

ABSTRACT

The Communal Conscience of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*

Megan Renz

Director: David L. Jeffrey, Ph.D.

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* personifies theological, moral, and psychological faculties, one of which is conscience, within a series of poetic dream visions. The semantic field of *conscience* evolved considerably between the classical and modern ages, moving from the concept of a morally neutral record keeper within the individual or a community, to a concept of internal or external lawgiver. I contend that Langland's conscience is located between the classical and modern word usage, and that it is communal in nature, i.e. a moral faculty that intrinsically and inextricably links the individual to his surrounding community. The role of Conscience in the interior community of the soul shows conscience's formation, its fallibility, and its authority by virtue of its relationship to the community of the Trinity. The role of Conscience depicted alternately as a place through which persons must travel in their journey toward Truth, the place at which "Christ will prove truly / that [a man] love[s] the Lord our God above all else," speaks of Conscience's participation in a scheme of salvation that is fundamentally co-operative, and thus of Conscience's own co-operative nature. Conscience's denunciation of Lady Mede reveals his authority to engage socio-economic matters in defense of justice: he defends traditional moral frameworks in the face of the intensifying profit economy. Finally, his kingship over a Christendom under attack exhibits his authority to call the community to holiness in an apocalyptic vision, as well as his innate fallibility and reliance upon the Trinitarian community. In all of these aspects, Conscience may be demonstrated to be communal.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS

Dr. David L. Jeffrey, Honors College

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM

Dr. Andrew Wisely, Director

DATE: _____

THE COMMUNAL CONSCIENCE OF WILLIAM LANGLAND'S *PIERS PLOWMAN*

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By
Megan K. Renz

Waco, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

William Langland, a fourteenth-century London layman, clerk, and visionary poet, wrote three versions of *Piers Plowman* over his lifetime. All three are a series of dream visions in which the personified Will, representative alternately of the human will and possibly of the poet himself, encounters the ideas of what constitutes the most faithful Christian life. Writing during a century in which English theological thought focused heavily upon the ethical, and in which philosophical shifts enabled new manifestations of pelagianism and simultaneously paved the way for the Reformation, Langland engages theological tumult and clerical corruption with courage and piety. As Father Conrad Pepler has put it in his much-quoted study on *Piers*,

The whole purpose of the work is to show the men of [England] how they may reach salvation; it describes the nature of Good Life for the ordinary man, and at the same time searches for an answer to the general theological question: how can men win salvation? He describes a world of sin and degradation...from which the well-intentioned men of the land will, by the grace of God, raise themselves to live a life of a spiritual character based on Truth and Love.¹

Langland's scope is not limited, however, to the strictly theological: he engages equally radical socio-economic transitions accompanying the growth of urban culture with power and zeal, seeking the ultimate perfection of his society as the culmination of the Incarnation. While an introduction may not be sufficient to convince my reader of the work's power to challenge, inspire, and edify, I hope that the subsequent chapters may do a little toward that end, acknowledging, of course, that I too am only scratching the surface.

¹ Conrad Pepler, O.P. *The English Religious Heritage* (St. Louis: Herder, 1958), 40.

The poem operates primarily through personification allegory, that is, the personification of psychological, theological, or moral faculties that interact with each other to reveal through narrative and dialogue an allegorical meaning. For example, that Pride attacks Conscience signifies that the individual or societal conscience is capable of being assaulted by the vice of pride. My research pertains specifically to the personification of Conscience in the B-text, and seeks to place the use of the word “conscience” in *Piers* within the scope of its evolution more generally. Conscience, one of the most complex and multivalent characters, engages theological, sociological, economic, and psychological aspects of Langland’s world, and though I do not claim in any sense to have grasped the breadth of his character, I do aim to prove one thing, that “conscience” for William Langland is inseparable from community. Doing so will require rudimentary engagement with century English theology, philosophy, devotional works, and social *mores*, but in order to prove anything about *Piers*, even something as small as the application of a descriptive adjective to one of Langland’s character personifications, one must engage it from multiple angles, and thus I shall. All *Piers Plowman* citations are taken from the B-text and labeled simply with passus and line numbers (e.g. XIX.8). Translations of the Middle English and Latin texts are my own unless otherwise specified.

CHAPTER ONE

The Role of Conscience in the Interior Community

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* explores the inner workings of the human soul through the allegorical personifications of its constituent parts. It is the chief purpose of this thesis to demonstrate the fundamentally communal nature of the faculty called Conscience within the interior community of the mental and moral faculties, and in society at large. To that end, in this chapter I will address Langland's structure of the soul, given in Passus XV of *Piers Plowman* in order to establish baseline terms of use as well as to establish that Langland's Conscience is communal in nature even as it operates in the soul of an individual. By way of introduction, I shall first address the imagination as it functions in Langland's personification allegory as well as the linguistic history of the English word "conscience." The argument proper requires two elements: a consideration of the role Conscience plays in relation to the other faculties of the soul, primarily Reason; and an exploration of the relationship of Conscience to the movement of God in the soul through the Holy Spirit, and through the presence of Christ Himself in the Eucharist. Thus, I shall establish the baseline definition, placed as specifically as possible within wider scholastic and monastic thought, of the term "conscience" in the work as a faculty that is *formed*, *fallible*, and yet also *authoritative* within the interior community.

Introduction to Personification Allegory Through Imagination

Sufficient familiarity with the conceptual framework under which Langland operates to define the psychological (i.e. as pertaining to the human *psyche*) faculties, requires a brief introduction to the imagination as it operates in medieval personification allegory. Langland's theological influences are notoriously difficult to identify with certainty because he alludes to an immense number of sources and is surrounded by an abundance of theological streams. Furthermore, he is, at his core, a poet with a mystical apocalyptic imagination, and not a systematic theologian or a philosopher. I will accordingly focus most of the discussion on the paradigm of the soul internal to the text, suggesting more external linguistic and devotional correspondences than definitive theological ones. That said, the imagination in medieval philosophy, adopted from Aristotle by Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, and Roger Bacon, is the foundation on which Langland's personifications of psychological faculties stand, and where we must begin.

Medieval access to Aristotle's psychology came through the Latin translation of *On the Soul* by the Arabic philosopher Avicenna, and much of the mental representation in medieval philosophy until John Duns Scotus and Henry of Ghent in the thirteenth century was variation on the basic Aristotelian theme.¹ As articulated by Avicenna, a particular object enters the imagination through the sense perception in a process called abstraction, in which "the representation in the imagination of particular things becomes universal in the intellect."² This image of a particular object, a *phantasia* for Aristotle, exists in the imagination, and from it, particular "intentions" or universals can be separated: the senses perceive a white rabbit, and in the imagination, whiteness as a

¹Henrik Lagerlund, "Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Web.

² Ibid.

universal concept can exist and be recognized in any future perception of a white box, or a pre-existing memory of a white cloud. Building upon this, Saint Thomas includes imagination among the interior sensitive powers, saying that

Phantasy or imagination is as it were a storehouse of forms received through the senses.... As to sensible forms there is no difference between man and other animals; for they are similarly immuted by the extrinsic sensible. But there is a difference as to the above intentions: for other animals perceive these intentions only by some natural instinct, while man perceives them by means of coalition of ideas.³

Roger Bacon, a later Franciscan theologian, to whom “species were representations, that is, real extended images like objects representing the thing cognized to the cognizer,” held a view quite distinct from Thomas, who understood species to be the forms themselves.⁴ Nonetheless, they both understood the imagination as formed by the perception of external things and the reassembly of their universal aspects as images within the imagination.

The form of *Piers Plowman* as a dream vision and an allegory wherein cognitive faculties are personified relies heavily on the imagination, for it is in dreams that the imagination is most active. Few specifically psychological faculties take personified form, but those that do ought to be read through this lens. Accordingly, the character of Conscience is not to be understood as the universal concept of conscience, a faculty which rational human beings possess. Rather, in the dream visions, it is to be understood as the Conscience of Will’s imagination, and as such, it assumes quite a different form than that of the abstract and universal concept of conscience attended to by philosophers and theologians. Perception forms an individual’s conscience not only through

³ST. I.74.4.

⁴ Lagerlund, “Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy.”

abstraction of particular things, but through abstraction of events and life experiences, which can, as Aristotle contends, result in false images, and thus be fallible.⁵

Additionally, the imagination can engage with the intellectual faculties like Conscience to create an image, with additions of any elements abstracted into the imagination through perception. While the constraints of this project limit the extent to which Langland's psychology of perception can be explored, it is sufficient to note that, on account of the medieval philosophy of imagination, the personified psychological faculties, denoted in most translations by capital letters, are formed by the particular cognitive experience of the individual, namely Will, and should not be confused with their corresponding universals. On the other hand, the passage in Passus XV regarding the arrangement of the soul's faculties deals more in the realm of universal concepts. Langland's choice to utilize personified interior cognitive faculties establishes Conscience as both *formed* and *fallible* by virtue of its construction from the abstraction of life experiences.

Introduction to Conscience in Classical and Medieval Usage

Since it is the task of this thesis to explore the way that Langland uses the term conscience, it is also of paramount importance to understand how the Middle English word "conscience" is situated within the larger evolution of the word, and how the modern "conscience"—as a technical term of modern psychology and as an idiomatic term with its own field of associations—is considerably different than that of Langland and his fourteenth-century readers. In *Studies in Words*, C.S. Lewis reveals the philological challenges "conscience" poses: the word has undergone a substantial change

⁵ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Mortimer J. Alder, Ed., *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 8 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1952), III.v.1-5.

in meaning from the original Latin *conscientia*, the noun synthesized from the prefix *con*, meaning “with”, and the verb *scire*, meaning “to know.” *Conscio* means, along with its Greek counterpart *sunoida*, “I know together with, I share (with someone) the knowledge [of something].”⁶ Thus, *conscientia* and *suneidesis*, the noun forms of these verbs, mean in their original use, “either the state (or act) of sharing knowledge or else simply knowledge, awareness, apprehension—even something like mind or thought.”⁷ In its earliest usage, *conscientia* assumed a certain degree of community: one cannot *conscire* alone, because it requires the agreement of multiple parties on an external object of knowledge. This first usage does naturally indicate that even though the word might mean, or evolve to mean, “mind or thought,” those two terms (*conscientia* and *suneidesis*) were not entirely liberated from the connotations of consensus.

Lewis traces the two branches of the word’s use, one which retained the strong sense of the prefix, and another, in which the *con-* weakened to a vestige. The “together” branch, in which the *con-* imposed force upon the meaning of its compound, is of most interest. What does it mean to “know together” with others? Lewis responds with the Anglicized word “consciring” to describe such a communal knowledge:

When everyone is consciring about a piece of knowledge, it will never be mentioned. Consciring is worth talking about only when two, or a few, men share some knowledge which most men do not possess; in fact, when they are a secret. The man who consicred anything with me is a *consciis* (or *suneidesis*) to me. The fact of his *consciring* is his *conscientia*, his shared knowledge.⁸

⁶ Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960), 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

Once again, *conscientia* as a consensus regarding an external object of knowledge necessarily requires community, i.e. the capacity for one person to concur with another about a given event. Granted, it might not have required external community, as one “can be to himself in the relation...called consciring.” In such a case, “he is privy to his own acts, is his own conscius or accomplice...[and he] inflicts you with shame and fear.”⁹ Saint Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul declares that “I *conscire* (*sunoida*) nothing against myself,” uses the term in this manner.¹⁰ But whether the community is external, in a societal sense, or internal in the sense of “witness,” *conscientia* in classical usage assumes a direct object, a deed of right or wrong. It meant being privy to the sins or good deeds of oneself or one’s community. *Piers Plowman* relies on this classical definition more than the definition that would emerge in subsequent centuries, but carries tones of the scholastic idea of conscience, or rather, the idea of conscience as Lawgiver that grew in strength in the centuries immediately preceding Langland.

The development of *conscientia* in Latin from this classical sense to the sense of Lawgiver was catalyzed by the scholastic doctrines of moral theology, in which *conscientia* was frequently distinguished from a variation on the word *sunoidesis*, *synderesis*. Bonaventure uses *synderesis* to mean “willing rightly...warning against evil and prompting toward good,” as distinct from *conscientia*, “which is judging correctly.”¹¹ Saint Thomas, in his evaluation of conscience in the *Summa*, asserts that conscience,

⁹ Ibid., 187.

¹⁰ 1 Cor iv.4 in Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 187.

¹¹ Saint Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Press, 2005), 95.

“properly speaking, conscience is not a power, but an act.”¹² His etymology attributes *conscientia* to “‘cum alio scientia,’ i.e. knowledge applied to an individual case,” different, indeed, than Lewis’ but nonetheless complementary.¹³ “Conscience,” he asserts, “is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke, [in the] *application* of knowledge or science to what we do” (emphasis mine).¹⁴ Saint Thomas makes distinctions between three kinds of application: conscience acts as witness insofar as “we recognize that we have done or not done something,” as judge “that something should be done or not done,” and as accuser as it judges “that something done is well done or ill done.”¹⁵ He does not make quite so strong of a distinction between *synderesis* and *conscientia* as Bonaventure does, but acknowledges that the former term is used in the more concrete sense of innate moral knowledge, or “habit of first principles,” and the latter in regards to the habits that stem from the first.¹⁶ Here, we have conscience as not a power, but both an act and a habit, a faculty of prudential wisdom that applies moral knowledge to particular situations. In *Piers Plowman*, Will’s Conscience does not adhere strictly to any of the three Thomist sub-definitions, and is certainly not the “first habit” of synderesis. But neither, as Morton Bloomfield maintains, does it adhere exclusively to the classical usage.¹⁷ Conscience in *Piers* is a complex

¹² *ST* I.79.13.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 167-77.

amalgamation of Internal Witness, External Witness, and Lawgiver, though perhaps less so an Accuser. As an important caveat, in whatever sense Conscience may be regarded as Lawgiver, it is never touted as infallible or innately possessing moral truth, a fact which certainly challenges the modern notions of conscience, as we shall next address.

The flexible definitions of the word created a substantial divergence in meaning, both literarily and colloquially, at the advent of modernity, leading to a definition very different than both the classical and the scholastic one. Lewis points out that at the time of the Puritan colonization, “conscience,” now in English, had taken on the sense of Lawgiver in such a way that allowed the denial of political and ecclesial authority, and the claim that a person was morally beholden to nothing other than the individual conscience.¹⁸ This only intensified in subsequent usage in both Christian and secular circles, and Lewis observes astutely the difficulty with such usage:

The more boldly men claim that *conscience* is, directly or vicariously, a divine lawgiver and the ‘spotless mirror of God’s majesty’, the more troublesomely aware they must become that this lawgiver gives different laws to different men; this mirror reflects different faces. Hence, we have consciences in the plural, not meaning those different conscirings which different men must obviously have but those different inner laws they acknowledge.¹⁹

The oversimplification of conscience as lawgiver from its full sense in the classical and medieval periods, having been influenced by the concepts of “mind” or “thought,” creates a vague term that ignores the possibility of any outside influence.²⁰ Conscience thus assumes individual “ideologies,” which paves an easy avenue for a moral relativism that is based on the language of individual “values” rather than universal truths about ethics.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 199.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

Within secular and mainstream Christian culture, the modern colloquial usage of *conscience* tends to be a mixture of “Jiminy Cricket” sitting on one’s shoulder as an unbiased observer of the situation on whom one can rely for perfect decisions, or as a term essentially synonymous with the Holy Spirit. In certain streams of Protestant thought, the matter of “formation of conscience” is obsolete because the Holy Spirit guides conscience unerringly. The underlying assumption is that its infallibility is a gift conferred by initial belief and the gifting of the Spirit, and any ethical error one commits stems from a defiant refusal to listen to this guidance. In such a paradigm, lessened culpability due to an inability to feel shame or genuine moral ignorance cannot exist. Catholics (despite the fact that “formation of conscience” and “examination of conscience” are still terms of use) are not free from modernity’s reach either: Pope St. John Paul II’s statement that a Catholic’s moral authority is ultimately his own conscience frequently provides an easy avenue by which to avoid Church’s more difficult teachings.²¹ In this way, Catholics can neglect the possibility that one’s own conscience can be badly formed, and assume the modern relativist equation of conscience with “value” or “ideal” that denies objective morality.²² These observations of colloquial usage are of note because the temptation for modern readers to impose their own linguistic baggage on Lancelotti’s conscience is strong, and must be avoided to see the

²¹ John Paul II, *On the Freedom of Conscience and Religion*, 1980: “the dignity of the human person, who experiences the inner and indestructible exigency of acting freely ‘according to the imperatives of his own conscience.’”

²² For example, in 2011, a group of women who had ordained themselves as Roman Catholic priests defended the validity of their ordination by saying that they were “following [their] consciences.” Micheal O’ Malley, “Woman priest, a Beachwood native, sees her ordination as valid; Roman Catholic Church does not,” Web.

beauty in his portrayal, as well as the challenge it presents to Christians of the twenty-first century.

The classical and medieval senses of conscience define it as a faculty that may (but does not necessarily) have the power of a lawgiver, and that, if it does possess this power, may judge wrongly. At the very least, the conscience is a witness, both internally, to the right and wrong committed by oneself, and externally, to the rights and wrongs of others upon which multiple parties can agree. It is within this basic framework that I shall examine the compelling and complex character of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*, and in what sense Langland's conscience retains the strong prefix meaning "together," i.e. in what sense it is communal.

Conscience in the Interior Community of the Soul

In the fifth vision, in which Christian, representative of the human soul, speaks to Will to explain himself and his names, Langland presents to the reader a model of the human soul and its interior community:

'The whiles I qukyne the cors' quod he, 'called am I *anima*;
And whan I wilne and wolde, *animus* ich hatte;
And for that I can [and] knowe, called am I *mens*;
And when I make mone to God *memoria* is my name;
And when I deme domes and do as the truthe techeth,
Thanne is *Racio* my righte name—"reson" on englissh;
And whan I feele that folk telleth, my first name is *sensus*—
And that is wit and wisdom, the welle of alle craftes;
And whan I chalange or chalange noght, chepe or refuse,
Thanne am I Conscience ycalled, goddes clerk and his Notarie;
And whan I love leellyoure lord and alle othere,
Thanne is lele Love my name, and latyn *Amor*;
And whan I flee fro the flessh and forsake the careyne,
Thanne am I spirit spechelees; *Spiritus* thane ich hatte.'

['When I animate the body,' he said, 'I am called *anima* (or 'soul');
And when I will and desire, *animus* (or 'intent') is my name;
And as the power that acquires and possesses knowledge, I am called *mens*;

And when I have communion with God in prayer, *memoria* is my name;
 When I make moral judgments and do what Truth instructs me,
 My correct name is *ratio*—"reason" in English;
 And when I perceive what other people say, my first name is *sensus*—
 Which is the intelligence of all practical skills;
 And when I reproach or reproach not, approve action or refuse to act
 Then I am called Conscience, God's clerk and Notarie.
 And when I love God and all others sincerely
 Then faithful love is my name, and in Latin, *Amor*;
 And when I flee from the flesh and depart from the corpse,
 Then I am a voiceless spirit, named then *Spiritus*.']²³

This passage and the narrative immediately surrounding provide essential clues to Langland's conception of conscience, but the case could be made that the paradigm presented is not intended as philosophical, but rather, psychological. Considerations of the alternatives will reveal the possible lenses through which the passage could be read, lenses that are not mutually exclusive.

Christian cites his source for this paradigm of the soul as "Austyn [Augustine] and Ysodorus"²⁴ the latter being the most directly formative. The B-Text includes the following passage from the *Etymologies* immediately beneath Christian's speech:

Anima pro diversis accionibus diversa nomina sortitur: dum vivificate corpus anima est; dum vult animus est; dum scit mens est; dum recolit memoria est; dum iudicat racio est; dum sentit sensus est; dum amat Amor est; dum negat vel consentit consciencia est; dum spirat spritus est.

[The Spirit for different actions is allotted different names: it is soul when it enlivens the body, will when it wills, mind when it knows, memory when it recollects, reason when it judges, sense when it senses; Love when it loves, conscience when it refuses [to act] or agrees [to act]; spirit when it breathes forth.]²⁵

²³ XV.23-36.

²⁴ XV.37.

²⁵ XV.39.

The fundamentally grammatical understanding of the organization of the soul reveals itself in both the quotation of Isidore's *Etymologies*, as the very name of the work explains, and in the Middle English poetic rendering: the constituent parts of the soul are named according to their actions (*accionibus*). The passage from the *Etymologies* discloses Langland's resistance to the onslaught of nominalism. Nominalism destroyed the established linguistic paradigms for thinking about the world in favor of a view that asserted the general arbitrariness of names: there was no substantive relationship between the name and the thing named. This significant departure from the classical tradition resulted in a number of significant consequences, not the least of which could arguably have been the Reformation.

