

Finding Words to Embody Poverty: Continuities and Discontinuities in Word and Image from *Piers Plowman* to Twenty-First-Century Australia

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In writing about concepts of the poor and the experience of poverty in the late middle ages I have become acutely aware of the need, not only to understand medieval reliance on earlier concepts of poverty, but also to evaluate what, in the medieval experience, can shed light on issues surrounding poverty in the twenty-first century. Several contemporary historians have made strong cases for the relevance of what has happened in the past in shaping how we think in the present. Mark Peel, on whose work I shall draw in this essay, agrees with Inga Clendinnen and Janet McCalman, that ‘historians have a particular responsibility to tell “true stories” about the past and the present, stories that tell us where we have been and where we might be going, stories that recognise suffering but also invention and ideas about change.’¹ And a writer with a keen sense of how politics and socio-economics interact, Michael Ignatieff, pleaded many years ago for a language which would create an awareness and a comprehension of human need:

We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty. But we also need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in. We need to see how we live now and we can only see with words and images which leave us no escape into nostalgia for some other time and place.²

In an attempt to avoid ‘an escape into nostalgia’ for the middle ages, and in order to highlight the continuities and discontinuities of word and image related to poverty, I shall use Mark Peel’s important work on contemporary Australian poverty, *The Lowest Rung*, as a modern point of reference for the varied interpretations and representations of poverty and poor people discovered in a range of Middle English texts. The essential difference between my studies and those of Peel is that Peel writes with the intention of effecting change and improvement on behalf of the communities who are the subject of his study whereas my

¹ Mark Peel, *The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty* (Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 175 (hereafter: Peel).

² Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Chatto and Windus, the Hogarth Press, 1983), 141 (hereafter: Ignatieff).

exploration into medieval representations and ways of thinking about poverty and the poor cannot effect change for those people. But it can inform a modern reader and suggest that there are different ways of thinking about poverty and the poor that were obvious to a medieval person but are not immediately obvious today.

The fourteenth-century English poet, Langland, grapples in *Piers Plowman* with the problems of providing words and images which speak to his own time and place. Although the poem is not 'about poverty', Langland has written about the experience of poverty distinguishing at least five differing viewpoints, each of which has a powerful bearing on the spiritual, moral, and social development of the main character, Will, a poor man through whose eyes and voice Langland critiques his society. These views may be summarized as first, that material poverty is the greatest of all evils and a state to be avoided; secondly, that it is a scandal which must be eradicated; thirdly, that riches are a corrupting evil and poverty is liberation from care; fourthly, that poverty is a virtue fundamental to Christian life; lastly, that it can be professed as voluntary Christian poverty in imitation of Christ. The poem follows Will as he lives the experience of poverty, continually brought up short by the contrast between the life of spiritual endeavour that he thinks is proposed ideally and his attempts to live the Christian life in the world, a challenge which is uncompromising in its demand for poverty. As a person who has chosen a life of poverty, Will is led, not to transcend earthly poverty, but to reverse his values and to place poverty as the good. Instead of taking heavenly treasure as the norm to which his life tends, he learns to take having nothing as the norm, in imitation of the poor Christ. This approach to poverty is in some ways similar to the better-known ideal espoused by Francis of Assisi who was determined to avoid all possessions; yet Kenneth Baxter Wolf has shown convincingly that Francis's goal was simply to achieve union with Christ³ whereas I suggest that Will uses the poverty he has chosen to give him solidarity with the poor for whom he learns to work with love. This personal experience of poverty ultimately puts him in a position of strength from which he can work for the reform of society, to establish Christ's kingdom on earth, in this foreshadowing the reforming impulse of modern workers for social justice. By considering this work and that of Mark Peel in the same essay I shall attempt to highlight continuities and discontinuities of word and image related to poverty, even in texts separated by more than five centuries.

Mark Peel has taken on the responsibility of writing true stories about the present. His book documents and assesses interviews with people in three disadvantaged Australian suburbs, Mount Druitt New South Wales, Inala Queensland, and Broadmeadows Victoria. Through painstaking and sensitive interviews Peel discovers that, more than the obvious, material needs of the communities and the individuals who compose them, the fundamental need of these communities is to

³ Kenneth Baxter Wolfe, *The Poverty of Riches: St Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 2003) (hereafter: Wolfe).

be treated with the same respect that is given to those who live in ‘the leafy streets that lie just minutes away’.⁴ Peel argues that the words and images used, for example, by the media and by government regulation, cast the poor in a light that makes them appear ‘other’, different from their contemporary Australian neighbours:

They [the media stories] ma[k]e poverty seem pitiable, rather than something for which we [can] identify causes. Even those stories that [refuse] to see it as self-inflicted still [tend] to imply that poverty [is] inevitable. They also [tend] to portray poor people as ‘trapped’, ‘excluded’ or ‘powerless’, rather than as people who might know something very important about the problems and their solutions.⁵

Peel’s interviewees, by contrast, speak of their efforts to deal with the complexities of welfare and funding agencies, and of their need for a justice that regards them as essentially the same as more wealthy people, and that will consult them as to their perceived needs rather than imposing so-called solutions from above.⁶

Peel’s work deals directly with the need for change arising from justice, and he argues powerfully for the common humanity of his poor to be recognized:

In order to do justice we must reject the fantasy that poverty is deserved. Further, we must have regard for our common humanity. We must insist that if we were in the same situation we would be just as unsure about how to solve our problems. We might make the same mistakes or worse ones.⁷

Ignatieff says something similar – that ‘need’ provides a basis of equality which must be met for all human beings:

What a man needs he does not earn or deserve. He does not have to justify his entitlement, only the extent of his necessity. His entitlement inheres not in his person but in his humanity.⁸

These statements highlight a belief well represented in both biblical and medieval didactic texts, that at ‘ground zero’, in birth and death, human beings are equal in sharing an essential poverty:

*Pouir was þin incomming, So ssal be þin outegoing;*⁹

⁴ Peel, 20.

