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## WILL AND THE PENITENTS: *PIERS PLOWMAN* B X 420-35<sup>1</sup>

By MARIE COLLINS

Just before the first 'inner dream' of the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, Will delivers a tirade prompted by Scripture's remarks on salvation. In the course of this heterodox, dubiously-argued refutation, Will cites four of the great Biblical sinners to support his view that it is easier for the lowly and unsophisticated to achieve salvation than for "wel ylettrede clerkes" (B X 403):

On good Friday, I fynde, a felon was ysaued  
That hadde lyued al his lif wip lesynges and pefte,  
And for he beke[w on] þe cros and to crist shrof hym  
He was sonner ysaued þan seint Iohan þe Baptist  
Or Adam or Ysaye or any of þe prophetes  
That hadde yleyen wip lucifer many longe yeres.  
A Robber was yraunsoned raþer þan þei alle,  
Wipouten penaunce of purgatorie, to perpetuel blisse.  
Than Marie Maudeleyne [who myȝte do] werse?  
Or who [dide] worse þan Daudid þat vries deep conspired,  
Or Poul þe Apostle þat no pite hadde  
Cristene kynde to kille to depe?  
And now ben [swiche] as Souereyns wip Seintes in heuene,  
Tho þat wrouȝte wikkedlokest in world þo þei were;  
And þo þat wisely wordeden and writen manye bokes  
Of wit and of wisdom wip dampned soules wonye.  
(B X 420-35; cf. A XI 271-84 and C XI 255-72)

Will's citation of famous redeemed sinners will be considered in this paper in the light of the orthodox lesson drawn from their careers, and of the usual contexts and ways in which they are put to didactic use. The critical issues raised by the relationship of the A, B and C-texts at the point of the diatribe on salvation will also be discussed. Because of Langland's reworkings, parallels between the texts are approximate: A XI 250-303 (spoken by Will); B X 377-481a (spoken by Will and with a new coda); C XI 201-305 (spoken by Rechelesnesse).

Will's 'roll-call' presents a selection of four of the exemplary penitents often cited, frequently in pairs or lists, by patristic and medieval teachers encouraging ordinary sinners to hope. Peter and Mary Magdalen, the penitent thief and Paul, appear most often, closely followed by David from the Old Testament, Doubting Thomas and Matthew the taxgatherer.<sup>2</sup> Their examples are used to show that God will always receive a contrite sinner who

trusts in His mercy, no matter how great the sin. Of the numerous passages on this theme which could be instanced from the Fathers, Sister Rose Bernard Donna provides a useful selection from Augustine, though in connecting them with the *Piers Plowman* passage under discussion she fails to note Langland's conscious misuse of his list of redeemed sinners.<sup>3</sup> No single patristic or early medieval list can in my view be indicated as the source of the medieval vernacular examples, which vary considerably in content and order: rather, I think we encounter a penitential 'device' which can vary in form and content to fit the immediate purpose. One of the best-known examples must have been Gregory's twenty-fifth homily on the Gospels, on John xx 11-18, referring to the case of Mary Magdalen as a "testis divinæ misericordiæ" ('witness to divine mercy'):

Quid itaque, fratres, quid . . . debemus aspicere, nisi immensam misericordiam conditoris nostri, qui nobis velut in signo ad exemplum pœnitentiæ posuit eos quos per pœnitentiam vivere post lapsum fecit? Perpendo enim Petrum, considero latronem, aspicio Zacchæum, intueor Mariam, et nihil in his aliud video, nisi ante oculos nostros posita spei et pœnitentiæ exempla. Fortasse enim in fide lapsus est aliquis; aspiciat Petrum, qui amare flevit, quod timide negaverat (*Matth.* XXVI, 75). Alius contra proximum suum in malitia crudelitatis exarsit; aspiciat latronem, qui et in ipso mortis articulo ad vitæ præmia pœnitendo pervenit (*Luc.* XXIII, 43). Alius avaritiæ astibus anhelans aliena diripuit; aspiciat Zacchæum, qui si quid alicui abstulit, quadruplum reddidit (*Luc.* XIX, 8)[.] Alius libidinis igne succensus, carnis munditiam perdidit; aspiciat Mariam, quæ in se amorem carnis igne divini amoris excoxit. Ecce omnipotens Deus ubique oculis nostris quos imitari debeamus objicit, ubique exempla suae misericordiæ opponit. (PL 76.1196)

(What, therefore, brothers, what . . . are we to see, except the immeasurable mercy of our Creator, Who has placed before us as if on a banner, as an example of penitence, those whom, through penitence, He caused to live after their fall? For I ponder on Peter, I consider the thief, I look at Zacchæus, I regard Mary [Magdalen], and in these I see nothing other than examples of hope and penitence placed before our eyes. For perhaps one man has fallen away in faith; let him look at Peter, who wept bitterly that he had denied in fear. Another man has burned against his neighbour in the malice of cruelty; let him look at the thief, who even at the point of death itself arrived, by repenting, at the rewards of life. Another man, panting with the heats of avarice, has despoiled another's property; let him look at Zacchæus, who, if he deprived anyone of anything, repaid it fourfold. Another, kindled by the fire of

lustfulness, has lost the purity of his flesh; let him look at Mary [Magdalen], who burned out the love of the flesh in herself with the fire of divine love. See, Almighty God everywhere casts before our eyes those whom we ought to imitate, everywhere places in view examples of His mercy.)

