

THE POLITICS OF CONSUMING WORLDLY GOODS:  
NEGOTIATING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE AND FEUDAL  
POWER IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

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In passus 15 of the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, Will meets a doctor of divinity at a feast and is outraged by his simultaneous learning and consumption. The doctor mouths a doctrinally “unobjectionable” definition of Dowel,<sup>1</sup> but Will accuses him of being uncharitable to the poor anyway (15.113–16, 76a).<sup>2</sup> What conspicuously gives away the emptiness of his religious discourse, to Will and to us modern readers as well, is the enormous appetite of this man for the “manye sondry metes, mortrewes and poddynges, / Brawen and bloed of gees, bacon and colhoppes” (15.66–67).<sup>3</sup>

*Piers Plowman* is peopled with characters like the gluttonous doctor who consume excessively or irresponsibly one thing or another — food, sex, drink, material goods. And Langland’s political criticism focuses on such characters and the social consequences of their immoral behavior. Waster or “Wastor,” who appears on Piers’s half-acre farm in the party of the rebellious wage laborers, is one such character and conspicuously at the center of the poet’s discriminatory discourse between the voluntary and involuntary poor. Although Langland’s discussion of sinful consumers covers all degrees of the social hierarchy, including friars who preach for the profit of their bellies (Prologue.57) and lawyers who wear “houes of selke” (Prologue.161), there is no doubt that the author applies class distinction in his depiction and evaluation of consumption. Waster does not deserve the food he consumes because he has not worked for it. Great lords and ladies, on the other hand, become sinful consumers, not because they are expected to labor on the half-acre, but because they engage in excessive and conspicuous con-

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<sup>1</sup> This is Derek Pearsall’s characterization of the doctor’s discourse. See n. 15.113 in Pearsall’s edition: *Piers Plowman by William Langland* (Berkeley, 1978), 251.

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<sup>2</sup> All references to the C-text, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. George Russell and George Kane (Berkeley, 1997), are to passus and line numbers and will appear in the text proper.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough examination of Langland’s critical attitude toward the doctor’s excessive consumption, see Anne Savage, “*Piers Plowman*: The Translation of Scripture and Food for the Soul,” *English Studies* 74 (1993): e.g., 214, 215, 216, 217.

sumption — indulging in a life of luxury and revelry and cultivating a horde of obsequious jesters, clerics, and retainers rather than giving to the poor in their community.

Scholarly discussions of wasters in *Piers Plowman* have centered largely on Langland's treatment of poverty, particularly his anxiety about poor people as low-class laborers who reverse their role from producers to consumers in the society.<sup>4</sup> The focus of such critical understanding of consumption is on the lower end of the social hierarchy, and such an approach identifies irresponsible consumption with class protest and social subversion. In this paper, I want to tackle the issue of consumption from the other end of the social hierarchy, and I identify wasteful behavior with the political establishment and its sins instead. From minstrels, feudal retainers, and clerics, to great lords and ladies who support and maintain them, Langland's depiction of corruption at the top makes a connection between excessive consumption and political power. This paper focuses on the connection and the particular problem it poses, for a poet such as Langland, in Christian terms. Secular political authority feeds on the intimate relation between power and extravagant spending and lavish display, and it identifies lordship with the maintenance of great consumers, feudal magnates and members of their households, who spend and use excessively and conspicuously. In this way, political authority in medieval society operates on a worldly logic contrary to the Christian logic of discipline and restraint, particularly manifest in ascetic leanings. Reading *Piers Plowman* in the theoretical context of the medieval dialectic between Christian and feudal approaches to consumption, I suggest that the religious is the primary category of Langland's political critique of consumption, and his critique is a moral one of secular political power, its operations, and arrangements.

My paper centers on the religious basis of Langland's criticism of the feudal practice of excessive and lavish consumption, and it examines the ramifications of such a practice for the management of political society in four sections. As the C-text is the final and therefore the authoritative version of the poem, I will refer mainly to it throughout the essay, with the exception of my reading of the rat fable, which compares both the B and C versions in detail. In the first section I introduce the problem of consumption as Lang-

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<sup>4</sup> See for example David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity* (New York, 1988), 35–46, for comments on Langland's condemnation of socially defiant working poor people as wasters. See also Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion* (Berkeley, 1994), 102–39; Anne Middleton, "Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388," in *Written Work*, ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia, 1997), 208–317; and Derek Pearsall, "Poverty and Poor People in *Piers Plowman*," in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph W. Wittig (Cambridge, 1988), 167–85.

land understands it: human beings must have food, clothes, and shelter to sustain themselves, but when they use and spend material goods for worldly enjoyment they become excessive and destructive, personally and socially. I analyze consumption as both an inescapable and a sinful condition in *Piers Plowman* and establish the primacy of the religious in Langland's approach to consumption. The next two sections attempt to understand the significance of Langland's moral agenda on consumption in the broader terms of a medieval dialectic between the Christian and feudal discourses on consumption. Section three, in particular, focuses on a contrast of agenda between *Piers Plowman* and *Winner and Waster*. Setting up the terms in which Langland understands waste and wasters and suggesting that Langland develops a criterion for social justice based on consumption rather than production in section three, I move to an analysis of the rat fable, the core of my paper, in the final section. The secular political community and its arrangements and power dynamics in the framework of worldly consumption are the center of Langland's moral critique in the rat fable. Arguing that the poet's moral attack on a politics based on worldly consumption in the fable is political rhetoric, I return, in the conclusion, to the issue of class that Langland scholars working on poverty have long commented on in the figure of Wastor. Considering the differences and similarities between different classes of wasters in *Piers Plowman*, I discuss the implications of Langland's moral rhetoric against corrupt political power and authority for shaping and changing the political community at large.

#### CONSUMPTION AND CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE IN PIERS PLOWMAN

The very first instance of the abuse of consumption in *Piers Plowman* centers on the sinful and socially destructive nature of gluttony. Gluttony is the first deadly sin mentioned in the C-text (and in the B version as well): "Somme potte hem to plogh, playde ful selde, / In settynge and sowynge swonken ful harde / And wonne þat þis wastors with glotony destrueth" (Prologue.22–24). For Langland, worldly consumption in its abuse and excess is, first and foremost, opposed to moral well-being, and his description of the behavior of the wasters as a sin, an inner spiritual degeneration, characterizes the author's perception and understanding of consumption in religious terms. Gluttony is not only a sin of private indulgence. The narrator conveys his resentment of the gluttonous wasters in social terms, in the way that they waste what others have produced. Much later in passus 15, the dreamer pointedly calls attention to the hypocrisy of the doctor's rhetoric of Dowel as "Do thy neyhebores non harm ne thysulue nother" (15.112), in light of the doctor's gluttony. While the learned, voracious friar may not appear to do harm actively to others and himself, his indulgence in fine

foods is not only unhealthy personally (15.95–97), but it is also, for Will, uncharitable behavior to others. Will observes loudly to the doctor that Dowel “semeth nouthe here, / in þat ȝe parteth nat with vs pore” (15.114–15). What makes the doctor so objectionable to the dreamer is that the way he eats displays an obvious insensitivity to, and lack of charity for, indigent people. The doctor eats well and complacently while there are starving, needy people around; Will’s perception of the doctor’s gluttony links individual behavior to social condition.

Gluttony evokes in the author an anxiety about the scarcity of food and material supplies for sustenance in his world. All human beings must consume, but there may not be enough to go around, especially if privileged individuals like the doctor take more than their fair share. As the first deadly sin mentioned in *Piers Plowman*, gluttony leads off the discussion of consumption in the poem. But gluttony’s being first does not so much distinguish it from other worldly vices as it turns sinful eating into a metaphor for the devouring of material resources and destructiveness to fellow human beings that hover around excessive consumption in the poem. For Langland, and his contemporaries as well, gluttony was not so much an isolated or unique case of material waste as a prominent embodiment of social evils associated with the various activities of human consumption. The significance of food in the premodern world of scarce material resources, as Caroline Bynum has highlighted in her study of medieval women ascetics and their food practices,<sup>5</sup> inevitably conferred upon food an important place in the medieval discourse of the handling, use, and treatment of material goods. Even before modern psychoanalysis, medieval writers understood that the various activities of consumption (e.g., eating, drinking, and sex) are related intimately, and they saw the psychical insecurity and deficiency behind excessive indulgence, which we may now associate with the tendency toward addiction, in these activities. The excessive consumption of food in a medieval world of scarcity became emblematic of sinful, fallen behavior in general.<sup>6</sup> Church fathers and ascetics often made the connection between gluttony and lust,<sup>7</sup> and for patristic writers like Jerome and Cassian, “gluttony was the basic source from which flowed other sins.”<sup>8</sup>

In the fourteenth-century Middle English *Book of Vices and Virtues*, gluttony leads to other wasteful and destructive activities in a life of debauchery and crime: “first he biegyneþ to be a tauerne-goer and an aale-goere,

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, 1987), 1–2. The entire work builds on this significance of food in medieval culture and the way eating figures as a vital social and religious concern in an age of material scarcity.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g., 32, 36, 82, 216, 297.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g., 79, 82, 174, 213, 216.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

and after he is a dees-pleiere, and after he silleþ his heritage and all þat he hap, and after þat he bicomēþ an harlot, holour, and þef.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Langland’s treatment of the deadly sins locates Glotoun in a tavern, socializing with the riffraff of London society, engaging in the game of “þe newe fayre” (6.377), and reveling in “othes an heep” (6.385). Glotoun’s unproductive nature and his condition of “accidie” (6.417) the morning after find a parallel in the behavior of many other sinful characters like the minstrels, who, according to the narrator in the beginning of the poem, “Wolleth neyther swynke ne swete bote sweren grete othes” (Prologue.36).

