

***Essays in Medieval Studies 13***

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

**page 51****Piers's Good Will:  
Langland's Politics of Reform and Inheritance in the C-Text****Michael D. C. Drout**

In Passus VIII of *Piers Plowman*, just before the famous plowing of the half-acre, William Langland has Piers prepare a will in the manner of a man going on a literal journey: "Forthy y wol ar y wende do wryte my biqueste. In dei nomine amen: y make hit mysulue" (VIII.94).<sup>1</sup> This line and the subsequent will are present in all three texts of the poem, but in the C-text Langland inserts an additional passage just before Piers announces his intention to have a will made:

Counsayle nat so þe comune þe kyng to desplese,  
 Ne hem þat han lawes to loke lacke hem nat, y hote þe.  
 Lat god yworhte with al, as holy wryt techeth:  
 Super cathedram Moysi sedent.  
 Maystres, as þe mayres ben, and grete mene, senatours,  
 What þei comaunde as by þe kyng countreplede it neuere;  
 Al þat they hoten, y hote, heiliche thow soffre hem  
 And aftur here warnynge and wordynge worche þou þeraftur.  
 Omnia que dicunt facite et seruate (VIII, 84-90).<sup>2</sup>

This passage's appearance in the C-text is significant not only because it may represent a reaction by Langland to the use of his work by the rebels of 1381, but because the social wisdom encoded in the passage becomes a significant part of Piers's bequest. Along with this wisdom, Piers metes out his possessions: his soul to God (96), his body and bones to the church (100), and to his wife, Dame Worch-when-tyme-is,<sup>3</sup> his rightfully earned goods, which she is to divide among his "dohteres and my dere childres" (105-6).<sup>4</sup> Having arranged his bequests, Piers is free to set out on pilgrimage "at þe plough for profit to pore and ryche" (111).<sup>5</sup>

A Christian's responsibility to arrange a will before departing on a pilgrimage reflects more than the dangers of travel in the fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup> By causing this legal instrument to be written, a potential pilgrim not only arranged for an

**page 52**

orderly disposal of his physical wealth; he also dramatized the significance of his pilgrimage. Starting out on this journey is the equivalent of entering the afterlife; it is a conversion from one mode of living to another. The act of preparing the will is the actualization of Piers's conversion and decision to go on the pilgrimage. This process of conversion cannot be localized to a single instant. Rather, it is the continuum encompassing Piers's reading of his own clothing "in pilgrimes wyse" (VIII, 56),<sup>7</sup> the preparation of the will (95-106), and the moment of setting out on the metaphorical pilgrimage (110-11). The will is the fulcrum of this continuum, the point beyond which events take on momentum towards a telos. Whereas Piers's clothing and his agricultural labors remain physically the same before and after the conversion, the will changes their interpretation and makes concrete a set of otherwise abstract possibilities. It determines the specific disposition of Piers's goods, narrowing a field of potential behaviors into a single social reality, and it performs this action even in the absence of Piers.

Encoded in law thus in theory enforced by actions of a social group wills work to preserve property rights and social relations. They can act as a brake upon social change, preserving the desires of an individual beyond a single life span. Wills are thus powerful but fragile social tools. In the fourteenth century legal enforcement of a will, particularly for

the social class to which Piers belonged, was not guaranteed by networks of legislated secular power. The church at times did attempt to enforce the implementation of wills but, it seems evident from sources such as the *Chronicle* of Jocelin of Brakelond [8](#) and the wills and judgments recorded by Edith Rickert in *Chaucer's World*,[9](#) that such enforcement had more to do with the interests of particular churches in receiving promised gifts than in a general imperative to adhere to the wishes of the dead.

Without legal enforcement, wills are dependent upon established custom or tradition, what in Anglo-Saxon times would have been called *folcright* ("folk-right"). Without the existence of an extensive apparatus of surveillance, adjudication and compulsion, such as existed for the wills of kings and nobles, wills rely on Voluntary compliance to the memory of authority, and this memory seems likely to fade as the material conditions within which it was established change over time. The power of a will is its ability to mobilize social power trans-temporally, and successful wills access those elements of the social system that remain stable over time. It seems reasonable to suspect that those elements of a will which appear just or moral under whatever ideology operates at a given time are those likely to be preserved. Because post-mortem modification is the negation of a will, we can see a powerful disincentive to perceived capriciousness or injustice as a condition in which wills are established. And because Piers serves as a type for a just man throughout the poem, his disposition of goods will be that which Langland believes to be appropriate, just and moral for a man of Piers's wealth and social class. Piers's bequest, we can be sure, is a good will, one that should not tempt the beneficiaries to modification.

