

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

William Langland
PIERS PLOWMAN



THE DONALDSON TRANSLATION
MIDDLE ENGLISH TEXT
SOURCES AND BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

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Prologue†

In a somer seson whan soft was the sonne
 I shope me in shroudes as I a shepe were;
 In habite as an heremite unholy of workes
 Went wyde in this world, wondres to here.
 5 [Ac] on a May mornynge, on Malverne Hilles,
 Me byfel a ferly, of fairy me thoughte:
 I was wery forwandred and went me to reste
 Under a brode banke bi a bornes side,
 And as I lay and lened and loked in the wateres
 10 I slombred in a slepyng, it sweyved so merye.
 Thanne gan I to meten a merveilouse swevene
 That I was in a wilderness, wist I never where;
 [Ac] as I bihelde into the est, an hiegh to the sonne,
 I seigh a toure on a toft, trielich y-maked,
 15 A depe dale binethe, a dongeon thereinne,
 With depe dyches and derke and dredful of sight.
 A faire felde ful of folke fonde I there bytwene,
 Of alle maner of men, the mene and the riche,
 Worchyng and wandryng as the worlde asketh.
 20 Some put hem to the plow, played ful selde,
 In settyng and in sowyng swonken ful harde;
 Wonnen that wastours with glotonye destruyeth.
 And some putten hem to pruyde, apparailled hem thereafter,
 In contenaunce of clothyng comen disguised.
 25 In prayers and in penance putten hem manye,
 Al for love of owre Lorde lyveden ful streyte,
 In hope for to have Heveneriche blisse—
 As ancre and heremites that holden hem in here selles,
 Coveiten nought in contré to kairen aboute,
 30 For no likerous liflode her lykam to plese.
 And somme chosen [hem to] chaffare—they [cheveden] the bettere,
 As it semeth to owre syght that suche men thryveth.
 And somme murthes to make as mynstralles conneth
 And geten gold with here glee, [gilteles], I leve.
 35 Ac japers and jangelers, Judas chylderen,
 Feynen hem fantasies and foles hem maketh,
 And han here witte at wille to worche yif [hem liste].
 That Poule precheth of hem I [dar] nought preve it here:
Qui loquitur turpiloquium [is Luciferes hyne].

Prologue

In a summer season when the sun was mild
 I clad myself in clothes as I'd become a sheep;
 In the habit of a hermit unholy of works¹
 Walked wide in this world, watching for wonders.
 And on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,² 5
 There befell me as by magic a marvelous thing:
 I was weary of wandering and went to rest
 At the bottom of a broad bank by a brook's side,
 And as I lay lazily looking in the water
 I slipped into a slumber, it sounded so pleasant. 10
 There came to me reclining there a most curious dream
 That I was in a wilderness, nowhere that I knew;
 But as I looked into the east, up high toward the sun,
 I saw a tower on a hill-top, trimly built,
 A deep dale beneath, a dungeon tower in it, 15
 With ditches deep and dark and dreadful to look at.
 A fair field full of folk I found between them,
 Of human beings of all sorts, the high and the low,
 Working and wandering as the world requires.
 Some applied themselves to plowing, played very rarely, 20
 Sowing seeds and setting plants worked very hard;
 Won what wasters gluttonously consume.
 And some pursued pride, put on proud clothing,
 Came all got up in garments garish to see.
 To prayers and penance many put themselves, 25
 All for love of our Lord lived hard lives,
 Hoping thereafter to have Heaven's bliss—
 Such as hermits and anchorites³ that hold to their cells,
 Don't care to go cavorting about the countryside,
 With some lush livelihood delighting their bodies. 30
 And some made themselves merchants—they managed better,
 As it seems to our sight that such men prosper.
 And some make mirth as minstrels can
 And get gold for their music, guiltless, I think.
 But jokers and word jugglers, Judas' children,⁴ 35
 Invent fantasies to tell about and make fools of themselves,
 And have whatever wits they need to work if they wanted.
 What Paul preaches of them I don't dare repeat here:
*Qui loquitur turpiloquium*⁵ is Lucifer's henchman.

† Text of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud misc. 581, printed with permission of the Bodleian Library. Edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd and Elizabeth Robertson. For further details about the

1. The speaker might intend to imply he was dressed as a shepherd or simply in a sheep skin. For Langland's opinion of hermits, see lines 28–30 below.
 2. These hills in the west of England overlook a broad plain that seems to encompass the core of the country as one looks toward London.
 3. Both are vowed to a religious life of solitude; anchorites were enclosed, whereas hermits could wander. (Gloss: the function of the Gloss at the end of this Norton Critical Edition is explained in the section "Using This Edition," p. xxiv)
 4. Minstrels who entertain with jokes and fantastic stories are regarded as descendants of Christ's betrayer, Judas.
 5. *Qui loquitur turpiloquium* is Lucifer's henchman.

