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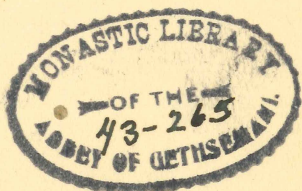
The Vision of
Piers
the
Plowman

By
William Langland
Done into Modern
English by
Prof. W. W. Skeat

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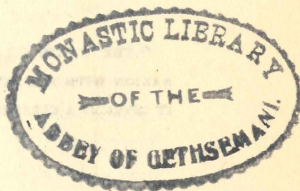
FIRST EDITION 1905
REPRINTED 1907, 1910, 1922, AND 1931

THE VISION OF PIERS THE PLOW-
MAN BY WILLIAM LANGLAND 1332-1400

Wron l masy su zupes tsmont ad jupets god spede ve plowst ende us koren l wron



THE VISION OF PIERS
THE PLOWMAN BY
WILLIAM LANGLAND: DONE
INTO MODERN ENGLISH BY
PROF. W. W. SKEAT.



CHATTO AND WINDUS: LONDON
1931

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"HE THAT WROTE THE SATYR OF PIERS PLOUGHMAN . . . BENT
HIMSELF WHOLLY TO TAKE THE DISORDERS OF THAT AGE."

G. Puttenham.

"OUR AUTHOR'S INDIGNANT SPIRIT, INDEED, IS VEHEMENTLY
DEMOCRATIC. HE DARED TO WRITE WHAT MANY TREMBLED TO
WHISPER. GENIUS REFLECTS THE SUPPRESSED FEELINGS OF ITS AGE."

I. D'Israeli.

"THE VISION . . . DERIVES ITS INTEREST . . . FROM ITS CON-
NEXION WITH THE ACTUAL LIFE AND OPINION OF ITS TIME, INTO WHICH
IT GIVES US A CLEARER INSIGHT THAN MANY A LABOURED HISTORY."

G. P. Marsh.

Printed in Great Britain.

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PASSUS I.

THE VISION OF HOLY-CHURCH.

WHAT the mountain may mean, and the murky dale,
And the fair field full of folk, I shall fairly show.
A lady, lovely of look, and in linen clothed,
Came down from the castle, and called me by name,
And said, "Son, sleepest thou? seest thou this people, 5
How busy they be, all about this maze?
The chief part of this people, that pass o'er the earth,
Want worship in *this* world, and wish for no more,
They hold no account of a heaven, save here!"

I had fear of her face, though her aspect was fair, 10
And said—"Mercy! my lady! what mean you by this?"
"That tower on the hill-top is Truth's own abode,

And I would that ye wrought as His word teacheth.
 He is Father of your faith, and formèd you all,
 Both figure and face, and He gave you five wits 15
 To worship Him with, all the while ye are here.
 He hath ordered the earth, for your help, to supply
 Both woollen and linen, and livelihood's needs
 In measurable manner, to make you at ease ; 19
 And commanded, of His courtesy, in common three things;
 None others are needful, now list to their names,
 I reckon then by reason ! rehearse thou them after.
 The first one is clothing, to keep thee from cold ;
 Next, meat at thy meals, best medicine for ill ;
 Last, drink when thou'rt dry, but desist from excess, 25
 Lest thy work be the worse, when worktime has come. . . .
 Dread drink that delights thee, thy deeds shall be better,
 Moderation is medicine, though much thou desire. 35
 All suits not the soul, that the appetite seeketh,
 Nor booteth the body, that's best for the soul.
 Ne'er trust to thy body, a traitor misleads it,
 This world with its wiles lies in wait to betray.
 For the fiend and thy flesh ever follow together, 40
 Pursuing thy soul, and seducing thine heart ;
 Be wise then and wary, I warn thee full well."

“ Gramercy, my lady, I mind well thy words ;

But the wealth of this world, so much wooed by mankind,
To whom doth that treasure, pray tell me, belong ?” 45
“ See the gospel,” quoth she, “ where God said Himself,
When the people would pose Him with a penny i’ th’ temple,
To tell if a tax should be tendered to Cæsar ;
He asked of them all, of whom spake the letters,
And whose was the image engraven thereon ? 50
‘ ’Tis Cæsar’s,’ they said, ‘ we can see it each one.’
‘ Give Cæsar,’ quoth God, ‘ what to Cæsar belongeth,
And to God, what is God’s, if to good ye incline.’
For Reason and Right should be rulers of all ;
Good Sense should be warden your wealth to preserve, 55
Safe guarding your goods, for your gain when in need ;
For caution and care are the causes of thrift.”

