PIERS AND TRUTH'S PARDON
IN THE B TEXT OF LANGLAND'S
PIERS THE PLOWMAN

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Abstract

A review of the current critical interpretations of the pardon scene in the Middle English narrative poem Piers the Plowman reveals three major viewpoints: that Piers rejects the pardon as completely invalid, that he accepts it as valid, but only in part, and finally that he accepts it whole heartedly as an unequivocally valid bull of forgiveness.

This paper proposes a new interpretation of the pardon scene in the poem; the author's close reading of the text of the scene leads him to assert that the pardon is meant to be both valid and invalid at the same time. The pardon points out the right path to salvation for everyone without necessarily guaranteeing salvation unconditionally to all people. Thus it ought to be viewed as a valid "guide" to salvation, but not an unconditionally valid bull of forgiveness.

William langland's Piers the Plowman is a fourteenth-century narrative poem in alliterative verse. It comprises the qualities of religious allegory and social satire; for the cycle of dreams or visions of which it consists are cast in the didactic form of medieval moral allegory - a spiritual journey which, though it takes place in a series of dreams dreamt by an imaginary dreamer, is constantly related to life as it has to be lived. The poem has reached us in three distinct versions usually referred to as the A, B, and C texts. The best known of these is the second i.e., the B text. In this text, the poem consists of a prologue and twenty Books, called by the author Passus - Latin for steps or stages.

Piers the Plowman is divided into two main parts, namely the "Visio," and the "Vita." In the B text, the first of these two parts covers the Prologue and the first seven Books or Passus, and is entitled, "William's Vision of Piers the Plowman." The second part covers the remaining thirteen Books, or Passus, of the poem and is usually entitled, "William's Vision of Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best." Although no plot-summary can
do justice to the work itself, a synopsis of the main events in the two parts of the poem may be indispensable for anyone reading about the poem without having read it in full in the original.

In part one the dramatic persona, Will (the dremaer), relates his vision of the Field of Folk - "an allegorical vision of the corruption of society and the attempt to purify it through Piers the Plowman. Piers stands for the ordinary man, seeking goodness through humility, honest endeavour, and obedience to the law of God." Having observed how all orders of society in this world - men of the Church as well as they laity - busy themselves with worldly gain between the Tower of Truth and the Dungeon of Falshood without caring to seek the former or trying to avoid the latter, the dreamer runs into Lady Holy Church, who explains to him the principles of Christianity and, upon his request, shows him the false, in the form of a proposed marriage between a suddenly personified False and an alluring wealthy woman called Lady Meed. This marriage is objected to by Theology, who considers Meed the reward God has promised to give to true men. As a result of Theology's objection to it, the proposed marriage is delayed until legal opinion regarding its validity is obtained in London. At the King's court in London, False and Meed lose the legal battle in consequence of the arguments against them presented by Reason and Conscience, and the first in the poem's cycle of visions ends with the king and his subjects persuaded that Meed must be condemned.

The second of the narrator's dreams begins with Reason preaching a sermon to the entire kingdom - a sermon which sets the people confessing their sins and planning a pilgrimage to the abode of Truth. It is at this point that Piers, the plowman, appears for the first time in the poem. He pokes out his head and promises to lead the throng to the abode of Truth on condition that they help him in ploughing a half-acre. The people strike the suggested deal with Piers but fail to abide by its terms willingly and voluntarily: when they are set to hard work, they prove to be neither eager nor conscientious about it; they work only under the threat of hunger or punishment. Ultimately, though, the half-acre is ploughed. But before Piers sets out to fulfil his promise to lead the folk on their pilgrimage to Truth, Truth herself sends a bull of forgiveness - a pardon - in Latin for Piers and all those who helped him honestly. She tells him to stay at home and plough his field instead of seeking her on a pilgrimage. Having had his pardon translated for him by a priest, Piers tears up the pardon in pure anger and vows to stop working so hard to earn his living and to start a new life of prayers and contemplation henceforward. A fight in words ensues between Piers and the priest in consequence of the latter's sneering at Piers' "learning" in matters religious, and the noise resulting from this fight wakes up the dreamer thus putting an end to the second vision in the poem.
The second part of the poem deals with the dreamer's search for the lives of Do-Well, Do-better, and Do-best - a search initiated by the practical lesson the dreamer had learned by experience from Piers' pardon and the latter's reaction to it. The dreamer's search in the second part of the poem forms an embodiment of Piers' vow to abandon the active life of the simple, though honest, Christian laborer to the contemplative life of the learned Christian intellectual. During this search, the dreamer falls asleep and dreams several times and asks information from various allegorical figures like Thought, Wit, Study, Clergy and Imaginative, among others. To his questions as to what Do-well (the good Christian life), Do-better (the life of Christ), and Do-best (The life of the Church) are and where they can be found, the dreamer receives different, some times conflicting answers. But the final conclusion reached by the dreamer is that they are all embodied in Piers, who, being Christ's vicar on earth, is sought at the end of the poem as the only one capable of conquering pride and of protecting the castle of Unity, i.e. the Church, from the attacks of Antichrist, made successful by corruption in the Christian society and the Church itself.