- 40 Bidders and beggeres fast aboute yede
 [Til] her bely and her bagge [were] bretful] y-crammed;
 [Flite thanne] for here fode, foughten atte ale.
 In glotonye, God it wote, gon hij to bedde,
 And risen [up] with ribaudye, tho Roberdes knaves.
- 45 Slepe and sleuthe seweth hem evre.
 Pilgrymes and palmers plighted hem togidere
 To seke Seynt James and seyntes in Rome.
 Thei went forth in here wey with many wise tales,
 And hadden leve to lye al here lyf after.
- 50 I seigh somme that seiden thei had y-sought seyntes:
 To eche a tale that thei tolde here tonge was tempred to lye
 More than to sey soth—it semed bi here speche.
 Heremites on an heep with hoked staves
 Wenten to Walsyngham, and here wenches after.
- 55 Grete lobyas and longe that loth were to swynke
 Clotheden hem in copis to ben knownen fram othere
 And shopen hem heremites, here ese to have.
 I fonde there freris—alle the foure ordres—
 [Prechyng] the peple for profit of [the wombe],
- 60 Glosed the Gospel as hem good lyked;
 For coveitise of copis, construed it as thei wolde.
 Many of this Maistres mowe clothen hem at lykyng,
 For here money and [here] merchandise marchen togideres.
 Sith Charité hath be chapman and chief to shryve lordes,
- 65 Many ferlis han fallen in a fewe yeris.
 But Holy Chirche and hij holde better togideres,
 The moste myschief on molde is mountyng [up] faste.
 There preched a pardonere as he a prest were,
 Broughte forth a bulle with bishopes seles,
- 70 And seide that hymself myghte assoilen hem alle
 Of falshed of fastyng, of vowes y-broken.
 Lewed men leved hym wel and lyked his wordes,
 Comen up knelyng to kissen his [bulle].
 He bonched hem with his brevet and blered here eyes,

- Beadsmen⁶ and beggars bustled about
 Till both their bellies and their bags were crammed to the brim;
 Staged flytings⁷ for their food, fought over beer.
 In gluttony, God knows, they go to bed,
 And rise up with ribaldry, those Robert's boys.⁸
 Sleep and sloth⁹ pursue them always.
- 45 Pilgrims and palmers¹ made pacts with each other
 To seek out Saint James² and saints at Rome.
 They went on their way with many wise stories,
 And had leave to lie all their lives after.
 I saw some that said they'd sought after saints:
 In every tale they told their tongues were tuned to lie
 More than to tell the truth—such talk was theirs.
 A heap of hermits with hooked staffs
 Went off to Walsingham,³ with their wenches behind them.
- 55 Great long lubbers that don't like to work
 Dressed up in cleric's dress to look different from other men
 And behaved as they were hermits, to have an easy life.
 I found friars there—all four of the orders⁴—
 Preaching to the people for their own paunches' welfare,
 Making glosses⁵ of the Gospel that would look good for themselves;
 Coveting copes,⁶ they construed it as they pleased.
- 60 Many of these Masters may clothe themselves richly,
 For their money and their merchandise⁷ march hand in hand.
 Since Charity⁸ has proved a peddler and principally shrives lords,
 Many marvels have been manifest within a few years.
 Unless Holy Church and friars' orders hold together better,
 The worst misfortune in the world will be welling up soon.
- 65 A pardoner⁹ preached there as if he had priest's rights,
 Brought out a bull¹ with bishop's seals,
 And said he himself could absolve them all
 Of failure to fast, of vows they'd broken.
 Unlearned men believed him and liked his words,
 Came crowding up on knees to kiss his bull.
 He banged them with his brevet² and bleared their eyes,

6. Wheedlers, or possibly those who said prayers for others at a price.

7. Contests in which the participants took turns insulting each other, preferably in verse.

8. I.e., robbers.

9. Not just laziness but irresponsibility more generally; see Gloss.

1. Virtually professional pilgrims who took advantage of the hospitality offered them to go on traveling year after year. Strictly speaking, "palmers" were pilgrims who had been to Jerusalem or who had made lifelong commitments to pilgrimage (Gloss).

2. I.e., his shrine at Compostela, in Galicia, Spain (Gloss).

3. English town, site of a famous shrine to the Virgin Mary (Gloss).

4. In Langland's day there were four orders of friars in England: Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Augustinians.

5. Interpretations.

6. Monks', friars', and hermits' long cloaks.

7. *Masters*: Masters of divinity. The "merchandise" sold by the friars for money is shrift; that is, confession and remission of sins, which by canon law cannot be sold.

8. The ideal of the friars, as stated by St. Francis, was simply love, i.e., charity.

9. An official empowered to pass on from the pope temporal indulgence for the sins of people who contributed to charitable enterprises—a function frequently abused; see Gloss.

