

Finding Resources to Repair a Broken Community in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*

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I. Introduction

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* creates an allegorical progression through the liturgical calendar in Medieval England. The allegory follows the timeline of participating in confession, the Eucharist, and the holy sacraments. Although little is known about William Langland, he writes his allegory in the later part of the fourteenth century (Kasten 12). The allegory follows the central character, Will, through a series of dreams where he experiences the most demanding religious and economical challenges facing England. In the first passus, Will enters his dream to meet Holy Church, his first teacher. Holy Church tries to reconnect with Will because she has known him his whole life, but Will does not recognize her. Holy Church tries to share with Will the importance of love and natural knowledge¹ to answer his question on how to save his soul, but she sends him on his way to find Truth, the source of love, so he can learn for himself the value in what she tells him.

Will then witnesses the emerging market economy and the first model of a broken-down society. Meed, a mistress representing undue reward, holds great power in the new economic system (II-IV). Meed frequently bribes and charms people in the allegory, exposing the corruption present in the market economy. When the king begins to regulate Meed, he turns to Conscience and Reason to advise him². Reason leads the people into confession, where the personified seven deadly sins attempt to amend their sinful behavior (VI-VII). These confessions lead into the first model of a virtuous community where Piers the plowman introduces himself.

Piers, a faithful plowman, claims to know and serve Truth well and he volunteers himself to guide everyone to Truth if they help him plow his half-acre (VII-VIII). The model of

¹ Natural knowledge refers to the inherent love for God. Also known as Kynde knowledge, the emphasis of connecting with and understanding the nature and work of God is important to a Christian.

² Although the king does not play an important role in my agreement, an important note is that the king in *Piers Plowman* does try to govern virtuously and listen to both Conscience and Reason as his primary advisors.

community created through Piers' leadership attempts to practice good works (satisfaction of deed) but sin and its wasteful nature begins to impact the laborers. Piers attempts to drive waste out of the half-acre, but the community structure inevitably collapses. This damage causes people to eventually disperse, and Conscience and Will find Patience to help them turn inwardly to reform their own selves. Importantly, Will meets Liberum Arbitrium³. Liberum Arbitrium guides Will to one resource, the Tree of Charity, and teaches Will about how sin tries to undermine the tree's healing powers. Through this inward reflection, Will discovers the importance of charity and feels ready to rejoin the Christian community.

The final stage of the allegory attempts to repair the Christian community as Conscience steps forward to lead, but the community ultimately fails. Piers returns to cultivate the cardinal virtues and Grace blesses his work so Piers can create a foundation for Christian community. People join to build a church with Grace supporting their work. Everyone again works well together at first, but people begin to reject Conscience's leadership before they all go into communion. As the church begins to feel physically sick, sin enters the church walls. Although Conscience tries to hold everything together, Peace informs him that Contrition died. This news causes Conscience to go on his own pilgrimage and leave behind the church.

Piers Plowman as an allegory provides layers of meaning where personified characters represent abstract concepts. Through the plot of the allegory, the poem reveals layers of political and religious interpretations. Derek Pearsall points out, however, that these levels of interpretations are not always consistent. "Langland's commitment to allegory is both instinctive

³ *Liberum* in Latin translates to "free, unimpeded, independent" and *Arbitrium* translates to "arbitration, choice, judgment, will." Most direct translations will say Liberum Arbitrium translates to "Free Will," but Langland avoids using this English translation. In using arbitration in Liberum Arbitrium's role, he serves as a mediator and guide (OED). The main difference between Will and Liberum Arbitrium is that Liberum Arbitrium "in the freedom of its will, human nature beards the deepest impression of the image of God according to which it was created. As the highest gift of God to humanity it appears and acts as a universal power of the soul" (Economou 248).

and casual: he moves towards and away from it with equal ease...where the allegorical is endorsed by the realities of the literal and the literal vivified by the possibilities of the allegorical” (Pearsall 13). Langland’s use of allegory helps expand our understanding of the characters and enhances our ability to incorporate them into our own lives. As an allegorical figure, Will represents the human will as the volitional faculty of the soul (wil MED), both individually and collectively. Will determines the direction of the allegory and the experiential journey Langland creates allows the audience to learn and reflect along with Will. The allegory allows audiences to process Will’s experiences and make mistakes along the way. Will also can be interpreted as an autobiographical character representing William Langland in his own self-discovery. As a Christian himself, Langland vulnerably criticizes his own church community in hopes of sparking more conversations about the weaknesses of the English church.

The poem calls attention to the weaknesses of the church as much as the transitioning economic system in the late fourteenth century. Pearsall calls *Piers Plowman* “a poem of crisis. It records in the minutest detail the conflict which racked late medieval society, as the feudal order and the Church of the west moved into their last stages of institutionalized decay, and as the antagonistic forces over which they had presided moved into the open arena” (6). Langland’s poem becomes his means to process the institutionalized decay happening around him, but Langland does so in written form to communicate these issues to his community as well. Langland attempts to hold the Christian church accountable in rebuilding a virtuous community, especially because Langland does not provide a concrete solution at the end of *Piers Plowman*. He includes his community into learning how to respond when communities break down and the institutions holding up society lose a sense of moral reason.

Langland writes his allegory in the form of a dream vision to encourage his audience to engage in a familiar form of reflection. “‘Are you asleep, Will?’” (l.5) Holy Church first approaches Will to check if he sleeps and only after can she deliver her message to Will. Madeleine J.A. Kasten writes that allegories including *Piers Plowman* “turn to the dream as a possibly privileged medium for reading sense into the perplexities of waking life” (23). Will enters a dream state so he can process the anxieties of the world around him. These spiritual dreams imitate the visions God sends his devote followers in the Bible to communicate His will⁴. Although these dreams often attempt to bring clarity to the dreamer, *Piers Plowman* leaves many questions unanswered. Langland “gives us thinking rather than thought; all the dreamer’s perplexities are before us, the riddles he cannot solve as well as the truths he can triumphantly affirm” (qtd. In Pearsall 13). The allegory grapples with the continual breakdown of community. Different challenges arise to undermine the virtue of the Christian church and Langland calls on his medieval audience to do the work in answering his question of what can come after church community collapses.

Langland follows the liturgy to model a virtuous Christian community. To better understand the historical context behind this model, I will use Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars* in this paragraph to explain the process of rebuilding Christian community. The liturgy served as the most important ceremony of the Medieval Christian Church and at the heart of the liturgy was the ceremony of Mass. The liturgy calendar included a 40 day fast (lent), Holy Week (Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday), and ended with communion on Easter Sunday (1141). The entirety of the ceremonies honored the crucifixion of Christ and his sacrifice to forgive the sins of humanity. Traditionally, Christians fasted for 40 days beginning on Ash Wednesday and

⁴ One example of God communicating his will is Joseph’s dream vision the night he decides to leave his betrothed Mary because of her illegitimate pregnancy (Kasten 254-256).

ending on Maundy Thursday. On Good Friday, Christians believed the body of Christ manifested on the altar of the church and witnessing the Host allowed them to experience the passion and later resurrection of Christ (2743). Mass ceremonially carried out the sacrament of the Eucharist, consuming the body and blood of Christ (the Host). Before receiving communion and consuming the Host, the church recited prayers to ask for the blood of Christ to wash away their sins.

Importantly, Duffy notes “the climax of the prayer...is seen as essentially communal, not individualistic” (2777). People pray for the renewal of humanity--not just their individual selves--and the Host symbolized the source of human community. The church recognized the need for corporative accountability to sustain harmony. “The Mass is the sign of unity, the bond of love: whoever desires to live, must be ‘incorporated’ by this food and drink...Only in that unity can anyone be a member of Christ” (2766). The majority of Christians only took Mass once a year in medieval England (2787). Failure to take communion resulted in major individual exclusion, and one would not receive the bread and wine if they did not complete the sacrament of penance. Attempting to take communion without following through on these requirements insulted the church community and threatened its very sanctity, because such individuals demonstrated an attitude favoring themselves above the collective good. In *Piers Plowman*, the community goes through confession in Passus VI and VII, and in Passus XXI, Conscience invites all who have “labored loyally all this Lenten time” to eat (382-384). The community resists, however, when Conscience instructs them to *give back* before going to communion (385-402). Here, the Christians prioritize the convenience of individual desire above the collective good, and community begins to break down.

Before taking communion, Christians needed to complete penance as a form of individual refinement. Penance served as the method of personal inward reformation where love and law

united (Pearsall 22, 266). Completing penance before taking communion proved a commitment and loyalty to both the church and God. Penitence included three steps: contrition of the heart, confession of the mouth, and satisfaction of deed. Contrition of the heart calls for the sinner to feel total sorrow for the sin committed with the intention of not committing this sin again (contricioun, MED). Confession of the mouth typically occurred on a Friday (Pearsall 127) and required a visit to the parish priest to confess one's sins. Friars, however, disrupted this loyalty to the church and Langland greatly holds friars accountable for disrupting the church's system of accountability. Friars received payment to hear people's confessions and did not serve any one church. Friars undermined the sanctity of confession because friars had no continual relationship or obligation to hold people accountable (Pearsall 7). Satisfaction followed confession with prayers of atonement, self-denial, and acts of charity (satisfaccioun MED) to become pure again. Common acts of restitution to complete satisfaction include financial compensation, pilgrimage, and fasting (Kasten 142). "By completing all three stages of penance—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—a penitent might obtain remission of sin as well as of guilt, amounting to a full pardon such as is granted to Piers and his friends" (ibid 143). Only until a sinner completes penance can they cleanse themselves entirely of sin, reconnect to God, and repair their damage done to the church community. Through the sacraments, a church could ideally restore a virtuous community. In *Piers Plowman*, however, Holy Church struggles to maintain her community because her followers struggle to perform these individual acts of reformation. The corruption involved in the transition away from the feudal economy into the market economy reflects the decline in morality that contributed to the medieval church's struggles.

During the fourteenth century⁵, the traditional feudal economy transformed into “bastard feudalism”⁶ where the traditional social hierarchy lost its place. The feudal tenure depended on a single lord who owned a large piece of land and the working class to attend to the lord’s fields. The feudal hierarchy led by the King included the noble class, then the knights who protect, the clergy who prays, and the peasants who sustain. Ideally, this structure created a social and economic order of mutual obligation and service with each class providing a service to the masses and receiving what they needed in return. The feudal economy depended on the working class to sustain the entire country, and in return they lived on and used the land their lord owned. The social element to the feudal system, however, began to diminish as more and more services in the fourteenth century could be exchanged for money. This shift in financial power transformed the idea of profit as a means of social mobility. “The development of capital in the fourteenth century, and the substitution of financial transaction and overt self-interest for the older networks of mutual obligation on which feudal society, at least in theory, depended, may have given Meed a more powerful role in society” (Pearsall 29). Meed, or undue reward, thrived as monetary transactions and self-interest rose. This shift provided more opportunities for greed and corruption to use Meed “instrumentally” rather than Meed acting as her own agent. Essentially, Langland fears the loss of mutual obligation amongst classes. Money replaces the idea of giving and receiving services as a gift (out of *love*) with the notion that monetary transactions always bring a sense of reward. As Will enters into this world of both a struggling church and corrupt market economy, he must navigate these systems and find resources to challenge them.

