of Charity’s “foliage […] is also verbal.” See Szitty, The Antifraternal Tradition, p. 256 and its larger discussion of friars’ linked faults of “word and werk” on pp. 249-255ff.
staves represent the power of the Trinity—“potentia dei patris,” “sapiencia dei patris” (that is the passion and the power of our Prince Jesus),” and, presumably, the grace of the Holy Ghost.\textsuperscript{450} Whatever else this polysemic tree and its situation might be said to represent—and it certainly goes on to represent quite a lot—many of the elements have something to do with propriety of speech.\textsuperscript{451} The leaves, we learn immediately, “ben lele wordes, þe lawe of holy chirche” (B.16.6). The blossoms “ben buxom speche and benigne lokynge” (B.16.7) Of the winds blowing to attract the tree, conceived of as the traditional “three foes” (the world, the flesh, and the devil) only the first—the world—seems at a glance not to be concerned with speech, being said only to engender a leaf-gnawing coveitise when it blows. The leaves it “forfreteþ” (B.16.29) however, let us remember, do represent “lele words” and the laws set down by the church. And the other two winds definitely concern speech. The wind that represents the flesh, as Piers explains to Will,

\begin{quote}

norisseþ nyce sightes and anoþer tyme wordes
and wikkede werkes þerof, wormes of synne
and forbiteþ þe blosmes riȝt to þe bare leues. (B.16.33-35)

\end{quote}

Here “sightes” and “werkes” receive pejorative modifiers—“nyce” meaning foolish or silly, “wikked” enjoying its current denotation—but “wordes,” interestingly, though they are allied with or bring about or might themselves even be “wormes of sinne,” are here only represented as “wordes”: as if words were sin enough.

Compared to these fairly brief references to speech, telling though as they are, the third wind—the devil—seems more associated with “wordes” even than a lexicographer. He attacks the tree with “vnkynde Neighebores,” “backbiteres

\textsuperscript{450} B.16.30, 36-37; the third stave or “pile” is not glossed, though.
\textsuperscript{451} Alford’s remark in “The Design of the Poem,” in the Alford Companion, speaks to this polysemy: “This allegory is charged with such a multitude of overlapping schemes, ‘a pluralizing of the tree image’ (Donaldson 188), that many readers have complained of being unable to see the tree for the forest.” (52)
brewecheste, brawleris and chideres,” at least half of whom define themselves by their type of speech (B.16.42-44). The rungs of the ladder the devil places against the tree in order to steal its flowers are made out of lies, moreover, and the devil prevents Will from savouring the various types of fruit growing on the tree—equivalent to the so-called degrees of chastity—by catching them into his basket when Piers shakes the tree. This separation of tree and apples thus reënacts the Fall, an interpretation supported by the fact that the poem procedes onward to describe the locking of the patriarchs in limbo thanks to their father Adam’s initial sin and then the rest of Christian salvation history. Here then, once again, just as in Ymaginatif”s discussion with Will, this fall has been brought about by improper speech.

Langland had every reason to believe that a good word might undo whatever improper speaking had brought about, of course. One of the underlying assumptions in Christian thinking about Adam’s fall is that God did not want the effects of that Fall to be permanent. If, in the monastic understanding especially, humans had been created to be able to replace the fallen angels who had rebelled with Lucifer during his prehistoric revolt, then humans have an allotted place in heaven. Jesus as the anointed Son of, coequal person with, and indeed Word of God conducted human life to redeem humanity for future heavenly glory. In essentially founding the Christian church by inaugurating his closest followers’ apostolic ministry, Jesus was thought to have passed down a new law according to which humanity—once released from fore-ordained slavery to the devil—oncemore could attain heaven.

The life of Jesus presented here in passus 16 of Piers Plowman clearly sets up oppositions between rash judgment (based on limited knowledge) and humility; between betrayal and rightousness; between rumormongering and prayer. It also notably employs a distasteful antisemitic rhetoric of supersession, but its unpleasantness finds itself somewhat mitigated by the probability that the Jews
mentioned with such opprobrium in the episode refer to Christian clerical corruption in Langland’s day.\textsuperscript{452} In response to Jesus’ cures and other miracles, “Iewes iangled þer-ayein þat Iuggede lawes” (B.16.119). But Jesus “missays” these in a manner described here as “manly,” as the poem turns to recount the so-called scourging of the temple—in which Jesus “knokked on hem wiþ a corde, and caste adoun hir stalles / þat in chirche chaffared, or chaungened any moneie” (B.16.127-29). This naturally provokes Jesus’ own people, here described otheringly as “þe Iewes,” to want to kill him; the apostle Judas is the most notorious of these, in so far as he works to hand over his lord to be executed, but for his hidden plotting he receives an open curse:

Enuye and yuel wil arne in þe Iewes.
Thei casten and contreueden to kulle hym whan þei myȝte;
eche day after oþer hir tyme þei awaiteden
til it bifel on a friday, a litel before Pasqe.
The þursday biforn, þere he made his cene,
sitting at þe soper he seide þise wordes:
‘I am solde þoruȝ som of yow; he shal þe tyme rewe
that euere he his Saueour solde for siluer or ellis.’
Ludas iangled þerayein, ac Iesus hym tolde,
it was hymself sooply and seide ‘tu dicis.’\textsuperscript{453}

Again, the centerpiece of the narrative is the opposition it sets between the frank, honest, sober speech of Jesus and the guile of those who would defeat him, and this contrast becomes even stronger a few lines later on:

And þus was wiþ Iudas þo þat Jesus bitrayed:
‘Aue, raby,’ quod þat Ribaud, and riȝt to hym he yede
and kiste hym to be caught þerby and kulled of þe Iewes.
Thanne Iesus to Iudas and to þe Iewes seide,
‘Falsnesse I fynde in þi faire speche

\textsuperscript{452} This sort of typological perspective may be corroborated by lyrics by Friar William Herbert, d. 1333, and in the collection of John Grimestone, on which see Luria & Hoffman’s Middle English Lyrics, which conflate the Old Testament God with the New Testament crucified savior, inviting a shameful identification by these poems’ real late medieval Christian audiences with the addressed tormentors.
\textsuperscript{453} B.16.136-45. Interestingly, this line seems to conflate two different verses and episodes of the Passion narrative—even with a studied ambiguity. In Matthew 26:25, when Judas asks if he himself will betray Jesus, Jesus replies, “Tu dixisti.” In Matthew 27:11, when Pilate asks Jesus if he is the “King of the Jews,” Jesus answers, “Tu dicis.” In Langland’s account, it has been rendered unclear whether the phrase “it was hymself sooply” refers to Jesus being the “Saueor” (as Rex Iudaevorum?) or to Judas being a traitor. Hence, perhaps, the Matthew 26 situation paired with the Matthew 27 response.
and gile in þi glad chere and galle is in þi laughyng. Thow shalt be myrour to many men to deceyue, ac to þe worldes ende þi wikkednesse shal worþe vpon þiselue: 

*Necesse est vt veniant scandala; ve homini illi per quem scandalum venit.*

Thou sho reshon be taken to youre iewe ne wille suffrêþ myne Apostles in pays and in pees gange.’ (B.16.151-59)

An account of the Passion follows, which shakes Will, and he wakes up for a time. Throughout all the dream’s retelling of Jesus’ life, the norm or new standard he encourages imbricates itself with matters of proper works and, especially, proper words.

The best statement from Jesus in this episode of what reform under a new law should really look like—of what might constitute the return to paradise—comes in the description of the scourging of the Jerusalem Temple. This building was richly meaningful as a symbol to medieval Christians, as Jennifer A. Harris has shown.454 The Temple Jesus promised to rebuild was understood even by the authors of the Gospels to refer to Jesus’ body, itself a metaphorical way to refer to all Christians (i.e. “the body of Christ”) and by extension—as Harris indicates—the Christian body.455 As a result, by putting an end to himself physically and then withdrawing from the world in the Ascension, Jesus’ body would be rebuilt as a presumably non-avaricious, non-cynical, Christian community. As Jesus goes on to conclude, “I hote you, / of preires and parfitnesse þis place þat ye callen: / Domus mea domus oracionis vocabitur” (B.16.135-35a). The episode might seem at first, therefore, only to refer to Jewish moneychangers and the Christian prelates who behaviorally are their heirs (as the description of the Jerusalem Temple as a “chirche” suggests). As a comparison of *Piers*’ treatment with the Gospel episode behind it shows, however, Langland places

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more emphasis here on the actions that Jesus promotes than on those which Jesus discourages. Its satiric norm or ideal more widely concerns not merely the avoidance of venality, then, but a particular type of discipline “of preires and of parfinessse” that should replace such vice.

Although the general referent here or target for reform must be the Christian Church, Langland’s quotation of the phrase “domus oracionis” would more immediately have brought that house of prayer par excellence, the monastery, to mind. Certainly monks themselves have thought of their vocation in this way. But it is in Langland’s own poem that our ability to make a clear-cut distinction between the parish church and the monastery or canonical cathedral becomes most difficult, since the poem translates monastic thought out of the cloister and into “the world.” Will, in the famous fifth passus of the C-text, proposes to his interlocutors that he betake himself to the church to spend all the rest of his days there in prayer, which we can all agree would make of Will’s parish church a very “domus oracionis” indeed—but this suggestion also comes across as a somewhat desperate gambit for ensuring personal salvation rather than logistically a viable choice; Jesus does tell potential followers in the Gospels to drop everything at once to follow him, to let the dead bury the dead for instance, but Will’s offer does not appear motivated by zeal so much as by fear. Nothing so literal is Langland’s final ideal.

The evidence uncovered by a cursory overview of database search results for “domus oracionis” and variants thereof reveals another way of considering how Langland might have understood Jesus’ ideal re-created Temple: not just as Jesus’ resurrected body, nor the Christian Church built over the metaphorical foundations of the synagogue, nor even the literal monastic life into which men and women retire to pray, but the human soul itself. The Rationale divinorum officiorum of William Durandus (1286), which circulated among secular clergy in the fourteenth century,
defines the related item “church” (*ecclesia*) with comprehensibility regarding any number of senses (and synonyms) of the word. It can, he says, mean a congregation of the faithful. It can also mean a building made from bricks and mortar, each of its elements however symbolizing some larger spiritual or historical aspect of the Church. In his discussion of this, Durandus mentions the “cloister of the soul” or interior cloister whose ideals are the basis for much of the inquiry in this dissertation. Again, it is an important passage to quote at length because it indicates a means by which non-monks could have encountered the idea of a “cloister of the soul” in the later Middle Ages:

The cloisters, as Richard, Bishop of Cremona, testifieth, had their rise either in the watchings of the Levites around the tabernacle, or from the chambers of the priests, or from the porch of Solomon’s temple. ‘For the Lord commanded Moses, that he should not number the Levites with the rest of the children of Israel; but should set them over the tabernacle of the testimony to carry it and to keep it.’ (Numbers 1:47; 18:6) On account of which divine commandment, while the Holy Mysteries are in celebration, the clergy should in the church stand apart from the laity. Whence the Council of Mayence ordained that the part which is separated with rails from the altar should be appropriated altogether to the priests choral. Furthermore, as the church signifieth the Church Triumphant, so the cloister signifieth the celestial Paradise, where there will be one and the same heart in fulfilling the commands of God and loving Him: where all things will be possessed in common, because that of which one hath less, he will rejoice to see abounding in another, for ‘God shall be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28). Therefore the regular clergy who live in the cloisters, and are of one mind, rising to the service of God and leaving worldly things, lead their lives in common. The various offices in the cloister signify the different mansions, and the difference of rewards in the Kingdom: for ‘In my Father’s House are many mansions,’ saith our Lord (John 15:2). But in a moral sense the cloister is the contemplative state, into which the soul betaking itself, is separated from the crowd of carnal thoughts, and meditateth on celestial things only. In this cloister there are four sides: denoting, namely, contempt of self, contempt of the world, love of God, love of our neighbor. Each side hath his own row of columns. Contempt of self hath humiliation of soul, mortification of the flesh, humility of speech, and the like. The base of all the columns is patience. In this cloister the diversity of office-chambers is the diversity of virtues. The chapter-house is the secret of the heart: concerning this, however, we shall speak differently hereafter. The refectory is the love of holy meditation. The cellar, Holy Scripture. The dormitory, a clean conscience. The oratory, a spotless life. The garden of trees and herbs, the collection of virtues. The well, the dew of God’s heavenly gifts, which in this world mitigateth our thirst, and hereafter will quench it.**

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**456** For further adaptations of the interior cloister idea, even in the vernacular, see Christiana Whitehead, “Making a Cloister of the Soul.” The English translation I use for William Durandus comes from John
Durandus’ treatise shows that the idea of the Church was a multivalent one in the later Middle Ages, not only a restoration of the Temple and transhistorical community but a reference to these. Furthermore, as Durandus’ discussion of the church “cloister” may be concerned, a physical church’s disposition in its architecture and its ornaments also provides a guiding pattern for the Christian believer’s disposition of virtues and faculties of mind. The idea that the human anima might build up its own interior cloister is not new to William Durandus. If anything, that author’s understanding that the interior cloister finds patristic expression in only part of a physical church is his only real innovation here. As I have already noted, earlier writers such Hugo de Folieto, in the twelfth century, developed the analogy of the “claustrum animae” on the

model of the monastic cloister. Still other writers spoke not of an inner cloister at all (even as part of a church) but instead of the *domus oracionis* of the human soul *tout court.*

This study obviously has a vested interest in seeing the reference by Langland’s Jesus to an ideal temple—a *domus oracionis* of some sort—as an indicator of an ascetic ideal, and so it would be very tempting to observe that the church when referred to by Langland often falls short of any acceptable standard of prayerfulness except when being portrayed as the church of poor, penitent religious separated from the world. One might also choose to mention that in the Middle Ages generally monastic life was the one most intensely associated with not only prayers but also (as Langland’s Jesus also puts it) “parfitnesse.” But to stress the identification too strongly between Langland’s view of the Church and his conception of monastic life distorts, I think, the focus on Church reform that the poem’s satire here and elsewhere wishes to achieve. As such, it might be best to keep with a more cautious assessment of the “*domus oracionis*” passage, namely that in it Langland clearly sees Jesus’ reference to rebuilding the Temple as not *only* a prediction of the rise of the Christian faith, not *only* (in context) as an image calling for a corrupt Christian church to be reformed, but *also* a reminder that—the reform of the Church corporate being predicated on the reform of individuals—individuals must rebuild their own interior temples or cloisters into places of “preieres and parfitnesse.” As we have seen from William Durandus, Langland could have encountered thought on the pursuit of Christian perfection, in terms of the building up of an interior *domus oracionis*, in writings meant primarily for use by the secular clergy.

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457 A relatively quick search of the *PL* database online indicates as much.
But if it seems plausible to think that for Langland’s poem the monastic life would come closest to an ideal for living with “preires and parfitnesse,” and if it seems obvious that writings by monastic authors most fully theorized this life in the later Middle Ages, it is indisputable that the world’s closest approach to the reversal of the Fall that Jesus was commonly believed to have helped accomplish could be found in regular religious life. I do not mean here that a well-informed medieval Christian would have thought of regular religious like monks as somehow more redeemed by Christ’s Passion; medieval theology understood that as a sacrifice performed once for all humanity.\textsuperscript{458} But I do mean that even a well-informed medieval Christian would recognize in monks theoretically a heightened state of holiness deriving from their impatience to be quit of the secular world, their zeal to conduct the life angelic in Paradise while still mortal and earthbound. That Langland also knew this shows up most prominently from Piers Plowman’s so-called \textit{paradisus clausuralis} passage, which I have quoted above, despite the uneasy prophecy with which the passage appears (B.10.297-310).\textsuperscript{459} It remains now to ask how the monastery or cloister of the

\textsuperscript{458} In \textit{Pourquoi?}, François Vandenbroucke takes great pains to indicate that the main rewards of monastic life are provided solely as a result of living in the baptized state, rather than thanks to some special ecclesiastical status such as priesthood, and that certain other aspects traditionally attributed to the monastic life—such as royalty or the role of prophet—follow from the sacrament of confirmation (78ff). That said, Vandenbroucke’s book to some extent wishes to re-tool monasticism for contemporary global society; especially as it draws toward its concluding chapters, its theological arguments increasingly verge on tendentiousness.

\textsuperscript{459} Kathryn Kerby-Fulton observes while discussing “Langland’s formal, intellectual, and polemical heritage” on p. 532 of chapter 19 (“Piers Plowman”) in the Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 513-38 at p. 532, that “in the heat of indignation [Langland] flirts” with making his satire more vernacular and otherwise overt. In the same chapter, however, she points out Langland’s knowledge of monastic thought—a matter well attested by Bloomfield in \textit{Apocalypse}, Wittig, “Inward Journey,” and by others as noted by Adams, “Langland’s Theology,” in the Alford Companion, pp. 87-114, esp. at 104-107 (s.v. “Monasticism”—which leads her to the idea that Langland might, himself, at least once have been a monk. It is interesting to speculate on the circumstances that might have driven Langland from monastic (or fraternal) life, assuming that he ever was profess to regular religion, and in turn to wonder if his departure from it helped to make his satire more or less overt than it would have been otherwise. But these are questions that might well be impossible to answer.
religious was understood to be a return to paradise. In so doing, we should consider how speech and silence were thought to bring about that return.

A sermon attributed to Peter Damian supplied Langland with his base text on the paradisus claustralis, as R. E. Kaske showed, but the real Peter Damian deserves to be quoted on silence as well.\footnote{As Kaske notes in “Paradisus Claustralis,” the text is actually by Nicholas of Clairvaux but was attributed “long” (and certainly by Langland’s rough contemporary Benvenuto da Imola) to “Petrus Ravennas.”} As one of Peter’s letters (to the Empress Agnes) makes clear, the practice of silence works in large part to design and build a fortresslike temple in the human heart.

