

EMILY STEINER

William Langland

William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, one of the most influential poems of the English Middle Ages, is a poem steeped in law. The poet's profound engagement with legal concepts, with fourteenth-century legislation and with legal instruments, such as charters and seals, is key to his innovative poetics as well as to his larger project of making English verse a discourse of theology, ethics and reform. Throughout the poem, Langland explores the dynamics of justice and mercy; along the way he touches on such bread-and-butter legal topics as contract, crime, inheritance and bondage.¹ As the poem shows, legal language, whether derived from scripture, from canon, civil, or common law, or from contemporary practice can forge creative, even daring links between politics, religion and social life.

A Law unto Itself

Medieval law is not limited to set of codes or practices, nor is it simply an object, such as a charter, or a place, such as a courtroom, representable in literature or art. On the contrary, law bridges several areas of medieval thought and several discourses that have come to seem distinct: theology, political theory, ethics and aesthetics. In *Piers Plowman*, Langland views law as an all-encompassing idea and as a set of general rules governing behaviour and belief, whether those rules take the form of biblical precepts or of common-law maxims. Consequently, references to fourteenth-century English law in the poem can seem somewhat disparate and inchoate. However, the diverse strands of law woven throughout *Piers Plowman* help account for Langland's distinctive poetics, while showing how complex and sophisticated the relationship was between medieval English literature and law.

Perhaps the aspect of law most familiar to modern readers is its corruption and the always pressing need for legal reform. In Langland's Westminster, law is a 'labor of the tongue' (B.19.33)² easily corrupted by money, which

greases the palms of a host of middlemen, including jurymen, summoners and executors. Conscience complains to the king that Meed (money, reward) controls the law and prevents poor people from obtaining justice: ‘And doth men lese thorough hire love that lawe myghte wynne – / The maze for a mene man, though he mote evere! / Law is so lordlich, and looth to maken ende: / Withouten presents or pens he pleseth ful fewe’ (3.159–62). The ecclesiastical court of appeals of the archbishop of Canterbury (the Court of Arches) is also rife with lies and greed, fur mantels paving the way for divorce: ‘And for a menever mantel he made lele matrymonye / Departen er deeth cam, and a devors shapte’ (20.136ff.). These passages tend to cluster towards the beginning of the poem (Prologue, B.2–4), a series of satires about political life, where a marriage charter between Lady Meed (payment) and False, drawn up in Westminster, serves as an allegory of all legal fraud; and then again in passus 20 where Covetousness, in league with Antichrist, with ‘glosynges and gabbynges’, brings down ‘the wit and the wisdom of Westmynstre Halle’ (l. 133).

The need for legal reform is dire, but its impetus comes neither from the centre nor from the locales of medieval government. The poet downplays the role of parliament, which, at the time the B-text was likely written (mid-1370s), was beginning to assume its modern shape. In *Piers Plowman*, parliament’s function is advisory or petitionary (as opposed to representative or legislative) and even in these capacities, severely limited.³ Indeed, the poet depicts the role of collective bodies in creating law and maintaining justice only very abstractly, in contrast to other medieval allegories, such as John Gower’s *Mirour de l’omme*, in which devils’ parliaments and heavenly councils, for instance, play a bigger role. In *Piers Plowman* what would consolidate into the House of Commons is obscurely drawn as a generalised community of the realm. We learn, for example, that the King, along with the Commune and Kind Wit, ‘shopen lawe and leaute – ech lif to knowe his owene’ (l. 122). In the belling of the cat episode in the Prologue, two parliament-like groups of mice and rats conspire to bell a menacing cat, perhaps referring to the king’s uncle, John of Gaunt, who dominated court politics, but they are too ‘unhardy’ to get the job done (Prol. 180). We are made vaguely aware of the existence of the King’s council, but his royal advisors, Reason and Conscience, represent every man’s ability to choose for the good rather than particular magnates or officers.