Langland, though, still firmly writes in the classical tradition, and accordingly, his frequently quoted statement in the C-text that "grammar is the ground of al"²⁶ reflects this. Jill Mann observes the linguistic significance of the Passus XV model of the soul, observing a lack of "one-to-one relationship of name and thing," that, "so far from representing a multiplicity of things, the many nouns converge on an underlying unity, which is verbal not nominal. The noun...is simply the freeze-frame in which verbal activity is artificially stilled."²⁷ Her observation about Langland's naming sheds light on the congruence between Langland and his appropriation of Isidore: in the *Etymologies*, the constituent parts of the soul are so named for the verbal activity they cause. This is not to say that the actions of the soul attributed to each part are indistinguishable, or the faculties lack differentiating features, but rather, that the action is the unity between all its

²⁶ C-text, XVII.107 cited in Mann, "Langland and Allegory," 24.

²⁷ Jill Mann, "Langland and Allegory," *The Morton W. Bloomfield Lectures on Medieval English Literature II* (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 22.

parts, and thus the naming has a certain amount of fluidity. The name of the element in the soul mirrors the habit it undertakes. For Langland and his predecessors, in a way that moderns generally cannot understand, “language is a mirror of *more* than reality. It not only names the objects that make up our physical life, it also names the invisible qualities which animate the physical world and constitute its hidden dynamics.”²⁸

If Langland uses linguistic structures to describe the reality of the interior workings of the soul, it becomes less necessary perhaps to align his paradigm of the soul exactly with either Isidore of Seville or Langland’s own contemporaries, the scholastics. One of the most interesting parts of the inclusion of the Latin text is its deliberate divergence from the original text of the *Etymologies*. In the comparison between the two, Langland’s changes to the following text are revelatory: “*Pro efficientiis enim causarum diversa nomina sortita est anima. Nam et memoria mens est, unde et immemories amentes.* [Different terms have been allotted to the soul according to the effects of its causes. For the memory is mind, whence the forgetful are [called] ‘mindless.’]”²⁹ The *efficientiis causarum*, that is, the effects of its causes, are the means by which names are allotted, not the *accionibus*. This is consistent with the assertion that Langland’s grammatical understanding of reality is of more consequence than a strictly philosophical understanding. The fact that he was able to appropriate the philological paradigm of Isidore, and changed the word *efficientiis* to *accionibus*, conceivably reveals his awareness of the philosophical weight that the former carried, and his decision, therefore, to avoid such a strict definition. This is reflected in the difficulty scholars have had

²⁸ Mann, 23.

²⁹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum Libri Viginti*. Patrologiae Cursus Completus (Paris: J.P. Migne, 1845), XI.i.14–i.30.

tracing the philosophical threads of *Piers* to any one scholastic thinker. Bloomfield argues convincingly that monastic philosophy was much more of an influence on Langland's thought, and even then, complex characters like Conscience are combinations of scholastic and pre-scholastic thought. He asserts that Conscience in the *Visio* is in the scholastic role of judge, who, in combination with Reason, "decides on the moral value of human action," and that both conscience and synderesis are subsumed, as for Thomas, into the term conscience.³⁰ He concedes, however, that the *Vita* contains a conscience that "does not exactly correspond to either, although it is perhaps nearer the spiritual...[as] a kind of social moral force."³¹

If Langland's paradigm of the soul is not to be read as though it carried the philosophical precision of a scholastic treatise, how ought it be read? The narrative immediately framing the passage gives a compelling answer. Christian compares the various names of the soul to the different names given to the bishop depending on what action he performs, like prelate, pontiff, pastor, etc., and assumes, correctly, that Will wonders "'the cause of alle [hire] names' ['the cause of all their names]'" and of Christian's himself to which Will expresses his desire to know "alle sciences vnder sonne and alle the sotile craftes [All knowledge under the sun and all the crafts to which one can dedicate one's mind.]"³² This request earns Will a sharp rebuttal wherein he is declared "inparfit [sinful]," and "oon of prides knyghts," not to mention that he also earns

³⁰ Bloomfield, 229.

³¹ Ibid., 229.

³² XV.45-48.

a comparison to the prideful Lucifer.³³ Christian continues with a lengthy discourse on Charity and the need for reform in the morally stagnant community, suggesting that the individual and the society must first seek holiness before they can seek the truth, either of the names of Anima or “alle sciences vnder sonne.” It should be noted that Christian’s response does not preclude an answer to Will’s question, but rather postpones it, identifying Charity as the prerequisite to the answer, which comes in the form of a society conducive to the cultivation of truth. The discourse subsequent to the paradigm of the soul suggests that it indeed ought to be read more spiritually and mystically than strictly according to scholastic or other contemporary theology.

Having established the way in which the Passus XV model should be read, let us turn to the features of conscience itself within the interior community of psychological faculties. First and foremost, the Soul names himself Conscience within this paradigm when he acts as “goddess clerk and his Notarie.” The habit accompanying this name Conscience he describes by saying, “Whan I chalange or chalange noghte, chepe or refuse.”³⁴ The image of a clerk or notarie immediately creates associations with the ancient sense of *conscientia* as *consciring*, except rather than within oneself or within a community, the persons of the Trinity are the other persons privy, each being a *consciuis*, to use Lewis’ terms, to good and evil action. Conscience instantly acquires a sense of community, a sense of shared knowledge of the deed (direct object) between the human individual and the divine, at the very least. The description of the habit of conscience as that which challenges (accuses) or challenges not and which agrees or refuses to act,

³³ XV.50.

³⁴ XV.31-32.

recalls some of the alternate uses of consciences that we have considered. Recall that Thomas' conscience included both the classical concept of record keeper, but also the arbiter of right and wrong decisions *to be made*, and inflictor of shame on account of decisions *having been made wrongly*. The Middle English text seems to align well with all three functions or habits of conscience; at the very least, it alludes to them. This supports the earlier contention that Conscience in *Piers* is a complex amalgamation of the Internal Witness, External Witness, and Lawgiver and perhaps one of the latest (chronologically speaking) snapshots of the semantic field that included to greater or lesser extent all three ideas. I do, however, maintain my earlier contention that Langland is not merely appropriating scholasticism for his picture of conscience, and shall in turn show how all three contribute to a communal sense of conscience despite not perfectly aligning with classical usage.

As noted previously, Langland's loose appropriation of Isidore's *Etymologies* changes a couple of elements from the original, and adds two specific manifestations of great import to the current discussion: Conscience and Amor. As is evident, the counterpart passage from the *Etymologies* presents only six secondary manifestations of Anima to Langland's eight:

Dum ergo vivificate corpus, anima est; dum vult, animus est; dum scit, mens est; dum recolit, memoria est; dum recte iudicat, ratio est; dum spirat, spiritus est; dum aliquid sentit sensus est.

[Therefore it is soul when it enlivens the body, will when it wills, mind when it knows, memory when it recollects, reason when it judges correctly, spirit when it breathes forth, sense when it senses something.]³⁵

³⁵ Isidore of Seville, XI.i.14–i.30. Trans., Stephen A. Barney.

Anima's names include will (*animus*), mind, memory, reason, sense, and spirit.

Langland's two additions are both key elements in his own conception of morality and its relation to society. "Faithful love" for Langland, whose other name is Charity, is established as the prime necessity for the soul in search of Truth in the remainder of the fifth vision. Conscience, as a distinct entity from *Ratio*, does not do Reason's task of "judging rightly" (Isidore) or "making moral judgments, acting as Truth instructs [him]," but rather, does the work of making daily decisions. Langland apparently deemed this concept important enough to amend Isidore's work to include it. Accordingly, in its definite distinction from *Ratio*, Langland establishes conscience as a fallible entity, that is to say, as a faculty that makes decisions worthy of record, but decisions which are certainly not inherently good simply by virtue of being under the jurisdiction of conscience (as the modern usage might suggest).

If Conscience is an entity distinct from Reason, then the question of the potential interaction between the two in the interior community comes to the forefront, especially as it pertains to authority. For even as much as Bloomfield notes the differences between the character of Conscience in the *Visio* and the *Vita*, an episode in the former is especially helpful in the consideration of the authority of Conscience as compared to Reason. Conscience fights the proposed marriage between Conscience and Lady Mede, who represents the power of finance and the desire for worldly gain, with the help of Reason. In response to the demand of the king that he marry the wicked lady, the knight Conscience declares that "But Reson rede me perto rather wol I deye [Unless Reason were to counsel me to do so, I would rather die.]"³⁶ It is not the case that Conscience in

³⁶ IV.5.

the absence of Reason is incapable of making correct decisions. In conjunction with the classical understanding of Conscience as record of deeds, Langland asserts that “Conscience and the commune knewen wel the sothe [Conscience and the people at large knew well the truth.]”³⁷ The implication is that, in the knowing of the deeds and facts, an accumulated perception of various experiences, Conscience has been formed to judge rightly, even without the direct help of Reason. Nonetheless the knight goes on a quest to find Reason, to bring him to court and publicly validate Conscience’s initial reflexes toward correct action. After the matter has been appropriately heard, the King requests Reason’s continued presence in his court, and Reason responds, “I am redy...to reste with yow euere; / So Conscience be of youre conseil kepe I no bettre [I am ready to be forever at your disposal... as long as Conscience may be among your counsel, I would like nothing better.]”³⁸

This same principle emerges in the kingship of Conscience over the ideal society instituted in the penultimate vision, following the injunction by Grace to “crouneth Conscience kyng.”³⁹ In this society, the community works together to cultivate truth, as if it were a grain. The most natural ruler of a society would most seemingly be Reason, but for Langland, Conscience holds authority. The fact that in Langland’s paradigm of the soul, Conscience and Reason are distinct entities, allows for this possibility, which ultimately asserts the importance of communal holiness and right moral formation. Though these topics might be explored further at length, it is currently enough to say that

³⁷ IV. 80.

³⁸ IV.192-93.

³⁹ XIX. 256.

Conscience is, within the interior community, in possession of more authority than the other faculties, and certainly more than most modern intuitions would naturally attribute to it.

Additionally, the Latin definition given for the *Piers* version of Isidore's *Etymologies* is “*dum negat vel consentit consciencia est,*” that is, “while I refuse or agree, it is conscience,” but the word *agree* contains the same prefix, emphasized to various degrees, of the word *conscientia*. *Consentio* apparently contains the same tone of community that *conscientia* does, and it is difficult to deem this word choice accidental. As noted earlier, there is an element to this etymology that asserts the necessity of a community for the moral decision making capacity of an individual, suggesting the possibility that conscience, being the faculty that *consents*, can be shaped and formed by something other than the individual. Conversely, the moral decisions of an individual can shape the conscience of others it seems. It is noteworthy, for example, that “Conscience and crist hath yknyt faste [knit tightly]”⁴⁰ marriage, contrary to the modern intuition to say that Faithful Love and Christ would have authority over such a union. Assuming that marriage is regarded as a key social building block through which a community gains stability, order, and growth, it does make sense that conscience, which participates in the morality of not only the individual, but of the society as a whole, would officiate.⁴¹ Marriage is written in the record book because Conscience is acting as an accountant—not necessarily right or wrong in itself, but a state of life in which right or wrong can be done.

⁴⁰ XV.242.

⁴¹ Marriage as the socio-economic foundation in *Piers* shall be treated at length in the third chapter.

To briefly review the considerations of this section, since the paradigm of the soul's interior faculties given in Passus XV is to be read in a grammatical and mystical light more than a strictly philosophical one, we understand conscience as the action and habit of the soul in its role as clerk and notary, a role consistent with the ancient concept of *conscientia*. We also understand conscience to have some decision making power (to agree or refuse) as the scholastics understood it, but it is not touted as infallible. Within this interior community of the intellectual faculties, the psychological entity Conscience is distinct from the moral truth found by Reason, and accordingly fallible, and also existing in a fluid exchange between society and individual. Additionally, the importance placed on the faculty in Langland's additions to Isidore's *Etymologies* hints at the authority it seems to hold in the interior community, an authority which is later confirmed in Passus XIX. Now we may approach the other important element in the question of conscience's nature and authority: Conscience's role in the community of the Trinity.

Conscience in the Community of the Trinity

The question of the authority of Conscience in relation to the other faculties in the interior community leads naturally to the question of its authority in relation to the Holy Trinity, the community into which the Christian soul has been drawn. While Langland himself does not explicitly organize the interactions of the divine with Will, I find this categorization both consistent with the themes of the work, and a helpful way of thinking about the various ways that Conscience interacts with the divine. The Father, by the nature of his Person's interaction with humanity, is not included in this discussion, however Conscience has significant interactions with the Holy Spirit and the person of the Son, both as He is present meditatively, and as He is present in the Eucharist.

Having established that Langland's Conscience is formed, fallible, and authoritative in some sense in relation to other members of the inner community, it remains to be seen the manner in which Conscience, as "goddess clerk and his Notarie," cooperates with the divine. Vision seven reveals Conscience's fundamentally deferent attitude to Christ and the *Spiritus Paraclitus*, and conversely, the authority that they place directly upon Conscience. The person of Christ appears in two ways in Passus XIX: in the meditation on the life of Christ during the Mass, and in the person of Piers.

Dozing off halfway through Mass, Will finds himself dreaming about the person he initially perceives as Piers, but whom Conscience reveals as Christ dressed in Piers' heraldic coat of arms. This juxtaposition is a trope throughout the work that emphasizes Piers' high calling to the imitation of Christ's martyrdom, the figure of Peter, the temporal authority of the Church, and the way in which Christ reveals himself in the temporal world through His Body, the Church. Will's confusion is certainly justified. In the perfect church Langland's work sought, Christ's selfless love would be consistently revealed through the current authority. Consequently, when Pride attacks the community established by Grace, Conscience rallies the community to abide safely inside Unity Holy Church "for Piers love the Plowman [for the sake of Piers the Plowman."⁴² For our current purposes, it is sufficient to observe the frequent juxtaposition of Piers and Christ, and to conclude that it reveals the innate deference Conscience pays to the person of Christ as Will encounters Him in the temporal authority of the Church.

The other way in which Conscience interacts with the person of Christ is through the Eucharist. In the medieval sacramental imagination, steeped in the tradition of the

⁴² XX.77.

real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the presence of Will and Conscience at the Mass (i.e. the fact that the dream concerning Conscience's teaching about Christ occurred during the offertory of the Mass) quite easily translates into an interaction with Christ Himself. The Eucharistic presence might be subtle, but if we assume, as posited in the first section of this paper, that imagination is formed by perception of external events, the external event of the Mass juxtaposed with a dream about Christ lends itself to a greater emphasis on the external setting of the dream. If indeed Conscience interacts with the Person of Christ through Piers and the Eucharist, it follows that his reverent interactions with them, can be attributed to his relations with the second person of the Trinity. Note that Conscience instructs Will in making decisions by presenting the Passion:

Ac the cause that he cometh thus with cros of his passion
Is to wissen us therwith, that whan we ben tempted,
Therwith to fighte and fenden us fro fallynge into synne.

[And the reason that he comes with the cross of His passion
Is to teach us by means of it, so that when we are tempted,
we can use it to fight and keep ourselves from falling into sin.]⁴³

The majority of the teaching Conscience gives to Will in the last passus comes from incidents in the life of Christ, which not only demonstrates Conscience's reverence toward Christ, but also his authority over Will, and, by extension, the Christian soul. Conscience's proper action in relation to Christ enables him to instruct Will.

This same principle of obeisance within the community of the Holy Trinity, which of course is the proper authority over the interior community, permeates Conscience's interaction with the Holy Spirit. The mere fact of their interaction establishes immediately that Conscience is not synonymous with the Holy Spirit, contrary

⁴³ XIX. 63-65.

to any modern tendency to equate the two. Instead, after the witness of the Passion and Conscience's moral teaching surrounding the life of Christ, we find Conscience commanding Will to kneel first before the cross, and then again at the appearance of the *Spiritus Paraclitus*: "Thus conscience of crist and of the cros carpede [spoke] / And counseiled me to knele therto."⁴⁴ They kneel in preparation for the arrival of the Spirit, and Conscience repeats his command as they sing *Veni Creator Spiritus*. This homage earns Conscience the reign over the community Grace, the alternate name of the Spirit, as is established in the final two passus. The risk of false prophets, deceivers, flatterers, and, worst of all, the antichrist and his armies for the valiant knight Conscience, is made evident from the outset, making dependence upon Christ a necessity.⁴⁵ There is also a sense in which the deference in the community of the Holy Trinity is instructive to Conscience; Conscience is formed not only by exterior circumstances, but also by the in-breaking of the divine into the community of the *psyche*. This final note ought to be kept in mind throughout the remainder of this exploration of the communal nature of conscience in Langland.

The apocalyptic streams that run so strongly through Langland's work do not emerge in a vacuum, that is, they emerge as a reaction to the egregious wrongs of the fourteenth-century English Church. Conscience's final haunting words, crying out for Grace, leave little room for hope in the morally distorted society, attacked relentlessly by the armies of the Antichrist. Perhaps, however, the humility of the Trinitarian community that allows the participation of the soul's interior community in its own life,

⁴⁴ XIX.200-01.

⁴⁵ XIX.221-22.

not primarily as external images incorporated into the *psyche* by perception, but rather as the liturgy, the sacraments, and the Holy Spirit (through the temporal authority of the Church), should be our constant hope for any further considerations of the communal nature of the Christian conscience. Langland's conception of conscience, both as Will's Conscience in particular, and as the universal faculty given to all human beings, is a predominantly ancient concept, one less philosophical than linguistic and psychological. His understanding of the conscience as formed, fallible, but nonetheless authoritative in the interior community because it is instructed by the divine challenges modern notions of moral psychology in compelling ways. The poem Langland wrote out of love for the Church in a time of crisis could yet have a great deal to speak to us about the holiness to which she is (and we as individuals are) called.

CHAPTER TWO

The Role of Conscience in the Journey toward Truth

Piers Plowman scholars have been persistently divided about the way that Langland presents the concept of salvation, an issue fundamental to the understanding of the work as a whole. The variety of theological schools that emerged in response to nominalism during the fourteenth century has made it difficult to identify Langland with any particular school of thought. In the last chapter, I established that Langland's vision of conscience is of a faculty inextricable from the interior community of the soul and the Divine Being at work within it. I will now survey the history of sacramental penance in relation to conceptions of salvation, in order to demonstrate that Conscience's words about penance and the placement of Conscience in the journey toward Truth demand the same co-operative sense of the faculty of conscience. As a secondary point, I also propose that the transition of penance from a public affair to a sacrament effected between the priest and the individual parallels the interiorization of conscience to such an extent that, eventually, the term "examination of conscience" became directly associated with sacramental confession. This parallel affirms the co-operative nature of the moral life in the journey toward salvation, and thereby affirms the co-operative nature of the moral faculty Conscience.

One impetus for this thesis was the personal discovery that salvation was perhaps not quite as simple as a formulaic prayer and intellectual assent at a given age, which required no works of any sort for its efficacy. Trying to teach Bible studies, I found myself lacking the vocabulary to speak about the need for morality in the Christian life,

even though Christ in the Gospels affirms this truth. I find Langland's scheme of salvation compelling, beautiful, and challenging to modern Christians for a number of reasons, but primarily because he presents the gift of grace, the role of works, and the influence of community in an individual's salvation. By addressing the topic of faith and works through consideration of the specifically moral faculty conscience, I hope to elucidate Langland's robust and orthodox theology while also proving that conscience in *Piers* is necessarily communal.

A passage of great import for the discussion at hand is found in Passus V when Piers addresses a group of pilgrims asking for the shrine of the saint called Truth—Truth being synonymous with God throughout the rest of the poem.¹ The question of how to get to Truth, then, is the question of Salvation, as I will demonstrate more fully at length. Piers instructs the pilgrims first to go through Humility, until they arrive at Conscience, where “that crist wite the sothe, / That ye loven oure lord god leuest of alle thynges [Christ will prove truly / that you love the Lord our God above all else.]”² Repeating Christ's injunction in Matthew 22, he then articulates the second of the two greatest commandments: “And thane youre neghebores next in none wise apeire otherwise than thow woldest [And next you must treat your neighbors in no way other than what you would have them treat you].”³ The pilgrims are then to follow the streams named after the Ten Commandments: “Beth-buxom [gentle]-of-speche,” “Youre-fadres-honoureth,” and the places called “Swere-noght-but-if-it-be-for-nede-And-nameliche-on-ydel-the-

¹ Robert Worth Frank, Jr., *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: an Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1969), 20: “The way to salvation is to follow Truth—that is, to love God and man.”

²V.563.

³ V.564-65.

name-of-God-Almyghty” and “Coveite-noght-mennes-catel-ne-hire-wyves.”⁴ “Stele-noght” and “Sle-noght” (Do-not-steal and Do-not-kill) are to be avoided and not glanced back upon. The pilgrims are to observe the “haliday” or Sabbath until evening, avoid the hill called “Bere-no-t-ais-witnesse, [Bear-no-false-witness],” and a couple of other moral landmarks before finally arriving at the House of Truth.⁵ The question then becomes what Piers means by saying that Conscience is where Christ will know that one loves Him; I argue that the answer is tied to the co-operative nature of both salvation and conscience.