⁵ In this chapter, I will reference information in Pearsall’s introduction on “Meed the Maid” from p.29-31.

⁶ Termed by McFarlane, as noted in Pearsall (29).

In my analysis of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, I explore the models of community Will experiences within the emerging market economy and medieval church⁷. I seek to understand how the different models of community change as the allegory's teachers guide Will and he finds resources including love, charity, and the virtue of poverty. Langland identifies these resources that can build powerful community to challenge an immoral society, but Langland struggles himself with what happens when community breaks down. Through the sacrament of penance and completion of communion, the fourteenth century Christian church can mend its community through a continuous cycle of work. Because Langland does not provide a concrete answer at the end of the allegory for what to do after community continues to break down, he instead provides a call to action to his audience to participate further. When a community collapses, its people must choose how to respond, and William Langland asks his own community to determine the course of action. In doing so, Langland models what he suggests is necessary for a healthy society: he calls on his own church to join him in finding sustainable solutions to repairing community. I follow the poem chronologically as Will completes the sacrament of penance through contrition, confession, and pilgrimage.

I focus on two community structures that develop through Will's journey but eventually collapse because each of them lacks essential resources to keep them sustainable. *Piers Plowman* leads the first community in Passus VIII where the Christian community emerges after confession and initiates spiritual practice. The first community collapses, however, because it attempts to grow without all the right resources. The people attempt to work virtuously, but because of a sinful human nature, the community cannot achieve a perfect society. Up until this point, Will learns from Holy Church and *Piers Plowman*. Until he meets Patience and Liberum

⁷ I chose to use the verse translation of Langland's C text, translated by George Economou. This specific version felt accessible and familiar to me, and I believe I could give my strongest analysis in using this text.

Arbitrium, Will does not understand how to practice love and charity intentionally. As the second community emerges in Passus XXI, Piers Plowman receives the gifts of Grace to sustain the Christians' spiritual works, but communal conscience breaks down. God gifts people with Grace so that even when people fall short of resisting sin, their efforts will always receive forgiveness. Will eventually learns through his dream vision that accountability, loyalty, and charity strengthen Christian community, but he recognizes that community will continue to break down over time with sin and the church needs to respond effectively to rebuild. Each of my chapters focus on a different stage of Will's development as he experiences the breakdown of community.

My first chapter serves as an introduction to the systems of waste and sin Will continues to encounter. I look at how the market economy allows Meed to damage political and spiritual institutions as well as how the confessions of the sins perpetuate waste. In this first part of the allegory, language serves as a powerful tool both in Meed's ability to leverage language to influence society, and also during the confessions of the seven deadly sins. I incorporate Holy Church at the beginning as she attempts to give Will all the resources he needs. Will, however, must experience her advice for himself before he can fully understand her teachings. As Will witnesses Meed, he encounters how sin thrives with her influence on the emergent market economy. Amid the economic shift of the feudal system, Will simultaneously continues his penitential journey where the seven deadly sins each take their turn in confession. I focus on Envy and Gluttony as they each endure profoundly physical reactions to waste, a theme continued into my second chapter. After coming out of confession, Christians begin to practice the third stage of penance: satisfaction of deed. Everyone contributes to building community through the good deeds they perform, but such work does not prevent their model to fail.

Following, Chapter Two focuses on the first developing community Piers Plowman leads and the flaws that lead to its breakdown. The plowing of the half-acre represents the traditional feudal economy's structure as well as the attempt to create a virtuous Christian community. Initially, the model Piers sets up looks promising; Piers pays everyone fair wages⁸, and the laborers collaboratively begin to plow the half acre. Despite all the pieces coming together, sin begins to infiltrate the workers' integrity and Waste threatens what the laborers' produce. Piers reacts in anger and calls Hunger to punish the laborers who turn to wasters, and the community he cultivates turns fearful rather than loving. As community breaks down, Will meets two powerful teachers who guide his self-reflection.

In Chapter Three, Will looks into himself to encounter his teachers Patience and Liberum Arbitrium as they guide Will towards the ways of practicing a virtuous Christian life. Patience emphasizes the virtue of poverty as he suggests living a simple life removes many temptations of sin. Most importantly, Liberum Arbitrium begins to apprentice Will into love through showing Will the source of charity. A transformation occurs in Will because his new connection to charity brings light to *natural knowledge* and the love lyrics Holy Church shared with him in Passus I. As Will grows more free, he becomes ready to enter the Church community once more and participate more consciously in mending the communal damages.

My fourth chapter analyzes the second community that arises with Conscience as its leader. With Piers cultivating the cardinal virtues and calling on Grace (rather than Hunger) to foster Unity, a new church, everyone receives gifts from Grace and a new hope emerges. Similarly to Piers, however, members of the community begin rejecting Conscience's authority. This comes

⁸ Although the first community model represents the structure of the feudal economy, Pearsall suggests that the new market economy penetrated Langland's thinking as he has accepted the idea that laborers can now be contracted for money (161).

at the point where the Christian community comes out of lent and should attend communion to complete the Eucharist. They grow so close to fully mending community, but the community rejects Conscience when he tries to hold them accountable to repay their debts as part of their satisfaction of deed. Conscience calls on the clergy multiple times for their help him lead the parish, but the clergy's own poor craft let the community crumble. Most important to note in this chapter, is the death of Contrition. The friars and clergy contribute to the growing sickness plaguing the church, and Conscience's desperate efforts to restore order go in vain. Contrition's death represents the absence of accountability. Because contrition leads the sacrament of penance, the possibility to complete penance dies too; the Church community no longer feels remorse for hurting others. This loss in sorrow of heart presents a troubling moral issue. Without Contrition, people cannot initiate their own inward reformation to repair the church community. When Conscience realizes the fate of Contrition, he flees, vowing to embark on his own pilgrimage to find Piers Plowman.

I. Chapter One: A Broken-Down Society Where Meed Thrives

This chapter evaluates the broken-down society created by the market economy in *Piers Plowman*. Holy Church feels her influence in medieval society continues to diminish as Meed gains more power. Will enters into the beginning stages of the emergent market economy as well as the sacrament of penance seeing everything in chaos. Will must process the conditions he sees before he can begin to participate in building community amid a broken system. The fall of the feudal system means monetary exchanges and self-interest dominate society, and Holy Church is in jeopardy of permanent damage.

Will does not recognize Holy Church when he first meets her, revealing he is not ready to join her. Although Will sees her as a fair and lovely woman, he feels afraid of her when she first

approaches him. As Holy Church talks with Will, he wonders how she recites scripture so well: “‘I am Holy Church,’ she said, ‘you ought to know me; / I received you at first and made you free’” (I.72-73). In the first line, Holy Church states her name for the first time, withholding her identity to test Will. Although Holy Church received him *first*, pointing to how he entered the Christian church when he was born, Will acts disconnected from Holy Church. Will not recognizing Holy Church despite being a part of the church at an early age⁹ means he does not participate in the church community regularly. At the end of the second line, Holy Church claims she made Will *free*¹⁰. This phrase refers to Will getting baptized and Holy Church making him free of sin (Pearsall 59). Because Will does not recognize someone so important to his life, Holy Church comes to Will proving how well she knows him in hopes of reconnecting their relationship. As Will asks more questions, Holy Church tries to guide him in finding natural knowledge.

Holy Church becomes the first teacher to Will and introduces him to the importance of love. She continues to guide Will to find Truth:

‘For Truth counts love sin’s best antivenin
And the sovereign of salves for the body and soul.
Love is the plant of peace, most precious its powers,
Heaven could not hold it, so heavy it first seemed,
Till it begat itself of earth.’ (I.146-150)

Love as an *antivenin*, oppositely points to sin as a sickness or bodily poison in need of treatment. Sin only exists as a poison that love defeats. Holy Church continues this theme in adding love as the leader of *salves*, suggesting healing begins with love before any other product.

⁹ We can assume Will was raised Christian based on the following line in the passus: “Godparents pledged you to fulfill my bidding” (I.74). His family made sure to secure his space in the church at his birth through financial means.

¹⁰ This line becomes more significant later in my argument in chapter three when Will meets Liberum Arbitrium.

Salves both sooth internal and external wounds, connecting to the physical body and soul within. Both the body and soul need to feel love because of their interdependence. Love, however, is not personified as its own character; Holy Church maintains love as a tool fostered by Truth. This passage evokes images of nature, making love appear as a very tangible and familiar resource for people to access. In the third line, Holy Church compares love to a *plant of peace*, giving love life. To nurture this plant means love itself needs the resources and time to grow—and love eventually outgrew Heaven. Treating love as a natural healing resource on earth gives people the ability to cultivate and work with love in familiar ways. In the final two lines, Heaven becomes personified as it could not hold the weight of love and interestingly suggests that love can overwhelm the force of God. Because Holy Church assigns love a *heavy* weight, she gives love a further physical and even measurable impact that created the earth. As Holy Church continues to make these connections with Will, she shares the faults in Christian society that keep people trapped.

Holy Church shares how the sin of greed damages Christian communities. Holy Church teaches how chastity without charity leads to corruption:

“They chew up their gifts and cry out for more,
Hampered by avarice—can’t creep out,
So tight has it shut its heavy lid on them.” (I.190-192)

To chew indicates an absence of swallowing or eating—people take their gifts and dismember them unproductively. The first line continues to say they *cry out for more* because they have an insatiable appetite. Comparing the sin of avarice with having such an appetite adds to the notion that people must resist their bodily cravings¹¹. The people destroying their gifts let avarice block

¹¹ In Economou’s footnote for “Don’t believe your body, for a liar’s its teacher, / Which is the wretched world that wants to beguile you” (I.36-37), he says that “the world and, the flesh, and the devil were the soul’s main enemies in medieval religious tradition” (224).

feelings of gratitude, and the gifts go to waste because they don't satisfy these people. Holy Church compares sin to a trap (in addition to a poison). In the second and third lines, she describes avarice trapping Christians and shutting its heavy lid on them. The people chewing up their gifts become nearly imprisoned because sin limits their focus. Holy Church again put a heavy weight on the situation: the trapped people cannot *creep out* or escape easily. Their desire for wealth renders Christians unproductive because *avarice* means to acquire and withhold wealth (avarice MED). Because avarice prevents any resources from escaping people's hands, the resources does not contribute to the economy. This link between chewing and avarice connects how greed prevents any satisfaction. Avarice prevents feelings of completeness as chewing without eating prevents any sustenance. Holy Church brings this very real issue to Will's attention: the world he begins to encounter runs rampant with avarice and little structure.