⁵ Peel, 23.

⁶ Peel quotes Elaine Cummings, then principal of a Mount Druitt primary school: ‘For so long, and still, we have had so many people who come to “save the children”. We’ve had missionaries, we’ve had people come from all sorts of angles, and they’ve come to save the poor people and they’ve come to save the children... We don’t need people to save the children, we just need some bloody good teachers’ (p. 29).

⁷ Peel, 10.

⁸ Ignatieff, 35.

⁹ *Swet ihc hend in Die Kildare-Gedichte: die ältesten mittelenenglischen Denkmäler in anglo-irischer Überlieferung*, ed. W. Heuser, Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik 14 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1904), 81-85, 82.

*Naked we come hider, and bare And pure, swa sal we hethen fare;*¹⁰
and the pragmatic recognition that death is the leveller is common in poetry and visual image:

*Now is he as pore as I; wormys mete is his body.*¹¹

The purpose of such aphorisms is to remind people that how they treat their fellow human beings has a direct bearing on how they will be treated at the Last Judgement. It also provides a salutary warning that fortune is unstable, and that the person who is powerful now may need the assistance of others when falling on hard times.

Peel and his interviewees want such an acceptance of common humanity to inform political decisions about how the poor should be treated. Their many anecdotes about being made to prove they deserve the help available from institutions, their reactions to the frequent accusations that the poor are culpable for their poverty, or that they are adept at rorting the welfare system¹² have resonances in patristic discussions about the deserving and undeserving poor as well as in the medieval practices of charity. Writers as early as St Gregory, St Ambrose and St John Chrysostom express stringent views about the treatment of the poor, and their words became enshrined as authorities in the medieval Code of Canon Law. Chrysostom is vehement in advocating indiscriminate charity:

Quiescamus ab hac absurda curiositate, et diabolica, et peremptoria.... Si vero pro nutrimento postulat, ne in his examines.

(Let us put a stop to this ridiculous, diabolical, peremptory prying.... If someone genuinely asks for food, do not put him to any examination.)¹³

The *Decretum* enumerates the cases when discrimination is to be applied in cases of need. St Ambrose gives ten levels of response to poverty, starting with those closest, kith and kin, and Christians.¹⁴ The texts abound in recommenda-

¹⁰ *The Pricke of Conscience (stimulus conscientiae): a Northumbrian Poem*, ed. R. Morris (Berlin: Asher, 1863), 509.

¹¹ *Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 120 (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1922; reprint 1960), 177-255. The image of Death as the leveller is found in many manuscript illuminations and on church wall paintings, often illustrating the story of the Three Living and the Three Dead.

¹² Some examples may be found in Peel, 10, 24, 85. There are many others throughout the book.

¹³ *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. E. Friedberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879-81; reprint 1959); Dist. 42, C.2. p.152, col.2.

¹⁴ 'But first we must always see that we help those of the household of faith. It is a serious fault if a believer is in want, and thou knowest it ... And we, indeed, ought to show mercy to all. But as many try to get help on false pretences, and make out that they are miserably off; therefore where the case is plain and the person well known, and no time is to be lost, mercy ought to be shown more readily True liberality also must be tested in this way: that we despise not our nearest relatives, if we know they are in want. For it is better for thee to help thy kindred who feel the shame of asking help from others, or of going to another to beg assistance in their need.... In giving we must also take into consideration age and weakness; sometimes, also, that natural feeling of shame, which indicates good birth.

tions to give away that which is superfluous, and place a firm responsibility on those who have plenty to attend to the want of their indigent brethren.¹⁵ Most frequently eliminated from the list of the deserving poor are the ‘unjust’, those who would be led into greater wrong if their wants were supplied from the alms. But the underlying basis for assisting the poor is fundamental justice:

God has ordered all things to be produced, so that there should be food in common to all, and that the earth should be a common possession for all. Nature, therefore, has produced a common right for all, but greed has made it a right for a few.¹⁶

The Christian view, which informs medieval thought and practice, is enriched by the belief that Christ identifies himself with the poor, and that therefore anyone who assists the poor gains merit:

*Ground of cristenmennus bileue seiþ þat crist is god and man, and was porerste man of lif.*¹⁷

Not only was Christ himself poor as man, but his human poverty sanctifies that of the involuntarily poor. A beautiful example of this can be seen in a sixteenth-century French illumination of Christ carrying his cross assisted by the poor,¹⁸ as well as in the *Piers Plowman* image of the poor wearing the same russet as Christ, which the poem calls his livery:

*For oure ioye and oure iuele, Iesu Crist of heuene,
In a pore mannes apparaille pursueth us evere,
And loketh on us in hir liknesses and that with lovely chere.*¹⁹

In many texts the poor are identified with God:

*Yef þou worþssipes þe pouere, þou worþssipes god;*²⁰

One ought to give more to the old who can no longer supply themselves with food by labour. So, too, weakness of body must be assisted, and that readily. Again, if any one after being rich has fallen into want, we must assist, especially if he has lost what he had from no sin of his own, but owing to robbery or banishment or false accusation.’ St Ambrose, Bishop Of Milan, 1997. *Three Books on the Duties of the Clergy*, Book 1, Chapter 30, §148-158 [online]. New Advent, Inc. Available from: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34011.htm> [accessed 31 May 2007].