The Journey to Truth: a “modern” reading

The description Piers gives the pilgrims in their journey toward Truth has prompted a considerable amount of scholarship that aligns Langland with the “modern” school of theology. Janet Coleman’s argument is worth due consideration in light of the fact that her reading of the theology of justification in *Piers* shapes her interpretation of the moral faculty of conscience in the passage from Passus V I aim to analyze. To begin, the *moderni* were the group of theologians influenced by William of Ockham, a Franciscan to whom we refer as a nominalist or terminalist.⁶ Ockham and the *moderni* applied the logic of language to theological and moral issues; that is, they applied speculative grammatical theory from newly available texts in the Aristotelian corpus to morality and theology to such an extent as to revive pelagianism.⁷ In the philosophical

⁴ V.570-74.

⁵ V.575-84.

⁶ Janet Coleman, *Piers Plowman and the Moderni*, (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1981), 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-22.

framework within which the *moderni* worked, the problem of God's freedom came to the forefront, and theologians needed to make further distinctions about God's power and human merit to prove that God's freedom was not being impinged upon by any human accomplishment.

The first distinction, necessitated by the redefinitions of the *moderni*, regards God's power: namely the distinction between the *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. The former is, quite simply, the absolute power of God's will in determining salvation, and the latter, "that relative power God had himself limited by entering into a covenant with man whereby salvation was promised to those who fulfilled their part of the bargain."⁸ Interestingly enough, though only moderately relevant for the current discussion, one can trace this framework through the philosophy of the Reformation and see it articulated even today in modern strains of Reformed theology.⁹ Coleman expands upon this distinction and its logical implications:

The pelagian *moderni*, therefore, developed a doctrine of indeterminacy and probability with regard to the certainty of things in this world and this life.... The absolute power of God's will was all that mattered, ultimately, and it was central to His omnipotence. He could, therefore, go back on anything He had previously ordained or decreed or created. God's absolute freedom was thereby assured. But at the same time, man was exalted in the realm of nature, to the point of working his own salvation through the exercise of his free will. Man was seen as caught

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ The link between Ockham and Calvin is not direct, because Calvin himself disputed the distinction, but subsequent proponents of Reformed theology, namely Amandus Polanus, William Ames, and Francis Turretini, defended it, and it seems that this has been passed down to modern Reformed theology. This would explain its presence in lay didactic settings, and open up the possibility that the moral frameworks flowing from this framework of justification may have been passed down into modern evangelicalism as well. Space and limited knowledge about the finer points of Reformation theology precludes further treatment of this topic, but it may be one open for research at some point, especially given the way in which it could illuminate the historical evolution of the word. See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 40-51.

within the *ordinata*, within creation, but God was absolutely beyond and free from it.¹⁰

This thought has profound implications for the theology of justification, merit, and salvation. Ockham, and to lesser or greater extent the thinkers that followed him (including Robert Holcote and Adam Woodham¹¹), believed that God's aid to man in the form of grace was contingent upon the *natural* first action of the man's free will, that is, upon the use of naturally given "right reason" to conform to the law to which God had constrained His power in order to deal justly with man (*potentia ordinata*).¹²

The second distinction that requires attention is that between merit *de condigno* and merit *de congruo*. It came about largely because of accusations of Pelagianism towards the *moderni*. If man may use his natural reason to follow a legal system under which God operates with His ordained power, then he could earn his salvation by his merits alone. A first grace is not necessary. To counter this, then, "modern" theologians distinguished between different forms of merit in the contract of salvation. Aers elucidates this distinction:

The assumed natural goodness of our works cannot make anyone worthy ("condignus") of eternal life, cannot make humans merit beatitude *de condigno* [but] God has established a covenant "pactum" whereby if someone does all she or he can do, "facit quod in se est," with natural, unaided powers, God will extend his grace of final acceptance. Thus the human model earns eternal life not *de condigno* but *de congruo*.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

¹² Ibid., 30.

¹³ David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 64.

John Lutterell provides an analogy for Ockham's scheme of salvation within this framework, that of a leaden denarius imprinted with the king's image given to the king to pay for salvation, which the king, by his pure will, accepts as if it were a silver coin.¹⁴ The leaden denarius is not worthy to "purchase" salvation, but the ordained will of God can and does accept it by virtue of its congruence to the silver coin similarly imprinted with the king's image. Accordingly, if the king should decide with his absolute will to offer salvation to a person with no coin at all, he could do so. Lutterell refutes this attempt to steer clear of Pelagianism and any hindrance of God's freedom with the statement that "God can accept an act elicited by purely natural powers by giving eternal life to the agent, but by merit as worthy only if purely natural features can be worthy of eternal life the way Pelagius supposed."¹⁵ He avows the insufficiency of that model to describe the complex interaction of divine and human agency in salvation.

Similarly, Bishop Thomas Bradwardine, in a number of substantial anti-modern writings, asserts that these distinctions (between absolute and ordained power and condigned and congruent merit) were merely means to communicate the same tenants of Pelagianism. He maintains that "the distinction between merit 'de congruo' and merit 'de condigno' serves a theology that enables people to feel confident that they can indeed merit saving grace by their own powers [and thus] undermines the unique and absolute nature of divine causality."¹⁶ A full explication of Bradwardine's presented alternative is unnecessary for the current discussion; thus, I shall only note at this point that he still

¹⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁵ John Lutterell cited in in Aers, 53.

¹⁶ Aers, 66.

offers a model for justification that overcorrects for the new articulation of the ancient Pelagian error. He defends that “grace, not contrition, is the cause of justification. Contrition is the consequence of justifying grace.”¹⁷ Only after considering the role that human agency plays in salvation, according to Ockham, the *moderni*, and Bradwardine, can one reasonably address how such schemes influence the understanding of conscience as a faculty necessary for right human action.

In the previous chapter, I proposed that Reason and Conscience were distinct entities in Langland’s poetic translation of addition to Isidore’s *Etymologies* because Langland’s conception of conscience does not always require the immediate presence and direction of Reason. Coleman, in her effort to align *Piers* with Ockham and the *moderni*, has asserted secondarily that the rational faculties Langland includes are formed by Ockham’s moral psychology. This influences her reading of conscience in *Piers* as the entity that “*actively judges* what is right from wrong on the advice of reason and is especially endowed with an innate inclination towards the good which makes it open to guidance by grace” (emphasis mine). She neglects any possibility of conscience in the sense of morally neutral record-keeper, which, as I have emphasized, is an essential element in the semantic field of conscience. Her evidence relies heavily on the C-text, which I do not endeavor to treat at length. David Aers has argued against her alignment of Langland with the *moderni* so fully and effectively that I feel confident deferring to his work and leaving a proper analysis of her argument aside in favor of a more specific examination of the topic of conscience.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ Ibid., 204, 211.

If Langland is truly writing as one in the “modern” school of theology, conscience could not be co-operative or communal. In such a justification theory, an individual’s salvation is congruently merited as an act of the ordained divine will based on the individual’s adherence to the divine law known by natural reason and conscience. According to Coleman, “Conscience alone can best unite what is considered just in practical worldly matters with what will be considered just beyond the *ordinata* [i.e. that] conscience links ethical obligations with the divine will.”¹⁹ She ascribes to conscience an “innate tendency toward the good” and “supernatural yearnings [that] are returned to the provenance of the rational order by Reason,”²⁰ and supplements this association of Langland with the *moderni* with a passage from the C-text. While I acknowledge that there are correlations between Langland’s work, coming from concerns about the abuses of the contemporary church, and modern theology, which engaged the questions of how human success or failure to live up to the standards of morality influenced salvation, these correlations need not be extended beyond what is directly apparent in the text, for as we have said, Langland’s influences are many and varied. Thus, though I concede that Coleman may be right to assert a certain amount of overlap between the Ockhamist conception of conscience and that of *Piers Plowman*, specifically in the C-Text, I maintain that a reading of the whole of the B-text presents conscience as something far more complex than the link between practical concerns and the divine will in the individual, and a faculty necessarily somewhat communal.

¹⁹ Coleman, 83.

²⁰ Ibid., 98

This shall be demonstrated by considering the way Coleman interprets Piers' instructions to the pilgrims, for an Ockhamist reading of the passage emphasizes innate moral sense and faithfulness to it over grace, sacramental or otherwise. Thus, Coleman reads Piers' words as an assertion that an individual knows his own conscience via obedience to "the laws of nature and the realm, Law's reflecting Truth's commands," and that "the honest workman will then be able to search in his own conscience for sufficient guidance to love God more than anything else."²¹ She continues:

According to Piers, naturally performed deeds in the world are rewarded by God. The Truth sought by all pilgrims is not found at a shrine; rather it is the endpoint of working well in the world. And this is achieved through meekness and honest labour whereby one attains a knowledge of one's conscience. The conscience knows that inscribed in each heart is the injunction to love God best of all things...According to Piers there is a natural way to understanding that Truth [and] following the precepts of a natural morality—the ten commandments and Christ's law of love—brings one the state of receptivity by grace...nature lacks nothing that is necessary to salvation.²²

Note that she emphasizes the sense of "Internal Lawgiver" that moderns assume, rather than any sense of conscience as "God's notarie and clerk," explicitly described in Passus XIX, which begs the question of an anachronistic interpretation of conscience.

Furthermore, her interpretation lacks sufficient explanation for a conscience where "Christ will know that you love the Lord your God above all else." Reading this passage without the framework she posits, one might find more congruence with other passages in the work, and a different, more ancient and co-operative notion of conscience. An alternate reading of this particular passage, though, requires consideration of the plan of

²¹ Ibid., 100.

²² Ibid., 101-102.

salvation in the work as whole: for this I draw heavily from Frank and Aers in their efforts to align Langland with the Augustinian and Thomist traditions.

The Journey to Truth: The Tradition from which Langland Draws

The theology of grace, merit, and justification in the West up to the fourteenth century draws largely from the thought of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. At the same time, the English Church in the fourteenth century was in an alarming state of moral laxity, and the source of many reform efforts. It is not difficult to see why Langland chose to portray the friars as the insurgents attacking Piers' city in the final passus, nor is it difficult to understand why both the dreamer, and presumably Will Langland himself, question the authority of an institution in which authority figures seem to have severely mal-formed consciences or a complete insensibility to the dictates of conscience. The same questions of the relation between salvation and individual agency that I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter would have been raised for Langland in a society where there was an egregious discrepancy between the doctrine instilled about the effects of sin on salvation and its praxis. Accordingly, it is not unreasonable that the theology of justification and merit present in *Piers Plowman* would not be an entirely verbatim articulation of the common tradition.

From the outset, a few caveats are necessary. In asserting that conscience is "communal," I mean that an individual's conscience is inseparable from the *mores* (Latin for habits of life) of his community, in that his individual moral sense is shaped by his experiences within a community and the norms around him, though shaped non-determinatively. This is to be clearly distinguished from any modern sense of the "collective consciousness (*conscience collectif*)" of Emil Durkheim's social theory,

wherein an individual's decision-making faculties are overridden by the intention of a group in emotionally charged situations.²³ In other words, in a group of five persons, we may speak of five, but certainly not six, consciences. I assert that for Langland these have a certain amount of moral and spiritual permeability, if you will, but exterior to an individual person, any sort of conscience would be impossible. Along the same lines, in arguing for the communal nature of salvation, I maintain a traditional Western understanding of original sin and the need for individual salvation. Sin is passed from parents to children within the human community, but it is at the same time the possession of each individual, and each must receive the grace of baptism for its remission. Neither the eastern understanding of sin as ancestral, nor any sense that the remission of sin is applied only to the community to the exclusion of the need for individual repentance is intended. Alternating use of the word "communal" with the word "co-operative" in this chapter more than the previous or the subsequent chapters should help avoid confusion about this topic that is of paramount importance. I also emphasize the communal nature of salvation because modern American evangelical culture particularly, and to some extent wider American Christian culture, errs on the side of over-individualizing faith, following a relegation of faith to the private sphere.²⁴ The movement toward the extreme interiority of faith has created a Christianity alarmingly unconcerned with issues of societal morality: in the medieval mindset, as I will show, this would be entirely absurd. This emphasis on my part, however, certainly does not exclude the individual's journey

²³David P. Schweikard and Hans Bernhard Schmid, "Collective Intentionality," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Web.

²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1986), 19.

toward salvation nor the necessity for personal contrition and holiness. If anything, it is intended to increase our appreciation of the gravity of all of these elements principally in relation to the ethics of the society.

Consider first that the plan of salvation given by Piers in Passus V is in fact the journey toward a house (in which multiple individuals reside) undertaken by a *group* of pilgrims. Though this plan arguably might not be intended to be entirely comprehensive, its inclusion of conscience is useful all the same, and so this passage deserves proper attention. The most obvious connection one might make is to Augustine's *City of God*, which, in the mind of the medieval catholic, is both the visible and mystical Church. It is "the heavenly city on pilgrimage, a determinate community of historical beings...a mixed body [which] in its pilgrimage has wrinkles and spots, unlike the bride of Christ in her final form."²⁵ Personal conversion, though it is never without a turning of the will to God, also entails conversion to the city of God, the community of Christians. In his *Confessions*, Augustine records that the story of Victorinus goaded him towards conversion—Victorinus whose private conversion to the faith without public profession elicited enough sorrow and discomfort to incite him to face public remonstrance and disdain in order to have a public baptism.²⁶ The *City of God* treats this sort of conversion in considerably more detail, but a passage from Book XIX, Chapter 17, demonstrates the co-operative nature of salvation clearly:

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, *calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims* of all languages [; It] preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme

²⁵ Aers, 7.

²⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, F.J. Sheed, Trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 143-44.

and true God is thus introduced. Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life, and makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven...In its pilgrim state the heavenly city possesses this peace [of perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and one another in God] by faith; and by this faith it lives righteously when it refers to the attainment of that peace every good action towards God and man; *for the life of the city is a social life* (emphases mine).²⁷

It is in this city, in the company of those being redeemed, that the will that turns toward God may bring the sinful flesh into proper subservience, and to join in the righteousness of the city. Where much of Christianity today underscores *personal* contrition, repentance, and conversion to greater or lesser extents depending on one's tradition, but often to the complete neglect of any concept of the public life in the journey of toward salvation, in the millennium preceding and few centuries following Langland, one's own salvation was intrinsically tied to the community.

A few brief examples will elucidate this. The *Fioretti* of Saint Francis, which precede Langland by only a few decades, and which are the product of the Franciscan spirituality which influenced Langland, record numerous tales of the merits of one friar contributing to the salvation of another. Friar Ugolino records that St. Francis "knew the secrets of the consciences of his friars in all things...all the merits and virtues of his companions, by divine revelation, and likewise their failings."²⁸ At one point, when divine revelation made it known to Saint Francis that a friar was damned, or would be if he left the other, he prayed for remission of the impending sentence and besought the pope that the friar might reenter the order, and thus be saved, according to the dictates of

²⁷ Saint Augustine, *City of God* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1887), 620, 621.

²⁸ *Fioretti*, Thomas Okey, Trans. (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc. 2003), 53.

the revelation: “Friar Elias, putting on the habit again, passed from this life, and his soul was saved by the merits of Saint Francis and by his prayers.”²⁹ While the *Fioretti* fall within the genre of hagiography, about which different positions can be taken on the literalism of any of the individual stories, no one can dispute that the Franciscan language of salvation in devotional work both assumes and requires a co-operative understanding of salvation. As I have noted, this does relate well to the London poet whose devotional correspondences are greater than his strictly theological ones. The language of merits and the treasury of graces shall be treated more fully in the subsequent chapters in relation to the economic aspects of Langland’s theology and conception of conscience, but note simply that such language would likely not emerge from a culture that tends to over-individualize faith. Furthermore, observe that conscience is used here in a manner concurrent with much of the surrounding discussion, that is, in a record-keeping sense in which this “book” is open miraculously to other individuals.

Another example from *Piers* shows that within the family, the basic structure of the church community, virtue and merit of the parents greatly influence the salvation of their children, an idea biblically based (“the sins of the fathers...”) but oft forgotten in a Christianity influenced by a culture that idolizes independence. A passage in Passus IX warns against the conception of a child in a time when both parents are not in states of complete charity, that is when “thei bothe were clene / of lif and lif and of loue and of lawe also [both are pure, physically and morally, in a state of true charity towards one another, and at peace in their conscience as regards God’s law.]”³⁰ Children conceived in

²⁹ Ibid., 60-62.

³⁰ IX.191; Schmidt, 93. Note: I have chose to include Schmidt’s translation of this passage, even though the Middle English is not difficult, since he as translator has chosen to add

any other circumstance will have no chance at a righteous life, but will be “As fals folk, fondlynges, faitours and lieres, Vngracious to gete good or loue of the peple; [As deceivers, bastards, rogues, and liars, lacking the grace to earn their keep or gain their neighbors’ love].”³¹ Not only will the child’s salvation be severely jeopardized (eternal company with the devil is inevitable unless God grants the grace of repentance), the entire community suffers from the sins of one or two.³²

If we accept that one’s *deeds* necessarily link salvation to that of those with whom one makes contact, we do in fact assume that human agency, effort, and merit play an undeniable role in one’s own salvation (as distinct from justification, which traditionally occurs at baptism). Conversely, sins have real consequences such that remission from them, while it justifies one at death, does not erase them entirely. To avoid the errors of Pelagius and his “modern” interpreters, a more subtle and nuanced paradigm is necessary than that of merit *de congruo* and *de condigno*. Augustine utilizes a number of scriptural paradigms for this, as does Thomas Aquinas, one of which Langland himself presents in the figure of Semyuief, or the sinner *semivivus* (half-alive). Thomas Aquinas’s compilation of previous exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan in the *Catena Aurea* has the wounded man as the wounded free will of the Christian brought into the house of the Church by Christ at conversion and baptism. This does not immediately save him because he must yet receive healing by ointments, that is, the grace conveyed

the word “conscience.” While some of his translation is less helpful, it seems that he attempts to maintain the sense of conscience used throughout the whole of the poem and includes it here in modern English prose to convey the idea of a “record” of charity and moral cleanliness between two persons. This addition I affirm given its correspondence with the idea of a morally neutral, record-keeping conscience.

³¹ IX.196-198.

³² IX.200-01.

through the sacraments.³³ Indeed, by entering the house, he is saved from dying, but his sins have left wounds and marks upon him that require gradual curative treatment from the community. This treatment of sin, even venial sin, as a wound that the judge on the last day cannot ignore, something necessitating sanctifying restoration with external aid, is congruent with the treatment of merit as being efficacious for oneself and for others. Never, however, is such healing undertaken entirely by the will of the wounded man; he is after-all, *semivivus*, half-alive, and half-dead. The matter of the relationship between human agency and grace has been treated at length, and though Langland himself is not explicit about it, the tradition from which he draws, as Aers has put it, provides a “model for thinking about salvation and sin [that has] a strong sense that the consequence of sin undermines the natural, God-given powers of the soul and their due fulfillment, paradoxically, once more, through the gifts of grace.”³⁴

As noted in the previous chapter, it would not be fitting to align Langland unqualifiedly with the scholastic vocabulary and grammar of salvation, grace, and merit. He is complex, and does explore the grammar of modern theology at different points to reconcile the discontinuity he sees between friars unaffected by the graces they receive while apparently residing within the walls of the city of God, but it is my hope to reiterate the erroneousness of allegations of pelagianism or semi-pelagianism for the purpose of a wider consideration of conscience. Consider the following passage:

Forthi I counseille alle cristene to crie god mercy,
And Marie his moder be meene bitwene,
That god gyue vs grace er we go hennes
Swiche werkes to werche, while we ben here,

³³ Aers, 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

That, after oure deeth day, dowel reherce
At the day of dome we did at he highte.

[And thus I counsel all Christians to cry unto God for mercy,
And to beseech Mary his Mother to intercede,
That God might give us grace before we depart this earth
To perform the works, while we are here,
That Do-wel might after our death declare
On the day of Judgment that we did as he commanded.]³⁵

It is evident that doing well never excludes mercy and grace. Indeed, according to Frank, doing well is the way to salvation and the overarching sense of morality, divided into “dowel, dobet, and dobest” only to emphasize different ideas at different points throughout the *Vita*.³⁶ Humanity is given grace and mercy, through sacramental penance and the Eucharist primarily,³⁷ to persevere in the path of virtue, rejecting not only mortal sins but also venial habitual sins that wound the soul. Saint Thomas articulates the relationship between faith and works in his commentary on Hebrews 10:38:

Why is [patience] necessary? That you may do the will of God and receive the promise, i.e., fulfilling God’s will, which is done by obeying God’s commandments, which are the signs of God’s will....Thus, you will receive the promise, i.e., the things promised, which is given to those who work: ‘Call the workers and give them their hire’ (Mt. 20:8); ‘In your patience you shall possess your souls’ (Lk. 21:19); ‘He that perseveres unto the end, he shall be saved’ (Mt. 24:13).³⁸

³⁵ VII. 201-205.