Holy Church warns Will against Meed; she reveals how Meed continues to break down community and asserts that Mead's relationship to her father, Favel, condemns Meed. When Will first sees Meed, he asks Holy Church in Passus II who she is. Holy Church responds:

That is the maid Meed, who has hurt me many times
And lied against my beloved who is called Loyalty
And slanders him to the lords that keep all our laws,
In the king's court and the commons' she contradicts my teachings. (II.19-22)

Holy Church holds deep resentment against Meed. In the second line, Holy Church shares that Meed did wrong against Holy Church by attacking her *beloved* Loyalty whom Holy Church loves and admires. The attacks on Holy Church grow personal when Meed betrays Loyalty because the reputation of Loyalty directly undermines the sanctity of Holy Church as an institution. When Meed slanders church loyalty in the courts, Holy Church loses her influence in politics. Derek Pearsall explains that "Meed stands for a new structuring of society based on monetary transactions rather than loyal service" and the motivation for personal gain can corrupt

systems (29). When people feel motivated by money rather than their loyalty (to church), the integrity of the courts weakens because of a loss of moral obligation. Because Meed lies, commits slander, and contradicts Holy Church's teachings, Meed attacks the validity of Holy Church in every social class: the lords, the king, and the commons. Each of the accusations disrupts communal trust in Holy Church. While Loyalty can lose his status in any social situation, Holy Church loses her status as a teacher. Because Holy Church has the capacity to mend community, she depends on church loyalty to maintain her identity. Holy Church warns Will against Meed because she recognizes the power Meed holds in the same spaces Holy Church works in.

Meed can motivate peace, but her testament to defend Wrong shows she holds harmful intentions. In Passus IV, Peace comes to the King to declare Wrong committed crimes against him including kissing Peace's wife and stealing his livestock. When the King hears Wrong's actions, he reacts angrily and wants to lock Wrong away. Meed, however, feels sympathy for Wrong and steps up with her own solution:

Then Meed began meekly to beg mercy
And gave Peace a present of pure gold.
'Have this of me, man,' she said, 'to amend your harm,'
For I vouch for Wrong he'll never do it again.' (IV.90-93)

In the first line, Meed demonstrates a meekness, and gently and modestly asks for Wrong's forgiveness. Although she hurts Holy Church, Meed problematically feels remorse for Wrong. Meed takes her own action and gives Peace a reparation; this gesture suggests the payment of pure gold equates the sufferings Peace endured. Although Meed can pay to replace the livestock Wrong stole because they are both economic exchanges, Peace must decide if the adultery of Peace's wife can equate a monetary gift. Meed's gift is one of luxury, not practicality. The idea that Gold can buy happiness or forgiveness signals the growing value in materiality with the

emergence of a market economy--gold can supposedly repair relationships as instantly as they can get damaged. In the third line, Meed gives this gift to *amend* Peace's harm, alluding to Meed's mother, Amends. Although Meed wants to fix the situation, her effort cannot negate that Peace already experienced harm by Wrong. While Holy Church attempts to lay down preventative measures to keep these wrongs from occurring in the first place, Meed can only try to repair the damage already done. Meed already proved she lies against Holy Church so her should not be taken seriously. Because she vouches for Wrong without him present, the court must depend on her word only. She takes the burden off of Wrong to hold himself accountable and does the work for him. This idea that financial reparations keep people from doing the work to repair their wrongs becomes the main consequence of the market economy—people no longer bind themselves to one and other through loyal service but by money, distorting moral accountability. This example validates Holy Church's fears of the impact of the market economy on communal relationships. Although Meed threatens a moral society, Reason too advocates for a strong community in order to resist her power.

Reason advises the King and emphasizes the need for community to maintain a strong kingdom. Reason asserts a good leader values his kingdom, but also enforces the need for a hierarchical order. Reason warns:

You know, in heaven on high was a holy community
 Till Lucifer the liar believed he himself
 Was smarter and more worthy than he who was his master.
 So stick together, and who does otherwise
 Causes all the troubles that confound a realm. (V.186-190)

Reason rallies everyone together again and suggests that the means of survival depends on community. In the first line, Reason suggests that the holy community of heaven no longer stands because of Lucifer's abandonment. The loss of one member causes the collective as a

whole to fall. In the second line, Reason isolates Lucifer the *liar* to show Lucifer deceived himself into feeling superior. Lucifer's intense individualism led to his fall and he bares sole responsibility. In the third line, Reason continues to criticize Lucifer's pride. Because Lucifer believed himself *more worthy* than his master, he broke the laws of order. R.B. Dobson finds that in 1348, the Black Death killed over a million people in a single year. The major loss of life devastated the feudal economy as labor shortages skyrocketed (54-55). Conditions for workers became increasingly demanding, and the lower classes began to realize how desperate the noble class needed working bodies. This passage in the allegory could refer to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 where during labor shortages, the working class demanded higher wages for the work they performed for the feudal lords (Dobson 60-74). The upset of power frustrated the feudal economy and traditional order. Reason tries to strengthen the power of the King and encourage obedient masses through familiar biblical evidence. The fear of change and the abandonment of tradition grows evident here, as Reason councils that the structure of community thrives with disciplined, cooperative masses. In the fourth line, he tells everyone to *stick together* how the heavenly community used to. The final line drives the point that a single person can bring down a realm, putting great responsibility on each individual. Reason enforces the notion that Christians are both responsible for themselves and the collective good, leading them all into confession together.

Confession greatly depends on the strength of a Christian community as the act creates a system of accountability. In Medieval England, confession took place as a collective event where Christians lined up to give turns confessing their sins to a parish priest. Because neighbors might potentially hear one and other's confessions, publicly confessing encouraged people to change their behavior and reconcile with their neighbors (Duffy 2051). In *Piers Plowman*, the seven

deadly sins manifest into their own characters and step forward to confess before Repentance.

Pride confesses first, as pride nurtures the development of the other six sins. Envy confesses second after Pride and shares a very physical reaction to how sin impacts himself. He craves control and curses his enemies, building on similar sensations Pride described. Envy goes on to confess:

Many years I cannot eat as a man ought to
Because envy and ill will are hard to digest.
May neither sugar nor sweet thing allay my swelling
Nor costly drink drive it from my heart (VI.86-89)

Envy's condition makes him very sick. He fills his stomach with *ill will*, preventing any sustenance from nurturing his body. *Ill Will* promotes hatred and malice, and Envy suggests in the second line these feelings do not process easily. In the third and fourth lines, Envy claims no sweet thing or costly drink can cure him. Both of these substances may temporarily bring sensation to the body, but they do not heal the soul. This reaction Envy experiences causes *swelling* where his belly grows morbidly enlarged because of the harmful toxins he holds. In the fourth line, Envy admits this sickness affects his heart as well, but claims no *costly drink* can cure him. Envy places value on the expense of the remedies he tries, but to no avail. His confession reveals he cannot take care of himself because of his obsession with other people; he cannot focus on nurturing himself back to health because he allows himself to get consumed by his thoughts. Despite his self-awareness in the first line in knowing how a man *ought to* eat, he says this in vain because he never pursues change. He continues to say when Repentance asks Envy if he's sorry: "I'm always sorry...seldom otherwise, / and that wastes me so because I can't get even" (VI.93-94). Envy again reveals a great reflection in his confession: he recognizes how waste impacts his body and makes him sick. He always feels sorry but uses that as an excuse for why he cannot move forward. He can never *get even* because he focuses on his

position compared to others. Allegorically, the physical sickness Envy experiences creates a “moral constipation” that prevents him from taking communion (Pearsall 124). Such constipation means that Envy can never move on from his feelings and complete his penitential cycle for what sorrow he feels. He immerses himself in a deep self-obsession, depriving his body of any healthy community or food. Gluttony experiences his own physical reaction to his sin but confesses nearly last.

Gluttony practices an excessive lifestyle where his body cannot handle his sinful behavior. Although his body tries communicating with Gluttony that his body cannot handle what he consumes, he proves this to be a habit that he pushes to the extreme:

And overate at supper and sometime at noon
More than my system could naturally handle,
And like a dog that eats grass I began to throw up
And wasted what I might have saved—I can’t speak for my shame. (VI. 428-432)

The first line includes a Gluttony’s multiple mistakes; he overeats at supper and then *sometime* at noon. His inability to regulate or even remember exactly what time he began eating shows a disconnect in his self-control. In the second line, Gluttony admits he eats more than he can *naturally handle*—his body can’t help but reject the sinful acts Gluttony practices. Gluttony quite literally demonstrates how this purging mimics confession, where the mouth becomes a tool in ridding the body of its harmful substance. He furthers this point in the third line by comparing himself to a dog eating grass—the animals intentionally eat grass when they know they need to throw up, and thus attempt to heal themselves. In the fourth line, Gluttony also admits to wasting. Rather than save the food he could save for when he needed it, he turned food into a method of sin. Although Gluttony tries to confess, his effort does not follow the principal order. Detailed manuscripts would help parish priests elicit full confessions out of people, especially for unlettered folks. The process of confession maintained a very strict progression to “work through

the Ten Commandments, seven deadly sins, the corporal works of mercy, the five bodily senses, asking the parishioner whether they had fulfilled the commandments, committed the sins, carried out the works, and so on” (Duffy 2000). Because Gluttony continues to ramble about a single experience, he misses many of the proper steps in confession. Interestingly, Gluttony admits he cannot *speak for his shame*. Gluttony’s shame inhibits his ability to use his mouth to speak. This claim is somewhat ironic because Gluttony commits sin by using his mouth to consume.

Both Gluttony and Envy’s improper confession endangers their capacity to fulfill the act of confession and embrace how to change their behavior. Their severe lack of self-awareness and proper confession reveal their inexperience in carrying out the sacraments. Envy and Gluttony continue self-deprecating behavior and do not nurture their bodies correctly because of sin. The link between body and soul becomes apparent as they waste their bodies in sin and waste speech in improper confession. Despite admitting their sin, their behavior will likely not change. Their inability to acknowledge the corporal works of mercy nor their five bodily senses means their bodies remain disconnected from performing holy works. The confessions of the sins introduce the idea of wasted speech, where one’s confession may forgive them of their sins, but they will continue to inflict self-harm. As Will passes through confession, he enters into the first attempt to repair community through practicing righteous works. Waste continues to damage spaces sin inevitably infiltrates.

II. Chapter Two: Modeling a Virtuous Community Without All the Resources

This chapter seeks to understand what Piers’ community lacks when he first emerges to lead the plowing of the half acre. As Piers attempts to model a virtuous community, he does well in overseeing the half-acre’s progress and ensuring a sustainable system of work and reward. His community still collapses, however, because his workers begin to waste time when sin impacts

their work. In a community where a leader does everything they can to ensure a just community, the collective is still vulnerable to waste. When a community depends only on their works with the belief they can *earn* salvation on their own, the community will always suffer and fall short of their expectation.