Gregory lists positive examples; Paulinus of Aquileia's *De Salutaribus* (ascribed by the Middle Ages to Augustine) pairs successful and unsuccessful penitents to sharpen the urgency of the need to repent in hope:

Paratus est semper Deus peccata nostra indulgere,  
si non tardaverimus ad eum reverti . . . nec Judam  
suscepit pœnitentem, nec Petrum deseruit flentem,  
nec Saul respexit pœnitentem, nec David despexit  
confitentem. (PL 40.1069)  
(God is always ready to make allowance for our sins,  
if we do not delay turning back to Him . . . He  
neither received the repentant Judas, nor abandoned  
the weeping Peter, nor had regard for the repentant  
Saul, nor turned away from David confessing [his sin].)

Ambrose, in an Epistle, uses the contrasting pair of the penitent thief and Judas to stress God's mercy to the penitent, which is so great that it could have pardoned even the betrayer, had he asked (PL 16.1283). The contrasting pair of Judas and Peter is often similarly used; in Peter's case, the lesson in hope is particularly important not only for the encouragement his case gives others, but also because he, entrusted with the power to bind and loose (Matt. xvi 19, often interpreted as the power to forgive sins, cf. John xx 23), learned from his own experience that he should be as merciful to others as Christ was to him. As Ælfric puts it, elaborating on Bede and Smaragdus:

Why ever did the Almighty Ruler wish to permit His chosen follower, whom He had established as teacher and shepherd for all faithful people, to deny Him so often in cowardice? But Christ the merciful wanted to show him in his own offence how he was to have mercy on other men in various offences, now he has complete possession of the key of the kingdom of heaven, so that he should not be too severe to frail men, but should have mercy on others as the Almighty did on him . . .<sup>4</sup>

Later, St Bernard makes much the same point, though at a higher 'emotional temperature', in his sermon on the feast of Peter and Paul:

Propterea dedit mihi Deus homines istos, qui et homines essent, et peccatores, et maximi peccatores, qui in se ipsis et de se ipsis discerent qualiter aliis misereri deberent. Magnorum enim criminum rei magnis

crimimbus facile donabunt veniam, et in qua mensura mensum est eis, remetientur nobis. Peccavit peccatum grande Petrus apostolus; et fortassis quo grandius nullum est: et tam velocissime, quam facillime veniam consecutus est, et sic, ut nihil de singularitate sui primatus amitteret. (PL 183.405-6)

(God therefore granted me those men [Peter and Paul], to be men, and sinners, and very great sinners, that they might learn in and from themselves how they should have mercy on others. For, guilty of great offences, they will easily grant pardon for great offences, and in the same measure by which it was measured out to them, they will measure out to us. The apostle Peter committed a great sin; and one than which perhaps none is greater: and he obtained pardon with equally great speed and ease, and in such a way that he lost nothing of the unique quality of his pre-eminence.)

Great sinners forgiven were extremely useful to penitential instructors: the mid-ninth-century *Poenitentiale* of Hrabanus Maurus, which goes beyond the usual early medieval 'tariff-manual' of sins, similarly commemorates Peter's lapse and restoration (PL 110.477). As medieval emphasis on private and individual penance developed, instructors found it helpful to multiply examples to hearten their charges, as in the following passage from the earliest of the new-style manuals for confessors, the twelfth-century *Liber Poenitentialis* of Alan of Lille. The confessor is advised to remind the penitent of the vast amount of punishment from which penance can free him:

. . . afferens in exemplum, David, qui per contritionem cordis a peccato est liberatus homicidii et adulterii . . . Mariam Magdalenam per poenitenti[ae] lamenta, a septem dæmoniis liberatam . . . Latronem, cui in cruc[e] pendenti dictum est: *Hodie mecum eris in paradiso* (Luc. XXIII [43]). *Deus enim non vult mortem peccatoris, sed ut convertatur et vivat* (Ezech. XVIII [23]). (PL 210.289)

(. . . citing in illustration, David, who was freed from the sin of murder and adultery by contrition of heart . . . Mary Magdalen, freed from seven devils by penitential weeping . . . the thief, to whom it was said, as he hung on the cross: "Today you will be with me in Paradise". "For God does not wish for the death of a sinner, but that he may be converted and live.")

In medieval didactic and devotional literature, the commemoration of great sinners, whether in single or multiple allusion, appears to be used in three main ways:

- (i) in didactic texts, delivered in tones of pastoral authority, counselling against despair and encouraging hope in contrite sinners;
- (ii) in lyric appeals from Christ to man, combining unchallengeable authority with the tone of personal entreaty as He reminds present

sinners of former instances of His mercies, to persuade them to repent; and

(iii) in first-person supplications and meditations by representative sinners entreating Christ to remember those former mercies and extend them to the present speaker. In these the tone is beseeching and the attitude humble.

These three types, mainly in Middle English, will be examined in turn.

