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DOWEL, DOBET, AND DOBEST IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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One of the bugbears of *Piers Plowman* criticism has always been the definition of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest.¹ The attempts to elucidate these terms have been many — the best known perhaps being those that have been based upon a critical desire to equate the triad of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest with respectively the triads of the Active, Contemplative, and Mixed lives, or the unitive, purgative, and illuminative stages of mysticism.² One immediate problem with the first in particular is Will's explicit statement in the C-text that there are "but tweyne lyves" (xviii.81) and *Liberum Arbitrium*'s explanation as to why then the Tree of Charity bears three kinds of fruit. *Liberum Arbitrium* does not contradict Will's belief in the existence of only two Lives, even as he describes the three fruits of charity: another seemingly separate triad of marriage, widowhood, and virginity. In the end one is sorely tempted to agree with Mary Carruthers that attempts to relate Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest to ways of life or sections of the poem are based on fundamentally wrong assumptions (9).

The most recent trend in *Piers Plowman* scholarship has been to downplay altogether any distinctively individual meanings behind the terms and instead to regard them as a device for rhetorical amplification related to contemporary sermon techniques (Alford 46). This approach has the benefit of not tying the three to sections of the poem, but is still inadequate because it

does not recognize that these terms must have actual meaning in the poem's context. Truth's pardon promises,

*Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam
Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum.* (B.vii.110a-10b)

That is, if one does well, one goes to heaven; if one does evil, one goes to hell. If one can do well, then grammar dictates it must also be possible to do better and even to do best. Yet, assuming that Truth is telling the truth, how exactly is one supposed to "*bona agere*"? No trivial matter, if one's salvation depends upon it! Clearly Dowel is a verbal concept related to James 2:17 — that faith without good works is dead (quoted at B.I.187a; C.I.183a). Yet whether one chooses to define the idea as a verb (do well) or a noun (good works), the concept itself, at the point it is introduced in the poem, is unclear and could mean virtually anything Will or the reader wanted it to mean. Without clarification, the pardon means nothing in particular. Viewed simply as a rhetorical device, Dowel loses all effectiveness as a didactic device to direct sinners without qualification toward certain salvation, and the quest for salvation would be thus as frustrated as Will's search for reliability of meaning in the Three Lives.

Past efforts to find clarification for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest have failed to some degree because they often seek a singular solution from outside *Piers Plowman* and then attempt to impose that solution forcibly upon Langland's work. These have resulted in at best a Procrustean fit. Source studies of *Piers Plowman* are valid; but, when the schemata and ideas of patristic, scholastic, sermon, and other texts are applied as magic solutions to puzzles in Langland's text, the logic behind such methodology needs hard questioning. First, such an approach assumes that Langland actually knew the text in question, a detail often conveniently glossed over. Another assumption inherent in the approach that unnecessarily limits the effectiveness of source-oriented explanations of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest to an even greater extent is the implicit idea that a single patristic or scholastic author holds the key to understanding what Langland meant. The notion that any author is indebted to one, single source alone is highly suspect.

Moreover, investigation reveals that the concept of doing well, doing better, and doing best is actually common to much of medieval English literature, and so clearly Langland need not have read *any* patristic, scholastic, or rhetorical source in Latin to have encountered the idea of Three Lives. The vernacular tradition, however, has all but been ignored as a factor in Langland's conception of the Three Lives.³ This paper aims to fill this gap

in scholarly knowledge by examining instead a wide variety of these other Middle English texts and their authors' definitions of what doing well, doing better, and doing best entail. Restricting its scope to only texts in English, the study casts light upon general medieval English attitudes toward the Three Lives and thus helps to establish the historical horizon behind what Langland likely intended and what his fourteenth-century readers likely would have expected them to mean in a vernacular text like *Piers Plowman*. The examination demonstrates that there are, in fact, three overlapping models in medieval English literature for the concept of doing well, better, and best, which should not and cannot be viewed as existing in rigid isolation from each other. These are referred to in this paper as the virginity tradition, the martyrdom tradition, and the contemplation tradition.

The virginity tradition — the concept of the states of marriage, widowhood, and virginity in that ascending order — is a familiar construct in the Middle Ages and goes back to the early Church. As B. Millett has pointed out, the source of this hierarchical arrangement is patristic commentary upon the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:4–9, 18–23; Mark 4:1–9, 13–20; Luke 8:4–8, 11–15), such as Jerome's commentaries in which the thirty-fold crop is likened to marriage, the sixty-fold crop to widowhood, and the hundred-fold crop to virginity (*Hali Meidhad* xxxviii–xxxix). Although marriage was not originally part of this triad — the order being widowhood, virginity, and martyrdom — after the fourth century virginity was regularly granted the hundred-fold reward it receives in *Piers Plowman* and many other medieval texts, expected and unexpected (*Hali Meidhad* xxxix). For example, in the twelfth-century virginity text, *Hali Meidhad*, the author comments:

gef of thes threo hat meidhadant widewehad ant wedlachad, wedlac is the thridde, thu maht bi the degrez of hare blisse icnawan hwuch ant bi hu muchel the an passeth the othre. For wedlac haueth hire frut thrittifald in heouene; widewehad, sixtifald; meithhad with hundredfald ouergeath bathe. Loke thenne herbi, hwa se of hire meithhad lihteth into wedlac, bi hum monie degrez ha falleth dunewardes. Ha is an hundred degrez ihehet towart heouene hwil ha meithhad halt, as the frut preoueth; ant leapeth into wedlac, that is dun neother to the thrittithe over thrie twenti ant zet ma bi tene. (*Hali Meidhad* 11)

While one expects this order in an openly pro-virginity text, it also appears in situations where there is no self-interest in proclaiming virginity to be third and best. God must reassure the married Margery Kempe that “thow the state of maydenhode be more parfyte than the state of wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode more parfyte than the state of wedlake, zet dowtyr

I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world" (Kempe 49). In spite of the Lollard loathing of monasteries and special man-made vows, the familiar order of wedlock, widowhood, and virginity appears in their writings too. One Lollard commentator upon the parable of the sower argues:

These three degrees of vertues, figurid bi pritti, [sic] sixti, and an hundrid, moun be undirstonde in every spice of vertues. But for every vice is spiritual fornicacyon and bi the same resoun, every vertue is chastitee, therefore comynely bi thrittifold frute is vndirstonde chastite of wedloc, echewynge al unfefful couplynge, holdynge apaid of the werk of matrimonye And right as the chastitee of widuhode, eschewynge al manere flescli couplynge that hee mai the more freliere zeve tente to Goddis service, answereth togidere to the 60 fold frute And right as chastitee of maidenhod (bi whiche forevere is echeuwid al maner of flescli couplynge [and] bi which the mynde is couplid alweie to God as to the spouse, as Seynt Poul seith) answereth to the hundred fold frute. (*Lollard Sermons* 103-04)

The idea of the three marital states and awards based upon them, whether interpreted literally as by Margery Kempe or with allowance for a wider interpretation as by the Lollard commentator, is so much a regular feature of medieval texts that it seems to have been an unquestioned concept and had to be especially countered when it did not suit.⁴ Margery Kempe knew the formula and so needed special reassurance from God that He still valued her spiritual devotion in spite of her married state. The tradition of awarding different degrees of heavenly bliss according to marital status must, therefore, have had some influence upon Langland, as its inclusion as the three fruits of charity in Passus XVI of the B-text and Passus XVIII of the C-text strongly suggests.

