

# Piers Plowman

*A Modern Verse Translation*



William Langland

*Translated by Peter Sutton*

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

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**e-ISBN: 978-1-4766-1817-3**

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*McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers*  
*Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640*  
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## Acknowledgments

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

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## Introduction

### *The Poem and the Translation*

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

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

*Piers Plowman* revolves around the narrator's quest for how to live a good Christian life that combines practical activity with spiritual reflection. Every reading of the poem reveals new layers of meaning, but the English of the text is so far removed from today's language that it cannot be read without assistance. The aim of this translation is to provide a version that retains the energy, alliteration, imagery and intentions of the original and can be read with pleasure for its own sake by anyone interested in poetry, history or literature. It is not intended primarily as a crib, although it can also be used as an introduction to the original, which well rewards deeper study.

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

### *Structure and Synopsis*

When the poem was first printed, it was given the overall Latin title *Liber de Petro Plowman* or "Book



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

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

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

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

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

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

The high point of the poem is reached in Step XVIII, when the narrator dreams of the terrifying Harrowing of Hell, which releases the souls of the penitent, including the heathen, from the clutches



of the devil. But then the forces of Antichrist gather, against whom the only defense is true Christian values. Conscience and Grace seek to withstand the onslaught of Sloth, Covetousness and Falsehood, but Courtesy finally causes them to admit a fraudulent friar, who brings corruption to the very heart of the Church. Conscience sets off in despair to seek the help of Piers once more, and the narrator awakes for the last time. The ending is sudden, but the journey has come to the end of the road.

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

### ***The Sources of the Text***

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

This translation was made initially from that Skeat edition, and lines from it were used in the presentation given at Little Malvern Priory as part of the 2012 Autumn in Malvern Festival. With the kind permission of Dr. A.V.C. Schmidt, emeritus fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, the translation was then compared with his 1995 Everyman edition of the B text, which can be recommended to general readers wishing to consult the original.<sup>5</sup> In consequence, some alternative readings have been adopted, and in a dozen instances, lines have been deleted, changed or added. Where the sense or the modern sentence structure requires, I have also transposed or rearranged a few lines on my own initiative. Attention is called in the footnotes to significant variations, "Schmidt" referring to the Everyman edition unless otherwise stated. Dr. Schmidt has also issued a revised and newly annotated parallel-text edition of the A, B and C texts, with the addition of a fourth, earlier version termed Z, and this has replaced Skeat as the standard scholarly edition.<sup>6</sup> Other revised editions of the B text are by Kane and Donaldson, and by Robertson and Shepherd,<sup>7</sup> and texts are becoming available online.<sup>8</sup>

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

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

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

### ***Verse Form***

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

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

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

The other main feature of alliterative verse is the caesura or break that occurs at the mid-point of each

line. It should be placed between grammatical structures, or in other words, it should be natural to pause at that point when reading the line.

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

The number of unstressed syllables in a line also varies considerably, although some rules can be inferred<sup>16</sup>:

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

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

5. Where the rhyme letter is a vowel, any vowel is acceptable.
6. A sounded H may be either disregarded or treated as a consonant and rhymed with other Hs.
7. Lines may contain a subsidiary repeated sound.
8. Alliteration may roll over from one line to the next.

### ***The Approach to the Translation***

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

In the interest of fluidity, the translation uses alliteration between any three out of the four stressed syllables in each line. Also, much use is made of pairs of alliterating syllables since it would have

looked like incompetence to place only two alliterating syllables in a line. This results in the patterns *abab*, *abba* and *aabb*, rather than Langland's occasional *axay* and *xaay*, where *x* and *y* do not alliterate with anything. Furthermore, the rhyme letter is placed consistently on stressed syllables, although stress patterns may vary from reader to reader. V and F are treated as rhyming, as are T and TH, S, X, SH and soft C, and Q, K and hard C. The division into paragraphs is mine.

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

The poem contains over 300 Latin quotations, the vast majority from the *Vulgate*, the Latin Bible of the Catholic Church, and references to chapter and verse are given in the footnotes. Many of these would have been familiar to readers and listeners from church services, even if they did not grasp every word, and they were often left incomplete in the original text. Here, they are given in full, and in order to reproduce a mixture of familiarity and alienation, the earliest possible English translation of the *Vulgate* is used, the so-called Douay-Rheims Bible.<sup>17</sup> This differs at many points from the "Authorized" or "King James Version" (KJV) commissioned for the Church of England in 1611, and footnotes point to these differences.