With this synopsis in mind as an introduction and a frame for the subject of our study (namely the pardon scene in general and the pardon-tearing incident in particular), we proceed now to discuss the subject proper of our paper. In this paper an attempt will be made at a close reading of the pardon scene in the B Text of Piers Plowman. After we have a look at the scene as it is recorded in the poem itself, the views of major critics representative in general of the various trends in interpreting the scene will be surveyed here and made use of as general guidelines only. With the opinions of these major critics in mind, an attempt will be made at an independent reading of the scene as it stands in the text. This reading and the conclusions of the paper will deal with the main issues the scene has always raised among critics, namely, the anger of Piers, the meaning of the pardon-tearing incident, the validity of the pardon, and Piers' acceptance or rejection of it. All quotations from the poem will be from the B Text unless otherwise noted.

To almost all critics and readers, the incident in this scene of Piers' angry tearing up of the pardon granted him by Truth seems most puzzling. The incident, however, is "artistically as effective a scene as the poem provides. The pardon incident is not only the climax of the Visio but the point where the transition from the Visio to the Vita begins, and its importance is emphasized by the vigor with which it is presented." It is puzzling because no easy interpretation of it can be given. Also, it is very significant because our conclusion about the place of the Active Life in the general scheme of salvation, in the poem, depends upon our understanding of it. It is also very effective, because it connects the two main parts of the poem, namely the Visio and the Vita.
The incident is puzzling because of the way Langland presents it: vigorously but with no explanation or revealing comment on why the pardon-tearing took place or what Piers precisely meant by doing it. Piers, having had his half-acre Ploughed with the help of the folk of the field, is ready to carry out his promise to lead them on the way to Truth which, he says, he knows very well. But Truth, having heard of Piers' plan, sends him a pardon:

And bad him holde hym at home and eyren his lyes,
And all that helpe hym to erie to sette or sowe,
Or any other myster that my3te Piers auaille,
Pardoun with Piers plowman treuth hath ygraunted. (VII, 5-8)

Langland proceeds to tell us in his own words, for the speech is not assigned to any character in the poem, of those who are conditionally included with Piers in the pardon and the conditions or ways of life they have to abide by in order to be included in it. At length, however, a priest volunteers to read and translate from Latin into English the yet folded pardon:

'Piers', quod a prest tho thi pardoun most I rede,
For I will construe eche clause and kenne it the on Engeliche. (VII, 106-107).

Piers obeys and unfolds the pardon for the priest to read. Looking from behind, the dreamer sees that the pardon is in two lines written in Latin with Truth as witness. The priest, having read the pardon, conveys its very unexpected message:

"Peter! quod the prest the 'I can no pardoun fynde,
But Dowel, and haue wel and god shal havue thi sowle,
And do yuel, and haue yuel hop thow non other;
But after thi ded-day the deuel shal haue thi sowle!' (VII, 112-115).

Here the priest gives the English translation of the Latin text, and does not forget to give his own judgement of it as being" no pardoun! Piers reacts immediately and violently.