¹⁵ The twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth-century glossators and commentators go into some detail to distinguish the proportions which may be given in alms. No-one is expected to give away that which is necessary to maintain his station in life in an appropriate manner. St Thomas Aquinas says: ‘it would be inordinate to deprive oneself of one’s own, in order to give to others to such an extent that the residue would be insufficient for one to live in keeping with one’s station and the ordinary occurrences of life: for no man ought to live unbecomingly.’ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 32, a. 6.

¹⁶ St Ambrose, *Three Books on the Duties of the Clergy*, Book 1, Chapter 28, §132.

¹⁷ ‘De Papa’ (Wycliffite tract), *The English Works of Wyclif*, ed. F. D. Matthew, Early English Text Society, Original Series 74 (London: Trübner, 1880; reprint Milwood: Kraus Reprint, 1978), 460-482, 460.

¹⁸ Huntington Ms HM 1088 folios 225v and 226.

¹⁹ *Piers Plowman*, B. XI, 184-6. All quotations from the poem are taken from *William Langland, Piers Plowman, a parallel-text edition of the A, B, C and Z versions*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London and New York: Longman, 1995).

the prayer of the poor person is efficacious:

*þe praier of poer may purchas þe pes;*²¹

earthly poverty is valued by Christ and rewarded with heavenly power:

To petre þat he pouerest fand,

*Of all he mad him mast weldand.*²²

In contrast with this way of regarding the poor as sanctified, the experience of Peel's interviewees can be paralleled in a different medieval viewpoint that not only regards poverty as an evil, but the poor as culpable. This idea gained strength during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, fuelled by the rise in vagrancy as well as by the scholastic debate on the validity of mendicancy. The terminology of the English Statutes against vagrancy in 1349 and 1388 demonises those who do not work, or who take to the roads as beggars. Work is the primary duty of the poor, and not to work becomes a crime. Beggars are to be pilloried as parasites upon society.²³ As Anne Middleton has pointed out,²⁴ words such as 'sturdy beggars' used in the 1349 statute were expanded in the intervening decades by a variety of more pejorative names. By the time of the 1388 Statute *mendinantz*, *vagerantz*, *stafstrikers*, *faitours* and *lolleres* had assumed a threatening identity. These wandering beggars were to be punished for not working and thereby harming the agrarian community. They were also to be punished for falsely assuming the role of beggar and in doing so devaluing the truly needy as well as the voluntarily poor person.²⁵

²⁰ *Don Michel's Ayenbite of Inwyte*, ed. R. Morris, rev. P. Gradon, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, Original Series 23 (London: Trübner, 1866; reprint London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1965), 188/24.

²¹ 'Awntyrs of Arthur' in *Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas*, ed. F. J. Amours, Scottish Text Society 27.38 (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons, 1897), 178.

²² *Cursor Mundi*, ed. R. Morris, Early English Text Society, Original Series 57-68 (London: Trübner, 1874-78), 13312.

²³ '...because many sturdy beggars, so long as they can live by begging for alms, refuse to labour, living in idleness and sin and sometimes by thefts and other crimes, no man, under the aforesaid penalty of imprisonment, shall presume under colour of pity or alms to give anything to such as shall be able profitably to labour, or to cherish them in their sloth, so that they may be compelled to labour for the necessities of life.' 25 Ed. III, *Stat. 2*, in *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 311-13.

²⁴ Anne Middleton, 'Acts of Vagrancy: the C Version "Autobiography" and the Statute of 1388' in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 208-388.

²⁵ '... many of the said wandering labourers have become mendicant beggars in order to lead an idle life; and they usually go away from their own districts into cities, boroughs and other good towns to beg, although they are able-bodied and might well ease the commons by living on their labour and services, if they were willing to serve. Many of them become "staff-strikers" and lead an idle life, commonly robbing poor people in simple villages by two, three, or four together, so that their malice is very hard to bear. The majority of the said servants generally become strong thieves, increasing their robberies and felonies every day on all sides, to the destruction of the kingdom.' R.B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), 73.

