

William Langland, translated by Peter Sutton. *Piers Plowman. A Modern Verse Translation.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2014. © Peter Sutton 2014.

From the opening of the Prologue

One summer season when the sun was still soft,
I set off like a sheep in a shaggy woolen smock,
The unholy habit of a wandering hermit,
And went seeking wonders in the wide, wide world.
And one morning in May on the Malvern Hills
I witnessed a wonder which I warrant was magic.

Quite weary with walking I wanted to rest
On a broad grassy bank beside a small brook.
As I lay down I leant and looked in the water,
Which babbled so sweetly I soon fell asleep.
And sleeping I saw the strangest of dreams:
That I wandered a wilderness, not knowing where,
And high in the east, looking up at the sun,
Saw a tower on a toft, built sturdy and true;
To the west, further down, were a dale and a dungeon
With deep, dark ditches that I gazed on with dread.

Between them I found a fair field full of folk,
All manner of men, both moneyed and poor,
Either walking or working at what the world wants.
Some were pushing a plow with no time for play,
And were sweating as they scattered and sowed the seed
And gathered the grain that the greedy would squander;
Some were pouting like popinjays, strutting with pride,
Bedecked in dandified, elegant dress;
And many were practicing penitence and prayer,
Living soberly and strictly for the sake of our Lord
In the hope that they'd have their reward in heaven,
Such as anchorites, hermits who aren't seen abroad
And don't go roistering round the roads
Or lead lives of luxury, lechery and lust.

From Step VI

“I have never worked,” said Wastrel, “and won’t.”
He made light of the law and still less of the knight,
Set Piers and his plow at the price of a pea,
And menaced his men if they met once again.

“By my soul, I shall see you are punished,” Piers said,
And he hollered for Hunger, who heard him at once.
“Avenge me on wastrels, those wens on the world,”
Piers said to Hunger, who seized the man’s stomach
And wrung the rogue roundly until his eyes ran.
He buffeted the Breton about his fat cheeks
So hard he grew lean as a lantern for life.
He beat all the braggarts till their guts nearly burst,
And if Piers had not proffered a pease loaf to Hunger
And begged him to stop they’d have starved and been buried.

“Please leave them alive to eat with the hogs,
Or have bread,” Piers said, “made from beans and from bran.”

Loafers and loungers fled in alarm
And flapped hard with flails from first light till last,
Till Hunger relented and left them alone
With the potful of pease that Piers had made.

An army of “hermits” looked hastily for tools,
And cut down their habits to make countrymen’s capes,
And set to with spades and workmanlike shovels,
And dug and delved to drive away Hunger.
The bed-ridden and blind were cured by the cartload,
And sprawling beggars sprang up quite sound.
To the hungry, horse-mash was milk and honey,
Many beggars were content with the bean-and-bran bread,
And poor men with pease for the pains of their hunger,
Seizing like sparrowhawks on tasks that Piers set.

From Step XIV

“If my neighbor has a hard-working animal or hireling
More profitable than mine I plot and I plan
How to get my hands on him all for my own,
And if all else fails, I finally filch him,
Or I pick the man’s locks and his purse in private.
By night and by day I’m dodging and dealing
To gather through guile the goods that I have.

“If plying the plow, I will push so far over
That I fetch in a furrow or foot of land,
Grabbing and grasping my neighbor’s ground,
And when I am reaping I reckon my reapers
Should snatch with their scythes what others have sown.
And if anyone borrows he has to buy
More time with presents or to pay more in private.
In that way I gain from the game regardless,
And to kith and to kin I am just as unkind.
I complain unless people who purchase my goods
Are prepared to pay a penny or two
More than their value while fiercely avowing
The price that I paid was appreciably more.
If I happen to hear the Mass on high days,
It never ever enters my head
To ask for mercy for I mourn much more
The loss of my goods than my guilt against God,
So I do not dread my deadly sins
As dearly as loans that are long overdue,
And if I show kindness to comfort fellow Christians,
In my heart I calculate the cash I may acquire.”

From Step XX

But Old Age and Life were still hand to hand,
And finally Age felled a fur-clad physician,
Who dropped in a fit and was dead in three days.
“Now I see,” Life said, “that surgery and drugs
Are utterly hopeless at staving off Age.”
And in hope of some healing he leapt on Good Heart
And rode off to Revelry, the home of carousing,
The Comfort of Company, as sometimes it’s called.

Old Age chased after him, over my head,
And my brow was left bald and my crown quite bare,
A swingeing assault to be seen for ever.
“Hang you,” I said, “you ill-mannered Age.
Since when has your highway led over men’s heads?
If you had any manners you’d ask my permission!”

“Oh, sure,” he said, and assailed me again,
Clouting my ears to hamper my hearing,
Mauling my mouth to pull out my molars,
And ensuring I shuffled, shackled with gout.
My wife was sorry to see my poor state,
And wished I had waddled away to heaven,
For my limb that she loved and liked to feel,
Lying next to me naked at night in bed,
Was now listless and limp, with no life left in it,
So sorely had she and Old Age overstrained it.

As I sat feeling sorry I saw Nature come near.
Then Death stood beside me and I started to shake
And appealed to Nature to put paid to my pain.
“Hoary Old Age has visited me here;
I wish you’d whisk me away from his grasp.”