To assume, however, that the virginity tradition is the only influence acting upon Langland's or a reader's conception here would be a sad mistake, for the virginity tradition stems from one interpretation of one New Testament locus. Yet other interpretations of the parable of the sower do not involve marital status, and furthermore this scriptural reference is not the only incident in the Bible that involves tripartite schemes. To name only two, John 20:10-20 where Christ is worshipped in three ways during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the three kinds of baptism (baptism by water and baptism by fire in Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:16; baptism by blood in Revelations 7:15), both have tripartite formulaic interpretations building on progression from least to best. Even the story of Martha and Mary at Luke 10:38-42, although it may seem to be a dual scheme, is sometimes interpreted in a tripartite manner. In the end, basically any scriptural

mention of the number three invited interpretations of a Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest nature, and, needless to say, interpretations of these texts do not all entail the notion of wedlock, widowhood, and virginity.

The first of these alternative traditions I call the martyrdom tradition, so named since whatever the first two stages may be, third and best is always martyrdom. In some respects this tradition overlaps with the better known virginity tradition and is actually the older. As was mentioned earlier, virginity was originally viewed as second to martyrdom until it displaced martyrdom, a displacement that allowed wedlock to enter the hierarchy in the lowest position. The martyrdom tradition did not disappear. Rather, a new list built up around it. The Lollard commentator on the parable of the sower cited earlier actually offers two interpretations of the passage. One is the wedlock-widowhood-virginity triad already examined. The other is as follows:

And in the same maner, a stronge man for vertu suffrynge harme in his outward goodes maketh the lowist frut; that is: 30 fold . . . in strengthe sufferynge (not oonli in temperal goodis, but also in hire owene bodi, as prisenyng, and betyng, and such other) answereth to the same frute [60 fold] . . . the hundred fold frute, rizt so in strengthe the studefastnesse of martiris and, in the same wise, of all spicis of vertues. But to maidens, and to martiris and to prechouris, longith a special worschipe in heuene that is clepid "laureola." (*Lollard Sermons* 103-04)

The two sets are put side by side with no indication that one is to be preferred to the other and no indication that virginity and martyrdom are to be thought of as the same thing, even if they meet the same reward. There are just two right answers to what the one parable means in this commentator's view. The two schemes share one similarity: difficulty is directly proportionate to one's place on the scale. The closer one comes to the hundred-fold reward, the greater the strength and dedication to virtue one needs.

A second Lollard commentator upon the parable of the sower offers a rather different viewpoint on the same material:

Thes three degrees of this growing tellen three profitis of men. Sum ben chast to ther spouse Crist, as virgyns and other good men; and thes holden the ten comandementis for love of the Trinite. The secounde fruyt, of the sixithe greyn, tellith trewe doctours of the Chirche; for thei holden Goddis hestis in hem sif, and doublen hem in the puple. The thridde seed, of a hundrid greyn, bitokeneth the hizeste charite, whanne a man suffrith deeth for to susteyne Goddis lawe and puttith well his owene liif for the profit of the Chirche. (*Select English Works of John Wyclif* 2.34-35)

This order would seem unusual to any reader expecting virginity automatically to be listed as third and best. Yet here virginity stands with "other good men" as simply indicative of a wholesome Christian life defined by obedience to the commandments. As with the first, the scale in the second Wycliffite text becomes more difficult the farther one advances. A new element is added in that the progression is not simply internal (increasing virtue in the first commentator's text) but external as well. The thirty-fold fruit is what one does for one's own good—obedience of God's law. The sixty-fold fruit demands that one look outside of one's self to help others by teaching them. The hundred-fold fruit demands even more effort to profit others to an even greater degree through one's death. Martyrdom, then, is not a simple, self-oriented physical act of faith. It is an act of the highest charity, undertaken out of love for God and love for one's fellow Christians, extending aid to others beyond their physical needs to their spiritual. Martyrdom is thus the ultimate act of love.

More interesting perhaps is that the Three Degrees as they appear in Wycliffite literature are not always meant literally. Just as the one Lollard sermonist offers two interpretations of the parable of the sower, alternative interpretations are also given of the worship offered to Christ upon his triumphant entry into Jerusalem:

Bi the firste moun skilfulli be vnderstonde hooli martiris that threwen forth hire bodies here to suffre peynus and deth for Crist. The secounde beth confessourus and doctouris that hewen out of Holi Scripture many faire and grene trutthes, as out of the tre of lyfe, and precheden hem tofore synful peple when thei weren here in the weie. The thridde beth alle other hooli men of alle thre partis of Cristus chirche, that with opene louynge of herte and mouth worschipeth God for synful men that been conuertid and ablid to grace. (*Lollard Sermons* 11)

This list identifies people by what they do, with again teaching being secondary to martyrdom. The alternative list substitutes instead actions related to the sacrament of penance:⁵

Also, me thynketh, it mai be vnderstonde zet in another manere: that every synful man repentaunt, in whom God sitteth thoru his grace, schulde haue euere in his mynde the thre partis of satisfaccion, for to amende him of his eerdon synnes and for to geten him more grace, that is: penaunce in his bodi, large almesdede, and preier, whiche moun wel be vnderstonde bi these thre werkis of this peple. (*Lollard Sermons* 11)

Aside from reminding the reader that the Wycliffite attitude toward the sacrament of penance can never be taken for granted, the text casts light

upon the fact that the three stages are not always to be understood as literal. Martyrdom does not always entail loss of life, but can be self-imposed physical suffering that demonstrates a general disdain for material existence and a corresponding emphasis upon the love of God.

While the martyrdom tradition appears frequently in Wycliffite literature, perhaps understandably so given the persecution suffered by the sect, it is not exclusive to it in Middle English literature. Both the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Barlam and Iosaphat* include the martyrdom tradition, *Barlam and Iosaphat* meaning martyrdom literally and the *Ancrene Wisse* meaning it metaphorically as spiritual perfection made up of the strong penitence of hard penance and extreme humility (*Ancrene Wisse* 182). If martyrdom is Dobest in the *Ancrene Wisse*, Dowel is ignoring the material world except for the barest necessities (178) and Dobet is ignoring the material world altogether. The three degrees are envisioned as a set of stairs the anchorite climbs, each step upward being a move toward perfection. The three degrees themselves the author describes as:

Threo manere men of godes icorene livieth on eorthe. The ane mahe beon to gode pilgrimes ieuenet. The othre to deade. The thridde to ihongede with hare gode wil o iesuse rode. The forme beoth gode. The othre beoth betere. The thridde best of alle (177-78).

