

Complaint to His Purse¹

To you, my purs, and to noon other wight,^o
 Complaine I, for ye be my lady dere
 I am so sory, now that ye be light,^o
 For certes, but if^o ye make me hevye cheere,²
 5 Me were as lief^o be laid upon my beere;^o
 For which unto youre mercy thus I crye:
 Beeth hevye again, or elles moot^o I die.
 Now voucheth sauf^o this day er it be night
 That I of you the blisful soun may heere,
 10 Or see youre colour, lik the sonne bright,
 That of yelownesse hadde nevere peere.
 Ye be my lif, ye be myn hertes steere,^o
 Queene of confort and of good compaignye:
 Beeth hevye again, or elles moot I die.
 15 Ye purs, that been to me my lives light
 And saviour, as in this world down here,
 Out of this tonne^o helpe me thurgh your might,
 Sith that ye wol nat be my tresorer;
 For I am shave as neigh^o as any frere.³
 20 But yit I praye unto youre curteisye:
 Beeth hevye again, or elles moot I die.

Envoy to Henry IV⁴

O conquerour of Brutus Albioun,⁵
 Which that by line^o and free eleccioun
 Been verray king, this song to you I sende:
 25 And ye, that mowen^o alle oure harmes amende,
 Have minde upon my supplicacioun.

William Langland

c. 1330–1387

Little is known of William Langland. On the basis of internal evidence in *Piers Plowman*, he is thought to have been a clerk in minor orders whose career in the church was curtailed by his marriage. He may have come from the Malvern Hills in the west of England, but he spent

1. This is a traditional "begging" poem, based on French models. The request for money is presented humorously, as a parody of a courtly love complaint to a cruel mistress. The parallel takes on ironic force when one recalls Chaucer's presentation of himself, in such early poems as *The Parliament of Foules*, as a failed lover. This is one of Chaucer's last poems, written a year before his death. It was addressed to Henry IV when he took the throne in 1399, to request a renewal of the annuity Chaucer had received from the deposed Richard II. The flattering "envoy" to Henry at the end alludes to the tradition dating

from Geoffrey of Monmouth that Britain was founded by Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, the exiled prince of Troy and founder of Rome.

2. Serious expression (in a person); full weight (in a purse).

3. Friar (with a bald tonsure).

4. The "envoy" is the traditional close of a ballad, usually directed to its addressee.

5. According to legend, Brutus conquered the kingdom of Albion and renamed it "Britain," after himself.

much of his professional life in London. He was clearly learned, using many Latin quotations from the Bible (given below primarily in English translation, designated by italics and unnumbered), and the style of his poem in many ways resembles sermon rhetoric.

Piers Plowman is an ambitious and multilayered allegory, an attempt to combine Christian history, social satire, and an account of the individual soul's quest for salvation. It is presented as a dream vision whose hero is a humble plowman, and whose narrator, the naive dreamer named Will, may be only a convenient fiction. Even its first audience sometimes reacted to this mysterious poem in surprising ways. *Piers Plowman* was so inspiring to the leaders of the Rising of 1381 that they saw Piers not as a fictional character but as an actual seditious person, as can be seen in the letter of radical priest John Ball in the readings following this poem (pages 475–77). This interpretation of the poem is remarkable given Langland's profound conservatism; despite his scathing social satire, he offers no program for social change. In fact, he supports the traditional model of the three estates, whereby the king and knights protect the body politic, the clergy prays for it, and the commons provide its food. Although he was sympathetic toward the poor and scornful of the rich and powerful, he felt that what ailed society was that *none* of the three estates was performing its proper role.

Piers Plowman survives in many manuscripts, a fact that suggests a large audience, which most likely included secular readers in the government and law as well as the clergy. Most of John Ball's followers would have been unable to read it. The poem exists in three versions—known as the A-, B-, and C-texts—and their history throws light on the poem's role in the Rising of 1381. The short A-text was expanded into the B-text some time between 1377 and 1381, when John Ball and other rebel leaders referred to it, while the C-text (which is translated in the excerpts below) is generally agreed to reflect Langland's attempt to distance himself from the radical beliefs of the rebels. Nevertheless, the poem remained popular for the next two centuries as a document of social protest and was ultimately regarded as a prophecy of the English Reformation. Langland's social criticism, however, is only part of his project, for he considered individual salvation to be equally important. A strictly political reading of *Piers Plowman*—whether in the fourteenth century or the twenty-first—misses a great deal of its originality and its power.

Piers Plowman is a challenge to read: it is almost surrealistic in its rapid and unexplained transitions, its many dreams, and its complex use of allegory. It is as confusing to people reading it in its entirety as to those reading it in excerpts, as here. Nevertheless, the poem does have a kind of unity, of a thematic rather than a narrative sort. It is held together by the dreamer's vision of the corruption of society and his personal quest to save his own soul. This quest is loosely structured by the metaphor of the journey, which is reflected in the poem's subdivision into parts called *passus*—Latin for "steps." The poem is further unified by the allegorical character of Piers the plowman: a literal fourteenth-century English farmer when we first meet him, in the course of the poem he becomes a figural representation of Saint Peter, the first pope and founder of the church, and of Christ himself.

The five passages included here suggest the connection between the social and spiritual aspects of the poem. In the *Prologue*, the dreamer has a vision of a tower on a hill (later explained as the seat of Truth, i.e., God), a hellish dungeon beneath, and between them, a "field full of folk," representing various professions from the three estates, who are later said to be more concerned with their material than their spiritual welfare.

Passus 2 is the first of three on the marriage of Lady Meed, an ambiguous allegorical figure whose name can mean "just reward," "bribery," or the profit motive generally, the last being a cause for anxiety as England moved from a barter economy to one based on money. The dreamer is invited by Lady Holy Church to Meed's marriage to "False Fickle Tongue." Members of all three estates attend this event, a sign of corruption on every social level.

Langland sees greed as a sin of the poor as well as the rich, and in a comic passage of personification allegory represents the seven deadly sins as members of the commons. Included here from *Passus 6* is the vividly realized portrait of Glutton, who revels in his sin as he

confesses it. Langland discusses the issues of poverty and work most directly in *Passus 8*, where Piers Plowman insists that the assembled people help him plow his half-acre before he will agree to lead them on a pilgrimage to Truth. Piers supports the traditional division of labor, explicitly exempting the knight from producing food, as long as he protects the commons and clergy from "wasters"—lazy shirkers. He insists, however, that the knight treat peasants well—in part because roles may be reversed in heaven, and earthly underlings can become heavenly masters. Yet Langland is not simply taking the workers' side. The knight turns out to be too courteous to control wasters, and Hunger must be called in to offer an incentive to work. When Piers takes pity on the poor and sends Hunger away, Waster refuses to work and the laborers demand more money, cursing the king for the statutes that have instituted wage freezes.

The spiritual climax of the poem takes place in *Passus 20*, which depicts Christ's crucifixion, harrowing of hell (release of the souls of Adam and other Old Testament figures), and resurrection. After many *passus* of theological debate about his own salvation, the dreamer falls asleep on Palm Sunday and dreams of a man entering Jerusalem on a donkey. The dreamer thinks the man looks like Piers the Plowman, until he recognizes him as Jesus. This man is presented as a young knight going to be dubbed: he will joust against the devil in Piers's armor ("human nature") for the "fruit of Piers the Plowman" (human souls).

Before Christ can release the souls from hell, a lively debate takes place among the "four daughters of God"—Mercy and Truth, Righteousness and Peace—homely "wenches" who embody the words of Psalm 84.11: "Mercy and Truth have met together, Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other." They concede that forgiveness can take precedence over retribution, whereupon Jesus, having "josted well," leads out the patriarchs and prophets in victory. As church bells ring to signal the resurrection, the dreamer awakes and calls his wife and daughter to church to celebrate Easter with him, thus connecting the grand scheme of salvation history to his personal experience.

The remainder of the poem, *Passus 21–22*, which are not included here, recount the foundation of the church (by Piers as Saint Peter), and offer an apocalyptic vision of its subsequent corruption by the friars and its attack by Antichrist. There are no answers: the poem ends inconclusively with the allegorical figure of Conscience setting out on a pilgrimage in search of Piers Plowman.

Langland did not write French-inspired rhymed poetry, which was fashionable in London and used by Chaucer, but rather he composed old-fashioned alliterative poetry, which survived from Old English. The so-called Alliterative Revival was divided into two traditions, one based in the north of England and featuring romances in the alliterative "high" style, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the other based in the south and west, and tending to social protest poems in a plain style. Langland's subject matter and style link him to the latter tradition, which includes satirical poems such as *Richard the Redeless*, *Mum and the Sothsegger*, and *Jack Upland*. In Middle English alliterative poetry, each line contains at least four major stressed syllables, with the first three usually beginning with the same sound. The translations of alliterative poems in this anthology—including *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain*, as well as *Piers Plowman*—all sufficiently retain the alliteration to convey its flavor in modern English. The following passage from *Piers Plowman* in Middle English, the description of Lady Meed in her gaudy clothes, makes the point more clearly. The dreamer, with naive admiration, reports that he

... was war of a womman wonderliche yclothed,
Purfiled with Pelure, the pureste on erthe,
Ycorouned in a coroune, the kyng hath noon bettre.
Fetisliche hire fyngres were fretted with gold wyr
And theron riche Rubyes as rede as any gleede,
And Diamoundes of derrest pris and double manere saphires,
Orientals and Ewages enuynemes to destroye.

Hire Robe ful riche, of reed scarlet engreynd,
With Ribanes of reed gold and of riche stones.
Hire aray me nauysshed; swich richesse saugh I neuere.

Although Langland generally uses the plainer alliterative style of southern protest poetry, here he uses the high style of northern alliterative romances, for satirical purposes. Meed's dress recalls that of Bercilak's lady in *Sir Gawain*, in "rich red rayled" (line 952), as well as the elegant clothing of the Green Knight, "with pelure pured apert, the pane ful clene" (154). In contrast to the clothing of Lady Holy Church, whom Langland introduces in *Passus 1* simply as "a lady lovely of look, clothed in linen," the robes of lady Meed seem dangerously seductive, thus underscoring a sexual metaphor for bribery which Langland consistently develops. Thus, in a more subtle fashion than some of his followers, such as the Wycliffite author of *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, Langland was able to use the specialized language of alliterative poetry in the service of social criticism.

from *Piers Plowman*¹
Prologue

In a summer season when the sun shone softly
I wrapped myself in woolens as if I were a sheep;
In a hermit's habit, unholy in his works,
I went out into the world to hear wonders
5 And to see many strange and seldom-known things.
But on a May morning in the Malvern Hills²
I happened to fall asleep, worn out from walking;
And in a meadow as I lay sleeping,
I dreamed most marvelously, as I recall.
10 All the world's wealth and all of its woe,
Dozing though I was, I certainly saw;
Truth and treachery, treason and guile,
Sleeping I saw them all, as I shall record.

I looked to the East toward the rising sun
15 And saw a tower—I took it Truth was inside.
To the West then I looked after a while
And saw a deep dale—Death, as I believe,
Dwelt in that place, along with wicked spirits.
Between them I found a fair field full of folk
20 Of all manner men, the common and the poor,
Working and wandering as this world asks us.

Some put themselves to the plow, and seldom played,
To work hard as they can at planting and sowing
And won what these wasters through gluttony destroy.
25 And some put themselves in pride's ways and apparel
Themselves accordingly in clothes of all kinds.
Many put themselves to prayers and penances,
All for love of our lord they live so severely
In hope of good ending and heaven-kingdom's bliss;

1. Translated by George Economou.

2. These hills in the west of England were probably Langland's original home.

30 As anchorites and hermits³ that keep to their cells,
 With no great desire to cruise the countryside
 Seeking carnal pleasures and luxurious lives.
 And some turned to trade—they made out better,
 As it always seems to us that such men thrive;
 35 And some know as minstrels how to make mirth,
 Will neither work nor sweat, but swear out loud,
 Invent sleazy stories and make fools of themselves
 Though it's in their power to work if they want.
 What Paul preached about them I surely can prove;
 40 *Qui turpiloquium loquitur*⁴ is Lucifer's man.
 Beggars and moochers moved about quickly
 Till their bags and their bellies were crammed to the top,
 Faking it for food and fighting over ale.
 In gluttony those freeloaders go off to bed
 45 And rise to rob and run off at the mouth.
 Sleep and sloth are their steady companions.
 Pilgrims and palmers⁵ pledged to travel together
 To seek Saint James⁶ and the saints of Rome,
 Went on their way with many wise tales
 50 And took leave to lie about it for a lifetime.
 A heap of hermits with their hooked staves
 Went to Our Lady of Walsingham,⁷ with wenches in tow;
 Great deadbeats that hated a good day's work
 Clothed themselves in hooded cloaks to stand apart
 55 And proclaimed themselves hermits, for the easy life.
 I found there friars from all four orders,⁸
 Preaching to people to profit their gut,
 And glossing the gospel to their own good liking;
 Coveting fine copes,⁹ some of these doctors⁹ contradicted
 60 authorities. *monk's capes / of divinity / begging*
 Many of these masterful mendicant⁹ friars
 Bind their love of money to their proper business.
 And since charity's become a broker and chief agent for lords'
 confessions⁹
 Many strange things have happened these last years;
 Unless Holy Church and charity clear away such confessors
 65 The world's worst misfortune mounts up fast.
 A pardoner¹ preached there as if he were a priest
 And brought forth a bull¹⁰ with the bishops' seals,
 70 *papal license*
 Said that he himself could absolve them all

3. Both were vowed to a religious life of solitude, hermits in the wilderness and anchorites walled in a tiny dwelling.

4. Who speaks filthy language; not Paul, though (cf. Ephesians 5:3-4).

5. "Professional" pilgrims who took advantage of the hospitality offered them in order to travel.