³⁶ Frank, *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation*, 20.

³⁷In Dobest, the Eucharist and penance, “unlike the others, could be received as often as desired, and by all Christians. It was principally through them that grace was transmitted to man in his daily struggle for salvation, and they are the sacraments which moralists and preachers exhorted their fellow men to take.” See Frank, 97.

³⁸ Hebrews 10:37-39: “‘For yet a little while, and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.” In *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Trans., Fabian R. Archer, O.P., 544.

This exegetical work synthesizes multiple scripture passages relevant to the topic of merit, and underscores the importance of the pursuit of the just and holy life. While it is not cited within *Piers*, it reflects the same love of the ethical that is not pelagian in the least but rather, quite biblical.

From this brief and much abridged articulation of the rich tradition behind the language of sin and salvation, we glean at least two facts which shall considerably influence our reading of Piers' speech to the pilgrims who enquire about the way to the house of Truth: an individual's salvation is inseparable from the life of the community (the city of God on pilgrimage), and the link between community and individual must be related to the deeds of sin or merit performed by the human individual. As a related, and absolutely essential point: deeds of merit are performed by the cooperation of the human will with divine grace, the human will being neither overridden by a strong version of predestination, nor entirely capable of doing right without the action of grace. How one understands the role of human action and its capacity for good or evil directly affects one's understanding of the faculties associated with ethical decision-making, namely conscience, and it is to this that we move next.

Conscience in Relation to Sacramental Penance

Aers notes a dissonance between Piers' words to the pilgrims and Langland's poetic interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which, as he has demonstrated, clearly reveals the co-operative nature of salvation. The parallels between this passage and the structure of sacramental confession, however, suggest more cohesion with the Good Samaritan passage than he permits. The English translation I cite renders the Middle English "into" as "at" in line 562, and this changes the meaning substantially.

If the pilgrims must first arrive at Conscience only to pass it on, then the concept of conscience has minimal interaction with subsequently presented moral precepts (the ten commandments), and likewise, little interaction with the House of Truth. Conscience is almost a seat of judgment, a place where Christ performs an instantaneous test of the orientation of the soul and the order of its loves.

While I concede that this is probably a part of the word usage, the severe dissociation it creates between the Ten Commandments, the objective laws of morality that are neither created by conscience nor necessarily known by a malformed conscience, and the instant of love for God is problematic. The modern translation may also be slightly anachronistic, in that it carries undertones of the same “Internal Lawgiver,” except that Christ is on the seat of judgment. Christ’s role as judge of the soul is not in question, but rather whether that judgment occurs in an instant in a place called Conscience at the beginning of the journey toward salvation, or whether, for Langland, moral judgment comes within the land of Conscience into which the pilgrims journey and in which they remain until reaching the House of Truth.

If Piers’ instructions are for the pilgrims to travel “into” Conscience with others to find the objective laws of morality set before them, then Conscience carries a considerably different meaning and aligns quite strikingly with the confessors’ manuals that emerged following the directives of the Fourth Lateran Council. It also explains Conscience’s words to Hawkyn: he is the one to direct the repentant sinner to contrition, confession, and satisfaction.³⁹ If indeed conscience is the place where Christians are directed toward grace in the form of sacramental confession, then even if such grace is

³⁹ XIV.16-28.

not explicitly listed as a landmark in the journey to the House of Truth, grace is still the underlying cause of the journey. To elucidate this point, and what it reveals about the cooperative nature of conscience, let us consider sacramental penance.

Penance as the formal interaction between a priest, acting *in persona Christi*, and the layperson for the sacramental remission of mortal sins was not codified or mandated by the Church until the Fourth Lateran Council 1215, at which point it was declared that

omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit, omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur, fideliter, saltem semel in anno, proprio sacerdot et injunctam sibi poenitentiam studeat pro viribus adimplere.

[all the faithful of both sexes, after they have reached the age of discretion, must confess their sins to their own parish priest, and perform to the best of their abilities the penance imposed.]⁴⁰

Until the sixth century, formal repentance was allowed only once after baptism, which meant that many, most famously Saint Augustine, waited until adulthood to be baptized.⁴¹ Penance was not obligatory, nor did it have the form of a conversation between a confessor and a penitent. Rather, penance involved the public donning of penitential garments, such as sackcloth and ashes, and the loud declaration of one's sins and one's prayers until such a time as elders officiated ceremonial reconciliation with the church.⁴² By the sixth century, Celtic monks had privatized the form of penance substantially, and in this community the first substantial body of penitential manuals emerged to guide priests "to restore the penitent to harmony with his environment, with

⁴⁰ Fourth Lateran Council, cited by Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983), 20; Braswell's translation.

⁴¹ Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983), 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

God, and with the Church [so that the penitent might be] once more a member of a group.”

The Fourth Lateran Council came about primarily because of a substantial lack in consistency in assigning penances, as well as considerable clerical corruption. The role of the community in morality may have undergone a noteworthy change as the Fourth Lateran systematized the sacramental penitential system. A new style of penitential manual emerged based on Celtic models and the rigorous ethic distinctions made by Scholastics:

English penitentials, unlike the Celtic manuals, often indicate the exact words the priest was to say to the penitent and include paradigms of the ways the confessant might be expected to respond... The exhaustiveness of these penitential manuals indicates that the overworked priest would need several hours to interrogate each penitent.⁴³

Confessor's manuals like Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*, and John Mirk's *Handbook for Parish Priests* (composed slightly after *Piers*) include many more items of discussion than what lay Catholics see today in an examination of conscience to prepare oneself for confession. Mirk's manual dictates that the confessor begins with, "Const thow thy pater and thyn aue / And thy crede, now telle thow me. [Can you now tell me the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Creed?]" If the penitent fails, he is to be assigned such penance as "will make hym hyt to lern [will make him learn it]."⁴⁴ Then, the examination proceeds to the articles of faith: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, the second coming, the final judgment, and the

⁴³ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁴ John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, Early English Texts Society (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Krübner & Co., Ltd., 1902), 805-809.

True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.⁴⁵ Only after these tenants of belief are sins themselves addressed with the template of the ten commandments and the seven deadly sins—longer manuals like the *Ayenbite* and *Handlyng Synne* have lengthy subdivisions within each, like the “Seven Boughs of Pride,” (one being “untruth” which itself is subdivided into foulness, madness, and apostasy), “the Seven Boughs of Chastity,” etc.⁴⁶ Leonard Boyle notes, further, that “These new manuals urged the priest to understand the penitent as a person according to his or her particular circumstances or calling (wife, husband, teacher, laborer, merchant, for example).”⁴⁷ As salvation is a community activity, sin is also inseparable from the community, and so is penance, on multiple levels.

Though there is little explicit evidence, there seems to be a parallel between the evolution of the word conscience in English and the progressive interiorization of confession and penance. Consider first that in early English penitentials, “conscience” is seldom found, except in later glosses. For example, *Ayenbite of Inwit* is frequently rendered in modern English as *The Remorse of Conscience*, but the word *inwit* seldom appears and its context does not necessarily require such a translation. The “House of Conscience” that exists in its table of contents is in fact found only in the line “Hous. is inwyt,”⁴⁸ which is part of an allegorical reading of Christ’s teaching on the house from

⁴⁵ Ibid., 812-848.

⁴⁶ Dan Michel, *Ayenbite of Inwyt, or Remorse of Conscience*, Early English Texts Society (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1866), lxxvii.

⁴⁷ Leonard E. Boyle, O.P., “The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology,” *The Popular Literature of Medieval England* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 33.

⁴⁸ Michel, *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, 263.

which demons have been driven out (Luke 11), but glossed as “spirit” by its nineteenth-century editor. The same word, in the phrase “clene inwyt” that appears in a section regarding chastity is alternately glossed “conscience.”⁴⁹ The variations in translation of this word indicate an ambiguity in its meaning and the necessity to make distinctions, as Randolph Quirk has done. Tracing common ME usage, he finds that “*inwit* is a faculty or collection of faculties relatively far removed from the bodily senses [and] signifies—more or less vaguely—the human faculty of comprehension.”⁵⁰ His research is quite helpful:

Both from the point of view of its etymology as well as by easy semantic development of its most frequent use, it is not unreasonable to expect that *inwit* could on occasion have the meaning “conscience.” It is possible to find examples where the meaning hovers between ‘intellect,’ ‘awareness of things’ and ‘conscience.’⁵¹

The Pricke of Conscience, however, equates the two terms, as does the *Ancrene Riwe*.

Nonetheless,

Inwit is the ‘classic’ translation of *animus*, [which would explain the second usage in the *Ayenbite*], that in general use referred to man’s intellectual powers, and that the more narrowly the word is applied to the scholastic concept of *intellectus*, the nearer its meaning becomes to ‘conscience’ and hence the harder it is to distinguish therefrom...Conscience is rather one aspect of *inwit*’s activity.⁵²

The most definitive conclusion we can reach from this is that Langland’s adherence to accurate distinctions are rare in wider Middle English usage.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 202.

⁵⁰ Randolph Quirk, “Langland’s Use of ‘Kind Wit’ and ‘Inwit,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (University of Illinois Press, 1953), 185-86.

⁵¹ Ibid., 186.

⁵² Ibid., 188.

Therefore, I propose that since none of the contemporary confessor's manuals have as distinct or specific usage of conscience as Langland does, the association between the moral/psychological faculty of conscience and sacramental penance as a manner of co-operating with the Church in the work of salvation was fairly uncommon. Consider, by contrast, the modern Catholic sacrament of reconciliation, where the penitent performs a systematic "examination of conscience" prior to confession to the priest. Though the priest agrees on the same objective moral precepts, and though those precepts are listed in much the same manner as the ME penitentials (though perhaps with fewer subdivisions of each sin), it is the conscience of the individual, guided by the Holy Spirit, that acts as lawgiver. Granted, the priest still assigns penance, but in modernity there is a much stronger association of the individual "conscience" with the activity of judging deeds by the standards of law. This is not to say that morality is somehow more subjective, nor that it does not also involve being reconciled to the community, but rather that the word as it used today may no longer convey the communal sense that it once did. Recall that the previous chapter contained a history of the word conscience extending back to ancient sources, in which the *con-* in *conscientia*, "knowing together with," had a much stronger meaning. This seems to parallel the sense of morality under which the Church operated, at least as it regards the activity of penance—an individual's sin polluted the community water well, so to speak, and accordingly, repentance involved public mortification and community forgiveness. It would be difficult to further trace links between conscience as a psychological faculty and repentance because the sense of conscience as a psychological faculty instrumental in individual contrition and repentance was not emphasized in language quite this way.

Moving forward chronologically, the increase of associations between conscience and sacramental penance (following, of course, the codification of sacramental penance in 1215) contributes to this parallel. In Langland, “conscience” carries a combination of ancient and scholastic force, being an amalgamation of the “record-book” concept and a formed and fallible authority within the human soul, and it is, by virtue of these things, necessarily still communal. Confession and penance at this time are also still community activities. The system of confession is such that even though it is between only two persons, the confessor and the penitent (rather than the entire community), the confessor conducts the moral examination, not the penitent. To put it another way, “examination of conscience” is never found in fourteenth-century penitentials the way it is in modernity. *Inwit*, which may loosely mean conscience on occasion, is not used uniformly or frequently enough to challenge this.

A Reconsideration of Passus V as a Journey to Truth Undertaken Within Conscience

I began with one particular interpretation of Piers’ speech to the pilgrims, in which conscience is regarded, according to a pelagian soteriological framework, as the natural sense of order given to man so that he may, even without divine grace, follow the moral precepts of natural law well so as to prove himself worthy (congruently) of grace. I moved from there into an exploration of a traditional soteriological framework articulated primarily in the language of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and then to a consideration of the development of the practice of auricular confession, as well as the parallel development in the word usage of conscience. I further asserted that by reading “into” conscience instead of “at conscience,” the subsequent Decalogue-style imperatives and the rest of the landmarks prior to reaching the House of Truth could be read as

sacramental grace in the form of confession and penance, thereby making claims about Langland's use of the word conscience. To tie all of these together, I would like to end with the arrival at the House of Truth in Piers' picture:

The moot is of mercy the Manoir about;
And alle the walles ben of wit to holden wil oute;
[The] kernele[s ben of] cristendom [that] kynde to saye,
Botrased with bileef-so-orthou-beest-noght-saved;
And alle the houses ben hiled, halles and chambres,
With no leed but with loue and lowenesse as bretheren of [o wombe].
The brugg[e] is of bidde-well-the-bet-may-thow-spede;
Ech piler is of penaunce, of preieres-to-Seyntes;
Of almesdedes are the hokes that the gates hangen on.
Grace hatte the gateward, a good man for sothe;
His man hatte amende-yow, for many man he knoweth.
Telleth hym this tokene: "Truth woot the sothe;
I parfourned the penaunce the preest me enioyned
And I am sory for my synnes and so [shal] I euere
Whan I thynke peron, theigh I were a Pope.

[All the dwelling houses within the precincts of the manor are roofed, halls and chambers alike, not with lead but with love and kindly words, such as a brother uses to a sister. The drawbridge is Pray-well-and-prosper-the-better. Every pillar is formed of *penance* and prayers of supplication to the saints, while the hinges the doors hang on are the deeds of alms. The gatekeeper's name is Grace—a good fellow, truly; and his duty is to Amend-your-ways, a face well known to many. Say this to him as a password: "*Truth knows truly I've carried out the penance the priest told me to do, and I'm sorry for my sins and shall carry on being so, every time they come to mind, even if I should be made pope on day.*"]⁵³

Two questions bid reflection here, the first being what Langland means by making penance the pillar that keeps the House of Truth standing, and the second, what it means that the password given to Grace for entrance is a confirmation of successfully completed penance.

⁵³ V. 585-600; Schmidt, Trans., 62. I have included Schmidt's translation here because it offers an apt and very readable modern English rendering of a lengthy passage.

Regarding the first, building upon the exposition above, one recalls that sacramental penance occurs within the community and is inseparable from the community—that community represented by the inn to which the Good Samaritan brings Semiyuif—even if penance was in the process of becoming more private. Regarding the second, building upon the soteriological traditions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and their treatment of human agency, grace, and merit, a password that asserts human participation does not in any way preclude the action of grace. Indeed, Grace is the gatekeeper, suggesting that the entire speech preceding carries the underlying assumption of the *grace* of sacramental penance. Furthermore, this corresponds very well with the final, heart wrenching lines in which Conscience cries out for grace, and the dreamer awakens. That the personification of conscience, alternately presented as a place where “Christ will prove truly / that [one] love[s] the Lord our God above all else,” would direct Haukyn to contrition, confession, and satisfaction (which entails restored moral rectitude) makes substantially more sense if read through this lens. Such a lens is a description of salvation and the role of morality in salvation radically different than Coleman’s nominalist paradigm.

In conclusion, conscience for Langland is the faculty that participates in the moral life of the pilgrim Church on earth as she journeys to heavenly perfection by directing individuals to lives of repentance in hopes of healing the sin that affects the entire the community. In this way, paralleling the nature of salvation as a co-operative endeavor, conscience is communal and co-operative. This point is essential, as shall be subsequently demonstrated, for understanding the way in which Conscience can call the

community to holy life in the face of radical socio-economic shifts and increasing relativistic self-determination.

CHAPTER THREE

Conscience as Protector of the Common Profit

The first two chapters of this project have focused upon, respectively, the role of conscience in the interior community, and the role of conscience in the individual's salvation being necessarily tied to the conscience and salvation of the community. The next two chapters shall explore the ways in which a communal understanding of "conscience" shapes social life. I assert that the character of Conscience in relation to Langland's vision of what we might now call "social justice," but what might then have been more appropriately termed the "common good," reveals yet another aspect of the communal nature of Conscience, namely, its authority to arbitrate just social practice on behalf of Truth into all "public" realms of culture. This shall be explored negatively in this chapter, through Conscience's denunciation of Lady Mede, and positively in the next through the return to religion that Conscience ultimately champions. It is first necessary to delineate some of the radical socio-economic transformations that underlie his picture of ideal Christian society, and that underscore the importance of Langland's portrayal of conscience as a force that shapes the community as well as the individual.

To begin, though, I make a brief digression to modern authors who have considered the historical transition of moral reasoning in "conscience" at length, because it illuminates the transformations of Langland's early modern, though pre-capitalist, society. Reinhard Hütter's article juxtaposing John Henry Newman and Thomas Aquinas on conscience clarifies the way in which modern relativism has appropriated the word "conscience" for its own purposes, "the voice of conscience being the indulgent voice of

a transcendent affirmer of our whims and wishes—the echo of the pronouncements of our sovereign self-determination.”¹ It is evident from this concept of ‘self-determination’ the way in which conscience has now been completely divorced from community or the common good. Newman’s writings focus upon the destruction of the theonomic conscience in the face of moral relativism, but also elucidate the fundamentally self-centered and autonomous sense of conscience to which we as moderns are frequently exposed, divorced from not only the divine voice, which is not completely unsurprising in a secular society, but also from any sense of community influence. Hütter, following Newman, asserts that conscience

comes to mean its counterfeit, the word denoting now nothing but the decisions posited as acts of sovereign self-determination [which refer] to what is now regarded as one’s property, namely one’s body and all the life choices that pertain to oneself as sovereign owner of this property.²

As noted briefly in the first chapter, this modern sense of conscience born in the early days of the Enlightenment and having come of age in modernity, has permeated the culture of lay Christianity to such an extent that conscience is largely divorced, in colloquial use at least, from social concerns. While our language has other means of addressing the issues of social justice, the weakening of the connection between individual good and societal good on the level of the psychological faculties deserves due consideration.

¹ Reinhard Hütter, “Conscience ‘Truly So Called’ and Its Counterfeit: John Henry Newman and Thomas Aquinas on What Conscience Is and Why It Matters,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition. Vol 12. No. 3 (2014), 707.

² *Ibid.*, 711.

Langland, by contrast, presents the psychological faculty conscience as not only theonomic but also communal.³ To some extent, the change in the practice of confession and penance, as described in the second chapter, reflects the beginnings of the general increasing interiority of which modernity has seen the culmination. That said, the total interiorization and subjectivization of conscience, that is, its distinct separation from the community, was certainly not evident in Langland's England, and his defense of traditional social structures in light of the "common good" reveals yet another aspect of his co-operative and communal Conscience. In other words, he, in continuity with the Western tradition, maintains far less of a distinction between person and community, between public and private, in not only the eternal realm, as previously discussed, but in the temporal realms of economics, labor, and family life as well. In order to demonstrate this I shall first address the moves towards commodification of formerly abstract concepts, that is, the transition from time and labor as the possession of God and the community to time and labor as the possession of the progressively more self-determinative individual.

The Background of "Mede": The Profit Economy in Urban Life and its Challenge to Existing Social Structures

I propose that the emergence of the profit economy and the rise of urban societies challenged pre-existing conceptions of community, increasing the extent to which abstract concepts were considered the private possessions of the individual, and consequently, increasing self-determination in the moral realm. This, I contend, elucidates why it is Conscience, as opposed to another of the psychological faculties, who

³ See Chapter 1, regarding the place of Conscience in the community of the Holy Trinity.

is forcibly engaged to, but who ultimately refuses to marry Lady Mede. With respect to the substantial transitions that came about with the rise of the profit economy, Lester Little's perspective as a historian of economics reveals key elements of the dynamic society of England in the fourteenth century. Prior to the coinciding agricultural and commercial revolutions of the eleventh century:

The principal social trait of village life derived directly from this fact of small size: every individual in the village knew every other individual in the village. Work bound the community together, for the heavier, more difficult kinds of labor necessitated cooperation...The village was thus not an agglomeration of so many individuals; it was instead social organism, apart from which none of its individual members could have existed.⁴

He describes in considerably more detail than is necessary for our current purposes the transforming mechanics of the profit economy, the emergence of which “created tensions between morality and behavior, between theology and society, between religion and life itself.”⁵ For medieval communities that had functioned for hundreds of years on a system heavily influenced by a gift economy, where values of particular goods of exchange were estimated and relative to the wealth of the giver, the rise of transferrable wealth shook social conventions and structures significantly.