Consumption is a problem of fallen nature in *Piers Plowman*; human beings must consume to live, but when their consuming activities get out of hand — and more often than not they do — they are destructive to themselves as well as to others, morally and socially. The others who suffer the consequences of these sins of consumption are needy people. When characters like Glotoun, the hypocritical doctor, minstrels, and other wasters in the poem eat, drink, and make merry, other people starve. The problem of consumption is, therefore, intimately related to the suffering and deprivation of needy people in *Piers Plowman*. In this way the discussion of consumption in the poem is a fundamentally ethical and social one, focusing on the social ramifications of immoral activities and endeavors by individuals on fellow human beings and on the community as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

Langland sees, then, that the practice of consumption must be reined in, and he urges discipline and regulation of consumption in religious terms. In passus 1, Holy Church’s first discourse on Truth, or God, relates the divine to the physical condition and maintenance of human beings. While the poet asserts the right to material sustenance as God-given and universal, he urges vigilant discipline of consuming activities:

For he is fadder of fayth and formor of alle;  
 To be fayful to hym he ȝaf ȝow fyue wittes  
 For to worschipe hym þerwith þe whiles ȝe lyuen here.  
 Wherefore he hette þe elementis to helpe ȝow alle tymes

<sup>9</sup> W. Nelson Francis, ed., *The Book of Vices and Virtues* (London, 1942), 47–48.

<sup>10</sup> That gluttony is at once a sin and a socially destructive and irresponsible behavior in *Piers Plowman* indicates that Langland’s concern with the salvation of the individual and the well-being of the community addresses, ultimately, one and the same problem, that of the fallen condition. In my discussion of consumption, I treat the categories of the individual and the communal, personal and private, not as mutually exclusive but as mutually reinforcing. I disagree, therefore, with scholars such as T. P. Dunning, who see the need to establish a hierarchical distinction between the individual and the communal. While for Dunning, “the regulating principle, in social life . . . was not, as in modern times, the welfare of the community, but first and above all, the good of the individual conscience,” I see Langland’s discourse of the individual as being inextricably bound up with the communal (*Piers Plowman*, ed. T. P. Dolan [Oxford, 1980], 51).

And brynge forth zoure bilyue, bothe lynnen and wollene,  
 And, in mesure thow muche were, to make zow attese  
 And comaundede of his cortesyne in comune thre thynges.  
 Aren non nidefole but tho and nemne hem y thenke  
 And rekene hem by rewe: reherse hem wher þe liketh.  
 The firste is fode and vesture þe seconde  
 And drynke þat doth the good — ac drynke nat out of tyme.  
 Loot in his lyue thorw likerous drynke  
 Wykkedly wroghte and wrathed god almyhty.  
 In his dronkenesse aday his doughteres he dighte  
 And lay by hem bothe as þe boke telleth;  
 In his glotonye bygat gurlēs þat were cherles  
*And al he witte it wyn þat wikkede dede:*  
*Inebriemus eum vino dormiamusque cum eo ut seruare possimus*  
*de patre nostro semen.*  
 Thorw wyn and thorw women there was loot acombred;  
 Forthy drede delitable drynke bothe day and nyghtes.  
 Mesure is medecyne thogh þow muche zerne;  
 Al is nat good to þe gost þat þe gott ascuth  
 Ne liflode to þe lycame þat lef is to þe soule.  
 Leef nat thy lycame for a lyare hym techeth  
 That is þe wrecchede world wolde þe bigyle.  
 For the fend and thy flesch folewen togederes  
 And þat seeth þi soule and sayth hit the in herte  
 And wysseth þe to be ywar what wolde þe desseyue.

(1.14–40)

The account of Lot's "glotonye" here lumps together drinking and sexual intercourse and characterizes them as the physical actions responsible for an incestuous family (1.31). Consumption here is not an isolated practice but integral to the operations of the "lycane" and the "flesch" that, Holy Church warns sternly, must not be trusted at all. Although Holy Church conflates the classico-Aristotelian ethic of consumption with the Christian, her discourse is ultimately and overwhelmingly a message of ascetic discipline for transcendence from the evils of worldly life. The ethic of temperance, "Mesure," the practical guide to a happy life of the golden mean touted in Aristotelian philosophy, is subsumed under a much larger discourse of religious self-control, as Holy Church shows she is concerned with more than just the practical issue of attaining happiness in this world. Borrowing the Aristotelian notion of temperance as antidote, "medecyne" for misbehavior, such as Lot's violation of taboo, Will's first spiritual guide goes on to conclude that all that is physical and worldly is evil and of the devil's party.

Holy Church is not concerned primarily with the right equilibrium within the body, but with the condition of the soul and the question of its salvation. Her focus is cosmic and religious, rather than practical and philosophical. It is about the perennial war between the soul and the flesh. In Lang-

land's condemnation of gluttons and other wasters as those who take unjustly from their hardworking, deserving neighbors, we see that such moral struggle within an individual has a "spill-over" effect on the rest of society. Acts of individual indiscretion, such as Lot's gluttony and incest, also militated against the community. Lot's giving in to the desires of the flesh, in drink and sex, did not merely make him an individual sinner but also spawned unwholesome and unsavory people, an entire cursed family, "gurles þat were cherles." Underlying Holy Church's agenda of asceticism, therefore, is a deep awareness of the social consequences of the fight between body and soul.

#### THE DIALECTIC OF RELIGIOUS AND FEUDAL APPROACHES TO CONSUMPTION

Langland's promotion of ascetic living did not merely express sympathy for religious discipline but also took a stance against the culture of material excess identified with feudal political life in the later Middle Ages. In taking such a position, Langland was taking part in the broader, late medieval conversation on the opposition between the feudal culture of magnificence and largesse and the Christian leanings toward purifying austerity and abstinence. Religious restraint and lavish extravagance represented the two extremes of the medieval discourse on consumption. Both extremes sought to promote and regulate different social behavioral patterns. While lordly magnificence and excess were at the core of feudal political authority, a political agenda lay behind the Christian approach to consumption as well.

Within medieval civilization there existed the opposing tendencies of feudal culture and Christian asceticism. While Dante envisioned Abstinence as the highest angel to lead the poet-narrator and his company out of the level of Gluttony in Purgatory,<sup>11</sup> another, such as Jean Froissart, gloried in the sheer material magnificence of the spectacular welcome of Isabella, queen of France, into Paris — from the canopy of precious camlet and silk that hung over the Grand'Rue Saint-Denis to the rich tapestries that covered the houses of entire streets.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary to Froissart were ascetic religious women who, as Bynum has documented extensively, lived on barely anything but the consecrated host.<sup>13</sup> Both the Christian tendency to oppose all matters of this world and the feudal investment in worldly power and domination laid claims to the management of social life. As Jill Mann, following

<sup>11</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi (New York, 1961), canto 24, lines 151–55.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, select., trans., and ed. Geoffrey Brereton (New York, 1968), 354.

<sup>13</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, esp. 113–42.

Mikhail Bakhtin, has shown, consumption is inevitably a socializing force.<sup>14</sup> It bears a vital relation to the patterns of acquisition and production within a given socioeconomic system. Shaping consumption according to a particular convention, habit, or ethic, then, implies a particular regime of social and political life.

Within medieval society, the phenomenon of largesse and magnificence was, in the words of a cultural historian,

a demonstration of power. Anyone who hoped to retain authority and influence in this world had to show himself the source of all good things for his dependents, and to equal, or preferably surpass, the magnificence of his allies and enemies. Lavish generosity was the hallmark of the important man. To err on the side of reckless extravagance might bring financial embarrassment; to err on the side of frugality could achieve nothing but contempt.<sup>15</sup>

The feudal magnate was a great consumer whose political authority depended on the very display and performance of magnificence, extravagance, and largesse. He spent, used, and gave to an extreme excess in order to maintain his power, sustaining ties of loyalty and favor with material goods. For medieval theorists of secular authority, therefore, the practical management of material wealth — its continued acquisition, display, and expenditure — was vital to the careers of great lords.