Piers emerges as a leader among a crowd coming from confession after they take the initiative to begin working justly. The disoriented people at first turn to an experienced pilgrim¹² decorated with religious tokens who still cannot answer where Truth lives. Piers then steps forward, introducing himself:

‘Peter,’ said a plowman, and put forth his head,
 ‘I know [Truth] as closely as a clerk does his books.
 Conscience and Common Sense gave me directions to his place...
 And though I do say so myself, I serve him to his satisfaction.’ (VII.182-193)

In the first line, the plowman first identifies himself as *Peter*. Significantly, both *Peter* and *plowman* stay separate, but both describe Piers. In calling himself Peter in his first introduction, Piers associates himself with St. Peter, the gatekeeper of heaven. Because Piers claims this high power as a modest plowman, Piers emerges as the rest of Jesus’s disciples do: an unexpected leader with great potential. The feudal system relied on a hierarchy of three main roles under the king and lords: the knights who protect; the clergy who pray; and the laborers who sustain. When Piers steps forth, however, he defends his higher claim even as he serves in the lowest class. He knows Truth *like a clerk knows his books*, distinguishing himself from the clergy. Pier’s skill as a plowman means he works well with his hands, and if he holds knowledge as a clerk he can put use of the clerks’ knowledge for more transformative action. Piers later “put[s] on his clothes of all kinds of crafts” (71), suggesting he has many different handy skills to sustain himself and

¹² The sacrament of penance—confessing and seeking forgiveness for one’s sins—often encouraged individuals to embark on a pilgrimage to visit the grave of a Christian martyr or a holy site as an opportunity to reflect and repent.

serve Truth. Piers the plowman stepping forward puts him in a position of spiritual leadership, similar to a priest guiding a church. Because he both knows the skills of a clergyman and a laborer, he assumes two of the three feudal positions and puts actions to his words. In the third line, Piers says both Conscience and Common Sense helped him find Truth, but no one else in the crowd understands how to do that. Pier's use of common sense and conscience, is ironically unique. Although common sense and conscience ought to be ordinary and assumed faculties, the two appear inaccessible to the majority of people. In a crowd of people coming from confession, the absence of such faculties means people still do not understand the significance of penance; people practice the sacraments without any intention behind them. Without this intention, the crowd cannot become a community, and they body of people only engage in meaningless action. In the fourth line, Piers shares he *serves* Truth to his *satisfaction*. To serve means Piers gives his body as an instrument or tool devoted to help Truth (serven, MED). Treating Piers as an instrument puts an artful spin on Piers' position and connects Piers and Truth's use of their hand to work—putting Piers above the clergy. Serving Truth to his satisfaction refers to the final step in repairing a church community: satisfaction completes the cycle of forgiveness and a sinner achieves atonement and reparation for their sins (satisfaccioun MED). Piers assumes an authority figure with his relationship to Truth and becomes a spiritual leader who will guide the church community to the end after they complete confession.

Piers calls on the people to help him plow his half acre before he can lead them to Truth. With the new hope and direction Piers brings to the crowd in Passus VII, people eagerly volunteer to join his cause and he finds a place for everyone to work. A veiled woman asks Piers first what her role can be in sowing the field: “‘I appeal to you for your profit,’ said Piers to the ladies” (Langland 70). Women stepping forth to seek work in contributing to plowing the field

shows an agency amongst women critical to building this community. Interestingly, Piers agrees, but appeals to the women's *profit*. This use of profit gives women power that comes independently as the passage references no men. In Susan Broomhall's *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, she argues that during the political anxieties of England, both men and women contributed to a collective moral good, even when men bore the majority of military and economic strength (89). Broomshall writes:

Civic conflict was a problem for the entire commonwealth, meaning a collective response was often prioritized. One of the impulses stressed in this period was the moral regeneration of the whole of society to which everyone, including young people, men, and women, could contribute with their particular abilities. (86)

Broomshall acknowledges that the commonwealth depends on each person in a medieval family contributing to the betterment of society. Interestingly, Broomshall suggests that resolving civic conflict becomes a need later in the fifteenth century (perhaps as a result of the declining moral conditions Langland identifies in the fourteenth century), and the community as whole resolved the issue together—*moral regeneration* requires everyone's contributions. This same connotated language comes from Piers in *profit*, where women contributing to community brings communal prosperity and spiritual well-being (profit MED). As the crowd works to revive community, Piers recognizes the need for women to participate. Piers proceeds to give women tasks to sew and weave, giving them their own opportunities and social identity within the system.

In addition to finding a place for women, Piers welcomes a knight to protect the community at work. A knight approaches Piers and offers his skills following the women, but admits to never having learned how to use a plow. The knight says "'But truly on the plow theme I was never taught.' / 'I wish I knew how,' said the knight'" (VIII.20-21). Piers responds to the knight and states "I shall toil and sweat and sow for us both / And labor for those you love all my lifetime, / On condition you protect Holy Church and me'" (VIII.24-26). Piers ignores the

knight's expression of curiosity in learning to plow, but Piers places the knight to serve where the knight knows best. Piers asks the knight to protect him and Holy Church, completing the feudal order of the protecting class serving the sustaining and praying classes. Piers states he will work *for us both*, suggesting he will take on double the work to cover the knight, so long as the knight fulfills his job. Pearsall notes that Piers takes on the role of the *communes*, or the estate of the commons, that provides for the whole community while other estates contribute in their own way (157). This mutual benefiting relationship models the feudal economy in Medieval England, but also builds a personal relationship amongst the knight and Piers. In the final line, Piers calls for the protection of Holy Church before himself. His request is significant because everyone plowing the half-acre works for more than just themselves; Holy Church represents the unity of their community and Piers recognizes that the well-being of the whole benefits each individual.

Piers' community thrives as he continues to lead the laborers and suggests how the product of the plowing can serve others. Piers frequently claims to work for those who cannot provide for themselves. Piers makes clear to his workers they share responsibility in that mission as well. After assigning the women their roles, Piers goes on to say:

‘Conscience counsels you to make cloth
To benefit the poor and for your own pleasure.
For I shall see to their sustenance, unless the land fail,
As long as I live, for love of the Lord of heaven.’ (VIII.13-16)

In the first line, Piers brings in *Conscience* again as one's moral faculty in knowing right from wrong, but also who represents the part of thought that governs feelings and desire (conscience MED). Conscience naturally counsels the will and serves as a guide for the Christian community to bring intent to every action. In the second line, Conscience includes both self and other to motivate people to work, bringing together the first practices of charity and spiritual work. *Pleasure* in the second line means to satisfy God through one's actions (plesir MED), so

benefiting the poor and bringing *your own pleasure* both serve the community and self interconnectedly. In the third line, Piers will work *unless the land fail*, where the land serves as the foundation for the community's labor. People equally depend on the land and their work on that land to gain sustenance, meaning their work means nothing if the land cannot provide. This line becomes the first acknowledgment that works alone cannot provide salvation. The gift of fertile land comes from God and gives the people the chance to work. In the final line, Piers devotes himself to this work for the rest of his life out of *love* for the Lord. *Love* becomes the motivation and the choice Piers makes to continue this work. With the foundation of community laid down and Piers' field developing, the value of spiritual work emerges. People coming from confession begin to work towards satisfaction to fully mend their church community with Piers as their guide.

As the fieldwork continues, the community Piers created becomes threatened. At first, the honest work the laborers and Piers accomplish goes well; everyone cooperates, and they make progress on the half acre:

Ditchers and diggers dug up the strip-ridges;
 All this pleased Perkin¹³ and he paid them good wages.
 Other workmen were there who worked very hard,
 Each man in his way made himself useful. (VIII.114-117)

Piers models his ideal functional society in this passage. In the second line, *strip-ridges* refer to ridges that often divided peasants' land or remained untouched for their particularly demanding terrain (Pearsall 161). The ditchers and diggers do not leave these ridges untouched, taking away all barriers between people and addressing every difficult job. In the third line, Piers shows his satisfaction by rewarding his workers. This exchange defies Meed because the workers

¹³ Perkin is another name used for Piers in the allegory. Langland switches back and forth between the two names.

earn the pay they receive. Piers assumes the role of a lord, but also complicates the feudal system as Piers does not depend solely on loyal service (fn 112, Pearsall 161). The relationship Piers maintains between himself and his workers shows how the feudal system should work; however, everyone does their job cooperatively, and integrity binds the community so the system functions smoothly. In the fourth line, everyone *made* themselves useful. Here, the community appears fragile because the people can only depend on their work ethic to ensure their success. In the lines following this passage, this system exposes its weaknesses when the workers choose not to maintain the same effort they started off with.

As community breaks down and the workers stop producing, Piers struggles to maintain a productive labor force when sin sneaks up on the community. When workers realize the progress they made, they lose their humility and sin begins to impact their work:

And then, some sat down and sang at ale
 And helped plow this half-acre with a 'hey trollioly!'
 Said Piers the plowman in a pure anger:
 'If you don't get up quickly and rush back to work
 No grain that grows here will cheer you in need,
 And though you die of grief, the devil takes him who cares.' (VIII. 122-127)

Sloth hits the community first as they all sit down in the first line and begin to *sing at ale*—very similarly to Gluttony's behavior (VI. 394-397). Only *some* workers stop plowing, but the line does not specify who because the plowing of the field collapses even when one person does not pull their weight. In the second line, the workers cry out drunk and merry with a '*hey trollioly!*'. This phrase suggests the workers attempt to plow the fields with their words instead of actions, completely ineffective. Eleanor Johnson explains the different contexts of waste: "[i]n Middle English, *waste* is often used in one of these two senses—as a verb denoting devastation or as a noun denoting a kind of physical space. But it is also used as an adjective meaning 'purposeless'

or an adverb meaning ‘in vain’” (461). In applying Johnson, the workers embody every type of waste: their idleness devastates the integrity of their community as they choose to render the space they share unproductive. The work they already accomplished goes in vain as the longer they wait, the higher the risk their land goes to waste. Well-intentioned folks still face the same temptation of sin and their harvest will suffer because of their choices.

The last three lines of Pier’s warning come harshly. Piers lets anger consume him and he responds with threats against the crowd. In the third line, Piers emphasizes an urgency to his workers that they have little time to waste. The fourth line continues to show how quickly the community can lose their comfort—their society depends on labor alone, so sloth will bring them their end. In the final line, Piers clearly states grief will not save anyone from the consequences of sin. Grief links to attrition, where the sorrow one feels for their sins comes from fear; attrition also falls short of contrition and remains fragmented (attricioun MED) as the sinner focuses on themselves rather than God. Here, Piers begins to find the flaws in the system: works and good-intention alone cannot mend a community. Piers loses his power too because his words do not affect the drunken folk at all, and without the workers, he can achieve little. Just as the workers try to plow the fields with a *hey trollioly* in the second line, Langland tries to persuade the workers back to work with his command. Words, however, do not get the job done. The interdependence of the community brings consequences: a lord is nothing without their workers, yet everyone suffers if the sustaining class does not provide. The agency of each individual can break a community down much easier than they can repair it, and Piers’ authority does not provide enough to keep the masses working. The plowing of the half acre begins to waste as it corrupts the Christian community.

The impact of waste jeopardizes the potential harvest and undermines Piers' authority. As lazy people reveal themselves, Piers calls them out: "'You're wasters, I know well, and waste and devour / What true land-tilling men loyally work for'" (VIII. 139-140). Wasters *waste and devour* and Piers suggests the wasters both predatorily and carelessly take from the workers. Waste only manifests as a biproduct of sin and cannot exist without sin. Waster becomes passive because he exists in the space of idleness. *Wastour* is someone who excessively spends money or consumes resources, but can also be an idle or unproductive consumer (wastour MED). In either circumstance, Wasters hurts the commonwealth by either taking too much or contributing too little, causing an imbalance. In this passage in particular, Piers accuses the wasters of taking too much for the system to be sustainable. Although the land-tilling men work loyally, they cannot produce enough to satisfy the wasters. This failure to create an equitable exchange rate endangers the system as a whole collapsing, and again, the works of the laborers do not keep the system safe from collapse. As the wasters surface, Langland shifts the group into a single character, Waster.