[When] then the din of human conversation ceases, through silence the temple of the Holy Spirit is constructed in you. [...] Indeed, the temple of God grew through silence, because when the human mind does not focus itself on outer words, the building of a spiritual edifice rises to the sublime summit, and rising up, the more it is lifted to the heights, the more it is prevented from focusing on external things, enclosed in the protection of silence, for, ‘The guardian of justice is silence.’ (Isaiah 32:17, with “custos” for the Vulg. cultus”) And Jeremiah says, ‘It is good to wait with silence for the salvation of the Lord, it is good for a man when he has borne the yoke from his youth. He shall sit solitary and be silent, because he has taken it upon himself.’ (Lamentations 3:26-28) Plainly, when the solitary is silent he raises himself above himself, because when the human mind is everywhere encompassed by the cloisters of silence it is led up to the highest places of the air, it is carried off to God through heavenly desire, and is kindled in his love through the ardor of the spirit. [...] Therefore, let the temple of your breast grow now through silence, let the edifice of spiritual virtues rise up in you as if made of celestial stones [...].\footnote{The translation comes from Irven M. Resnick, ed. & trans., Peter Damian: Letters 121-150, The Fathers of the Church, Medieval Continuation 6 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), letter 124, pp. 21-25, at pp. 22-24. Since in this case I am able easily enough to do so, and since the poetic language of the letter might otherwise induce (unfounded) readerly doubts about the translation, I provide the Latin from the Patrologia Latina here as well: “dum strepitus humani cessat alloquii, constuitur in te per silentium templum Spiritus sancti. [...] Templum quippe Dei per silentium crescit, quia cum mens humana per exteriora se verba non fundit, in sublime fastigium spiritualis edificii structura consurgit, tantaque subcrescens, in altiora sustollitur, quanta per silentii custodiam circumclusa, sese extrinsecus fundere prohibetur. Custos enim justitiae silentium. Et per Jeremiah dictit: ‘Bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutare Domini. Bonum est viro cum portaverit jugum ab adolescentia sua: sedebit solitarius, et tacet, quia levabit se super se (Thren. III).’ Solitarius plane, dum tacet, se elevat super se, quia mens humana, dum intra silentii clausura undique circumcluditur, in superioira sublimis erigitur, ad Deum per coeleste desiderium rapitur, et in amore ejus per ardorem Spiritus inflammatur [...]. Templum ergo tui pectoris nune per silentium crescat, virtutum spiritualium tanquam coelestium lapidum in te structura consurgat [...].” (S. Petri Damiani S. R. E. Cardinalis}
The idea of a temple or cloister in the soul is hardly unique or even new to Peter Damian, as we’ve seen, and his letter need not have been known specifically to Langland; it merely stands as an exceptionally fine illustration of the concept whose existence this study wishes here to assert, hence my quoting from it at length. The silence referred to by Peter Damian’s letter is here of course the silence of contemplation—but not necessarily of a purely monastic, rule-imposed sort. If anything, it is the repose of prayer. And while the silence of prayer and the silence that comes from refraining from judging other seem divided very deeply, the two need not to be understood as emanating from entirely different thought worlds: not for Langland, either. In Peter Damian’s text here, the virtue provided by silence comes hand in hand with the virtue of being removed from other people not merely physically but mentally. One is removed from the care for the worldly pursuits of other people.

One of Peter Damian’s most striking scriptural quotations in the letter comes from the book of Lamentations, whose currency in the Middle Ages seems to have been limited (according to Hugh Farmer, no one knew what to do with it), at least in the sense that not many commentaries on the book seem to exist. Of these, as Farmer notes, two important commentaries—William of Malmesbury’s and the better known one by Paschadius Radbertus on which William of Malmesbury’s commentary was based—derive from, and not surprisingly then speak to, ascetic religious contexts.⁴⁶²

Of course, Lamentations did not provide the only references to silence known to regular religious or other medieval Christians. Scott G. Bruce has noted for instance the ways in which monastic silence was part and parcel of the “angelic

Ambrose G. Wathen draws attention to how silence was legislated in the Benedictine Rule itself. P. Salmon has shown how the theology of monastic silence developed from ideals to reality (manifested in religious praxis and as penance) and draws particular attention to how silence enables a change in focus from things external to things internal. He is also eloquent in reminding the reader that silence was not a monastic practice alone, despite its being so well adopted and theorized in the monastic orders:

Désormais avec la création des ordres mendiants, des clercs réguliers et à plus forte raison des congrégations modernes, qui ne sont plus astreints à la vie claustrale dans toute sa rigueur comme les moines, il n’est guère question de silence régulier, ni même de silence pénitentiel, et l’on parle presque uniquement du silence-recueillement, de la vertu de silence. Il y a d’ailleurs à cela quelque avantage, c’est que l’on insiste sur un aspect, et le plus important de cette pratique. Bien qu’il ait, à ses origines, une grande affinité avec la vie monastique—et c’est dans son cadre qu’il est le plus facilement, le plus complètement observé, et qu’il s’épanouit le plus parfaitement—le silence n’est pas un privilège des moines: il est une des données de la vie chrétienne, et il doit avoir sa part dans l’effort personnel de tous ceux qui font profession de celle-ci; seulement cette part doit être plus grande dans la vie de ceux qui cherchent à suivre de plus près les maximes de l’Evangile et qui tend à une perfection plus grande.

As one might expect from an order attempting to meld eremetic and cenobitic lives, the Camaldolese Constitutiones Rodulphi Camaldulensis (1080, 1085) provide a rationale for silence and a framework in which it might be cultivated, noting that “silentium sine meditatione mors est, & tamquam vivi hominis sepultura,” while “meditatio sine silento inefficax est, & quasi sepulti hominis exagitatio,” though “simul [...] spiritualiter copulata” leads with great spiritual benefit to

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“contemplationis perfectio.” Jean Leclercq’s *Otia monastica* offers lexical and similar evidence that silence is best viewed as part of an environment supportive of meditation. It makes for no surprise, then, that Hugo de Folieta’s “cloister of the soul” was wonderfully distinguished by silence. In reality, however, earthly cloisters were at times full of commotion and *locutio*.469

Nor do all injunctions to silence in the Middle Ages come from this ascetic Christian worldview, either, and seem often to derive instead from a sort of politically calculating streetwise Stoicism. In *Piers Plowman*, one finds such “political” expressions turned on their heads—or at least interrogated from the perspective of Christianity (e.g. the Catonian “sic ars deluditur arte”). Others seem more neutral between pagan and ascetic Christian viewpoints. What for instance are we to make of the French tag quoted by Reason in his rebuke to Will, that “Bele vertue est suffraunce”? But since utterances like these, too, appear in a Christian matrix, *Piers*  

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468 Hugo de Folieta, liber 4, chapter 36: “De silentio celestis claustri,” *De clastro animae*, PL 176, coll. 1017-1181 at coll. 1174C-1176C.


471 It could be proverbial, and certainly is presented as something learned at one’s mother’s knee rather than in university halls.
Plowman, in which much that is in a word ascetic is highly valued, we might well consider even more deeply monastic thinkers on the value of silence: not only in prayerful solitude (as Peter Damian seems to have described) but also in interactions with others.

Especially important for the terms of this study, one of the main virtues said to be upheld by such humility and obedience is also important to ordering the interactions between individuals in the poem: love of one’s neighbor, or Amor proximi. As Berlière quite clearly expresses it, before (significantly) turning his attention to the related virtues of humility and obedience—virtues that result in charity for one’s fellows—

L’esprit de silence, cette ‘taciturnité’ dont S. Benoît relève l’importance dans un chapitre spécial de sa Règle, semblait donc à nos ancêtres la garantie de l’observance et le secret du progrès dans la vie intérieure. Le silence du Christ leur était une leçon. De l’exemple de l’Homme-Dieu, qui s’enveloplit dans le silence du sein de Marie, Guerric d’Igny déduit la convenance et la fécondité du silence. C’est dans le silence que l’homme intérieur, comme l’Homme-Dieu dans le sein de sa Mère, se refait à l’image du Christ, et que se nourrissent et se développent les vertus chrétiennes, ces vertus que cet auteur appelle l’ossature du Christ dans l’homme spirituel.472

This assessment also seems to work for Piers Plowman, in so far as to firmly identify charity (which we have seen promoted by temperate speech, even silence) with love of one’s neighbor.473 Will’s vision of the tree of charity opens into or precipitates a

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472 Berlière, Ascèse, p. 128. Again, the “virtus chrétiennes” which follow, in his scheme but according to many medieval religious writers he mentions, are obedience, humility, and—in my opinion synonymous here with amor proximiti—charity.

473 Mary Carruthers adduces a line of monastic thought according to which silence in fact is directly related to judgment and the boldness (or parrhésia) of satire, just as the introduction to this dissertation has already indicated, in “On Affliction and Reading. Weeping and Argument: Chaucer’s Lachrymose Troilus in Context,” Representations 93 (2006), pp. 1-21. One passage from her article is worth quoting at length on this point: “Laughter and harsh criticism (parrhésia) are condemned by [rather early, patristic-era] ascetics because the attitude they can require is hard and cold [whereas to Gregory of Nyssa tears were “hot, moist, and restorative of deadened, scarred flesh”). Both phenomena were considered ambiguous. ‘Speaking freely’—parrhésia—can be a virtue but it can also be a fault. St. Barsanuphius (d. ca. 540), an important figure in desert monasticism, distinguished two kinds of parrhésia, that from impudence (anaideiás) and that from gaiety (hilarótés). Laughter is the outer
reprise of Christian salvation history ending in the betrayal and death of Christ. Will then sees Abrahamic “Feib” and the patriarchs still locked in Limbo (for the Resurrection has not yet happened), and this sad sight prompts him to lament in terms similar to Haukyn’s: “‘Allas!’ I seide, ‘þat synne so longe shal lette / the myght of goddes mercy þat myȝte vs alle amende.” (B.16.270-271) At this point, however, arrives a secret messenger who announces that his name is Hope:

‘I am Spes, a spie,’ quod he, ‘and spire after a Knyght that took me a maundement vpon þe mount of Synay to rule alle Reames wiþ; I bere þe writ riȝt here.’

‘Is it enseled?’ I seide; ‘may men see þe lettres?’

‘Nay,’ he seide, ‘I seke hym þat hæþ þe seel to kepe, and þat is eroþ and cristendom and crist þeron to honge; and whan it is enseled þerwiþ I woot wel þe soþe
That Luciferis lordshiphe laste shal no lenger. [And þus my lettre menþ; ye mowe knowe it al.]’

‘Lat se þi lettres,’ quod I, ‘we myghte þe lawe knowe.’

He plukkede forþ a patente, a pece of an hard roche wheron was writen two wordes on þis wise yglossed: Dilige deum & proximum tuum,

this was the tixte, trewely; I took ful good yeme. The glose was gloriously writen wiþ a gilt penne:

In his duobus mandatis tota lex pendent & prophete,

‘Is here alle þi lordes lawes?’ quod I; ‘ye, leue me,’ he seide.

(B.17.1-17)

The narrative thus gives way to a progression from Abrahamic Faith to secret and fervent Hope, bearing a message heralding the advent of true Charity. Amor Proximi, to this extent, makes for a culminating focus in the vita of Piers Plowman after Will’s expression of both. But, since the ambiguity of laughter makes it easily misunderstood, Barsanuphius comments, it is best for a monk to avoid it altogether. But, his disciple persists, there is a kind of ‘proper gaiety’ (prépousa hilarótes)—what about that? A monk should be master enough of his craft so that he can display a pleasing countenance and pleasant demeanor, all the while he is groaning inwardly, as a monk should. Spiritual dryness (acedia) is the great enemy of monastic discipline, and tears must constantly water the monk’s thoughts to prevent it. The tears can be not only spontaneous but also the result of willed mental exercise. They are necessary for the intellectual method of meditation.” (7-8) On the continuation of these spiritual exercises of willed tears into the modern period, see again Jean-Joseph Navatel, “La Devotion Sensible.” That work, by the way, explicitly brings up the question of whether spiritual individuals in premontane times were more easily given to tears since they do not seem quite so often on display in modernity as in medieval religious texts.

474 The line in square brackets is omitted from many manuscripts and respelled according to Kane-Donaldson’s base manuscript (in which it does not appear).
long series of interlocutors have again and again cautioned him to silence and humility. It tempers and counterbalances his desire to judge others in defense of Truth.

*Will’s Learning, Revisited*

The long foregoing exposition, if it can be said to have proven anything other than the central importance of the virtue of *Amor proximi* and the primarily ascetic discipline of *taciturnitas* in order to promote such love, has shown that Will is hardly quick to grasp that lesson from his string of interlocutors. We could hardly allow ourselves to consider our analysis of the poem’s take on satiric judgment complete without considering possible reasons for Will’s inability to learn more quickly.

Another question raised by Will’s hard-learned lesson also demands an answer: why, in the part of the poem most focused on the necessity of not condemning others, does *Piers Plowman* allow its characters to indulge, unchastened, in its most ringing condemnations of all?

The easiest apparent solution to the problem, that Will is a typically slow-witted “Goliardic” narrator and that the judgments and condemnations indulged in by his teachers but stringently forbidden from him, must be dispensed with. I claimed in chapter 3 that Will’s function as a vehicle for comic relief has been overestimated. Will’s instructors and debate partners, for their part, even at their most colorful, do not come across as mere ventriloquizings from an embittered poet. They seem sincere, their lesson seems to hold consistent throughout its development, and they seem to argue their point at times with dauntingly sophisticated reasoning—not just pronouncements propounded by fiat.

The very sincerity of the poem’s various speaking figures of authority and of the poet’s desire for his audience also to learn their lesson might better explain their
judgments. As Will’s poetic misadventures make clear, the issue of satiric judgment
(indeed of any type of judgment) makes for a vexed and complicated matter at best.
Despairing of coming to the conclusion that no answer exists, that we cannot know
when to speak out and when to hold our mouths shut, is likewise not allowed, since
the many pronouncements made by God in the course of holy writ indicate there to be
some divine opinion or other about the matter. Reading Will’s uneven, unhasty
progress from the end of the second vision almost up to the end of the poem, we
become aware of the issues at stake in choosing to speak out, or hold our tongues
about, perceived evils; we hear the arguments and counterarguments that can be made;
and we as readers probably come away from the experience more fully aware of how
to live apparent contradictory precepts. We have been told how wonderful those
precepts are. The very dauntingness of the command to love our neighbors,
furthermore—not merely as Will implies when rebuking to Scripture to “suffer”
them—also prepares the mind of the poem’s last and most major theme, the absolute
necessity and ineluctable mystery of Grace.

This is not to deny our ability to progress a little more quickly than Will to an
understanding of the issue. We certainly can, and from there might draw further
conclusions from what his teachers preach. We learn that the intentions of others, if
unknown, might not need to be defended; we learn that an abandonment of learning
out of frustration at its own deficiency does more harm than good. Even as the poem
doggedly unspools its message of Amor proximi, one of the supports of the “cloister of
the soul,” we see that it often stands in conflict with another of those supports—amor
Dei, or love of God, manifested through Veritatis defensio.

Finally, the judgments we see delivered in the poem are frequently non-
destructive, non-personal, and in their care not to attack too harshly seem to
understand that total reform, total “paradise,” is nowhere to be found—not even “in
cloistre or in scole.” To see why and where that leaves Langland’s satire will call for another argument, but we can for the present sum up and look forward to it with the words of Dom Jean Leclercq:

Or, dans l’Église—et dans la vie donnée à Dieu, par excellence dans la vie claustrale—toute réalité se juge correctement par rapport à deux paradis, entre lesquelles elle se ‘situe’: le premier—celui de la Genèse—et le dernier—celui de l’échotologie, celui qui doit venir et dont parle l’Apocalypse. Il répond au premier comme son antitype: les mêmes images s’y retrouvent, empruntées aux mêmes créatures comme aux symboles du monde restauré. On y trouve l’arbre de vie et le fruit donné au vainqueur, transposés, les parfums de la terre et ses couleurs servent à exprimer l’éternel bonheur de l’esprit.

Lui non plus, ce paradis restauré ne désigne un lieu ni un temps, mais une situation religieuse de l’humanité. Le premier représentait l’état de l’homme avant le péché, le dernier symbolise l’état de l’homme après la manifestation totale de la victoire du Christ sur le péché. Entre les deux— interim, comme disent nos Pères—l’Église et chacun de ses membres sont dans un état transitoire, provisoire.475

With appropriate attention to the shape moving out of that “interim” must take, Leclercq adds that “[t]out passera et il y aura une catastrophe finale”—but what does it mean to see reform solely in a distant “catastrophe”?476 Does one’s ideal become, necessarily, prophetic?

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In “Le Cloître est-il un Paradis?” as well as in other writing, Jean Leclercq observed that when monastic writers refer to the perfect life (and they often do) their discourse verges into the eschatological.\textsuperscript{477} For medieval Christians more broadly, in fact, the intensest visions of the ideal world often verged on the prophetic. Not surprisingly, then, can we ascribe a strong affinity with prophecy with medieval satire; because monastic reflections on a perfected world rise out of a discourse that always takes imperfection to exist in the present and defers perfection to the future. By now, the reader can grant that ascetic ideology inherently encourages critical perception. It is not pessimistic, however, even though its optimism remains to be shown. As literary critics have known about satire for some time, satiric criticism cannot help but express an implicit ideal.