6. That is, his shrine at Compostela, in Spain.

7. English town, site of a famous shrine to the Virgin Mary.

8. The four orders of friars—Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Augustinians. In 14th-century England they were much satirized for their corruption (cf. the friar in the *General Prologue* to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*).

9. Confession and the remission of sins is cynically sold by the friars.

10. An official empowered to pass on from the Pope absolution for the sins of people who had given money to charity.

Of phony fasts and of broken vows.
 70 Illiterates believed him and liked what they heard
 And came up and kneeled to kiss his pardons;
 He bonked them with his bulls and bleared their eyes
 And with this rigmarole raked in their brooches and rings.
 Thus you give your gold to help out gluttons
 75 And lose it for good to full-time lechers.
 If the bishop were true and kept his ear to the ground
 He'd not consign his seal to deceit of the people.
 But it's not through the bishop that this guy preaches,
 For the parish priest and pardoner split the silver
 80 That, if not for them, the parishoners would have.

Still I kept dreaming about poor and rich,
 220 Like barons and burgesses and village bondmen,²
 All I saw sleeping as you shall hear next:
 Bakers and brewers, butchers and others,
 Weavers and websters, men that work with their hands,
 Like tailors and tanners and tillers of earth,
 225 Like dike and ditch diggers that do their work badly
 And drive out their days with "*Dew vous saue, dame Emme.*"³
 Cooks and their helpers cried, "Get your hot pies!
 Good geese and pig meat! Come on up and eat!"
 And taverners touted in much the same way:
 230 "White wine of Alsace and wine from Gascony,
 Wash down your roast with La Reole and La Rochelle!"
 All this, and seven times more, I saw in my sleep.

Passus 2

[THE MARRIAGE OF LADY MEAD]

And then I kneeled before her¹ and cried to her for grace,
 "Mercy, madame, for the love of Mary in heaven
 That bore the blessed child that bought us on the cross,
 Teach me the way to recognize Falsehood."
 5 "Look to your left and see where he stands.
 Falsehood and Fave² and fickle-tongued Liar
 And many more men and women like them."
 I looked to my left as the lady said
 And saw a woman wonderfully clothed.
 10 She was trimmed all in fur, the world's finest,
 And crowned with a coronet as good as the king's;
 On all five fingers were the richest rings
 Set with red rubies and other precious gems.

2. Barons were members of the higher aristocracy; burgesses were town-dwellers with full rights as citizens; and bondmen were peasants who held their land from a lord in return for services or rent.

3. Presumably a popular song.

1. Lady Holy Church.

2. "Lying"; the name of characters representing deceit in Old French literature.

Her robes were richer than I can describe,
 15 To talk of her attire I don't have time;
 Her raiment and riches ravished my heart.
 Whose wife she was and her name I wanted to know,
 "Dear lady," I then asked, "conceal nothing from me."
 "That is the maid Meed¹ who has hurt me many times
 20 And lied against my beloved who is called Loyalty
 And slanders him to the lords that keep all our laws,
 In the king's court and the commons' she contradicts my teaching,
 In the pope's palace is privy as I,
 But Truth would she weren't for she's a bastard.
 25 Favel was her father who has a fickle tongue
 And seldom speaks truth unless it's a trick,
 And Meed takes after him, as men remark on kin:
Like father, like daughter.
 For never shall a briar put forth berries
 Nor on a rough, crooked thorn a real fig grow:
A good tree bringeth forth good fruit.⁴
 30 I should be higher, for I come from better stock;
 He that fathered me *filius dei*⁵ is named,
 Who never lied or laughed in his entire life,
 And I am his dear daughter, duchess of heaven,
 The man that loves me and follows my will
 35 Shall have grace a-plenty and a good end,
 And the man that loves Meed, I'll bet my life,
 Will lose for her love a morsel of charity.
 What is man's most help to heaven Meed will most hinder—
 I base this on King David, whose book⁶ does not lie:
Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle.⁶
 40 And David himself explains, as his mute book shows:
And not taken bribes against the innocent.⁷
 Tomorrow Meed marries a miserable wretch,
 One False Faithless of the Fiend's lineage.
 With flattery Favel's foully enchanted Meed
 And Liar's made all the arrangements for the match.
 45 Be patient and you will see those that are pleased
 By Meed's marriage, tomorrow you'll view it.
 Get to know them if you can and avoid all those
 Who love her lordship, both the high and the low.
 Don't fault them but let them be till Loyalty's judge
 50 And has power to punish them, then do your pleading.
 Now I commend you to Christ and his pure mother,
 And never load your conscience with coveting meed."
 Thus the lady left me lying asleep

1. A richly ambiguous word referring to a wide variety of "reward," both positive and negative, including just reward, heavenly salvation, recompense, the profit motive, graft, and bribery.

4. Matthew 7:17.

5. The book of Psalms.

6. Psalms 14:1.

7. Psalms 14:5.

And still dreaming I saw Meed's marriage.
 55 All the rich retinue rooted in false living
 Were bid to the bridal from the entire country,
 All kinds of men that were Meed's kin,
 Knights, clerics, and other common people,
 Like jurors, summoners, sheriffs and their clerks,
 60 Beadles, bailiffs, businessmen, and agents,
 Purveyors, victualers, advocates of the Arches,⁸
 I can't keep count of the crowd that ran with Meed.
 But Simony and Civil⁹ and his jury-men
 Were tightest with Meed it seemed of all men.
 65 But Favel was first to fetch her out of chamber
 And like a broker brought her to be joined with False.

from *PASSUS 6*
 [THE CONFESSION OF GLUTTON]

Now Glutton heads for confession
 And moves towards the Church, his *mea culpa*¹ to say.
 Fasting on a Friday he made forth his way
 By the house of Betty Brewer, who bid him good morning
 And where was he going that brew-wife asked.
 355 "To Holy Church," he said, "to hear mass,
 And then sit and be shriven and sin no more."
 "I have good ale, Glutton, old buddy, want to give it a try?"
 "Do you have," he asked, "any hot spices?"
 "I have pepper, peony, and a pound of garlic,
 360 A farthing-worth of fennel seed² for fasting days I bought it."
 Then in goes Glutton and great oaths after.
 Cissy the shoemaker sat on the bench,
 Wat the game warden and his drunken wife,
 Tim the tinker and two of his workmen,
 365 Hick the hackney-man and Hugh the needler,
 Clarice of Cock's Lane³ and the clerk of the church,
 Sir Piers of Pridie and Purnel of Flanders,
 A hayward, a hermit, the hangman of Tyburn,
 Daw the ditchdigger and a dozen rascals
 370 In the form of porters and pickpockets and bald tooth-pullers,
 A fiddler, a rat-catcher, a street-sweeper and his helper,
 A rope-maker, a road-runner, and Rose the dish-seller,
 Godfrey the garlic-man and Griffith the Welshman,
 And a heap of secondhand salesmen, early in the morning
 375 Stood Glutton with glad cheers to his first round of ale.

8. The officials in this and the two preceding lines had jobs that made them particularly open to bribery.

9. Simony is the buying and selling of church offices or spiritual functions; Civil is civil as opposed to criminal law (especially noted for its bribery and corruption).

1. By my own fault; formula used in Christian prayers and confession.

2. An herb thought to be good for someone drinking on an empty stomach.

3. Clarice and Purnel (of the next line) are prostitutes.

Clement the cobbler took off his cloak
 And put it up for a game of New Fair⁴
 Hick the hackney-man saw with his hood
 And asked Bart the butcher to be on his side.
 380 Tradesmen were chosen to appraise this bargain,
 That whoso had the hood should not have the cloak,
 And that the better thing, according to the arbiters, compensate the
 worse.

They got up quickly and whispered together
 And appraised these items apart in private,
 385 And there was a load of swearing, for one had to get the worse.
 They could not in conscience truthfully accord
 Till Robin the rope-maker they asked to arise
 And named him umpire so that all arguing would stop.

Hick the hostler got the cloak
 390 On condition that Clement should fill the cup
 And have Hick the hostler's hood and rest content;
 And whoever took it back first had to get right up
 And greet Sir Glutton with a gallon of ale.

There was laughing and louting and "please pass the cup!"
 395 Bargaining and drinking they kept starting up
 And sat so till evensong⁵ and sang from time to time,
 Until Glutton had gobbled down a gallon and a gill⁶
 His guts began to rumble like two greedy sows;
 He pissed half a gallon in the time of a *pater noster*,⁶
 400 He blew his round bugle at his backbone's bottom,
 So that all who heard that horn had to hold their noses
 And wished it had been well plugged with a wisp of briars.
 He could neither step nor stand unless he held a staff,
 And then he moved like a minstrel's performing dog,
 405 Sometimes sideways and sometimes backwards,
 Like some one laying lines in order to trap birds.

And when he reached the door, then his eyes dimmed,
 And he stumbled on the threshold and fell to the ground,
 And Clement the cobbler grabbed him by the waist
 410 And in order to lift him up set him on his knees.
 But Glutton was a huge boor and troubled in the lifting
 And barfed up a mess into Clement's lap;
 There is no hound so hungry in Hertfordshire

That he'd dare lap up that leaving, so unlovely it smacked.⁹
 415 With all the woe in this world his wife and his daughter
 Bore him to his bed and put him in it,
 And after all this excess he had a bout of sloth;
 He slept through Saturday and Sunday till sundown.
 Then he awoke pale and wan and wanted a drink;

4. An elaborate game involving the exchange of clothing.
 5. Vespers, the evening prayer service said just before sunset.

6. The time it takes to say the Paternoster, the Lord's Prayer.

1/4 pint

tasted

420 The first thing he said was "Who's got the bowl?"
 His wife and his conscience reproached him for his sin;
 He became ashamed, that scoundrel, and made quick confession
 To Repentance like this: "Have pity on me," he said,
 "Lord who are aloft and shape all that lives!
 425 To you God, I, Glutton, acknowledge my guilt
 Of how I've trespassed with tongue, how often I can't tell,
 Sworn 'God's soul and his sides!' and 'So help me God, Almighty!'
 There was no need for it so many times falsely;
 And overate at supper and sometime at noon
 430 More than my system could naturally handle,
 And like a dog that eats grass I began to throw up
 And wasted what I might have saved—I can't speak for my shame
 Of the depravity of my foul mouth and maw—
 And on fasting days before noon I fed myself ale
 435 Beyond all reason, among dirty jokesters, their dirty jokes to hear.
 For this, good God, grant me forgiveness
 For my worthless living during my entire lifetime.
 For I swear by the true God, despite any hunger or thirst,
 Never shall on Friday a piece of fish digest in my stomach
 440 Till my aunt Abstinence has given me leave—
 And yet I've hated her all my lifetime."

from *PASSUS 8*
 [PIERS PLOWING THE HALF-ACRE]

Perkin¹ the plowman said, "By Saint Peter of Rome!
 I have a half-acre to plow by the highway;
 Had I plowed this half-acre and afterwards sown it
 I'd go along with you and teach you the way."
 5 "That would be a long delay," said a lady in a veil,
 "What should we women work on meanwhile?"
 "I appeal to you for your profit," said Piers to the ladies,
 "That some sew the sack to keep the wheat from spilling,
 And you worthy women with your long fingers
 10 That you have silk and sandal² to sew when you've time
 Chasubles³ for chaplains to the church's honor.
 Wives and widows spin wool and flax;
 Conscience counsels you to make cloth
 To benefit the poor and for your own pleasure.
 15 For I shall see to their sustenance, unless the land fail,
 As long as I live, for love of the Lord of heaven.
 And all manner of men who live off the land
 Help him work well who obtains your food."
 "By Christ," said a knight then, "he teaches us the best;
 20 But truly on the plow theme I was never taught.
 I wish I knew how," said the knight, "by Christ and his mother;

robes

1. A nickname for Piers, or Peter.

2. A thin, rich form of silk.



Plowmen, from the Luttrell Psalter, early 14th century.

I'd try it sometime for fun as it were."

