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How to Read Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in Piers Plowman

Curtis Gruenler
Hope College, gruenler@hope.edu

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By Curtis Gruenler

Perhaps the most enigmatic story of a riddle contest in European literature is told in a scene near the middle of *Piers Plowman* known as the Banquet of Conscience. It draws on a bewildering variety of riddling forms current in the fourteenth century, from the most arcane Latin riddle tricks to popular stories of riddle contests, all of which distill ancient and widespread riddling traditions. The prominence of such materials in one of the poem's most dynamic scenes suggests that the whole scene might best be read as a riddle contest. Indeed, I propose reading it in light of what were probably the two best-known stories of riddle contests at the time, one about a saint and one about the peasant trickster named Marcolf. In Langland's hybrid contest, the contestants become not merely characters but representations of modes of discourse. The winner is the enigmatic mode itself: this scene uses riddling as a form to intensify the poem's focus on a pervasive poetic mode oriented toward open-ended interpretation of mystery. Moreover, this enigmatic mode grows in authority here, on its way to becoming the poem's dominant, most far-reaching voice, precisely and paradoxically through its association with both saints and fools. Langland's scene thus consolidates and extends a medieval tradition of riddle contests, one that has yet to be adequately considered as such by modern scholars. It shows how the play of riddling, when incorporated into larger literary forms, can reach toward the theological implications of the verse that so fascinated medieval thinkers, "We see now through a mirror in a riddle, but then face to face."[1]

Whereas interpretation of the riddles in the Banquet of Conscience has begun with what they mean, even more important is *how* they mean. Like the characters in this scene, readers of *Piers Plowman* find themselves in the middle of a high-stakes game of interpretation. Knowledge of prior riddle contests makes the invita-

[1] 1 Corinthians 13.12, my translation of the Vulgate, "Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate; tunc facie ad faciem," in *Biblio sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber et al., 3rd corr. ed. (Stuttgart, 1983), which is in turn a direct translation from the original Greek. The better-known English phrase, "We see now through a glass darkly," which comes from the 1560 Geneva Bible by way of the King James Version, obscures the Greek term *ainigma*. The Challoner edition of the Douay-Rheims translation, which I use elsewhere for translations from the Vulgate, reads, "We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face" (Baltimore, 1899; repr., Rockford, Ill., 1971).

tion to this game more recognizable and can illuminate the models Langland offers, in the characters of Patience and the narrator Wille, of how to play. Patience, who wins the contest as both mystic riddler and holy fool, becomes one of the poem's several bearers of enigmatic authority, while the more comprehensive and perplexing folly of Wille mediates and models its reception. Both figures situate the reader of *Piers Plowman* within an appropriation—even culmination—of riddling traditions. Because Langland's use of these traditions is so complex, because his precise sources for them are indeterminable, and because they have scarcely been studied together, it will be necessary to collect rather widely their principal relevant features before returning to the Banquet of Conscience.

Riddle contests belong to the larger, more diffuse category of riddling dialogues, which make explicit the dialogic situation already implied by riddles that stand alone or occur one after another in collections. Sometimes medieval riddles survive situated in other contexts, like the letter within which Aldhelm enclosed his collection of *Enigmata* or the history that surrounds the riddles in the so-called John Ball letters. Even here we can see the use of riddles to form community around a means of knowing that yields not just a coded solution but a way of looking at (and being in) the world. A fuller sense of the uses of riddling comes when it happens in a story. Riddle contests are integrated into medieval narratives in a variety of ways and take so many forms that the category of riddle contest, like the category of riddle itself, has thick and fuzzy borders. One way of organizing this variety, however, is in a spectrum according to the importance of the riddle contest to the story. In the middle is the basic folktale form of a brief story focused on a riddle contest. On one side is the riddling dialogue, in which the frame story diminishes sometimes to no more than identification of the speakers and the only narrative is the back-and-forth exchange, with no explicit stakes attached. On the other side would range more elaborate stories that involve riddles but do not focus on them or set them off from the rest of the narrative as part of a formal contest. At the extreme in this direction might be *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* a romance built around interlocking games—beheading, exchange of winnings, hunting, seduction—that are conducted and expressed, especially in part 3, with verbal indirection and polysemy that give them an air of riddling, even though there are no riddles per se. A brief survey of this spectrum will prepare for more extended consideration of two texts that seem especially to have shaped how these traditions inform the Banquet of Conscience: the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf and the story of St. Andrew and the Three Questions. Here, as with riddles that survive outside of dialogues, Christian authors adapted and redirected classical and folk traditions. In this case there is more evidence of continuity from the Old to Middle English periods, but no genius of reinterpretation like Aldhelm—until Langland, who combines the two main medieval developments of riddle-contest tradition, one in which the riddle master is a wise fool and the other in which he is a saint, in order to construct his poem's mature, enigmatic voice.

Riddles as Masterplot

Christine Goldberg, in a thorough analysis of folktales from Indo-European cultures that feature riddle contests, cites several literary examples from medieval

Europe.[2] Two classical stories known in the Middle Ages can serve to locate the center of the spectrum of riddle contests. Both end in failure to solve a riddle. In one, the poet Homer dies because he can't solve a riddle posed to him by some fisher boys: "We have what we did not find; what we did find we left behind."[3] Similarly, in a contest between the Greek soothsayers Calchas and Mopsus, Calchas dies for shame when he cannot say how many apples are on a certain tree.[4] More famously, Oedipus succeeds in solving the riddle of the Sphinx, but his story is the kind in which the riddle challenge leads to a more serious game that begins when the challenge seems done.[5] The Sphinx's riddle itself exemplifies enigmas that are far from random but rather gain resonance within a larger story, such as Oedipus's tragic self-discovery. These classical stories imply that even a master of the game, whether he answers well or not, will in the end be mastered by it.

Two major medieval romances parallel the story of Oedipus by making riddle contests part of a longer narrative and also by sharing that story's elements of incest and recognitions of identity. True to the shift from tragedy to romance, however, the resolutions become comic rather than tragic. In the story of Apollonius of Tyre, the hero successfully negotiates, in some versions, as many as three separate riddle sessions. One of the most popular nonreligious stories throughout the Middle Ages, it descends from a lost Greek or Latin original from the late-classical era and was common across Europe in Latin as well as vernacular versions.[6] Inverting the story of Oedipus, Apollonius escapes the doom of incest at the outset of the

[2] Christine Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters: A Study of the Folktale AT 851,* Garland Folklore Library 7 (New York, 1993). While Goldberg focuses on one tale type among several in the Aarne-Thompson classification that involve riddling (revised by Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography,* FF Communications 284 [Helsinki, 2004]), her study is a good guide to others as well. I depend heavily on her overview of and contribution to the extensively studied topic of riddle tales and will not duplicate her bibliography. The other main classificatory scheme for folklore, Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature,* rev. ed., 6 vols. (Bloomington, Ind., 1955; repr., 1989), includes a long section of riddle motifs under the larger category "Tests," H530–886.

[3] The answer is lice; see Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters,* pp. 15–16. See also Daniel B. Levine, "Poetic Justice: Homer's Death in the Ancient Biographical Tradition," *Classical Journal* 98 (2002–3), 141–60. This story of Homer's death is included in the *Alphabetum narrationum* (see Frederic C. Tubach, *Index exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales,* FF Communications 204 [Helsinki, 1969], no. 2597); Vincent of Beauvais includes the story but not the riddle itself (*Speculum historiale* [Douai, 1624], 3.87). The riddle on lice is widespread (Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* [Berkeley, Calif., 1951], pp. 159–60). Another similar story is the death of Croesus after misinterpreting a riddling oracle (in Herodotus) or dream (in medieval versions such as Chaucer's at the end of the Monk's Tale).

[4] Alluded to in the *Eclogue* of Theodulus. See Ian Thomson and Louis Perraud, *Ten Latin Schooltexts of the Later Middle Ages,* Mediaeval Studies 6 (Lewiston, N.Y., 1990), p. 143 and note.

[5] See Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters,* pp. 13–15. In English, the fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate tells the story of Oedipus in his *Siege of Thebes* with a highly elaborated version of the riddle of the Sphinx (ed. Axel Erdmann, EETS ES 108 and 125 [London, 1911–30], 1:29, lines 659–78), but Latin and French versions would also have been known in England.

[6] See Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters,* pp. 18–20. We know it was translated once into Old English and twice into Middle English (once by John Gower as the last story of the *Confessio Amantis*), and it is the source for Shakespeare's *Pericles.* Critics have discussed the connection between the riddles and both incest and the story's redemptive turns (see Elizabeth Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations* [Cambridge, Eng., 1991], pp. 23–25). The most recent editor of the earliest Latin versions of *Apollonius* provides thorough notes on its riddles: G. A. A. Kortekaas, *Commentary*

story, and a series of reversals and recognitions leads to a happy ending, converted from catastrophe to what J. R. R. Tolkien would call "eucatastrophe," "the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function."[7]

A similar conversion of narratives happens in the opening segment of the vast and popular French Arthurian compendium known as the prose *Tristan*, where the story of Sador's love for Celinde, modeled on the story of Oedipus's parents, is interlaced with that of his brother, who decides to serve the Grail. According to Sylvia Huot, this segment "is marked by frequent enigmas, in the form of riddles, dreams, and visions." By such means the story modulates from the tragic plot of Oedipus to the most mystical and enigmatic medieval story, the Grail quest. As Huot explains, "Pagan solutions tend to be partial, focusing on short-term explanations and on individual actions while failing to discern the universal import of the riddle. The advent of Christianity brings in its wake riddles of a different nature, unfolding into ever greater marvels and necessitating a consideration of the individual in a cosmic framework."[8] In this contrast, Huot implies two ways in which riddling could become the germ of a longer plot, what Eleanor Cook has called enigma as "masterplot." Cook distinguishes five types of enigma as masterplot, two of which fit the medieval stories involving riddle challenges: the Sphinxine and the Pauline. Cook takes the term Pauline from 1 Corinthians 13.12 and finds its promise of an ending "in revelation, in light, in the dispersal of cloud, in the clarifying of the obscure, in the answering of the inexplicable, in the straightening of the labyrinthine" to be dominant in Christendom, in literary and other contexts, well into modernity. On the other hand, "Oedipal or Sphinxine riddling moves downward to darkness. It is Pauline riddling turned upside down. Not the Epistle to the Corinthians but the man from Corinth, Oedipus."[9]

Evidence from folktale studies reveals a broad range within the comic masterplot of enigma, even if it reached fullest expression under Christian influence during the Middle Ages. Many riddle tales, with sources extending, in the Indo-European tradition, to the ancient Near East, end in marriage.[10] In one common type of tale, for example, a suitor must answer riddling questions or perform seemingly impossible tasks. A fifteenth-century lyric of this type, though it lacks the courtship narrative known from ballads collected later, restates the demands as questions before answering them:

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on the "Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri," Mnemosyne, Supplementum 284 (Leiden, 2007), pp. 35, 51–52, and 703–37.

[7] J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Monsters and the Critics*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1997), pp. 109–61, at p. 153.

[8] Sylvia Huot, "Unspeakable Horror, Ineffable Bliss: Riddles and Marvels in the Prose *Tristan*," *Medium aevum* 71 (2002), 48.

[9] Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006), pp. 64–91, quotations from p. 66 and 70. Cook takes the term "masterplot" from Terence Cave, who takes it in turn from Peter Brooks, and notes that both are referring to the dominance of the Christian story (p. 64). She also points out that Dante juxtaposes Pauline and Sphinxine riddling in the closing cantos of *Purgatorio*, marked with a reference to the Sphinx at 33.47 (p. 71).

[10] Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters*, pp. 25–31 and 153–55.

> How xuld [should] ony cherye [cherry]
> be with-oute ston?
> & how xuld only [*recte* ony] dowe [dove]
> ben with-oute bon?
>
> How xuld ony brer [briar]
> ben with-oute rynde [branch]?
> how xuld y loue myn lemman
> with-oute longyng?
>
> Quan [When] þe cherye was a flour,
> þan hadde it non ston.
> quan þe dowe was an ey [egg],
> þan hadde it non bon.
>
> Quan þe brer was on-bred [unborn],
> þan hadde it non rynd.
> quan þe maydyn haȝt þat che [she] lovit,
> che is with-out longing.[11]

In this case, the riddles all turn on transformations that could be seen to cast marriage as a threshold of change that is deeper than the end of longing. That is, while riddling is subordinated to the immediate end of winning a spouse, the content of the riddles implies the subordination of the lovers to the play of love and death. These tales share the kind of fulfillment that goes with the Pauline masterplot, even though the constraints of form preclude the exploration of the riddles' significance that is possible in a longer romance, or a poem like *Piers Plowman.*

   John Gower's "Tale of the Three Questions," on the other hand, by extending this tale type into something more like a short romance, can develop the content of the riddles at length.[12] A king fond of his own wit sets a final challenge of three

[11] Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries,* 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1955), pp. 40–41; no. 1303 in Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, *Index of Middle English Verse* (New York, 1943). See Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* 5 vols. (Boston, 1882), nos. 1, 2, 46, 47; his introductory notes contain detailed summaries of similar tales from throughout Europe and beyond. Though Child's sources are postmedieval, they include such widespread variation and so many resemblances to medieval survivals that they are thought to reflect oral traditions that go back to the Middle Ages. Goldberg treats these ballads as examples within her large category of wisdom tales involving "the battle of the sexes" (*Turandot's Sisters,* pp. 141–46). Vincent A. Dunn finds in Child ballad 46, "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship," a survival of an archaic pattern of initiation that also shapes Old Irish courtship stories such as *The Wooing of Emer,* in which the suitor, Cúchulainn, is tested by Emer in a riddling dialogue (*Cattle-Raids and Courtships: Medieval Narrative Genres in a Traditional Contest,* Garland Monographs in Medieval Literature 2 [New York, 1989], pp. 72–73 and 211–12). Joanne Findon discusses the significance of this riddling dialogue in the context of similar exchanges elsewhere in Old Irish literature in *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, 1997), pp. 39–46. (I thank Prof. Joseph Falaky Nagy for these Irish references.)

[12] This tale concludes book 1 of the *Confessio Amantis,* lines 3067–3402; the lines quoted here are 3099–3106. The poem's most recent editor, Russell A. Peck, notes that no specific source for it has yet been discovered (1, 2nd ed. [Kalamazoo, Mich., 2006], p. 274), but James T. Bratcher has analyzed its similarities to two folktales about riddle contests (see "Gower and Child, No. 45, 'King John and the Bishop,'" *Notes and Queries* 48 [2001], 14–15, and "Gower's 'Tale of Three Questions' and 'The Clever Peasant Girl' Folktale," *Notes and Queries* 53 [2006], 409–10). Two other stories in the *Confessio* involve riddling: the Tale of Florent (1.1407–1882), a version of the story also retold by Chaucer as

riddles, with life or death at stake, to a knight who has always been able to answer his questions:

> The ferste point of alle thre
> Was this: "What thing in his degré
> Of al this world hath nede lest,
> And yet men helpe it althermest?"
> The secounde is: "What most is worth,
> And of costage is lest put forth?"
> The thridde is: "Which is of most cost,
> And lest is worth and goth to lost?"

The knight is stumped, but his teenage daughter offers to answer for him. Of course she answers right—earth, humility, and pride—and gives long explanations of each solution. The king, impressed with her cleverness as well as her beauty, says he would marry her if her father were noble enough but instead offers her whatever worldly goods she wants. She asks him to give her father an earldom and points out that she is now eligible for the king to marry, which he does. All three riddles relate to the topic of book 1 of the *Confessio,* pride, which both king and knight have been led through the riddle game to overcome. Gower's tale is a more moral, and less mysterious, version of the Pauline masterplot in which the lessons of the riddles become part of the comic resolution.