Sir John Fortescue's well-known fifteenth-century treatise on constitutional government in England contains a section on how a noble lord should give. The king, the greatest feudal lord, must possess great wealth and understand that his political authority inheres concretely in the way he dispenses material goods. The relationship between the king and his subjects and retainers goes beyond the mere contractual obligation between an employer and an employee. The political status of a king perennially calls for spending beyond ordinary moral and legal obligations; he must spend even when there is no reason to, and he must be able to spend at will, even when it appears capricious, for personal pleasure and reasons other than the normal obligations of fair exchange and reciprocity. In fact, it is the king's political duty to incur "extraordinary charges," to spend wealth when he has no need to. And his extravagant spending and giving display and solidify his power and influence:

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<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 281. Jill Mann comments on and applies Bakhtin to the Hunger episode in Langland in "Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman*," *Essays and Studies*, n.s., 32 (1979): 28, 29, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast* (University Park, PA, 1976), 11. See also Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, *Savoring the Past* (New York, 1983), 3, 5.



the kyng shall beyre yerely charges vnknown in receyvinge off ligates and messengers sende ffrom the pope, and off ambassatours sende ffrom kynges and oþer princes, and also ffrom grete communalities bi yonde þe see, which will putt þe king to great expenses while thai bith here, and at thair departynge thai most nedis haue grete giftes and rewardes; for þat þe sitith þe kynges magnificence and liberalite, also it is necessarie ffor the worship off his reame.<sup>16</sup>

Such an understanding of political authority reflected the reality of feudal politics in the later Middle Ages. Nobles maintained respect and authority by dressing magnificently and eating, drinking, and spending extravagantly in front of their peers, rivals, and subjects.<sup>17</sup> For feudal magnates and their retainers, magnanimity and magnificence were secular virtues inextricably bound up with their political authority. The ability to lavish gifts on retainers and followers cemented relationships between great lords and their subjects.<sup>18</sup> A feudal magnate risked losing his authority immediately if he was not able to appear the great consumer that he was born to be. Henry III was accused of avarice when he attempted to cut back on household expenses in order to alleviate his own financial problems.<sup>19</sup> Feudal power depended on the very superficial things that wealth bought, such as rich foods, wardrobe, and other finery, and being in short supply of such things was detrimental to one's political career. Indeed, a contemporary observer painted a pathetic image of Henry VI at his return to office in 1470, locating the king's apparent lack of authority in his poor wardrobe: "more lyker a play than the shewyng of a prynce to wynne mennys hertys, ffor by this mean he lost many and wan noon or Rygth ffewe, and evyr he was shewid In a long blew goune of velvet as thowth he hadde noo moo to change with."<sup>20</sup>

In this way the late medieval practice of consuming to an extravagant and lavish extreme supported the feudal establishment and its status quo. The freeing of the senses from moral restraints, and the material excess of feudal culture did not promote pleasure for the sake of pleasure; they were not subversive means of undermining social repression but a way of maintaining aristocratic privilege, power, and domination. Opposed to such a logic of material excess was the Christian promotion of discipline and aus-

<sup>16</sup> John Fortescue, *The Governance of England*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford, 1885), 124.

<sup>17</sup> David Starkey, "The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c. 1350–1550," in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Medcalf (New York, 1981), 224–27, 243–82, esp. 224, 244.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of feudal magnanimity and magnificence see *ibid.*, 253–61.

<sup>19</sup> Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley, eds., *The Great Chronicle of London* (Gloucester, 1938), 215, quoted in A. R. Myers, ed., introduction to *The Household of Edward IV* (Manchester, 1959), 5.

tere living as a way of pursuing transcendence. While ascetic practices within Christianity, like feudal practices of excess, shaped and structured social life by regulating the way individuals ate, drank, dressed, worked, and interacted, they did not have a set place within any given power center or institution. And their effect on the political establishment was contingent and tenuous at best. The excessive and extravagant practice of consumption functioned within a given political framework; it operated at the very center of the feudal establishment. But ascetic discipline in the Christian opposition to the world had no set political framework; it functioned as an influential ideal and social rhetoric available to all rather than as an instrument of a certain class or power structure. The rich and poor alike aspired to pure and austere living in the pursuit of salvation in the Middle Ages. Christian discipline of, and opposition to, the world served as a potent rhetoric against waste and excess. Although such a rhetoric challenged feudal practices of magnificence and extravagance, it was not necessarily subversive, since it posed no intrinsic threat to social hierarchy or the power center.

For a female saint such as Angela of Foligno, food was symbolic of the corruption inherent in human nature.<sup>21</sup> This was an echo of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, where he characterized eating and drinking as the needs of fallen animal nature.<sup>22</sup> Concomitant with such a distaste for worldly goods was the sense that in enjoying food and drink a Christian might be taking more than his or her fair share of material resources in a world of scarcity. As scarcity seemed an inescapable and natural fact of life for medieval authors such as Augustine,<sup>23</sup> the fact that some individuals had and took more material resources than they needed for physical survival implied that others within the same society must have been in need. In the Parson's Tale, Chaucer saw both private indiscretion and social irresponsibility in the sin of excess:

at every tyme that a man eteth or drynketh moore than suffiseth to the sustenance of his body, in certain he dooth synne. / And eek whan he spekethe moore than it nedeth, it is synne. Eke whan he herkneth nat benignely the compleint of the povre; / eke whan he is in heel of body and wol nat faste when other folk faste, without cause reasonable; eke when he slepeth moore than nedeth, or whan he cometh by thilke enchesoun to late to chirche, or to othere werkes of charite; / eke whan he useth his wyf withouten sovereyn desir of engendrure to the honour of God or for the entente to yelde to his wyf the dette of his body; / . . . / eke if he amenuse or withdrawe the almesse of the povre; eke if he apparailleth his mete moore

<sup>21</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast* (n. 5 above), 143.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 10.30.41–31.47, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York, 1961), 233–37; and elsewhere.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Haven, 1986), 22.

deliciously than nede is, or ete it to hastily by likerousnesse. (10.372–74, 377)<sup>24</sup>

As Chaucer's condemnation of all forms of excess here reveals, consumption, acquisition, and possession all manifested one and the same appetite and desire for worldly goods and pleasure.

Church fathers such as Ambrose and Augustine made powerful, damning statements against wealth because the excessive possessions of the rich and powerful implied a lack of material necessities for their fellow human beings. Likewise Jerome saw it as a *duty* of those who had more possessions than they needed to give them away rather than save them for personal consumption: "If thou hast more than is necessary for food and clothing, give that away, and consider that in thus acting thou art but paying a debt."<sup>25</sup> Such patristic thought on material management influenced Aquinas, even with his Aristotelian emphasis on "measure": "One man cannot overabound in external riches without another man lacking them, for temporal goods cannot be possessed by many at the same time."<sup>26</sup>

If possessing and consuming more than one's basic needs robbed others of their necessities, then, inversely, the practice of fasting and abstinence contributed to the material welfare of fellow human beings. Bynum has associated the consumption habits — or non-consumption habits — of Christian ascetics with their interest in helping indigent people.<sup>27</sup> Women mystics in the Middle Ages who fasted and lived in voluntary poverty were not just socially withdrawn recluses. Often they saw their lifestyle as a way of alleviating poverty. Through their willful suffering and discipline, they sought to serve poor people. With the food and money they saved from fasting, they provided for those in need.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the affinity of medieval religious ascetic thinking to agenda of social justice and economic equity, for obvious reasons its actual political impact was dubious at best. Such thinking had no consistent source of political power and support. Ascetics did not represent the political establishment, and they could not change the ways of power systematically from the center. While the majority of medieval Christians aspired to pure and religious living, asceticism was not an attainable way of life for them. While

<sup>24</sup> Reference to the *Canterbury Tales* is to fragment and line numbers in the edition by Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Canterbury Tales* (Boston, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Jerome, Epistle 120.1 (PL 22:985), trans. in Bede Jarrett, *Medieval Socialism* (London, 1913), 86.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II q.118 a.1, trans. in *Saint Thomas Aquinas on Law, Morality, and Politics*, ed. William P. Baumgarth and Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, 1988), 210.

<sup>27</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 33–39, 44, 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g., 114, 126–27, 134, 135–36, 138, 142, 145, 148.

Christian lords of both church and state often lent their support to ascetic communities, the center of power in medieval society largely identified material magnificence with lordly dignity. Feudal magnates reconciled the position of power to which they were born with their religious aspiration for transcendence. One such example was the Anglo-Norman penitential discourse of Henry of Lancaster, *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, in which we see a nobleman's discourse on religious self-discipline. While Henry recounted with relish his indulgence in gluttony and admitted that even listening to the description of good eating delighted him, he expressed compunction and penitence and reconciled the opposition of feudal excess and Christian purity with the Aristotelian virtue of temperance.<sup>29</sup> Great churchmen themselves lived within the sphere of the medieval elite, and self-denial for them, as we know from biographers such as the deacon Paulinus and St. Possidius, was more a gesture they made to point to their inner holiness than a way of life that they practiced consistently.<sup>30</sup> Especially toward the later Middle Ages, the Aristotelian ethic of moderation and temperance readily provided a means of reconciling the dialectic of feudal excess and Christian purity. Medieval writers, therefore, had different ways of approaching and interpreting such a dialectic. Because, as I have been emphasizing, Christian self-denial did not have the power and institutional backing to change the whole of medieval society, medieval writers who promoted it did not plan to change society programmatically, but rather used it rhetorically. In the next two sections, I will discuss Langland's rhetorical Christian perspective against secular political power, focusing on the way the author thinks through the dialectic between the secular and the Christian in relation to the alliterative *Winner and Waster* in section three, and on his moral analysis and critique of the secular establishment in the final section. Because Langland's moral promotion of Christian self-denial is rhetorical rather than programmatic, I will conclude this final section by working out the implications of his rhetoric for social change and class politics. Given that the author does not expect all, especially not lords and ladies, to become ascetics, what kind of political action does he propose, and how does he plan to achieve reform?

