CHAPTER 5

Piers Plowman *and the Inappropriable*

> Regula et vita isoturum fratrum haec est, scilicet vivere in obedentia, in castitate et sine proprio. . .
>
> St. Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*[1]

> Forthy cristene sholde be in comune ryche, noon coueytous for hymsulue.
>
> *Piers Plowman*[2]

Piers Plowman is not a text to be mastered. Scholarship on Langland is punctuated everywhere with comments ranging in tone from irritation to awe on the poem's instability and ambiguity, its resistance to interpretation, its irreducible and manifold difficulties. For Morton Bloomfield, reading it is like reading "a commentary on an unknown text"; for David C. Benson, it is like playing "a literary game of snakes and ladders, in which we constantly find ourselves back at what looks very much like the place from which we started."[3] For John Bowers, it is a poem of "crisis" and "chaos"; for Charles Muscatine, it is "surrealistic."[4] Nicolette Zeeman has argued that the poem dramatizes the failure of ideology to contain desire; according to Mary Carruthers, the poem dramatizes the failure of language to express truth.[5] The dream-vision genre of the poem was one of the most popular literary forms in the later Middle Ages, but *Piers Plowman* is unique in comprising eight distinct dreams in its longest version, the C text, including a dream within a dream.[6] Much of the poem invokes the theme of pilgrimage, and yet the Dreamer's journey is a disorienting one without a clear destination. Figures and characters move from the realm of allegory into the poet's historical world and back again. With its "density of wordplay, symbol, allusion, and self-commentary," *Piers Plowman* "resists continuity and arrests interpretive attention."[7] And compounding these structural, thematic, and allegorical difficulties is the poem's complex textual history: the composition of *Piers Plowman* occupied Langland for nearly thirty years as he repeatedly

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revised the text to create at least three distinct versions over the 1360s, 70s, and 80s. The recursive nature of Langland's compositional process is echoed in the poem's form and its content as it ruminates on key images, themes, and phrases, circling around a series of conclusions but never landing on one.

In this chapter, I propose to read the resistance of *Piers Plowman*, a text that refuses to be captured, as an expression of inappropriability. In political and economic theory, appropriation is the act of making something one's own. Marx's theory of surplus value defines exploitation, the basis of capitalist profit, as the property owner's appropriation of "the unpaid labour of others or its product."[8] The political theorist Carl Schmitt places appropriation at the heart of the juridical order: for Schmitt, every political entity is founded on an original act of claiming ownership. Schmitt bases this thesis, in part, on his etymological analysis of the word *nomos*, the Greek word for law which also means appropriation, distribution, and production. Insofar as the "first meaning of *nomos* is appropriation," the process of establishing the law is initiated by the sovereign's appropriative act.[9] What for Marx is an act of theft is for Schmitt a self-legitimating conquest that precedes and makes possible the law itself.[10] Appropriation also makes debt possible, as the *Dialogue of the Exchequer* illustrates with striking precision: as we have seen, in Fitznigel's explanation of the accounting practices of the Exchequer, the tax debts owed to the crown are incurred as payments owed for William I's beneficence in bringing the rule of law to England. In this way, the *Dialogue* prefigures and instantiates Schmitt's thesis about appropriation and the law and, remarkably, traces the governmental apparatus implemented for debt accounting and enforcement to this foundational mechanism.

Partly in response to Schmitt's theory, Giorgio Agamben has attempted to discover in the legacy of Franciscanism what he calls a form-of-life, invoking a genre of text known as *regula et vita* or *forma vitae*. In their attention to the smallest details of time and habit, and to shaping the very rhythms of monastic life, the *forma vitae* makes life indistinguishable from form; the rule, that is, the law, is not imposed or obeyed so much as it is absorbed into the heart and inner life.[11] The monastic ideal "takes literally the Pauline prescription of unceasing prayer [. . .], [transforming] the whole of life into an Office."[12] According to Agamben, the Franciscans exemplify this transformation: not only does the friar *live* rather than *obey* the rule; he also abdicates all legal rights. The Franciscan tenet of *usus pauper*, literally "poor use," was central to this radical abdication, such that the friar was to inhabit the world of material goods not as a legal subject

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but as an animal. "As the horse has *de facto* use but not property rights over the oats it eats," writes Bonagratia in his defense of the mendicants, "so the religious who has abdicated all property has the simple *de facto* use of bread, wine, and clothes."[13] Such a life, argues Agamben, is "entirely removed from the grasp of law. [. . .] That is to say: [a] life [. . .] which is never given as property but only as common use."[14] Agamben thus turns to Franciscan theology and legal theory as a source for imagining the world and its resources as inappropriable, perceiving in Franciscan theory a Schmittian insight in reverse, that to live outside the "grasp of the law" means also to live without property, to use the goods of the world without making them one's own.

At the same time, Franciscan spirituality and doctrine exemplify the economic-theological paradox by which Christian ascesis and renunciation produce an economy of debt and credit. Many scholars have remarked on the Franciscan genius for economic theorizing. As Langholm has shown, arguably the best and most influential economic thinkers of medieval scholasticism – Peter Olivi, Alexander of Hales, and John Duns Scotus – were Franciscans.[15] It seems that the need to formulate and defend the doctrine of poverty against critics made such theoretical acumen necessary. Franciscans had to become experts on money, property, and trade in order to renounce them.[16]

Giacomo Todeschini has argued that Franciscan poverty is properly understood as a "rigorous" expression of theological elements central to Christian thought and culture generally. While the Franciscans did not "[invent] capitalism," their

> approach to the market reveals that it was the most rigorous Christian religiosity that formed a large part of the vocabulary in western economics, that the Christian world was never extraneous from the market, as fantasized between the 1800s and 1900s, nor was there a clear separation between morality and business. Franciscanism, in the very heart of Roman catholicity, identified in deprivation and renunciation the decisive elements for understanding the value of trade. However, this was the logical, everyday conclusion of a theological journey founded on metaphysics and on the politics of the Divine Incarnation (the sacred exchange), as the Christian tradition had progressively extolled them over the centuries.[17]

Franciscanism offers a particularly lucid but by no means unprecedented or unique expression of the economic theology that we have traced in the charter lyrics, which also figure the Incarnation as an economic paradigm, and the marriage debt, which aims at containing desire but instead produces an economy of it, much in the way that, Todeschini suggests,

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Franciscan poverty aims at "deprivation and renunciation" but instead produces the economic rationality that grounds capitalism and makes it possible.

Langland's relation to the fraternal orders, as well as the relation of *Piers Plowman* to Franciscan spirituality and doctrine, has been the subject of some debate in Langland studies. The poem's frequent attacks on the friars have led most scholars to conclude that Langland was an uncritical heir of William of Saint-Amour in his rehearsal of well-worn anti-mendicant stereotypes. As we saw in the previous chapter, one key element of Langland's critique of the friars echoes the traditional complaint that they were "mesureless" – not subject to the institutional limits placed on other orders and at risk of proliferating beyond what the Church and the general economy could sustain. But the consensus around Langland's anti-mendicancy has been growing increasingly unsettled in recent years. Lawrence Clopper is at the forefront of a critical movement to rethink Langland's treatment of Franciscanism, arguing that the poet "is deeply influenced by Franciscan thought" and that he aims to reform the fraternal orders from within the tradition by calling the friars back to their apostolic roots.[18] Indeed, there were few critics of Franciscan failings as fierce and as vocal as Franciscans themselves.[19] Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, too, hears many "echoes" of Franciscan thought in Langland's portrayal of Patience, and in his vision of patient poverty as a remedy against pride and avarice.[20] In this chapter, I suggest that there are echoes also in Langland's urgent concern with questions of economy. The poem sets out to determine the right way, in moral and theological terms, to manage material goods and resources. This is also a central focus of the Franciscan rule and mission. The debates between the Franciscans and their various opponents about the meaning of poverty ultimately were debates about "the appropriate relation of human beings to material goods," and about "what is owed to others."[21]