More basic than marriage to the comic pattern in riddling tales, however, is their manipulation of power, whether the setting is matrimonial, judicial, political, or religious ritual.[13] "The common forms of these tales," writes Goldberg of the most widespread types focused on a riddle challenge, "involve a double twist: the party ostensibly in power (princess, judge) sets up a test that causes itself to be tested by the subordinate party (youth, prisoner). The subordinate wins not only by meeting a challenge but by exposing, humiliating, or shaming a superior." More important, "There is never any extraneous guessing or taunting of the loser, and very little fanfare for the winner. No one in the tale ever suggests that the riddle is unfair, although in both tales the hero wins by making up a new riddle outside the traditional set of rules."[14] Gower's "Tale of the Three Questions" is a more re-fined, gentler example: no one is shamed or stretches the rules. Nonetheless, the rules are a given, and the knight's surrender of the adventure, and thus of the power to determine his own fate, and his daughter's willingness to take them up illustrate what is essential to coming out on the happy side of the power dynamic in these Pauline riddle stories. In the story of St. Andrew and the Three Questions and Langland's Banquet of Conscience, the position of the subordinate outsider is filled by the unambiguous authority of a saint in one case and Patience in the other.

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the Wife of Bath's Tale, and the Tale of the Two Coffers (5.2273–2390), a riddle game with a number of well-known medieval variations (see *Confessio Amantis,* ed. Peck, 3 [Kalamazoo, Mich., 2004], p. 405).

[13] Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters,* pp. 157–60. Drawing on a wide range of local studies, Thomas A. Burns identifies six categories of occasions for riddling: various rituals, especially those of initiation and death; courting; education, both formal and informal; greetings (less common); folk narratives; and leisure-time riddling ("Riddling: Occasion to Act," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 [1976], 139–65, at pp. 143–45).

[14] Goldberg, *Turondot's Sisters,* pp. 171–72.

First, however, a look at the other end of the spectrum of riddle contests, dialogues in which the frame narrative all but disappears, will lead to the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf, in which the play of power is resolved more ambiguously in the figure of the wise fool.

<div align="center">RIDDLING DIALOGUES</div>

Dialogues of all kinds were staples of medieval literature, and it is tempting to hear throughout them echoes of the dialogues found in some of the oldest Indo-European texts, such as Sanskrit Vedas, which are nothing if not enigmatic. Indeed, Johan Huizinga saw these ancient riddle contests as the epitome of the kind of play that is the cradle of philosophic thought.[15] A tension between play and serious educational or speculative purpose animates many medieval instances of different kinds of dialogues. The most influential of them all, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy,* plays the precision of Platonic prose dialogue against poetic attempts at greater fullness of meaning in order to press the limits of human understanding. More characteristic of medieval educational culture, however, are the many debate poems that survive. Some debates, like those between body and soul, are clearly instructive, while others, such as the Middle English *Owl and the Nightingale,* explore the potential of the art of dialectic, so central to medieval schools, to become a lively, more open-endedly truthful poetic form.[16] Riddling is also found in some examples of the most common kind of medieval educational text, the catechetical dialogues that were a staple of the elementary classroom. These harness the inherent playfulness of enigma to a mainly didactic purpose. The dialogues that constitute much of *Piers Plowman* combine all these variations on the form, as do other poetic dialogues such as the one between the narrator and the eagle that makes up the middle part of Chaucer's *House of Fame.* One family of Middle English texts shows the persistence of an important tradition of dialogues with an especially strong riddling element: *Ypotis, Questiones by-twene the Maister of Oxenford and His Clerk,* and *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus.* These texts descend, through interrelated medieval Latin and Old English intermediaries, from antique sources, both Western and Byzantine.[17] This whole tradition shows how riddling, as a leavening agent within a larger, more stable generic category, can either go flat or make it rise with possibility.

Ypotis, popular enough to survive in fifteen manuscripts, is mostly didactic. Chaucer lists it as a romance in his Tale of Sir Thopas, but he must be joking because the work is entirely a conversation between the Roman emperor Hadrian and a child prodigy named Ypotis. It descends from the third-century *Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti Philosophi,* which consists of seventy-three questions

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[15] See Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, 1955), pp. 105–18 and 146–57.

[16] For this view of *The Owl and the Nightingale* see Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 111–38.

[17] For an overview with bibliography see Francis Lee Utley, "Dialogues, Debates, and Catechisms," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1400,* ed. Albert E. Hartung, 3 (New Haven, Conn., 1972), section 7, items 68–71.

and answers and had been rewritten in the eighth century by Alcuin as a dialogue between himself and his student, Charlemagne's son Pippin. Both of these earlier dialogues mix several riddles with a series of encyclopedic questions that work like riddles in reverse. The latter begins: "Pippin: What is a letter? Alcuin: The keeper of history. P: What is a word? A: The revealer of the mind."[18] Each metaphorical, often kenning-like answer, and often there are several for one question, is less a definition than the beginning of a game that, like Aldhelm's *Enigmata,* uses language to see more deeply into things.[19] The questions in *Ypotis,* however, are more restricted to purely religious subjects, and its answers are longer and more discursive: how many heavens there are, how many orders of angels, and so on down to the unforgivable sins, the remedy for despair, and finally the reasons for fasting on Friday—thirteen events that happen on a Friday, from Creation to the Last Judgment, which constitute an overview of salvation history. There are flashes of whimsy, though, and the first question sets a tone of disclosing secrets. The emperor asks, "What may hevene be?" and Ypotis replies, "Godes privete" (a phrase familiar from Chaucer's Miller's Tale, 1.3164 and 1.3454). Two questions later, the theme of language that opens Alcuin's dialogue gets a more theolog-

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[18] *Disputatio Pippini cum Albino,* my translation from Lloyd William Daly and Walther Suchier, eds., *Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti Philosophi,* Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 24/1–2 (Urbana, Ill., 1939), pp. 137–38. These questions, along with many others from the *Disputatio Pippini cum Albino,* were grafted onto another ancient text in the tradition of riddling dialogues, the *Vita Secundi Philosophi,* when it was translated from Greek into Latin in the twelfth century (Ben Edwin Perry, *Secundus the Silent Philosopher,* Philological Monographs 22 [Ithaca, N.Y., 1964], p. 24). The story of Secundus was widely known in the later Middle Ages, surviving in more than a hundred manuscripts from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. At *Piers Plowman* B 14.276, Patience quotes Secundus on "What is poverty?" (I thank Traugott Lawler for showing me his draft notes on this passage for his forthcoming volume of the *Penn Commentary on "Piers Plowman.*") The "What is it?" form is also characteristic of many of the enigmatic epigrams attributed in the classical period to Pythagoras; see Peter T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, N.J., 2004), p. 97.

[19] Huizinga, *Homo ludens,* p. 154. Indeed, Alcuin was a product of the English revival of learning nurtured by Aldhelm, whose texts were much studied in both Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon schools. See especially Nancy Porter Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm's Riddles in the British Library Ms. Royal 12.C.xxiii* (Toronto, 1990); also Michael Lapidge, "The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England I: The Evidence of Latin Glosses," in *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain,* ed. Nicholas Brooks (Leicester, 1982), pp. 99–140, and Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln, Neb., 1991), pp. 104–12. While Alcuin gives this dialogue an educational context, what he seems most to teach is a kind of play with words that renews the meaning of both words and things. Near the end, in response to Pippin's question "What is a wonder?" the dialogue shifts into a fully enigmatic mode unparalleled elsewhere in this dialogue tradition. Alcuin answers, "Recently I saw a person standing, moving, walking, who never was," and goes on to pose riddles as full of wonder as those of Aldhelm and more eloquent in their brevity, at least to modern ears. Pippin's playful, witty responses show that he knows the answers while offering further clues to the reader, so that the game becomes not so much lesson or contest, but rather—like Aldhelm's riddles enclosed in his letter to Acircius—an affectionate exercise and an exercise in affection, first between teacher and pupil, and then involving further readers. Martha Bayless, "Alcuin's *Disputatio Pippini* and the Early Medieval Riddle Tradition," in *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,* ed. Guy Halsall (Cambridge, Eng., 2002), pp. 157–78, places this text in context and includes an edition, translation, and commentary on the riddle section. I quote from her translation at p. 176, and the answer to the "wonder" Alcuin poses is a reflection in water. Another of Alcuin's riddles is the same one on lice that is said to have stumped Homer; he probably found it in Symphosius, no. 30 in his collection.

ical spin when the emperor asks, "What com furst of Godes mouth?" Ypotis cites the opening of the Gospel of John, "In principio erat verbum," and continues, "At that word was the sone, / Fader and the holigost to-geder come, / Threo persones in trinite— / Never on may from other be."[20] Words, the stuff of dialogue, are here both figure and product of the primal relation between not two persons, but three, the mystery of the Trinity, which marks the fullest possibility of meaning. By the end of this Middle English adaptation, Ypotis is revealed to be Christ himself, and the original rehearsal of classical, schoolroom learning between Hadrian and Epictetus has morphed into the story of the boy Jesus in the temple. Because the wisdom of Ypotis is clear from the start, there is no folktale-style reversal in which the emperor is humiliated. Yet the revelation of his real identity, along with the whole extension of the riddling form in the direction of doctrinal mysteries, might be seen as a humiliation of pagan learning by the greater marvels of Christianity.[21]

A larger part of this complex of medieval riddling dialogues attaches to the name of King Solomon. The tradition of Solomon as a riddle master goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures, in which the Queen of Sheba tests him with riddles ("temptaret eum enigmatibus," 2 Chronicles 9.1, also 1 Kings 10.1). Though the Bible does not tell what riddles he answered, ancient Hebrew legend supplied them, and the many legends that grew up around Solomon include other riddle contests as well.[22] How any of these reached England is obscure, but the English versions include four dialogues in Old English between Solomon and a pagan sage named Saturn (one of which has a Middle English parallel) and a Middle English translation of the Latin dialogue between Solomon and Marcolf that was popular throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages.[23] The Middle English *Questiones bytwene the Maister of Oxenford and His Clerk* relocates the setting from the ancient,

[20] Carl Horstmann, ed., *Altenglische Legenden, Neue Folge* (Heilbroun, 1881), p. 341, from the Vernon Manuscript, fol. 296. Cf. the later, slightly different text edited by George Shuffelton, with thorough explanatory notes, in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 2008), p. 222.

[21] Cf. "Childe Jesu and the Maistres of the Lawe," ed. Carl Horstmann and Frederick Furnivall, *Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript,* 2, EETS OS 117 (London, 1901), pp. 479–84.

[22] See Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters,* pp. 22–24, and Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* Harvard Studies in Medieval Latin 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), pp. 17–19. For some samples without citation see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews,* 4 (Philadelphia, 1936), pp. 141–49.

[23] For the Old English texts and their background see John M. Kemble, *The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturnus* (London, 1848), and Robert J. Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (New York, 1941), whose conclusions are summarized by Donald Beecher in the introduction to *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus* (Ottawa, 1995), pp. 59–63. The Old English poems are in fact the oldest surviving dialogues in this tradition, though Pope Gelasius censured an *Interdictio Salomonis* in the late fifth century. The second of them incorporates riddles and other enigmatic obscurities into a fascinating quest for wisdom and consolation on the part of Saturn. Because of its general air of mystery it has been called the most profound of Old English didactic works, and it has been well discussed by T. A. Shippey (*Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* [Cambridge, Eng., 1976], pp. 21–28) and Elaine Tuttle Hansen (*The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* [Toronto, 1988] pp. 147–52). Its first riddle, on book, encapsulates the purpose of the mental and emotional effort that the poem both narrates and demands from its reader. The other Old English dialogues of Solomon and Saturn are more catechetical. *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn,* ed. and trans. Daniel Anlezark, Anglo-Saxon Texts 7 (Woodbridge, Eng., 2009), appeared too late for this article.

exotic world of Solomon or Emperor Hadrian to a familiar, educational one.[24] Like *Ypotis,* its matter is religious and mixes common and obscure, factual and imaginative, and it, too, begins with an enigmatic series of questions touching the power of language:

> Clerk: Sei me, where was god whanne he made heven and erthe?
> Master: I sey the, in the forthere ende of the wynde.
> C: Tell me that word that god firste spake.
> M: Be ther made light, and light was made.
> C: Whi is heven clepid heven?
> M: For the heven coveryth all that is under hym.[25]

The second question's focus on the power of language in God's act of creation might also make sense of the first question as a place to begin by imagining the breath that carries God's speech.[26] The third question, then, shifts to human language, and we do not need to know the basis of the etymology given in the answer to get the larger point of how names can unlock the secrets of things.[27] Names and numbers figure largely in the lore of this dialogue, nowhere more puzzlingly than in one of several questions about Noah: "Clerk: Where-of was made Noe is [Noah's] shippe? Master: Of a tree that is clepid [named] chy." This time the name is the answer, not the question, and it turns the question into a deeper riddle that invites wonder at mysteries of letters and trees. What is the tree called Chy? Francis Utley, beginning with the Greek letter chi (χ), shaped like a cross, and citing a vast range of medieval learning, has shown that it refers to the tree of Paradise from which Christ's cross was made, "a tree which is a central link both in the Chain of Being and what we may call the Chain of History."[28] This is the same tree alluded to by Aldhelm's apple-tree riddle and Langland's Plant of Peace. Utley's citations show that this tree symbolism was a strong part of the medieval imagination of salvation history, and it no doubt lies behind Langland's allegorical Tree of Charity as well. In the *Questiones by-twene the Maister of Oxenford and His Clerk,* the tree called Chy lurks as a riddle to engage both the perplexed and the knowing without upsetting the hierarchy between student and master.

[24] Surviving in two manuscripts, this text is related to one of the Old English prose dialogues of Solomon and Saturn, which also shares many of its questions with an Old English version of Hadrian and Epictetus under the names Adrian and Ritheus. James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill suggest that the Old and Middle English versions were probably translated from a Latin source that does not survive (*The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus* [Toronto, 1982], pp. 11–12). Utley, who takes the Middle English as a translation of the Old English, comments, "Such a continuity between late Old English and late Middle English documents is rare, almost unique" ("Dialogues, Debates, and Catechisms," p. 738).

[25] Carl Horstmann, ed., *Englische Studien* 8 (1885), 284.

[26] Cross and Hill cite Psalms 17.11 and 103.3 and Proverbs 8.27–28 as sources for the answer to the first question (*The Prose Solomon and Saturn,* pp. 60–61). Cannon shows the importance for dialogues, especially between nonhuman speakers, of "a medieval theory of language which held that words were also alive" (*Grounds of English Literature,* pp. 116).

[27] The answer depends on an etymological connection of Latin *caelum* to *celare,* meaning to conceal, which modern linguistics, oddly enough, finds to be a cognate instead of "hell." See Cross and Hill, *The Prose Solomon and Saturn,* p. 63.

[28] Francis Lee Utley, "The Prose *Salomon and Saturn* and the Tree Called Chy," *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957), 67.