1. Papal license to act as a pardoner, endorsed by the local bishop (Gloss).

- 75 And raughte with his ragman rynges and broches.
 Thus [ye] geven [yowre] golde glotones to kepe,
 And leneth [it] loseles that lecherye haunten.
 Were the bischop y-blissed and worth bothe his eres,
 His seel shulde nought be sent to deceyve the peple.
 80 —It is naught by the bischop that the boy precheth,
 [Ac] the parisch prest and the pardonere parten the silver
 That the [povere peple] of the parisch sholde have yif thei nere.
 Persones and parisch prestes pleynd hem to the bischop
 That here parissches were pore sith the pestilence-tyme,
 85 To have a lycence and a leve at London to dwelle,
 And syngen there for symonye, for silver is swete.
 Bischopes and Bachelers, bothe Maistres and Doctours,
 That han cure under Criste and crounyng in tokne
 And signe that thei sholden shryven here paroschienes,
 90 Prechen and prey for hem, and the pore fede,
 Liggen in London in Lenten an elles.
 Somme serven the kyng and his silver tellen,
 In Cheker and in Chancerye chalengen his dettes
 Of wardes and wardmotes, weyves and streyves.
 95 And some serven as servantz lordes and ladyes
 And in stede of stewardes sytten and demen.
 Here Messe and here matynes and many of here Oures
 Arn don undevoutlych: drede is at the laste
 Lest Crist in constorie acorse ful manye.
 100 I parceyved of the power that Peter had to kepe
 To bynde and to unbynde as the Boke telleth,
 How he it left with love as owre Lorde hight
 Amonges foure vertues, [moste vertuouse of alle],
 That “cardinales” ben called—and closyng yatis
 105 There Crist is in kyngdome, to close and to shutte,
 And to opne it to hem and Hevene blisse shewe.
 Ac of the cardinales atte courte that caught of that name
 And power presumed in hem a pope to make

- And raked in with his parchment-roll rings and brooches.
 Thus you give your gold for gluttons' well-being,
 And squander it on scoundrels schooled in lechery.
 If the bishop were blessed and worth both his ears,
 His seal should not be sent out to deceive the people.
 —It's nothing to the bishop that the blackguard preaches,
 80 And the parish priest and the pardonere split the money
 That the poor people of the parish would have but for them.
 Parsons and parish priests complained to the bishop
 That their parishes were poor since the pestilence-time,³
 Asked for license and leave to live in London,
 85 And sing Masses there for simony,⁴ for silver is sweet.
 Bishops and Bachelors, both Masters and Doctors,⁵
 Who have cures under Christ and their crowns shaven
 As a sign that they should shrive their parishioners,
 Preach and pray for them, and provide for the poor,
 90 Take lodging in London in Lent and other seasons.
 Some serve the king and oversee his treasury,
 In the Exchequer and in Chancery⁶ press charges for debts
 Involving wards' estates and city-wards,⁷ waifs and strays.
 And some like servants serve lords and ladies
 95 And in the stead of stewards⁸ sit and make judgments.
 Their Masses and their matins and many of their Hours⁹
 Are done undevoutly: there's dread that in the end
 Christ in his consistory¹ will condemn full many.
 I pondered on the power that Peter had in keeping
 100 To bind and unbind as the Book tells,²
 How he left it with love as our Lord commanded
 Among four virtues, most virtuous of all,
 That are called “cardinals”—and closing gates³
 Of the kingdom of Christ, who may close and lock them,
 105 Or else open them up and show Heaven's bliss.
 But as for the cardinals at court that thus acquired their name
 And presumed they had the power to appoint a pope

3. Since 1349, England had suffered a number of epidemics of the plague, the “Black Death,” which had caused famine and depopulated the countryside. Cf. p. 427.

4. Buying and selling the functions, spiritual powers, or offices of the Church for money. Wealthy persons, especially in London, set up foundations to pay priests to sing Masses for their souls and those of their relatives (Gloss). Cf. p. 443.

5. *Bachelors*: i.e., bachelors of divinity; elsewhere, may also mean a novice knight; see Gloss. *Doctors*: Doctors of Divinity, most commonly, but can also mean medical doctors in some contexts.

6. The Exchequer was a royal commission that received revenue and audited accounts; Chancery dealt with petitions addressed to the king. Both typically had bishops or other clerics among their officers, if not at their heads.

7. The king was guardian of an underage heir (“ward”) to the holdings of one of his major noblemen and could claim dues from the subdivisions of a city (“city-wards”), lost property, and strayed cattle (or, according to another interpretation, the property of deceased aliens with no legitimate heirs).

8. The managers of large households or estates.

9. Clerics organized their day around seven canonical “hours,” or periods of liturgical prayer called offices, of which matins was the first (Gloss).

1. Literally, a bishop's court or the senate of cardinals convened by the pope to deliberate on church affairs.

2. Matt. 16:18–20 recounts Christ's giving Peter and the succeeding popes this authority to make pronouncements on earth that will also be binding in Heaven.

3. The four cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude and are distinguished from the three “theological” virtues of faith, hope, and charity; Langland plays below on the fact that “cardinal,” from Latin *cardo*, “hinge” (hence “gates”), is also the term for the superior group