The form-of-life inscribed in St Francis's *Rule* is one of radical indebtedness in which the *fratres minores* are to own nothing and yet owe everything. In most interpretations of the *Rule*, this form is attainable only by the few who aspire to spiritual perfection. Legal rights and property – *dominium* – are necessary to govern the majority and to prevent chaos and violence. The problem for the friars, both in the internal debates between the so-called Spirituals and Conventuals and in the Franciscan conflict with the papacy, concerned the means of material survival in such a condition of radical debt.[22] According to the *Rule*, the friars "can accept, like other poor people, whatever is needed for the body, excepting money" and while they should not be "ashamed" to take alms, St Francis's

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intention clearly was that the friars should be unsolicitous in their daily lives. Francis did not lay out a clear plan for how, in practical or legal terms, such a position was to be sustained, especially as the order grew in members. The principles provided were simple and left open to interpretation, as well as being potentially contradictory: the brothers "must live without anything of their own and in chastity and in obedience"; at the same time, those "who know how to work [must] do so and exercise the trade they have learned, provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly. [. . .] The Apostle says, *Whoever does not wish to work shall not eat*."[23] The friars are not allowed to touch coined money, but those who "work at acquiring [alms] will receive a great reward and enable those who give them to gain and acquire one."[24] As we saw in the previous chapter, Langland is deeply aware of the difficulty of measuring what is enough, what is "needed for the body" and no more. One way to navigate this difficulty was to argue, as the friars did, that they did not own the food they ate, that they were not legally entitled to anything – to change the economic measure from one of quantity (how much is enough) to one of quality (what is the nature of one's relation to the food, drink, and shelter necessary for survival).[25]

These questions and controversies are expressed in the poem as concerns about the "lyflode" of the debtor. What is required for physical survival and for a life outside the grasp of the law – this is the question that shapes many of its quandaries and that opens the poem, in the Dreamer's exchange with Holy Church about needful things and the nature and role of money. Ultimately, I argue, *Piers Plowman* is shaped by a poetics of inappropriability in which the poem enacts, on the level of allegory and scriptural allusion, a formal instantiation of this economic theme. The poem calls its readers into a relation with a material world that resists capture, just as the poem frustrates readers' attempts to seize its meaning and make it their own. But *Piers Plowman* is not only a work of economic theology; it is also a work of vernacular theology profoundly engaged with the tasks of teaching and preaching, and with articulating a vision of the Church on earth that focuses on the logistics of translating a Franciscan form-of-life into vernacular, worldly terms. While the Franciscan *forma vitae* details the way of living for each brother, from his clothing to his daily activities to the correction of his faults, *Piers Plowman* details the means of making a living in an inappropriable world. Clopper contends that the poem seems to ask "[w]hat are the circumstances under which a person can be itinerant without committing sin or an illegal act? Who may justly take the alms of others?"[26] I argue that the poem asks these questions

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by way of its sustained meditation on the meaning and nature of labour as the continual payment of an unpayable debt.[27] Langland explores the value and meaning of labour most explicitly in and through the three figures in the poem who are most closely linked with Franciscanism, and who court most dangerously the charges of idleness and default: Rechelesnesse, Nede, and the Dreamer himself. As we will see in this chapter, the irreducibly ambiguous nature of these three figures, who mix truth with half-truth and misunderstanding, who aspire to the ideals taught by Holy Church, Patience, Kynde, and Conscience, but who embody an all-too-human failure to attain them, encapsulates the poem's interpretive inappropriability.

Works and Work: Rechelesnesse and the Rejection of Predestination

In the world of work as it is depicted in the poem, all human labour is engaged with the task of tending and managing the resources that are created and owned by God, and "lent" to human beings for their use.[28] The labourer is also a kind of debtor. The possibility that human beings might use these resources and share them freely – that is, that they might "be in comune ryche" (C.XVI 42) – expresses Langland's sympathy with the Franciscan renunciation of *dominium*, as Clopper has shown.[29] It also produces an idea of the human economy as a bureaucracy, in which all "crafts" are offices and all officeholders are stewards of creation. The inappropriability of things results in a sacralization of work that pervades *Piers Plowman*, in which material productivity, contributed to the common good, earns salvific merit, while "wasting" resources risks damnation. We may recall that, for Weber, the spiritualization of labour that drives the Protestant work ethic represents a decisive break with the medieval world, where monastic ascesis is "separated" from everyday life and work by an "unbridgeable" gulf.[30] After the Reformation and the entrenchment of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, worldly activity, particularly one's work understood as a "calling," becomes proof of election rather than the means of earning salvific merit.[31] This is the ascesis of labour that, in Weber's account, becomes secularized as capitalism. The theological root of this ascesis is the doctrine of predestination, which leaves the believer profoundly isolated, in a state of radical doubt and uncertainty about his own salvation. To relieve the "torments" provoked by such uncertainty, Weber contends, Calvinists in particular were taught "they simply had a duty to *regard* themselves as elect, and to dismiss any

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doubts as a temptation from the devil"; a crucial aid in building and maintaining such self-assurance was "tireless labor in a calling."[32] The devotion to worldly work as an end in itself, and productivity of labour as a sign of salvation rather than a means of earning it, stands in stark contrast to the medieval Christian, for whom faith without works is dead.[33] In other words, the Weberian account of the Protestant work ethic locates in the spiritual uncertainty of election by grace the impetus for a shift from *works* to *work*: charity is redefined as mundane labour "in the service of [. . .] social usefulness."[34]

In *Piers Plowman,* what I would call a Franciscan ascesis – the sacralization of work in an inappropriable world – far from remaining separate from everyday life, is the model for *all* people living and working in the "fair feld ful of folk." There is no separation between work and works here. Rather, worldly labour and salvific works of charity are thoroughly and mutually implicated; material profit and productivity are spiritually profitable and productive. As Agamben rightly notes, the sacralization of human work originates in monastic rules, such as Cassian's *Institutes*, *The Rule of Master*, or the Benedictine *Rules,* in which manual labour and the Divine Offices alike are to be carried out with the same careful attention and awareness that, in performing the task, one is performing the will of God.[35] What allows for this confluence of work and works in *Piers Plowman* is debt, or, more specifically, the worker defined as a debtor. Work understood as stewardship corresponds to an idea of the worker as a debtor to whom all material goods and life itself are lent, to be used but not owned, since any claim that the debtor has over the goods he makes use of is, necessarily, tenuous and provisional, the goods themselves liable to seizure or forfeiture.[36]

The Prologue presents a scene of earthly labour populated by two essential types, a division that clearly alludes to the mid-fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Wynnere and Wastoure.*[37] But while the earlier debate poem depicts winning and wasting as reciprocal and mutually necessary impulses of production and consumption, conserving and expending, in Langland's allegory there is no socially or spiritually beneficial purpose served by "wasting." On the contrary, failures to contribute to the common good or acts of disproportionate consumption are cast as deadly sins.[38] The winners, or workers, put themselves to the plough to produce "what this wasters with glotony destrueth" (Pr. 24). The proud who dress to satisfy their vanity are opposed to those who "potten hem" to prayer and penance: the repetition of the reflexive verb "putte" is key here, for it draws a parallel between the labour of the ploughman and that of

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the anchorite, while well-dressed vanity serves as an example of proud wasting.[39] Those who "chesen chaffare" are a kind of worker, and so their affluence is earned, but minstrels who act like fools and tell dirty stories "neyther swynke ne swete" (Pr. 36). False beggars and bidders, too, are wasters, as are friars who preach "for profyt of þe wombe" (Pr. 57); all of these are implicitly opposed to the possibility of the truly needy, whose suffering and deprivation save them from culpability.[40] This opening scene indicates the poem's overarching concern to invest earthly labour, not only works of charity but also literal and mundane work, with spiritual significance and merit. The spiritual value of labour is registered in the poem's ferocious and uncompromising work ethic: everyone must work for a living, the harder and more diligently the better, and no one is entitled to a free ride.