The well-meaning King decries corruption but is largely ineffectual. In this sense, law points to the irony at the heart of allegorical satire: personifications are, by their very nature, ill-equipped to reform society. If an allegorical King should permit his ward, Lady Meed, to marry False, or permit Wrong and Peace to settle out of court, ‘to make pees with his pens,

handy-dandy payed' (4.75), all of society would be irrevocably damaged. Unlike his contemporary John Gower, Langland offers no practical guide for English princes. For him there is no stable centre of worldly justice and no human embodiment of law. When Reason is called upon to advise the King, he conjures up a scene of total submission, in which monks adhere to their rules without deviation, wayward children and wives are beaten, in which the king's counsel is inseparable from the common profit, and law itself serves as 'a laborer and lede afeld donge' (5.47), always subordinate to the power of love. In *Piers Plowman*, examinations of worldly kingship are scattershot and under-theorised. Only the most marginal figures – a goliard, a lunatic and an angel on high – weigh in on whether the King is above the law, answerable only to God and divine law, or beholden to the law of the realm. The commons are left to shout (in Latin) their unqualified obedience: 'The king's precepts are for us the binding force of law!' (*Precepta regis sunt nobis vincula legis*) (l. 145).⁴ The image of a truly law-giving and law-enforcing monarch appears only in B.19, which portrays the risen Christ as a conquering king, entitled to institute new laws, upend hierarchies and enslave those who resist him: 'To make lords of laddes, of lond that he synneth, / And fre men foule thralles, that folwen noght hise lawes' (ll. 33–4). True legal reform lies in the past and in an apocalyptic future in which nothing remains but total overhaul.

Personal Liability

Corruption in Westminster may be intractable, and Reason too lofty to combat it. Nonetheless, in *Piers Plowman*, the definition of a good person – someone who has what it takes to be saved – is intrinsically bound up in the law. Indeed, the poem shows that it is virtually impossible to imagine goodness and its reward without recourse to legal language and to a vivid legal imagination. Most obviously, for the poet, all of human society participates in a divine system of justice and mercy, in which sin is punished or pardoned and virtue rewarded in the afterlife. Within this system, one does well, in part, by obeying worldly laws or by using law to help, rather than hurt, other people. For example, in the Plowing of the Half-Acre (B.6), agricultural labourers flaunt the Statute of Labourers (1351, and subsequent statutes), which decreed that all able-bodied beggars be forced to work and that labourers not leave their estates or demand higher wages, thus making landlords compete for workers.⁵ Piers the Plowman, unsure whether to compel 'wasters' to work by starving them, is assured by Hunger that God will punish them in the afterlife (l. 226). Piers' moral quandary is thus resolved by a collusion between theological precept (you will be rewarded or punished

in the afterlife) and statute law (all able-bodied labourers to do well must work). To take a slightly more nuanced example, Truth's Pardon (B.7) condemns lawyers for accepting money to defend the innocent (from a moral standpoint, can advocacy be paid?), but then pardons them if they argue for the poor *pro bono*, and refrain from injurious speech. These lawyers, in their turn, will suffer no injury post-mortem from the notoriously litigious devil ('And [for Oure Lordes love lawe for hym sheweth] – / Shal no devel at his deeth day deren hym a myte', ll. 49–50).

These examples point to a complex interface between divine and human law: the poet, in the form of a divine pardon, imagines a reciprocal justice for principled lawyers (those who refrain from injuring others with legal language will not be injured themselves in a divine court of law). But they also suggest that law frames what it means to be good. To look at this idea from a different angle, *Piers Plowman* uses law to model goodness by asking its readers to imagine themselves as persons in law. That is, those seeking eternal salvation – those hoping to access divine grace, atone for their sins and join the community of the saved – must be able to express legal 'personality' (i.e., their advantages and disadvantages in law). They need to be able to picture themselves entering into contracts, suing or being sued, paying penalties for crime or debt, or, conversely, suffering disability in law by virtue of status, gender, age, or mental or physical incapacity.⁶ Although the poet discourages social mobility, he asks his readers to become penitents by envisioning themselves in different legal situations as different kinds of persons in law.