(i) *Didactic pastoral exhortation*

*Ancrene Wisse*, produced at a time of great interest in penitential teaching, contains a chapter on confession. Amongst its many important attributes is the need for hope: "schrift schal beon hopeful".<sup>5</sup> Yet hope, the counter to despair, must be delicately balanced against fear, the counter to presumption, like the grindstones of Deut. xxiv 6 as interpreted by Gregory the Great (PL 76.687-8), for "vntrust 7 ouertrust beoð of alle sunnen nest te 3ete of helle".<sup>6</sup> Examples to induce fear are Cain and Judas, and to induce hope, Peter and the penitent thief:

On oðer half loke. 3ef þu hauest untrust of his [sc. Christ's] unimete milce, hu lihtliche 7 hu sone. seinte peter efter þ he hefde forsaken him. 7 þ for a cwene worð, wes wið him isahtnet. O þe þeof o rode þe hefde aa iliued ueele in a stert hwile hefde him milce wið a feier speche. for þi bitweone þeos twa. Vntrust. 7 ouertrust. hope 7 dred beon aa. ifeiet togederes.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Robert Mannyng's penitential manual *Handlyng Synne* treats Judas as a warning against Wanhope (though remembering the more positive lesson that asking mercy would have won even him forgiveness), pairing him with the penitent thief as an argument for hope:

Beþenke þe weyl of þe þefe  
 þat loued nat God, no was hym lefe, -  
 he þat was hanged on a tre  
 Bysydē Ihesu for vylte;  
 he spēke o wurde at hys endyng.  
 "lordē, haue on me menyng!"  
 And asswyþe ha wan þe prys,  
 And was sent yn-to paradys . . .  
 And, þarfor, dysmay þe nocht  
 For no þyng þat þou hast wroght;  
 For, haue þou do neuer so mykyl . . .  
 with sorow of herte and répentauce  
 þou mayst pay God wyth lytyl penaunce.<sup>8</sup>

The passage continues with a paraphrase of God's pronouncement "Nolo mortem impii" (based on Ezech. xxxiii 11; cf. Ezech. xviii 23), often adduced in such contexts to encourage sinners (cf. Alan

of Lille's *Liber Pœnitentialis*, above p.293). Mannyng's source, Wadington's *Manuel des Pechiez*, teaches the lesson in hope briefly (in ten lines) and generally, without using specific examples. Mannyng's aim for didactic clarity above all, produces a rather laboured explicitness as he adduces almost automatically two obvious negative and positive examples of sinners.

Whereas, in *Ancrene Wisse*, the lesson was originally directed at a small and specific religious audience, in a collection of sermons in British Library, MS Royal 18 B xxiii,<sup>9</sup> there are two pieces employing series of successful penitents, directed at a wider, lay audience. In Sermon 42, a long discursive piece on sin and its remedies, three obstacles to repentance are examined, the second of which is despair. A further distinction of three potential causes of despair is made. Successful penitents are adduced in each case to show that each variety has already been averted by God's mercy: to some people "semeþ þer offence so gret þat God wold not forȝeue hem" but Peter's great offence was followed by such contrition that "þerfore God forȝaue it hym. And dowltes so will he iff þou wolt be sory and aske forȝenes"; some fear that their sins are too numerous and frequent, but the contrite Mary Magdalen received forgiveness despite the multiplicity of her sins; some fear that they have lived too long in sin, "but lat þem be-hold how þat þe þeffe was saved on Good Friday . . . And dowltes as gladly wold þe good Lord resceyve euery synnefull man to mercy þat hertely ashes þer-aftur".<sup>10</sup> Here, as in the other sermon in this manuscript to employ a series of penitents (probably by a different author), their cases are given a more specific orientation than usual; Sermon 32, on sin and forgiveness, follows Ambrose in distinguishing three types of sin, in thought, word and deed, promising to demonstrate that "God haþ mercyfully forȝeven þise synnes" by citing the cases of "iiij worshippfull persones þat are now in þe blis of heven". No man thought more sinfully than Paul who persecuted Christians, yet when God had forgiven him he became "þe grettest prechoure . . . in holychurche". No man spoke more sinfully than Peter at the denial, yet Christ forgave him and raised him to be "prince and maistur of all is apostels". No-one ever acted more sinfully than Mary Magdalen, filled with seven devils, that is, with the seven deadly sins, but she was forgiven for loving God enough to ask mercy. The series is summed up in God's wish, not for a sinner's death, but for his conversion (Ezech. xviii 23 and xxxiii 11, cf. above pp.293 and 294).<sup>11</sup> In both these sermons, the appropriately authoritative stance of a pastoral instructor is clear not only from each preacher's confident tone of voice but also from the professional precision with which each directs his use of selected examples to illustrate a specialised analysis.

Although Christians of all periods have been exhorted to mend their ways before death makes it too late, the literature of the fifteenth century shows particular consciousness of the need to regard life as a preparation for death, as can be seen from mortality lyrics, morality plays and *artes moriendi* of the period. John Audelay in a didactic poem urges the need for cleansing in good time through shrift, and reminds sinners of yet another trio of successful penitents:

Bot aboute His [sc. Christ's] warkis is His mercy,  
 Denke what did Mare Mawdleyne,  
 And Peter þat foresoke him þry  
 Fore þe weys of twey wemen,  
 And Toh[m]as of Ynd þat mysbeleued þen,  
 Al þai had mercy and grace;  
 And so schul haue al Cristyn men  
 Þat wil repent wyle þai han space; . . .<sup>12</sup>

Combining his examples with several commonplaces of penitential literature, Audelay speaks with pastoral authority, addressing the individual sinner as 'thou' (though he later uses the preacher's 'we' to include himself in the lesson of hope), and with a spiritual director's understanding of the need to sustain ordinary people's interest (he enlivens his lesson by giving direct speech to Christ in the stanzas briefly developing the chosen examples).