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

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

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

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## *The Imagery of the Poem*

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup>The Schmidt C numbers are taken from his 1995 Longman edition.

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

<sup>11</sup>R.W.V. Elliott, “The Langland Country,” in S.S. Hussey, ed., *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (London: Methuen, 1969), 228.

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

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

<sup>14</sup>T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, 59.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>21</sup>Nicodemus is named as one of those taking Christ’s body for burial in John xix 39.



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## The Identity of the Author

There are three well-known sources for the identity of the author. One is a note appended in Latin to an early manuscript of the poem held in Trinity College Library, Dublin. This states that the father of “Willielmus de Langland” was Stacy de Rokayle, a gentleman who held land in Oxfordshire from the Despensers. The second is the 1550 printed edition, the preface to which says that the author was “Roberte Langelande, born in Cleybirie about viii miles from Malverne hilles,” although the name Robert stems from a misreading of the poem, and Cleobury Mortimer, as the town is now known, is 2 rather than eight miles from Malvern.

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

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

Steps VIII, XIII and XV suggest that he has undertaken a physical as well as a spiritual journey, and in the “autobiographical” passage from the C version (here at the end of Step XIV) he speaks of his late life in London, living humbly with his wife and singing offices for the sick and the dead. He says that his father and friends paid for his early education and that he has always had a clerical occupation, and he suggests that he is tall and ungainly. From the dating of the B version of the poem to the late 1370s and the statements that Lovely-to-look-at and Imagination have accompanied him for 45 years (XI 4 XII 3) and that Piers has followed Truth for forty-something (V 543), it can be inferred that he was born between 1330 and 1332, although the number forty may well be notional and there is no guarantee that the author of the poem is identical to its narrator.

There is a strong local tradition that he was born and educated in Shropshire or in the Malvern area, on the borders of Worcestershire and Herefordshire, and the dialect of the poem confirms the author’s western origin. In Shropshire, Cleobury Mortimer parish church, which dates to the twelfth century, boasts a large stained-glass window installed in 1875 to celebrate Langland and his poem. It shows heaven at the top, flanked by hope and faith, Christ in glory in the second tier flanked by peasants and gentry, the Passion and biblical miracles lower down, and Langland, flanked by Truth and Falsehood.

lying at the foot with the Malvern Hills in the background. In support of the town's claim to Langland it is argued that the Latin abbreviation *pat* in the Dublin manuscript stands for *patronus* (patron) rather than *pater* (father), and that he came from a "Longelond" family living in nearby Kinlet.<sup>1</sup> A Shropshire website states unequivocally: "His father owned some land and William, the second son, was destined to be a clerk. He was sent to the Austin Friars at the Woodhouses to be educated."<sup>2</sup>

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

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

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

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

The author who made these claims in the 1920s, A.H. Bright, whose family had occupied a house below the Malvern Hills for generations, is more convincing in his identification of a point on the Hills which fits the topography of the opening vision.<sup>8</sup> From here, where one of many springs issues from the Hills, it is possible to look up on a "morning in May" to the summit of the Herefordshire Beacon, albeit more to the south than the east, where a Norman fortification once stood, and down toward houses in the west which retain some suggestion of a "Moat," according to local maps. Even though Langland's description need not be taken literally, this view may have been in his mind.

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

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

Estimates of how he spent his time between leaving the Priory and arriving in London vary from years spent as a peasant farmer, according to the Colwall Village Society,<sup>11</sup> to further study at University, although possibly without completing a degree.<sup>12</sup> He certainly knew Latin and had a grounding in religious education, but the only direct evidence again comes from the poem, and it is inconclusive. Aside from the Bible and books of prayer and the liturgy, he repeatedly cites the "four doctors" of the Church, Saints Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory and Jerome, who, according to a former Dean of Worcester Cathedral, "not uncommonly appear on medieval screens and pulpits."<sup>13</sup> He also names Peter Comestor, the twelfth-century "Master of Histories," the late sixth-century Saint Isidore of Seville, and the writer known as Saint John Chrysostom. He appeals to the authority of the conventional founders of monasticism, he mentions Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, and he quotes from Boethius, the sixth-century Roman philosopher.

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

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

Innocent III of the early thirteenth century, and his own contemporary, Bishop Brinton of Rochester.

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

There is nevertheless speculation that he knew the work of a few Christian authors at first hand, including Saint Augustine of Hippo,<sup>14</sup> the prolific twelfth-century theologian Alan of Lille,<sup>15</sup> and perhaps the thirteenth century John of Hoveden, who also wrote in Latin.<sup>16</sup> He may have taken some of his righteous indignation from manuals on morals,<sup>17</sup> and his style may have been influenced by the prose of Saint Bernard<sup>18</sup> and by Latin hexameter versification,<sup>19</sup> both learned in school.