Contempt of self and world, love of neighbor, defense of truth: so far in this dissertation I’ve been focusing on these elements of monastically theorized ascetic ideology as phenomena broadly reflected upon throughout medieval religious writing. Moreover, as Pranger was quite apt to point out in his ‘\textit{Artificiality}’ of Christianity, contempt of the world was not only written: it was also lived.\textsuperscript{478} Nevertheless, the ideological guidance for such life did promulgate itself textually to an extent that might seem amazing: the \textit{Rule of Saint Benedict} was read out to newcomers to any monastery, and was repeated at dinner times by increments to all the cloister’s inhabitants;\textsuperscript{479} works \textit{de contemptu} were inspired by, and themselves inspired \textit{ruminatio} on, the Rule’s precept for each monk to “\textit{sæculi actibus se facere}”

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
  \bibitem{footnote3} See for example chapter 58 in the \textit{Rule of St. Benedict}.
\end{thebibliography}
...alienum."480 Yet equally if not more influential on the lives of monks attempting to keep themselves “unspotted by the world” were the works of the Church Fathers, prophetic reflections on the joys that would repay earthly restraint in heaven, and, preéminently texts both ascetic and prophetic in the Bible. The liturgical prayers of the mass, confession, sermons: all these spoken texts (especially the latter) provided instruction to monks on how to contemn the world, and these also were heavily influenced by the Bible. If the monasticism developed during the medieval period can be said to amount to a “second patristic age” (as Leclercq claims in L’Amour) then it also accounts for a second biblical age of sorts since the Church Fathers were themselves heavily indebted to the Bible.

I’ve previously written (in other chapters, above) of satiric discourse existing on a theoretical continuum with sermon and prophecy. Satire predominately points out problems, sermons aim to resolve them, and prophecy attends to the consequences of either the unchanged behavior targeted by the satire or the reform suggested by the sermon—but, as with most continua, all the elements can coëxist and indeed bleed into one another. I would like to add here that satire and prophecy bear an affinity in terms of what James G. Clark might call the ascèse (or lived practice) of monasticism as well.481 For if prophecy influenced the monk’s sense of a justification and ultimate vindication of his asceticism, then prophecy cannot help but influence the satiric ideal for any satire produced by that monk—and ascetic ideology was, as I have previously argued, almost inherently (if problematically) inclined to the satiric mode.

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480 See the Rule, chapter 4, on the “instruments of good works.” The preface to Bernard’s De contemptu mundi is relevant here, as is the discussion of similar meditations on the heavenly Jerusalem in Leclercq’s Amour des Lettres: these show “contempt of the world” in a more positive light—a desire for the life of paradise.

481 I use the term ascèse here on the model of Clark in The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion 30 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), who employs it ostensibly to denote asceticism as lived practice rather than purely abstracted ideology or doctrine.
One small, discrete example of how satire, sermon, and prophecy might be said to come together in Langland’s poem appears even as early as the B prologue, relating not incidentally to the friars:

I fond þere Freres, alle þe foure ordres,  
prechynge þe peple for profit of þe wombe;  
glosed the gospel as hem good liked;  
for coueitise of copes construwed it as þei wolde.  
Manye of þise maistres mowe cloþen hem at likyng  
for hire moneie and hire marchaundis marchen togiders.  
Siþ charite hāþ ben chapman and chief to shryue lorde  
many ferlies han fallen in a fewe yeres.  
But holy chirche and hij holde bettre togidres  
the mooste meschief on Molde is mountynge vp faste.  
(B prol.59-67)

Here the discourse is roundly and even conventionally satiric, certainly, describing the “foure ordres” by the ostentation of their clothes. The friars and their merchandise also “march” together, reminiscent of Wynnere and Wastoure. The passage is also sermonic in so far as it outlines how the friars depart from the example of the gospel and may yet be reformed: they preach for gain in a way that Paul’s epistles denounce, and they should therefore hold faster to the precepts of Holy Church. Yet prophecy also coexists here with the other types of discourse, declaring the natural wonders that corruption has brought about and its threat of causing “the moost mischief on molde” if the reforms do not come about. The satirist’s schematizing portraits help a sermonizer make his point even as they enable a prophet to show the consequences—and here, at least, sermonizer and prophet are one figure and the same.482

482 In the chapter on satiric hybridity that concluded Part I of the dissertation, above, I noted some differences between classical and medieval satire, one being that in the latter high regard is given to serious theological reflection. This has a further consequence, that medieval satire is more likely to appropriate unto itself the mode of the prophetic. As it happens, then, we find less prophecy in classical satire than in medieval satire even though the modes are intertwined. Medieval satirists took greater advantage of the theoretical possibility of melding prophecy and satire, just as they also expanded on classical ideas of ambiguity and hybridity which I discussed in Part One.
The purpose of this chapter, then, will be to discuss how *Piers Plowman* draws on prophetic discourse to express its own satiric ideal, an investigation that will show better than any of the analyses so far that *Piers* is not completely the product of monasticism.\(^\text{483}\) As it will appear, Langland’s poem references not only biblical prophecy but also a type of secular literary prophecy long associated with satire. Based on both ascetic and learnedly literary references in the poem, we can postulate a potential target or “circle” for the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman*—the subject of investigations by Ralph Hanna, Steven Justice, and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton already, among others.\(^\text{484}\)

**Prophecy in Monasticism**

The prophet, considered as a type, has always had a rather specific iconography, as Jean Leclercq has noted, such that an inveterate reader of Gary Larson’s famous “Far Side” cartoons will not gain from his reading an appreciably different concept of what a medieval layman might have thought about the bearers of prophecy.\(^\text{485}\) He—for while not *essentially*, the prophet always seems to be *incidentally* male—stands out from the rest of society, marked by a fullness of years, idiosyncratic vestments, and passion or even rage. His message is to alert society of what fate seems likely to befall it. One might here keep in mind the simple schematic differentiation between preaching, satire, and prophecy with which I opened the

\(^{483}\) That Langland departs from monasticism’s typical concerns is not a new claim, being inferrable in several other ways, but obviously needs to be reinforced here.

\(^{484}\) On Langland’s possible circles see for example the claims of Hanna, at least for the A version, that it might have been written with a somewhat upper-class urban coterie in mind in *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). See also both Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, on a perhaps-similar group of intended addressees, in “Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380-1427,” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997), pp. 59-83.

\(^{485}\) As I indicate, Jean Leclercq makes much more cogent remarks on this topic in *La Vie Parfaite*. 275
chapter, namely that in satire the emphasis lies in pointing out the need for reform, while in preaching the emphasis lies on how one might accomplish the reform, and in prophecy the emphasis lies in what will happen if the necessary reforms are or are not carried out. The prophet’s peculiar appearance—as, unlike satirist or sermonizer, he almost always stands out—relates to (sc. might stem from) and informs others of the peculiar extra-institutional authority he has appropriated: if a satirist can criticize, and a sermonizer suggest solutions, a prophet can warn of or even call down divine wrath and punishment.486

The prophet’s announcement of the likely outcomes of a ruler or society’s decision for or against reform rarely involves, at least in the most central Christian and Judaic traditions most relevant here, specific dates. For whatever reason, biblical prophecy instead seems to focus on specific outcomes or events, especially in narratives of historical character recounting the mercies and punishments of the Old Testament deity: consider the forty days’ warning given to Nineveh by Jonah (Jonah 3:4). The parts of the Bible that depart from historical narrative to look more expressly forwards, like the prophecies of Isaiah about the coming of the Messiah, describe events that might very happen far in the future and therefore have no set date. One specific date given in the New Testament—in Jesus’ “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I shall raise it up,” John 2:19—is the exception that proves the rule for the Christian Gospels.

The uncertainty over dates so evident in biblical prophecy accompanies a certain vagueness in imagery, too, thanks not to a prophet’s desire for willful obscurantism but instead the poetic qualities of his message. This evocative

486 The biblical Book of Jonah makes vivid the limitations of the prophet’s power when it comes to choosing whom to criticize or even to call down divine judgment, but at the same time it shows the respect with which prophets are held and their own temptation to see themselves as wielders of punishment.
strangeness so marked out prophecy for Late Antique and medieval readers that almost any poetic Scriptural text from the Bible, in the Middle Ages, seemed to call for interpretation as prophecy.\footnote{The same of course held true for texts by Virgil, among others.} When the Dantaean letter to Can Grande purports to read the 	extit{Divina Commedia} in literal, allegorical, anagogical, and typological terms it merely applied to a great vernacular poem the same critical lenses used for centuries already in interpreting the Christian scriptures, out of which half the four senses had a future-minded if not fully prophetic character.\footnote{\textit{i.e.} the moral and anagogical senses, which display again the easy commerce between sermonic and prophetic modes. In addition to the famous “Letter to Can Grande,” explaining Dante’s \textit{Divina Commedia} in terms of the four senses, the well-known medieval mnemonic verse: “Littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria / moralia quod agas, quo tendas anagogia.”}

As the Book of Revelation shows, some of the most poetic scriptural prophecy for the Christian faith involved the rejuvenated world after the final triumphant conquest of good over evil: the \textit{redemptio mundi}, or redemption of the world, the very name of which indicates some of that term’s importance to this dissertation. As further discussion later on in this chapter will show, the idea of \textit{redemptio mundi} lies (however silently, however paradoxically) at the heart of monastic thought: both transhistorically and in the later Middle Ages specifically. Just as central is the concept’s role in the worldview of the satirist (again, viewed in the double perspective of both the Middle Ages and all history): although satirists, unlike preachers, do not make it their primary objective to suggest remedies for society, seemingly content merely to point out its flaws, their investment in the continuation and improvement of the very world that they decry stands evident from their often delicately crated, artfully worded critiques’ very existence. Prophecy, both despairing over the present order and looking forward for a new paradise, goes just one step further.\footnote{Bloomfield, \textit{Apocalypse}, gives a brief intellectual history of the term. “The imagery of paradise in Christian thinking is most complex, and most of it goes back to Patristic speculation on the subject. Paradise, according to Father Jean Daniélou, may be: the earthly paradise of Adam and Eve; heaven, the place of beatitude; a place where the souls of the just await resurrection [...] the soul; and finally the}
That said, a peculiarity of the medieval worldview that we need to pay particular attention to is that even though the Middle Ages saw paradise as lost and in need of restoration, it also conceived of this paradisiacal nature as *not* being lost *everywhere*. Indeed, one of the distressing things about the Crusade era (for medieval observers) was that it showed the presumably heretofore inviolate sanctity of Jerusalem overthrown. The legendary history of the so-called “holy rood tree” and related tales took as a matter of course that when Adam and Eve were originally expelled from paradise, the Garden of Eden did not cease to exist. Joinville writes of sweet-smelling bark flowing towards the Mediterranean by the river Nile, ostensibly carried from trees growing in the earthly paradise.\(^490\) Other medieval literature, such as the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach (itself drawing on any number of medieval lapidaries like that famous one by Marbode of Rennes) describes the curative powers of several precious stones thought to have come from paradise, still a place on earth.\(^491\)

\(^{490}\) For a translation that while old nevertheless accords with my memory of the passage in a much more recent book, see Ethel Wedgwood, trans., *The Memoirs of the Lord Joinville* (London: John Murray, 1906), providing Joinville’s observations of the Nile: “Before the river reaches Egypt, men who are practised in it cast their nets loose in the stream at nightfall, and when morning comes, they find in their nets such raw goods as are imported into this country: to wit, ginger, rhubarb, aloes, and cinnamon. And it is said, that these things are washed down from the Earthly Paradise; that the wind blows down the trees of Eden just as the wind in this country blows down the dry wood; and that what the merchants sell to us in this country, is the dry wood that falls into the river there.” (88)

\(^{491}\) Leopold Pannier’s work on medieval French lapidaries of “oriental” origin (e.g. those attributed to Marbode and Mandeville) and of “Christian” origin (largely anonymous) mentions emerald appearing "en Syce, ou flun de Paradis" (244, line 206, after Mandeville). See also the fragmented (“Christian”) lapidary of “Philippe,” p. 297, making a similar claim, and a remark about paradisical origin for ruby as well on page 295 of those fragments. On pages 294-295 of the fragments appears a more extensive remark about emeralds: “Sainz Jehans nous dit en l’apocalipse qu’il vit esmeraudes quarte pierre desoz le verai regne, et pour ce senfie ele la foi des quatre evangelistes. Et si nous dist sainz Jehans l’evangelistes que une meniere de bestes sont qui ont non gripon, qui gardent les esmeraudes sur le flun de paradis en la terre de Sirie, et icelles manieres de bestes ont quatre pies et deus eles en maniere d’anges, et par derriere comme lyons; et une maniere de gens sont qui ont non Arimpiles et n’ont qu’un œil en mi le front et vont querre les esmeraudes, et les quierent tuit armé él flun et les prament. Et cèles
As we’ve also seen, the monastery (and to a lesser extent the school) was also viewed as a place in which paradise was being restored, for which reason monastic writers engaging in discussions of prophetic *redemptio mundi* tended to see the bringing about of a restored world as a matter of following even more closely the monastic life and its ascetic ideals. Given a typical if probably not universal understanding of the course of sacred history by Christian monks, the cloister was meant through the constant liturgical reënaction of the Divine Office (especially after the Cluniac reforms) and the enclosed penitential separation and austerity of its inhabitants to both train monks for later existence in, and also to restore to the paradise above, the depleted ranks of angels fallen during Satan’s prehistoric rebellion.  

The *bios angelikos* ideal in monasticism accounts, at a stroke, for the apparent abandonment of the world by cloistered religious and the salutary optimism of their—otherwise—seemingly negation-freighted earthly existence.

Satire by monks also very clearly displays these traits enforced through monastic discipline, such that one can say without hesitation that both satire by monks and the lives of those monks themselves participate in the same prophetic ideal. In Bernard of Cluny’s *De contemptu mundi*, for instance—a poem whose very name, translated by Pepin’s edition as “Scorn for the World,” would seem to indicate an

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bestes devant nomées vont corant et volant et lor tolent a leur pooir, et moult sont angoisseuses et ardanx dou toilir, mes il sont armé et toilir ne lor puuent.” But if this so far seems like a description verifying the existence of an actual earthly paradise, what follows profoundly modifies—moralizes—what had gone before: “La fine esmeraude nete et gentil et tresvert senefic la grant verdure de bone foi qui ne puet flechir, que li bon patriarche et li prophete orent si grant et si tres finement vert, por quoi il ont la grant gloire dou ciel. Tuit cil qui sont en ceste grant verdor, dit sans Jehans, n’ont que un ciel, c’est a dire Jhesucrist. Li Armpile vont querre les esmeraudes armé, si se combatent as gripons. Li gripon senefient les diables. Toutes ieces choses doivent avoir en memoire tuit cil qui esmeraude portent.” Despite this moralistic conclusion, it is not difficult to see how descriptions of an earthly paradise (attributed to saints no less) could help to contribute to the idea of such a place’s literal existence by individuals such as Joinville (quoted above). See *Les Lapidaires Français du Moyen Âge des XIIe, XIIIe et XIVe Siècles* (Paris: Vieweg, 1882).

492 On the growing centrality of the Divine Office for monks in the medieval period, see Berlière, *Ascêse*.  

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active and disdainful renouncement of all transitory things—the narrator’s torrent of deprecations gives way to an affectingly beautiful meditation on the heavenly Jerusalem. Nor were such meditations uncommon, as Jean Leclercq in *L’Amour des Lettres et le Désir de Dieu* long ago pointed out; monks seem, especially in the high and later Middle Ages, to have taken Jerome’s dictum that it is “better to have lived well than to have lived in Jerusalem” to heart. That Bernard would have found it appropriate to place such a vision in his *De contemptu*, by its own admission a poem that indulges in satire, deserves consideration. Monastic prophecy, purely defined as prophecy engaged in by the writings of monks, is thus inherently biblical and also inherently ascetic, its main field of inspiration application being monks and not all people (though certainly the salvation of all people may be entertained as a possibility). At the same time, satire such as one finds in Bernard of Cluny’s *De contemptu* serves as a strong reminder of how the monastic vision of a healed and restored world, prior to the fourteenth century, considered only superficially the character of *redemptio* and reform outside cloister and college walls.

**Secular Prophecy: the Evidence from Satire**

Leclercq made much of the differentiation between monks and scholars, but the reason for his caveats is clear: no one wanted new monks or those interested in monastic life to confuse scholarship with *ascèse*, the cloister with the school. In terms of satire, though, the most obviously different of *comparanda* are not the works of the scholastics but rather secular satirists—particularly those writing in the vernacular. Because monastic thought is so little generally understood, discussions of its literature often assume a familiarity with secular examples. It might prove useful, though, to consider medieval secular satire with a presumption of already understanding
monastic thought so as to throw fresh light on what makes this secular poetry’s use of prophecy noteworthy, interesting, and innovative.