#### AGAINST *WINNER AND WASTER*

In *Piers Plowman*, waste is always sinful and destructive to one's community, but productiveness is not inherently moral, nor does it contribute

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<sup>29</sup> Henry of Lancaster, *The Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, ed. E. J. Arnould (Oxford, 1940), 48 and 19–20 respectively.

<sup>30</sup> See for example F. R. Hoare, trans. and ed., *The Western Fathers* (New York, 1954).

necessarily to social well-being. The poem's opening condemnation of wasters as gluttons who consume what others have produced (Prologue.22–24) invites consistent condemnation of similar characters throughout the rest of the poem. Even though they may not be labeled “Wastor” explicitly, these characters nevertheless spend excessive material goods for personal enjoyment at the expense of the rest of the community. These characters are from all classes and persuasions; they range from the minstrels who entertain the rich with ribaldry (Prologue.35–36) to the bums on the street who beg to have their bellies “bretful ycrammed” with food (Prologue.42). Wasters include the lords and ladies who feast in the privacy of their homes to the exclusion of the deserving needy. Langland does not label the socially irresponsible rich as wasters and, in fact, Wastor is specifically a low-class wage laborer in *Piers Plowman*, a transposition I shall get to at the end of the paper. But there is no question that he views them as sinful, excessive consumers who are responsible for more waste and hunger than other members of society: “þe carfole may crye and quake at þe ȝate, / Bothe afyngred and afurst, and for defaute spille” (11.40–41). “Harlotes” and “munstrals” inside engage in vulgar and blasphemous speculations on divinity, “tellen of þe trinite how two slowe þe thridde / And brynge forth a balled reson” (11.35–36), “and gnawen god with gorge when here gottes fullen” (11.39). The image of lords, ladies, and their sycophantic followers devouring God as they stuff and indulge themselves while the poor outside cry from starvation identifies the socially uncharitable behavior of wealthy people as the deepest offense against the divine. In seeing the eating, drinking, and merry-making of rich people and their parasitic retainers as a spiritual gnawing on the body of Christ, the poet suggests that victims of great, lordly consumption are poor people, Christ-like in their suffering.

In contrast to his discourse of waste, Langland's understanding of production is not primarily moral. While wasting is inimical to the well-being of the human community, the concept of productiveness is never praised intrinsically. The character Piers Plowman is an example of Langland's celebration of morally meritorious labor, but labor is not inherently meritorious.<sup>31</sup> The example of *Activa Vita* shows that honest, productive labor, in and of itself, may be morally dubious. While Langland celebrates Piers for his spiritual awareness and moral commitment to poor people and the Christian community, *Activa Vita* remains a laborer entirely absorbed in the

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<sup>31</sup> For discussions of the context of Christian charity and moral redemption in which Langland idealizes Piers's manual labor, see Derek Pearsall, “Langland's London,” in *Written Work* (n. 4 above), 185–207; Elizabeth D. Kirk, “Langland's Plowman and the Recreation of Fourteenth-Century Religious Metaphor,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 2 (1988): 1–21; Stephen A. Barney, “The Plowshare of the Tongue,” *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973): 261–93.

immediate concerns of physical survival and worldly endeavor, one who lacks a firm sense of the moral purpose or meaning of his work.<sup>32</sup>

In making consumption a fundamentally moral behavior and labor a neutral one, Langland's emphasis is on the discipline and control of social evil rather than on the promotion of economic well-being. Waste is always bad, but producing and acquiring worldly goods are not necessarily good. In such an emphasis the poet rejects any pragmatic understanding that waste has a legitimate place and function in political and economic life. The pragmatic dimension of "winning," therefore, may be as immoral as that of wasting in *Piers Plowman*. Those who engage in acquisitive activity, as opposed to those who perform honest labor, are in fact consumers themselves. They are the lawyers and the prelates who work for selfish gain in order to live in the lap of luxury, wear silk and fur (4.115), and go "Haukyng and huntynge"

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<sup>32</sup> While Langland scholars have suggested that the spiritually degraded status of *Activa Vita* indicates Langland's moral preference for the contemplative life over the life of labor, I see it not as a downgrading of the ideal of meritorious labor but as an illustration that morality is a vital component of productive work in *Piers Plowman*. For a discussion of the moral condition of *Activa Vita*, see n. 194 in passus 15 in Pearsall's edition of the C-text. Most scholars who comment on *Activa Vita* or his counterpart in the B-text, *Haukyn*, agree that Langland does not idealize this character but seeks to portray the failings and limits of a life totally immersed in "getting and spending" (Pearsall, *Piers Plowman* [n. 1 above], 255 n. 194) in contrast to the spiritually higher, contemplative life. There is a connection between *Piers* and *Activa Vita*, but where the former represents a spiritual ideal, the latter is spiritually flawed. *Activa Vita* "serves Peres, but does not understand Peres's ideal of service" (ibid.). The most important articulation of such an interpretation of *Activa Vita* (or *Haukyn* in the B version) is by Stella Maguire, "The Significance of *Haukyn, Activa Vita*, in *Piers Plowman*," *Review of English Studies* 25 (1949): 97–109. A more recent articulation of this view, in relation to Langland's discourse on labor and eremitism, is by Malcolm Godden, "Plowman and Hermits in Langland's *Piers Plowman*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 35 (1984): 129–63, esp. 148–49. David Aers also points out that honest hard work without spirituality "is no solution. On the contrary, the poem has claimed, in present society it fosters boundless desires which rupture the webs of community. . . . In its own idiom, the poem asserts against *Haukyn*, that economic growth will not in itself even eliminate poverty, let alone create anything Langland could recognize as a just society" (*Community, Gender* [n. 4 above], 59–60). For other comments on *Haukyn* or *Activa Vita* that express a similarly critical view of this character, see Malcolm Godden, *The Making of Piers Plowman* (New York, 1990), 11; James Simpson, *Piers Plowman* (New York, 1990), 164–65; John M. Bowers, *The Crisis of Will in Piers Plowman* (Washington, DC, 1986), 204; Mary Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth* (Evanston, IL, 1973), 118; Elizabeth D. Kirk, *The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman* (New Haven, 1972), 157–58; John Lawlor, *Piers Plowman* (New York, 1962), 123–36. For scholarship on *Activa Vita* as a representation of the mundane individual who must be renewed and redeemed spiritually through the practice of penance, see Britton J. Harwood, *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto, 1992), 99–100; Pamela Raabe, *Imitating God* (Athens, GA, 1990), 91–93; Judith J. Anderson, *The Growth of a Personal Voice* (New Haven, 1976), 91–93.

(3.466). They desire and work to attain great wealth in order to spend it, often conspicuously. Unlike the contemporary alliterative *Winner and Waster*, therefore, Langland's poem does not represent a clear, two-sided debate between Winner and Waster, for there is not one Winner but different kinds of winners. There are bad winners in the poem, such as the greedy people who pursue and follow Mede, and there are good winners, such as Piers.<sup>33</sup> The term "winning" in *Piers Plowman* applies to both acquisitive activity and meritorious labor, and is almost always used in a neutral sense. In the poem, the major versions of which run twenty to twenty-two passus (not counting the prologue), the word "win" in its various grammatical forms appears relatively infrequently, roughly about sixty times, by my count, of the C version. In one instance Langland exhorts workers, "wynneth whiles ze mowe" (8.341), while in another he urges clerics to reject "alle euel wynnynge" (16.261). An individual may "wynne with riht, with wrong or with vsure" (21.351).

The connection that Langland sees between greed, acquisitiveness in neutral terms, and waste, exemplified by the mercenary lawyers and prelates who also engage in conspicuous consumption, wearing finery and going hunting and hawking, is a legitimate one for the anonymous poet of *Winner and Waster*, who views consumption and production through coldly pragmatic lenses.<sup>34</sup> As scholarship on *Winner and Waster* has shown, the poem is an exploration and analysis of the way the feudal economy works in the practical interpenetration and interdependence of consumption and production.<sup>35</sup> By carrying out a debate between Winner and Waster, the anony-

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<sup>33</sup> In contrasting *Winner and Waster* against *Piers Plowman*, Stephanie Trigg suggests that Langland's unconditional condemnation of Waster indicates his identification with Winner. Yet Trigg's observation that Langland "would accord the superior position to Winner" must be qualified here (Stephanie Trigg, "The Rhetoric of Excess in *Winner and Waster*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 3 [1989]: 97). Langland does not celebrate labor uncritically in and of itself, but what labor *means*, or *represents*, in moral and religious terms.