Then I meekly besought, for her Maker’s sake—
“ The dungeon in the dale, so dreadful to see,
What meaneth its menace, my lady, I pray ?” 60

“ ’Tis the Castle of Care ; whoso cometh therein
May mourn that he born was, in body or soul.
There watcheth a wight, and Wrong is his name,
The father of falsehood, and finder of ill.
Adam and Eve he to evil incited, 65
Gave counsel to Cain, how to kill his brother,

And Judas beguiled with the Jews' silver,
Who hung himself after, on branch of an elder.
He letteth all love, and he lies to all those
That trust in his treasure, whom soon he betrays." 70

Then I wondred in my wit, who this woman might be
Who such words of wisdom from holy writ drew ;
I asked her, in the High name, ere ever she went,
To say who she was, who had warned me so well. 74

"Holy-Church," quoth she, "as thou oughtest to know ;
I received thee at first, thy faith I thee taught ;
Thou broughtest me sureties, to be at my bidding,
And leally to love me, while life should endure."

Then I knelt on my knees, and her mercy besought,
And piteously prayed her to pray for my sins, 80
And kindly instruct me on Christ to believe,
And to work at His will, who had wrought me as man.
"Ne'er tell me of treasure, but tell me the truth,
How to save my soul ; as a saint I revere thee !"

"When all treasures are tried, know, Truth is the best,
'God is Love,' saith the text, and it teaches you all 86
That Truth can be trusted, like true God Himself.
Who is true of his tongue, and has no false tales,

Though true of your tongue, and true in your dealings,
And as chaste as a child that in church first weeps,
Unless ye love leally, and lend to the poor,
And such goods as God sends you, in goodness impart, 180
Ye have no more merit in mass or in prayers
Than Moll of her maidenhood, whom no man desires.

For James the gentle thus judged in his book,
That Faith without fact has nothing of worth,
'Tis as dead as a doornail, save deeds shall follow ! 185
Faith without works is dead also (James ii. 26).
Chastity without charity shall chained be in hell ;
'Tis as lorn as a lamp, whose light is extinct.

Many chaplains are chaste, but their charity's naught ;
Promote them, they prove to be greedy and grasping,
Unkind to their kin, and to Christian souls, 190
They chew up their charity, and chide to have more !
Such chastity without charity shall chained be in hell !
Many curates in charge are chaste in their ways,
Yet covetous cravings encumber them ever,
So hardly hath avarice hasped them in bonds ; 195
Their truth has been turned into treachery of hell,
And incites the unlearned to cease to give alms.

Then weigh well the words that God's word utters,

Whereon were red rubies, as red as a coal,
Diamonds full dear, and double-rich sapphires,
Most precious of gems, that could poison destroy.

Her robe was full rich, of red scarlet in grain, 15
With ribands of red gold and richest of stones ;
Her ravishing raiment, her riches amazed me ;
I wondered what she was, whose wife she might be.

“ Who is this woman so worthily drest ? ”
“ ’Tis Meed the maid, who hath injured me oft, 20
Who hath Loyalty slandered, my lief one and dear,
And lied to all lords who have laws to observe.
In the palace of the pope she’s as prime as myself,
Though justice would ban her, for her bastard birth.

Falsehood was her father, full fickle of tongue, 25
Who never said sooth since he settled on earth,
And Meed has his manners, his natural match ;

*Like father, like daughter ; a good tree bringeth forth good
fruit (Matt. vii. 17).*

My place is above her ; my birth is the better.
Great God is my father, the ground of all graces,
Who ne’er had beginning, and I his good daughter. 30
Mercy He gave me, for my marriage-portion ;

Meed sat on a sheriff, new shod for the nonce,
False rode an assize-man, that softly trotted,
And Flattery a flatterer, finely attired. 165

Then had notaries none, annoyed were they all
That Civil-law and Simony should follow on foot;
But Simony swore, and Civil-law also,
That sumners should be saddled, to serve them at need,
And provisors apparelled as palfreys also; 170
Sir Simony himself was to sit on their backs.

“Ye deans and ye subdeans, now draw you together,
Archdeacons, officials, and registrars all,
Be saddled with silver, our sins to allow,
Adultery, divorces, and doubling of debts, 175
And payments for bishops that visit abroad.
The Paulines’ people, for plaints in consistory,
Shall serve here myself, who am Civil-law named.
Cart-saddle the commissary, our cart shall he draw,
And lewd men shall fee us for lewdnesses winked at. 180
Give Liar a long cart, to lead all the others,
Such as friars and false men, that run all afoot.”

