



## Does dream-vision poetry allow writers to confront, or to escape, the pressing issues of their time?

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In this essay I explore three poems, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, *Piers Plowman* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* to argue that their poets most definitely employed dream vision poetry to confront the pressing issues of their time. I first examine how the poems *themselves* categorically state their intentions in their prologues and opening lines, which clearly offer a ‘here’ and ‘now’ polemic that engages with their contemporary socio-political issues. I also explore how the medium of dream vision itself is used in order to explore these issues, and how the forms of the poems themselves create the illusion of being in a dream for the reader and why. The rest of my essay is roughly divided into three areas of analysis of the ‘pressing issues’ confronted by the poets. The first is taken up with my exploration of the antifraternal tradition; first in each of the poems as a whole, and then specifically in Passus XX of *Piers Plowman*, and I then briefly explore Langland’s ‘estates-satire’ in *Piers Plowman*. The second section of the essay is divided into an analysis of law, monarchy and the quest for ‘truth’ through allegory, by first exploring the battlefield allegory in *Wynnere and Wastoure* in relation to Edward III and the Statute of Treason, then examining the rat fable in *Piers Plowman* in relation to Richard II and John of Gaunt, and finally appraising the bee allegory in *Mum* in light of ‘truth-speaking’ and Henry IV. In the final section of my essay I look at the notion and elements of ‘werd and work’ in each of the three poems, before concluding that each of the poems ultimately champion these notions.

Each of the poems explicitly confront contemporary issues, but they vary in their explorations of these according to the incumbent monarch, laws on censorship and socio-political events at the time. Broadly speaking, *Wynnere and Wastoure* is the most emboldened poem and *Mum and the Sothsegger* the less so, but what all poems have in common is that from the outset readers are made aware that they are reading a dream vision not centred on an abstract ‘other world’ full of beautiful appearances and natural surroundings, but a vision which is used satirically to confront the ‘here’ and the ‘now’. *Wynnere and Wastoure*, written in c. 1352 by an anonymous poet, begins with a prologue which stresses the urgency of what is perceived to be a society in disrepair, with temporal deictics such as ‘nowe’, ‘neghe aftir’, ‘neghe or neghe here’ and ‘now’ scattered throughout the prologue, and the poet gives an indication in the line ‘[w]yse words and slee, and icheon wryeth othere’<sup>1</sup> that he is aware of the subtlety of language, the ethics of speaking and not speaking, and the power of language and truth. References in the poem to real places such as Cheapside in London cite the poem in a very contemporary urban setting, similarly to William Langland’s 1378 *Piers Plowman*,<sup>2</sup> whom Schmidt describes as ‘a poet of the capital

<sup>1</sup> L. 6

Text taken from module reader. All further quotations provided in text by line number.

<sup>2</sup> William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995).

