

PIERS PLOWMAN

ca. 1372–1389

From *Passus* 5*

[THE CONFESSION OF ENVY]

- 75 Envy with heavy heart asked for shrift
 And, grieving for his guilt, began his confession.
 He was pale as a sheep's pelt, appeared to have the palsy;
 He was clothed in a coarse cloth—I couldn't describe it—
 A tabard¹ and a tunic, a knife attached to his side,
 80 Like those of a friar's frock were the foresleeves.
 Like a leek that had lain long in the sun
 So he looked with lean cheeks, louring foully.
 His body was so blown up for wrath that he bit his lips
 And shook his fist fiercely—he wanted to avenge himself
 85 With deeds or with words when he saw his chance.
 Every syllable he spat out was of a serpent's tongue;
 From chiding and bringing charges was his chief livelihood,
 With backbiting and bitter scorn and bearing false witness.
 This was all his courtesy wherever he showed himself.
 90 "I'd like to be shriven," said this scoundrel,
 "if shame would let me.
 By God, I'd be gladder that Gib had bad luck
 Than if I'd won this week a wey² of Essex cheese.
 I have a near neighbor, I've nettled him often
 And blamed him behind his back to blacken his name:
 95 I've done my best to damage him day after day,
 And lied to lords about him to make him lose money,
 And turned his friends into his foes with my false tongue.
 His good luck and glad lot grieve me greatly.
 Between one household and another I often start disputes
 100 So that both life and limb are lost for my speech.
 When I met in the market the man I most hated
 I fondled him affectionately as if I was a friend of his:
 He's stronger than I am—I don't dare harm him.
 But if I had might and mastery I'd murder him once for all.
 105 When I come to kirk³ and kneel before Christ's cross
 And ought to pray for the people as the priest teaches,
 For pilgrims, for palmers, for all the people after,
 Then crouching there I call on Christ to give him sorrow
 That took away my tankard and my torn sheet.⁴
 110 Away from the altar I turn my eyes
 And see how Heinie has a new coat;

* The translations are based on *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, edited by George Kane and E. T. Donaldson (1975).

1. A loose sleeveless jacket, worn over the tunic.

2. A very large measure.

3. Church.

4. The loss of Envy's tankard and torn sheet, and his fury at it, have not been explained.

Then I wish it were mine, and all the web⁵ it came from.
 And when he loses I laugh—that lightens my heart;
 But when he wins I weep and wail the time.
 115 I condemn men when they do evil, yet I do much worse:
 Whoever upbraids me for that, I hate him deadly after.
 I wish that everyone were my servant,
 And if any man has more than I, that angers my heart.
 So I live loveless like a loathsome dog
 120 So that all my breast is blown up for bitterness of spirit.
 For many years I might not eat as a man ought,
 For envy and ill will are hard to digest.
 Is there any sugar or sweet thing to assuage my swelling,
 Or any *diapenidion*⁶ that will drive it from my heart,
 125 Or any shrift or shame, unless I have my stomach scraped?⁷
 “Yes, readily,” said Repentance, directing him to live better;
 “Sorrow for sins is salvation for souls.”
 “I am sorry,” said Envy. “I’m seldom otherwise,
 And that makes me so miserable, since I may not avenge myself.
 130 I’ve been among burgesses⁷ buying at London
 And made Backbiting a broker to blame men’s wares.
 When he sold and I didn’t, then I was ready
 To lie and to lour at my neighbor and belittle his merchandise.
 I will amend this if I may, by might of God almighty.”

[THE CONFESSION OF GLUTTONY]

Now Glutton begins to go to shrift
 And takes his way toward the church to tell his sins.
 But Betty the brewer bade him good morning
 And she asked him where he was going.
 300 “To Holy Church,” he said, “to hear mass,
 And then I shall be shriven and sin no more.”
 “I’ve good ale, good friend,” said she. “Glutton, will you try it?”
 “Have you,” he asked, “any hot spices?”
 “I have pepper and peony⁸ and a pound of garlic,
 305 A farthing-worth of fennel seed⁹ for fasting days.”
 Then Glutton goes in, and great oaths after.
 Cissy the seamstress was sitting on the bench,
 Wat the warren-keeper and his wife both,
 Tim the tinker and two of his servants,
 310 Hick the hackneyman and Hugh the needle-seller,
 Clarice of Cock’s Lane¹ and the clerk of the church,
 Sir Piers of Pridie and Parnel of Flanders,
 Dave the ditch-digger and a dozen others,
 A rebeck-player,² a rat-catcher, a street-raker of Cheapside,
 315 A rope-maker, a redingking, and Rose the dish-vendor,
 Godfrey of Garlickhithe and Griffin the Welshman,
 A heap of old clothesmen early in the morning

5. I.e., bolt.

6. A twist of medicinal sugar.

7. City people.

8. In the Middle Ages, a spice.

9. This herb was apparently considered salubrious to one drinking on an empty stomach.

1. Clarice (and Parnel of the next line) are prostitutes.

2. Fiddle-player. “Street-raker”: a scavenger—hence street-cleaner—of Cheapside, a section of London. What a “redingking” was is not known.