Dream visions are obviously important vehicles of literary prophecy, to say nothing of secular satire, in the later Middle Ages. For late fourteenth century England they are inherently important to a range of literature hard to summarize, since as L. O. Aranye Fradenberg has observed the era’s literary output distinguishes itself by making dreams an extremely common setting for narrative literary works.493 There can of course be no doubt that the dream setting of Piers Plowman is not simply sterile convention, as (perhaps best of all) the ending to the second vision makes clear. The second vision provides two excellent examples of prophecy by the narrator, and I particularly want to focus on the latter of those two since it provides good evidence inter alia for the prophetic significance of the poem’s dream vision frame

In the second vision’s conclusion, the narrator awakens from the altercation between the priest and Piers about the latter character’s ability to read and correctly make sense of Truth’s “pardon.” He then steps back, as it were, from recalling events as they happened to reflect on the strangeness of all that he had seen:

The preest and Perkyn apposeden eiþer oober,
and þoruþ hir wordes I wook and waited aboute,
and seiþ þe sonne euene South sitte þat tyme,
metelees and moneilees on Maluere hulles.
Mysynge on þis metels a myle wey ich yede.
Many tyme þis metels hap maked me to studie
of þat I seiþ slepynge, if it so be myyte,
and for Piers loue þe Plowman wel pencif in herte,
and which a pardon Piers hadde þe peple to conforte,
and how þe preest inpuigned it wiþ two propre wordes.
Ac I haue no sauour in songewarie for I se it ofte faille.
Caton and Canonistres counseillen vs to leue
to sette sadnesse in Songewarie for sompniæ ne cures.
Ac for þe book bible bereþ witnesse

how Daniel diuined þe dremes of a kyng
that Nabugodonosor nemplē þise clerkes—
Daniel seide, ‘sire kyng, þi sweuene is to mene
that vnkoupe knyʒtes shul come þi kyngdom to cleyme;
amonges lower lordes þi lond shal be departed.’
As Daniel diuined in dede it fel after:
the kyng lees his lordshipe and lasse men it hadde.
And Ioseph mette meruellously how þe moone and þe sonne
and þe elleuene sterres hailsed hym alle.
Thanne Iacob iugged Iosephes sweuene:
‘Beau fitʒ,’ quod his fader, ‘for defaute we shullen,
I myself and my sones, seche þee for nede.’
It bifel as his fader seide in Pharaoes tyme
that Ioseph was justice Egipte to loke;
it bifel as his fader tolde, his e frendes þere hym souʒte.
Al þis makeþ me on metels to þynke,
and how þe preest preued no pardon to dowel
and demed þat dowel indulgences passeþ,
biennals and triennals and Bishopes lettres.
Dowel at þe day of dome is digneliche vnderfongen;
he passeþ al þe pardon of Seint Petres cherche.”

Two main observations about prophecy stand out upon examination of the foregoing
passage. It will strike the reader first that the narrator presents his “enigmatic dream”
(as Macrobius might have put it) explicitly in terms of biblical narrative. This fact
has not been lost to David Johnson, who finds in the scene an allusion to patristic
writings about prophecy. Second, the narrator considers even the biblical dreams
on which he draws as precedent in terms of learned medieval dream theory

\[494\] B.7.144-78. Though I do not wish to raise the specter of the old authorship controversy again, I will
make the note that the second vision’s ending as it does proves that Langland was able to make a
narrative end with an effective and familiar sense of closure. Perhaps no scholars have seriously thought
Langland incapable of writing other than iteratively, but paying attention to this and to other loci of
closure in the poem helps us to keep in mind that the B/C version’s last end comes about as the result of
the poet’s conscious choice (on which see discussion below). I suppose it possible that Langland could
have intended to make the end of the second vision the end of the entire poem but decided not to or else
was somehow thwarted in redesign.

\[495\] Medieval dream theory is very much informed by the Late Antique commentary on Cicero’s
Somnium Scipionis by Macrobius. For the meaning of such terms as “enigmatic” and “oracular” dream,
see William Harris Stahl, ed. Commentary on the Dream of Scipio. Records of Western Civilization

\[496\] See David Frame Johnson, “‘In somnium, in visionem’: the Figurative Significance of Sleep in Piers
Plowman,” which observes that Will’s falling asleep in the poem might be understood not only
pejoratively but also in terms of patristic thought on the positive, vaticinatory role sleep might have. It
appears in Loyal Letters: Studies on Medieval Alliterative Poetry & Prose, ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen and
Alasdair A. MacDonald (Gröningen: Egbert Forsten, 1994), pp. 239-60.
Macrobius, arguably Richard of St. Victor) and of course—that schoolboy authority Langland so often seems to present as a touchstone for conventional common sense—the Distichs of Cato. This being the case, it ought therefore to be asserted that the dream vision is Langland’s application of “literary” prophecy, however mixed it may be with biblical references. 497

Straightforward political prophecy is another type of what I’ve been calling literary prophecy. Piers Plowman is not the only piece of late medieval dream literature to ascribe political significance to the prophecy it contains. Nor is it the only satire to do so. In fact, of all types of writing that indulge in prophecy, satiric writing might lay the greatest claim to political commentary—if it does not always indulge in prophecy—for reasons which by now should be obvious. And it is precisely the political sensitivity in the satiric message that dictates the often riddling form used in a secular prophecy. The obscurity of enigmata provides an apparent substitute for the perhaps more purely poetical obscurity of the more sincerely vatic utterances by the inspired prophet, hiding political critique from the ears of those who cannot or should not understand it while validating and encouraging the solidarity in the group of those who should and do understand (as we shall see below).

Of course it is hard to say that in later medieval literature culture poetic prophecy—in dream form, of a riddling nature, quite possibly with political valence in referring to specific names and dates or other setting markers—is not Christian at all. Some of what I have been calling literary poetic prophecy obviously could draw sufficiently on pagan models (and thus needs no scriptural referents), as in the twelfth-

497 Indeed, the tale of Daniel reminds us that even actual examples of prophecy in the Bible are sometimes of the “literary,” riddling sort—following various conventions to hide names and occasionally intended references to specific dates and individuals (as in the purported gematria in the Book of Revelation identifying 666 with Nero).
century *Prophetia Merlini.*

Even medieval literary prophecy can hardly have escaped completely from scriptural models, nevertheless. Yet even here, *Piers Plowman* being a case in point, satiric literary prophecy looks different from biblical prophecy when the two coexist. If by a degree, one type of prophecy has the present more “worldly” state of affairs more specifically in mind than the other does.

One of the purest examples of literary political prophecy in *Piers Plowman* occurs in the Prologue to the B version with the words of the “angel of heaven” who speaks in Latin to the king being celebrated there. To it should be added the Latin quip of the “Goliardeys” just following. Iconographically, the angel is reminiscent of the person dressed as an angel in the pageant surrounding king Richard II’s triumphal entry into London during coronation celebrations in 1377—and because the king is here being addressed by an angel then the overall picture seems quite flattering to the king. I begin my quotation a bit earlier for the sake of context:

Thanne loked vp a lunatik, a leene þyng wiþalle, and knelynge to þe kyng clerically he seide, ‘Crist kepe þee, sire kyng, and þi kyngryche, and lene þee lede þi lond so leaute þee louye, and for þi riþful rulyng be rewarded in heuene.’ And siþen in þe Eyr an heï z an Aungel of heuene lowed to speke in latyn, for lewed me ne koude langle ne fugge þat justifie hem sholde, but suffren and seruen; forþi seide þe Aungel, ‘“Sum Rex, sum princeps”; neutrum fortasse deinceps. O qui tura regis christi specialia regis, hoc quodagas melius, iustus es, esto pius! Nudum ius a te vestiri vult pietate. Qualia vis metere, talia grana sere. Si ius nudatur nudo de iure metatur;’

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498 For the largely non-scriptural prophecies, such Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Prophecies of Merlin*, see for example Jacob Hammer, “A Commentary on the *Prophetia Merlini* (Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book VII),” *Speculum* 10.1 (1935), pp. 3-30 and continued in *Speculum* 15.4 (1940), pp. 409-31. It mentions other commentaries as well, such as the one attributed to Alan of Lille. On a wider context for the *Prophecies of Merlin*, see Rupert Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911).

499 For more, see the accounts of the triumphal entry in *Richard Maidstone: Concordia (The Reconciliation of Richard II with London)*, ed. David R. Carlson with verse trans. by A. G. Rigg (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 2003), app. II.
As the passage shows, the angel’s words tell another story—for they sternly warn the king of potential vices he might fall prey to, in a sort of subjunctive satire; they direct him as to how he might best go about living rightly so as not to fall into those ways, in a sort of admonitory sermon; and they indicate the dire consequence if he does not do so, fully in the manner of prophecy. Although the “lunatik” speaking in English hardly utters any explicit criticism at all—he sneers, but says only the kindest words—the angel’s Latin suggests obliquely yet straightforwardly enough that strict and unforgiving justice should and might alight on a king who is not merciful and wise; he might not be “Rex and Princeps” in the future.

The Goliard, “grewed” (likely by these too-conciliatory utterances) repeats the angel’s message in a distich. In so doing, he rephrases the message at once more circumspectly and also more starkly, which suggests—even early in the poem—an implicit theory of how to judge others. The angel, as minister of heaven, can “speak truth to power” face-to-face (though Langland puts this message in Latin and in rather polite address). The Goliard, a “gloton of words,” makes for a different case. Scholars have generally taken the epithet merely Langland’s alliterating recognition of one

500 A. V. C. Schmidt’s translation, ad loc.: “(You say) ‘I am King, I am Ruler’; you may perhaps be neither in future. O you who administer the sublime laws of Christ the King, in order to do better what you do, as you are just, be godly! Naked law requires to be clothed by you with a sense of your duty to God. Sow such grain as you wish to reap: if the law is nakedly administered [lit. stripped bare] by you, then let (judgement) be measured out (to you) according to the letter [lit. naked law]. If goodness is sown (by you), may you reap goodness.

501 Schmidt: “Inasmuch as a king has his name from (the fact of) being a ruler [ultimately the word rex is from regere, ‘to rule’], he possesses the name (alone) without the reality unless he is zealous in maintaining the laws.”

502 Schmidt: “The king’s bidding has for us the binding force of law.”
possible etymology for Golias and his sons. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest here that the poet could also have been keying the reader in to how deeply the Goliard’s words here might reward interpretation. On the one hand, as befits a mortal person speaking to someone in a position of supremely high temporal authority, the Goliard merely points out not that stern justice might deprive a bad king of his titles but that an unwillingness to rule would give him the name without the actually performed office (in other words, provide the nomen [...] sine re) of the ruler.

On the other hand, the message quite clearly suggests actual violent death. At least one scholar of Goliardic poetry has observed that these medieval satirists often played around the edges of scholastic thought by considering words in a realist as opposed to a nominalist sense. In other words, the Goliards suggested that words themselves held a key to and to some degree partook in the nature of those beings they described; nominalists would declare that names are merely names, on the other hand, and have as arbitrary signs or locutions no real bearing on the matters they describe.

Langland’s Goliard, then, does not really believe that the king can ever have a “nomen [...] sine re” and still misrule. On the contrary, the ruler will have the “nomen” denoted “sine re” in so far as the “nomen” (the noun spelled R-E-X), “sine re” (without R-E) is simply a mark of obliteration: X.

Though it may seem obvious from the quotation and the chapters in this dissertation which have come above, the implicit theory of satire in the passage above quoted suggests not only the dangers but also the importance of satire and satirists. For while it is obvious from the lunatic, angel, and Goliard’s circumlocutions and choice of Latin (in the latter two cases) that those who would provide criticism to anyone so powerful as a king must choose their words carefully, the reader gets the distinct

503 Mann, “Satiric Subject and Satiric Object.”
504 Thus one satirist, as Mann explains in “Satiric Subject and Satiric Object,” was able to write that the “presbyter” takes his title by the fact that he “ter prebiberit,” or “tipples thrice.”
impression that—at least in the opinion of the poet—normal people have no way at all of speaking up for themselves; satirists (by which I mean here individuals who are able to send critical and admonitory messages to the king using a fine touch as well as verbal ingenuity) are, so far as public advocacy goes, the only game in town. A relatively recent study by Fiona Somerset in the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* has made this point forcefully, since the study locates the source of the people’s jubilant exclamation that the “precepta regis” would be “vincula legis” to them. As it turns out, this line comes from a larger work in which, in context, it speaks of the “precepta” of God rather than any mortal monarch. Not only can the people not “jangle ne jugge that justifie hem sholde,” then, but the passage actually shows us how; the people’s attempt to use Latin only exacerbates their role—to “suffren and serven”—when they so address the king.505

We may compare the angel and Goliard’s admonitory suggestions to the king, which I have called (literary) political prophecy in its purest form in *Piers*, by virtue of its use of Latin and its careful wordplay and topicality, to the prophecy that ends passus 6 of the B-version and constitutes the narrator’s reflections on the failure of the “plowing of the half acre” in the second vision. I discussed the “plowing of the half acre” at length in chapter 4, above, but I did not at that time focus on the confusing prophecy that concludes the passage. There, the narrator—recounting what he has seen so far as Will, is warning laborers everywhere that their unwillingness to exert themselves save under threat of Hunger, could result in very dire consequences. That Piers had called down Hunger to avenge the sloth and disrespect of wastours was in a way merely a scare tactic alone and did not represent actual famine. The hunger that arrives upon the scene could be said to represent simply a lack of crops at harvest time

caused by a dearth of workers, as Robert Worth Frank has indicated, though as Kaske has shown Hunger’s characterization matters, too.\textsuperscript{506} We can take the farewell banquet to Hunger as proof:

\begin{verbatim}
      Al þe pouere peple pescoddes fetten;  
    benes and baken apples þei broȝte in hire lappes,  
    Chibolles and Cheruelles and ripe chiries manye;  
    and profrede Piers þis present to plese wiþ hungry.  
    Hunger eet þis in haste and axed after moore.  
    Thanne pouere folk for fere fedden hunger yerne  
    grene poret and pesen; to peisen hym þei þoȝte.  
    By þat it neȝed neer heruest newe corn cam to chepyng.  
    Thanne was folk fayn and fedde hunger wiþ þe beste;  
    wiþ good Ale as gloton taȝte þei garte hym to slepe.  
    And þo noûde Wastour noȝt werche, but wandred aboute,  
    ne no beggere ete breed þat benes Inne come,  
    but Coket or clermatyn or of elene whete,  
    ne noon halpenny ale in none wise dryyne,  
    but of þe beste and þe brunneste þat breweytere selle.  
    Laborers þat haue no land to lyue on but hire handes  
    deyne þoȝt to dyne a day nyȝt olde wortes.  
    May no peny ale hem paie, ne no pece of bacoun,  
    but if it be fressh flessh ouper fissh yfyred,  
    and þat chaud and þus chaud for chillynge of hir mawe.  
    But he be heȝliche hyred ellis Wolfe he chide;  
    that he was werkman wroȝt warie þe tyme.  
    Ayeins Catons counselle comseþ he to langle:  
    Paupertatis onus pacienter ferre memento;  
    he greueþ hym ageyn god and gruccheþ ageyn Reson,  
    and þanne corseþ þe kyng and al þe counseil after  
    swiche lawes to loke laborers to chaste.  
    Ac whiles hunger was hir maister þer wolde noon chide  
    ne stryuen ayeins þe statut, so sterneliche he loked. \textsuperscript{(B.6.292-320)}
\end{verbatim}

The availability of food at harvest time, so suddenly arriving, fills certain workers with pride and causes them to demand only the finest foods for themselves, and only the easiest laboring conditions, as compensation for what (little) they do.

As the narrator warns, though, this will not always be the case. Just as surely as winter comes to reward ants and to punish grasshoppers in the familiar fairy tale (not that Langland mentions any version of this tale here), so to will Hunger come again...and with a vengeance:

Ac I warne yow werkmen, wynne \( \text{þ} \) whil ye mowe
for hunger hiderward hastep hym faste.
He shal awake þoruȝ water wastours to chaste;
er fyue yer be fulfilled swich famyn shal aryse.
Thoruȝ flood and foule wedres fruytes shul faille,
and so selp Saturne and sente yow to warne.
Whan ye se þe mone amys and two monks heddes,
and a mayde haue þe maistrie, and multiplie by eiȝte,
thanne shal deep wiþdrawe and derþe be lustice,
and Dawe þe dykere dye ye for hunger
but if god of his goodnesse graunte vs a trewe. (B.6.321-31)

But what sort of warning does this riddling passage refer to? On the one hand, it may seem reasonable to assume that Langland had a very specific topical matter in mind—that the riddle has a solution. On the other hand, however, that the prophecy itself is topical does not make for an open-and-shut case. Certainly it seems to be topical and “literary” in so far as it seems to indulge in riddling references—predominately non-scriptural or markedly religious—to time-stamped future events. Famine shall arise “er fyue yer be fulfilled,” for instance.\(^\text{507}\) The signs referred to afterwards also appear to indicate some real year or date, given the suggestion to “multiplie by eiȝte.”

But the passage can also be said to touch on the conventions of biblical prophecy. In addition to God at the end—whose “trewe” in the form of pardon from Truth will be the subject of the next passus of Piers—the prophecy also seems to dwell on the cosmic, the \textit{ahistorical}, the universal. One gets the feeling on reading it that the passage would be very different without the temporal markers, “er fyue yer be

\(^{507}\) Saturn is a traditional debate partner in literature from the medieval sapiential tradition, e.g. \textit{Solomon and Saturn}, and also a deity associated with wet weather. See for example James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill, edd. \textit{The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Rithus} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
fulfilled” and (especially) the direction to “multiplie by ei3te.” “Marking the sun amiss” after all reminds us of the eschatological prophecies of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Matthew about “eclipses of the sun and moon.” As for whether the “mayde with mastrie” and the “monkes heddes” are a number or refer instead to portents like an eclipse, it bears noting that the events they are said here to refer to do happen later in Piers (the eclipse and resurrection of passus 19) but otherwise seem more generally apocalyptic.

To recap, then, a medieval satirist might write two broadly different types of prophecy. Both appear intermingled in Piers. One, which I have chosen to call “biblical,” flourished naturally in that continuation of the patristic age that Leclercq has called the monastic world and has redemptio mundi as its goal; it is not date-specific, not “coded.” The other, which I have vacillated between calling “satiric” and “literary,” has pagan literary exemplars and during the time this study concerns itself with focused its vision on the necessity of more immediate reforms (especially in the political sphere). 508 What does it mean for Langland to draw on both types of prophecy? At first glance, at least, it may not mean necessarily much: as I’ve just written, it would be difficult for literary prophecy to differ from biblical prophecy in every respect, given the latter’s prominence and availability as a model; by the same token, purely biblical prophecy could invite the use of nonbiblical literary models as well.

