

An Experimental Edition of the Prologue
to
Piers Plowman

Michael Murphy

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This is an attempt at an edition of the Prologue to **Piers Plowman** in the original words but with modern spelling and assuming modern pronunciation. It is NOT a translation. It is similar to editions of Chaucer's **Tales** and **Troilus and Criseyde** done in modern spelling. In the case of Chaucer one has to contend with the fact that not all of his rhymes will work in modern pronunciation because of the Great Vowel Shift, and there is the necessity of keeping the iambic pentameter reasonably intact. The attempt with Langland's poem does not have to deal with these two obstacles: there is no rhyme and no iambic decasyllabic meter.

The vexed question of pronounced *-e* at word-end, which is very relevant to the meter of Chaucer's verse cannot altogether be elided in Langland, but it is much less pressing. In Chaucer we can often (but by no means always) tell where a now silent *-e* is to be pronounced because the iambic rhythm dictates a syllable or not at that point. In the following Chaucerian passage in old spelling it is fairly clear that the *-e*'s that are dotted are to be pronounced in order to keep the prevailing iambic pentameter; the others are *not* pronounced for the same reason, whether they occur before a vowel or not:

By him shall othere men corrected be
 The samè wordès writeth Ptolomee
 Rede in his Almageste and take it there ...
 Telle forth youre talè, spareth for no man
 And teche us yongè men of youre practike.

There is no such guide in **Piers Plowman**, and there is no iambic meter to be accommodated in lines whose syllable count can vary regularly between 9 and 17, where the normal range in Chaucer is 9-11. We probably will miss subtleties if we also pronounce Langland's verse in modern phonology, but any subtleties are and have to be speculative; we also miss subtleties even if we fabricate a 14th century English dialect, as is done for Chaucer. Passage of time ensures that we will miss such nuances in Shakespeare too, but that does not stop us reading him in modern spelling and

pronouncing his words with a modern phonology, and assuming that we know a great deal about what he says and means.

Using either modern pronunciation or reconstructed medieval pronunciation we will not be pronouncing the text of **Piers Plowman**, even in our heads, precisely the way the author intended. Nobody knows what that was. Using our own pronunciations we can enjoy the original words without pretense of knowing their sounds intimately. And Langland's four-stress rhythm remains in the modspell version and is familiar to us, for it is common even in iambic decasyllabic verse like Chaucer's, and in much other verse.

But even the spelling of **Piers Plowman** cannot be totally modernized because there are some words now totally obsolete which have no modern form: *swink, sweven, hals*. In others the modspell editor is fairly frequently obliged to keep a light syllable even if it is an obsolete feature such as the **-en** on infinitives or plural of verbs : *tellen, marchen, comen*. This causes no serious problem in comprehension because these and other words mean the same with or without the *-(e)n*. The same is true of the even more occasional use of *y-* to indicate past participle: *y-broken, y-crammed*. Also sometimes the old spelling for a word must be kept if the modern spelling would be misleading: *lewed* instead of *lewd*, for example. Words such as *thou* and *thee* and *-eth* endings of present tenses are archaisms familiar to most students from readings in Shakespeare or the Bible. Retaining these hardly needs comment.

What does a modspell version do to the original old-spelling text, apart from make it more immediately comprehensible ? The modern version retains all the words of the original, all the 4-stress meter and the alliteration, but it assumes that **-e-**, **-es**, **-en**, **-eth**, can often be dropped for an effective modern reading. The result is that in general the modspell text is 2 syllables shorter per line than the old-spelling versions if one assumes the same rules for pronouncing **-e-**'s that we use for Chaucer, as the Toronto

editors of the **A** text do.¹ Does this matter? Not to meaning, alliteration or to marked rhythm. But if **-e** and **-es** were pronounced as persistently in the 14th century as the **A** editors and many others assume, dropping them would indeed have been noticed even more by a 14th century ear than by ours. With the dropping of light syllables, the stresses of the line become more heavy and marked: 4 stresses in say 10 -12 syllables, a common number in the modern version, rather than 4 stresses in 12-14 syllables, most common in the old spelling/pronunciation. The argument in favor of a relentless pronouncing of now-silent **-e** in Chaucer's verse at line end is not strong; for it disturbs the iambic meter and *very* frequently gives 11 syllables instead of 10, the norm in an iambic pentameter line. But here we do not have such a meter to contend with, so the question of what **-e** to pronounce and which to drop becomes easier, at least for the pragmatic reader or editor.

The remarkable flexibility of the alliterative long line remains in the modspell version. Like the oldspell, it still provides a marked variety in line length, ranging from 9 syllables to 13, compared to a range of 9-17 in the old spelling/pronunciation. But the more usual range in the newspell is 10 -12; in the oldspell 12-14.

Let us look at versions of several lines to illustrate the differences.

˘ ˘ / | ˘ ˘ / | ˘ ˘ / | ˘ ˘ /

7. I was weary for-wandered, and went me to rest (modspell of B. Prol. 7)

I regard this line 7 as a modspell "standard" from which other lines deviate or vary.² Some Mss and Kane-Donaldson differ only in having *wente* and *reste*.

