

William Langland. *Piers Plowman*. Trans. A. V. C. Schmidt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.
Pp. 42-63, 270-79.

He instructed Tom Stowe to get a good pair of canes and fetch his wife Felicity home, before she ended up on the ducking-stool* for shrews! He gave a warning to Walter that his wife was getting into bad ways, wearing a hat worth twenty times his own poor hood. And he ordered Bud to cut a couple of branches and give his Betty a sound thrashing if she wouldn't get down to work.

Next, he urged merchants to bring up their children strictly: 'Don't let your growing prosperity lead you to spoil them while they are little! Take care not to cosset them beyond what's reasonable because of the anxiety for their well-being which the terrible attacks of the plague have made you feel. My father and mother both brought it home to me, that the more you love a child, the more care you must take to bring your child up well. And Solomon, author of the books of Wisdom, concurred: "Spare the rod", he wrote, "and spoil the child!"'*

After this, Reason addressed an appeal to both the higher and the lower ranks of the clergy. 'You yourselves must put into practice', he said, 'whatever you exhort your hearers to do in your sermons. Make your teaching a reality in your own lives, and the consequences for you will surely be happy. If you lead lives such as you urge us to pursue, won't we take your teaching all the more to heart?*' And then he admonished members of religious orders to adhere firmly to their Rule of Life. 'Otherwise', he warned, 'the King and his Council are going to reduce your revenues drastically. They'll come and take over the management of your endowments until you manage to put your own houses in order.'*

Having said this, he advised the King to love the common people. 'They', he said, 'are your real treasure, and your sovereign remedy in time of supreme need—if only we were sure no treason was lurking amongst them!'

He went on to implore the Pope to have pity on the state of Holy Church, and to put his own affairs to rights before granting favours and indulgences to others.

'And you', he went on, 'in whose hands lies the administration of the law—don't hunger and thirst for golden

VISION TWO

PASSUS V

The King and his knights made their way to church to hear matins, followed by mass. And I now stirred from my slumbers,* but how miserable I felt not to have remained more deeply asleep, and so to have seen more! However, before I had walked two hundred paces, I suddenly began to feel drowsy; why, I felt I couldn't move another foot for lack of sleep! So I sat down quietly, and set about saying my Creed; and as I did so, the sound of my own voice murmuring the prayers made me drop off asleep.

And then I had a vision of much more than I've already described. I saw the field full of people which I mentioned before, and Reason getting ready to preach to the whole realm at large.* I saw how he took a cross and, standing before the King, proceeded to give a homily in the words that now follow. The recent plague,* he demonstrated, had been brought down on our heads solely on account of our sins; and the strong south-west wind* that raged on Saturday evening was clearly caused by our sins of pride and nothing else whatever. Pear trees and plum trees had been levelled by great gusts, as a sign, my friends, that you must amend your ways! Beeches and great oak trees were blown flat and turned their roots to the sky; that was a fearful presage that, before Doomsday itself approaches, the severity of their sins will be our people's undoing. This is a theme I could say much more on, but all I shall do, please God, is describe my vision of Reason preaching, and the blunt and forthright terms he used to the people.

He urged Waster* to go and do some work, as he well knew how to, and earn what he spent by plying some sort of trade. He appealed to Petronella,* the paragon of pride, to doff her furs and lock them away in her chest against a day of need.

gifts, but the treasure of truth and right; that is the way to win the Almighty's favour. Remember what He himself says in the Gospel to those who act against truth: "I say to you solemnly, I do not know you."^{*}

'You pilgrims', he said, 'who search for St James or the martyr-saints of Rome, go and look for St Truth:^{*} he is the one with the power to save you all. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: a blessing on all who follow what I preach!'

Those were Reason's final words. And at once Repentance^{*} rushed forward, and went over again the substance of what he had said, bringing water-drops from Will's eyes. Petronella,^{*} that proud-hearted dame, flung herself face down upon the ground and lay there for a long time, before crying out at last, 'Mercy, Lord, have mercy!' Thereupon she swore a vow to the Creator of us all: she said she would unpick her undergarment and put in its place a hair-shirt, to discipline her flesh, which was boldly bent upon sin. 'Swelling self-regard', she cried, 'will master me no more from now. Instead I shall humble myself, and meekly endure the harsh words of others—something I have never done in my life before. But now my wish is to abase myself, and to beg mercy for all that crabb'd resentment I have long been harbouring deep within my heart!'

Then Lust^{*} let out a lament, and cried to the Blessed Virgin to obtain God's mercy for the many evil acts he had performed. He vowed that every Saturday for a period of seven years he would taste only what ducks drink and eat only one meal that day.

Next Envy,^{*} with heavily burdened spirit, asked to be confessed, and in anguished tones uttered his '*Mea culpa*,^{*} through my own fault I have sinned.' His features were as pale as a cannon-ball of stone, and he seemed to be shaking all over. I couldn't begin to describe what he was wearing: it was an under-jacket and coat of some coarse material, the front part of the sleeves like those the friars wear,^{*} and by his side he carried a knife. With his hollow cheeks and hideous grimace he resembled a leek that has spent a long time lying

out in the sun. His body was all swollen up with rage and resentment, and he kept on biting his lip. He walked along with clenched fists, always dreaming up ways of getting his own back, verbally or physically, if he should see a chance. Every word he uttered was like a viper spitting poison. He spent his whole life in quarrels and accusations, backbiting and slander, and bearing false witness. This was as far as his good-fellowship went, whenever the fellow appeared on the scene.

'I want to make my confession', the scoundrel said, 'if shame would let me do so! But, God help me, I'd be much happier if old Gib there suffered some setback or other than if someone offered *me* an enormous Essex cheese! I've got a neighbour nearby whom I've often got into trouble, what with telling lies about him to the powers-that-be, just to put him out of pocket. Thanks to this crooked tongue of mine, I've turned his own friends against him. But every success and bit of good luck he has made me curl up inside with misery!'

'I often stir up conflict between one household and another; the things I say lead to loss of life and limb! At market-time, if I meet a man whom I've really got it in for, I greet him as warmly as an old friend; the real reason, though, is he's more than a match for me—so I haven't actually any choice in the matter. But oh, if I could just get the upper hand, God knows what I'd do, I can tell you!'

'When I go to church and the time comes to kneel before the cross and say the bidding prayers as the priest directs—you know, for pilgrims, and for the whole community, too—I cry out, as I am kneeling there, "Christ curse the fellow who walked off with my bowl and that old tattered bed-sheet of mine!" Then, as I turn my eyes away from the altar, what should I notice but our friend Harry, who's gone and got himself a new coat. At once I wish it was mine—every last bit of thread in the blessed thing. Still, I can have a good gloat over his losses; that, now, really lights up the gloomiest day! But when he makes a profit, I end up down in the dumps. I'm always criticizing other people's faults—through my own, as it

happens, are fifty times worse than theirs. And if anyone else criticizes *me* for that reason, he's my enemy number one from that moment on!

'What I'd really love is this: for everyone to have to do just what I want! You see, I become quite livid at anyone who's got more than myself. Well, that's the sort of loveless existence I lead—just like some vicious, good-for-nothing cur. The result is my whole body seems bloated with the bitter juices bubbling up inside me.* I've been finding it hard to eat properly for years now. And why? Because envy and malevolence are damnably hard to digest! Ah, isn't there any sugar or syrup that could bring about some relief from this swelling? Isn't there any sweet medicine to flush the stuff right out from deep inside me? Will no confession do the trick, no act of mortification? Nothing short of having my stomach-wall scraped?'

'Yes, yes, of course there is!' said Repentance, urging him to look on the brighter side. 'Sorrow for sin is what saves a man's soul.'