With the emergence of Waster as a single person, the allegory targets the lower-class waster among Pier's field. Margaret Kim explains how Langland organizes social obligation with class meaning Waster in Passus VIII only refers to lower-class men: "Waster is expected to contribute to the well-being of his community with manual labor... Waster is a representation of Langland's fears of the illegitimate, able-bodied poor and about confusing them with the righteous poor" (367). Additionally, Pearson identifies Waster as "a portrait of itinerant labourers who drifted into beggary" (162). This class distinction on Waster jeopardizes both community and the righteous poor because Waster does not have any legitimate excuse not to work, so his actions

jeopardize everyone around him unnecessarily. Waster first interacts as a personified character with the knight protecting Piers' field when Piers calls the knight to rid his half acre of Waster:

Then the knight, as was his nature, courteously
 Warned Waster and advised him to improve...
 'I'm not used to working,' said Waster, 'and I won't start now!'
 And made light of the law and less of the knight. (VIII. 161-165)

The knight tries to remain polite but cannot persuade Waster to work because such behavior goes against Waster's nature. In the second line, the knight gives both a warning and advice to Waster rather than using brutal force to exile him. The acts of the knight reveal how the community only contains limited resources to protect themselves against the sinful nature of Waster. The knight, even with his authority and rank, cannot push out Waster any better than Piers. The knight loses his authority because their community operates off voluntary action and cooperation. Waster interrupts this structure by challenging the authority of the knight and refusing to comply. Piers feels he needs to find an alternative solution to getting Waster out.

Piers makes a poor decision in his desperation to rid his half acre of Waster, not anticipating the consequences of what harm he could bring to the community. Piers impulsively calls on Hunger to motivate his people to work when he sees the laborers struggle:

'Now by Christ,' said Piers, the plowman, 'I'll punish you all,'
 And whooped after Hunger who heard right away...
 Hunger in haste then grabbed Waster by the belly
 and hugged him so tight that his eyes watered. (VIII. 167-172)

Piers calls on Christ's name in vain and wrongly justifies his cruel act. Piers oversteps his power and wants to punish his workers beyond withholding their wages. The use of *grabbed* and *hugged* to describe Hunger's attack on Waster reveals an interesting role Hunger plays. The embrace creates an intimate and violent encounter that catches Waster off guard. The hug mimics the physical pain when the stomach contracts. Hunger has Waster so tightly that Waster

cannot move; Waster now becomes unable to work or move as his body becomes helpless to Hunger. Hunger's aggression uncannily forces Waster to confront his own decisions. A hungry Waster would not have any resources to misuse, so instead, Hunger forces Waster to turn in on himself. The power of Hunger becomes evident in this passage: although Waster alone cannot cause famine, Waster's failure to produce and contribute leads to hunger. Because Hunger hugs Waster, Hunger exploits his power onto Waster and again, Waster assumes a passive role. Waster embodies his very essence and rather than wasting external resources, his own body begins to waste away. Kate Crassons in *Claims of Poverty* recognizes that Hunger and Waster share an identity in their relationship to food and need, where Hunger corrects and compliments Waster. Need can quickly convert to excess, Crassons argues, and says: "Their presumed opposition as enemies glaring at one and other in challenge may instead be seen as a mirrored gaze, reflecting the acquisitive desire that can define excess and poverty alike" (31). The binary relationship between the two becomes weaker, and their hug suddenly reveals Waster and Hunger's commonality as much as their opposition. Because Hunger and Waster both come from the lower class, they are constantly aware of the other in order to survive.

Piers' decision to call on Hunger to punish Waster hurts his community. "It turns out that Piers has underestimated the neediness of the Christians he addresses, their lack of necessary resources for the journey he outlines. In doing so, he also overlooked their need for the historical community that will recognize that the saints' life is a social one" (Aers 105). Aers describes a perfect community as a "saints' life." Piers' community focuses on their own needs and hunger so heavily that they do not recognize the needs of the others. Hunger in this case, deprives everyone from food as much as community. As Hunger affects both Waster and worker, the consequence of waste changes the dynamic of the field. The reality of famine plagues the

workers' minds and their attitudes about working shift. Although Hunger inflicted temporary pain, his presence necessarily reminds the workers of a more lasting threat: famine. Frustrated, Piers confides in Hunger: "'It's not for love, believe it, they labor this hard / But for fear of famine, in faith,' said Piers" (VIII. 214-215). Piers sees the half-acre becomes more productive through fear, but creating a society based off fear means the space lacks justice and freedom. To work out of fear robs the soul of its free will because fear depends on coercion to progress. Love in the first line, as a moral and Christian virtue, connects the soul to God and to the people around it harmoniously (love MED). Without love, a Christian community loses its purpose because God created humankind out of love (recall Holy Church's love lyrics on plant of peace). The community may have regained an incentive to work, but their faith does not support justice or love when their virtuous community falls short.

Piers must lead by example as Truth does rather than resort to the tempting strategies of violence. Hunger reminds Piers of the foundation he needs to rebuild his community:

'But if you find people who've been impaired by false men
Comfort them with your goods for so Truth commands;
Love them and give to them, as the law of nature asks:
Bear ye one another's burdens.'" (VIII. 229-232)

Although Hunger inflicted a painful experience on the laborers, his presence returns the people to work. In the first line, Hunger argues false men *impair* people, a far more extreme and permanent consequence than Hunger's hug. While Hunger may motivate people to work for immediate need, his power over people does not ensure a sustainable community. In the third line, Hunger calls on Piers and his community to act out of *love*. Although physical need always remains an individual need, a community that acts out of love connects to a deeper purpose that fulfills the love lyrics Holy Church introduced at the beginning. The fourth line calls Piers to follow *natural law*. If sin causes the body to react unnaturally and prevents people from feeling

whole, then the opposite of this reaction means to love. Baring other people's burdens and supporting one and other is a means of survival and community becomes more than just a convenience. This idea also supports Reason's point in Chapter One. When people begin to act in this way, they build community strength and start to follow Truth's commands. Piers learns his lesson here about how to lead a virtuous community and how to nurture them back to physical and spiritual health. Ironically, Hunger gives a kind of sustenance to Piers, and reminds him of Truth's essence.

III. Chapter Three: Lessons from Patience and Liberum Arbitrium

In this third chapter, Will meets Patience and Liberum Arbitrium after coming from a corrupt market economy, threatened Holy Church, and a collapsed community. As he works with Conscience, the two learn together how to rebuild Christian community again and find several valuable resources they lacked in their previous models. In this chapter, Will experiences a profound transformation that helps him finally connect to the message Holy Church gave him in Chapter One. After this connection, Will can re-enter the church and contribute to the repair of the Christian community.

After Piers Plowman disappears in Passus XV with Reason, Conscience and Clergy are left behind. Conscience goes to walk with Patience and Will follows. At this point, Patience provides a dependable teacher who guides Conscience and Will to understand how to refine their work. At this midway point in the allegory, Patience provides a form of reflection where he teaches his companions to disconnect their desire for material wealth—the source of much of their troubles up until this point. Wealth, they learn, often disrupts the relationship between God and his people because wealth creates barriers to act virtuously.

Patience calls on the Christian community to reevaluate its priorities, as the desire for wealth leads to dire consequences. open passus XVI, Patience cries: “Alas! That riches shall remove and rob man’s soul / From the love of our Lord at his last end” (XVI.1-2). *Riches* receives a new kind of agency in actively taking man’s soul. Although wealth does not count as a sin, Patience asserts the power in the of distraction material wealth provides. The market economy allows more individual opportunities to gain wealth and Meed motivates people more than their moral obligation. The line also divides the act into two pieces: *remove* and *rob*. Separating these two pieces suggests two separate stages where the riches removes the man’s soul when alive and only then robs the soul when the man dies. The only crime committed occurs after the man dies and loses any last chance to change his behavior. *The last end* signals that the soul may have received multiple opportunities to change their hearts, but ultimately failed in the end a one last time to receive forgiveness—assuming this line refers to the robbed soul. The vague use of *his* in the second line makes the warning even more unsettling because the passage does not clarify who the pronoun represents. Assuming the lowercase *his* pronoun refers to God’s love rather than God Himself, the warning turns apocalyptic because no new no silver lining comes after Patience’s dire warning. The uncertainty within this line calls the Christian community to reconsider their priorities and hear the sting of how materialism diminishes their community. This disconnection between an individual and God expands into a communal concern because the church thus fails to achieve its purpose.

Patience introduces the virtues a Christians ought to live by in order to restore the connection between individual acts and healthy community. He follows the warning against riches by naming the antonyms of a wealth that guide a Christian heart in the right direction:

And repair us for your mercy and make us all meek,
Humble, and loyal, and loving, and poor of heart.

And send us contrition to cleanse our souls with
And confession to kill all our kinds of sins
And satisfaction which fulfills the will of the Father in heaven. (XVI.23-27)

Although Patience addresses God and asks Him to grant *us* these virtues, Patience wants the *will* and agency to work towards these goals. Patience initiates community in using *us* to not only incorporate the community of characters, but the medieval audience—he does not make any limitation to who can belong in his prayer. He includes himself in this prayer and models how to show humility and compassion as he preaches the characteristics of a healthy church. In the second line, Patience calls us to act in very specific ways against how wealth act manipulatively. To be *poor of heart* creates a virtue out of poverty but shifts the focus away from material possessions and instead, onto a state of mind. A poor heart suggests a simpler life¹⁴ where Patience identifies the priorities needed. A poor heart only holds a few and focused priorities, meaning the heart holds space for humility and loyalty. Having loyalty with humility excludes pride, and a *loving poor* heart means finding an identity lacking selfishness. All of the traits in the second line recognize that the absence of self allows the room to change, and this lack of singularity transforms the individual works into a community effort. *Repair* becomes a critical term as Patience acknowledges the damaged condition of humanity.

The steps of repairing a community come through works of *contrition*, *confession*, and *satisfaction*. Repeating *And* in four of the lines connects each of the acts together into a more fluid and uninterrupted practice. Contrition *cleanses* the soul as it removes pollution and dirt¹⁵

¹⁴ Poverty separates itself from famine. While famine refers exclusively to a bodily deprivation of nutrients, poverty can simply mean the absence of excess or rather, the presence of priority. Poverty demands only needs be met and rarely goes beyond that. To be poor of heart means to focus on need and simplifies the goals at hand. *Imitatio Christi* was a medieval tradition that meant to imitate the life of Christ through taking a vow of poverty. St. Francis is a good example of this practice.

¹⁵ Mary Douglass, defines dirt “as matter out of place...It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. It [dirt] is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing

from the soul. Once the soul rids itself of the cluttering matter, the soul can release sin through *confession* and another weight lifts off the soul. To *kill* sin violently and abruptly ends sin's power but brings justice to the soul. To shed this weight brings relief and thus, *satisfaction*. *Satisfaction* in the fourth line serves the soul and God and signals a completion of the cycle. This result connects the soul to God, where the soul and God's will become in the same. Significantly as a virtue himself, Patience validates this journey and encourages an authentic and sustainable process. Patience continues to connect poverty and freedom as a tangible solution.