Not all Piers's bequests are contained in the will; the plowman provides a different but equally important bequest even before he causes a document to be written, bequeathing social wisdom to his son in lines 84-91 (reproduced above).

page 53

This social wisdom is intellectual wealth, and it is as significant as any physical property: heuristics preserved in wisdom can be as effective a tool for social reproduction as the plow is for the generation of physical sustenance. We can take the content of the passage, therefore, as a guide to what types of social behavior Langland thinks might effectively maintain the social position of Piers's children. The advice is also significant because it demonstrates a movement of discourse that serves to encode information as authoritative within the context of a gift of wisdom. As John Ruffing notes in a discussion of the labor structure of Ælfric's *Colloquy*, the "move from authority to wisdom allows effective control of the dialogue by deflecting confrontation and appealing to an authority beyond the speaker, of which the speaker is nevertheless in control because that authority is a linguistic construct; . . . scripture . . . is probably the most powerful of such constructions. . . ." [10](#) Ruffing is discussing a discursive artefact that antedates Langland by three hundred years, but his observations holds true for this passage of *Piers Plowman*.

Piers's advice to his son accesses the authority of scripture, of otherworldly authority and of natural order. The passage is curious, then, in its simultaneous reinforcement and undercutting of authoritative structures. Donaldson seems correct in his interpretation that the meaning of the passage is "that the common people should be obedient to their superiors should not, indeed, try to wield any political power." [11](#) But there is more happening in this passage than a call for simple social stability. While overtly supporting the existing hierarchy, the opening line hints that this hierarchy may be vulnerable to agitation (otherwise, why warn against it?). The passage strengthens the potential for action against the hierarchy by expressing its possibility: a course of behavior that was absent from the B-text is brought into imaginative existence by being named.

The construction of authority in the passage is also unusual in that the metaphorical hierarchies appear to run in both directions. Obedience is to be given to one's local superiors as if they were the equivalent of the king (87-88). At the same time, familial authority usurps the highest rank in the hierarchy by getting in the last word: "Al þat they hoten, y hote" (89). [12](#) Supreme authority is constituted in the person of the father. This authoritative position, like that of the will, is both powerful and fragile. In fourteenth-century law the father possessed nearly absolute power over his son, and this power was sanctioned by scripture. [13](#) Thus to read the king's rule in terms of the father is to naturalize and localize an otherwise legalistic and far-removed power. But, as dramatized by the will, the father's rule is limited by its reliance upon his living presence. Piers calls attention to this limitation when he mentions his own mortality, "for now y am olde and hoer" (92). [14](#) When the father has died, his rule is continued only insofar as his will is obeyed: his long-term authority, therefore, is constituted by the instrument of the will.

The position of the father and the institution of inheritance were of personal significance for Langland. As Louise Bishop notes, "father and friends provided schooling for the poet-cleric-narrator, who would have entered his vocation early, although not as the result of inheritance, since clerical celibacy precludes heredi-

page 54

tary vocation." [15](#) Langland's father did not pass on to his son the endowed benefices that the poet sees as venom and poison to the body of the church (XVII, 224-225); his legacy was apparently one of wisdom and morality. Langland, by the manner he constructs Piers's bequests, appears to have found it of value.

The above analysis shows secular authority to be bound up with the ability of the will to project power after death. But the will is limited in power by its reliance upon obedience. As a legal document the will can mobilize the authority of the community to carry out the wishes of the deceased, but unlike the living father, the will has little power to enforce the wishes of its writer through physical compulsion. Similarly, secular laws promulgated by the first estate were limited in their application outside the physical presence of the king's representatives. [16](#) The written law is dependent upon the obedience of individuals in the absence of an apparatus of compulsion; thus the will and the law rely on the internalization of the systems of authority within which they are constituted.

Langland, as he is wont to throughout the poem, is not content to limit his analysis to only two of the three estates. He works the clergy into his model by sacralizing the value of obedience to the hierarchy. The son must suffer the control of those above him in a "heiliche" (89) [17](#) manner: "Lat god yworthe with al, as holy wryt techeth" (86). [18](#) The mobilization of Holy Writ to reinforce existing hierarchies would seem to further ossify the social system. But, just as he does in his metaphorical construction of systems of authority, Langland complicates the relationship of morality and religious doctrine to the structure of authority.