The ‘sturdy beggar’ may have been demonised by the Statutes of the Realm, yet there is much evidence to suggest that late medieval people heeded the scriptural command to care for those in need. Artefacts celebrating the corporal works of mercy, the building of almshouses, the provision of hospitals and maisons-dieu, and the provision for the poor in some wills all testify to the medieval consciousness that care of the needy is a *sine qua non* of salvation.²⁶ Many texts suggest that everyone has an obligation to take note of the poor, to love them in a practical way by giving alms, and to treat them with respect. Robert Mannyng’s didactic treatise *Handlyng Synne* admonishes:

What ys loue vnto men pore? Almes to hem ys recouere (relief),²⁷

and Thomas of Wimbledon, whose sermons distinguish the rights and duties of all sectors in society, specifies that the poor must be treated with dignity:

*Pou schalt not take hede of þe persone of a pore man to be to hym þe hardere for his pouert.*²⁸

The *Book to a Mother* is still more specific:

*Pe lowere, þe porere, þe lasse a man hap, þe bettur welcome.*²⁹

Many wills make provision for the poor to receive food, a robe and sometimes shoes on the funeral day of the deceased testator.³⁰ Some are specific in instructing that the most needy should be sought out to ensure they receive this bounty:

*Y pray myn exec. to pay v lib. to his executors, or to the porest men that they may wyte yt he aught any trewe dette to.*³¹

The Rolls of Parliament take this attention to the poor a stage further, advising that priority is to be given to the poorest person bringing a suit:

*He shal...loke which is the poverest sutours Bille, that furst to be rad and answerd.*³²

While these references relate mainly to works of compassion and charity, they belong to a view of the world that sees poor people as a distinct and immutable

²⁶ Graphic reminders of medieval charity can be seen in manuscript illuminations, like the sequences depicting the works of charity in the fourteenth-century *Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux*, The Cloisters, Acc. No. 54.1.2, the fifteenth-century Flemish manuscript, Brotherton MS 7; in stained glass windows like that in All Saints, North Street, York, and in an exterior ceramic frieze on the Hospital of the Ceppi in Pistoia, c.1500 by the della Robbia workshop.

²⁷ Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. I. Sullens (Binghampton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies 1983), 7106.

²⁸ *Wimbledon’s Sermon ‘Redde rationem villicationis tue’: a Middle English Sermon of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. I. K. Knight, Duquesne Studies, Philological Series 9 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1967), 83/353 (hereafter *Wimbledon’s Sermon*).

²⁹ *Book to A Mother*, ed. A. J. McCarthy (Salzburg: Universität, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), 123/1.

³⁰ P. H. Cullum and P. J. P. Goldberg, ‘Charitable Provision in Late Medieval York: “To the Praise of God and the Use of the Poor”’, *Northern History*, 29 (1993), 24-39; Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 253-254 (hereafter: Warren).

³¹ *Testamenta Eboracensia ...*, ed. J. Raine, vol. 3, Publications of the Surtees Society 45 (London: Whittaker, 1865), 27.

³² *Rotuli Parliamentorum; ut et Petitiones et Placita in Parlamento* [1783], 4.344a.

group in society. In this tradition of thought, poor and non-poor enjoy a reciprocal relationship in which the rich can fulfil the corporal works of mercy by attending to the needs of the poor, and the poor can justify their existence by praying for the souls of the rich.³³ The sentiment is expressed in a sermon of Caesarius of Arles:

If nobody were poor, nobody could give alms and nobody could receive remission of his sins.³⁴

From a slightly different viewpoint, the existence of peasants, many of whom were very poor, was accepted as vital to the good order of society. Thomas of Wimbledon's sermon, preached in 1388 at St Paul's Cross, sums up in memorable terms the relationship of peasants to the established estates of priesthood and knighthood:

*And to laboreris it falleþ to trauayle bodily and wiþ here sore swet geten out of þe erþe bodily liflode for hem and for oþer parties.... And 3if þe laboreris weren not, boþe prestis and kny3tis mosten bicomme acremen and heerdis, and ellis þey shode for defaute of bodily sustenaunce deie.*³⁵

The reforming bishop, Thomas Brinton of Rochester, gives three reasons for the existence of the poor: that the rich need the poor to work, otherwise the world would decay; the poor exist so that God may test the love of the rich; and the poor are poor so that they may earn merit.³⁶ This underlines the difference between Peel's view of poverty as a scandal to be eradicated and the medieval view of it as a condition. The medieval writer works towards establishing each person's human dignity within an estate; Peel and his three communities want to raise people out of poverty, even while recognising that terms which imply that the poor are trapped, excluded or powerless³⁷ are used by the non-poor masking their own inability to provide solutions to what appears an immutable condition.

There is no room in the crusading work of Peel for the notion of poverty as having any form of spiritual value such as that implied in the foregoing texts, although he does quote some instances in which his interviewees see themselves as morally superior to their wealthy neighbours:

Local legends used ridicule, irony and dramatic inversions to accuse those who so often accused them. They turned the stigma on its head, charging the rich with moral poverty and selfishness, and adding a few more insults

³³ Maria Moisa makes this point, taking Bromyard's *Summa Praedicatorum* as her reference, in her article: 'Fourteenth-century Preachers' Views of the Poor: class or Status Group?', in *Culture, Ideology and Politics*, ed. R. Samuel and G. Stedman Jones (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 160-175 (165).

³⁴ *Sancti Caesarii Arelatensis Sermones*, ed. G. Morin (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953), I, 112 (ep. 25), quoted by Ludo J. R. Milis, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men: Monasticism and its Meaning to Medieval Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 55.

³⁵ *Wimbledon's Sermon*, 63-64.

³⁶ *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373-1389)*, ed. Mary Aquinas Devlin, Camden Third Series, 85-86 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1954), 194-195.