¹ I refer to the edition of the **A** text to be found on the internet, edited by scholars at the University of Toronto. In this edition the **-e**'s that, in the editors' judgement, need to be pronounced, are bolded.

² . My marking with a vertical line is not a claim that the line should be divided into feet. It is a metrical convenience for illustration. Marie Borroff has said that in **SGGK** the prevailing metrical pattern, in traditional terms, would be the anapest, as here.

I was wery forwandred and wente me to reste

It is possible that the final **-e** was *always* pronounced in Langland's day except before other vowels, and so the original might have been two syllables longer, but one is entitled to doubt it. Of **SGGK** Marie Borroff did more than doubt:

It is my view that the speech of the Gawain poet's time and place had evolved in the direction of modern English to the point where the final -e familiar to the student of Chaucer's verse was no longer pronounced.

And the editors of the standard edition of the poem were of a similar opinion.³ **SGGK** is not **Piers Plowman**, of course, but it *is* an alliterative poem from the same period, and can reasonably be made to share the doubt. Hoyt Duggan has engaged in a vigorous controversy with Thomas Cable that centers on this topic of pronounced **-e**'s, and his general view seems to be that **-e**'s were pronounced far less frequently than Professor Cable would insist. Duggan's sensible view is that "some historical final **-e**'s were sounded and some were suppressed" often in the same positions as we think standard for elision in Chaucer (p.184 ff) Moreover, "Some features of English grammar are features of the written system only." (189).⁴

I am not inclined or competent to decide this controversy, but whatever may or may not have been the practice of the poet, I find the rhythm of the modspell half-line "and went me to rest" more amenable to a modern ear than "wenté me to resté."

³ M. Boroff, **Sir Gawain & the Green Knight**, A Verse Translation, New York: Norton 1967, p. 58); **Sir Gawain & the Green Knight** ed J.R.R. Tolkien and E V Gordon, rev N. Davis, Oxford: OUP 1968, p. 133

⁴ Hoyt Duggan, "Langland's Dialect and Final -e," **Studies in the Age of Chaucer** 12, 1990. One thing they seem to agree on is that all lines must end with an unstressed syllable, a rule that a modspell version does not follow for the most part. I do not mean to imply that any of these scholars would agree with the more radical changes I make to the original text. They are exclusively concerned with some early version(s), and in the case of Borroff, with a translation also. Cable's book is **The English Alliterative Tradition** (Philadelphia: U of Penn 1991).

On the other hand, in one oldspell version of line 21

21. In settinge and sowinge swonken full harde

for the same rhythmic reason, pronunciation of the **-e** in *sowinge*, but not in *settinge* or *harde*, would give a line with the same rhythm as line 7 except for the first “foot”:

21. In setting and sowingè swonken full hard.

The full modspell version omits all the **-e**'s for consistency, but still gets an acceptable line especially if one pronounces the end of *sowing* with an η + **g**: *sowing*, a pronunciation still found in the West Midlands of England.

Here is line 50 in the original spelling:

50. I seigh somme that seiden thei hadde ysought seintes

The modspell line will go more smoothly if a few of the archaic features are kept:

50. I saw som|è that said|en they had|y-sought saints (12 syllables)

This gives an acceptable and readily understood line. One CAN do without the archaisms of **-è**, **-en**, and **y-**, though the absence of all three makes for a very heavy curtailed line:

50. I saw some that said they had sought saints (9 syllables)

It becomes a question of which is preferable : a good or satisfactory rhythm and quicker comprehension through ready recognition of familiar spelling; or a more archaic version with rhythm which might very well be closer to that of the author.

Line 28 is rhythmically somewhat unsatisfactory in all versions, but least so, I think, in the modspell, especially as it avoids putting a stress on the possessive adjective which

carries the **h-** alliteration in the oldspell versions:

28 As ancrès and hermytès that holdeth hem in heorè cellès (A, 17 syllables max.)

As ancrès and herèmitès that holden hem in hirè sellès (B, oldspell, 18 syllables max.)

As anchorites and hermits that hold them in their cells (B, newspell, 12 syllables)

Is there any serious loss to sense or rhythm in the elision of syllables ?

The question of which **-e-**'s to pronounce or elide is not made easier by the divergence in the appearance of **-e-** between even two MSS of the B version, which can be strikingly different:

(**W** Ms of B text)

Line 8 Under a brood bank by a bourne syde (11 syllables max.)

(**L** Ms of B text)

Line 8 Under a brode banke by a bornes syde (13 „ „ „)⁵

W Ms of B text

Line 17: A fair feeld ful of folk fond I ther bitwene (12 syllables max.)

L ms of B text:

⁵ The **L** (Laud) ms is the base text for Bennett and the Norton editors. J. A. W. Bennett, **Piers Plowman The Prologue and Passus I -VII of the B Text** (Clarendon Press, 1972). Elizabeth A Robertson and Stephen Shepherd. **Piers Plowman**. Norton Critical Editions (NY: 2006).