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

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

This awareness not only of natural events but also of political affairs suggests that Langland moved in relatively high social circles, and a further possible sighting of the poet in such company has come to light recently. Michael Bennett has identified someone referred to as “William called Long Will” (*Willelmus vocatus Longewille*) in a list of persons named as accessories to a murder committed in 1385 in the north of England by the half-brother of the King.<sup>23</sup> The odd soubriquet stands out because all the other accused bear conventional forenames and surnames. Despite his apparent poverty and clerical allegiance, did Langland perhaps occupy a privileged status in disaffected noble households because of his prowess as a poet, saying things about the government that few others dared to utter? This role would neatly coincide with the description of his life in London, with the overall tenor of the poem, and with the revisions made to the C version.

It is not known when he died, although the period 1385–87 is likely from a reference in a poem by John But to the death of the author of *Piers Plowman*, But himself having died in 1387.<sup>24</sup>

In the absence of firmer evidence, the figure that emerges from the shadows is thus that of a tall, awkward son of the minor nobility who was born about 1330 in Cleobury, Shropshire, and was sent to school, perhaps at first at a local Augustinian priory, and then about thirty miles away at Little

Malvern Priory, at the expense of Sir Hugh Despenser of nearby Hanley Castle. After Sir Hugh died in the Plague of 1348–49, he spent some time wandering the country observing life, and arrived in London in the 1360s. There he made a living as a poet, copyist for lawyers and “chantry priest” in minor orders. This enabled him to marry, and his poetic skill allowed him eventually to move in elevated social circles opposed to the government, even though he still lived very modestly. He probably began the earliest version of the poem around 1360, gave it up around 1365, returned to it in the 1370s, and produced a final version in the 1380s, by which time the poem was well known and, in his view, misunderstood by rebels attacking the structure of the state and organized religion.

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

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

<sup>2</sup>[www.shropshire-promotions.co.uk](http://www.shropshire-promotions.co.uk)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>10</sup>Adams, 67. See also [www.edwardthesecond.blogspot.com](http://www.edwardthesecond.blogspot.com).

<sup>11</sup>*Colwall History Map* (Colwall, Herefordshire: Colwall Village Society, 2000). See also A.H. Bright



- <sup>12</sup>Anna Baldwin, *A Guidebook to Piers Plowman* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5–6.
- <sup>13</sup>R.L.P. Milburn, *Saints and Their Emblems in English Churches* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 15.
- <sup>14</sup>David Lawton, “The Subject of Piers Plowman,” in John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds., *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society* vol. 1 (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1987), 10.
- <sup>15</sup>A.V.C. Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things: Collected Essays on Piers Plowman* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 63–67.
- <sup>16</sup>Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things*, 79–81.
- <sup>17</sup>G.R. Owst, “A Literary Echo of the Social Gospel,” in Edward Vasta, ed. *Interpretations of Piers Plowman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 22–53; Rosemary Woolf, “The Tearing of the Pardon,” in S.S. Hussey, ed., *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (London: Methuen, 1969), 50–75, esp. 58.
- <sup>18</sup>Schmidt, *Earthly Honest Things*, 69.
- <sup>19</sup>Traugott Lawler, “Langland Versificator,” in Andrew Cole, Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 25 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 37–76.
- <sup>20</sup>E. Talbot Donaldson, “Piers Plowman: The Religious Allegory of the C Text,” in Edward Vasta, ed. *Interpretations of Piers Plowman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 133.
- <sup>21</sup>Brian Smith, *A History of Malvern* 2d ed. (Malvern: Alan Sutton and the Malvern Bookshop, 1978), 100.
- <sup>22</sup>Anne Middleton, “The Passion of Saint Averoy: ‘Deuynyng’ and Divinity in the Banquet Scene,” in John A. Alford and M. Teresa Taormina, eds., *Yearbook of the International Piers Plowman Society* vol. 1 (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1987), 31–40.
- <sup>23</sup>Michael Bennett, “William Called Long Will,” in Fiona Somerset and Lawrence Warner, eds., *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* vol. 26 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012), 1–25.
- <sup>24</sup>See, for example, the Introduction to Schmidt’s 1995 Everyman edition, xxiii.
- <sup>25</sup>Lawrence Warner, *The Myth of Piers Plowman. Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22ff.