³⁷ Peel, 3.

besides. They turned their own poverty and hardship into a story of heroic endurance.³⁸

For the most part, both Peel and his communities regard poverty as an injustice from which they have a right to be delivered. A strong body of medieval imagery takes a similar view that poverty is the worst of all evils. Poverty keeps sad company; it is frequently found in combinations such as *wo, nede, tribulacioun, mischef* and general suffering:

*Bysynesse, care, and sorow3
Is myd man vche morow3e,
Somme for sekenesse, for smert,
Somme for default oīper pouert.*³⁹

The poor person is deemed to be friendless:

*Whan a man is in pouerte falle, He hap fewe frendes wiþ alle,*⁴⁰
and to be a nonentity, not taken into the reckoning:
*A poer man for his pouert is noght set by.*⁴¹

The poor are treated ill:

Euere þe porere þou art þe lesse art þou charched (considered important),⁴²

and to be old and poor is to be particularly afflicted:

*If þou be pore and nedy in elde, Þou schalt oftyen euyl fare.*⁴³

Analysis of the verbs associated with becoming poor reinforces the view that poverty is a disastrous fate; if a person does not *fallen, descenden*, or become *yleft*, with its connotations of abandonment, violence in reaching a state of poverty is implied by such expressions as: *plungen in, putten to, casten in*,⁴⁴ and the book of Job speaks of overproud kings being

*boundun with the roopis of pouert.*⁴⁵

³⁸ Peel, 42.

³⁹ *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. G. V. Smithers, Early English Text Society, Original Series 227 (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1952; reprint 1961), 6.

⁴⁰ *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, ed. E. Kölbing, Early English Text Society, Extra Series ES 46, 48 (London: Trübner, 1885-1886; reprint as one vol. Millwood: Kraus Reprint, 1978), 170/3593.

⁴¹ *Ipomedon*, ed. E. Kölbing (Breslau: Wilhelm Koebner, 1889), 353/50.

⁴² 'Dialogue between Reason and Adversity' in *A Late Middle English Version of Petrarch's De Remediis*, ed. F. N. M. Diekstra (Assen: Gorcum, 1968), 27/21.

⁴³ 'The Castle of Perseverance' in *The Macro Plays*, ed. M. Eccles, Early English Text Society, Original Series 262 (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1969), 2529.

⁴⁴ *On sche [Fortune] can richely hi3e exalte, And anoþer plonge in pouerte. Lydgate's Troy Book*, ed. H. Bergen, parts 1-3, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 97, 103, 106 (London: Trübner, 1906-1910; reprint as one vol. Millwood: Kraus Reprint, 1996), 2.49; *Fortune...from her riches doth hem fle, And plongeth hem in poverté*, 'The Romaunt of the Rose' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. L. D. Benson (Boston et al.: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 5472 (hereafter: *The Riverside Chaucer*).

⁴⁵ 'Wycliffite Bible' (later version), *The Holy Bible ... by John Wycliffe and His Followers*, eds. J. Forshall and F. Madden, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850), Job 36.8.

Not only is poverty a sorry and painful state, it is linked with moral evil and can lead to crime:

*The nedy poverte of his houshold might rather egren hym to don felonyes.*⁴⁶

Poverty is an aspect of hell:

*O fire of helle...of whome the wode is glotonye...the smoke is the evill name; the assches is pouerte.*⁴⁷

This view that poverty is the worst of all evils is endorsed by Innocent III's *De Miseria Condicionis Humane*,⁴⁸ and referred to by many of the great fourteenth-century English writers, particularly Chaucer⁴⁹ and Hoccleve⁵⁰.

In contrast, the moral value of poverty as a Christian good, and essential to any true following of the Christian way of life, is crucially important within medieval culture and prompted some people to embrace it voluntarily within the regular life while others strove to reconcile a life of wealth with the call to detachment from material possessions. For the devout nobleman Henry of Lancaster, the only way of achieving a truly poor following of Christ is to embrace the religious life. In his writings he sees holiness and the active life as irreconcilable opposites, yet his career was an example of the active life played to its ultimate perfection: he was a good man by every definition. As Ann Warren writes, 'Henry's endowments of religious institutions were not the attempts of a wicked man to redeem his way into heaven but vicarious acts completing his life.'⁵¹

The apparent contradiction between an ideal of voluntary poverty and a reality in which poverty is the worst of all fates reflects an ambivalence that pervades late medieval discussions of poverty. The duality inherent in the medieval approach is graphically typified by the allegorical figure of Poverty, blessed in spirit but outwardly a hag, who was said, in a quotation from the *Gesta Romanorum*, to be the second daughter of Jesus Christ, and who, in the figure of Lady Poverty, became St Francis's beloved spouse:

⁴⁶ Chaucer, 'Boece', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 4.pr.6.301-2.

⁴⁷ *The Epistle of Othea translated from the French Text of Christine de Pisan by Stephen Scrope*, ed. C. F. Bühler, Early English Text Society, Original Series 264 (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1970), 35/12.

⁴⁸ Lotario dei Segni, *De Miseria Condicionis Humane*, ed. Robert E. Lewis (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

⁴⁹ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 'The Man of Lawes Tale', Introduction, Prologue and Tale pp. 87-104; 'The Romaunt of the Rose' pp. 691-2, ll.449-474.