The *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus,* though sharing the figure of Solomon with these catechetical dialogues, shows no sign of direct descent from them but rather partakes of the broader form of riddling dialogue in ways that extend it and anticipate *Piers Plowman.* The English translation printed under this title in 1492 reflects a Latin tradition that was already at least five centuries old and seems to have had a late-medieval explosion of popularity. It survives in Latin and vernacular versions that suggest continuous fluctuation as it likely even "moved back and forth between spoken and scripted iterations."[29] The editors of the Latin text call it simply *Solomon and Marcolf,* and I will use that title to refer to the whole tradition in both Latin and vernacular versions. Various English references to Marcolf, both visual and verbal, show that this tradition had been well known in England since at least the thirteenth century.[30] Though there is no clear evidence that Langland knew any version of it, similarities to his Banquet of Conscience can at least help us understand his uses of riddling. Above all, Marcolf himself emerges as a possible inspiration for *Piers Plowman*'s distinctively enigmatic voice and a fascinating figure in his own right for how he crosses wisdom with folly.

Structurally, *Solomon and Marcolf* is more complex than the other riddling dialogues because it adds narrative elements akin to riddle tales. The English translation, like most of the surviving versions, marks a division into two parts, but Nancy Mason Bradbury has proposed a division that better reflects the text's internal structure as a series of five contests between Solomon and Marcolf.[31] Marcolf is introduced as a visitor from the East, "of visage greatly misshapen and foul" but nevertheless "right talkative, eloquent, and wise."[32] Solomon first engages him in

[29] Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 12.

[30] Some account of a confrontation between these two figures was known at the monastery of St. Gall already in the tenth century, however, and there are three twelfth-century witnesses to some version of the dialogue. In England, a room in Westminster Palace called the *camera Marculfi,* created around 1252 for Henry III, is thought to have been painted with scenes from the life of Marcolf, perhaps like those painted in a number of fourteenth-century English and Flemish manuscripts, carved on misericords, and also mentioned in inventories of tapestries. The English proverbs of Hendyng that circulated widely from the early fourteenth century refer to their author as Marcolf's son, and in the fifteenth century, two English poets, Audelay and Lydgate, each mentioned him. About sixty fifteenth-century manuscripts of the Latin text seem to have survived in modern times, mostly from German-speaking areas, and there are forty-nine surviving early prints of it, as well as translations into German, Dutch, French, and Italian as well as English. The best overview of the entire tradition is now Ziolkowski's edition and translation of the Latin text, *Solomon and Marcolf,* with full introduction, commentary, and appendix of background texts. See also Beecher's edition of the English text, *Dialogue,* pp. 72–96; Nancy Mason Bradbury, "Rival Wisdom in the Latin *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf,*" *Speculum* 83 (2008), 331–65, at p. 331 n. 1; Malcolm Jones, "Marcolf the Trickster in Late Mediaeval Art and Literature, or: The Mystery of the Bum in the Oven," in *Spoken in Jest,* ed. Gillian Bennett, Mistletoe Series 21 (Sheffield, 1991), pp. 139–74; Richard Firth Green, "Marcolf the Fool and Blind John Audelay," in *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V. A. Kolve,* ed. Robert F. Yeager and Charlotte C. Morse (Asheville, N.C., 2001), pp. 559–76; James A. Schultz, "Solomon and Marcolf," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages,* ed. Joseph Strayer et al., 11 (New York, 1988), p. 367; and Menner, ed., *Solomon and Saturn,* pp. 28–29.

[31] Bradbury, "Rival Wisdom," pp. 334 and 346–64.

[32] In the interest of both readability and approaching the text as Langland might have known it from two different directions, I cite in my text from Beecher's respelled edition of the 1492 translation (here p. 133) and include in the notes Ziolkowski's slightly altered version of Walter Benary's edition of the Latin, which, as here, shows some embellishment on the part of the English translator (or perhaps a different Latin source): "valde turpissimum et deformem, sed eloquentissimum" (p. 52).

a brief contest of ancestry, in which Marcolf parodies Solomon's biblical genealogy with a similar-sounding one made of nonsense names. The second and longest contest is a duel of proverbs, which has been the focus of much of the scholarship on this text. As Bradbury divides the remaining contests, the third is a riddle contest, the fourth involves proving arguable propositions, and the fifth is a dispute over whether women are good or bad. Donald Beecher has drawn attention to how the whole text combines what the folklorist André Jolles called the "simple forms" of proverb, riddle, and jest into a nascent example of the jest cycle or trickster biography, a genre that grew and multiplied in early-modern texts such as *Tyl Eulenspiegel* and its English imitators and analogues.[33] Yet we might just as well see riddling, rather than the jest, as the element around which *Solomon and Marcolf* coheres and the basic form of its contests. In one of the earliest witnesses to the tradition behind it, William of Tyre writes, referring to one Abdemon who helped Hiram, king of Tyre, in a legendary exchange of riddles with Solomon, "Possibly this is the man who in fictitious popular narratives is called Marcolf, of whom it is said that he used to solve the riddles of Solomon and in turn responded to him, reciprocating with riddles to be solved in turn."[34] While this likely refers to an earlier version of the dialogue than the one that survives from more than two centuries later, it shows the centrality of riddling to it at an early stage. Structurally, riddles in the purest sense remain central to the later tradition. Not only is the middle of the five contests typical of riddle contests in folklore,[35] but all of the contests have a riddling aspect paralleled in dialogues or tales. Proverbs can be seen as the inverse of riddles in their use of figurative language to state an answer rather than a question and are especially close in form and function to the riddles of catechetical dialogues. And whereas Solomon's proverbs here sound just like the Book of Proverbs, which they often in fact quote, Marcolf answers with proverbs that hover between sense and nonsense, sometimes tending toward parody and sometimes drawing on an alternative stock of proverbs closer to peasant life, but consistently inviting the question of what alternative wisdom they might offer. Some are riddling in themselves: "Solomon: It becometh no fools to speak or to bring forth any wise reason. Marcolphus: It becometh not a dog to bear a saddle."[36] The fourth contest, too,

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[33] Beecher, *Dialogue*, pp. 18–43.

[34] Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf*, p. 336, from William's *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, written c. 1181–84: "Et hic fortasse est quem fabulose popularium narrationes Marcolfum vocant, de quo dicitur quod Salomonis solvebat enigmata et ei respondebat equipollenter, iterum solvenda proponent" (*Willelmi Tyrensis Archiepiscopi Chronicon*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, CCCM 63 [Turnhout, 1986], 13.1, p. 586).

[35] The riddles in the contest include a series shared with the folktales of the Clever Farmgirl, Aarne-Thompson 875, and the King and the Peasant's Son, Aarne-Thompson 921 (Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf*, pp. 195–96; the later oral currency in English of a group of these riddles is shown by "The Clever Boy," in *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, ed. Katharine M. Briggs [London, 1970], 2:391–92) as well as a version of the old one on lice that got Homer.

[36] Beecher, *Dialogue*, p. 153; Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf*, p. 72: "S: 'Non decent stulto composita verba.' M: 'Non decet canem sellam portare.'" Some of the proverbs have parallels in *Piers Plowman*, though they are sufficiently explained by drawing on common sources. Compare Marcolf's "The shepherd that waketh well, there shall wolf no wool shit" (Beecher, p. 153 and note at pp. 209–10; Ziolkowski, p. 72: "Molli bergario lupus caccat lanam") with *Piers Plowman* C 9.264–65 and "An angry housewife, the smoke, the rat, and a broken platter are oftentimes unprofitable in a house" (Beecher,

shares a riddling aspect with tales that involve performing impossible tasks. The contest itself is to stay awake; each time Marcolf is caught falling asleep, he says he was only thinking and states a seemingly unprovable proposition he was thinking about. Solomon then challenges him to prove them all. The last and most interesting is that nature goes before learning, which Marcolf proves in a version of a widespread folktale.[37] He comes with three mice up his sleeve to supper, where Solomon has a cat he had trained to hold a candle. Marcolf lets the mice go one by one, and Solomon's glare keeps the cat from chasing the first two but not the third. Since Marcolf has been associated with nature and Solomon with learning throughout the preceding frame narrative, proverbs, and riddles, the jest here takes on the added significance of commentary on the relative wisdom and authority of the contestants and is left enigmatically suspended. Having proved that nature comes before learning, Marcolf is once again banished by Solomon and mutters as he leaves, "Neither so nor so shall the wise Solomon of Marcolphus be quit."[38] Thus, while *Solomon and Marcolf* shows clear contact with the form of the riddling dialogue, it joins it with other forms that can also be drawn into the enigmatic mode, much as Langland's poem, while traveling a wider range of genres, combines long stretches of dialogue, often between figures of contrasting authority, with moments of puzzling action, such as the tearing of the pardon or the Banquet of Conscience, that gain significance from the dialogues that surround them.

   Like *Piers Plowman* in another respect, *Solomon and Marcolf* coheres more around a figure than a form—a figure, indeed, who seems to have been identified as the carrier of a compelling but extrainstitutional outlook in much the way Piers the Plowman was to be in later works that invoke him. Yet, like Piers, the valence of this figure is hard to measure. Clearly there is a confrontation in the *Dialogue* between the serious and the playfully comic, but these two qualities are not simply identified with Solomon and Marcolf. Marcolf is portrayed as wise in his folly, and Solomon, while preserving his regal dignity and his reputation for at least one kind of wisdom, plays along with the game. On the other hand, the riddles that begin the third contest, which are the purest in form, do not add to the profundity of authoritative wisdom, as in the previous riddling dialogues, but rather operate outside of it. They refer, in riddling language, to the circumstances of Marcolf's rustic life and so are simple but apparently beyond Solomon's ken. Similarly, Marcolf's proverbs often make literal the figurative language of Solomon's, resulting in a parody that might also give its own sort of common wisdom.[39] Marcolf frequently draws on the "material bodily lower stratum" that Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes as an important component of the carnivalesque, as in this typical exchange: "Solomon: Of abundance of the heart the mouth speakest. Marcolphus: Out of a full wombe

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p. 147) with *Piers Plowman* B 17.317–28. In the latter case, the English is closer to *Piers Plowman* than the Latin: "Domina irata et patella perforata dampnum sunt in casa" (Ziolkowski, p. 64).

   [37] On its analogues see Beecher, *Dialogue,* pp. 215–16, and Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* pp. 217–18.

   [38] Beecher, *Dialogue,* p. 175; Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 84: "Neque sic neque sic sapiens Salomon de bricone Marcolfo pacem habebit."

   [39] See Beecher's introduction, *Dialogue,* pp. 27–35.

the arse trompeth."[40] Indeed, Bakhtin points to this dialogue as an example of a much more general process in the later Middle Ages in which unified discourse of high literary genres, represented by authorities like Solomon, is "dialogized" when confronted by the low, parodic, rustic discourse of an outsider like Marcolf.[41] As Richard Firth Green argues from Audelay's references to Marcolf, however, it would be too simple to identify him with a Bakhtinian "licensed misrule."[42] Marcolf is not a folk production, whatever folk forms might lie behind the text that grew within institutions of Latin learning, nor is he a serious challenge to institutional power.[43] Marcolf plays not for power but for the game. When Solomon gives up the proverb contest after ninety or more exchanges and refuses to keep his promise that, if Marcolf can answer all his "questions," he will make him rich and name him above all others in the realm, Marcolf departs with another proverb: "I shall always say, 'There is no king where no law is.'"[44] The only authority he recognizes is within the terms of the game. While his wit and wisdom are recognized by Solomon, he remains an outsider and wins nothing other than his own freedom.

If the dialogue resists simple satire and affirms both kinds of what Bradbury calls "rival wisdom," there remains a question of how it might resolve the rivalry. Bradbury sees the dialogue's contests as unresolved, with the wisdom of each side qualifying the other and exposing its incompleteness, but with neither side vanquished or subordinated to the other. The form of open contest dictates openness to multiple valid but inadequate perspectives. Following a suggestion from Helen Cooper, Bradbury compares this dialogue with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in that both juxtapose perspectives to each other in order to enrich each one, but without

[40] Beecher, *Dialogue,* p. 151; Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 70: "S: 'Ex habundancia cordis os loquitur.' M: 'Ex saturitate ventris triumphat culus.'" See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), pp. 368–436.

[41] "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in M. M. Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series 1 (Austin, Tex., 1981), pp. 41–83, at pp. 76–77. Bradbury argues that the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf is more important to Bakhtin's thought than is immediately obvious from his references to it: "Newcomers to the work are often struck by how 'carnivalesque' or 'Bakhtinian' is Marcolf's subversion of authority, but describing Bakhtin's theory as Marcolfian would be truer to the historical reality" ("Rival Wisdom," p. 336).

[42] Green, "Marcolf the Fool and Blind John Audelay," p. 564. Ziolkowski makes a similar point, *Solomon and Marcolf,* pp. 41–42.

[43] See Beecher, *Dialogue,* pp. 43–48.

[44] Ibid., p. 157. Compare the Latin text, "ubi non est lex, ibi non est rex" (Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 74 with notes to parallels at pp. 193–94), with the similar proverb spoken by "a goliardeis" in *Piers Plowman,* "Dum 'rex' a 'regere' dicatur nomen habere, / Nomen habet sine re nisi studet iura tenere" (prol. 141–42; citations of *Piers Plowman* throughout are from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions,* ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 1 [London, 1995] and refer to the B text unless specified otherwise). Andrew Galloway translates this as "Since *rex* [king] is said to have its name from 'rectification' [*regere*], it has the name without the substance unless he is zealous to uphold the laws," traces its English provenance, and discusses the goliard as "a voice of truth outside the courtly world" in the *Penn Commentary on "Piers Plowman,"* 1 (Philadelphia, 2006), pp. 128–29.

implying resolution in an overarching perspective.[45] Such a view of both texts aligns them with the types of enigma as masterplot that Eleanor Cook calls cyclic and random: the cyclic follows from ancient views of riddling that align it with basic cycles such as birth and death, light and darkness; the random she relates to postmodern deconstruction. These types contrast with the Pauline and possibly the Sphinxine in not requiring a narrative directed toward a certain end.[46] Yet both texts arguably give an ending that better suits the Pauline type. In Marcolf's case, it borders on fairy tale. Solomon, tricked into looking at Marcolf's arse in an oven, finally loses his patience and sentences him to be hanged.[47] Marcolf asks to choose the tree on which he will hang, and, once more, Solomon plays along. After Marcolf takes his guards on a search beyond Jerusalem all the way to the Red Sea (thus recapitulating the history of Israel in reverse), he does not find a tree to his liking: "And thus he escaped out of the danger and hand of King Solomon, and turned again unto his house and lived in peace and joy."[48] Such an irenic conclusion associates Marcolf with such pastoral riddlers as those at the end of Virgil's third eclogue and the *Eclogue* of Theodulus whose riddling inhabits a sphere of meaningful play set apart from the violence of death sentences. Finally, though, the medieval category through which Marcolf's wisdom can be taken seriously is the notion of wise folly.

    Marcolf himself states the principle when Solomon, in the middle of their riddle contest, asks him the source of his wisdom: "He is holden wise that reputeth himself a fool."[49] The Middle English term "fool sage," applicable to a broad range of both "natural" and "artificial" fools, implied both the possibility that a fool might speak wisdom and the fool's privilege to speak freely even if bluntly and critically.[50] Barbara Swain suggests that the fool's "'innocence' lowered him beyond the reach of vengeance and left him free to speak his mind," though it seems equally plausible that fools were already such objects of abuse that any cost of speaking unpleasant truths was already paid.[51] Siegfried Wenzel has analyzed seven stories, found in

    [45] Bradbury, "Rival Wisdom," pp. 345–46 and 355. Cooper identifies this dialogue as a "powerfully suggestive analogue to Chaucer's method in the *Tales*" in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales,* ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, 1 (Cambridge, Eng., 2002), p. 17. Cannon arrives at a similar view of *The Owl and the Nightingale* as an expression, not of superior enlightenment, but of the purity of dialogue as a form (*Grounds of English Literature* [above, n. 16], p. 138).