The absolute obligation to work is repeated in various ways at nearly every key juncture in the poem, but it is expressed with particular clarity in the scenes of collective or communal labour that anchor the narrative at its beginning, middle, and end: in addition to the Prologue, the ploughing scene in C.VIII and the building of Holy Church in C.XXI. At the close of Passus C.VII, Piers promises to lead the people on a pilgrimage to Treuthe, but in the opening lines of C.VIII, he informs them that he must first plough his half-acre of land. When the time comes for Piers to put on his pilgrim's cloak, he dons "clothes of alle kyn craftes" (C.VIII 58) – and then announces that his "plouh-pote" will be his "pyk-staff" (64). In other words, the physical labour of ploughing is not merely a symbol of all that is necessary to discharge in the world before one goes on a pilgrimage; rather, the physical labour is simultaneously a symbol of the spiritual pilgrimage and the pilgrimage itself. The significance of *craft*, which I would suggest is Langland's word for vocation, is reflected in the fact that Piers's pilgrimage attire encompasses all kinds of work and that he calls "Alle kyne crafty men þat conne lyve in treuthe" (C.VIII 69). This continues the theme of the Prologue, in which "winning" or earning through honest labour means contributing to the common good *and* to one's own store of salvific merit. It also looks ahead to the poem's final scenes, in which the individual's inclusion in the "vnite" of the reformed Church is contingent upon his faithful dedication to a craft. The pilgrimage-as-labour metaphor shifts again when Piers next announces that he must also write out his last will and testament before he leaves, for the will turns out to be a statement of accounts: "For thouh Y dey today my dette is yquited: / I bar hoem that Y borwed ar Y to bedde 3ede" (C.VIII 107–108). With this, it becomes clear not only that the pilgrimage consists of "alle kynes of craft," that the

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earthly life of labouring and producing is the highest penitential calling, but also that this labour-as-pilgrimage serves as payment for the debt of sin.

The fluidity of the allegory extends into the rest of the passus, when the pilgrimage of life and work is threatened by idlers and "faytours" who refuse to work. Here, the metaphor of earthly work as a pilgrimage produces a sustained and conflicted consideration of those who claim exemption from the imperative. Piers sets about to plough the field, and he is "apayed" with the "pilgrimes" who work with him: these workers he "payede hem wel here huyre" (C.VIII 115). But the efforts of the good workers are mocked by those who drink ale and sing songs instead of helping, and who, when Piers reminds them that the survival of the community depends on the contributions of all, pretend to be lame and unable to plough. These lines remind us that the agricultural labour depicted here is, first of all, an allegory of salvation, recalling both Matthew 13:39, in which the souls of the saved are those that will be harvested by Christ, and the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20, in which divine reward is a fair wage for human merit and effort. The idlers who trouble Piers are figures of the impenitent sinner who seeks pleasure rather than Treuthe, even as real-life idlers are also, literally, impenitent sinners.[41] The allegory's conflation of spiritual and material levels of signification results in a definition of charity that is remarkably concrete as well as community-minded. We might imagine a different vision of the "harvest" of souls in which the impenitent sinners who did not care to earn their salvation are cast off and cut off from the community of the saved without a second thought. But in the Half-Acre scene, Piers insists that the failure of the able-bodied to help are failures of charity that hurt, not only the idlers who are damning themselves, but "Suche poore" as rely on the "grayne" for their survival. The obligation to work is, on the simplest level, an obligation to work for the sake of others, to provide for others. This is the allegorical juncture where *work* becomes *works*. Individual salvation depends on acts of charity because the economic survival of everyone depends on productive labour.[42]

The poem's spiritualization of work thus moves in two directions – charity is a kind of labour and labour is salvific – and has important consequences for Langland's theology of salvation. The extent to which Langland is to be considered Augustinian or "semi-Pelagian" is the question that has dominated discussions of soteriology in *Piers Plowman* studies for at least the past thirty years. Robert Adams's influential 1983 article made the compelling case for Langland's semi-Pelagianism, arguing that Langland's position on grace and works is consonant with much late

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medieval theology, from Thomas Aquinas to Alexander of Hales, Duns Scotus to William of Ockham, which generally attempted to "strike some balance between the two extremes [in the patristic debate between Augustine and Pelagius] as to preserve both human responsibility and the necessity for grace."[43] Augustine's unrivalled place at the theological head of the medieval Church meant that Pelagius and views deemed Pelagian were condemned at successive Church councils, and yet the majority of texts devoted to the subject from the twelfth century on affirmed the efficacy of human works in a way that, in reality, charted a middle course between the heretic and the bishop:

> The majority insist that human works can merit eternal life, not because such works have inherent worth, but because God has freely bound Himself to honor them, *as though they did*: for most medieval preachers this *is* the gospel – Christ died so that His followers' good deeds might merit Heaven. Accordingly, Guigo II, ninth abbot of the Grande Chartreuse, writing at mid-century, actually cites Augustine in support of the popular semi-Pelagian doctrine of *facere quod in se est* (doing what is in one, i.e., doing one's best) as the path to grace.[44]

The orthodox middle course that evolved affirms the purpose and value of human acts and works at the same time as it affirms God as the source of all purpose and value. Grace is not God's response to human merit, but God's gracious and "free acceptance" of works imbues them with merit.

David Aers has been the most vocal proponent on the Augustinian side of the debate. Aers argues that Langland, following Augustine, wrestles with the "catastrophic" consequences of sin and places Christology at the centre of his picture of salvation in ways that the "hegemonic" view of Langland as semi-Pelagian utterly misses. [45] Aers bases his argument on his reading of Langland's telling of the story of the Good Samaritan, particularly the representation of Semyuief, whom Aers identifies as the embodiment of sinful human nature: "Half-alive, half-dead, utterly dependent," the sinner is unable to act unless first acted upon by the healing grace of Christ.[46] Aers offers a deeply persuasive reading of the nuances in Augustine's account of human agency, showing that it is neither negation "nor passivisation that hollows out human responsibility and will,"[47] and he contextualizes Langland's treatment of the parable with reference to commentaries by Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Gorran, Nicholas of Lyra, Denis the Carthusian, and, of course, Augustine.[48] In all of these, the parable is interpreted as an allegory about the effects of sin: the wounded man represents Adam, unbaptized people, or the fallen human will; the

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Samaritan "is Christ, while his merciful actions represent the Passion and Christ's merciful mediation of grace through the church."[49]

What is remarkable about Langland's use of the Good Samaritan, however, is the extent to which he diverges, in emphasis if not in substance, from this exegetical tradition. In line with Langland's typical use of allegory, the Good Samaritan is a dynamic figure who, once he enters the poem, appears to leave behind the parameters of the Scriptural source text and to move freely through the dream narrative. And vice versa: the Good Samaritan's appearance in Will's dream-vision allows Will to enter the parable narrative in a strikingly literal way. Immediately following Langland's orthodox rendering of the parable, the Dreamer leaps into the action and begins to follow the Samaritan on the road, peppering him with questions about the relation of Faith and Hope to Charity and the nature of the Trinity: "Ac Y sewede the Samaritaen and saide how [Faith and Hope] bothe / Were afered and flowe fram þe man ywounded" (XIX.82–83). The result of the Dreamer's seeking and questioning is the Good Samaritan's sermon, which begins with the Trinity but ends with a firm condemnation of "alle vnkynde creatures," all those who fail to show charity (XIX.182). The Good Samaritan singles out as negative exemplars those who fail to make restitution (XIX.205) and the rich who, like Dives, fail to feed and clothe the poor. In other words, the parable of the Good Samaritan leads directly into a lesson on *human* charity. In this light, Semyuief may serve as a symbol of fallen humanity, but he is ultimately an image of the suffering poor, while the Good Samaritan is both Christ who saves and a model of charity that human beings are meant to imitate. The real force of the episode lies in what the parable means for human moral action, and more pointedly, how love for one's neighbour leads to salvation while unkindness leads to damnation: "Minne ye nat, riche men, to which a myschaunce / That Diues deyede, dampned for his vnkyndenesse. . ." (XIX.233–234). Regardless of where we draw the line between the categories labelled Augustinian and semi-Pelagian, the fact remains that *Piers Plowman* is profoundly and urgently concerned with human action in the world – what people do, what they ought to do, and what they fail to do – and this concern with action is everywhere framed in the poem as bearing directly on salvation: "How Y may saue my soule," that is, what must I *do* in order to save my soul? (C.I 80).