⁵⁰ *Hoccleve's Works: The Regement of Princes*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 72 (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1897).

⁵¹ Warren, 173.

*Ihesu crist..hathe ij doughtirs, one faire, that is, the worlde..and the other doughtir blak, that is, poverte or tribulacion, that few men desiren for to wedde.*⁵²

Poverty's generation from Christ makes her blessed, but her appearance is forbidding and her nature full of misery. Few want to wed her, but for those who do, like St Francis who espoused the outwardly hideous Lady Poverty,⁵³ or the knight in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* who wedded the loathly lady,⁵⁴ the rewards will be outward and apparently suffering but inward, or personal, everlasting happiness.

This belief, that poverty, with all its hardships, is the state most pleasing to God and most beneficial to the human spirit is not one that can be proposed to Peel as an immediate solution for his communities. It is an impulse of the non-poor who are moved to assess the moral priorities in their lives, to redeem themselves from the hardness that makes them callous to their fellow human beings, and to redeem the world by proposing models of unselfishness and love towards the rest of humanity. In the work of Langland, poverty is explored, not only as the socio-economic condition in which the majority of fourteenth-century people involuntarily find themselves,⁵⁵ but as an ideal for the whole of society. Through the character of Will, the poem traces the experiences of one poor man who learns through hard experience that the impulse towards voluntary poverty in imitation of Christ must be accompanied by a readiness to accept the hardships of involuntary poverty and a commitment to achieving sufficiency for all the poor. Only when the non-poor are prepared to accept solidarity with the poor can a just society be achieved. This message has real resonances for the modern poor.

Piers Plowman, proceeds by a series of dream visions punctuated by the waking moments of Will, the dreamer. Will is the unifying force within the poem, a personification of the human faculty, will, *voluntas*. Choice, responsibility and intention are guiding forces in a life which is full of failures and renews.⁵⁶ Will lives a life of poverty in his waking moments, and a life of spiri-

⁵² *The Early English Version of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. S. J. H. Herrtage, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 33 (London: Trübner, 1878; reprint London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1962), 355.

⁵³ 'Sacrum commercium Sancti Francisci cum Domina Paupertate,' in *St Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. Marion A. Habig, 3rd ed. revised by John R. H. Moorman (London: SPCK, 1972), 1531-1596.

⁵⁴ Chaucer, 'The Wyf of Bath's Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 116-122.

⁵⁵ Anne M. Scott, *'Piers Plowman' and the Poor* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 70 (hereafter: Scott).

⁵⁶ Wittig defines the controlling argument of the poem as being 'that all reform is rooted in the reform of the individual human will', in 'The Dramatic and Rhetorical Development of Long Will's Pilgrimage', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975), 52-76 (p. 53). Simpson points out that the name of Will, linked as it is to the Latin *voluntas*, sums up Will's nature as his 'kynde name', and fits within a medieval commonplace scheme in which the affec-

tual quest during his visions. The visions take us into the deepest recesses of his mind and emotions; the waking moments show him suffering the practical effects of striving to renew his intention. Will *chooses* a life of poverty (B.Prol.2-4); by definition this is voluntary poverty. Yet he experiences, in the course of the poem, all the aspects of basic need which the involuntarily poor have to endure; he goes hungry, thirsty and barefoot (B.20.3; C.22.3; B.18.1; C.20.1), begs for the basic necessities of life (C.5.51-52), is treated as though he is an idle vagrant (C.5.12-34; B.12.16-17), sometimes as a madman (B.15.1-10), scorned as an outsider (B.15.4), and left to drink from the ditch in utter destitution (B.20.19). These experiences lead him to come to terms in his own life with the fact of poverty as a scandal and a condition calling for reform, while all the time wrestling with the concepts of it as a religious virtue, and a philosophical good. He eventually accepts that his life in poverty has value because it identifies him with Christ (B.20.48-50) and, once he has done so, is ready to work for the good of all his *bloody brethren* – a refrain that is repeated frequently throughout the poem to remind both the protagonist and the reader of the solidarity of all human beings.

Will is an outstandingly important medieval literary figure because he gives textual expression to an experience of Christian poverty in the active life that goes beyond devotional formulas and conventional professions of poverty in the religious life. Hermits, anchorites and friars act as representative poor within the community, contemporary embodiments of Christ. All medieval society, from kings to poor widows, contributed to their support in varying degrees, depending on the regularity and generosity of benefactions.⁵⁷ In this, as in so many other manifestations of poverty, inconsistency in medieval attitudes leads to moral judgements about the poor. Those who hear and answer the call to perfection are respected and valued, whereas the tramp, the vagabond and the beggar are mistrusted by their contemporaries. Will expresses this duality in his own life, for it is by no means clear whether he is a true hermit or a feigning mendicant. Nevertheless, whatever ambivalence there may be in Will's initial choice of poverty, clothed as he is *in habite as an heremite vnholy of werkes* (B.Prol.3), the poem shows him sharing in and developing an understanding of both the material want and the social disdain experienced by the indigent.