We see the expression of legal personality through the various legal documents in the poem, which together attest to a contract drawn up between God and humanity, in which Christians may earn salvation rather than being automatically condemned to hell as a punishment for Original Sin. The recipient of these documents must shuffle a number of legal roles: debtor, heir, pardoned offender, or witness. In B.14, for instance, Patience assures Hawkyn the Active Man that sincere penance (i.e., a poor heart) operates like a quittance, a document proving payment for debt which the debtor can present to the devil in the heavenly court: 'Ac if the pouke wolde plede herayein, and punysshie us in conscience, / He sholde take the acquitaunce as quyk and to the queed shewen it, / Pateat &c: *Per passionem Domini*' (ll. 189–90a). Likewise Moses/Hope assures the dreamer that the benefits conferred by his letters patent (the Ten Commandments), once sealed by Christ hanging on the cross, will apply to anyone who loves God and his neighbour: 'And whoso wercheth after this writ, I wol undertaken / Shal nevere devel hm dere, ne deeth in soule greve' (B.17.16–17). Conversely, Meed's feoffment damns everyone who participates, the notaries, scribes, beneficiaries and witnesses, drawn from various social ranks: Simony and

Civil Law (clerics), ‘unfoldeth the feffement’, Mede and False, portrayed as highborn aristocrats, are enfeoffed with the earldom of Envy and the lordship of Lechery; and Piers the Pardoner, Reynald the Reeve, Munde the Miller and others serve as witnesses to the translation.⁷

Conceiving of oneself as a legal person is an enabling activity in several respects. First, it suggests that earthly law has an imaginative purchase on divine law that can be expressed in a variety of ways. Second, the notion that a Christian of any status, gender or age may be legally saved suggests that earthly law, too, might confer privileges and penalties more expansively. For example, at the core of legal personality is the ability to inherit, whether as an individual or as a collective. Like many medieval poets, Langland describes salvation as an inheritance that good Christians have the right to claim through their relationship with Christ. Thus inheritance raises questions not only about who has the right to claim but also about how kinship and belonging are defined. Such questions drive a number of debates towards the middle of the poem (B.11–12). Scripture insists, for instance, that only the poor can inherit their ‘eritage in hevене – and by trewe right’ (10.339), to which the dreamer protests that baptism is the main requirement for salvation, not poverty. Scripture agrees that baptism organises a class of redeemable people who can claim inheritance from Christ, a class that includes even Saracens, Jews and other ‘heathens’, but only if they convert at the eleventh hour and have been living all along in conformity to Christian beliefs. The Emperor Trajan breaks into protest that some pagans, such as himself, can be saved under exceptional circumstances. All the various people who can, under certain exceptions and conditions, inherit the kingdom of heaven, are described by the poet as blood brothers (‘bloody bretheren’), sharing kinship ties: ‘For alle are we Cristes creatures, and of his cofres riche, / And bretheren as of oo blood, as wel beggeres as erles’ (11.198–9). Christian salvation changes the terms of inheritance by changing the definition of kinship; at the same time, however, inheritance offers an invitation to the legal imagination that enables people to think of themselves as one of the possibly saved. The crucial question is not simply who has the chance to be saved, but also under what conditions we can conceive of ourselves as legal persons, able to inherit.

A parallel to inheritance is the concept of mainprise. Mainprise refers to the medieval legal practice in which someone accused of a crime is temporarily released from custody before the trial. A mainpernour agrees to provide surety for the accused by putting up bail. In theory, the mainpernour promises his own body in exchange for that of the accused, agreeing to suffer the punishment should the accused not return (‘corpus pro corpore’ [a body in exchange for a body]), probably deriving from hostageship), but, in practice,

that promise has been commuted to a fine.⁸ Those who benefit from mainprise have access to influential people willing to vouch for them. Not surprisingly, in the king's court at Westminster (B.2–4), mainprise is portrayed as a potential obstruction of justice. The King, learning of False's and Favel's intrigues, threatens to hang them, should they be captured, and refuses them the right to post bail: 'Shal nevere man of this molde maynprise the leeste. / But right as the lawe loketh, lat falle on hem alle' (2.198–9). Later, Wrong's friends plead for lenience: 'lat Maynprise hym have / And be borgh for his ble, and buggen hym boote' (4.87) and agree amongst themselves that 'Mede moste be maypernounr', that is, that money should provide surety for Wrong's release (l. 112). In these examples, mainprise, though a useful way of buying time in a system in which people languished in prison before trial, is portrayed as partial, a legal stopgap for those with deep pockets, and an impediment to justice should the accused escape.