    [46] Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles,* pp. 74–80.

    [47] This scene is painted in two fourteenth-century manuscripts; see Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 27 n. 25.

    [48] Beecher, *Dialogue,* p. 199. The Latin text is terser at this point: "Et sic Marcolfus evasit manus regis Salomonis" (Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 100).

    [49] Beecher, *Dialogue,* p. 161; Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 76: "Talis dicitur esse sapiens qui ipse habet se pro stulto." Marcolf calls himself "follus" at the end of the genealogy by which he introduces himself (p. 54) and is called the same by Solomon's stewards at the end of the exchange of proverbs and by the narrator at the beginning of the next section (p. 74).

    [50] See the *Middle English Dictionary* s.vv. *fol* (3) and *sage,* adj. (d). Chaucer mentions a "kynges fool" who teaches ladies the transience of beauty in *Troilus and Criseyde* 2.400–406. On the fool's right of free speech see Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York, 1935), pp. 198 and 237. On natural and artificial fools see also below, pp. 626–27.

    [51] Barbara Swain, *Fools and Folly during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (New York, 1932), p. 54. Derek Pearsall cautions against idealizing the subversive potential of fools in "Lunatyk Lollares," in *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England,* ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), pp. 163–78, at p. 174.

collections of sermon exempla going back to the beginning of the fourteenth century, of household fools who speak wisdom under the guise of nonsense. Arguing that these are the direct ancestors of the "fool sage," he discusses the stories' common "concern for the poor and for the plight of the lower classes," not only as the fool's social equals but also in recognition of the true wisdom of detachment from the world.[52] Marcolf, then, might be seen as an important literary cousin of the "fool sage," an apparent fool found to be wise, who wins for the lowly and their discourse a victory against those in authority.[53] The fifteenth-century poet John Audelay in particular identifies Marcolf, "the more fole mon," as a spokesman on behalf of the poor.[54] In *Solomon and Marcolf,* his folly is both beneath and beyond the king's wisdom, and he gains this ambiguous place above all through riddling. Marcolf's responses to Solomon's challenges all tend to reduce the difference between them, to make the fool appear wise and the wise king seem a fool. The king, by repeatedly casting Marcolf out and threatening him with violence, moves to restore the difference and to mark Marcolf as the poor victim. Yet Marcolf's tricks, all based on riddling wordplay, deflect the violence through the king's faithfulness to his own word—a word that turns out to mean more than he knows. The continued play of the game is not an absence of resolution so much as an achievement of precarious balance, a sort of unstable reconciliation. Read this way, Marcolf's use of riddle tricks to disarm the power of Solomon as king and sage, precisely because he plays for the game rather than for power, parallels Langland's association of riddles with the patient folly of the Gospel. This Pauline aspect of Langland's own riddle contest, and what might be his rewriting of the story of Marcolf, emerges more clearly by comparison with what was probably the most widely known riddle story in the Middle Ages, the legend of St. Andrew and the Three Questions.

Saint as Riddle Master

A more straightforward contest for power, the legend of St. Andrew and the Three Questions nonetheless employs riddles as mysteriously as any riddling dialogue or tale. Its combination of decisive contest and educational process, its motif of three questions, and its sheer popularity make it an important model for understanding Langland's more intricate use of riddling traditions. Folklorists have classified it as one of many variations on the tale type Catch the Devil through a Riddle; the Grimm brothers' story of the Devil and His Grandmother might represent common oral versions.[55] The first recorded instances of this tale type, one told of

[52] Siegfried Wenzel, "The Wisdom of the Fool," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield,* ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1982), pp. 225–40, at pp. 235 and 237.

[53] Swain discusses Marcolf in *Fools and Folly,* pp. 30–36, and Welsford in *The Fool,* pp. 35–40.

[54] *The Poems of John Audelay,* ed. Ella Keats Whiting, EETS OS 184 (London, 1931), pp. 10–46, at line 66, p. 12; see also line 989, p. 45. Lydgate also refers twice to Marcolf as a fool, but less positively: *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate,* ed. Henry Noble McCracken, 2, EETS OS 192 (Oxford, 1934), pp. 449 (in *The Order of Fools*) and 564 (in *The Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep*).

[55] Uther, *International Folktales* (above, n. 2), no. 812; see also Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters* (above, n. 2), pp. 146–48.

St. Andrew and another of St. Bartholomew, occur in one of the most widely known texts of the late Middle Ages, the collection of saints' lives called the *Legenda aurea*. In the Bartholomew version, the saint asks the riddles, while in the Andrew version he answers them, but the context and effect are the same.[56] The Andrew version went on to appear as a separate exemplum in Arnold of Liège's *Alphabetum narrationum* and in the thirteenth-century *South English Legendary* as well as many similar collections in both Latin and Middle English.[57] Even the translations suggest that it was something of a favorite: the *South English Legendary* and Mirk's *Festial* each select only parts from the rest of St. Andrew's life as it is transmitted in the *Legenda aurea,* differ in the parts they select, and often abbreviate them, but both include a full retelling of the miracle of the three riddles. It thus survives in far more medieval copies than any other riddle story. I will quote from the version in the *South English Legendary,* which is in verse rather than prose and embellishes the riddles while somewhat condensing the rest of the story.

A bishop's special devotion to St. Andrew arouses the envy of the devil. So the devil comes to him as a beautiful maiden demanding that he hear her confession. He reluctantly agrees and then invites her to dine with him and his household. When he is on the point of deciding to "do folie" with her, one calling himself "a seli pilgrim" knocks on the bishop's gate. The bishop tells the porter to let him in, but the maiden, warning against admitting an evil "gilour," recommends that

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[56] The *Legenda aurea* survives in some one thousand manuscripts, an astounding number; see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints,* trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 1:xiii and 18–20 and 2:113–14. A Middle English translation survives "more or less complete" in seven manuscripts; see *Gilte Legende,* ed. Richard Hamer, 1, EETS OS 327 (Oxford, 2006), pp. xi and 9–12. Andrew, whose feast is on November 30, is first in the order of legends, and in the Middle English translation, which omits the prologue and material about Advent as well as a short concluding story about Andrew, his legend becomes the first item and the story of the three riddles the last story in his legend. The first two of the three riddles also differ somewhat between the Andrew and Bartholomew versions.

[57] On the *Alphabetum narrationum,* which survives in more than fifty manuscripts, see Thomas D. Cooke, "Tales," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English,* ed. Albert E. Hartung, 9 (New Haven, Conn., 1993), section 24, no. 216, and Mary Macleod Banks, ed., *An Alphabet of Tales: An English Fifteenth Century Translation of the Alphabetum narrationum,* pt. 1, EETS OS 126 (London, 1904), pp. 49–51. The holdings of the British Library alone include six collections of exempla in Latin, all differing in plan and contents, that include the miracle of the three riddles, four of which date from the fourteenth century; see J. A. Herbert, ed., *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum,* 3 (London, 1910), p. 66, no. 75; p. 540, no. 30; p. 568, no. 115; p. 641, no. 33; p. 674, no. 1; and p. 679, no. 34 (indexed, along with a selection of others from throughout Europe, in Tubach, *Index exemplorum* [above, n. 3], p. 23, no. 214). The *South English Legendary* survives in twenty-five complete manuscripts plus nineteen fragmentary ones (E. Gordon Whatley et al., eds., *Saints' Lives in Middle English Collections* [Kalamazoo, Mich., 2004], p. 12; see p. 39 n. 1 on the Andrew legend). *A New Index of Middle English Verse,* ed. Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards (London, 2005), no. 2848, indicates that the life of St. Andrew appears in sixteen manuscripts of the *South English Legendary,* but this may not include its occurrence in partial versions of the collection. Other Middle English collections containing this story include the *Gilte Legende,* the *Northern Homily Cycle,* Caxton's *Golden Legend,* and John Mirk's late-fourteenth-century *Festial* (ed. T. Erbe, EETS ES 96 [London, 1905], pp. 9–11). The *Speculum sacerdotale* contains a Middle English translation of the Bartholomew version (ed. Edward H. Weatherly, EETS OS 200 [London, 1936; repr., New York, 1988], pp. 193–94).

they first ask him "a good demaunde." All agree that she should ask it, since she is "queintest of þoȝt." She reluctantly agrees:

> Esche him wuche is þe meste wonder þat þe kyng of alle kynge
> Our Lord euere an erþe dude in a lutel þinge.[58]

The pilgrim answers well: the human face. The maiden insists on asking a second, "straunger demaunde": "in wuche stude erþe heiere þen heuene be?" He answers:

> Þo God was an erþe man, erþe he was inouȝ.
> To heuene seþþe in is monhede erþe wiþ him drouȝ,
> & þer as he is in is trone, aboue þe heuene he is.
> Þere is erþe in is manhede, heiere þen heuene iwis.[59]

All wonder at his answer, and the maiden/devil asks a third question, "Hou muche is bitwene heuene & erþe, & hou mony myle?"

> Þe porter esete þis demaunde, þo he to þe ȝate wende.
> "Escce of him sulf," quaþ þis oþer, "þat þe huder sende,
> Vor he it met þo he vel fram heuene to helle
> Wiþ Lucifer & oþer deueles. He may þe bet telle."
> Queynte was þe escere þat so queinte vnderstod,
> Ac queintore was þe answeriare þat is answere was so good.
> Þe porter sede is erande þat þe pilgrim hem sende.
> Þo þe deuel ihurde þis, adeuelwei he wende.[60]

The pilgrim also disappears, and the repentant bishop later receives a "toknynge" in prayer that he was St. Andrew.

Here is the Pauline masterplot of enigma at its starkest. Whether Andrew answers the riddles or Bartholomew asks them, the third one reveals the true nature of the other contestant. In the *Legenda aurea* Andrew declares that the woman is the devil in disguise, but the *South English Legendary* emphasizes the revelatory power of the pilgrim's answer to the third question by omitting this explicit decla-

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[58] Charlotte D'Evelyn and A. J. Mill, eds., *The South English Legendary,* EETS OS 235–36 and 244 (London, 1956–59), p. 548, lines 181–82, punctuation modernized: "Ask him which is the greatest wonder that the king of all kings, our Lord, ever did on earth in a little thing" (my translation here and below).

[59] Ibid., lines 197 and 203–6: "'Where does earth stand higher than heaven?'. . . 'When God was man on earth, earth he was enough. Since then to heaven in his humanity [he] drew earth with him, and there as he is in his throne, above heaven he is. Thus there earth is in his humanity higher than heaven.'" Andrew's answer in the *Gilte Legende* is simply, "In hevene imperiall wher that the body of Jhesu Crist is" (p. 11).

[60] *South English Legendary,* lines 212 and 215–22. "'How far is it between heaven and earth, and how many miles?' . . . The porter asked this riddle when he went to the gate. 'Ask of himself' said this other, 'who sent you hither, for he found out when he fell from heaven to hell with Lucifer and other devils—he may tell you better.' Clever was the asker, who so cleverly understood, but cleverer was the answerer that his answer was so good. The porter said his errand, that the pilgrim sent him on. When the devil heard it, a-devil-way he went." This question, unlike the first two, is one of the more common riddles in folklore, but St. Andrew's answer appears to be unique. See Thompson, *Motif Index,* H682.1, and Walter Anderson, *Kaiser und Abt: Die Geschichte eines Schwanks,* FF Communications 42 (Helsinki, 1923), pp. 113–29.

ration and letting the riddle do all the work. Like Marcolf, Andrew comes to court as an outsider, though a pilgrim rather than a grotesque peasant. Behind Andrew as riddle master we might also see the legends of King Solomon, who (earlier than the Christian saints) was reputed to have power over demons. Indeed, the sexual charge of the story might seem to associate the bishop, too, with Solomon as one tempted to lust, so that several Solomonic motifs are echoed and given a Christian, comic turn.[61] Most important, Andrew troubles the boundary of outside and inside like Marcolf does: he is the outsider with inside knowledge.

While this story is more a decisive contest than a dialogue, it moves from a scene of seduction that the bishop only thinks is a scene of education, into a scene of deliverance in which the bishop receives an education. The first two riddles rise above the stark confrontation of good and evil to instruct more enigmatically about the marvels first of creation and then of redemption. As E. Gordon Whatley has noted, the riddles "revolve around the crisis at hand," with the first drawing attention to the source of the bishop's temptation and the second to the only body he should be devoted to.[62] All three of these riddles require taking a spiritual view of earthly, physical things, though whereas the second and third answer a seemingly physical question with a spiritual event, the first question seems to ask for a spiritual answer, but the solution is a physical reality that comes to be seen as an ordinary miracle, the face as the most familiar boundary where the meeting of physical and spiritual is apparent. The second riddle, meanwhile, calls to mind the similar paradoxes of earthly and heavenly, heavy and light, that Langland's Plant of Peace passage locates in the unique event of the Incarnation. The version in the *South English Legendary,* moreover, seems to have borrowed from the widespread Middle English riddling verse "Erthe upon Erthe." Andrew's answer shares its first rhymes with the earliest surviving version of that poem:

> Erþe toc of erþe erþe wyþ woh,
> Erþe oþer erþe to þe erþe droh [drew, added],
> Erþe leyde erþe in erþene þroh [coffin, grave, trough],
> Þo hevede [Then had] erþe of erþe erþe ynoh [enough].

Application of this play on "earth" to the Incarnation and Ascension appears at the end of a later, eighty-two-line extension of the same poem:

> And God ros ought of the est this erth for to spede,
> And went into hell as was gret need,

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[61] Relevant here is a particularly interesting cousin to the tradition of riddling dialogues edited, with full introduction and commentary, by Jan M. Ziolkowski as *Jezebel: A Norman Latin Poem of the Early Eleventh Century* (New York, 1989). Andrew Galloway ("Word-Play and Political Satire: Solving the Riddle of the Text of *Jezebel*," *Medium aevum* 68 [1999], 189–208) has persuasively emended the beginning of this 141-line poem to reveal its use of graphic riddles similar to those he has shown to be present in *Piers Plowman* (see below, pp. 617–18). These emendations also clarify *Jezebel*'s satiric thrust as ridicule of profligate sexuality despite its clever expressions of it. Like *Piers Plowman*, though almost certainly unknown to Langland, *Jezebel* combines satire with a more ambiguous, Marcolfian embrace of folly.

[62] Whatley, *Saints' Lives,* pp. 65–66, notes the version in the *Scottish Legendary.* See also Whatley's wide-ranging commentary on possible sources and backgrounds for this story, which have not been fully studied, pp. 39–45.

And toke erth from sorowe thus erth for to spede,
The right wey to heven blys Jesus Cryst us lede.[63]

The concept behind this second riddle, as expressed more briefly in the *Legenda aurea*'s original version, is even closer to the climactic riddle found in a common instructional text, the *Eclogue* of Theodulus. As in that text, the contest of knowledge and power conducted by riddles here is entirely conclusive, rather than merely a stage on a quest of adventure or learning.

