

WILLIAM LANGLAND

c. 1332 - c. 1400

The identity of the author is one of the most fascinating problems attached to English literary scholarship. From scattered allusions in the many manuscripts, it was assumed for a long time that the poet was William Langland, a native of Shropshire; his father perhaps a freeman land-holder or franklin; and he himself later a cleric in the Benedictine convent of Malvern. Subsequently he came to London and led a vagabondish life through the rest of his days. He was assumed to have a learning of a sort, but he owed it more to wit than to application. Possibly he took minor orders in the Church. It was assumed that he was born about 1332 and died shortly before the turn of the next century; in other words he was a strict contemporary of Chaucer.

Such was the older view of his life. But certain discoveries have been made and certain arguments have been advanced that tend to destroy much of the figure of Langland as he had been drawn. It is obvious that there are three separate versions of the poem, believed, because of various allusions to contemporary events, to have been written at different times, anywhere between 1362 and 1398. Indeed the suspicion persists that there is no essential reason for regarding one man as the author of all three texts. In fact more than one man is alluded to as the author in the course of the three versions.

Certainly the poem speaks for itself. "Piers Plowman" is far more important than its author. What it does is to tell us an intricate story of Piers, a humble plowman, who saw the devil in this world and in his vision tried to lead mankind to truth. It is a supreme instance of the "vision" literature of the Middle Ages applied to the trials and tribulations of the common people; it faces away from feudal romance or the unreality of theological doctrine and dogma to the unflinching truth of the life that eddied about its creator or creators.

(Literature of England, Woods, Watt, Anderson, N. York 1936, p. 101).

PIERS PLOWMAN

Prologue - The Field Full of Folk

In a summer season, when soft was the sun,
In rough cloth I robed me, as I a shepherd were.

In habit like a hermit¹ in his works unholy,
And through the wide world I went, wonders to hear.

But on a May morning, on Malvern Hills²,
A marvel befel me - sure from Faery it came -
I had wandered me weary, so weary, I rested me
On a broad bank by a merry-sounding burn;
And as I lay and leaned and looked into the waters
I slumbered in a sleeping, it rippled so merrily,
And I dreamed-marvellously.

All the world's weal, all the world's woe,
Truth and trickery, treason and guile,
All I saw sleeping.

I was in a wilderness, wist I not where,
And eastward I looked against the sun.
I saw a Tower on an hill, fairly fashioned,
Beneath it a Dell, and in the Dell a dungeon,
With deep ditches and dark and dreadful to see,
And Death and wicked spirits dwelt therein,
And all between, between the Hill and Dungeon.

A Fair Field Full of Folk³

Rich and poor, all manner of men,
Working and wandering as in the world we must.

Some were for ploughing, and played full seldom,
Set their seed and sowed their seed, and sweated hard.
To win what wastrels with gluttony destroy.

Some were for pride, in parade of apparel.

Some were for prayers and penance ay, many a one,
Living strait lives for love of our Lord
In hope of heavenly bliss,
Anchorites, hermits, that held in their cells,
And coveted not to roam the country side and beg,
Nor with dainty living their body to please.

Some chose merchandise; they throve the best.

And some were for music, the music of minstrelsy,
Gold getting, gleeful, in an innocent heart.

But jesters and janglers⁴, Judas children,
Feigning their fancies, and fooling the crowds,
With wit enough to work, if work they would.

Paul precheth about them-no more will I say-
He that speaketh filthily is the Devil's man⁶.

There were tramps and beggars fast about flitting,
Crammed with bread in wallet and belly,
Lying for their food, and fighting in the taverns,
Going to bed in gluttony, rising from bed in ribaldry,
Gangs of mean thieves.
Sleep and sorry sloth pursue them ever.

Pilgrims and palmers⁶ plighted together,
To seek S. Jamer⁷ in Spain, and S. Peter in Rome;
They went upon their way with many a wise tale,
And have leave to lie all their life after.
I saw some of them. O, they had gone the pilgrimage,
Each told a different tale-every one a lie-
Their tongues turned to lying, and not to truth.

Hermits, a heap of them, with hooked staves,
Were walking to Walsingham⁸ - each had his wench with him-
Great long lubbers, that loth were to work,
Clad in copes to be known for hermits,
To pass for hermits, and have an easy life.