<sup>34</sup> Britton J. Harwood makes brief but useful comments on the difference between the project of *Piers Plowman* and that of *Winner and Waster*: "The Plot of *Piers Plowman* and the Contradictions of Feudalism," in *Speaking Two Languages*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, 1991), 102–3, 111. Although Harwood is not concerned primarily with the contrast between Langland's moral framework and the pragmatic orientation of *Winner and Waster*, his discussion of the different ways in which feudal monarchical authority is conceptualized and treated in the two poems is relevant to my overall point that Langland's religious approach to consumption is a moral critique of secular power.

<sup>35</sup> Trigg, "The Rhetoric of Excess," 91–108; idem, "Israel Gollancz's 'Wynnere and Wastoure': Political Satire or Editorial Politics?" in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature*, ed. Gregory Krantzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge, 1986), 115–27. My reading of *Winner and Waster* in this essay largely draws upon Trigg's approach to the relation of consumption and production in the poem. See also Lois Roney, "Winner and

mous poet of this shorter, alliterative poem works out the various ways in which winning and wasting may be mutually reinforcing, rather than exclusive, principles. Christian and moral ideals are secondary rhetorical tools for both Winner and Waster in the debate, and the fact that neither wins the debate in the end shows that the poet ultimately sets aside moral judgment in naturalizing the cooperation of these two economic forces in service of political authority.<sup>36</sup> The princely magnificence and noble largesse of the medieval ruling classes are maintained by long-term economic planning and management.<sup>37</sup> And the “productive” activities of a feudal economy as portrayed in *Winner and Waster* include acquisitive activities such as warfare and plunder. Production is spurred on by the demands of the noble consumers of feudal estates. When Waster comments, “Whoso wele schal wyn a wastour ‘moste’ he fynde” (390),<sup>38</sup> the king seconds his activity as it serves as a powerful incentive for gaining and acquiring material goods: “Þe more þou waste þi wele þe better þe Wynner likes” (495).

The king acknowledges both Winner and Waster as members of his household, and both are feudal retainers. The allegiance of both Winner and Waster to the king bespeaks a valorization of feudal governance.<sup>39</sup> The king’s encouragement of both toward the end of the poem is evidence of a complacent understanding of feudal government as the happy laissez-faire, or the hands-off result, of the naturally interdependent workings of great

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*Waster’s ‘Wyse Wordes’: Teaching Economics and Nationalism in Fourteenth-Century England,”* *Speculum* 69 (1994): 1070–1100; Thomas L. Reed, Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia, MO, 1990), 261–93; John Scattergood, “*Winner and Waster* and the Mid-Fourteenth-Century Economy,” in *The Writer as Witness*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork, Engl., 1987), 39–57; Nicholas Jacobs, “The Typology of Debate and the Interpretation of *Wynner and Wastoure*,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 36 (1985): 481–500; A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (New York, 1976), 129–34; Jerry D. James, “The Undercutting of Convention in *Wynner and Wastoure*,” *Modern Languages Quarterly* 25 (1964): 243–58.

<sup>36</sup> A. C. Spearing comments that a “decisive victory” is granted to neither Winner nor Waster “because the poet accepts them both as permanent tendencies in human nature. All the king can or need do is to assign them to their proper places, and make use of them himself as seems expedient. The poem’s religious implications are not finally brought to bear on its political and economic meaning” (*Medieval Dream Poetry*, 134). Ordelle G. Hill also remarks that the poet “does not attempt to represent God’s point of view at any time” (*The Manor, the Plowman, and the Shepherd* [Toronto, 1993], 42).

<sup>37</sup> The mutually reinforcing exchange between winning and wasting is not, however, as Lois Roney claims, the basis for a tightly conceived program of national economy but alludes to the popular feudal means of generating power and profit, such as the practices of largesse and magnificence, and warfare and plunder.

<sup>38</sup> Quotations of the poem are from Stephanie Trigg, ed., *Wynner and Wastoure* (Oxford, 1990). References are to line numbers and appear in the text.

<sup>39</sup> For comments on the appreciation of the feudal noble household in *Winner and Waster*, see Starkey, “The Age of the Household” (n. 17 above), 245–46.



consumption and great production. After urging Waster to waste as a means of motivating production (495), the king turns to Winner:

And wayte to me, þou Wynnere,	if þou wilt wele chefe,
When I wende appon were	my wyes to lede
For at þe proude pales	of Parys þe riche
I thynke to do it in ded	and dub þe to knyghte
And giff giftes full grete	of golde and of siluer
To ledis of my legyance	þat lufen me in hert.

(496–501)

By the king's promise of prosperity, honor, and riches for Winner, we are aware that the king himself is a man of excess. As a warrior he destroys, rather than enhances, material resources. Implicitly, by his demand for the vast riches of the world, he motivates Winner to struggle for and acquire more worldly goods. The promise of material gain and acquisition as the end of warfare also conflates destructive, "wasteful" activity with "productive" activity, traditionally associated with the domains of agriculture and commerce. Plunder, in the sense that it is acquisitive, serves Winner as much as Waster in this poem. The poet's justification of war, therefore, collapses the distinction between "winning" and "wasting." His portrayal of the interdependence of consumption and acquisition, or "acquisitive production," conveys a pragmatic argument that appeals to mutual material advantage and profit rather than to ideological and moral difference. It is in Winner's interest to tolerate Waster, since he justifies Winner's existence and motivates him to greater success as a "producer." Conversely, Waster depends upon Winner and owes his lifestyle of excess to him. The two strengthen the status quo of acquisitive and spending habits of feudal society. The more Winner and Waster spur each other on to greater, more feverish feats of winning and consuming, the more material riches flow through society. The author is interested in the practical economic operations that work together in the maintenance of feudal authority. Ultimately, his coolly pragmatic and secular examination of the interdependence of consumption and acquisition affirms the beneficence of the feudal practices of material extravagance and excess. By being great consumers, feudal magnates "redistribute" material resources back to their henchmen, followers, and subjects, and thereby "reinvest" these resources in "society at large." In bowing to the king, Winner invests the most excessive and powerful feudal consumer with political authority, and in return gains the consumer's investment in his "productive," that is, acquisitive, enterprise.

Where the anonymous poet of *Winner and Waster* views acquisition and consumption as mutually reinforcing economic forces that sustain the wealth and material base of feudal society, Langland sees the relation between them as responsible for domination and corrupt power. Mede, or money, as

the universal agent of economic circulation, enhances the kind of cooperation between acquisition and consumption that the anonymous poet of *Winner and Waster* sees in the late medieval feudal economy. Mede arouses and inspires the drive to acquire and consume excessively. With her fine clothes, gold, and jewelry, Mede herself is a great, conspicuous consumer, and men's desire to possess her is all wrapped up in their wanting to consume the rich material things she wears and carries. The first moment he sees her, the dreamer wants to know to whom she belongs and confesses to Holy Church that he is consumed with passion for all the gaudiness and richness of her fully decked appearance:

Here robynge was rychere þen y rede couthe;  
 For to telle of here atyer no tyme haue y nouthe.  
 Here aray with here rychesse raueschede my herte;  
 Whos wyf a were and what was here name.

(2.14–17)

Unlike the beauty of Holy Church, Mede's good looks arouse erotic desire and the illusion of total attainability. Langland characterizes Mede and her operations in the language of erotic desire and consumption. Categorized as a "consumption good" in Thomistic economic thought (*res fungibiles*) and defined purely as a means of circulation of economic activity, money is not considered "real capital" in medieval culture. The function of money is to circulate and sustain activity in the economy.<sup>40</sup> As Will's lust at first sight shows, Mede will never permanently belong to anyone, for every time she is seen by a man, he gets aroused erotically and asks to whom she is married. And the gendered relation between her and those who pursue her bespeaks the eroticized link between money and the male-dominated power structure. In the way that all the men who see her want her and her finery and gold, Mede is the erotic promise of consumption.

Mede's role as a major, solidifying power player in an intimate network of corrupt social connections is evident in her ability to overwhelm all men except Conscience with desire. In *Piers Plowman*, Mede's promiscuous movement from one man to another shows that, although she does not belong to anyone permanently, the network of economic activity, serving both desires for material gain and for spending and worldly enjoyment, forms a web of corruption in which all individuals involved are complicit.<sup>41</sup> As the person-

<sup>40</sup> W. Stark, *The Contained Economy: An Interpretation of Medieval Economic Thought*, Aquinas Paper 26 (London, 1956), 1–3.