Ms **W** (Trinity college) is that used by Schmidt and Kane-Donaldson, and the University of Virginia internet version. George Kane and E. T. Donaldson, eds. **Piers Plowman: The B Version** (London: Athlone, 1975. A. V. C. Schmidt, ed. **The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B Text** (London: Dutton, 1978).

Line 17: A faire felde ful of folke fonde I there bytwene (16 syllables max.)

With these variations of one line in the manuscripts perhaps it is not surprising that in most printed editions of **Piers Plowman**, even those versions intended for students, editors avoid any instructions on how to pronounce the lines, though such introductory books almost invariably have detailed instructions on how to pronounce the words of **Canterbury Tales**. The one exception in **PP** texts I found was in the Norton “dual language” edition with Donaldson’s translation. It says that these comments apply to “Midland English,” presumably something between South East Midland and West Midland. But in fact they have simply borrowed from the **Norton Anthology of English Literature** pages essentially directed to the dialect of Chaucer’s verse, and their few illustrative quoted lines from **PP** are there to illustrate alliteration only (p. xxi), without any indication of how, say, line 17 (**L Ms**) is to be read — with 12 syllables or 16.⁶

Occasionally, as with line 28 above, modernization interferes with the alliteration in minor ways. In line 180, e.g.,

180 [Ac] held them unhardy and their counsel feeble,

[Ac] held hem unhardy and here counseille feble

The modspell substitutes *their* for *here*, and *them* for *hem*, but *held* and *un-hardy* carry most of the alliteration, and *here* can scarcely have carried a heavy accent. It is possible that in this case and in line 28 we lose something more than the alliteration by substituting *their* for *hire* or *heore*, but it would be hard to say what.⁷ The gain in

⁶ M.H. Abrams et al., **The Norton Anthology of English Literature I** (NY: Norton, 2006), xvii-xxi), *Reading Middle English*.

⁷ Michael Samuels, probably the pre-eminent authority on medieval English dialects, says about the 3rd person plural pronoun: “Langland’s forms, as shown by both alliteration and the relict forms, were *þey* and *hii*. Here again the co-occurrence of these two forms in a single system is well-evidenced.” “Dialect and Grammar,” in **Companion to Piers Plowman** ed John Alford (Berkeley: U of Cal P, 1988), p. 213.

comprehension seems worth any small cost. And, of course, there are many lines in the original which do not carry a full complement of three alliterating consonants. I am not sure if a note or marginal gloss indicating the substitution is at all useful in a student edition

In **The English Alliterative Tradition** Thomas Cable⁸ sums up the three general rhythmic principles for medieval alliterative poetry, but “**PP** diverges from these principles more than nearly any other poem of the Alliterative Revival ...” Nevertheless, he gives a couple of lines from **Piers Plowman** to show that even they illustrate his principles including the one that **the line must always end in an unstressed syllable.**

Prol 36 Feynen hem fantasiès and folès hem makèth

6.33 For thei cometh to my croft and croppeth my whetè

He may very well be right about the first line, though one could make the suggestion that *fantasies* be pronounced *fancies* which makes the rhythm more fluid here in mid line, and that **maketh** was pronounced more like **makes**, as it often certainly was two centuries later, even when written **-eth**.⁹ In the second line Cable’s scansion assumes, as most Chaucerians do, that *line*-final **-e** is always sounded. He insists that the line-final light syllable, often an **-e**, is an *essential part of the pattern* in alliterative **b** half lines. I find his argument about the requirement for the ending of such lines more logical and consistent than that of the Chaucerians with iambic lines, for he tries to fit his practice into a pattern; they allow it to violate a pattern, the iamb. Cable may be right, but a modspell version could make a perfectly acceptable line that ends in a stress and preserves the anapestic foot that Marie Borroff accepts as the predominant metrical measure of **Sir Gawain the and the Green Knight**. Thus, 6.33 quoted above appears in

⁸ U of Penn 1991, P. 86.

⁹ Skeat’s translation actually does use the form “fancies” here. Whether he would have pronounced *fantasies* that way is more doubtful. See **The Vision of Piers Plowman. Done into Modern English by W. W. Skeat** (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905, rpt 1922). See footnote 11 below for 17th century quotation.

newspell as:

For they cōme to my cróft and cróppeth my whéat (6.33)

This also assumes the same freedom to mingle verb forms as in the original which often mingles *-eth* and *-en* for plural present tense ending, sometimes in the same line as in Prol. 36 above.

But Cable takes one unusual step further: “because scribes are inconsistent in their writing of final **-e**, it is necessary to let the historical form of the words shine through the written form Thus, in the following line *will* (from OE *willa*) has an *-e* that **is not written**”.¹⁰

x x x x x ´ x x ´ x x ´ x x ´ x
And also he bigileth þe gylere ageines his wil (7.70)

But if it is permissible to assume that a syllable is there though it isn't written, it may be even more permissible to drop a syllable that isn't there in pronunciation though written, a feature of English we are totally familiar with in modern usage as in *walked*, *strokes*.¹¹

¹⁰ p.87. On p.107 he gives more than a dozen lines from *The Wars of Alexander* (mid 15 c) in which, he maintains, all the present participles (northern form *-and*) and a few strong past participles in *-en* need an *-e* although it is not written: *-and(e)*, *-en(e)*. This, again, is to accord with his rhythmic theory which in this agrees with Professor Duggan's, he says.