'Well, I'm always sorry!*' cried Envy. 'I'm seldom anything else. And that's just what makes me lose so much weight—the fact that I have no outlet for my desire for revenge. I've often moved in business circles, amongst the London merchant-traders, and I've employed Messrs Slander and Co. as my agents to bring my rivals' wares into disrepute. When they would bring off a sale, and I proved unsuccessful, I was quick off the mark with some lie or other and a knowing scowl at my colleague—anything that would serve to make his transactions look shady. But now, through the power of Almighty God, I want nothing except to put all this behind me—if only I can!'

After this Anger got up; the whites of his eyes were showing, his nose was running, and the skin of his neck hung down in a flap. 'I'm Anger', he growled. 'Time was, I was a friar, and worked in the friary garden, grafting shoots on trees. Ha! I used to graft lies on learned mendicants and lecturers,* until they would put out leaves of lick-spittle language—the sort of stuff the nobility love to lap up. And next thing, they started to bud into private boudoir-

confessions,* and you know the fruit that produces in the end: people now much prefer confessing to a friar rather than to their own local parish priest. But now that the parsons have grasped that the friars are eating into their portion,* they've started to preach sermons attacking the brethren! The friars, for their part, proceed to find fault with the parish clergy, as anyone can tell you; and what happens then? Well, when they deliver their public sermons in one place or another, your good friend Anger is right in there with them, lending them lessons straight out of my library. Oh, yes, they spend so much time going on about "spirituality" that either side soon ends up bitterly hostile to the other. Both end up out of pocket and have to live off *my* kind of "spirituality"; or else, one party corners the lot and can then afford a nice little horse to ride on. But I'm Anger and I never give up my pursuit of these unsavoury people; isn't that, after all, my special gift?

'Let me tell you about my aunt, who's a nun—an abbess, in fact. She'd rather faint dead away—no, more, she'd rather die—than endure a single moment's physical pain. I've worked as a cook in her kitchen,* and spent a number of months employed by her convent (I've been with monks, too, but more of that anon). Anyway, I used to make stews for the prioress and those other good ladies vowed to a life of poverty. What turbulent dishes I used to stir up for them! I said that Lady Joan was illegitimate, and Lady Clarissa . . . she, admittedly, *was* the daughter of a knight, but not of her "father" (he, poor chap, was a cuckold!) As for Lady Petronella . . . well, now, she was a priest's pretty little poppet—not quite the stuff that prioresses are made from! Didn't she have a baby come last June? The whole chapter* knew what was going on! What vile vegetables I used to boil up from these vicious asides of mine! It wasn't too long before it all came spewing out in one go—"You're a liar!" "No, you're a liar!"—and each one slapped the other across the mouth. Christ Almighty, if the creatures had been carrying knives, they'd have done each other in there and then! Don't you think St Gregory was a wise old pope? He had a pretty shrewd notion of what might easily happen, when he laid down his rule that a prioress must never be ordained a

priest. Why, they'd have lost their claim to a good pastoral reputation from the very first confession they ever heard. Women can't keep a secret to save their lives!*

'Now, I could have settled down for the duration with our friends in the monasteries, but on the whole I've tended to give that lot a miss. A number of them keep a pretty strict watch on my cronies*—what with their prior, and their sub-prior, not to mention old Father Abbot himself. If I ever let my tongue wag amongst those people, they get in a huddle together, and the next thing I know I'm on bread and water every single Friday. In the chapter house I'm forced to own up, as if I was still a kid—yes, and I even get beaten on the bum, and without so much as a pair of pants in the way! That's why I don't care to hang about with those chappies. I get nothing to eat but some half-grown tiddly fish, and as for the beer—it's about as thick as water. There are occasions, though, when they bring wine round after dinner, and if I get the chance, ah, do I drink! My nose ends up running so badly my mouth tastes foul for a week. And every last bit of scandal I know about any of my precious brother-monks—well, I vomit it up in the cloister, and the whole lot of them step right in!

'Now', rejoined Repentance, 'repent what you've done! And never again repeat anything private you know of—don't let it out by so much as a word or a look. And don't drink as if you were some sort of master of wines, or else some common boozer. It's the main thing that will lead you into your sin again—the road to wrath. Be sober, man, be sober, do you hear? Saying this, he gave me absolution,* and urged me to aim at real contrition as the chief means of amending my evil ways.

And then Greed* came forward. I cannot begin to describe old Sir Harvey, his face looked so famished and caved-in. He had beetling brows, thick lips and a pair of inflamed eyes, and his cheeks flopped down like a leather purse, trembling with age and drooping below his chin. His beard was all covered with grease, like a workman's after eating his bacon. On his head there was a hood and on top of it a hat crawling with lice. He was wearing a tattered jacket that had seen a dozen

years' use, but the Welsh flannel it was made of had grown so threadbare that a louse would have found no foothold there—unless it was a champion jumper!

'I have gone in for greed', muttered this wretched creature, 'I openly avow it to you here. For a time, I was apprenticed to Simon Stylegate, and contracted to look after my master's interests. I started off by learning a page or two of falsehood, my first lesson being on how to handle fraudulent weights. I used to go along to the fairs at Weyhill* and Winchester, with all kinds of goods, as my master instructed me. And by God, if the devil's own luck hadn't been with me, that stuff would have stayed unsold for seven whole years!

'Next, I got in with the cloth-merchants,* to qualify in my Rogues' Rule-book: the subject was stretching the selvaige to make a piece of material appear larger. What a lot I learned there, sitting in the middle of those fancy striped fabrics! I would sew them with a pack-needle, then fold them over together and give them a real old racking in a clothes-press, until ten or twelve yards of cloth were stretched out to measure thirteen.

'My wife was a weaver whose business was making woollen cloth. She'd drop a word to the spinning-women to spin the wool out very fine. The pound-weight she used to value the wool actually registered four ounces more than my own steelyard, which I kept for weighing true. I used to buy her barley, too, which she'd brew up to be sold. She would dilute the good strong beer with some of the cheap penny-a-gallon tipple.* Now, the brew for the labourers and riff-raff used to stand in a place by itself; but the best ale was kept in my inner closet or else in our bedroom. Well, whoever got a taste of *that*, naturally bought it up, paying not less than four times the price per gallon, when it was brought out to them by the retailer, and she's practised this line of hers for the last eleven years. But now I swear, so 'elp me Gawd a'mighty, I'll have done with that sin, and I'll keep off dishonest weighing and adulterating my wares. I'll go on pilgrimage to Walsingham, and so will that wife of mine, and we'll pray before the great Bromholm Cross to be released from our guilt!*

'Have you ever repented?' asked Repentance, 'or ever made restitution?'

'Oh, yes!' he replied. 'On one occasion I was staying in the same inn as a party of merchants; and when they'd all gone to bed, I got up and rifled their bags.'

'You call that restitution?*' Repentance let out. 'That wasn't restitution, it was downright robbery! You deserve to be hanged just for that—more, in fact, than for any other sin you've mentioned.'

'But I thought rifling *was* restitution!' protested Greed. 'I've never learnt to read, and I assure you I don't know a word of French. Nobody does who comes from the far end of Norfolk!*'

'Have you ever in your life practised usury?*' went on Repentance.

'Oh, no!' he answered. 'Except when I was young. I picked up a thing or two when I was living among the Lombards and the Jews. I learnt how to work out the weights of silver pennies, and then take clippings off the heaviest ones. I also became quite devoted to the cross—I mean the one on coins that I took to lending. I also learned how property is pawned and forfeited. To prevent my victim absconding, though, I'd make sure to have the agreement in writing. Oh, I've acquired more real property by foreclosing on defaulters than from presents given to me by any grateful person I generously lent to in his time of need. I've also made loans in kind to members of the nobility,* male and female, and subsequently done duty as their agent, too, and bought back the very same goods myself! My stock-in-trade is wheeling and dealing, with a special line in currency-exchange. I lend to people whose aim seems to be to lose a shaving off every shekel they borrow. Equipped with bills of exchange from Lombard bankers, I've carried bullion to Rome.* This is how I've done it: I'd calculate the amount due by tally on this side, and give them another figure on arrival.'

