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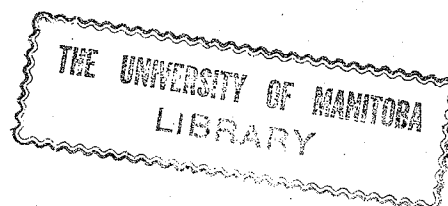
"PIERS THE PLOWMAN" AS A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENT.

by

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Introduction.

In the latter half of the fourteenth century, an era in which the minds of thinking men were perplexed with problems arising from political strife, changing social conditions, and increasing dissatisfaction with the contemporary church and churchmen, not the least ^{important} thinker was the obscure author of "Piers the Plowman". Living poor and unknown in the busy city of London, he saw and comprehended, as few men of the period did, the evils of his time. Perceiving the sickness of society, he offered the remedy; and the poem in which he criticised the follies and vices of his contemporaries and pointed out to them the way of reform, has become of great value to us, not only as a work of art, but also for the picture which it gives us of English life in the later middle ages.

Concerning the value of this poem as a social and historical document, Dr. J.J. Jusserand has written:- "Next to the 'Canterbury Tales', the poem usually called Piers Plowman is the greatest literary work produced by England during the Middle Ages; and it was considered so from the first, these two poems being almost equally popular. Fifty seven manuscripts have preserved for us Chaucer's tales; forty five Piers Plowman. This latter work is a unique monument, much more singular and apart from anything else than Chaucer's Masterpiece. It is more thoroughly English; of foreign influences in it there are but the faintest traces. Allegorical as it is, it gives us an image of English life in the

fourteenth Century of unsurpassed vividness. If we had only Chaucer, we should know much less; Chaucer is at his best when describing individuals; his portraits are priceless. The author of Piers Plowman concerns himself especially with classes of men, great political movements, the general aspirations of the people, the improvements necessary in each class for the welfare of the nation. Contemporary events and the lessons to be deducted from them, the hopes, anxieties, problems, and sufferings occupying his compatriots' minds, are never far from his thoughts; plague, storms, French wars, questions of labor and wages, bishops becoming royal functionaries, power of Commons and the king, duties of nobles, the priest, the workmen. He does not describe them simply to add picturesque touches, but to express what he feels, and show how the nation should be governed and be morally improved. He is not above his time, but of it; he is not a citizen of the world, but a thorough going Englishman, and nothing else?

Chapter 1. Poem -- The Three Texts.

The poem really consists of two distinct parts. The first was originally known as the Vision of Piers Plowman. In this are contained the visions of the Field Full of Folk, Holy Church, the marriage preparations and trial of Meed, the Repentance of the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Setting out of the pilgrims in search of St. Truth. In this last vision Piers the Plowman appears, as the only one who knows the way to Truth.

The title of the second part of the poem was at first "Visio ejusdem de Do-wel, Do-bet et Do-best," and is an account of the Dreaner's search for the three. "But the two portions were subsequently treated as constituting one long Book, and the name 'Liber de Petro Plowman' was conferred upon the whole."¹

There are still extant, forty five manuscripts of the poem, "and from a comparison of these, it is evident that it takes five or six distinct shapes, of which some are due merely to confusion, or to the carelessness of the scribes; still after all allowances for such causes of variation have been made, it is clear that three of the shapes are due to the author himself. It is certain that he altered, added to, and re-wrote the whole poem, not once only, but twice. ----- Let us call the three forms of the poem, as at different times composed; the A text B. Text and C text!"²

¹ Skeat. "Piers the Plowman" P. Vlll ² Ibid P. lX

Concerning the re-writing of the poem, Mr. Manly disagrees with the foregoing. He believes, and brings forth many points in support of his theory, that the three texts are the work, not of one man, but of five; that the three authors of the A text had no share in the B text, and that the author of the B text, in his turn, had no part in the writing of the C text. It would be impossible in a work of this nature to give any succinct account of the arguments which have been advanced in favor of both theories of authorship; all that can be said is that the question is still unsettled, and each side has many supporters.

But whatever view one holds concerning the authorship of the poems, all agree that there are three distinct versions of the poem, and continue to call them, the A, B, and C. texts.

The A text is thought to have been written about the year 1362, and contains about 2567 lines, - "In it the Vision of Piers the Plowman, and the Vision of Do-Wel, Do-bet, and Do-best are kept quite distinct."¹ In the confession of the Seven Deadly Sins, Wrath is omitted

The date assigned to the B text is 1377. This Vision which contains 7242 lines is three times the length of the first, and is considered the best of the three. The confession of Wrath, and the famous fable of the rat-parliament are added. The distinctions between the Visions of Piers Plowman, and Do-wel, Do-bet, and Do-best are not so careful.

¹ Manly, Prof. J.M. "Piers the Plowman and its Sequence" P.I. Vol. II Chap. I of
² Skeat. "Piers the Plowman" Intro P.IX. "Cambridge History of English Literature".

The date of the C. text is thought to be about 1390 or later.
 "It contains additions and revisions made at various periods
 later than 1380".¹ This is of still greater length than text B.

The A. text consists of a prologue to both parts, and eight
 and three passus respectively;² in all, 557 lines.

The B. text has a prologue and seven passus to the first
 vision; a prologue to each of the three sub-divisions of the
 second part, and six passus to Do-wel, three to Do-bet, and
 one to Do-best; in all, the second division of the B. text
 contains three prologues and ten passus.²

The C. text contains ten passus of Piers the Plowman, seven
 of Do-wel, four of Do-bet, and two of Do-best; a total of
 twenty-three^{passus} and no prologues.¹

¹ Skeat. W.W. "Piers the Plowman" Harendon Press. 1906. P.XI.

² Ibid.

Chapter 11. William Langland.

(a) His Name.

With the question of the authorship of "Piers the Plowman" still undecided, it would be useless to attempt a biography of the poet. It must suffice to say that, until a few years ago, he was always accepted as one William Langland or Langley. His name was concluded to be such from a few internal and external references. In more than one place in the poem the author refers to himself as "Will"; and once he says;—

"I have lyued in lond" quod I "My name is Longe Wille"
(B. Pass. XV. L. 148)

There seems to be no point to the statement that he "lives in lond" unless he intended by this means to give a clue to his name. In one of the Dublin MSS. in a handwriting of the 15th century, there is a note in Latin, which, after referring to "Pater Willielmi de Langland", states that "Willielmus fecit librum qui vocatur Perys Ploughman".¹ "Again, in a MS. belonging to Lord Ashburnham, is an early note to the effect that 'Robert, or William langland made pers ploughman'".¹

(b) His Life.

Though we accept the poem as the work of one man, and that man the traditional William Langland, any account we can give of his life must be suppositional

and based on very little real evidence. "No outside allusion of any importance, save that of tradition tells us who the writer was. We gather his biography, if it can be called so, from his work".¹

At the time of writing the B. text, the author was forty-five years of age, and therefore must have been born about 1332, probably at Cleobury Mortimer. His father and his friends put him to school--possibly in the monastery at Great Malvern--made a clerk or scholar of him, and taught him what holy writ meant.²

"Whan ich yong was" quoth ich "Many yer hennes,
My fader and my frendes founden me to scole,
Tyl ich wiste wyterliche what holy wryt menede,
And what is best for the body as the boke telleth,
And sykereast for the soule by so ich wolle continue".
(Piers Plowman, C.pass.Vl. ll 35-39).

In 1362 he wrote the A text of the poem, which version he describes as having been partly composed in May, whilst he was wandering in the Malvern Hills. It was probably not long after this that he went to live in London; there he lived in Cornhill with his wife Kitte and his daughter Calote for many years.²

"Thus ich a-waked, got wet whann ich wonede in Cornhulle,
Kyttre and ich in a cote clothed as a lollere
And lytel y-lete by-leyue me for sothe
Among lollars of London and lewede heremytes".
(Piers Plowman, C.pass.Vl. ll, 1-4).

¹ Burrell, Arthur. "Piers the Plowman" P.XV.

² Skeat. "Piers the Plowman". Clarendon Press. 1906. P.XVIII & XIX.

"Tyl the day dawed this damaiseles daunced

That men rongen to the resurexion and right with that I waked
And called Kitte my Wyf and Kalote my daughter".

("P. the P.". C.pass XXI. 11.424-6)

In the C. text, written at some time after 1390, the poet presents himself (apparently) as having left London, and in the commencement of Passus VI. gives us several particulars concerning himself, wherein he alludes to his own tallness, saying that he is too "long" to stoop low. *I*

"Certes" ich seyde "and so god me helpe,

Ich am to waik to worche with sykkel other with sythe,

And to long, lefy me, lowe for to stoupe

To worchen as a workeman eny whyle to dure."

("P. the P. C.pass.VI. 11.22-5)

He has also some remarks concerning the sons of freemen which imply that he himself was the son of a franklin or freeman.

"For shold no clerk be crowned bote yf he y-come were

Of franklens and free men and of folk ywedded."

("P. the P.". C.pass VI. 11.63-4)

He had probably taken minor orders. The supposition that he was married explains why he never rose in the Church. He earned a precarious living as a chantry priest. *I*

"And yut fond ich neuere in faith sythem my frendes deyden

Lyf that me lyked bote in thes longe clothes.

Yf ich by laboure should lyue and lyflode deseruen,

That labour that ich lerned best ther with lyue ich shelde;
 And ich lyue in Londone and on Londone bothe,
 The lomes that ich labore with and lyfode deserue
 Yo 'pater noster' and my primer 'placebo' and 'dirige',
 And my sauter some tyme and my seuene psalms.
 Thus ich synge for hure soules of suche as me helpen".
 (Piers Plowman, C.pass.Vl. ll.40-43)

Lastly, in the poem of 'Richard the Redeless', he describes himself as being in Bristol in the year 1399, when he wrote his last poem. This poem is short, exists only in one manuscript, and terminates abruptly in the middle of a page, so it is quite possible that it was never finished. This is the last trace of him, and he was then probably about sixty-seven years of age, so that he may not have long survived the accession of Henry IV.¹

(C) His Ideals.

But if we know so little of the life of Langland, we know his ideas and ideals from his poem. "But however much the reader may regret that the personal records of a writer so remarkable should be so meagre and obscure, no one who has studied his work in itself can doubt that he was a man of profound religious conviction; that, by force of character and intellect, he was qualified to form a right judgment of man

¹ Skeat. W.W, "Piers the Plowman" Clarendon Press. 1906.

and society; that experience had acquainted him with the minutest details of the life which he described".¹ With the eye of a critical student of human nature, he saw the vices of his contemporaries; with the heart of a reformer and a devout Christian he wished to see these vices amended.

"Before middle life, William, like Dante, had recognized that the world was out of joint"---"he too looked with longing for the deliverer who should set it right.....he too lifted up his voice in warning and menace, before the great and mighty of the earth, before princes and priests; he too held up a mirror to the world in which it saw both its own image and the ideal to which it had grown faithless".²

¹ Courthope, W. J., "A history of English Poetry". Vol. 1. Chap. 6 P. 268

² ten Brink, B. "English Literature" Vol. I Book IV. Chap. VII P. 353

Chapter III. Poem as a social document.

To study Piers Plowman as a social document, it will be necessary to deal with the poem under several headings; for in it the vices of the times are personified, customs and institutions are criticized, and classes of men are censured or exhorted to reform. In the 'field full of folk' nearly every class of society is represented, and changing scenes bring their different people to be described, questions to be discussed, or abuses to be condemned. "This poem pictures the social, political and religious life of the later 14th Century, but the author does not write as a chronicler like Salimbene, or as an artist like Chaucer, but as an idealist and social reformer, whose reason for writing was not to describe the outward pageantry of life, but to give expression to his own discontent with things as they were, and to urge men to live life better".¹

To Langland, the chief evils of the age were the greed of the upper classes and the laziness of the lower; the loss of faith in true religion, and lack of sincerity. He thought that bishops and prelates were failing in their duty, and that the Church was hindered by her wealth. The impression of the time gathered from Langland's writings is not so much one of material suffering as of social unrest and discontent. "The England of Langland is bitter, discontented, and sullen. It is the popular answer to the class prejudice and reckless greed of the lords and gentry".²

¹ Warren, Kate, "The Vision of Piers Plowman". P. 4

² Fout. T.F., "The Political History of England". Vol. III. Ch. XIX. P. 424

Chap. 111. (a) The seven deadly sins and trial of Meed.

Among the most notable passages of the poem are those which describe the preparations for the marriage, and the trial of Meed, and the confession of the Seven Sins at the preaching of Reason and Repentance. M. Jusserand has called the last "The general confession of England at the time of the Plantagenets".¹ Miss Warren describes it as a "Ruthless revelation of the seamy side of human nature in the 14th Century". "The scene of the confession before Repentance is a piece of true comic drama in which the characters are no personifications, but living English peasants and mechanics".² The description of the costume of Meed indicates the extravagance of dress of the women of the day.

"Purfiled with pelure, the finest upon erthe,
y-crounede with a corone, the kyng hath non better.
Fetislich hyr fyngers were fretted with gold wyre,
And thereon red rubyes, as red as any glede.
And Diamants of deirest prys and double manere safferes,
Orientales and ewages enuennymes to destroy.
Hire robe was ful riche, of red scarlet engreyned
With ribanes of red gold, and of riche stones;
Hire arraye me rauysshed, such richness saw I neuere"
(Piers Plowman B. Pass.11. 11 9-17)

Fur was one of the most fashionable trimmings for garments.

¹ Jusserand. M.J.J. "A Literary History of the English People" Ch. 11/P. 386 Vol. I. Book 11.

Warren. Kate, "The Vision of Piers the Plowman". P.

² Traill, H.D. "Social England". Vol. 11. Chap. VI. P. 226.

"Peronelle proude-herte" or Pride, the first of the Seven Sins to repent, is prayed by Reason "Her purfyle to lete"¹, also Reason

"Warnede Watt his wyf was to blame,

That hire hed was worth halve a mark, his hode nought worth
a grote". ("P the P" B. pass V. 11 30-31

The gaily dressed, bold faced woman of the time is here typified as Peronelle, a name which had become proverbial of her class.² This extravagance in dress was not limited to the women, but fur trimming was also used by men. This was the age in which the Order of the Garter was instituted, resulting in splendor of retinues. English soldiers were noted in France and in Scotland for the bravery of their apparel. In the field full of folk, there were some who ,

"Putten hem to pruyde, apparailled hem thereafter.

In contenance of clothing, comen disguised".

("P the P" B. Pro. 11 23-24)

Holy Church tells the dreamer that this gaily dressed woman "wommon so worthily attired" is Meed or Bribery, who has caused her much annoyance. Then follows an account of the people among whom bribery is general, and the complaint that Meed has,

"Bilowan hire to lordes, that lawes han to kepe

In the popis paleys she is pruye as myself".

("P the P". B. pass.2.11.2

Next came the vision of those assembled for the wedding of Meed and Falshood. There were knights, clerks and "other comune people", jurors, summoners, sheriffs and their clerks.

¹ "Piers the Plowman". B. Passus V. 1.26.

² Skeat. W.W, "Piers the Plowman". *Harvard Press. 1906* P.127.

beadles, bailiffs, makers of bargains, foregoers, victuallers and 'advocates of the arches'. "I can nought rekene the rout that ran aboute Meede". ("P.the P." B. pass. 11. 1.61)

But those among whom bribery was most common were Simony, Civil-law and Court Jurors. The former two consented, for silver, to say whatever Flattery and Falsehood wished. Then follows a description of the evils that will follow the union of Reward and Falsehood; pride, despising of peverty, defaming, boasting, bearing false witness, slandering, scorning and scolding, disobedience to the ten commandments, envy, wrath, strife, usury, and theft. To witness the gift of Flattery to Meed and Falsehood, there were, a pardoner, a beadle, a reeve, a miller, and many others. When Theology objected to the marriage on the grounds that Meed (here identified with lawful reward) was a "Mayden of gode". and should rightfully be allied with Truth, Civil-law, consented to refer the matter to Westminster, but Simony and the Notaries refused their consent until they had been bribed. At Westminster, Meed was courteously received.,

"They that wonyeth in Westmynstre worschipped hir alle".

("P.the P." B. pass. 111. 1. 12)

Justices came to promise her their help. She thanked them and distributed gold, silver and jewels; clerks came to comfort her, and she promised them advancement and titles no matter how ignorant they were.

"Shall no lewdnesse lette the leode that I louye,

That he ne worth first auanced for I am biknowen

There konnyng clerkes shul clokke bihynde"

("P.the P." B. passus 111. 11.32-4.)

A confessor, coped like a friar, absolved her of any sin she might ever have committed, and asked only a small gift for himself and a stained glass window for his church. Here the poet inserts two or three lines condemning the ostentatious custom of glazing of windows for the chapels of the friars; for, "It was usual to introduce portraits of the benefactors, in stained glass"¹

"Ac god to alle good folke, suche grauynges defendeth,
To wryten in wyndowes of eny wel dedes,
On auenture pruyde be peynted there and pompe of the world"

"For-thi I lere yow, lordes leuthh suche werkes,
To wryten in wyndowes of yours wel dedes,
Or to greden after goddis men when ye delen doles"

(P. the P^r B. pass 111 64-66. 69-71)

Then he censures the mayors, the mediators between the king and the common people, who, on account of bribes fail to keep the laws and to punish those who harm the poor. Among those who should be on the pillory are brewers, bakers and cooks;

"For thise aren men on this molde that moste harme worcheth
To the pore people that parcel-mele buggen"

(P. the P^r B pass 111. 1 80-81)

For they poison people by selling bad food, and grow rich by selling at retail after buying cheaply from the wholesale dealer

"The frauds and adulterations of the 'regraters' were a constant source of annoyance and were continually being complained of!"²

¹ Skeat.W.W. "Piers the Plowman" Clarendon Press. 1906. P.120

² Ibid P.121

But, complains the poet, they go unpunished, for the mayors have been bribed to abet them.¹ In the trial, when Conscience is asked by the king if he will marry Meed, he refuses, and in a long speech enumerates the evils in the realm of which she (Bribery) is the cause. Through her, wives and widows become wantons, she has dethroned a king, she poisons popes and impairs the church, she is common to all, to priests, lepers, minstrels, jurors and summoners. She causes men to lose their lands and their lives, jailers are bribed to let the false and the criminal escape from prison, while true men are caught and bound fast. When Peace came into Parliament and presented the petition against Wrong, in giving an account of the doings of Wrong, she described the practices of a band of men from whom the lower classes suffered many abuses. Wrong is representative of the oppressive body of men known as the King's purveyors. The peasantry often complained bitterly of them, accusing them of taking things by violence.¹ These men accompanied the King in his travels, and for ten leagues on each side the road they requisitioned food stuffs and appropriated carts. There were statutes against forced loans, which demanded that everything should be paid for. But the purveyors ignored these, seized the best provisions, cheated the people by false measurement and usually paid only with promises. To add to these evils, many impostors gave out that they were King's officers. Many complaints were made against them, and statutes were passed requiring them to make just payment, but with little result.¹ (Reference on next Page).