¹¹ An interesting piece of evidence from the 17th century is cited in the **Cambridge History of English and American Literature**, Vol 14, Chap 15. Richard Hodges is cited giving as equivalent pronunciations: *furze*, *furs*, *furreth*, and *Knox*, *knocks* (noun), *he knocketh*. Howsoever wee use to write thus, *leadeth* it, *maketh* it, *noteth* it, *raketh* it, *perfumeth* it, etc. Yet in our ordinary speech ... we say *leads* it, *makes* it, *notes* it, *rakes* it, *perfumes* it.” (1646). Hodges also gives a list of other words “like in sound and unlike in their signification and writing:” *Cox*, *cocks*, *cocketh* up the hay. *Rites*, *rights*, *wheelwrights*, *righteth*, *writeth*.”

And, of course, we do not feel obliged to pronounce final -e in all English words, any more than Chaucer did in his verse.

John Lawlor in **Piers Plowman**,¹² was of the opinion that

The poem is so far oral in its essential mode of being that a true text is in some ways as artificial a conception as a true text of some of the ballads ... The impact of Langland's phrases ... not with any effect of singular meaning in the word, but in the whole fall of the phrase, seems to make the poem peculiarly not any one speaker's property, so that an authentic word by word text is to be distinguished from all variation — but is the common possession of all who hear, and in their turn are moved to re-tell it.

I do not know what Lawlor would think of this re-telling of the poem in modern spelling (and sound), but I suspect his attitude (and mine) would not please George Kane, the great editor of the Athlone edition. For him the idea that “Chaucer's English, if its spelling is modernized, is pretty directly accessible,” is an “indestructible illusion”.¹³ He is wrong, I think, as has been demonstrated in editions to be found in print and on the internet.¹⁴ Moreover, the semantic changes in words that he adduces to make his point are still as true if one leaves the old spelling as if one adopts the new; the meaning and the spelling are not related. Besides, his standards for a good translation are so high that any such thing is unattainable. He is, perhaps right about the Penguin translation's loss of concision; it has, he says, 1000 lines more than the original. But that is not true of George Economou's verse translation of the C text which has the same number of lines as the original.¹⁵ My trial version of the prologue also has the same number of lines as the original and all of Langland's words, but far fewer syllables. This idea of concision would probably not conciliate.

¹² **An Essay in Criticism** (London: Edward Arnold Pub, 1962), p. 325.

¹³ **Chaucer and Langland** (Berkeley: U of Cal Press, 1989), p. 92 .

¹⁴ **Canterbury Quintet and Canterbury Marriage Tales** (Brooklyn, NY: Conal & Gavin Publ, 2004); Chaucer's **Troilus & Criseyde** and Henryson's **Testament of Cresseid** at www.ThomondGate.net

¹⁵ George Economou, **William Langland's Piers Plowman, The C Version. A verse translation.** U of Pennsylvania P., 1996.

Professor Kane's other charges against translations are more vague: translations lose force of statement, energy, extra-lexical meaning, tonal effect and quality of utterance. To "possess" the poetry "we need after all only to learn Middle English." Only ! He has just been illustrating the difficulties of thoroughly learning Middle English, particularly in its wildly variant spellings, pointing out the errors of even mature and knowledgeable translators. To possess the poetry, then, would mean learning Middle English as George Kane has learned it. Few of us have his great talent and extraordinary indefatigability and 30 years or so to devote exclusively to **Piers Plowman**. One wonders what he thought of the translation by his equally talented and diligent collaborator, Talbot Donaldson. And in any case, the version I produce here is **not** a translation.

The point of this experimental modspell edition is to find another way to make the original words of a great poem more readily accessible to a modern audience who cannot "possess" the text unless they learn Middle English to a level unattainable by most. I have assumed, somewhat like Lawlor, that, whatever Langland's rhythmic system may have been, his work is strong enough to survive transformation into a modspell, modsound version that keeps his alliterative pattern and all of his words.¹⁶

Notes to the reader

1. Dotted -è- suggests that this -e- may be pronounced for a better rhythm. But it is only a suggestion.
2. Verbs ending in *-en* like *comen*, *putten*, *marchen* mean the same with and without the *-(e)n*, which is sometimes retained for the sake of the meter.
3. Similarly, words like *y-crammed*, *y-broken* mean the same with and without the *y-*, which was a sign for a grammatical past participle. Again it is sometimes retained for the meter.

¹⁶ For those who grumble about modernization as "dumbing down the classics," the presence of a large number of marginal glosses and annotations even in this reader-friendly, modernized version, should indicate the difficulty of the poem even in this form. To elucidate a piece of 231 lines there are 12 subheadings, 121 marginal glosses, mostly for archaic words or phrases, and 29 footnote annotations.