Much of the poem, especially the *Vita*, relates spiritual encounters and explores the scriptural and theological world of salvation history, yet with all its renewed starts and disappointments the poem returns repeatedly to the earth, to the world. Study of the poor man, Will, brings out the importance of choice in the life of the Christian. Will makes choices all through life – he chooses the life of a poor wanderer but not the monastic life of perfection. Though Will chooses voluntary poverty it becomes clear that his motives are suspect. By his associa-

tive part of the soul works with the cognitive part, represented by Thought, Wit and Imaginative: J. Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (London: Longman, 1990), 95-96.

⁵⁷ See Warren, 50-51, on the differential support of various anchorholds.

tion with lollers (C.5.1-108) he lays himself open to charges of idleness and fraud; he chooses to be a clerk, perhaps, initially, because he does not want to do manual labour. What separates him from being like the wasters whom the poem pillories in the harvest scene? It is the distinction that he begs only for that which he needs for the moment, not to store goods away for the future: *without bagge or botel but my wombe one* (C.5.52);⁵⁸ and he stresses, too, the return his work gives to those who support him; he is a labourer worthy of his hire. Will works on his intention throughout the poem, always being taught that charity must underlie all his actions. During the course of the *Vita*, in particular, we see him progressively defining and redefining the terms of his search which starts as an aimless quest for *wondres* (Prol.4) before becoming focused on a search for Truth (B.1.83-84). In the course of his dreams the visionary learns, among many other things, about the spiritual value of poverty and about trust in God, putting into practice Christ's counsel: *Ne solliciti sitis* (B.14.29-80). He also learns about the scandal of poverty, the need for Christians to relieve the poverty of their fellow human beings, to recognize that the poor are their brothers and sisters, and to accord the poor the dignity of their human condition as members of Christ: *Alter alterius onera portate*. This quotation from Galatians 6. 2 recurs almost like a refrain. It is quoted by Hunger to Piers (B.6.221a), by Rechelesnesse (C.13.77a), and by Trajan in his disquisition on the relationship between rich and poor (B.11.196-210a).

Will's extreme poverty positions him firmly in the *saeculum*, the earthly and tangible world. Even though the whole poem is concerned with Will's quest for truth and for heavenly treasure, the poverty he achieves, which Holy Church (B.1.175-79), Trajan (B.11.230-318), Rechelesnesse (C.13.1-97), Patience (B.14 passim) and Anima (B.15.268-317) elevate to a state of spiritual good, is a corporeal experience. In the process of definition and redefinition, Will chips away at the accretions of philosophy that propose a concept of poverty far removed from that which is lived and perceived by the indigent. By the end of the poem, Will's poverty, voluntarily assumed at the outset, becomes absolute, physical need. His experience of need is a challenge to the interpretation of poverty practised by religious orders, a legal detachment from the goods of this world which allows a person to enjoy material goods without actually owning them. By persistently reassessing his mode of poor living and its social and moral significance, he reaches the uneasy understanding, shared by modern thinkers, that to follow Christ is willingly to accept a life of solidarity with involuntarily poor people. Will's voluntarily accepted poverty has the goal, simultaneously both spiritual and sociopolitical, of achieving for them access to

⁵⁸ This phrase is widely used in contemporary polemical writings to refer to evangelical poverty, based on texts where Christ sent forth his apostles without purse or bag, e.g. Luke 10. 4. By using this term Will claims that his poverty is purposeful and accredited by the Gospel. Wendy Scase examines the full anticlerical implications of the concept in *"Piers Plowman" and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), 136-160.

the justice and charity of God's kingdom on earth.⁵⁹ The poem demonstrates this most clearly at the end when Will encounters the allegorical figure of Need and actively chooses to accept his poverty as uniting him with Christ, than whom none was poorer:

*Sif he þat wro3te al þe world was wilfulliche nedy,
Ne neuere noon so nedy ne pouerer deide.*
(B.20.49-50)

Does Will's identification in poverty with Christ mean that the poet regards the condition of utter need as acceptable? I think not. Will's need for food, shelter and clothing is an evil, an aberration, something that belongs to the rule of Antichrist. The allegorical Need, morally neutral, is nonetheless the forerunner of Antichrist, both in *Piers Plowman* and in Gregory's *Moralia in Job* which, as Robert Adams has convincingly demonstrated, is the ultimate, though not the only source for the Need episode.⁶⁰ As such need is to be resisted, not, perhaps, by methods which modern readers might expect – political revolution, systematic schemes of social welfare – but in ways available to a poet for whom salvation is the aim of all living. *Lerne to loue* is the command Kynde gives to Will. As Holy Church says at the start of the poem, love, which achieves *mesure* by taking steps to ensure that all have enough, is the only solution to need (B.1.175-78). At the end of the poem, Will experiences the fulfillment of his youthful choice of voluntary poverty with its uncomfortable consequences – starvation and destitution, compounded by the devastatingly earthly decay of old age. Such inescapable need fuses the experiences of voluntary and involuntary poverty into one, a poverty which he is invited not to transcend, but to suffer in imitation of Christ, while continuing to strive, through practical acts of love towards his fellow human beings, for a just society.