Upon closer inspection, biblical and literary prophecy’s cross-pollination hardly seems to have been unavoidable in every case. The prophecies in “Thomas of Erceldoune,” though they take place in a poem obviously familiar with Christian cosmography, have all the specificity and enigma of the pagan literary prophecy. 509

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508 Classical satire does not contain prophecy to the same degree, as I have already pointed out.
509 See for example the edition by Brandl, provided in the bibliography.
On the other hand, one finds in the prophecies of Bernard of Cluny’s *De contemptu mundi* an eschatological vision almost resistant to specific reference or date. This is not to say that religious prophecies cannot contain specific references or riddles, or that literary prophecy cannot be vague: for the former, again, see the Book of Revelation and its clever use of *gematria*. But the types tend to have distinctly different priorities. Scholars have been known to ascribe one or another of these sets of priorities to Langland, but not both.

The appropriate answer to the question of whether Langland’s use of prophetic discourse in *Piers Plowman* deserves special attention or not, then, must be “yes,” since, far from avoiding a mixture of the biblical and literary types he draws greatly on the conventions specific to both. His biblical prophecy is especially biblical, one might say, and his literary prophecy elaborate. Various examples could be adduced here to prove this point, but the best evidence in broad outline is that some of Langland’s “biblical” prophecies even go so far as to allude to, or even directly quote, prophetic utterances from the Bible. Langland’s literary prophecy, on the other hand, circumscribes itself. There are a number of places in *Piers Plowman* in which the narrator or some other character seems on the verge of making a topical, politically charged utterance of warning and chastisement only to restrain itself or otherwise occlude its message from being too openly understood.

Because *Piers* draws on biblical and literary prophecy so thoroughly, it seems likely that Langland wrote with an audience in mind that would have been especially familiar with both. The end of the second vision contains for example a meditation on the significance of dreams clearly allying the poem so far with the biblical prophetic tradition, as we’ve seen, but it also contains an example of extremely obscure and ostensibly topical prophetic admonition in its last lines when it mentions the return of Hunger and the signs that will attend that. The references to monks’ heads and eclipses
tempt conjecture, as I have observed, since we assume they must mean something yet no satisfactory solution for them has been found. Far more important, however, might be the lines’ appearance of meaning something: their suggestion that the person with the proper sort of knowledge might be able to unlock their secrets and know the date being referred to (if indeed that is what they mean). The passage would thus beckon a sense of pride in an initiate group identity—and also thwart it, much as Dame Study claims to tempt (yet thwart) seekers after higher knowledge with the distractions of (pseudo-)scientific lore. The passage here also illustrates another feature of Langlandian prophetic vision, in so far as one cannot always be certain of the vision’s referent’s being in the waking world of sublunary reality or in the poem itself.510

Moreover, and much more solidly literary, some prophecy in the poem seems to draw on or allude to satire produced in a university context and to both Goliardic and parodic texts.511 These imitations and allusions, while few, should be respected since they indicate even more about the literary taste of Langland and a possible target audience. These allusions have been alleged not to say much, being typical fare for sermons and entertaining tales. The fable of the mice attempting to bell the cat, for instance (whose cartoonesque frivolity clearly aims to soften the blow of the biblical tag quoted there only apparently in passing, “Woe to the land where a boy is king!”) appears in a recorded medieval English sermon contemporary with Langland and has the character of a traditional fable. But other seemingly similar references would not

510 When Langland sees pope and king in the prologue, are these the plot or a prophetic vision? And do the monks’ heads later refer to real famine in 14th-century England or, within the narrative only, to the dire setting in which the poem introduces the character Nede?
511 Will makes an angry reference in B.13.90-92 that the gluttonous “doctor of divinity” “haþ dronken so depe he wolde deuyne soone / and preuen it by hir Pocalips and passion of Seint Auereys / that neiþer bacon ne braun, blancmanger ne mortrews, / is neiþer fishe ne flessh, but fode for a penaunt.” The “Pocalips” has been seen as a reference to the Goliardic Apocalipsis Goliae (edition listed in the bibliography), while the “passion of Seint Auereys” has occasioned more uncertainty. It appears however to be a reference to the parodic Tractus Garsie (edition listed in the bibliography): see Ben Parsons, “An Unrecognized Reference to a Latin Satire in Langland’s Piers Plowman,” Notes & Queries n.s. 57.1 (2010), pp. 27-29.
be so universally appreciated outside a certain literate setting. Nor can we look at such references and claim that Langland is only borrowing a story which will appeal to a wide class of readers, since the references take the form of allusions that only someone familiar with their literary referents already could appreciate.

Before turning to how Langland might have encountered it, it deserves noting that the presence of satire one could associate with the medieval world of learning in a poem arguably much indebted to the monastic prophetic tradition puzzles. Again, not for no reason did Leclercq open *L’Amour des Lettres et le Désir de Dieu* by contrasting the monastic as opposed to the scholastic worldview and way of representing the world and ideas: although scholasticism and monasticism stand out as twin peaks of high-minded, disinterested life, especially for the Middle Ages, the methods and aims of “classic” Benedictine monasticism diverge sharply from those of even medieval schools.⁵¹² Monks could be said to draw their energy, as we have seen, from the practiced impracticability and leisure for associative thinking that adherence to their rule (and a concomitant separation from “the world” to examine more closely the health of their own souls) provides them. Scholastics, despite a propensity for abstraction, are much more concerned with practical things than monks, much as in modern universities mathematicians might, however incorrectly, be considered more engaged with the present hour than medieval historians.

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⁵¹² On the incompatibility of monastic and scholastic thought see an extended treatment at the beginning of Leclercq’s *Amour des Lettres*. See also Leclercq’s review of C[eslas] Spicq, *Esquisse d’une Histoire de l’Exégèse Latine au Moyen Âge*, in the *Bulletin Thomiste* (1942-1945), pp. 59-67, noting that the twelfth century especially recognized “deux exégèses, correspondant à ce qu’on pourrait désigner comme ‘deux moyen âges’ parallèles”: one, monastic, was concerned with spiritual growth and the other, scholastic, emphasized on didactic explication (62). He also notes, following Spicq, that the fourteenth century saw “une sorte de rupture entre les deux exégèses, littérale et allégorique, que la tradition avait unies, tout en mettant l’accent sur la seconde,” plunging exegesis into an unremitting literalism and (as a result) “caducité” (at least on the evidence provided by Spicq’s examination of too few authors). Leclercq concludes that there were indeed “two Middle Ages,” the second scholastic, and that writers of the first category—“mystique, prolongement de l’époque patristique [...] relèvent non de l’histoire de l’exégèse, mais de celle de la morale et de la spiritualité.” (68-69)
Does this use of different types of prophecy point simply to the poem’s satiric hybridity, or does it point to the poem’s “circle” as well? I think the latter option must be the case. The presence of both types of prophecy undoubtedly speaks to the author’s discursive eclecticism. Reading them in situ, though, one does not get the sense, which would be possible, that the poet wanted to dole them both out equally. On the contrary, “biblical” prophecy (here associated with the monastic worldview) achieves far more prominence in the poem and also seems more serious. Appropriations of the scholastic seem at key points almost mockingly, parodically, to make overtures to that worldview’s adherents only to undermine them, calling their trademark elaboration into question. All this suggests a circle, but not a close one: one that Langland stood on the edge of, that could appreciate scriptural and academic discourse but whose taste, to Langland, may have been too academic and not scriptural enough.

**Langland’s Circle?**

Scholars have long commented on the elaborate scholasticism of certain passages in *Piers*, the impression Langland gives of familiarity with the educated world of his day. Ralph Hanna has proposed that Langland spent part of his early career around the University of Oxford, a circumstance which would help to explain some of the poem’s more learned references. Moreover, scholars such as D. Vance Smith and Anne Middleton have noticed that the poem also contains references to the curriculum of study and examinations necessary for the achievement of a doctorate in

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513 See Hanna, *William Langland* as well as the claims aforementioned in *Pursuing History*. 

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theology.\textsuperscript{514} This, too, suggests non-casual knowledge with an educated elite, whether Langland was firmly a member of that group or not. While the extent and exact nature of the poet’s learning has been subject to some debate—as witness the articles in a special edition of \textit{The Yearbook of Langland Studies} on that very subject\textsuperscript{515}—it seems reasonable to assume that the poem’s author was sufficiently well acquainted with learned circles to address them confidently, if he also stood outside those circles enough to pass judgment upon them.

Langland’s taste in riddles seems to have been of a piece with late fourteenth-century English scholarly tastes as well, if the evidence provided by the curious figure of John Erghome can serve as any guide. Erghome—friar, university don, and author most famously now of a commentary on the so-called prophecies ascribed to John Bridlington (if not those prophecies as well)—appears in his writings to indulge in the same occultative literary tricks that one also finds in the so-called “Oxford Riddles” contemporary to him and, it has been plausibly argued, Patience’s riddle in \textit{Piers Plowman} (a riddle which appears in a scene prominently featuring a “doctour of divinity”).\textsuperscript{516} The commentary on the prophecies of John of Bridlington in fact enumerates in its preface the various methods of hiding one’s message and uses these same techniques to veil its author’s name.\textsuperscript{517}


\textsuperscript{517} More on medieval literary obfuscation might be found in Jan M. Ziolkowski, “Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition,” \textit{Medievalia} 19 (1996 for 1993), pp. 101-170. As Ziolkowski shows, this was
That Erghome, or those like him, should indulge in riddles of the sort one finds in *Piers Plowman* is made even more interesting by the fact that he obviously also had an interest in the composition of literary prophecy, as the commentary to which his treatise on obfuscation is prepended makes very clear. Erghome’s extant list of books further supports this assessment, showing him to have been interested in matters not only obscure but positively occult as well. One reads *Piers Plowman* with the distinct impression that, even if some of the poem’s most cryptic statements might not have an easily recognizable solution, Langland could indulge in the same techniques himself as well as make light of them. Therefore, even if we can identify persons such as Erghome in *Piers Plowman*’s target audience, we should not necessarily consider Langland to have been one of them. He does portray himself as such a figure, though, to the extent that Will is a Goliard or gyro vague; given the currency of antifratal polemic, he must have been aware of this. His curious awareness of

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519 The fact that Langland takes care to make a critique of such writing exactly by indulging in it indicates that he sees its attraction. This is not a surprise, as Will’s exploration of learning near the beginning of the *vita* clearly indicates a sympathy to how one could be misled into the deceptive knowledge of non-lerical disciplines by pride in learning itself.

520 Szitti, in *The Antifratal Tradition*: “[Like the ‘notorious Biblical wanderer’ Cain], [l]iteral wanderers are reviled throughout the poem as spiritual wanderers[—] especially the friars, ‘men of his
Franciscan internal conflicts, too (even though he disapproves of the friars’ fall from their founder’s ideal), only strengthens this impression.\textsuperscript{521}

As a friar, we may assume, John Erghome would have been as interested in biblical prophecy as any medieval Christian if not more so by virtue of extended familiarity with scripture.\textsuperscript{522} As Augustine showed in \textit{The City of God}, that history which began in the garden of Eden and the creation (by Cain) of the first of corrupt human cities, and realized in Augustine’s time its apogée at Rome, would culminate at the end of time in the celestial city of the Heavenly Jerusalem—a location reached in this life only by meditation on the future and the contemplative visions of prophecy. It is clear that Erghome had books on the past as well, of course, suggesting an interest in the fate of empires and reigns as well as the future of humanity.\textsuperscript{523} As a friar, no doubt, Erghome would also have known the works of that mysterious Cistercian Joachim of Fiore, whose prophecies about world reform undertaken by new monks were understood by the Franciscan “spirituals” to refer to themselves.\textsuperscript{524} Joachim’s

\textit{moole \(\text{pat} \) moost wide walken’} (B.8.14), who were derogatorily called \textit{gyrovagi} by their critics of the fourteenth century.” (251)

\textsuperscript{521} The case for Langland’s familiarity with fraternal thought has been most enthusiastically made by Lawrence M. Clopper in his \textit{“Songs of Rechelesnesse”: Langland and the Franciscans}, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Civilization (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). It is important to recognize when considering this book that even its author never quite fully signs on to the notion that Langland was or had been a friar. Nevertheless, his investigations do much to change our understanding of Langland’s religious and intellectual background and help to re-orient our perspective on his satire.


\textsuperscript{523} \textit{cf}. Middleton’s remarks in “The Audience and Public of \textit{Piers Plowman},” concerning such collections, and Trigg’s notes about the Thornton miscellany.

\textsuperscript{524} In addition to Morton Bloomfield’s remarks in \textit{Apocalypse}, a very useful discussion of how Joachim was received by Franciscan spirituals might be found in Frédérand Callaey, \textit{L’Idéalisme Franciscain Spirituel au XIVe Siècle: étude sur Ubertin de Casale} (Louvain: Bureau de Recueil de Travaux du Universite de Louvain, 1911). The most recent treatment regarding Langland seems to be Kathryn
work, which was so controversial in large part because it dealt with relatively recent history, deserves comparison with the more literary and older, yet equally topical, *Prophecies of Merlin* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. One of the manuscripts in Erghome’s collection, in fact—heading the list of the books of “*supersticiosia*” originally owned by him in the Austin friars’ priory at York—contains all these pieces.

Erghome’s interest in satiric poetry is even better attested than his reading of prophecy, appearing in a number of manuscripts catalogued at York from his collection and yet showing themselves to represent only an aspect in Erghome’s obvious concern with and interest in poetry evinced by numerous treatises on rhetoric and composition. Part of the reason Erghome’s concern for *poetics*—the choices poets make to bring various messages and impressions across to others—must be the friar’s evident general belief in the inherent, even quasi-divine, authority possessed by poets. Works by both Persius and Juvenal appear in books together with matters of more objective and codified learning, and the same obtains with the verse prophecies of Merlin as well as Horace.

Less understandable, it may be, is Erghome’s extensive collection of works of parody such as those found in MS 121 with its *massa compoti*. These works tend to lampoon the very upper circles of court, church, and college in which Erghome himself was known to move, but of course that might have accounted for some of their charm or interest. Erghome certainly was not afraid to possess somewhat unorthodox material compared to which even the most scurrilous writings of the Archpoet would seem slight, as his numerous works of “*supersticiosia*” attest. MS 379 also indicates an interest in polemic, containing “Nicholaus de Lira contra ludeum de verbis Euangeli,”

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“Anselmus inter christianum et gentilum,” and astonishingly “Wilhelmus de Sancto Amore.” Though the catalog gives only the author’s name and not his subject for the latter piece, it is recognizably that same body of work produced a century earlier at the University of Paris, declaring the friars to be the agents of Satan and harbingers (as false prophets) of the end of things.

In general, the satirical works owned by Erghome and his other works of prophecy and magic indicate sobriety more than frivolity. Parody takes up less shelf space than social criticism by the ancient poets, and the medieval poetry in Erghome’s collection other than parody and purely instructional matter reveals its character even in a list: Alan of Lille and Bernardus Silvestris seem to be favorites—at least they are well attested—and to them we can add Johannes de Hauvilla and Bernard of Cluny, all of which explore the fallen state of human nature and man’s rightful place in the universe while reflection on the potential perfection of his behavior and future in the world to come. John Bromyard’s *Summa praedicantium*, also in the York priory’s possession, notably described “world” [*mundus*] in terms astronomical, geological, and geographical as well as social and theological, and Erghome seems to have considered “man’s place in the world” from a similarly broad series of perspectives.

It would of course be a bad idea—it would lead the wrong impression—to consider Erghome’s manuscript holdings in poetry alone. Erghome possessed much that was written in prose, and many of these works are devotional ones which also have a clearly evident interest in matters relating to contempt of the world. Several copies in fact exist in the putative library of Augustine’s *soliloquia*, the treatise “*de spiritu et anima*” cited by Wittig as a possible background text for Langland, and the like: including much by Seneca, attributed to Seneca, or otherwise Stoic in outlook. Marbode’s work on the “contempt of the present life” shows up just as surely as his famous lapidary—and who is to say which work might have been the better
appreciated by the Austin friar? In addition to works one might consider of more scholarly or professional clerical interest like the above the collection includes a number of pieces which were also instructional, as exemplary texts about men who died before making confession, for example, make clear.

The question no doubt arises in my readers’ minds, as it has in mine, the extent to which the presence of a given work in Erghome’s book collection really can be said to reflect Erghome’s own thought and reading rather than casual interest; we all, admittedly in an era in which books are plentiful and printing still relatively cheap, have texts in our possession which we have not yet had a chance to read. In the case of Erghome and fellow scholars or Austin friars, we may feel a bit more certain about the real interest book owners would have had in their texts, since books were more expensive at a time when time itself was for certain classes of society more amenable to careful reading. Yet it still challenges credulity to think of a professor or preacher turning to his primary texts for full and careful readings in advance of sermon or lecture. Not surprisingly, shortcuts existed: florilegia, the gathering of the best and choicest excerpts and bon mots from particularly nectarsome texts. A florilegium, as the name implies, is just a collection of passages that can be used to embellish—like so many flowers—another work. They need not necessarily be religious in nature. Nevertheless, in the Middle Ages florilegia were commonly compiled to serve as

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525 MS 489, containing also, as Humphrey records it, “(a) Cosmographia et michrochosmus Bernardi Silvestris libri duo; (d) versus de contemptu presentis vite [“Marbod of Rennes: PL 171.1667; Walter 20702”]; (l) versus de paupertate et anxile/tate; (m) versus de ruina Rome; (n) versus de infortunio.”