William Langland
The Vision of Piers Plowman
based on the **B** text from the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library

*The narrator falls asleep in the open air, and dreams
a midsummer day's dream.*

<p>In a summer season, when soft was the sun, I shope me into shrouds as I a sheep were, In habit as an hermit, unholy of works, Went wide in this world wonders to hear. ¹⁷ Ac on a May morning on Malvern Hills Me befell a ferly, of Fairie methought. ¹⁸ I was weary for-wandered and went me to rest Under a broad bank by a burn's side; And as I lay and leaned and looked on the waters, 10 I slumbered in a sleeping, it sweyed so merry. Then gan I meten a marvelous sweven -- That I was in a wilderness, wist I never where. A[c] as I beheld into the east on high to the sun, I saw a tower on a toft trily y-makèd, A deep dale beneath, a dungeon therein, With deep ditches and dark and dreadful of sight.</p>	<p><i>dressed in clothes like a sheep In clothing like Ac = But I experienced a wonder from walking stream's rippled I dreamt a m. dream I didn't know But On a hill, well built</i></p>
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¹⁷ Out of religious fervor hermits chose to live apart from the rest of the world, in cells situated in out of the way places. But, as we see below in lines 53 ff, people who professed to be hermits often did exactly the opposite by frequently traveling on pilgrimages, sometimes with mistresses (*wenches*) tagging along for comfort. Presumably the gullibly pious supported them with offerings, possibly in return for a promise of prayers offered at the shrines.

¹⁸ "I experienced a marvel, otherworldly it seemed to me." *Methought* is not bad grammar; it means "to me it seemed." Similarly, *me befell* means "it happened to me."

*He sees a field full of folk of all sorts: the pious, the hardworking,
the lazy, the gluttonous, entertainers, businessmen, etc*

A fair field full of folk found I there between,
Of all manner of men, the mean and the rich, *poor*
Working and wandering as the world asketh.

20 Some put them to the plough, playèd full seldom,
In setting and sowing swonken full hard, *they worked*

And won what these wasters with gluttony destroy.
And some put them to pride, appareled them thereafter, *dressed accordingly*
In countenance of clothing comen disguised.¹⁹

In prayers and penance putten them many,
All for the love of Our Lord livèd full strait *strictly*
In hope to have heavenly bliss, *joy in heaven*
As anchorites and hermits that hold them in their cells²⁰ *Such as*
Covet not in country to cairen about *traipse*

30 For no lecherous liflode their licham to please²¹ *no l. way of life their bodies*
And some chose chaffare; they 'chievèd the better, *business ... achieved*
As it seems to our sight that such men thrive;
And some mirth to make as minstrels can, *legitimate entertainers*
And get gold with their glee -- [guilt]less, I 'lieve- *I believe*
Ac japers and janglers, Judas's children, *But*

¹⁹ *In countenance* ... seems to mean that they wanted their clothes to give an impression of secular or clerical rank or wealth.

²⁰ Hermits who actually keep to their hermitage cells unlike those mentioned in ll. 53 ff below, who gad about the country. L. 27: *heavenly*: the phrase in the mss is *heavenriche blisse*: bliss in the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ "Not to please their bodies (*licham*) by a lecherous way of life," exactly the opposite of what hermits and anchorites professed.

*The friars*¹

I found there friars, all the four orders,
 Preaching the people for profit of themselves:
60 Gloséd the gospel as them good likéd;² *commented on*
 For covetise of copes construed it as they would.
 Many of these masters may clothe them at liking
 For their money and their merchandise marchen together.
 Since charity has been chapman and chief to shrive lords³
 Many ferlies have fallen in a few years. *Many marvels h. happened*
 But Holy Church and they hold better together *Unless H. C.; they: ms has hii*
 The most mischief on mold is mounting up fast. *on earth*

*A pardoner*⁴

There preached a pardoner as he a priest were: *as if he were*
70 Brought forth a bull with bishops' seals, *document w seal (L: bulla)*
 And said that himself might assoillen them all *absolve*
 Of falsehood, of fasting, of vows y-broken. *fasts not kept*

¹ **Friars** were clerics who were not attached to a parish, but who went from place to place preaching, and often begging, since they had no other means of support. There were four orders of Friars. [See **Endnotes for more information**].

² ME *glose* means to gloss, i.e. write or speak an explanation of passages of classics or Scripture. The marginal italicized explanations on this page are glosses. However, explanations of Scripture might not only explain, but explain away awkward or inconvenient passages in the interests of the speaker, or of the hearer, who might give the glosser a *cope*, a fine clerical cloak, in return for salving his conscience. Some of the friars were well educated in divinity, often with Masters degrees, and had a reputation for *glosing* the Bible.

³ “Since Charity has become merchant and chiefly to hear the confession of lords.” *Charity* is presumably ironic. The meaning is that friars have been too understanding and forgiving of the sins of powerful people. *Chapman* = merchant; *shrive* = hear confession and give absolution.