¹ This passage is quoted in connection with Avarice. P. 23

¹ Skeat W.W. "William Langland's 'Pearl the Plowman'." London Press. 1886. Vol. 11, p. 8

Peace complained that among other and worse crimes, Wrong had seized his geese and pigs, had taken his horse and had not returned him, had prevented him from getting a good price for his wares at the fairs; he broke his barn-doors and seized his wheat, and

"I dar noughte for fere of hym fyghte me chyde"

("P. the P" B pass 1V. 1 52.)

because Wrong had beaten Peace and hired men to murder his servants.

I Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life" XIVth. Century Part. 1.
Chapt. 11 P. 91 & 92.

As the passages concerning Meed shew chiefly the corruption of the official classes, just so, those dealing with the Seven Deadly Sins and the search for St. Truth depict the faults of the poor; the chief being, to Langland's mind, that of idleness.

The poets purpose in this passage is not to give an artistic description of the Seven Sins; this is a "Means to an end, the end is a statement of the economical and social problems of his day!"¹ 'Pride' the first of the sins to repent, is considered the worst, and the cause of many of the evils which afflict the realm. 'Reason' in his arraignment of the people in the field,

"Preued that thise pestilences were for pure synne,
And the southwest wynde on Saterdag at euene
Was pertiche for pure pryde and for no poynt elles.
Piries and plomtrees were puffed to the erthe,
In ensample, ye segges ye shulden do the bettere.
Beches and brode okes were blown to the grounde,
Torned vpward her tailles in tokenyng of drede,
That dedly synne at doomesday shal fardon hem alle"

("P. the P" B. pass V l 13-20)

"It is singular that Pride is the only vice which William Personsifies by a female. He doubtless does so with particular reference to extravagance in dress, to repress which, a special statute was passed in 1363."²

¹ Chambers R.W. "Piers the Plowman"Controversy" P. 13

² Skeat W.W. "Wm. Langland's Piers the Plowman" Vol 11 P.72

Clarendon Press. 1886.

"In the C. text, however, is a long additional passage (ll.14-62) which the confession of Pernel Proudheart is supplemented by that of a male example of Pride cf. P xxll 337"¹

These lines which, in the C text, are the second example of Pride, form, in the B text, part of the description of Haukyn the active man whose coat is spotted by wordly sin.

The confession of Lust is a very short one in the two earlier texts: "The poets chief warning is directed against getting drunk upon a Saturday, when work was over sooner than ^{on} other days as it was the eve of Sunday"²

Then came Envy:

"Clothed in a courimaury, I couthe it neghte discrene

In Kirtel and Kourteby and a knife bi his syde

Of a freres frock were the forslene"³.

(P. the P." B.pass V. ll 79-81)

This last line may have reference to the trouble between the friars and the secular clergy. The friars had sadly fallen away from the high ideals of service and poverty which animated the first members of the order, and were now usurping many of the privileges of the secular clergy. This resulted in envy and strife within the church. The rest of the passage may be taken as depicting the evils which envy causes among men generally, and especially among tradesmen.

¹ Skeat. W.W., "William Langlands Piers the Plowman", Vol. 11. P.72

² Ibid,

Vol. 11. P.81

"Of chydyng and of chalangyng was his chief lyfode

With backbitynge and bismer and beryng of fals witnesse"

("P. the P." B. pass. V. ll 88-9)

Envy rejoiced in the misfortunes of his neighbours; he made them lose money by the lies he told about them to lords; he turned their friends to foes. Through the quarrels that he caused among people both lives and limbs were lost. He was openly courteous to those who were stronger than he, but;

"Hadde I the maystrye and the myghte god wote my wille".

("P. the P. B. pass V. l 103)

In church when he should pray for the people and the pilgrims, he called down misfortune on the heads of those who robbed him of a few cheap articles. He grudged his neighbors their new clothes, and wept if they had good fortune. If any one reproved him he hated him ever after. He wished everyone else were his servant.

"For who-so hath more than I that angreth me sore

And thus I lyue loneless lyke a luther dogge

That at my body bolleth for bitter of my galle".

("P. the P. pass. V. ll. 117-9)

When told by Repentance to be sorry, for sorrow for sins was the soul's salvation, he replied that he "Was sorry;

"he was seldom otherwise"

"And that maketh me thus megre for I ne may me venge.

Amonges burgeyses have I be dwellynge at Londoun

And gert backbiting be a brocoure to blame mennes were

Whan he solde and I noughte, thanne was I redy

To lye and to loure on my neighbore and to lakke his

chaffare.

("P. the P". B. pass. V. ll 128-130)

The confessions of Wrath, who was once a friar; and of Sloth, who is a parson, belong to the discussion of the vices of the church of the fourteenth Century, and will be dealt with under another heading. "Avarice ... affords a picture of the regrater".¹
Avarice pleads guilty to all the tricks of dishonest trade

"First I lerned to lye a leef other tweyne,

Wikkedlich to weye was my furst lessoun .

To Wy and to Wynchestre I went to the faire,

With many manere merchandise as my maistre me highte;

Ne had the grace of gyle ygo amonge my ware,

It had be vnsolde this seuene year so me god help."

("P. the P. " B. pass V. 11. 203-8)

Then he learned the art of stretching out cloth until ten or twelve yards measured thirteen. His wife, too, made cloth, and

"She spak to spynnesteres to spynnen it oute.

As the pounde that she paid by poised a quarteroun more,

Than myne owne auncere who-so weyghed treuthe."

(P. the P. "B. pass V. 11 216-8)

She was also an alewife. The brewing business was carried on chiefly by women who retailed their own brew. " It was reckoned a low calling, and woe to the alewife who infringed the 'assize of beer'. After repeated fines she stood in the pillory at Westchepe, where the beer drinking mob would probably not be very merciful to her."²

¹ Chambers R.W. "Piers Plowman Controversy"

P.13.

² Traill H. D. "Social England".

Vol. 11. Ch. V. P.263.

The thought of possible punishment does not seem to have deterred "Rose the regrater" from mixing poor ale with the good, and from giving short measure, for Avarice says

"...it cam in cupmel this crafte my wyf used. "
 "(P. the P." B. pass V. 1 225)

Avarice also practised usury. Though condemned by Canon Law, usury was familiar to most places, and not least to the Papal Court. The friars soon became the worst offenders. Avarice confesses the he clipped ^{coins} ~~eximes~~ and then lent them for pledges which he hoped would not be redeemed, he obtained many manors through his customers being in arrears of payment, and "In his dealings with knights, used to buy silk and cloth from them at a sufficiently cheap rate, and he now ironically calls his customers mercers and drapers whon^{er}ever paid anything for their apprenticeship".²

"I lerned amonge Lumbardes and Iewes a lessoun,
 To wey pens with a peys and pare the heuyest,
 And lene it for loue of the crosse to legge a wedde and
 and lese it." ("P. the P." B. pass V. 11 242-4).

"I haue no maneres thorw reages than thorw miseretur et
 comodat." ("P. the P." B. pass V. 11 246).

Avarice, the regrater and usurer, did not know what it was to have any pity on poor men and neighbourly charity was far from his heart. It is the poets opinion that usurers and regraters should not be enfranchised in spite of any bribe.

¹ Coulton G. G. "Chaucer and His England." Chap. X. P. 124.

² Skeat W. W. "William Langlands Piers the Plowman." Vol. 11 P. 86.

"Hit is noght semly forsoth in cyte ne in borwton,
That vsurers other regratours for eny kynne gyftes,

Be fraunchised for a free man and haue a fals name."
("P. the P.". C.pass. 1V.11.112-14)

But alas! Usury still continues to be one of the vices of the age,
for Meed the Maid is all powerful, and

"....the meyre hue by-souhte"

Of alle suche sellers suluer to take,

Other presentes with-out pans and other pryueye gyftes,

And haue reuthe of the regratours that han ryche hondes;

Loue hem for my loue quath this lady Mede,

And soffre hem som time to sulle agens the lawe."
("P. the P.". C.pass 1V. 11.115-20)

The confession of Gluttony is very notable for the picture it gives of the life of idle workmen, and of taverns in the 14th Century. There were many taverns of ill repute and it was commanded by law to close them at curfew "Because such offenders as aforesaid, going about by night do commonly resort and have their meetings and hold their evil talk in these taverns more than elsewhere, and there do seek for shelter, lying in wait and watching their time to do mischief."¹ It was for fear of such dangers that sheriffs and bailiffs were obliged in the Views of Frankpledge, to require the men in their bailiwick to say upon oath what they knew "of such as continually haunt taverns, and no man knoweth whence they come, of such as sleep by day and watch by night, eat well and drink well, and have nothing."²

¹ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life". XIV. Century" Part.1
Part 1 Chap.11. P.133

² Ibid

Chap.11. P.133

The taverns then must have been an important factor in the idle life of many of the laboring classes. It was in them that all classes congregated, and spent many long hours in gossiping, quarrelling, gambling and drinking. " We know the fine picture of a tavern in the 14th Century which Langland has left us. With as much spirit as Rabelais he brings us into the presence of the tumultuous scenes which pass at the ale house, to the discussions, the quarrel, the big bumpers, the intoxication which ensues: we see every face, we distinguish the sound of voices, we remark the coarse behaviour; and one might almost take part in that strange assembly where the hermit meets the cobbler, and the "Clerk of the church", ~~and~~ a band of cut-purses and bald headed tooth-drawers".¹ Glutton, on his way to church, turned aside at the invitation of Beton the brewster, and went into the tavern. There he found a gay throng; men of religious orders mingling with laborers of all sorts and women of ill-repute.

"Sesse the sywestre sat on the benche,
 Wotte the warynere and his hus wif dronke,
 Thomme the tynkere and tweye of hus knaues,
 Hicke the hakeneyman and Houwe the neldere,
 Claryce of cockeslane, the clerk of the churche,
 Syre Peers of Prydie and Purnel of Flaundres,
 An Haywarde and an herenyte the hangman of Tyborne,
 Dauwe the dykere with a dosen harlots
 Of portours and of pykeporses and pylede toth-drawers

A. rybiour and a ratoner a rakere and hus knaue,
 A ropere and a redyngkyng and Rose the disshere,
 Godefray the garlek-mongere and Griffyn the Walish"
 (P. the P." C. pass VII ll 363-373)

Then follows a passage descriptive of the gambling and jangling with which the revellers whiled away the hours. Clement the cobbler put up his cloke for sale; Hicke the Hackneyman offered his hood for it: they chose deputies who tried to make a bargain, but who could not agree, and Robyn the roper had to be called in as umpire. If either of the disputants drew back he was to be fined a gallon of ale. Then

"Ther was lauhyng & lakeryng and 'let go the coppe!'

Baregyne and beuereges by-gunne to aryse,

And setyn so til erusong rang and songe vmbwhyte,

Til Gloton hadde yglobbed a gallon and a gylle."
 ("P. the P." C. pass VII ll 394-7)

Besides the sin of spending his days in idleness and boisterous rioting, eating and drinking until he had to be carried home to bed by his wife and daughter, Glutton confesses to the sin of swearing. "Hard swearing was extremely common!"
 When he turned aside to the tavern

"Thenne goth Gloton yn and grete othes after.
 ("P. the P." C. pass VII l 361)

and in his confession to Repentance he said

"To the, god, ich Gloton gulty me yelde
 Of my trespass with tunge ich can nauht telle how ofte,
 Sworen 'thy saule and thy sydes' and 'so help me, god
 almyghty!'

Whan that no ned was meny tyme falsliche."
 ("P. the P." C. pass VII ll 425-8.)

Chapter 111 (b) "The Marriage Question".

One of the serious problems of the 14th Century was the marriage question. For very slight causes marriages could be declared illegal, and yet children could pledge themselves and their property to each other for life, without the consent of their parents, and without any legal ceremony. No legislation restricting age could be really effectual as long as such marriages continued to be counted legal. On the other hand, marriage was nullified by consinship to the 4th degree, and even by the fact of the contracting parties having stood as sponsors to the same child, unless a papal dispensation had been bought.¹ Not only were half the peasant marriages nullified by this; for in the small villages nearly everybody is more or less related, but it gave rise to many tricks for obtaining fraudulent divorces.¹ Men, tired of their wives, could suddenly discover that they were related to them.¹ "One of the most characteristic features of good society in the middle ages - marriage a loveless compact an alliance for money, position, etc." As property owners had to be able to fight, both in self protection and for the realm, women who owned property, being unable to fight, had to marry someone to fight for them. According to feudal customs an heiress could not marry without the consent of her guardian.

1 Coulton G.G. "Chaucer and His English"

Ibid

Chap. XVI P. 205

Chap. P.

With parents arranging marriages between small children for the sake of political or financial advantage, with elderly men marrying child heiresses, and young men marrying elderly women for their wealth, it is little wonder that the state of marriage became so corrupt as to call forth Langland's vehement protests against such customs. He emphasises the importance of pure and honourable wedlock, and ^{the} evils which inevitably follow its corruption.

"Furst and foreward to folk that ben i-weddet,
 And libbeth as heore lawe wolehit liketh God almihti;
 For thorw wedlac ^{the world} stont, hose whole hit i-knowe.
 Thei ben ricchest in reame and the rote of Dowel;
 For of heore kuynde thei come that confessours beth nempned,
 Bothe maydens and martires monkes and anores,
 Kynges and knihtes and alle cunne clerkes,
 Barouns and burgeis and bonde men of tounes"

("P. the P. A. pass X 1 127-134)

Those born out of true wedlock are "'fals folke' and feithless theones and lygers" ("P. the P. A. pass X 135). Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, Cain and all his descendants were accursed; and so were those descendants of Seth who intermarried with those of Cain in spite of being forbidden by God to do so. As a result of this disobedience, the flood came upon the earth and destroyed every living thing except those saved in the Ark. And as troubles fell on the children of Seth for marrying contrary to the will of God, the same will happen to-day.

"For-thi haue thei maugre for here mariages that marylge so
her children;

For some, as I se now, soth for to telle,

For coueitise of catel vnkyndeliche ben wedded!"

("P the P" B pass LX 1 153-155)

"For goode shulde wedde goode though hij no goode hadde?"

("P the P" B pass LX 1 158)

"It is an oncomely couple bi Cryst, as me thinketh,

To gyuen a younge wenche to an olde feble,

Or wedden any widwe for welth of hir goodis

That newwe shal barne bere, but if it be in armes?"

Many a peire sithen the pestilence han plichte hem togideres?"

("P. the P. B pass LX 1 160-4)

The only result of such marriages is quarreling and harsh words.

"And though thei don hem to Denmowe but if the deuel help

To folwen after the flicche fecche thei it neuere;

And but thei bothe be forsworne that bacoun thei tyne?"

("P the P" B pass LX 1. 168-170)

This is the earliest known allusion to the Dunmow Flitch of bacon. The custom was "if any pair could, after a twelvemonth of matrimony, come forward, and make oath at Dunmow that, during the whole time, they had never had a quarrel, never regretted their marriage, and, if again open to engagement, would make exactly that they had made, they should be rewarded with a flitch of bacon!"

The poet wishes to amend these abuses; therefore, as marriage was instituted by God, he counsels all Christians to cease marrying for desire of wealth or of rich kindred. For youths should mate with maidens and widowers with widows.

"For no londes, but for loue loke ye be wedded,
And thanne gets ye the grace of God and good ynough to lyue
with!" ("P. the P. B pass LX 175-6)

Chapt. 111 (c) Chivalry, Knighthood, Life of Upper Classes.

In the 14th. Century the age of chivalry was in its prime, "an age which, if only the lesson taught had been carried out, should have made society perfection!"¹ There were two orders of knights, religious and military, though the religious orders were dying out, the Knights Templars having been dissolved in 1322.

"The knight should have taken as his model that 'veray parfite gentelhome, the good knyghte Christ', who, according to Piers Plowman, knighted the angels:

"For Crist, Kyngene Kyng, knytede tene,
Cherubim and Seraphin an al the four orders,
And gaf hem maystrie and miht in his Maiestie!"¹

The knight was to be courteous, kind, truthful, to set the wrong right, to be sober and religious, and a defender of women.

"Altogether the ideal knight should have been the perfection of humanity, a father to his people, a redresser of wrongs!"¹

¹ Traill.H.D. "Social England" Vol 11. Chap V. P. 125.

But chivalry had declined from its high ideals, and the knights were guilty of many of the vices of the age. In imitation of King Arthur, King Edward III. had a round table at Windsor and in 1344 instituted the famous Order of the Garter. The installation of a knight was a most solemn function, and was accomplished with much ceremony. Naturally such ceremony became accompanied with luxury and extravagance, and resulted in the greed which Langland condemns in the upper classes. The poet was not a leveller, he believed in the existing order of social distinctions, and objected to the knighting of those who were not of gentle blood.

"For it is a carful knyght and of a catif kynges makynge
That hath no londe ne lynage riche ne good loos of hus hondes"

("P. the P! C pass XLV L 110-111)

"Ac sith bondemenne barnes han to be mad bisshopes,
And barnes bastards han ben archidekenes,
And sopers and here sones for seluer han be knyghtes,
And Lordene sones here labores and leid here rentes to wedde
For the ryght of this reame ryden agens oure enemys,
In comfort of the comune and kynges worshep,
And menkes and moniales that mendinaums sholden fynde,
Han mad here kyn knyghtes and knyghtfees purchased,
Popes and patrons, poure gentle blod refuseth
And taken Symondes sone seyntewarie to kepe.

("P. the P! C pass VI L 70-79)

But he did not believe that the gentry should lead lives of luxurious ease. He considered it the duty of ploughmen and laborers to work for the support of the upper classes; but in return, knights and ladies should care for and protect the poor and keep the realms in ^{law} and order. While the pilgrims in search of St. Truth were waiting for Piers the Plowman to finish ploughing his half-acre, a lady asked him what the women were to do during the interval. His reply, which expresses the poets opinion of fitting occupations for gentlewomen, was,

"Somme shal sowe the sakke for sheddynge of the whete.
 And ye louely ladyes with youre longe fynGRES,
 That ye han silke and sendal to save whan tyme is,
 Chesibles for chapelleyne cherches to honoure,
 Wyves and wydwees wolle and flax spynneth,
 Maketh cloth I conseilte you and kenneth so your doughtres
 The needy and the naked nymmeth hede how he liggeth,
 And casteth hem clothes for so somaundeth treuthe".

("P. the P. B. pass Vl. 11.9-16)

Piers expresses his readiness to sow and labour both for himself and for the knight, and tells the latter what duties he should perform in return: he should guard the church and the labourers from the

"Wastoures and fro wykke men that this world struyeth".
 ("P. the P." B. pass Vl. 1. 29)

He should hunt the wild animals and birds that destroy the labourers crops.