526 MS 109, though not actually Erghome’s, contains a text “de quodam milite in peccatis suis mortuo qui dum vellet penitire et confiteare non potuit.”

527 For a typical statement of such gathering, see Alan of Lille’s statement on his role in compiling the summa Quoniam homines: “[H]orto sacre scripture circumponantur excubie ne inter herbas fructiferas inimicis seminat zizania, ne flores sacre scripture per malos defloratores deflorent, ne eorum petulantia in diversis sententias virginales deflorent. De nostris ergo nulla influere laboremus nec de nostro thesauro nova proponere, sed ex antiquorum patrum tractatibus antiqua elicere ut quasi ex diversis flosculis nostri interventu laboris mellita quadam doctrina emergat, ut non nostrum inventum sed totum potius furtum esse credatur. Huitusmodi tamen furtum non penam sed veniam promeretur.” (Glorieux, p. 120)
preachers’ aids, and the type of thinking (and reading) associated with them seems to have been developed most strongly (it could be, originally) in the monastic world.

Vitally, Erghome and those associated with him appear on the evidence of marginalia to have read the works aforementioned way consonant with Langland’s use of such writing: “florilegally,” in other words, drawing on short excerpted portions for moralistic interpretation and possibly quotation in sermons or other didactic works.528 Because ultimately for the purposes of this chapter I’m concerned with a type of reading than with any specific type of text that facilitates such reading, a narrow definition of the term “florilegium” is useless to me. Reading florilegia allows one searching for a key statement or bit of information to use to some practical end—I have suggested a school lesson or a sermon—to find it quickly, and then to find other similar statements (or at least statements by other texts on the same theme by other authors). Whereas a distinction collection might be organized alphabetically and might cover an encyclopedic range of topics (as my references to “mundus” in Bromyard should indicate) a classic florilegium might confine itself more narrowly either to one text or another—what does Bede say about a certain subject? Where is this material in the Historia Ecclesiastica?—or to specific conceptual ranges involving sin or the sacraments, for example.

Because they introduced readers to specific nuggets of textual statements not originally in dialogue about often theological material, thus inviting the reader to expand on their perforce excerpted statement with fuller treatment on his own, florilegia could be useful for devotional meditation. Jean Leclercq in fact points to florilegia as among the most significant gifts bequeathed to the Western heritage by

medieval monasticism in *L’Amour des Lettres et le Désir de Dieu* (q.v.) and names a specific type of work he calls the “florilège ascétique.” The differences between monastic and scholastic *florilegia* should not detain us, given that by John Erghome’s era both had cross-pollinated (if they ever were so conceptually distinct as Leclercq would seem to claim) and both existed in textual, as opposed to their originally memorial, form. Among the earliest certainly must be counted the *Liber scintillarum* by Defensor in the sixth century; by the late fourteenth century, Erghome could own his own *Scintillarum poetarum* (this by one Alberic of London)—recognizably in the same tradition, at least to go by its name.

How did one read satire “florilegially”? The same exegetical frames of mind that helped bring about the commentary tradition and the *florilegium* itself also inspired a way of *reading* that was, itself, florilegial. It is well known of course that poets from classical antiquity were taught, and thus read, in medieval schools. Given however the manifestly pagan and sometimes obscene or other objectionable material these poets works contained, simply to read them without some guidance was not permitted: hence the famous *accessus ad auctores* which stated the ways in which a given classical text of obviously questionable content, like the elegies of Maximianus, actually “ethice subponitur.” In a world replete with the so-called spoils of the Egyptians (to use a favorite metaphor) in which too “all that is written is written for our doctrine,” texts of pagan and indeed any origin had to be approached by ginger respect. Hidden mines had to be avoided, hidden treasures to be found. Excerpting, and then interpreting the excerpt out of context as a statement on universal truths, amounted to rather standard practice.

Modern day biblical concordances attest to the persistence of florilegial reading even into the twenty-first century, and *manipuli* mark the notable lines in early modern editions of Chaucer: such reading is not to be considered medieval alone. Not
surprisingly, it is possible to detect evidence for florilegial reading (in addition to the reading of florilegia) in Erghome’s collection as well—and of satire, at that. The marginal annotations in Erghome’s copy of the Architrenius, one of the few which still survives today (as London, British Library MS Cotton Vespasian B.xxiii) seem to indicate a reader’s looking for lines or images to discuss (perhaps in a lesson) elsewhere.529 Even had the manuscript not existed, though, the contexts of the poem suggest its being read this way in so far as it consists of excisable speeches and other set pieces on a wide number of edifying subjects.

Given that I have just been claiming that sufficiently learned members of later medieval English society gave near-universal acknowledgment to a practice of florilegial reading, it will hardly come as a shock that I wish to ascribe florilegial reading to Langland as well. But since I intend to claim, or at least suggest, that Piers Plowman was written to be read florilegially, some further demonstration of how Langland so read his texts appears to be desirable. The most striking and relevant example comes from the Entheticus and is uttered by Dame Study in C.11t:

Qui sapiunt nugas & crimina lege uocantur,
Qui recte sapiunt lex iubet ire foras. (C.11.18a)

[Those who know about trifles and slanders are called in by the law; those who are truly wise the law commands to go away.]530

In the Entheticus, a different and more topical sense hoves into view:

Ebria fortunae donis nova curia rege
sub puero credit, cuncta licere sibi.
Insanire putes aeqe invenesque senesque;
insanit iudex officiumque suum.
Curia nugas solos amat, audit, honorat,
artes exosas aulicus omnis habet;
artes virtuti famulantes aulicus odit,

529 As Humphreys records, the manuscript contains the following texts: “(a) Architrenius libri 10; (b) Ouidius de vetula libri 3; (c) centones Virgilii per Probam; (d) Alunus de complanctu nature; (e) Fabule Ysopi; (f) Exidium Troianum; (g) Emigmata Symphosii.” This is Schmidt’s manuscript H.

530 Pearsall’s translation from his earlier edition of the C-text, p. 194.
sed famulas carnis aulicus omnis amat. 
Hos aulae mors funambulus intulit ille, 
qui, quod præsumit, lege tue tur avi. 
Qui sapiunt nugas et crimina, lege vocantur; 
qui recte sapiunt, lex iubet ire foras.

[Drunk with the gift of Fortune the new court under a youthful 
king believes that all things are lawful for it. 
You would think that both young and old men are equally mad, 
the judge is mad, and his office. 
The court loves, hears, honours only the triflers; 
every courtier holds the arts as detested; 
the courtier hates the arts which serve virtue, 
but every courtier loves servants of the flesh. 
That rope-dancer, who defends by the law of his grandfather 
whatever he attempts, has introduced these morals to the court. 
Those who have a taste for trifles and crimes, are called upon by the law; 
those who have the right taste, the law orders to go abroad.]

On the one hand, Langland makes only fleeting use of this poem from the Entheticus. 
On the other hand, and also befitting florilegial reading, the tag invites those who can 
recognize the source to look closer at it in somewhat wider context (even if not at all 
of the Entheticus). I have earlier said that florilegial reading invites interpretation out 
of context, but by its disconnection of statements from their original matrix in larger 
texts the opposite is also true—for those who have access to the original texts, who 
know what those texts are. When a reader possesses such knowledge in this case, he 
discovers that the poem has as its subject matter the perils of life under the reign of a 
young king. This is exactly the sort of material thought to have been blunted by the C 
revision, of course, and to find its presence “occulted” here indicates how 
referentiality such as provided by the wordplay-rich literary prophecy this chapter has 
already concerned itself with might help to sharpen the poem’s satiric edge for readers 
“in the know.”

In any case, up to this point in the chapter I have been referring to John 
Erghome mostly in his secular role, and for good reason. The chapter has so far been 
concerned with how Langland’s poetic prophecy—and by extension his poem’s satiric

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ideal—speaks to secular as well as religious concerns; and for this the secular literary
tastes and enterprises of John Erghome provide a most important context analogous, if
not identical, to Langland’s own. This secular context lies in a learned, literate world,
where texts and an especially scholastic verbal ingenuity were in plentiful supply.

Yet Erghome was also “a religious”: not only an instructor of some standing at
the University of Oxford but also—not that, at the time, this was uncommon—a friar in
the Order of the Hermits of Saint Augustine. As such, he would have been a member
of a religious group whose members were sworn to perpetual and deep
impoverishment following the example, preeminently, of St. Francis of Assisi. The
towering mass of antifraternal polemic in the later Middle Ages, including in
Langland’s poem, needs to be seen in this light. For although the Franciscans pledged
themselves to poverty, the order attracted luminous intellectuals whose gifts brought
them handsome positions and continued to attract money from donors. Moreover, all
this occurred in a gray area opened up between the urban world in which they
ministered and the traditional separate monastic life.

*Redemptio Mundi*

The ultimate question I wish to touch on regarding prophecy and the intentions
of *Piers Plowman* regards how we might conceive of its “ideal,” that essential element
lending coherence to satire by indicating what does *not* deserve criticism and in fact
might even deserve emulation. The question also needs to be raised of whether or not
we can ascribe that ideal to the members of any particular demographic. Granted that
the poem’s literary prophecy and numerous other allusions to texts regarded from the
high Middle Ages onward as clerical, even learned, might have been meant to speak to
the concerns of a demographic such as Erghome’s. Can we then say that the poem’s
ultimate message is for the friars alone to reform themselves? If learned paraclaustral members of any religious orders form one main audience for the poem’s ultimate vision, is the vision presented to them necessarily one meant for friars or the religious orders alone? It would seem to me that the vision in Piers might indeed appeal to the four orders (such as the Franciscans or Austin friars) but need not have been solely a fraternal invention.

As a religious ideal, redemptio mundi is the necessary (although often highly implicit) complement to contempt of the world. As I earlier tried to indicate, it also forms the ideal for prophetic and indeed sermonic discourse. The necessity for a vision of renewal of the world might well account for the existence of Piers Plowman B and C, in fact. It is perfectly laudable for the poem to encourage both religious and secular reform. Even so, the awful paradox posed at the end of A in passus 11—that the world’s corruption needs to be avoided, but that entrance to the clerical estate invites a host of perilous responsibilities—inspires a desire not for improvement so much as for inertia and despair. “Why take action when I am nonetheless destined to fail?” is a sober question to ask, but it is also one that the B and C texts appear to take seriously by delving more deeply into religious thought. The discourse of regular religious orders allowed for both learning and salvation, it had spread beyond the cloister, and already it was being applied at least tentatively to the problems of the laity’s secular life. Its answer to the A.11 problem was that learning could lead to perfection and salvation rather than ambition, inflation, and fall. One simply needed to maintain the proper perspective.

This appears to have been Langland’s position in the B version, too, though it rather slowly unfolds in the narrative. Certainly the problem of fallen human volition lamented at the end of A—of the “wikked wille”—shows up in that poem from the first, and again in B and C. The poem’s central conceit, of the aptly named Will
searching endlessly for the proper combination of learning and action that will help him save his immortal soul, therefore has a direct bearing on the issue of the *redemptio* to be sought by and for all society: having voiced the need for such reform so searingly in A, in fact, the poet almost has no choice in B and C except to address it. This the so-called *vita* that forms the new poem’s sections repeatedly tries to do, but nothing presenting itself as an answer to him there seems to satisfy Will enough. The events that transpire about him (and happen to him) continue to mystify Will; selfish behavior, such as displayed by Wastoure and company on the half acre, seem unavoidable. What prophecy there is in the poem indeed, is dark—not only at the end of the second vision, foretelling a return of Hunger, but also in final scenes.

Will’s confusion in the *visio* and then in the *vita*, it seems obvious now, is not necessarily Langland’s. On the contrary: the poet rather consistently, if quietly, advocates for the cluster of ascetic ideals forming the so-called interior cloister: contempt of self, contempt of the world, love of neighbor, and defense of Truth. Judging others in view of non-frivolous religious motivations requires abandoning ridicule or downplaying it, choosing to employ circumspection and more earnestly to desire that one’s targets (including oneself) change behavior. Not for nothing is the graven and gilt “patent” in B.17.11 a resplendent statement of the so-called “Golden Rule,” though it takes time for Will to see what it promises.\[532\] Will grows “wery of þe world” (B.18.4) after years of careless wandering, and falls asleep dreaming of the liturgy of Palm Sunday—whereupon the life, passion, and resurrection of Jesus that follows, in the ensuing narrative of passus 18, exceeds the “Golden Rule” and suffuses the narrative with hope.

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532 Anima makes reference to this well beforehand in passus 15: “And lewes lyuen in lele lawe; oure lord wroot it hymselfe / in stoon for it stedefast was and stonde sholde euere. / Dilige deum & *proximum* is purfit lewen lawe; / and took it Moyses to teche men til Messie coome, / and on þei leue and leten it þe beste.” (B.15.582-86)
The poem’s atmosphere of inexorable resolution culminates in the Pentecostal division of the gifts of Grace in passus 19 and the founding of that large barn, Unite, which symbolizes the church:

[...] Oon Spiritus paraclitus to Piers and to hise felawes, in liknesse of a lightnynge [...] lighte on hem alle and made hem konne and knowe alle kynne langages. I wondred what þat was and waggede Conscience, and was afered for þe light, for in fires liknesse Spiritus paraclitus ouerspradde hem alle. Thanne bigan grace to go wiþ Piers Plowman and counseillede hym and Conscience þe comune to sompne: ‘For I wolde dele today and dyuyde grace to alle kynne creatures þat kan hise fyye Wittes, tresour to lyue by to hir lyues ende, and wepne to fighte wiþ þat wolde neuere faille. For Antecrist and hise al þe world shul greue and aombre þee, Conscience, but if crist þee helpe.

Divisiones graciarum sunt, &c. Some wyes he yaf wit with wordes to shewe, to wyne wiþ thruþe þat þe world askeþ, as prechours and preestes and Prentices of lawe: they lelly to lyue by labour of tonge, and by wit to wissen òpere as grace hem wolde teche. And some he kennede craft and konnyng of sighte, by sellynge and buggynge hir bilyue to wynne. And some he lered to laboure on lond and on watre and lyue, by þat labour, a lele lif and a trewe. And some he tauȝte to tile, to coke and to thecche, to wynne wiþ hir liflode bi loore of his techynge; and some to deuyne and diuide, figures to kenne; and some to kerue and compace, and colours to make; and some to se and to seye what sholde bifalle, boþe of wele and of woe and be ware bifore, as Astronomys þoru³ Astronome, and Philosofres wise. And some to ryde and to recouere þat vnriʒfuly was wonne: he wissed hem wynne it ayein þoru³ wightnesse of handes and fechen it fró false men wiþ Folyules lawes. And some he lered to lyue in longynge to ben hennes, in pouer and in pacience to preie for alle cristene. And alle he lered to be lele, and ech a craft loue oþer, ne no boost ne debat be among hem alle.

‘Thou³ some be clenner þan some, ye se wel,’ quod Grace, ‘that al craft and konnyng come of my ʒifte. Lokeþ þat noon lakke oþer, but loueþ as breþeren; and who þat moost maiories kan be myldest of berynge.’ (B 19.201-20, 228a-55)
The passage shows clearly that the dilemma of selfish laborers in the second vision, and the corruption Will had seen on the “fair field full of folk” in the prologue, both receive their recapitulation and resolution here.\textsuperscript{533} Instead of a few heart-hardened estates acting only according to their own immediate interest—which had confounded Will and dashed Piers’ hopes before this—innumerable professions authorized by the very will of God appear. (It does not escape my notice here that those blessed with “longynge to ben hennes” are mentioned last, even as the secular clergy are mentioned first—perhaps reluctantly adding those following the monastic ideal to a list of decidedly uncloistered occupations.) Piers’ half acre has been expanded, moreover, into the entire world.\textsuperscript{534}

Passus 19, if it were allowed to end \textit{Piers Plowman}, would probably have made the poem much more popular with twentieth-century readers but less popular with them as a satire. A realization that its narrative needed to end “on the ground,” with ongoing struggles towards rather than an achievement of an ideal, might ultimately have pushed Langland into writing the much darker passus 20, which really does “end” the poem. For no sooner is the division of Grace accomplished and social perfection respective of diversity accomplished than that Pride, the chief of all sins, plots an attack. Conscience directs the people into Unite, which they surround by means of a moat filled with saintly tears called holiness, but the battle seems lost before it has even started. Eschewing an elaborate psychomachia such as at the end of Alan’s \textit{Anticlaudianus}, Langland depicts instead of a chaos of characters’ (prideful) claims to rule and not be ruled over.

\textsuperscript{533} Stephen A. Barney, in \textit{The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman}, vol. 5 (C Passus 20-22; B Passus 18-20) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), notes that “[t]o think of Grace’s exposition here as merely a description of a redeemed social order will involve problems; at this point in the narrative it is an order of hope rather than achievement.” (141)

\textsuperscript{534} J. A. Burrow, in “The Two Ploughs of Piers Plowman (B XIX 430),” \textit{N&Q} 54.2 (2007), pp. 123-24, observes in an overlooked image a direct reference back to the “plowing of the half acre” in the second vision.
As passus 19 ends and passus 20 begins, the poem embraces prophecy more fully. The narrator claims to wake up and to write just as he had dreamed, for example, which brings to mind the similar connections between visionary experience and writing in the biblical book of Revelation. Passus 20, in fact, describes the narrator’s vision of actual apocalyptic events, including the coming of Antichrist and the fall of Unite threatened by corrupt friars (guided by Envy) within. Given a putative audience or “circle” of friars, Langland’s narrative choices here are fantastically interesting: they include a great deal of criticism for the friars, after all, largely in the authoritative voice of his character Conscience. Conscience will not allow friars into Unite, for example, except on condition that they not expand their numbers too greatly or depart from their rule of poverty; in response, Envy sends friars to university so that their message that can be all the more persuasively set forth:

Enuye herde þis and heet freres go to scole
and lerne logyk and lawe and ek contemplacion,
and preche men of Plato, and preue it by Seneca
that alle þynges vnder heuene ouȝte to ben in comune. (B.20.273-76)

In recounting this the narrator immediately adds that “he lyeþ, as I leue, þat to þe lewed so precheþ”—preaching Plato, not the Gospel—which narratorial aside, given the character who had just sent the friars into higher education, is certainly unnecessary and thus perhaps the sign of real opposition on Langland’s part.