Piers draws upon scripture (Matthew 23.2-3) to frame his advice with the example of the Pharisees, who preach the truth but are unable to practice it because they are taken with the love of power and wealth. This frame and Piers's gloss of the passage "Ac after here doynge ne do thow nat, my dere sone" (91) [19](#) seem to work at cross purposes. On the one hand, they uphold existing hierarchies, claiming that even if people higher in the system of rank do not obey the law, their orders should still be followed. But by pointing out that those high in the social ranks are not necessarily moral in their behavior, Langland undermines one of the important props of the social order. As Aers points out in his explication of a Thomas Wimbledon sermon of 1388, one of the important naturalizations of the estates ideology was the notion that both the first and second estates served to "mayntene Goddis Lawe." [20](#) By pointing out the fallibility of the higher ranks, Langland calls this justification of the social structure into question in the same breath in which he exhorts his son to fulfill his social role by obeying the established hierarchy.

That this complex social positioning is the cultural and intellectual legacy that Piers leaves for his son should alert us to some aspects of Langland's project in the poem. Langland is concerned to maintain the status quo of the social structure. In fact, as Aers has convincingly argued, the poet wishes to return to the status quo ante; Langland was opposed to the freedom of movement and increased pay for wage laborers engendered by the Black Death of 1349 and the subsequent "demographic collapse." [21](#) At the same time he is not willing to

page 55

accept the contemporary situation as moral. For a poet who is, in Britton Harwood's phrase "not sometimes Christocentric, sometimes ideological [but] always both," [22](#) the moral failings of the ruling estates are cause for alarm. Langland positions himself in the role of judge, but he hedges the power inherent in that position by refusing to recommend change in the hierarchical structure. Is this position paradoxical? Or is there a way for us to understand Langland's support for the social order at the same time he criticizes its operation?

Some answers lie in Piers's will and the order of power and obedience that this document constructs. While a will is a document intended to dispose of possessions within a system of property rights, even when dealing out his worldly possessions Piers focuses little upon physical wealth. There is no listing of land or the tools used to work it, no mention of a dwelling, and no instructions to use saved monies for memorial masses. The will is instead primarily concerned with the specific rights of people and institutions. This focus is due partly to the allegorical nature of the passage and may be influenced by the genre of literary testaments, [23](#) but is even more intimately tied to Langland's

view of wealth, a view closely connected to notions of the maintenance of proper Christian hierarchies.

Before Piers arranges for the transfer of the rights of ownership he now possesses, he sacralizes the entire project by preparing the will in God's name (VIII, 94) and affirming his Christian belief (96-98). In the manner of a catechumen, Piers confesses his faith by acknowledging God as the maker of all souls (96) and keeper of accounts of worldly behavior as specified by the creed (98). But although the will is sacralized, the primary metaphor is one of commercial land relations. Piers views his sins as a "rental" (99), according to Pearsall "the record of properties on which rent was due; here, metaphorically, a record of sins on which payment was due."<sup>24</sup> This metaphor, picked up in line 107 when Piers emphasizes that his debts are all paid, suggests that relations of production and distribution are tied to religious processes and indicates that the moral order of society, as constituted by Holy Writ, should be applicable to all relations within society. Given this view of social structure, Langland's lack of trust in the morality of those higher in the social hierarchy should be a powerful condemnation indeed. But the order in which Piers's goods are distributed suggests subservience to the proper hierarchy. God receives the first goods, Piers's soul. Piers then arranges that "the kyrke shal haue my caroyne and kepe my bones" (VIII, 100),<sup>25</sup> but nothing else, since Piers has paid his tithes of grain and property (101-2). Rather than bequeath a separate gift to finance post-mortem masses, a common practice in the fourteenth century,<sup>26</sup> Piers assumes that the parson of the parish church will hold a mass for him out of a sense of duty and for tithes already paid. Piers's expectations are analogous to those generated by the will and reveal a certain idealism about social relations. Even though his physical presence will no longer be able to enforce them, the plowman makes no special efforts to ensure that the covenants (implicit or explicit) that he has entered into in life are carried out after his death.

page 56

Idealism is also apparent in Piers's giving all worldly goods to his wife with the assumption that she will distribute them appropriately among their children (VIII, 105-106), an assumption often absent from wills throughout the Middle Ages, which took great pains to specify property distribution within families.<sup>27</sup> In this idealized marriage, Piers does not need to assure a specific arrangement of goods for progeny: his wife will make the proper choices. The idealism evinced throughout this portion of the will demonstrates Langland's belief in the proper operation of hierarchies and social structures when these social positions are held by moral people, and suggests a reading that explains Langland's complicated positions in his bequeathing of wisdom and his will, positions that critics have tended to view as contradictory and paradoxical.<sup>28</sup> Langland's project in this section of the poem is to find a position inside the existing social hierarchy from which he can call for reform without actually suggesting concrete changes in the structure of the hierarchy. This stance does appear to be a paradoxical position: how can one call for reform while working to preserve stability? To understand Langland's position, we must note that he views the social structure as being separable from the people who embody it. The teachings of the scribes and Pharisees are to be obeyed "super cathedram Moysi sedent . . . omnia que dicunt facite et seruate" (86, 90).<sup>29</sup> The seat of Moses, the site in the hierarchy to which power is attached, is separable in morality from the individual occupying that seat.