{For holy churche hoteth alle manere people
Under obedience to be and buxum to the lawe
Lewede men to laborie .and lordes to honte
In frythes and forestes.for fox and other bestes
That in wilde wodes ben and in wast places
As wolues that wryeth men,wommen and children}

(C.Pass.x,11,219-226.)

The knight should be merciful to his tenants, and should not accept gifts from poor men or misgovern his bondsmen lest he suffer for it in purgatory; for in the sight of God, all men are equal. That Langland believed that the aristocracy were in need of this advice is shown by his condemnation of their neglect of the poor, and their skeptical attitude towards the mysteries of religion. He emphasizes in several places the importance of being charitable to the poor,

{For-thi I rede you riche.haueþ reuthe of the pouere,
Though ye be myghtful to mote ,beth meke in youre werkes
For the same mesures that ye mete ,amys other elles,
Ye shullen ben weyen ther-wyth whan ye wend hennes}?

(B.Pass.I.11,173-176).

{Holy Church}tells the dreamer upon the Malvern Hill that
"Whan alle tresouris ben triedtreuthe is the beste"

(C.Pass.II.1,81.)

and that it is the duty of kings and knights to ride about the realm and bind transgressors, and to stand fast by those who live for truth, and never leave them for lack of silver,

"Trewely to take, and trewliche to fyghte

Ys the profession and the pure ordre that appendeth to
knyghtes".

("P. the P". C. pass 11. 11 96-7)

The 14th Century was an age of transition in the life of the upper classes. The baronage was gradually losing its political pre-eminence, as the commons obtained a hold upon the administration by securing the right of holding royal ministers to account, and of having their petitions answered, not orally but formally recorded and sealed.¹ The old fortified castles were beginning to give place to more openly situated houses and villas. In the older buildings, the life centred about the large hall in which the masters and servants all sat and dined together. Here travellers were received and given hospitality and at table were placed near the lord or among the servants according as they were of high or low degree. Here also minstrels sang their songs of love and knightly deeds, and helped to while away the weary hours. For at this time, when books were rare, and the theatre did not exist, in the season when darkness fell early and prevented the pursuit of outdoor sports, the life of a baron on his country estate must sometimes have been very lonely and uninteresting had not the evening hours been enlivened by tales of brave knights and their prowess in tournament and battle. But Langland complains that the hospitable and social customs of hall-life are passing away.

"Elyng is the hall uche daye in the wyke

There the lorde ne the lady lyketh nought to sytte

New hath uche riche a reule to eten bi hym-selue

In a pryue parloure for pore mennes sake,

¹ Traill. H.D. "Social England". Vol. II. Chap. VI. P. 152.

"Or in a chambre with a chymneye, and leue the chief halle
That was made for meles, men to eten inne,
And al to spare to spille, that spend shal an other."

(B.Pass, x.11, 94-100.)

This is not the only fault however of which the rich are guilty; they are forsaking religion. Wisdom and intelligence are regarded as "Not worth a cress", unless some material profit can be gained from them; he who can deceive the people and hinder truth by means of a "loueday" is called into council; he who understands slander is called by the law to help it, but the truly wise are bidden to be off; he who can rob the people by trickery and feeble speech is revered and clothed.¹

"Thei loueth lond and lordshipp and lykyng of body more
Than holyness other hendenesse other al that seintes
techeth"

(C.Pass. XII.11, 12-13.)

According to the complaint of Study, harlots are helped before the needy poor. Little is he welcomed at feasts who can tell of Christ's passion or of the twelve apostles. Unless one can tell idle tales,

"Shulde neuere kyng ne knyght, ne chanoun of seynt
Poules

Gyve hem to her yeresgive the gifte of a grote."

(B.Pass. X.11, 46-47.)

Minstrelsy and mirth have come to nothing but loose tales, gluttony, and oaths, and when the minstrels are silent, men discuss religion and scoff at its mysteries.

"Thanne telleth thei of the trinite a tale other tweyne,
 And bringen forth a balled resoun and taken Bernard to witness
 And patten forth a presumpsioun to prene the sothe?

("P. the P". B. pass X. ll 53-5)

They talk of Christ and his power as though they were clerks; they blame the Almighty for all our troubles; they say it is unreasonable to believe that all mankind should be punished for the transgression of Adam and Eve; why should our Saviour suffer such a serpent to enter the place of his bliss, the Garden of Eden.

"Ac the careful may crye and carpen atte gate,
 Bothe afyngred and a-thurst and for chele quake;
 Is none to hymen hym nere his noye to amende,

But heen on hym as an hounde and hoten hym go thennes?
 ("P. the P". B. pass X. ll 58-61)

Little does he, who is so niggardly with his charity as this, love the Lord who gave him all his wealth. Were not the poor more merciful than the rich, beggars would have to go to bed hungry. The rich continually discuss God, but it is the poor who do his bidding.

"God is moche in the gorge of thise grete maystres,
 Ac amanges mene men his mercy and his werkis;
 And so weith the wauter I haue yseye it ofte,

Ecce audiuimus eam in Efrata, inuenimus eam in campis
 silue" ("P. the P". B. pass X. ll 66-8)

Chap. III. (d) Merchants, Chapmen & Pedlars.

One of the main causes of the national strength of England during the 14th Century, was the progress made by the industrial and artisan classes. "There is little doubt that this progress was largely due to the careful protection of the crown and the enlightened legislation of Parliament". Flemish weavers were encouraged and there were colonies of experts in both the Eastern and the Western Counties. Other trades such as clock-makers were settled in England, and the native manufacturers were encouraged and protected by the law. Markets were secured on the Continent for English exports. Wool was the chief export of England at this period and was always required by the weavers of Flanders. Edward III. for a time, brought the navy to the highest point of efficiency that it had yet reached, so the carrying trade to and from the Continent was fairly safe. Aliens within the kingdom were encouraged to import freely, while regulations for the disposal of goods favoured the native retailer. The Ordinance of the Staple, 1353, assigned ten English towns for the exclusive sale of wool. Here all the wool had to be brought and certified before being sold and exported. Much of the trade in the 14th Century was regulated by guilds. The guild was a democratic body formed out of merchant traders and artisans, to whom guild membership gave an equal footing as burgesses, and its mission was to regulate the internal and external trade pursued by the guild brethren.

"A typical craft gild in the 14th Century contained three classes of artisans:-masters, journeymen and apprentices; and in spite of certain inequalities and hardships the interest of all three classes was identical".¹ The gild usually had its own gild court and officers, and here were tried all cases arising out of trade disputes and discipline. In such cases craftsmen could claim to be tried by their gild courts instead of by the municipal authorities. Besides hearing cases brought for trial, it was the duty of the officers to oversee the workmanship and dealings of the craftsmen, and thus ensure a high standard of work. One of the necessities of the merchants calling was constant travelling. Traders were compelled to visit the Continent often, and thus they became, in England, one of the most reliable sources of information concerning events, thoughts, and ideas in France. These became their chief topic of conversation as they travelled along the roads of England. The necessities compelling the merchants to travel so much were many. Among the chief were the Staple and the fairs. As has been mentioned before, certain goods could be bought and sold only at towns assigned to this purpose. Fairs took a very important part in the life of the day. Every large town had one or more during the year, people flocked to them from far and near. Merchants, pedlars, druggsellers and traders of all kinds established themselves in the fair grounds and proceeded to advertise their wares. Many severe regulations were imposed, so the fair time was one of fines and forfeitures,

¹ Traill, H.D. "Social England". Vol.11. Chap. V. P.110.

as well as of bustle, noise and gaiety. The merchants made use of Waterways as much as possible, as a means of transportation. "Hence the constant interference of the Commons with the erection of new mill^l, weirs, and other hindrances on rivers by the lords of the adjoining lands".¹ They preferred water transportation for three reasons:- the cost of carriage was less; they were more certain to find a clear course than on ordinary roads, though they would occasionally meet with unexpected locks and weirs; and they could protect themselves better from robbers. But it was not always possible to reach their destination by water, and they were obliged often to travel on the high roads and run the risk of misfortune there or at the inns. Avarice, in his confession, depicts one of the risks to which the merchant must expose his goods. On being asked by Repentance if he ever made restitution to the people he had cheated, he replied

"Yus, ones I was herberwed! quod he 'with an hep of chapmen,

I roos whan thei were arest and yrifled here males"! (Pⁿ. the Pⁿ. B. pass V. 11.233-4)

But if the merchant was often the victim of theft or highway robbery, he, in his turn, was commonly guilty of unjust dealings. The 'regraters' whom Langland represents by the personification of the deadly sin, Avarice, and the way in which they escaped punishment by the help of bribery, have been dealt with under another heading. Avarice tells how, as an apprentice, he took

¹ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life," XIVth Century" Part 11. Chap. 11. P.242.

his masters goods to the fair; goods which he could not have sold in seven years, had he not lied about them. When the throng of followers of Falsehood, Flattery and Meed, journeying to London, had been roused by the news that the king had ordered their arrest and punishment, Guile prepared to go away and die of fright.¹ But the merchants met him, and forced him to remain with them. They dressed him as an apprentice and put him in their shops to display their wares. Liar also, when he could be spared by the pardoners and friars, was besought by the spice sellers to eversee their wares.

"For he couth of here craft and knewe many gomme"
 ("P. the P". B. pass 11. L. 226)

In the pardon which St. Truth sent to Piers the Plowman, the merchants were not included "for they do not observe holy days as the Church teaches, and they perjure their souls in order to sell their goods". They were instructed by Truth in a special letter, to perform certain charities. They should give money to have hospitals, broken bridges and bad roads repaired; should give contributions to enable girls to marry or become nuns. They should feed poor people and prisoners, pay for the education of poor scholars, and endow religious orders.²

In those days when there was a great deal of travelling done, and the only modes were on foot, on horseback or in clumsy carriages or carts, good roads and bridges were important, and to repair or build a bridge was regarded as an excellent form of charity. In theory, landed proprietors

¹ "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pass 11. Ll 211-214.

² Ibid.

B. pass VII. 11. 18-36.

were obliged to maintain good roads and bridges on their domains, and sometimes, in the towns certain rents were assigned to this work; alms were offered, and a certain tariff known as 'brudtholl' (bridge-toll) was collected from the passers-by. But as those, to whom the collection of the rents was assigned, very often appropriated the funds, bridges frequently went unrepaired until some one mended them as a work of charity.

Among the many wayfarers who frequented the roads in the middle ages, was a class which is still quite common in the present day, - the pedlars. In the 14th Century when not every village had its shop, the pedlars held quite an important place in the life of the country districts. They carried household wares from village to village; in their packs were hosts of things, necessities and small luxuries, - vests, caps, gloves, pewter pots, musical instruments, purses, girâles, hats, outlasses, and numbers of other articles. "As to the means by which pedlars came by their goods, several were familiar to them, and purchase seems to have been only one among many. A proverbial saying, preserved for us by Langland, shows how they secured furs for their country customers".¹ When Avarice is asked by Repentance

"Hastow pite on pore men that mote nedes borwe?".

("P. the P". B. pass V. l. 257)

¹ Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 11.

his reply is

"I have as moche pite of pore men as pedlere hath of cattes,
That wolde kille hem yf he cacche hem myghte for coueitise
of here skynnes." (P. the P." B.pass V.11 258-9)

Chap. 111 (e) Lawyers, Sheriffs, Jurors and Summoners.

For many years,¹ there existed in the ecclesiastical courts of England a professional class formed by the 'legists' and 'decretists' who were willing to plead causes of others for fees. The clergy of the time were continually engaged in lawsuits, usually with wealthy religious houses, so the business of pleading causes was a flourishing one. Young Englishmen were sent to Bologna to learn the law of the Church. First Oxford, and then Cambridge, granted degrees in civil and canon law. In the church court were the 'advocate', whose part was to plead in behalf of a client, and the 'procurator' who represented his clients person and attended to his cause. Two groups similar to these grew up in the Kings court in course of time; the ecclesiastical 'procurator' corresponding to the civil 'attorney' and the 'advocate' to the 'pleader'. The right to appoint a representative in the court at first belonged to the king alone. This right the king could confer upon any of his subjects, at first, as an exceptional favour, and afterwards as a general rule. The origin of the 'pleader' had a different source. From very early days a litigant was allowed to bring his friends into court, and to take counsel with them before speaking. ¹

(Foregoing paragraph taken from) ¹

¹ Traill. H.D. "Social England" Vol. 11. Chap.V. Pages 33-35.

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Then sometimes one of the friends prompted or was even allowed to speak for the litigant, naturally the acutest and most experienced friends were chosen for 'counsel'; naturally soon, acute and experienced men could be found who were willing to be anybody's friends for the time being, if they were paid for it. Finally, a class of expert pleaders gradually formed. Seemingly it was in the reign of Henry III. that pleaders seeking employment began to cluster round the king's court. The king kept some in his pay, and these were his "Serjeants" i.e. servants "at law". Under Edward I a process brought these professional pleaders under the control of the judges, and began to secure a monopoly of practise to those who had been formally admitted to the ministry of the law. At the same time men began to climb from the Bar to the Bench, and judges were ceasing to be ecclesiastics. By Edward I time the various offices and tribunals were :-

"The King's Bench," which was a court for criminal causes and other "pleas of the crown". A 'Common Bench', a court for actions brought by one subject against another; an "Exchequer" which both in a judicial and administrative way collected the King's revenue and enforced his fiscal rights; a Chancery, which was a universal secretarial bureau, doing all the writing that was done in the king's name.†

Lawyers are amongst those most condemned by Langland. He represents them as being quite without charity, and amongst those most corrupted by Meed. †(Foregoing paragraph taken from)‡

In the motley throng in the field full of folk, the dreamer observed about a hundred men in silk coifs. These, he explains, are law-serjeants, who plead the law for pence and pounds, but will not open their lips through love of the Lord.

"Thow myghtest better mete the myste on Maluerne hulles,
Than gete a momme of here mouthe but money were shewed."
("P. the P." B.pro. 11.214-5)

Men of law are most conspicuous among the followers of Falsehood and Meed.

"To marie this maydene was many man assembled,
As of knightes and of clerkis and other commune people,
As sysours and sompnours shireues and here clerkes,
Bedelles and baillives and brokours of chaffare,
Forgoeres and vitailleurs and vokates of the arches;
I can nought rekene the route that ran aboute Mede.

Ac Symonye and Cyuile and siscours of courtes

Were moste pryue with Mede of any men me thoughte".
("P. the P". B.pass 11. 11.56-63)

Favel, when distributing florins to ensue the support of his partisans, bribed false witnesses and gave

"namelich to the notaries that hem none ne faille,"
("P. the P." B.pass. L. 145.)

In the search for horses to carry the disputants to Westminster, Meed mounted a sheriff, and Falsehood, a juror.¹ Simony and Civil Law, annoyed at finding no horses, saddled premissors and summoners.² When Meed arrived, a prisoner, at Westminster, all those who dwelt there worshipped her. Justices came to comfort her and to promise their support.³

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B. Pass 11. 11. 163-4.

² Ibid Text B. Pass 11. 11. 168-170.

³ Ibid Text B. Pass 111. 11.13-19.

Conscience, in recounting the crimes of which Meed is guilty declares that,

"Sesoures and sompnoures, suche men hir preiseth;

Shirenes of shires, were shent gif she mere;"

(B. pass. III. II. 133-4.)

She corrupts judges and hinders the law; truth has no power against her florins; she so controls law, that, men who but for her might succeed in getting justice, are lost; and a poor man might plead forever without procuring any redress of his wrongs.

"Lawe is so lordeliche and loth to make ende,

Withoute presentz or pens, she pleseth wel fewe."

(B. pass. III. II. 161-2)

Wisdom and Wit, who have duties in the exchequer and in the chancery, are represented as being wholly influenced by Meed,

"There as wratthe and wranglyng is there wyn thei silver;

Ac there is love and lewte thei wil noughte come there;

Thei ne gyueth noughte of god one gose wynges

For, wot god, thei wolde do more for a dozeine chickenes,

Or as many capones or for a seem of otes,

Than for love of owre lorde or alle hise leue seyntes.

For-thi, Resoun, lete him ride, tho riche bi hem-seluen,

For Conscience knoweth hem noughte, ne Cryst, as I trowe,"

(B. Pass. IV, II. 36-42.)

The allusions to the corruptions of law by bribery are many. Reason declared, on being asked if he thought that Wrong should be pardoned, that he would have no pity until many of the prevalent evils should be amended.

Then, when love rules the land, law would be no longer required and would be forced to become a laborer. Clerks who were confessors, tried to construe Reason's speech for the king's benefit, ^{for} not/ the good of his soul, or for the comfort of the common people.

"For I seighe Meed in the moot-hall on men of lawe wynde
And thei lawghyng lope to here and lafte resoun mayne."

Waryn wisdom wynde upon Mede

And seide 'Madame, I am youre man, whatso my mouth jangleth'

'I fall in floreins' quod that freke' an faile speche ofte"
"(P. the P." B. pass. IV ll. 142-6)

Conscience prophesies that when Reason governs the realm, when Loyalty, Love and Humility reign in the place of Meed, who is now the master, Loyalty alone shall administer the law to those who trespass against Truth.

"Shall no seriant for here seruye were a silke howue,

Ne no pilure in his sloke for pledyng atte barre."
("P. the P." M. pass 111. 11.793-4)

When Theology objected to the marriage of Meed and Falsehood, and demanded that the case be taken to London, "there law is yshewed", he implied some doubt as to the decision of the judges.

"And though Justices jugge hir, to be joigned with fals

Yet yeth war of weddyng for wytty is Truthe,

And Conscience is of his counseille and knoweth your uchone,"
("P. the P." B. pass 11. 11.136-8)

There is here a suggestion that the judges might very possibly be more influenced by bribery and corruption than by truth and conscience.

Langland again voices his disapproval of the lawyers, in his account of the pardon received by Piers from St. Truth. Men of law, who plead for reward, received the least pardon, the Psalter condemns such as accept gifts, especially from the poor; pleaders should uphold the cause of the poor for the sake of love and justice, and princes and prelates, not the poor, should pay them for their work.

"Ac many a Justice and Juroure wold for Johan do more,

Than (pro dei pietate) leue thiw none other."

("P. the P. B. pass. VII. 11. 44 - 5.)

But he who pleads for the innocent and needy poor, who comforts him without thought of reward, who injures no man, and interprets the law for love of the Lord, shall not be troubled at his death - hear by any devil who can harm his soul. For human intelligence like water, wind and fire, is the gift of God, and is meant to be free for all men to profit by. Therefore, those who are intelligent should give counsel to those who are too poor to pay for it. With regard to the way in which some lawyers pleaded the cause of the poor, Mr Skeat says "One gross form of cruelty practised by some lawyers, was to exact from a poor man all he could afford to give, and then to pay no attention whatever to his case." ¹

And, continues Langland, when those who sell what is the free gift of God (i.e. their intelligence) and charge poor men for their services, come to die, they will find their share of pardon very small.