Men at death's door are particularly vulnerable to the devil's temptation to despair. *The Craft of Deyng* gives as a remedy one of the longer lists of successful penitents (though tersely), combined with commemoration of the Crucifixion in affective Bernardine style (though it is in Christ's lyric appeals from the cross that concentration on the Passion and reference to forgiven sinners achieve their most poignant combination, as in the examples of section (ii) below):

[Christ hung] Inclynand the hed to the heryng, the  
 mouth to þe kysing, the armys to the embrasing, the  
 handis to the gebyn, and al his body to the Rademyng  
 of Synaris, and sua suld na man be dysparyt of godys  
 mercy: For in ensampill thare-of he gaif to the maist  
 synare maist mercy and grace, as to Petyr at denyd  
 hyme, to Paul at persewyt hyme, to matho the okyrrar,  
 to magdalyne the synare, till dauid the murthersar  
 and aduiltrare, to þe þeif that hang besyd hyme one  
 the cros, and to mony vthir that war lange to raherss.<sup>14</sup>

Pastoral awareness of the efficacy of commemorating series of great penitents as a spiritual medicine against despair, is suggested by the survival of the device, virtually unmodified, until a late date and even across the barriers of religious reform in England (this paper takes illustration no further than the seventeenth century). The sermons on the Psalms by John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester and Tudor martyr (d. 1535) incorporate lists of forgiven sinners in utterly traditional manner and contexts: that on Ps. xxxii contains a passage on the need for contrition for all, because no man is sinless, even Peter, Mary Magdalen and numerous others now saints in heaven;<sup>15</sup> later in the same sermon Matthew, Mary Magdalen, Peter and Antony the hermit (a nonce-appearance in such a list, to my knowledge) substantiate the point that God "entyseth" sinners to penitence by His benefits;<sup>16</sup> the sermon on Ps. li uses, like *Ancrene Wisse*, Gregory's comparison of fear and hope to Deuteronomy's two millstones, grinding sin away between them. Whereas this was shortly followed in *Ancrene Wisse* by the



opposition of Cain and Judas to Peter and the penitent thief, Fisher follows it with successful penitents only, Peter, Mary Magdalen and David "oure prophete".<sup>17</sup> The sermon on Ps. cxlii illustrates God's universally merciful nature by the cases of the kings David, Nebuchadnezzar, Ahab and Hezekiah and of the commoners Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalen, the woman taken in adultery, the "publycane" (Matthew) and the penitent thief, not to mention "other innumerable".<sup>18</sup>

At about the time of John Fisher's martyrdom, William Bonde, a brother of Syon Monastery, Isleworth, a centre notable for its use of the early printing-presses to reach a lay audience, had printed *A Deuoute Epystle or Treatyse for them that ben tymorouse and fearefull in Conscience*, a treatise against scrupulosity (a form of religious over-anxiety easily leading to despair). In Bonde's argument against despair, the infinite mercy of God is evidenced by Christ's choice of sinners as intimates:

Why thynkest thou. that our most marcyfull sauour  
Jesu dyd chuse to his singular famylyarite. Mathew.  
Peter. Paule. Zache. mari Magdalen and mary the  
Egipcian / 7 the thefe and blasphemar that honge on  
his right syde. wyth innumerable mo grete syners.  
that now byn holy saintes in heuen. but only that  
thou shuldest neuer despayre . . .<sup>19</sup>

The near-contemporary Erasmus, by temperament more aloof satirist than earnest spiritual director, uses the penitents with an unusual combination of quasi-pastoral exhortation and sharp reproof in his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (here quoted in the sixteenth-century English translation):

We haue also lerned, yf holy men haue done any thyng  
not to be counterfayted or folowed, to take that onely  
of them and drawe it in to the ensample of luyng  
. . . But yf it delyte men so greatly to counterfayte  
holy synners / I do not gaynsaye them / so that they  
counterfayte them hole and all togyder. Thou hast  
folowed Dauyd in adultery / moche more folowe hym in  
repentaunce. Thou hast counterfayted Mary Magdaleyne  
a synner / counterfayte her . . . castynge her selfe  
downe at the fete of Iesu. Thou hast persecuted the  
churche of god, as Paule dyd / thou hast forsworne  
thy selfe as Peter dyd: Se lykewyse that thou stretche  
forthe thy necke for the fayth and relygion of  
Chryste, after the ensample of Paule / and that thou  
feare not the crosse no more than Peter. For this  
cause god suffreth euen greate and ryght excellent  
men also to fall in to certayne vyces / that we whan  
we haue fallen, sholde not despayre: but with this  
condicyon / yf that we, as we haue ben theyr felowes  
in synnyng and doying amysse / euen so wyll be theyr  
companyons and parteners in the amendynge of our  
synnes and mysdedes.<sup>20</sup>

The seventeenth century gives us a treasury of medieval common-places *contra desperationem* as well as of eclectic modern scholarship in the final chapter of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, on the cure of despair (the culmination of the section on religious melancholy). God's mercy ("a panacea, a balsam for an afflicted soul, a sovereign medicine, an alexipharmacum for all sin") was

. . . great to Solomon, to Manasseh, to Peter, great to all offenders, and whosoever thou art, it may be so to thee . . . Who persecuted the Church more than Paul, offended more than Peter? and yet by repentance (saith Chrysologus) they got both *magisterium et ministerium sanctitatis* . . . God of His bounty and mercy calls all to repentance (Rom. ii 4); thou mayst be called at length, restored, taken to His grace, as the thief upon the cross at the last hour, as Mary Magdalen and many other sinners have been, that were buried in sin . . . A denying Peter, a persecuting Paul, an adulterous cruel David, have been received; . . . no sin at all but impenitency can give testimony of final reprobation.<sup>21</sup>

Burton's exhortation is in part, at least, directed inwards: composing the *Anatomy* was self-therapeutic by his own admission ("I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy"<sup>22</sup>). Yet it is notable that so idiosyncratic a man turned to an established 'public' tradition for comfort here, speaking, as an Anglican cleric, with authority as firm as that of any Catholic predecessor.