And Piers for pure tene pulled it atweyne. (vll-116)

quoting, in Latin, the twenty-third Psalm to the effect that he will never fear death nor evil while God is with him. He then announces a resolution of his own:

'I shal cessen of my sowyng' quod Piers and swynk nou3t so hard
Ne about my bely-joye so bisi be namore!
Of preyers and of penaunce my plow shal ben herafter,
And wepen when I shulde slepe though whete-bred me faille' (vll. 1711-120)
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He also quotes the Gospel in Latin calling upon it to be his witness that God, who provides birds with food in winter when there are no barns for them to go to, will provide the same for His men, who spend their days and nights praying and weeping for His mercy. The priest sneers at Piers’ learning and wonders contemptuously where he has acquired it. Piers answers the priest’s contempt with "Lewed Lore! 'And the two exchange angry words through which the dreamer awakes and begins to reflect on the scene he saw in his dream.

One issue that raises itself for discussion at the first reading of the incident is whether Piers, by tearing up the pardon, demonstrates his acceptance or rejection of it. From this main issue stem the questions dealing with the cause and object of Piers’ anger, his reason or reasons for tearing up the pardon, the degree of validity of the pardon, and the resolution Piers takes afterwards, a resolution which concerns the kind of life he vows to undertake from now on. Almost every critic dealing with these issues has his own interpretation of the scene, which differs partly or completely from those of other critics. But we can roughly classify these various interpretations into three main groups within each of which there are enough elements of basic agreement about the way to read and interpret the scene. The first group includes viewpoints of critics who read the tearing of the pardon as a rejection of it by Piers. The interpretations in the second group are to the effect that Piers accepts the pardon, but only in part, because its validity, according to these interpretations, is limited. The third group, on the other hand, maintains the view that Piers accepts the pardon and that it has complete validity and promises salvation to mankind.

E. T. Donaldson, among critics contributing to the first group of interpretations, believes that Piers’ anger is aroused by the priest, "because he is supercilious and insulting and because, being an ecclesiastical bureaucrat, he refuses to recognize that the promise of the creed is as effective as any pardon ever granted by the Pope. And Piers’ anger is aroused by the pardon itself, because Piers is disappointed in it, having apparently expected some larger, less commonplace sanction for his manner of life." He also points out that Piers, in the pardon scene, turns from the Active Life to the Contemplative Life. On the latter point, Donaldson is in full agreement with R. W. Chambers who says the same about Piers’ abandoning of the Active Life for the Contemplative Life and adds that Piers’ anger is really directed against himself as he suddenly realizes that “Dowell”, the life of honest labor, is not enough for salvation, the higher ideal which the poet is to depict later in the poem under the name of "Do-better" being implied here. Chambers states explicitly that Piers rejects the pardon and decides to trust only to the Psalmist’s assurance that death can have no terrors for the just man." Nevill Coghill al
so shares with Chambers this latter view in an earlier essay and sees in Piers’ action of Pardon-tearing "mortification as well as disappointment." In a later lecture, however, Coghill modifies his opinion in part and accepts the pardon as efficacious, but rejects the priest.  

H. W. Wells, among critics contributing to the second group of interpretations, says that the pardon is addressed to and valid for the laity, but not for the men of the Church. That is why, according to Wells, Piers - a plowman - accepts it, while the priest - a man of the Church - rejects it. 

This view of Wells’ is in accordance with his main thesis that the Visio contains religious teaching for the laity, while Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best contain religious teaching for the "persons dedicated to the life of scholarship and religious practice." So, in Wells' opinion, the validity of the pardon is limited to the folk in the field and Piers as a simple plowman in the Visio as contrasted to the men of the Church. Francis Carnegy, on the other hand agrees that Piers accepts the pardon but sees the limitation of the pardon's validity from a different angle. He sees the pardon as valid for Piers but not for mankind. He argues that, for mankind, the pardon is given under the condition of honest and hard work which proves to be too difficult to be met by any group. This difficulty is shown in the Visio, where the folk of the field work only under the threat of Hunger and return to idleness after his departure. Bernard Huppe also believes that Piers accepts the pardon but, like Carnegy, says that it is no pardon for mankind in general since the pilgrims fail to deal with Do-wel (Good Works), as embodied by Piers, as a precondition for spiritual progress and coming to Truth. Huppe also supports the opinion that Piers, in the pardon scene, decides to lead a more contemplative life than the one he has been leading before receiving the pardon. 

