

‘In that folie I raigned ...’: Reason, Justice and the King in *Piers Plowman* and *King Lear*

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In 1550, Robert Crowley edited the first printed edition of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, under the title *The Vision of Pierce Plowman*, and began to offer copies for sale from his bookshop at the Ely Rents in Holborn, in London. Until that year, Langland’s work had been on the list of books banned by Parliament. Presumably, this was because of its anticlericalism, and because the *Piers Plowman* tradition was identified with the Wycliffite movement, whose writings had been banned under censorship regulations culminating in the ‘Act of Six Articles’ of 1539.

A note on the texts of *Piers Plowman* and *King Lear*: Crowley’s preface to *Piers Plowman* is quoted from the first of his editions of 1550. Citations of the actual text are from the 1561 reprinting by Owen Rogers. Hereafter the title is abbreviated as *PP*. Crowley numbered folios in his publications; Rogers’ imprint is unpagged. (My thanks are due to the British Library for giving me direct access to both, and for providing microfilm material.) For convenience of reference I have added in square brackets corresponding references to the second edition of A.C. Schmidt (1995). Translations following Middle English quotations are my own.

King Lear (hereafter, *KL*) is cited from *The Tragedie of King Lear* in the Nonesuch ‘variorum’ edition (3: 737-836). I have also consulted the ‘First Folio’ facsimile edited by Helge Kökeritz, cited in the list below. For the purposes of the present discussion, I treat the 1608 Quarto (‘*Q*’) and the First Folio versions as equally authentic, accepting Steven Urkowitz’s hypothesis that ‘the [1608] Quarto was printed from Shakespeare’s foul papers, and the [1623] Folio was printed from the Quarto version that was carefully brought into agreement with the official promptbook’ (127). (‘*Q*’ in any of my citations indicates that a phrase I have quoted appears only in the 1608 Quarto.) For reading convenience, I have added, in square brackets, corresponding references to Kenneth Muir’s ninth edition in the Arden series.

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Divided though the populace was on religious issues at this time, there was a groundswell of support for reforms initiated during the reign of Henry VIII – who certainly ‘...could not have effected his personal purpose if there had been a stiff resistance on the part of the English people to a rupture with Rome’ (Hutchinson 1). It stimulated enough interest in *Piers Plowman*, which was then perceived as a prophecy of the English Reformation, to enable Crowley in that same year, 1550, to commission from Richard Grafton, the Protestant printer who had printed the first edition, two further impressions of this epic work of the late fourteenth century which had never ceased to rouse controversy (King 345).

Crowley’s three imprints appeared when England was passing through the ‘Edwardian’ phase of its Reformation. The young Edward VI, a zealous Protestant, personally favoured the legislation initiated by his successive Regents, the Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland, to consolidate his father’s reforms. Specifically, an Act of his Parliament of 1549-50 ordered ‘the suppression of all service-books, other than the Prayer Book and Henry VIII’s Primer, and the destruction of all remaining religious statues, and paintings’ (Bindoff 121). While Edward lived, the religious uproar that had broken out during his father’s reign mounted steadily, accompanied by a crescendo of iconoclasm directed against the images and relics of the Catholic Church.

On his death in 1553, at the age of sixteen, Edward was succeeded by his older half-sister Mary, the staunchly Catholic daughter of Henry’s first Queen, Catherine of Aragon. Mary dedicated herself grimly to the quixotic task of forcing the realm to subject itself once again to the religious jurisdiction of the Pope. Those upholding the reformed religion were relentlessly persecuted. Like many other Protestants of that time, Robert Crowley, by then ordained in the ministry of the Anglican Church, was driven into exile, and spent the years of Mary’s reign in Frankfurt-am-Main.

Piers Plowman resurfaced shortly after the kingdom returned formally to the reformed church with the accession in 1558 of the young Queen Elizabeth I. A reprint of Crowley’s third impression was produced by another London printer, Owen Rogers, ‘dwelling neare vnto great saint Bartelmewes gate, at the sygne of the spred Egle’, in 1561. Rogers made no acknowledgement of Crowley’s editorial role and omitted Crowley’s preface and annotations, though preserving his summaries of the *passūs*. (Hudson 255, 261.) He appended to Crowley’s text *Pierce the Plowmans Crede*, an anonymous work of the early 1390s satirizing the orders of friars (probably inspired by a discussion between Piers and two friars in *passus* XIII of what is now known as the ‘B’-text of *PP*).

Crowley, a graduate and later a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, was a careful editor whose version of the 'B'-text of *PP* was long accepted as authoritative. He was aware of the existence of versions other than that in 'the copie that I folowe', an ms. of the 'B'-text, and evidently had access to other mss. Textual variants between the first, second and third of the three impressions Crowley produced in 1550 appear to be attempts at emendation made in the light of readings from other ms. sources. The poem was still being copied out in manuscript in the earlier part of the sixteenth century; three mss. of this period survive, as well as a larger number from the fifteenth century. Charlotte Brewer concludes that Crowley consulted at least four mss., including one of the 'C'-version. (Brewer 17-19; Middleton, 'Audience and Public' 101-23; Kane 175-200; Hudson 251-66.)

Obviously anxious to disseminate the work, Crowley took pains to make its text more easily accessible. He silently modernised spellings, words, and grammatical usages, and transliterated the Middle English alphabetical forms *thorn* and *jogh*. Thanks largely to his edition and its reprintings, Langland's visionary poem continued to be available, and to be *read*, during the latter half of the sixteenth century. The figure of Piers became a symbol of radicalism in later sixteenth-century political tracts such as *Piers the Plowmans Exhortation* and *The Plowmans Complaint*. For polemical as well as other reasons the influence of *Piers Plowman* persisted to the end of the sixteenth century, and beyond. A.V.C. Schmidt, a distinguished recent editor, notes that in Crowley's edition, *Piers Plowman* 'was known to, and influenced, English poets such as Spenser, Marlowe, and (possibly) Shakespeare ...' (xviii).

Piers Plowman had long been regarded as a precursor of religious reform in England. But in the mid-sixteenth century especially, as Hoyt N. Duggan notes,

Langland's depiction of the spiritual strivings of a fourteenth-century Catholic world was ... rebaptized as a proto-protestant poem, its reformist arguments taken to have anticipated and hastened the advent of protestant England. (2)

Robert Crowley's preface to his text of the poem reveals that he was a major role-player in the mid-sixteenth-century 'rebaptizing' of *Piers Plowman* as a 'proto-protestant poem'. Crowley was himself a passionate social reformer. His published works include *An Informacioun and Peticion agaynst the oppressours of the pore Commons of this Realme* (1548), a tract addressed to the Parliament of Edward VI, in which he attacked the tyrannical practices of the landlords and capitalists of the time. In his best-known work, *The Way to Wealth* (1550), Crowley attributed the government's failure to stop enclosure of common land to the organized resistance of those 'gredie cormerauntes', the wealthy upper

classes (Ward and Trent 3: 28-29). He agreed profoundly with Langland's tendency towards a 'Christian Socialism', and believed that in Langland he had found a kindred spirit – as his marginalia to the text repeatedly suggest. Like many contemporary and later readers of *Piers Plowman*, Crowley associated Langland with the 'Lollard' reformist doctrines of John Wycliffe – a long-held assumption that has been seriously questioned by recent scholarship (Gradon 179-205; Lawton, 'Lollardy' 780-93).