The Germanic economic model from which European Christendom developed, in contrast to Roman economy which had state controlled markets and the minting of money, might best be described as a gift economy in which “goods and services are exchanged without having specific, calculated values assigned to them,” and in which

⁴ Lester Little. *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

“the act of giving is more important than the thing given.”⁶ The rise of Christendom “hardly put an end to the gift exchange but only halted and redirected its least productive forms. Gifts to sanctuaries and churchmen were always made in anticipation of spiritual benefits.”⁷ It is important to note that in a gift economy mindset, the anticipation was far less contractual than in a profit economy; this initial mindset lacked the calculation of precise values by which “giving comes to an end and profit-seeking begins.”⁸ While the “economy of salvation” in scripture itself was not burdened with the language of precision and calculation of profit that makes it distasteful and problematic to persons familiar only with a profit economy, this is a larger point for which I direct the interested reader toward Gary Anderson’s work on the biblical basis for the treasury of graces.⁹ This said, though the transition of money from something eliciting a certain amount of wonderment, as before precious treasure, to something embraced as an everyday tool was not immediate, by the time of Langland, it had become commonplace, enabling accompanying social transitions that were previously rare and quite radical.¹⁰

The intervening stage that treated money as a rather mysterious thing with debatably insidious powers, as recorded in the preaching and penitential manuals that placed a taboo on professions that involved handling money and gaining profit thereby, is significant, but perhaps more relevant to preceding centuries.¹¹ That is, Langland’s

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Gary Anderson, *Charity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Little, 35.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

Christendom did not outright condemn money and profit as Christian leaders a century or two before him did. Money as a commonplace and, in itself morally neutral tool, which an individual might possess and do with as he would, created an element of individualization and potentiality for self-determination previously unseen in society founded on gift economy. The profit economy created an environment where more of the common conceptual world was becoming the possession of the individual. To phrase it another way, prior to the emergence of transferable wealth, a man's labor as an abstract concept was less his possession than that of the community. With the emergence of wage-labor, a coin represented a specific quantity of his time and work, something of which he had possession and could use as he so chose, independent, perhaps, of the needs and desires of the community.

I contend that Langland opposes the negative effects of this increasing self-determination by placing Mede in opposition to Conscience, but it ought to be noted that he cannot and does not suggest returning to a primitive monetary system as much as he warns of its pitfalls. Indeed, his very image of the pilgrim, Will, reveals one of transferable wealth's great benefits. In the traditional society Little describes above, no common person would have ever left the community outside of necessary tasks like wood-gathering because it was dangerous. But by the fourteenth century, if not earlier, pilgrimage had become commonplace through the improvement of infrastructure, and, more importantly for this discussion, the convenient transferability of the pilgrim's wealth: "The pilgrim had a special association with money, for the very symbols of his condition were the staff he held in one hand and the purse he carried over one

shoulder.”¹² Money allowed pilgrimage, and it is the pilgrim who is the primary image of the spiritual progress in *Piers*, and so Langland cannot be read as having entirely opposed this unstoppable social force. He opposes most vehemently, rather, the ways it enabled avarice and other sins at the expense of justice.

The profit economy radically transformed social frameworks of the Middle Ages, spreading across a Europe deeply entrenched in a gift economy, and aided by corresponding transformations in conceptualization of time and labor. I propose that with the profit economy, there were correlative commodifications of time and labor, and that allowing these concepts to be even more the property of the individual and less the property of the community or family set the precedent for the autonomous conscience of modernity. Let us consider first the way in which the concept of time changed and only then the way in which this change allowed for the wage-labor system. This shall include a consideration of the historical background associated with post-plague labor conflicts, and, finally, a brief picture of marriage in fourteenth-century society, as the family is the individual’s most immediate community and the foundation of the traditional economy. All of these elements inform our reading of Langland’s Conscience and its profound ability to fight for the “common profit” against the absolute power of Mede.

Jacques le Goff’s work, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, brings to light the radical changes that occurred in the thirteenth century with the contribution of the work bell to the village or city, from which “arose a regular, normal time,” as opposed to “a time linked to event, which made itself felt only episodically and

¹² Ibid., 31.

sporadically.”¹³ A society which relied not on clocks but on church bells signaling the hours of daily prayer for a monastic community or local clerics would have had little way of quantifying and measuring the value of labor other than perhaps a day’s work. In an “economy dominated by agrarian rhythms, free of haste, careless of exactitude, unconcerned by productivity,” society was “*sober and modest*, without enormous appetites, undemanding, and incapable of quantitative efforts.”¹⁴ Robertson records that until the late 1370s, London city ordinances operated under the traditional medieval time system, where the day was divided into twelve hours from sunrise to sunset, a division corresponding to monastic prayer. Thus, during the winter, “hours” were shorter than in the summer.¹⁵ Clocks began to be produced commercially in the early years of the fourteenth century, and King Edward took so readily to them that by Langland’s day in London, St. Paul’s and the tower at Westminster sported these innovative devices.¹⁶

In a society not run by clocks, that is, in which time was not the possession of the individual, there would have simply not have been a way of paying an hourly wage comparable to that of which we might conceive today. Granted, Langland’s London did not have an hourly wage system, but there was a daily wage, and thus the potential for employers to manipulate control of time by insisting on longer working days and night shift labor equivalents to newly quantifiable day shifts.¹⁷ Before this, time was, in a

¹³ Jacques le Goff. *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, Arthur Goldhammer Trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁵ D.W. Robertson, *Chaucer’s London*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1968), 29, n. 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29, n. 36.

¹⁷ Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 20-72.

sense, larger, and the certainties lay in seasonal and liturgical time rather than in the progress of the day. But with the advent of the city bell, “time was no longer associated with cataclysms or festivals, but rather with daily life, a sort of chronological net in which urban life was caught.”¹⁸ Le Goff describes the gravity of the transition thus:

Time as an essence was supplanted by time as a conceptual form and mental tool; the mind could make use of time according to its needs, and might divide or measure it. It was a discontinuous time... From the first half the fourteenth century on, the theme became more specific and dramatic. Wasting one’s time became a serious sin, a spiritual scandal. On the model of money and of the merchant who, in Italy at least, became an accountant of time, there arose a calculating morality and miserly piety...¹⁹

What then are the tangible results of such a transition? Time as God’s possession has become time as man’s own property, convertible into a medium of exchange in the market. Furthermore, by the time of the Renaissance, the virtue of temperance (associated with time) was exalted at the expense of all other virtues, like justice. In closer proximity, though, following the English Plague, a considerable labor shortage throughout England resulted in a type of class conflict only possible in a society characterized by “labor time [that had been] transformed along with most other social conditions [and] made more precise and efficient.”²⁰

Two labor ordinances called the Statutes of Laborers, the first in 1349 and the more specific second in 1351, placed national mandates on cheap labor by freezing wages at rates comparable to the time before the plague.²¹ In addition, they burdened

¹⁸ le Goff, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 335.

agricultural and manorial workers to stay with their masters rather than to leave in search of better wages, but did little to control prices except to say that prices on foodstuffs ought to be “reasonable.” Prompted by the Commons in the favor of less-moneyed employers, who would have otherwise lost any possibility of obtaining labor, this was a reaction to the sharp rise in wages (a sixty percent increase) following the plague of the 1340s.²² Laborers’ reactions against the restrictions placed on the market included a collective failure to reap manorial corn in certain counties, and ultimately, the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381.²³ The factors contributing to the revolt are many, and have been treated quite thoroughly by a number of historians, but one of those most pertinent to the discussion at hand is the jealousy of tenant workers of their counterparts working freely on leased lands, who “were enjoying a new sense of the power of money and were anxious for more.”²⁴ That said, the institution of a new poll tax in 1380, the persistence of the now more quantifiably specific *merchetum*, “a traditional fee for the marriage of a daughter,” and *heriot*, a “reversion of a part of a peasant’s goods to his overlord at death,” the latter two being far less influential than the first, did also contribute to the building unrest that boiled over in 1381.²⁵ Ultimately, as Robertson has asserted, outside of bloodshed, private vengeance, and looting, the revolt accomplished nothing, because “in spite of their theoretical attacks on the hierarchy of the kingdom, what they wanted was actually the same thing the government wanted: more money.”²⁶

²² Ibid., 334.

²³ Ibid., 338.

²⁴ Robertson, 143.

²⁵ Ibid., 143.

²⁶ Ibid., 150.

The evidence that unbridled desire for individual profit dominated the world of Langland and his contemporaries Chaucer and Gower is clear, and though the Revolt is not explicitly addressed in the B-text of *Piers*, Langland (through Conscience) does launch a staunch attack on the power of finance that fueled it. To return to the broader questions at hand regarding the relation of the individual and the community to the abstract concepts of time and work, let us say that there was a transition from time and labor as the property of God and community to commodities, that is, the precisely measurable, transferable properties of the individual. Saint Thomas' condemnation of usury in the section dealing with justice in the *Summa* elucidates the contrast:

To take usury for money lent is unjust in itself, because this is to sell what does not exist...the use of the thing must not be reckoned apart from the thing itself, and whoever is granted the use of the thing, is granted the thing itself and for this reason, to lend things of this kin is to transfer the ownership.²⁷

He compares money to wine or wheat, which have obvious property value. They belong to an individual and can be consumed by the individual. Time as the property of the individual appears not to exist within his conceptual framework for economics, nor ostensibly in the framework of the wider culture. Neither was labor the property of the individual—this was in large part enabled by the ability to calculate time more specifically. By the fourteenth century, though, the use of the powerful tool of quantifiable wage labor could, in a way not seen in previous centuries, earn the individual calculated profit, but it could also create what Aers has called “a culture of independence, assertiveness, and anti-authoritarianism,” which Langland endeavors to counter with Conscience, among other things.²⁸

²⁷ *ST.* II-II.78.1

²⁸ Aers, *Faith, Ethics, and the Church*, 64.

Another complementary element that permeates Langland's social vision is his perspective on marriage and the family as the fundamental economic unit, rather than the individual wage laborer. It shall be significant for our discussion of Conscience to consider in what way conceptions of marriage and family related to the profit economy, in that the family is regarded as the individual's most proximate community, and that his just or unjust interaction with the wider community is practiced first in his home. In other words, the "common good" cannot be achieved without families as its foundation. Recall, as mentioned briefly in chapter one, Langland's vehement criticism of marriages that "Conscience and crist hath yknyt faste," that are dissolved for money by greedy canon lawyers.²⁹ Here we have an understated idea echoed more explicitly in other places in the poem that marriage is not merely about the individual's possession of love, his individual deciding power, but rather, a societal bond influenced and affirmed by the community. In the first place, individual emotional self-determinative power influenced but did not comprise the entirety of the decision in a medieval marriage, as Robertson's study of fourteenth-century London reveals: "'Love' or sexual infatuation was regarded as a nuisance."³⁰ He cites a contemporary court case in which a man was accused of using "'the company of a woman which was to his grete loss and hinderyng for asmoch as he was so affectionate that he resorted daily unto her."³¹ For Langland, this sort of self-determination was not the root of the injustice he rails against. It was another transition associated with marriage in the wider community that disturbed him.

²⁹ XV.242.

³⁰ Robertson, 118.

³¹ Footnote 121, in Robertson's *Chaucer's London*, 118.

To reiterate, the questions that frame Langland's picture of social have to do with proper ownership: whether time and labor belong primarily to God, the community, the family, or the individual, and whether they ought to be bought and sold for individual profit. Marriage itself was not undergoing great transition in the fourteenth century, in the sense that arranged marriage was commonplace throughout the ancient and medieval traditions, and it was frequently undertaken for financial or political gain, (which certainly did not preclude love in the sense of charity, if not in the sense of infatuation). Nonetheless, the economic aspects of family life were changing. In traditional peasant households,

the nuclear family was the unit of primary production as well as of consumption. For those living within this family, essential access to the hold—the basic source of subsistence, self-identity, and the very condition of family reproduction—was controlled by marriage and inheritance patterns under parental, normally patriarchal domination.

By contrast, “the landless family was not a unit of production bound to a family holding. In so far as it was an economic unity, it depended on each individual selling her or his labour-power on the market as an autonomous worker.”³² Accordingly, “the means of subsistence was attained by individual access to the labour-market, not to a family holding.”³³ The market economy allowed for the transition of family life toward younger marriage ages and toward more self-determinative power for children in their marriages. If the family is comprised of loose collection of economically discrete pieces, its unitive strength is considerably diminished. This weakening of family bonds in favor of economically autonomous individuals in full control of commodified labor was only

³² David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 53.

³³ *Ibid.*, 53.

compounded by the way that transferrable wealth allowed for individuals to travel and find work, leaving their lands and families to do spend their time and labor as they found most personally beneficial. Concisely, the market economy allowed for more independence within traditional social structures: marriage was being threatened by no longer being tied closely to the family holding and the economic well-being of the community, and by the vice proper to the profit economy, individual greed.

To conclude on these contextual matters, one would do worse than to refer to a recent source which traces the outcomes from our fourteenth-century setting through the Enlightenment into modernity to demonstrate that interiorization of time and labor that heretofore were communal has since extended into the moral realm in modernity. Lesslie Newbigin has commented on the changes modernity brought about, particularly regarding the emergence of the public and private realms. Though he focuses primarily upon the changes brought about by the Enlightenment, his commentary on the influence that changes in labor structure had on the growth of a market economy and other consequences is instructive:

In an earlier age, as in contemporary pre-modern societies, farming and the various skilled crafts were mainly for the use of the family of the local community. The market in which money operated as a means of exchange was only a minor and marginal part of the economy. But as the principle of labor gained ascendancy, the market moved into the central place as the mechanism that linked all the separate procedure with each other and with the consumers...it was no longer about the requirements of justice and the dangers of covetousness.³⁴

A consequence of this market economy was the removal of the place of work from the home to the factory (though in fourteenth-century England, perhaps a guild or another man's land) that resulted in "a deep divide between the public world of work, of

³⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1986), 30-31.

exchange, of economics, and the private world that is withdrawn from the world of work and remains under another vision of how things are.”³⁵ In the traditional rural society like that away from which Langland’s England was moving,

Each person is securely fixed in a single human milieu that embraces work, leisure, family relationships, and religion. These all form part of a given world that is accepted as real and within which the individual person has a secure and well-defined identity. In a city the individual...is in the midst of a plurality of worlds among which he chooses.³⁶

To the extent to which a person possesses the ability to determine his own job, leisure, familial relationship, etc., he can arbitrate his own identity, and with this, comes the progression into the moral realm to personalize and subjectivize conscience in the same way. Though the earliest manifestations of this self-determinative power did not depart from the “theonomic” conscience the Newman and Hütter describe, they did to some extent begin to lose the sense that conscience has authority over public matters, that is, matters pertaining to the common good, and it is this loss of moral authority that Langland opposes. He sees the profit economy as potentially destructive to the common profit, and depicts Conscience as the defender of truth and justice.

Conscience and Lady Mede in the Dreamer’s First Vision

Conrad Pepler’s foundational study on Langland in *The English Religious Heritage* calls the poem “a protest against the recent introduction of money power into the social scheme of his day,” and a “bitter war” against Lady Mede “who typifies the power of finance [and] appears as the actual ruler of both Church and State.”³⁷ Some of

³⁵ Ibid., 30-31.

³⁶ Ibid., 32.

³⁷ Pepler, 42.

the lengthiest speeches attributable to Conscience occur in the dreamer's first vision, in his encounter with the wealthy and disreputable Lady Mede, and it is the multivalence of Mede's character that allows Langland to pursue the topics of labor, time, and family life concurrently. Consider, first, the primary definition of "mede" given in the Middle English dictionary, and a few variations of its usage:

(a) A gift; noble or royal endowment; a suitor's blandishments; to institute the giving of gifts; (b) a material reward; compensation (for work or services); wages, earnings, salary; (c) a fee; ransom; reparation; the payment of a fee, a bribe; also, bribery, graft; also personified; (d) material wealth, worldly gain; also, revenue, income, profit; also, the temporal value (of something).³⁸

A word with such a rich semantic field gives both the author and reader ample room to explore a variety of concepts, and the personification of Mede contains Langland's perception of the various means by which the profit economy was shaping English society in the fourteenth century. I propose, furthermore, that in Conscience's denunciation of Mede lies the key to understanding the poet's vision of the just society. I shall examine what the personification of Mede reveals to the reader about, respectively, the family, time, and labor, and the extent to which those were increasingly becoming the property of the individual and capable of being twisted into tools for personal rather than common profit. That Conscience declines to be engaged to Lady Mede reveals that Conscience rejects the beginnings of the primarily self-determinative "counterfeit conscience" in favor of the common profit, and reveals, on another level, that the poet's understanding of Conscience is inseparable from social justice.

The pilgrim Will encounters the splendidly adorned Lady Mede immediately following his request to Holy Church: "'Kenne [teach] me by som craft to knowe the

³⁸ Robert E. Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 2001), "Mede," (Def. 1).

false.”³⁹ He falls once again to sleep, and sees in a vision Lady Mede who, as Will soon discovers from Theologie, is engaged to marry False, when rightly she ought to have married Truth.⁴⁰ According to him, she is the daughter of Amendes,⁴¹ and “God graunted to gyve [her] to Truthe.”⁴² In keeping with the custom of arranged marriages which Langland affirms in Passus IX at length, we see the lady advised by her father in marriage, but the plan is waylaid through the contrivances of False, and through Mede’s own willfulness (Mede’s corrupt courtly supporters promise to, for a fee, see to it that Conscience cannot stand in the way of Mede marrying whomever it is she fancies).⁴³ The document False drew up tells the public ““that Mede is ymarried moore for hire goodes / Than for any vertue or fairnesse or any free kynde [generous nature],”” and that ““Falsnesse is fayn of hire for he woot hire riche [Falseness is keen to have her because he knows her to be rich.]””⁴⁴ This gains another intriguing facet in Passus III when it is none other than Conscience who stands in for Truth at the King’s court. The king, in an effort to save her from False, decrees that she marry Conscience. The levels of meaning

³⁹ II.4

⁴⁰ II.116-17: "Now sorwe mote thow have / Swiche weddynges to werche to wrathe with Truthe!"

⁴¹ Amends is the term referring to the spiritual economy and the duty of the Christian to repay what the debt he owes to Christ in reparation for his guilt not with any sort of equal recompense, but a gift of worth relative to his own ability and comparable to Christ’s redemptive gift relative to His own perfect ability—the Christian repays his good will and his good works. Though I mention this briefly here, it shall be expanded upon at length in the next chapter which deals with the way in which Conscience commands lay piety and a common spirit of *redde quod debes*.

⁴² II.119-120; Though there is a contradiction regarding Mede’s pedigree, in that Holy Church called her the daughter of Falsity, Theologie’s identification is to be presumed authoritative for reasons too extensive to examine in detail here. I defer to A.V.C Schmidt’s textual notes in the Oxford Classics edition, note 18, pg. 263.

⁴³ III.131-150.

⁴⁴ II.75-78.

are characteristic of the medieval exegetical style that certainly influenced Langland's style to some extent, wherein both literal and allegorical meaning exist harmoniously in the narrative. These levels of meaning shall be examined in turn in light of the historical and cultural context thus far proposed.

Mede in Marriage

On the narrative level, Langland affirms a paradigm for marriage and family in Mede's situation that is consistent with his wider statements about the nature of lay community and the duty individuals have to their community. The home as the center of production and consumption and the fundamental economic unit was, as we have seen, disintegrating. Even while assuming that arranged marriages are morally acceptable, nay, preferable, he makes a severe distinction between marriages arranged by the family and community with the motive of love and those arranged with the motive of profit.⁴⁵ Conscience, by refusing the marriage on a narrative level, rejects the marriage on a cultural level arranged purely for profit, that is, *mede*. Mede's marriage document, mentioned above, describes the predicted outcome of this unabashedly profit-based marriage, in that Mede is now required

To be Princes in Pride, and povertē to despise,
To bakbite and to bosten and bere fals witnessē,
To scorne and to scolde and sclaundre to make,
Unbuxome and bolde to breke the ten hestes.

[To be Princess in Pride, and to despise poverty,
To speak spitefully and to brag, and to bear false witness,
To scorn and to scold and to cause scandal,

⁴⁵ IX.115: "First by the fadres wille and the frendes conseille, and sithenes by assent of himself as thei two myghte acorde; and thus was wedlock ywroght and god himself it made. In erthe the heuene is; hymself was witnessē."

And, Rebellious and bold, to break the ten commandments.]⁴⁶

In addition, their marriage will attain for False and Mede “the erldom of Envye and Wrathe” together and possession, in a sense, usury, avarice, and lust, among other things.⁴⁷ Social structures established by hope for monetary gain have the direct result of moral decrepitude for not only the couple being married, but even more that that, the wider community, through scorn, slander, and usury, not to mention contemptuous treatment of the poor.

The moral, societal, and economic consequences of a marriage undertaken in willfulness with the motive of personal greed as opposed to love and community benefit are made even more clear when we juxtapose the words of one of Conscience’s teachers, Kind Wit, or natural intelligence.⁴⁸ Wit speaks to the pilgrim in Passus IX regarding the ideal of the family as the fundamental economic unit:

For coveitise of catel unkyndely [some] ben wedded.
As careful concepcion cometh of swiche mariages
As bit-el of the folk that I bifore of tolde.
For goode sholde wedde goode, though thei no good hadde;
‘I am via et veritas,’ seith Crist, ‘I may avaunce alle.’