Patience defends poverty as a virtue. Rather than see poverty as an opportunity to take advantage of other people, Patience reveals how poverty keeps one humble. Later in passus XVI, Active demands Patience share what Poverty means, and Patience continues:

It can wholly put off Pride in any place where he reigns...
Seldom does Poverty sit to declare the truth,
Or to be a justice to judge men, no poor man is enjoined,
Nor to be mayor over men or minister under kings.
Seldom is any poor man positioned to punish people,
Ergo Poverty and poor men perform the commandment (XVI.122-127)

Interestingly, the first line suggests Poverty disrupts Pride's rule, but the following lines suggest Poverty holds no structural power. Despite Poverty potentially lacking resources to sustain itself, Poverty *wholly* resists Pride and remains complete without him. Poverty's ability to *put off* Pride leads Pride to grow frustrated because he cannot influence Poverty. Even if Pride rules over a territory, his authority holds little impact on Poverty who can act freely. Poverty's power lies in his freedom from responsibility or temptation, and because it can resist Pride, Poverty does not worry about the sins that follow pride. In the second line, sitting to declare truth could reference

room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications."

several positions of power. Poverty rarely sits on a throne to govern because he more often holds labor intensive positions. To *declare the truth* alludes to a pope or king in power who believes their word to be irrefutable. Poverty also feels no need to inflict judgement or punishment on others. The second, fourth, and fifth lines parallel occupations to the duties of God. Poverty neither adopts a sinful occupation nor assumes any role to mimic God. Because Patience shares these lines, he brings a reflective and profound understanding to Poverty's virtue. In the last line, *ergo* signals a final statement in his argument. Patience names both *Poverty* and *poor men* to link the concept with reality. Because Patience defends Poverty and poor men, Patience challenges the hurtful rhetoric that attacks poverty and paints it in a poor light. Poverty becomes the individual practice of virtue. Because Charity embodies poverty and wealth at different times, he becomes a resource that contributes to nourishing Christian community.

Charity's childlike behavior shows an innocence praised by Patience and Liberum Arbitrium. Charity does not become personified until the passus XVI where Will observes his actions. Throughout this passus, Charity does not speak for himself like many of the other characters Will meets. Instead, Liberum Arbitrium shares Charity's nature with Will. "Charity is a childish thing, as Holy Church witnesses, / *Unless you become as little children, ect.*" (XVI. 296-297). The audience must finish the bible verse in the second line: "And said: Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*Douay Rheims Bible*, Matthew 18:3). Significantly, Liberum Arbitrium does not use *childish* to demean Charity. In referencing this bible verse, Liberum Arbitrium points out that the key to heaven calls people to return to their childish nature and uses Holy Church to validate Charity. This link between Holy Church and Charity also draws out their distinction. Although Holy Church can support Charity, Charity remains its own entity. Holy Church does not always

act out of Charity, but Charity will always have a holy connection. His innocence creates a model for others to follow.

Charity's distinctive detachment from material good make him unfamiliar and difficult to recognize. Liberum Arbitrium then further describes Charity but his clothes—distinct from other characters—do not give Charity away:

‘You’ll never know him by clothing or by speech,
But through works you might learn where he walks...
I have myself seen him sometimes in russet,
Both in gray and fine fur and in gilt armor,
Which he just as gladly gave to men who needed it.’ (XVI. 338-344)

Liberum Arbitrium makes himself an invaluable resource as he shares his experience witnessing Charity. Because Liberum Arbitrium guides will to Charity, he connects Will to the virtue of love and community Charity embodies. Because a free will chooses charity, this suggests how Liberum Arbitrium encourages the will to choose to do good (Pearsall 271). Both clothing and speech offer clues to one's status and education, but Charity walks among all social classes. Liberum Arbitrium also suggests why Charity may not speak for himself. Charity's speech holds less importance than his actions and to witness his work means to understand his nature. The third and fourth lines tell that Charity wears russet or expensive clothing, but because Charity holds no attachment to them, his identity remains within the ability to give and receive freely. The fourth line's *fine fur* and *gilt armor* also further suggest Charity willingly giving up warmth and protection for those who *need* it in the fifth line. Meed also wears fine fur as a wealthy woman, but Charity's identity does not necessarily associate with Meed's demonstration of power. *Gilt* indicates the armor bares a thin outer cover of gold (OED). Gold can dent easily and serves no productive purpose--the gilt's only purpose makes the armor look flashy and expensive. Charity potentially changes the armor's purpose because in giving the armor away,

the expensive item can convert to money or protection for those in need. Charity makes himself vulnerable for the sake of others, but Liberum Arbitrium also never suggests Charity ever needed the gifts he received. Charity makes himself a resource for people in need and feels delighted when he can help. In the fifth line, Liberum Arbitrium uses the word *give* and eliminates the need for money or trade. Charity disrupts the economic system as a whole where giving and receiving depend on one and other and therefore, he removes the need for power.

Liberum Arbitrium begins to apprentice Will by guiding him towards charity. Will appreciates Liberum Arbitrium unique to any other character Will meets. The teacher remains honest with Will in their time together, and Liberum Arbitrium calls out a weakness in Will's motivations. Will excitedly says: "'all the sciences under the sun and all the subtle crafts / I would like to master and know naturally in my heart'" (XVI.209-210). Liberum Arbitrium challenges Will, however, and says: "'Then you're imperfect,' he said, 'and one of Pride's knights; / For such a desire and longing Lucifer fell from heaven'" (XVI.211-212). Liberum Arbitrium makes a critical point in his conversation with Will. Along with the themes of materialism and avarice, Will's desire to master *all* areas of knowledge could lead him away from God as he expresses a different form of greed. In the first line, Will repeatedly uses *all* naively, not understanding the power of that word holding a Godly connotation. Both *sciences* and *crafts* cover different areas of knowledge and demand intense study. When Will states "all the sciences under the sun," he mistakenly distances theology and spiritual practice from the earthly subjects he shows interest in. Although Will's intention may be to search for *truth*, Liberum Arbitrium redirects his thought. Will consistently refers to *natural knowledge* throughout the allegory, but the subjects he desires to learn do not grant him natural

knowledge¹⁶. Will forgets what Holy Church taught him in the first passus. Liberum Arbitrium begins to refine Will's desire to learn in a more practical and rewarding way. Liberum Arbitrium delivering this message places responsibility on every choice someone makes as the decision either leads to God or away from God.

Connecting Charity to Holy Church creates shared communities of purpose. Will asks Liberum Arbitrium what Holy Church is, and Free Will responds:

‘What is Holy Church, dear friend?’ I asked. ‘Charity,’ he said;
Life and love and loyalty in one faith and law,
A love knot of loyalty and of true belief,
All kinds of Christians clinging to one will...
God teaches no person to love without true cause.’ (XVII.125-131)

Although Will meets Holy Church as the allegory's first character, Will could not recognize her until after he learns about Charity. Liberum Arbitrium teaches how true community thrives and how charity provides a purpose for Christians. This link between Holy Church and Charity creates a beautiful realization for Will: the nature of Charity sustains Holy Church. In the second line, love and loyalty impact both spiritual and political spaces—a trait lacking in the beginning passus in the emerging market economy. Liberum Arbitrium emphasizes the value of relationships within Holy Church as her main foundation. A *love knot* between loyalty and true belief creates an authentic codependency that allows both to grow with the other. Banded together, loyalty and true belief create an active and strong church. The fourth line says *all kinds* of Christians unite into a single force where their will becomes love. As Will becomes apprenticed into love, the Christians practice the same in this line. As they *cling* to one will, the Christians hold on tightly and depend on this love to give them direction. The sixth line verifies this claim, as Free Will asserts love never learns in vain. This final line becomes essential

¹⁶ Refer back to Holy Church's teaching in chapter one.

because love becomes an act of intention. This depiction of a Holy Church creates community through the relationships and common goal where ideally, Christians practice these values in order to create the Holy Church Liberum Arbitrium describes. Love further deepens as a theme of action as Liberum Arbitrium continues to teach Will.

Liberum Arbitrium introduces three different reasons to love but suggests all deserve the same level of attention. Liberum Arbitrium continues to explain love deeper as he gives specific instructions on who to love:

‘Love God because he is good and ground of all truth;
Love your enemy entirely, God’s commandment to fulfill;
Love your friend that follows your will, who is your fair soul.’ (XVII. 142-143)

In the first line, *ground* of all truth alludes to the creation story where God created Adam and Eve out of dust. Because humanity’s existence begins in the earth, its inception of truth begins in the ground. Liberum Arbitrium continues to advise Will to love his enemies, but only justifies his advice through God’s commandment. Unique to God or friends, Liberum Arbitrium tells Will to love his enemy *entirely* with no space to feel hate or pride. These two aspects make the most challenging expectation. The final line calls to love a friend that *follows your will*, and speaking to Will, that commandment creates a deeper attention to his essence, one who goes loyally with the desires of his soul. The line reveals an example of a love not; to add *who is your fair soul*, suggesting that a friend plays a role so intimate that they manifest as his own beautiful soul. To love God, your enemy, and your friend completes a triangle of dependence and connection and community. To love an enemy entirely contradicts the understanding of an enemy who one would “hate or seek to injure” (enemi: MED), so more accurately, the enemy is just one who does not mirror Will’s soul. Liberum Arbitrium’s call for Will to love these three as an act of Will’s own free will.

Liberum Abitrium then introduces Will to the Tree True-love and shows the source of Charity and love for Will to witness. Importantly, this tree represents Charity in its strongest form, presenting the plant of peace Holy Church referenced in Passus I. The tree resides in the country called *Cor-hominis*¹⁷ and grows in the graft of named *Ymago-dei*¹⁸ where Covetousness, Flesh, and wicked works eat the fruit of the tree:

‘And all chew *Caritas*¹⁹ right down to the bare stalk;
Then I carry the second plank, *Sapiencia-dei-patris*²⁰,
Which is the passion and the penance and the perfectness of Jesus,
And with that I guard it at intervals till it grows ripe.’ (XVIII.39-42)

Liberum Arbitrium admits to protecting the tree against its oppressors. Again, the theme of *chewing* emerges, indicating an intent to waste, as the sins destroying the tree bite, degrade, and damage the True-love, but they never swallow and eat to gain any sustenance; the sins mean to take away rather than receive. To *chew* the tree means to destroy its essence wastefully *down to the bare stalk* where the tree’s roots still remain grounded, but the tree must spend more resources and energy to grow again to return to its original position. The cruel and oppressive act does not kill the tree but prevents it from producing its precious fruit and spreading its power beyond itself. This image of a tree plays a crucial role in Christian theology, as *Piers Plowman* reference multiple times that a tree took away life and a tree will restore that same life.²¹ The power of a tree, though it remains stationary and defenseless, comes in its ability to grow and show resilience against its threats. In the second line, Liberum Arbitrium uniquely describes a plank made up of the suffering Jesus endured during his crucifixion. The *passion* of Jesus refers

¹⁷ The heart of man

¹⁸ The Image of God

¹⁹ Christian love for human kind; charity

²⁰ Wisdom of God the Father

²¹ Where the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden produced the fruit Adam and Eve ate because of Lucifer’s deception and the cross crucified Jesus so he could forgive the sins of humanity (XVIII.68-70)

to the endured suffering specific to penance (passioun: MED) and the trial of Jesus from his arrest to his crucifixion. The chewing of the tree connects to Jesus's death on the cross as both the tree and Jesus endure intense battering only to come back stronger²². Because Liberum Arbitrium guides Will to this tree, Will learns about *Caritas*, meaning love, with Liberum Arbitrium as its protector. Liberum Arbitrium, as the "deepest impression of the image of God... and the highest gift of God to humanity" (Economou 248) means Liberum Arbitrium nurtures Charity and the spirit of love; the inherent nature of humanity cultivates *love*, not hate. The significance of Liberum Arbitrium guiding Will to the Tree of True-love signals Will's ability to return to Holy Church with a true understanding and want for community. Will finally wants to find Charity, so Liberum Arbitrium takes him at his free will: "'Now, surely,'" I said, and sighed for joy, / 'I thank you a thousand times for guiding me here'" (XVIII.16-17). Will's sigh signals a spiritual connection as every breath he inhales and exhales is the breath of God running through him (*Douay-Rheims Bible* Genesis 2:7). Will's joy comes in connecting with his free will and finding a meaningful answer in his quest. In this final sigh of joy, Will finally connects to Holy Church's claim she made him *free* in Passus I.