The poem prepares us for the Good Samaritan's sermon, and for the essential role of charity in the building of Holy Church in Passus XXI, with its earlier consideration and rejection of the doctrine of predestination. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has argued, Langland's discomfort with

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predestination was apparent in the A text, which breaks off in crisis in the face of God's seemingly arbitrary judgment.[50] Revisions to B and C only intensify this sense of discomfort and formalize Langland's theological objections to the doctrine.[51] When Rechelesnesse takes over the debate about salvation that occupies the inner dream of passūs XI–XIV in the C text, his association with Wanhope (C.XI 198) leads directly into his articulation of Langland's most direct and explicit reference to the doctrine:

> For Clergie saith þat he seyh in þe seynt Euaungelie
> That Y man ymaed was and my name y-entred
> In the legend of lyf longe ar Y were.
> "Predestinaet" thei prechen, prechours þat this sheweth,
> Or "prescit inparfit," pult out of grace,
> Vnwriten for som wikkednesse, as Holy Writ sheweth:
> *Nemo ascendit ad celum nisi qui de celo descendit.*
> (C.XI 204–209a)

Rechelesnesse is perplexed by a teaching that, in his view, means that such figures as Aristotle and Solomon end up "in helle" despite their exemplary lives; in the same breath he suggests that the doctrine tends to produce the wanhope or despair that is his own "sib": "And yf we sholde worche aftur here werkes to wynnen vs heuene / That for here werkes and wyt wonyeth now in payne / Thenne wrouhte Y vnwysly, for alle 3oure wyse techynge" (C.XI 222–224). The conditional phrasing here, with its echoing of "work" and "works," conveys a dark irony even as it underscores the total identification of work (in the sense of worldly action and occupation) with works (in the sense of meritorious acts). The "wise teaching" – Langland everywhere associates the doctrine with a kind of specious learnedness – makes it "unwise" to emulate Aristotle and Solomon, both paragons of human wisdom, if by such emulation one hopes to merit salvation.

The status of Rechelesnesse and the truth value of his views are complex because the figure embodies one element among many in the Dreamer's consciousness; as such, Rechelesnesse is neither authoritative nor even reliable. But many of his claims and arguments contain a significant amount of truth, particularly his discourse on poverty, most of which is later echoed and affirmed by Patience. And while Rechelesnesse's speech on predestination does not present a nuanced interpretation of Augustine's doctrine of election by grace, it does express Langland's sense of where the doctrine can lead, in a pastoral sense, and the impulses and ideas with which it is associated in the Dreamer's own mind. In other words, the belief in predestination here induces a spirit of carelessness, which is, as

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Pearsall glosses it, "not altogether unadmirable" insofar as it is associated in turn with faithful reliance on what God provides, a healthy indifference to worldly success, and a Franciscan-like embrace of poverty and simple living. But the dark side of this belief is manifest in Rechelesnesse's disdain for Scripture and clergy, the official and institutional forms by which the Christian community is organized and governed. It is manifest also in the way in which an admirable disregard for worldly striving slides very quickly into indolence, indeed, into the attitude of a "wastour," someone who consumes without producing and takes without paying; the figure of Rechelesnesse here embodies the sin of acedia in all of its senses. The crucial point is not whether it is fair to posit a causal link between predestination and misguided recklessness – whether such a link does justice to Augustine's ideas about sin and grace – but rather that, according to Langland, the way this doctrine is taught by "prechours" and understood by "lewed folk" tends equally toward spiritual despair and physical torpor.

Langland stages an even more acute crisis of salvation anxiety in the following passus, where, once again, the theological lesson is framed in terms of its pastoral effects – with an eye to how the doctrine of "lettred" men is received by and influences the spiritual psychology of the "lewede" men they teach. The sermon preached here by Scripture, which Will fears may undermine the faith of the uneducated, interprets the parable of the wedding feast as an allegory of predestination, in which "*Multi* to a mangerye and to þe mete were sompned" but few ("pauci") are chosen (C.XII 48–50). The Dreamer's immediate reaction to these words is more intense even than the doubt he imagines would be elicited in the "lewede":

> Al for tene of here tyxst tremblede myn herte
> And in a wer gan Y wex and with mysulue to despute
> Where Y were chose or nat chose; on Holy Churche Y thouhte,
> That vnderfeng me at þe fonte for on of Godes chosene.
> For Crist clepede vs alle, come yf we wolde—
> Sarrasynes and sismatikes, and so a ded þe Iewes
> And bad hem souke for synne saue at his breste
> And drynke bote for bale, brouke hit ho-so myhte:
> *O vos omnes sicientes, venite ad aquas.*
>
> (C.XII 51–58a).

What is striking about these lines is the sudden shift from Will's relatively detached commentary on the beliefs and feelings of other people ("if lewede men hit knewe") to his own anger, distress, and fear: while to this point Langland has been emphasizing the pastoral effects of salvation

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doctrine, here he dramatizes them in the first person. It is crucial, therefore, that what comforts Will in his inner turmoil is the thought of Holy Church, the institution that received him at baptism as one of God's chosen – chosen not in the sense of election by grace alone, by a mechanism both unknowable and unfathomable, but in the sense of active membership in the corporate body of Christ. Equally crucial is the radical openness and inclusivity of Will's view of the Church, insofar as his recollection of belonging by baptism dovetails seamlessly with his claim that Christ calls all people, Christians and non-Christian alike, and invites them to accept the salvation proffered by his blood. This is not exactly a vision of universal or unconditional salvation, for Christ's call must be answered, but rather a gloss on the foregoing parable, challenging and finally rejecting the possibility that it might be read as endorsing belief in predestination.[52] The Dreamer reminds himself, in effect, that the saved are not chosen randomly or arbitrarily and that the institution of the Church offers the apparatus of the sacraments by which human beings can participate in their own salvation.

These inner thoughts the Dreamer then expresses aloud in the form of an extended analogy comparing the sinner to an indebted bondsman: like a "cherl" who has no legal autonomy, once baptized into the Church, the sinner can never be cut loose and left to his own devices, even if he wants to be. The condition of the sinner is one of debt bondage, but this is a condition for which there is a remedy. The debtor faces purgatorial punishment, but he does not face the terrifying and solitary uncertainty of the predestined soul who can do nothing but simply wait to receive his fate:

> For thogh a Cristene man coueitede his Cristendom to renoye,
> Rihtfolliche to renoye no resoun hit wolde.
> "For may no cherl chartre make ne his chatel sulle
> Withouten leue of þe lord; no lawe wol hit graunte.
> Ac he may renne arrerage and rome fro home
> As a recheles caytyf other reneyed, as hit semeth.
> Ac Reson shal rekene with hym and rebuken hym at thorne laste
> And Conscience acounte with hym and casten hym in arrerages,
> And potten hym aftur in prisoun in purgatorie to brenne,
> And for his rechelesnes rewarde hym þere riht to the day of dome,
> Bote yf contricioun and confessioun crye by his lyue
> Mercy for his mysdedes with mouthe and with herte."
>
> (C.XII 62–72)

The threat of punishment ("in purgatorie to brenne") is linked to the promise of mercy in exchange for contrition and confession insofar as these

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are the means available to the sinner to pay his debt and earn salvation. As we have seen in Langland's grappling with the problem of "enough," the conceptualization of sin as a debt serves to limit the scope and weight of sin so that it is manageable and less terrifying.