Twentieth-century reformers faced with Langland's dilemma might adopt the position that the existence of the seat itself creates corruption, that the social structure generated injustice. By eliminating the seat of Moses as a site of power, the corruption of the individual holding that seat becomes a far less significant social problem. However this type of structural reform, particularly as articulated in the Peasants' Revolt, is anathema to Langland. He has no quarrel with the existence of the seat itself and defends hierarchies. As Bishop notes, "by naturalizing his metaphor for work, by making it internal and inescapable," Langland works to re-establish an order of labor upset by the possibility of rebellion.<sup>30</sup> The equivalence of ecclesiastical work to physical labor also serves to defend an existing set of dominance relations as an ordained order of things.

So Langland wants to retain the seat of Moses. Very well, another sort of modern reformer might conclude, retain the position but change the person holding that position. The social structure would thus remain essentially the same but its operation should be more just and equitable if a moral person occupies the site of power. Langland would agree that the goal he seeks is for a moral person to occupy the site of power, but he is not willing to replace the person holding the site. As shown by his retelling of the fable of the mice belling the cat, Langland sees the replacement of corrupt individuals as an ineffective exercise: "Thow we hadde ykuld þe cat 3ut shulde ther come another / to crache vs and alle oure kynde though we crope vnder benches" (Prol., 199-200).<sup>31</sup> To remove one corrupt person has only the result

of replacing him with another unless the moral order of society is changed. In addition, for Langland the process of removing corrupt individuals from the hierarchy is suspect in light of the Peasants' Revolt,

page 57

the Papal Schism and the political machinations of the English court.<sup>32</sup>

Unwilling to adopt either of these two strategies re-engineering social structures or replacing corrupt persons occupying sites of power Langland appears to be unable to reform his society. He is caught in a quandary, one, according to Aers, not uncommon to moralists. Aers reads Langland's paradoxical position as a result of the incompatibility between Langland's class interests and his reading of the Gospel.<sup>33</sup> This untenable, paradoxical position may also lead to Langland's apocalypticism.<sup>34</sup> For apocalypticism, on various scales, allows Langland one way of re-ordering the behavior of people in society to his liking. This reorganization occurs in miniature in Piers's call to action in Hunger (VIII, 169-70) and in larger scale throughout Passus XXII. This reformation via divine fiat (as it does in real politics) elegantly skirts the very issues Langland raises in the poem. It no more solves problems in Langland's physical world than the appearance of Hunger does in the half-acre. Langland's apocalypticism, therefore, is an easy way out of the very social dilemmas the poet raises. While it is significant, due to its position at the culmination of the poem, I read the apocalypse and coming of the Anti-Christ as only one potential telos for the narrative. The apocalypse is on Langland's one hand. On the other is a reform of society that simultaneously retains structure and personnel. We return to Langland's quandary.

Langland's social position as an underemployed member of the "clerical proletariat"<sup>35</sup> is likely a contributing factor to his ideological position. With no real ability to forcibly change the system or to replace the individuals within it, Langland's only power was that of rhetoric acting upon human hearts and minds. According to Aers, this is an untenable position; one cannot disentangle moral behavior from position in a social hierarchy. Corruption and the unjust distribution of power and wealth would then be a structural phenomenon, unable to be repaired by changes in personnel or their behavior.

But I believe that Langland, at least in Passus VIII, does not give up his hoped-for reform of human behavior as impossible. Though in the end he may consider destroying the earth through apocalypse, within the context of the half-acre he finds a model that points toward the reformation he so desires. This model is the action of the will. Langland sees the will as operating beneficently across temporal and social boundaries. In the idealized portrait of Piers and his family, the will and the advice which precedes it serve as a moral guide to the proper distribution of cultural and physical wealth. With no apparent physical compulsions, no specter of violence, Piers is able to control the activities of others after his death because the activity he desires is consistent with morality. Piers's will works not so much to reform his local society which in this regard is not shown as being in need of reform but to reaffirm the ability of people to perform morally within a social system. If the will can reach across the bounds of death and compel right behavior, then it seems there is hope for people to be reformed without the disruption of the social structure or its personnel.