⁴ A lay preacher who often deceived ignorant people into accepting “pardon” for their sins in return for money. He was supposed to have, from the local bishop or the pope, a license with seal (bull). See **Pardoner in ENDNOTES for fuller explanation**.

Lewed men [be]lieved him and liked well his words, *Unlearned men*
 Came up kneeling to kissen his bull. ¹ *to k. his (faked) papal document*
 He bonked them with his brevet, and blearèd their eyes,
 And [he] raught with his rageman rings and brooches. *Got w. the aid of his "bull"*

Comment

Thus you give your gold gluttons to help,
 And lend it [to] losels that lechery haunt *give to lazy lechers*
 Were the bishop y-blessed and worth both his ears,
 His seal should not be sent to deceive the people.
80 Ac it is not by the bishop that the boyo preaches. *by the b's leave*
 For the parish priest and the pardonor parten the silver *share*
 That the poor of the parish should have if they ne werðf *pardoners weren't there*

*All ranks of the clergy
 take secular jobs and neglect their pastoral duties*

Parsons and parish priests 'plained them to the bishop *complained*
 That their parishes were poor since the pestilence time, *since plague, Black Death*
 To have a licence and leave at London to dwell,
 And sing there for simony, for silver is sweet. ²
 Bishops and bachelors, both masters and doctors — *w. university degrees*
 That have cure under Christ, and crowning in token ³ *tonsure, i.e. cropped head*

¹ The **k** of *kneeling* would have been pronounced, keeping the alliteration.

² In London one might get to be a chantry priest, i.e. commissioned with regular pay, to conduct services for a guild, often saying masses for their dead members. Langland seems to regard this practice as simony, that is a sin by a person who pays to get an ecclesiastical office or power.

³ *Cure* is a job caring for souls. *Crowning* refers to the tonsure received at ordination as a token of priesthood. It consisted of a shaved patch at the crown of the head, presumably to forestall vanity in elegant hair coifs.

And sign that they should shrive their parishioners, *hear confessions*
90 Preach and pray for them, and the poor feed —
 Liggan at London in Lenten and else. *Spend Lent & other times in L.*
 Some serven the King and his silver tellen, *& count*
 In 'Chequer and in Chancery challenge his debts *collect*
 Of wards and of wardemotes, waifs and strays.
 And some serve as servants [to] lords and ladies,
 And instead of stewards [they] sitten and deemen. *Sit as judges in manorial courts*
 Their mass and their matins and many of their hours
 Are done undevoutly. ¹ Dread is at the last
 Lest Christ in consistory accursè full many. *At the Judgement*
100 I perceived of the power that Peter had to keep —
 To bind and unbind, as the Book tells — ² *Matt. 16: 18-20*
 How he left it with love as Our Lord hight *promised*
 Amongst four virtues, most virtuous of all virtues,
 That cardinal be called and closing gates
 There Christ is in kingdom, to close and to shut,
 And to open it to them and heaven's bliss show.
 Ac of the Cardinals at court that caught of that name *at papal court*
 And power presumed in them a Pope to make
 To have the power that Peter had, impugnen I n'ill — *I won't question it*
110 For in love and in lettrure the election belongeth; *learning*
 Forthy I can and cannot of court speak more. *Therefore*

¹ The *hours* were the prayers at appointed times each day. Matins was one of the hours, in the morning; vespers was in the evening, and there were other *hours* in between.

² The syntax here is confused and the allusions confusing. He starts to speak of the power of forgiving sins to the repentant, a power given by Christ who said to St Peter: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, & whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt 16:19). This brings up an association with cardinals who elect popes, heirs of St Peter, which leads to thoughts of the cardinal virtues, (temperance, prudence, fortitude, justice). *Cardinal* comes from Latin *cardo*, a hinge, hence the reference to opening and shutting gates with the power of the keys.

The King and the Common People. The Political and Social Order.

Then came there a King; Knighthood him led;
 Might of the Commons made him to reign.
 And then came Kind Wit and clerks he made *Common Sense*
 For to counsel the King, and the Commons save. *The community*
 The King and Knighthood and Clergy both
 Cast that the Commons should them [commons] find. ¹ *Decreed*
 The Commons contrived of Kind Wit crafts, *invented trades*
 And for profit of all the people plowmen ordained
120 To till and to travail as true life asketh.
 The King and the Commons and Kind Wit the third *Common Sense*
 Shaped law and leaute, each life to know his own. *loyalty or justice*
 Then looked up a lunatic, a lean thing withal, ²
 And kneeling to the King clerkly he said, *like a cleric*
 "Christ keep thee, sire King, and thy Kingdom,
 And lene thee lead thy land so leaute thee love, ³
 And for thy rightful ruling be rewarded in heaven"
 And sithen in the air on high an angel of heaven *And then*
 Lowed to speak in Latin -- for lewed men ne could *uneducated men*
130 Jangle ne judge that justify them should, *argue or judge what would j. them*
 But suffer and serven. Forthy said the angel: *Therefore*

¹ They decreed that the common people should support [*find*] them (king, knight & clergy). *Commons* has the additional intended meaning of food supply or general support. Langland here hints at the accepted categories of medieval society: 1) those who work 2) those who fight & 3) those who pray. Those in #1 support those in #2 and #3. The syntax of 118-20 is "The commons ... assigned plowmen to till and travail for profit of all the people."