<sup>41</sup> The corruption that Mede practices and supports in an ever-proliferating series of economic exchanges, therefore, contradicts J. Stephen Russell's characterization of Mede as the energy and lifeblood vital to society, and it cannot serve to legitimate worldly activity as parallel to the spiritual, as suggested by James Simpson. See Stephen Russell,

ification of money, Mede is often associated with an emerging market economy in the later Middle Ages. But in Langland's analysis of the power structure, Mede is not opposed to the feudal system. She does not challenge, subvert, or replace the economy of excessive worldly desire and extravagant consumption in *Piers Plowman*, but, rather, she makes it available to more people. Langland's account of Mede's followers includes all social orders, the noble as well as the common:

Al þe riche retenaunce þat roteth hem o fals lyuyng  
 Were beden to þe Bridale a bothe half þe contre,  
 Of many manere men þat of medes kynne were,  
 Of knyghtes, of clerkes and other comune peple,  
 . . . . .  
 Y kan nouzt rykene þe route þat ran aboute mede.  
 (2.57–60, 64)

As Mede's followers include all levels of civil government, Langland here alludes to the corrupting effect of worldly consumption on the political community. What accounts for all this orgiastic frenzy around Mede, for the author, is not basic human need alone but a secular socioeconomic framework that operates and functions on the liberation of appetite and on the manufacture, elicitation, and exploitation of worldly desire and its fantastic promises.

#### THE RAT FABLE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Besides the group that followed Mede, another "route" (Prologue.167) that ran about for the sake of worldly living is that of the rats and mice, pests who consume the supplies of the human household. Whereas Langland's focus in the Mede episode is on the social evil of worldly consumption, in the rat fable he centers on the political society that is itself based on the logic of consumption. And where in Mede Langland analyzes the politics of consumption largely from the perspective of critics and observers (Holy Church, and Will to some extent), in the rat fable he explores such politics from the inside of a political power structure, notably from the point of view of the rats and mice, who are themselves wasteful consumers. In both

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"Lady Meed, Pardons, and the *Piers Plowman Visio*," *Mediaevalia* 9 (1985 [for 1982]): 239–57, and James Simpson, "Spirituality and Economics in Passus 1–7 of the B-Text," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 1 (1987): 83–103. Derek Pearsall's comment on Simpson offers a cogent criticism of his approach: "It seems to me that this does not signal acceptance of the world of money and profit and new forms of economic relationship but is a characteristic appropriation of its language for the purposes of spiritual paradox" ("Langland's London" [n. 31 above], 199).

major versions of the fable, Langland examines and critiques thoroughly, inside and out, the ramifications of a political community built on relations, habits, and practices of consumption.

My analysis in this section will move from observations of the basic physical nature and experiences of the players that make up such a community to a discussion of the larger ethical implications of the politics of such a community. Whereas in the B version the poet focuses on the nature of a politics steeped in pragmatic materialism, in the C version he goes further to explore the problem of a political authority that is unaccountable to the community and operates beyond it. Against Anna Baldwin's argument that Langland promotes and legitimates absolute kingship in the rat fable, particularly in the C-text,<sup>42</sup> my reading here will show that political authority within a secular framework is dangerous to Langland. Drawing a parallel between the bestial, consuming animals in the rat fable and Wastor, I suggest that Langland carries out a moral rhetoric against all consumers and their maintenance of political corruption. In the conclusion of the paper, I will analyze such a rhetoric and its implications in the broader context of Langland's politics of class and reform.

Both the rodents and the felines in the rat fable in *Piers Plowman* are power players within a political structure. Besides the familiar identification of the cat in the rat fable as royal authority in the court of London, the rat parliament is also an obvious allusion to the historical English parliament in the late fourteenth century.<sup>43</sup> These beasts, therefore, sit atop the social hierarchy and run the politics of their society. Langland makes these power players, rather than the entire animal kingdom, specifically wasteful and destructive consumers of one kind or another. The rats and mice live parasitically on the supplies of the human household and destroy "many mannys malt" (Prologue.216). Above them sits another species of rapacious consumers, the felines. They not only consume greatly; to the rodents they are also dangerous predators who play with and torment the lesser animals (Prologue.171–72) and eat them, too. Anna Baldwin's criticism of the rats and mice as destructive,<sup>44</sup> therefore, should extend also to the cat in the fable. Langland is equally conscious of the unwholesome bestiality of the feline as well as of the rodent. He characterizes in depth different ways in which such bestiality manifests itself in animals of different status and strengths. Rather than taking the dimension of bestiality, as Baldwin does, as a condemnation

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<sup>42</sup> Anna P. Baldwin, *The Theme of Government in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1981), 17–18.

<sup>43</sup> Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Vision of William Langland concerning Piers Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*, 2 (Oxford, 1886), 17 n. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Baldwin, *Theme of Government*, 17.

of just the rodents, the use of destructive, ravenous bestiality as a fundamental category of government as a whole is a scathing critique of all involved in that government.

Langland treats the bestial nature of these players and the materialistic, cynical politics that they run in the rat fable in a highly self-conscious and theoretical fashion. Compared to contemporary analogues, some of which he may have read,<sup>45</sup> the rat fable in *Piers Plowman* reflects self-consciously on the nature of being and existence under certain social arrangements and on the tenuous, contingent relation between the moral and the political. The rodents call attention to their own nature as destructive vermin within the human household and even ponder the question, whether they can rule themselves (Prologue.177, 216–19). They also discuss extensively the character of the cat of the court, his deadly playfulness and cruelty (170–75), and their despair that in such an existence they cannot escape the presence of such a malignant power, which continually inflicts pain and suffering: “Thow we hadde ykuld þe Cat ȝut shulde ther come another / To crache vs and alle oure kynde thogh we crope vnder benches” (202–3). In such self-reflectiveness, Langland’s rat parliament repeatedly calls attention to these creatures’ nature as bestial and unredeeming and to their own condition as compromised and unsympathetic, within a specific, definite arrangement of communal relations. The poet is not merely concerned with contemporary political events but also tackles the broader theoretical questions of social relations and political organization in secular politics that such events may have inspired.

An analogue, such as the sermon of Bishop Brinton, treats the fable as a straightforward topical discussion of the cowardice of the contemporary parliament against corrupt authority. The bishop opens his sermon with the theme “Factor operas hic beatus,”<sup>46</sup> expressing his call for political action against the corrupt government of Edward III. In the context of his exhortation for the wise and righteous to speak out against evil, there is no doubt that Brinton is on the side of the rodents, egging them on, while they feel

<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth M. Orsten has demonstrated that Langland’s version of the rat fable differs conspicuously from contemporary analogues: “The Ambiguities in Langland’s Rat Parliament,” *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961): 216–39. See also Baldwin, *Theme of Government*, 17; Dorothy L. Owen, *Piers Plowman* (Folcroft, PA, 1971), 86–87; J. J. Jusserand, *Piers Plowman* (New York, 1965), 39–48; Bernard F. Huppé, “The Date of the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*,” *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941): 35–40, esp. 36; Paull Franklin Baum, “The Fable of Belling the Cat,” *Modern Language Notes* 34 (1919): 462–70.

<sup>46</sup> Sermon 69. Mary Aquinas Devlin, ed., *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373–1389)*, 2 (London, 1954), 315. For a thorough discussion of Brinton’s sermon, see Eleanor H. Kellogg, “Bishop Brinton and the Fable of the Rats,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 50 (1935): 57–68.

compelled to, but dare not, act against evil. Langland, on the other hand, identifies no moral agent and expresses no firm sympathy for either party in his rat fable. The animal characters in *Piers Plowman* do not stand just for good and evil; the author examines the bestial dispositions to consume, waste, destroy, and kill within all these characters, and makes these dispositions the basis of their being and endeavor.

While Baldwin's reading of the rat fable is sympathetic to the cat at the expense of the rodents, the way Langland tells the fable actually discourages such an approach. While both species are destructive and wasteful, the poet sets up the account of the relationship between them primarily from the perspective of the rodents. The rat parliament speaks about the experience of oppression and exploitation; the feline does not talk, and the only way it interacts with other animals is by physically toying with or attacking them. As a result of the primacy of the perspective of the rats and mice, the role of the ruler, or the royal court, as represented by the feline, is curiously remote and yet threatening and mysterious at the same time. If the rodents do not deserve much sympathy in their irksome, destructive energy, the feline lurches behind them in an even more unsavory posture. The rats and mice make various successive attempts to rationalize their power relations with the cats, in terms that are pragmatic, material, and even moral. While the ruler is distant, he fails to have the kind of dignified authority and reverence that subjects confer upon a monarch. Characterized as a rapacious feline, he is regarded as an alien species who is feared and who nonetheless determines fundamentally the material well-being of lesser animals. Although the author aligns our point of reference with the rodents' standpoint, the position of the rats and mice within the power structure compromises them morally, and we are not made to sympathize wholeheartedly with these household pests either. We catch a glimpse of the vermins' psyche and their professed experience of living in the shadow of the cat from the lower and subordinate end of a highly asymmetrical partnership in government with the royal court. As vermin, these creatures are far from perfect and righteous beings and do not profess to be. Their position within the animal kingdom is an intermediary one, defined by relations of domination, below the great predators and above the non-aggressive creatures. And such a position makes them both vulnerable to exploitation from above and liable to displacement onto those below.