Among those in favor of the opinion that Piers does accept the pardon and that its validity is full and complete, Robert Frank seems to be the most enthusiastic. Frank argues that owing to the special character of the pardon, its tearing up by Piers signifies acceptance: "For this pardon contains a message which is by implication an attack on pardons and which does in fact lead to such an attack by the dreamer... In tearing the parchment, Piers is symbolically tearing paper pardons from Rome." Not only the tearing of the pardon but, in Frank's opinion, Piers' quotation from the Psalter also signifies his acceptance since it should express faith, he thinks, either in the priest or in the pardon; and if Piers cannot be said to have had faith in the priest, he must have had it in the pardon. The logical object of Piers' anger, according to Frank, is neither the pardon nor himself, but the priest. He also argues that the omission of Piers' reactions to the pardon
in the C text shows that they are too unimportant to be held as evidence of Piers' rejection. By concluding that Piers accepted the pardon completely and that Langland offered it as valid for all mankind, Frank changes the formula of unity in the poem as a whole and takes the pardon as one which settles the quest for Do-well in the Visio successfully and thus makes the Visio complete in its thought. He seems to be arguing for the Visio's being a separate poem from the Vita: he says that the visions of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest develop new though related themes, and are not a second attack on the problems posed in the Visio. Ruth Ames agrees with Frank about the pardon's goodness and validity for mankind but believes that both Piers and the priest were right in their different readings of the pardon. For, Ames thinks, the priest sees only the letter, while Piers sees the spirit, of the pardon, the difference between them being the same as that between the Old Law of Moses and the New Law of Christ. To Ames, Piers' tearing up of the pardon in 'pure tene' may reflect Piers' frustration when he realizes he cannot make the pardon effective...Certainly, in the large plan of the poem, it is still a long time until the Redemption. The coming of Christ fulfils the Old Law of Moses and reconciles the doctrines of Piers and the priest and, in Ames' words, "in the end, Piers is the hero and his pardon the foreshadowing of the ultimate pardon of Christ." With the interpretations of these critics, and others, in mind as guidelines and illuminating insights, and remembering Donaldson's valid remark that any solution of the pardon scene can only depend on reading between the lines, one feels obliged to go back to the text itself and make an attempt at reading it independently. For, since there are no right or wrong interpretations of works of literature, the validity of any interpretation must depend on the text itself and the argument presented to support it.

The roots of Piers' reaction to the pardon and his tearing of it in "pure tene" are to be sought, I think, in Passus five when Piers first puts "forth his hed" and tells the folk in the field how intimate he is with Truth and how familiar with the way to Him. Piers tells the folk then that he has been taught the way to Truth and how to serve Him by "Conscience and Kynde Witte." And what is the lesson they have taught him? It is,

Both to sowe and to sette the while I swynke myghte. (v. 548)

Now, the question is whether Langland believed that, from the purely theological point of view, "Conscience and Kynde Witte" alone can teach the Christian all he needs for salvation. They definitely can not. Langland must have been aware of their incapability to do so; for he portrays conscience, the teacher of Piers - the plowman of Passus five- as "pilgryme" walking wide at the end of the poem,

To seke Piers the Plowman that Pryde may desruy, (xx. 380) and thus solve the
problems of mankind. If Langland knew that the lesson taught to Piers at this stage was inadequate, the question should be whether he meant Piers, in Passus five and before the coming of the pardon, to be aware of the fact of his teachers' inadequacy or not. A close look at Piers' description of the way to Truth as he knew it tells us that the answer is in the affirmative. After telling the pilgrims that Truth can be met through obeying the commandments, Piers describes the dwelling of Truth as having a moat of Mercy, walls of Wit, battlements of Christendom and roofs of Love and Low-Speech; it can be reached only through a bridge of Pray-well with pillars of Penance and hooks of Alms-deeds; its gateway is Grace whose man is Amend-Yourself. Piers then tells the pilgrims that once they cross the bridge,