With the testimony of Trajan, the poem effectively concludes the salvation debate on the side of works. If the Dreamer found comfort in the thought of Holy Church because of the institution's role in mediating human action in the salvation economy, Trajan declares that even without the mediating structures of the Church, human action is sufficient: "loue" and "leautee" are the only requirements. The excesses and limitations of Rechelesnesse's speech do not undermine the significance of Trajan's testimony, which is later confirmed by Imaginatif: "Troianes was a trewe knyhte and toek neuere Cristendoem / And he is safe, saith the boek, and his soule in heuene" (C.XVI 205–206). Indeed, if anything, the excesses and limitations of Rechelesnesse's speech lead us away from his assertion that it is "vnwys" to perform good works in hopes of salvation and toward the opposing view, that *only* good works merit salvation. The arc of the inner dream moves from salvation anxiety to reassurance in the form of affirming the salvific value of works, an affirmation that grows surer and more fine-grained as we encounter, first, *Liberium arbitrium* and, finally, the Good Samaritan.

Making Friends with Mammon: The Dreamer, Use, and Stewardship in the C Text

> This worldly Protestant asceticism [. . .] acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries. On the other hand, it had the psychological effect of freeing the acquisition of goods from the inhibitions of traditionalist ethics. It broke the bonds of the impulse of acquisition in that it not only legalized it, but (in the sense discussed) looked upon it as directly willed by God.
>
> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*[53]

Drawing on the work of Werner Sombart, Weber defines the "traditionalist" economy as an economy of needs or subsistence, whereas the capitalist economy is defined as one of acquisition.[54] The notion that medieval society was organized as a subsistence economy, that the medieval labourer worked only when compelled or for bare survival, has been repeated often and appears in various guises in what I have labelled the separate spheres paradigm. According to the familiar narrative, the modern

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work ethic is first devised by the Puritans, and it evolves into a pervasive "[c]oncern for timekeeping, disciplined work routines and regular employment" in tandem with "the growth of factories and large-scale employment in modern times."[55] Before this, labour was understood as a necessary evil and as punishment for sin, following Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden.[56] In the absence of any positive moral or spiritual impetus to labour, in this account, medieval people "tended to work slowly and inefficiently, and to stop whenever possible"; they also placed a higher priority on leisure than modern people do.[57] Above all, where medieval workers toiled because they had to, living hand to mouth, Protestants working to assure themselves of their own election toiled because they wanted to, and ended up accumulating stores of wealth as a fortunate by-product.[58]

We have seen that Langland inscribes a work ethic enjoining discipline, sincere effort, and material productivity across the three estates and beyond; and while earthly labour is valued as a payment for sin, it is also a communal ideal, a material instantiation of *caritas*, wherein human beings are meant to bear one another's burdens. In this way, the labourer is simultaneously a debtor and a generous creditor, paying what he owes but forgiving what others owe to him, scrupulous with regard to his own debts, generous with regard to the debts of others. In his complaints about wasters, Langland gives us an image of what was to become the stereotypical medieval labourer who works only when compelled or coerced, but this is the negative exemplum and is juxtaposed with the ideal and diligent labourer who works both because he loves his fellow man and because he knows he must earn his salvation.

I want to suggest here that the ideal economy in *Piers Plowman*, with the generous debtor-labourer at its centre, is neither one of subsistence nor of acquisition, but of use. In Middle English writing, the word for economy in both a theological and ecclesiastical sense, referring both to divine providence and to the administration of the Church, is *dispensacioun*, following the Vulgate's *dispensatio.* In his translation of the *Polychronicon*, Trevisa writes that "Peter his successoures [. . .] haveþ lawefulliche þe dispensacioun of office of holy chirche."[59] And Chaucer, translating Boethius, writes of the "wise dispensacion of God" to describe the workings of divine providence.[60] Langland's economic lexicon, by contrast, favours terms associated with economy as husbandry and the management of material resources, including but not limited to domestic or agricultural resources. Rosemary O'Neill has recently drawn attention to the importance of stewardship in the C text of *Piers Plowman*; indeed, she argues that the poem participates in a larger, late medieval "ethos of

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stewardship" that is also reflected in husbandry manuals and religious texts, such as Wimbledon's *Redde Rationem* sermon.[61] As we have seen, too, Conscience insists on defending the Church of Unity as a divinely ordered *oikonomia,* for "in mesure God made alle manere thynges" (XXII.254). But the poem depicts the earthly Christian community as an *oikonomia* also in the sense of bureaucracy: the world of work and of human life in history is structured in the poem as a series of divisions governed by delegated, or what Agamben calls *vicarious*, authority. The essence and ruling principle of this economy is the idea that power does not inhere in the person but in the office; we are all representatives or agents of a power that is not our own. Another word for this delegated authority, or the economy of the office-holder and manager, is stewardship. Stewardship is the Franciscan economic mode par excellence because it depersonalizes wealth even as it depersonalizes power.[62]

The poem is replete with images of stewards, that is, of officers who use wealth and resources they do not own – some good and some bad. In the latter category are the clergy who neglect the care of souls for more prestigious positions in London, specifically in the Exchequer and the Chancery, where they keep the king's accounts and enforce taxpayers' debts (C.Pr. 90–92). "Raynald the reue" acts as a witness to Wrong's Charter, alongside such unsavoury characters as Peres the pardoner and Simony (C.II 115); similarly, included in the long list of Mede's targets are "mayres and other stywardes" who look the other way in exchange for bribes (C.III 122). By contrast, "resoun" is a "reue" who pays labourers their wages promptly, "rewardyng treuthe" (C.III 308); Reason is also a "styward" at the Feast of Patience (C.XV 40). The poem details equally ideals and abuses of stewardship. The "lord" who speaks out at the close of Passus XXI pits his "reue" against his "styward," as the one honest manager must check the accounts of the other, dishonest manager. And, of course, the most perfect and exemplary steward is Piers the ploughman, who is delegated by Grace to be his (and Christ's) earthly representative, his "procuratour and [his] reue / And registrer to reseyuen *Redde quod debes*" (C.XXI 259–260). The key point in all is that virtuous economic action in the poem typically hinges not on the virtuous management of one's own possessions but on the *use* one makes of another's.

In this light, Langland's treatment of the parable of the dishonest steward at Luke 16:1–18, widely considered to be the most difficult and enigmatic of all the parables, is a thematic key. A rich man ("homo quidam erat dives") hears reports that his steward is squandering his goods, so he commands the steward to give an account of his management and then to

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leave his post. The steward wonders anxiously what he will do without this job, for he is unable to dig and ashamed to beg ("Fodere non valeo, mendicare erubesco"); instead of manual labour or begging, he decides to win the affection and loyalty of his lord's debtors so they will welcome him into their homes and he will not become destitute. In order to make these debtors his friends, he summons them one at a time and remits a percentage of their debts. When the lord learns of this scheme, he does not condemn but rather praises the steward's prudence ("quia prudenter fecisset") – much to the perplexity of medieval commentators and modern theologians alike. The moral that Jesus distills for his disciples provides a tagline that Langland repeats throughout the C text: "facite vobis amicos de mammona iniquitatis" (*make friends for yourself with the mammon of iniquity*).[63] This surprising moral, seemingly at odds with the injunction to keep honest accounts, is made more perplexing by the verses that follow, in which Jesus exhorts his followers to faithfulness in all things ("qui fidelis est in minimo et in maiori fidelis") and sets God against Mammon, in the oft-quoted "non potestis Deo servire et mamonae" (*you cannot serve God and Mammon*).