'Have you ever made loans to the nobility just for the sake of enjoying their protection?*'

'Oh, yes—I've lent to such people; and precious little kindness they've shown me for it! I've turned more than one

knight into a kind of cloth-merchant without his having to hand me a pair of gloves like a new apprentice.'

'Have you shown compassion towards the poor when they are forced by sheer need to borrow?'

'Compassion? Yes, like a pedlar towards cats.* Don't they care for their skins so much they kill 'em if they can catch 'em?'

'Are you generous with food and drink towards your neighbours?'

'I'm no more welcome to them', he answered, 'than a cur in a kitchen. That's about the sum of my standing amongst my neighbours.'

'Now', said Repentance, 'unless you repent straight-away, I hope God will *never* grant you the grace to make good use of your money!*' May your heirs after you get no joy from your fortune! May your executors fail to make proper use of what you bequeath them! And may the wealth that you dishonestly acquired end up being spent by criminals and thieves! I tell you, if I were a friar in a house where charity and good faith were still to be found, I couldn't see my way to spending a penny of your money—not on clothes, or on church-repairs, or on little personal luxuries—God damn my soul if I'd do it! Not for the richest book in the place, even if its leaves were of burnished gold—if I knew for a fact you were what you say you are.

Seek fancy foods, another's slave you'll end;

Eat simple bread, and you'll remain God's friend.*

'What an unnatural monster you are!' cried Repentance. 'I can see no way to give you absolution until you make restitution—pay back all that you owe wherever it's due. And till Reason can honestly record in the ledger of Heaven that you *have* made good, there is no way for me to absolve you: "The guilt will cling until the goods go back."*' And I give you my solemn assurance: anyone who *possesses* any of your property will also be required at the Last Judgement to help you in your duty of restitution. Anyone who doesn't believe what I say is true, I advise him to look at the gloss upon Psalm 50, a text in which "truth"—honesty—is referred to:

“Have mercy on me, O God . . . for indeed you have loved the truth!”* No labourer on earth will prosper on the money you’ve acquired. “*Cum sancto sanctus eris*”!.* just find out what that means in English!

At this, that villainous creature lost all hope, and tried to hang himself. But Repentance managed to bring him to his senses, before he could go through with it, and this is what he said:

‘Keep the thought of *mercy* in your mind, and beg for it—*mercy*—with your mouth! Remember, “*Misericordia eius super omnia opera eius*”.*—God’s *mercy* is a greater thing than every other one of his works. Every possible evil human beings could perform, or even imagine, can no more survive before the *mercy* of God than a glowing ember that falls into the ocean. And so, always keep *mercy* in your thoughts; and as for material wealth—I say, renounce it! Really, you have no genuine means to buy yourself a muftin for your breakfast*—not without begging, or working with your hands. The whole future you’ve built up for yourself is founded on a lie, and so, as long as you live, you’ll go on falling still deeper into debt, always unable to pay back a single penny. Now, if you have no idea about who you should actually make restitution to,* or if you don’t know where to go, take the money to the bishop, and humbly beg *him* to dispose of it, in some way that will do real good for your soul. If you do this, then he will bear the responsibility of answering for you at the final reckoning; he’ll be the one who’s called to account in your case—and also, doubtless, for many others as well. Put your faith completely in what he taught you during Lent; rely on that portion of *God*’s great spiritual treasure, which the bishop lent to you to save you from sinning!’

And now Gluttony set out to make his confession, and took himself off to church to make a clean breast of it all. But Betty the brewer greeted him with ‘Good morning!’, and then asked him where he might be off to?

‘To church’, grunted Glutton, ‘to hear mass. After which I intend to go to confession and give up sin for ever.’

* ‘With the holy you will be holy.’

‘I’ve got some good ale, Glutton my friend!’ she answered. ‘You wouldn’t like to come and give it a try?’

‘Have you got any hot spices?’* Glutton asked.

‘I’ve got pepper and peony seeds’, she replied, ‘and a pound of garlic, as well as a farthing’s worth of fennel-seed—good fare, all this, for fasting-days!’

So Glutton entered the tavern with a mighty oath. Cicely Shoemaker was sitting there on the ale-bench, and with her Walter the warren-keeper and his wife, Tim the tinker and a couple of his lads, Hick the horse-hirer and Hugh the needle-seller, Clarissa of Cock’s Lane with the parish clerk, Sir Piers Pridie the priest and Petronella the Fleming, Davy the ditcher, and a dozen others. There was a fiddle-player, a rat-catcher, a Cheapside scavenger, a rope-maker and an odd-job man; Rose the dish-seller, Godfrey of Garlickhithe, and Griffin the Welshman.* A gaggle of old-clothes dealers who had got there early gave Glutton a cheery greeting and offered to buy him a drink.

Before long, Clement the cobbler threw down his cloak, offering it to all comers in a game of barter.* Hick the horse-hirer flung down his hood in suit, asking Bud the butcher to act as his second. Some small traders were selected to put a value on the goods; they decided that whoever took the hood would be paid the difference between its worth and that of the cloak. They got up smartly and had a whispered discussion, and then everyone involved privately valued the goods put up for barter. A good deal of swearing went on, because someone was bound to end up with the worse bargain. They found it impossible, in all conscience, to reach a basic agreement. Eventually, therefore, they begged Robin the rope-maker to get up and be nominated as umpire, to stop any disputes from arising. Hick the ostler got the cloak, on condition that Clement bought drinks for everyone, took Hick’s hood, and considered himself satisfied. And anyone who had second thoughts about the bargain would have to get up and provide, *gratis*, a gallon of ale for Glutton.

There followed a good round of laughter and much pulling of faces, with cries raised of ‘Let the drinks go round!’ A great deal of bartering and imbibing of ale took place, and the

whatever. I've over-eaten so grossly at supper-time and at lunch that sometimes I've spewed the whole lot up before I'd gone a mile. Yes, that way I've wasted food that could have been saved and given to someone who had nothing to eat. There've been feast-days when I've eaten and drunk over the odds, and sometimes I've sat over my food so long that I think I've fallen asleep and carried on eating! I've stuffed myself in taverns just in order to spend longer drinking—and get in some juicy gossip while I'm at it. And on fasting-days, I've rushed off to my meal before the noon-bell sounded.'

'Well', said Repentance, 'this effort of yours to confess ought to do you some sort of credit, anyway.'

At this Glutton broke down and burst into passionate sobbing over the evil life he had lived; he followed this with a solemn vow to fast. 'However hungry or thirsty I become', he declared, 'my stomach will digest no meal of fish on a Friday till Aunt Abstinence lets me have permission. She's someone I've had no time for all my life!'

Then Sloth came forward, filthy from head to foot, with a pair of oozing eyes. 'I've got to sit down', the fellow said, 'or else I'll drop off where I stand. If I got into my bed, I tell you I wouldn't stir before I was ready to eat, except to relieve my bowels. As for the bells, they could ring on for ever!' Belching, he got out the words 'Bless me—', * thumping his bosom hard; then stretched, gave a prodigious yawn, and was soon snoring soundly.

'Come on, stir yourself, man!' cried Repentance. 'Get a move on and make your confession!'

'I can't be bothered to open an eyelid', came the reply. 'Not if my life depended on it! I can't say my "Our Father" properly as the priest intones it at mass. I know some ballads about Robin Hood and Randolph, Earl of Chester,* but I don't know any about our Lord or our Lady. I've made solemn resolutions forty times over—and completely forgotten them by the next morning. I've never carried out penance imposed on me by the priest, nor have I ever felt any great sorrow for my sins. And if I ever let out a prayer—except in anger!—what my tongue utters is miles from what I actually feel. I've spent every single day—holy days

whole crowd sat there till the hour of evensong,* bursting into song from time to time, till Glutton had succeeded in putting away rather more than a gallon down his gullet. His guts now started to rumble like a pair of greedy sows, and he pissed four pints in the time it takes to say one Paternoster. Then he blew a resounding blast on his bum-bone; everyone hearing that horn play held their noses, and heartily wanted the thing waxed with a handful of prickly furze!