Nor does this venture end well for the rest of society: one of the highly educated friars, infiltrating Unite and thereby wreaking havoc, provides the impetus for Conscience’s anguished pilgrimage at the very end of the poem. Yet Langland also shows himself susceptible to the friars’ easy arguments, beginning passus 20 with a waking episode in which he meets with the character “Nede.” This character, soon to be associated with the Antichrist (who “sprede and spede mennes nedes,” line 55) explains to the poet what he presents as almost divine prerogatives accordant unto a
situation of indigence which he, the poet, just like the friars, might legitimately appropriate in imitation of Christ.

As so often, then, Langland’s strategy is to suggest not only problems but why those problems exist. He shows what makes possible solutions inadequate, and he even identifies with the same temptations facing his putative targets. Because few restrictions hold against the friars and essentially anyone can join their order, Langland seems to suggest, the friars are given insufficient respect. “Envy,” then, is right to send friars to school for the prestigious study of theology and the arts. But with every resulting magister among the friars, their reputation and visibility increase, meaning that more friars come about. And since the new friars have as models only the most visible mentions of the orders in their mind upon joining, they would hardly feel content with the sort of humility practiced by Francis and Dominic. What use is learning, they might ask, if not to apply it for saving souls in confession? (Pure Benedictine thinking would as I have previously noted suggest a more private role for learning, but man must eat.)

One detects in Conscience’s anguish at the very end of the poem the same renunciatory exasperation that had been displayed by Piers at the end of the second vision—an “elynge in herte” such as Will’s shortly before his encounter with Nede, and a “longyng to ben hennes,” quit from the world, such as characterizes ascetics during passus 19’s “division of Grace.” This is well understandable, since the friars’ entry into Unite shows that no institution on earth can entirely avoid the entanglements of the world and the invert pantheon of human vices at work therein. (“Wherever you go,” as the saying runs, “there you are.”) But if the ending to Langland’s poem might seem to rear once more the vexing problem of predestination earlier debated in the poem, it avoids it by suggesting the power of the ascetic ideal for world renewal...an ideal particularly well developed among Franciscans.
Though one would hardly guess it from the large bulk of antifratal polemic produced during the fourteenth century, after all, friars were not completely secular; they cultivated a sort of *contemptus mundi* of their own. As Salvatore Nicolosi points out, strong currents of religious and philosophical thought dating back to Antiquity had made contempt of the world rather hard to avoid in the Middle Ages:

Il sistema bonaventuriano sviluppa una visione ‘simbolica’ e allegorica dell’universo, considerando la realtà come segno di quella invisibile. In questa concezione, in cui non è difficile scorgere l’eredità platonica e agostiniana, sorge il quesito su quale sia la ‘consistenza ontologica’ del mondo circostante. Da quando, nel famoso apologo dell’inizio del libro VII della *Repubblica*, Platone propone una sua interpretazione del mondo come immagine e come ombra—e quindi come segno del mondo autentico—la speculazione si è dibattuta tra una visione simbolica, mediata, ed una visione diretta, immediata, del reale. Si tratta di rispondere alla domanda ‘quid est?’ che è la domanda sul senso dell’essere, riportandola alla sua radice storica, quale fu intesa dai Greci, cioè la domanda sul senso delle cose che ‘ci stanno davanti,’ che ci ‘appaiano.’ I Greci con il termine phænomenon intesero tanto ciò che è veduto, tanto ciò che ‘appare,’ quanto ciò che ‘sembra.’

At the same time, however, the world was a sign of God’s grandeur and to that extent inherently good—something Francis was alert in recognizing—and this meant that utter disavowal of worldly things (as aspired to by some anchorites) was also not acceptable:

Se questo mondo è ‘orma’ e ‘segno’ di un altro mondo, che senso ha il nostro agire in questo mondo e per questo mondo? Il vivere in questo mondo deve tradursi, per il credente, in una progressiva ‘liberazione’ da questo mondo, in una continua ricerca del ‘simboleggiato’ attraverso i simboli, in una ricerca di Colui che ha impresso la sua ‘orma’ nelle cose di questo mondo visibile. In una concezione allegorizzante, vivere in un mondo di sogni e di vestigia, no può significare altro che orientarsi verso la realtà significata. La figura e la spiritualità di S. Francesco d’Assisi si presentano come una forma originale della spiritualità cristiana. Si tratta di un atteggiamento che, ad un

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536 Salvatore Nicolosi, “*Contemptus mundi* e *Redemptio mundi* nella Dottrina Morale di S. Bonaventure,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 29 (1982), pp. 61-72 at 61. I have removed the paragraph breaks appearing every sentence or two in the text.

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osservatore superficiale, può apparire come una delle tante forme di ‘fuga dal mondo,’ ma in realtà si tratta di una forma di amore per tutte le creature, che suppone una già avvenuta ‘redemptio mundi.’ Nell’’austerità del Poverello non c’è più il ‘contemptus mundi’ degli anacoreti, giacché il ‘contemptus mundi’ suppone una non ancora superata ‘corruptio mundi.’ La povertà e l’austerità di S. Francesco di Assisi sono, in definitiva, molto diverse dalla ‘fuga dal mondo’ di certi anacoreti. La fuga dal mondo anacoretica suppone una concezione pessimistica dello ‘status’ di questo mondo: ‘status’ corrotto e corruttore. La povertà di S. Francesco attua, invece, la fuga dal mondo come affermazione di una libertà interiore: si scopre il volto di Dio, se non ci si attarda a rimirare il ‘vestigio’ impresso nelle cose visibili. Di questa visione del mondo, serena e rasserenante, luminosa ed illuminante, la testimonianza più grandiosa è forse il Cantico delle Creature, dove tute le creature sono contemplate in una visione gioiosa, perché sono ‘segno’ di Dio, delle sue opere, dei suoi precetti. E questa visione serena trova la sua conclusione, logica e commovente, ne i versi aggiunti alla fine della vita: ‘Laudato si, Signore, per sora nostra Morte corporale, da la quale nullo omo vivente po’ scampare.’ Non si tratta solo di serenità di fronte alla morte, ma di attesa gioiosa dell’abbraccio sorale a lungo sospirato, nel diuturno cammino percorso di orma in orma, per ritornare dall’esilio alla patria.537

The fraternal ideal was then neither to flee from the world entirely, nor to embrace it exclusively, but to move through it—in imitation of Christ, as Nicolosi goes on to mention—so as to bring about its redemption and their arrival at the “more real” world to come. Redemption of the world of course is an old ascetic, prophetic, and often satiric ideal as references to other works in this dissertation so far have shown. The fraternal ideal viewed it as accomplishable through action in the world rather than complete enclaustration away from it. This seems to have been Langland’s ideal as well: he is truly, as David Aers would write, “in the last resort [the] poet of incarnate man, of the existence of individual spirit in the social and material world.”538 Nevertheless, as we might expect from a poem naming one of its major sinners Actina vita, the ideal of

action in *Piers Plowman* is not at all what contemporary Christians would consider “social work” today.\(^{539}\)

Langland’s satiric ideal thus owes much if not all its power to asceticism, as I have argued, but specifically to an asceticism that can exist outside the cloister: one perfectly suited to, and indeed developed by, learned friars respectful of learning yet aware of its shortcomings or limitations. This shows that contempt of the world outside the cloister was not meant for contemporary religious reformers to be a decision made under duress, by those who could not live in a cloister or who did not feel called to it. Instead it was also a decision motivated by an informed theological (and satiric) ideal, “redemption of the world”: one just as radiant as *contemptus mundi’s* satirizing distortion (its ascetic renunciation) of worldly vanity could seem dark.

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\(^{539}\) For this question regarding the social activity allowed by an ideal of fraternal *redemptio mundi*, Gwynn’s synopsis of William Flete’s second letter to English friars, written c. 1380 and presented in *English Austin Friars*, is most interesting and strikingly relevant. William Flete, O.E.S.A., had received university degrees in England but at the time of his writing was living as a hermit in Italy where he had become a close associate of Catherine of Siena. As Gwynn recounts, “[Flete] begins by recalling the words of the Gospel: ‘Neither be ye called masters, for one is your Master, Christ.’ They are not to take pleasure in their titles nor in their dignity, but should strive to walk in Christ’s footsteps, and be thus perfect masters. A master is a doctor, and St. Chrysostom tells us that a doctor must be adorned with virtuae, as it is also written in the Gospel: ‘Master, we know that Thou art truthful, and dost teach the way of God in truth.’ Let them therefore be more truthful than all their brethren, keeping strictly to the rule they profess, and seeing that others keep it also. They are both doctors and professors, and are thus bound by a double tie to teach as doctors and to profess their rule. They are bound to give good example to their brethren: especially in these latter days, when the judgement of God is at hand. A reverend doctor of the order had once said to Flete: ‘*It is plain that God wishes to renew the face of the earth,* and He has promised me that He will help the reform of the order.’ [...]” (199, emphasis mine) Flete goes on, as Gwynn writes, to urge the O.E.S.A. to be “bound to a higher perfection, and specially to greater *contempt of the world* [...] than other friars,” to embrace solitude and contemplation, and (in a nod “to their favourite study of logic”) to “let your premisses be sound in this life, that a good conclusion may follow from them in your death.”” (200, emphasis mine)
CHAPTER 7
THE LAST LAUGH: LANGLANDIAN PARRHESIA IN LITERARY HISTORY

This dissertation has been focusing on William Langland’s appropriations of ascetic ideology for his satire and thus, rightly, has set the poet’s great contemporaries Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower to the side. For the most part, I’ve simply asserted that Langland’s rationale for writing satire, to say nothing of his actual practice, differs from theirs. Now, however, it’s time to bring these star players back on stage, at least briefly, to help to answer a question the foregoing study has certainly raised but cannot (all by itself) firmly answer: what happened to the ideology of asceticism in vernacular literature, preeminently satire, after Langland? In the next few pages I attempt at least to sketch out a response by considering Chaucer, Gower, Spenser, and a small group of later writers in turn.

Langland’s understanding of the ascetic ideals making up the cloister of the soul was both subtle and thorough. He seems to have been interested in using the schematizing capabilities of satire to promote actual reform, and the reforms he promotes on various levels seem to match with those envisioned by earlier ascetic writers. The framework he employs, which he acknowledges neither as the spiritual cloister nor as in any way monastic, is both flexibly and creatively explored. Behavior that corresponds to “contempt of self” comprises his suggestions for criticism of self. His view of how the estates should work together leans heavily—if a little surprisingly—on an extraclaustral version of “contempt of the world.” His poem’s protracted meditations on when and how one should judge others (or remain silent) acknowledges an inherent tension between “love of neighbor” and “defense of Truth.” His ultimate prophetic ideal is no less than a “redemption of the world.”

Langland’s appropriations of asceticism for his satire thus make him far more general than earlier theorists Hugo de Folieto and Richard of St. Victor were in their
treatments of the same ideals but also far more specific than a host of other writers, extending well into the fifteenth century and beyond. These later whose expressions of ascetic piety were so general as to be actively boring to D. R. Howard, who in the following passage can barely suppress a yawn:

The content of these writings on contempt of the world need not delay us, for they nearly all say the same things. They argue that worldly life is mutable and transitory, that its pleasures are vain and disappointing, that man is fallen, his nature corrupt, and his body infirm. They often depict human society as a caldron of vices and hypocrisies, and a good many of them end with apocalyptic passages describing the punishments of hell and the joys of heaven.  

Nevertheless, Howard had in fact cut his scholarly teeth on vernacular “contempt of the world.” And as he taken pains in his dissertation and first book to point out, the great fourteenth-century Middle English poets were at least conversant in the triple topos of world—flesh—devil, often used as a vehicle for teaching a very basic ascetic piety. The same topos shows up in *Piers Plowman* in the “tree of Charity” episode and (with *Concupiscientia carnis* and “pride of perfect living”) in the inner dreams. Given the wide circulation of ascetic discourse in both Latin and vernacular literature in the later Middle Ages, which the work of Rice and Constable indicates for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, asceticism of one sort or another would have been hard for any of these writers to avoid. Yet assessing “the ascetic” in these writers is not an all-or-nothing proposal. They appreciate it differently and make use of it in different ways.

Such divergent approaches become apparent after considering *Piers Plowman*’s second vision, in which Langland presents contempt of the world with vigor and even optimism. The pilgrims, lost and foundering on their way to Truth, do not know what they should *do* while their new guide plows his half acre—but Piers,

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who had “poked” his head into the narrative just at their lowest point, is happy to let them know. The second vision presents contempt of the world not as an immurating closing-off of social ties but rather as the check to pride and spur to cooperation that will enable functioning estates working for the common profit. Piers’ effective ascetic withdrawal in the face of attacks by a condescending priest is just opposite of the armed revolt certain readers of the poem would have had him lead. Langland views the cloister and school’s separation, albeit with noted reservations, as “heuene [on] pis erpe” and “ese” to the “soule.” His asceticism depends on motivations other than negativity.

**Chaucer and Gower**

It could be, following a suggestion of D. R. Howard’s in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, that contempt of the world in the later Middle Ages was motivated by a growing consciousness of the corruption of an ideal, the inability of society to conform to its formerly fixed, formal course. In this sense, as Howard goes on to speculate, Chaucer can hardly have avoided contempt of the world. It was the most obvious way to think satirically, was a common Christian way of seeing the world even outside of monasteries at this point, and might in fact still be the “seed of satire.”

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542 Howard writes: “The Troilus [gives] us a picture of an ordered social unit in a society which existed before the age of grace and is about to be swallowed up in the process of history; we know where it is headed. The Canterbury Tales gives us a picture of a disordered Christian society in a state of obsolescence, decline, and uncertainty; we do not know where it is headed. The Troilus shows us noble if inadequate ideals and a glittery actuality whose fate is sealed; The Canterbury Tales shows us ideals no longer followed and an evanescent actuality whose fate is unknown. Both works teach contempt of the world, but the Troilus teaches that lesson by fastening chiefly upon the themes of mutability and vanity. The Canterbury Tales fastens upon the other themes of contemptus mundi writings—upon the corruptiveness of human nature and society and the world’s decline. Both works are ambivalent about the vanity of human wishes, pursuits, and efforts; so were the treatises on contempt of the world. Pope Innocent III in his classic treatise (which Chaucer says he translated) inveighed against the vanity of
Nevertheless, Chaucerian contempt is of a markedly different character from Langland’s: a type of, as well as an impetus to, mourning over man’s fallen state of imperfection. As Jean Leclercq notes in the introduction to La Vie Parfaite, the very word “perfection” implies that it cannot be achieved in this life. The fourteenth-century English writers under discussion would surely all have acknowledged this, yet for Chaucer more than for Langland the fallen world seems to provide an impediment too great to challenge with any hope of winning. This leads to certain reversals when the renunciatory ideal of Christianity meets directly with what the world can bring: Howard has pointed out in his discussion of Chaucer’s style that the narrator’s inveighal against “old clerkes speche / in poetry” comes not “a moment” in Troilus and Criseyde after he “had spoken reverently of five ‘old clerks,’ the pagan poets Vergil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius.”543

Perhaps that gesture is also an idealistically self-abnegating one, coming as it does from a narrator obviously in love with old books—and for whom it would be thus a sacrifice indeed to reject them. On the other hand, to question a bit more than Howard Chaucer’s ascetic sincerity, perhaps Chaucer liked showing the world’s messy humanity win over and over again—we enjoy reading about its conquests too much in his works to think that he did not enjoy writing them—and this is the reason confession seems almost a distraction or an afterthought as presented in the Canterbury Tales, at least in its fragmented form.544

[544] Oliver Sacks writes, in “Cupid’s Disease,” of an elderly woman whose syphilis resulted in symptoms so delightful that she feared to have it removed: see The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat [New
Chaucer claimed to have translated at least part of Innocentian De miseria (in the prologue to The Legend of Good Women), though if it ever existed that translation is probably lost. On the evidence, however, he appears to have gravitated to it for its shock factor—to have extracted about as much as its author did from his own source, the rather more balanced Meditationes piisimae. Chaucer excels in the expression of ascetic pieties, in other words, yet falls short when it comes to promoting ascetic practices. Mary Carruthers has written a very fine article on the somatic and mental processes attendant on meditation in monastic thought, in fact, and finds the tradition reflected only “ambiguous[ly]” by major characters in Chaucer’s Troilus. We can conclude that Elde and holiness fear that Will might come to believe in Piers Plowman, Chaucer seems convinced of, himself: that time teaches better than a rule.

Rules of behavior and penitential habitus play a much more prominent role in Gower’s poetry, for which reason one might think Gower to have more sympathy for the ascetic practices Chaucer seems to ignore. But this is not the case. The Confessio Amantis has confession as its conceit, and its real subject might be right governance even more than amorous pursuits, but in his very act of displaying concern for how properly to maintain the intricacies of human relationships Gower shows his allegiance to that more rigid and compartmentalizing system rather than to the distractions that it imposes on a human’s more important relationship to God. Gower’s intricate Confessio concludes by dismantling itself enough to unveil its author—to announce, with Chaucer and Langland both, that initiation to certain insights comes

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York: Simon & Schuster, 1985], pp. 102-104); the doctor was professionally obligated to encourage treatment, regardless of whether or not that would destroy her new-found joie de vivre (fortunately, it simply allayed future deterioration).