Crowley was, moreover, convinced that *Piers Plowman* was a work of prophecy. For example, Crowley's preface (*PP* f.ii.r, ii.v.) drew attention to a famous messianic passage in *passus X* [X.314-68] that includes the lines 'And than shal the Abot of Abington and al his issue for euer / Have a knocke of a king, and incurable the wound ...' ('*And then shall the Abbot of Abingdon, and all his successors forever, receive a blow from a king, and the wound shall be incurable ...*') (*PP.X.* [X.323-24]). Abingdon Abbey, in Oxfordshire, was signally representative of monastic wealth and power in England in the fourteenth century. Crowley read these lines, and their context, as a foretelling of Thomas Cromwell's dissolution of monastic institutions in England from 1535 onwards, under two Acts of Henry VIII. To Crowley, this 'suppression of the abbayes' declared 'the iuste iudgement of God, who wyll not suffer abomination to raigne unpunished'. Dating the composition of *Piers Plowman* back to the reign of Edward III (that is, before 1377 – though references to contemporary historical events actually move the *terminus ad quem* of the 'B'-text to the reign of Richard II, between 1377 and 1379 [Schmidt xxiv – xxv]), Crowley tells his readers

[At that time] it pleased God to open the eyes of many to se hys truth, giving them boldenes of herte, to open their mouthes and crye oute agaynste the workes of darckenes, as dyd John Wicklyfe ...(*PP*f.ii.r).

Crowley's printed edition would almost certainly have been the version in which Spenser read *Piers Plowman*. Spenser expressed his esteem for Langland's poem in the Chaucerian verse-epilogue to the 'Embleme' that concludes the December Eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), coupling 'the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde a whyle' with 'Tityrus' – the Virgilian pseudonym Spenser gave to Chaucer, his most admired poetic mentor (*Poetical Works* 467). In his preferred persona of court poet, singing the praises of Queen Elizabeth I and her Tudor lineage, Spenser would on the whole have supported Crowley's strongly Protestant reading of *Piers Plowman* (if, that is, he had read the poem in one of Crowley's own imprints). In the 'Abessa' episode of Book I of *The Faerie Queene* (1590), he allegorically presented the suppression of the abbeys under the King's authority in as positive a light as Crowley did (I iii 11-19) – though later in the work he decried such Protestant extremism as 'havocke [and] theft'

(VI xii 23-25; first published in 1596).

There is no unequivocal external evidence that Spenser's younger contemporary Shakespeare was acquainted with *Piers Plowman*. But he could easily have been. Printed books were certainly more treasured possessions in the sixteenth century than in the present age of the throwaway paperback. Copies of Langland's work in Crowley's three 1550 editions, and in Rogers' 1561 reprinting, were available in the second decade of the seventeenth century, and much later. Alexander Pope owned one in the first half of the eighteenth century. (Ian Jack [154] comments on the 'close ... relation' between the imagery of *Piers Plowman* and those images Pope chose to retain in his own 'versifications' of Donne's satires.) It is eminently possible that Shakespeare, living in London, could have had access to a printed copy of Langland's poem in the last decade of the sixteenth century or the first few years of the seventeenth.

When Robert Crowley in 1550 wrote in his preface to his edition of 'the workes of darckeness', he meant in the first place the tenets and practices of the Catholic Church. But Shakespeare was capable of conceptualizing in a broader and deeper sense the social evils so powerfully depicted in this landmark work of the late Middle Ages. I believe that Shakespeare's reading of Langland's memorable outcry against materialism, spiritual corruption, and injustice in his own society left its mark specifically upon the greatest of all Renaissance tragedies, *King Lear*.

In 1613 Andrew Bostock, an educated Catholic, wrote marginal notes into his own copy of Crowley's text, correcting and refuting a number of the editor's polemical annotations. For instance, in response to Crowley's comment that Langland 'scorneth the auctority of Popes', Bostock wrote '...the Author must not be understood to scorn the Authority of the Chief Pastor, as the Heretical margin wold suggest, but to reprove those who trust, or presume upon such pardons whilst they live vitiously.' (MS Douce L 205, fol. xxxixr; Brewer 18-19) Claire Marshall speaks for many modern scholars when she writes that 'the radicalism with which Piers the Plowman and, by inference, *Piers Plowman*, became associated by far outstripped the sentiments of the poem, which, although critical of the clergy, were certainly not heretical at the time of writing.' (3)

Would Shakespeare have endorsed the ideological trend of Crowley's interpretations (as Spenser apparently did at one time)? There is a strong case to be made *against* it. Historical evidence suggests the presence of recusancy and a Catholic connection within Shakespeare's immediate family.¹

To take a parallel instance: Kenneth Muir has amply demonstrated the use Shakespeare made in *King Lear* of an anti-Catholic tract he had to hand when working on the play, Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603; Muir, 'Samuel Harsnett' 11-21; 'Shakespeare and Harsnett' 555-56; *King Lear* 239-42; Elton 89-93; Murphy *passim*). Despite Shakespeare's

obvious appreciation of the lively phrasing and colourful vocabulary of Harsnett's work, and despite his extensive borrowings from it – especially in the utterances of the Bedlam beggar – the text of *King Lear* does not convey any consistent sense of such virulently anti-Papist sentiments as Harsnett offers his reader.

Elton (84 n.18) draws attention to the ambivalent treatment in the play of the notion that sins are washed away by 'holy water' – a concept specifically disparaged at the time as 'Papist'. On the one hand the Fool makes a pejorative reference to flattery as 'Court holy-water' (*KL III.ii* [III.ii.10]), while on the other, Cordelia's tears of compassion are described as 'holy water from her heavenly eyes' (*KL Q* [IV.iii.30]). The ambivalence may have been that of the playwright himself, and he would have known that he wrote for audiences who were divided in their religious sympathies.

In what follows, I have not found it necessary to deal with the question of whether Shakespeare would have agreed with the generally anti-Catholic slant of Crowley's annotations to his edition of *Piers Plowman*. Where Crowley read the poem as 'a religious exhortation with a quasi-biblical and prophetic status' (Marshall 5), I believe that Shakespeare read it primarily as a work of literature, and that his principal engagement was with the *text*. Indeed, if he read it in the reprint of 1561, he would not have been exposed to anything *other* than the text, in Rogers' occasionally careless typesetting, with only scriptural references in the margins. My argument in this essay is simply that Shakespeare *did* read at least certain parts of *Piers Plowman*, if not the whole of the 'B'-version; and that he was both intrigued and deeply moved by its satire, perceiving it as highly relevant to his own time and place in the troubled political, moral and religious climate of the early years of James I's reign. He made his own ingenious use of its technique of grittily uncompromising moral allegory, and assimilated into his creative imagination the work's vivid imagery – often earthy, sometimes mystical – its flashes of black humour, and the intensity of its ultimately despairing rage.

Richard Strier's radical reading of *King Lear* has demonstrated that certain supposedly "modern" notions – like collective guilt and the moral responsibility of all individuals to oppose authorized evil – were ... thinkable (and thought) in that period' (165). My sense of the play's ironic use of rhetoric, and indeed of its subversive presentation of the social hierarchy, agrees at many points with that of Strier; but I find a direct inspiration for this 'subversive' view in Langland's work.