Friars? All the four orders⁹, I found them there,
Preaching to the people, and glosing¹⁰ the gospel
For their own profit.

Many of these masters may dress as they will,
Money and their preaching soon meet one another.
•God's love has turned trader, and the rich pay high,
And we in few years have seen wonderful things.
If God's love and the Church do not cut down such Friars,
The greatest mischief in the world will mount up full fast.

Look there, a Pardoner, preaching like a priest,
A papal bull¹¹ he brought, sealed by the bishop,
He can assoil them all, of fasting, falsehood, and of broken vows.

The simple fools believed him, loved his words,
Came and knelt and kissed his bull,
He bunched¹² his letters in their faces and blinded their eyes,
And his parchment roll robbed them of rings and brooches.
Thus, men, ye give your gold to keep gluttons going,
And lend it to loafers that follow lechery.

If the bishop were holy and worth both his ears,
He would not send his seal to deceive the people,
But against the bishop your Pardoner preaches not,

For the parson and the Pardoner share the sermon-silver,
Which the parish poor would get if the Pardoner were away.

Some parish priests complained to the bishop,
The parish was poor since the Great Pestilence¹³,
Praying for licence in London to dwell,
And sing masses for souls for silver is sweet.

Bishops and deacons, masters and doctors,
With cures under Christ and tonsured to show it,
Who ought to shrive their people and pray and feed their flocks,
They lie in London, in Lent, ay, all the year;

Some serve the king, collecting his moneys,
In the Court of Chancery, in the wards and ward-motes,
They claim his debts, in dues of waifs and stays.

Conscience accused them, and the commons heard it,
"Ye suffer idolatry in many sundry places,
And bring your iron-bound boxes to take the untrue tolls.
Many a wax candle hangs as record of miracle,
But all the world knows well, that miracle is none.
It profiteth your purses and ye prelates suffer it
That men should live and die and believe-in their ignorance.
And all the world is worse for this your covetise¹⁴."

From *Piers Plowman*, A. Modern Version and Introduction by Arthur Burrell, London 1912, Dent Everyman's Library; the Introductory Note from the *Literature of England*, Woods, Watt, Anderson, New York 1936, pp. 101.

¹ hermit: the dress of the rural shepherd in 14th century England would resemble the costume of a hermit. - ² Malvern Hills: between Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The main action of the poem itself, however, is in London. - ³ field full of folk: the world, the figure is from the gospel of St. Matthew, XIII. - ⁴ jesters and janglers: minstrels or trubadurs who played and sang and told stories, had a bad reputation among the conservative, particularly if they were of the itinerant sort. Doubtless the same objection could be raised against these strolling players that was raised against friars and pardoners and other parasites of the Church. ⁵ He that speaketh ... Qui ... loquitur: from the letter to Ephesians, V. - ⁶ palmers: pilgrims who had been to the Holy Land and brought back a palm-branch. But the term is used almost as a synonym for "wanderer". - ⁷ St. James: the shrine of Saint James at Compostella, Galicia, Spain, was one of the most famous places of pilgrimage in medieval Europe. - ⁸ Walsingham: in Norfolk. It was a celebrated shrine, next in importance to that of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. - ⁹ the four orders: the Carmelites (white friars), the Augustinians (Austin friars), the Dominicans (Jacobins, black friars), and minorites (Franciscans, gray friars). - ¹⁰ glosing: glossing, interpreting. - ¹¹ papal bull: the credentials or licence for the pardoner to dispense his pardons or indulgences with the leaden seal of a Church dignitary attached. From this leaden seal (bulla) the whole paper received the name. The usual occasion for employing the word, however, is in reference to a proclamation by the Pope (papal

bull. ² bunched: brought together into folds or into a bunch. - ³ Great Pestilence: an allusion to the great scourge of the Black Death, which swept through all Europe during the 14th century. The three great epidemics- we may more accurately call them pandemics- where in 1348, 1361, and 1389, but the first one was by far the worst and is probably the one referred here to.