The form of a saint's legend perhaps demands that riddling be put to more decisive use than it is in *Solomon and Marcolf*. Yet the position of both Andrew and Marcolf as outsiders aligns them as members of a tradition that Langland will more explicitly designate as wise folly. While riddle contests as a form tend toward either the clear resolution of St. Andrew and the Three Questions or the endless play of *Solomon and Marcolf,* the enigmatic as a poetic mode includes both possibilities in its affirmation of simplicities that nonetheless invite further interpretation. Perhaps no poem pursues these possibilities more vigorously or explicitly than *Piers Plowman.*

Riddling Strands in *Piers Plowman*

Langland's blending, in the Banquet of Conscience, of the models of riddle contest represented by St. Andrew and Marcolf brings into focus his larger, more complex development of the enigmatic mode over the course of a much larger narrative. At over seven thousand lines, it is somewhere in size between the two longest texts considered above, *Apollonius of Tyre* and the immense prose *Tristan*. In addition, unlike such romances, it combines a bewildering variety of literary forms, all of which get pulled into the orbit of its enigmas. Among these are several that can traditionally include riddling: quest, dialogue, and contest. These three formal strands become knotted particularly tightly in the Banquet of Conscience that begins passus 13 in the B text—the only scene in the poem to discuss riddles explicitly, though it has not to my knowledge been analyzed before as a riddle contest. In one sense, the poem's devices here become particularly obscure, even impenetrable. But from the perspective of a poetics of enigma, the poem pulls itself together again here, at the beginning of its fourth dream, after a long, loosely jointed section in the third dream, and then weaves itself more artfully toward the apocalypses at the end. This scene decisively exposes the inadequacy of the kind of academic discourse that had preoccupied the poem in that middle section while embracing the challenges of enigma and folly that will move it forward. By means of riddling, it positions Patience and the dreamer as voices of wise folly and reintroduces to the poem Piers the Plowman, the central figure of its poetics of enigma, through whom it will thence move more steadily to its climaxes. Understanding the importance of this episode requires connecting it to some of the strands of riddling that precede it in the poem, which in turn recapitulate older traditions of riddle contests and dialogues.

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[63] Hilda M. R. Murray, ed., *The Middle English Poem Erthe upon Erthe,* EETS OS 141 (London, 1911), pp. 1 and 34.

The poem's first and third dreams are largely made up of dialogues or debates. In the first dream, what seems at first to be a straightforward catechetical dialogue between the dreamer-narrator and the authoritative figure Holy Church is enriched by the poetic language of Holy Church's ever-longer answers to the dreamer's questions about what he saw in the poem's prologue.[64] In the middle of their dialogue we find the enigmatic Plant of Peace passage, which can be read in connection with tree riddles from a wide variety of medieval sources. This is Holy Church's answer to the dreamer's demand for power to know in the holistic fashion that he calls "kynde knowing" and points to the centrality of enigmatic knowledge in the dreamer's quest. Her riddling language also challenges the dreamer (as well as the reader) to a contest of interpretation that will continue in various forms throughout the rest of the poem.

A courtroom debate between Conscience and the temptress Lady Mede in passus 3 introduces a format that is continued in a more academic vein in the third dream, marked by the formulaic interjection for introducing a rebuttal, *"Contra!"* taken from oral disputations and Scholastic treatises.[65] Wille (as the dreamer has become known by the third dream in the B text) again asks the questions, as he had with Holy Church in passus 1, first of a pair of friars he meets before the third dream begins, then of a series of personifications of faculties of learning, both mental and institutional. The last interlocutor in this series, however, asks *him* questions (11.409, 12.160–68), a shift similar to the one in Alcuin's *Disputatio Pippini* when Alcuin begins posing riddles to Pippin instead of just answering his questions.[66] Langland's poem has not yet arrived at such a playful celebration of shared knowledge, but it is moving toward forms of knowledge that are more involved and involving—that is, modes that are both more intricate and intended to engage the heart as well as the mind.[67]

The questions that give rise to the debate about knowledge and its kinds are mostly about Dowel, a term that comes from the first half of the notorious pardon given to Piers in passus 7: "Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule." Dowel is quickly hypostatized by Wille as the object of his quest and then split into three: Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. Thus to the ambiguity of whether Dowel is concrete or abstract—whether it is a matter of where it lives or what it is—is added the question of whether it is one or three. The question of Dowel, that is, becomes more of a riddle as it keeps getting asked. Figures and wordplay thicken toward the end of Wille's dialogue with Ymaginatif and even include, near the end of the third dream, a couple of tricks typical of Latin riddling at the time. When Wille returns to the issue of whether non-Christians can be saved (a subtopic of the ongoing question of the value of learning),

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[64] On the form of passus 1 see Galloway's headnote in the *Penn Commentary,* 1:147–53. On Holy Church's language see Sr. Mary Clemente Davlin, OP, *A Game of Heuene: Word Play and the Meaning of Piers Plowman B* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), pp. 25–46.

[65] Said by Wille at 8.20 and 10.343 and by Ymaginatif at 12.277. Huizinga traces academic disputation to riddling in *Homo ludens,* pp. 112–18.

[66] See Bayless, "Alcuin's *Disputatio Pippini*" (above, n. 19), p. 176.

[67] See James Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman,*" *Medium aevum* 55 (1986), 1–23.

> "*Contra!*" quod Ymaginatif þoo, and comsed for to loure,
> And seide, "*Saluabitur vix iustus in die iudicii;*
> *Ergo saluabitur!*" quod he. . . .[68]

(12.277–79)

This answer sticks with the dreamer enough that he mentions it as one of the specific things from the third dream that he keeps thinking about when he wakes up, and a passage added there to the C text explains how Ymaginatif can take a verse that hardly seems to hold out hope for the heathen and read it more hopefully:

> And Y merueyled in herte how Ymaginatif saide
> That *iustus* bifore Iesu *in die iudicii*
> *Non saluabitur* bote if *vix* helpe.

(C 15.21–23)

The just man who died before Jesus, that is, will not be saved in the day of judgment unless "*vix*" help, which turns "vix" from the Latin adverb meaning "scarcely" into a sort of acronym in which "v" stands for the five wounds of "ix," the Greek initials of Iesus Christ.[69] Ymaginatif closes his speech (in the B text) with what is probably a similar acronym: "For *Deus dicitur quasi dans* [*eternam vitam*] *suis, hoc est fidelibus*" (12.290), that is, as glossed by A. V. C. Schmidt, "God is called *Deus* because his name spells salvation to his people—i.e. '*d*ans *e*ternam *v*itam *s*uis' gives 'devs.'"[70] To call these tricks, though, is to understate the capacity they evidently had for Langland's audience to manifest the participation of words in reality. Indeed, riddling as a form is merely one of the most obviously puzzling aspects of a broader enigmatic mode that engages many kinds of interpretative attention toward finding hidden meaning. Earlier sections of *Piers Plowman* also employ a riot of more popular, Marcolfian voices that can approach the enigmatic from the opposite direction. At the most unacademic extreme, even the "Hote pies, hote!" and "Whit wyn of Oseye" hawked in the street scene at the end of the prologue (226–30) can come to seem sacramental in light of the poem's later program of food and drink imagery. Ymaginatif begins to pull these registers together through his use of a wide variety of figures from the academic to the homely. Both the cries of the marketplace and the more high-flown riddling of the Plant of Peace are recalled, for instance, when he says, "Ac grace is a gras þerfore, þo greuaunces to abate. / Ac grace ne groweþ noȝt but amonges [gomes] lowe" (12.59–60). Ymaginatif's use of riddling play with words and letters subordinates

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[68] Schmidt's translation of the Latin: "'The just man shall scarcely be saved' (1 Pet. 4.18) on the day of judgement; therefore—he *shall* be saved!" (*The Vision of Piers Plowman,* 2nd ed. [London, 1995], p. 203). On the wordplay in this part of passus 12 and the part of passus 11 it develops see Davlin, *Game,* pp. 72–80.

[69] See Pearsall's note, *Piers Plowman,* new ed. (Exeter, 2008), p. 251, citing a text by Wyclif.

[70] See John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations,* Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 77 (Binghamton, N.Y., 1992), p. 81, who also cites possible biblical allusions and notes Schmidt's reference to a similar etymological explanation of the word *Deus* in Evrard of Béthune's *Laborintus,* a late-medieval grammatical text. See also Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "The Pardon Scene in *Piers Plowman,*" *Speculum* 26 (1951), 317–31, at p. 330 n. 39. The brackets indicate that all the manuscripts of the poem transpose two words of the acronym, which would suggest the scribes did not recognize it.

it to a life of love lived out in patient poverty, and it is this idea that will become in the fourth dream both a personification and the answer to a winning riddle that turns on the poem's most intricate use of transcendence by means of grammar.

Conscience's Riddle Contest

The transitions between dreams in *Piers Plowman* are notorious for their discontinuity, but the one between the third and fourth dreams does more than any of the others to collect the poem thus far before continuing. At the end of the third dream, Ymaginatif not only reasserts the poem's riddling mode but also repeats some of the central terms from Holy Church and quotes the verse that had been spoken by Piers just after he tore the pardon. In the interval between the dreams, Wille summarizes much of the long third dream by way of describing how he was mulling it over while walking "nearly witless" (13.1). The fourth dream is thus set to take up major threads that have been left hanging, and it does so by staging a brilliant scene that turns the poem's ideas into characters whose words and actions can be read in multiple allegorical senses (social, psychological, theological) even as they make direct, dramatic sense. James Simpson describes the scene as "a representation of an academic feast, where Conscience is the master of the college and Clergy and the Doctor of Divinity his guests on high table, while Patience and Wille sit on the side-tables in the body of the hall."[71] The conversation forms a series of "comic agons," to extend a phrase from Traugott Lawler's thorough reading of this scene.[72] To see the central agon here as a riddle contest not only identifies likely sources of this scene but, more important, clarifies how it resolves the conflict of discourses—and of poetics—that is behind it.[73]

One important model for this episode has been suggested by Traugott Lawler: "the scene in Matthew 22 in which a Pharisee who is a doctor of the law baits Jesus by asking him, 'Which is the great commandment in the law?'"[74] After dinner, Wille confronts the doctor in a similar spirit with his question about the identity

[71] James Simpson, "Desire and the Scriptural Text: Will as Reader in *Piers Plowman*," in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages,* ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), pp. 215–43, at p. 225; see also his treatment of this scene in *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text,* 2nd ed. (Exeter, 2007), pp. 126–34.

[72] Traugott Lawler, "Conscience's Dinner," in *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Boroff,* ed. M. Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager (Woodbridge, Eng., 1995), pp. 87–103, at p. 96. Elizabeth Kirk, in *The Dream Thought of "Piers Plowman"* (New Haven, Conn., 1972), p. 152, notes that the most important thing about Patience's riddle is that it is a riddle and makes its impact by revealing the different approaches the characters in the scene take to it.

[73] Trajan in passus 11 twice mentions the "Legenda Sanctorum" (11.160, 219) and Anima cites the same title before talking about several saints, including mention of Andrew (15.269, 292). The referent here, as well as for the "book" cited by Ymaginatif as the source of Trajan's story (12.281, from the legend of St. Gregory), is undoubtedly the *Legenda aurea,* which is also the earliest source of the story of St. Andrew and the Three Questions.

[74] Lawler, "Conscience's Dinner," p. 89. John Alford makes a strong case for finding sources of this scene's ideas in the exegesis of Proverbs 23, but these sources do not pertain to its drama or its riddles ("Langland's Exegetical Drama: The Sources of the Banquet Scene in *Piers Plowman*," in *Literature and Religion in the Later Middle Ages: Philological Studies in Honor of Siegfried Wenzel,* ed. Richard G. Newhauser and John A. Alford, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 118 [Binghamton,

of Dowel. But the scene leaves this model behind in important ways because the doctor is not so successful in answering, nor does Wille lose the game like the Pharisees do. The doctor's brief answer, that Dowel is "Do noon yvel to thyn evencristen," fails to satisfy because it is merely a negation and also, as Wille points out, conflicts with the doctor's own gluttonous injustice to the poor. Moreover, Langland's scene includes three other participants in the conversation. When Conscience repeats the question more courteously, he turns the confrontation into more of an academic game, which then follows a variant of the common folktale pattern of three questions by asking the same question of three people, who give increasingly riddling answers. The doctor defends the authority of his institution more plainly by defining Dowel as obedience to the teaching of the clergy. Clergy is asked second and defers to some cryptic words of Piers the Plowman that, at a minimum, signal the limitations of academic learning. The third one asked, Patience, answers with a notoriously difficult riddle (to be considered in a moment) that makes the doctor quit the game.

It is rather as if Langland has blended the story of St. Andrew with the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf. Wille is, like Marcolf, a low-status outsider impertinently challenging the figure of supposed wisdom who turns out to be not so wise, although it is Clergy who will, like Solomon, accept at the end the limitations of his own knowledge. The doctor, then, is more like the devil in the St. Andrew story: sitting in the position of honor, seducing his host (to physical and spiritual gluttony, rather than to lust), appealed to for knowledge, and exposed by the contest. Conscience, the host and object of seduction, thus resembles the bishop. Hosting an academic feast would be a typical role for a bishop, as, indeed, are the other roles played by Conscience in the poem's literal narratives, though it would be a mistake to say that Conscience always stands for a bishop in the poem's allegory.[75] What links him more importantly to the bishop in the St. Andrew story is the shape of the plot. Like him, Conscience is the protagonist, the moderator of the contest, and, above all, the one who is rescued through it.[76] Patience, finally, is like St. Andrew. He is said to be clothed like a pilgrim, what Andrew claims to be in the *South English Legendary,* and appears uninvited, begging in the palace, but not in the banquet hall until Conscience calls him in. His holiness is obvious, and his riddle in answer to the question of Dowel exposes to Conscience the doctor's seduction. That he asks a riddle rather than answering them parallels the Bartholomew version of the miracle of the three questions, but the existence of the two versions implies the reversibility of the roles of asking and answering.[77] The exposure that results in *Piers Plowman,* however, is not as dramatic or extreme. Neither

N.Y., 1995], pp. 97–117). On the cornucopia of sources for the imagery of eating and drinking here see Jill Mann, "Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman,*" *Essays and Studies* 32 (1979), 26–42.

[75] See Traugott Lawler, "The Secular Clergy in *Piers Plowman,*" *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002), 85–117, at pp. 115–16.

[76] That Conscience is "the central figure of the scene" is a major point of Lawler's in "Conscience's Dinner" (p. 88).

[77] Note also that the idea of patient poverty is introduced to the inner dream within the third dream at 11.255 just after a discussion of how Christ, John, and other saints have appeared unrecognized as poor pilgrims, 11.230–45. The quotation at 11.267a from Alexander of Ville-Dieu's *Doctrinale* (line 1091) is also relevant to Patience and Wille as riddlers: "Pauper ego ludo dum tu dives meditaris" (Poor, I play,

the doctor nor Patience vanishes, but Conscience makes the choice to leave the doctor behind and become a pilgrim with Patience (and Wille).[78] Even the decisiveness of this choice is mitigated, however, when Conscience reconciles with Clergy before leaving, an irenic conclusion that, like the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf, retains respect for one kind of knowledge while preferring the other.