Thus False and Sir Flattery fared on their way,
With Meed in the midst, and all these men after.

To fetter Sir False, and to bind all his fellows.
Then went Dread away, and gave warning to False,
Bade him flee for fear, and his fellows go with him.

Then False in his fear fled fast to the friars ; 210
And Guile too was going, aghast for his life,
But met with some merchants, who made him abide,
Shut him in their shops, to show forth their ware,
And apparelled him as a 'prentice, the people to serve.

Then lightly did Liar go leaping away, 215
Lurking through lanes, and belaboured by many ;
He was nowhere welcome for his wily tales,
But everywhere hooted, and hustled to flee,
Till pardoners had pity, and pulled him indoors,
Washed him and wiped him, and wound him in raiment,
And sent him with seals on Sundays to churches, 221
Giving pardons for pence, by pounds at a time.
Then leeches had envy, and letters they sent him
To dress as a doctor, and dwell with them ever.

The grocers besought him to sell men their spices, 225
And tout for their trade ; their terms well he knew.
But minstrels and messengers met with him once,
And withheld him a half-year, and eleven days.

And maketh men misdo many score times ;
Trust in her treasure betrayeth full many.
To wives and to widows she wantonness teacheth ;
Soon lechery learn they, who love well her gifts. 125
Your father she felled by her false deceits ;
She hath poisoned popes, and impaired holy church ;
There is no better bawd, by Him that me made,
Between heaven and hell, in the whole wide earth ;
She is loose in her living, and lavish of speech, 130
As common as the cart-way to carters and knaves,
To monks and to minstrels, and miscreants base.
Assize-men and sumners, and such men praise her ;
Sheriffs of shires were shiftless without her.
She lures men to lose both their lands and their lives. 135
She plucks men from prison, and pays for them often,
Gives gold to the jailers, and groats of silver,
To unfetter the false men, to flee where they please.
The true she attaches, and ties them in bonds,
And hangs men, for hatred, who never did harm. 140

To be cursed by a council she counts not a rush,
But clothes the commissary, gives coats to his clerks,
And as soon is assoiled, as it pleaseth herself.
She may nigh do as much in a single month
As your secret seal may in six-score days. 145

Didst dread to be dead, so dim was the weather,
And homeward didst hie thee, lest hunger should end thee.

Thou didst ruthlessly rob men, and ravage the land,
And carry their chattels to Calais to sell. 195
I stood by my lord there, his life for to save ;
I made his men merry, their mourning to mend ;
I patted their backs, and emboldened their hearts,
Till they jumped for joy, to enjoy mine aid.
Had *I* been his marshal, his men to command, 200
I'd have laid my life, and no less a pledge,
He'd have held that land, in length and in breadth,
As king of that country, his kindred to aid,
Till each brat of his blood were a baron's peer ! 204
Thou, coward-like, Conscience, didst counsel him thence,
To relinquish his lordship, for a little silver,
That richest of realms that the rain sweeps over !

It becometh a king, who a kingdom rules,
To give meed unto men that meekly him serve,
To aliens and all men, and honour them with gifts ; 210
Meed makes him beloved, a man to be honoured.
Emperors and earls, and all kinds of lords,
For gifts, have their young men to run and to ride.
The pope and all prelates rich presents receive,

Giving meed in return, to maintain their laws. 215
 Servants, for service, we see well the sooth,
 Take meed from their masters, as meetest appears ;
 Beggars beseech men for meed, as a boon ;
 Minstrels, for mirth, claim meed for reward ;
 The king hath his meed for maintaining the peace ; 220
 Tutors, for teaching, take pupils' fees ;
 Priests ever preach to the people for pay,
 For mass-pence, and meat when the mealtime comes.
 For 'prentices, craftsmen their payments crave ;
 Merchants and meed ever meet well together ; 225
 No wight that's in want in this world long lives."

The king said to Conscience, " I can but admit
 That Meed is well worthy the mast'ry to have."

To the king quoth Conscience (and knelt on the earth)—
 " There are meeds in two manners, my lord, by your leave!
 One, God of his grace and in mercy granteth 231
 To well-doing workers, the while they are here,
 As the prophet has preached, and put in the Psalter,

Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle ? (Ps. xv. 1) :—
 ' Who shall dwell in Thy house with Thy holy saints,
 Or Thy holiest hills inhabit ? '—he asketh. 235
 And solves it himself, as the Psalter saith—

He that walketh uprightly, and worketh rightieousness (Ps. xv. 2).

What hence is concluded, I care not to show ;
Lest aught should annoy you, none end will I make.
'Tis the way of this world with those that have power, 280
Who says what is soothest, the soonest hath blame.