V. Chapter Four: The Collapse of the Church Community and its Lessons

After learning from teachers Patience and Liberum Arbitrium, Will reveals his growth in a subtle way. In the opening of Passus XXI, Will awakes after dreaming about the fall of Adam and Eve. Will says, "Thus I awoke and wrote what I had dreamed / And dressed myself in my best and took me to church" (XXI. 1-2). This new awakening differs from the other times Will awakes because normally he awakes and describes the clothes he already wears. In this passage, however, Will shows a new agency in writing down his dream as well as choosing what he

²² Jesus was resurrected three days after he died on the cross.

wears. The reflection Will practices also shows he values what he learned. The unexplained *best* he dresses in is also unusual. Will fails to mention the material of his outfit as he normally does, meaning he erases any class distinction—his best only needs to be as best he can. Where other characters' dress gives clues on their social class, Will's clothes often reflect his stage of learning. This moment signifies a growth in Will; after the lessons he learns up to this point in the allegory, he actively chooses to go to church and join the Christian community with his new perspective. Although Will did not recognize Church in Passus I, he understands many of the lessons she tried to teach him early on. As Will enters the church community, however, he begins to witness the creation of the church and how the institution grows sick.

Grace first builds a balanced community, giving everyone different skills to spread out responsibilities. Will witnesses:

And some he showed how to labor on land and on water...
 And some to divine and divide numbers...
 And he taught all to be loyal and each craft love the other,
 Nor any boast or debate be among them all. (XXI.236-251)

The long list of skills Grace rewards various people with include manual laborers, salesmen, teachers, and clergymen. Rather than assign men direct occupations, however, Grace teaches everyone how to master a specific skill to master the work they adopt. The gifts Grace gives to nurture a community comes as he embodies refinement, elegance, and as a favor from God. Grace recognizes that before a healthy church can arise, a community must have the foundations to sustain themselves. In the first line, Grace teaches men how to work the earth, including both farmers and fishermen. *Labor* in carries heavy connotations with intense physical work as a pattern throughout the allegory. Although the plowing of the half acre demanded hard labor, Grace inserts his power to bless them purposefully here. In gifting the people labor, Grace blesses the people's work so they can receive salvation. In Piers' community, the people worked

without Grace, so they would always fall short of a unachievable standard. In the second line, *divine* suggests exploring through intuition, meaning these mathematicians hold an intellectual capacity to naturally understand the numbers they work with. The word also links their work to God as being from or like Him. To finish the list of skills that *some* each get, Grace teaches *all* to *craft love*. While everyone contains unique abilities, everyone must be able to craft love to cultivate a sustainable community. Treating love as a craft makes love a skill people must actively practice. This idea connects to how the will becomes apprenticed into love so a community continues to (try to) master this craft. Grace continues to say “all crafts and skills come of my gift” (XXI.253). He makes a distinction between skill and craft where skills can actively and artistically develop into a craft. The gift Grace gives comes directly from God without any cost. To craft love means to unify labor with an actively virtuous community. The final line discourages any hierarchy from emerging; *boasting* encourages one to brag about their achievements and to *debate* suggests disagreement where dissatisfaction overshadows collaboration. In learning to love without debate or boasting means to remove pride—the initial sin that corrupts. A humble and productive society creates the ability for Grace to then create the church.

Grace makes Piers Plowman the leader in harvesting the values of the Christian church. Grace provides the resources for Piers to create the church, and commands Piers to cultivate the cardinal values:

‘Harrow all that natural intelligence knows with counsel of these doctors
And cultivate the cardinal virtues according to their teaching.’
‘When it’s time your grains,’ said Grace, ‘begin to ripen,
Ordain yourself a house, Piers, to store your harvest in.’ (XXI.316-319)

In using Piers Plowman’s role working the fields to represent the creation of cardinal values again emphasizes the need for continual attention to building a community and nurturing

progress. The *harrow* in the first line holds two significant purposes: dragging this heavy frame with teeth over soil pulls out weeds and loosens the soil and at the same time covers the seeds placed in the ground (OED). This process utilizes *natural intelligence* and converts its potential into the *cardinal virtues* that manifest. The doctors participating compliment Piers because both Piers and the doctors understand different fields of health to contribute. To *cultivate* the cardinal values suggests they did not always exist, but rather, the cardinal values only arise after Piers commits to developing them. In the third line, Grace refers to the virtues as grains, a staple in the Medieval English diet consisting of very small and excessive amounts of seeds. Not only can grains feed, but they can get planted to grow again. The capacity of a single small grain can majorly impact a lot of people. Grace commands Piers to build himself a house to store his harvest in, similar to Joseph in the seven years of plenty (*Douay-Rheims Bible* Genesis 41:48-50) as a keeper of the wellbeing of the community. Including the council of doctors and commanding Piers to build a house both suggest the cardinal values have human lives that will evolve from the earth as Adam and Eve. This house Piers builds becomes the church, or a house of prayer for the Christians to inhabit. This new creation story creates hope because this new community receives the gifts from Grace that Piers Plowman's community lacked in Passus VIII. Here, Piers continues his work in storing the seeds that will create a sustainable community. The works of people receive Grace from God to build a stronger community.

As Conscience leads the Christians away from the first threat of Pride, the people create a barrier to protect themselves, but Conscience errs in making this decision. Pride sends several of his men to force the Christian people to surrender the seeds, but the Christians retreat:

And then Common Sense came to teach Conscience.
 And cried and commanded all Christian people
 To dig a deep ditch around Unity
 So that Holy Church stood in holiness as if it were a fort. (XXI.361-364)

The presence of Common Sense to teach Conscience compliments Conscience because he readily responds in a rational manner. Because Common Sense *teaches* Conscience, however, suggests he still needs to learn more. As a constable, Conscience only holds limiting authority to maintain peace and even as the highest ranked official under the King, he should not be the man in charge of governing (OED). If collective conscience fails, the community loses its moral thought and awareness that holds it accountable. In the second line, Conscience *cried* and *commanded* everyone, showing an evolution of his authority. He first cries as an expression of distress but continues to give direct instructions to dig. The third line stands as the isolated mistake Conscience makes: the deep ditch the Christians dig isolate themselves. Although in the fourth line Holy Church stands holy and untouched from sin, comparing Unity to a fort militarizes her. A fort historically presents a permanent and strategic site for armies (OED), shifting the purpose of Holy Church. Now with a moat and standing strong as a fort, the church can combat external forces, but remains vulnerable to internal corruption.

Although the community through Unity builds a strong Holy Church, the people fight back against Conscience. When Conscience advises the community to participate in Piers' *Redde quod debes*²³ to repay their debts before going to communion, the people grow defensive and a brewer speaks out:

‘Oh yeah?’ said a brewer, ‘I won’t be ruled,
By Jesus! despite all your fast-talk, according to *Spiritus iusticie*
Nor according to Conscience, by Christ, as long as I can sell
Both dregs and swill and draw at one hole
Thick ale or thin ale; that’s the kind of guy I am
And not to poke around for holiness—so just shut up, Conscience!

²³ “Render what you owe”: The power given by Christ to St. Peter and the church to grant absolution (see Matthew 16:19) depends upon the prerequisite need for restitution, not only in the sense of paying things back but also in the sense of rendering the debt of charity. The variation below, “who *renders what he owes*”, refers to the individual Christian who is assure his reward for meeting this demand (Economou, XXI 187)

Your *Spiritus iustici* speech is a lot of hot air!’ (XXI.396-402)

The brewer expresses with a rebellious and angry tone his own agency. In the second line, the brewer accuses Conscience of using *fast-talk*, or pressuring everyone to make a hasty decision based off misleading information (OED). The Brewer refuses to obey Jesus or Conscience as long as he can sell his own alcohol. The brewer makes a mistake, however, as he tries returning to the idea that he can live without God—working without God’s grace will lead him nowhere. *Spiritus iusticie* encourages charity because of God’s grace. Ultimately, no individual can live without God’s grace, nor the help of their community. Charity gives what he can when, and the Christian community ought to practice this often to empower justice. The brewer asserts he can make money selling *dreg* and *swill*, both rooted in gluttony and poor taste. He does not care if he sells thick or thin ale. The *dreg* refers to the remains of a drink and *swill* where a drink swirls around a cup as if to stall. The two combined add to wasteful and indulgent acts that break up community. Although a brewer specializes in crafting ales that manipulate people’s capacities to think and speak, he accuses Conscience of wasting speech with his *fast-talk* and *hot air*. The brewer tires of listening to Conscience and chooses the easier path. Although Conscience can try to influence their choices, Conscience holds no authority nor power in his faculty to make them act righteously.

Arising from the crowd, a vicar shares his experience in the church that holds the church accountable for its lack of virtue. After Conscience retaliates against the brewer and reminds everyone to live by the cardinal values or they’ll never be saved, the vicar steps forward to respond:

‘Then many a man’s lost,’ said an uneducated vicar.
 ‘I’m a parson of Holy Church and never in my time came
 Any man to me who could tell me about cardinal virtues
 Or who counted Conscience worth chicken feathers. (XXI.409-412)

Conscience always warns his followers of the potential consequences, but the vicar here settles with the reality. Although Conscience wants to save everyone and gets frustrated easily, the vicar supplies a hard truth. His status as an *uneducated vicar* connects him to Piers, as both men emerged from the masses to meet a need of the people. A vicar holds their position when appointed to take the place of a real parson, but also can receive their power from as an “earthly representative of God” (vicar: MED). The vicar’s authority comes from God and not his education, the second time a lower-class man offers a powerful and needed perspective. He continues to claim his position as a parson of the church, he holds influence and reveals the institution he serves does not contain the very values Conscience defends. The vicar’s claim that he cannot identify a single person who valued the seeds the church ought to store or Conscience himself calls out the church in its present state. Similar to Pier’s struggle in plowing the half acre, this new community becomes vulnerable because the church loses its connection to heavenly holiness; in the third line, the vicar shares *no man* could name the cardinal virtues. Because Piers returned to cultivate these virtues, the community’s disconnection again threatens his foundational work. In the fourth line, the vicar also criticizes the church from not listening to Conscience. Because *conscience* depends heavily on a Christian conviction and having a mindful awareness that leads decision-making (conscience, MED), the regard for Conscience less than *chicken feathers* means his influence on the church nears none. The consequences of this late realization means the community risks falling back into the same patterns in plowing the half acre. Only now does Will learns the value of love and individual works to mend a community.