and not, in spite of his origins, a provincial writer'.<sup>3</sup> Langland exploits the 'experimental realism' evident in all three dream visions, and in presenting in the Prologue '[a] fair feelde ful of folk...ther bitwene- / Of alle manere of men, the meene and the riche' (17-18), Langland sets up a 'crowded and assorted...half-acre [which] is a literary device with historical sense behind it',<sup>4</sup> in order to demonstrate from the outset that this will be a poem which questions all members of society and the way in which they work together. The Prologue to *Mum and the Sothesegger*, written anonymously in c. 1409 after tumultuous socio-political upheaval and harsh treason statutes, launches immediately into contemporary issues in a haunting tone of desperation that permeates the entire narrative. The narrator tells of startling and graphic violence in 'frounting for faute of the coigne'<sup>5</sup> and a man 'al to-teereth his toppe for his trewe tales' (48), and the words 'coroune' (1); 'cunseil for coigne that ye lacke' (6); 'tresorier' (11); 'chancellor' (13); 'iustice and iuges' (16) virtually mirror Baldwin's description of the 1381 Peasant's Revolt in which the rebels 'killed not only the Chancellor, Archbishop Sudbury...and the Treasurer, but also all the lawyers and judges they could find'.<sup>6</sup> The narrator earnestly sets out his quest to find out if it is better to be 'mum' or a 'sothesegger' but it is clear that the poet himself was very much aware 'of the potential unrest caused by illicit criticism' and so experienced 'grave anxieties about the propriety of writing his own poem'.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike conventional dream vision poetry of their time, these poems all employ the dream vision as a *vehicle* for conveying their message about 'real-world' issues in order to make statements about society removed enough to minimise chances of adverse consequences. Instead of the dream vision in the poem being a key focal theme or element of the plot (such as a fantastical new world the narrator discovers in the dream), in the three political poems discussed dream visions are employed as a tool for providing a barrier between the real world and the dream world, and the differences between these two worlds heightens the rhetoric about the state of society itself. The narrator in *Mum* reaches the point of '[f]ull woo' (573) before falling asleep, and the beautiful dreamed world he sees 'gladid my herte...And movid forth myrily to maistrie the hilles' (879-82), juxtaposing sharply with the real world which causes him such sorrow. The fact that the dream vision itself occurs nearly 900 lines into the poem is also significant, in that it firmly demonstrates the oppressiveness and immediacy of the real world: in other dream vision poetry the narrator falls asleep and dreams shortly after the beginning of the poem, but in *Mum*, escapism is much less difficult to achieve. Langland uses several dream visions throughout *Piers Plowman*, and physical circumstances are amorphous and at times difficult to comprehend, the overall result being that the narrative is shadowy and confusing like a dream itself. *Wynnere and Wastoure*, a debate poem offering two allegorically personified attitudes towards spending and saving money and the court culture behind this, is similarly vague in that there is no 'right' argument and the poet engages in 'defining an action in the make-

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All quotations taken from this B-text and provided by line number.

<sup>3</sup> Schmidt, A.V.C., ed., in 'Introduction' to *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Everyman, 1995), p. xxix

<sup>4</sup> F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The England of Piers Plowman: William Langland and His Vision of the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), p. 47

<sup>5</sup> L. 28

Text taken from module reader. All further quotations provided in text by line number.

<sup>6</sup> Anna P. Baldwin, 'The Historical Context', in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John A. Alford (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 72

<sup>7</sup> Helen Barr, *The Piers Plowman Tradition: A Critical Edition of Pierce the Plowman's Crede, Richard the Redeless, Mum and the Sothesegger, and The Crowned King* (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 26

believe realm of the dream vision, yet clearly inventing in terms of actual patterns of royal and parliamentary conduct'.<sup>8</sup>

All three poems are explicit examples of fourteenth-century antifraternal satire, and friars were a key target, as '[t]heir growth in numbers, their popularity as preachers and confessors, and their rise to supremacy in the universities, had been phenomenal'.<sup>9</sup> The Friars- a new and urban religious order- abused their sacramental authority to abdicate people of their sins through bribery, and their notorious corruption is made evident in all three poems, from *Piers Plowman*'s 'freres of oure fraternytee for a litel silver' (XX, 368) to the *Mum*'s Friars who 'mellen with no monaye more nother lasse' (429) to Wastoure warning Wynnere to spend his wealth before he dies, '[o]wthir freres it feche when thou fey worthes' (300). The confident *Wynnere* poet also satirises Papal Rome, as he places Wynnere — hoarder of wealth and possessions — at the end of the poem 'by Paris to the Pope of Rome; The cardynalls ken the wele, will kepe the ful faire' (461-62), indicting the Papacy as a site of corruption and greed. The Friars also came under intense scrutiny from fourteenth-century literary satirists because they abused their intelligence and powers of persuasion to such an extent that it would 'depress and scandalize a simpler public'.<sup>10</sup> Their intellectual prowess, from colourful preaching to exegesis, came to be seen as dangerously influential, but Langland turns this on its head in what some critics have come to call 'sermon satire'. *Piers Plowman* satirises the Friars not only in its content but its style, and the narrative tone is like that of a priest- or indeed a Friar- delivering a rite or creed in mass, from the didactic verses to the Latin declarations which punctuate them. The success of the poem is that, unlike the Friars' exclusive rhetoric, it deliberately and inclusively communicates with people of a range of intellectual capabilities.