Reading the scene in this way, whether or not we grant the two earlier riddle contests the status of sources for it, highlights Langland's exquisite balance between satire of the doctor's academic idolatry and affirmation of the proper place of "clergy," academic learning, under an integrating wisdom enacted with patience and a penitent will. The names of the personified actors no doubt imply such abstract notions of discourses and attitudes, but to restate the scene in this way cannot capture what it achieves through harmonizing two such different stories of riddling. Moving from modes of dialogue or contest focused on two opponents to a drama with five characters opens up richer possibilities of resolution. We feel the force of Patience's victory over the doctor but also, perhaps even more, the reconciliation between Clergy and Conscience that closes the scene and anticipates Conscience's cry for Clergy near the end of the poem (20.228–29). The whole scene looks forward to the reconciliation of the four daughters of God at the end of passus 18, when they are joined in song with Love as a fifth. In both places, two quite different versions of the Pauline masterplot of enigma, decisive exposure and playful reconciliation, combine in a counterpoint that moves toward a more capacious understanding. Patience's answer to the question of Dowel begins, in fact, with what could be a description of the method of both scenes:

> "At your preiere," quod Pacience þo, "[by] so no man displese hym:
> *Disce,*" quod he, "*doce; dilige inimicos.*
> *Disce,* and Dowel; *doce,* and Dobet;
> *Dilige,* and Dobest—þus tauȝte me ones
> A lemman þat I louede: Loue was hir name."
>
>   (13.136–40)[79]

The first two commands, to learn and to teach, name the two sides of the dyadic structure of catechetical dialogue, but the third, to love enemies, opens it to a reconciling triad. Christopher Cannon finds a similar movement in *The Owl and the Nightingale* when they are joined by a third speaker, the wren.[80] Recalling Cooper's suggestion, amplified by Bradbury, that the lack of closure in *Solomon and Marcolf* resembles Chaucer's method in the *Canterbury Tales,* we might find the same shift from the dyadic structure of the middle part of *The House of Fame* to the multiplicity of perspectives in the *Tales.* Langland, likewise, has moved from the opening dialogue between two speakers, the dreamer and Holy Church, to

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while you, being wealthy, brood); see vol. 2 of A. V. C. Schmidt's *Parallel-Text Edition* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 2008), p. 607, n. to C 12.155a.

[78] It is worth noting that in the C version of this scene, Piers speaks the first part of the speech in which, in the B version, Patience challenges the doctor, and then mysteriously vanishes. How he had arrived at the feast and how long he had been there are not indicated.

[79] In the C text this answer to the question of Dowel is abbreviated and put in the mouth of the mysteriously appearing and disappearing Piers.

[80] Cannon, *Grounds of English Literature* (above, n. 16), pp. 135–36.

gradually more complex dialogic and dramatic structures. Patience's words here, however, suggest that the ideal structure toward which this poem moves is not a democratic wealth of style but rather Trinitarian, since the Third Person of the Trinity has, since at least Augustine, been identified with love. Enigmatic language points (as in the third question of *Ypotis*) to a fullness realized in the Trinity of the relations enabled by language.

More remarkable still is how the contest between kinds of knowledge in the B text version of the banquet scene plays out also in the riddles themselves through the kinds of learning they draw on. These two, Clergy's on the "two infinites" and Patience's long riddle on love, demand maximal learning from readers and perhaps for that reason are omitted from the C text except for a vestige of Patience's riddle. The C text thus rests the burden of the scene more squarely on the contest to answer the question of Dowel as already described, and is thus even more helpfully illuminated by its similarities to the stories of Marcolf and St. Andrew. Nonetheless, the extra riddles in the B text, like all good riddles in an enigmatic masterplot, further disclose the significance of the tale built around them. Here they add not only metaphoric richness but a metalevel of reference to the various realms of knowledge that are also signified and put into dialogue by the speakers in the scene.

Several persuasive approaches to solving Patience's riddle have been offered, all of which agree on the basic answer. Taken together, however, they show the poem engaging an astonishing range of learning within a few lines and pulling the discursive fields they come from into the contest. The riddle is contained in a speech that begins with Patience's answer to the question of Dowel quoted above, which already gives away the solution: love.[81] Attention thus shifts from *what* the riddle means to *how* it means. Here is the riddle:

> Wiþ half a laumpe lyne in Latyn, *Ex vi transicionis*,
> I bere þerinne aboute faste ybounde Dowel,
> In a signe of þe Saterday þat sette first þe kalender,
> And al þe wit of þe Wodnesday of þe nexte wike after;
> The myddel of þe moone is þe myght of boþe.
> And herwith am I welcome þer I haue it wiþ me.
>   Vndo it—lat þis doctour se if Dowel be þerinne.

<div align="right">(13.152–58)</div>

No subsequent proposals have contradicted Walter Skeat's century-old suggestion that "The general solution . . . is Charity, exercised with Patience,"[82] yet no single approach gives adequate sense to these lines on its own. Compatible as these solutions are, Langland could hardly expect a single reader to come up with them all, though any of them could be within reach of a well-educated one. A summary that conveys how they span the late-medieval universe of literacy will reward the patience it requires.

Andrew Galloway solves some parts of the riddle by appealing to the rather recondite tradition of Latin riddling he shows was current during Langland's time.

[81] See Lawler, "Conscience's Dinner," pp. 92–93.
[82] *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman in Three Parallel Texts,* ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford, 1886), 2:196.

Thus "half a laumpe lyne in Latyn" and "the myddel of þe moone" both parallel the beginning of a Latin riddle that describes the shapes of the letters that spell "cor," the Latin word for heart, with the letter *c* represented by a half moon. Galloway takes the Latin phrase *"Ex vi transicionis"* to refer to the kind of decoding involved, one of several modes of what the handbook of academic tricks known as the *Secretum philosophorum* calls "variatio," representations of individual letters in a word—although it does not use the word "transitio."[83]

A better-attested and a more accessible context for *"Ex vi transicionis"* is elementary grammar, in which this phrase was used to refer to how a transitive verb rules the grammatical case of its object. Cynthia Bland has shown that this phrase and the system of grammatical analysis oriented around such rules, called regimen, were sufficiently common in school texts during Langland's lifetime that "the term would not have been obscure to a literate person." She adds that "*ex vi transicionis* as a grammatical term is metaphorical in itself and thus invites the use of it made by Langland."[84] Using it to refer to a riddle trick transfers its sense from basic language arts to more arcane ones.

Two related readings of *"Ex vi transicionis"* also address further lines of the riddle through biblical and exegetical sources. The less plausible, perhaps, because it depends on such a specific reference, is Ben Smith's suggestion that line 152 refers to what Hugh of St. Cher calls the "transitive" reading of the first half of Psalm 4.7, "The light of thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us."[85] Smith coordinates this with Peter of Blois's scheme for matching the seven days of Creation with seven symbolic days of the Re-creation, so that "þe Saterday þat sette first þe kalender" is the seventh day of creation, when God rested and human history began, and "þe Wodnesday of þe nexte wike after" is the Passion. "The myddel of þe moone" is then the full moon of Easter, which divides the two eras and represents the power of the Resurrection.[86] R. E. Kaske develops another of Smith's suggestions from Peter of Blois, who also links the days of the week to the seven virtues, so that Saturday stands for charity and Wednesday for prudence or wisdom. By means of a complex yet persuasive web of allusions to grammatical, theological, and biblical texts, Kaske reads *"Ex vi transicionis"* as a grammatical metaphor for how patience guards all the virtues with the help of charity and wisdom.[87]

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[83] Andrew Galloway, "The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The 'Oxford' Riddles, the *Secretum philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 70 (1995), 68–105, at pp. 86–94. Nor does the second preface to "The Prophecies of John of Bridlington," the only other late-medieval English explanation of riddle tricks known to me, use the term "transitio" (ed. Thomas Wright, *Political Poems and Songs,* Rolls Series 14 [London, 1859], 1:126–27). Yet Galloway's approach is the more convincing because it also entirely explains the C text's one-line abbreviation of Patience's riddle, "In the corner of a cart-whel, with a crow croune" (C 15.163), as another riddle on "cor."

[84] Cynthia Renée Bland, "Langland's Use of the Term *ex vi transicionis,*" *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 2 (1988), 125–35, at pp. 133–34.

[85] "Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui Domine."

[86] Ben H. Smith, Jr., *Traditional Imagery of Charity in Piers Plowman* (The Hague, 1966), pp. 40–55. See also Skeat's parallel-text edition, 2:196–97.

[87] R. E. Kaske, "'*Ex vi transicionis*' and Its Passage in *Piers Plowman*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 62 (1963), 32–60.

Equally persuasive is the liturgical solution developed by Edward Schweitzer from J. F. Goodridge's suggestion that *"Ex vi transicionis"* refers to "'the Passover, the slaying of the paschal lamb, and the crossing of the Red Sea, which symbolizes a Christian's passing from the Old Law to the new life of grace through baptism."[88] This approach does not converge on a single answer but opens onto wide associations with the course of salvation history as it is celebrated at Easter. Such an answer is attractive because liturgy was probably more familiar than academic riddles, exegetical commentaries, or even grammar books. Yet it is difficult to prefer any one solution over the others because, in each case, bringing to bear a less obscure discourse also yields a less precise solution.

And there is no need to choose, because all of these solutions share the notion that Dowel is a change of heart toward charity. Thus the riddle's answer points beyond academic learning, and Patience's challenge, "Vndo it—lat þis doctour se if Dowel be þerinne," uses a typical way of closing a riddle to tell the doctor to look into his own heart. By constructing his riddle from largely academic materials, however, Patience shows both the potential and limits of learning at the same time that he sets himself over the doctor as an authority. Indeed, readers unable to solve the riddle might nonetheless recognize the kinds of discourse it draws on, and for them the claim to superior knowledge, or to what Galloway calls "rhetorical power," would be its primary meaning. Yet whereas Galloway finds "a sustained uneasiness on Langland's part regarding the status and effects of such riddling activities and communities,"[89] I suggest that riddling contributes strongly here to a kind of authority Patience claims through the poetics of enigma.

A similar authority is ascribed earlier in this scene to Piers himself by means of a riddling metaphor drawn from grammar. Before asking Patience about Dowel, Conscience asks Clergy, who defers to Piers and cites the answer he has somehow heard from him: ". . . þat Dowel and Dobet arn two infinites, / Whiche infinites wiþ a feiþ fynden out Dobest, / Which shal saue mannes soule . . ." (13.128–30). Anne Middleton has explicated these lines according to the grammarian Priscian's discussion both of infinitive verbs and of the "infinite" or interrogative pronoun. In either case, the metaphor suggests that Dowel and Dobet cannot be limited to specific commands, social functions, or stages of spiritual growth, but are instead open containers that point beyond themselves to their fulfillment in the perfection of Dobest. More important, Middleton argues, grammatical metaphor, in an era when grammar was thought to describe the real relations of things in the universe as they reflect the mind of God, would be able to rise highest within the temporal limits that make all knowledge of spiritual truths at best enigmatic. Indeed, grammatical metaphor draws attention to these very limits.[90]

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[88] Edward Schweitzer, "'Half a laumpe lyne in Latyne' and Patience's Riddle in *Piers Plowman*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73 (1974), 313–27. He quotes Goodridge at p. 315 n. 8.

[89] Galloway, "The Rhetoric of Riddling," p. 92.

[90] Anne Middleton, "Two Infinites: Grammatical Metaphor in *Piers Plowman*," *English Literary History* 39 (1972), 169–88. Building on Middleton, D. Vance Smith reads Dowel as lacking *vis transicionis*, construed as the power of transitivity, in order to argue that these riddles are an instance of the whole poem's focus on the problem of beginning: "how one passes from the beginning that Dowel represents to the completion that Dobest represents" (*The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century* [Minneapolis, 2001], p. 208). That it is Conscience who must become a beginner again underscores the

Patience's riddle likewise deploys scholarly learning in order to go beyond it. The kinds of learning that it potentially draws on—grammar, exegesis, the liturgy—could each claim a superior access to spiritual truth. In the form of a riddle, however, especially one that also involves Latin word games, this intellectual authority becomes double-edged. On one hand, academic learning reinforces, and is in turn reinforced by, the realist metaphysics implicit in much medieval riddling. In this view, all of language is, as Wit had said earlier, "a game of heuene" (9.102). The experience of solving riddles dramatizes the link between words and things by the ring of truth that confirms the answer to a riddle—even if Patience's riddle results in superfluity of signification rather than luminous clarity. On the other hand, putting academic learning into riddle form has a leveling effect. It questions whether a science such as exegesis has any greater access to truth than do riddle tricks. The leveling effect is all the more challenging coming from an academic outsider like Patience.[91]

Like the devil in the story of St. Andrew warning the bishop not to admit a "gilour," the doctor of divinity responds to Patience's riddle by accusing him of being a "disour," a disreputable kind of storyteller that Piers had earlier warned against (6.52–54). Of course, Patience's holiness is obvious, and the poem really does recommend the way of patient penitence. Yet the doctor's accusation might alert us to the possibility that Patience also includes a dash of the trickster Marcolf. Before letting the doctor answer, Patience had claimed that his riddle can somehow give mastery over all men:

> And ek, haue God my soule! and þow wilt it craue,
> Ther nys neiþer emperour ne emperesse, erl, kyng ne baroun,
> Pope ne patriark, þat pure reson ne shal make þee
> Maister of all þo men þoruȝ myȝt of þis redels—
> Nouȝt þoruȝ wicchecraft but þoruȝ wit; and þow wilt þiselue
> Do kyng and quene and alle þe comune after
> Ȝyue þee al þat þei may ȝyue, as þee for best yemere [guardian],
> And as þow demest wil þei do alle hir dayes after:
> *Pacientes vincunt.*
>
> (13.165–72a)

point, especially if, acting as a bishop, he brings to mind the association of bishops earlier, in the poem's first two definitions of the three Do's, with Dobest (8.95 and 9.14, perhaps recalled in the doctor's definition of it at 13.118 as those who do as they preach, since bishops exemplified those who combine lives of teaching and action). On the other hand, while Smith sees Wille "bound in a life of pure beginning, a life of pure, undirected action with no possible end" (p. 210), I would argue that Patience also figures the poem's way forward.

[91] Or Piers. Indeed, the fact that Clergy defers to the authority of Piers, and then ascribes to him a grammatical metaphor, underscores the similarity between Patience's confrontation with the doctor and Piers's earlier confrontation with the priest over the pardon (as noted by Simpson, *Introduction,* pp. 227–28, and Elizabeth D. Kirk, *The Dream-Thought of Piers Plowman* [New Haven, Conn., 1972], p. 152). Both challenge the institutional authority represented by their opponent. As Piers quotes the Latin Bible against the priest, so Patience makes use of his opponent's kind of learning (they share one quotation, Matthew 6.25: 7.127, 14.34b). And both center their challenge on an enigma. Like Patience's riddle, the tearing of the pardon points to the need for inner conversion rather than conforming to institutional authority. Finally, Patience's riddle, like Piers's resolution after tearing the pardon, aligns him with social groups that stand outside the institutional order. For Patience and Piers these extrainstitutional associations include elements of holiness and folly that take wisdom out of the realm of academic discourse and out of the control of official culture.

Although this power must have to do with the change of heart and love of enemies the riddle refers to, the domain in which Patience locates it is not devotional but courtly, including the courts of both secular and ecclesiastical rulers. A reference to witchcraft suggests the charmlike power of riddles, though Patience specifies that this power derives not from witchcraft but from wit.[92] Though we might envision some sort of wise counselor, the better comparison might again be Marcolf, who masters Solomon and was promised mastery of the rest of his kingdom. Patiently suffering and loving one's enemies is arguably closer to the way Marcolf disarms Solomon through tricks than to St. Andrew's victory over the devil. Langland's poetics of enigma here leaves these models behind, but they help show how, though the enigmatic spans the hierarchical range of medieval discourse, it is most pure at the extremes: the expression of theological mysteries, as in riddles answered by St. Andrew, and the riddles of common folklore or academic recreation. Patience's riddle links these extremes, which also correspond to his dual social status as saint and outsider. Although theological enigma would normally be associated with the discourses of the church, the surrounding dialogue instead unites both the high and low registers of the enigmatic in opposition to official authority, and thus fashions a discourse resistant to institutional cooption.[93] Rather than vanishing like the devil in the St. Andrew story, the doctor merely pushes the table away, refuses to keep playing the game, and takes Clergy and Conscience aside to urge them to expel Patience as a liar. But, for the poetics of enigma, continuing the game is essential; Marcolf never runs out of tricks. And, at the other end of the hierarchy of discourses, human knowledge of truth is necessarily incomplete and thus mixed with lies—and perhaps even most fully grasped in fictions. The riddle of Dowel is infinite in the theological sense of surpassing human capacity for perfect knowledge or action in this life.