Langland refers to the parable once and only glancingly in the B text, at VI.226–227a. In the C text, he expands this reference and repeats it at two more crucial junctures in the narrative. The first instance is the Dreamer's response to Reason in the *Apologia pro vita sua*, when he excuses his idleness on the grounds that he is too weak to labour with an allusion to the steward's words to himself: "Y am to wayke to worche with sykel or with sythe / And to long, lef me, lowe to stoup, / To wurche as a werkeman eny while to duyren" (C.V 23–25). The allusion captures and echoes the introspective moment after the steward's dishonesty and wastefulness have been discovered but before he has acted to ameliorate his situation, here reflected in the Dreamer's inner dialogue with his own reason. Like the steward's concern for his livelihood in the parable, the Dreamer's concern is about the means of his survival. The Dreamer's identification with the steward suggests that his failure to produce and to contribute to the common good is a failure of stewardship, and the goods he has squandered are his God-given abilities – that is, the "craft" that, later in the poem, we are told is to be our "styward."[64] This identification suggests further a parallel between the steward's debt remission, which earns him "friends," and the Dreamer's clerical "lyflode," which consists of intercessory prayers in exchange for alms (provided, of course, that the Dreamer begs "Withoute bagge or botel but [his] wombe one" [C.V 52]). Indeed, the Dreamer's use of the word "welcome" – "Thus Y synge for

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here soules of such as me helpeth, / And tho that fynden me my fode fouchen-saf, Y trowe, / To be welcome when Y come other-while in a monthe" (C.V 48–50) – echoes the Vulgate's "recipiant," the welcome that the steward can expect from his friends, while the word "fynden" links the passage to the concern throughout the poem with the establishment of a "fyndyng" or secure provision for the friars. In this first allusion, then, Langland suggests that the Dreamer's mendicancy is to be understood as a reflection of the parabolic steward; at the same time, the steward's relation to the lord, to the goods he manages, and to the debtors he befriends offer together an image of mendicancy in general.

Langland's insight that the steward's praiseworthy prudence might be considered an analogy for the mendicant's "singing for souls" suggests a strikingly plausible interpretation of a notoriously difficult text. It also links the parable to the poem's profound and abiding concern with the salvific value of labour. Many readers have noted that the Dreamer has much in common with the wasters and minstrels deplored throughout the poem: he sets out in the opening lines of the Prologue dressed as a "heremite vnholy of werkes" (Pr. 3); Reason accuses him of being "an ydel man" (C.V27); and he identifies so closely with the figure of Rechelesnesse in C.XI and XII that "Couetyse-of-yes" calls him by that name.[65] If the rejection of predestination in these passūs seems designed to assuage salvation anxiety, however, the insistence on work and works, or "Do-well" as a requirement for salvation provokes a new anxiety. Precisely because he need not worry about being chosen, he must worry about the merit of his labours; this worry takes the form of an extended meditation on the meaning of the parable.

Medieval commentators from Augustine to Bonaventure typically used the unjust steward not as an exemplum to be followed but as an illustration of the slipperiness of parables.[66] One major crux concerns the idea that the steward, in remitting debts owed not to him but to his master, is deducting from the master's profits for his own future gain, and thereby merely continuing the mismanagement that got him into trouble in the first place. O'Neill calls the steward's scheme "embezzlement" and an act of "fraud," suggesting that Langland's discomfort with the parable is due largely to the fact that it contradicts the C text's insistence on restitution.[67] She notes further that most Middle English sermons on the parable "remain notably untroubled by the issue of theft."[68] But the parable does not say that the steward stole from the lord, nor does it say that he was deceptive when he remitted the debts. There are medieval and modern interpretations of the parable that assume that the debt remission is a theft, but there is also a

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body of interpretation that sets out from the premise that the steward's "iniquitas" consists strictly of the mismanagement, the squandering, of goods referred to in verse 1. The sermon on Luke 16 in the *Wycliffite Sermon Cycle* is "untroubled" by the steward's debt remission because it does not consider this to be an act of theft; rather, the sermon writer contends that the steward was praised by the lord because his actions in verses 5–7, by displaying generosity in the lord's name, earn "worschype" or honour for the lord.[69] Langland's suggestion in C.V, moreover, is that the steward's debt remission is praiseworthy because it is analogous to the remission of the punishment of sin granted by the mendicant's intercessory prayer. It is an act of charity, but not of almsgiving, which is figured instead in the parable by the hospitality that will be shown to the steward by the friends he has made through his salvific "pater-noster."

The second reference to the parable comes, in the C text, in Hunger's counsel to Piers, in response to Piers' question of how he might compel his brethren who are refusing to help plough the half-acre to "[. . .] to louye, / And to labory for here lyflode [. . .]" (C.VIII 221–222). Again, here, as in Passus V, the question concerns the means of survival, the "lyflode," of the whole community, and what is each individual's obligation to contribute to the common good. In this context, Hunger makes allowance for the deserving poor, for those who have been "apayred" through no fault of their own, counselling charity rather than enforced labour or neglect:

> *Alter alterius onera portate.*
> And alle manere men þat thow myhte aspye
> In meschief or in mal-ese, and thou mowe hem helpe,
> Loke, by thy lyue, lat hem nat forfare.
> Yf thow hast wonne auht wikkedliche, wiseliche despene hit:
> *Facite vobis amicos de mammona iniquitatis.*
> (C.VIII 231a–235a)

These lines and the context clearly link the steward's debt remission to the practice of charity, of "bearing one another's burdens," but where, in the B text, the Latin tagline follows directly from the injunction to be charitable, in the C text, Langland glosses the parabolic moral with the advice to spend "wiseliche" anything won "wickedly"; that which has been "wonne [. . .] wikkedliche" would seem, then, to be Langland's translation of "mammona iniquitatis." But to what, in the parable, does this phrase refer? In interpretations that assume the steward's debt remission is a form of theft from his master, the mammon of iniquity refers to the amounts owing that the steward has forgiven – the fifty barrels of oil and the twenty

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quarters of wheat, respectively. These are the amounts, wickedly won through theft, with which the steward has "made friends" for his future livelihood. This would seem to make sense of Piers's anxious question, "Myhte Y synneles do as thow sayst?" – can I *really* make use of ill-gotten gains in this way? – and Hunger's reply that, yes, *unless* the Bible lies. The question and the doubt implied in denying that the Bible could lie both point to incredulity, and thus to an understanding that the parable is in fact equating the debt remission with the winning of ill-gotten gains.

But there is also the possibility that the mammon of iniquity refers not to a specific amount of money, oil, or wheat as gains, ill-gotten or otherwise, but rather to an entity and an idea larger and more abstract: the personification of the desire for earthly riches. This is certainly the meaning of "Mammon" at verse 13, as it is in Matthew 6:24, where it denotes a false idol who demands anxious concern about the necessities of life. To serve God rather than Mammon is to be, on the contrary, and to use Langlandian parlance, "rechelesse," to be "not solicitious for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body, what you shall put on" (Matthew 6:25). In this light, "making friends with the mammon of iniquity" means using earthly riches as a means to an end rather than serving it as an end in itself, that is, of using riches without caring about them or turning them into an idol. In the case of the parabolic steward, moreover, the "mammon" or preoccupation with wealth is "iniquitatis" because the steward is himself, or has been, unjust, in the sense of unequal, unfair, and unbalanced, just as his accounts have been unbalanced: he is a "villicum iniquitatis" (v. 8) and so his desire for riches, his anxiety about his livelihood, is "mammona iniquitatis" (v. 9). His redemption in the parable comes at the moment when he is able to turn the pointless and self-centred waste of verse 1, which then turns into anxiety about his livelihood at verse 3, into prudence, which, remarkably, consists here of forgiving, at least in part, the debts of others.

That Langland is meditating in Passus VIII on the parable specifically as a commentary on "lyflode," as he is in Passus V, is made clear by the fact that Hunger immediately follows his reassurance that the steward's example is sound by reminding Piers that the book of Genesis teaches that "With swynke and with swoet and swetande face / Bytulye and bytrauayle trewely oure lyflode" (C.VIII 241–242). This reference recalls the implicit comparison of different means of winning and producing in Reason's interrogation of the Dreamer ("'Can thow seruen,' he sayde, 'or syngen in a churche, / Or koke for my cokeres or to the cart piche?'" [V.12–13]), and Langland's concern throughout the poem that the labours of the

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mendicant are not as easily measured as those of the ploughman. Does wielding his "prymer" count in the same way as tilling and travailing "With swynke and with swetande face"? Read in conjunction with the *Apologia pro vita sua,* Piers' question about the merit of the steward's conduct – "Myhte Y synneles do as thow sayst?" – is a question about the merit of praying for one's keep when one is too weak to lift a scythe and too tall to bend to work the earth. Langland's own anxiety, expressed in his grappling with Luke 16:1–13, is generated by the suspicion that the work he does "yclothed as a lollare" is not enough, or is too easy to fake – that the life of perfect poverty is, in the end, impossible to tell apart from the life of the "faytour." But this is an anxiety and a suspicion that the poem regularly hauls into the light to examine and consider, not necessarily to endorse. In his repeated allusions to Luke 16, Langland seems to be reassuring himself that, in his own labours, "prudenter fecisset."