Will addresses Kind and then learns the most valuable craft he can master: love. After Will grows old, he realizes he needs to use what time he has left to work meaningfully, so he turns to Kind to give him that direction:

'Council me, Kind,' I said, 'what craft's best to learn?'
 'Learn to love,' said Kind, 'and forget all the rest.'
 'How shall I earn a living, to clothe and feed myself?'
 'If you love loyally, you'll never lack
 Clothes or earthly food as long as you live.' (XXII.207-211)

Will asks for formal advice from Kind to know what craft to learn because Kind provides the forgiveness after Nature's wrath. To know Kind connects to the natural knowledge Will seeks: Kind represents the inherent nature of people that embodies the "humanity of Christ" (kinde, MED). To master a craft at the end of his life appears unusual but learning the craft of love never comes too late. In the second line, Kind commands Will to unlearn everything in order to learn love, even if he cannot perfect the craft like Kind. In the third line, Will asks an important question: he centers his own needs concerning his life on earth and worries he about how he can live dependent on love. Although he does not understand at first, Will's question leads to Kind further explaining the value of love. In the fourth and fifth lines, Kind links love and loyalty again, validating Patience's words earlier in the allegory. The exchange between Kind and Will connects heaven and earth where the craft of love provides Will a sustained life. Although each contributor to Piers' and Conscience's communities practice their own unique labor, the craft of love unifies their practice and connects to Kind where individual works repair a community. The fragility of community continues to suffer, however, because of the threat of sin that penetrates the church.

Conscience's power depends greatly on the integrity of the clergy, but the detachment between church leaders and Conscience causes more internal turmoil. Covetousness attacks the church externally in the allegory because he yearns for the power he does not have. When Conscience calls for the help of church leaders, they respond ineffectively:

Conscience cried out, "Help, Clergy, before I fall
 Through imperfect priests and prelates of Holy Church!"

Friars heard him cry and came to help him,
 But because they didn't know their craft well
 Conscience gave up on them. (XXII.228-233)

Clergy could refer to the ordained leadership within the church, but also the whole body of Christians (clergie: MED), both of which suggest a hierarchy of power and spiritual knowledge. Conscience cries out for help before he *falls through*, asking for a kind of safety net or barrier to catch him, but the imperfect priests can't help but let him fall. Even with the different levels he calls on, their help does not serve enough. The priests and prelates of higher ranks cannot support Conscience, although the passage does not specify whether they disregard Conscience or try to help. Because Covetousness attacks the church and Conscience cries out urgently, Conscience blames the priests and prelates for letting him fall in the first place. The lower ranking and free-roaming friars respond to Conscience, but they too fall short. In the fourth line, the friars' failure does not come necessarily from their corrupt nature, but their inexperience and poor craft. Despite Grace giving gifts of unique craft to everyone, the friars do not know their craft well because they disassociate themselves with the church for their independent gain. The friars' lack of community and accountability means they give little to Conscience. In the final line, Conscience giving up on *them* means both upper and lower ranks lose their connection to God, and the religious community renders inauthentic and broken. If Will and Conscience cannot depend on the church leadership to catch them, this signals that the church can no longer support the sacraments. If imperfect priests cannot uphold proper confession, communion, or any other duty, then this renders the church community useless. This failure jeopardizes the labor of the people, even with Grace's gift. Despite this choice, Conscience calls on Clergy again in the final lines of the allegory one more time.

The perseverance of Conscience demonstrates his loyalty to Unity, but the internal sickness grows beyond his control. Sloth and Pride take advantage of the weak defense of the church and again go after Conscience, the only loyal Christian left:

Conscience cried out again to Clergy to come help him,
And asked Contrition to come help hold the gate.
“He lies drowned,” said Peace, ‘and so do many others;
The Friar’s enchanted these people with his treatments
And gives them sleeping potions so they fear no sin.” (XXII.377-379)

In the first line, Conscience asks for help rather than depend on them to totally save him. His desperation as the church’s integrity continues to diminish forces him to ask again in good faith. He mistakenly asks for Contrition to guard the gate when Peace fails, disregarding Contrition’s illness. A sick Contrition at the gate would mean a weak guard. Contrition could easily let unworthy people pass the first sacrament of penance and enter the church unprepared. This recklessness by Conscience jeopardizes the sanctity of church as well as the Christians working at penance. In the third line, however, Peace ends this possibility by revealing that Contrition *lies drowned*. This image uniquely characterizes the state of Contrition: his death emphasizes his deprived condition in his sickness and death. The phrase suggests the friar’s treatment overwhelmed Contrition, and now he lies absorbed with the toxins inside his body. The tragedy in this death shows Contrition weighed down, where the excessive corruption of the church defeats him. This physical reaction again describes the impact of sin on Christians. The infection in the sick church affects the individual bodies, and because Contrition dies, no one can even begin penance. The Friar in the fourth line *enchanted* the sick, suggesting he appealed to their pleasure rather than healing the root cause of their sickness. This difference between enchanting and healing numbs and distracts the Christians from the pain they feel but prevents them from addressing any source of the problem. Because the friars do not know their craft well, they

choose the easier method of subduing their clients. The use of *enchant* and *potion* connects the Friar to witchcraft rather than holy practice. The *sleeping* potions given to the Christians makes them passive—they no longer practice agency, love, or awareness. The Friar destroys the community he infiltrated and robs the Christians of their free will. Conscience again trusts a broken church, but his decision leads to further defeat.

Upon recognizing the hopelessness of the church's condition, Conscience abandons the community to become a pilgrim to practice penance. When Conscience hears Peace's news, he decides to abandon Unity:

“By Christ,” said Conscience then, “I’ll become a pilgrim,
And walk as wide as the world reaches...
Now Kind avenge me,
And send me good favor and health till I have Piers plowman.”
And then he cried out loud for Grace until I began to awake. (XXII. 380-386)

With Contrition dead, the Christian community no longer feels bad for how they treat one and other and confession and satisfaction become irrelevant. His death means that people will feel no sorrow in committing sin, allowing sin to disrupt and damage a virtuous community.

Conscience's first words, “by Christ,” play on his shock in hearing the news, as well as his loyalty to Christ. For Conscience to become a pilgrim means he gives up his status as a constable and therefore, his leadership role. In the second line, he vows to walk to ends of the world if he needs to with no time limit on his return. Conscience calls on Kind to avenge him but does not specify how. Interestingly, Conscience is the only character to every call directly on God for help. Conscience demonstrates an incredible sense of faith in this moment, asking Kind for what he needs, but putting that decision into the hands of God. In the fourth line, Conscience seeks out Piers Plowman, as the two remain the most loyal servants to God and embody the marriage between Loyalty and Holy Church. The final line of the allegory describes Conscience crying out

again, this time for Grace. This cry becomes a prayer for Grace, as Conscience looks to unite Kind, Piers Plowman, and Grace. But in a state of complete darkness, Conscience abandons everyone else in the Christian community. Conscience can choose to either serve other people, as Piers learned to do in the plowing of the half-acre, and stick together like Reason counseled, or abandon it all for solitary growth. Because Covetousness and the friars infiltrated the church and made the people sick, the church community lies shattered.

Although Conscience demonstrates resilience throughout the allegory as he continues to lead, the church community no longer has a collective conscience. With Conscience on pilgrimage, he still searches for satisfaction to complete penance, but alone. The allegory's apocalyptic and vague ending feels uncertain, but Langland does not want his audience feeling hopeless. Through Will's journey, Langland gives as many resources he can to contribute to the conversation of addressing this ethical issue, but cannot do so by himself. No solution arises out of Langland's *Piers Plowman* because Langland calls on his audience to do the work in answering what happens after Conscience leaves. When community breaks down, the community must decide to rebuild as a whole and do the work to make restoration possible. Langland attempts to show his own thought process in understanding how to react when his church reaches crisis, and he demonstrates his own effort to build community in calling on his audience to participate. Even if community does not fix itself overnight, love always prevails.

VI. Conclusion

Langland lets the Christian community collapse twice, leaving his audience with no final answer of how to repair the situation. Meed, sin, and imperfect church leadership all contribute to undermining the sanctity of the Christian community. With the help of Holy Church, Piers, Conscience, Patience, and Liberum Arbitrium, and others, Will finds his way in learning the craft

of love and reconnecting with Holy Church. Although the allegory ends with the church community collapsing again, Will now knows the importance of love and charity to continue to rebuild that community.

I initially felt a sense of hopelessness to see Conscience leaving community. So often do we see institutions and leadership fail, leaving the public the responsible ones for cleaning up the mess. As my understanding of the allegory developed, however, Langland's intention became more transparent. When we recognize our own stake in the collective well-being and how we impact the systems around us, we begin to appreciate our dependence on one and other.

Langland's ability to call out his own community shows incredible bravery and love. I choose to believe in hope at the end of the poem. I think the strongest communities recognize they need to continue to work on themselves as well as their relationships with each other in order to thrive. If a community experiences deterioration, such tension can create opportunities to grow. The Christian community in *Piers Plowman* demonstrates the taxing realities of how sin tries to break down community, and Langland calls his audience to resist sin's power together more effectively. When sin becomes a name for dividing community and threatens well-being, we can apply that to each of our lives. Justice, love, and community are all interdependent on the relationships we foster.

I think the power in this allegory comes from the way Langland engages his audience. Langland ends his allegory in chaos and leaves no real solution for his audience in understanding how to deal with the impact of sin. The audience is left with the collapse of community and the freedom to choose how it wants to react. I think because community rebuilt once in the allegory, and because Langland provides several teachers and resources, he calls on his audience to want to respond with hope. Although he does not provide all the answers, Langland gives his audience

an opportunity to reflect on the ills and beauties of society, providing his own understanding and reflection on its conditions. As he leaves an unresolved ending, he wants his audience to do the work using the resources he provided throughout the allegory. Although community can break down, the most important element to rebuilding community includes resilience. Conscience and Piers Plowman both continue to fight for love, even as they make mistakes and grow throughout the allegory. Langland provides the resources of love and charity to challenge his own community to return to a more natural and whole society. Interestingly, however, despite the difficulty in repairing community, Langland often called the resources he identifies as natural and familiar. Holy Church wants Will to have the *natural* knowledge to love the Lord. Liberum Arbitrium embodies this idea most because although he holds the capacity to do whatever he wants—good or bad—he always moves towards love. This idea that our beings experience the most complete sense of self and satisfaction when we love one and other creates a collective liberation.

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