Conscience opts against the institution in which he himself has been host and in favor of playing the game by choosing to join Patience as a pilgrim. In response, Clergy reiterates the doctor's accusation and implies that by choosing to follow Patience, Conscience is choosing the life of a wandering minstrel, "hankering after New Year's gifts and odd bits of largesse."[94] And indeed, as Simpson shows, Pa-

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[92] Kaske seems to consider the riddle to be a sort of charm: *"Ex vi transicionis,"* pp. 229, 247, and 255. I would suggest, however, that Langland implies an opposition between them as proposed by Northrop Frye in "Charms and Riddles" (in *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* [Bloomington, Ind., 1976], pp. 123–47).

[93] In this respect, the rhetoric of enigma is similar to that of the *sermo humilis* described by Erich Auerbach in *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages,* trans. Ralph Mannheim, Bollingen Series 74 (Princeton, N.J., 1965), pp. 25–66.

[94] Schmidt's translation (*Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text* [Oxford, 1992], p. 143) of 13.184–85, "'What!' quod Clergie to Concience, 'are ye coueitous nouþe / After yeresȝeues or ȝiftes, or yernen to rede redels?'" Alford, "Langland's Exegetical Drama" (above, n. 74), pp. 105–6, associates line 185 with scholars rather than minstrels, taking "to rede redels" as "evidently a hallmark of professional scholars, especially of those eager to gain from their knowledge" and "yeresȝeues or ȝiftes" as "common ploys for getting around the prohibition" against selling knowledge. He apparently reads "nouþe" in line 184 as "not," even though it clearly means "now" at 3.290, 6.205, and 10.48, and both Donaldson and Schmidt translate it as "now" here. In his *Piers Plowman: A Glossary of Legal Diction* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), p. 170, Alford cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "yeres-yeve": "A gift customarily given or exacted at the New Year, or at the beginning of a year of office." At

tience comes to represent a sort of minstrelsy.[95] At the end of passus 13, Langland's narrator warns lords against feeding "fool-sages, flatereris and lieris" that make them laugh (13.422–27). Minstrels of various sorts and those who employ them receive some of the poem's most severe censure.[96] Patience, however, by telling a riddle at meal time, after having begged food as an uninvited pilgrim, and perhaps also by claiming power through his riddle over those who employ jesters and minstrels, combines in one figure the constellation of minstrels, beggars, and lying pilgrims to which we are introduced in the poem's prologue (33–52) and which recurs throughout. His holiness, however, developed especially through his devotion to scripture, as shown when it is his food at the feast, makes his a positive, holy minstrelsy that will lead to a taxonomy of three good kinds of minstrels: beggars, the poor for a "fool sage," and a learned man to teach about Christ's passion (13.437–52). Both Marcolf and St. Andrew fit these positive classes of minstrelsy better than the pejorative ones, and could be seen to contribute to them. Another important model for Patience's minstrelsy is no doubt the more diffuse and powerful image associated with St. Francis of the "joculatores Domini," which Talbot Donaldson has shown to lie behind the phrase "God's minstrels" at the end of the passus (13.430).[97] Langland's construction of a holy minstrelsy includes all of these and thus goes beyond any one of them. Riddling is harnessed to a devout poetics yet makes it all the more powerful and uncontainable, both in its engagement of mental faculties and in its challenge to institutions.

Christine Goldberg, noting that folktales of verbal cleverness, including riddle contests, have been classified among the few kinds that are realistic rather than marvelous, suggests that the enigmatic functions much like marvels. In riddle tales, "the enjoyment of the audience comes not just from having one character outdo another of higher status, but also from having the central character redefine the problem in such a way that he or she is in control. This stepping outside the boundaries gives these novelle the same kind of intellectual lift that wonder motifs can to magic tales."[98] However well Langland's audience understands the riddles at the feast of Conscience, wonder surely ought to be one of their effects. Indeed, I take it as an example of how the poem fulfills the promise made at its very beginning when Wille says he "wente wide in þis world wondres to here" (prol. 4). The enigmatic is the marvelous in *Piers Plowman,* and by pulling the tradition of the riddle contest into a full theological vision, Langland enhances its visionary potential. Marvels and riddles only work for those who are ready for them, however, and the poem's focus on penance in the remainder of its fourth dream, after Conscience, Patience, and Wille set out on their pilgrimage, has implications too for how it prepares its readers to receive the benefit of its riddles.

3.100 "yeresyeues" is connected with officials who take bribes, and it is used metaphorically at 8.52, but at 10.47 it refers specifically to minstrels retained by nobility.

[95] Simpson, *Introduction,* pp. 135–38.

[96] See also 10.30–50 and E. Talbot Donaldson's comprehensive treatment of minstrelsy in all three versions of the poem, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven, Conn., 1949; repr., Hamden, Conn., 1966), pp. 135–48.

[97] Donaldson, *The C-Text,* pp. 146–47.

[98] Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters* (above, n. 2), p. 190.

The Authority of Folly

How the poem asks to be read extends from the problem, pervasive in Langland's poem, of what kind of authority it projects. The first sign of the problem, in the opening lines, is the ambiguous status of the narrator, who distances himself from suspect categories of tale-tellers through his satirical visions yet bears marks of belonging to them. In the third dream, the voice of suspicion comes mostly from Dame Study, who states the need to guard wisdom from flatterers and fools. She complains of the debasements of minstrels and, on the other hand, the presumption of theologians who make jokes about the Trinity at feasts when the minstrels take a break (10.5–70).[99] While she affirms that love is the sovereign science, she represents a kind of thinking that appears limited when she admits that theology does not quite make sense to her: "The moore I muse þerinne, þe mystier it semeþ, / And þe depper I deuyne, þe derker me it þynkeþ" (10.183–84). Even Ymaginatif, a more poetic faculty, criticizes Wille's idle verse making (12.16–19).[100] Patience's holy and enigmatic minstrelsy at the Banquet of Conscience begins to help answer this problem of authority by playing both high and low discourses, mystery and folly, against the middle, and thus shifting to a different kind of poetry. Patience's authority faces another test when he, Conscience, and Wille meet another kind of minstrel named Haukyn. If Conscience, Clergy, and the doctor represent one potential, narrow audience of the poem, Haukyn stands for an opposite, broader audience. The most universal surrogate audience, however, is Wille himself, whose deeper state of folly when he wakes from the fourth dream, both insider and outsider, both comprehending and confused, offers the most challenging model of how to play the poem's games.

Unlike Patience, Haukyn is far from holiness; his dirty cloak is allegorized as an inventory of the seven deadly sins. He seems to justify the criticisms leveled against minstrels elsewhere in the poem, including the banquet scene. Yet the poem again disengages the notion of minstrelsy from its usual connotations, largely through continued metaphors of food and hunger. For Haukyn is a particular kind of minstrel, a "waferer" attached to a household (rather than a wandering minstrel), charged with making the special biscuits that accompanied the sweet wine at the end of a meal as well as providing mealtime entertainment. Haukyn explains, however, that he is a failure as minstrel because he cannot do the entertaining things that minstrels do, like singing, dancing, and telling stories.[101] While Patience figures an enigmatic minstrelsy that is poor in body and overflowing in spiritual and se-

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[99] Both Anne Middleton ("The Passion of Seint Averoys [B.13.91]: 'Deuynyng' and Divinity in the Banquet Scene," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 1 [1987], 31–40, at p. 32) and James Simpson (*Introduction,* p. 138) have noted how this scene anticipates the Banquet of Conscience. In both passages, the question of proper discourse is connected to imagery of eating as well as the imperative of hospitality toward the poor.

[100] On the many other links between the narrator and minstrelsy see Donaldson, *The C-Text,* pp. 148–55.

[101] See John Southworth, *The English Medieval Minstrel* (Woodbridge, Eng., 1989), pp. 80–81. I am ignoring the larger economic implications of Haukyn; see David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London, 1988), pp. 58–62.

mantic riches, Haukyn is the reverse, a minstrel who is poor in spirit in the sense that he lacks song and wit and is occupied only with the body. Indeed, he is also something of a general baker who serves everyone from beggars to the pope, and thus, as a provider of food, he resembles Piers the Plowman. But unlike Piers he can neither provide spiritual food nor, initially, does he desire it for himself.

The drama of Haukyn's dialogue with Patience is how he comes, by the end of the fourth dream, to weep for his need. Haukyn's minstrelsy is the simple but no less profound kind of one who is poor in spirit and to whom, Jesus says at the beginning of the Beatitudes, the kingdom of heaven belongs. So poor is he, indeed, that he does not know his poverty. The Beatitudes, as Simpson notes, are the "base text" here from which Patience develops the paradoxes of how salvation comes first to the poor.[102] Patience responds to his need by offering to teach him to repent in terms that recall both the food imagery of the banquet scene and Piers's resolution after tearing the pardon (14.29–34a; cf. 7.119 and 126–30). To Haukyn's skepticism, Patience answers ". . . paciently, and out of his poke hente / Vitailles of grete vertues for alle manere beestes, / And seide, 'Lo! here liflode yno3, if oure bileue be trewe'" (14.37–39). What follows is a splendid ecological vision of the plenty of Creation that feeds all things, from the worms on up. But this plenty is manifest to Haukyn as Patience's words, unfolding the riches that were enclosed in his riddle. The climax of their dialogue returns to the enigmatic mode in response to Haukyn's question, "What is poverty?" Patience answers by quoting from a Latin text, translated from a Greek dialogue that is part of the tradition discussed above involving Emperor Hadrian, in which one Secundus responds to questions with riddling sequences of phrases.[103] When Haukyn then asks him to "kenne me þis on Englissh" (14.277), Patience expands playfully on each of the nine phrases, all the while developing the key idea that poverty is "odibile bonum," a hateful good, because it is suffering for the body but health for the soul. After this passage, Haukyn speaks briefly before lapsing into inarticulate weeping for his sin and crying for mercy. It is an ambiguous response, both literally and as figure for the poem's poetics. Perhaps he falls into despair, and we are plunged with him into a Sphinx-ine enigma of self-understanding without hope or of Homer unable to solve a riddle. But perhaps his recognition of utter need is a first step toward penance and faith, and he is a figure for willingness to admit ignorance and approach truth again as a beginner.[104] Either way, his emptiness is an enigma in itself that needs

[102] Simpson, *Introduction,* p. 145. Patience quotes the first verse of the Beatitudes at 14.215a; the omission of "spiritu" makes it closer to the version in Luke 6.20 than Matthew 5.3 (see Alford, *Guide to the Quotations* [above, n. 70], p. 90).

[103] See Lawler's notes on this passage in his forthcoming volume 3 of the *Penn Commentary on "Piers Plowman."*

[104] For a sympathetic reading of Haukyn that falls between these possibilities by focusing on just his self-knowledge and need, see Nicholas Watson, "*Piers Plowman,* Pastoral Theology, and Spiritual Perfectionism: Hawkyn's Cloak and Patience's *Pater Noster,*" *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 21 (2007), 83–118. He also notes previous sympathetic and hostile readings of Haukyn (p. 84 n. 2). Watson's attempts to locate the poem with respect to late-medieval and Reformation ideas about pastoral theology lead him to see Haukyn's weeping as "proto-Lutheran tears" (p. 115). An earlier link, however, would be to Augustine's wailing in the garden at the end of book 8 of the *Confessions.* Patience's last speech ends with a reference to Augustine as the source of his understanding of the ninth definition of poverty

and thus summons compassionate, enigmatic fullness, keeping it ever moving, ever giving, never rigid and controllable.

The poem's sympathy for Haukyn is manifest in Wille, who imitates his state of poor folly with heightened ambiguity and self-awareness. While Haukyn is still on the cusp of despair and contrition, between the unpardonable sin and the fundamental act of salvation, Wille awakens. The simple act of penitence toward which Patience has led Haukyn will not suffice for Wille, who is on a much more circuitous path that moves not toward inarticulate wailing but toward a highly articulate yet deeply felt engagement with the mysteries of the Christian faith—one that seems to have produced the holy minstrelsy of the poem itself. Before the fifth dream begins, Langland draws together in Wille's self-description as a fool all that has been figured about this surrogate reader through Patience and Haukyn:[105]

> Ac after my wakynge it was wonder longe
> Er I koude kyndely knowe what was Dowel.
> And so my wit weex and wanyed til I a fool weere;
> And some lakkede my lif—allowed it fewe—
> And leten me for a lorel and looþ to reuerencen
> Lordes or ladies or any lif ellis—
> As persons in pelure wiþ pendaunʒ of siluer;
> To sergeaunʒ ne to swiche seide noʒt ones,
> "God loke yow, lordes!"—ne loutede faire,
> That folk helden me a fool; and in þat folie I raued,
> Til Reson hadde ruþe on me and rokked me aslepe.
>
>   (15.1–11)[106]

Waxing and waning wit, of course, implies lunacy, a real mental deficiency that leads here to some kind of raving. The major effect of becoming a fool that Wille describes, however, is rejection by society. Though it would seem that his folly includes a lack of respect for those with status and authority, his description emphasizes their lack of respect for him. Wille's reciprocal disrespect could, in fact, be read as only something of which he is accused. Even his foolish state, which he first asserts as a psychological reality, he then describes in line 10 as a social one, a common opinion of him. In this respect, becoming a fool places Wille more firmly in the same category as others who lack social standing: Patience

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from Secundus: "The nynþe it is swete to þe soule, no sugre is swetter; / For pacience is payn for Pouerte hymselue, / And sobretee swete drynke and good leche in siknesse. / Thus lered me a lered man for Oure Lordes loue, Seint Austyn— / A blessed lif wiþouten bisynesse for body and for soule: / *Absque sollicitudine felicitas*" (14.313–17a). This might refer to another passage of the *Confessions*, 3.6.11, in which Augustine uses similar figures of food and drink in what he calls the "enigma" of Solomon at Proverbs 9.17 to describe the fixation on material things that kept him in a state of spiritual poverty while he was a follower of the Manichees, his realization of which climaxes in book 8. This would suggest a hopeful reading of Haukyn's similar realization.

[105] Haukyn has often been recognized as "in many ways the alter ego of the dreamer himself" (John A. Alford, "The Design of the Poem," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman,* ed. John A. Alford [Berkeley, Calif., 1988], pp. 29–65, at p. 50). Most striking is his self-imposed alienation from society described at 13.285–87.

[106] Pearsall notes that the dreamer's self-description in B 15.1–11 "is removed in C, and elements reintegrated in the description of the lunatics in C.9" ("Lunatyk Lollares" [above, n. 51], p. 172).

and Haukyn, as well as beggars and minstrels in general, and even, though he is still something of a plowman, Piers himself. Yet if Wille, as a wanderer of uncertain character and occupation, has been in this category all along, what does it add for him to call himself a fool? If the fusion of Marcolf and St. Andrew as riddlemasters had tipped toward saintly wisdom in Patience, Wille now becomes another embodiment of the enigmatic who tips it instead toward folly, but folly of a more motley kind than Haukyn's. To take the full measure of this portrait of Wille and Langland's intervention in the complex medieval tradition in which Marcolf was a major figure requires a brief consideration of the sophisticated, psychosocial approach to folly throughout the poem.

