

from *Piers Plowman*¹

B. PROLOGUE

In summertime, when the sun was fine,
I clothed myself in garments as if I were a sheep.

Outfitted like a hermit whose works are unholy,
I traveled widely in the world to hear about wonders.²

And on a May morning on the Malvern Hills
I encountered a marvel; it seemed supernatural!
I was all tired out and decided to rest
Against a broad bank by the side of a stream;
And as I lay, and leaned, and gazed on the water
I nodded off to sleep, it flowed so merrily.

Then I began to dream a marvelous dream:

I was in a wilderness, I knew not where.

As I looked toward the east in the direction of the sun,
I saw on a hill a tower finely built,

A deep valley beneath it, a dungeon inside,
With pits deep, and dark, and dreadful to see.

Between them I discovered a fair field of folk
Of all kinds of people, the poor and the rich,
Working and wandering as the world demands.

Some took up the plow, very seldom played,
Worked very hard at planting and sowing,
And won what those wasters destroy in their gluttony.
Some took up a life of pride, dressed accordingly,
Came all decked out in superficial show.

Some took up a life of prayers and penance,
Lived austere, entirely for the love of our Lord,
In the hope to have heavenly bliss:
Such as anchorites and hermits³ who remain in their cells,

Have no desire to traipse about the country
To find extravagant food with which to please their
bodies.

And some took up trade; they did well for themselves
It seems to me that such men thrive.
And some took up entertainment, the kind that
minstrels know.

And get gold for their performance—blameless, I guess.
But tricksters and jokesters, Judas's⁴ children,
Make up stories and make others into fools,
And have their wit on hand to use when they like.⁵
What Paul says about them I won't demonstrate here:
Whoever speaks evil is Lucifer's servant.⁶

Beggars and bidders made the rounds quickly
'Till their belly and bag were filled to the brim;
They faked [injury] to get food, fought at the ale.
In gluttony, God knows, they go to bed.
And rise with obscenity, those Robert's⁷ knaves!
Sleep and shameful sloth follow them always.

Pilgrims and palmers together vowed
To seek Saint James and the saints in Rome,⁸
Went forth on their way with many wise tales
And had excuse to lie for the rest of their life.
I saw some who said they had sought out saints:

Traditionally, anchorites are confined to cells, usually attached to churches or monasteries, whereas hermits were supposed to live a solitary life but are not confined to cells.

⁴ *Judas's* Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve apostles and Christ's betrayer.

⁵ *But tricksters ... they like* Throughout the poem, the poet is concerned to distinguish between good entertainment, which educates and inspires the audience, and bad entertainment, which wastes speech, corrupts the audience, and takes away alms from the deserving poor.

⁶ *Whoever speaks ... servant* See Ephesians 5.4 and Colossians 3.18.

⁷ *Robert's* A generic name for a robber.

⁸ *To seek ... in Rome* Another form of religious "athleticism" was pilgrimage, making the arduous journey to the shrines of saints, for example, across the Pyrenees to St. James of Compostela in Spain, or to the city of Rome, or even by ship to Jerusalem. Like hermits, pilgrims were criticized for taking on religious apparel for the wrong reasons; in this case, to have adventures to relate when they get back home.

¹ *Piers Plowman* Translated by Emily Steiner for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*.

² *I traveled ... wonders* The narrator immediately establishes himself as a curious conflation of two kinds of wanderers: the knight errant of medieval romance and the itinerant religious, a frequent object of criticism in estates satire. Although it is the desire to wander that allows the narrator to experience marvels, the same desire marks him as someone who has strayed from institutionally-sanctioned paths.

³ *anchorites and hermits* Sometimes used interchangeably in the poem, anchorites and hermits refer to those medieval Christians pursuing a solitary life of religious "athleticism," living apart from a religious community and maintaining an ascetic personal regimen.

With every tale they told their tongue was tuned more
 To lie; and through their speech
 Than to tell the truth, at least it seemed by their speech.
 A heap of hermits with hooked staffs
 Went to Walsingham, their mistresses in tow;
 Big, tall lubbers, who were reluctant to work,
 Dressed themselves in cloaks to set themselves apart
 And passed themselves off as hermits to live the easy life.
 I found friars there, all four orders,
 Preaching to the people to benefit themselves.¹
 [They] expounded the gospel however they saw fit,
 Construed it as they liked to get themselves cloaks.
 Many of these master friars can wear what they want
 Because their profession and their money march together.
 Ever since Charity has become a dealer, and mainly to
 Confess lords,
 Many strange marvels have occurred in the last few years.
 Unless [the friars] and Holy Church support each
 Other better
 The biggest disaster on earth is just around the corner.²
 A pardoner preached there as if he were a priest.³
 He brought forth a bull with bishops' seals,
 And said that he had the power to absolve them all
 Of [their] broken fasts and broken vows.
 Laymen readily believed him and liked his words;
 They came up kneeling to kiss his bulls.
 He struck them with his letter and bled their eyes.

