

# Lecture 8: *Piers Plowman* by William Langland

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 works,  
Walked wide in this world, watching for wonders.  
And on a May morning on Malvern hills, 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.

(A333-34)

What is that Tower?

and why is there a dungeon beneath it?



Pardoners are especially obnoxious predators:

A pardoner preached there as if he had priest's rights,  
Brought out a bull with bishops' seals,  
And said he himself could absolve them all 70  
Of failure to fast, of vows they had broken.  
Unlearned men believed him and liked his words,  
Came crowding up on knees to kiss his bulls.  
He banged them with his brevet and bleared their eyes,  
And raked in with his parchment-roll rings and brooches.  
Thus you give your gold for gluttons' well being. 76

Absentee clergy are worse than useless (A 335):

Parsons and parish priests complained to the bishop  
That their parishes were poor since the pestilence-time,  
Asked for licence and leave to live in London, 85  
And sing Masses there for simony, for silver is sweet.

After this realistic opening Prologue,  
the poem transposes into a very flexible ALLEGORY,  
a DREAM VISION, in which dream-like, surreal figures  
perpetually shift between complex abstraction and vivid,  
concrete manifestation.

**What is Allegory?**

ALLEGORY is extended metaphor. E.g.:  
“The LORD is my Shepherd” is a metaphor.  
Psalm 23 can be read as an allegory,  
in which some of the meanings of “Shepherd”  
are spelled out: guide, governor, provider (feeder).  
The corresponding meanings of Sheep are implied:  
error-prone, unruly, dependent.  
We need rods & staffs to keep us in line,  
but we are well provided for.

If Piers (i.e., Peter) Plowman is an ALLEGORY,  
what does the Plowman stand for?

OK, then why not a shepherd, since the figure of the Good  
Shepherd is so deeply entrenched as a figure for Christ?

The traditional Shepherd figure constitutes a fairly simple,  
unequivocal allegory: a 1 to 1 correspondence between  
VEHICLE (Shepherd) and TENOR (Divine Governor).

Any questions?

As I was saying, the traditional Shepherd figure constitutes a fairly simple, unequivocal allegory: a 1 to 1 correspondence between VEHICLE (Shepherd) and TENOR (Divine Governor).

Allegorical fictions are usually more complex. They are generally of two kinds, according to Dante's distinction between

(I) the allegory of theologians and (II) the allegory of poets.

I. is structured, hierarchical, implicitly conservative.

II. is more fluid, even anarchic, dynamic, unstable, radical.

For a long time, scholars have been trying to deal with *Piers Plowman* as if it were a conservative, theological allegory that had somehow got out of control.

Thus, for example, E. Talbot Donaldson (one of the great Langland scholars of the last century) wrote that Langland "in his emphasis on the individual . . . was in advance of his own church and of his own nation—and, indeed, of himself." In Donaldson's view, Langland was, paradoxically "a political and religious moderate . . . conservative and traditionalist." He believes that the poem was "Written to reinforce traditional ideas." Therefore, he has difficulty accounting for the "mystery" that *Piers Plowman* "was read, by many contemporaries, and by many others since, as revolutionary." [1

WELL, THAT'S HOW I READ IT.

Theological allegory (like Dante's *Commedia* and *Everyman*, perhaps) may be conservative, but the visionary allegory of the poets is often a vehicle of radical *REVISION*, questioning and challenging, rather than reaffirming the established order.

For me, this inherent instability and profound ambiguity constitute the defining characteristic of Langland's allegory.

Take, for example, Lady Mede in *Passus 2* [2  
[I] was aware of a woman wonderfully dressed,  
Her gown was faced with fur, the finest on earth;  
Crowned with a coronet—the king has none better. 10  
Her fingers were filigreed fancifully with gold,  
And rich rubies on them, as red as hot coals,  
And diamonds most dear of cost, and two kinds of sapphires,  
Pearls and precious water-stones to repel poisons.  
Her robe was most rich, dyed with red-scarlet, 15  
With ribbons of red gold and with rich stones.  
Her array ravished me—I'd seen such riches nowhere.  
I wondered who she was and whose wife she might be.