The subject of fools in the Middle Ages is complicated by the difficulty of firmly locating in medieval usage the distinction that seems most important from a modern perspective: between what was called already by the early modern era "the 'natural' fool (a mentally deficient person kept as entertainer) and the 'artificial' fool (a mentally normal person who pretends to be mad in order to be kept as entertainer)."[107] Regarding natural fools, Barbara Swain writes, "The real fools were cared for by individuals or communities. They were harbored by noblemen as harmless dependents and butts of merriment, playing aimless pranks and uttering confused talk. Or they remained in their villages, regarded with a mixture of disdain and superstitious awe as the privileged children of God."[108] Their lack of reason was seen alternatively as sinful and demonic or as a gift of God that allowed privileged access to a higher wisdom; it excluded them, like children, from all sacraments except baptism, yet it also gave them the right not to participate in the life of the normal world.[109] They also became entertainers and objects of abuse, and it is these functions, shared with artificial fools and wandering minstrels, that confuse the distinction between the two. As Pearsall imagines, "someone with a 'comic' physical disability or deformity could easily 'play the fool,' but someone mentally retarded could also learn to exploit that infirmity and become renowned for spectacular acts of lunacy, such as jumping out of high windows."[110] Besides performing antics and receiving abuse, the fool's entertainment consisted largely of babbling talk, supposed to hold shreds of truth amidst its nonsense.[111] Turning folly into entertainment only made it more suspect, but nonetheless it was accorded a prominent place in Christmas and spring festivity. Swain comments, "The outcast condition of the tolerated domestic fool—his failure—and his occasional seasons of

[107] Wenzel, "Wisdom of the Fool" (above, n. 52), p. 235. Enid Welsford's study approaches the fool as one who "breaks down the distinction both between folly and wisdom, and between life and art" (*The Fool,* p. 27).

[108] Swain, *Fools and Folly* (above, n. 51), p. 53.

[109] See Muriel Laharie, *La folie au moyen âge: XIe–XIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1991), pp. 23–113 and 244–45; and Swain, *Fools and Folly,* pp. 10–52. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* and its supplement explain the status of madmen and imbeciles in baptism (IIIa.68.12), the Eucharist (IIIa.80.9), marriage (supp. 58.3), and extreme unction (supp. 32.3); see the translation by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas,* 18 vols. (London, 1911–22; repr. in 5 vols., Westminster, Md., 1981).

[110] Pearsall, "Lunatyk Lollares," p. 174.

[111] Swain, *Fools and Folly,* pp. 59–60.

triumph were real facts, made apparent in the persons of jesters, festival fools, and actors."[112] Thus the ambiguity of the fool's entertainment was compounded by the underlying question of whether it was intentional or not.

Langland intensifies the ambiguity by distinguishing between natural and artificial fools while complicating his initial association of innocence with involuntary fools and guilt with those who choose folly.[113] The "fooles" in the prologue (36), censured with minstrels who dodge more productive labor, are clearly artificial, as are "þoo þat feynen hem foolis" (10.38), condemned by Dame Study in her rant against the debasement of wisdom and wit in the way the wealthy entertain themselves. Though her ensuing speech condemns artificial fools, she begins with an implied reference to Wille as a fool (the first one in the poem) that is made ambiguous by adding that he is "frenetike . . . of wittes" (10.6), which implies madness.[114] Earlier, Wit had asserted that "fooles þat fauten Inwit," like others who lack Inwit—orphans, widows, madmen, and helpless maidens—ought to be cared for by the church (9.67–72; see also 8.92–94). Already in the prologue, a "lunatik" speaks "clergially" to the king (123–27). These seem to be natural fools, though their witlessness is portrayed more in terms of social marginalization and helplessness than mental deficiency. During his inner dream within the third dream, Wille is again called a fool, this time by friars, for wanting to be buried where he was baptized rather than in their friary. They think him stupid.[115] But there is irony, perhaps, owing to the fact that Franciscans, at least in their early days, used the language of folly to describe their rejection of the world, as well as society's occasional mockery of them.[116] In Piers's rejection of the world after tearing the pardon in passus 7, Langland draws on the larger, ancient tradition that finds holiness and true wisdom in the unworldliness of fools and also figures the choice of a life apart from the world as a kind of foolishness.[117] The same pun on fowls/fools used by Piers is later applied to the apostles and early hermits (15.313). Finally, at the beginning of Wille's last dream, Antichrist begins to overthrow truth and immediately wins the friars and religious along with all the folk, "saue oonly fooles" (20.61). "Fooles" remains the word that Conscience uses for this faithful remnant as he gathers them together (20.74, 77). The narrator describes both their innocence and their opposition to any who would sway them:

[112] Ibid., p. 54; see also pp. 63–74.

[113] Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Brighton, Eng., 1984), p. 23, suggests that Langland helped establish the theological difference between natural and artificial fools.

[114] The other contemporary citation given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) is Chaucer's *Troilus* 5.206, "frenetik and madde." The A and C texts have "frentyk"/"frentike" here, which also implies illness in this period.

[115] Langland uses the term "folie" for stupidity (12.138, 13.149, 15.150, 20.147) as well as for sin (14.186 and 297, 15.76–77, 18.225). A possible pun on fool/foal at 2.163 would also imply stupidity.

[116] See Laharie, *La folie,* pp. 94–95; Wenzel, "Wisdom of the Fool," pp. 238–39.

[117] On this tradition see Laharie, *La folie,* pp. 87–89; Wenzel, "Wisdom of the Fool," pp. 237–38; and Pearsall, "Lunatyk Lollares," pp. 168–69 and 178. Wenzel quotes a passage from the *Summa virtutum de remediis anime:* "A juggler (*ioculator*) lets himself be heavily beaten for money or a small reward. Much more readily do patient men give their bodies over to torments for God's sake. . . . A truly patient man is also like a fool (*stulto*), who lets himself be beaten and treated with shame for the sake of food and drink. Such foolishness in Christ is the greatest wisdom" (p. 236).

> And þat were mylde men and holye, þat no meschief dradden,
> Defyed alle falsnesse and folk þat it vsede;
> And what kyng þat hem conforted, knowynge h[ir] gile,
> They cursed, and hir conseil—were it clerk or lewed.
>
> (20.65–68)

While these are fools cleansed of all negative connotations in order to figure the faithful, they are imagined in a court context and thus retain a connection to the household fools who had been objects of both censure and charity earlier in the poem. Their righteous opposition to authority builds, in particular, on the depiction of holy fools as outcasts that transfers from Patience and Haukyn to Wille himself by the beginning of the fifth dream.

The poem's most explicit proposal for an alternative, holy minstrelsy, in a passage from the end of passus 13 already mentioned above, appeals to a scriptural precedent chosen, it seems, to emphasize the evangelical authority that attaches to outcasts:

> Clerkes and knyȝtes welcomeþ kynges minstrales,
> And for loue of hir lord liþeþ [comfort/listen to] hem at festes;
> Muche moore, me þynkeþ, riche men sholde
> Haue beggeres bifore hem, þe whiche ben Goddes minstrales,
> As he seiþ hymself—Seynt Johan bereþ witnesse:
> *Qui vos spernit me spernit.*
>
> (13.437–41a)[118]

Before it goes on to describe three kinds of "Goddes minstrales," the poem introduces them all with a Latin quotation that, although attributed to St. John, actually comes from Luke, where it concludes Christ's instructions to the seventy-two disciples sent out to preach: "He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me; and he that despiseth me, despiseth him that sent me."[119] The rest of Christ's instructions were a major source for the model of radical discipleship practiced by those who came to be known throughout Christian tradition as fools of God and describe not just poverty, but the social alienation characteristic of fools and emphasized in Wille's folly. Langland now implies, through the figure of the fool, that the poor are fit preachers not only because they understand the Gospel, but also because they are like Christ in having been rejected. His Latin verse does in fact recall one from John's Gospel, near the end of Christ's last speech before the beginning of the Passion narrative proper, that uses the same verb, "spernit," of those who reject Christ and his words.[120] Langland's proposal opens

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[118] See Ralph Hanna's discussion of these lines in their altered location in the C text ("Will's Work," in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship,* ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton [Philadelphia, 1997], pp. 23–66, at pp. 45–48), which puts the idea of Wille's minstrelsy in a different context but does not change it fundamentally.

[119] Luke 10.16, "Qui vos audit, me audit; et qui vos spernit, me spernit; qui autem me spernit spernit eum qui me misit." The parallels at Matthew 10.40 and John 13.20 speak only of receiving, not rejecting, those whom Christ sends. Pearsall emphasizes the relevance of this and similar Gospel texts to the "lunatyk lollares" also added to the C text (C 9.105–40; "Lunatyk Lollares," p. 169).

[120] John 12.48, "Qui spernit me et non accipit verba mea habet qui iudicet eum; sermo quem locutus sum ille iudicabit eum in novissimo die" (He that despiseth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one

the possibility, reasserted more provocatively at the beginning of passus 15, that fools and other victims have authority to speak because they are like Christ, not least in being abused social outcasts.[121]

The state of folly in which Wille describes himself before his fifth dream seems to be the most ambiguous of all, one that he both suffers and chooses. As involuntary, to what extent is it social, an accusation against him, like the other two times he is called a fool in the poem? Yet there is certainly some element of madness here, anticipated by the dreamer's descriptions earlier in the poem of his speech as babbling and of himself as "witlees nerhande" (5.8, 21; 13.1). The further waxing and waning of his wit here is introduced as a consequence of being cut off from "kynde knowing" of Dowel. On the other hand, he also says that Reason had pity on him and rocked him to sleep, so that the dream itself may be under a more rational influence. As a choice, Wille's folly claims not just the fool's privilege to speak but the authority that follows from his potential access to higher wisdom and position as an outcast.[122] In this sense, Wille might be seen as continuing to accompany Patience in his waking life. Could his description of waking life emphasize his society's view of what, seen from the inside in his dreams, is more like Marcolf's folly, supremely self-confident and self-aware? One exchange in the *Dialogue* goes so far as to attribute to Marcolf a Socratic counterpart to the Christian discourse of Solomon: "A merciful man doth well to his soul." Marcolphus: "He despiseth a great gift that knoweth not himself."[123] The ambiguity of Wille's folly extends to its relation to other cultural authorities, especially the institutions entrusted with

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that judgeth him; the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day). Of course, the great spurning of Jesus is the Passion itself, and this same verb is used again by Luke: "Sprevit autem illum Herodes cum exercitu suo et inlusit, indutum veste alba" (23.11, "And Herod with his army set him at nought, and mocked him, putting on him a white garment"). Wyclif compares those who read Scripture irreverently with "those Gentiles who reckoned Christ to be a fool on account of his humility and forbearance" (*On the Truth of Holy Scripture,* trans. Ian Christopher Levy [Kalamazoo, Mich., 2001], p. 103). The Passion plays of the Corpus Christi cycles indicate how far the foolishness of Christ, and perhaps the Christlikeness of fools, might go. In two of the surviving cycles, Christ is explicitly made into a fool during his trial and torture (noted by Billington, *History of the Fool,* pp. 18–19): the York plays of the Litsters and of the Tilemakers (Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays* [London, 1982], pp. 273–80 and 302–4) and the Wakefield Buffeting (A. C. Cawley, ed., *The Wakefield Pageants* [Manchester, Eng., 1958], pp. 87–89). See V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, Calif., 1966), pp. 175–205, and *Telling Images: Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative II* (Stanford, Calif., 2009), pp. 226–40.

[121] The converse, the Girardian idea that Christ himself has authority because he is a victim who exposes the strategies of violence in which the powerful participate, is also visible in Langland, but I shall not argue it here. On the authority of the victim versus the authority of the crowd and its leaders/puppets see Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 22–34, applying René Girard's theory to the Passion in Mark.

[122] Jay Martin applies the fool's right of free speech but finds that "the mode of the fool" gives the dreams an unambiguous aspect of divinely inspired visions ("Will as Fool and Wanderer, in *Piers Plowman,*" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 3 [1962], 535–48, at pp. 539–40). John M. Bowers (*The Crisis of Will in Piers Plowman* [Washington, D.C., 1986], pp. 148–52) reads Wille's folly as more ambiguous but finds it more likely a concomitant of sin than of holiness.

[123] Beecher, ed., *Dialogue,* p. 151; Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf,* p. 68: "S: 'Bene facit anime sue vir misericors.' M: 'Magnum donum despicit qui seipsum non recognoscit.'"

the religious mysteries at the core of the poem.[124] Are these authorities, as represented for instance at the Banquet of Conscience, opposed, or can they be integrated? This is one of the larger riddles the poem poses to its reader. Passus 18 offers a divinely comic ending to the poem's Pauline masterplot but one that seems to unravel over the course of the final two passus. The poem's assertion of its enigmatic poetics is itself enigmatic, but in preparation for the climactic sequences of the last three dreams, Langland has deftly positioned his narrator to carry a riddling authority that matches that of his text. One can easily imagine that Langland found models in St. Andrew and Marcolf, not only for Patience and Wille at the Banquet of Conscience, but for the side he himself plays in the game he wrote.

To appeal to riddling dialogues as a model for textual authority also implies a model of reading. Wille's state of folly, both chosen and suffered, is one that readers of *Piers Plowman* might well identify with. Like Marcolf, the voices of *Piers Plowman* keep starting the game again and inviting readers to keep playing.[125] But like St. Andrew and the masters of the catechetical dialogues, they also seek to disclose truths through their riddles and invite belief in what they disclose. Such folly resembles the foolishness that St. Paul attributes to preaching, through which God saves those who believe.[126] Indeed, this famous passage from the beginning of 1 Corinthians makes the revelation of the Gospel sound like a riddle game in which those who think themselves wise and strong are humbled. St. Paul's implication that those who are made wise in Christ must somehow continue to embrace their foolishness is probably the ultimate basis for Langland's synthetic interpretation of these two versions of riddling dialogue through the figure of folly. The hermeneutic posture that results might be compared with what Paul Ricoeur posits as a "second naïveté," a renewed and deepened belief that can come after a passage through critical interpretation.[127] In Langland, of course, the passage is not through sophisticated modern modes of criticism, though the exegetical techniques that were current in his day are indeed part of the process of enigmatic reading. More fundamentally, his poem summons its readers to a second naïveté by passing repeatedly—with Patience, with Piers the Plowman, with Wille, and finally with Conscience—from the position of Marcolf, outside institutional authority, to the high table where, like a saint, one is farther inside than the insiders, and then out again, to exile and to pilgrimage.

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[124] Some corroboration of this reading of Langland's poem through its early reception might be seen in John Audelay's choice of Marcolf the fool as narrator for a poem heavily influenced by *Piers Plowman* that aims for a similarly delicate negotiation among the institutional authorities and conflicting discourses of its time. See James Simpson, "Saving Satire after Arundel's *Constitutions:* John Audelay's 'Marcol and Solomon,'" in *Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale: Essays in Honour of Anne Hudson,* ed. Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchison, Medieval Church Studies 4 (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 387–404.

[125] Smith's *Book of the Incipit* treats the poem as constantly beginning, though perhaps in a less playful light.

[126] 1 Corinthians 1.21, ". . . placuit Deo per stultitiam praedicationis salvos facere credentes."

[127] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston, 1967), pp. 351–52.

Curtis Gruenler is Associate Professor of English at Hope College, Holland, MI 49422 (e-mail: gruenler@hope.edu).