The seventeenth century also sees the penitents in the context of a fine late flowering of the *ars moriendi*, Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*. It is in many ways not far in spirit from its Catholic predecessors, including, for example, "An Exercise against Despair, in the Day of our Death" and corresponding "Considerations against Presumption". In the argument against despair, Taylor gives a baroque turn to his use of the sinners' cases as illustrations of God's mercy by introducing them with a gorgeous extended simile, whilst preserving a medieval mode of thought in his use of the Old Testament to prefigure the New:

And as the sun, passing to its southern tropic, looks with an open eye upon his sun-burnt Ethiopians, but at the same time sends light from its posterns and collateral influences from the back-side of his beams, and sees the corners of the east when his face tends towards the west, because he is a round body of fire, and hath some little images and resemblances of the Infinite: so is God's mercy; when it looked upon Moses, it relieved St. Paul, and it pardoned David, and gave hope to Manasses, and might have restored Judas, if he would have had hope, and used himself accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

(ii) *Appeals by Christ*

Lyric appeals by Christ which cite forgiven sinners as examples to hearten penitents are, obviously, more personal and emotive in tone than pieces of pastoral didacticism, not only because Christ addresses the individual soul, but also because He is generally recalling personal experience of showing mercy to people He knew in His earthly life. Christ instances both failures and successes to stress His merciful nature in "The Dollorus com-plant of oure lorde Apoune þe croce Crucifyit" (extant in three manuscripts, one printed text, and adapted for incorporation into the Towneley Play of the Resurrection):

I wes wraith with Iudas  
ffor he wald me na marcy as,  
Than I wes for his gret trespas  
Quhen he me sauld.  
I wes reddy  
to gif marcy --  
Ask he nocht wald . . .

[A stanza follows saying much the same of Cain]

Sanct peter, þat me thris forsuke  
Apoun a nycht, as sayis þe buke,  
Vnto my mercy he him tuke --  
My marcy gat he --  
In hert had cair  
þat he sa sair  
Had grevit me.

Paule, Magdalen and mony ma,  
That in þis warld wrocht mekill wa,  
Without marcy past nocht me fra,  
Quhen thai It aste.  
But þair askyng  
in alkin thing  
Thai had als fast.

The theif þat hang on my rycht syid,  
Ane littill quhile befor he deit,  
Efter mercy sa fast he cryit  
On reuthfull wise.  
Thairfor with me  
þe day Is he  
In paradise.<sup>24</sup>

Urgent tenderness comes to the fore in Christ's expression of reluctance to lose the soul of the sinner addressed and in His entreaty: "Now ask mercy, / þi fader am I, / And thou my barne" (lines 138-40). Rosemary Woolf felt that the section on sinners unbalanced the poem, and guardedly wondered whether, since the Kele print and the Towneley play-text have only the 'Judas' stanza, the rest might not be an addition.<sup>25</sup> Bearing in mind the tradition of commemorating

great sinners to encourage other penitents, I would prefer to argue that the poem in the fuller versions of the manuscripts seems more likely to reflect its primary function as a tool for meditative use,<sup>26</sup> and that the Towneley play probably represents an abbreviation suited to a dramatic context, retaining what in the setting of a cycle would be the most potent object-lesson, Christ's willingness to forgive even Judas (whom the audience has just watched in the act of betrayal) had he not despaired. Miss Woolf otherwise saw the lyric in the tradition explored in this paper, relating it to a Latin penitential prayer recorded in an early sixteenth-century French manuscript, and observing that good poetry could be made out of the examples of penitents: she instanced, from *Piers Plowman*, the "fine passage" about Robert the Robber (B V 461ff.), but curiously, did not comment on the use of the penitents in the passage discussed in this paper.<sup>27</sup>

Briefer use of the sinners is made in other complaints of Christ to encourage penitents. In a long lyric recorded in variant versions in two Lambeth Palace Library manuscripts (306 and 853), various emotional appeals are addressed to the audience: an entreaty to consider Christ's wounds is followed by an appeal to friendship, supported by instances of Christ's forbearance to His earthly companions:

Wayte what ded [MS 853 what y dide to] Mary Mawdeleyne,  
And what I seyð to thomas of Inde;  
I graunte the blysse, why lovys thou peyne?  
why art þou to thy Frende onkynde?<sup>28</sup>

A similar progression from the wounds of the Passion to Christ's mercies to the sinful is made in a lyric in Cambridge University Library, MS Hh. iv. 12, a free expansion of the brief Latin appeal "In cruce sum pro te, qui peccas; desine, pro me, / Desine; do veniam; dic culpam, retraho penam":

I had, on petyr and magdaleyne, pite  
For the gret constrent of there contricion;  
Gayne thomas Indes incredulite,  
he put hys [hand] depe in my side adowne;  
Rolle up thys mater, graue it in thy reson;  
Sith I am kynd, why art þou so vnstable?  
My blod, best triacle for thy tran[s]gression;  
Why art thow froward, sith I am merciåble?<sup>29</sup>

The lesson is put with more explicitness if less urgent entreaty by Christ in "Man, þus on rode I hyng for þe". He declares His readiness to receive any penitent, however wicked previously, "Euer arely & late" (a powerful revivification of a rhyme-tag if ever there was one), and shortly follows this with concrete instances:

In my mercy dispaire þou noght,  
Sen I þe so dere haue boght,  
And ensauple þou take

Of synfull Mary maudelayne,  
 Dat with syn was gastly slayne  
 And sythen gan it for-sake.