The emphasis in the *Ancrene Wisse* is upon the attainment of the metaphorical martyrdom of Dobest in which the anchorite shares in the experience of Christ's Passion. Thus very different authors regard literal or figurative martyrdom patterned upon the life of Christ as the ultimate Christian expression of love.

Barlam and Iosaphat — a Middle English account of the (needless to say, Christianized) life of the Buddha — is another text in this martyrdom tradition. It builds upon the three types of baptism: by water, by fire, and by blood. The first and lowest type, baptism by water, is the act of Christian conversion and obedience of the ten commandments (*Barlam and Iosaphat* 80). Baptism by blood, the third and best type, is martyrdom: the ultimate act of love for God and one eagerly sought out by the persecuted Christians in the text (51). Martyrdom, however, was a relatively remote possibility for the Western Christian in the later Middle Ages, and correspondingly the emphasis in *Barlam and Iosaphat* is upon the second stage, Dobet: those men and women who "made here body lene and feble with grete abstinence, and were marteris in here wylle and folowed Crystis passion" (52). Dobet is martyrdom in will, if not in fact. Again, the tradition expresses a desire to

share in the experience of Christ's Passion. Dobest attains this desire fully, and Dobet is an improvement over Dowel in part through its acceptance of sharing Christ's martyrdom as a desirable fate. Further elaboration explains what doing better means to this author. It is first of all a total renunciation of material life, similar to the second stage of the *Ancrene Wisse*. The Christians of *Barlam and Iosaphat* live solitary lives in caves, without possessions, with grace and virtues. It also involves teaching, since "euery man techyth other to lyue in vertu and in good conuersacion" (53). Once again teaching appears in second place, just as in the Wycliffite texts. The Three Lives in *Barlam and Iosaphat* can thus be summarized as the converted, obedient anchorite, hermit-teachers, and martyrs, or as a Christian life reluctantly in the world, a Christian life out of the world, and martyrdom.

Yet another text in this martyrdom tradition is St Bridget of Sweden's *Liber Celestis*, available to English readers in a Middle English translation. In it, Bridget discusses the natures of the martyrs and confessors who lived between the times of St Peter and Pope Celestine:⁶

And ȝet were noȝt all gude bitwene Petir and Celestine, ne all euell, bot thare ware thre diuers degre: that menes, gude, bettir and best.

In the first degre were thai that thoght thus: "We trowe all thinge that holi kirke biddes. We will begille no man, bot that we haue dissaiued we will amend it. And we desire of all oure hert to serue God." All these were as in the first degre. (And thai that hase resaiued the faith, and in wedlake and othir gude disposicion dwelles therein ai, bi ordinance of holi kirke, that air in the positife degre.)

Bot thai that leues all thaire awen will and worldli gudes for Goddes sake, and hase shewed, to othir, gude ensampill of lifynge with wordes and werkes, and set bi nothinge so mikill as Criste, thai ware in the comparatife degre. And thai that gaue thaire bodies to the dede for the loue of God were in the superlatife degre. (*Liber Celestis* 237)

By now the pattern is familiar: the lowest degree is obedience (notably linked here with conversion and wedlock) in the service of God; the middle degree is the renunciation of temporal life and the education of others; the highest degree is dying out of one's love for God. (Or being "in gude wil for to die" [237], as in the *Ancrene Wisse*, martyrdom need not be literally understood.) Bridget's scope is very narrowly focussed on divinely-sanctioned models of spiritual goodness; that is, on saints in heaven. However, she goes on to state that in the present time "Knighted and religion suld be in the comparatife degre and superlatife degrees" (238), suggesting a parallel between the Three Lives and the three estates of feudal society.⁷ The knight in particular becomes in Bridget's mind a type of the Christian Soldier

described in Ephesians 6:11–16 whose endeavours “strenghe the treuthe and sprede obrode verrai faithe” (237–38) and whose exposure of self to death in battle makes him in effect a potential martyr. Yet this potentiality is as far as Bridget goes. She takes care to qualify such connections with the estates: knights, doctors, and religious are “*holden to be*” and “*suld be*” in the comparative and superlative degrees; there is no life “more straithe than knigh[th]ed, *if* it be kept eftir the first ordinaunce” (237). “Holden to be,” “suld,” and “if” collectively suggest that the contemporary reality is all too often different, and that no worthwhile connection can be made between social estate and degree. Examples of doing well, better, and best therefore can be seen with certainty only in the saints and martyrs of the past.

Texts like the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Barlam and Iosaphat* especially point to another tripartite tradition that overlaps with the martyrdom one. The authors of this tradition are generally either mystics or recluses and rank contemplation as third and best—the contemplation tradition. Death or a longing for death often accompanies contemplation in its highest degree, and in this sense both the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Barlam and Iosaphat* are contemplative texts. The *Ancrene Wisse* differentiates between the Active and Contemplative Lives by appealing to the expected source in the New Testament: Luke 10:38–42, Christ’s response to Martha (*Ancrene Wisse* 211–12). Notably, however, the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* differentiates the degrees of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest elsewhere in the text (177–78), where the context makes it clear that they refer only to the Contemplative Life. Doing well, better, and best, according to this author, have nothing to do with the Active Life. In *Barlam and Iosaphat*, Dowel can be somewhat linked to the righteous active life of the Christian convert, but not truly since conversion to this author really means a conversion to the anchorite’s way of life and should be a very temporary stage. Dobet and Dobest are stages exclusively reserved for the recluse and thus obviously describe stages only in the contemplative experience.

Nevertheless, the concept of the Contemplative and Active Lives is so ingrained in the medieval construct that the establishment of contemplation as best was an open invitation for the inclusion in some form of the Active Life as well. A text that demonstrates this and thus is more straightforwardly a part of the contemplation tradition is one that has often been studied in relation to *Piers Plowman: The Cloud of Unknowing*, which takes the episode of Martha and Mary as the basis for its discussion and deals with the same question of two but three Will asks at C.XVIII.81:

What meneth this: "Mary hath chosen the best"? Where-so-euer the best is set or nemnyd, it asketh bifore it theese two thinges: a good & a beter; so that it be the best, & thryd in noumbre. Bot whiche ben thees thre good thinges, of whiche Marye chees the best? Three lyues ben they not, for Holi Chirche makith no mynde bot of two—actyue liif & contemplaytyue liif; . . . Bot thof al ther be bot two lyues, neuertheles git in theese two lyues ben thre partyes, ich one betir the other . . . the first party stondesth in good & onest bodily werkes of mercy & of charite; & this is the first degree of actyue liif, as it is seyde bifore. The second partye of thees two lyues liggeth in good goostly meditacions of a mans owne wrechidnes, the Passion of Criste, & of the ioyes of heuen. The first partye is good, & this partye is the betir, for this is the secound degree of actyue liif and the first of contemplaytyue liif. In this partye is contemplaytyue liif & actyue liif couplid to-geders in goostly sibreden & maad sistres, at the ensample of Martha & Marye. . . . The thrid partye of thees two lyues hangeth in this derk cloude of vnknowyng, with many a priue loue put to God by him-self. The first partye is good, the secounde is betir, bot the thrid is alther beste. This is the beste partye of Marye. (*Cloud of Unknowing* 52-54)