The Vision of Piers Counsel

Then says Perkin Plowman:
I have half-an-acre to plough
Had I ploughed my half-acre
I would wend with you,
"That were a long waiting time,
What should we women
"Some shall sew the sacks,
And ye wives that have wool,
And spin it speedily,
Save it be holiday
Look forth your linen,
See the needy and the naked,
Throw clothes upon them,
For I shall give the poor a living as long as I live
For the Lord's love in heaven,
"And ye lovely ladies,
Take silk and sendal,
Chaubies for chaplains,
"Wives and widows,
Make cloth, I counsel you,
Conscience biddeth you
For the profit of the poor
And for all manner men
Help them to work well,
"By Christ: says a gentleman,
But on this theme truly
But lead me" says he,
I will help thee labour
"Surely, Sir Knight,
And all my life
If thou wilt keep
From the wasters and the wicked
Go thou and hunt
The boars and badgers,

"By S. Peter of Rome
by the high way;
and sown it afterward,
I would show you the way"
said a veiled lady,
work meanwhile?"
for fear the wheat be spilt,
work it fast,
spare not your fingers,
or a saint's vigil.
labour ye hard on it,
take thought how they lie;
Truth would love that,
unless the land fail."
with your long fingers,
and sew while there be time
the churches to honour."
spin your flax and wool,
and teach your daughters so,
to make the cloth
and for pleasure to yourselves,
that live by meat and drink,
who win your food for you."
"he teacheth us the best,
never was I taught,
"and I will learn to plough,
while my life lasteth"
I shall toil for both of us,
will labour for love of thee,
my church and me
that would us destroy.
the hares and foxes,
that break my hedges down:

And tame thy falcons
That come to my croft
Courteously the knight replied:

"By my power, Piers,
To fulfill the covenant

"But yet one point, " says Piers"
Trouble not thy tenants,
And though ye be right to fine let mercy be your tax-master,
And let meekness be your master for all that Meed¹ may do;
And though the poor proffer you presents and gifts
Take them not; perchance
Thou shall pay it all again
In the full perilous place

"Do not harm to thy bondman,
He is here thine underling,
He may be better set
Save thou do work
Friend, go up higher!"

At church and in the charnel vault churls be hard to tell
Or whether one be Queen or quean², knight or knave.

"Be thou true of thy tongue,
Save of wisdom and sense
Tales of kindness,

"Hold not with the loose storiers, they are the devils talkers;
Avoid them at thy meat time.

"I assent", says the knight,

"And I", says Piers, "Shall apparel me in pilgrim's wise,
And wend with you I will
I will cast clothes on me,
My stockings, my cuffs,
And hang my basket round my neck, by way of pilgrim's scrip";
And a bushel of bread-corn within.

I will sow it myself,
On pilgrimage, as palmers do, my pardon to win.
My ploughfoot shall my pikestaff be, to pick the roots in two,
And help my hoe to cut
And all that help me plough and weed
Shall have leave by our Lord to come and glean after me,
And make merry with their winning, let him grudge who will.

"And all kind of craftsmen
I will find them food
Saving Jack the Juggler,

wild birds to kill,
and crop my wheat!"

I plight thee my troth,
while I may stand!"

I ask thee more;
save Truth assenteth,

ye do not them deserve:
at the year's end,
named Purgatory."

that it be well with thee,
but it may hap in heaven
and happier too than thou,
and live as thou shouldst,

and hate all tales,
to hasten thy workmen,
of battles or of Truth."

"While my life dureth".

and then with you will wend

and cleanse the furrows.

that can live by Truth,
who live faithfully, -
and Janet of the Stews,

And the ribald Robert for his filthy words,
And Friar the beggar, and Daniel the dicer,
Truth told me once and bad me tell it after him".
They shall be blotted from the book of life.
No tithe shall be taken, no tithe be asked of them.
They shall not be written with the righteous.
They are in luck; they need not pay; God mend them.
"Now am I old and hoar, I have goods of my own,
On pilgrimage and in penance will I pass with all these others
And, ere I wend, will write my will and testament!"

From Piers Ploughman, a Modern Version and Introduction by Arthur Burrell, London 1912.
Dent, Everyman's Library.

¹ Meed: lady Meed was in the poem the personification of reward, pay. - ² quean: a woman in a derogatory sense, a hussy. - ³ scrip: a bag carried by a traveller; nowadays rare, except in a "pilgrim's scrip".