I, Conscience, this know, as Common-sense taught,
That Reason shall reign, and govern all realms ;
As happened to Agag, shall happen to others ;
A Samuel shall slay them, and Saul shall be blamed, 285
And a diadem'd David be deemed supreme ;
One Christian king shall be chief over all.

No more then shall Meed be a master, as now,
But Lowness and Love, and Loyalty also
Be masters on earth, to maintain the truth ! 290

Who is traitor to Truth, or takes what He claims,
Loyalty alone shall judge him by law.
No sergeant for service shall silk hood wear,
Nor furnish his cloak with fur, when he pleads.
For Meed of misdoers makes many a lord, 295
And against lords' laws misruleth a realm.

But Kind-love shall come yet, and Conscience also,
And make Law a labourer ; such love shall arise,

Such peace among people, such perfect truth,
That Jews shall well ween, and be wondrous glad, 300
That Messiah or Moses amidst us is here,
And muse in their minds why men are so true !

He that beareth a cutlass, a broad sword, or lance,
An ax or a hatchet, or any such weapon
To death shall be doomed, or must duly recast it 305
As sickle or scythe, as share or as coulter :

They shall beat their swords into plough-shares (Isa. ii. 4).
Each shall play with a plough, a pickax or spade,
Or spin, or spread dung ; or perish in sloth.

Parsons and priests shall their prayerbooks ply,
Ever dealing with David each day, until eve ; 310
If hawking or hunting shall hinder his work,
Of his boasted benefice bare be he shorn !
Neither king, nor knight, constable, nor mayor
Shall the commons oppress, or shall summon to court,
Or put them in pannel, to pledge their truth ; 315
As the deed is done, shall the doom be given,
Guilty or not guilty, as Truth shall decide.

King's court and common court, consistory and chapter,
All shall be *one* court, and *one* baron judge ;
And True-tongue be mine, who a traitor was never. 320

I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance
(Matt. ix. 13).

All that Mark ever made, John, Matthew, and Luke—
Thy doughtiest deeds—were done in our armour :—

The word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (John i. 14)

By so much, me seemeth, more surely may we
Both pray and beseech, if it be Thy will, 510
Our Father and Brother, Thy mercy be shown us ;
Have ruth on these ribalds, repenting them sorely
They wrought Thee to wrath, in word, thought, or deed.”

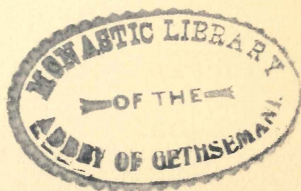
Then Hope seized a horn, *Thou-shalt-quicken-us-again*
(Ps. lxxi. 20),

And blew it with *blessed-is-he-whose-sin-is-forgiven*
(Ps. xxxii. 1), 515

Till saints high in heaven all sang in accord :—
O Lord, Thou preservest man and beast; how excellent is
Thy loving-kindness (Ps. xxxvi. 6).

A thousand of men then came thronging together,
Crying upward to Christ and His kindly mother
That grace might go with them, to seek saint Truth.

No wight was so wise that the way there he knew ; 520
They blundered, like beasts, over banks and o'er hills,
A long while, till late, when a lithe one they met,



seraphs, and seven more.' But it was said that there was once a *tenth* order, or 'one other,' viz. the (original) brightest order of all, of which Lucifer was chief; but this order rebelled, and was cast out of heaven; see ll. 111-114, which is founded on Isaiah, xiv. 12-15; the name of Lucifer being supposed to refer to Satan.

119. 'Nine days they fell'; Milton, Par. Lost, vi. 871.

132. The 'texts' are Matt. xxii. 20 (see l. 51) and 1 John, iv. 8 (see l. 86).

139. The line here quoted is given in Latin in the original, and runs thus: 'Hei mihi, quod sterilem duxi vitam iuvenilem.' Probably it is Langland's own; it recurs in Pass. v. 448 (p. 86).

153. The reference is to the Incarnation.

178. Because children sometimes weep at baptism.

187. It refers to the parable of the ten virgins.

NOTES TO PASSUS II.

20. *Meed*; i. e. Reward; but here used in a bad sense, as the personification of Bribery.

58. *Assize-men*, assisors; men who constituted the assize or inquest; whence the modern jury originated. *Sumners*, summoners; men who were employed to warn offenders to appear in court.

60. *Purveyors*. The original has 'Foregoeres and vitaillers.' These were the purveyors, who went before a king or great lord in his progress, and bought up provisions for himself and

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.