Certainly, sir knight," said Piers then,

"I shall toil and sweat and sow for us both

And labor for those you love all my lifetime,

On condition you protect Holy Church and me

From wasters and wicked men who spoil the world,

And go hunt hardily for hares and foxes,

Boars and bucks that break down my hedges,

And train your falcons to kill the wild birds

Because they come to my croft³ and defile my corn."⁴

field / grain

Courteously the knight then commenced with these words:

"By my power, Piers, I pledge you my truth

To defend you faithfully, though I should fight."

"And still one point," said Piers, "I ask of you further:

Try not to trouble any tenant unless Truth agrees

And when you fine any man let Mercy be assessor

And Meekness your master, despite Meed's moves.

And though poor men offer you presents and gifts

Don't take them on the chance you're not deserving,

For it may be you'll have to return them or pay for them dearly.

Don't hurt your bondman, you'll be better off;

Though he's your underling here; it may happen in heaven

He'll be sooner received and more honorably seated.

Friend, go up higher⁵

At church in the charnel⁶ it's hard to discern churls

Or between knight and knave or a queen on a corner⁷ and one on the throne.

It becomes you, knight, to be courteous and gracious,

True of tongue and loth to hear tales

Unless they're about goodness, battles, or good faith.

3. Luke 14:10.

4. Crypt for dead bodies.

5. I.e., "queen," a prostitute.

50 Don't keep company with crude-mouths or listen to their stories,
And especially at your meals avoid such men
For they are the Devil's entertainers and draw men to sin.
And do not oppose Conscience or the rights of Holy Church."

55 "I assent, by Saint Giles," said the knight then,
"To work by your wisdom and my wife, too."

"And I shall dress myself," said Perkin, "in pilgrims' fashion
And go with all those who wish to live in Truth."

Now Perkin and these pilgrims go to their plowing;
Many helped him to turn over the half-acre.

Ditchers and diggers dug up the strip-ridges;

115 All this pleased Perkin and he paid them good wages.

Other workmen were there who worked very hard,

Each man in his way made himself useful

And some to please Perkin picked weeds in the field.

At high prime, about nine⁶ Piers let the plow stand

120 And oversaw them himself; whoever worked best

Would later be hired when harvest time comes.

And then, some sat down and sang at ale

And helped plow this half-acre with a "hey trolliloly!"⁷

Said Piers the plowman in a pure anger:

125 "If you don't get up quickly and rush back to work

No grain that grows here will cheer you in need,

And though you die of grief, the devil take him who cares."

Then the phonies were frightened and pretended to be blind

And twisted their legs backwards as such losers know how

130 And moaned to Piers about how they couldn't work:

"And we pray for you Piers and for your plow, too,

That God for his grace multiply your grain

And reward you for the alms you give us here.

We may neither sweat nor strain, such sickness ails us,

135 Nor have we limbs to labor with, the Lord God we thank."

"Your prayers," said Piers, "if you were upright,

Might help, as I hope, but high Truth would

That no fakery were found in people that go begging,

You're wasters, I know well, and waste and devour

140 What true land-tilling men loyally work for.

But Truth shall teach you to drive his team

Or you'll eat barley bread and drink from the brook,

Unless he's blind or broken-legged or braced with iron—

Such poor," said Piers, "shall share in my goods,

145 Both of my corn and my cloth to keep them from want.

But anchorites and hermits who eat only at noon

And friars who don't flatter and poor sick people,

Hey! I and mine will provide for their needs."

6. Nine in the morning, after a substantial amount of work has been done.

7. Probably the refrain of a popular song.

150 Then Waster got angry and wanted to fight
And pressed Piers the plowman to "put 'em up!"
And told him to go piss with his plow, pigheaded creep!
A Breton came bragging and threatened Piers also:
"Whether you like it or not," he said, "we'll have our way,
155 And take your flour and meat whenever we like
And make merry with it, despite any grumbling."
Piers the plowman then complained to the knight
To keep him and his property as they had agreed:
"Avenge me on these wasters who bring harm to the world;
160 Excommunication they take no account of nor fear Holy Church.
There will be no plenty," said Piers, "if the plow stands still."
Then the knight, as was his nature, courteously
Warned Waster and advised him to improve:
"Or I'll beat you according to the law and put you in the stocks."
"I'm not used to working," said Waster, "and I won't start now!"
165 And made light of the law and less of the knight
And sized up Piers as a pea to complain wherever he would.
"Now by Christ," said Piers the plowman, "I'll punish you all,"
And whooped after Hunger who heard right away.
"I pray you," Piers said then, "Sir Hunger, *pour charite*⁸
170 Avenge me on these wasters, for the knight will not."
Hunger in haste then grabbed Waster around the belly
And hugged him so tight that his eyes watered.
He battered the Breton about the cheeks
So that he looked like a lantern the rest of his life,
175 And he so beat both of them up he nearly busted their guts
Had not Piers with a peas-load⁹ called him off.
"Have mercy on them, Hunger," said Piers, "and let me give them
beans,
And what was baked for Bayard¹ may come to their relief."
Then the fakery were frightened and flew into Piers' barns.
180 And flapped with flails from morning till evening,
So that Hunger was less intent on looking upon them.
For a portful of portage that Piers' wife had made
A heap of hermits took up spades,
Dug and spread dung to despite Hunger.
185 They cut up their capes and made them short coats
And went as workmen to weeding and mowing
All for fear of death, so hard did Hunger hit.
The blind and broken-legged he bettered by the thousand
And lame men he healed with animal entrails.
190 Priests and other people drew towards Piers
And friars from all five orders,² all for fear of Hunger.
For what was baked for Bayard relieved many hungry,

8. For charity's sake.

9. Cheapest kind of bread, standard fare for the poor.

1. A generic name for a horse; a bread made of beans and bran was fed to horses.

2. See Prologue, n.8 (line 56) on the four orders. The fifth order referred to here may be the Crutched Friars, a minor order.

Dross and dregs were drink for many beggars.
195 There was no lad living that wouldn't bow to Piers
To be his faithful servant though he had no more
Than food for his labor and his gift at noon.
Then Piers was proud and put them all to work
At daubing and digging, at dung bearing afield,
200 At threshing, at thatching, at whittling pins,
At every kind of true craft that man can devise.
There was no beggar so bold, unless he were blind,
Dared oppose what Piers said for fear of Sir Hunger.
And Piers was proud of that and put them all to work
And gave them food and money according to their deserts.
205 Then Piers had pity for all poor people
And bade Hunger hurry up out of the country
Back home to his own yard and stay there forever.

* * *

"I promise you," said Hunger, "I won't go away
Before I have this day both dined and drunk."
"I've no penny," said Piers, "with which to buy pullets,
Nor goose or pork but two green cheeses
305 And a few curds and cream and an oat cake
And bean and pea bread for my kids.
And still I say, by my soul, I've no salt bacon
Nor any egg, by Christ, to fry up together.
But I have leeks, parsley and scallions,
310 Chives and chervil and half-ripe cherries,
And a cow with a calf and a cart-mare
To draw my dung afield during dry spells.
And we must live by this means of life till Lammas time³
And by then I hope to have harvest in my fields;
315 Then may I make dinner just as I like."
All the poor people then fetched peascods;
Beans and baked apples they brought by the lapful,
And offered Piers this present with which to please Hunger.
Hunger ate it all in haste and asked for more.
320 For fear then poor folk fed Hunger quickly
With cream and curds, with cress and other herbs.
By then harvest drew near and new corn came to market
And people were happy and fed Hunger deliciously,
And then Glutton with good ale put Hunger to sleep.
325 And then Waster refused to work and wandered around,
Nor'd any beggar eat bread in which there were beans,
But the finest white breads and of pure wheat,
Nor no way would they drink half-penny ale
But the best and brownest that brewsters sell.
330 Laborers with no land to live on but their own hands

3. The harvest festival, August 1, when a loaf made from the first wheat of the season was offered at mass.

Wouldn't deign to dine today on last night's veggies;
 No penny-ale or piece of bacon pleased them
 But it had to be fresh meat or fish, fried or baked,
 And that *chaud* or *plus chaud*⁴ against a chilled stomach.
 335 And unless he's hired for high pay he'll otherwise argue
 And curse the time he was made a workman.
 He begins to grumble against Cato's counsel:
*Paupertatis onus pauciter ferre memento.*⁵
 And then he curses the king and all his justices
 340 For teaching such laws that grieve workingmen⁶
 But as long as Hunger was master none of them would bitch,
 Nor strive against his statute, he looked so stern.
 I warn you workmen, get ahead while you can,
 For Hunger's hurrying this way fast as he can.
 345 He shall awake through water, wasters to punish,
 And before a few years finish famine shall arise,
 And so says Saturn⁷ and sends us warning.
 Through floods and foul weather fruits shall fail;
 Pride and pestilence shall take out many people.
 350 Three ships and a sheaf with an 8 following
 Shall bring bane and battle under both halves of the moon.
 And then death shall withdraw and dearth be the judge
 And Dave the ditcher⁸ die of hunger
 Unless God of his goodness grant us a truce.

ditch-digger

Passus 20

[THE CRUCIFIXION AND THE HARROWING OF HELL]

Wool-shirted and wet-shoed I went forth after
 Like a careless man who takes no care of sorrow,
 And tramped forth like a vagrant all my lifetime
 Till I grew weary of the world and wanted to sleep again
 5 And lay down till Lent and slept a long time.
 I dreamed a great deal of children and of *gloria laus*¹
 And how to instruments elder folks sang osanna.²
 One who resembled the Samaritan and Piers the plowman
 somewhat
 Barefoot came riding bootless on an ass's back
 10 Without spurs or spear—sprightly he looked,
 As is natural for a knight who came to be dubbed,
 To get his gilt spurs and cut-away shoes.
 And then Faith was in a window and cried, "A, *filii David*!"³

Hosanna

4. Hot or very hot.
 5. Remember to bear your burden of poverty patiently.
 From Cato's *Distichs*, a collection of phrases used to teach Latin to beginning students.
 6. A reference to the Statutes of Laborers, passed after 1351, when the Black Death depopulated the countryside and a labor shortage ensued. They were intended to control the mobility and the wages of laborers.

7. Planet thought to influence the weather, generally perceived to be hostile.

1. "Glory, praise [and honor]"; the first words of an anthem sung by children on Palm Sunday. This part of the poem reflects the biblical account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

2. On the first Palm Sunday, crowds greeted Christ crying "Hosanna [line 7] to the son of David."

As a herald of arms does when adventurous knights come to jousts.
 15 Old Jews of Jerusalem sang for joy,
*Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.*³

Then I asked Faith what all this activity meant,
 And who should joust in Jerusalem? "Jesus," he said,
 "And fetch what the Fiend claims, the fruit of Piers the plowman."
 "Is Piers in this place?" I said, and he looked at me knowingly:

20 "*Liberum-dei-arbitrium*"⁴ has for love undertaken
 That this Jesus for his gentility will joust in Piers' armor,
 In his helmet and in his mail, *humana natura*;⁵
 So that Christ not be known as *consummatus deus*,⁶
 In the plate-armor of Piers the plowman this cavalier will ride,
 25 For no dent will damage him as in *deitate patris*.⁷

"Who will joust with Jesus," I said, "Jews or scribes?"⁸
 "No," Faith said, "but the Fiend and False-doom-to-die.

Death says he will undo and bring down
 All that live or look on land or in water.
 30 Life says he lies and lays his life as pledge,
 That for all Death can do, within three days, he'll walk
 And fetch from the Fiend the fruit of Piers the plowman,
 And lay it wherever he likes and Lucifer bind
 And heat down death and bring death to death forever.

O death, I will be thy death, thy bite!"⁹
 35 Then came Pilate with many people, *sedens pro tribunali*,¹
 To see how doughtily Death would do and to judge both their
 rights.

The Jews and the justices were against Jesus,
 And all the court cried "*Crucifige*"² loud.
 Then a prosecutor appeared before Pilate and said.

40 "This Jesus made jokes and despised our Jewish Temple,
 To demolish it in one day, and in three days after
 Rebuild it anew—here he stands who said it—
 And still make it as sizable in all ways,

Both as long and as large, aloft and on ground,
 45 And as broad as it was ever; this we all heard."
 "*Crucifige*" said a court officer, "he practices witchcraft."
 "Tolle, Tolle!"³ said another, and took sharp thorns

And began to make of green thorns a garland
 And set it roughly on his head, and then hatefully said,
 50 "*Aue, raby*,⁴ that scoundrel said, and poked reeds at his eyes;
 And they nailed him with three nails naked upon a cross

3. Matthew 21.9.

4. The Free Will of God.

5. In the Incarnation Christ assumed human nature, to redeem humankind.

6. The perfect (triple) God.

7. In the godhead of the Father: as God Christ could not suffer, but as man he could.

8. Scribes were persons who made a strict literal interpretation of the Old Law and hence rejected Christ's teaching

of the New.

9. Hosea 13.14.

1. Sitting as a judge (Matthew 27.19).

2. Crucify! (John 19.6).

3. "Away with him! Away with him!" (John 19.15).

4. "Hail, Rabbi [i.e., Master]" (Matthew 26.49); the words Judas spoke when he kissed Christ to identify him to the arresting officers.