The Cloud of Unknowing differs most markedly from the two martyrdom texts in, first, allowing the Active Life a place in the triad, and, second, in its categorizing of the second stage as a mixed combination of the Active and Contemplative Lives. It must be noted that this mixed stage is not listed here as the best Life, as sometimes it is known and as it is familiar to scholars of *Piers Plowman*. Indeed, it is not a "Life" at all. *The Cloud of Unknowing* solves the dilemma of Two Lives but Three Parts by creating an overlapping area (but not a separate Life) between the Active Life and the Contemplative Life, and then conflating the two resulting triads.

The contemplation tradition does not always appear under the obvious guise of the Active and Contemplative Lives. The often-repeated "three degrees of love" (insuperabile, inseparabile, and singular) in the vernacular writings of Richard Rolle are an example: "In the first degre ben many; in the tother degre ben ful fewe; bot in the thrid degre vnnethes ben any, for euer the more that the perfeccioun is, the fewer folwers hit hath" (Rolle 16-17). In "Ego Dormio," Rolle defines what his three degrees entail: "The first degree of love is when a man holdeth the ten commendementz, and kepeth hym fro the vii deedly synns, and is stabil in the trouth of holy chirch; and when a man wil nat for any ertly thyng wreth God bot trewely standith in his service" (27). Rolle's first degree of love is identical to the first stage as described somewhat in *Barlam and Iosaphat* and closely in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the second Lollard commentary on the parable of the sower, and St Bridget's *Liber Celestis*. In all of these texts the first stage to some

degree is identifiable with the Active Life when understood simply as a good Christian life epitomized by obedience. Rolle goes on to give the aspiring Christian the following advice regarding the second degree of love:

Bot when thou hast wel lyved in the comandementz of God, and straytly kept the fro al deddly synnes, and paied to Crist in that degre, bethynke the that thou wil more love God, and do better with thi soule and bicum parfite. And than entres thou in to the tother degre of love, that is to forsake al the world, and thi fadyr and thi modyre and al thi kyn, and folow Crist in povert. (28)

This is essentially forsaking the world — the same second degree as appears metaphorically in the *Ancrene Wisse* and in an extreme form in *Barlam and Iosaphat*.

The best one can do is the third degree of love, which in “Ego Dormio” means a heart continuously on fire with the love of God, and in which “thou wil covait the deth, and be ioyful when thou hirest men name deth” (32). Such sentiments recall the metaphorical martyrdom of the *Ancrene Wisse* and the literal and figurative martyrdoms of *Barlam and Iosaphat* and St Bridget’s *Liber Celestis*. To all these authors, death is not merely a fearful physical event, but, more important, the spiritual experience that caps every mystic’s progress toward perfection in God. Death brings about the final union with the Divine.

Rolle’s scheme is very interesting for several reasons. First is his deliberate rearrangement of the degrees of love into a tripartite form. His apparent Latin source, *De Quattor Gradibus Violentiae Charitatis* by Richard of St Victor, has four degrees of love: insuperabile, inseparabile, singular, and insatiable (Watson 20, 326). Rolle for some reason omits the fourth degree of love. What is even more curious is the connection Rolle draws between his three degrees of love and the Active and Contemplative Lives. In “Ego Dormio” Rolle writes that the third degree of love is “cald contemplatif Liif” (Rolle 31), although his description of the first and second degrees never mentions the Active Life. In “The Form of Living” he discusses the three degrees of love and the Active and Contemplative Lives separately, but also divides the Contemplative Life into two parts:

Contemplatif lif hath two parties, a lower and a hegher. The lower partie is in meditacioun of holy writynge, that is Goddis word, and in other good thoghtes and swete that men hath of the grace of God about the loue of Ihesu Crist, and also in praysynge of God in psalmes and ympnys, or in praiers. The heghe partie of contemplacioun is biholdynge and desyre of the thynges of heuyn, and ioy in the Holy Goost, that men hath oft, though hit so be that

thai be nat praiynge with the mouth, bot only thynkynge of God, and of the fairheed of angels and holy soules. (24)

Both lower and higher contemplation are strictly private, internal affairs and do not involve preaching to or helping others in any respect, so Rolle should not be seen here as advocating any sort of "Mixed" stage. The intensity of the emotional response and the purely mental effort involved seem to be the main elements dividing the higher contemplative from the lower. Rolle creates in effect two separate yet interrelated triads (insuperabile love, inseparabile love, singular love / active, lower contemplation, higher contemplation) in a strategy that recalls the *Cloud of Unknowing* and its author's similar effort to turn two into three, if not the actual result. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that Rolle deliberately changes the quadruple degrees of love found in Richard of St Victor to a tripartite design because he wants to be able to parallel the degrees of love with the Active and Contemplative Lives without identifying the two sets as the same. Rolle never so connects them explicitly.

A text that demonstrates Rolle's influence is *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, a very popular fourteenth-century devotional work that conflates ideas and passages from several mystical texts.⁸ *Contemplations* offers a curious treatment of the degrees of love, for it describes three seemingly independent scenarios: two triads and one group of four. The first triad described belongs to the contemplation tradition as developed by Rolle in "The Form of Living"; yet here even the lowest degree is possible only for that very rare "sad contemplatif man or woman":

The ferste loue ys so feruent, that nothing whiche i[s] contrarie to Godis wil may ouercome that loue, welthe ne wo, helthe ne sekenesse. Also he that hath this loue wol nat wrethe God enytime, for to haue al the world witouten ende, but rather suffre al the peine that miȝt come to any creature than onis wilfulliche displese his God, in thoȝt or in dede. The secounde loue ys more feruent, for that ys so stronge that what man loueth in that degre, al his hert, thoȝt and miȝt ys so enterliche, so bisiliche, and so parfittliche stablid in Ihesu Crist that his thoȝt cometh neuer from him but oneliche whan he slepeth. The thridde degre of loue ys hiest and most wonderful, for what man cometh to that loue, al counfort, al solas is closed ouut of his herte, but oneliche the ioye of Ihesu Crist; other ioye may nat his herte receyue for swetnesse that he hath of the ioye euermore lastinge. (*Contemplations* 6)

The author does not encourage readers to attempt this triad, instead portraying it as practised by "holi men bifore this tyme" (5), "holi fadres in old time" and "holi men [who] liuede bifore this time" (6). Rolle's "Form

of Living," then, has been interpreted as a tripartite model of holiness now within the reach of only the most exceptional.