Hunger follows the reference to Genesis with a retelling of the parable of the talents, continuing the theme of productive stewardship and emphasizing the idea that such stewardship consists of *using* "mammon" prudently, as a steward or an accountant uses but does not appropriate his lord's wealth, as a form of "loyal labour" in God's service. Thomas Wimbledon also paired these two parables in his 1388 sermon, in his rendering of the Final Judgment as a "manorial audit procedure."[70] In both the poem and the sermon, the pairing supports the reading of Luke 16 as more directly concerned with the steward's debt remission as an act of redemptive accounting, and not (primarily or exclusively) a story about using ill-gotten gains in almsgiving. Langland's treatment uniquely links the steward's charitable management to the mendicant's intercessory prayer in order to vindicate the mendicant's contribution to the common good.

Langland returns to the parable a third time in Passus XIX in the context of the Good Samaritan's sermon on charity, specifically in the concluding section of the sermon, in which the Samaritan deplores at length the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit. According to the Samaritan, the unforgiveable sin is "unkyndeness," by which he means an unnatural, because cruel, denial of charity and gratitude. Here the allusion to Luke 16 is directed, specifically and pointedly, at the rich who are called to give away their wealth in acts of charity, regardless of how they won it. Here, the Latin tagline is used to underscore the point that it is the mere withholding of riches, or failures of omission, that result in damnation for the rich. Those who won their wealth dishonestly and did not share it will certainly be damned; but even Dives, who won his wealth

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"withoute wyles," ended up in hell. Do not think that you will be saved because you are in all respects a moral person, if you have not charity. Do not think, in other words, that only those who have won their wealth dishonestly will be damned. The point is that even fairly earned wealth must be shared with "the nedfol pore" (XIX.242). The Samaritan follows this injunction with a final glance back to the parable: *Facite vobis amicos de mammona iniquitatis*.[71] It is indeed possible to see this tag as referring specifically to "That that wikkidliche is wonne, to wasten hit and make frends?" as "Holy Writ techeth" (XIX.248, 247), thus supporting the narrower interpretation of "mammona iniquitatis" as ill-gotten gains. And yet, the Samaritan apparently sees no contradiction between the counsel to "gyueth youre goed" no matter where it came from and the payment of restitution as an absolute requirement. On the contrary, those who are "unkynde," those who will not be forgiven, are directly opposed to those who "make frends," for these are on the side of "folke of mylde hertes / That reufulliche repenten and restitucion make" (XIX.201–202). The wider upshot of the whole section, from 164 until the end of the passus, is to align restitution with charity and mercy as the key requirements of salvation, and to oppose these to "unkyndeness" and miserliness in wealth as the surest way to hell. There is no hint of a possibility that "making friends" through almsgiving might be a way to "bypass restitution."[72] It seems, rather, that almsgiving and restitution here become synonyms. A broader definition of restitution is likewise suggested when the Samaritan segues to his closing allegory with a comment on the gracious compassion of Christ, who accepts "sorwe of herte" as payment from "such that may nat paye" (XIX.298).

Another way to phrase the question that emerges at the end of the poem with respect to Luke 16 and the ideal of stewardship, then, is what happens to the imperative of restitution when the sacrament of penance is performed in the context of use, that is, in an economy of vicarious power, where goods and resources are shared and managed but not appropriated? How, in such a context, can each receive their due? In the closing passūs of the poem, use-as-stewardship and the demands of justice are reconciled in the founding of Holy Church as an earthly bureaucracy through the delegation of power and authority to the Piers the Plowman, who is here also the apostle Peter, the rock on which the Church is built and the keeper of the keys to "bynde and to vnbynde" both on earth and in heaven.[73] The principle of delegation is emphasized throughout the New Testament, particularly in Paul's comments on the administration of the house of God, or *oikos theou*. In 1 Corinthians 9:16–17, *oikonomia* is a task

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assigned or delegated to Paul, who therefore acts to fulfill God's will rather than his own: "If I preach the Gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me. [. . .] For if I do this of mine own will, I have a reward; but if not of mine own will, I have an *oikonomia* entrusted to me." The sense in which God's *oikonomia* is given as a kind of fiduciary duty is indicated by its frequent combination with *pisteuō*, trust or faith. The first Christians are, according to Paul, *oikonomous*, or managers, of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1): they are delegates tasked with the job of fulfilling a divine assignment or will. The word used in the Vulgate is "dispensatores," as the Greek *oikonomia* is typically rendered in Latin *dispensatio* (or, alternatively, *dispositio*).

Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion of God's governance of the world in the *Summa theologiae*, asserts that God governs all things immediately in the design (*ad rationem*) of government but through intermediaries in the execution (*ad executionem*) of government.[74] This division reflects, for Thomas, the perfection of God, for "it is a greater perfection for a thing to be good in itself and also the cause of goodness in others, than only to be good in itself. [. . .] If God governed alone, things would be deprived of the perfection of causality."[75] The principle of deputization in the execution of divine government Aquinas describes as a diversity of orders organized in a hierarchy, from the superior angels down to man:

> This diversity of orders arises from the diversity of offices and actions, as appears in one city where there are different orders according to the different actions, for there is one order of those who judge, and another of those who fight, and another of those who labor in the fields, and so forth. But although one city thus comprises several orders, all may be reduced to three, when we consider that every multitude has a beginning, a middle, and an end. So in every city, a threefold order of men is to be seen, some of whom are supreme, as the nobles; others are the last, as the common people, while others hold a place between these, as the middle-class. In the same way we find in each angelic hierarchy the orders distinguished according to their actions and offices, and all this diversity is reduced to three – namely, to the summit, the middle, and the base.[76]

The threefold division of orders finds a corollary in the division, typical of medieval political theory, between the three estates of clergy, knighthood, and labourers. It is also a deliberate parallel with the Trinitarian economy itself.[77] Thomas extends and systematizes this strategy, detailing throughout the *Prima pars* of the *Summa* the central idea that sacred power is hierarchically ordered; indeed, as Thomas explains, *hierarchia* means literally sacred power.[78]

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Through Piers, likewise, the Church is granted the power to absolve sin by means of officials – Piers will be a "reeve" of Christ – except for "dette" alone, an exception which is typically understood to mean the debt of restitution:

> To alle manere men mercy and foryeuenesse
> In couenaunt that they come and knoleched to pay
> To Peres the plouhman *Redde quod debes.*
> (XXI.185–187)

The Latin phrase that serves as a summary refrain in the closing passūs comes from another parable of an unjust steward, this one in Matthew 18:23–35. This parable shares with Luke 16 the theme of debt remission, but here the explicit moral is that of forgiveness – specifically, forgiving one's debtors as one's own debts have been forgiven. Again, the story begins with accounting, when a king decides to take account ("rationem") of his servants, one of whom owes him ten thousand talents and has not the means to repay it. The king commands that the servant, his wife, and his children be sold into debt slavery, but when the servant falls at his feet and begs him for mercy, the king has pity and forgives the debt. The indebted servant then discovers that a fellow servant owes him one hundred pence; he grabs him by the throat and demands, "*Redde quod debes*." When the fellow servant is unable to pay, the indebted servant shows no mercy and has his fellow thrown in prison. The king hears of the injustice and tortures the indebted servant until the debt of one thousand talents has been repaid. This parabolic allusion, offered at the Church's founding moment, makes sin into a debt to be managed and administered by officeholders. It also plays on the doubleness of debt and the many paradoxes it creates: the only debt that cannot be forgiven is the refusal to forgive another's debt.