Langland's Will, his protagonist and fictional *alter ego*, is a wandering mendicant cleric, poorly clothed, often hungry, marginalised by society, despised by most folk as a 'fole' (*PP.XV* [XV.10]) and at times driven 'witles nere hand' (*almost out of [his] mind*; *PP.XIII* [XIII.1]) by his visionary dreams. Clad in the rough

woollen garment of a penitent, Will sets out one summer's day 'wonders to here' ('to hear of marvellous things'; *PP.Prol.*[Prol. 4]). He soon falls asleep and experiences the first of the eight dream-visions that constitute *Piers Plowman*.

The setting of Will's first dream is a 'faire felde full of folke', placed symbolically between a lofty tower on a hill and a deep valley in which a 'dungeon' stands. As 'all maner men' go about their daily occupations in the field, a King enters with his train. He is addressed by a lean 'Lunatike' who urges him to rule justly. An angel appearing 'in the ayre on highte' (*high up in the air*) then counsels the King (in Latin verse, which, as Langland notes, is unintelligible to the 'lewde' [*uneducated*] majority) to clothe naked justice with compassion: '*Nudum ius a te vestiri vult pietate*' ('the naked law requires that it be clothed by you with kindness'; *PP.Prol.* [Prol.128]), says the angelic voice.

The vision begins in earnest when the lovely Lady Holy Church, clad in pure white linen, descends from the hill-top tower to speak with Will. He begs her to tell him 'How I may save my soule' (*PP.I* [I.84]). She replies at length, emphasizing that 'When alle treasures are tried, trueth is the best' ('*when all treasures are tested and proved, Truth is of most value*'; *PP.I* [I.135, 207]). Finally, she points out the enemies of Truth – 'False' (*falsity*), 'Fauel' (*deceit*), and 'False's' daughter, Lady Mede (*material reward, or fee*) – and warns Will against them and their many companions (*PP.II* [II.5-6]).

In bold contrast to the unadorned white linen shift of Lady Holy Church, Lady Mede is dressed in scarlet and splendidly decked out with jewels. Holy Church complains that Mede has 'lacked my lemman that leautie is yhote, / And bylowe h[im] to lordes that lawes haue to kepen' ('*disparaged my lover, whose name is Justice, and told lies about him to the lords who administer the laws*'; *PP.II* [II.21-22]). Mede, who is about to be married to 'fals fikel tonge, a fendes beyet' ('*False Fickle-tongue, a fiend's offspring*'; *PP.II* [II.40-41]), becomes the focus of a symbolic pageant, extending over the next three *passūs*, that enacts the conflict of materialism with morality. It is in the three *passūs* of the Lady Mede episode that I perceive the principal parallels between *Piers Plowman* and *King Lear*.

A convenient point in *King Lear* for initiating the present discussion is the incident in Act II in which Lear's faithful follower the Earl of Kent is put into the stocks.

The order to subject Lear's servant to this degrading public form of punishment was given by Cornwall. In doing so he rejected both Kent's protest that such punishment would 'show too bold malice / Against the Grace, and Person of my Master', (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.127-28]), and the warning of his elderly host, Gloucester, that 'The King his Master, needs must take it ill / That he so slightly valued in his Messenger, / Should haue him thus restrained ...' (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.141-43]). Regan did not merely acquiesce passively in the command given by her husband, but actively augmented the unreasonable penalty he had imposed (*KL*

II.ii [II.ii.130-31]).

When Lear arrives at the gates of Gloucester's castle to find Kent locked in the stocks outside it, he demands 'What's he,/ That hath so much thy place mistooke / To set thee heere?' (*KL II.ii* [II.iv.11-12.]) He then wrings an admission from Regan that she shares responsibility for the instruction with her husband.

The 'stocking' of Lear's servant, a huge insult to the King, seems to have been a device introduced into the play's main plot by Shakespeare himself. (Muir discusses the sources for the main plot and sub-plot: xxiv-xxxix and 207-235.) In the old chronicle play *The History of King Leir*, the personage whose role most closely approximates to that of Kent is the nobleman 'Perillus'. (Elton 63-71; Murphy 119-34) Like Kent, Perillus speaks in the voice of Reason. He deplores Leir's rejection of his youngest daughter, but – lacking Kent's forthrightness – merely reflects sadly, when Leir is offstage, that 'Reason to rage should not haue giuen place' (I, iii: 339). When Perillus does raise the matter face-to-face with Leir in a later scene, he does so in a deferential manner. Leir responds 'Vrge this no more, and if thou loue thy life' (I, vi: 569), and Perillus – who differs from his Shakespearean counterpart in what Elton calls his 'pious insipidity' (64) – hastily drops the subject. Perillus does not desert his master, but is never banished. He therefore has no need to conceal his noble rank by disguising himself as a household servant, nor is he ever humiliated by being put into the stocks like a common thief.

The 1608 Quarto version of Gloucester's objection spells out clearly what the corresponding speech in the Folio only implies, that even if Cornwall had been dealing with a genuine 'Caius', the serving-man Kent pretends to be, confining such a person in the public stocks would *not* be an appropriate punishment in the circumstances. In the Quarto version of the play Gloucester points this out to Cornwall as a matter of common knowledge: '... your purpost low correction / Is such, as basest and [con]temnest wretches for pilfrings / And most common trespasses are punisht with ...' [*KL Q II.ii.138-40*]. Edgar in the role of the Bedlam beggar speaks of having been 'whipt from Tything to Tything, and stockt' (*KL III.iv* [III.iv.132]), since this penalty was meted out to vagrants as well as petty thieves. Tradesmen and women like 'brewesters and baksters, bochiers and cokes' who sold products of sub-standard quality, also risked being punished 'on pylaries and on pynnyng stooles' (*PP.III* [III.78-82]): indeed, the parting 'prophecy' of Lear's Fool refers to errant brewers who 'marre their Malt with water' (*KL III.ii*.[III.ii.82]). To be 'pilloried', to be confined in the stocks and exposed to public ridicule, is an undeserved humiliation for the servant 'Caius', as well as a gross insult to his master the King.

When Kent 'raiz'd [raz'd]' his real self (*KL I.iv* [I.iv.4]), he vowed also to disguise his speech – to '[borrow] other accents ... That can my speech defuse' (*KL I.iv* [I.iv.1-2]). Muir quotes contemporary usages for 'defuse' that give it the

senses ‘disorder, confuse, render indistinct, speak broad, disguise’ (34; and see OED ‘Diffuse’, II.6.). Although a contemporary document cited by G.M. Young prescribes ‘That if any doe unseamly behave themselves towards there betters, the offence to be punnyshed first by the stockes’, the openly aggressive manner assumed by ‘Caius’ towards Oswald cannot easily be called ‘unseamly [behaviour] towards [his] *better*’. Strier points out that although Oswald, as a steward in the household of the King’s daughter, would certainly have been regarded as having a higher rank than the kind of servant ‘Caius’ represents himself to be, the point of Kent’s outburst against him is ‘moral rather than social’ (187). Oswald is a ‘super-serviceable finicall Rogue ... one that would’st be a Baud in way of good service’ (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.16-18]) – one whose rank in the domestic hierarchy is effectively annulled, from Kent’s point of view, by his questionable moral status.