Glutton could not walk or stand up straight without the support of his stick. Then he began to move forward like a minstrel's trained dog—now to one side, now backwards, like a fowler laying down nets in lines to trap birds. When he got near the door, his vision became misty, he lost his footing on the threshold, and fell flat on the ground. Clement the cobbler caught him round the waist, managed to get him upright, then lowered him onto his knees. But Glutton, being a massive brute, was the very devil to lift, and succeeded in spewing a mess in Clement's lap. I don't think all Hertfordshire would yield a dog so near to death's door that it would ever have licked up those left-overs, so horrible did they smell!

A miserable time now followed for Glutton's wife and his serving-woman as they carted him home and got him into his bed. After this little bout of indulgence, he had a severe attack of sloth,* and slept through Saturday and Sunday right until dusk. Then, at long last, he stirred from his slumbers and rubbed his eyes. The first word to come from his lips was 'Where's the jug?'

His wife, and his own returning sense of sin, reproached him for the vicious life he was leading; and Repentance, too, at the same time rebuked him: 'Glutton, the life you've been living is an utter disgrace—your words are as wicked and worthless as your actions! Make your confession, now! Be ashamed of what you've done; and *show* you are, by acknowledging it openly.'

'I'm a glutton!' the fellow declared, 'I know I'm guilty. I've sinned with this tongue of mine time out of mind. I've sworn "By God's soul and sides!" and "So help me the Holy Relics!"—getting on for a thousand times,* without any call

included—in idle gossip at the inn, and sometimes in church, too. The sufferings of our Lord Jesus isn't a subject I spend a great deal of thought on!

'I've never visited the sick, or prisoners in their cells. And I'd much rather hear a filthy story or watch a shoemakers' farce in summer,* or laugh at a lot of lying scandal about my neighbours, than listen to all that Gospel stuff—Matthew and Mark and Luke and John. As for vigils and fast-days, I give all that a miss; and in Lent I lie in bed with my girl in my arms till mass and matins are well and truly over. I then make off for the friars' church,* and if I get to the place before the priest's "Go, mass is finished", I feel I've done my bit. Sometimes I never get to confession even once in a year, unless a bout of sickness scares me into it; and then I produce some confused mishmash or other.

'I've been a priest in a parish* for over thirty years, but I've no idea how to read music or sing the mass, or to read the life of a saint. I'm much better at tracking down a hare in a ten-acre field than at chanting "Blessed the man" or "Blessed are all those . . ." I wouldn't know how to go through these psalms verse by verse for the benefit of my parishioners. Another thing I do know is how to conduct settlement-days and hear the reeve's accounts read, but I wouldn't be up to making out even a line or two of canon law.

'If ever I buy anything on credit, unless it's carefully recorded in writing, I let the matter slip my mind in a trice. And if they come asking me to pay up, six or seven times, I start swearing blind that I don't owe them a thing! That way I cause a good deal of trouble to poor honest fellows I deal with—I've done it a thousand times if I've done it once. And as for the people who work for me—well, there've been times enough when their pay falls overdue. Ah, your heart would bleed if you could hear the complaints they make when I'm doing the wage-packets! I really get worked up into a rage when it's time to pay my employees—and I can tell you, I utterly hate having to do it.

'Now, if anyone does me a good turn, or helps me in time of need, all I give him for his kindness is ingratitude. Behaviour like his I can't make head or tail of. You see, my

own reactions are just like a hawk's (I've always been that way). You can't lure me with kindness,* there's got to be something hidden in your hand to peck at—I mean some tangible gain in it for me somewhere! And as for kindnesses my fellow Christians showed to me years ago—things they said or else refrained from saying—I've forgotten that sort of thing five dozen times. Over and over again, too, I've let good food go to waste. Meat, fish, bread, beer, milk, and cheese—you name it: I've kept them till they'd gone right off and were no use at all to a soul. When I was young, I spent my time gadding about and simply refused to learn a thing. Since then, I've had to resort to begging, thanks to this damnable laziness of mine.

God! How I failed to rise and shine
During that long-lost youth of mine!*

'Didn't you repent?' asked Repentance—and for answer, Sloth passed out immediately. He remained like that till Keep-Watch Wakeful* drew water from his eyes and dashed it over his face, shouting at him over and over again:

'Sloth, you'd better watch out! Guard yourself against Despair, who's out to get you. Say to yourself, "*I am sorry for my sins.*" Beat your breast and beg God for his grace. There's no vice in the world so black that it cannot be extinguished by his goodness.'

Then Sloth got himself into a sitting position, and made the sign of the cross again and again. Solemnly he resolved before God to overcome his vice. 'Every day for the next seven years', he declared, 'unless I'm prevented by illness, I'll get to church before daybreak,* and hear matins and mass, just like a monk. And I won't swallow down so much beer with my lunch that I have to miss evensong. All this I promise here in front of the cross! That's not all; if I possibly can, I'll give back everything I've obtained dishonestly since the time I reached the age of reason. And even if it means not having enough to live on myself, I won't stop till I've put everything right with everyone—not till the day I die. And with what's left over (I swear by the Chester Road),* I'll go searching for Truth before I set eyes on Rome!'

Robert the robber* saw the words 'Give it back!'—and wept bitterly, because he *had* nothing to give back. None the less, the guilty creature said to himself: 'Christ, when you were dying on the cross at Calvary, my brother-robber Dismas* begged you for mercy. And because of those words of his, "Remember me, Lord!", you *did* have mercy. Take pity in the same way, Lord, on this Robert here, though I lack the means to make restitution, nor can I hope to earn anything through any skill I possess. No, but I beg you to grant, through your great mercy, some softening of my sentence. Do not damn me outright on the Day of Judgement for the wrongs I have done!'

I cannot tell exactly what happened to this felon, but I do know that his eyes shed copious tears.* Moreover, he acknowledged his guilt to Christ over and over again, and undertook to give his pikestaff a new coat of polish (it was named *Penance*),* and use it to walk with during the rest of his life; for he had slept with Theft, the Devil's aunt.

And now Repentance took pity on them all, and told them to kneel. 'I am going to beg our Saviour to grant every one of us sinners the grace to amend our evil ways, and to show mercy to us all. Now', he continued in prayer, 'O God, you created the world out of your goodness: you made everything out of nothing, and you fashioned man in your near likeness—and then permitted him to commit sin, bringing a malady on the whole human race. Yet all this was for the best,* as I believe, whatever the Bible may appear to imply: "O happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam!"'

'And this is the reason why: that sin was the cause that made your Son come down to earth and take flesh from a virgin in order to save mankind. Yes, through your Son, you became like one of us, sinners though we are: "Let us make man in our image and likeness" was one text; another said, "He who lives in charity, lives in God, and God in him . . .".*' And then, in the person of your Son, you died as a man—on Good Friday, at the stroke of noon, you did this. Neither you, God, nor your Son, experienced death's ultimate dolour,* but our human nature bore the brunt of it all, and your Son lifted off the heavy burden and "led captivity captive". The sun,

struck with sorrow at what happened, briefly became unseen and unseeing.* This took place about noon, the hour when the blessed eat, for it was then that your freshly-spilt blood fed our ancestors in the shadows where they waited: "The people who walked in darkness saw a great light." And that light, which sprang forth from you, blinded Lucifer, and blew all your holy ones into the bliss of heaven!