"Ye ligistres and lawyers holdeth this for treuthe,

That yif that I lye Mathew is to blame

For he bad me make you this and this prouerbe me told

Quodcumque vultis ut faciant vobis homines, facite eis".

("P. the P. B. pass. VII. 11. 59-61)

Chap. III. (f) Doctors and Quacks.

The Theoretical medicine and surgery of England in the earliest times were those of the Byzantine writers, whose works were to be found in the monastic libraries. One or two of the monks would devote themselves to the study of the¹ authors, and would make a collection of prescriptions and remedies, in many cases substituting native herbs, of which they made great use, for foreign drugs that were difficult or impossible to procure. Astrology and superstition mingled with medicine, and days and hours following the changes of the moon, or seasons were carefully observed. Medicine was never administered without ceremonial; while the medicine was being prepared, the patient would repeat a psalm twelve times or perform some other rite; remedies were supposed to be most effective if they were administered on consecrated grounds or at the shrine of a saint, or after touching a holy man. As a belief in magic was prevalent, the religious ceremonial naturally became mingled with the use of charms. "It is clear from the cases preserved by monkish chronicles that the maladies of the Middle Ages had an unusually large amount of hysteria in them, so that a proportionately large element of faith came not amiss in the course of treatment."² Much of the treatment was purely domestic. The resources of surgery were comparatively few and the instruments simple. The leeches of the day knew how to care for wounds, perform the simple operations, and treat all the ordinary maladies of our own days.³

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England" Vol. II, Chap. V. P. 83.

² Ibid

Vol. II, Chap V. P. 82-3.

In the 12th Century the Jews were thoroughly versed in the Arabian medical lore, and though they were forbidden by canon law to administer to a Christian, they were practising at every court in Europe. The monks, also, had been forbidden by the Church to practise medicine, for love of gain had lead them to go far afield to attend to patients. Nevertheless, both Jews and monks evaded the law and continued to practise, for they had no competent rivals. The next class of noted physicians was the Franciscan Order of Friars. The most famous of this Order was Roger Bacon, who included medicine in his studies. He applied chemical knowledge to the removal of diseases. He claimed also that the chief use of astrology was in medicine, and a century after his death aknowledge of this science was everywhere admitted to be the qualification of an academical physician, as distinguishing him from a quack. Chancer's physician was "grounded in astronomy,"¹ and richly clad.² As medicine was linked with astrology, so it was with magic. The Saxons and Danes brought to England a belief in runes and spells, and when the medical man, probably a Jew, settled among them, his cures were set down to superior efficacy of charms. "A book of counsels of young practitioners (1300) gives curious sidelights on the manners of the time."³ He was cautioned to use long words that would not be understood and never to visit a patient without doing something new, lest the patient should think he could do nothing without his books and to sustain a reputation for infallibility at all costs.⁴

¹ Chancer G. "Canterbury Tales" Prologue.1.414

² Ibid Prologue.11. 439-440

³ Traill H. D. "Social England" Vol. 11, Chap. V. P. 78

⁴ Ibid Vol. 11, Chap. V. P. 82-86.

SUCH men, if they did not directly encourage popular superstition were not at all likely to oppose it. Even Bacon quoted Constantine in approval of the use of charms," not because they can bring about any change, but because they bring the patient into a better frame of mind."¹

More popular among the people than the physicians were the quacks or drug sellers. These men were the most cheerful of all the wanderers that travelled up and down the highroads, and appeared to the populace to be the most beneficial. They went about the world selling health and their ware contained sure cure for all ailments. They established themselves in greens or market places and began to harangue the people and expatiate on the merits of their remedies. "Big words, marvellous tales, praise of their noble and distant origin, enumeration of the extraordinary cures they had made, ostentatious display of an unbounded devotion to the public good, and of entire pecuniary disinterestedness, all this is found, and always will be found in the tale of these insinuating itinerants".² In spite of their solicitude for the welfare of the public, these men had a poor reputation. Popular songs and satires of the times show them to have been on good terms, in the taverns, with the worst of society. Royal ordinances were issued against them for illegal practise of medicine and they got into trouble if they tried their cures publicly in the towns, but in the country, they like many other wayfarers, found means almost always to escape from the rigour of the laws.

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England" Vol. 11, Chap. V. P. 78.

² Jussarand J. J. "English Wayfaring Life". XIVth Century" Part. 11 Chap. 1, P. 178.

Langland says very little about medical men, but that little is not to their advantage. He represents them as being addicted to the vice of extravagance, a vice so general at this time. They are richly clad in hoods and cloaks trimmed with fur and having gold buttons. This fondness for luxury does not go hand in hand with charity, so the physicians, like the lawyers, must have been among those who refused their aid to the needy unless they were well paid for it. When the throng journeying to Westminster scattered in terror, leeches were among those who besought Liar to dwell with them and assist them in their profession.¹ It is evident that the poet did not believe that doctors of physic were of any great value to the rest of mankind, but regarded them rather as impostors, who either did not know their trade, or were very careless² in their administration of it. Piers the Plowman complains to Hunger that he and his men sometimes suffered such pains that for a week at a time they were unable to work.

" Yet I prey you " quod Pieres " par charite, and ye kunne

Eny leef of lechecraft leae it to me my dere"

" (P. the P. B. pass. VI, ll 255-6)

Hunger replied that their ills are due to eating and drinking too much and too often. He advises them to eat only when they are hungry and to leave the table "Ar appetit have eten his fulle"³. Following these rules will benefit them more than calling in the physician, and the latter will have to work honestly for his living, which circumstance Langland would regard as a change for the better.

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B. pass. ll, ll. 223-4.

² Ibid

Text B. pass VI l. 266.

"And gif thou diete thee thus, I dar legge mine ere
 That Phisik shall his furred hodes for his fode selle,
 And his cloke of Calabre with alle the knappes of golde,
 And be fayne, bi my feith, his phisik to lete,
 And lerne to laboure with londe for lyflode is swete;
 For mortherers are meny leches, lord hem amende!
 Thei do men dye thorw here drynkes ar destine it wolde".
 ("P. the P."B. pass VI, ll. 270-276)

111 (g) Sciences, Astronomy, Astrology, Alchemy, Magic.

One of the notable features of the 13th and early 14th Century was the growth of interest in natural sciences. The circulation of treatises on popular science in the vulgar tongue had formerly been limited to a few monasteries, and hardly ever reached the outside world. But in the 13th Century new sources of knowledge had been formed, and there were now better means of acquiring this knowledge and of making it more widely known. In Spain, Sicily, Tripoli and Syria, Christian and Moslem lived in friendship and both tolerated the Jew. The East had inherited and added to the scientific knowledge of Greece. The works of these early scientists were translated by the Jews into European languages. Up to this time all learning had passed through the monasteries and was "deeply tinged by the channels it passed through. The new matter, coming from Moslem sources through Jewish interpreters, was distinctively secular, and the Universities, just rising into prominence, gave an opportunity for its study" ¹

The universities were international in character and accepted each others degrees; thus, learning passed without hindrance from one to another. But though the universities were secular institutions most of their teachers and students were studying with the one object of becoming better preachers. The preaching Friars, Dominican or Franciscan " were still in their early outburst of enthusiasm ripened by a generations experience",¹ and owning neither corporate nor private property, they passed about from one place to another gathering knowledge and using it as teachers in the University or as preachers in the market place. Thus in all the villages throughout the land, these men skilled in science, were using it in illustration of their texts and doctrines, and thereby notions of science were becoming familiar to the mass of the people.

Astronomy.

The science of this period was however largely mingled with superstition. Practical astronomy had reached a state of great perfection and tables of over a thousand fixed stars and planets had been drawn up two or three centuries before.² One of the tables fell into the hands of Roger Bacon about the year 1267.³ At this period too, the Jews at Toledo drew up the " celebrated Alphonsine Tables" from Arab sources.³ English men of science were among the first to receive and spread the knowledge of Astronomy in Europe.

¹ Traill H.D. "Social England" Vol.11 Chap. V. Page 75.

Ibid

Vol.11. Chap. V. Page 75.

Astrology.

"But the theoretical astronomy of the day was fundamentally wrong, and had to be proved so by centuries of toil, dragged meanwhile at the heels of every charlatan of later days!"^L It became a mass of superstition and a popular means of practising charlatanry. The positions of the stars were supposed to affect earthly affairs. Children's futures were predicted at their birth. An important office of astrology was to pronounce on the proper time for doing anything, whether it were a matter of getting married, going on a journey, or making war. Medicines were to be taken, or people to be bled, only when the moon was in certain positions. The astrologer required a considerable amount of real astronomical skill, so in course of time a mass of real observations, taken to check the tables used, would be accumulated. Magic.

In the middle ages a belief in magic grew and spread. It was a period when pilgrims and other wanderers brought back tales of marvellous things in far off lands and any wonderful thing was looked on as quite possible. Stories of strange happenings were joined, confused and added to until men began to whisper of a compact between the Evil One and the necromancer, and black magic was fully established in the popular imagination. Side by side with this was White Magic largely composed of a knowledge of what may be called the sympathetic properties of things.

Thus chrysolite, being clear and pure, typified wisdom; accordingly the wearing of chrysolite was believed to bring wisdom. Many charms may be explained by self-hypnotism, or by the action of drugs and fumes. During the 14th. Century an important change took place consequent on the attitude of the church. By it, all magic became considered as the result of a diabolical compact expressed or understood. In 1324 a woman was burned alive for practising magic at Kilkenny.¹

Alchemy.

Alchemy was the speculative and practical science of the day. It was of Eastern origin, and at this period was brought to Europe along with medicine. The first names connected with alchemy in England are those of writers on medicine, and the rise of alchemy was due to a mistaken analogy from medicine. All metals were considered to be of the same matter, sulphur and mercury, and the differences between e.g. lead and silver, were put down to a corrupt or diseased sulphur and mercury. Alchemists sought a panacea which would expel the corruption from the sulphur and mercury of imperfect metals, leaving them pure silver and gold. People soon recognized that the alchemists could not make natural gold and proclamations were issued against bad money. "In a very few years the practice of alchemy became so widespread that it became a public danger and 'the craft of multiplying gold and silver' was declared a felony by statute in 1403."²

¹ Traill H.D. "Social England" Vol. 11. Chap V P 80

² Ibid. Vol. 11 Chap V P 81

One passage seems to indicate a belief in astrology on the part of the poet, for he says,

"Cleregie cometh bote of siht and kynde witt of sterres

As to be bore other bygete in suche constellacion,

That wit wexeth ther-of and othere wyrdes bothe."

("P. the P.". C.pass.XV. 11.30-2)

But Dame Study, in her advice to the dreamer, classes Astronomy with other sciences, as unprofitable and deceitful. She tells him that these sciences are all based upon sorcery: those who practise them deal in guileful speech and trickery: their main use is to deceive the people, and all who would do good must beware of dealing with them. Those 'she says' who would find Do-wel must learn to love: they must pray for their enemies and return good for evil. To love thus is better for the soul than to know any science that exists.

"Ac astronomye is an harde thyng and yvel for to knowe

Geometrie and geomesye is ginfyl of speche;

Who-so thenketh werche with tho two thryueth ful late

For sorcerye is the soueryne boke that to the science langeth

Yet ar there fybicches in forceres of fel mennes makynge

Experimentz of alkenamyne the people to deceyue,

If thou thinke to dowel dele ther-with neuere

Alle thise sciences I my-self sotiled and ordeyned

And founded hem formest folke to deceyue."

("P. the P.". B.pass X. 11.207-215)

Chap. lll. (h) Wayfarers, Minstrels, Messengers, Beggars, Robbers.

In the middle ages there were several classes of men who spent their lives wandering up and down the highroads. Some of them had resting places, many had not, but just wandered on without any fixed itinerary, and rested where they could procure shelter. Conspicuous among these wayfarers were the minstrels. They were very popular and were welcome everywhere, for with them travelled the only existing music and popular poetry, and their songs brought joy and forgetfulness to many a troubled heart. They were found at all feasts and festivities, where their duty was to enliven the throng. Except for the yearly feasts and their miracle plays, there was no kind of theatre, and there were few better amusements for the lords than listening to the minstrels who sang of bygone warriors and heroes of romance, adding new descriptions and adventures to the old songs. The king and some of the richer nobles kept regular companies of minstrels in their pay. The services of others were well rewarded, "Wandering singers seldom came to a castle where they did not get gifts of cloaks, furred robes, good meals and money".¹ This generous treatment rendered their lot an enviable one and led to an overcrowding of the profession. Abuses followed. Men became minstrels because they were too lazy to work; then they associated themselves more and more with the licentious bands of tumblers, jugglers and loose characters in the taverns and fell into public contempt. The jugglery and buffoonery were exceedingly coarse but they remained popular. Other important causes

¹ Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 11.
Chap. 1. P.200.

of the disappearance of minstrelsy were the invention of printing, which made books more common and extended the spreading of reading among the people. Langland classes minstrels among the less usefull and respectable members of society. It is true that he twice suggests that the money they received is a proper reward for their service. In Meed's defence of herself, she shows how essential she is to the realm and among those who receive pay for their work she enumerates the minstrels. In this passage Meed is represented as lawful reward, and not as bribery. Also in the field full of folk, among the mingled crowd pursuing its diverse occupations, there are some who create mirth as minstrels have the art of doing, and "geten gold with hire glee, synneless I leue". (B. p. 20. l. 34). On the other hand in Conscience's indictment of Meed, he names minstrels as amongst those ^{to whom} she, as bribery, is common, ^I and in the throng in the field opposed to the true minstrels are those deceitful ones who make fools of themselves because they are too lazy to work, though they are quite capable of earning their livelihood at honest toil.

"Ac iapers and iangelers Iudas chylderen

Feyen hem fantasies and folles hem maketh

And han here witte at wille to worche yif thei sholde".
("P. the P." B. Pro. 11. 35-7)

The much sought after Liar, when temporarily off duty from the pardoners, friars, leeches and spice-sellers, was once captured by minstrels and messengers and held by them for half a year and eleven days.²

1 "Piers the Plowman" Text B. Pass. 111. Ll. 132.

2 Ibid Text B. Pass. 11. 11. 227-8.

Activa-vita tells conscience that he follows the profession of minstrelsy. But he gets few robes and furred gowns, and so cannot be a true minstrel, and this is not only because he knows little about music, but because he does not indulge in the coarse tricks and jests of other performers.

"Wolde ich lye and do men laugh thenne lacchen ich sholde

Mantels other moneye among lordes minstrales".

("P. the P". C.pass XVI. 11.203-4)

Wit, in bemoaning the many vices of the age, complains of the way in which the minstrels have degraded what should be a noble profession.

"Wolde neuer the faithful fader his fithel were vntempred,

Ne his gleman a gedel ynge a goer to tanernes".

("P. the P.". B.pass IX. 11.102-3)

Dame Study also complains that the art of minstrelsy has become an indulging in follies, deceitful living, drinking, talking nonsense, speaking foul words, and slandering those who give no gifts.

"Thei conne namore mynstralcyne ne musyke man to glade,

Than Munde the mylnere of multa fecit deus!"

("P. the P." B.pass X. 11.43-4)

Disapproval is expressed several times of the custom of giving money and clothes to the minstrels, instead of to the poor and helpless. In the C text, following the confession of Sloth, is a passage on the prevailing attitude towards religion. People no longer care to hear about Christ, but wanted only fools and flatterers to make them laugh.

The patriarchs and prophets, and those who preached God's word,
can save mens soules from hell,

"Ryght so flaterers and foles aren the fendes precurtores,

Entysen men thorgh here tails to synne and to harlotrie".

("P.the P. C.pass Vill. 11.90-10)

Therefore charity given to these jesters is wrongly bestowed, and
rich men are advised to entertain in their place, the poor, the
blind and the bed ridden.

"Clerkus and knyghtes welcometh kynges mynstrales

And for loue of here lordes lithen hem at festes;

Muche more, me thenketh riche men aunte

Haue beggers byfore hem whiche beth godes mynstrales,

As he seith hymself seynt Iohn bereth witnesse,

Qui uos spernit, me eciam spernit."

("P.the P." C.pass Vill. 11.97-101)

Messengers.

Of the many constant travellers in the 14th Century the
messengers were the swiftest. As travelling was their sole
occupation they were naturally good horsemen. They were clever
at getting out of trouble on the highroads or at the inns and
if they were the messengers of some powerful noble, or of the
king, heavy fines were the punishment of any one who tried to
stop them. "Messengers were the only equivalent for mail and
parcels post. They were to be found in the service of abbots,
bishops, nobles, sheriffs, and of the king".¹

¹ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 11.
Chap.11. P.223.

They were too expensive a luxury to be possessed by everybody, and poor people, wishing to send letters, had to wait until some friend went on a journey in the desired direction. The king kept twelve messengers in his service and paid them a regular salary. They travelled with him wherever he went and had to be in constant readiness to take a message anywhere at any moment. "In time of war they had to conceal their real quality and were in constant danger of being stopped and having their bag searched and their letters opened. People felt very strongly about foreigners living in England, many of them being friars who might disclose the secrets of the realm in their private correspondence".¹

It is evident that messengers were not only safe from molestation but even possessed privileges not granted to other travellers. Scripture, in a discourse on the respective difficulty which the rich and the poor would experience in passing through Purgatory, compares the former class to a merchant and the latter to messengers. If a merchant and a messenger meet together, and are going on the same journey, the former must needs be longer on the road. For the merchant is hindered by his pack and his debts, if he tries to take a short cut through fields and is caught by the hayward, he must forfeit his hat, hood or gloves, or perhaps a sum of money. Many times he is required to stop and pay toll on his merchandise; he is afraid to travel after dark on account of robbers.

¹ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 11.

On the other hand the messenger tells his errand, shows his letter and is allowed to pass; he may make free use of short cuts through fields, for,-

"Thauh the messenger make hus wey amydde the whete,

Wole no wys man wroth be ne hus wed take;

Ys non haiwarde yhote hus wed for to take;

Necessitas non habet legem".

("P. the P". C. pass. XLV. ll. 43-5)

He is exempt from paying toll, and has no fear of robbers, for he travels without goods.

"Ther the marchaunt ledeth a male with meny kynne thynges,

And dredeth to be ded there-fore and he in derke mete

With robbours and reuers that riche men dispoilen;

Ther the messenger is ay murye hus mouthe ful of songes,

And leyueh for hus letteres that no wight wol hym greue."

("P. the P.". C. pass XLV. ll. 56-60)

Robbers.