The eschatological final passus (XX) of *Piers Plowman* is exemplary of antifraternal satire, in which Langland also employs personification-allegory to heighten the effect. When the Barn of Unity is stormed and Conscience, Contricion, Unitee, Pees, Hende-Speche and others are in need of a doctor, 'Frere Flaterere' offers his services, forming a powerfully metaphorical scene in which the Friar literally takes advantage of good virtues and the trust placed in him. There are other compelling allusions and double-entendre in the scene, such as when the friar claims he is 'a surgien...and salves can make' (337) before Peace explains that their previous surgeon 'salved so oure women til some were with childe' (348), playing on the double meanings of 'salve' as 'healing' and 'greeting'. This sinister meaning of 'salve' is further perpetuated when we read that the Friar 'gropeth Contricion' (364). In contaminating Contrition in such a way the Friar has committed a catastrophically bad act, for if Contrition is no longer 'contrite' then there can be no understanding of and therefore no absolution of sinful action. Langland further alludes that the Friar entering the Barn of Unity marks the calamity of the church as a whole in his evocation of the New Testament and the antifraternalist William of St. Amour, in his characterization of the Friar as '*Sire Penetrans-domos*' (341), literally someone who will 'make their way into houses' ('*qui penetrant domos*', 2 Tim 3:1-6). What is symbolic about this 'penetrator of houses' is that Conscience allows him to gain entry into the Holy Church under siege, symbolising that as a friar he infiltrates the physical church, but also the interior of people's minds through listening to their conscience in confession. This provides a powerful metaphor for Langland's views of the mendicant order within Christianity, and that 'it is inevitable that the disintegration of the

<sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Reed Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 266

<sup>9</sup> John A. Yunck, 'Satire', in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John A. Alford (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 143

<sup>10</sup> Du Boulay, p. 81

Church should also entail the weakening of the individual conscience'.<sup>11</sup> The final passus of *Piers Plowman* provides not so much an abandonment of the church as a redefinition, but the poem, along with *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Mum and the Sothsegger*, beseeches a reform among their religion, as the narrator in *Mum* states: 'By cause that the clergie and knighthood to-gedre / been not knytte in conscience as Crist dide thayme stable' (1738-9).

Du Boulay argues that *Piers Plowman* is 'a major landmark in the history of satire, a protest at a society that had gone wrong, or a prophecy of change in society to come',<sup>12</sup> and in addition to the satirization of the mendicant tradition, Langland also dissects the three estates and feudal society. In organising labour on the half-acre he challenges the status quo of the power balance between peasants, priests and knights, in that he commands (some) authority as a labourer, and that the knight also offers to help plough the field. The feudal system, in which all land was owned by the King who kept a quarter, gave some to the church, and leased the rest under strict hierarchical controls, is directly referred to in the prologue:

Thanne kam ther a Kyng; Knyghthod hym ladde;  
 Might of the communes made hym to regne.  
 And thane cam Kynde Wit and clerkes he made,  
 For to counseillen the Kyng and the Commune save.  
 The Kyng and the Knythod and the Clergie bothe  
 Casten that the Commune shoulde hem [communes] fynde (112-17).

In short, the order of the day was that the peasants worked for the clergy, knighthood and king, '[t]o tilie and to travaille as trewe lif asketh' (Prologue, 120), without much say in the matter. However, after the Great Plague in 1348, nearly a third of the population had been eliminated, and labourers were scarce. By the laws of supply and demand, labourers were able to command wages, and for the first time, '[t]he social estates were putting themselves into a new relation with each other, a relation governed not by custom but by money'.<sup>13</sup> Langland through *Piers the Plowman* seems to approve of this, and he warns on landlords to '[l]oke ye tene no tenaunt byt Truthe wol assente; / And though ye mowe amercy men, lat mercy be taxour' (VI, 38-9) and also that serfs should be treated with respect, as '[t]hough he be thyn underlyng here, wel may happe in hevene / That he worth worthier set and with moore blisse' (VI, 46-7).