[(Some) for covetousness of property have been wed unnaturally.
As wicked offspring come from such mariages
As characterize the people that I told of before.
For the good should wed the good, though they may be poor;
‘I am the way and the truth,’ said Christ, ‘I may increase all things.’]⁴⁹

Wit describes, in tragic contrast, the marriages wrought purely for profit, those between very young women and old men, and those that lack goodwill, but are rather

⁴⁶ II. 80-83.

⁴⁷ II.85-93.

⁴⁸ III. 284: “I, Conscience, knowe this, for Kynde Wit it me taughte.”

⁴⁹ IX.156-161.

characterized by jealousy and domestic abuse—“cheeste and chopp[es],” that is, fighting and blows.⁵⁰ Wit’s advice, thus, is that “alle Cristene coveite nocht be wedded / For coveitise of catel [property] ne of kynrede riche [wealthy kin]...For no londes [lands], but for love,”⁵¹ that they may attain God’s favor. Wit’s reasoning takes a more economically-oriented turn a few lines further, in which he makes the strong assertion that ““In this world is Dowel trewe wedded libbynge folk, / For thei mote werche and wynne and the world sustene. [In this world Do-wel is among married persons living honestly, / for they work and earn and sustain the society,]” that is, they are the economic foundation of the society.⁵² To these honest ones, who, in spite of the personal monetary gain they forfeit, choose to marry for charity and the benefit of the community, he affirms that God’s provision in all necessities with the words of the thirty-third psalm: “*Inquirentes autem Dominum non minuentur omni bono* [they that seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good.]”⁵³ The importance of this defense of familial charity in *Piers* cannot be overstated. Aers observes that in Langland’s mind, “if the traditional family unit was collapsing, then wage freezes, labor legislation, and the employers’ work ethos would hardly be sufficient remedy...The trouble is that marriage [was] dominated by the market.”⁵⁴ This concisely describes the narrative significance of the Conscience’s rejection of Mede in the first vision.

On the level of personification-allegory, that Lady Mede was originally intended

⁵⁰ IX. 162-175.

⁵¹ IX. 173-177.

⁵² IX.108-09.

⁵³ IX.107; Psalm 33:11 (VULG; ESV).

⁵⁴ Aers, *Community, Gender, and Identity*, 56.

to be married to Truth and that the king asks Conscience to marry Mede in Truth's stead are both worthy of consideration. Truth is another equally multivalent word in *Piers*, representing at the same time God, salvation attained in the soul's journey to God, and, as I suggest here, justice. The equivalence of truth with justice in the medieval tradition can be traced to Saint Anselm in the eleventh century, in his treatise *On Truth*, in which he argues that "all truth is rectitude," and that "justice is the rectitude of will preserved for its own sake."⁵⁵ If indeed such an equivalence underlies Mede's marriage to False as the distortion of her intended marriage to Truth, then the scene carries new meaning for the nature of conscience as well. Conscience becomes the intermediary of societal justice in the absence of the full knowledge of what is just. This hypothesis is affirmed by Theologie's statement that "Conscience is of [Truth's] conseil," as well as by Reason's later comment that "The true facts were known to conscience."⁵⁶ Conscience's powerful condemnation of Mede before the king, which includes a strong critique of financial greed, bears significantly more weight because of the position he stands in relation to Truth, and accordingly to justice. Conscience's own words condemn the Lady Mede as promiscuous, dishonest, and a generally unsavory woman, and in them, he calls for general rejection of Mede in the family, that is, a renewal of morality and strengthening of the family as the economic foundation of society.

⁵⁵ Saint Anselm, "On Truth," in *Three Philosophical Dialogues: On Truth, On Freedom of Choice, On the Fall of the Devil*, Thomas Williams, Trans., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002), 21, 26.

⁵⁶ II.139

Mede as the Individual's Ownership of Time

By rejecting Mede, with the authority he possesses as one privy to Truth's dictates, Conscience rejects not only Mede in the family, being the foundation of society, but as previously mentioned, the distortions of the profit economy more widely, including that of time. Recall that one of the definitions of *mede* in middle English is "the temporal value of something," and I suggest that this fits very well into Langland's social critique, though Conscience's words do not explicitly define it as such. Rather, in Passus IX, Kind Wit, as Conscience's teacher, articulates that Truth knows that "To spille any speche or any space of tyme...Is moost yhated upon erthe of hem that ben in hevene," that is, the saints dislike none more than those who waste time or speech.⁵⁷ While a full examination of Langland's condemnation of the 'Wasters' is out of the scope of this discussion, it does play a substantial part in his picture of social justice. Because time is now a measurable commodity that can be exchanged for coins or goods, these 'layabouts' are portrayed as those who, waste theirs selfishly and beg without doing honest labor. The poet acknowledges that time was becoming measurable and a form of personal currency as never before and pushes back against any greedy or covetous use of it.

Context as presented earlier in this chapter heightens the likelihood that Langland's critique was informed by changes in time becoming a personal commodity. Le Goff asserts that by the Renaissance, "the time which used to belong to God alone was thereafter the property of man...the cardinal virtue of the humanist was temperance, which...was given the clock as attribute. Henceforth, the clock was to be the measure of

⁵⁷ IX. 98-100.

all things.”⁵⁸ This intersects tellingly with Need’s words to Will in Passus XX, by which he rejects both Conscience and the set of cardinal virtues, submitting himself only to

Temperance:

o Nede...may nymen as for his owene,
Withouten conseil of Conscience or Cardynale Vertues—
So that he sewe and save Spiritus Temperancie.
For is no vertue bi fer to Spiritus Temperancie.

[Need may take [something] as for his own
Without the counsel of Counsel of Conscience of the Cardinal Virtues—
So that he may follow and observe the Spirit of Temperance,
For there is no virtue comparable to the Spirit of Temperance.]⁵⁹

This statement exemplifies the temptation to exalt Temperance at the expense of Conscience and the other three virtues, particularly justice, possibly foreshadows the cultural transformation that comes about by the Renaissance. An individual might possess time as the result of clocks and transferable wealth to such an extent that it no longer fell under the authority of God or the community. This, I suggest, laid the groundwork for the sort of self-determination that Newman credits with the creation of the “counterfeit conscience.” In *Piers*, though, Conscience still fights with zeal for the virtue and justice of the community, and still retains authority to do so as spokesman for Truth. By rejecting Mede in all of her facets, he rejects the selfish and avaricious use of time for personal profit.

Mede as Individual Profit

The final facet of the interaction between Conscience and Mede pertinent to the considerations at hand is Conscience’s explicit condemnation of Mede in a purely

⁵⁸ Ibid., 51-52.

⁵⁹ XX.20-21.

monetary sense (misused wages or profit) in his speech to the king. This encompasses both the facet of wage-labor with all its controversies, and that of money more generally. Though Langland develops his social vision extensively throughout the poem, I shall attempt to contain the discussion to the passages that most directly reveal of the nature of the communal conscience. In the first place, Conscience uses the image of a promiscuous woman, in stark contrast to the picture of virtuous marriage Langland presents throughout the poem, to expose Mede's true character: "Is noght a bettre baude, by Hym that me made, / Bitwene hevne and helle, in erthe though men soghte!"⁶⁰ She sells her own body for profit, the very epitome of the sort of commodification we have been exploring, and of the radical self-determination Newman and Hütter find to be characteristic of the "counterfeit of conscience." This is consistent with the dreamer's description when he first glimpses her in his vision, a description which has a great deal of overlap with that given in Revelation of the Whore of Babylon—a lady adorned in a magnificent robe of scarlet, gold, and costly jewels.⁶¹ To make the largerr point that far too much of what is rightly the property of God or the community (the family most proximately), has become personal property, Conscience paints Mede as one far to eager to reject morality and the common good for her own selfish gain. In effect, Mede is destructive of marriage in the full range of its meaning as medieval metaphor.

Consider next the words of Conscience as he kneels before the King in Passus III regarding the grounds on which he rejects Lady Mede. He defines Mede in two ways, the first being the heavenly reward God grants to those who have labored on the earth, and

⁶⁰ III.129-130.

⁶¹ II.8-16; Schmidt, n.15, 262; Revelation 17.

the second being “mede mesurelees, that maistres desireth.”⁶² Of this Mede, which might be defined as the excessive individual profit received without comparable labor, he says that it is found among priests who accepted monetary reward for saying masses—labor which properly belonged to God—and any who engaged in bribery generally.⁶³ Conscience creates a careful distinction between that which “laborers and lewede [common men] taken of hire [their] maistres,” which “is no manere mede but a mesurable hire,”⁶⁴ and the sort of Mede that has fallen prey to injustice and avarice. Wage-labor, in Langland’s mind, is not inherently unjust, because were it so, Conscience, as one in Truth’s council, and thus a transmitter of just precepts, would have had to denounce wage-labor entirely in favor of communism or some other radical ideology. Indeed, as I have noted previously, he does not outright oppose the market economy; not only could he do nothing to stop it, but here, Conscience avows that “in marchaundise is no mede.” Rather, “it is a permutacion [a fair exchange] apertly—a penyworth for another.”⁶⁵ Schmidt’s translation renders it thus: “What you have here, quite clearly, is an act of *exchange*: goods worth so much are given for goods of another sort, but worth the same in value.”⁶⁶ This translation affirms the possibility that Langland’s perspective on the market economy being viable and just for society in both wage-labor and commerce was informed by his adherence to the values and framework of a gift economy. Another avenue of research might be the language of exchange and how it changed before and

⁶² III.246

⁶³ III.247-254.

⁶⁴ III.256.

⁶⁵ III.257-58.

⁶⁶ Schmidt, 31.

during the fourteenth century, but given the current constraints, this is a question for another time.

The ills of Mede, then, do not inherently abide in honest wage-labor nor in the market system. Rather, they result from commodification of what, by virtue of justice, ought not be commodified—selling what is not one’s own to sell and treating it as one’s own property, a mark of the interiorization of which we spoke earlier. Conscience, in his continued tirade against Mede, tells the story of Samuel’s message to Saul that he would be punished for succumbing to greed.⁶⁷ Here again, like the depiction of Mede as the woman selling her own body as if a quantifiable commodity, her own property rather than God’s or, in some sense, her husband’s,⁶⁸ Scriptures depict Saul taking what is common for his own—the livestock of the Amalekites was to be destroyed according to the dictates of divine justice, and it was not his to take. For failing to destroy it, he *and his descendants* were punished severely.⁶⁹ Justice is a private matter in neither the Biblical nor the medieval framework in which Langland wrote, and it seems that Conscience has been deemed the appropriate faculty with which Langland can affirm this.

Conscience’s denunciation culminates in a threat to those prey to the moral evils of Mede: on the day that Reason reigns once more, “right as Agag hadde, happe shul somme,” that is, Samuel shall slay the unjust, and “Saul shal be blamed.”⁷⁰ This juxtaposition of the Biblical narrative with those who have succumbed to the moral evils

⁶⁷ III.261-279

⁶⁸1 Corinthians 7:4.

⁶⁹1 Samuel 15 and 31.

⁷⁰ III.286-87.

of personal profit sheds light on Langland's perception of justice as conveyed to the community through Conscience. Agag and the Amalakites represent those deserving of justice from God and the community: either chastisement in the context of corrupt and lecherous clergy, or, in the context of the faithful laity, the just reception of sacraments. Profit seekers who would earn profit from unjust labor are compared to Saul: included in this category are those who would bribe clergy, charge money to say mass or hear confession, lawyers, usurers, and merchants who cannot distinguish between lawful and unlawful gain.⁷¹ Samuel, who may, given the role he plays in the establishment of the just community with Piers the Plowman in the final passus, be, in fact, Conscience, for it is he who ultimately reestablishes justice, having spoken in the name of Truth to the unjust and the profiteers alike, and having been ignored.

This, admittedly, is conjecture, but the authority Conscience wields throughout the poem suggests that he certainly does not play an insignificant part in the reestablishment of the just society for the common profit. The picture he presents to the king at the end of his speech is that of a time when Kind (Unfeigned) Love and Conscience together shall come "and make of lawe [the law profession] a laborer; swich love shal arise / And swich pees among the peple and a parfit truthe" that the Jews will marvel "that men beth so trewe," or perhaps just.⁷² He describes a society in which every man is engaged in honest labor, either in agriculture or something comparable for which he may earn a wage, or in a craft for which he may earn a profit by sale of goods. Passus

⁷¹ Langland in another place condemns "men of business who handle money won't have the slightest idea whether the profits they make are lawful or unlawful, or tantamount to usury," Schmidt, 237.

⁷² III.301-04

XIX provides an even fuller picture of the just society instituted by Grace, and of which Conscience is king and protector and Piers Grace's agent and officer. This passage widens the definition of honest labor to those who have intellectual power, i.e. preachers, teachers and students, along with merchants, artists, mathematicians, and scientists, law-enforcers, and many other honest trades.⁷³ Conscience, however, as king and protector, must speak into the everyday lives of community members to protect them from the powers of avarice. Let us conclude with the point that Conscience, by virtue of his relationship to Truth and, implicitly, justice, can and must speak into the morality of the community. Conscience is the farthest thing from a matter of an individual's self-determination, and like other socio-economic structures and abstracts concepts common to the society, it is not the property and possession of the sole individual.

In conversation with the Brewer in the previous passage, Conscience comes up directly against this same rejection of common justice. The Brewer, who makes a profit selling the last scrapings from his barrel and passing weak ale off as strong ale, both decidedly unjust business practices, tells Conscience to take his *Spiritus Iustitiae* elsewhere, and that, in fact, he has "no time" for holiness.⁷⁴ The time reference is subtle but striking—time, once again, has become interiorized and exchanged for personal gain.

Furthermore, Aers observes that the Brewer

shows us how a fixed and deludedly autonomous individual can be produced by a certain kind of community, one in which the market is god: such individuals are persuaded that the pursuit of profit and self-interest constitutes rationality and felicity, even as they are persuaded to deny the roots of creatureliness and the fluid contingency of the self.⁷⁵

⁷³ XIX.232-252.

⁷⁴ XIX.396-402

⁷⁵ Aers, *Faith, Ethics, and the Church*, 74.

This seems to get to the heart of Conscience's interaction with the community: As its designated protector, he observes the "culture in which not only production but all human relations become exchanges in a market for commodities," the culture symbolized by Mede, and does his best to counter it.⁷⁶ In this "community with no boundaries, no cogent moral principles, with no criteria other than pragmatic response to profit and loss in the market,"⁷⁷ perhaps there is little that can be done, but if any are to undertake it, it seems that Conscience has been given authority. If conscience, as has been established in the first two chapters, may not have inerrant determinative power within the individual's moral community, he does possess significant authority in calling society, laity particularly, to greater morality in a culture threatened by the onslaught of untempered financial power.

Conclusion: Conscience as the Protector of the Common Profit

Having explored the way in which Conscience engages contemporary culture in order to denounce the rise of insidious avarice and self-determination at the expense of the community, consider the words of Father Pepler regarding Langland's image of the just society:

The power of finance must be broken if conscience is to have an honest chance of living and converting the souls of many... [but Langland] offers no mere economic or political remedy for these social evils. Society for him requires a spiritual reform based on supernatural justice and charity... The individual Christian [following Christ's example] cannot refuse... responsibility for the sins of the world [for the] way to holiness does not lie in a vacuum. Langland,

⁷⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 66.

therefore, calls for an ascetic recreation of life in society based on the Christian virtues of each individual.⁷⁸

This “supernatural reform,” of which Conscience speaks most compellingly in the dreamer’s final vision I will further explore in the final chapter. Conscience, as has been demonstrated, has much to denounce with his authority as “Truth’s bosom-counselor,” as Schmidt has translated it, and his agent in the absence of the fullness of Truth. For the temporal realm is yet on pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, where the fullness of Truth and common justice abide. Inasmuch as our city is not there yet, Conscience has been given the power, not of moral self-determination, as advocates of the counterfeit conscience of modernity would attribute to it, but rather, of speaking truth and justice into the *community*. Regardless of the morally neutral cultural framework shifts like the emergence of the profit economy, Conscience has been given power to perceive and arbitrate “common profit” in a changing time, and accordingly, he is called “that kepere...and gyour / Over kynde Cristene and Cardynale Vertues,” that is, the protector and ruler over Christians and the Cardinal Virtues.⁷⁹ In *Piers*, Langland depicts Conscience as inseparable from community: whatever power it might lack in individual moral reasoning it gains in the authority to calls society to holy and just life irrespective of the cultural vicissitudes particular to a given era.

⁷⁸ Pepler, 42-44.

⁷⁹ XX.72-73.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conscience as King of the Pilgrim Church

To briefly re-iterate for the purposes of clarifying the following argument, my first chapter employed Lewis' philological research on the historical transformation of *conscientia* to "conscience" as it is used today, arguing that Langland's complex depiction of conscience is a combination of the Witness and the Lawgiver. The first sense, embodied in the description of conscience as "goddes clerke and Notarie," is that of a record-keeper or a record-book which is privy to the deeds of oneself and one's community. Thus both personal habits and external experience of sin and merit can influence moral perception. The second sense, that of Lawgiver, is described by Langland through Christian as the action of judging and accusing one's own actions and the actions one perceives.¹ Though this lawgiving action has some authority as given by the Holy Spirit, the conscience is always still formed by the community and deferent to the Trinity and to church authority as figured in *Piers*.

The second chapter furthered these considerations in its assertion that for Langland, conscience is the place in the soul where the moral acts that either condemn or sanctify are undertaken. The individual's conscience serves as record of these deeds, which are not simply matters of individual culpability, but are necessarily harmful or edifying to the Pilgrim Church that strives for her own perfection. I emphasized the morally neutral sense of conscience as it appeared in *Passus V* in order to focus upon the

¹ See Chapter 1.

way in which sin and salvation were co-operative: if the individual cannot trust the presence of an infallible internal Lawgiver to identify moral evil that would turn him from Christ, he must rely upon his community. In this light it is clear that Langland's "conscience" cannot be understood as equivalent to its modern meaning. I suggest that the complexity of Conscience's character is largely owed to the fact that the moral and spiritual barriers distinguishing persons from their community are more permeable than they are in modernity, and thus *Piers* retains remarkable fluidity in its relation of personal and communal morality. Now I will explore some of the same ideas with a more direct focus upon the community aspect, asking in what way the conscience is a morally neutral witness in the classical sense, a record of the deeds of society, and in what sense it possesses lawgiving authority over the community. Secondly, having described the nature of Conscience's authority in the society, I shall describe the defining features of the society that Conscience defends and seeks to protect. The same Conscience, who attempts to lead the community from the profit economy to the economy of grace, has an integral role in the apocalyptic vision that Langland presents: a picture of the Pilgrim Church brought into holy fullness as the completion of the Incarnation.

Conscience as Witness and Lawgiver

A popular text contemporary to *Piers* helps to provide perspective. *The Abbaye of the Holy Ghost*, a fourteenth-century allegorical romance, contains a remarkable amount of overlap with *Piers*, particularly with the character Conscience.² Morton Bloomfield finds this overlap compelling proof for his claim that Langland's influences were

² Bloomfield, 16.

predominantly monastic rather than scholastic.³ A closer look at the original text reveals illuminating evidence for the claims being made here about Conscience as witness to the deeds of the community. Consider first that conscience is described as a *place* on which the “abbey of the Holy Ghost,” that is, the soul, is founded: “There begynneth a matere spekyng of a place hat is named the abbaye of the holy ghost / that shall be founded or grounded in a clene conscience in whiche the abbaye shall dwell.”⁴ This should immediately prompt recollection of the description of the journey to Truth to which Piers directs the pilgrims. As I argued, the Middle English “at” in the original renders conscience a place in which the moral law is enacted within the soul, rather than a point through which the pilgrims must pass on their way. Further on, regarding the specific placement of conscience, *The Abbaye* places conscience adjacent to “a place that is called Synderesis,” that stirs a man to goodness and warns against evil, and in which, by grace, “every man may doo well yf he woll.”⁵ On the other end, Conscience is bordered by Joy should “the soule be clene our of synne.”⁶ The distinction inconsistent across contemporary moral treatises (Thomas differs considerably from Bonaventure on this matter) appears in this text as well, and it aligns not with strict Thomistic or Bonaventurian thought but with a more general distinction between the Lawgiver and the Witness. *Piers’* conscience is an amalgamation of the two. This is certainly true on the individual level, but given the strong metaphorical link between the monastic community

³ Ibid., 169.

⁴ *The Abbaye of the Holy Ghost*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907. Digitized by Cornell University. Openlibrary.org.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

(which alternately represents the pilgrim Church as a whole) and the individual soul, it seems that there is sufficient evidence to extend the metaphor into the communal conscience for both the monastic text, and, given its connection to *Piers*, for Langland's text as well.