The rodents at first fantasize that it is possible to control the cat and his court, and subsequently, to be like the great predators: "We myhte be lordes alofte and lyue as vs luste" (177). The inherent moral ambiguity of the rodents' experience as non-productive, destructive creatures constantly victimized and exploited by a force greater than themselves bespeaks Langland's resistance to any stereotyped or sentimental notion about the nature

of social oppression and domination. Far from sympathizing with the cat, we learn that any moral justification for its existence lies in its negative function as a restraining force upon the destructive tendencies of the rodents themselves. Baldwin reminds us that the rats' destructive nature warrants the cat's function,<sup>47</sup> but in both major versions of the poem, the royal feline is also described as a natural killer and ravenous carnivore with an appetite for all small animals, not just household pests. The rodents feel most at danger because they live and operate in close proximity to the royal household, not because the cat has a naturally vigilant sense of justice to punish only destructive and unproductive animals. Even though the speaker mouse moralizes that the cat may serve as an agent of justice with his suppression of the unruly, his agency is not consistent or programmatic, and the ravenous instinct to kill and consume, rather than the ideal of justice, guides his action. When Baldwin suggests that the cat serves the justice of the "wider community of the household" and this legitimates his superior position,<sup>48</sup> she implicitly understands the "community" in terms of human beings and their material possessions in the "household." The animals in the fable — cats, rodents, and other lesser animals of whom Langland makes mention — do not form an overall community or separate, individual communities that operate on ethical principles. And the cat is not there for the protection of the lesser animals (some of them innocent) but as a guard of the humans' material store (the "household"). Ethical principles apply only when a threat to the household's goods is perceived, as when the rats rationalize the cat's function as a restraint on their destruction of "mannys malt" (216). In such an interpretive approach, the good of the community, then, equals the material interest of the humans, not necessarily the well-being of the animals.

The rats are willing to risk the danger of being within easy reach of a formidable, big beast because it also affords them access to the abundant store of the household. They consumed and wasted the material supplies of the household with carefree glee, much to the annoyance and discomfort of the humans, until the kitten began to grow much larger, extended his claws much farther, and used them more savagely (216–18). This is a characteristically apt representation of the prominent merchants and landowners of parliament who courted power opportunistically and sought royal favors and connections in order to engage in exploitative practices and consolidate their fortunes and power by setting themselves above the law, only to find out later that one could be caught in such a web of connections. These creatures, in their unproductive and destructive nature, are really in the same

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<sup>47</sup> Baldwin, *Theme of Government*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

trade as Wastor in the Hunger episode and other wasters elsewhere in the poem. The obvious difference between them and the working-class Wastor on Piers's half-acre is that these rodents ally themselves openly with an unpredictable and violent source of power. Of course, there is a heavy price to pay for such an alliance. And the rats' and mice's fantasy of overcoming the cat to achieve their own dominance reflects that, often, the price itself is felt to be too high.

The consuming and destructive nature of the rodent and feline species fundamentally shapes and structures the political community within the rat fable of *Piers Plowman*. And because the basis of such a political community is the various destructive, wasteful activities of its animal consumers, it is not a just political community. Members of this community best understand bestial desire, and government is described as the perpetual tension and reciprocal relationship between two species of destructive animals. Government operates on the tenuous balance of two negative, destructive forces countering each other. It does not embody the reign of justice or a rational, mechanistic system of checks and balances between these forces. There is no intrinsic structure of legitimate civil authority to speak of; it is simply the relationship between a predator and its prey living in close proximity to each other. Often the relationship between these two seems merely a suspension of anarchy in the constant tension, anxiety, and fear of the destruction of life and property.

How the rodents cope with the anxiety and fear in this relationship of suspended violence receives different treatments in the B and C versions. In the B-text, a heavily moralized policy of pragmatism informs the debate and discourse of the rat parliament. This version of the fable centers specifically on the rodents' pragmatic policy of exploiting the cat's gluttony in order to ensure their survival. The rats and mice decide they will feed the cat with the flesh of the lesser and hapless animals until he is sated and appeased. While the apparent purpose of the rat parliament is to stay alive, its discussion also points to the victims in this pragmatic scheme. The entire discussion of the rat parliament in the B-text is an illustration of Langland's criticism of gluttony as a destructive and predatory sin that causes others to suffer.

The speaker mouse in the B-text proposes a calculated policy of appeasing the cat based on his appetite to devour flesh alone. The cat preys randomly and instinctively on the lesser animals; he does not discriminate among his victims. He may happen to catch harmful household pests, but he may also catch other small animals to satisfy himself. The policy that the speaker mouse lays out for the parliament aims directly to manage the predatory feline's appetite to the greatest possible advantage of the rodent community. It is a calculated policy of exchanging short-term material and indi-



vidual loss for collective peace and stability for the rodents in the long run: “The while he cacchezþ conynges he coueiteþ nozt oure caroyne / But fedep hym al wiþ venyson, defame we hym neuere; / For bettre is a litel los þan a long sorwe” (B.Prologue.189–91).<sup>49</sup> What for the speaker mouse is a “litel los” refers euphemistically to the rabbits and venison that the cat will eat. In B’s treatment of the fable, the feudal relationship of reciprocity between lord and subject is characterized as a compromising relationship based on bribery: as long as we bribe the kitten with food, he will sustain our material interest by allowing our own destructive and wasteful activity to go on within the household. The language of the speaker’s harangue is one of naturalistic and materialistic calculation. The long-term collective prosperity and peace for the vermin class that the mouse envisions in this policy comes at the expense of the individuals and the lower classes. Particularly in the B-text, the cat is understood as a great beast whose appetite can be satiated and bloodthirsty rampage controlled, with the appropriate appeasement of venison and with the diversion of his hunt to other creatures, such as the hapless (and some may say effete, French) rabbits. There is no question here that the portrayal of the cat is as a natural predator, whose instinct to kill is random and unprejudiced. In the B version, the speaker mouse interprets the ruler’s nature as fundamentally animal and therefore controllable; as long as he catches rabbits his aggressive instinct is dulled, and satiating him with even more offerings of game further relieves him of any killing rage natural to a hunter. The B-text’s solution to the rats’ anxiety about a big, fierce predator may seem to appeal to the mutual interest of feline and vermin, but certainly at the expense of the “conynges” of the world.

Baldwin has read the proposal to bell the cat in the C-text allegorically as a form of bribery,<sup>50</sup> but the policy of appeasement here in the B version literally bribes the cat with food. Bribery implies buying off and appeasing a more powerful individual by appealing to his lesser nature, and this is exactly the rodents’ plan in B: satiating him and keeping his bloodthirsty instinct dull in exchange for long-term peace and security. The act of belling the cat, however, inverts the act of bribery. Belling the cat calls attention to the bloodthirsty and destructive nature rather than sating it, and the unthinkable, terrifically audacious nature of such an act for the speaker mouse confirms that this is beyond ordinary bribery. While Baldwin reasons that the act of belling suggests “great lords’ gifts of collars and liveries to the knights — or the officials and judges” and therefore compromise of the

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<sup>49</sup> Quotations from the B-text are from George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (Berkeley, 1988). References are to passus and line numbers and appear in the text.

<sup>50</sup> Baldwin, *Theme of Government*, 17.

king's justice,<sup>51</sup> such an act, in fact, may be performed only by the great magnates toward lesser figures who may not be able to beg off their advances — certainly not the other way around, by the lesser characters (from the Commons) toward the greater (to the king and his court). But Baldwin's characterization calls attention to the fairly common practice of late medieval feudal politics, a practice that Langland clearly condemns.

While the mouse speaker's solution presumes to bring about collective peace and prosperity, such a proposal does not imply a vision of a moral community that embodies a greater good and constitutes "all breeds of animals" within civil society at large. In the long run, the strategy of feeding and satisfying the great beast in his gluttonous appetite will pay off for the class of the rodents, but such a political culture consists of the sacrifice and suffering of lesser animals for the gluttony of the cat and, indirectly, of the rats and mice as well. In order to maintain their access to the supplies of the household and continue their wasteful and destructive practices, these parliamentary vermin are ready to exploit and sacrifice the harmless poor people. Peace for the rodents can be bought, "þouȝ it costned me catel" (B.Prologue.205), but what for these rats and mice is simply a calculation of economic loss, the high and heavy price of bribery, consists in reality of the lives and suffering of other small animals who are not as destructive and harmful as they are.