The second triad of the *Contemplations*, the "other thre degres of loue . . . whiche be nat of so hie degre as tho that be rehersed bifore," is lifted almost word for word from Rolle's "Ego Dormio":

The ferst degre of this ys whan a man or a woman holdeth the hestis of God, and keputh him ouut of dedely sinne, and is stable in the feith of holi cherche. Also whan a man wolde nat for any ertheliche thing wrath God, but trelweliche stondeth in his degre wether he be religious or seculer . . . The secounde degre ys whan a man forsaketh al the world for the loue of God, that is to sey his fadur, his modur, al his kin, and foleweth Crist in pouerte. Also stodeth nigt and day how clene he may be in alle vertues, and hate alle vices, so that al his lif be gostliche and nothing fleschelich. The thridde degre is hiest, for that ys a ful contemplatif lif as whan a man or woman loueth to be alone from al maner noise. (7)

The author clearly advocates Rolle's "Ego Dormio" as the pattern of love most suitable for the average reader to follow. Indeed, the lowest degree of this triad "eche man is bounde to kepe" (7), since it entails the minimum requirements of Christian living: essentially a broadly understood Active Life once again based upon obedience—obedience to God's commandments and obedience of the dictates of one's social station.

The bulk of *Contemplations*, however, is an explication of the "fourde degres of loue wiche eche Criste[n] man, religious and seculer, scholde holde and kepe, any may performe for the more partie, yif his wil be feruentliche yset to the loue of God" (8). These four are "ordeigne" love, "clene" love, "stedefast" love, and "parfit" love—a group of four which, as Connolly notes (103, n.x), bears a striking resemblance to a passage in St Bridget's *Liber Celestis*. These four degrees, as with the author's earlier interpretation of Rolle's "Ego Dormio," are open to all Christians of all estates and social degrees who desire a closer bond with God. In fact, these four degrees of love are in many respects an elaboration of the first degree of the second triad. Their emphasis is upon the practical lessons a person needs to learn in order to develop stability of heart in the love of God: love one's enemy (fifth point of "ordeigne" love); consider every sin to be serious (third point of "clene" love); do not give into temptation out of faintheartedness (fifth point of "stedefast" love); persevere (sixth point of "parfit" love). All of these qualities are ones that every Christian can develop to some point.

The three schemata of *The Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* should not be seen as conflicting, contradictory statements. In actuality,

the three together make up one triad with each section overlapping into the next and subdivided into parts. The four degrees of love collectively describe Dowel, basic lessons on developing one's inner self as a Christian. Once one has fully achieved that "sad" grounding in love, one can move on to Dobet and the lower three stages of love that centre one's focus more and more on the divine. After one is "sadliche iset in this lif and in this loue" (7) at its highest, one can move on to the higher three degrees of Dobest — degrees of love so high that many "men and women that schulle rede this haue nat knowing of hem, and neuer herd speke of suche degres of loue bifore time" (6). The author reassures his readers, however, that such heights are not necessary to please God. Living properly in the lower degrees of love pleases Him just as well.

Another mystic influenced at least in part by Rolle is Margery Kempe.⁹ Kempe, who pays lip service to the virginity tradition quite early in her book, later reveals another list that is more in keeping with her own way of life. God reminds her:

"Fasting, dowtyr, is good for zong be-gynnars and discrete penawns, namly that her gostly fadyr zeuyth hem er inioyneth hem for to do. And for to byddyn many bedys it is good to hem that can no bettyr do, and zet it is not parfyte. But it is a wey to-perfeccyon-ward. For I telle the, dowtyr, thei that arn gret fastarys and gret doers of penawnce thei wold that is schuld ben holden the beste lyfe; also thei that zeuyn hem to say many devocyons thei wold han that the beste lyfe; and thei that zeuyn mech almes thei wold that that wer holdyn the beste lyfe. And I have oftyn-tymes, dowtyr, teld the that thynkyng, wepyng, and hy contemplacyon is the best lyfe in erthe." (Kempe 89)

Certainly the influence of Rolle upon Kempe can be found here in her emphasis upon thinking and "high contemplation" as best, the emotional response of weeping being substituted for Rolle's joy. Yet Kempe is also clearly her own person. In her definition of doing well, better, and best, there is no mention of the Active Life and all the facets relate to internalized spiritual exercises. Thus at first glance Kempe's list appears similar to those of the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Barlam and Iosaphat*, which limit the three degrees to only the contemplative strictly kept apart from the world. However, Kempe's statement must be put in the context of her life, surely the best medieval example of a mystic who remains a part of the active world. Kempe's list cannot be regarded as restricting the best and highest life to the cloistered contemplative. In fact, it is the only list that allows the active person, following Kempe's example, to attain the best life.

The contemplation tradition points to another facet that has bearing on a medieval author's (or reader's) attitude toward the three degrees: there are two contrasting attitudes toward contemplation. One point of view is inclusivist. For various reasons Rolle, Kempe, St Bridget, and the authors of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* define Dowel and sometimes even Dobet as lay stages, or at least as stages to which the lay reader could aspire. Kempe goes so far as to define even Dobest as such a stage. In contrast, the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Barlam and Iosaphat* represent an exclusivist attitude, life in the world even as represented by Martha being of little import to these writers. Barlam counts himself as "alive" only from the time he becomes a Christian monk (*Barlam and Iosaphat* 76), and Iosaphat gives up his worldly crown for a monastic cell in the desert as soon as he inherits his kingdom and can find a suitable replacement to be king (164–66). In these two writers, the focus is largely upon individual spiritual growth, and the three stages of doing well, better, and best belong exclusively to the Contemplative Life.

The most extensive treatment of the Three Lives in Middle English literature, of course, is William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Langland demonstrates his awareness that the subject of doing well, doing better, and doing best had already been well worked over by others before him in Imaginatif's sharp remark to Will that "ther are bokes ynowe / To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest bothe" (B.xii.17–18).¹⁰ Comparison of *Piers Plowman* with the vernacular texts examined thus far shows that English sources must be recognized as forming a part of these "bokes ynowe," helping to shape the normative expectations of both author and reader. Wit's second definition at B.ix.108, for example, makes use of the virginity tradition model. Dowel is "trewe wedded libbynge folk" from whom "maidenes" and others come. Perhaps surprisingly, the virginity tradition plays only a very minor role in the definition of the Three Lives, Imaginatif alluding to it at B.xii.204, though in the context of the rewards of heaven rather than life on Earth. Its most prominent appearance is at B.xvi.68–72 as the three fruits of the Tree of Charity, which are never explicitly related to Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. Only Wit mentions marriage and virginity in the specific context of the Three Lives.

Likewise the contemplation tradition seemingly appears in *Piers Plowman* only in a minor position. Wit's first definition (B.ix.95–98) and fourth definition (B.ix.204–07) focus at least in the first two stages upon inner, spiritual growth: to do well is to dread God; to do better is to dread God out of love and to suffer. Clergy echoes such sentiments at B.x.246–50 where

to do well is to believe and to do better is to "suffre for thi soules helthe" the teachings of the Church.