In the author's description of the founding of the abbey, we see that the abbey was given not simply to an individual man, but that

The Almyghty god in tynyte fader sone and holy ghost have gyve and granted and with my worde confermed to Adam the forefather of man and to Eve his wife and to theyre heyers [heirs] a lytel precious place that is called Conscyecne that lyeth in their soules.⁷

The soul, in this treatise, is given to mankind, it seems, for the description of the first man and woman as representatives of all mankind speaks more to the community aspect of morality than to the individual. Further on, the description of the destruction of the abbey ascribes its fall to the Fall of our first parents, and in continuity with the narrative of Scripture, redemption of the abbey of the soul comes directly from Christ's own sacrifice. While much further study could be devoted to this text and description of salvation history, for our current purposes, it is sufficient to observe that the juxtaposition in this text of the image of the abbey of the soul and the Christian narrative allows for a substantially greater emphasis on the communal aspects of morality, acknowledging, of course, that this community is not merely synchronous, but in its own self-understanding has been continuous across Christian history beginning with our first parents. The monastic tradition from which Langland's most dominant influences stem is that which is "less psychologically oriented and more closely rooted in the liturgy and Bible than the

⁷ Ibid.

later monasticism.”⁸ Each section begins with the Latin of a scriptural or liturgical text, adding another layer of liturgical narrative to the multiple narratives already in place. This monastic tradition focused heavily upon a “notion of perfection, not only to the realms of being, or society, and of self, but also to the problem of the realm of history.”⁹ That *The Abbaye of the Holy Ghost* juxtaposes the moral narrative of the individual soul with the Biblical narrative presupposes this tradition and, inasmuch as this text can be shown to overlap with *Piers*, it also supports our contentions about the communal nature of Langland’s conscience.

I would present a further comparison to substantiate this observed overlap, that of an attack on Conscience common to both *Piers* and *The Abbaye*. Further on in the text, through personified virtues and vices, that the abbey founded on Conscience is far from impervious to the machinations of the tempter, whose daughters are as able as the virtues to enter the abbey: “The fyrste doughter pryde / the other was envye / the thyerde false demynge [judgement] / the fourth fleshly lust. Thyse foure wenchis by counsell of the devil theyr fader came to noye this abbay so [that] nyght and daye in soule the worse rest they have.”¹⁰ Passus XX describes a strikingly similar attack on the personified Conscience led by the Antichrist. Grace, that is, the personification of the Holy Spirit, warns Conscience, whom he has instated as king, that the “Antecrist and hise al the world shul greve [injure], / And acombre [overwhelm] thee, Conscience, but if Crist thee

⁸ Bloomfield, 100.

⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰ *The Abbaye of the Holy Ghost*.

helpe.”¹¹ The attack commences, and Conscience finds himself assaulted by the same personifications of Pride, Lechery, and Envy as in the monastic text, as well as by Hypocrisy, Presumption, and others. These foes operate in large part by corrupting and equipping friars, a narrative move that aligns compellingly with the established analogies between the *abbey* (monastic life), the individual soul, and community morality. Bloomfield has already treated at length the way in which the friars as the main recipients of Langland’s wrath substantiate these analogies, and I defer this matter to him.¹²

Thus, it remains for us to continue with the implications of the Antichrist’s attack, about which a couple of necessary points must be made. First, the attack on Conscience involves his fallibility. The dire straits are illustrated with this threat: “And thanne shal Pride be Pope and prynce of Holy Chirche, / Coveitise and Unkyndenesse Cardinals hym to lede.”¹³ The highest echelons of the religious life, it would seem, are threatened by these vices, whose attacks are duplicitous and subtle, deceiving the vulnerable Conscience. Presumption and Kill-Love, the emissaries of Pride himself, threaten Conscience and his community, saying “That Conscience shal noight knowe by Contricion / Ne by Confession who is Cristene or hethene,” and that Conscience about the merchant who deals with money shall not know “Wheither he wyne with right, with wrong or with usure.”¹⁴ This passage aligns with two of the most prominent themes addressed so far, contrition in sacramental confession, and monetary gain. The role of the Conscience in the sacrament of confession, that sacrament which for Langland and

¹¹ XIX.220-221.

¹² Bloomfield, 45.

¹³ XIX.224-25.

¹⁴ XIX. 350-53.

his contemporaries is necessary for the salvation of the individual and for community holiness, is under threat: friars are willing to sell confessions and consequently, citizens are being shriven without contrition. To be unable to tell a citizen of the city of God from the city of the world—a lack of that discernment which, as we have seen, is proper to Conscience (for, indeed, Conscience is where “Christ shall know that you love Him”)—would devastate Holy Church and her Unity. Furthermore, not only does Conscience lose his ability to judge true from false confession, but he is also deceived entirely by the designs of those who worship Mede. The same Mede (in the sense of disordered love for monetary gain enabled by the profit economy) whom he earlier denounced is now sneaking into his divinely sanctioned society, and the implication is that he may, if these threats come to fruition, be rendered silent about the matters relating to socio-economic structures and the morality thereof.

Another overlap between the texts comes in the respective responses to the attacks of Satan or his emissary the Antichrist. In *The Abbaye of the Holy Ghost*, The abbess Charyte, who represents the soul’s goodwill, responds with an alarm and the faculty known as Dyscrecion calls for the interior community to kneel and sing a hymn, *Veni creator spiritus*, just as Conscience himself does in Passus XIX of *Piers*, albeit in response to different events.¹⁵ “Discretion” in ME usage was “the faculty of discerning,” and appears in the c. 1384 Wycliff Bible, where it is defined as the “verry knowynge,” that is, the true or reliable knowledge with regard to something.¹⁶ Recall that Conscience says explicitly that he is formed by Kind Wit in Passus III—the concept of Kind Wit in

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John A. Simpson, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), “Discretion,” (Def. 2).

Piers, as Quirk has articulated, being that of the natural reason common to animals and humans alike, and distinct from infallible divine reason.¹⁷ It is more complicated than this though: Kind Wit is equated with “kind knowing” in Passus VII and is both cousin and confessor to Scripture.¹⁸ Concisely, as Quirk has put it:

These two terms [kind wit~wit] are an attempt to represent the unity of and at the same time the distinction between the *vis cogitativa* (which corresponds to the *vis aestimativa* in animals) and the *ratio particularis*; they conveniently express these two aspects of the same faculty.¹⁹

The former terms refer respectively to the perception abilities of animals and humans, and come from Thomas Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Sentences* as well as other standard treatises on perception theory, the expanse of which is too great to address fully at this time.²⁰ The point, though, remains that conscience, as a fallible communal entity parallel to the fallible individual entity, may call upon the aid of the divine as the individual can.

The overlap in terms between a concept of “discretion” that functions in the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, as that which is a faculty of discernment, and Kind Wit, Conscience’s teacher, gives credence to the supposition that the allegorical personification of Conscience describes a faculty that can be informed, threatened, and, quite possibly, wrong, if not properly defended. The implications would be that the common sense of justice could be entirely wrong if assailed by vices and corruption long enough. This text, *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, though composed slightly later than *Piers*, reveals the devotional streams running through the late fourteenth-century English

¹⁷ Quirk, “Kind Wit and Inwit,” 183.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁰ Jörg Alejandro Tellkamp, “Vis aestimatiua and vis cogitatiua in Thomas Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Sentences*,” *The Thomist*, Vol. 74, No 4, Oct, 2012, 611-12.

Church, and accordingly, serves as a useful lens through which to understand Langland's influences. Indeed, this text clearly supports the sense of Witness in the common Conscience in *Piers*, that is, it supports that at least part of Conscience's complex character is flavored by monastic influences, and serves more as the *place* where the "commons" must reject battle vice and temptation in all its subtlety and cling to virtue, lest it be tricked.

Authoritative Lawgiver

A repetition changed slightly from the Prologue to Passus XV gives considerable evidence to the assertion that Conscience in the community has more of a lawgiving function than it does in the interior community. The society pictured in the prologue is that which the "the Kyng and the Commune and Kynde Wit" brought into being law and justice,²¹ but later in Passus XV, this same triad is transformed into a quartet of "knyghthod and kynde wit, and the commune and conscience."²² A brief digression is necessary to shed light upon this transformation. As Bloomfield has noted in his deliberation on this passage,

[The King] is not merely Edward III and the situation is not merely the tangled political events of 1376 and 1377, but rather the *rex Justus* and the new or reformed age to which history was tending. [The] "communes" is not the House of Commons but the community in general or common weal. [The] *communitas*, the whole society, provides the basis and sanction for the king's rule. The good king...supported by the nobility and the clergy, and counseled by practical reason, sets up the ideal commonwealth in which each class will have its proper role to play"²³

²¹ P.121-22.

²² XV.551.

²³ Bloomfield, 109.

This can be best understood through the standard societal vision to which Langland subscribed. The word justice ought not carry with it any of the baggage of the modern Western democracy, even for all of its good. For Langland, a “conservative radical,” the societal ideal was one of *status*, with each of the three classes or “estates” performing their respective and complementary duties: “In effect, it is Plato’s ideal of the just society transformed by Christianity and in particular by monastic philosophy.”²⁴ The tri-partite scheme “was divided into the religious, the lords temporal, and workers,” and Langland’s ideal for this scheme “implied that the religious would spiritually sustain, the knights would defend, and the workers would materially support society.”²⁵ Accordingly, justice would be found in the right relationships between classes, with each class paying what it owes to the others, or so Bloomfield contends.²⁶ As I have argued in the previous chapter, justice also seems to hinge upon the virtuous practice of individuals within the fast-encroaching market economy, that is, on their rejection of Medea and her accompanying vices, and the refusal to forfeit the moral goods of traditional socio-economic patterns despite changing structures. Furthermore, as I will argue in the final pages of this chapter, justice also depends upon the holiness of the society and the progress of its journey toward perfection. That is to say, *redde quod debes* cannot be reduced to the relationships between the classes in that it is more of apocalyptic concept which carries with it conceptions of the treasury of graces and the path of perfection for the Pilgrim Church.

²⁴ Ibid., 46.

²⁵ Ibid., 104.

²⁶ Ibid., 104.

It is Anima, the Christian soul who taught the dreamer about the interior psychological faculties, who also speaks about what is wrong with society and what ought to be done to bring about just authority structures. He reminisces idealistically of a time when men loved God and morals:

How thei defouled hir flesh, forsoke hir owene wille,
Fer fro kyth and fro kyn yvele yclothed yeden,
Baddely ybedded, no book but conscience,
Ne no richesse but the roode to rejoisse hem inne.

[How they mortified their flesh, forsook their own wills,
Went poorly clad far from their families
Sleeping uncomfortably with no book but conscience,
Nor any riches but the cross to rejoice themselves in.]²⁷

And the result “was plentee and pees amonges poore and riche.”²⁸ We see once more the image of the “book of Conscience” read by the individual that bears witness to the state of his own soul. By contrast, the current times in which persons are impervious to the state of their own morality are characterized most predominantly by avarice and rejection of religion:

[The noble] Is reverenced er the roode, receyved for the worthier
Than Cristes cros that overcam deeth and dedly synne.
And now is werre and wo, and whoso why asketh--
For coveitise after cros; the croune stant in golde.
Bothe riche and religious, that roode thei honoure
That in grotes is ygrave and in gold nobles.

[The noble is honored above the cross, received as more valuable
Than Christ’s cross that overcame death and deadly sin.
And now there is war and woe, and would you ask why?
Because of covetousness after the cross; the crown stamped in gold.
Both the rich and the religious—the cross they honor is the one
that is engraved on grotes and gold nobles.]²⁹

²⁷ XV.532-535.

²⁸ XV. 536.

²⁹ XV.538-543.

Anima's wrath is most directly aimed at the emerging class of lay clerics, of which Langland himself was a member, that represent most directly the lay state of life and the community's departure from holy life. He, with the text of the Magnificat, "*Deposuit potentes de sede &c.*" threatens their demise as enacted by the God of justice.³⁰ This justice, he asserts, should come about through this authority paradigm:

If knyghthod and kynde wit, and the commune and conscience
Togideres love leelly, leveth it wel, ye bisshopes—
The lordshipe of londes [lese ye shul for evere]

[If knighthood and Kind Wit, and the Commons and Conscience
Together love virtuously, trust this well, you bishops—
You shall lose lordship over your lands forever.]³¹

What then, may we say regarding the transfer of authority from "King, Commons, and Kind Wit," to "knyghthod and kind wit, and the commune and conscience"? Kind Wit and the Commons have been addressed already, and remain constant. This foreshadows Conscience's kingship in Passus XIX, and, if kingship is identified with the *rex Justus* of the coming age, it seems that Conscience is in some sense identified with this also as authority on justice.

Two brief examples I would bring to mind. As noted in the previous chapter, Conscience has considerable power to call out the ills created by the profit economy, as evident in his denunciation of and refusal to marry Lady Mede, and he is given, if not ultimate authority, considerable authority to do so. He calls upon Reason as his supporter, but in the concluding statements of the dispute, the King asserts that he would henceforth require Conscience's presence in his decision-making process. Thus we see

³⁰ XV. 550.

³¹ XV. 551-552.

that the Lawgiving functions of Conscience are exercised primarily in community. It should also be noted that Conscience's authority is not readily accepted in a society that clings to mede. When Conscience attempts to compel the community to pay what they owe prior to receiving communion, the Brewer, symbolic in some sense of the man consumed by profit, tells Conscience that he has no jurisdiction over lay life; that is, he ought to return to the royal court. And thus we see that Conscience, who ought to exercise authority in the society's laws, as well as in common life and practice, is rejected and attacked. Furthermore, in Passus XX, when Unity is under the attack of the Antichrist, Conscience takes a lead in her defense and speaks with authority:

'I conseilte,' quod Conscience tho, 'cometh with me, ye fooles,
Into Unite Holy Chirche, and holde we us there.
And crye we to Kynde that he come and defende us
Fooles fro thise fendes lymes, for Piers love the Plowman.
And crye we on al the comune that thei come to Unitee,
And there abide and bikere ayeins Beliales children.'

['I advise,' said Conscience, 'that all of you sinners come with me
Into Unity Holy Church and we will hold ourselves there.
And let us cry to Kynde that He might come and defend us
Sinners from those abrasive fiends, for the love of Piers the Plowman.
And let us cry out to all the commons that they come into Unity
And abide there and war against Belial's children.']*³²

A few lines later, the poet depicts him standing with Kynde, the image of the Father, holding tightly to His hand and waiting to see who would return to the Church and who would betray her.³³ All of these examples substantiate the claim that though Conscience both interiorly and exteriorly is in some sense communal, in its exterior community, it

³² XX.74-79.

³³ XX.104ff.

takes upon more of a scholastic authority figure capable of judgment and action as informed by the divine wisdom.

Conscience and the Apocalyptic Vision

If indeed we may say that Conscience has authority in the common moral life, ostensibly more authority that it does in the individual soul, being, as I contend, fundamentally communal and co-operative, for what does he ultimately use this authority? In the previous chapter, I argued that he powerfully denounces one sense of Mede and defends the common profit against the encroaching powers of finance, but positively, towards what end does he push the society as king? In the final passus, with Conscience given authority as king by Grace, that is, the Holy Spirit, and Piers given authority as Grace's emissary, both to whom Conscience is yet beholden, Conscience envisions Apocalypse and Incarnation. He calls the community to the sacraments, and to obey the dictums of moral law prior to reception. For this call, he encounters substantial opposition. Hence, let us consider the streams of apocalyptic thought that fed into the spring of the Langlandian spirituality, as well as the treasury of graces that formed his vocabulary and spiritual imagination.

As argued in the second chapter, the individual's conscience is a faculty fundamental in his journey to Truth as the place in which contrition draws him to sacramental confession, the corollary for the community aspect of conscience would be societal repentance and pursuit of holiness. That is, journey to Truth in a political sense might be more aptly described as apocalypse, being the transformation of the unfaithful Church into the beautiful, holy, and perfect Bride of Christ. Furthermore, where many streams of religious and devotional writing in the latter half of the fourteenth century

(Julian of Norwich, for example), center heavily upon mysticism, that is, meditation upon the life and Passion of Christ, Langland's focus is more pressingly upon the kingship of Christ, and the transformation of society from the city of the world to the city of God.³⁴ Langland's application of Christian perfection to historical narrative is not entirely unfounded, however, and it shall be useful for us to consider some of his contemporaries and their thoughts on these matters. As Bloomfield has it:

Although in the Judeo-Christian tradition the notion of perfection was always more than a metaphysical idea and embraced society as well as the individual, in the later Middle Ages, the political and social aspects of perfection were heavily stressed, perhaps as a response to the rising age of individualism. The great sense of expectance that is characteristic of the last part of the Middle Ages... was molded and stimulated by the concept of perfection, the perfect man and perfect society.³⁵

The most obvious example is Joachim of Flora, a monastic writer who divided history into three epochs respectively relating to the persons of the Trinity. The first was the time preceding Christ's birth, that of the Old Testament correlating to the Father. The second epoch, the equivalent amount of time following Christ's birth, appropriately referred to as the Age of the Son. This, according to Joachim, would be followed by an age of the Holy Spirit, one of monks.³⁶ Marjorie Reeves' work on Joachim declares this interpretation too simple to do justice to Joachim, but she does concede that "although Joachim certainly believed in the equality of the Persons, he did see the work of the Third Person as the culmination of history in the third *status*."³⁷ History was moving toward perfection. Some of his apocalyptic thought, though rejected doctrinally by the Church,

³⁴ Bloomfield, 100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁷ Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, (London: SPKC, 1976), 6.

permeated monastic spirituality, particularly among the Spiritual Franciscans, for whom “society must be made perfect before individuals could be perfected in this world [and] the apocalyptic [was] a political and social phenomenon.”³⁸ The perfection evident in Scripture that individuals are impelled to pursue was not a merely individual pursuit for the medieval monastic—Apocalypticism on this view does not mean necessarily the coming of Christ to renew the world as much as it denotes the transformation of the current society into the holy perfection of the Kingdom of God.

A brief aside for clarity is necessary here: Two ostensibly contradictory emphases among prominent Langland scholars have emerged in the course of this study. Bloomfield contends that *Piers* can only be read as an apocalyptic poem, given that it departs so considerably from the contemporary mystics like Julian of Norwich. David Aers, Conrad Pepler, Janet Coleman, and others previously cited, have chosen to read the work with far more emphasis given to individual perfection or salvation.³⁹ That is, they emphasize the implications for individual conversion and salvation over the historical/societal perfection upon which Bloomfield’s argument centers. I find that the combination of these interpretations, while apparently contradictory in emphasis, reveals complementary aspects of Conscience. Whether one is disposed to read *Piers* with an apocalyptic or a mystical lens, Conscience is still a communal entity. In the second chapter’s considerations that leaned heavily toward individual salvation, following Aers and Coleman most prominently, we saw that the individual’s conscience must be cooperative in nature, and now, in this final chapter, we shall see that Conscience as an

³⁸ Bloomfield, 99.

³⁹ Aers, *Sin and Salvation*, and Pepler, *The English Religious Heritage*. Aers’ work includes comparison to Julian of Norwich as demonstrative of the mystical tradition from which Langland draws.

objective entity shared among the members of the community, though it be more of a Lawgiver, is that which has both authority and responsibility within the community.

This aside, if indeed apocalyptic consciousness is a prominent influence on Langland, through the Spiritual Franciscans if not Joachim or other apocalyptic thinkers directly, how might this inform the way in which Conscience's authority is exercised?

Bloomfield points out that Langland's most acerbic criticisms are of these same Franciscan friars:

Because they are potentially monks and Christians on the highest level of perfection, [Langland] makes the reform of the friars one of the crucial issues in the reform of the world... Their corruption is the pattern of all Christian, and especially ecclesiastical, corruption.⁴⁰

The final image we see of Conscience going in search of Piers represents partially the destruction of Pride, and partially, the necessity of providing for the friars who would flatter men because of need and thus attack the Unity that Conscience fights for.⁴¹ If indeed, as has been contended, the monks are symbolic of the Church more widely, and of individual souls by analogy, that Conscience exercises his authority to fight for them is indicative of the sort of holiness to which he calls the society and the Church. Etienne Gilson's articulation of the conception of the apocalyptic vision, as Bloomfield has recorded, is striking and beautiful, and I find it beneficial to repeat here given its insightfulness:

The Gospel had not only promised to the just a kind of individual beatitude, but it has announced to them entrance into a kingdom, that is to say a society, of the just, united by the bonds of their common beatitude. The preaching of Christ had

⁴⁰ Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse*, 45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

been early understood as the promise of a perfect social life and the constitution of this society had been seen as the final purpose of His incarnation.⁴²

The idea that a perfect society, the holiest state of the Bride of Christ, might have been regarded by Langland and his contemporaries as the final end of the Incarnation, explains why Conscience would necessarily be communal and why the Bride's holiness would be so worth defending. Conscience as an individualistic faculty would have power to direct a human toward holiness, perhaps, depending, of course, on the weight one gives to either of its aspects (Witness and Lawgiver). Conscience as a communal faculty, however, would have power (as both Witness and Lawgiver) to influence the society to the pursuit of holiness as its King. In the subsequent discussion, I will reflect upon the economy which he proposes for this society, and what implications it has for the perfection of the Christian community.