On the one hand, Lady Mede has strong affinities with the Great Whore of Revelation, an unambiguous figure of female corruption.

“I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication” (Revelation 17:3-4).

But things are not quite so simple in *Piers Plowman*. For example, the jewels that Lady Mead wears have the power “to repel poisons” (14).

The dreamer is “ravished” (17), not simply because he is dazzled by her riches and enticed by her opulent sexuality, but because she is vitally alive and deeply mysterious.

The figure of Lady Mede is, in fact, extremely complex, multi-dimensional and polysemous.

Do you have questions—or suggestions?

Let’s stop for a minute and analyze the figure of Lady Mede. What is the VEHICLE? What is the TENOR?

Other lesser figures are even more complex in some ways because their semantic function (as vehicles or tenors) is radically indeterminate. They are continually shifting, not only back and forth from abstract signification to concrete signifier and back again, but even from human to animal:

A little later in this Passus (2), Theology questions the legitimacy of Mede's marriage to False Fickle-tongue; the whole crew sets off for London to consult the Court. The animals on which the pilgrims ride are people:

And then they had to have horses to haul them thither;  
Then Favel\* fetched foals of the best; [4

Set Meed on a sheriff shod all new;

And False sat on an assizer that softly trotted, 165

And Favel on Fair Speech, clad in feigning clothes.

Then notaries had no horses, and were annoyed also

Because Simony and Civil should on on foot. [5

The allegory becomes surreal, nightmarish, and in this way a satiric point is sharply made: the bestiality of some occupations, like summoners, turns them into vices—in this case Greed.

This nightmarish elusiveness of TENOR and VEHICLE makes the poem very difficult to understand & interpret. And the problem is further complicated by uncertainties about the author's religious point of view—traditional or radical, Catholic or proto-Protestant?



Considered thematically, or ideologically, is Langland's allegory Roman Catholic & "Conservative" because it invokes an image of Order—and employs forced labor as a remedy for Idleness?

Or is it implicitly Protestant (Lollard) and "Radical" because it releases and cannot really control the revolutionary energies of Reformation?

These questions are difficult because the poem is constantly shifting the apparent focus of its attack and leaving us uncertain about the intent of its author. So it seems appropriate to end with a final question:

In Passus 7, after a characteristic diatribe against idleness, Piers receives from Truth a "Pardon" that apparently supports his doctrine of salvation by work:

*They that have done good shall go into life everlasting;  
And they that have done evil into everlasting fire.*

Instead of being pleased by this judgment, Piers is outraged: "for pure wrath [he] tore it in two" and said:

*Though I walk in the midst of the shadow of death  
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.*

(113-14, 119-21)

Why does Piers respond the way he does, answering a passage from the Athanasian Creed with a passage from the Bible?

## NOTES

1] Quoted from the Introduction to *Piers Plowman: An Alliterative Verse Translation*, ed. Elizabeth D. Kirk and Judith Anderson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), vii.

2] For reasons (?) that baffle me, this famous passage is not included among the selections in your anthology. You can find it and its context in the *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, Volume 1.A, 429ff. As I see it, this passage lies at the heart of Langland's complex and powerful critique of proto-capitalist feudalism.

3] "Flattery" is a poor translation of the Middle English *Favel* (which Donalson wisely declined to translate). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED): 1. As a noun, *Favel* is the proper name of a fallow-coloured [yellowish-brown?] horse. 2. The fallow horse is proverbial as a type of fraud, cunning, or duplicity. 3. Hence the word is used by Langland as a personification of cunning or duplicity.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is an invaluable resource. It is accessible online to all members of the University community at:

<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

4] According to the OED, **Simony** is "the act or practice of buying or selling ecclesiastical preferments [church offices], benefices [or 'livings', as they were often called] or emoluments; traffic in sacred things." The sale of pardons was a form of simony.