Overwhelmingly, however, Langland seems most in tune with the martyrdom tradition in his definitions of the Three Lives. Seven figures in the B-text offer definitions of all three stages: Thought, Wit (four times), Clergy, Imaginatif, the Master of Divinity, Patience, and Conscience (twice). Of these seven, three stress the link between Dowel and obedience, generally the first stage of the martyrdom triad. Thought argues that to do well one must be *true* of tongue, hands, and reckoning (B.VIII.81-84); that is, one must obey the commandments and the dictates of one's social position. Wit also stresses the need to be true. Marriage alone does not guarantee that one does well; one must be of the *true* wedded folk. To emphasize this point he subsequently goes on to define Dowel in his third definition as "to doon as lawe techeth" (B.IX.200), a sentiment later repeated by the Master of Divinity in his definition of Dowel as "do as clerkes techeth" (B.XIII.115). Furthermore, Imaginatif in a single definition offers that Dowel is "to do as lewte techeth" (B.XII.32) by living according to the law and one's rule. Clearly, then, Dowel has something to do with obedience, just as it does for Wycliffite writers, St Bridget, Rolle, and the authors of *The Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* and *Barlam and Iosaphat*.

Likewise, just as the martyrdom tradition stresses the importance of teaching others as part of the second degree of doing well, so too does Langland in *Piers Plowman*. Of the seven who give complete definitions, four include the verbal instruction of others as part of Dobet. Thought speaks of Dobet in terms of rendering the Bible and preaching to the people (B.VIII.91-92). Confessors and clerks (B.IX.110,111) come from Wit's "trewe wedded libbynge folk" who do well. The Master of Divinity admits that doing better entails teaching others (B.XIII.116), and Patience sums up Dobet as simply the imperative, "*doce*" (B.XIII.136). Nevertheless, Dobet for all these figures needs to be understood as larger than helping others through instruction. Rendering the Bible and preaching are forms of Dobet to Thought, but so too are destroying the bags of avaricious lords and helping all men according to their needs. Wit also points out that one who is unkind to the needy "dooth noht wel" (B.IX.93). Dobet in sum entails concern for both the physical and moral welfare of others.

Yet if the martyrdom tradition forms the backbone of Langland's approach, where in the text does martyrdom itself appear in the definitions of the Three Lives? It only appears in the context of the definition of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest once, briefly in Wit's second definition alongside virginity

as a result of true marriage. Elsewhere it appears in Imaginatif's explication of the levels of rewards in heaven, again alongside virginity, (B.XII.202–05) and later in Anima's praise of Thomas Becket and other martyrs as models for modern-day bishops (B.XV.517–30). It may thus appear that Langland is not working within the familiar framework of the martyrdom tradition after all. Nevertheless, one must recall that martyrdom need not be literally understood as enduring physical death and that martyrdom is an extended form of helping others out of love. This pattern does occur in *Piers Plowman*. Imaginatif defines the triad as "*Fides, spes, caritas*" (B.XII.29a), Patience as "*Disce, . . . doce; dilige inimicos*" (B.XIII.136). When Dobest is understood as love, the other definitions of the third degree fall into place as love expressed through actions. Wit's third definition of Dobest is to love friend and foe, yet in his third definition of Dobest he makes it explicit that one must do more than simply feel love, but that one must express that love by healing and helping, caring for young and old (B.IX.202–03). Other definitions of Dobest focus particularly upon acting out of concern for the spiritual state of others: saving and reprimanding sinners (Thought at B.VIII.96–99), bringing down the "moody" (Wit's fourth definition at B.IX.205), and boldly blaming the guilty — if one's own life is clean (Clergy at B.X.256). The supreme example of Dobest then is Christ's own self-sacrifice upon the Cross, an act of martyrdom and love committed so that sinners might be saved. There is no need, then, for Langland to elaborate especially upon martyrdom, whether literal or metaphorical, as the third and best stage since the text reiterates that point over and over again in the references to the Passion (B.XV.515, XVI.160–66, XVIII.36–63, XVIII.134–41, XVIII.245–50, XIX.140–42).

The last figure to offer definitions of the Three Lives is Conscience, who does so twice, first at B.XIV.16–24 in the context of the cleansing of Haukyn's coat, and secondly at B.XIX.108–32, 183–88 in the context of events in the life of Jesus: Dowel, Jesus' first miracle, the miracle at Cana where the water is turned into wine (John 2:1–10); Dobet, the other miracles of his ministry, the one specifically mentioned being the miracle of the loaves and fishes where two fish and five loaves of bread feed five thousand men and their families (Matt. 14:15–21; John 6:5–13); Dobest, Christ's granting of the power to forgive sins to Peter (John 20:23).¹¹ Conscience's second definition particularly fits neatly within the martyrdom tradition. The wine of Dowel is likened to "lawe and lif holynesse" (111) — in other words, obedience. The miracles of Dobet entail comforting the "carefulle" (128), the crippled, the blind, the hungry, the deaf, and the dumb — in other words, concern for the

physical welfare of others. Dobest extends that concern to their spiritual welfare through the power to forgive sins.

Conscience's definitions, however, add new dimensions to the meaning by putting the Three Lives clearly into the context of the sacraments of the Church, especially the two sacraments most available to Christians as an avenue to divine grace, Penance and the Eucharist. Conscience's first definition at B.XIV.16-24 equates Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest with contrition, confession, and satisfaction.¹² If one interprets restitution as an aspect of contrition and satisfaction, then the Three Lives according to this definition are the three human stages of penance that culminate in the divine stage of absolution. The second definition parallels the Three Lives with the Eucharist and Penance. The wine of Cana and the bread of the loaves and fish miracle are types of the Eucharist; the forgiveness of sins the last stage of penance. One message is thus immediately clear: Christians can only do well, do better, and do best with the sustaining power of divine grace, and this power is available to all through the sacraments of the Church.

Yet Conscience does even more, especially in his second definition. At Cana, "there bigan God of his grace to do well" (B.XIX.110). Jesus too did well, did better, and did best during his life on Earth. In also striving to do well, to do better, and to do best, in receiving the sacraments, each Christian in effect imitates Christ and can thus partially realize the desire of every martyr and of every mystic: a share in the experience of the divine.