Langland's hope is not unique to the Middle Ages. When thinking about the poet's wishes for reform without structural or personnel change I am reminded of public-relations campaigns to modify the behavior of twentieth-cen-

page 57

ture Western individuals. Such programs generally rely on the use of advertising to convince people of the moral necessity of some sort of behavioral change. Attempts to make smoking, drug use or personal prejudice socially unacceptable rather than illegal are the modern manifestations of Langland's call to reform. Like the institution of the will, they are attempts to modify behavior by accessing custom, tradition and morality without the strong arm of coercion. And like Langland's hope for an England morally reformed by Piers Plowman, they are an indication that the power to accomplish concrete social reform remains frustratingly beyond the grasp of those who most clearly see its necessity.

*[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]*

**page 58**

Notes

1. "I wish ere I go that my bequest be written. In the name of God, Amen: I make it myself." Langland will be cited throughout from *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter, 1994). Unless otherwise indicated, Roman numerals in brackets refer to passus, Arabic numerals to line numbers. Translations from Middle English are my own.
  2. "Counsel not the commons the king to displeas,  
Nor they that have laws fail to keep them, I command thee.  
Leave it all to God, as Holy Writ teaches:  
The [pharisees] sit on the seat of Moses.'  
Masters, as they mayors be, and great men, senators,  
what they command, as by the king contradict it never.  
All that they command, I command, devoutly thou suffer them  
and after their warning and command work thou thereafter.  
Practice and observe whatever they tell you."
  3. "work when there is time for it."
  4. "daughters and my dear children."
  5. "at the plow for profit to poor and rich."
  6. On a Christian's duty to make a will before setting off on a pilgrimage, see Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, p. 150, note 94; and J. A. W. Bennett, ed., *Langland, Piers Plowman: The Prologue and Passus I-VII of the B Text* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 201-4.
  7. "in the manner of a pilgrim."
  8. The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond Concerning the Acts of Samson Abbot of the Monastery of St. Edmund (London, 1949), pp. 91-92.
  9. Edith Rickert, Clair C. Olson, and Martin M. Crow, eds., *Chaucer's World* (New York, 1948), pp. 401-19.
  10. John Ruffing, "The Labor Structure of 'Ifric's Colloquy," in *The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery and Labor in Medieval England*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat (Glasgow, 1994), pp. 55-70, at 66.
  11. E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven, 1949), p. 103.
  12. "All that they command, I command."
  13. I am here assuming that because Piers leaves his possessions to his wife, Piers's son has not yet attained his majority. Fathers had less than absolute power
- page 59**
- over grown sons, even in the laboring classes: R. H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 467.
14. "for now I am old and hoar."
  15. Louise M. Bishop, "Hearing God's Voice: Kind Wit's Call to Labor in Piers Plowman," in *The Work of Work*, ed. Frantzen and Moffat, pp. 191-205, at 192.
  16. David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London, 1988), pp. 40-41.
  17. "devout."
  18. "Let God command all, as Holy Writ teaches."
  19. "but after their doing do thou not, my dear son."
  20. "maintain God's law." See Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, pp. 7-8.
  21. David Aers, "Justice and Wage-Labor After the Black Death: Some Perplexities for William Langland," in *The Work of Work*, ed. Frantzen and Moffat, pp. 169-90, at 171.
  22. Britton J. Harwood, "The Plot of Piers Plowman and the Contradictions of Feudalism," in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, 1991), pp. 91-114, at 91.
  23. Eber Carle Perrow, "The Last Will and Testament as a Form of Literature," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters* 17.1 (1914), 682-753. See also Edward Wilson, "The Testament of the Buck and the Sociology of the Text," *Review of English Studies* n.s. 45 (1994), 157-84.
  24. Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, p. 130, note 99.
  25. "the church shall have my carrion and keep my bones."
  26. David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London, 1980), p. 22.
  27. See for example Michael M. Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 188-203; and Rickert, Olson and Crow, *Chaucer's World*, pp. 287, 401.
  28. Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, pp. 10-11; Harwood, "The Plot of Piers Plowman," pp. 103, 108.
  29. "they sit in the seat of Moses . . . perform and serve all they tell you."
  30. Bishop, "Hearing God's Voice," p. 198.
  31. "Though we had killed the cat yet there should come another / to claw us and all our kind though we crept under benches."
  32. Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet*, pp. 91-98.
  33. Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, pp. 19-22.
  34. Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, p. 64.
  35. W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1955), quoted by J. F. Goodridge, ed., *William Langland: Piers the Ploughman* (New York, 1966), p. 9.