'On the third day after this, you went abroad in human form and Mary the sinner saw you, before Blessed Mary your mother. Surely it was as a sign bringing comfort to all sinners that you allowed this to happen so: "I did not come to call the just, but to call sinners to repentance."* And everything that the evangelists Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John set down about you was done, Lord, when you wore our coat of arms.* "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us." And that is why we can feel complete assurance when we turn to you in our entreaty, since you are our Father and our brother,* and ask—if it be your will—for mercy upon us. Have pity on these notorious sinners who repent now in tears for ever having angered you in any place, in word or in thought or in deed!

Then Hope seized a horn called 'Turn, O God, and bring us back to life' and into it blew a breath, 'Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven!' At this, all the saints in heaven chorused together:

'You will preserve both men and beasts, O Lord:
O God, how you have multiplied your mercies!'

Then a myriad of people crowded together in throngs, raising their voices in prayer to Christ and his Virgin Mother, asking for grace to go and search for Truth—God grant that they may receive it! But none of them was wise enough to know how to get there, and in total disorder they strayed forth like animals over the valleys and hills, until, late in the day, they met someone dressed in the weird garb of a pilgrim.* He was holding a staff round which was wrapped a broad strip of cloth, that wound all about it like a woodbine plant. By his side he carried a bowl and a bag; on his hat were perched a hundred tiny phials, as well as tokens of shells from

Galicia, cross-ornaments on his cloak, a model of the keys of Rome, and on his breast a vernicle. All these emblems were designed to inform the world at large of all the pilgrim-shrines he had visited. The first thing everyone asked him was, where did he come from?

'From Sinai', he replied, 'and from the tomb of our Lord. I've been in Bethlehem, in Babylon, in Armenia, Alexandria, and various other places. You can tell from the souvenirs sitting on my hat that I've gone walking far and wide in quest of sundry holy saints, for the good of my soul.'

'Do you know anything', they asked him, 'about the shrine of a saint called Truth? Could you give us directions to where he is to be found?'

'Heavens, no!' the fellow replied. 'I've never seen any pilgrim go looking for him with pikestaff and bag full of provisions: never, I can tell you, and nowhere!'

'By St Peter!' a ploughman called out,* thrusting his face forward. 'I know him—every bit as well as a scholar knows his books! Conscience and Kind Wit directed me to his dwelling. And then they made me give my word I would serve him for ever, sowing and planting as long as I had the strength for the work. I've been his follower for the last forty years, sowing his seed and tending his stock, looking after all his affairs, both within-doors and without, ditching, digging, carrying out his orders. There are times when I sow, and times when I thresh, pursue the tasks of a tailor, or mend things like a tinker—whatever Truth happens to think of. And, though I say it myself, I think he's pleased with my work; he pays me well—sometimes more than I'm due. He's the promptest paymaster known anywhere to the poor,* and he never holds back the wages of his servants beyond the close of a full working day. He's as meek as a lamb and the words he utters are kind. If you want to know where he lives, I'm more than willing to show you the way.'

'Piers, you're a friend!' said the pilgrims, offering to pay him a fee.

'Not on my life!' Piers swore. 'I wouldn't accept a farthing, not for all the wealth in St Thomas's shrine!*' Otherwise Truth would think the worse of me over the years to come.

But if you really want to get there, this is the way to take. You must travel, both men and women, through Humility, until you arrive at Conscience: there Christ may know for certain that you love the Lord your God above all else. And after this, you must refrain from harming your fellow men in any way whatever: you must treat them exactly as you would have them treat you.*

'After this, continue on your way,* following a stream called Speak-gentle-words, until you come to a crossing, Honour-your-parents. Step into the water there, and wash yourselves thoroughly; then you'll run all the more nimbly the rest of your life. And in this way, you will see a place called Never-swear-needlessly-and-never-take-God's-sacred-name-in-vain.

'Next you will reach a little field, and this you must not enter. Its name is Do-not-desire-men's-money-or-their-wives-and-do-not-cause-their-servants-any-mischief. Be careful to break no branch from any tree except your own. Two tree-stumps stand there; but don't you make a stop there. They are called Do-not-steal and Do-not-kill—press firmly on past both. Pass them on your left, and don't throw a backward glance towards them; observe every holy day with all due care, until the evening comes.

'Next, you must turn aside by a hill called Do-not-bear-false-witness. It is hedged about with silver coins and various other kinds of payment; but don't pluck anything growing there—it might well cost you your soul!

'Now you will see a place called Tell-only-truth-and-perform-what-you-say | And-never-do-otherwise-for-threat-or-for-pay. And then you'll arrive at a castle* shining bright as the sun. This manor-house is encircled by a moat, named Mercy; its walls are constructed of Wisdom, to keep Wilfulness at bay; its crenellations are Christian Faith, to strengthen and protect; and its buttresses are Believe-this-if-your-wish-is-to-be-saved.

'All the dwelling-houses within the precincts of the manor are roofed, halls and chambers alike, not with lead but with love and kindly words, such as a brother uses to a sister. The drawbridge is Pray-well-and-prosper-the-better. Every pillar

is formed of penance and prayers of supplication to the saints, while the hinges the doors hang on are deeds of alms.

'The gatekeeper's name is Grace—a good fellow, truly; and his deputy is Amend-your-ways, a face well known to many. Say this to him as a password: "Truth knows truly I've carried out the penance the priest told me to do, and I'm sorry for my sins and shall carry on being so, every time they come to mind, even if I should be made pope one day. Tell Amend-your-ways to approach his master humbly and ask him to open up the wicket-gate. This is the one slammed shut by a woman's hand as it plucked the apples Adam and Eve ate raw.'

The door that Eve once caused to close
Was opened by a virgin Rose.*

Remember—it's Grace who holds the big latchkey in his keeping, even if the king of the castle should be at rest. And if he allows you to pass through in this way, you will catch sight of Truth seated within your own heart,* wearing his chain of charity; and you must behave like a child, obeying him without grumbling, as if he were your father.

'But that's the time to be on guard against that vicious devil Anger. He's full of resentment against the one who sits within your heart, and he'll stir up inside you the fires of self-regard. The brilliance of your own virtuous acts will seem to blind you then, and as a result you'll dry up like the morning dew, the door will slam to behind you, the key will turn with a click, and you'll find yourself outside. It may be a century or so before you step inside again! This is how you might come to lose God's love—by thinking much too highly of yourself.* Obtain it again you may, that's certainly true—but only by means of his grace, not any gift you can proffer.

'However, there are seven sisters whose task it is to serve Truth constantly;* it is they who guard the side-gates of the castle. One is called Abstinence, and another is Humility. Charity and Chastity are his principal pair of servants, while Patience and Peace afford great help to many others. The lady Liberality lets in many a man, and has helped to liberate a good thousand from out of the devil's dungeon. Anyone who

is a kinsman of these seven sisters, I swear to you, will receive a wonderful welcome and splendid hospitality. But unless you are related to one or more of these seven—you have my word, it will be hard going indeed for any of you to squeeze your way in at any one of these gates, unless Grace should take a hand and intervene.'

'Christ Almighty!' exclaimed a pickpocket, 'I haven't any kinsmen there!'

'Nor have I', muttered a man who kept apes, 'as far as I can make out.'

'Dear God', breathed a wafer-seller,* 'if I knew this was true, I wouldn't put one foot before another, if every friar on earth were to preach his choicest sermon at me!'

'Oh yes, you would!' cried Piers, urging them to try and do some good. 'There's a young woman here called Mercy;* she has authority over them all. Moreover, she is the particular kinswoman of every single sinner; and so, for that matter, is her son. It is through the help of these two—place your hope in them, and in no one else—that grace will be yours for the getting; but get there in time!'

'By St Paul!' exclaimed a pardoner. 'But what happens if no one knows me there? I'd better be off and get my box of indulgences, my papal bull, and episcopal authorization!'

'Christ in Heaven!' exclaimed a prostitute.* 'I think I'd better go along with you; you can say to people I'm your "sister!"'