And with a pole put poison up to his lips
 And bade him drink, to delay his death and lengthen his days,
 And said, "If he's subtle, he'll help himself now;"
 55 And "If you're Christ—and Christ, God's Son—
 Come down from this cross and then we'll believe!
 That Life loves you and won't let you die."
 "Consummatum est,"⁵ said Christ and started to swoon.
 Piteously and pale, like a dying prisoner,
 60 The Lord of Life and Light then laid his eyes together.
 For dread the day withdrew and dark became the sun;
 The wall of the Temple split apart all to pieces,
 The hard rock completely riven, and darkest night it seemed.
 The earth shivered and shook as if it were alive
 65 And dead men for that din came out of deep graves
 And told why the storm had lasted so long:
 "For a bitter battle," the dead body said;
 "Life and Death in this darkness destroy one another,
 And no man will know for sure who shall have the mastery
 70 Before Sunday, around sunrise," and sank with that to earth.
 Some said he was God's Son who died so fairly,
*Indeed this was the Son of God,*⁶
 And some said, "He's a sorcerer; good that we test
 Whether he's dead or not dead before he's taken down."
 At that time two thieves suffered death
 75 Upon crosses beside Christ, such was the common law.
 A court officer came and cracked their legs in two
 And the arms after of each of those thieves.
 But there was no punk so bold as to touch God's body;
 Because he was a knight and a king's son, Kind⁷ fully granted that time
 80 That no punk had nerve enough to touch him in dying.
 But a blind knight with a sharply honed spear came forth,
 Named Longinus,⁸ as the record shows, and he had long lost his sight;
 Before Pilate and the other people in the place he waited in readiness.
 Over his protests he was forced at that time
 85 To joust with Jesus, this blind Jew Longinus;
 For they were all gutless who hovered or stood there
 To touch him or contact him or take him down and bury him,
 Except this blind bachelor, who pierced him through the heart.
 The blood sprang down the spear and spread open the knight's eyes.
 90 Then the knight fell straight on his knees and cried Jesus mercy—
 "It was against my will," he said, "that I was made to wound you."
 And sighed and said, "Sorely I repent it,
 For the deed that I've done I put myself in your grace.
 95 Both my land and my body take at your pleasure,
 And have mercy on me, rightful Jesus!" and right with that he wept.

5. "It is finished" (John 19:30).

6. Matthew 27:54.

7. Nature (an aspect of God).

8. Longinus appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, which was the principal source of this account of Christ's harrowing of hell.

Then Faith began fiercely to upbraid the false Jews⁹
 Called them low-down no-goods, accursed forever:
 "For this was a vile villainy; may vengeance befall you
 Who made the blind beat the dead—this was a punk's doing!
 100 Cursed low-downs! It was never knighthood
 To beat a bound body with any bright weapon.
 Yet he's taken the prize for all his great wounds,
 For your champion rider, chief knight of you all,
 Surrendered crying out defeat, right at the will of Jesus.
 105 When this darkness passes, Death shall be vanquished,
 And you clowns have lost, for Life shall have mastery,
 And your unstinted freedom fall into servitude,
 And all your children, churls, will never achieve prosperity,
 Nor have lordship over land or any land to till,
 110 And as barren be, and live by usury,
 Which is a life that our Lord forbids in all laws.
 Now your good times are over, as Daniel told you,
 When Christ through the cross overcame, your kingdom will fall apart.
*When the holy of holies comes, it ceases, etc.*¹¹
 What for fear of wonder and of the false Jews
 115 I withdrew in that darkness to *descendit ad inferna*,²
 And there I surely saw, *secundum scripturas*,³
 Out of the west, as it were, a young woman, as I thought,
 Came walking on the way, hellward she looked.
 Mercy that maid was named, a mild thing as well
 120 And a very good-willed maiden and modest of speech.
 Her sister, as it seemed, came walking softly
 Squarely out of the east, and westward she was headed,
 A comely and pure creature, Truth was her name.
 Because of the virtue that followed her, she was never afraid.
 125 When these maidens met, Mercy and Truth,
 They asked each other about this great wonder,
 About the din and the darkness and how the day dawned,
 And what a light and a shining lay before hell.
 "I'm astonished by this business, in faith," said Truth,
 130 "And I'm coming to discover what this wonder means."
 "Don't marvel at it," said Mercy, "joy is its meaning.
 A maid called Mary, and mother without contact
 With any kind of creature, conceived through speech
 And grace of the Holy Ghost, grew great with child,
 135 Without womanly spot brought him into this world;
 And that my tale is true I take God to witness.
 Since this baby was born thirty winters have passed,
 Died and suffered death this day about midday;
 And that is the cause of this eclipse that now shuts out the sun,

9. This and the next 18 lines are an example of late medieval antisemitism.

1. Compare with Daniel 9:24.

2. He descended into hell (from the Apostles' Creed)

3. According to the Scriptures.

140 In meaning that man shall be drawn out of murkiness
While this light and this beam will blind Lucifer.
For patriarchs and prophets have preached of this often,
That what was lost through a tree, a tree shall win back,⁴
And what death brought down, death shall raise up."
145 "What you're saying," said Truth, "Is nothing but hot air!
For Adam and Eve and Abraham with other
Patriarchs and prophets who lie in pain,
Never believe that yonder light will lift them up
Or have them out of hell—hold your tongue, Mercy!
150 What you're saying is just a trifle; I, Truth, know the truth,
That a thing that's once in hell never comes out.
Job the perfect patriarch discredits your sayings:
*Because there is no redemption in hell.*⁵
Then Mercy most mildly mouthed these words:
"From experience," she said, "I hope they'll be saved;
155 For venom undoes venom, from which I fetch proof
That Adam and Eve shall have remedy.
Of all devouring venoms the vilest is the scorpion's;
No medicine may amend the place where it stings
Until it's dead and applied thereto, and then it destroys
160 The first poisoning through its own virtue.
And so this death shall undo, I'll bet my life,
All that Death and the Devil first did to Eve.
And just as the deceiver through deceit deceived men first,
So shall grace, which began all, make a good end
165 And deceive the deceiver, and that's a good deception:
*It takes a trick to undo a trick.*⁶
"Now let's just hold it," said Truth; "it seems to me I see
Out of the nip^o of the north, not very far from here,
Righteousness come running. Let's take it easy,
For she knows more than we—she was before we both were."
170 "That's true," said Mercy, "and I see here to the south
Where Peace, clothed in patience, comes ready to play;
Love has desired her long—I believe none other
But Love has sent her some letter about what this light means
That hovers over hell thus; she'll tell us."
175 When Peace, clothed in patience, approached them both,
Righteousness revered Peace in her rich clothing
And prayed Peace tell her to what place she was going
And whom she meant to gladden in her gay garments.
"My wish is to go," said Peace, "and welcome them all
180 Who for many a day I could not see for murkiness of sin,
Adam and Eve and many others in hell,
Moses and many more will sing merrily

4. The first tree bore the fruit that Adam and Eve ate, thereby damaging humankind; the second tree is the cross on which Christ was crucified, thereby redeeming

humankind.

5. Compare with Job 7.9.

6. From a hymn sung on Palm Sunday.

And I'll dance to their tune—do the same, sister!
For Jesus jousted well, joy begins to dawn.
*In the evening weeping shall have place, and in the morning gladness.*⁷
185 Love, who is my lover, sent me such letters
That my sister Mercy and I shall save mankind,
And that God has forgiven and granted to all mankind
Mercy, my sister, and me to bail them all out;
And that Christ has converted the nature of righteousness
190 Into peace and pity out of his pure grace.
Look, here's the letter patent!⁸ said Peace, "*in pace in idipsum—*
And that this deed shall endure—*dormiam et requiescam.*"⁹
"Do you rave?" said Righteousness, "or are you just drunk!
195 Do you believe that yonder light might unlock hell
And save man's soul? Sister, never believe it!
At the world's beginning, God gave the judgment himself
That Adam and Eve and all their issue
Should downright die and dwell in pain forever
200 If they touched that tree and ate of its fruit.
Afterwards Adam against his prohibition
Ate of the fruit and forsook, as it were,
The love of our Lord and his teachings, too,
And followed what the Fiend taught and his flesh's will,
205 Against reason; I, Righteousness, record this with Truth
That their pain is perpetual—no prayer can help them.
Therefore let them chew as they chose and let's not fight about it,
sisters,
For it is care past cure, the bite that they ate."
"And I shall prove," said Peace, "their pain must end,
And finally their woe must turn into well-being.
210 For had they known no woe, they'd not know well-being;
For no one knows well-being who never suffered woe,
Nor what hor hunger is who never was famished.
Who could naturally describe with color
If all the world were white or all things swan-white?
215 If there were no night, I believe no man
Should really know what day means;
Or had God suffered at the hands of some one other than himself,
He'd never have known for sure whether death is sour or sweet.
For never would a very rich man, who lives in rest and health,
220 Know what woe is if there were no natural death.
So God, who began all, of his good will
Became man of a maiden, to save mankind,
And suffered to be sold to see the sorrow of dying,
Which unknits all care and is the beginning of rest.
225 For until plague meets with us, I give you assurance,
Nobody knows, as I see it, the meaning of enough.

7. Psalms 29.6.

8. Document conferring authority.

9. In peace in the self-same . . . I will find rest (Psalms 4.9).

chill

Therefore, God of his goodness the first man Adam
 Set up in first solace and in sovereign joy;
 And then suffered him to sin, in order to feel sorrow,
 230 To know thereby what well-being was, to understand it naturally.
 And afterward, God ventured himself and took Adam's nature
 To know what he had suffered in three different places,
 Both in heaven and on earth—and now to hell he heads,
 To know what all woe is, he who knew all joy.
 But prove all things; hold fast that which is good.¹
 235 So it shall go for these folk: their folly and their sin
 Shall reach them what love is and bliss without end.
 For nobody knows what war is where peace rules
 Nor what is real well-being till he's taught by woe-is-me."
 Then there was a person with two broad eyes;²
 240 Book that good father was named, a bold man of speech.
 "By God's body," said this Book, "I will bear witness,
 That when this baby was born a star blazed
 So that all the wise men in the world fully agreed
 That such a baby was born in Bethlehem city
 245 Who should save man's soul and destroy sin.
 And all the elements," said the Book, "bear witness of this.
 That he was God that made everything the sky showed first:
 Those in heaven took *stella comata*³
 And tended it like a torch to reverence his birth;
 250 The light followed the Lord into the low earth.
 The water witnessed that he was God, for he walked on it dry:
 Peter the Apostle perceived his passage
 And as he went on the water knew him well, and said,
 'Lord, bid me come to thee.'⁴
 And oh, how the sun locked up her light in herself
 255 When she saw him suffer, who made the sun and sea!
 Oh, how the earth for heaviness that he would suffer
 Quaked as if alive and the rocks cracked also!
 Oh no, hell might not hold, but opened when God suffered
 And let out Simeon's sons⁵ to see him hang on cross.
 He should not see death.⁶
 260 And now shall Lucifer believe it, loath though he be;
 For Jesus comes yonder as a giant with an engine⁷
 To break and beat down all that oppose him
 And to have out of hell all those he pleases.
 And yet I, Book, will be burnt if he not arise to life
 265 And comfort all his kin and bring them out of care
 And all joy of the Jews dissolve and despise,

1. 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

2. Book's two broad eyes suggest the Old and New Testaments.

3. Hairy star (i.e., comet).

4. Matthew 14:28.

5. According to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus,

Simeon's sons were raised from the dead at the time of Christ's crucifixion.

6. Luke 2:26, which continues, "before he had seen the Christ the Lord."

7. A military device, perhaps like a giant slingshot.

And unless they revere this resurrection and honor the cross
 And believe in a new law, be lost body and soul."
 "Quiet," said Truth: "I both hear and see
 270 A spirit speaks to hell and bids the gates be opened."
 Lift up your gates.⁸
 A loud voice within that light said to Lucifer:
 "Princes⁹ of this place, quickly undo these gates,
 For he comes here with crown, the king of all glory!"
 Then Satan⁹ sighed and said to Hell,
 275 "Such a light against our leave fetched away Lazarus;¹
 Care and encumbrance is come to us all.
 If this king comes in, he'll fetch mankind
 And lead it where Lazarus is and bind me easily.
 Patriarchs and prophets have long talked of this
 280 That such a lord and light shall lead them all hence.
 But rise up, Ragamuffin, and hand over all the bars
 That Belial your grandfather beat with your mother,
 And I shall block this lord and stop his light.
 Before we're blinded by this brightness, let's go bar the gates.
 285 Let's check and chain and stop every chink
 So that no light leaps in through louver or loophole.
 Ashtaroth, call out, and have out our boys;
 Colting and his kin to save the castle.
 Boiling brimstone pour it out burning
 290 All hot on their heads who come near the walls.
 Set high tension cross bows and brazen guns
 And shoot out enough shot to blind his squadron.
 Set Mahmet² at the siege-engine and throw out millstones
 And with hooks and caltrops³ let's block them all!"
 295 "Listen," said Lucifer, "for I know this lord;
 Both this lord and this light, I knew him long ago.
 No death may hurt this lord; nor devil's cunning,
 And where he wills is his way—but let him beware the dangers:
 If he deprives me of my rights, he robs me by a power play.
 300 For by right and reason the crowd that is here
 Belongs to me body and soul, both good and evil.
 For he himself said it, who is Sire of heaven,
 That Adam and Eve and all their issue
 Should grievously die and dwell here forever.
 305 If they touched a tree or took an apple from it.
 Thus this lord of light made such a law,
 And since he is a loyal lord I can't believe
 He'll deprive us of our rights, since reason damned them.
 And since we've possessed them seven thousand winters

8. The first words from Psalms 23:9, which reads in the Latin Bible, "Lift up your gates, O princes, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in."