² Skeat surmised that the lunatic was Long Will himself. One has to speculate as to why he has to be a lunatic.

³ "And grant that you rule your land justly so the people are loyal to you." In the preceding line most mss have *kingric* or *kyngryche* for *kingdom*.

" *Sum Rex, sum Princeps*", -*neutrum fortasse deinceps* ¹

O qui iura regis Christi specialia regis,

Hoc quod agas melius -- iustus es, esto pius

Nudum ius a te vestiri vult pietate.

Qualia vis metere, talia grana sere:

Si ius nudatur, nudo de iure metatur;

Si seritur pietas, de pietate metas.

Then grieved him a goliard, a glutton of words, ²

a wandering scholar

140 And to the angel on high answered after:

" *Dum rex a regere dicatur nomen habere,*

Nomen habet sine re nisi studet iura tenere'. ³

Then [c]an all the Commons cry in verses of Latin

To the King's council -- construe whoso would --

"*Precepta Regis sunt nobis vincula legis*" ⁴

The council of rats and mice

With that ran there a rout of ratons at once

And small mice with them: more than a thousand

Came to a council for the common profit;

For a cat of a court came when him liked

150 And overleaped them lightly and lached them at his will,

seized

¹ [You say] "I am king, I am a prince." But may be neither afterwards. Oh you who administer the laws of Christ the King, do what you do, but do it better. You are just, but be merciful too. Naked law needs to be clothed in mercy. What you sow you will reap, for if you administer rigid law, you will be judged by rigid law. If you sow mercy, you will reap clemency."

² Why is the *goliard* angry? Why is he a glutton for words? Is he a mere pedant? Why is he such a stickler for law and order? Goliards, wandering scholars and unconnected clerics, were not known for their respect for either.

³ Since *rex* (king) comes from *regere* (to rule), he has only the name of king if he does not take care to enforce the law.

⁴ "The wishes of the king are to us the chains of law."

And played with them perilously and possessed [them] about.

"For doubt of diverse dreads we dare not well look, *for fear of various dangers*

And if we grouch of his games he will grieve us all --

Cratch us or claw us and in his clutches hold.

That us loathes the life ere he let us pass. *Makes our life miserable ...*

Might we with any wit his will withstand,

We might be lords aloft and live at our ease'.

Belling the Cat

A rat of renown, most reasonable of tongue,

Said for a sovereign salve to them all,

160 "I have seen segges", quod he, "in the City of London *men*

Bearing beighes full bright about their necks, *collars, necklaces*

And some collars of craft-work. Uncoupled they wend ¹ *they go*

Both in warren and waste[land] where them leve liketh, *where they please*

And otherwhile they are elsewhere, as I hear tell.

Were there a bell on their beighe, by Jesus, as me thinketh, *on the collar*

Men might wit where they went and away run. *Might know*

And right so," quod that rat, "reason me shows

To buy a bell of brass or of bright silver

And knit it on a collar for our common profit

170: And hang it upon the cat's hals. Then hear we may *neck*

Where he rides or rests or roameth to play;

And if him list for to laik, then look we may *wants to play*

And appear in his presence the while him play liketh,

And if him wratheth, be ware and his way shun. " *if he gets angry*

¹ Possibly something has been inadvertently left out, for there is a disconcerting jump from *segges, men,* to dogs (?) that can be "uncoupled" and hunt (?) in "warren and wasteland." Perhaps Langland (if not the rat) wants us to understand that the rich oppress the people and act like dogs hunting down the poor. No comment from Schmidt or Norton.

All the rout of rats to this reason assented;
 Ac though the bell was y-brought and on the beighe hanged *on collar*
 There ne was raton in all the rout, for all the realm of France, *kingdom*
 That durst have bounden the bell about the cat's neck, *that dared*
 Ne hang it about his hals all England to win, *his neck*
180 [Ac] held them unhardy and their counsel feeble,
 And let their labor lost and their long study.
 A mouse that much good couth, as me tho thought, *that knew m. good, as it seemed then*
 Struck forth sternly and stood before them all,
 And to the rout of ratons rehearsed these words: *proclaimed*
 "Though we had killed the cat, yet should there come another *Even if we*
 To cracchen us and all our kind, though we crept under benches.
 Forthy I counsel all the Commons to let the cat worth, *therefore ... let the c. be*
 And be we never so bold the bell him to show.
 The while he catches conies he covets not our carrion, *rabbits ...our flesh*
190 But feeds him all with venison; defame we him never. *feeds on game*
 For better is a little loss than a long sorrow:
 The maze among us alle, though we miss a shrew! ¹
 For I heard my sire say, is seven year past,
 'Where the cat is a kitten, the court is full elenge.' *unhappy*
 That witnesseth Holy Writ, whoso will it read --
Vae terrae ubi puer rex est, &c. ²
 For may no renk there rest have for ratons by night. *No man*
 For many men's malt we mice would destroy,
 And also you rout of ratons rend men's clothes,

¹ Bennett glosses *maze* as "turmoil, confusion" and has no comment on what it would mean here. "Muddling through a maze = Norton; Schmidt: "it would be utter confusion among us all, even though we should be free of one particular person." The 2nd half line does seem to mean "even if we got rid of one nasty animal."