I've no idea *what* became of that pair.

39 *No-evil meets Unpunished . . . fee!*: the couplet is in Latin in the original and enunciates the rule that the innocent must not be afflicted and the criminal must not prosper.

40 *the legal profession . . . ploughmen*: Reason's attack echoes Conscience's on p. 32 above: if legal justice obeys the moral law, there will be no scope for crime, and hence none for lawyers.

Kind Wit agreed: his agreement with right reason here shows he is much closer to Conscience than to the 'worldly' wisdom embodied in Warren Wise and Clevercraft.

Honest Fidelity: here a personification of the King's loyal subjects as a collective concept as much as the abstract principle of justice (see note to p. 15 above).

41 *the Commons*: refers to the whole estate of the common people of England, but also includes their parliamentary representatives at Westminster.

let all of us keep together!: the King's declaration at the end is that he will rule his land under the guidance of his own reason and conscience working together, and also with the advice of those in whom the principles they denote are embodied—his upright counsellors in Church and State respectively. Since Reason is shown at the opening of the next passus as a bishop, it seems fair to assume that Conscience (called a 'knight' on his first appearance, on p. 26 above, stands for the secular estate of the nobility.)

42 *I now stirred from my slumbers*: the perfunctory waking interlude serves as a mere bridge-passage from the first vision to the second, which continues the themes of the first (political and social) on an individual (moral) plane.

preach to the whole realm at large: Reason's identity as a bishop is now revealed: he holds what may be a crossier with a cross at the top.

The recent plague: the great plague known as the Black Death reached England in 1348, and further outbreaks occurred in 1361-2 (the period of the A-text) and 1375-6 (the period of the B-revision). Like other contemporary commentators, Langland sees diseases and natural disasters as punishments for past and warnings against future sin. See Introduction, p. xxii.

the strong south-west wind: occurred on Saturday, 15 January 1362, during the second outbreak of plague, and lasted five days.

Waster: a 'type-name', perhaps traditional, since Langland envisages a destructive parasite rather than the rich profligate of the earlier poem *Winner and Waster* (c.1352).

Petronella: another 'type-name', for a vain woman.

43 *the ducking-stool*: was a traditional village punishment for notoriously shrewish women.

Spare the rod . . . child!: Prov. 13: 24, which continues: 'but he who loves him corrects him betimes.' All the Wisdom books of the Bible were traditionally ascribed to Solomon.

If you lead lives such as you urge us . . . heart!: Reason here identifies himself with the laity, though he is still speaking in his symbolic role as the chief bishop of the realm.

take over the management . . . order: the threat of royal intervention here anticipates the prophecy of Clergy in Passus X (see pp. 104-5), but Langland is advocating right observance of the religious life, not its suppression.

I say . . . know you: Matt. 25: 12, in the parable of the ten virgins, one of two speaking of the Second Coming of Christ at the Last Judgement.

St Truth: not a person but the personified principle of a life lived in accordance with the will of God ('Truth').

Repentance: embodies the surge of penitent feelings evoked by the sermon; Will is both the human faculty, here collectively that of the folk of the field, in which the power to sin or refrain from sin resides, and also a wry allusion to the author's name and his fictive counterpart in the work.

Petronella: the only one of the deadly sins who is female, and one of two to be given a personal appellation (cf. p. 47 below, where the name recurs); The extreme brevity of the account of Pride, which was regarded as the root sin, may be due to Langland's having presented a type of Pride already in Vision One in the figure of Lady Meed.

Lust: the brevity of the description may also be due to so much of it having been dealt with in the Lady Meed section (see esp. p. 24 above). The Virgin Mary is the special patron of chastity, and Saturday was a day of special devotion to her. The penance of avoiding excess food and drink as leading to lust recalls Holy Church's exhortation of Lot in Vision One (pp. 8-9 above).

Envy: for Langland, both resentment at others who have what one does not have and hostility against them for having it (= Lat. *invidia*). It covers our idea of 'hate' and partially overlaps with Wrath. Envy's sin includes delight in others' misfortunes, pleasure in stirring up trouble, and an inability to wish anyone well (that is, the total absence of love or charity).

Mea culpa: part of the prayer of penitence at the opening of mass (the *Confiteor*) rather than the formula for private confession to a priest.

like those the friars wear: Langland associates the friars with envy on p. 250.

my whole body . . . inside me: the 'psychosomatic' effects observable in the envious—the secretion of bile and a constant fretful indigestion.

46 *I'm always sorry!*: Envy can no more understand the right meaning of 'sorrow' than he can pray for others' good; cf. Greed's problem on p. 50 below).

lectors: friars who read a scriptural text and then preach a homily on it, 'glossing' the meaning so as to render its hard moral demands acceptable to those with power and wealth.

47 *private boulevard-confessions*: to an amenable friar made possible an 'easy' absolution (cf. Chaucer's *General Prologue*, 221-4) and the avoidance of shame involved in facing one's own parish priest (an element of the act of penance Langland regarded as an important deterrent to sinning again).

the friars are eating into their portion: Anger refers to the quarrels between friars and parish priests occasioned by the latter's resentment at their 'spirituality' (the income arising from performing church offices, including hearing confessions) being eaten into by the preaching friars (the result being the decline of 'spirituality' in the modern sense).

a cook in her kitchen: the metaphor shifts from grafting (p. 46) to cookery as Wrath continues his exposure of the all-too-human world of (here, female) religious communities.

The whole chapter: the members of the convent assembled in a regular formal meeting would have to consider the case of Petronella's pregnancy before it came before the archdeacon in the ecclesiastical court, which dealt with such matters.

47-8 *a prioress must never be ordained . . . lives*: the hearing of nuns' confessions by the abbess of a convent was forbidden by Pope Gregory IX (1227-41). The observation here could be authorial, as it is echoed at a later point (see Passus XIX, p. 231), but is appropriate coming from Anger.

48 *a pretty strict watch on my cronies*: the favourable account of discipline in the monasteries is in sharp contrast with the strong criticisms of the friars voiced earlier and at many other points in the work.

he gave me absolution: the reference to *me* is not a lapse from dramatic propriety but another reminder that all the sins are those of Will (the representative sinner). The original puns on 'wilne' (the verb translated 'aim at'), literally 'desire, will (to)'.

Greed: translates 'covetise', strictly the desire for possession, but Langland's description shows he clearly has in mind the other aspect of the sin called in Latin *avaricia*, miserliness. Greed is shown in traditional terms as a wretched old man who has spent his life in unlawfully acquiring riches, by one means or another, in a number of trades and mercantile activities.

49 *Weyhill*: near Andover, Hants, and Winchester both had an important autumn fair.

I got in with the cloth-merchants: Greed stretched the fabric in a frame to make it appear longer, but weakened the material in the process. His wife's trick was twofold: to use material which had been loosely spun and was therefore easier to rack or stretch once woven, and to weigh wool with a false weight, thus paying the spinners for only one pound's worth while getting 1½ pounds (and thus tricking those she had already instructed in the art of fraudulent spinning). Greed's own steelyard gave accurate measure, but trading regulations banned it (as the device was open to fraudulent abuse), prescribing only the scales or balance.

She would dilute . . . tippie: the trick with the ale involved giving customers a sample of the best brew (four times the price of the cheapest) but actually filling their jugs with a mixture of good and less good while out of sight.

Walsingham . . . guilt: on Walsingham see note to p. 2 above. Bromholm Priory, also in Norfolk, had a reputed relic of the True Cross set into a great crucifix.

50 *restitution?*: Greed's error uses a (perhaps understandable) difficulty in grasping the meaning of penitential terminology as an emblem of deeper spiritual obtuseness; cf. Envy's even grosser mistake about 'sorrow' on p. 46 above.