All-so ensauple may pou luke  
 Of saint Peter þat me for-soke  
 And sythen rewed it sare.  
 Mercy had þai some of me;  
 Man þe same I will do þe  
 Þarfor lete at my lare.<sup>30</sup>

(iii) *Individual petitions*

Whereas in the complaints, Christ uses the examples of forgiven sinners (usually his own associates) to combine the personal with the doctrinal in the lesson about mercy, in appeals from sinners to Christ for mercy, the relationship between saviour and man is presented from a very different angle. Whereas it is right and proper for Christ to encourage sinners to see themselves on the same footing as the great penitents, to hearten them, it would be presumptuous of any sinner to claim that as of right. Lyric supplications remind Christ of instances of His merciful forgiveness, but humbly suggest, rather than confidently claim, that the contrite speaker might be treated like Peter, the thief or Mary Magdalen. A Latin verse-prayer by Pope Leo IX (d. 1054) reinforces the suggestion by a verbal echo making the connection indirectly: the stanza supplicating on the speaker's behalf opens with the appeal "Respice . . .", and the three subsequent stanzas open with "Rexpexisti quondam Petrum", "Rexpexisti et latronem" and "Rexpexisti at [sic] Mariam", each developing the allusion further.<sup>31</sup> This pattern also appears vestigially in the Latin prose prayer referred to by Rosemary Woolf (see above p.300 and n.27).

In the *Dies Irae* of the Office for the Dead, probably a thirteenth-century Franciscan product, the lesson in hope of two penitents is alluded to in a context combining terror with tenderness (in which Christ can be addressed as both "iuste iudex ultionis", 'righteous Judge of vengeance', and "Iesu pie", 'compassionate Jesus'):

Qui Mariam absolvisti  
 Et latrone[m] exaudisti,  
 Mihi quoque spem dedisti.<sup>32</sup>  
 (You, who freed Mary [Magdalen] from sin,  
 and gave ear to the thief, have also  
 given me hope.)

To commemorate the great sinners when one is in the extreme strait of contemplating the General Judgment is to testify incidentally to their strongly positive power to encourage; as we have already seen from the *artes moriendi*, their cases are equally potent for individuals facing death and particular judgment, as in this "Orison on the Passion" from the Wheatley Manuscript:

Ihesu, I pray, forsake nought me  
 Gyf I of synne gylty be,  
 For to þat theef þat hongre the by  
 Redily þow gaue hym þi mercy.

Ihesu, þat greet curtasye  
 Maketh me holde on the to crye,  
 For wele I woot with-outen drede  
 Thi mercy is more þanne my mysdede.

Ihesu, þat art soo leue and dere,  
 Here and spede this poure preyer;  
 For Paule, tha[t] was so felle and woode  
 To spille Cristen mennes blode,  
 To the wolde he no preyer make,  
 And 3it thow wolde hym nought forsake.

Thanne may þow noght forsake me,  
 Sithen þat I preye thus to the;  
 At my dying I hoope i-wys  
 Of thy presence shal I not mys.<sup>33</sup>

The suppliant carefully makes plain that his 'boldness' in calling to Christ, citing the cases of the thief and Paul, is made possible only by the very existence of such previous models of Christ's great 'courtesy' in demonstrating that His mercy surpasses His justice. Any charge of presumption is thereby deftly avoided.

In the lyric entitled by Carleton Brown "A Dialogue between Natura Hominis and Bonitas Dei" the form itself provides for the expression of both sides of the coin, humble supplication and divine reassurance. Natura Hominis uses the case of Mary Magdalen as a reminder to Christ of His mercy, and that of Peter as an encouraging 'figure' of it, in two stanzas separated by a stanza of encouragement from Bonitas Dei in which Christ Himself speaks of His redemptive acts:

[Natura Hominis] Þat mercy, lord, take þu to mynde,  
 þat þu wold schewe to Maudeleyn;  
 Thynke þat þu art of owre kynde,  
 let noght mane-kynde þoro synne be sleyn . . .

[ " " ] Lord, of þi mercy fygur I fynde,  
 On Petur qwen I caste my thoghte;  
 How þat he was to þe vn-kynde,  
 & seyde þat he knewe þe noghte.  
 þu lokudste one hym with mylde mode,  
 aftur mercy hertly can he cry.  
 As þu for vs wold schede þi blode,  
 mercyful god, I cry mercy!<sup>34</sup>

To generalise briefly: works of devotional and instructive literature citing the cases of great penitents, balance very carefully the elements of hope and fear, confidence and supplication, according to the proprieties demanded by the speaker's status and by the circumstances of delivery, a thought to bear in mind when returning to the passage from *Piers Plowman* quoted at the opening of this paper. Priscilla Martin, writing of the A-text version (to which the B-text remains quite close in Will's tirade), comments that "the errors into which the dreamer falls at the end of A would be obvious to any educated Christian".<sup>35</sup> Among the "errors" of the tirade we may count Will's use of the penitents in A and B. He goes wrong in several respects:

- (i) in treating the penitents as counters in arguing his (actually faulty) case, Will speaks as if he were a clerical controversialist with some didactic authority, thus pretending to a status inappropriate to the sinner in need of repentance which he really is;
- (ii) Will's confident, even aggressive, tone of voice is entirely inappropriate, in his position, to citing the cases of the penitents. We have seen how suppliant sinners employing this device in devotional literature are carefully dissociated from presumption, using their examples of forgiven sinners only as emotionally-persuasive reminders to Christ or themselves, never as points to score in argument. Only Christ, and His representatives, the clergy, can cite the sinners with a confident (but never aggressive) tone to instil hope in the timorous. Will has overbalanced into presumption;
- (iii) in any case, Will uses the penitents to back the wrong argument. Normally they appear as an inducement to hope, or as an argument against despair, for latter-day sinners hovering on the brink of repentance. Will may give an incidental nod of recognition to the thief's 'shrift' on the cross, but he cites the penitents to prove, not the value of true contrition or the hope their cases give latter-day penitents, but rather, that educational and theological sophistication are no help, and even a hindrance, to salvation. This is neither the traditional nor the proper function of adducing the great penitents.

Ironically, although "wel y-lettrede clerkes" would have little trouble in making these fairly obvious criticisms of Will's use of the penitents, "lewed Iuttes" (B X 467) might be misled, thus imperilling their chances of salvation. Langland seems to have felt unease about the effect of Will's whole diatribe on salvation. In the C-text, the equivalent material has undergone extensive re-shaping: it is spoken, not by Will, but by a character newly brought to prominence, Rechelesnesse the kinsman of Wanhope (ironically, the proper target against which the examples of the penitents ought to be directed). Derek Pearsall, in his C-text edition, offers a convincing suggestion of why Langland re-allocated the material: "the immediate purpose of extending [Rechelesnesse's] role in C is so as to allocate to him the intellectual questionings concerning learning and salvation attributed to the dreamer of AB, and in so doing to discredit them explicitly, or at least to withdraw from them any hint of authorial sanction" (note to C XI 196). A major

contributory factor to Langland's general anxiety about the heterodox passage on salvation was arguably the potential danger for the uncritical of missing the errors in Will's citation of the penitents. Their power to encourage, to judge from the examples examined earlier, must have been so strong for sinful humans, and their cases must have been used so frequently as a spiritual medicine by confessors and teachers, that citing them could have been too easily accepted at face value as a convincing argument, whereas questions have to be asked about the speaker's position and attitude and about the context in which they appear here. To re-allocate to Rechelesnesse the diatribe in which they appear sounds the moral 'red alert' loud and clear, removing, as Pearsall says, any inadvertent "hint of authorial sanction". Each of the texts of *Piers Plowman* has its qualities; as Pearsall remarks, "discrimination of relative merit is . . . a highly subjective matter, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of the different versions of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*" (Introduction to his C-text edition, p.10). The re-allocation of the whole of Will's diatribe on salvation, including the passage on the penitents, in the C-text, makes large-scale changes consistent with Pearsall's view of the revision's overall purpose as "reshaping and clarifying the general outline of the poem . . . C may be less exciting, but it makes better sense" (Introduction, p.11). It is certainly easier to tell at a glance that a speech by Rechelesnesse on the topic of salvation is likely to be misguided. Yet on a smaller scale, the C-text's tendency to clarify and amplify creates some anomalous effects. In the passage on the penitents, Will in the B-text gives Mary Magdalen and David a line each:

Than Marie Maudeleyne [who my3te do] werse?  
Or who [dide] worse þan Dauid þat vries deep conspired {?}  
(B X 428-9)

Rechelesnesse in the C-text is more circumstantial, giving a thumb-nail sketch of their stories rather like an anxious pastor afraid that his flock may need prompting with the relevant details, which runs counter to Rechelesnesse's function:

Then Marie Maudelene who myhte do worse  
As in likyng of lecherye, no lyf denyede?  
Or Dauid þe douhty þat deuyned how Vrye  
Mouhte sleylokeste be slawe and sente hym to worre,  
Lelly, as by his lokes, with a lettere of gyle?  
(C XI 264-8)

The C-text's overall gain in clarity in its treatment of the diatribe on salvation (even if tempered locally as in the passage just examined) involves a loss, too, as Pearsall's comment "C may be less exciting, but it makes better sense" indicates. The C-text's Will has been stripped of a powerful instance of his B-text equivalent's wrongheaded doctrinal pugnacity, of his delight in crying "'Contra!' . . . as a clerik" (B VIII 20), which has its own didactic usefulness as a safety-valve for the audience's rebelliousness, functioning rather like the sneaking sympathy permitted early



in the progress of a morality-play with the 'mankind'-figure as he sows his moral wild oats. We can learn with Will corrected by "maistres" (B XI 80), as we can learn with Mankynde taught by Mercy and experience, the lesson of the penitents of which he stands badly in need, which we could never learn with Rechelesnesse: *Sola contricio [delet peccatum]* (B XI 81a).<sup>36</sup>