Piers Plowman thus maps out in traditional forms easily recognizable to medieval readers two schemata that describe on one level personal growth as an individual social being (the martyrdom tradition) and to a lesser degree, personal growth as an individual spiritual being (the contemplation tradition). Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest therefore at the very least must be understood on two separate levels, the social and the spiritual. What is truly remarkable, nevertheless, is that the Dreamer Will still flounders. He searches for but does not find Dowel. Yet of course Will *does* actually find Dowel, twice in fact. Imaginatif defines Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest as *fides*, *spes*, *caritas* (B.XII.30), three figures whom Will later encounters in Passus XVI and XVII. Conscience defines them as contrition, confession, and satisfaction (B.IV.16-24). The first two at least Will undergoes when he finally chooses to enter the Barn of Unity at B.XX.213. Significantly, however, neither time does Will recognize them as the objects of the quest that has consumed so much of his life. Even more significantly, it is doubtful that Will ever *does well* in the sense of the definitions he hears. He does not obey; instead he argues with authorities. He neither works to sustain the

physical welfare of the less fortunate as Piers Plowman does at B.VI.136–38 nor does he instruct others. He reprimands sinners boldly, but without first correcting his own faults as Clergy demands. In Imaginatif's accusing words, Will "makes" rather than "does" (B.XII.16).

The solution perhaps lies in consideration of whether Langland adheres to an inclusivist or exclusivist vision of the contemplative experience. The majority of scholarship on *Piers Plowman* would favour an inclusivist interpretation, and certainly the appearance of Haukyn in the B-text and Activa Vita in the C-text supports the argument that Langland does not view the righteous Christian life as unimportant or invalid in his scheme of things. This interpretation does not require a radical reassessment of the poem. However, it is problematic. By the time Haukyn and Activa Vita appear in their respective versions, the search for even Dowel—the meanest state—has proven fruitless and confusing for Will. Will, in fact, never does find Truth or recognize Dowel; he only hears about them. Haukyn's coat is befouled by sin as soon as it is cleansed (B.XIV.12–15), and Activa Vita in the C-text must be hushed by Patience (C.xv.233). The text concludes with Conscience starting out all over again on a new quest for Piers Plowman. Certainly there is something about Will the Dreamer that speaks of a fundamental weakness impeding his spiritual growth. What his weakness is has been variously described as an enigmatic inability to "explain or justify himself or to name with authority or use correctly what he has seen and heard" (Middleton 115), or as "willfulness and presumption, his desire to know before doing" (Clopper 13), or as a "wrongheaded attempt[t] to analyze faith logically" (Raabe 77), or as an inherently ambivalent "narcissistic involvement with the physical" (Kruger 85), or as "sloth manifested as distracting activity" (Clifton 44), or as "*curiositas*" (Emmerson 93). Yet whatever his problem is and whether or not his weakness is overcome in the course of the text, Truth and Dowel both remain elusive to him and the search for Piers Plowman must begin anew. Is Langland suggesting through all this that so long as one is attached to the world, no matter if one is the most righteous of active Christians, even Dowel will elude one's grasp? If so, then the distinct possibility exists that Langland's vision of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest as an inner spiritual progression is similar to the exclusivist attitude expressed in texts like the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Barlam and Iosaphat* and that Langland's message about spiritual (rather than social) growth does need to be radically reassessed.

Passages in both the B-text and the C-text support an exclusivist interpretation of the contemplative experience. Before the search for the Three

Lives begins, the text is concerned with another search, that for Truth — with Piers Plowman's first role in the poem as the guide to Truth. In the B-text, Piers rips the pardon he receives from Truth in two and swears off sowing, swynking, and belly joy, in favor of prayers, penance, and weeping (B.xvii.115-21). Piers in effect chooses to move from an emphasis upon physical welfare to spiritual welfare. Will, however, does not. His choice is to remain part of the world, and this is the choice the text follows when, dressed in russet — the colour of hermits, friars, and Lollard heretics¹³ — Will roams without authoritative direction from either priest or plowman. He may be "shaped" in the habit of a hermit, but Will persistently resists the path of true contemplation: he argues, rather than listens; he sleeps, rather than acts; he waits to enter the Barn of Unity until the last possible moment as an old, dying man (B.xx.183-200). As Clopper and Emmerson individually point out, "The Dreamer is not described as a contemplative. He is no Augustine who believes first and then uses his intellect to understand that which he believes. He is a passive object of visions, not a performer of spiritual exercises" (Clopper 28); "it is not clear that Will ever realizes the extent to which his visionary experience is motivated by an intellectual *curiositas* that at best leads only to 'makynge' rather than doing well and at its worst allies him to the hated friars . . . Will would rather write (and dream) about Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest than actually do well" (Emmerson 119). In the C-text, the initial action focusses instead upon the husband Actif, the fore-runner of *Activa Vita*, who excuses himself from Piers's pilgrimage to Truth by putting the sexual desires of (and for) his wife over the rigorous demands of the spiritual journey (C.vii.299-304). The only prospective pilgrim to accept Piers's guidance to Truth is Contemplatif, who expresses willingness to endure care, hunger, and want on the journey (C.vii.305-06). Yet, again, the text does not follow Contemplatif's spiritual choice, since the journey to Truth does not take place. The text follows Actif's worldly choice instead. Thus in both the B-text and C-text, when Will embarks on the quest he never completes to learn what Truth's pardon meant by doing well, the message is clear: the path to Truth is exclusive to the contemplative experience. Will is doomed to have no more than a limited comprehension of what Truth meant by "*bona egerunt*" because he made the wrong initial choice: he remained concerned about what the world demands of him, instead of totally rejecting the world and its demands in favour of the spiritual as do Piers and Contemplatif. Thus the whole process at the very end of the poem needs to begin over with the search for the initial guide to Truth, Piers Plowman, this time through the agency of Conscience. Yet in another sense Will's

failure is utterly unimportant: it has no impact on his salvation, since as *Imaginatif* exclaims, "*salvabitur vix iustus in die iudicii; ergo — salvabitur!*" (B.XII.279–80). Will flounders because he did not make the contemplative's choice. He can be saved nevertheless because Langland's dominant model for the Three Lives — the martyrdom tradition — emphasizes the individual as a necessarily social being (obeying laws, helping others in the community, participating as a member of the Church in the reception of sacraments) where faith and works go hand in hand with divine grace. One, after all, must *do* well, not *know* well.

Yet if Langland's Three Lives when seen as a spiritual model are accepted as exclusive to the contemplative experience, then that is one explanation as to why the Tree of Charity in Passus XVIII of the C-text bears three fruits while there are but two lives. The messages of the parable of the sower and the Martha and Mary story are combined. The conflation at once provides comfort to lay readers that they do have a part in God's kingdom. God loves the active Martha, we are reassured, just as he elsewhere reassures the married Margery Kempe that she is loved, but the combination also tells us that the Active Life can never offer the complete spiritual experience. Mary's choice of contemplation is superior and it is Mary's choice alone that receives the tripartite rewards of the parable of the sower of which the Tree of Charity reminds us. Wedlock, widowhood, and virginity in Passus XVI of *Piers Plowman* are thus not meant to be understood only as literal descriptions of marital status in the material world — which they most certainly are, covering all sinning, fallen humanity — but, just as importantly, as metaphorical descriptions of spiritual growth. Wedlock describes a desire to remain connected — married — to the world. Widowhood describes the renunciation of all worldly concerns. Virginity describes the spiritual purity of total centredness upon God. The martyrdom tradition describes the same process, except with a social emphasis and using actions such as obeying the commandments, teaching and giving to others, and accepting death for the faith. This tradition appears in *Piers Plowman* as the triad of Faith (Abraham's obedience), Hope (Moses's giving of the Ten Commandments), and Charity/The Good Samaritan (Christ's self-martyrdom upon the Cross), and relates to the verbal aspect behind *Dowel*, *Dobet* and *Dobest*. Langland, in conflating several Biblical incidents, has conflated the three traditions, easily found in the vernacular literature of his time, of virginity, martyrdom, and contemplation. All three must be credited with contributing to the meanings of *Dowel*, *Dobet*, and *Dobest*.

