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Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ

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INTRODUCTION

IN bringing before the reader a version of this amazing book, I wish, as in the case of my

edition of the Canterbury Tales, to disarm, if I can, the criticism of the scholar. My version is not intended in any sense for those who can read with ease the alliterative poems of the fourteenth or earlier centuries. Knowing, however, that it requires very careful study to read Piers Plowman with ease and pleasure, I have occasionally omitted and always simplified. I have tried to preserve and bring out the meaning, the careless alliteration, and the elusive rhythm. I have regularly modernised the spelling, and have indeed followed the example set by the most learned editor of the poem, who has Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ himself published a modernised text: indeed there are several of such texts in the market. This, as in the case of the Chaucer, is the whole of my offence. The specialist will find echoes from M. Jusserand and Professor Skeat everywhere.

Piers Plowman is regarded as the poor mans book. But, though I hope the spirit is preserved, I have resolutely avoided by any phrase reading into it a special message for to-day. A Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ comment with notes inwoven has indeed called attention to singular survivals, parallels in social life, but these parallels would, even without the reference to them, force themselves upon the attention of any one.

Much has been made about the confusion in the poem; but the main scheme is perfectly clear. Under the favourite form of a vision, it is a picture and an arraignment of the England of Edward III. and Richard II. As the first Isaiah, said to have been a young aristocrat, listened to the call in the Temple, and left Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ a life of ease to act for thirty years as the unsparing critic of the Jerusalem and Judah of his day, so per contra our author, a man of humble extraction, it would seem, and of no social pretension, hurled his invective, his satire, and his grim fun at the London and the England of Chaucers time. He is an Old

Testament prophet with English humour added to Hebrew seriousness. We are, whatever we think of the question of authorship, in the presence of one who when in earnest is terribly in earnest, whether he is describing the great plain which lies below Malvern Hills, or the marriage of Jobbery to Falsehood, or the shriving of Gluttony and Wrath, or the iniquities of the hated lawyers at Westminster, or the beauty of Charity, or the triumphant march on Hell by Piers Plowman, the man Christ Jesus. Picture after picture paints the same story, preaches the same sermon; and the story and the sermon are these. The world is good enough if man were not so bad; the birds sing blissfully enough if underneath there droned not on the note of misery; life is sweet and jolly enough if men were not so bitter; Malvern Hills are fair enough if only in the plain, in the great Field Full of Folk, there were more charity, more honesty, more simplicity, more useful work, and a greater wish to set forth on the great pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is not to Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ Canterbury or Walsingham or Compostella or Rome; it is a pilgrimage to Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ Truth, the saint whom men so regularly disregard.

" Knowest thou a holy saint that men call Truth? Canst thou tell us of the way where that saint dwelleth? "

" God bless me, Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ nay," quoth this fellow then.

" Never saw I palmer with pike-staff and with scrip,

That asked after Truth till ye now in this place."

Instead of seeking Truth, men seek money; instead of honouring Love, they honour Wrath; instead of dealing honestly, they bow down before Pride, Flattery, Bribery, Corruption, and Jobbery, branded under the title of Lady Meed, who is the thin disguise of Alice Ferrers, the infamous mistress of Edward III. Kings are weak, barons are cats that seize and pass about the people of the realm, knights are idle hunters, lawyers are thieves; monks and nuns are no better than they should be, merchants are swindlers, bankers are coin-clippers, and all the wonderful array of papal officers and English churchmen are mere plunderers of the land, pocket-fillers, and cheaters of the people. As for Friars, "there was one good Friar, Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ in the Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ days of Francis, but that was long ago." Neither Wit nor Learning, Scripture nor Imagination, Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ helps the seeker one

jot in his pilgrimage; words, words, words, are the end of them. The working man, God save the mark, is an idler, a drinker, a spoil-work, a wastrel, a loafer, and an unemployable; the professional beggar, with limbs professionally broken for his trade, is no worse Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ than he; and ruffling Regulars, covetous lords, cheating shopmen, idle priests, lying pilgrims, and fine-furred harlots, jostle one another in the chaos of the scene. Through all, warning all, and at times tearing and punishing all, stalk the shadow forms of Plague and Storm and Famine, regularly visiting England, God's messengers to the generation that have clean forgotten Him; and though Piers Plowman may go down to Hell and fetch Humanity from Satan's grip, yet there rises the dread shape of Antichrist and sweeps that sweet and gentle figure from the scene; "and it was night." This is the first impression that one gets of the book known as Piers Plowman; but it is a first impression only. Another reading shows another side. Kings may be weak, but they are resolved to deal sharply with Lady Meed. Reason and Conscience have by no means left the land; they plead passionately for the punishment of Wrong (the king's officer). Barons and knights are not all wicked; they can rule far better than the people could who would try their hand at government; and it is they who will, when the tune comes, bring the Church to the bar of judgment. Gentlemen are willing and even anxious, Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ though almost impotent, to help against the disorders of the day; some lawyers here and there will plead for God's poor and take no fee for it; some monks and nuns stay in their convents, some hermits in their cells, and there they work or pray; some honesty is still left in trade; and a bishop here and there knows his business, and parish priests here and there do not skip away to London, but stay in Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ their parishes and comfort and feed their people. Unity and Peace and Conscience and Charity never cease to do their work in the human heart, and they raise the banner of the Christ in the field of Armageddon. The working man, the real, true, leal, honest, uncomplaining, working man, is up early and hard at work for very few pence; the cottage woman holds her head up and "puts a good face on it;" some Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ of the beggars are Christ's poor who can perform do nothing but lie as Lazarus did at Dives' door; and in the mob that fill