Numerous were the outlaws and bandits to which the forests of the middle ages gave shelter. Though modern civilization was beginning, the roads were not yet safe to travellers. But the outlaws were not the only ones who practised highway robbery. Frequently a lord or knight, surrounded by devoted men, would hold up merchant's servants, travelling with their master's goods; often the bailiff, who pursued them with his men, would find himself opposed stoutly and would be forced to take flight. The preamble to a statute in 1378 complains of the misdeeds of these men, who ride about destroying and taking possession, or lie in wait and beat or slay people and act as

though it were war.¹ The servants fought many such fights for their lord and received his protection in return. Besides these, there were the outlaws in the forests. "In the popular mind, the idea of the grand rustling forest and the idea of the free life which the prescribed led there, were mingled in one and the same sentiment of sympathy. This is why, alongside of the Arthurian epic, we find that of the trees and bushes, that of the brave men who, dwelling in the underwood, were imagined to have struggled for public liberty, those of Hereward, of Fulk Fitz-Warin, of Robin Hood. Let a man be pursued, he was immediately on his way to the forest; it was easier to get there, he remained nearer to his relations, and he was quite as safe as if he had crossed over to the continent".² Once the sentence of outlawry was passed a man was practically forced to become a brigand to gain a livelihood, and as the sentence of death, and consequently of outlawry if the criminal escaped, was the punishment given for many crimes, the number of outlaws became very large. Beside fugitives from justice, many of these forest dwellers were peasants who had fled from their overlords; some perhaps to escape hard treatment, many through the desire to see more of the world, and to become free men, and many simply wished to avoid work. Added to these two classes were the rough characters, common to all ages to whom a life of brigandage and crime appealed. As a testimony of the popularity of the tales

¹ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 1.
Chap.111. P.149.

² Ibid

Part 11. Chap.111. P.253.

of outlaws. Sloth, a parson, confesses that he does not know his 'pater-noster' well, but

"Ich can rymes of Robin Hood, and of Randolf, erl of Chestre
Ac of our lord ne of oure lady, the best that ever was
maked."
("P.the P" C.pass Vlll. ll. 11-12)

Following the confession of Sloth is the repentance of Robert the Robber (in A & B texts). He wept sorrowfully because of his misdeeds, and because he had no means of restoring the many things he had dishonestly gained, and could not hope to earn by labor all he owed.¹ In the throng in the field, the dreamer on the Malvern Hills saw amongst others, deceitful beggars who had all the bread they could eat or cram into their bags, and yet went about fighting for food and spending their days in surfeiting and rioting. Sloth and Ribaldry accompany these knaves,

"In glotonye, god it wote gon hy to bedde
And rysen with ribaudye the Roberdes knaves
Slepe and sore sleuthe seweth hem eure".
("P.the P.". B. Pro. ll. 43-5)

"Robartes men or Robertsmen, were a set of lawless vagabonds notorious for their outrages when Piers Plowman was written. The statute of Edward III. (an reg.J.C.XLV) specifies divers manslaughter, felonies, and robberies done by people called Roberdesmen, wastours and drawlacches".² Langland represents the wastours as spending in extravagance and surfeiting that which others plant and sow and labor hard to earn.³

¹ Piers the Plowman" Text B. Pass V. ll. 470-6.

² Skeat, W.W. "William Langlands Piers the Plowman" Vol.11. P.7.

³ Piers the Plowman" Text B. Pro. ll. 20-2

Clarendon Press. 1886.

One of the passages already quoted in connection with messengers shows how merchants could not travel after dark for fear of robbery or death at the hand of these bandits.¹

Beggars.

Langland shows great sympathy for the true poor, for the blind and the maimed and those who are unable to earn their livelihood otherwise than by begging; but he has only contempt and harsh criticisms for those who assume ailments or religious disguise because they are too lazy to work. Some of the more vicious of these have already been classed among the robbers.² Among the pilgrims waiting for Piers to guide them to the shrine of St. Truth, were some who wanted to sit around idly.

"and hulpen erie his half-acre with how trollilolli".³ When Piers said they could get no food if they did not get to work they pretended to be blind or crippled. They were willing to pray for Piers and his plough too, but complained that they were much too ill to work. The ploughman replied, that those who were really helpless should be given the best food he had, but those who were shamming would soon be discovered and treated accordingly; they were spendthrifts and idlers who wasted what honest men toiled hard to earn and should therefore be given only the poorest food. One of the wasters then grew angry and would have fought Piers, but the latter appealed to the knight,

"to kepe hym, as couenante was from cursed shrewes".

¹ Piers the Plowman" Text C. Pass. XLV. ll. 56-8.

² Ibid Text B. Pro. ll. 40-5.

³ Ibid Text B. Pass. VI. l. 118.

"And fro this wastoures wolueskynnes that maketh the worlde
dere:

For the waste and wynnen noughte and that ilke while
Worth neuere plente amonge the people ther-while my plow
liggeth" ("P.the P". B.pass Vl. ll. 162-5)

But the knight's efforts were unavailing and the idlers continued
to rebel until Piers called upon Hunger. The severe treatment of
Hunger soon brought the deceivers to reason; they hastened to
work, and,

"Blynde and bedredde were botened a thousande
That seten to beg syluer sone were thai heled"
("P.the P." B.pass Vl. ll. 194-5)

In reply to Piers question as to how he was to treat beggars,
Hunger answered,

"Here now" quod Hunger "and holde it for a wisdom;
Bolde beggeres and bigge that mowe her bred biswynke
With houndes bred and hors bred holde vp her hertis
Abate hem with benes for bollyng of her wombe;
And gif the gomes grucche bidde hem go swynke,
And he shal soupe swettere whan he it hath deseuid."
("P.the P.". B.pass Vl. ll. 215-20)

But he should love and help those who were really in need and
injured by fortune. In the pardon which Piers received from
St.Truth, beggars were not included, unless they begged through
necessity.¹ For those who begged without being obliged to,
defraud the needy and deceive the giver, and are living contrary
to the law of God and the teaching of the Church. The rich are
admonished never to give to beggars whose ~~their~~ churches are brew-
houses, even if they faint from hunger, unless they are blind or
sick. For many of them are really in good health, many live

lawless lives; many break their bones purposely that they may not be obliged to work.

"There is moe mysshape peple amonge thise beggeres,
Than of alle maner men that on this molde walketh;
And thei that lyue thus here lyf mowe lothe the tyme,
That euere he was man wrought whan he shal hennes fame".
("P. the P. " B.pass VII. 11.95-8)

But there are many people who are really needy. These are our neighbours, prisoners in cells, and poor folk in cottages. These cottagers work hard and suffer cold and hunger to get money to support their children and pay their lord's rent. They do not beg and make their wants known, but to aid them with gifts of food and clothing would be to perform an act of true charity,

"Frydayes and fasting days a ferthyng-worth of muscles
Were a feste for such folke other so fele cockes.
These were almes, to helpe that han suche charges
And to comfortie such cotyers and crokede men and blynde".
("P.the P.". C.pass X. 11. 94-7)

There are others, too, who should be helped. These are the lunatics who wander about from place to place, careless of heat or cold. They are ^{like} the Apostles, for though they do not preach, they travel,

"Withoute bred or bagge as the bok telleth
Barfot and bredles beggeth thei of no man".
("P.the P.". C.pass X. 11. 120-1)

Minstrels are everywhere received by lords and ladies and are given presents and money.

"Ryght so ye riche, rather ye sholde, for sothe
Welcoman and worshipen and with your goode helpen
Godes myn strales and hus messagers and hus murye bordeours
The which are lunatik lollers, and lepers aboute
For under godes sefre seel here synnes been ykenured".
("P.the P." C.pass X. 11. 134-8)

Chap. 111. (i) Crime and Punishment.

"Judging by our own standards there was very little crime, and very few cases are reported in the City records."¹ Murder, burglary, highway robbery, and gross theft were capital crimes and the punishment was hanging. Those guilty of forgery or fraud were usually put in the pillory, but sometimes were imprisoned or set in the stocks. The pillory was also the punishment for the second offence of perjury: for the first offence, the criminal had to stand on a high stool, 'coram populo' and confess his sin. This punishment, with the addition of a whetstone tied around the neck, was meted to those guilty of telling lies or slandering. The "thewe", a pillory especially for women, was the punishment for child-stealing, for thickening the bottom of a quart with pitch, for selling putrid soles, for being a procuress, and for false accusation. It was also inflicted in 1375 on a woman for being a common scold, for annoying her neighbors, by her malicious words, backbiting, and sowing envy, discord, and ill-will among them.² "The pillory was the punishment for cheating with false tables and dice, for slandering the mayor, for selling putrid conger, for pretending to be a physician, for sorcery, practising the art of magic and sooth-saying; whilst anyone counterfeiting the licensed begging poor was to be put in the stocks."³

¹ Traill. H.D. "Social England" Vol.11. Chap.VI. P.270.

² Ibid " " Vol.11. Chap.VI. P.270.

³ Ibid " " Vol.11. Chap. VI.P.271.

Mr. Skeat differentiates between the various stools used. The 'pyning-stool', also called 'cucking stool', was the seat of ignominy.¹ "In Scotland, an ale-wife who exhibited ~~and~~ drinks to the public was put upon the 'Cock-stule'".¹ "It was different from the 'ducking-stool', which was a punishment especially for scolds".¹ He also quotes from various sources, several examples of punishment of the pillory meted;— to bakers for selling light bread or for making bread out of putrid material; to a woman for selling mixed butter; to others for selling bad meat, giving short measure, or for other fraudulent practices.

It is evident, though, that persons guilty of these various offences did not always pay the penalties. Envy confessed that he had been guilty of backbiting, chiding, and bearing false-witness.³ Avarice and his wife practised many frauds, such as giving short measure and weight, and mixing poor ale with the good.⁴ Yet all seem to have escaped the pillory, for they make no mention of it. Langland complains too, that the mayors have been corrupted by bribery and fail to punish on the pillories and 'pyning-stools', the brewers, bakers, butchers, and cooks from whose frauds the poor people suffer so much.⁵

When Pees came to Westminster and laid his charge against Wrong, Wisdom and Wit told Wrong that he would certainly be punished unless Meed could obtain his pardon,

Blarindan Press. 1886.

- ¹ Skeat. W.W. "William Langlands Piers the Plowman" Vol.11. P.43.
² Ibid Vol.11. P.42.
³ Piers the Plowman" B.pass.V. 11. 94-130.
⁴ Ibid B.pass.V. 11. 204-227.
⁵ Ibid B.pass.111. 11.76-90.

"for bothe thi lyf and thy londe lyth in his grace" ¹

"Offenders convicted of great crimes were put 'in the kings grace', who could hang them and confiscate their property, unless he were pleased to shew mercy. Sometimes he was satisfied with exacting a heavy fine". ²

The right of sanctuary, also, saved many criminals from imprisonment or death. A Church was a sacred place and whoever crossed the threshold was under the protection of God, and placed himself beyond the reach of men and of the law. ³ "To drag men out of sanctuary was a sacrilege which brought down excommunication". ⁴ This right was very valuable for political offenders, but also, and much more so, for robbers and other criminals. ⁵

¹ Piers the Plowman" B.pass.IV. 11.73.

Clarendon Press. 1886.

² Skeat, W.W. "William Langlands Piers the Plowman", Vol.11 P.56.

³ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life" XIVth Century" Chap.111. P. 152-3

⁴ Ibid

Chap.111. P.157

⁵ Ibid

Chap.111. P.159.

Chap. lll. (j) Miscellaneous.

Attitude towards Welshmen and foreigners.

There are several characteristics of the time, mentioned by Landland, which cannot conveniently be dealt with under any specified heading. Such are,-- the attitude towards Welshmen, to Jews and Lombards: the coinage, and the spoiling of children.

(1) The Welshmen of the period frequently harassed their English neighbors by making raids across the border and carrying off all the portable property they could lay hands on. This pillage was the subject of many complaints made to parliament by the people of the Western Counties, though it is probable that the Welsh were not the aggressors in every case. Langland's attitude towards the Welsh is the natural one if he was, as was always supposed until recently, a native of the western counties. In the tavern described in Glutton's confession, among the boisterous, riotous throng is 'Gryffin the Walshe'.¹ And in the C. text the repentance of Avarice is followed by that of a Welshman who confessed sorrow at his former dishonest life.

"Then was ther a Walishman was wonderliche sory,
He highte Yyvan Yeld-ageyn-if-ich so moche haue,
Al that ich wickeddliche wan sytthen ich wit hadde:
And thank my liflode lacke leten ich nelle
That ech man shal haue hus er ich hennes wende.
For me ys leuer in this lif as a loral-beggen
Than in lysse to lyue and lese lyf and soule".

("P. the P". C. pass. Vll. ll. 309-315)

¹ "Piers the Plowman. B. pass V. ll. 324.

Coinage (2)

One of the things Edward I's reign was especially noted for was the improvement of the coinage. When Edward I. returned from the Holy Land one of his first reforms was directed to the coinage.¹ Clipping of coins had become a widespread practice and numbers of people were put to death for it.¹ The Jews were supposed to be the worst offenders.¹ Though Edward I. punished those who clipped the coins, he reduced the silver in the penny by about one per cent.² In the 17th year of Edward I's reign appeared a new coinage and one which was in gold.² These were florins, half-florins and quarter florins. They were not well received and were recalled.² But at the end of the same year the king again issued a gold coinage.² These were nobles, maille nobles and ferling nobles, and at once became popular.³ In the device, which was a new one, Edward was represented as standing in a ship with the banner of St. George at the masthead, a sword in his right hand and on his left a shield with the arms of England and France.³ The device may have been merely to commemorate the victory at Sluys over the French fleet, when the king personally captained the English fleet; but the national sentiment was flattered by the notion that it was a claim to the dominion of the seas.³

¹ Traill. H.D. "Social England" Vol. 11. Chap. V. P. 58.

² Ibid Vol. 11. Chap. V. P. 59.

³ Ibid Vol. 11. Chap. V. P. 60.

The noble became so popular throughout Europe that it was difficult to keep it in England. There was little change made in the silver coinage, but groats and half groats were used as well as pennies.¹

Though Mr. Traill says that the florins were recalled soon after being issued, Langland makes at least two references which seem to indicate that he was familiar with them.

"Thanne fette Faueil forth floreyne ynowe

And bad Gyle to gyue gold al aboute,

And nameliche to the notaries that hem none ne faille,

And feffe Fals-witnes with floreyne ynowe".

("P.the P.". B.pass 11. 11.143-6)

Conscience, in accusing Meed of corrupting the law and the justices declares that

"Feith may noughte have his forth here floreyne go so thikke".

("P.the P.". B.pass 111. 11.136.)

To the other new coin mentioned in "Social England" i.e., the great, there are several references. Reason, when admonishing the throng,

"Warnede Watte hys ~~was~~ was to blame

That hire hed was worth halve a mark

His hode nought worth a grote".

("P.the P.". B.pass V. 11. 30-1)

Avarice kept his best ale in his bower or in his bed chamber,

"And who-so bummed ther-of bought it ther-after

A galoun for a grote, got wote, no lesse".

("P.the P.". B.pass V.11.223-4)

¹ Traill. H.D. "Social England" Vol.11. Chap. V. P.60.

Jews and Lombards (3)

In the thirteenth century the feeling against Jews had become very bitter. Statutes had been passed to restrain the excessive usury which they practised. It had also been enacted that they wear a badge in the shape of the two tables of the Law of Moses. The Commons tried to have them banished, but they gave the king a large sum of money to be allowed to remain. But the popular antagonism was too great, and in 1290 an Act of Banishment upon Jews was passed, and their immovable goods were confiscated.¹

The Jews were succeeded in the money lending trade by the Lombards, and these latter consequently became hated by the commons. These money-lenders, though unpopular among the nation, were very often, useful to the king, who, in return for his protection could always obtain large sums of money from them when Parliament refused to grant him funds. The King often found it impossible to carry on a war, and even to pay his expenses in time of peace out of the amount of money that Parliament considered sufficient.

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England" Vol. II. Chap. V. P. 116.

Though the Jews had been formally banished from the Kingdom, many of them must have found the means of remaining behind, or of returning and carrying on their old trade. For, half a century later, Langland refers to them along with the Lombards as being usurers. Avarice, when asked by Repentance if he ever practised usury, replied :

"Nay sothely", he said, "sane in my youthe

I learned among Lombardes and Iewes a lessoun,

To wey pens with a peys, and pare the heuyest

And lene it for lone of the cross to legge a wedde and
lese it."

("P. the P." B. pass.V.11 241-4)

He also confesses that;

"With Lombardes lettres I ladde golde to Rome

And toke it by taille here, and tolde hem there losse.

("P. the P." B. Pass V. 11 251-2)

Reason tells the king that these money lenders will no longer be necessary to him when Meed and the many abuses which follow in her train are expelled from the land, and when he Reason rules the realm.

"And Ich dar legge my lyf the Ioue wol lene the suluer

To wage thyne and help wyne, that thou wilnest after

More than al thy marchauns other thy mytrede bissopes.

Other Lumbardes of Lukes that lyven by lone as Iewes."

("P. the P." C. Pass.V. 11 191-4)

The poet shows no hostility to the Jews as a race but merely to their usurious practices. As may be seen by several reference to them, he expresses the hope that they will turn to Christianity when the errors existing within the Church have been reformed.

Spoiling Children (4)

One of the results of the terrible ravages of the Black Death, was the growing tendency to spoil the children. That the loss of many thousands of lives should make the children then growing up, doubly dear to their parents, is quite natural, and it is probably natural also that over-indulgence should assume the proportion of a real vice. Reason, when preaching to the people in the field, warned them against this.

"And thanne he charged chapman to chasten her children
 Late no wynnyng hem forweny whil thei be yonge
 Ne for no pouste of pestilence please hem noughte out of
 'My syre seyde so to me, and so did my dame
 That the leuere childe the more lore bihoueth,
 And Salamon seide the same that sapience made,

'Qui parcit virge, odit filium'

The Englich of this latyn is who-so wil it knowe

Who-so spareth the sprynge spilleth his children."

("P. the P." B. pass V. ll 33-41.

Reason, in the trial of Meed at Westminster, when asked to have pity on Wrong, declared he would have none till various reformations had taken place. One of these was that "childryn cherissyng be chastyng with yerdes".

(P. the P." B. pass lV. ll7)

Chap. 111 (k) Labour Troubles.

In the 14th century the long and not yet ended struggle between capital and labour had its beginning in England in the quarrel between the landowners and the peasants. In order to give any clear account of the causes of the quarrel it will be necessary to summarize briefly the relations existing between the two classes. The lords owned vast domains, and on these lands existed two classes of men who cultivated the land:— the free-men who paid their rent in money or services, but who were personally free: the villeins who paid their rent in services. These latter were by far the more numerous class. They belonged to the land, and could not leave it without the consent of their lord. A villein could purchase his freedom if his lord wished to sell it to him, or gain it by running away and remaining in a free town for a year and a day, without once leaving it, and without the lord having interrupted the prescription.¹

Usually about a third of the land was reserved to himself by the lord, and this was his demesne. The rest was divided into small holdings amongst the tenants. In return for the land the tenants cultivated the lord's demesne and performed other services, such as carting, whenever the lord might require them. Many of them also had to render a small tribute in kind, such as eggs on feast days or a little seed wheat one a year, but in return meals were often provided for them while they were employed on the demesne.²

¹ Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 11. Chap. 111. P. 258.