One would assume that, in the next life, perfect justice would obviate the need for such remediations. As the poem called the 'Quatrefoil of Love' (c. 1400) affirms, at the Last Judgement, when the dead rise up, 'Thar may no gold ne no fee make owre maynpryse, / Ne kyn.'⁹ Neither gold nor kin can buy a reprieve from prison, here conceived as penal rather than merely custodial. By contrast, in *Piers Plowman* the poet is determined to redeem mainprise, and indeed any legal practice that offers remedy or respite from the severity of the law. Not every accused person has the cash and kin to go free, but every faithful Christian does, insofar as Christ embodies both the payment and the connection. In a Christian era, God assumes the liability. As Abraham/Faith explains to the dreamer,

Out of the poukes pondfold no maynprise may us fecche
 Til he come that I carpe of: Christ is his name
 That shal delivere us some day out of the develes power,
 And better wed for legge than we ben alle worthi
 That is, lif for lif –

(B.16.264)

In this passage, Abraham/Faith is talking about a one-time event, the Harrowing of Hell, when Christ freed the patriarchs and prophets from the devil's prison, laying down his life for theirs 'corpus pro corpore', a phrase that simultaneously evokes English legal practice and the sacrifice of the Holy Sacrament, the Corpus Christi. Christ's mainprise however, turns out to be a repeated rather than singular event: although the prisoners change, the mainprenour stays the same, forever granting and posting bail for those who deserve it. The idea is that, in a Christian era, mainprise, under certain conditions, is available to all: at the end of B.18, for example, Peace declares that God has granted that she and her sister Mercy mainprise 'al mankynde'

(l. 186). Mainprise is thus refurbished and repurposed to serve salvation theology, but the point is not that divine law transforms and redeems earthly law. It is rather that earthly law provides the apparatus through which one can imagine oneself as a legal person – able to inherit or be mainprised, to be pardoned or not – and thus able to participate in the scheme of salvation.

The Long Arm of the Law

Piers Plowman's encounter with law is eclectic and vast, drawing upon a repository of terms, practices and perspectives. As the poem abundantly shows, law is a language-making machine: it is nearly impossible to talk about one's relationship to other people (or to God) without recourse to law. Although the practice of law is often corrupt, and its application to other discourses often misunderstood, in *Piers Plowman* the virtue of law is that it is neither rigid nor restrictive. Law makes things happen 'for real', and Langland often invokes legal performativity in order to make a point about social or ecclesiastical reform; for example, just as a poorly written charter, with interlinear notes or bad Latin, will not hold up in court, so a priest who botches his prayers is doing no one any service (B.11.303–8).¹⁰ At the same time, for the poet, working with the law also requires such qualities as flexibility of thought, the ability to think concretely and abstractly at once, and the will to inhabit a range of identities. Law is thus critical to a poetry that demands the same qualities from its readers.

In many passages in *Piers Plowman* the wonderful elasticity of law, and of the medieval legal imagination, is exemplified by metaphor. As suggested above, however, in medieval literature the application of earthly law to salvation is not exactly figurative. You might say that a legal metaphor such as 'heaven is my inheritance' is not metaphorical at all; it describes instead the disciplinary overlap between theology and law. In medieval literature, this overlap has surprisingly material dimensions. For example, the religious poet Guillaume de Deguileville (fl. 1330–50), whose well-known dream-vision poetry influenced *Piers Plowman*, portrays a heavenly court complete with judge, advocates, witnesses and written instruments.¹¹ Did Deguileville believe in a literal court? Quite possibly the image of a post-mortem courtroom was so conventional by the later Middle Ages that it had shed whatever metaphoricity it might have had in the first place. And certainly a legal metaphor such as 'the devil's prison' will cease to be metaphorical when theology is retrofitted to explain it (e.g., in the case of the doctrine of Purgatory). Perhaps a better way to think about medieval legal metaphor is the following: because law crossed various discourses it was always available as both a literal and a figurative concept.