And if Grace graunte the to go in this wise,
Thow shalt see in thi-sales Treute sitte in thine herte,
In a cheyne of charyte as thow a childe were,
To suffre hym and segge nou3te a3cin thi sires wille. (V. 614- 617)
But even then the pilgrimage will not be over; there is something to beware of:
Ac bewar thanne of Wrath-the that is a wikked shrewed
He hathe enuye to hym that in thine herte sitteth,
and pukketh forth prayde to prayse thi-seluen. (V. 618-620)

Two points arise from these lines and from Piers' description of the abode of Truth. The first is that, as Elizabeth Zeeman has pointed out, a such a speech seems too learned and spiritually-oriented for a simple plowman and mere follower of the Commandments as Piers is supposed to be here. The speaker knows that Truth, Christ, or God is in man's heart: in a chain of Charity; he also knows that pride can creep into man's heart even when man thinks he has found Truth in his heart already. The second point is that Piers knows that if man works his way to Truth merely by obeying the commandments, he can be an easy target of "pride", the gravest among sins, or even the father of all of them in Medieval theology. Piers knows then quite a bit about religious mystery and is aware at this stage that, according to the theology of Langland's time, the Ten Commandments by themselves are no safeguard against "Pride". He also knows that if you find Truth with the help of the Commandments alone, you may not be able to stay with Him for ever; for "Pride" may get into you still, and

Thus myght thou lesen his loue to late wel by thi-selue,
And neure happliche eftete entre but grace thou hauue. (V. 625-626)
Piers then must have known that there is a safer and more adequate way to salvation than the Commandments, honest work, or the Active Life. And the reason why Langland would make Piers confine himself temporarily to the Active life despite his awareness of its inadequacy is not hard to seek. As an embodiment of Christ and His Church, Piers is
meant to act as Man's teacher, albeit he teaches by practice; he allows the dreamer to observe him directly as he advances from one stage of goodness and spirituality to another, and from doing well to doing better, then ultimately to doing best.

Assuming that Piers, while receiving Truth's pardon, realizes all this about the inadequacy of his works but still confines himself to them, we may arrive at an understanding of his anger and tearing up of the pardon. He is taught by Conscience and Natural Wit to obey the Commandments. He is told by Truth to hold to his plow and work honestly. For fifty years, and up till he receives the pardon, he has been doing both. He has been as faithful a follower of Truth as blind obedience may suggest. He knows he could do better; yet he still hopes to be saved by his Master through mere obedience and honest work. He is at length granted a pardon in which he hopes to find salvation. When the pardon is unfolded, read, and translated for him, Piers Finds in it "no pardoun", and no guaranteed salvation. How Piers may feel and what his reaction can be at this point may be perceived through a very simple analogy from daily life. A student, let us say, is told by his teacher that he should read the textbook before taking his test. He does read the textbook, but nothing else. he knows he would do better with some outside reading and research, but hopes to pass with the minimum work and effort. He finally takes his test and when he gets it back he finds, instead of a passing grade, a remark from the teacher saying: "Those who study hard will pass the test, but those who waste their time will not." The student, at reading this remark, tears up the textbook angrily and goes straight to the library to work hard and do as much outside reading as possible. If this student was asked why he did so, his answer would very likely be, "I am frustrated and angry with myself because I knew I could have done better by exploring the material more deeply and thoroughly, which I did not do. I am also disappointed for not getting a passing grade although I know I do not deserve it. All I have is a remark reminding me of what I knew already: that the minimum work and literal following of the letters of the master's orders are not enough for final passing. Therefore I have decided to do more studying and instead of limiting myself to the textbook alone, I will go deeper into the material so I would have my own insights."

This student is mentally convinced of the truthfulness of his teacher's message to him; that is why he is acting in accordance with it by going to the library. Yet he is psychologically vexed with it. He cannot help feeling angry with himself for spending his time before the test reading the textbook when he knew and still knows that something more should be done. he also feels disappointed and angry at the textbook he has in hand although he knows it carries the truth - the teacher's remark - and deprives him of no rights of his. His immediate reaction is caused by his vexation and anger; he violently tears up
the test-book. But his thoughtful reaction is a mature decision to do whatever he thinks his teacher's remark implies he should do: he will do more studying.