To Cornwall, a man known for his ‘fiery quality’ (*KL II.iv* [II.iv.89]), Kent’s offence in this scene is not so much his angry attack on Oswald, as the apparent insolence with which he responds to Cornwall’s own arrogant assessment of his speech and manner:

Corn.:... This is some Fellow
 Who hauing beene prais’d for bluntnesse, doth affect
 A saucy roughnes, and constraines the garb
 Quite from his Nature. He cannot flatter, he,
 An honest mind and plaine, he must speake truth, ...
 These kind of Knaves I know ...
 (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.92-98])

This is the moment when Kent deliberately alters the ‘borrowed accents’ of his disguise, abandoning the ‘vnmannerly’ plainness of speech to which he had resorted in the opening scene of the play (*KL I.i* [I.i.144-48]), when he was trying by all means possible to dissuade Lear from the self-destructive course of action on which his royal master was bent. In replying to Cornwall here, Kent inverts the rhetorical register of his speech from the ‘plainnesse’ (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.98]) and sincerity of a ‘low’ style to an exaggerated parody of the ‘high’ style of conventionally insincere courtly flattery – while claiming, with studied irony, that he speaks ‘in sincere verity’:

Kent: Sir, in good faith, in sincere verity,
 Vnder th’allowance of your great aspect,
 Whose influence like the wreath of radiant fire
 On flicking [flickering] *Phoebus* front ...
 (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.102-05])

At this point Cornwall seriously begins to lose his temper. ‘What mean’st by this?’ he demands. ‘To go out of my dialect, which you discommend so much,’ Kent replies (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.105-07]). Infuriated by the insolence of this ‘old Fellow’ (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.82]) who has dared to address him sarcastically in the ‘dialect’ of a young Osric, Cornwall explodes: ‘Fetch forth the Stocks ...[!]’ Snarling at Kent ‘You stubborne ancient Knaue, you reuerent Bragart, / Wee’l teach you ...’ (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.105-24]), he sweeps aside both Kent’s objection and Gloucester’s. ‘Fetch forth the Stocks[!]’ he bellows – ‘As I haue life and Honour, there shall he sit till Noone’. Regan adds spitefully ‘Till noone? till night my Lord, and all night too.’ (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.129-31]). And so Kent is locked into the stocks all day, and ‘all night too’. He is released on the following morning (*KL II.ii* [II.ii.124]) only after Lear in outrage has thrice demanded it.

In the *passūs* of *Piers Plowman* that set forth the allegory of ‘Lady Mede’ (*PP.II, III* and *IV*), two personages are threatened by the King with punishment in the pillory or stocks. These situations, and their contexts, bear complex ironic relationships to the ‘stocking’ of Kent as well as to certain other incidents in the play.

The first personage the King commands to be ‘put on the pillory’ is ‘lyer’ (Liar), who has been busily engaged in promoting the proposed marriage of the Lady Mede to ‘False Fickle-tongue’. Liar has presented a document composed by ‘gile’ (Guile) to legitimize the marriage. Subsequently he yokes himself to a ‘long cart’ in which all the ‘freres and faytours’ (*[corrupt] friars and cheats*) in Mede’s train are to be carried to the parliament at Westminster to obtain its sanction for the marriage. Liar intends thus to introduce many forms of corruption into the affairs of government, along with Mede herself (*PP II* [II.40-43, 69-70, 182-83, 204-05]).

The King, however, hears of their intentions from Conscience, and condemns all the participants, commanding that Falsity be fettered, and Guile beheaded. He declares: ‘[R]ight as the lawe wol loke, let fal on hem all[!]’ (‘...*as the law determines, let it take its course with all of them!*’ *PP.II* [II.198]). Mede is to be brought into his presence, and Liar is to be put into the pillory or stocks:

... if ye latch Lier, let him not escape
 Or he be put on the pilery, for any prayers I hote.
*(And if you capture Liar, I command that you do not let him escape before
 he is put into the stocks, whatever plea [he may make].)*
(PP.II [II.204-05])

But in the event, all these miscreants, except Mede, *do* escape. As soon as they get wind of the King’s condemnation Falsity flees to the friars, while Guile

takes refuge with merchants. Liar finds at first that he is 'no where welcome, for his many tales' (*[he is] not welcome anywhere for his many [false] tales*; *PP.II* [II.218]). But even he is taken in at last by pardoners, who appropriately make him a member of their dishonest fraternity. Soon the services of Liar are much in demand, not only by the pardoners, but also by physicians, spice-merchants and others. In due course Liar, like Falsity, is welcomed by the friars as a brother and goes to live in comfort amongst them, coming and going as he pleases.

The next person condemned to be pinioned in the stocks is 'Wrong', already identified by the Lady Holy Church with the 'Father of falshead' (*Father of Falsehood*) (*PP.Prol.* and *I* [Prol.11-19, I.59-64]).

At the King's express request (*PP.IV* [IV.6-9]), Conscience has summoned Reason to the royal court. The King gives Reason a courteous reception and sets him in a place of honour, 'betwene him selfe and his son' (*PP.IV* [IV.45]). While they are thus seated 'on benche' – on the judgement seat (a sense distinguishable in English from the thirteenth century onwards – OED, 'Bench' 2[a.] and 2b.) – a complainant called Peace appears before them. He tells a lurid tale of injuries and malicious acts perpetrated against himself, his family, and their community by the evil villain Wrong. This ruthless warlord has assembled a murderous band of followers, through whom he has established a reign of terror over law-abiding and peace-loving citizens. Wrong and his gang have assaulted, robbed, defrauded, raped, and murdered their neighbours with apparent impunity.

When Peace accuses him of his misdeeds before the King, Wrong's first reaction is 'to make peace with his pence' (*'to make peace [or: make reparation to Peace] with his money'*). He is convinced that if he can secure the King's favour, 'litle would I reche / Though peace and his power, plained hem euer[!]' (*'... I would care little, even though Peace and his supporters complained to him continually'*; *PP.IV* [IV.65-66]). Lady Mede is immediately drawn into this affair by her wily companions, 'Wisdom' and 'Wit', both of whom support Wrong (*PP.IV* [IV.34-36]). Warning him 'But if mede it make, thy mischief is up' (*'Unless Mede makes good [for you], your mischief is over'*; *PP.IV* [IV.72]), they thrust the pliant lady forward to plead on his behalf before the King.

With the Lady Mede as his willing ally, Wrong tries first to bribe his accuser – 'to make peace with his pence, handy dandy payd' (*'to placate Peace by means of his coins, he paid bribes [i.e., money changed hands]'*; *PP.IV* [IV.75]). But Peace, his head still covered with blood from Wrong's most recent assault, stands his ground and insists on pressing charges, despite the efforts of Wisdom and Wit 'to overcome the king, with cattel if thei might' (*to overcome the King[']s scruples through wealth, if they could*; *PP.IV* [IV.82]).

Schmidt, relating this interaction to the children's game of 'handy-dandy' (422), comments 'Wrong will pay Wisdom "with closed hands" (i.e., secretly), as he may go on to bribe the judges.'² The situation evokes the passage in *KL* in which Lear, with the piercing insight of his madness, says to the blind Gloucester:

A man may see how this world goes, with no eyes. Looke with thine eares:
See how yond Justice railes upon yond simple theefe. Hearke, in thine
eare: Change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the Justice, which is the
thief ... (*KL IV.v* [IV.vi.149-52]).