This problem of legal metaphor can be approached in still a different way. If the metaphoricality of law describes the overlap between law and theology, it is also built into theological literature, and particularly into Paul's epistles. When Paul speaks of the circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:25–9) or the bond of debt nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14), he is speaking metaphorically but not merely so; he also showing that legal language is indispensable to Christian hermeneutics and to Christian salvation. For Paul, the law, through its suitability for metaphor, bridges an Old Testament and New Testament worldview. Moreover, in the Pauline epistles, and elsewhere in biblical hermeneutics, a crucial part of grasping the rules of salvation is to experience the gap between spiritual and temporal law. That gap has emotional power, making readers feel anxious or relieved about their future. Part of what legal metaphor does in *Piers Plowman* is to maintain that gap – or tension – between law and theology, and thereby sustain the emotion necessary for theology to function as law.

In many passages in *Piers Plowman* legal metaphors are deployed to heighten and deepen the emotional life of salvation and to shock the reader into gratitude or fear. In B.II.129–36, for example, the dreamer, desperate to ensure his salvation, perversely insists that baptism is a contract of unfreedom between a lord and a churl:

Ac he may renne in arerage and rome fro home,
 And as a reneyed caytif recchelesly aboute.
 Ac Reson shal rekene with hym and rebuken hym at the laste,
 And Conscience acounte with hym and casten hym in arerage,
 And putten hym after in prison in purgatorie to brenne,
 For his arerages rewarden hym there right to the day of dome,
 But if Contricion wol come and crye by his lyve
 Mercy for hise mysdedes with mouthe or with herte.

In this extended metaphor, Paul's bondservant of Christ is reimagined as a churl, who is not allowed to draw up a charter, alienate property or leave the manor without his lord's permission. Although a churl may rack up debt and run away from his manor, the lord's henchmen (i.e., his own faculties, Reason and Conscience) will force him to confront his crime and throw him into the manor jail, until he confesses and begs pardon. There are two medieval English legal situations operating in this extended metaphor. One is the situation in which a bondsman leaves the manor, becoming officially a 'fugitive'. After a year, if the lord fails to file a claim, or to apprehend the fugitive, the bondsman earns his freedom and cannot legally be coerced. But if the lord files a claim initially, or catches up with the villein, he can force the villein to return to the manor.¹² Overlaid on top of this fugitive metaphor, in

Piers Plowman, is a related one regarding imprisonment for debt ('he may renne in arerage'). In the fourteenth century, a debtor could be held in close imprisonment until he paid his debt or his creditor allowed for his release. Here Reason and Conscience, playing the role of the lord's agents, catch up with the sinner/villein, confront him with the (spiritual) debts he owes, to his lord or someone else, and incarcerate him until the debt is paid, that is, the sinner is purged in Purgatory, unless he proves himself contrite.

In this playful if disquieting analogy, inclusion in the community of the saved is compared to unfreedom on the manor, thus yoking together one kind of anxiety ('will I be saved?') with another ('will I, or do I want, to be caught?'). To feel like a Christian, bound to Christ, one is supposed to feel like a villain, bound to the lord and to his law, and it is through the legal metaphor that such emotions are freshly felt and through which one can imagine oneself as someone who presumably many of Langland's readers were not, that is, unfree. From a theological perspective such metaphors may seem superfluous – and somewhat perplexing: is it not enough for Langland's dreamer to claim that baptism is a contract, in which God promises to redeem all Christians who do penance for sin, after a purgative stint in Purgatory? But the 'fugitive churl' critically re-figures the relationship between law and theology, if theology can be said to be law because of the tension that metaphor maintains between the two. The passage is emotional in part because it uses medieval English law to animate and narrativise spiritual law: a churl falls into debt and is imprisoned; he leaves the manor and is caught. But its emotional punch is derived from the gap that metaphor opens up between law and the Law: we are meant to feel like God's servant by feeling like a fugitive, reluctant, trapped, coerced – and safe.

Giving the Slip: Literature at the Limits of the Law

Legal metaphors in *Piers Plowman* point to the overlap between secular law and salvation theology, while maintaining a productive tension between the two, stressing the gap between the certainty and uncertainty of being saved. These metaphors aim to startle readers out of aesthetic or spiritual complacency: what would it feel like to be a renegade churl thrown into his lord's prison? Would one be relieved or aggrieved, happily or unhappily constrained? The poem's most powerful metaphors, however, turn on the legal exception, the unexpected or archaic remedy that saves you from certain death. Because pre-modern English law prescribed capital punishment for crimes that modern Western readers would consider minor, it also mediated the severity of the law by providing escape hatches that later jurists would consider unjust. Such remedies, loopholes and exceptions show what it

means to write poetry ‘in the shadow of the gallows’, or in other words to create a high-stakes literature that saves.