In addition to antifraternal- and estates-satire, the poems satirize variously the law, government and monarchs of their times, and how these had an effect on freedom of speech and truthfulness. *Wynnere and Wastoure*, arguably the most audacious of the three poems, is considered by many critics to be 'a satiric indictment of the king's (and transparently, Edward III's) unwillingness or inability to eschew the twin evils of niggardliness and extravagance'.<sup>14</sup> In addition to Edward III's erroneous handling of the court's money, the *Wynnere* poet also draws attention to the recently introduced Statute on Treason in the battlefield allegory (Fitt 1), in which various 'troops' carry banners to denote the four orders of the friars, the Papacy and the lawyers and judges: '[a]nother banere es upbrayde with a bende of grene, / With thre hedis white-herede with howes on lofte' (149-50). Later on in the poem in the line '[a]hat alle schent were those schalkes and Scarshull iwiste' (317), the poet specifically references Chief Justice Shareshull who composed the Statute and redefined treason, which stated that any gathering of troops under a banner which is not that of the king is treacherous. Therefore, the gathering of the judges '[i]f any beryn be so bolde with banere

<sup>11</sup> James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (Harlow: Longman, 1990), p. 245

<sup>12</sup> Du Boulay, p. 6

<sup>13</sup> Baldwin, p. 71

<sup>14</sup> Reed Jnr., p. 269

for to ryde' (131) — together with the reference to the Edward III's Order of the Garter motto '[h]eythyng have the hathell t gat any harme thynkes' (68) — specifically and sardonically satirises the king, the judges and the law in that they are treacherous themselves by riding into battle under their various banners.

Langland also alludes to the monarch of his time, Richard II, as well as John of Gaunt, in the rat allegory in the Prologue of *Piers Plowman*, offering similar polemic on the virtues of being able to speak the truth, and Parliamentary obstruction of this. The fable sets out a group of mice and rats, 'mo than a thousand/ Comen to a counseil for the commune profit' (147-48) who dare not speak out against injustice '[fo]r a cat of court...overleep hem lightliche and laughter hem at his wille' (150). There are several mentions of silence and oppression of free speech, and the mice 'noght...unlose hire lippes ones' (214) and refuse to 'get a "mom" out of hire mouth!' (216), and despite suggestions of a bell around the cat's neck to signify his approach, none of the mice are brave enough to actually place the bell. Baldwin, among other critics, identifies the cat with John of Gaunt, 'for in February 1377 he had imprisoned [the House of Commons] speaker, that courageous "mouse" Peter de la Mare, for leading the commons in their most daring interface with the government'.<sup>15</sup> The passage also offers satirical mocking of Richard II's young age and possible incompetency, in the warning '[t]here the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge' (194) and the line '[v]e terre ubi puer est rex!' ('[w]oe to the land where the king is a child!') (196). It should be noted, however, that Langland was far from anti-monarchical, and this is stressed as some of the mice argue that they wouldn't be able to govern themselves, and that '[p]recepta Regis sunt nobis vincula legis!' ('[t]he king's bidding has the binding force of law') (145). Simpson argues that 'Langland's motive...is political wariness: he does not *dare* to interpret the fable, in which he has simultaneously argued that the King...is not to be toyed with...and implied that the King is not sufficiently mature',<sup>16</sup> and I would argue that Langland here is asserting his disagreements with facets of the ruling government, but approves of the estates model overall.