In his note on *KL* [IV.vi.151] Muir glosses the word 'handy-dandy' as 'take your choice' (168), though he mentions the Langland reference, apparently as an afterthought. In fact, the respective contexts suggest that Langland and Shakespeare were using the word in essentially the *same* broad sense, relating to money 'changing hands', with the additional word-play in the *KL* usage on 'changing places'. The Justice and the thief are indistinguishable from one another in this rundown society, in which money has replaced morality, and the King himself is the symbol of a totally amoral authority. 'Praecepta Regis, sunt nobis vincula Legis[!]' ('*The King's bidding has for us the binding force of law!*'; *PP. Prol.* [Prol.145]) cry the uncomprehending common folk of Langland's 'felde' (who understand no Latin, so they must be repeating it mindlessly by rote). Lear confirms their ignorant, unthinking response: 'When I do stare, see how the Subject quakes[!]' (*KL IV.v* [IV.vi.108]).

When the personification of lawless amorality is actually brought to trial in his court, the first response of the King in the *PP* passage is to condemn Wrong outright. '... [W]ronge for his workes, should wo thorowly' ('... *Wrong should suffer grievously for his acts*'), the King decrees, ordering a constable to 'caste him in yrons ...' ('*to confine him in chains ...*'; *PP.IV* [IV.84-85]). But Wisdom and Wit rush to Wrong's defence. They contend that he should be allowed to pay a fine for his misdeeds – to make material reparation – rather than suffer the punishment decreed by the law. As Wit persuasively, and tongue-twistingly, puts it:

Better is that bote bale adowne bringe
Than bale be ybeate, and bote neuer the better[!]
Better that evil should be defeated by reparation ['bote'],
than that evil be beaten / punished, and [the victim] be no better off

E. Freed / 'In that folie I raigned...'

['bote neuer the better']! [i.e., the victim gains no material benefit if the offender is physically punished]

PP.IV [IV.92-93])

Mede presses upon Peace a gift of gold, whereupon the victim becomes quite amenable to the arrangement and is much inclined to forgive the erstwhile aggressor:

For he hath waged me wel, as wisdom him taught
And I forgiue him that gilt, with a good will....

... Mede hath me amends made, I may no more aske ...

*(For he has paid me well, as Wisdom advised him,
and I forgive him that misdeed with a good will*

...Mede has made adequate compensation to me, I can ask no more ...)

PP.IV [IV.98-103]

But the King is not so easily satisfied:

Nay quod the Kyng tho, so Christ me helpe

Wrong wendeth noght so away, erst I wyll wit more ...

But reason have ruth on hym, he shal sit in my stocks ...

('Nay', said the King then, 'so may Christ help me!

Wrong shall not walk free in this manner, first I will know more ...

Unless Reason takes pity on him, he shall sit in my stocks ...')

(PP.IV [IV.104-07])

Reason, for his part, is adamant that he will *not* 'have ruth' on Wrong – he refuses to be appeased. He has no intention of allowing this vicious criminal to be treated with leniency. Instead, he sets out an ironic list of near-impossible conditions upon which he will agree to commute Wrong's punishment to a fine:

Tylle lordes and ladies, loven all trueth

And haten al harlotrie, to hearken or mouth it ...

Till clarkes couetise, be to clothe the pore and fede ...

And til preachers preaching be preued on hemselfe;

Til the kynges counsel, be the common profite ...

...by the rode, I shal no ruth haue
While mede hath the maistery in this mout hal ...
(*Until all lords and ladies love honest living and hate all obscenity, either to hear it or to utter it ... till the avarice of clerics becomes a desire to feed and clothe the poor ... till the preaching of the ministry be demonstrated in their conduct; till the public good becomes the King's counsel ...[I swear] by the Cross! I shall not have mercy while Mede holds sway in this council-chamber.*)

(PP.IV [IV.114-25, 134-35])

The style and some of the content of the mocking 'Prophesie' spoken by the Fool before his exit in *KL* III.ii parallel this speech by Reason:

When Priests are more in word, then matter ...
(*Till clarkes covetise, be to clothe the pore and fede ...
And til preachers preching be preued on hemselfe ...*)
When Slanders do not live in Tongues;
(*Tyll lordes and ladies, loven all trueth
And haten al harlotrie, to heare or to mouth it ...*)

(*KL* III.iv [III.ii.81, 85, 87])

Muir's note on these lines identifies the Fool's 'prophecy' as 'a parody of some pseudo-Chaucerian verses' found in Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), reading partly: 'When faithe fayleth in preestes sawes / And lordes hestes are holden for lawes / And robbery is holden purchace / And lechery is holden solace / Than shal the londe of albyon / Be brought to great confusion.' Shakespeare undoubtedly did echo the final two lines just cited, but Reason's speech in *passus* IV of *Piers Plowman* is similar in style to both the lines Puttenham quotes and the *KL* passage, and is closer to Shakespeare's lines in content than the 'pseudo-Chaucerian verses' are. Puttenham himself may have known this passage, since he specifically mentions *Piers Plowman* in his discussion of satire in this work, labelling its 'nameless' author a 'malcontent' who, like the Latin satirists Juvenal and Persius, 'intended to taxe the common abuses and vice of the people in rough and bitter speeches' (Middleton, 'Introduction' 9).

Reason asserts that if he were King,

E. Freed / 'In that folie I raigned...'

Would neuer wrong in this world, that I wit might
Be unpunished in my power, for perill of my soule,
Ne get my grace for giftes, so me god saue
Ne for no mede haue mercy, but if mekenes it made ...
*(as far as I know about it, and as far as I am able to prevent it,
[I swear] upon the peril of my soul that Wrong should never go unpunished,
nor earn my indulgence through gifts, so may God save me!
nor find mercy for any fee [or: nor find mercy for the sake of Lady Mede],
unless [his] humility / contrition brought it about ...;)*
(PP.IV [IV.139-42])

On hearing this, the clerical lawyers in the court immediately go into a huddle, re-interpreting and subverting the words of Reason 'for the kinges profit,/ And not for the confort of the pore comon, ne kinges soule' ('*for the King's [material] gain, but not for the benefit of the common people, or [that of the] King's [eternal] soul ...*'; PP.IV [IV.150-51]). Lady Mede winks and beckons to these lawyers, who laugh and desert Reason, allying themselves instead with Mede.

However, 'al rightful ... and the most people in the hal, and many of the great' ('*all just men, ... and the majority of those in the assembly, and many of the nobility*'; PP.IV [IV.157, 159]) express their support of Reason. The King too is persuaded by Reason's advice, asserting wrathfully that 'Mede ouer maistreth law, and much trueth letteth' ('*"Mede" overcomes the rule of Law, and greatly impedes the [discovery of] the truth*'; PP.IV [IV.176]). He rebukes the lawyers present, declaring that he will leave it to Reason to pass judgement upon Wrong: 'I wole have Leauty in law ... And as most folke witnesseth, wronge shal be demed.' ('*I will have justice in [the enforcement of] law ... And Wrong shall be judged as the majority [in this court] have decided.*' PP.IV [IV.180-81]).

The King then vows that he will never relinquish the counsel of Reason, who in turn promises to remain always at the monarch's side, provided Conscience accompanies them. The King affirms their mutual covenant wholeheartedly, concluding '... god forbid it faile / As long as oure liues lasteth, liue we togethers' ('*God forbid that [this covenant] fail - let us live together for the duration of our lives!*'; PP.IV [IV.195]). On this idealistic note the dream ends, and Will wakes sorrowfully to the cold reality of a world that defies Reason and treats Conscience with contempt.