In Passus B.18/C.20, for example, Christ, having triumphantly harrowed hell, gives a victory speech jam-packed with rationales for saving humankind. In this speech, he is prepared to be generous. He affirms that, at Doomsday, it is possible that even those Christians consigned to hell will not be judged perpetually to death. As the divine judge Christ is authorised to pardon even condemned criminals. What follows are two legal analogies:

It is noight used on erthe to hangen a feloun
 Ofer than ones, though he were a tretour.
 And if the kyng of that kyngdom come in that tyme
 There the feloun thole sholde deeth or oother juwice,
 Lawe wolde he yeve hym lif, and he loked on hym.
 And I that am kyng of kynges shal come swich a tyme
 Ther doom to the deeth dampneth alle wikked;
 And if lawe wole I loke on hem, it lith in my grace
 Wheither thei deye or deye noight for that thei diden ille.
 Be it any thyng aboutght, the boldenesse of hir synnes,
 I may do mercy thourgh rightwisnesse, and alle my wordes trewe.
(B.18. 380–90)

In the first lines we are told that felons are not hung twice, which may refer to the rare event in medieval law that, if someone inadvertently ‘gives the slip’ at the gallows – if the rope breaks, or the condemned man is cut down before he gasps his last breath – that person is not re-hung, however disappointed the crowd.¹³ The unlikelihood of the person’s survival meant that his escape was seen as a miraculous event; kings would often give pardon to the hanged man out of the charity that such miracles demand. This passage in *Piers Plowman* may allude to the well-known case of one Walter Wynkeburn who was hung in 1363 at Leicester, revived in the cart, was rushed to the abbey to protect him from being hung a second time and pardoned by King Edward III, who happened to be at Leicester.¹⁴ Even traitors are not hung twice, Langland adds with cold comfort, reminding us that, after the 1351 Statute on Treason, traitors might suffer multiple deaths: drawn, hung and disembowelled.¹⁵

The second legal analogy explains that, if the king should arrive at the gallows and give a sign (‘and he loked on hym’), he may release a condemned man. This is an appeal to ancient tradition that a king could pardon anyone about to be executed if he happened to be passing by. For example, in 1397, one William Walshman was convicted of stealing a silver ‘pendant’ and sentenced to death. The king happened to pass by the site of execution and ordered William’s release.¹⁶ Likewise Christ can make an exception

and grant mercy, even to those already in hell.¹⁷ In this passage, the legal exception (the failed hanging) and the rarely used legal remedy (the royal look) heighten the emotional drama of salvation. Christ through his absolute power can give mercy even to the worse sinner, but that man has a noose about his neck, which may or may not break. The king may or may not ride by; he may turn and look. This passage is at once literature as legal compendium and poetry in the shadow of the gallows.

One final example of legal exception in *Piers Plowman* is the benefit of clergy, or what later medieval writers called ‘neck-verse’, a peculiarly English practice that tried to reconcile canon law and common law. In England, after the late thirteenth century, those accused of crimes in secular court (always excluding certain crimes such as treason) had the option of proving their clergy by reading aloud a verse from a Latin psalm, which eventually became identified with penitential psalm 50/51, ‘Miserere mei’, a psalm considered relatively easy to recite. If the accused passed the literacy test, he would be transferred to ecclesiastical court, where he might be retried, and where he was unlikely to receive the death penalty. By the end of the fourteenth century, the ‘neck-verse’ was becoming a legal fiction of clergy: the Gaol Delivery Rolls record many cases of laymen, who, lacking tonsure and habit, proved their ‘clergy’ by reciting the psalm.¹⁸ In sum, by the late fourteenth century, psalmic literacy provided a remedy at the same time that it enabled social mobility in law.