9. Langland pictures hell as populated by a number of

devils: Satan, Lucifer, Goblin, Belial, and Ashtaroth.

1. Compare with John 11.

2. Mohammed.

3. Iron balls with spikes meant to impede the progress of enemy cavalry.

Without any objections, and if now he begins,
 Then his word is deceitful, who is truth's witness."
 "That's true," said Satan, "but I sorely fear,
 For you got them with guile and broke into his garden;
 Against his love and his leave went into his land,
 Not in a fiend's form but in form of an adder
 And enticed Eve to eat on her own—
*Woe to him that is alone!*⁴—
 And promised her and him then to know
 As two gods, with God, both good and evil.
 Thus with treason and treachery you bewitched them both
 And made them break their obedience through false promises,
 And so you had them out and in here at the end."
 "It's not duly got where guile is the root,
 And God will not be duped," said Goblin, "or taken in.
 We have no true title to them, for your treason caused it.
 I'm afraid, therefore," the Devil said, "lest Truth fetch them out.
 For as you beguiled God's image by going as an adder,
 So has God beguiled us all by going as a man.
 For God has gone," said Goblin, "in man's likeness
 These thirty winters, I believe, and went around preaching.
 I've assailed him with sin, and sometimes asked
 Whether he was God or God's son? His answer was short.
 Thus he's rolled on like a proper man these thirty-two winters;
 And when I saw it was so, I contrived how I might
 Slow down those who loved him not, lest they martyr him.
 I would have lengthened his life, for I believed, if he died,
 That if his soul came here it would destroy us all.
 For the body, while its bones walked, was ever about
 To teach men to be loyal and to love one another;
 Which life and law, should it be long in use,
 It will undo us devils and bring us all down."
 "And now I see where his soul comes sailing this way
 With glory and great light—it's God, I know it.
 I advise we flee," said the Fiend, "straightaway from here,
 For it were better not to be than to abide in his sight.
 Because of your lies, Lucifer, we first lost our joy,
 And your pride made us fall here out of heaven;
 Because we believed in your lies, we had to lose our bliss.
 And now, for a later lie you told Eve,
 We've lost our lordship on land and in hell.
Now shall the prince of this world, etc."⁵
 After Satan so rudely berated
 Lucifer for his lying, I believe none other
 But our Lord in the end rebuked liars here
 And blamed on them all the misery that is made here on earth.

4. Ecclesiastes 4.10.

5. John 12.31, continues "be cast out"; "prince of this world" is a title of the devil.

Take note, you wise clerks and you smart lawyers,
 That you not mislead unlettered men, for David in the end
 Witnesses in his writing what is the reward of liars:
*Thou hatest all workers of iniquity: thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie.*⁶
 (I've digressed a bit for the sake of lies,
 To call them as I saw them, pursuing my theme!)
 For again that light commanded them unlock, and Lucifer
 answered.
 "What lord are you?" asked Lucifer. A voice said aloud:
 "The lord of might and main, that made all things.
 Dukes of this dim place, undo these gates now
 That Christ may come in, the son of heaven's king."
 And with that breath hell with all of Belial's bars broke;
 Despite all prevention, the gates were wide open.
 Patriarchs and prophets, *populus in tenebris*,⁷
 Sang with Saint John, "*Ecce agnus dei!*"⁸
 Lucifer could not look, so blinded him had the light,
 And those whom our Lord loved with that light flowed forth.
 "Now hear this," said our Lord, "both body and soul,
 To live up to both our rights to all sinful souls.
 Mine they were and of me; I may the better claim them.
 Though reason recorded, and right of myself,
 That if they ate the apple all should die,
 I consigned them not here to hell forever.
 For the deadly sin they did was caused by your deceit;
 You got them with guile against all reason.
 For in my palace, paradise, in an adder's person
 You falsely fetched there those I happened to watch over,
 Sweet-talked and deceived them and broke into my garden
 Against my love and my leave. The Old Law teaches
 That deceivers be deceived and fall in their guile,
 And whoever knocks out a man's eye or else his front teeth
 Or any manner member maims or hurts,
 The same injury he'll have who strikes another so.
*Tooth for tooth and eye for eye.*⁹
 So a life shall lose life where a life has life destroyed,
 So that life pays for life—the Old Law demands it;
 Ergo,¹ soul shall pay for soul and sin counter sin,
 And all that men did wrong, I became man to amend;
 And that death my death destroys to relieve
 And both revive and requite what was quenched through sin,
 And guile be beguiled through grace in the end.
It takes a trick to undo a trick.
 So do not believe it, Lucifer, that against the law I fetch
 From here any sinful soul by a pure power play,

6. Psalms 5.7.

7. People in darkness (Matthew 4.16, citing Isaiah 9.2).

8. Behold the Lamb of God (John 1.36).

9. Matthew 5.38, citing Exodus 21.14.

1. "Therefore," a central term in scholastic argument, used to introduce the logical conclusion to an argument.

395 But through right and reason ransom here my servants.
*I am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.*²
 So what was gotten with guile, is now through grace won back.
 And as Adam and all through a tree died
 Adam and all through a tree shall return to life.
 And now your guile begins to turn back on you
 400 And my grace to grow wider and wider.
 The bitterness you've brewed, enjoy it now yourself;
 You who are doctor of death, drink what you've mixed!
 For I who am Lord of life, love is my drink,
 And for that drink I died today, as it seemed.
 405 But I will drink from no deep dish of learning
 But from the common cups of all Christian souls;
 But your drink becomes death and deep hell your bowl.
 I fought so, I thirst even more for the sake of man's soul.
*I thirst.*³
 May no sweet wine or cider or precious drink
 410 Fully wet my whistle or my thirst slake
 Till grape harvest time fall in the vale of Jehosaphat,⁴
 And I drink fully ripe new wine, *resurreccio mortuorum*.⁵
 And then I shall come as king, with crown and with angels,
 And have out of hell all men's souls.
 415 Fiends and fiendkins shall stand before me
 And be at my bidding, of bliss or of pain.
 But to be merciful to man then my nature demands,
 For we are brothers of one blood, but not all in baptism.
 But all that are my full brothers in blood and in baptism
 420 Shall never come to hell again, once they are out.
*To thee only have I sinned, and have done evil before thee*⁶
 It's not the practice on earth to hang any felons
 More often than once, though they were traitors.
 And if the king of the kingdom come in the time
 When a thief should suffer death or other sentence,
 425 The law requires he grant him a reprieve if he sees him.
 And I who am King of Kings shall come at such time
 When doom damns to death all the wicked,
 And if law wills I look on them it lies within my grace
 Whether they die or die not, did they never so ill.
 430 Be it to any extent paid for, the boldness of their sin,
 I may do mercy out of my righteousness and all my true words.
 For holy writ wills that I take satisfaction from those who did ill,
 As *nullum malum impunitum, et nullum bonum irremuneratum*.⁷
 And so on all the wicked I will take vengeance here.
 435 And yet my kind nature in my keen anger shall constrain my will—

2. Matthew 5.17.

3. John 19.28.

4. On the evidence of Joel 3.2, 12, the Last Judgment was to take place at the Vale of Jehosaphat.

5. The resurrection of the dead (from the Nicene Creed).

6. Psalms 50.6.

7. [He is a just judge who leaves] no evil unpunished [and no good unrewarded] (from Pope Innocent III's tract *Of Contempt for the World*; see 4.143-44).

*Rebuke me not, O Lord, in thy indignation*⁸—
 To be merciful to many of my half-brothers.
 For blood may see blood both thirsty and cold
 But blood may not see blood bleed without taking pity.
*I heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter.*⁹
 But my righteousness and right shall reign in hell,
 440 And mercy over all mankind before me in heaven.
 For I'd be an unkind king unless I help my kin,
 And namely in such need that needs to ask for help.
*Enter not into judgment with thy servant.*¹
 Thus by law," said our Lord, "I will lead out of here
 The people I love and who believe in my coming.
 445 But for the lies that you lied, Lucifer, to Eve
 You shall bitterly abide," God said, and bound him with chains.
 Ashtoreth and company hid in nooks and crannies,
 They dared not look on our Lord, the least of them all,
 But let him lead forth those he liked and leave behind whomever he
 pleased.
 450 Many hundreds of angels then harped and sang,
*Flesh sins, flesh clears, flesh of God reigns as God.*²
 Then Peace piped a note of poetry:
*After darkest clouds, the sun will shine bright;
 And love shine brighter after every fight.*³
 455 "After sharpest showers," said Peace, "brightest is the sun;
 There is no warmer weather than after watery clouds,
 Nor any love dearer, nor dearer friends,
 Than after war and wreckage when love and peace are masters.
 There was never a war in this world nor wickeder envy
 460 That Love, if he wanted to, could not turn it to laughter,
 And Peace through patience stop all perils."
 "Truce," said Truth, "You tell us the truth, by Jesus!
 Let us kiss each other and clutch in covenant!"
 "And let no people," said Peace, "perceive that we squabbled,
 465 For nothing's impossible to him who is almighty."
 "That's the truth," said Righteousness and kissed Peace
 reverently,
 And Peace her, *per secula seculorum*.⁴
*Mercy and truth have met each other; justice and peace have kissed.*⁵
 Truth trumpeted then and sang *Te deum laudamus*,⁶
 And then Love strummed a loud note on the lute,
*Behold how good and how pleasant it is, etc.*⁷
 470 Till dawn the next day these damoiselles caroled
 On which men rang bells for the resurrection, and right with that I
 awoke

8. Psalms 37.2.

9. In 2 Corinthians 12.4, St. Paul tells of how in a mystical vision he was caught up to heaven, where he saw things that cannot be repeated.

1. Psalms 142.2.

2. From a medieval Latin hymn.

3. From Alain de Lille, a 12th-century poet and philosopher.

4. Forever and ever (the liturgical formula).

5. Psalms 84.11.

6. We praise thee, God (a celebrated Latin hymn).

7. Psalms 132.1.

And called Kit my wife and my daughter Calote:
 "Arise, and go reverence God's resurrection,
 And creep on your knees to the cross and kiss it as a jewel
 475 And most rightfully as a relic, none richer on earth.
 For it bore God's blessed body for our good,
 And it terrified the Fiend, for such is its might
 No grisly ghost may glide in its shadow!"

❑ "PIERS PLOWMAN" AND ITS TIME ❑

The Rising of 1381

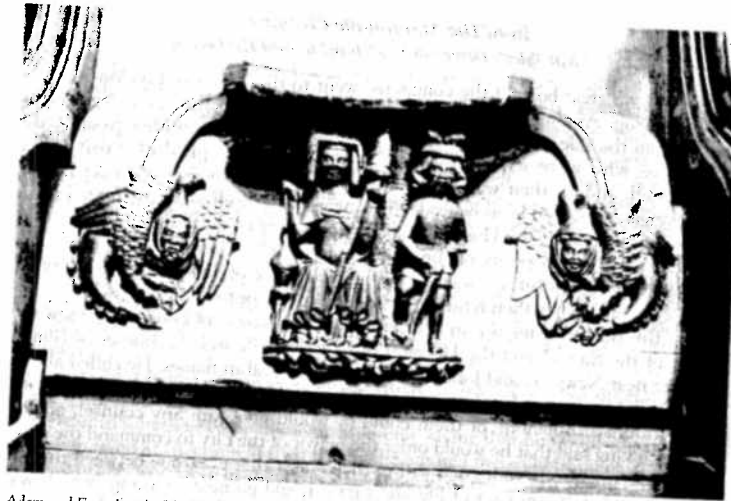
The event previously known as the "Peasants' Revolt" is generally referred to by today's historians as the "Rising of 1381," since it is now recognized that it included many members of the commons who were not peasants but rather middle-class landholders, artisans, and so forth. William Langland had a rather ambiguous relation to the rising, for while deploring the conditions that caused it, he refused to endorse its radical social program. When the rebels invoked his character Piers as a cultural hero, he revised *Piers Plowman* for a second time (the so-called C-text), thus disassociating himself from them. This section brings together a number of documents that record the events of the rising, and more importantly, reveal the subjective responses of contemporary writers to it.