Some of the most important parallels between *King Lear* and the allegory of Lady Mede in *Piers Plowman* concern justice and its subversion. In the 'stocking' of Kent, Shakespeare has dramatized an *inversion* of the scene in *passus* III of *Piers Plowman*, which may well have suggested not only this incident, but also the 'escape' of the phantom 'accused' in the nightmarish trial scene of Act III (in *Q* only).

In *Piers Plowman*, the just ruler, following the dictates of his Conscience, decreed that Liar should be punished as he deserved by being confined in the pillory. But Liar escaped, together with his fellow-wrongdoers. Each of them eventually found not merely a hiding-place, but widespread public acceptance and even appreciative recognition within that society. *This* is the world depicted in *King Lear*. In it Liar, Falsity and Guile are elevated to the status of respected members of the community. Kent at first addresses Cornwall with the same honest 'plainnesse' which he had felt in honour bound to use with Lear when, speaking in the voice of Reason, he tried to dissuade him from the irrational act of disinheriting Cordelia. 'Sir, 'tis my occupation to be plaine', he tells Cornwall (KL II.ii [II.ii.89]). Cornwall is frankly contemptuous of such 'plainnesse'. Those who profess it, he scoffs, 'Harbour more craft, and more corrupter ends, / Then twenty silly-ducking observants, / That stretch their duties nicely.' (KL II.ii [II.ii.98-101]) Kent refuses to patronise either Falsity or Guile by using the deferentially insincere courtly speech of 'silly-ducking observants' when addressing his supposed 'better'. When Kent-as-'Caius' does employ such language, he uses it ironically, underscoring his assertion that he is 'no flatterer' (KL II.ii [II.ii.107]). As Strier comments: 'Plain speech and conscientious breaches of decorum remain touchstones of value and are richly developed as such [after the opening scene of *KL*]' (184).

Unlike Liar, Kent does *not* escape the stocks – in fact, he is stocked for *not* being a liar. In the world of the play he pays a dire penalty for taking Reason's part, and indeed, where Reason in *PP* is elevated to a place of honour, Kent as the voice of Reason (Perillus in *King Leir* has basically the same role) is degraded into a position of humiliation. He is condemned and punished first by Lear and then by Cornwall, because his loyalty, honesty, and plainness of speech are perversely misread as craft, corruption and insolence.

The 'trial' episode of the 1608 Quarto version of Act III of *King Lear* is another direct inversion, in this instance based on a composite of the two 'stocking' situations in *Piers Plowman*. Lear, by now insane, constitutes an imaginary tribunal in which he attempts to try his two older daughters for their crimes against him. In the hovel where he and his companions shelter from the storm he assembles a 'bench' of 'most learned Justice[s]' – a Bedlam beggar, his Fool and his servant 'Caius' – before whom he declares he will 'arraign' Goneril and Regan.

The storm into which Lear plunged when he rushed out of Gloucester's castle at the end of Act II of *KL* seemed to him to herald Doomsday, summoning all mankind to divine judgement. He proclaimed:

...Tremble thou Wretch
That hast within thee undivulged Crimes
Unwhipt of Justice ...
... Close pent-up guilts,
Rive your concealing Continents, and cry
These dreadful Summoners grace.
(*KL III.ii* [III.ii.51-3,57-9])

Lear's response to the storm recalls the apocalyptic account in *PP* of an historical event, a real 'Hyrricano' that devastated the southern counties of England in 1362. Langland's personage Reason had evoked this memorable wind-storm in a sermon delivered before the King and all his subjects in *passus* V of *PP*, and had linked it directly to the sinful misdeeds of the populace:

Piries and plumtrees, were puffed to the earth ...
Beches and brode okes, were blowen to the grounde
Tourned upwardes the tailes, in token of dred
That dedly synne er domesday, shal fordone hem al ...
(*Pear-trees and plum-trees were blasted to the earth ...
beeches and broad oaks were blown to the ground,
and turned their nether ends [roots] upward as a fearful portent
that deadly sin shall destroy all before Doomsday.*)
(*PP V* [V.16-20])

Lashed by the wind and rain, Lear in Shakespeare's play experienced a sudden epiphany. At that critical instant – the very last moment of his sanity – Lear felt upon his own body, and truly understood for the first time, the suffering of other 'poor naked wretches' in situations like his own at that moment. What the King was experiencing – what Shakespeare was dramatizing – was the condition of those swarms of destitute beggars who wandered about the English countryside for decades after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries had 'deprived the destitute of the alms which had been expressly given in trust for them.' (Ward and Trent 3: 32)

In that flash of heightened insight, just before the encounter with the naked Bedlam overturned the fragile balance of his mind, Lear perceived the very principle proclaimed to the King in the Prologue to *Piers Plowman* by the angel from heaven: '*Nudum ius a te vestiri vult pietate*' – it is the King's sacred duty to

clothe naked justice with compassion. ‘...Take Physicke, Pompe’ Lear had cried, at this startling revelation: ‘Expose thy selfe to feelee what wretches feelee,/ That thou maist shake the superflux to them / And shew the Heavens more just’ (*KL III.iv* [III.iv.33-35]).

In the surreal vision of Lear’s madness in the later scene, he literally *identifies* the wretched mendicant in his nakedness with Justice, naked Justice, the ‘*nudum ius*’ of *Piers Plowman*. The King in the *PP* scene, who sat ‘on [the] bench’ with Reason by his side, is replaced in the scene from *King Lear* by a bench constituted of very different judges. On Lear’s Bench sits the ‘robbed [robed] man of Justice’ (*KL Q* [III.vi.36]) – the naked fugitive Edgar, ‘unaccommodated man’, unjustly outcast from society both in being decreed an outlaw, and in the rôle that he assumes of the despised Bedlam beggar. Word-play is inherent in the ironic use of ‘robbed’ in the Quarto text to describe Edgar, who is ‘un-robed’ in his ‘Bedlam’ disguise, but has in fact been ‘robbed’, in several senses, by his amoral half-brother the ‘Bastarde’ Edmund. ‘Benched’ by the side of the Bedlam is the banished Earl of Kent, disguised as the serving-man ‘Caius’. On the other side of this ‘most learned Justice’ sits his ‘yoke-fellow of equity’ (*KL Q* [III.vi.37]), Lear’s ‘sapient’ Fool.

The Fool is a ‘licensed plain-speaker’ whom Strier (185) compares to Raphael Hythloday of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Lear’s Fool, Cassandra-like, speaks truths, but is doomed never to be taken seriously. His role is like that of the ‘leane thinge’, the ‘lunatike’ who knelt before the King in the Prologue of *Piers Plowman*, just before the angel appeared. It was that ‘lunatike’ who had respectfully advised the King to ‘...lede thy londe so le[au]ty the loueth, /And for thy rightful ruling, be rewarded in heauen’ (... *rule thy kingdom so that truth/ justice may love thee, And be rewarded in Heaven for thy just rule!*; *PP.Prol.* [Prol. 126-27]). But few pay attention to the utterances of a madman – even fewer, perhaps, than were willing to hear out that other ‘fole’, Langland’s visionary protagonist Will, driven ‘witles nere hand’ by the corruption he perceived in the real world.