² Traill H. D. "Social England" Vol. 11 Chap. V. P. 94.

As a lord's estate usually consisted of several manors in different parts of the kingdom, it was impossible for him to exact personally the services of his tenants. So each manor was handed over to a bailiff, who looked after the accounts and acted as a sort of overseer.¹ In this work, the bailiff was assisted by subordinates who were themselves villeins, and who were chosen by their fellows to be responsible for them if they failed in performing their services.¹ Any villien was liable to be chosen to hold one of these offices, so that it was to the interest of each to see that the rest did their services. As a last resort, the villein's as a whole were responsible for each other, so if the lord failed to get satisfaction from his officers he could fine the whole township.¹ The most important of the bailiff's subordinates were the reeve or provost and the hayward.¹

During the 13th century a change took place on many manors. This was the gradual replacing of the villeins, and their obligation of rendering services, by a class of practically free laborers who paid their rent in money and worked for money wages, though in the eyes of the law, these men remained serfs for many years more.³

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England"

Vol. 11 Chap. V. P. 94

² Ibid

Vol. 11 Chap. V. P. 92

³ Ibid

Vol. 11 Chap. V. P. 97.

The agency which brought this about was the self interest of the average manorial lord. Under the system of services, the land owner received no money from his tenants and as compulsory labor is proverbially ineffective, it could not have been easy to get the domain properly cultivated. The advancing civilization with its increasing love of luxury, the pomp and splendor, following the rise of chivalry, the prevalent taste for building and a somewhat ostentatious charity, all combined to increase the lord's need of ready money. This he gained by allowing his tenants to pay their rent in money, and at the same time he paid money wages to these same serfs to cultivate his land. In this system there were advantages to each side. The lord gained his ready money, and if the money were not forthcoming he could always fall back on the old system of services; and his work was done better by hired workmen than it had been done under the compulsory method. The villeins for their part now felt that their work was voluntary and remunerative. Also, when the lord had enough laborers to do his work he did not greatly care whether the rest of them stayed on the land or not, and for a small fine allowed them to go and seek work elsewhere. Thus many of the serfs left the land and became practically free.¹

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England", Vol. 11 Chap. VI. P. 98-99.

(Foregoing paragraph taken from pages from "Social England" as quoted.)

This system was found so advantageous to both sides that many lords permanently adopted it,¹ Others still clung to the old system of demanding services. By the middle of Edward III's reign, these wandering serfs formed a class of workmen, who though not legally free, sought work where they could find it.² But in the year 1348 all this changed and hope of future progress died away.³ The Black Death ravaged England and blotted out over a third of the population. The harvests rotted in the field with no one to gather them, and famine resulted. The landowners now had a large amount of land on their hands, and had no one to work it. Many tenants had died leaving no successors, and the land thus vacated as well as his own demesne, had to be cultivated by the lord. But the laborers, realizing their value, demanded exorbitant wages, sometimes two or three times the amount they had received before the pestilence.⁴ Co-incident with the demand for higher wages came the demand for better and more luxurious food.⁴ The laborers now scorned their former fare. The landowners had to choose between two losses. Either they must let their lands lie uncultivated or pay such wages that they would cultivate at a loss.⁴

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England"

Vol. II. Chap. V. P. 98

² Ibid

Vol. II. Chap. VI. P. 137

³ Ibid

Vol. III. Chap. VI. P. 138

⁴ Ibid

Vol. III. Chap. VI. P. 142.

Added to this, there was the danger that many workmen if unable to obtain the wages they asked, would become "sturdy beggars" and become a public menace.¹ To remedy this, the Statute of Labourers (1351)¹ was passed requiring that every man or woman under 60, bond or free, who was able to work - "not having his own where of he might live" nor land of his own to occupy himself with, "should be bound to serve any employee who might require him, provided that the lords of any bondsman or land-servant should be preferred before others for his services," that such servant should take only the wages which were customary in 1347. Any workman leaving his work should be liable to imprisonment, and none under like penalty, should receive or retain him.² Workmen who demanded, or landowners who paid higher wages than those fixed should be liable to fines.² In order that these wages be sufficient, Parliament also tried to regulate prices, and those guilty of over-charging were liable to heavy penalties.³ But none of these measures accomplished its purpose. Some of the landlords attempted to continue the exaction of services, others broke the law and hired runaway workmen; the workmen continued to run away, to demand high wages or to turn wandering beggars. Prices continued to increase. Parliament, which represented only the aristocracy, landowners and wealthy burgesses of the towns, failed to see that opposition only made the labourers more obstinate.

¹ Traill H. D. "Social England"

² Ibid

³ Ibid

Ibid

Vol. 11. Chap. VI. P.98 / 143.

Vol. 11. Chap. VI. P.137 / 144

Vol. 11. Chap. VI. P.139 / 145

Vol. 11. Chap. VI. P.142.

Measures taken against the rebellious peasantry increased in severity until finally open revolt broke out. The poll tax brought about the explosion.¹ This was a tax of so much placed on every individual of a certain age. It was assessed so that the rich in a community paid a great part of the tax of the poor. But in villages, or communities where there were no wealthy people, the burden fell very heavily on the poor. This taxation caused the bursting forth of the spirit of rebellion which had been increasing for so many years, and in 1381 the Peasants' Revolt broke out. The peasants in thousands marched upon London and entered the city. At first they had many sympathisers among the townsmen, but their excesses in bloodshed and pillage soon turned all the more moderate citizens against them. For two or three days they possessed the city. Then Richard, the boy king rode fearlessly out to meet them and make terms with them. Their leader, Tyler, was struck down by the mayor of London. Richard promised the rebels that he would now be their leader, and asked what they wished. They replied that they wished to be serfs no longer. Their freedom was promised them, they received charters and the danger was overcome.

¹ Oman C. "The Political History of England." Vol. IV. Chap. 11. P.26.

In a few weeks the revolt was quieted in every part of England. The charters of emancipation were annulled and the serfs remained serfs. Whether the revolt was of any real effect in the final emancipation of the serfs, is a point on which historians disagree. But it remains as the first outbreak of the quarrel between capital and labour, and it serves to show the great social discontent rife among the working classes.

Langland does not make any reference to the Peasant's Revolt. This may be because at the time the C text was written, more than ten years had passed away since the revolt. The A. and B. texts were written before the outbreak occurred. But the poem reflects the social discontent, and the unwillingness of the labourers to work. The poet's attitude to the labour situation is one of disapproval of the wandering class of peasants. The ideal workman, Piers the Plowman, is sober industrious and a faithful servant to his master. Langland believes in the existing order of class distinctions: he nowhere utters the opinion that serfdom should be abolished: he believes that the upper classes should rule. He wants reform, but does not look for it in a new system which shall alter the relationship of the various classes of society: he preaches a reform of the existing classes by the fulfillment of their duties to each other. Thus when asked by the dreamer to whom the wealth of this earth belongs, Holy Church quotes the Scripture, and gives Christ's answer to the Jews.

"Reddite Cesari" quod god "that Cesari bifalleth

"Et que sunt dei, deo" or elles ye done ille"

("P. the P: B pass l. ll 52-3)

Repentance, when questioning Avarice about his deeds, good or bad, asked his if he ever lent to lords "for loue of her mayntenaunce!"

Piers was willing to labour all his life for the knight as well as for himself. But, as has been before pointed out, Langland did not approve of the rich living in idleness and luxury. Several times he exhorts them to care for the deserving poor, and to guard the realm from evildoers. But he censures the lazy among the working classes. Some of these who feign sickness so that they may beg for a living, have already been described. Others who don hermit's or pilgrim's garb to escape work, will be dealt with later. In the field full of folk, those are mentioned who do their work carelessly,

"Of alkin libbyng laboreres lopen forth somme,

As dykers and delueres that doth here dedes ille,

And dryuen forth the longe day with 'Dieu vous saue,

Dame Emme'"

("P. the P: B prologue, ll 222-4)

Reason on questioning the poet about his life asked him if he had lands, or rich friends to support him, for he seemed an idle man, a spendthrift who wasted time, and one who gained his livelihood by begging at men's doors or at churches.

"The which is lollarene lyf that lytel ys preysed,
Ther ryghtfulnesse rewardeth ryght as men deserueth!"

("P. the P" C pass Vl. ll 31-32)

Piers, the ideal workman would not go on pilgrimage until his half acre was ploughed. Because he laboured steadily and honestly he alone knew the way to the shrine of St. Truth.

The extravagant tastes of the period spread among the lower classes. Wasters and beggars would not eat bread made of beans, but demanded the best: they would drink only the finest beer.

"Laboreres that haue no lande to lyue on but her handes,
Deyned nought to dyne a-day myght olde wortes.

May no peny-ale hem paye ne no pace of bakoun,

But if it be fresch flesch other fische fryed or bake,

And that chaude or plus chaude for chillyng of her mawe!"

("P. the P" B pass Vl. ll 309-313)

Langland warns labourers to work while they can lest famine arise and hold the land in its grip.¹ The poet's attitude towards the strife of the landowners and peasants may be seen in the names he gives to Piers' wife and family. These names shew his dislike of the idle peasantry. Piers' wife's name is 'Dame Worche-whan-tyme-is': his daughter's is 'Do-righte-so-or-thi-dame-shal-the-bete': his son's is 'Suffre-thi-souereynes-to-hauen-her-will-deme-ham-noughte-for-if-thow-doste-thow-shalt-it-dere-abugge'.²

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B pass Vl. ll 322-332.

² Ibid.

Text B. pass Vl. ll 80-84.

The name of the central character denotes himself, Piers the Plowman, denotes industry.

That Langland did not believe the trouble could be remedied by acts of Parliament, is shown by the fruitless attempt of the knight to make the idlers get to work.¹ He thought hunger alone could save the situation by bringing the slothful and rebellious peasantry to reason.²

But though Langland would have dealt harshly with the thriftless wasters, he considered the industrious labourer one of the most important props of the realm. Piers declares -

"I wil worschip ther-with Treuthe by my lyue,
And ben his pilgryme atte plow for pore mennes sake.
My plow-fote shal be my pyk-staf....."

("P. the P" B pass Vl. ll 103-5)

Thus he makes the real pilgrim and follower of Truth, the man who works honestly for himself and others. In the pardon sent Piers, it was found that

"Alle lybbyng laboreres that lyuen with her hondes,
That trewlich taken and trewlich wynnen,
And lyuen in loue and in lawe for her lowe hertis,
Haueth the same absolucioun that sent was to Peres"

("P. the P" B pass Vll. ll 62-65)

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B. pass Vl. ll 166-170)

² Ibid. Text B. pass Vl. ll 173-220.

Chap. IV.

Church of the Period.

From the later part of the thirteenth century, for many years following, the history of religion in England is the same as on the continent. It is the age of triumphant Catholicism passing into decline. The pope was now struggling against a spirit of nationalism which was steadily gaining strength in the Western states of Europe. The policy of Edward I. was to hold Rome at arm's length; and also to shake the hold of the native English Church over lands and chattels, check its power of aggrandisement, and subject its spiritual courts to the law of the land. By the Statute of Mortmain 1275, land left to the Church by "dead hand" was to be forfeit to the lord, or in his default, to the crown. Hitherto the Church had been acquiring lands at an alarming rate and it was feared all England would become Church property. Edward lessened the scope of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and increased the power of the civil courts. He also attempted to put a tax on Church property. This tax he collected twice; then the clergy refused to vote any more money, and to vote at all save in their own clerical house. The king outlawed the whole body of clergy, but was forced to compromise, for in the meantime nobles and merchants had also broken with him, and he was obliged to turn his attention to troubles in Flanders and Scotland. ¹

¹ Traill

"Social England" Vol 11. Ch. V. P 18-24.

"The Social aspect of Church History is the chief interest of these later years (1297-1348) after the close of the struggle with Edward I. The higher clergy became more and more pliant as they felt their growing dependence on the crown; the lower, except perhaps the parish priests, were fast losing all the spirit of the last revival of religion. Not a few traces of anti-clerical spirit among the gentry and commons appear in the early fourteenth century; it is not simply against Papal interference ^{and} monastic overgrowth, it is the beginning of a revolt against ^{clerical} church influence in politics and society!" ¹

"But it was in jurisdiction that the 'laicising' movement was strongest!" ² The abuses of the Church courts were ^{the} special objects of attack by reformers.

The supremacy of the pope in England was further weakened by the removal of the Papal See to Avignon, in the beginning of the 14th century. The Pope lost prestige by associating himself with England's enemy France. He became considered more as a temporal power and liable to criticism. Moreover, Germany was at this time poor; France was impoverished by wars; Italy resented the loss of the Holy See; therefore the chief burden of supplying the Papal revenues fell upon England. This caused dissatisfaction, then outspoken complaint, and finally declared opposition, in the country which had hitherto been most loyal

¹ Traill H.D. "Social England" Vol. 11. Chap V P 24.

² Ibid. Vol. 11. Chap V P 26.

Another practice which perhaps caused more discontent than anything else, was the Pope's custom of making "provision" for the next presentation to a benefice during the lifetime of the incumbent. "He had also the unquestioned prerogative of nominating to bishoprics vacated by translation; and his policy was to translate bishops as often as possible, and so obtain not only the fees and firstfruits (or first years income) of the bishop who was translated, but also those of the prelate who was appointed in his room!"¹ Naturally, this continual changing caused the See or other benefice to be neglected. But what caused even greater discontent among the English people, was that these benefices were often given to foreigners who collected the revenues without even troubling to visit England.

"In 1351, the Statute of Provisors prohibited the acceptance of the papal letters of provision, and handed over the patronage of benefices so dealt with to the king. But the law was constantly evaded, and all attempts at setting matters on a more satisfactory footing failed of any real success!"¹

Such were the conditions which led Wycliffe, first, to combat the temporal power of the Pope; to preach the doctrine of Church poverty; and finally to deny some of the fundamental doctrines of Catholicism, such as Transubstantiation and the Pope's power of excommunication.

¹ Traill H.D. "Social England" Vol 11. Chap VI. P 159.

² Ibid. Vol 11. Chap VI. P 157-159.

³ (The foregoing paragraph taken from pages quoted, from "Social England")

In spite of the existing evils, the church was still foremost in many good works. It was a leader in education: it made provision for orphans, lepers, and the destitute poor, and in the nunneries supplied boarding schools for girls.¹

"The Avarice of Churchmen, the abuses of Bishop's courts, the constant papal interference, and the compulsory clerical celibacy leading to concubinage were the chief drawbacks on the Church's usefulness. The higher clergy were, on the whole, pure; and men like Kilwardby, Peckham, and Winchelsea were worthy leaders of English religion; but as the doctrine grew fixed that local or national reformation was heretical without the instance of Rome, men grew tired 'both of the evils of the age and their remedies'.¹

¹ Traill, H.D.

"Social England" Vol 11. Chap V P 32.

Chap. V.

(a) Langland's Attitude toward the Church; its Doctrines and its corruptions.

Langland is at one with Wycliffe in denouncing the moral decay of the Church, the covetousness of the clergy, and the vicious lives led by friars, pardoners, and hermits. He believes the wealth of the Church to be a source of evil; he disapproves of disputes being taken to Rome for settlement; but he does not express any opinions decidedly antagonistic to the existing doctrines of the Church, or to the spiritual authority of the Pope. He will not deny the Pope's power to open or close the gates of Heaven to humanity. Speaking of the four cardinal virtues which permit or deny entrance to Heaven, he says -

"As of the cardinales atte courte that caughte of that name,
And power presumed in hem a pope to make,
To han that power that peter hadde inþighen I nelle;"

("P. the P" B. prologue ll. 167-169)

Again, he expresses his belief in the pope's power to grant absolution, but adds that he thinks it is safer to trust the souls' salvation to good works.

"Now hath the pope powere pardoun to graunte the peple
With-uten eny penaunce to passen in-to heuene;
This is owre bileue as lettered men vs teacheth,
'Quodcumque ligaueris super terram, erit ligatum et in
celis,&c!

And so I leue lelly (lordes forbode ellis!)
That pardoun and penaunce and preyeres don saue
Soules that haue synned seene sithes dedly.

"Ac to trust to thise triennales trewely me thinketh

Is nought so syker for the soule certis, as is Dowel."

("P. the P.". B.pass VII. 11.173-0)

Later, he refers to the Pope's powers with even less confidence. Haukyn, the active man, complains that he has contributed to the support of the pope, and has received nothing in return excepting a pardon: if he could but procure the services of a scribe he would write to the Pontiff and ask him for a salve to cure the pestilence. *I*

"For sith he hath the powere that Peter hym-self hadde,

He hath the potte with the salve sothly as me thinketh:

'Argentum et aurum non est mihi; quod autem habeo, hoc

tibi do; in nomine domini, surge et ambulo."

Ac if mighte of miracle hym faille it is for men be nought
worthy

To haue grace of god and no gylt of the Pope".

("P. the P. B.pass XLII. 11.254-7)

As Whitaker has pointed out, these lines are ironical, for the Pope, who was notoriously wealthy, is compared to St. Peter who said "silver and gold have I none". *2*

That Langland did not believe in the infallibility of the Pope is shown in Reason's sermon to the throng in the field.

1 "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pass. XLII. 11.243-9.

2 Skeat, W.W. "William Pangelands Piers the Plowman". Vol. II. P.202

"And sithen he prayed the pope haue pite on holicherche.

And er he gyue any grace gouerne firste hym-selue!

("P. the P! B pass V. ll 51-52)

He expresses his disapproval of appealing to Rome for a decision. When the followers of Meed and Falsehood were put to flight, -

"Symonye and Cyuyle senten to Rome,

And putte ~~hem~~ thorw a-peles in the popes grace.

Ac Conscience to the kyng a-cusede hem bothe,

And seide, 'syre kyng, by Cryst bote clerkus amende,

Thi kyngdom thorw here couetyse wol out of kynde wende,

And Holy Church throw hem worth harmed for euere!

("P. the P! C pass lll. ll 243-247)

Reason declared that if he ruled the realm he would show no pity until,

"And alle Rome-renneres for robberes of byyonde

Bere no siluer ouer see that signe of kynge sheweth.