Now if we replace the student in this analogy with Piers, the teacher with Truth, the test-book with the pardon, and the textbook with the Commandments or honest work, we will probably get a clearer picture of the pardon scene. Piers knew enough theology and religious mysteries to make him realize that the Active Life he had been leading before he got his pardon was neither a dependable protection against pride nor a sure way to find salvation. But he did not live wholly by his realization and knowledge. The pardon comes as a reminder to him. It arouses his feeling of guilt for not having put his knowledge into practice for fifty years.² It also frustrates him, as would any truthful message that does not carry satisfaction with it, by putting him face to face with the fact that salvation exacts from him a different kind of labor instead of, or maybe besides, the one he has been doing for fifty years. So, with "pure tene", he tears up the pardon, but at the same time decides to start the kind of life it indirectly recommends. Significant is the fact that he tears it up violently and immediately after the priest tells him of its contents. He does not premeditate the action of tearing, or do it in a calculated way. His anger is sudden and temporary. His tearing up of it means he rejects it as a non-absolute pardon for a period of non-satisfactory work. He is dissatisfied with it because he hoped for the absolute salvation which it does not give. His calculated decision to follow the path of the contemplative life indirectly recommended by the pardon shows that he accepts the pardon as a necessary reminder of his previous life's inadequacy and as a valuable and basic stimulus for starting his new life, which will hopefully be an adequate one. His spiritual progress towards a union with God could not have been started, let alone completed, without the pardon, in spite of its being the same pardon that reminded him after fifty years of hard work that his foot was in the wrong shoe, or at best that both his feet were in a single and very tight shoe.

Those who think Piers accepts the pardon as a full absolution or final promise of salvation can be easily answered. If we take Piers Plowman as one and a whole poem, which is generally the case with all critics, even those who argue for more than one author, we cannot miss the spiritual progress that Piers achieves because of the pardon: a progress that was initiated by the message of the pardon and began with Piers' promise to "cessen" his sowing and make his plow hereafter "of prayer and of peneance." This spiritual progress lies behind Piers' being sought by Conscience at the end of the poem when he, Piers, becomes identical with Christ. Before he embarked on his spiritual pilgrimage to Truth, which was initiated by the pardon, he had Conscience as his teacher. Now it is the other way round; Piers is being sought by Conscience as a Teacher and Savior. If the
pardon granted Piers absolute salvation, he would not have had to change any aspect of his previous life, nor would he have embarked on any pilgrimage, because absolute salvation is the final aim of both man's physical and spiritual activities, and nothing higher than it is to be sought or achieved.

Those who think that Piers rejects the pardon completely can be answered easily, too. The pardon does affect Piers' attitudes and coming life greatly. It does convince him to change his life-style from the one lived by the ants that collect in summer what they need in winter to that of the birds, who wait, in winter, for their God to provide for them the livelihood they used to earn from barns in summer. This very change which takes place only through the pardon is responsible for Piers' spiritual purification and his coming closer and closer to God until he is identified with Him at the end. How can someone like Piers, who knows he needs this change of life and realizes that the pardon helps him initiate it, be anything but grateful for having the pardon come to lead him to the right path. If Piers' tearing up of the pardon may make us think he rejects it, his embracing of its message and contents tells us the opposite. His pledge to stop sowing and working so hard, and his vow to start a life of prayer and penance;

Ne about my bely-joye so bisi be namore!

Of prayers and of penaunce my plow shal ben herafter (VII. 118-119)
can hardly be said to suggest that he rejects the pardon; rather, they clearly tell us that he takes the meaning of the pardon's words to heart.

As for its validity to Piers, the pardon can never be valid in the sense of an absolute pardon which relieves Piers of his duties towards man and God and makes him carefree with a single stroke. This is after all what the corrupted priests claim their indulgences to do, the indulgences which Langland means to attack. Piers' pardon stands at the other extreme and in complete opposition to such indulgences. Yet the pardon cannot be considered completely invalid to Piers in the sense of being a mere piece of paper that means nothing and is of no use to him. It changes his whole life as we have seen and puts him in the only path that would lead to salvation. His acceptance of its content and recommendation of the new contemplative life that he decides to lead shows very clearly that it means a lot to him. In a word, the pardon was neither completely valid nor completely invalid to Piers but both at one and the same time, depending on what sense of validity the reader has in mind. Piers neither completely accepts nor completely rejects the pardon. He does both at one and the same time, too.