In that climactic moment of perception vouchsafed him just as Reason was about to desert him, Lear had proclaimed that the King must ‘... shew the Heavens more just’. As audiences and critics have long recognized, all three of the ‘Justices’ appointed by this ‘lunatike’ King (in *KL Q* [III.vi]) have in common their *outcast* status from the society that has now seen fit to cast out the King himself. The society that has dealt so unjustly with Edgar (who comments ironically ‘Let us deale justly’; *KL Q* [III.vi.40]) is no more discomfited by the howlings of poor Tom, ‘whipt from Tything to Tything’ (*KL III.iv* [III.iv.131]), than by the Fool’s penetrating characterisation of Truth as a stray dog, ‘[that] must be whipt out’ (*KL I.iv* [I.iv.109-10]) like the Bedlam beggar. A court Fool was laughed at, but could essentially be ignored. And Kent, most faithful of retainers,

was denounced for his very integrity and loyalty by the King himself, using the terrible indictment '*recreant*' (*KL I.i.* [I.i.165]). In its feudal sense, the word means one who *fails* in his duty or is *disloyal*; it is described in the OED as 'a term of the greatest opprobrium'. Kent does not dare to appear in public except in disguise, because he too has been banished by royal decree.

King Lear, likewise rejected by this community, has now been abandoned as well by Reason, the chosen confidant and counsellor who pledged lifelong companionship with Langland's ideal King. '[G]od forbid it faile', Langland's King had prayed of his covenant with Reason (*PP IV* [IV.194]). Shakespeare, with the imaginative daring of genius, has caused the unthinkable to happen to the old King in this play: *his* covenant with Reason *does* fail. The King goes mad.

Kenneth Muir notes that 'in *none* of the fifty or sixty versions of the Lear story in existence before Shakespeare's play does the old king go mad' (xxxix, n.2; my emphasis).³ Where the King in Langland's court was *supported* by Reason, presiding in a place of honour beside him as his chief counsellor and lifelong companion, King Lear, reduced from a King to a 'poore, infirme, weake and dispis'd old man' (*KL III.ii* [III.ii.20]), has in this extremity been *abandoned* by Reason.

I wish to propose that it was his reading of *Piers Plowman* that inspired Shakespeare not only to present his King as going mad, moving – in a parallel to his flight from the castle to the wild storm-swept heath – from the regulated realm of Reason to the chaotic wilderness of witlessness, but also to make Edgar assume the disguise of a beggar and make pretence of being mad.

Like Edgar's persona 'poor Tom', Langland's protagonist Will in his waking life is 'meatelesse and moneillesse' (*without food and money*; *PP VII* [VII.142]), wanders about 'wolward and wetshod' (*shirtless and shoeless*; *PP XVIII* [XVIII.1]), and at times appears 'witles nere hand'. '[F]olke helden me a fole', he says, 'and in that folie I raigned ...' (*People regarded me as a fool, and in that folly I reigned*; *PP XV* [XV.10]). Crowley's source-MS evidently had 'raigned' where the MSS of the 'family' on which modern editions of the 'B'-text are based read 'raved' – and 'raigned' was what Crowley (and, in 1561, Rogers) reproduced. The crux is significant. Like Langland's Will, Lear reigns in 'folie' and takes over the role of his own Fool.

Certain elements of Langland's great work fused in the crucible of Shakespeare's imagination. The poverty-stricken protagonist whom society dismisses as 'witles' and a 'fool'; the despised truth-speaking 'lunatike' who counsels the King to rule justly; the angelic visitant who adds that it is the King's duty to clothe naked justice in his compassion; the King's public act of taking Reason as his lifelong companion and formally recognizing that reason should form the basis of his judiciary decisions; all these are amalgamated into *King Lear*. Shakespeare has used them to perpetrate a shocking dramatic inversion. He has

portrayed Reason, on whom Langland's King relies to guide him in governing justly, 'in Madnesse' (*KL IV.v* [IV.vi.173]). Shakespeare's Lear is *abandoned* by Reason, leaving him to become a Fool / King who 'raigns' in folly. He embraces the counsel of, and appoints to the judicial Bench, a Fool, an outlaw, and Langland's lowly 'lunatik' embodied in the '*nudum ius*'. The Bedlam is a living metaphor, a wretched naked outcast behaving in lunatic fashion while presiding over a court of law.

Shakespeare's device in the trial scene of Act III (1608 *Q*) is essentially to *invert* the trial of Wrong from the fourth *passus* of *Piers Plowman*. King Lear's court of law is not the splendid hall of Westminster Palace, where the scene in *Piers Plowman* takes place, but a wretched hovel on a deserted heath. Upon the bench in this court Lear sets up, as presiding judges, three outcasts whom society customarily mocks at and ridicules: the Bedlam beggar, the court Fool, and Kent, who in his disguise as a serving-man has just been released from the stocks, where public humiliation and the jeering of passers-by were even stronger punitive elements than the physical confinement of those 'Cruell Garters' (*KL II.iv* [II.iv.7]). And while this travesty of a trial is yet in progress, the phantom prisoner escapes – as did Falsity, Guile and Liar in *Piers Plowman*. Too late, Lear tries to raise the alarm: 'Armes, armes, sword, fire, corruption in the place', he cries in anguish, vainly importuning the impotent 'Bench' – 'False Justicer why hast thou let her scape ...[!]' (*KL Q* [III.vi.54-55]).

By Act IV Scene v of the play Lear has achieved a cynical moral expediency. He magnanimously spares the life of a phantom defendant accused of adultery in an imaginary court of law (*KL IV.v* [IV.vi.109-14]). The situation recalls Lady Mede's earnest assurance to the corrupt friar to whom she makes confession. After paying him well, she promises to pay him even better if he will 'loue Lordes, that lechery haunten / And loke not Ladye[s] that loue well the same' ('...*favour lords who indulge in lechery, and turn a blind eye to ladies who enjoy the same ...*'; *PP III* [III.53-54]). Her justification is that this is only natural: lechery is 'a course of kynde, whereof we comen all' ('*an impulse of nature, from which we all arise*'; *PP III* [III.56]). Lear states the same principle in vivid imagery: '... the Wren goes too't, and the small gilded Fly / Do's letcher in my sight ...' (*KL IV.v* [IV.vi.13-14]).

Once the King and Reason have parted company, any attempt to 'deal justly' becomes an exercise in futility. At the end of the play Lear is unable even to recognize the image of Reason in the person of the faithful Kent. As Edgar sadly comments, it is all 'Very bootlesse' (*KL V.iii* [V.iii.293]). Langland had allowed Wit to play wittily on the word 'bote' in his attempt to confuse the King into commuting the sentence of Wrong:

Better is that bote bale adowne bringe

Than bale be ybeate, and bote neuer the better[!]
(*PP.IV* [IV.92-93])

Shakespeare extends this beyond word-play. His King Lear literally acts out the sense of futility, or ‘botelessness’, that he feels when he reflects upon the meaninglessness of justice in so thoroughly corrupt and materialistic a society:

Place sinnes (Q *Plate sin*) with Gold, and the strong Lance of Justice
hurtlesse breakes: Arme it in ragges, a Pigmies straw do’s pierce it.
None do’s offend, none, I say none, Ile able ’em; take that of me
my Friend, who have the power to seale th’accusers lips ...