The causes of the rising were varied. Among them was the "Statute of Laborers" enacted by Parliament in 1351 to freeze wages and restrict laborers' mobility, both of which had been increasing as a result of the depopulation caused by the Black Death. The more immediate catalyst, however, was a flat poll tax enacted in 1380, which hurt the poor disproportionately and which the government collected in a particularly ruthless way.

The rising itself was astonishingly brief, beginning at the end of May 1381 and collapsing by the end of July. From the prosperous southern counties of Essex and Kent the rebels marched to London, swearing loyalty to one another and to Richard II. Their hostility was directed against the church hierarchy and the feudal lords rather than against the monarchy. In London they burned the Savoy Palace, the local residence of the powerful John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and uncle of King Richard. The king, then only fourteen years old, found his advisers ineffectual, and so retreated with them to the Tower of London.

Having agreed to meet the Essex contingent outside the city, at Mile End, the king acceded to their demands of an end to villeinage (serfdom), and ordered his office of chancery to make multiple copies of charters to that effect. During this meeting, some rebels broke into the Tower of London and beheaded two of the most hated men in the kingdom, Simon Sudbury (the king's chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury) and Robert Hales (his treasurer). Afterward, they displayed their heads on London Bridge, as a sign that they were traitors to the commons.

The next day the king met with the Kentish rebels, again outside the city, at Smithfield. Here their captain Wat Tyler demanded not only the abolition of villeinage but fixed rents, partial disendowment of the church and dispersal of its goods to the poor, and punishment of all "traitors" held to be responsible for the poll tax. In the course of a scuffle, the Lord Mayor of London, William Walworth, stabbed Tyler and mortally wounded him; thereupon, the king rode before the rebels and declared himself their new captain, successfully leading them off the field.



Adam and Eve, detail of a misericord, c. 1379. Misericords were shallow seats in the choir stalls of medieval churches, on which worshipers could rest, still standing, during the long celebrations of the Mass and Daily Office. Their undersides were often carved with animal grotesques and scenes of common life, both seen in this depiction of Adam and Eve from a misericord in Worcester Cathedral. Eve spins and Adam digs, in a moment reminiscent of the couplet from John Ball's sermon: "Whan Adam dalf and Eve span, / who was thanne a gentilman?"

Tyler's death broke the will of the rebels, and the king promptly revoked the charters freeing the serfs. In a series of trials, he prosecuted the instigators, among them John Ball, the priest who had shortly before preached to the rebels at Blackheath the famous sermon challenging the division of society into three estates: "Whan Adam dalf and Eve span, / who was thanne a gentilman?" Ball was found guilty of treason, and drawn, hanged, and quartered. Aside from such punishments, there were few apparent effects of the rising, although the nobles and the clergy relented in their treatment of the commons, and in the long run, the institution of villeinage declined. For the ruling class itself, the rising caused intense anxiety. John Gower, in his allegorized account, *The Voice of One Crying*, reports hiding in the woods to escape the peasants. Like him, the monastic chroniclers like Thomas of Walsingham generally present the rebels as mad beasts.

What is perhaps most significant about the written reception of the rising is the languages—Latin, French, and English—in which it occurs. Like Gower's *Voice of One Crying*, the chronicles are generally written in Latin, although the *Anonimale Chronicle*, from which a passage is included here, is in French. Langland and Chaucer wrote in English, while the short poem below, *The Course of Revolt*, is macaronic, alternating English lines with Latin ones. Although there is little written evidence in the voice of the rebels themselves (who were generally illiterate), there are two rantalizing scraps identified as John Ball's letters, written in English although embedded in hostile Latin chronicle accounts of Ball's trial and execution. It has been suggested recently that the most important fact about the rebel speeches and writings is their "vernacularity"—the fact that they appear in a language that the common people could understand.

from *The Anonimale Chronicle*¹

[Wat Tyler's Demands to Richard II, and His Death]

At this time a great body of the commons² went to the Tower of London to speak with the king. As they could not get a hearing from him, they laid siege to the Tower from the side of Saint Katherine's, towards the south. Another group of the commons, who were within the city, went to the Hospital of Saint John, Clerkenwell, and on their way they burned the place and houses of Roger Legett, questmonger,³ who had been beheaded in Cheapside, as well as all the rented property and tenements of the Hospital of Saint John they could find. Afterwards they came to the beautiful priory of the said hospital, and set on fire several fine and pleasant buildings within it—a great and horrible piece of damage to the priory for all time to come. They then returned to London to rest or to do more mischief.

At this time the king was in a turret of the great Tower of London, and saw the manor of the Savoy⁴ and the Hospital of Clerkenwell, and the houses of Simon Hosteler near Newgate, and John Butterwick's place, all in flames. He called all the lords about him into a chamber, and asked their counsel as to what should be done in such a crisis. But none of them could or would give him any counsel; and so the young king said that he would order the mayor of the city to command the sheriffs and aldermen to have it cried within their wards that everyone between the age of fifteen and sixty, on pain of life and limb, should go next morning (which was Friday) to Mile End, and meet him there at seven of the bell. He did this in order that all the commons who were stationed around the Tower would be persuaded to abandon the siege, and come to Mile End to see him and hear him, so that those who were in the Tower could leave safely at their will and save themselves as they wished. But it came to nothing, for some of them did not have the good fortune to be saved.

Later that Thursday, the said feast of Corpus Christi, the king, remaining anxiously and sadly in the Tower, climbed on to a little turret facing Saint Katherine's, where a large number of the commons were lying. He had it proclaimed to them that they should all go peaceably to their homes, and he would pardon them all their different offenses. But all cried with one voice that they would not go before they had captured the traitors within the Tower, and obtained charters to free them from all manner of serfdom, and certain other points which they wished to demand. The king benevolently granted their requests and made a clerk write a bill in their presence in these terms: "Richard, king of England and France, gives great thanks to his good commons, for that they have so great a desire to see and maintain their king; and he grants them pardon for all manner of trespasses and misprisions and felonies done up to this hour, and wills and commands that every one should now quickly return to his own home: He wills and commands that everyone should put his grievances in writing, and have them sent to him; and he will provide, with the aid of his loyal lords and his good council, such remedy as shall be profitable both to him and to them, and to the kingdom." He put his signet seal to this document in their presence and then sent the said bill by the hands of two of his knights to the

1. This gripping account describes the rebel Wat (Walter) Tyler's confrontation with the King. Written in French rather than Latin, *The Anonimale Chronicle* is considered to be more contemporary and more balanced than judgmental Latin accounts like that of Thomas of Walsingham. Translated by R. B. Dobson.

2. The common people as opposed to the nobility or the clergy; the third estate.

3. One who made a business of conducting inquiries.

4. The beautiful palace of John of Gaunt, the King's powerful uncle.

people around Saint Katherine's. And he caused it to be read to them, the man who read it standing up on an old chair above the others so that all could hear. All this time the king remained in the Tower in great distress of mind. And when the commons had heard the bill, they said that it was nothing but a trifle and mockery. Therefore they returned to London and had it cried around the city that all lawyers, all the men of the Chancery and the Exchequer and everyone who could write a writ or a letter should be beheaded,⁵ wherever they could be found. At this time they burnt several more houses within the city. The king himself ascended to a high garret of the Tower to watch the fires; then he came down again, and sent for the lords to have their counsel. But they did not know how to advise him, and were surprisingly abashed.

On the next day, Friday, the commons of the country and the commons of London assembled in fearful strength, to the number of a hundred thousand or more, besides some four score who remained on Tower Hill to watch those who were within the Tower. Some went to Mile End, on the way to Brentwood, to wait for the king's arrival, because of the proclamation that he had made. But others came to Tower Hill, and when the king knew that they were there, he sent them orders by a messenger to join their companions at Mile End, saying that he would come to them very soon. And at this time of the morning he advised the archbishop of Canterbury and the others who were in the Tower, to go down to the little water-gate, and take a boat and save themselves. And the archbishop proceeded to do this; but a wicked woman raised a cry against him, and he had to turn back to the Tower, to his own confusion.

And by seven of the bell the king himself came to Mile End, and with him his mother in a carriage, and also the earls of Buckingham, Kent, Warwick and Oxford, as well as Sir Thomas Percy, Sir Robert Knolles, the mayor of London and many knights and squires; and Sir Aubrey de Vere carried the royal sword. And when the king arrived and the commons saw him, they knelt down to him, saying "Welcome our Lord King Richard, if it pleases you, and we will not have any other king but you." And Wat Tyghler, their master and leader, prayed on behalf of the commons that the king would suffer them to take and deal with all the traitors against him and the law. The king granted that they should freely seize all who were traitors and could be proved to be such by process of law. The said Walter and the commons were carrying two banners as well as pennons and pennoncels⁶ while they made their petition to the king. And they required that henceforward no man should be a serf nor make homage or any type of service to any lord, but should give four pence for an acre of land. They asked also that no one should serve any man except at his own will and by means of regular covenant. And at this time the king had the commons arrayed in two lines, and had it proclaimed before them that he would confirm and grant that they should be free, and generally should have their will; and that they could go through all the realm of England and catch all traitors and bring them to him in safety, and then he would deal with them as the law demanded.

Because of this grant Wat Tyghler and the commons took their way to the Tower, to seize the archbishop and the others while the king remained at Mile End. Meanwhile the archbishop had sung his mass devoutly in the Tower, and confessed

5. Chancery held the archives of public record and the Exchequer dealt with the collection of revenue. The Latin chroniclers saw the rising as a threat to writing itself; Thomas of Walsingham, for example, reports that

the rebels gleefully burned records they saw as guaranteeing the lords' legal power over them.

6. Small flags and streamers borne on a lance.

the prior of the Hospital of Clerkenwell and others; and then he heard two or three masses and chanted the *Commendatio*, and the *Placebo* and *Dirige*, and the Seven Psalms, and the Litany; and when he was at the words "*Omnes sancti orate pro nobis*" [All saints pray for us], the commons entered and dragged him out of the chapel of the Tower, and struck and hustled him roughly, as they did also the others who were with him, and led them to Tower Hill. There they cut off the heads of Master Simon of Sudbury, archbishop of Canterbury, of Sir Robert Hales,⁷ High Prior of the Hospital of Saint John's of Clerkenwell, Treasurer of England, of Brother William of Appleton, a great physician and surgeon, and one who had much influence with the king and the duke of Lancaster. And some time after they beheaded John Legge, the king's serjeant-at-arms, and with him a certain juror. At the same time the commons had it proclaimed that whoever could catch any Fleming⁸ or other aliens of any nation, might cut off their heads; and so they did accordingly. Then they took the heads of the archbishop and of the others and put them on wooden poles, and carried them before them in procession through all the city as far as the shrine of Westminster Abbey, to the contempt of themselves, of God and of Holy Church: for which reason vengeance descended on them shortly afterwards. Then they returned to London Bridge and set the head of the archbishop above the gate, with the heads of eight others they had executed, so that all who passed over the bridge could see them. This done, they went to the church of Saint Martin's in the Vintry, and found therein thirty-five Flemings, whom they dragged outside and beheaded in the street. On that day there were beheaded 140 or 160 persons. Then they took their way to the places of Lombards and other aliens, and broke into their houses, and robbed them of all their goods that they could discover. So it went on for all that day and the night following with hideous cries and horrible tumult.

At this time, because the Chancellor had been beheaded, the king made the earl of Arundel Chancellor for the day, and entrusted him with the Great Seal; and all that day he caused various clerks to write out charters, patents, and letters of protection, granted to the commons in consequence of the matters before mentioned, without taking any fines for the sealing or transcription.

On the next day, Saturday, great numbers of the commons came into Westminster Abbey at the hour of Tierce,⁹ and there they found John Inworth, Marshal of the Marshalsea and warden of the prisoners, a tormentor without pity; he was near the shrine of Saint Edward, embracing a marble pillar, hoping for aid and succor from the saint to preserve him from his enemies. But the commons wrenched his arms away from the pillar of the shrine, and dragged him into Cheap, and there beheaded him. And at the same time they took from Bread Street a valet named John of Greenfield, merely because he had spoken well of Brother William Appleton and the other murdered persons; and they brought him into Cheap and beheaded him. All this time the king was having it cried through the city that every one should go peaceably to his own country and his own house, without doing more mischief; but to this the commons would not agree.

And on this same day, at three hours after noon, the king came to Westminster Abbey and about two hundred persons with him. The abbot and convent of the said

7. Sudbury and Hales were especially hated by the rebels—the former, as chancellor of England, for instituting the poll tax, and the latter, as treasurer, for collecting it.

8. Immigrants from Flanders, who had become wealthy in

the London wool trade; they were particular targets of the rebels (see Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, line 576).

9. The third of seven canonical "hours" around which clerics organized their day; usually, the third hour after sunrise.

abbey, and the canons and vicars of Saint Stephen's Chapel, came to meet him in procession, clothed in their copes and their feet bare, halfway to Charing Cross; and they brought him to the abbey, and then to the high altar of the church. The king made his prayers devoutly, and left an offering for the altar and the relics. Afterwards he spoke with the anchorite,¹ and confessed to him, and remained with him some time. Then the king caused a proclamation to be made that all the commons of the country who were still within the city should come to Smithfield² to meet him there; and so they did.