Not only is the speaker of the rat parliament prepared to sacrifice other animals for the preservation of his own class, but the ultimate purpose of appeasing the cat is individual, not collective, survival. The speaker advises his fellow rodents to tolerate the cat, "suffren as hymself wolde to slen þat hym likeþ" (B.Prologue.206), ostensibly for the sake of the whole community of rats and mice. Losing individual rodents to the tyrant likewise appeases and satiates him, and as long as he targets only individuals and is not provoked to go on a frenzy of mass killing, the rodent class will survive collectively. Yet while the mouse superficially offers a policy that will contribute to the survival of his class in the long run, his notion of society on the level of individual interaction is a dog-eat-dog one of fighting for self-interest and individual survival, of every-man-for-himself: "Forþi ech a wis wigt I warne, wite wel his owene" (B.Prologue.208). Within the animal kingdom, the rules of the game perpetually promote the worship of sheer power, even among the lesser creatures themselves. The rodents wish to become lords like the cat, and they are willing to sacrifice others to maintain the status quo. In a world without the transcendent notion of justice, the discourse of material power reigns supreme. Without the hope of ever having

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

recourse to justice, the oppressed can aspire only to power, to be like the powerful, in order to survive.

The violent tension between the cat and the rodents may be controlled by a long-term policy of appeasement on the part of the smaller animals, and in material terms this policy ultimately benefits and serves the interests of both the royal feline and his parliamentary partners in government, for one gains a steady source of income and sustenance and the other an environment of relative security in which to conduct their acquisitive, destructive business undisturbed. But this policy is clearly implemented at the expense of the other creatures, the hapless and the alien, such as the rabbits. Whereas the author of *Winner and Waster* presents a rosy picture of the happy reciprocity of Winner and Waster in consuming and acquiring, Langland is keenly aware that many fall victim to this scheme.

In the B-text the parliamentary speaker moralizes his pragmatic policy of appeasement by remarking that rats and mice are destructive and are capable of many evils when left on their own (B.Prologue.197–200). The policy that he proposes does not so much provide discipline for justice and temperate behavior, appealing, as it does, to the gluttonous, destructive appetites within all and promoting the exploitation of others for self-interested gain and security. Given the fact that such a moral qualification is meant actually to support a policy of self-interested, pragmatic material (albeit defeatist) calculation, we should question whether the speaker mouse is entirely righteous in motive and intention. Furthermore, are the control and restraint of a destructive force by an even greater one within the animal kingdom phenomena to be emulated within human society?

In the C version, this moralistic rationalization of pragmatic materialism takes on added significance in the omission of the parliamentary speaker's proposal of bribery. The emphasis shifts from the material pragmatism of bribery to the theme of suffering and victimization as conditions of existence. In addition to the pragmatic advice, also found in the B-text, that appeasement and resignation are the best policy (C.Prologue.204–5), the speaker puts a morally righteous spin on the suffering and ruthlessness involved in politics: "soffre and sey nouȝt, and so is þe beste / Til þat meschief amende hem þat many man chasteth" (Prologue.214–15). Not only is he suggesting that quietism will work in favor of the rodents in the long run, but in the C-text he states that it is actually a morally purifying experience for "hem," those individuals who suffer and eventually learn from misfortune. Instead of saying bluntly that they should allow the aggressor to target and sacrifice individuals for the maintenance of general peace (B.Prologue.206), the speaker in C presents the fallen nature of things as a moral basis for putting up with evil. His speech is made in a self-righteous tone that nonetheless seeks to conceal undercurrents of self-interestedness; it

moralizes on the suffering of others. He refers to the suffering creatures as “hem,” in the third person. He does not specify whether he supports patient suffering as “*pe beste*” in the pragmatic or moral sense, but he certainly does not include himself among those who suffer.

The moralism of the speaker’s quietism serves as a rhetorical justification of victimization and suffering for the unfortunate in a politics of cold, hard calculation. It easily makes the speaker mouse’s ready concession to violent power look good. Yet accountability has no universal application in this system. The feline and his kind never suffer or learn a moral lesson; nor does the speaker mouse himself plan to, although he expects that others will. Individuals of certain power and status are not morally accountable to their community for their actions in such a scheme of things.

It is always easier to moralize on the universal condition of sinfulness when it applies to others. Just as the ruler, although a fellow human being of equally fallen nature, is portrayed as being of an entirely different breed from the rest of society, moralizing victimization as spiritual discipline in the postlapsarian world puts certain members of society curiously above punishment and beyond accountability. The “people,” the majority of the society, will be subjected to oppression and domination, while those above them will serve to tell them that they deserve it in the fallen world. Moralizing on such a senseless condition of oppression turns the ruler into a metaphysical agent who is beyond any communication or dialogue with the people. Although I disagree with Baldwin, who holds that this episode illustrates Langland’s promotion and idealization of monarchical absolutism, it is not surprising to see that the authority of the ruler is beyond communal accountability in the speaker mouse’s tirade in the C-text, when we agree to read into the senseless experience of oppression a moral of human suffering in the fallen world.<sup>52</sup>

I have suggested that considering the construction of the political community and its ramifications in the rat fable is key to understanding Langland’s attack on politics based on worldly consumption, and that the moral criterion of the poet’s condemnation of waste and excess as sinful applies universally — to the royal cat and the rodent parliamentarian as well as to the gluttonous doctor and Wastor. But the author’s criticism of secular power constitutes a forceful moral rhetoric rather than a systematic political vision. While he attacks the political establishment for its excess and destructiveness, he does not expect powerful, wealthy people to become

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<sup>52</sup> Anne Savage also points out that the external imposition of discipline on consumption does not eradicate the cause of wasting because it cannot serve as internal moral control: “as any kind of real moral force, food remains ineffective: wasters can, sometimes, be made to work, but not to reform inwardly” (“*Piers Plowman*” [n. 3 above], 20).

self-denying ascetics living among poor people. While he sees the sins of consumption everywhere in society, from the top down, he does finally characterize wasters of different social classes differently. Wastor on the half-acre eats, drinks, and sings, refusing to work, and turns into a mean and threatening lower-class protester when Piers forces him to work. Like Wastor, the great lords and ladies, and their henchmen and minstrels, are also beasts of waste and exploitation (e.g., 11.35–41), but Langland defines their social duty differently. Whereas Wastor is expected to contribute to the well-being of his community with manual labor, no such thing is expected of the feudal magnates and their households. And whereas Wastor is a representation of Langland's fears about the illegitimate, able-bodied poor and about confusing them with the righteous poor, wasters on top of the political hierarchy pose a different, and greater, social problem for the author. While the vocal poor like Wastor may be threatening, Langland perceives that wasters at the top of the social hierarchy cause more sin and suffering by virtue of their power: greater power, greater damage. His focus on the relationship between the royal court and the parliament in the rat fable shows that destructive behavior at the top affects the entire political community. Similarly, the lords and ladies who feast while their sycophants entertain and gorge themselves are also morally responsible for the poor people starving and crying outside their gate.

Then there is also the fact that the poet represents, in the rat fable, powerful people as rapacious and ravenous animals who are destructive by instinct. It remains a question whether he really thinks powerful people are *naturally* so, and representing the relation between feudal lords and humble subjects as one between predators and prey is an established tradition in medieval culture upon which he clearly draws.<sup>53</sup> Because Langland's moral criticism of worldly power is rhetorical, and he offers no programmatic vision of dismantling such a political hierarchy, class distinctions of sinful consumers remain in the poem. As I have suggested in characterizing excessive consumption as a social sin linked to the suffering and deprivation of indigent people, the author's concern with poverty seems to be the central agendum driving his rhetoric. We must attack excessive consumption because it hurts poor people and is responsible for their suffering.

Reducing material waste and excess, then, is a direct means of alleviating poverty. And by virtue of their different social positions, the poet assigns different responsibilities to the different social classes. Because the lords and ladies have greater power, they have a greater responsibility to help poor people. The power to act and contribute to social well-being, moreover, lies

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<sup>53</sup> See for example Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford, 1990), 40–59.

with the lords and ladies, and Langland's audience for his discussion of poverty is the rich and powerful, whom he exhorts because they can do something about it. They can cut back on their excess and give to the needy; such actions affect not only their households, but also those below them socially. For the poet, political passivity rather than activity may be the responsibility of poor laborers like Wastor.<sup>54</sup> They can contribute to the welfare of their community by staying in their place as traditional workers and being the docile, good poor people they are expected to be.

Langland sees excessive and irresponsible consumption as reflective of the pathological immorality of worldly politics that is not answerable to a moral, religious authority. All who practice sinful consumption are, therefore, destructive of their community regardless of their class status. The author, however, sees that different social classes do harm in different ways, and thus, repairing the community requires different actions for the classes. Because the ruling classes have greater power, they must use this power to curb themselves and their followers and help poor people. Not only must they discipline themselves, but they can also affect the well-being of the rest of the society by consuming less and giving more. Wastor and the able-bodied poor, on the other hand, must return to their proper social place by working to provide the material resources. For Langland, their refusal to work complicates the compassion we should have for needy people and the duty everyone has to alleviate the problem of poverty. Simply by resuming work and being who they are supposed to be, they ameliorate the problem of material scarcity and ease the poet's anxiety about giving to the "wrong" poor.

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<sup>54</sup> I discuss Langland's anxiety and conflict about poor people's taking political action in "Need, Hunger, and the Politics of Poverty in *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* (2002): 131–68, esp. 145–66.