To mankind, the pardon's validity is the same as it is to piers. For Piers symbolizes mankind in his continuous effort to realize god in himself through the stages of obedience,
spiritual progress by contemplation, and finally identification with Him. If the pardon was to be valid to mankind as a full absolution for mere honest labor, there would be no need for any further progress in charity or spirituality beyond honest physical labor, and there would be no reason for the existence of priesthood or even the Christinn faith. But the pardon cannot be completely invalid to mankind either. For it grasps, in the two lines it consists of, the essence of both the social and spiritual moralities, without which man can by no means live or cooperate with his brothers, let alone pleasing his Creator. Nothing would encourage man to be good and discourage him from being evil more than

"-- 'Dowel, and have wel and god shal haue thi sowle
And do yuel and haue yuel hope thow non other
But after thi ded-day the deuel shal haue thi sowle!" (VII. 113-115).

This is Piers' pardon, and it is just what man from the point of view of Christianity, needs to keep in mind so he may always check his deeds and make sure they serve to bring him closer to his fellowmen and brothers, and consequently to his Creator. The pardon in this sense helps man achieve happiness in both this life and the other life in Heaven through his own good deeds instead of spoiling him by granting such happiness to him unconditionally and thus encouraging him to care the least for what harm he might cause his society or even his own soul's well-being.

One more issue that remains to be clarified in relation to Piers and his pardon, is the priest's position as to Piers' anger and tearing up of the pardon. Whether we discuss this issue in light of Piers' character at this stage or in light of the pardon-tearing as it is recorded in the poem, I can see no way of concluding that Piers' anger which results in his tearing up of the pardon is caused or aroused by the priest. It is true that the two of them have a fight of words at the end of the scene, but as far as I can see, as a reader, the fight is instigated by the priest's sneering at the learning Piers shows. This learning, mocked by the priest, is shown in Piers' speech and his quoting from Latin, which he does only after tearing up the bull. Before that everything is going on well between the two, and there is no reason why the priest should be an object of Piers' anger. Piers at the beginning of the scene is, as Coghill notes, "the simplest embodiment of Dowel: an innocent, obedient and good-natured plowman. This explains his readiness to unfold the pardon when the priest asks him to. The priest's translation of the pardon cannot be dismissed as fraud, because, as Ruth Ames points out, the draamer, standing behind both Piers and the priest sees the message and Truth's secret seal on the pardon, and tells us it truly stands in two lines. And even if piers mistrusted the priest's translation and was angry with him for that, which obviously was not the case, he would not tear up the pardon. On the contrary, he would keep it to spite the priest and also to show it to someone
else who would translate it correctly for him. So it is clear that Piers' anger at the priest starts after the tearing up of the pardon and thus has no bearing on the action of tearing or on Piers' subsequent decision to change his life-style.

Finally, and to sum up, I tend to believe that the pardon in the poem serves to help both Piers and Mankind to help themselves. It does so by reminding them that the way to salvation lies through the individual's own effort to progress toward the love of God. But in any case, and whatever our interpretation of the pardon-tearing or the pardon scene as a whole, it remains with its ambiguity, and maybe because of it, a rich and ever-flowing source of wonder, lively discussion, and artistic interest for both readers and critics alike. The fact that it is puzzling and ambiguous, together with its value as a unifying element in the poem, makes it the most important incident in one of the most important, if not the most important, scenes of Piers Plowman. It will always attract more and more readers and literary critics and cause them to wonder with Langland on Piers, Piers' spiritual progress, "And which a pardoun Piers hadde."
Notes

5. Ibid, p. 137, n 12.
8. Ibid. p. 119.
12. Ibid. 124-125.
15. Ibid, 600-602.
18. Ibid, 322.
19. Ibid, 324.
22. Ibid, p 69.
27. Ames, p. 166.
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