Noyther graue ne vngraue golde noither siluer,

Vppon forfeiture of that fee who so fynt hym at Douere,"

("P the P". B. pass lll. ll 128-131)

Langland denounces the corruptions of the Church which are due to bribery and greed as emphatically as Wycliffe. Holy Church tells the dreamer that Lady Meed is as intimate in the pope's palace as she herself.¹ In the ride to Westminster, deans, sub-deans, archdeacons, and other officials, were saddled with silver, so that they would permit sins, such as divorces and secret usury.²

¹ Piers the Plowman" Text B. pass ll. 1.23.

² Ibid Text B. pass ll. ll. 172-175.

Conscience, recounting the crimes of Meed, declares that she has poisoned popes and impaired Holychurch;¹ through her influence, bishops and priests are permitted to lead immoral lives;² as provisors well know, she is intimate with the Pope, for she and Simmony seal his bulls.³ She supplies the commissary with copes and his clerks with coats.⁴

Langland believes that the corrupt clergy are responsible for many of the evils of the time. Anima, in a discourse on the necessity of being charitable, says that, as holiness and honesty spread out from Holychurch through faithful men who teach the law of God, so do all evils spread from her if the preachers and teachers are an imperfect priesthood. The priests are like the trees in the summer time: some branches bear leaves, some do not.

"Right so persones and prestes and prechoures of holy chereche,
That aren rote of the righte faith to reule the peple;
As there the rote us roten reson wote the sothe,
Shal neure floure ne frute ne faire leef be grene."
("P. the P.". B. pass XV.11.97-100)

Therefore the clergy should be truthful; should hate profligacy; should not accept in tithes money which had been dishonestly gained.⁵ It is the duty of every bishop to travel throughout his domain, teach the people to believe in the Trinity, to sustain them with spiritual food, and to provide for the needy.⁶

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ¹ "Piers the Plowman". | Text B. pass lll. 1.127. |
| ² Ibid | Text B. pass lll. 11.148-151. |
| ³ Ibid | Text H. pass lll. 11.146-7. |
| ⁴ Ibid | Text B. pass lll. 1.142. |
| ⁵ Ibid | Text B. pass XV. 11. 103-5. |
| ⁶ Ibid | Text B. pass XV. 11. 561-4. |

But, unhappily, those who should be the people's leaders fail in their duty. Since the pestilence, parsons and priests complain that their parishes are poor and desert them to serve in London as chantry priests "for siluer is swete".¹ Bishops and bachelors who should be shriving their parishoners and feeding the poor, hold political offices in London, or serve as stewards to lords and ladies.² And Religion has now become a rider, a land buyer, and keeps hounds as though he were a lord.³ Reason besought prelates and priests to practise what they preached and to live as they told others to; and he advised members of religious orders to obey their rules lest the king and his council should take away their lands.⁴

Though the parish clergy were, on the whole, the most faithful and uncorrupted of the various religious classes, they too became somewhat degraded after the Black Death. Large numbers of them died of the plague. Like the labourers, they took advantage of their scarcity to demand higher salaries: many of the vacant places were filled by ignorant men of the lowest classes who thought preaching a simple method of earning a living: others, finding that their parishes had become poor since the plague, went to London to serve as chantry priests.⁵

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B. pro. l. 86.

² Ibid Text B. pro. ll. 87-96.

³ Ibid Text B. pass. K. ll. 306-9.

⁴ Ibid Text B. pass. V. ll. 42-8.

⁵ Ibid Text B. pro. ll. 83-6.

In the confession of Sloth,¹ Langland gives a description of one of the unfaithful and ignorant priests. Sloth confessed that he knew rhymes of Robyn Hood, and of Randolf, Earl of Chester, but he did not know any of our Lord or our Lady; he did not even know his 'pater-noster'. He made many vows, but forgot them immediately; he never performed penance or was truly sorry for his sins. He seldom thought of God's Passion, but occupied himself with idle tales and ale. He never visited sick people, or prisoners in fetters. He would rather watch buffoonery, or games, or laugh at lying tales, or slander his neighbours than read anything that was ever written by Mark, Matthew, Luke or John. He neglected vigils and fasting days, and went to shrift only when he was ill, and then "up gesse I schryue me".² He did not pay for what he bought or borrowed; was in arrears with his servants salaries; he never did a kindness to a fellow Christian, and if any did him one he could not understand it.

"I haue be prest and parsoun passynge threttī wynter,
 Yete can I neither solfe ne syngē ne seyntes lyues rede,
 But I can fynde in a felde or in a fourlonge an hare,
 Better than in beatus vir or in beati omnes
 Construe oon clause wel and kenne it to my parochienes.
 I can holde louedayes and here a reues rekenynge,
 Ac in canoun ne in the decratales I can noughte rede a lyne".
 ("P.the P.". B.pass V.11.422-8)

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B.pass V.11.400-447

² Ibid Text B.pass V.11.421.

With regard to the evils caused in the Church by greed and wealth, Anima says that the cross on the gold coins is more revered than the Cross that overcame sin and death.¹ He prophesies that covetousness shall cause men of Holychurch to be overthrown as were the Knights Templars.² When Constantine endowed the Church with lands and wealth, men at Rome heard an angel cry,-

"Doe ecclesie this day hath ydronke venym,

And tho that han Petres powere arn apoysoned alle."

("P. the P. B. pass XV. ll. 522-3)

The only remedy is for the lords to take the lands away.

"If possessioun be poyoun and inparfit hem make,

Good were to dischargen hem for holicherche sake,

And purgen hem of poyoun or more perile falle.

Yif presthod were parfit the peple shoulde amende,

That contrarien Crystes lawe and Crystendome dispise.

("P. the P.". B. pass XV. ll. 527-531)

¹ "Piers the Plowman" Text B. pass XV. ll. 501-3.

² Ibid

Text B. pass XV. ll. 508-9.

Chapter V. (b)

Friars, Monks, Pardoners, Palmers, Pilgrims and Hermits.

There are few classes so severely censured by Langland as the friars. The founder and first members of these orders were inspired by the very highest ideals, from which their successors rapidly fell away. The mission given them by their founder was to go, - barefoot, coarsely dressed, and ill-fed, to visit the poorest districts and dwellings, and to carry bodily and spiritual comfort to the needy. Their mission of service soon made them very popular. Wealth, which their rules forbade them to accept, was showered upon them, and they speedily became avaricious and corrupt. "As early as 1274 Gregory X had restrained their 'unbridled multitude' to 'all the four orders'¹ noted in Piers Plowman".² Matthew Paris declared that they had become more debased in one generation than the Benedictine monks had in three or four centuries.³

Langland represents them as being altogether greedy and unscrupulous. In the 'field full of folk' he saw all the four orders of friars preaching for their own profit; interpreting the Gospel to suit themselves, to win for themselves money and clothing. He refers to their evil custom of shriving for gain, and says if they and Holy Church do not hold together better, one of the greatest misfortunes on earth would increase very fast.³

¹ Trail. H.D. Social England. Vol.11. Chap. V. P.29.

² "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pro. l.58.

³ "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pro. ll.58-67.

The allusion in this last sentence is to the strife between the secular clergy and the friars and pardoners. These last two classes, - unscrupulous money-grubbers -, were usurping many of the privileges of the parish priests. There are scores of references throughout the poem to the corruption of the friars. When the followers of Meed and Falsehood took to flight, the friars coaxed Liar to them, coped him as a friar to disguise him from all comers; and he was welcome to dwell with them whenever he pleased to do so.¹ When Meed was taken to be tried at Westminster, a confessor coped as a friar, offered, for a reward, to shrive her however immoral her past life might have been.² Envy's foresleeves were like those of a friars frock.³ Covetousness-of-eyes told the poet to confess his sins to a friar,

"For whiles Fortune is thi frende freres wil the louye".
 ("P.the P.". B.pass XI. 1.54)

but they deserted him when fortune became his foe.⁴ They follow the rich and neglect the poor, and no one is buried in their church or churchyard unless he bequeaths them something.⁵ The rich are censured for depriving their heirs of the lands which they leave to religious orders, already rich, to have prayers said for their souls.

"Allas! lordes and ladyes lewed conseil le haue ye
 To gyue fram yowre eyres that yowre ayeles yow lefte,
 And giueth to bidde for yow to such that ben riche,
 And ben founded and feffed eke to bidde for other".
 ("P.the P.". B.pass XV. 11.316-9)

¹ "Piers the Plowman". Text B, Pass. 11. 11.229-232.
² Ibid Text B. pass 111. 11.35-42.
³ Ibid Text B. pass IV. 1.81.
⁴ Ibid Text B. pass XI. 11.60-2.
⁵ Ibid Text B. pass XIII. 11.7-10.

In the confession of the Seven Sins, Wrath¹ is represented as a friar.

"I am Wrath" quod he "I was sum tyme a frere,

And the couentes gardyner for to graffe ympes."

("P. the P.". B. pass V. ll. 136-7)

He confesses that he grafted lying tales into limitours and lecturers until they bore abroad servile speech to please lords and ladies, and blossomed out to hear confessions in ladies bowers. And now the result is that many people would rather confess to the friars than to their own priests; the parish priests have seen that the friars are sharing their profits of confessions, and the 'possessioners' preached to the people against the friars; the latter find fault in turn, with the priests: and so Wrath stirs up strife between the two parties. He also served as a cook in a convent and caused enmity and quarrels by spreading scandalous tales about the nuns. He lived for a time in a monastery, and tried to cause trouble there.

"Al the wikkednesse that I wote bi any of oure bretheren

I couth it in our cloister that al owre couent woth it".

("P. the P.". B. pass V. ll. 180-1)

When Anti-Christ came to the world in the form of a man,

"Freres followed that fende for he gaf hem copes".

("P. the P.". B. pass XX. l. 57.)

and when he almost overcame Conscience in the struggle and the latter called

"Helpe clergye or elles I falle

Thorw imparfit prestes and prelates of Holichurch".

("P. the P.". B. pass XX. ll. 227-8)

¹ "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pass V. ll. 136-181.

"Freres herden hym crye and comen to helpe
As for thei couth nought wel her craft Conscience forsoke
hem". ("P. the P. B. pass XX. ll. 229-230)

Charity was found once in a friars frock,

"As it is ferre agoo in seynt Fraunceys tyme".
("P. the P. B. pass XV. l. 226).

Monks.

The monks come in for a very small share of Langland's criticism. It is true that Conscience numbers them amongst those who are corrupted by Meed,¹ and Reason warns them to adhere more strictly to their rules.

"Gregorie the grete clerk gart write in bokes
The ruele of alle religious ryghtful and obedient.
Right as fisshes in flod whenne hem failleth water,
Deyen for drouthe whenne thei drye ligger,
Ryght so religion roteth and sterueth,
That out of couent and cloistre coneyteth to dwelle".
("P. the P.". C. pass VI. ll. 147-152)

He says that monks and canons now ride around the country, keep hounds, own lands, and live in luxury as though they were lords. But they show no pity to the poor and if they do not reform they will be punished by destruction.

¹ "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pass lll. l. 132.

"As yut shal come a kyng and confesse yow alle,

And bete you, as the byble telleth, for breking of youre
reule,

And amende yow monkes moniales, and chanons,

And putte yow to youre penaunce ad pristinum statum ire,

.....

For the abbot of Engelonde and the abbessse hys nece,

Shullen haue a knok on here crownes and incurable the wounde."
(*"P. the P. C. pass Vl. 11.169-178*)

Of the peaceful life led in the cloisters by monks who obey their
rules, Langland speaks highly. Wrath's efforts to stir up strife
in the monastery were not very successful¹; and in the same speech
in which he censures the religious orders for not obeying their
rules, Reason says,--

"For yf heuene be on thys erthe other eny eyse for saule,

Hit is in cloistre other in scole by meny skyles ich fynde.

For in cloistre cometh no man to chide ne to fighte;

In scole ys loue and lownesse and lyking to lerne "

(*"P. the P." C. pass Vl. 11.153-6*)

¹ *"Piers the Plowman". Text.B. pass.V. 11. 169-179.*

Pardoners.

In the middle ages the punishments imposed for sin were often long and severe. Sometimes penance, such as fasting or some other mortification of the flesh was carried on for months or even years. Little by little it became the custom to allow offenders to commute these chastisements for many a payment in alms. But as it became obvious that a money payment or the repeating of a few psalms or prayers could not absolve sinners from the greatest penalties, a new system was established. This was the theory of the "treasury".¹ The difference between the offence and the amount of penance performed was said to be made up by the application to the sinner of the merits of Christ, of the Virgin, and of the Saints; the dispensation of which merits belonged to the Pope and the clergy.¹ As the treasury was inexhaustible, the Church authorized men to go around selling some of this merit to faithful Christians. The men so authorized became known as 'pardoners'

The pardoners were, at first, sometimes secular priests and sometimes friars. Soon they required no licence at all from the Church: and the employment, being exceedingly lucrative, attracted hundreds of imposters. They went from place to place, making speeches, showing their relics, dazzling the eyes of the ignorant with the sight of their parchments and seals, and released people from all sorts of vows and pardoned all manner of crimes, for ^{money} ~~many~~, they became unscrupulous men of corrupt ways of life.

¹ Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth. Century" Part III

"They passed their lives in undoing what the real clergy did, and that without profit to anyone but themselves.¹ The pardoners thus undid the work of the parish priests, undermined their authority usurped their privileges, and pocketed their dues; and inevitable strife soon sprang up between the two classes.

Langland gives a description of the pardoner, preaching to the people, dazzling the ignorant with his fine words and sealed parchment, selling absolution for gold which enabled him to live a vicious life.

"There perched a pardonere as he a prest were,
Broughte forth a bulle with bishopes seles,
And seide that hym-self myght assoilen hem alle
Of falshed of fastyng of vowes ybroken.

Lewed men lewed hym wel and lyked his wordes,
Comen vp knelyny to kissen his bulles;
He bonched hem with his breuet and blered here eyes,
And raughte with his ragman rynges and broches.
Thus they geuen here gold glotones to kepe,
And leueth such loseles that lecherye haunten!

("P. the P" B prologue ll 68-77)

When the followers of Meed and Falsehood were routed, and Liar fled through lanes, hooted at from all sides, the pardoners were the first to rescue the fugitive.

1 Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth. Century" Part III
Chap. 11 P. 321.

They had pity on him and took him home with them.

"They wesshen hym and wyped hym and wonden hym in cloutes,
And sente hym with seles on sondayes to cherches,
And gaf pardoun for pens poundmel aboute!"

("P. the P! B pass ll. ll 220-222)

When Piers described to the pilgrims the difficulties to be encountered on the way to the abode to St. Truth, and the virtues necessary to gain admission to the dwelling.

"By seynt Poule!" quod a pardonere, "peraventure I be moughte knowe there,

I will go fecche my box with my breuettes and a bulle with bishopes lettres!"

("P. the P! B pass V. ll 648-9)

Palmers and Pilgrims.

"In spite of the talent of the physicians, soothsayers, and sorcerers, there were maladies which resisted the best remedies, and in this case a man promised to go on pilgrimage, or to have himself carried there, to beg for his cure!"

Certain shrines would become popular for a time through reports of miracles having happened there. Others were perpetually popular, and the most noted of these were Our Lady of Walsingham, and St. Thomas of Canterbury. On the course of a journey to a shrine, all ranks of society mingled together. Most of the pilgrims were sincere in their faith, and when they reached the shrine,

prayed fervently and went away consoled. But many went simply to gather money, or to enjoy the pleasures of the journey. It was this latter attitude which led reformers to denounce pilgrimages, which they conceived as an encouragement to laziness and idle wandering.

Before leaving a shrine, the pilgrims bought medals or images made of pewter or lead, as remembrances of their journey, and they sewed these in conspicuous places on their garments.

Apart from those who made occasional journeys to some shrine, there was a class of men whose profession it was to make pilgrimages. These men were the 'professional pilgrims' or 'palmer'. Their whole life was spent in travelling from one shrine to another, and, having no trade, they lived by begging. They carried a staff, a bag for provisions, and wore a great number of medals and images on their garments. In exchange for alms, they told of wonderful things seen and heard in distant lands. And as every one who returned from these pilgrimages told marvellous tales, their veracity was not doubted by the uneducated and credulous.

The shrines on the Continent which attracted most English pilgrims were those at Cologne, Paris, and Our Lady of Rocamadour in Guyenne, and St. James in Galicia, Spain. Rome was famous for relics, and nearly every object mentioned in the Gospel was reputed to be there.

The 'palmer' was a professional pilgrim who had visited Jerusalem, and as a distinguishing mark he carried a palm of the Holy Land on his shoulder. But as in nearly all the religious

classes of the time, there were many false pilgrims. Many peasants, to escape from their masters, started off as if bound on a pilgrimage, and never returned. Many others used the pilgrims staff as an excuse for an idle life, and gained their livelihood by begging.

Langland attests the popularity of pilgrims^{age} when he makes his throng of repentant sinners vow to do penance by seeking the shrine of St. Truth. At the same time, he condemns the custom by the description he gives of the palmer. The pilgrims wandered around searching for the way of St. Truth, and could find no one to direct them. At length they met a man, -

"Apparailled as a paynym in Pylgrymes wyse.

He bare a burdoun ybounde with a brode liste,

In a withewyndes wise ywounden aboute."

("P. the P.". B. pass V. ll. 523-5)

He carried a bowl and a bag, and wore hundreds of signs of Sinai, Galicia, Rome, and all the other shrines which he had visited.

The pilgrims asked him where he came from, and his reply was

"Fram Synay" he seyde 'and fram owre lordes sepulcre;

In Bethleem and in Babiloyne I haue ben in bothe,

In Ermonye, in Alisaundre in many other places.

Ye may se bi my signes that sitten on myn hatte,

That I haue walked ful wyde in wete and in drye,

And soughte Gode seyntes for my soules helth".

("P. the P.". B. pass V. ll. 433-8)

The pilgrims asked this traveller and seeker of shrines if he could direct them to St.Truth. But this saint was unknown to him.

"Nay, so me god helpe!" seide the gome thanne,

"I seygh neuere palmere with pike ne with scrippe

Axen after hym er til now in this place".

("P. the P.". B.pass V. 11.541-3)

Twice the poet expresses the opinion that Christians ought rather to practise charity at home than to seek distant sepulchres.

Reason vows that when he rules the land, he will have no pity

"Tyl seynt Jame be souht ther poure syke lyggen,

In prisons and in peore cotes for pilgrimages to Rome,

So that non go to Galys bote it be for euere:"

("P. the P.". C.pass V. 11.122-4)

Imaginative, too, preaches the superiority of charity above all other virtues, and advises men of religious orders to obey their rules instead of making pilgrimages.

"Right so, if thow be religious renne thow neuere ferther

To Rome ne to Rochemadore but as thi reule techeth,

And holde the vnder obedyence that heigh way is to heuene".

("P. the P.". B.pass XII. 11.36-8)

In the throng in the 'field full of folk' were some of those professional pilgrims who had visited different shrines, and had come back to impose upon credulous people by means of their tales of marvellous and impossible adventures abroad.