Gladly treated Glutton to drinks of good ale.
 Clement the cobbler took the coat off his back
 320 And put it up as a prize for whoever would play "New Fair,"³
 Then Hick the ostler⁴ took off his hood
 And bade Bette the butcher to be on his side.
 Then peddlers were appointed to appraise the goods:
 Clement for his coat should get the hood plus compensation.
 325 They went to work quickly and whispered together
 And appraised these prizes apart by themselves.
 There were heaps of oaths for anyone to hear.
 They couldn't in conscience come to an agreement
 Till Robin the roper was requested to arise
 330 And named as an umpire so no quarrel should break out.
 Then Hick the ostler had the cloak
 In covenant that Clement should have his cup filled
 And have Hick the ostler's hood, and call it a deal;
 The first to regret the agreement should get up at once
 335 And greet Sir Glutton with a gallon of ale.
 There was laughing and louring and "Let go the cup!"
 They began to make bets and bought more rounds,
 And sat so till evensong and sang sometimes,
 Till Glutton had gulped down a gallon and a gill.⁵
 340 His guts began to grumble like two greedy sows;
 He pissed four pints in a Paternoster's length,⁶
 And on the bugle of his backside he blew a fanfare
 So that all that heard that horn held their noses after
 And wished it had been waxed⁷ with a wisp of gorse.
 345 He had no strength to stand before he had his staff in hand,
 And then he made off, moving like a minstrel's bitch,⁸
 Sometimes sideways and sometimes backwards,
 Like some one laying lines to lime⁹ birds with.
 But as he started stepping to the door his sight grew dim;
 350 He felt for the threshold and fell on the ground.
 Clement the cobbler caught him by the waist
 To lift him aloft, and laid him on his knees.
 But Glutton was a large lout and a load to lift.
 And he coughed up a custard in Clement's lap.
 355 There's no hound so hungry in Hertfordshire
 That would dare lap up that leaving, so unlovely the taste.
 With all the woe of this world his wife and his maid
 Brought him to his bed and bundled him in it,
 And after all this excess he had a fit of sloth
 360 So that he slept Saturday and Sunday till the sun set.

3. "New Fair" was a game in which two participants exchanged items in their possession which were not of equal value and hence involved a cash payment by the player who put up the less valuable object. Clement puts up his cloak, Hick his hood; each chooses an agent to represent him in the evaluation of the objects, which is carried on by peddlers. Hick is represented by Bette, but since the evaluators are unable to agree, Robin is named as an umpire. It is decided that Hick should have Clement's cloak and Clement Hick's hood, but that Clement should receive a cup of ale as well, or

perhaps the money for a cup of ale which he would then share with all the participants. A fine of further ale would be placed on either of the men who grumbled at the exchange.

4. I.e., a stableman.

5. I.e., a quarter pint.

6. I.e., the time it takes to say the Lord's Prayer.

7. I.e., sealed. "Gorse" is a spiny shrub.

8. I.e., a trained dog.

9. Birds were caught by smearing a sticky substance ("lime") on strings laid out on the ground.

When he was awake and had wiped his eyes,
 The first word he spoke was, "Where is the bowl?"
 His spouse scolded him for his sin and wickedness,
 And right so Repentance rebuked him at that time.
 365 "As with words and with deeds you've worked evil in your life
 Shrive yourself and be ashamed, and show it with your mouth."
 "I, Glutton," he began, "admit I'm guilty of this:
 That I've trespassed with my tongue, I can't tell how often;
 Sworn by God's soul and his sides and 'so God help me!'
 370 When there was no need for it, nine hundred times;
 And overstuffed myself at supper and sometimes at midday
 So that I, Glutton, got rid of it before I'd gone a mile;
 And swilled what might have been saved and dispensed to the hungry;
 Overindulgently on feast days I've drunk and eaten both;
 375 And sometimes sat so long there that I slept and ate at once;
 To hear tales in taverns I've taken more drink;
 Fed myself before noon on fasting days."
 "This full confession," said Repentance, "will procure favor for you."
 Then Glutton began to groan and to make great woe
 380 For his life that he had lived in so loathsome a way,
 And vowed he would fast, what for hunger or for thirst:
 "Never shall fish on Friday be fed to my belly
 Till Abstinence my aunt has given me leave,
 And yet I have hated her all my lifetime."