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## Prologue

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

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

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

Quite weary with walking I wanted to rest  
On a broad grassy bank beside a small brook.  
As I lay down I leant and looked in the water,  
10 Which babbled so sweetly I soon fell asleep.  
And sleeping I saw the strangest of dreams:  
That I wandered a wilderness, not knowing where,  
And high in the east, looking up at the sun,  
Saw a tower on a toft, built sturdy and true<sup>2</sup>;  
15 To the west, further down, were a dale and a dungeon  
With deep, dark ditches that I gazed on with dread.

Between them I found a fair field full of folk,  
All manner of men, both moneyed and poor,  
Either walking or working at what the world wants.  
20 Some were pushing a plow with no time for play,  
And were sweating as they scattered and sowed the seed  
And gathered the grain that the greedy would squander;  
Some were pouting like popinjays, strutting with pride,  
Bedecked in dandified, elegant dress;  
25 And many were practicing penitence and prayer,  
Living soberly and strictly for the sake of our Lord  
In the hope that they'd have their reward in heaven,  
Such as anchorites, hermits who aren't seen abroad  
And don't go roistering round the roads  
30 Or lead lives of luxury, lechery and lust.

And some were making their money as merchants,  
Successfully it seemed from what I could see,  
And others as minstrels, through music and mirth,



Not sinning but singing amusing songs,  
35 While japing jackasses, Judas's children,  
Feigned uncouth fancies and foolish affronts  
Yet well had the wit to work if they would.  
I will not repeat Saint Paul's great reproof;  
*He who speaks slander is Satan's slave.*<sup>3</sup>

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

There were pilgrims and palmers pledging to go  
Conjointly on journeys to Rome and Saint James,<sup>4</sup>  
Which would let them tell lies for the rest of their lives,  
And some were saying they'd already seen shrines  
50 And were citing wise stories they said they had heard.  
But the way that they spoke showed their stories were slim  
And their tongues were attuned not to truth but to lies.  
A whole army of "hermits" with hook-ended staves  
Were walking to Walsingham with wenches in tow.<sup>5</sup>  
55 They were great tall lummocks who disliked hard labor<sup>6</sup>  
And dodged hard work by donning strange dress,  
Hooded long habits that made them look holy.

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

A pardoner was preaching as if ordained priest,  
Brandishing a bull with a bishop's seals<sup>7</sup>  
70 And saying he could safely bestow absolution  
For falsely breaking both fasts and vows.  
The unlearned believed him and liked what he said,  
And came on their knees to kiss the false claim.  
He bamboozled and blinded and baffled them with it,  
75 Reaping with his rigmarole their brooches and rings,  
Garnering gold from the gullible to feed

An unholy humbug who hungered for pleasure.

If the bishop were blessed with both his ears,  
He'd not send his seal to deceive people so.

80 Though he had not appointed the pardoner to preach,  
The priest and the pardoner were splitting the proceeds  
That ought to have helped the hungry and poor.

Parish priests and parsons were complaining to bishops  
That their parishes were poor since the time of the Plague

85 And begging for license to live up in London  
And sing the psalms for the sweet sound of money.  
And abundant bishops and bachelors and masters  
And doctors of divinity, who should feed poor folk  
And should preach and confess and pray for their people,  
90 And are tonsured in token of these tasks under Christ,  
Already were living in London—in Lent!—  
Some serving the King and counting his cash  
In exchequer and chancery, checking the takings  
From the sale of strays, court sessions and wardships;  
95 And some were enlisted by lords and ladies  
To sit as their stewards and settle disputes,  
Saying Matins and Mass and most other rites  
With such insincerity that when they decease,  
Christ and his court may keep the gates closed.

100 I perceived how power had been passed to Peter  
To bind and unbind, as the Bible recounts.<sup>8</sup>  
As our Lord had wished, Peter lovingly left it  
To four vital virtues, the finest of all,  
The cardinal hinges on which heaven's gates hang,  
105 To enclose the kingdom of Christ, to stay shut  
Or to open and offer the bliss of heaven.  
I will not comment on the cardinals at court  
Who appropriate the name and the power of Peter,  
Improperly appointing the Pope of Rome.  
110 His election requires both learning and love:  
I could but I cannot say more on the case.<sup>9</sup>

A king then came, accompanied by knights,  
And crowned by assent of the commons besides.

Native Wit named some people who were knowing  
115 To counsel the King and to safeguard the commons.  
And the King and his company of counselors and knights  
Decreed that folk should provide them with food,  
So Native Wit showed them what skills to establish.  
They appointed plowmen for the profit of all,  
120 To till and to toil as honesty dictates,

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