In *Piers Plowman*, neck-verse shows how literature and law collude in shaping narratives about near-death escapes and, in the process, construct hair-raising theological poetics. With neck-verse, Langland places his own risky poetic project at the limits of the law. In B.12 (also in C), Imaginative is defending the special status of the clergy, by which he means both ‘the clergy’, that is, the men who preach and teach, and ‘clergie’ the learning that priests transmit to others to save them from eternal damnation:

Wo was hym marked that wade moot with the lewed!
 Wel may the barn blesse that hym to book sette,
 That lyvyng after lettrure saved hym lif and soule.
Dominus pars hereditatis mee is a merye verset
 That hath take fro Tybourne twenty strong theves,
 Ther lewed theves ben lolled up – loke how thei be saved!

(12.185–190)

The passage begins by claiming that it is spiritually detrimental to be a layperson. Lucky are the ones who learn to read Latin psalms as children, because the psalms tell you what to believe and how to mourn your sins. In short, learning to read the psalms may save your soul. Yet the example of the benefit of clergy and its ‘murye verset’ links the idea that psalmic reading can

save you to a more contested site of legal performance. According to the poet, in his day, thuggish thieves (twenty ‘lewd’ and ‘strong’) locked up in Tyburn prison can dodge the noose by reciting a verse from the psalm.

This outrageous comparison between psalmic reading and neck-verse feels like a travesty of spiritual literacy: surely the poet realises that the saving power of the psalms with respect to the soul is not on the same level as the literacy which any lowborn thief can use to save his neck! Presumably, the speaker, Imaginative, is contrasting criminality in the temporal mode with sin and forgiveness in the spiritual mode. That is to say, the psalms are so essential as expressions of contrition and faith that their application to the most instrumental of worldly causes highlights their value for all humanity. And yet, the poet, who loves a risky comparison, is also using the literacy test as a radical test case for clergie. Reading can save us in a pinch if are willing take that leap and imagine that mercy can be justice and that anyone, cleric or lay, knight or knave, saint or thief can claim the benefit.

Relief for a thief, temporal or spiritual, is never a sure thing. As Imaginative concedes, their status is ever precarious: ‘for he that is ones a thef is everemoore in daunger / And as lawe liketh to lyve or to deye’ (12.205). Yet medieval English law, with its battery of compromises and exceptions, makes spiritual benefit possible to imagine and to claim. Neck-verse may bridge the gap between earthly and heavenly salvation because English common law has the resources to remediate its own rules and to accommodate other legal systems. This is law – and literature – on the edge.

Notes

1. See James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B Text*, 2nd rev. edn (Exeter: University of Exeter Press) for a thorough explanation of the dynamics of justice and mercy in the poem.
2. Law plays an important role in the three major versions of the poem. I focus on examples from the B-text following A. V. C. Schmidt’s edition (*The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17* (London: Dent, 1995)).
3. See Emily Steiner, ‘Commonalty and Literary Form in the 1370s and 80s’, *New Medieval Literatures* 6 (2003), 199–221; Matthew Giancarlo, *Parliament and Literature in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 179–208.
4. See Fiona Somerset, “‘Al þe comonys with on voys at onys’”: Multilingual Latin and Vernacular Voice in *Piers Plowman*’, *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2005), 107–36; and Larry Scanlon, ‘King, Commons, and Kind Wit: Langland’s National Vision and the Rising of 138’, in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, ed. Kathy Lavazzo (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2003), 191–233.

5. For *Piers Plowman* and labour legislation in the fourteenth century, see Anne Middleton, 'Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version "Autobiography" and the Statute of 1388', in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. Stephen Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): 208–317.
6. On legal person and medieval allegory, see Elizabeth Fowler, 'Civil Death and the Maiden: Agency and the Conditions of Contract in *Piers Plowman*', *Speculum* 70:4 (1995), 760–92.
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8. See Kathleen Kennedy, *Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), esp. 61–88; and Jonathan Rose, *Maintenance in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), esp. 150–80.
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10. Bruce Holsinger, 'Langland's Musical Reader: Liturgy, Law, and the Constraints of Performance', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21:1 (1991), 99–141.
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15. See generally, J. G. Bellamy, *Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
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18. For histories of medieval benefit of clergy, see Richard H. Helmholz, 'Conflicts between Religious and Secular Law: Common Themes in the English Experience, 1250–1640', *Cardozo Law Review* 12 (1990), 707; Leona Christine Gabel, *Benefit of Clergy in England in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Octagon, 1928); Katherine Zieman, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), ch. 22; John G. Bellamy,

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