The Mede of Conscience in the Economy of Grace

In contrast to his denunciation of Mede, a key aspect of the apocalyptic vision which Langland presents is the transformation of the economy of greed to that of grace. Remember, if you will, that Conscience denounces Mede in scathing terms, and that Mede bore a number of meanings related to profit, wage-labor, and temporal value. As was briefly mentioned, though not explored at length, it bore a second, perhaps eschatological layer, that of the value of deeds in the heavenly economy. Consider the following secondary definition given by the MED:

Moral consequence or spiritual reward; requital, retribution, just deserts; a favor or kindness; benefit or advantage; also, the ultimate reward of vice or virtue;

⁴² Etienne Gilson. *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale*. Etudes de la philosophie medievale, (Paris: 1944), cited in Bloomfield, 4.

theol. grace, merit... of God, Christ: ben~, to be a (person's) Savior, be the salvation (of someone); ben in ~, be in a state of grace.⁴³

Compare this to the speech of Conscience regarding the “two manere of medes.”⁴⁴ The second sort of mede is that mentioned in the previous chapter, the sort of mede that is associated with personal profit and avarice, that which the Lady Mede represents. The first sort, however, which God granted in his bliss, is that characteristic of the merit David describes in the fifteenth Psalm and which Langland places into the mouth of Conscience: “*Domine, quis habitabit in tabernaculo tuo?* / Lord, who shal wonye in thi wones with thyne holy seintes / Or resten in thyne holy hilles?”⁴⁵ The response is an expansion on “*Qui ingreditur sine macula et operatur iusticiam,*”:

Tho that entren of o colour and of one wille,
And han ywroght werkes with right and with reson,
And he that useth noght the lyf of usurie
And enformeth povere men and pursueth truthe:
Qui pecuniam fuam non dedis ad usuram, et munera super inflocentem &c.
And alle that helpen the innocent and holden with the rightfulle,
Withouten mede doth hem good and the truthe helpeth--
Swiche manere men, my lord, shul have this firste mede
Of God at a gret nede, whan thei gon hennes.⁴⁶

This sort of Mede uses the same economic metaphor that permeates the Bible and early church exegesis regarding the treasury of merit as it pertains to just social action.

Charity, corporal and spiritual works of mercy, just financial practice, defense of the innocent, and freedom from greed earn one reward in the eyes of the Lord. Mede in this

⁴³ Robert E. Lewis, ed. *Middle English Dictionary*, “Mede,” (Def.2a).

⁴⁴ III.231.

⁴⁵ III.234-36.

⁴⁶ III.237-245.

sense is comprised of the good works by which we demonstrate our love to God, as Christ's own commands dictate.

This same alignment of the corporal works of mercy and other acts of religion (for it is none other than Conscience who calls the community to Mass and Confession, forces the dreamer to kneel at Pentecost, and leads the community in singing *Veni creator spiritus*) with justice and reward, of which Conscience in *Piers* seems to be the defender, is supported by another contemporary work of considerable influence throughout fourteenth-century Europe, the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. This work was a pastoral manual training preachers how to read salvation history typologically, and each Gospel story was juxtaposed with three or more Old Testament or classical prefigurations of the Gospel event or parable.⁴⁷ One manuscript from the 1390s in Germany proves illuminating to Langland, for though he would not likely have ever seen this particular manuscript, he perhaps would have had access to something similar, given that it circulated widely throughout Europe in the fourteenth century, and influenced the laity through the preachers who read it and committed the typologies to memory. The chapter that depicts the final judgment shares some overlap with Conscience's words about sin and merit both in response to Mede and in his final speeches. Consider the following passage that interprets the parable of the minas:

*Qui tradidit servis suis Christus minas ut ex eis lucrarentur...
Et ab uno quoque minam suam ex lucro repeciit
Qui multum adquisierat illum multum remuneravit
Qui autem minus illi mercedem minorem donavit.
Illum vero qui minam sine lucro restituit -*

⁴⁷ Wilson, Adrian, and Joyce Lancaster Wilson. *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis, 1324-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Non contentus in hoc pro lucro neglecto punivit.
Hoc modo Christus in die iudicii iudicabit
Quia secundum quantitatem lucri vnumquemquam remunerabit.
Qui autem nihil fecerit non solum nihil recipiet
Set etiam suam negligenciam in inferno perpetuo luget.
Non enim satis est hoc quod homo peccata dimittat
Set oportet etiam quod bona opera faciet.
Austerus iudex metet vis non seminavit
Set etiam a paganis quaeret bona opera quibus nullus predicavit.
Quanto magis Christianis vult bona opera extorquere
Quibus tot salutaria documenta dignatus etiam exhibere.

[This man, Christ, handed minas to his servants that they might make a profit from them. And when they paid him back, they (the minas) might be rendered to him from the profit...And from each one he takes back his coin out of the profit. He who had submitted much has returned that much. He who, on the other hand, (submitted) less gave a small wage to Him. Truly, he who paid back the coin without profit—The man, not pleased with him, punished [the servant] for the profit having been neglected. In this way will Christ judge on the day of judgment, because he will remunerate each one according to the quantity of profit. He who, moreover, will have done nothing will not merely receive nothing, but also lament his negligence in perpetual fire. For He is not satisfied that man abandons his sins, but it is fitting, also, that he do good works. The austere judge cuts off by force he who did not produce, but he also seeks good works from the pagans to whom nothing made (it) known. How much more he wants to exhort good works from Christians to whom he even deigned to show so many salvific signs.]⁴⁸

Granted, this parable in particular is not the primary one from which Langland draws.

Redde quod debes comes directly from the parable of the unmerciful servant, being the words of the servant who was forgiven a greater debt to his own debtor who owed less.

These indeed, are the words of Conscience to the persons present at Mass: they may only receive communion once they have “Or as ofte as thei hadde nede, / tho that hadde ypaied / To Piers pardon the Plowman, *redde quod debes*.”⁴⁹ Beyond that, though, I find the obvious economic metaphors for good works consistent across both works, and the

⁴⁸ *Speculum humanae salvationis*, Oklahoma City, Green Collection MS 321 (s. xiv), 43V.

⁴⁹ XIX. 391-93.

Speculum thus illuminating for the holiness to which Conscience, in whatever capacity he may, calls the community.

Note the logic of the *Speculum* text: it is fitting and just that the Christian do good works. This is duty to our God, not simply a whim or preference for the scrupulous conscience. Charity and works of mercy, the acts of religion, are not matters of preference, to which some are called and others not, but rather acts of the common conscience as a matter of justice. The language, following the Biblical metaphor, is predominantly economic. *Lucri* provides an excellent example. In English, it might be most literally rendered “lucre,” with the semantic field including such phrases as “filthy lucre,” implying the insidious sort of mede against which Conscience rails. Alternately, though, it can be translated “profit,” as I have chosen to translate it—this translation allows for the negative connotation that it might have for modern readers, but also leaves room for a positive sense, the same of which Conscience spoke in Passus III.

Remunerabit, mercedem (of which Conscience does in fact speak in the C-text), and *extorquere* could be similarly rendered into English with a negative connotation by merely utilizing cognates, but it seems that in Latin and Middle English, these words were multivalent.

Saint Bonaventure’s exegesis of the Lucan passage described in the *Speculum* (Luke 19:12ff) reveals overlap with *Piers* and lends greater proof to the supposition that the economic metaphors of Scripture and the Biblical Tradition are morally neutral and may have a number of layers. In reference to verse thirteen, Bonaventure comments that there are three kinds of trades in which the servant of the king may participate, *equivalent*, in which “temporal goods are exchanged for temporal goods,” *evil*, in which

“spiritual goods are exchanged for spiritual goods by means of simony,” and finally, the *best* sort of trade, through which “a person gives spiritual goods so that he may garner spiritual goods.”⁵⁰ Immediately this final trade brings to mind the *Piers* poet’s structure of Do-Wel, Do-Bet, and Do-Best. Beyond that though, this best trade, “is good and pleasing to God,”⁵¹ according to Isaiah 23:18, which tells of a wage sanctified to the Lord,⁵² and Proverbs 31:18, which speaks of the good tradeswoman.⁵³ Conscience calls the community to trade spiritual goods, in a sense, in Passus XIX, upon recognizing the threat of Pride and the Antichrist: general repentance, refusal to sin again, “bedes biddynge [saying prayers]... pilgrimage... pryve penaunce...penyes delynge [almsgiving]” are the deeds of spiritual merit through which “Unitee Holy Chirche [might be made to stand in] holynesse.”⁵⁴ Conscience feels fortified during the season of Lent, when there was the greatest amount of spiritual capital, so to speak, and he leads the Church with joy to Easter. Only later, as these spiritual goods diminish, is he attacked beyond recovery.

Consider, in closing this section, the connection between religion and justice: Conscience has authority to speak justice into society and to call persons to religion as a

⁵⁰ Saint Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Vol III*. Robert J. Karris, O.F.M., Trans., (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2004), 1814.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1814.

⁵² Isaiah 23:18: “*et erunt negotiatio eius et mercedes eius sanctificatae Domino non condentur neque reponentur quia his qui habitaverint coram Domino erit negotiatio eius ut manducent in saturitatem et vestiantur usque ad vetustatem* [Her merchandise and her wages will be holy to the Lord. It will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who dwell before the Lord.]” (VULG; ESV)

⁵³ Proverbs 31:18: “*teth gustavit quia bona est negotiatio eius non extinguetur in nocte lucerna illius* [She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.]” (VULG; ESV)

⁵⁴ XIX.378-82.

part of that. We see the same idea in the Mass when it we, like Langland would have said, say in the Preface, “*Vere dignum et iustum est...nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere*. [It is truly right and just...always and everywhere to give You thanks.]” Likewise, Saint Thomas’ writing when he speaks of religion as a theological virtue associated with justice suggests something similar:

Religion...denotes properly a relation to God. For it is He to Whom we ought to be bound as to our unfailing principle; to Whom also our choice should be resolutely directed as to our last end; and Whom we lose when we neglect Him by sin, and should recover by believing in Him and confessing our faith...[Religion] has other acts, which it produces through the medium of the virtues which it commands, directing them to the honor of God... Accordingly ‘to visit the fatherless and widows in their tribulation’ is an act of religion as commanding, and an act of mercy as eliciting; and ‘to keep oneself unspotted from this world’ is an act of religion as commanding, but of temperance or of some similar virtue as eliciting.⁵⁵

Practicing justice, then, in a society, is not a matter of charitable works for the sake of charitable works, but as a matter of the virtues commanded by the just practice of religion. Charity was not merely a matter of the individual conscience feeling some amount of remorse for his affluence and attempting to counter that by works of mercy, but rather, a duty under the authority of justice and the religion associated with justice. Returning to the fifty-fifth psalm that Conscience cites in his definition of Mede, justice involves a rejecting usury, works of mercy, help for the poor, and other social acts deserving of spiritual reward. The connection that Conscience makes between mede, justice, and the acts proper to religion becomes clear, and this same doctrine he defends and preaches most bravely in the final passus as the key to defeating the Antichrist and his attackers. That said, it seems that by the end of the poem, the spiritual bank, with its

⁵⁵ *ST* II-II.81

defense of prayer and works of mercy, has been depleted by corruption, and it is this that we shall consider in concluding the argument.

Conscience in the Community of the Holy Trinity

At this point, it is tempting to read the final lines of the poem as a cry of despair: if the morality of a society has degenerated to such an extent that Pride, Presumption, Flattery, and Greed, through the designs of the Antichrist, may assault both the individual and the common Conscience and thus weasel their way into a society purported to be the completion of the Incarnation, the City of God brought into earthly fullness, what hope has that pilgrim city of salvation? If conscience is communal, as we have said, the place at which the individual works out his salvation, and the faculty which calls the church corporately away from the sin that would mortally harm her and towards the works that would sanctify her, what hope have we if it is destroyed? It would not merely be destroyed, either, but corrupted, and in its corruption have eternal and calamitous consequences. The destruction of the conscience in the modern sense, that is, of a particular individual's internal Lawgiver independent of communal implications, would be tragic. To whatever extent one believes moral deeds, as dictated by Conscience, impact salvation, to that extent he would also acknowledge that such a destruction of the individual conscience would entail eternal consequences. The grief at our loss of a single soul would be overwhelming. How much more, then would we grieve the loss of an entire generation? The destruction of Conscience as communal entity, which belongs as much to the church and to the wider society as to the Christian, would have infinitely greater loss and grief, not only in the temporal realm—through the proliferation of the

vices of pride and greed amplified by existing socio-economic structures—but, more crucially, in eternity.

Lewis' well-known words in "The Weight of Glory" regarding the necessity of seeing individuals as "immortal horrors or everlasting splendours," not "*ordinary* people," or "mere mortal[s]" gain new force with the potentiality of seeing it applied to an entire Church.⁵⁶ Langland's presentation of conscience as communal, with the moral self in porous connection with the moral community, would thereby amplify this picture. One cannot simply look at an individual and with his mind's eye imagine her eternal destiny—one would have to recognize that each person is closely and inseparably tied to the others. For the despairing poet, his apocalyptic vision is one of immortal horror. Thus, he, through the "dreamer," cries for Grace. Conscience, the danger to whom is overwhelming, thereafter calls for the aid of his divine community, that of the Holy Trinity, and in this we have the key to whatever hope the poet may leave himself and the reader.

We have said that Conscience exists in relationship to the interior community of the Trinity, in the person of Christ in the Eucharist, the Father through Truth, and the Holy Spirit called Grace. Thus it seems that the only possible redemption for the inevitable demise of Unity and ultimate destruction of Conscience, the virtues, and Contrition, is the relationship of Conscience to the Holy Trinity.⁵⁷ Truly, Conscience's

⁵⁶ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory." Sermon, Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, June 8, 1942.

⁵⁷ A.V.C. Schmidt, notes in *Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 285, 351.

cry for Grace to which the dreamer awakens devastates the man, be he poet or reader, who “seeks first the kingdom,” so to speak:

‘By Crist!’ quod Conscience tho, ‘I wole bicom a pilgrim,
And walken as wide as the world lasteth,
To seken Piers the Plowman, that Pryde myghte destruye...
Now Kynde me avenge,
And sende me hap and heele, til I have Piers the Plowman!
And siththe he gradde after Grace, til I gan awake.

[‘Dear Christ!’ said Conscience ‘I will become a pilgrim
And walk to the farthest ends of the earth,
To seek Piers the Plowman, that he might destroy Pride...
Kynde avenge me now,
And send me good health and luck, until I have found Piers the Plowman!’
And this cry after Grace multiplied until I then awoke]⁵⁸

Conscience calls for Kynde, whom we are to regard as the Father, to avenge him in the manner of the Scriptures, as he goes in search of the image of the Son, Piers the Plowman. Granted, Piers’ character is considerably more complex than a simple equivocation with the Son. Referring to the general analogy governing the Plowman, Bloomfield describes the harvest as “paradise or salvation, and those who tend it lead man to his proper end.” Thus, “Christ is the supreme harvester or plowman, and all plowmen to some extent are symbols of his true follower—priests, religious, or even laymen who are creating or bringing in the harvest...the Plowman is both the ecclesiastic and eschatological image.”⁵⁹ In other words, Conscience’s pilgrimage in pursuit of Piers the Plowman describes his relationship to the second person of the Trinity not at this point through the Eucharist or mystical contemplation (though Conscience does impel individuals, namely Will, to pursue the Son through the meditation on the Passion and the

⁵⁸ XX.381-387.

⁵⁹ Bloomfield, 106.

reception of the Eucharist), but rather, through the pursuit of the eschatological Christ—the perfection of the Church into which Christ brings His own Kingdom. This apocalyptic vision can only be accomplished by means of the Holy Spirit, Grace, to whom Conscience cries as the dreamer awakens. The tones of *Veni creator spiritus* in which Conscience led the community at Pentecost resound beneath his final prayer, and perhaps echo in the dreamer’s mind as he rouses.

The form of the dream allegory in combination with the fact that the dreamer moves in and out of the dream state with considerably more frequency as the poem progresses suggests a movement toward objective reality. Dream allegories in medieval literature are not merely fantasies but have substantive connections to objective reality. Though a full explication of this issue is beyond the scope proper to this study, suffice it to say that the Biblical, Classical, and other pagan literary traditions are rich enough of prophetic, philosophical, and apocalyptic dream allegory that averring a strong connection between the dream state and reality in *Piers* is not unfounded.⁶⁰ That the dreamer awakens could suggest a fusion of the narrative character Will with the dreamer, including all his psychological faculties. The dreamer, brought back into reality, would awaken with the “ringing,” as Schmidt has rendered it, of Conscience’s cry for Grace in his ears, requiring of him a supreme act of spiritual courage: now in possession of the communal Conscience, that which is a combination of the individual moral record, and that faculty which by rights must call the community to radical socio-economic and religious perfection, the awakened Will must join with him in his pilgrimage. Such a pilgrimage would be towards Truth, towards personal, societal, and ecclesial perfection,

⁶⁰ A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 1-18 and 111ff.

and further into the community of the Holy Trinity. The pilgrim, persevering in patience and hope in the face of the greatest horrors for a lover of holy splendor, would work out his salvation in the economy of grace. That Conscience is communal is of paramount importance, but can never be more important than the potentiality of the in-breaking of Grace, and it is for this that I pray with Conscience in conclusion:

*Veni Creator Spiritus
mentes tuorum visita,
imple superna gratia,
quae tu creasti pectora.*

Come, O Creator Spirit blest!
And in our souls take up Thy rest;
Come with Thy grace and heavenly aid,
To fill the hearts which Thou hast made.

CONCLUSION

The end goal of this project, as stated in the introduction, was to prove that conscience in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is communal in nature, a moral faculty that intrinsically and inextricably links the individual to his surrounding community. Given *Piers*' engagement with moral, theological, and socio-economic topics, I have endeavored to prove this definition of *conscience* by addressing this issue from multiple angles. The first chapter provided a perspective from form, etymology, and the paradigm of the soul: its thesis was that conscience was formed, fallible, and yet authoritative in the moral community by virtue of its relation to the life of the Trinity, and it explored conscience's function as both witness and lawgiver. The second chapter provided another perspective from the angle of the individual—that of the individual's pursuit of salvation within the community. Conscience depicted as a place through which persons must travel in their journey toward Truth, the place at which "Christ will prove truly / that [a man] love[s] the Lord our God above all else," speaks of Conscience's participation in a scheme of salvation that is essentially co-operative, and thus of Conscience's own co-operative nature. The third chapter approached Conscience's denunciation of Lady Mede, and thereby revealed his authority to engage socio-economic matters in defense of justice: he defends traditional moral frameworks in the face of the intensifying profit economy. Finally, the fourth chapter maintained that his kingship over a Christendom under attack reveals his authority to call the community to holiness in an

apocalyptic vision, as well as his innate fallibility and reliance upon the Trinitarian community.

To whatever extent I may have accomplished the stated goal of establishing that Langland's conscience (both in personified form and more general use of the word) is communal, I hope also to have shown implicitly that the way one defines conscience reflects, and perhaps even enables, wider moral and religious frameworks. In other words, conscience as an individualized faculty, in a sense the property of a single person, can enable moral relativism and rejection of moral authority, even within Christianity; by contrast, conscience as a communal entity more accurately reflects the Christian tradition. That its communal nature would require it to be informed by an external source or sources would explain the heavy emphasis that Christian tradition has placed upon moral formation. That conscience might be wrong, formation being absent or inadequate, is a counter to the claims of moral relativism, as well as to the equation of conscience with the Holy Spirit that can enable moral relativism. That conscience can speak into the socio-economic sphere authoritatively by being communal and authoritative would help to warrant the claims of those who fight for shared ideals of goodness and justice with regard to economics, marriage, and work. That conscience might be able to authoritatively call a community to holy life rejects tendencies toward individualism and could potentially enable a renewed pursuit of social justice ("common good") within Christian communities.

On the most important level, though, a communal conscience requires a co-operative understanding of sin, grace, and salvation, one that I firmly believe to be reflected in the scriptures. It counters presumption by saying that the individual ought

not trust his moral reasoning unquestioningly. As the Psalmist writes: “Who can discern his errors? / Declare me innocent from hidden faults, / Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins.”¹ Likewise, a communal conscience reminds the individual that his sin is not without effect upon his neighbor, his community, or successive generations. A communal conscience calls the Church to unite on matters of morality, and (even acknowledging conscience’s potential to be attacked by vice) to speak with authority on social matters knowing that justice is not a private matter. A communal conscience that calls individuals from greed and selfishness to participation in the economy of grace that their merits might be somehow effective, should inspire us to holy life. Finally, a conscience embraced in the community of the Holy Trinity summons Christians to prayer, knowing that only this Divine Community can lead the Pilgrim Church to her perfection in the city of God.

¹ Psalm 19:12-13 (ESV).

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