Norfolk: here stands for a region at some distance from the capital; but Greed's resolve to go on pilgrimage to two Norfolk shrines suggests that Langland thought of him as a Norfolk man (his oath, translated as Cockney, is Norfolk dialect in the original). Norfolk people seem to have had a reputation for close-fistedness.

usury: Greed learnt to make money from lending at exorbitant interest by living among the Jews (the practice was forbidden to Christians) and the financial community of Lombards in the City of London, who had developed in particular various methods of transferring capital abroad at a profit. He became devoted to the cross imprinted on coins rather than the cross of Christ (avarice, not charity).

loans in kind . . . nobility: Greed took pledges from impoverished noblemen and then bought them himself (at a cheap price) in order to supply them with the ready cash they desired.

bills of exchange . . . bullion to Rome: the Lombard bills of exchange were an early form of credit transfer that obviated the necessity of actually transporting gold abroad. Money due in Rome was paid in England and the corresponding sum disbursed in Rome on production of the bill or credit-note. The operation allowed ample scope for making a profit.

for the sake of . . . protection?: Greed complains that he got scant gratitude from needy nobles to whom he advanced cash; but he managed to acquire some of their costly wearing-apparel given in pledge when they failed to pay up on the day. The allusion to gloves is

to the practice of making a gift-offering to the master of one's trade on taking up with him as an apprentice to the craft.

Compassion . . . *cats*: Greed again fails to understand the terminology of Christian love. He 'skins' his neighbours in need rather than helping them with his surplus wealth.

God will never grant . . . money!: this, the severest denunciation of any of the sins, is a measure of Langland's abhorrence of covetousness, which he sees as a fundamental sin against the fundamental Christian virtue of charity.

Seek fancy foods . . . *friend*: the proverbial couplet, praising simplicity of life as against luxury, anticipates the praise of poverty in Passus XIV.

The guilt will cling . . . back: this quotation from St Augustine's Epistle 153 underlines the vital importance of restitution, part of 'the work of satisfaction' needed if sacramental penance was to be efficacious.

Have mercy on me . . . truth!: from the opening and eighth verses of the fourth penitential psalm, Ps. 50(51), the standard medieval gloss on which took it to mean that God would punish sin and demanded that sinners seeking forgiveness should show mercy to others. This is one of the leading ideas in the poem.

Cum sancto sanctus eris: the Latin quotation is from Ps. 17(18): 26: 'with the holy you will be holy, with the innocent, innocent; . . . and with the wayward, you will likewise go astray.'

Misericordia . . . eius: the answer to Greed's despair on regarding the enormity of his sin is the thought from Ps. 144(145): 9, the sense of which in context is that God's merciful kindness is shown in all his actions; but it was commonly interpreted to mean that mercy was God's supreme attribute, and this is Langland's understanding here and in Passus XVII and XVIII.

you have no genuine means . . . break/ast: Repentance means that everything Greed possesses has been obtained by underhand means; his genuinely 'honest' wealth is nil.

make restitution to: if it is too late to restore ill-gotten goods to the actual owners, Greed should hand their value to his spiritual father, the bishop, who will be able (and is obliged) to apply them to some worthwhile, charitable end. God's spiritual treasure, on which alone he should rely, is of course 'mercy' and 'truth'.

hot spices: could be chewed without formally breaking the rule of fasting; they would also make Glutton thirsty, as the brewer is aware.

Cicely Shoemaker . . . Griffin the Welshman: the motley crew in the tavern include prostitutes from Cock's Lane and an incompetent priest (*Pride*, a phrase from the consecration prayer, was the point at which a priest who had forgotten the bread and wine had to recommence mass).

53

a game of barter: Hick and Clement have their hood and cloak valued and with Robin's help make an exchange, Clement paying the agreed difference in value with a drink (probably for everyone).

the hour of evensong: mention of evensong and the Our Father point up Glutton's failure to do his religious duty and the length of time he has been drinking in the tavern since setting out to mass that morning.

attack of sloth: the sin of gluttony was traditionally thought to lead directly to that of sloth, beginning in indifference and ending in despair.

I've sworn . . . a thousand times: loss of rational control through drink (which Holy Church had warned could lead to lechery and worse—see Passus I, pp. 8-9) here results in breaking the second commandment: these are the 'mighty oaths' of p. 53; cf. also Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, C. 638 ff.

Bless me: ('father, for I have sinned'), the opening words of the penitent to the priest in making confession. Sloth's sin undermines the attempt at repentance as radically as did Glutton's.

Robin Hood . . . Earl of Chester: this, the earliest reference to Robin Hood, like that to another popular twelfth-century hero, the Earl of Chester, suggests Sloth was a devotee of minstrels in taverns, where such stories were recited.

a filthy story . . . farce in summer: Sloth's idleness and impiety make him easy prey to the minstrel-purveyors of bawdy matter attacked in the Prologue (p. 2).

the friars' church: the implication is that the friars would not mind if Sloth put in only a token appearance before the end of mass, whereas his parish priest would rebuke him severely for it. Proper attendance at mass on Sunday was obligatory under pain of grave sin, as was confession at least once a year.

a priest in a parish: Sloth is here imagined as an idle and ignorant priest, unable to live by the standards of virtue outlined in Ps. 1 and 127(128), and therefore unable to instruct his parishioners. He is familiar with customary manorial law (because there's something in it for him) but ignorant of the laws and rules of the Church he represents. The passage may allude to the low standard of clerical education and general spiritual calibre in the years after the Black Death, which killed nearly half the clergy of England.

lure me with kindness: the hawk's lure was made of leather and feathers, to resemble a bird; sometimes the falconer put a piece of meat in it, the 'tangible gain' Sloth has in mind as a motive for any action.

God! How I failed . . . mine!: a proverbial expression of regret over an ill-spent youth.

Wakeful: the name alludes to Mark 13: 33, a warning to be prepared for death and judgement.

57

54

55

56

I'll get to church before daybreak: Sloth resolves to get up at dawn and drink nothing between noon and 3 p.m. Sleep, caused by laziness and alcoholic stupor, is the vice that keeps him from a moral and devout way of life.

the Chester Rood: a great cross that formerly stood on Rood Island in the Dee at Chester.

Robert the robber: stands for a specific sin of which the particular penance is appropriately to restore property; but he also symbolizes, like Will at the opening of the confession-scene (see p. 44), all sinful humanity in debt to God for its offences and needing salvation by Christ.

my brother-robber Dismas: the 'Good Thief' of Luke 23: 40 was given the name Dismas in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, a source Langland also drew on for the Harrowing of Hell sequence in *Passus XVIII*. His words 'Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom' (v. 42) bring hope to those in the final moments of life, when it is too late to make reparation or rely on anything but God's mercy. Christ's answer at v. 43 offers encouragement to the worst offender and staves off despair.

shed copious tears: Robert's tears echo those of Will (see p. 44 above) and bring the confession proper to an end. (The prayer that follows expresses confidence in God's mercy to those who repent.)

his pikestaff . . . named Penance: Penance, specifically sacramental confession, is the support by which sinners must make their way through life. Theft is the devil's aunt because theft was the first sin committed by the fallen angel Lucifer, and the one of which Christ accuses him in *Passus XVIII* (see p. 221).

all this was for the best: Repentance means that despite the apparent calamity of Man's fall as described in Genesis, the subsequent Incarnation of Christ made the fall a paradoxically 'happy' one, since it required God to become man in order to save man. The quotation is from the great *Exultet* hymn sung at the Easter Vigil service on Holy Saturday.

Let us make man . . . He who lives . . . him: the two texts quoted (Gen. 1: 26 and 1 John 4: 16) are complementary: the completion of man's creation in God's image occurs with his becoming like Christ, God-made-man, through the supernatural virtue of charity.

Neither you . . . nor your Son . . . death's ultimate dolour: Repentance means that God the Father did not 'die' (he cannot) and neither did the divine nature present in the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son. But Christ's human nature *did* die, and thereby liberated man from eternal death, the penalty of sin. The quoted passage (Eph. 4: 8) looks forward to Christ's act of leading Adam and the just of old out of Limbo in *Passus XVIII* (see p. 225 below).