In the course of this long poem, Will questions all the traditional ways of regarding poverty and does not come up with any easy answers. There are certain moments when the poem, in describing patient poverty, appears to present a model of poverty akin to that of the great saints and apostles who fled from the world in order to become truly poor followers of Christ (e.g. B.15.268-97). Will, it is true, has tried to follow this ideal of patient poverty, but in his involvement with the active life in the world he is more akin to the incarnate Christ who lived, worked and died in the world, involved with the concerns of the *saeculum* while rejecting its perverse values. Where preachers like Brinton or Wimbeldon

⁵⁹ The poem's repeated emphasis on the need for carrying one another's burdens (*alter alterius onera portate*) and for undertaking practical acts of poor relief in order to fulfil the requirements that will be demanded at the Last Judgement, Matt. 25, demonstrates a different attitude to poverty from that expounded in Kenneth Baxter Wolf's recent reconsideration of the poverty of St Francis of Assisi. For Francis, the main inspiration of his life of poverty was the imitation of Christ in abject poverty and humility, not the relief of the involuntarily poor (Wolfe, *passim*).

⁶⁰ Robert Adams, 'The Nature of Need in *Piers Plowman* XX', *Traditio* 34 (1978), 273-301 (283-289).

are content to accept the status of the poor as immutable, Will wrestles with the injustices he sees, perpetrated by the poor as well as by those in power.⁶¹ Will has value as a poor man not because he gives an opportunity to the non-poor to practise charity and thereby gain heavenly reward, but because he accepts his state in imitation of Christ, and works within it to establish the justice of Christ's kingdom on earth. In searching for the truth as handed to the pristine church, represented in the final Passus of the poem by Piers in the Barn of Unity, Will chooses to range himself against the administrative machine of the institutional fourteenth-century church, condemning, rejecting and fighting against its ruling ideology of avarice. This active role moves Will onward from a position where he accepts poverty as an immutable socioeconomic state, or as a spiritual good to be achieved by renunciation of the world. It looks forward to the more modern view that socio-economic poverty is a scandal to be eradicated by insisting that the poor and the non-poor all share the one humanity.⁶²

[And] *it are my blody breþeren, for God bou3te vs alle* (B.6.207)

Though Langland's promotion of poverty as the best state for Will may not initially seem to have much to say to Peel's communities, in the final analysis, what Peel and his communities seek is the same as that which Langland promotes. For Langland, poverty is the best human state, and the rich must be just stewards towards their poor brethren if they are to be poor in heart. Both Peel and Langland ask for a just society in which the dignity of each individual is respected, and in which all can live a life in which frequent lapses into sin – or, as secular society would term it, bad decisions, lapses of judgement, even at times rorting the system – can be accepted as the dark consequence of human choice and an occasion to obtain the mercy of forgiveness, or in modern terms, another chance from the rest of society. Neither Langland nor Peel ask the rich to become needy themselves but both require that the poor be considered, not just as equal, but as more important. In medieval terminology, this derives from a brotherhood in Christ. In modern terms it comes from shared humanity, expressed by Peel in terms that the twenty-first century can grasp:

There is a crisis that surrounds our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but it's not a crisis of dependency or racial tensions or even hope. And it doesn't actually happen in Inala, Broadmeadows or Mount Druitt. It's a crisis of compassion, among those with much for those with very little. It's a crisis of belief, based on arguments about poverty and undeserving

⁶¹ This is particularly evident in Passus B. 6 and B. 7. Many commentators have dealt with these passus, particularly David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 41-59; Kathleen Hewitt-Smith, 'Allegory on the Half-Acre: the Demands of History', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 10 (1996), 1-22; and Scott, 85-114.

⁶² (B.5.591) *Wiþ no leed but wiþ loue and lowe speche, as breþeren* [of o wombe];
(B.11. 201) *And blody breþeren we bicome þere, of o body ywonne*;
(B.11.199) *And breþeren as of oo blood, as wel beggeres as erles*;
See also B.11.206-210; B.18.394-96; B.19. 254, and discussion in Scott, chapter 5.

people that are just as cruel and untrue now as they were sixty or 100 years ago. It's a crisis of obligation, from the lucky to the unlucky, the old to the young, the insider to the outsider, those rich in confidence and chances to those who despair of either. It's a crisis of empathy. It might not seem that these are our neighbours, our sisters, our parents, our daughters and sons, our nieces or nephews, but they are, given different decisions, harder luck and fewer resources.⁶³

⁶³ Peel, 182.

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VON GERHARD JARITZ

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DES AMTES DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

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Vorwort

Medium Aevum Quotidianum 56 hat die Aufgabe mit Hilfe von drei Beiträgen die starke Unterschiedlichkeit alltags- und kulturgeschichtlicher Fragestellungen und Ansätze hervorzuheben. Der Beitrag von Lucie Doležalová zur biblischen Mnemotechnik führt in die Welt christlicher Theologen, Mönche, Studenten und Prediger. Tamás Visis Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit der großen Bedeutung, welche formale Kriterien für die Abfassung jüdischer Scheidungsurkunden hatten. Anne M. Scott zeigt auf, dass die Analyse des Armutsdiskurses in englischer Literatur des 14. Jahrhunderts durchaus nützlich dazu anregen kann Beziehungen zu den Aspekten einer modernen Armutsdiskussion herzustellen. Alle drei Untersuchungen können zur allgemeinen Feststellung führen, dass unser Forschungsbereich in starkem Maße von transdisziplinären und komparativen Methoden geprägt ist, welche entscheidend auf der Unabdingbarkeit von Kontextualität und Kontextualisierung im Analyseprozess beruhen.

Gerhard Jaritz (Herausgeber)