the Malvern plain, stretching to Worcester roofs, are honest traders, good ankers, and a stray

woman of the streets, eager for the great pilgrimage. Through all, warning all, encouraging all, comes at length, though foreshadowed throughout the former scenes, an ordinary man, PIERS PLOWMAN, the people's man, the people's Christ, poor humanity adorned with love, hardworking humanity armed with indignation, sympathetic humanity clad in the intelligence that knows all and—makes allowances; at one Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ tune setting high-born ladies to work, at another passionately attacking the insolent priest, at another calling upon Famine to help him against the loafing, growling wastrel of the streets; but Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ always encouraging Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ the penitent sinful, helping the weak, leading the way in the great journey; a strange figure, Christ in humanity, humanity Christ-clothed, neither all a poor man, nor all a ploughman, nor all a Jesus, but fading and vanishing and reappearing in all forms of his humanised divinity, and ending as the Christ conqueror that from the Cross went down and burst the doors and defied the brazen guns of hell, and brought Piers Plowman's Fruit home with victory; yet, even in this majestic battle with Lucifer and Belial, Ragamuffin and Goblin, no omnipotent God far removed from the cares and sorrows of fourteenth-century England, but—

One like the Good Samaritan and somewhat like Piers Plowman,

Barefoot, bootless, without spur or spear,

Riding on an asses back, brightly he looked

Like one that cometh to be dubbed knight,

To get him his gilt spurs and his slashed shoon.

This is the general picture of the poem, or of such parts as are here wholly or partly transcribed.

The teaching of the book is negative in that, in face of the tremendous issues, it counsels no opposition to King, Church, Barons, or Knights. It is not inflammatory; it is no harbinger of the Reformation, though it contains a startling prophecy of that great event. It cannot be looked upon as anti-papal, though it was written in the tune of the Great Schism; it distinctly disbelieves in the extremes of what the modern world calls democracy, although moral collectivism is its watchword; and it nowhere gives any support to the notion that it foresaw the coming of the great revolt of 1381, or approved of that revolt when it

came. It seems, notwithstanding a few political allusions, to be as remote from politics as are the Gospels themselves, and for the same reason. No form of government, it would say, is in itself bad, if men have the religious spirit; every form of government is bad if they have it not.

On the other hand, the teaching of the book is positive enough, in that it puts its finger on the abuses of the time, lawlessness, falseness, dishonesty, jobbery, money-grubbing, luxury, Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ and idleness. Idleness of all things it cannot away Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ with; the idle rich are scourged Piers Plowman; the

vision of a peoples Christ as much as the idle poor; idleness, with all its accompanying evils—begging, gluttony, dishonourable dealing, simony, neglect of plain duty, luxury senseless and unbridled, idleness is the unpardonable sin; and Professor Minto has sketched a curious parallel between this poem and the teaching of Thomas Carlyle, who possibly never had the book in his hands. If the undecided king is the victim of his circumstances, the wasters among the rich are what they are because they have not enough true work to do. The same may be said of the unworthy prelate—he does not do his true work. It may equally be said of pardoner, merchant, knight, lady, hermit, pilgrim, huckster and hewer, ditcher and delver. Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ Truth (who stands confusedly for God the Father) rules that each man should have his work and do it well; and the heaviest condemnation of Truth is for those in all ranks of life who instead of working go a-hunting or sit by the road and sing " Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ Hey Trolly Lolly " and " God save you, Lady Em." Piers Plowman himself preaches work ; he puts his mittens on and hangs a basket round his neck, a mock pilgrim, and off he goes to plough his half-acre. Indeed, the motto of the poem might be EACH MAN MUST PLOUGH HIS HALF-ACRE ; but it must be ploughed without the thought of self-enrichment at the cost of others. Work is not enough; Pride and Flattery work, traitors work, lechers work, disers and minstrels work, thieves work, Liar works for the Friars, the Friars themselves work, merchants and their 'prentices work, the Pardoner works hard—they are all Judas children. It is not enough to work; a man must work honestly for himself and for his fellows; he must work for his religion, for his king, and for his country.

In the humorous section dealing with his own life, the writer condemns himself for idleness; and we in our day

should say he condemns himself with justice. His definite teaching is that of the Gospel, " The poor ye have always with you: more shame to you. Your rich England should have no poor: it is your bounden duty to rid the world of the miserably poor, and you can do it if you will, by making all work for all." " The poor ye shall have always with you " is a text he never refers to, because he knows that he cannot find it in the Gospels. No autocrat can be more severe than he upon those who will not work. He has one word for the able-bodied loafer, and one alone: "Starve him;" and he knows that such an heroic remedy had not been tried in his own day, any more than it has been tried since.

Along with this gospel of Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ true work for self and others, for home and country, is his definite preaching of home sympathy. England for Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ England is his cry throughout the poem. He hates to see the Pope meddle in the appointment of foreigners to livings Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ that have not fallen vacant; he hates to see men carry Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ good English money to Avignon or Rome; he hates to see men make pilgrimages to St. James and St. Peter, when the pilgrimages they should make are Piers Plowman; the vision of a peoples Christ to jails and hospitals, and to their poorer neighbours cottages. If Englishmen go to Sinai and Bethlehem to seek the saints, for Gods sake let them stay there, he says; we want no such pilgrims here. You can find your true pilgrimage by going the round of your own parish.

Piers Plowman The Vision Of A Peoples Christ

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