*Mum and the Sothesegger* was written in the reign of Henry IV, shortly after the 1409 *De Heretico Comburendo* had been passed, which stated that all heretics be burned at the stake. This was to counter the advancement of Lollardy and other anti-clerical movements and the production of political verse, and the narrator's claim that '[h]it is a soothe-sigger that seilde is y-seye' (38) would have been very much literal. As with *Piers Plowman*, 'Mum makes extensive use of bestiary lore to show whether behaviour conforms to natural ordinance or violates it',<sup>17</sup> and within the dream vision the bee-fable is used to highlight the injustices in society. The bees are 'bisi...aboute commune profit' (1078), but suffer attacks from the drones, who 'doon worste, deye mote thay alle; / they haunten the hyue for hony that is ynne, / ....And truelyn no twynte but taken of the beste' (982-85). The bees, like the soothe-seggers, are oppressed, and the fable highlights once again the injustices of the current society. However, as with *Piers Plowman*, this is not an absolute indictment against the monarchy and more a complaint against aspects of the ruling estates. Henry IV is mentioned several times in the poem, such as when 'Henry-is hovs holsumly y-made' (206), and although it could be reasonably stated that the *Mum* poet sympathised with the Lollards, it was perfectly feasible for him to support the king also, as hereticism and political rebellion were not mutually exclusive until 1414. It is clear, however, that like all three poems, the oppressed, the truth-sayers and the working classes are championed and spoken for, as the poet laments that 'the wacker in the writte wol haue the wors ende' (1581).

<sup>15</sup> Baldwin, p. 79

<sup>16</sup> Simpson, p. 23

<sup>17</sup> Barr, p. 28

All three poems are examples of what Burrow (1969) has termed the ‘werd and work’ theme, which Szittyá defines as ‘two of the highest duties of man, to act well or do well....and to speak the Truth’.<sup>18</sup> In *Mum and the Sothesegger*, the bees work hard for ‘commune profit’, and in *Piers Plowman*, the ‘wasters’ are berated by Piers, who rebukes: ‘[y]e ben wastours, I woot wel, and Truthe woot the sothe’ (VI, 130). The disputes he engages in with the wasters over the merits of working are mirrored in *Wynnere and Wastoure*, whose themes of working against ‘wasting’ are played out throughout the debate, from Wynnere who states that he will ‘spedfyllly will spare and spende not to grete’ (222-24) to Wastoure who antagonistically asks ‘[w]hat scholde worthe of that wele if no waste come?’ (223). All three poets discredit those who go against ‘werd’, from the *Mum* poet who triumphantly claims after his encounter with the bee-keeper that ‘Mum nys the maker and moste cause eeke’ (1155), to the *Wynnere* poet who laments the ‘childe appon chere, withowtten chyn-wedys, / That never wroghte thurgh witt this words togedire, / Fro he can jangle als jaye and japes telle’ (24-26), and these ‘jongleurs’ and ‘japers’ are equally reviled in by *Piers Plowman*, who admonishes the ‘murthes to make as mynstralles konne, / And geten gold with hire glee- synneless, I leeve’ (33-34). These medieval minstrels were disliked because they spoke ‘filth’ instead of good and perverted the ‘right’ order of life, and were also associated with the ubiquitous Friars, who were ‘chief among those who abuse the divine gift of speech’.<sup>19</sup>

These abuses of ‘werd and work’ symbolise what each of the poems represent and the causes of their passionate polemic: speaking ill and not working hard are earthy wrongs in themselves, but they also represent a spiritual truth and labour. For Langland, for example, hard work isn’t necessarily about fairness or egalitarian values but penance, and the notion that working hard in this life will be rewarded in the next. The *Sothesegger*’s heart-rending quest for truth and the meaning of truth is about justice and fairness, and the notion that ultimately, ‘trouthe and the trinite been two nugh frendes’ (1248), while *Wynnere* emphasises the importance of hard work and not ‘wasting’ and *Wastoure* highlights that those who may be hard at ‘work’ may not always be adhering to the notions of ‘werd’. All three poems champion the idea that no matter how oppressed — whether by the notorious mendicant tradition, by unfair landlords or those of higher intellect or wealth, by terrifying treason laws or overwhelming judges or monarchs — the destitute or exploited should have a voice and be able to speak ‘sothe’, and justice, mercy and honesty should prevail, regardless of social standing. The poets of *Wynnere and Wastoure*, *Piers Plowman* and *Mum and the Sothesegger* all employed dream vision to communicate their own visions for a better society.

<sup>18</sup> Penn R. Szittyá, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 249

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255

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