"Pilgrims and palmers plighted hem togidere
 To seke seynt James and seyntes in Rome.
 Thei went forth in here way with many wise tales,
 And hadden leue to lye al here lyf after,
 I seigh somme that seiden thei had ysought seyntes;
 To eche a tale that thei tolde here tonge was tempred to lye,
 More than to sey soth it semed bi here speche."
 ("P. the P.". B.pre. 11.46-52)

Hermits.

Unlike the recluses of former times, the hermits of the 14th Century seldom retired to the solitude of deserts or of forests. Most of them lived in cottages by the highroads, or at the corners of bridges, and lived on the charity of the passers by.¹ Those who lived by a bridge were supposed to keep this edifice and its chapel in repair; and as this repairing of public highways was regarded as a noble work of charity, alms were freely given for the purpose by the passers by.² But like many another so-called religious class of the day, they neglected their duties and lived a life of hypocrisy. "They swelled the number of parasites of the religious edifice, sheltering under the religious habit a life that was not so."³

¹ Jusserand J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XVth Century. Part I. Chap. 11.
² Ibid " " " " " " P. 137
 Chap. 11. P. 138.

It was soon apparent that these idle, and often vicious men were a menace to the Church and to society at large. "Solemn interdictions and rigorous prescriptions were not wanting; these cast down heads which ever rose again. To become a hermit a man must be resolved on an exemplary life of miseries and privations, and, that imposture might be impossible, he must have episcopal sanction, that is, possess 'testimonial letters from the ordinary'.¹ But these rules were broken continually, and the life of the hermit, who did no work, had no responsibilities, and lived on alms, tempted many idle characters. The statutes classed hermits, except those who lived as true hermits and possessed the testimonial letters, as beggars and vagabonds who were liable to imprisonment.² "A statute like this proves sufficiently that Langland did not exaggerate in his eloquent description of the life of hermits; his verse is but the commentary on the law".³ The poet has no word of reproach for these sincere recluses who live truly religious lives. There were some of these in the motley throng in the 'field full of folk'.

"In prayers and in penance putten hem manye,
 Al for lone of owre lorde lyueden ful streyte,
 In hope forto haue heuenriche blisse;
 As aneres and hermites that holden hem in here selles,
 And coueiten nought in centre to kairen about,
 For no likerous liflode her lykam to please."
 ("P. the P.". B.pro. 11.25-30)

¹ Jusserand, J.J. "English Wayfaring Life XIVth Century" Part 1. Chap.11 P.139

² Ibid

Part 1. Chap.11. P.140.

But in more than one passage he censures the idle, worldly and corrupt hermits. In the same motley throng, there were,-

"Hermite~~s~~ on an heep with hoked staues,
 Wenten to Walyngham and here wenches after;
 Grete lobyes and lange that loth were to swynke,
 Clothedon hem in copis to ben knowen from othere;
 And shopen hem heremites here ese to haue".
 ("P. the P.". B. pre. 11.53-7)

Anchorites were among the idle pilgrims in search of St. Truth, who refused to help Piers and to gain their bread by honest toil. But when temporarily subdued by the harsh discipline of Hunger,-

"An heep of deremites henten hem spades,
 And ketten here copes and courtpies hem made,
 And wenten as werkemen with spades and with shoueles,
 And doluen and dykeden to dryme awaye hunger".
 ("P. the P.". B. pass VI.11.190-3)

Langland says Holy Writ tells of hermits in the early days¹ who went off by themselves and lived in deserts or forests. They begged from no one. Birds brought food to some of them. Paul, the first hermit, shut himself up where none might see him. Others toiled with their hands to earn their livelihood.

¹ "Piers the Plowman". Text B. pass XV. 11.6-20

In the pardon sent to Piers by St.Truth, "holy" hermits receive the same pardon as the plowman himself.¹ But those² are not included who dwell by the highways or among brewers, or who beg in churches. These are "lollers" and drawlatches, and covet all the things such as riches and honours, which holy hermits despise. Former hermits dwelt by themselves in the woods, and were fed by birds, or had food brought to them by their kinsmen. These were learned men and were of good lineage, and they forsook land, power, and bodily luxuries. But these hermits who live by the highways were formerly labourers and apprentices who abandoned their work and donned religious garments in order to live idle and loose lives.

"And ryght so sothlyche such manere eremytes

Lollen agen the byleyue and lawe of holy churche.

For holy churche hoteth all manere puple

Under obedience to bee and buxum to the lawe."

("P. the P.". C.pass X. 11.217-220)

The hermits, indeed, may be said to be the very first class to be criticized by Langland. For on the May morning when the dreamer went out to wander idly among the Malvern Hills,

"I shope me in shroudes as I a shepe were,

In habite as an heremite unholy of workes,

Went wyde in this world wondres to here."

("P. the P. B.pro. 11.2-4)

¹ "Piers the Plowman", Text C. pass X. 1.187.

² Ibid Text C. pass X. 1.188-215.

Chapter VI. Poem as a Historical and Political Document.

The B. text of the poem has several allusions to contemporary politics which reflect the conflicts of the latter part of Edward III reign. The war with France broke out again in 1355, though the commons would willingly have accepted a lasting peace.¹ The victory of Poitiers led to the Peace of Bretigny in 1360, by which more than half the provinces of France were ceded to England.¹ But the ravages of the free companies in France created there a new spirit of union and patriotism: by 1372 little was left to England but Bordeaux and Calais.¹ "His later reign was clouded by strife and omens of coming storm".² Queen Philippa died in 1369: henceforth the infamous Alice Perrers ruled at court almost openly.³ The king was completely under her influence. She squandered his wealth and permitted her favourites to plunder the kingdom.³ The death of the Black Prince on June 8th 1376 left Richard, a boy of ten, heir to the throne.

Such was the state of affairs that led Langland to insert in the B. text the notable fable of the rat-parliament. A crowd of rats and mice (typifying the burgesses and lower commons)⁴ met to discuss their grievances. There was a court cat which came amongst them at will and caused them great trouble.

"For doute of dyuerse dredes we dar noughte wel loke;

¹ Trail, H.D. "Social England" Chap. VI. P.150.

² Trail, H.D. "Social England" Chap. VI. Vol. II. P.151.

³ Davis, J.F. "Langland: Piers Plowman". Chap. P.1X.

⁴ Skeat W.W. "William Langlands Piers the Plowman" Vol. II. P.19.

And zif we grueche of his gamen he wil greue us alle,
 Cracche us, or clowe us and in his cloches holde,
 That vs lotheth the lyf or he lete vs pass."
 ("P. the P.". B. pre. 11.151-5)

Then a renouned rat arose and made a suggestion.
 "I haue ysein segges" quod he "in the cite of London
 Beren bighes ful bright abouten here nekkes,
 And some colers of crafty werk; uncoupled thei wenden
 Bothe in wareine and in waste where hem leue lyketh."
 ("P. the P.". B. pro. 11.160-3)

If these wore bells on their collars, men might know
 when they were coming and could run away. And if a bell were hung
 upon the neck of the cat, everyone could tell when the cat was
 angry, and keep out of his way. The rats agreed to this proposal
 and bought the bell: but there was none amongst them that dared
 hang it on the cat's neck, for the realms of France and England.
 Then a learned mouse stood up and spoke sternly,

"Though we culled the catte yut sholde ther come another,
 To cracchy vs and al owre kynde though we crope vnder benches
 For-thi I conseilte alle the commune to lat the catte worthe,
 And be we neuer so bolde pe^{lille} hym to shewe;
 For I herde my sire seyn is seuene yere ypassed,
 There the catte is a kitoun pe caarte is ful elyng."
 ("P. the P.". B. pro. 11.185-190)

The rats themselves need to be kept in order, he says:
 the cat will sometimes catch rabbits, and meanwhile they will be
 safe: if the cat were not there to overrule them, confusion
 would result.

("P. the P.". B. pro. 11.195-200)

from them by ambitious lords who sought their own advancement.

they are, dangerous beasts, who prey upon the commonwealth.

Only by this interpretation can we get any sense out of 'in the City of London', or any humour out of the whole passage".

And as Langland elsewhere represents practically all official classes as being corrupted by Meed, we must suppose that he here refers to those "segges" as a menace to the interests and safety of the poor.

In the trial of Lady Meed at Westminster, several references are made to historical events.

Conscience, in accusing Meed of being responsible for many crimes, declares to the king,

"Yowre fader she felled thorw fals biheste".
("P. the P.". B.pass 111. 1.126)

Meed's reply,

"For kulled I neuere no kyng ne conseilled ther-after".
("P. the P.". B.pass 111. 1.186)

proves that the reference is undoubtedly to the murder of Edward 11. after he had been dethroned through the scheming of Queen Isabella and the unscrupulous and ambitious Mortimer.

Meed, in her defence, declared that it was through the advice of Conscience that the king lost the realm of France.

"In Normandye was he noughte noyed for my sake;

Ac thow thi-self sothely shamedest hym afte,

Crope in-to a kaban for cold of thi nailles,

Wendest that wyntre wolde haue lasted euere,

And draddest to be ded for a dym cloude

And hiedest homeward for hunger of thi wombe".

("P. the P.". B.pass 111. 11.188-193)

"Cowardliche thow, Conscience conseiledest hym thennes,

To leuen his lordeship for a litel siluer,

That is the richest rewme that reyne over houeth".

("P. the P.". B.pass 111. 11.205-7)

The allusion is to the wars in Normandy and to the Peace of Bretigny in 1360, by which Edward III. renounced his claim to the throne of France and restored some of his conquests. The French king was Edward's prisoner, and the Dauphin agreed to pay 3,000,000 crowns of gold for the ransom of his father.

"The sufferings of the English in their previous retreat from Paris to Bretagne were very great, and they encountered a most dreadful tempest near Chartres, with violent wind and heavy hail. Hence the allusions in the text to the cold, to the lengthening out of winter till May, to the dim cloud, and to the famine from which the army suffered,.....Meed suggests that, instead of exacting money, Edward should have foregone it, or even paid some, to secure to himself the kingdom of France." I

At the end of the trial, the king grew angry with Meed for the evils she caused, and with the law for its corruptions. He declared

"Ac resoun shal rekene with you yif I regne any while".

("P. the P.". B.pass 1V. 1.178)

The condition expressed shows that Edward was growing old and knew himself to be near the end of his life.

The first years of Richards reign were filled with the struggles of various factions which tried to govern the young king, and through him, the kingdom. The events of these years (e.g. the Peasants Revolt and the means taken to remedy the labor troubles)

served to show the incapacity of the king's uncles, of the baronage, and of the commons. In 1387 Richard made an attempt to rule as an absolute monarch. This was frustrated by the Lords Appellant, five lords who placed themselves at the head of parliament, overthrew and banished Richard's friends and advisers, Suffolk and Vere, and chose the king's council. Suffolk, formerly De la Pole, had been raised to the peerage from the merchant class. He had no sympathy with the factious baronage and, realising the incapacity of barons and commons alike, had tried to restore orderly government in England by strengthening the royal prerogative: for Richard was a promising boy and seemed to be developing all the good qualities of his father, the Black Prince. The rule of the Lords Appellant proved unsatisfactory and despotic. So at the age of twenty-three Richard assumed the government, dismissed the council chosen for him, and chose his own. He recalled John of Gaunt from Castile to be one of his strongest supporters and protectors. For ten years he ruled quietly, but was preparing to seize autocratic power, which he did in 1397. He shed very little blood, and cannot be called cruel or thriftless.¹ His fall was due to his vain boasting of his power, his petty interferences with the liberties of his subjects, his fits of passion, and senseless acts of injustice to men of minor importance.¹ His subjects felt that their lives and property were not safe under his rule, and that he

was not merely aiming at revenge on his old foes, the Lords Appellant, but at the exercising of a freakish tyranny of which every man would be the victim.¹ In 1398 Richard banished Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, and Norfolk, two of the former Lords Appellant, but now his supporters. John of Gaunt died on the 13th of February, 1399, and Richard seized his lands. Bolingbroke returned to claim his estates and landed in England while the king was absent in Ireland. Many supporters flocked to his standard. Richard, who could also have commanded many supporters, scarcely opposed him, and on September 30th, 1399, signed a formal deed of abdication.

The C. text of "Piers Plowman", written near the end of Richard's reign, contains one or two allusions to the king's unpopularity. In Conscience's indictment of Meed at Westminster, there are several lines added in the C. text. While enumerating the evils which Meed has caused in the realm, Conscience declares,-

"Vnsyttyng Suffraunce hure suster, and hure-selue,

Haue maked al-most bote Marie the helpe,

That no lond loueth the and yut leest thyn owene."

(¹"P. the P. C. pass. lV. 11.208-210)

This is thought by some to be a reference to Richard's unpopularity after he began to rule as an absolute monarch.

Others think it alludes to his quarrel with the Londoners in 1392.² (ms. 119)

¹ Oman, C. "The Political History of England". Vol. lV. Chap. VI. P. 151

We must suppose the latter to be the correct interpretation, as Richard did not assume despotic power until four years after the date assigned to the writing of the C. text. In 1392 the London citizens had been requested to make a loan of £1000. to the Exchequer. On their refusal to do so, a Lombard merchant advanced the money. The enraged citizens assaulted the merchant, and left him for dead. As a punishment for this deed, the mayor was deposed, and the citizens put out of the king's grace. Their old civic constitution was only restored through the mediation of John of Gaunt: the city was fined £10.000.¹

The hatred of foreigners, and especially of the money-lending Jews and Lombards, was at this time intense; and any dealing with them could only prejudice the king in the minds of his subjects. Hence the advice of Conscience to the king against tolerating usury and bribery.

In Meed's defence of herself, when she in her turn arraigns Conscience, the C. text adds many lines: among which, these are supposed to refer to Richard.

"Caytiflyche thow, Conscience consailedist the kyng leten

In hus enemys honde hys heritage of Fraunce.

Vnconnyng ys that conscience a kyngdome to sulle,

That ys conqueryd thorw comune helpe.....".

("P. the P. C. pass 1V. 11.242-5)

¹ Davis. J.F, "Langland. Piers Plowman".

P.XI. (ms. P. 118)

¹ Oman. C, "The Political History of England". Vol.IV. Chap. V. P.12

"I here note that Walsingham (ed. Riley, ii, 170) says that, in the year 1387, a French messenger was caught, on whom was found a compact, by which the king of France was to buy Calais and the adjacent country from Richard".¹

In the B. and C. texts, with the exception of a change in one line, occurs this passage,-

"And thanne come there a kyng and bi his crowne seyde,
I am kyng with creune the comune to reule
And holykirke and clergye fro cursed men to defende.
And if me lakketh to lyue by the lawe wil I take it,
There I may hastlokest it haue for I am hed of lawe;
For ye ben but membres and I aboue alle.
And sith I am yowre aller hed I am yowre aller hele,
And Holycherche chief help and chiftaigne of the comune.
And what I take of yow two I take it atte techynge
Of 'Spiritus iusticie' for I iugge yow alle;
So I may baldely be houseled for I borwe neuere
Ne craue of my comune but as my kynde asketh".

"In condicion", quod Conscience "that thou konne defende
And rule thi rewme in resoun right wel, and in treuth,
Take thou may in resoun as thi lawe asketh".
(¹"P. the P.". B. pass. XLX. 11.462-476)

The last line, in the C. text, reads,

"Than, that thou haue thyn askyng as the lawe asketh."
(²"P. the P!". C. pass. XXII. 1.481)

"The change is very significant; the king is no longer to take, but to ask for what he wants. Richard II. was rapidly falling into disgrace".³

¹ Skeat. W.W. "William Langland's 'Piers the Plowman'", Vol. II. P.49.
² Ibid Vol. II. P.275

We find in text B. a reference to the Hundred Years and the Papal wars.

'It is but a Dido' quod this doctour 'a dysoures tale.
 Al the witt of this worlde and wight mennes strengthe
 Can nought confourmen a pees bytwene the pope and hys enemys
 Ne bitwene two Cristene kynges can no wighte pees make,
 Profitable to ayther peple'.

("P. the P. B. pass XlIII. 11.172-6)

The intervals of peace between England and France were practically armed truces. War broke out afresh on the slightest provocation.

Langland makes several references to the dearths and pestilences which caused so much suffering in England in the latter half of the 14th Century

" . it is nought longe ypassed,

There was a carful comune whan no carte cam to tounne
 With bake bred fro Stretforth tho gan beggeres wepe,
 And werkmen were agaste a litel this wil be thoughte longe.
 In the date of owre dryghte in a drye Apprile
 A thousande and thre hondreth tweis thretty and ten,
 My wafres there were gesen whan Chichestre was maire

("P. the P. B. pass. XlIII. 11.265-71)

Quotations have already been given, in which Langland complains of the corruptions that have arisen in marriage, and in the training of children "since the Pestilence". And Reason proved to the people in the field.

".....that thise pestilences were for pure synne,

And the southwest wynde on Saterdag at euene

Was pertliche for pure pryde and for no poynt elles."

("P. the P.". B.pass V. 11.13-5)

The Black Death reached England in August, 1348, and ravaged the land until the end of September, 1349.¹ "The second pestilence is the one to which William more immediately alludes. It lasted from August 15th, 1361, to May 3rd, 1362."¹

The "southwest wynde " alludes to a violent tempest which occurred on January 15th, 1362, which was a Saturday. Fabyan says - "In this ~~XXXVII~~ yere vpon the daye of seynt Mauryce, or the XV day of Januarii, blewe so excedynge a wynde that the lyke therof was not seen many years passed. This began about euensong tyme in the South." He says it lasted for five days.¹

¹ Skeat. W.W. "William Langland's 'Piers the Plowman'", Vol.11. P.64
1886.

Conclusion.

Before accepting the poem "Piers the Plowman" as an absolutely authentic description of the manners and morals of the 14th, Century, we must remember that it is the work of a reformer; and being such, it emphasises the darker side of human nature, and throws out in bold relief the sins and abuses which the poet was endeavoring to reform. Thus, while he describes vividly the law corrupted by bribery, negligent churchmen abandoning their duties, the luxurious rich heedless of the wants of the poor, and the idle laborers too lazy to work for their livelihood, he gives only occasional glimpses of honest men sincerely endeavouring to do their duty. The king, after the trial of Meed, resolved to rule henceforth with justice and reason; the knight's efforts to assist Piers in making the idle pilgrims work, though ineffectual, were sincere; Piers the Plowman laboured patiently and steadily, followed Truth, and supported the Church. Langland thus shows that among the rulers, nobility, and common people, there were still some who were earnestly trying to fulfill their responsibilities to each other, to the nation, and to the Church. And so, while bearing in mind that the poem emphasises the vices rather than the virtues of the time, we may justly consider "Piers the Plowman" with its descriptions of classes, customs, and men, and with its references to contemporary events, as one of the most interesting and valuable social and historical documents in English literature.

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