And when the king with his retinue arrived there, he turned to the east, in a place before Saint Bartholomew's a house of canons: and the commons arrayed themselves in bands of great size on the west side. At this moment the mayor of London, William of Walworth, came up, and the king ordered him to approach the commons, and make their chieftain come to him. And when he was called by the mayor, this chieftain, Wat Tyghler of Maidstone by name, approached the king with great confidence, mounted on a little horse so that the commons might see him. And he dismounted, holding in his hand a dagger which he had taken from another man; and when he had dismounted he half bent his knee and took the king by the hand, shaking his arm forcefully and roughly, saying to him, "Brother, be of good comfort and joyful, for you shall have, in the fortnight that is to come, forty thousand more commons than you have at present, and we shall be good companions." And the king said to Walter, "Why will you not go back to your own country?" But the other answered, with a great oath, that neither he nor his fellows would leave until they had got their charter as they wished to have it with the inclusion of certain points which they wished to demand. Tyghler threatened that the lords of the realm would rue it bitterly if these points were not settled at the commons' will. Then the king asked him what were the points which he wished to have considered, and he should have them freely and without contradiction, written out and sealed. Thereupon the said Wat rehearsed the points which were to be demanded; and he asked that there should be no law except for the law of Winchester³ and that henceforward there should be no outlawry⁴ in any process of law, and that no lord should have lordship in future; but it should be divided among all men, except for the king's own lordship. He also asked that the goods of Holy Church should not remain in the hands of the religious, nor of parsons and vicars, and other churchmen; but that clergy already in possession should have a sufficient sustenance and the rest of their goods should be divided among the people of the parish. And he demanded that there should be only one bishop in England and only one prelate, and all the lands and tenements of the possessors should be taken from them and divided among the commons, only reserving for them a reasonable sustenance. And he demanded that there should be no more villeins⁵ in England, and no serfdom nor villeinage but that all men should be free and of one condition. To this the king gave an easy answer, and said that Wat should have all that he could fairly grant, reserving only for himself the regality of his crown. And then he ordered him to go back to his own home, without causing further delay.

During all the time that the king was speaking, no lord or counselor dared or wished to give answer to the commons in any place except for the king himself. Presently Wat Tyghler, in the presence of the king, sent for a jug of water to rinse his mouth, because of the great heat that he felt; and as soon as the water was

1. A religious recluse who lived enclosed in a tiny dwelling.

2. An area outside the walls of the city of London.

3. The reference is unclear; it may refer to a claim by the

rebels to the rights of tenants on royal lands.

4. Condition of being outside traditional legal protection.

5. Serfs tied to the land; bondsmen.

brought he rinsed out his mouth in a very rude and villainous manner before the king. And then he made them bring him a jug of ale, and drank a great draught, and then, in the presence of the king, climbed on his horse again. At that time a certain valet from Kent, who was among the king's retinue, asked to see the said Wat, chieftain of the commons. And when he saw him, he said aloud that he was the greatest thief and robber in all Kent. Wat heard these words, and commanded the valet to come out to him, shaking his head at him as a sign of malice; but Wat himself refused to go to him for fear that he had of the others there. But at last the lords made the valet go out to Wat, to see what the latter would do before the king. And when Wat saw him he ordered one of his followers, who was mounted on horseback and carrying a banner displayed, to dismount and behead the said valet. But the valet answered that he had done nothing worthy of death, for what he had said was true, and he would not deny it, although he could not lawfully debate the issue in the presence of his liege lord, without leave, except in his own defense: but that he could do without reproof, for whoever struck him would be struck in return. For these words Wat wanted to strike the valet with his dagger, and would have slain him in the king's presence; but because he tried to do so, the mayor of London, William of Walworth, reasoned with the said Wat for his violent behavior and contempt, done in the king's presence, and arrested him. And because he arrested him, the said Wat stabbed the mayor with his dagger in the body in great anger. But, as it pleased God, the mayor was wearing armor and took no harm, but like a hardy and vigorous man drew his dagger and struck back at the said Wat, giving him a deep cut in the neck, and then a great blow on the head. And during this scuffle a valet of the king's household drew his sword, and ran Wat two or three times through the body, mortally wounding him. Wat spurred his horse, crying to the commons to avenge him, and the horse carried him some four score paces, and then he fell to the ground half dead. And when the commons saw him fall, and did not know for certain how it happened, they began to bend their bows and to shoot. Therefore the king himself spurred his horse, and rode out to them, commanding them that they should all come to him at the field of Saint John of Clerkenwell.

Meanwhile the mayor of London rode as hastily as he could back to the city, and commanded those who were in charge of the twenty-four wards to have it cried round their wards, that every man should arm himself as quickly as he could, and come to the king's aid in Saint John's Fields, where the commons were, for he was in great trouble and necessity. But at this time almost all of the knights and squires of the king's household, and many others, were so frightened of the affray that they left their liege lord and went each his own way.

Afterwards, when the king had reached the open fields, he made the commons array themselves on the west side. And presently the aldermen came to him in a body, bringing with them the keepers of the wards arrayed in several bands, a fine company of well-armed men in great strength. And they enveloped the commons like sheep within a pen. Meanwhile, after the mayor had sent the keepers of the town on their way to the king, he returned with a good company of lances to Smithfield in order to make an end of the captain of the commons. And when he came to Smithfield he failed to find there the said captain Wat Tyghler, at which he marveled much, and asked what had become of the traitor. And he was told that Wat had been carried by a group of the commons to the hospital for the poor near Saint Bartholomew's, and put to bed in the chamber of the master of the hospital. The mayor went there and found him, and had him carried out to the middle of Smithfield, in the presence of his companions, and had him beheaded. And so ended his wretched life. But the mayor had his head set on a

pole and carried before him to the king, who still remained in the field. And when the king saw the head he had it brought near him to subdue the commons, and thanked the mayor greatly for what he had done. And when the commons saw that their chieftain, Wat Tyghler, was dead in such a manner, they fell to the ground there among the corn, like beaten men, imploring the king for mercy for their misdeeds. And the king benevolently granted them mercy, and most of them took to flight.

Three Poems on the Rising of 1381

John Ball's First Letter¹

John Ball Saint Mary Priest, greeteth well all manner of men, and biddeth them in name of the Trinitie, Father, Sonne, & holy Ghost, stand manlike together in truth, & helpe truth, and truth shall helpe you:

now raygneth pride in price,
couetise^o is holden^o wise
lechery without shame,
gluttonie without blame,
enuye raygneth^o with reason,
and sloath is taken in great season,
God doe boote^o for nowe is time. Amen.

greed / hold

reigns

make amends

John Ball's Second Letter²

LITTERA IOHANNIS BALLE MISSA COMMUNIBUS ESTSEXIE
[THE LETTER OF JOHN BALL TO THE ESSEX COMMONS]

Iohan schep, som-tyme seynte marie prest of york, and now of colchestre, Greteth wel Iohan nameles & Iohn the mullere and Iohn cartere, and biddeth hem thei bee war of gyle [treachery] in borugh, and stondesth to-gidere in godes name, and biddeth Pers ploughman / go to his werk and chastise wel hobbe the robbere; and taketh with yow Iohan Trewman and alle hijs felawes and no mo, and loke schappe you to on heued³ and no mo.

Iohan the mullere hath y-grounde smal, smal, smal.
The kynges sone of heuene schal paye for al.
be war or the be wo.^o
knoweth your freend fro your foo.

beware or be sorry

1. This and the piece following can only provisionally be called "poems," despite their rhymed couplets and sporadic alliteration. The court that tried and convicted Ball regarded them as actual directions to his followers, and modern scholarship has tended to concur. If so they are directions in code, for they are, in the words of one chronicler, "full of enigmas." In this poem the complaint about the seven deadly sins running rampant is conventional, but the conclusion, "God do here for now is time" (God make amends, for now is the time) is highly unusual in its call to action. Significantly, the sin of anger is absent from the list.

2. According to the chronicle from which this "letter" was taken, Ball sent it to "the leaders of the commons in Essex . . . in order to urge them to finish what they had begun," and it was "afterwards found in the sleeve of a man about to be hanged for disturbing the peace." It appears

in Thomas Walsingham's Latin *Historia Anglicana*, where it is included as evidence of the treason for which Ball was hanged. In the prose introduction to the poem, John the "shep," priest of Colchester, is the assumed name of John Ball (as "pastor"), while John Carter and John the Miller are both generic occupational names often ascribed to the leaders of the rebels. The reference to "Pers Ploughman" in the poem's introduction indicates that the rebels interpreted Langland's conservative poem for their own purposes. It presents Piers not as Langland's patient laborer, but as one who should get to his "werk" of punishing "robbers," perhaps "Hobbe" (Robert) Hales, the treasurer of the king, beheaded by the rebels for his role in collecting the poll tax.

3. Take one head for yourself; possibly a reference to the rebels' loyalty to Richard II as opposed to the nobles.

haueth y-now & seith hoo!
and do wel and bettre and fleth° synne,
and seketh pees and hold yow ther-inne.
and so biddeth lohan trewaman and alle his felawes.

Hanc litteram Idem Iohannes halle confessus est scripsisse, et communibus transmisisse, et plura alia fatebatur et fecit: propter que, ut diximus, trahitus, suspensus, et decollatus apud sanctum albanum Ildibus Iulij, presente rege, et cadauer eius quadripartitum quatuor regni ciuitatibus missum est. [John Ball confessed that he wrote this letter and sent it to the commons, and said and did many other things. For which reason, as we have said, he was drawn, hanged, and beheaded before the king at Saint Albans, on the ides of July; and his body was quartered and sent to four cities in the kngdom.]

The Course of Revolt⁴

	The taxe hath tened° vs alle, probat hoc mors tot validorum;°	harmed this death tests so many of the strong!]
	The Kyng therof had small, ffruit in manibus cupidorum ⁵	it was in the hands of the greedy ones
5	yt had ful hard hansell,° dans causam fine dolorum;°	had omen giving cause to an end of sorrows
	vengeaunce nedes most° fall, propter peccata malorum.°	must on account of the sins of the wicked
	In Kent care° be-gan,° mox infestando potentes;°	troubles soon attacking the rulers
10	On rowtes° tho Rebawdes° they ran, Sua turpida arma ferentes.°	crowds / rascals bearing their shameful weapons
	ffoles° they dred no man, Regni Regem, neque gentes;°	fools neither king of the realm, nor the people
15	laddes° they were there Cheveteyns,° Sine iure fere superantes.°	churls / captains lawlessly rising above their station
	laddes° lowde they lowght,° Clamantes voce sonora,°	churls / laughed shouting in a loud voice
20	The bischop ⁷ wan they slowght,° Et corpora plura decora.°	slew and many handsome people
	Maners down they drowght,° In regno non meliora;°	they threw down manor houses there were none better in the kingdom
	Harmes they dyde y-nowght;° habuerunt libera lora.°	enough they had free rein
25	lak strawe ⁸ made yt stowte° Cum profusa comitiua,°	suggested with a captain's munificence
	And seyð al schuld hem lowte,°	bow down to them

4. Unlike the two preceding letters, there is no doubt that this piece is a poem: it is written in six- or eight-line stanzas of English alternating with Latin, with a rhyme scheme *abab (ab)*. The masculine rhymes of the English (*alle, small, etc.*) contrast with the feminine rhymes of the Latin (*validorum, cupidorum, etc.*) to give it a lilting quality. The poem laments the violence of the rising, although it opens with a recognition of the rebels' grievances: the poll tax of 1377, 1379, and 1380-1381 "hath

tened [harmed] vs alle."

5. Much of the tax revenue was diverted to collectors rather than returned to the king.

6. The rising actually began in Essex and spread to Kent.

7. Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury.

8. Jack Straw was a fictional character believed to have been a leader of the rising; see Chaucer, *Nun's Priest's Tale*, lines 628-31.

	Anglonum corpora uiua.° Sadly° can they schowte, pulsant pietatis oliua.°	the living community of Englishmen vigorously / shouted they beat the olive branch of pity those who used to skulk disgrace the plough and plough handle
30	The wycche were wont to lowte,° aratrum traducere stiua.°	
	Hales,° that dowghty° knyght, quo splenduit Anglia tota,°	brave in whom all England shone
35	dolefully° he was dyght,° Cum stultis pace remota.°	pitiably / cut down when removed from peace by foils
	There he myght not fyght, nec Christo soluere vota.°	nor say his prayers to Christ
	Savoy ¹ semely set° heu! funditus igne cadebat.°	beautifully built alas, it was given over to the fire
40	Arcan don there they bett, ² Et eos virtute premebat.°	and threatened them with force
	deth was ther dewe dett, qui captum quisque ferebat.°	whoever carried off stolen goods
45	Oure kyng myght have no rest, Alii latuere cauerna;°	others hid in caves
	To ride he was ful prest, recolendo gesta paterna.°	remembering his father's deeds
	lak straw down they cast ³ Smetefeld virtute superna.°	at Smithfield with superior strength
50	god, as thou may best, Regem defende, guberna.°	defend the kingdom and govern it

John Gower

from *The Voice of One Crying¹*
from PROLOGUE

In the beginning of this work, the author intends to describe how the lowly peasants violently revolted against the freemen and nobles of the realm. And since an event of this kind was as loathsome and horrible as a monster, he reports that in a dream

9. Sir Robert Hales, treasurer of England and therefore closely associated with the collection of the poll tax. He was beheaded at the Tower of London during the rising.