545 Here I am glad to acknowledge the study by Jennifer Wong (“Public Chaucer: Translation and the Uses of Prose,” Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 2002) with its helpful bibliography on the matter. Wrong writes on p. 227, following a suggestion of C.S. Lewis, that “the passages which Chaucer selects to include in the Man of Law’s Tale seem to come not from an artist’s deliberate, meaningful selection rom a source, but rather from the page which Chaucer happened to have in front of him.”

best through the mysteries of old age. But even here the lesson is not entirely ascetic. Gower recognizes that his time has come *por reposer*; Langland’s Elde brings him a thrillingly urgent call *to work*.

In writing the foregoing of Gower I am not ignorant of the *Carmina de multiplicia viciorum pestilencia* and its gestures *de contemptu*—just unconvinced. Certain features of the work strike me as fundamentally misunderstanding asceticism, while others seem almost painfully disingenuous to me. For the poet’s misunderstanding of ascetic ideology I would point line 304, “*Hec qui mente capit gaudia raro sapit,*” which Yeager translates as “Who understands this rarely enjoys delights.”547 The implication here seems to be that it is somehow salutary to deprive oneself of *gaudia*, whereas a more truly ascetic foundation would acknowledge how *earthly* delights are not actually joys at all.548 As for how we can call Gower here “disingenuous,” I would point to the first poem in the work, against the Lollards, which seems to suggest that the truly religious person will subject himself entirely to the dictates of temporal and ecclesiastical authority.549

A book has been written on the thesis that Gower and Chaucer wanted consciously to define themselves against the overwhelming presence of *Piers Plowman* on their contemporary literary scene, though as a reviewer has noted its comparison of Chaucer and Langland is doomed never to be exact.550 We know “Langland” from his poem’s circulation in many manuscripts—but who, exactly, was

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548 The marginalia noted in the TEAMS edition might be a reader’s attempt to make orthodox sense of them.
549 In “L’Ascèse dans les Sectes d’Origine Protestante,” Jean Séguy observes, thinking of Weber, that asceticism (in part because of its promotion of intense obedience to one’s abbot and one’s God rather than to other figures or institutions) paradoxically can be considered *resistant to authority*. This of course makes it especially worthwhile as a vantage point from which a satirist might choose to speak.
Isn’t “Langland” something of a pen name? And if Chaucer was not as widely circulated at first, except thanks to the tireless publicization efforts of his son, can we even so call him marginal in his own day? His narrower circle of readers would after all have been of higher status and more influential. Chaucer and Gower had their sights on translatio imperii more than redemptio mundi, despite how pious they might have been.

**Spenser**

The poet Edmund Spenser was also associated with high-ranking society, like Chaucer and Gower but unlike Langland, counting Elizabeth I of England as a patron as well as the model for his “Faerie Queene.” He shares other attributes with Langland, no doubt owing to the fact that he definitely had access to the text of Piers Plowman through Crowley’s impressions (from 1550) and Owen Rogers’ impression of 1561. He also was not even in a phantom competition with Langland to be “Father of English Poetry,” unlike Chaucer, and in fact lived at a moment when—though all “moments” meld and are “in transition” from one to another—it was acceptable to approve of what Piers Plowman, even more than Chaucer, seemed to represent: Englishness, Protestantism, a rustic style.

Spenser’s understanding of contemptus, however, does not always appear markedly different from Chaucer’s. Spenser’s Daphnaida, modeled on Chaucer’s Book of the Duchess, is in fact a text explicitly designed to elicit sorrow.

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552 The only major study of this phenomenon in the Renaissance of which I am aware is Douglas Trevor, The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The book observes perspicaciously that Spenser seems to portray sadness in a positive light on numerous occasions (but not on others). In the Faerie Queene, for instance, Spenser embraces otherworldly tristitia as praiseworthy and Galenic “humoral” melancholy as an affliction. Unfortunately, Trevor seems completely unaware of the existence of contempt ideology—perhaps because it had been replaced by other discourse, though the discourses and discussions that Trevor cites
What euer man he be, whose heauie mynd
With griefe of mournefull great mishap opprest,
Fit matter for his cares increase would fynd:
Let reade the rufull plaint herein exprest,
Of one (I weene) the wofulst man aliue;
Euen sad Alcyon, whose empierced brest,
Sharpe sorrowe did in thousand peces riue.

But who so else in pleasure findeth sense,
Or in this wretched life dooth take delight,
Let him be banisht farre away from hence:
Ne let the sacred Sisters here be hight,
Though they of sorrowe heauilie can sing;
For euen their heauie song would breede delight:
But here no tunes, saue sobes and grones shall ring.

In stead of them, and their sweete harmonie,
Let those three fatall Sisters, whose sad hands
Doe weaue the direfull threads of destinie,
And in their wrath breake off the vitall bands,
Approach hereto: and let the dreadfull Queene
Of darknes deepe come from the Stygian Strands,
And grisly Ghosts to heare this dolefull teene. (1-21)\(^5\)

The work’s despairing hero who longs for death, Alcyon, seems not to die so much as
to disappearing, and in so doing he draws faintly but firmly on the same tradition of
the Old Man in Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*, itself echoing the pagan Late Antique
“elegies of Maximianus.” This Stoic image had a place in the medieval ascetic
imagination, but it served not for emulation so much as for a warning.\(^5\)

To his credit, however, Spenser realized that asceticism meant more than
lugubrious thoughts about death. Book One of the *Faerie Queene* shows his broader
understanding especially clearly, particularly in its narration of the Redcrosse knight’s
meeting with the character “Despayre” and that meeting’s aftermath. Despayre’s

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\(^5\) Elizabeth Fowler of the University of Virginia gave a paper at the International Spenser Society
Conference in Toronto, in which she compared the form of Spenser’s *Daphnaida*, rich with anaphora,
to a multi-sided funeral monument expressing different aspects of mourning.

\(^5\) See George Lyman Kittredge, “Chaucer and Maximianus,” *American Journal of Philology* 9 (1888),
pp. 84-85.
arguments in Spenser are perfectly analogous to wanhope’s threats in Langland: a mash-up of Despayre’s words with Haukyn’s desolation at the end of B.14 would not be jarring in content, I suspect, but only in style.⁵⁵⁵ The treatments the Redcrosse knight undergoes at the house of holiness are also in keeping with those urged on Haukyn by his interlocutors.⁵⁵⁶ That they lead out of despair and into the vision of a heavenly Jerusalem greater than city seats of earthly power, as the knight encounters Contemplation, embraces the prophetic ideal of asceticism as Gower’s Carmina did not.

Comparisons between Langland and Spenser run more deeply still, extending further than just one or two episodes in the tale of the Redcrosse knight. Spenser’s entire Faerie Queene has an edificatory purpose, the “Letter to Raleigh” explains, with each of the six books devoted to one of twelve supposedly Aristotelian “moral virtues”: holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy.⁵⁵⁷ Langland likely also influenced Spenser’s sense of satire as well. Behind the letter’s assertion that the Faerie Queene would be “a continual allegory, or dark conceit,” as A. C. Hamilton has noted, likely lie Crowley’s words describing Piers—the only other model Spenser would have had for such a text.⁵⁵⁸ Moreover, Hamilton observes that references to Piers in Spenser’s satiric verse tend to promote an ideal of separation from the world.

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⁵⁵⁵ For corroboration see Harold Skulsky, “Spenser’s Despair Episode and the Theology of Doubt,” Modern Philology 78.3 (1981), pp. 227-42 at 229-30 on what Langland would surely have identified as the perils of the active life.

⁵⁵⁶ The “Castle of Caro” in Piers Plowman also seems, manifestly, to have inspired Spenser’s Castle of Alma in the Faerie Queene.


⁵⁵⁸ Crowley: “The sence [is] somewhat darecke […] but not so harde, but that it may be vnderstande of suche as will not sticke to breake the shelle of the nutte for the kernelles sake.” (qtd. by Hamilton, “Spenser and Langland,” p. 535)
William Goddard and the English Epigrammatists

I would like to close this brief overview with some attention to another research subject I have explored, one William Goddard and similar poets very early in the seventeenth century, in so far as these might hold the key to the fate of Langlandian asceticism and satire in the early modern period. They provide the very interesting means by which Chaucer’s scurrility was sanctioned by classical precedent, increasing the license for satiric parrhesia—not without debate—while at the same time fatally compromising its seriousness through overreliance on humor.

I first became acquainted with William Goddard while examining a copy of the 1602 edition by Thomas Speght of Chaucer’s collected works—a book which, its purchaser noted, had been owned by the “well known Elizabethan poet and satirist Willyam Goddard.” Goddard had heavily annotated Chaucer’s *Romaunt of the Rose* and nothing else, he claimed, which was not true. But Adams also claimed that “[o]n the blank reverse of the portrait of Chaucer Goddard has inscribed a commendatory poem, and signed it boldly with his full name”—and this was true. As a further proof of his authorship, one not provided by the text in Adams’ note, Goddard had even changed the poem in the midst of writing:

If thou yll-rellishe Chaucer for his rime
Consider when he liu’d, the age, and tyme
And then thou’t saie old Geffr’ ye neatlie writt
And showes both eloquence and curious witt
    No age did ere afford a merryer straine vaine,
    Yet (diu’d into) a deepe and sollid vaine straine

It was fitting that Goddard made his ownership known by means of a signed epigram, moreover, because he was one of a group of poet-pamphleteers dedicated to increasing

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the spread of their mostly lighthearted verse, a group Thomas Warton called the
“epigrammatists.”

The English epigrammatists—Goddard and his compatriots—helped to provide an important corrective in the nascent business of Chaucer criticism, which had by Speght’s 1602 edition made Chaucer far more patrician and removed from coarse human concerns than the evidence would seem (to us) to warrant. Speght wrote in the front-matter to his edition that

it were a labor worth commendation, if some scholler, that hath skil and leisure, would confer Chaucer with those learned Authors, both in Greek and Latin, from whom he hath drawn many excellent things [...] which would so grace this auncient Poet, that whereas diuers haue thought him vnlearned, and his writings meere trifles, it should appeare, that besides the knowledge of sundrie tongues, he was a man of great reading, & deep judgement[...]

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560 Thomas Warton, in The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century, to Which are Prefixed Three Dissertations: of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe, on the Introduction of Learning into England, [and] on the ‘Gesta Romanorum’ in four volumes (London: Thomas Tegg, 1824), writes at length in praise of Bishop Hall and John Marston, the self-proclaimed first and second satirists of the English language, who inspired what he calls “an innumerable crop of SATIRISTS, and a set of writings, differing but little more than in name, and now properly belonging to the same species, EPIGRAMMATISTS.” (Among these, Warton happens to cite William Goddard and a closely related writer, Samuel Rowlands: see the bibliography for title and publication information about some of Goddard’s works and two works of Rowlands to which I allude.) Hall and Marston apparently borrowed from Juvenal and Persius for their writings, to which the epigrammatists certainly added Martial and other poets of a similar vein: Warton’s history tells us that Martial’s epigrams were first rendered into English by Timothy Kendall in 1577, who titled his collection Flovvres of Epigrammes (out of Sundrie the Most Singular Authors Selected, as well auncient as late writers: pleasant and profitable to the expert readers of quicke capacite, &c.). Kendall’s book contains epigrams by “Martial, Pictorius, Bubonius, Politian, Bruno, Textor, Ausonius, the Greek anthology, Beza, Sir Thomas More, Henry Stephens, Haddon, Parkhurst, and others,” not to mention Kendall (upon whose contributions Warton frowns). “But by much the greater part,” Warton assures us, “is from Martial.”

561 Thomas Speght, letter “To the Readers” in The Workes of Our Ancient and learned English Poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, newly Printed, ed. Thomas Speght (London: Adam Islip, 1602). Speght had Francis Thynne, son of the earlier Chaucer compiler William Thynne, in mind, who apparently “wished to make a Coment in our tongue, as the Italians have for Dante, Petrark, and other of their poets.” In this connection it’s interesting to note that a poem of similar length to Goddard’s epigram by one Nicolas Watson, hand-written behind an engraving in F.J. Furnivall’s former copy, makes these very associations: “Parnassus Topp, pure streame of Hellicon, / Grave Lawret, and thou English Horace, he / (Pearle of Olimp:) whom Muses since each one / So dearly priz’d, y’ they strove whose shouldst be / But now thou art gone to him that first thee made, / To walke with him in the Elizian shade, / And yet th’art heare, where Poetts are thy Paiges / And thou art Tutor to surviving Ages. Nic’s: Waf.” Such testimonia have been collected in volume one of Caroline Frances Eleanor Spurgeon’s monumental
The epigrammatists’ response to such assessments seems to have hinged upon the fact that Martial was a more-or-less classical poet, too, and that Chaucer fit better in that tradition than in the pure, Appollonian firmament into which he had been set. Goddard’s point that criticism of human nature could be accomplished through humor was merely the flip-side of the classical understanding that humor could leaven criticism of human nature. Just as his “wife, widow, and maid” in A Satyricall Dialogue built upon Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, Goddard’s absurd character of Diogenes, in the same work, merely built on absurdities inherent in the original figure. If humor and outspoken criticism were allowed in such figures as Chaucer, Martial, and Seneca, why should they face censorship like the 1599 “bishops’ ban”—a ban on satire itself?

It might have looked good for Langland’s literary fortunes, in terms of asceticism and satire, if early seventeenth-century epigrammatists were defending the “broad”ness—the parrhesia—of their verse by appealing to the well-acknowledged high-minded purpose of outspoken classical writers and their oft-crowned English heir. As it happened, however, the opposite scenario obtained. Goddard’s annotations show that despite his hand-written epigram’s professed admiration for how Chaucer mixed humor with seriousness, he mainly noted passages presenting one element or the other. The portions of the Wife of Bath’s monologues that he highlights have just

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562 On the real human being behind the strange figure Goddard and his compatriots would concoct, see Luis E. Navia, Diogenes of Sinope: the Man in the Tub, Contributions in Philosophy 67 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998).

563 On this background, see R. A. McCabe, “Elizabethan Satire and the Bishops’ Ban of 1599,” Yearbook of English Studies 11 (1981), pp. 188–94. As he notes, “[t]he terms of the ban […] show quite clearly that its primary target, despite the inclusion of one undoubtedly obscene work, Thomas Cutwood’s Callis Poetarum, was neither eroticism nor lewdness but satire itself.” (189) The ban has been published in The Stationers’ Registers, Register C, fols 361a, 361b. On the connection between satirists and pamphleteers see also Andrew McRae, Literature, Satire, and the Early Stuart State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
about as much edifying substance as Goddard’s own version of the same, while Goddard’s chosen excerpts from the *Plowman’s Tale* there ascribed to Chaucer (but really written by a third-rate and possibly Lollard Langlandian) exhibit real pathos and simply are not funny.\(^{564}\)

Goddard was unable to mix his humor and his seriousness, after all, not having found the two mixed in Chaucer’s “workes” (or not noticing when they were). His poems show all too clearly that he decided to prioritize humor in his writings, as did his contemporaries, in order to maximize sales and to weaken the case for censorship.\(^{565}\) To this decision, I suspect, we owe the place of humor in the satire of even the contemporary era, where it holds a prominence greater than it had even in Horace, Persius, Juvenal, and Martial’s day. Will, searcher after Dowel, becomes a shadow in the purportedly stoic figure of Diogenes of *A Satyricall Dialogue*; the character of Death, in Samuel Rowlands’ *Look to It!* *Ile Stabbe Ye*, will prompt no meditation on the grave.

By the eighteenth century, when as Howard explicitly notes the popularity of works *de contemptu* had begun to wane, Langland would still be viewed as a satirist—and in the vein of classical poets rather than English writers, which would surely have been some consolation. An eighteenth-century inscription in one manuscript of *Piers Plowman* refers to the poem as “an auntient English Poem, very Satyrical” and observes that one “learned Dr Hickes sometime Dean of Norwich” called it “*Egregius*

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\(^{564}\) This has been a cursory overview; in time to come, I aspire to publish an essay fully devoted to William Goddard and the epigrammatists’ Chaucer.

\(^{565}\) As McCabe notes in “Elizabethan Satire and the Bishops’ Ban,” “verse satire […] was clearly one of the most popular forms of the day, and the epigram, its sister genre, shared in this new popularity—all of which might have been quite harmless were it not becoming increasingly obvious that the enthusiastic response of the reading public was prompted by an awareness that the new writers were beginning to realize the full potentials of their medium as a vehicle for social complaint.” (191) Humor was vital for the survival of such works.
Satyricon Liber, in a good Sense." 566 Even so, his apparently outspoken plowman dominated the conversation; and the extent to which the rest of his poem made use of satire had begun to dry into several small pools, where I think he had intended a lake. This is certainly an injustice at the hands of posterity—and one which I hope this dissertation might in some small way help to redress. Such injustices, however—forming the very subject of Langland’s satire, and fading by the light of its ideal—are what the poem best knows how to bear.

566 See London, British Library Additional MS 35157. Nor was this view an eighteenth-century invention, as the inscription’s quotations from Crowley convey. Middleton writes in her introduction to the Alford Companion (“The Critical Heritage”) that Puttenham—rough contemporary to Crowley—in 1589 referred to “‘that nameless’ who wrote it as ‘a malcontent of that time’ and [placed] him in the tradition of the Latin satirists ‘Lucilius, Iuvenall and Persius’ as one who ‘intended to taxe the common abuses and vice of the people in rough and bitter speaches.’” (9)
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