The sun . . . became . . . unseeing: these lines allude to the darkness that covered the earth when Christ died, lasting from the sixth to the ninth hour (i.e. 3 p.m., but *nona hora* in the Gospels being misunderstood as midday; see Matt. 27: 45, for example). Langland envisages Christ's blood passing through the earth below the cross and descending to where the patriarchs wait in the darkness of Hell; they are the 'blessed' who repeat that act as they daily feast in Heaven. The quotation from Isa. 9: 2, familiar from its use in Advent, is especially apt in reference to this event, which is fully described in *Passus XVIII*, where the quotation again occurs (p. 220).

Mary the sinner . . . I did not come . . . repentance: Mary Magdalen, emblem of a great repentant sinner, was the first to see Christ after his resurrection (Mark 16: 9). The lesson of this is again the mercifulness of God to sinners, as the quotation from Luke 5: 32 affirms was the aim of Christ's coming.

when you wore our coat of arms: the notion that Christ's human nature was like the coat of arms worn by a knight going to battle is developed more fully in *Passus XVIII* (see p. 210). The quotation is from the prologue to St John's Gospel (1: 14).

our Father and our brother: God is man's father as his creator, his brother through having assumed human nature in the Incarnation; both are important themes to be fully developed in *Passus XVIII*.

Turn, O God . . . Blessed are those . . . You will preserve . . . mercies: Hope's exultant cry is a quotation from Ps. 70(71): 20 in the form it has in the mass, where it occurs at the end of the opening or penitential section in the old rite. The idea of a 'horn of salvation' occurs in Ps. 17(18): 3, closely linked with the notion of hope in God. The second quotation (Ps. 31(32): 1) is the breath of life of the sinner whose hope has been restored through forgiveness. The third, from Ps. 35(36): 7-8, again stresses the universality of God's saving mercy towards all his creation.

dressed in the weird garb of a pilgrim: the folk of the field have set out in search of Truth, a spiritual reality, but encounter an all-too-material 'professional' pilgrim. He carries souvenirs or 'tokens' of the shrines he has visited—pewter phials from Canterbury, mementoes of St Francis at Assisi, shells emblematising a miracle of St James at Compostella, cross-symbols from Jerusalem, St Peter's keys from Rome, and an image of the face of Christ supposedly imprinted on the handkerchief with which St Veronica wiped Christ's face on the way to Calvary. Sinai was the mount on which Moses received the Ten Commandments; of the other, less well-known shrines, Babylon, near Cairo, had a church commemorating the Flight into Egypt; Armenia refers to Mount Ararat, the resting-place of Noah's ark; Alexandria was the site of St Catherine's martyrdom.

a ploughman called out: Piers on his appearance asserts his relationship with two powers of man's rational moral nature already familiar from

the first vision. He has never travelled abroad but follows Truth by heeding laws and principles that every man has by nature.

60 *the promptest paymaster . . . poor*: Truth's prompt payment may be contrasted with the dilatory meanness of Sloth towards his workmen (p. 56 above). He means that, since virtue is its own 'reward', its payment is instantaneous.

St Thomas's shrine: Piers's pointed allusion to the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury, rich with pilgrims' gift-offerings, shows how 'Truth' is a form of spiritual wealth which cannot be acquired for money. The 'pilgrimage' to the shrine of Truth, being moral and spiritual, is purely interior, although the allegorical description Piers uses makes it seem an adventurous and hazardous journey, as indeed it turns out to be.

61 *love the Lord your God . . . treat you*: Piers's directions begin with Christ's great double commandment to love God entirely and one's neighbour as oneself (Matt. 22: 37-9, 7: 12).

continue on your way . . .: The journey involves mention of several of the Ten Commandments—the fourth ('Honour-your-parents'), the second ('Never-swear . . .'), the ninth and tenth ('Do-not-desire . . .'), the seventh and fifth ('Do-not-steal . . . kill'), the sins they forbid being left on the 'left' or evil side, the third ('observe every holy day'), and the eighth ('Do-not-bear-false-witness').

a castle: this is the tower of truth glimpsed at a distance in the opening of the Prologue. It is the inner spiritual condition (cf. Luke 17: 21) which leads to ultimate reward in Heaven with God. This condition requires faith, penance, and prayer. The way into Heaven is through the action of grace and conversion, which follows from it.

62 *The door that Eve . . . Rose*: from an anaphora to the Blessed Virgin Mary from the Office of Lauds on the Monday within the octave of Easter. Mary opens the door to Heaven closed by the sin of Eve, both through giving birth to Christ and through continuing to intercede with him for sinners.

within your own heart: Truth is to be found within the soul, garlanded with love; the two virtues are for Langland indissociable.

thinking . . . of yourself: Piers's warning against Pride is now directed at a higher level than Reason's at the beginning of this Passus. The converted soul becomes prey to *spiritual* pride, a sin possible only to those who have left behind the grosser worldly sins and set out on the pilgrimage to virtue and holiness.

seven sisters . . . serve Truth constantly: the seven virtues protect the soul against their contraries (the seven deadly sins, each recurring in subtler but no less deadly guise). Without the help of *positive* virtuous qualities, the soul cannot progress.

63 *a pickpocket . . . a man who kept apes . . . a wafer-seller*: the three pessimists are representatives of those whose sin is habitual, a kind of trade. Haukin later, in Passus XIII, is a wafer-seller.

Mercy is an indirect name for the Virgin Mary, as Truth is for God. *a pardoner . . . a prostitute*: they give up the quest for truth as they have too much to lose by persisting (cf. p. 238 below).

64 *a veil*: covering head and chin was worn by ladies of rank and by nuns. *embroider . . . churches*: fine English needlework (*opus anglicanum*) was highly esteemed.

something that Truth commands us to do: Truth's command is implicit in the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself, but explicit in Matt. 25: 36 (cf. also Jas. 2: 15-16). It is one of the 'corporal works of mercy'. Feeding the hungry, which Piers undertakes to do, was another.

the good will I have towards you: Piers expresses content with his lot and displays no hostility to the social classes above him, provided they fulfil their own obligation to protect and foster the basic work of society—feeding itself by agriculture.

65 *entitled to impose fines on them*: the various customary fines and dues were a heavy burden for the tenant-farmer; Piers urges not the abandonment of traditional prerogatives but a humane exercise of rights that recognizes their conditional nature; cf. Grace's words later in Passus XIX (p. 234).

the conclusion of life's long year: the notion here is that just as an earthly tenancy is renewable annually, so earthly privilege is a kind of lease with a fixed date, the end of one's life.

Friend, take a higher place!: from Luke 14: 10; but cf. also Jas. 2: 3. *Keep death's lesson . . . heart*: the lesson (that Death levels all) graphically enacted in Passus XX (see p. 245).

pilgrim's clothes: his ordinary working-clothes, an apt symbol of the difference between the 'spiritual' pilgrimage to Truth (that is, living rightly) and literal pilgrimages to one shrine or another. No special 'journey' is planned, only an inner preparation for the encounter with God at death.

66 *a bushel-weight*: 8 gallons dry measure, enough to sow a half-acre.

Jack the juggler . . . Ramdy Robin: the list here consists of people whose vice is not an occasional failing but a deliberately practised (and profitable) occupation.

blotted out of the book of life: from Ps. 68(69): 29, echoed in Apoc. (Rev.) 3: 5 (the idea found as early as Exod. 32: 32). The Church did not accept tithes from income earned immorally.

Work-in-time: the allegorical names of Piers's family denote ideal types of industry, obedience, and respect for authority.

In the name of God, Amen!: the standard formula for making a will. He is preparing for death, but it was also usual to make a will before setting out on a normal pilgrimage.