1. John of Gaunt's London residence.

2. A reference to Achan (Joshua 7), who transgressed the law of God by stealing valuables from Jericho. Several chronicles mention the rebels' restraint in not looting the houses of the nobles.

3. It was not (the fictional) Jack Straw, but Wat Tyler who was mortally wounded at Smithfield.

1. Gower grew up in Kent (one of the counties where the Rising of 1381 started), in a well-connected family, and both Richard II and Henry IV were his patrons. He was a friend of Chaucer, who refers to him as "moral Gower."

The immorality of contemporary society, particularly the refusal of the three estates to work together, is in fact the unifying theme of Gower's work. Of his three long poems (written in the three languages of the period, English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin), the Middle English *Lower's Confession* (*Confessio amantis*), though primarily a dream vision exploring the frustrations and folly of human

divine love, is set a framing complaint about the three estates, and the Anglo-Norman *Mirror of Man* (*Miroir de l'Homme*) is based on such a complaint.

Gower's Latin *Voice of One Crying* (*Vox Clamantis*) laments the failure of the three estates in a more prophetic way: the speaker identifies himself with John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness of 14th-century England. Like *Piers Plowman*, the poem takes the form of an allegorical dream vision. Like Langland, Gower revised his work in response to the revolt. He had written Books 2-7 by 1378 as a general complaint about the three estates, though he blamed the peasants in particular. Their refusal to produce food "by the sweat of their brow" as God decreed shows their laziness, and their demand of higher wages shows their wickedness and greed (bk. 5.9). After the Rising of 1381 occurred, he composed what is now Book 1 to decry the violence, which he saw as led by the devil; in it, he casts the peasants as beasts lacking reason, and their leader, Wat Tyler, as a rabble-rousing jack-daw, or jay (bk. 1.9). Translated by Eric W. Stockton.

he saw different throngs of the rabble transformed into different kinds of domestic animals. He says, moreover, that those domestic animals deviated from their true nature and took on the barbarousness of wild beasts. In accordance with the separate divisions of this book, which is divided into seven parts (as will appear more clearly below in its headings), he treats furthermore of the causes for such outrages taking place among men. * * *

[WAT TYLER AS A JACKDAW INCITING THE PEASANTS TO RIOT]²

Here he says that in his dream he saw that when all the aforementioned madmen stood herded together, a certain Jackdaw (in English a Jay, which is commonly called Wat) assumed the rank of command over the others. And to tell the truth of the matter, this Wat was their leader.

When this great multitude of monsters like wild beasts stood united, a multitude like the sands of the sea, there appeared a Jackdaw, well instructed in the art of speaking, which no cage could keep at home. While all were looking on, this bird spread his wings and claimed to have top rank, although he was unworthy. Just as the Devil was placed in command over the army of the lower world, so this scoundrel was in charge of the wicked mob. A harsh voice, a fierce expression, a very faithful likeness to a death's head—these things gave token of his appearance. He checked the murmuring and all kept silent so that the sound from his mouth might be better heard. He ascended to the top of a tree, and with the voice from his open mouth he uttered such words as these to his compeers:

"O you low sort of wretches, which the world has subjugated for a long time by its law, look, now the day has come when the peasantry will triumph and will force the freemen to get off their lands. Let all honor come to an end, let justice perish, and let no virtue that once existed endure further in the world. Let the law give over which used to hold us in check with its justice, and from here on let our court rule."

The whole mob was silent and took note of the speaker's words, and they liked every command he delivered from his mouth. The rabble lent a deluded ear to his fickle talk, and it saw none of the future things that would result. For when he had been honored in this way by the people, he quickly grabbed all the land for himself. Indeed, when the people had unadvisedly given themselves into servitude, he called the populace together and gave orders. Just as a billow usually grows calm after a stiff breeze, and just as a wave swells by the blast of a whirlwind, so the Jackdaw stirred up all the others with his outrageous shouting, and he drew the people's minds toward war. The stupid portion of the people did not know what its "court" might be, but he ordered them to adopt the laws of force. He said, "Strike," and one man struck. He said, "Kill," and another killed. He said, "Commit crime"; everyone committed it, and did not oppose his will. Everyone he called to in his madness listened with ears pricked up, and once aroused to his voice, pursued the [prescribed] course. Thus many an unfortunate man, driven by his persuasive raving, stuck his hand into the fire again and again. All proclaimed in a loud voice, "So be it," so that the sound was like the din of the sea. Stunned by the great noise of their voice, I now could scarcely lift my trembling feet. Yet from a distance I

2. From Book I.

observed how they made their mutual arrangements by clasping their hands. For they said this, that the mob from the country would destroy whatever was left of the noble class in the world.

With these words, they all marched together in the same fashion, and the wicked ruler of hell led the way. A black cloud mingled with the furies of hell approached, and every wickedness poured into their hearts rained down. The earth was so thoroughly soaked with the dew of hell that no virtue could flourish from that time forth. But every vice that a worthy man abhors flourished and filled men's hearts from that time on. Then at midday the Devil attacked and his hard-shot arrow flew during that painful day. Satan himself was freed and on hand, together with all the sinful band of servile hell. Behold, the untutored heart's sense of shame was lost, and it no longer feared the terrors of crime or punishment. And so when I saw the leaders of hell ruling the world, the rights of heaven were worth nothing. The more I saw them, the more I judged I ought to be afraid of them, not knowing what sort of end would be bound to come.

[THE LAZINESS AND GREED OF PLOUGHMEN]³

Now that he has spoken of those of knightly rank who ought to keep the state unharmed, it is necessary to speak of those who are under obligation to enter into the labors of agriculture, which are necessary for obtaining food and drink for the sustenance of the human race.

Now you have heard what knighthood is, and I shall speak in addition of what the guiding principle for other men ought to be. For after knighthood there remains only the peasant rank; the rustics in it cultivate the grains and vineyards. They are the men who seek food for us by the sweat of their heavy toil, as God Himself has decreed. The guiding principle of our first father Adam, which he received from the mouth of God on high, is rightly theirs. For God said to him, when he fell from the glories of Paradise, "O sinner, the sweat and toil of the world be thine; in them shalt thou eat thy bread."⁴ So if God's peasant pays attention to the plowshare as it goes along, and if he thus carries on the work of cultivation with his hand, then the fruit which in due course the fertile field will bear and the grape will stand abundant in their due seasons. Now, however, scarcely a farmer wishes to do such work; instead, he wickedly loafs everywhere.

An evil disposition is widespread among the common people, and I suspect that the servants of the plow are often responsible for it. For they are sluggish, they are scarce, and they are grasping. For the very little they do they demand the highest pay. Now that this practice has come about, see how one peasant insists upon more than two demanded in days gone by. Yet a short time ago one performed more service than three do now, as those maintain who are well acquainted with the facts. For just as the fox seeks his hole and enters it while the woods are echoing on every side of the hole, so does the servant of the plow, contrary to the law of the land, seek to make a fool of the land. They desire the leisures of great men, but they have nothing to feed themselves with, nor will they be servants. God and Nature have ordained that they shall serve, but neither knows how to keep them within bounds. Everyone owning land complains in his turn about these people;

3. From Book 5.

4. Genesis 3:19.

each stands in need of them and none has control over them. The peasants of old did not scorn God with impunity or usurp a noble worldly rank. Rather, God imposed servile work upon them, so that the peasantry might subdue its proud feelings; and liberty, which remained secure for freemen, ruled over the serfs and subjected them to its law.

The experience of yesterday makes us better informed as to what perfidy the unruly serf possesses. As the teasel⁵ harmfully thins out the standing crops if it is not thinned out itself, so does the unruly peasant weigh heavily upon the well-behaved ones. The peasant strikes at the subservient and soothes the troublesome, yet the principle which the old order of things teaches is not wrong: let the law accordingly cut down the harmful teasels of rabble, lest they uproot the nobler grain with their stinging. Unless it is struck down first, the peasant race strikes against freemen, no matter what nobility or worth they possess. Its actions outwardly show that the peasantry is base, and it esteems the nobles the less because of their very virtues. Just as lopsided ships begin to sink without the right load, so does the wild peasantry, unless it is held in check.

God and our toil confer and bestow everything upon us. Without toil, man's advantages are nothing. The peasant should therefore put his limbs to work, as is proper for him to do. Just as a barren field cultivated by the plowshare fails the granaries and brings home no crop in autumn, so does the worthless churl, the more he is cherished by your love, fail you and bring on your ruin. The serfs perform none of their servile duties voluntarily and have no respect for the law. Whatever the serf's body suffers patiently under compulsion, inwardly his mind ever turns toward utter wickedness. Miracles happen only contrary to nature; only the divinity of nature can go against its own powers. It is not for man's estate that anyone from the class of serfs should try to set things right.

END OF "PIERS PLOWMAN" AND ITS TIME



MYSTICAL WRITINGS

Throughout the Middle Ages, religious belief was communally expressed in the great public liturgies: the mass and the Divine Office—those prayers, hymns, and readings performed, especially by monastic communities, at the eight liturgical "hours" from dawn until dark. Private devotion, however, also had a continuous place in medieval Christianity. The British Isles enjoyed a particularly rich and ancient tradition of lives led in holy solitude and of texts and collections intended for private devotion by both clergy and laity. Such early works were enriched in the late eleventh century by the influential *Prayers or Meditations* of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anselm's prayers and related works were collected into portable books. Beginning in the thirteenth century, England also produced distinguished, sometimes elaborately decorated psalters—collections of psalms and other prayers—that were often privately owned. Toward the middle of the thirteenth century, an Oxford workshop produced the earliest of the decorated

⁵ A bristly plant like a thistle.

Books of Hours, a form that was to prove enormously popular across Europe for the rest of the Middle Ages.

Books of Hours typically contained the "Little Hours of the Virgin," an abbreviated version of the Divine Office that allowed for private commemoration of the holy hours, as well as other prayers, extracts from the gospels, and the "seven penitential psalms." Psalters and Books of Hours both featured texts devoted to the Virgin Mary, only one manifestation of a widespread English tradition. Many were explicitly intended for use by women, both lay and clerical, and emphasize female readership in their illustrations, as in the scene of women reading from the Bedford Hours (see Color Plate 10). Psalters and especially Books of Hours played a key role in the growth of lay literacy during the later Middle Ages.

By the fourteenth century, then, England had an ancient tradition of private religious devotion and varied books created especially for that purpose as well as a growing readership, lay and clerical. Two further, related elements added to the growth in that century of works that have been grouped, largely retrospectively, as "mystical." First, across Europe there was a renewed expression of "affective spirituality," the emotionally, even physically empathetic contemplation of the crises of salvation, especially the crucifixion of Christ and the sufferings of the Virgin Mary. This is reflected in the vision of the crucifixion in *Passus* 18 of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and in many lyrics, as well as in sculpture and drawings like that on page 530. Second, widespread dissatisfaction with the established church—or a more diffuse sense of spiritual needs left unfulfilled there—led a growing number of Christians to explore more immediate and often private avenues of religious experience. The quest for a mystical union with Christ or God the Father is a particularly ambitious aspect of such exploration.

This search was often exercised, particularly in the lay community and among religious women, in the recently invigorated vernacular, which (whether French or English) had long had a place along with Latin in Books of Hours. Among these expressions were the "Wycliffite" translations of the Bible into Middle English, as well as texts intended for religious recluses and for people seeking mystical experience even as they remained active in the mundane world. These emergent religious aspirations, as well as some of their accompanying fears and tensions, are expressed below in Julian of Norwich's *Book of Showings* and the Companion Readings that follow it.*

Julian of Norwich

1342–c. 1420

Dame Julian of Norwich was an anchoress, a woman dedicated to prayer and contemplation who lived separate from the world, literally enclosed in a modest residence and symbolically "dead" to the secular world. Yet Julian also lived in the midst of the world. Her anchorhold at the church of Saint Julian—hence her name—was in a busy market neighborhood of Norwich. Dame Julian's lifelong stability as an anchoress, and her persistent rhetoric of humility (she most often speaks of herself only as a "creature"), may have masked or softened the daring of her theology. This she developed from decades of meditation on a sequence of sixteen visions of the Crucifixion—"showings"—that she received in extreme illness at age thirty.

The urban space and domestic arrangements of Julian's anchorhold serve as an emblem for her theology and her place in the spiritual world. She had a maidservant, and received and

*The editors express their gratitude to Professor Nicholas Watson for his advice on this section.