NOTES

- 1 The *Piers Plowman* editions referred to are as follows: for the A-text, Thomas A. Knott and David C. Fowler, ed., *Piers the Plowman: a Critical Edition of the A-Version* (Baltimore and London, 1952); for the B-text, George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, ed., *Piers Plowman: the B-Version* (London, 1975); for the C-text, Derek Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman by William Langland: an Edition of the C-text* (London, 1978).
- 2 Other Biblical and apocryphal penitents sporadically join them (Nebuchadnezzar, Ahab, Manasseh, Zacchaeus, Mary the Egyptian, for example), as in some of the passages quoted in this paper.
- 3 Sister Rose Bernard Donna, *Despair and Hope: a Study in Langland and Augustine* (Washington, 1948) pp.164-72.
- 4 Translated from Malcolm Godden, ed., *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series Text*, EETS SS 5 (London, 1979), p.142, and cf. Bede, *In Lucae Evangelium Expositio*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout, 1960) p.392 and Smaragdus, PL 102.185.
- 5 J.R.R. Tolkien, ed., *Ancrene Wisse: Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 402*, EETS OS 249 (London, 1960) p.170.
- 6 *Ancrene Wisse*, p.170.
- 7 *Ancrene Wisse*, p.171.
- 8 F.J. Furnivall, ed., *Robert of Brunne's Handlyng Synne* [and its French original], EETS OS 119, 123 (London, 1901-3; repr. as one vol., 1973) p.171, lines 5203-10, 5219-21, 5227-8.
- 9 Woodburn O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B xxiii*, EETS OS 209 (London, 1940 for 1938; repr. 1960).
- 10 *Middle English Sermons* . . . , pp.275-6.
- 11 *Middle English Sermons* . . . , pp.163-5.
- 12 Ella Keats Whiting, ed., *The Poems of John Audelay*, EETS OS 184 (London, 1931 for 1930) p.86, lines 144-51.
- 13 E.g.: that penitential tears can quench purgatorial fire like the sea quenching a spark (*Poems of Audelay*, p.86, lines 152-6); that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one reformed sinner than over "iiij score" righteous (*ibid.*, pp.86-7, lines 157-62); that Christ did not come to save the righteous, but sinners (*ibid.*, p.87, lines 165-9); that Christ, in His mercy to Peter, porter of Paradise, taught him to be as merciful to others as Christ had been to him (*ibid.*, p.88, lines 196-208).
- 14 *The Craft of Deyng*, in J. Rawson Lumby, ed., *Ratis Raving, and Other Moral and Religious Pieces, in Prose and Verse*, EETS OS 43 (London, 1870) pp.3-4.
- 15 John E.B. Mayor, ed., *The English Works of John Fisher*, EETS ES 27 (London, 1876) pp.33-4.

- 16 Works of Fisher, p.39.
- 17 Works of Fisher, pp.114-15.
- 18 Works of Fisher, p.248.
- 19 William Bonde, *A Deuoute Epystle or Treatyse for them that ben tymorouse and fearefull in Conscience* (Michael Fawkes, London, ?1535) f.xxvV.
- 20 Anne M. O'Donnell, S.N.D., ed., *Erasmus: Enchiridion Militis Christiani: an English Version*, EETS OS 282 (London, 1981) pp.165-6.
- 21 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London, 1932; repr. 1978) pp.411, 413, 414, 420 (twice).
- 22 *Anatomy of Melancholy*, p.20.
- 23 Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, ed. Israel Gollancz (London, 1901) pp.303-4.
- 24 Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* (Oxford, 1939) pp.154-5 (poem 102, lines 99-105, 113-33).
- 25 Rosemary Woolf, *English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968) p.204 and n.5.
- 26 Though, as Woolf, *English Religious Lyric . . .*, p.204, n.5, points out, the verses about the forgiven sinners occur in a different arrangement in London, British Library, MS Addit. 37049, this need not mean that the stanzas are accretions to the original poem; they may simply have been rearranged in that MS or its exemplar. Compare, for example, the variant order of stanzas in the thirteenth-century lyric entitled by Carleton Brown "Of One That Is So Fair and Bright" (see Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford, 1932) pp.24-7).
- 27 Woolf, *English Religious Lyric . . .*, p.204.
- 28 Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Political, Religious and Love Poems . . . from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth MS. No. 306, and Other Sources*, EETS OS 15 (London, 1866) p.194 (MS 306); cf. p.195 (MS 853).
- 29 Furnivall, *Political, Religious and Love Poems . . .*, p.142.
- 30 Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century* (Oxford, 1924; corrected edn. by G.V. Smithers, 1957; repr. 1970) p.61. This poem, like the previous one quoted (see n.29 above) is headed by the Latin tag "In cruce sum pro te (etc.)": see Brown's notes pp.261-2.
- 31 G.M. Dreves, ed., *Hymnographi Latini: Lateinische Hymnendichter des Mittelalters*, *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* 50 (Leipzig, 1907) pp.306-7.
- 32 C. Blume and H.M. Bannister, ed., *Liturgische Prosen des Übergangsstiles und der zweiten Epoche*, *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* 54 (Leipzig, 1915; repr. Frankfurt a.M., 1961) p.269.
- 33 Mabel Day, ed., *The Wheatley Manuscript* [London, British Library, MS

Additional 39574], EETS OS 155 (London, 1921 for 1917) pp.5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, pp.165-6.

<sup>35</sup> Priscilla Martin, *Piers Plowman: the Field and the Tower* (London and Basingstoke, 1979) p.24.

<sup>36</sup> I am very grateful to my colleague James Simpson and to my co-editors for helpful conversations about this paper, and to Robert Ireland for checking the translations.