¹ *I found friars ... benefit themselves* Dominicans, Franciscans, Carthusians, Carmelites, and Augustinians. Like many of his contemporaries, the poet repeatedly satirizes the mendicant friars (religious orders that rejected both individual and communal poverty), who traveled around preaching and hearing confession, and whose dependence on alms tended to put a strain on the resources of charitable laypeople.

² *The biggest disaster ... corner* The narrator emphasizes the seriousness of his critique by referencing the conventions of visionary prophecy, a literature that claims to reveal divine truths as well as imminent future events.

³ *A pardoner ... a priest* Pardoners carried grants of indulgence, offering remittance of purgatorial punishment, in exchange for good works. These works often took the form of collections or fund-raising for special Church projects (see Passus 5). Pardoners were notoriously corrupt.

75 And caught rings with his ragman⁴ and brooches too,
 Thus you help gluttons by giving away your gold,
 And handing it over to rascals who routinely fornicate!
 If the bishop was blessed and worth both his ears,
 His seal would not be sent to deceive the people.
 80 But the fellow doesn't preach through permission of
 the bishop;
 Rather, the pardoner and the priest split the silver,
 Which the poor people of the parish ought to have
 instead.
 Parsons and parish priests complained to the bishop
 That their parishes have been poor since the time of
 the plague,
 85 To have a license and leave to live in London,⁵
 And to sing there for simony,⁶ because silver is sweet.
 Bishops and scholars, bachelors, masters, and doctors
 [of divinity]—
 Who have care of souls under Christ and tonsure⁷ as proof
 And sign that they should confess their parishioners,
 90 Preach and pray for them, and feed the poor—
 Reside in London, at Lent and other times too.
 Some of them serve the King, and count up his silver:
 In the Exchequer and Chancery⁸ they prosecute his fines

⁴ *ragman* A ragman refers to a document—here, the papal bull carried by the pardoner—that had a ragged appearance due to the seals hanging from the bottom of the document by strips of parchment. The poem's medieval readers probably would have also noted the pun: a ragman also referred to the Devil, who was sometimes imagined to carry with him a list of sinners or their offences.

⁵ *Parsons and parish ... in London* I.e., rural priests are buying up benefices (appointments) in London, which will guarantee them both property and income. The plague (or Black Death, c. 1349–50) devastated the populations of the countryside, and, as a result, priests receive fewer tithes from their parishioners.

⁶ *simony* The exchange of spiritual for temporal goods; here, it refers to the practice, condemned by medieval reformers, of paying for ecclesiastical offices.

⁷ *tonsure* I.e., the bare part of a priest's or monk's head as a result of shaving.

⁸ *Exchequer and Chancery* Departments or "courts" of the royal household, which dealt with finance and law, respectively. The Exchequer collected and disbursed revenue. Chancery was an administrative office, which also served as a court where the king could prosecute claims—for example, his claim to the wardship of a feudal heir (noble guardianship entitled the king to the income from a fief during the minority of an heir).

- From wards and ward-meetings,¹ "waifs and strays."²
 95 And some serve as servants to lords and ladies,
 And in place of stewards, sit and judge.³
 Their mass, and their matins; and many of their hours
 Are performed without devotion; the dreaded
 outcome is
 That Christ at Judgment Day will curse many in his Court.
- 100 I thought about the power that was entrusted to Peter—
 To bind and unbind, as Scripture reports—
 How he lovingly bequeathed it, as Our Lord commanded,
 To the four virtues, most virtuous of all the virtues,
 Which are called "cardinals"⁴ and "closing gates,"
 105 To close and to shut the kingdom of Christ
 Or to open it up and reveal heavenly bliss.
 But of the Cardinals at court who assume the same name
 And take for granted the power to make a Pope
 Who has the same power that Peter had, I won't speak
 badly—
- 110 For love and learning pertain to the election [of a pope].
 Therefore I both can and cannot speak more about
 the court.

What this dream signifies, you men who are merry,
210 Interpret yourselves—I don't dare—by dear God in
heaven!

And yet, a hundred still lingered there in silken caps,
Sergeants, it seemed, who served at the Bar,
Who pleaded the law for pennies and pounds,
And wouldn't once unloose their lips for love of our Lord.
215 You'd have a better chance of measuring the mist on
Malvern Hills
Than getting a "mum" from their mouths, before they
see the money.

Barons, and burgesses, and bondsmen, too,
I saw in this assembly, as you shall hear next:
Bakers, and brewers, and butchers aplenty,
220 Weavers of wool, and weavers of linen,
Tailors, and tinkers, and toll-takers in markets,
Masons, and miners, and many other types.
Of all living laborers, some stood out,
Such as dikers, and diggers, who do their work badly,
225 And drive forth the day with "God save you, Dame
Emme."¹
Cooks and their boys cried out, "Hot pies, hot!
Good geese and pork! Let's get some dinner!"
Innkeepers touted the same sort of thing,
"White wine of Alsace and wine of Gascony,
230 Of the Rhine, and La Rochelle, to digest the roast!"
All this I saw sleeping, and seven times more.

—C. 1377-79