Now, now, now, now. Pull off my Bootes: harder, harder, so.
(*KL IV.v* [IV.vi.166-68, 170-71])

The ideal King in *PP* was bidden to rule ‘rightful[ly] (*just[ly]*)’ and to ‘lede [his] lond so leaute [him] loue (‘rule [*his*] kingdom so that Justice may love [*him*]’; *PP.Prol.* [Prol. 126-27]). In *King Lear*, the corrupt society, not the unfortunate thief, should be in the dock. ‘Reason[ing] in Madnesse’, Lear concludes that his own role as King is a mockery, for he smells the overwhelming stench of moral decay. To rule over such a kingdom is a travesty of kingship; it is pointless, futile, ‘bootless’. Transmuting the word into its literal sense (as in the irrational word-play on ‘peace / peece’ at *KL IV.v* [IV.vi.89]), Lear demands that his boots be pulled off his feet. Lady Mede and her allies have triumphed.

In his second dream in *PP*, Will becomes involved in communal preparations for a penitential pilgrimage to the shrine of Truth. Though Piers the Plowman ‘putte[s] forth his hed’ (*PP.V* [V.537]) to offer himself to the community as a guide to this shrine, their departure is so long delayed that interest in the pilgrimage dwindles away. The abortive pilgrimage evolves, much later, into Will’s solitary search for the guidance of Piers Plowman, who comes to represent fundamental Christian ideals of integrity and altruism, and is even, eventually, identified with Christ (*PP.XIX* [XIX.6-8]).

In the dream of *Piers Plowman*’s final *passus*, Kynde (Nature) – the deity to whose ‘law’ the ‘services’ of Shakespeare’s ‘Bastard’ Edmund are ‘bound’ (*KL I.ii* [I.ii.1-2]) – descends balefully ‘out of the planets’ (‘from the [*malevolent*] stars’; *PP.XX* [XX.80]). ‘Foragers’ (*harbingers*) sent out by Nature bring with them a rout of ills preceding Death. Edmund plays ostensibly on a sexual sense when he declares himself ‘Yours, in the rankes of death’ (*KL IV.ii* [IV.ii.25]) in his parting avowal to Goneril,⁴ but the phrase carries the grim undercurrent of the literal sense emerging from this passage of *PP*, in which symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases jostle with other fatal ailments in Death’s host: ‘...feuers and

fluxes, / ...cardiacles, ... radgondes and raynous scalles, / Byles and botches and burning agues, / Frenesies and foule euele ...' ('... fevers and morbid discharges, ... heart-attacks, ... running sores and filthy scabs, boils and swellings and burning agues, frenzies and vile diseases ...'; PP. XX [XX.81-85]).⁵

In the vanguard of this dreadful procession Elde (Old Age) parades, bearing Death's banner. Nature follows, 'with many kene sores, / As pockes and pestilences ...' ('with many grievous hurts, such as plague-sores and pestilences ...'; PP. XX [XX.97-98]). Behind them drives Death himself, 'and all to dust passhed / Kynges and kayzers, knyghtes and popes ...' ('[Death] dashed into the dust kings and emperors, knights and popes ...'; PP. XX [XX.100-101]). Advancing implacably, Old Age rides roughshod over the protagonist Will, robbing him of his faculties, assailing him mercilessly with one physical affliction after another, until at last Will implores Nature to end his miserable existence. 'Out of care me brynge[!]' he groans, 'Lo Elde the hore hath me besette: / Awreke me if youre wyl be, for I would be hence' ('Deliver me from [this] suffering! Behold! how hoary Old Age has set upon me: take your vengeance upon me, if that is what you desire, for I long to go hence!'; PP. XX [XX.201-03]).

So, in the final moments of *King Lear*, Kent prays for the deliverance by death of his beloved master from 'the wracke of this tough world' (KL V.iii [V.iii.312-14]) – for his deliverance from an earthly life that has become a torment to him, in that Lear is subjected both to the *retributive vengeance* of Elde (in the primary sense of 'wracke'), that has decayed his body and mind into ruin, and to emotional torture. (The O.E.D. gives 'Wrack, wracke', *sb.1*, I.1. 'Retributive punishment; vengeance ... persecution'; I.3. '... wreck, ruin, subversion'; and under *sb.3*, 'frequently erroneous for "Rack"', 'An instrument of torture ...'.)

It is by no coincidence that both poets, Langland and Shakespeare, chose to fasten upon the same theme with which to conclude their great works. Desperately seeking solace in the face of death, Langland's Will, who has plumbed the depths of human suffering, begs Kynde for advice. 'Counsel me, Kynde ... what craft is best to learne' (PP. XX [XX.207]), Will pleads. The peremptory reply he gets from this last and harshest of his many instructors is: 'Learne to loue.' (PP. XX [XX.208])

As Shakespeare's Edgar prepares to ascend to the throne in succession to Lear, he says essentially the same thing (in the Folio version; *Q* gives this line to Albany). Edgar, a figure of compassion who has suffered no less than Langland's Will, speaks in terms of *humane* 'kindness', of common humanity:

The waight of this sad time we must obey,
Speake what we *fee*le, not what we ought to say ...'
(KL V.iii [V.iii.323])

With Death close at hand, Will recognizes that he will never find the object

of his quest in what Kent understatedly describes as ‘this tough world’. *Piers Plowman* closes with the figure of Conscience, vowing in desperation to become a pilgrim, to travel ‘as wide as the world lasteth, / To seke Piers the Plowman ...’ (‘as widely as the world extends / To seek Piers the Plowman’; PP XX [XX.382-83]). The ending of this epic ‘thrusts us out ... [into] a realm beyond the poem, which the poem has told us is a realm of moral confusion ... and moral weakness ...’ (White 115). And so too does Shakespeare’s tragedy.

NOTES

1. A hand-written Catholic testament of faith, signed in the name of John Shakespeare, the poet’s father, was found during the course of the eighteenth century, hidden under the eaves of the house in Stratford-upon-Avon in which William Shakespeare was born. Recent scholarship has shown its text to be an accurate sixteenth-century translation of a spiritual testament composed in Latin in the 1570s by Cardinal Borromeo, with whom the Jesuit priests Edmund Campion and Robert Persons were closely associated. John Shakespeare may have received the testament from Father Persons while he was in hiding in the house of Edward Arden, an active supporter of recusants and a kinsman of the poet’s mother Mary Shakespeare (Wood 73-79).

2. Derek Pearsall interprets the word ‘handy-dandy’ in the corresponding line of the ‘C’-version of *Piers Plowman* as ‘a game where children guess which hand a present is in. It came to mean a covert way of giving a present or bribe, as here.’ (91, note to IV.68)

3. Muir (xxxix, n.2.) draws attention to a contemporary incident, of which Shakespeare may have heard, involving a pensioner of Queen Elizabeth, Sir Brian Annesley, whose two older daughters tried in 1603 to have him ‘certified as insane so that they could get his estate’. His third and youngest daughter, whose name was Cordell, defended him, claiming that his services to the late Queen ‘deserved a better agnomination, than at his last gasp to be recorded and registered a Lunatic’. Muir offers this as a possible source of Shakespeare’s inspiration for Lear’s madness.

4. Edmund’s treacherous ‘contract’ with both Goneril and Regan results in the deaths of both sisters; as he gasps when he himself is dying ‘... all three / Now marry in an instant’ KL V.iii [V.iii.223-28, 238-40]).

5. This nightmarish vision may also have suggested Thersites’ catalogue (in

Troilus and Cressida [V.i:15-23]) of the ‘rotten diseases ... guts-griping Ruptures, Catarres, Loades a gravell i’t’h’backe, Lethargies, cold Palsies and the like’, brought about – as Edmund observes in *KL I.ii* [I.ii.124-25] – by the ‘goatish disposition’ of ‘whoremaster man’.

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