NOTES

¹ A testament to W.W. Skeat's greatness as an editor and scholar of *Piers Plowman* more than a century ago is that in his editions passing references were made to some of the points dealt with in this paper. See in particular his commentary throughout the fourth volume of *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman*.

² The following are the major critical arguments that the Three Lives are related to the Active, Contemplative, and Mixed Lives: Wells 123-40; Coghill 108-35; Chambers 127-28; Donaldson 158, 169; Robertson and Huppé 13, 113. Meroney offered the alternative scenario of a link with the unitive, purgative, and illuminative stages of mysticism (11-35).

³ The Latin dominance of studies devoted to discussions of the intellectual horizon behind Langland has been overwhelming. A quick survey of Robertson and Huppé's index, for example, reveals their frequent use of numerous Latin sources, such as William of St Amour, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Peter Lombard. Vernacular sources are limited to one oblique reference to Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* and one reference to Chaucer (which is in conjunction with a Latin source, Bede, as it turns out). This pattern of preference for Latin texts has been repeated time and again by *Piers Plowman* scholars. G.H. Russell, for example, looks to the influence of the fourteenth-century theologian, Uthred of Boldon (101-16). Joseph Wittig relates the issue to *Meditationes Piissimae, Liber de Spiritu et Anima* and Augustine's *Confessions* (211-80). Philomela O'Driscoll sees the debate over Dowel as Langland's response to the scholastic debate "around the nature of 'merit', the scholastic equivalent of Langland's Dowel. The disputants were on the one hand the modern Pelagians [Ockham and some of his followers], on the other Bradwardine" (21). Kathryn Kerby-Fulton argues for the influence of Hildegard of Bingen, William of St Amour, Joachim of Fiore, and Richard Fitzralph. And in a recent article on the subject Stephen Manning places "the Do's in a tradition of spiritual growth—a larger concept than mysticism—in order to understand both why Langland keeps redefining his terms and how such redefinitions fit his basic theme of the perfectability of man" (77-78). Manning's tradition, however, is made up entirely of Latin authors such as Richard of St Victor, Bonaventure, and Gregory the Great. In stark contrast, with the exception of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which has several times been linked to *Piers Plowman* studies (the best of which is still S.S. Hussey's article), acknowledgement of the possible contributions of vernacular texts to an understanding of the intellectual background of Langland's poem are much harder to find. R.W. Frank does note where vernacular texts such as *The Book of Vices and Virtues, Speculum Christiani*, and *Middle English Sermons* offer parallels to ideas in *Piers Plowman*, and he does note that some texts (*Mum and the Sothsegger*, the letters of John Ball and Jakke Carter) likely deliberately echo Langland's terminology; yet his discussion of these points does not develop beyond the footnotes. T.P. Dunning's treatment is slightly more heartening. He does include some consideration of the vernacular texts *Speculum Vitae, The Book of Virtues and Vices*, and the *Middle English Sermons* in the main body of his essay, although here too the discussion is dominated by Latin texts—Aquinas, Bonaventure, Aelred of Rievaulx, Uthred of Boldon, Brinton, and Bromyard. If nothing else, I hope in this essay to demonstrate that vernacular texts must be given their due in any consideration of the horizons behind the author, or readers, of *Piers Plowman*.

⁴ But not always. St Bridget of Sweden, for one, in her *Liber Celestis* refused to distinguish awards based on marital state: Christ said to her "Maidenhede is gude, for it is like to aungells if it be deuote and lawli, and zet may it so be that a wyfe or wedow may be euen in mede wyth a meke maiden. I set ensampill of Susan, Judith and Tecle,

the whilke thre were euen in mede, for thai had all thre olike entent, and ȝet thai were noȝt like in luyngre It is bettir that the body be wythoute and the saule wythin than the body closede and the saule wauerynge abowte' (1.316).

⁵ Compare *Piers Plowman* B.xiv.16–28, B.xiv.87–96, and B.xix.108–91.

⁶ Celestine v (c. 1210–1296) briefly pope in 1294, canonized in 1313.

⁷ Compare *Piers Plowman* B.viii.96–108, B.ix.1–16, B.x.336.

⁸ For Rolle's influence, see Connolly's introduction (xvi–xvii).

⁹ For her acknowledgment of Rolle's influence, see Kempe (39, 143, 154).

¹⁰ Given the intense critical debate, scholars should note with some irony that the only figure in *Piers Plowman* who hesitates to offer an opinion on the subject is Clergy:

"Now thow, Clergie," quod Conscience, "carpe us what is Dowel."

"I have sevene sones," he seide, "serven in a castel

Ther the lord of lif wonyeth, to leren hem what is Dowel,

Til I se tho sevene and myself acorde

I am unhardy," quod he, "to any wight to preven it." (B.xiii.118–22)

¹¹ For discussion of B.xiv.16–28, B.xiv.87–96, and B.xix.108–91, see E. Higgs 133–34; 138–39. Higgs, however, misses the fact that B.xix.108–91 parallels the Three Lives to the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance.

¹² This sort of link is not unique to Langland. Compare *Lollard Sermons* (11) where the three types of worship offered to Christ upon his triumphant entry into Jerusalem is likened to the "thre partis of satisfaccion." Compare also *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook* (257) in which the five loaves are likened to contrition, confession, penance and satisfaction, perseverance without backsliding, and the Eucharist. Each loaf is then further subdivided into three parts.

¹³ On hermits' association with russet, see Pearsall (ed. C-Text, 178, note 2). On the Lollards' association, see Aston (16–17, 94, 255). On the friars, note Wyclif's comments in the *Dialogus*: "*quidam enim russeto signante laborem eorum desuper sunt vestiti . . . et intrinsecus ad denotandum laborem suum in ecclesia russetis vestimentis vestiuntur*" (337). The connection with Lollardry, of course, is almost certainly post-Langland, yet it deserves mention since it underscores the negative aspects of this colour of dress. Russet reopens the question of Will's ambivalent position as hermit/poet and parallels him at B.viii.9 with the Franciscan Grey friars he meets immediately next. As R.H. Robbins notes (339, note 23), russet can actually mean a coarse grey cloth. Cf also B.xv.167.

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