² "Woe to the land where the king is a boy." Ecclesiastes 10:16

200 N'ere the cat of the court that can you overleap; *if there were no cat*
 For had you rats your [raik] you could not rule yourselves.
 I say for me," quod the mouse, " I see so much after,
 Shall never the cat nor the kitten by my counsel be grieved,
 Nor carping of this collar that costed me never . ¹
 And though it costed me chattel, biknown it I n'ould, *would not admit*
 But suffer as himself would, to do as him likes -- *but accept*
 Coupled and uncoupled to catch what they may. ²
 Forthy each a wise wight I warn -- wit well his own! ” *Therefore ..wise man ..mind..*
 What this metels bemeaneth, ye men that be merry, *this dream*
210 Divine ye -- for I ne dare, by dear God in heaven! *Interpret ! For I dare not*

Lawyers

Yet hoved there a hundred in howves of silk -- *caps, hoods*
 Sergeants, it seemed, that served at the Bar, *Senior lawyers*
 Pleaded for pennies and pounds the law, ³
 And not for love of Our Lord unloosed their lips once.
 Thou mightst better mete mist on Malvern Hills *measure*
 Than get a "mum" of their mouth till money be showed!

Aristocracy, wealthy citizens, workers

Barons and burgesses and bondmen also

¹ “Nor chattering about this collar that I didn’t help pay for. But even if it had cost me, I would not admit to it.”

² We seem to be back at line 162 with the mysterious “coupled & uncoupled”. Confusing movement from *himself* to *they* (206-7).

³ Ms has *poundes* which Donaldson translates as a verb: *impounded*. Here we take it as a noun, *pounds* that goes with *pennies*.

I saw in this assembly, as you shall hear after;	
Bakesters and brewsters and butchers many,	<i>bakers, brewers</i>
220: Wool websters and weavers of linen,	<i>wool weavers</i>
Tailors and tinkers and tollers in markets,	<i>tax collectors</i>
Masons and miners and many other crafts:	
Of all kinds [of] living laborers lopen forth some	<i>came forth</i>
As dikers and delvers that do their deeds ill	<i>ditch diggers</i>
And drive forth the long day with "Dieu save Dame Emma!" ¹	
Cooks and their knaves cried, " Hot pies, hot!	<i>helpers</i>
Good geese and grys! Go we dine, go we!"	<i>and pork</i>
Taverners unto them tolden the same:	<i>called out likewise</i>
"White wine of Oseye and wine of Gascoigne,	<i>W. wine from Alsace</i>
230 Of the Rhine and of La Rochelle, the roast to defie!"	<i>to go with</i>
All this I saw sleeping, and seven sithes more.	<i>7 times</i>

Endnotes

Friars were clerics who were not attached to a parish, but who went from place to place preaching, and often begging, since they had no other means of support. There were four orders of Friars: Franciscans, followers of St Francis, who were also known as Friars Minor; Dominicans, followers of St Dominic, known formally as the Order of Preachers; Carmelites who claimed some relationship with Mt Carmel in Palestine; Augustinians(Austins), followers of St Augustine. Some of them were quite learned, but had acquired a reputation of using their learning to

¹ God save Dame Emma. Apparently a popular saying or phrase from a song; its significance is a mystery.

advance themselves or their order materially. Chaucer's portrait of a Friar in the **Canterbury Tales** is very unflattering, both in the *General Prologue* and in the *Summoner's Tale*.

Pardoners are well known from Chaucer's memorable description of one in the **Canterbury Tales**, and for the tale assigned him there. The Pardoner's trade grew out of a church practice that was difficult to understand and easy to abuse — the doctrine and practice of indulgences which was roughly this: Even when you had confessed your sins, expressed your regret and a determination to try to avoid them in the future, there was still something owing, penance of some kind, which could take various forms: fasting, going on a pilgrimage, saying prayers, giving money to the poor or to some other good cause like the building of a church. It was in the last-mentioned that a fatal slippage took place. Careless or unscrupulous people implied that if you gave money to a good cause, which they represented, that act in itself bought forgiveness for your sins, even without confession or contrition. This was not, of course, church teaching. But it was an idea widely disseminated and widely believed, because it satisfied at the same time the need for easy forgiveness in some, and the need for easy money in others. The Pardoner gave false assurances of God's pardon; the deluded sinner gave real money in exchange. Pardoners were supposed to have the seal, the permission, of the bishop which could be faked about as easily as a papal seal (bull). They were not allowed to preach, but did so anyway.

End of Edition