Immediately following Christ's delegation of Piers as his earthly representative, invested with the power to "assoyle of alle manere synnes [. . .] saue of dette one," the Dreamer beholds a vision of Pentecost (C.XXI 199–212). This vision hews closely to the Biblical account in Acts 2; *Spiritus paraclitus* alights on Piers and his companions like a flash of lightning, "And made hem konne and knowe alle kyne langages" (204). The Holy Spirit is henceforth identified as "Grace," and the next lines in the passus describe the distribution of the gifts of the spirit. Joseph Wittig observes that Langland here does not present what happens next in the Gospels – Christ's commissioning of the apostles to go make disciples of the nations – but rather turns to an earlier moment

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when Christ declares Peter to be the rock and foundation of the Church and gives him the "power of the keys" (Matthew 16:18–19), after which Langland turns to the Second Coming and Last Judgment before dramatizing the scene of Pentecost. Wittig sees this as a deliberate substitution on Langland's part that serves to lead Will in understanding that the scene of Pentecost "is not simply celebratory: What God has done demands something in return."[79] The suggestion of a *quid pro quo* is fitting, for what is being founded here is nothing less than the *oikonomia* of the Church on earth. The scene of distribution is introduced with a quotation of 1 Corinthians 12:4, "Divisiones graciarum sunt," indicating that the "dividing" of "Tresor" among "all kyne creatures" echoes Paul's discourse on the spiritual gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Crucially, however, the focus of the Biblical verse is not the giving of gifts but rather the oneness that remains even through division: "Divisiones vero gratiarum sunt, idem autem Spiritus: et divisiones ministrationem sunt, idem autem Dominus: et divisiones operationum sunt, idem vero Deus qui operatur omnia in omnibus. Unicuique autem datur manifestatio Spiritus ad utilitatem."[80] Langland's allusion to this verse signals the central preoccupation of the remaining lines of the poem: the idea that the Church is and ought to be an epitome of unity forged from diversity, of heterogeneous elements harmonized into a complex whole. We have seen how the theme of justice in *Piers Plowman* is expressed in the question of what is enough, and in a vision of the ideal social order in which the measure of money makes possible fair payments and just relations. Langland's image of the Church as an entity that produces unity paradoxically through division, likewise, expresses an economic vision of measure, order, and balance. Indeed, this image of the Church embodies an idea of economy as such.

In Langland's reimagining, the new dispensation activated by the descent of the Holy Spirit applies not only to the apostolic mission. Rather, the spiritual gifts bestowed on the community include all possible forms of work on earth, both secular and religious. Grace specifies eight different categories of labour: those who have skill with words, such as preachers and students of law; those who buy and sell, such as merchants and traders; those who work on the land; those who work with numbers; those who build; those who read the stars, such as philosophers and astronomers; those who enforce the law and recover goods unlawfully taken; and, finally, those who pray in ascetic contemplation.[81] These spiritual gifts are given by Grace as weapons with which to fight the Antichrist because they fend off "ydelnesse" as well as envy and pride

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(XXI.229); some forms of work are "clenner" than others, but all come from Grace and all are required in the earthly Christian community (XXI.253–255). Grace concludes this catalogue of work with a call to "crouneth Conscience kyng" and to make "Craft" your steward,

> For Y make Peres the plouhman my procuratour and my reue
> And registrer to reseyuen *Redde quod debes*.
> My prowour and my plouhman Peres shal ben on erthe
> And for tulye treuthe a teme shal he haue.
>
> (C.XXI 259–262)

The Pentecostal image of division and delegation is recapitulated first in the division of tasks in the world of work, in which "craft" or professional skill is itself a "styward," that is, one to whom management authority is delegated, and again in the designation of Piers as Grace's agent, reeve, and registrar. It is not surprising that the founding of the Church on earth involves the delegation of vicarious power, but it is remarkable that Langland includes all forms of labour, even mercantile labour, in this great bureaucratic order. It is also remarkable that, in Langland's ideal economy, *grace* is an assignment of work, a delegation of tasks, and precisely *not* a gift that removes or mitigates the need for work and human effort.

"Ryche in comune": Nede, the Friars, and the Economy of Debt

Near the close of Passus XXI, the poem's long meditation on the work and works necessary for individual salvation culminates in a vision of the Church as an *oikonomia* of stewards, "leel laborers" (C.III 347, XI 298) who manage, out of love, the material goods and resources created by God. The diversity of orders unified into a whole is, in the words of *Liberium arbitrium*, "a loue-knotte of leutee and of lele byleue / Alle kyne Cristene cleuynge on o will, / Withoute gyle and gabbynge gyve and sulle and lene" (C.XVII 127–129). It is, quite explicitly, a vision of economy, of giving, selling, and lending, in which all forms of human labour, even that of the merchant, the Dreamer, and the mendicant may count as meritorious contributions to the common good, so long as their work is performed in a spirit of charity. In this way, Langland follows a well-established tradition in Christian thought which, as Todeschini writes, "glorified the profit that was advantageous to the sacred community, and demonized that meant only for personal and individual happiness."[82] For Langland, too, the only profit to be sought is the profit of the whole, and of God, who

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owns all. In this "love-knotte" of social unity, paying one's debts means not only doing one's job and making restitution for one's transgressions; it also means forgiving the debts of others.

But the poem does not end here. Rather, with the figure of Nede, Langland returns to the problem of the Dreamer's "lyflode" – the problem that was made explicit in the *Apologia pro vita sua*, that was raised obliquely in the speech of Rechelesnesse, and that, indeed, opens the poem when the Dreamer sets off to wander "in abite as an heremite vnholy of werkes" and is immediately, implicitly, classed with the other wanderers who do not "swynke" and who fail to produce (Pr. 3, 36). I have suggested that in his grappling with the parable of the unjust steward, Langland attempts to reconcile the salvific value of work with the intangible fruits of the mendicant-poet's labour, which is another way of saying that the parable and the broader New Testament theme of stewardship offer Langland a way of reconciling the ideal of patient poverty with a pastoral emphasis on the necessity of works. The Dreamer and, by extension, all sinners, can renounce worldly striving and the pursuit of profit – and embody the admirable qualities of Rechelesnesse – without thereby shirking the duty to produce "that to the comune nedeth," not only in the sense of agricultural labour but also intellectual, ecclesiastical, and even mercantile labour. Managing but not owning makes this reconciliation possible. With Nede, the poet circles back to this central idea but poses the question more explicitly and directly as a question of Franciscanism: the final passus of the final version of the poem begins and ends with the question of Franciscan poverty, phrased as a question of provision, or "a fyndyng," or "where to ete" and "at what place," for those who "willefolliche" have nothing of their own (C.XXII 3, 49). The answer to this question, once again, is works *as* work, labour *and* charity, in an economy of use. Thus Kynde counsels the Dreamer, who is growing increasingly desperate as Elde and Death draw near, that he must "conne som craft" before he can enter into the unity of the Church, and that the best craft to learn is love. If the Dreamer "love truly," that is, *works* truly, then he need not worry about lacking "worldly mete" (C.XXII 206–211). This message is repeated in Conscience's final instructions to the friars: they, too, can enter unity and will not lack "breed and clothes / And othere necessaries ynowe" so long as they live according to their *Rule* (C.XXII 248–249). As the poem ends, it is clear that the friars have not yet, in Langland's present, succeeded in meeting this condition. Instead of forgiving the debts of others and paying their own debts – with Conscience standing as "borwe" – they collude in debt evasion for personal gain:

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For persones and parsche prestes þat sholde the peple shryue
[. . .]
Alle þat been here parschienes penaunses enioynen
And be aschamed in here shryft; ac shame maketh hem wende
And fle to the freres, as fals folk to Westmynstre
That borweth and bereth hit theddere and thenne biddeth frendes
3erne of for3euenesse or lengore 3eres leue.
Ac while he is in Westmynstre he wol be bifore
And maken hym murye with oþere menne godes.
And so hit fareth with moche folke þat to freres shryuen,
As sisours and secutours; they shal 3eue the freres
A parcel to preye for hem and [pleyen] hem merye
And soffren þe dede in dette to þe day of dome.

(C.XXII 281–294)

These lines comprise concatenating similes linked by debt: people evade true penance in favour of the friars' easy penance, *as* debtors evade payment in favour of merrymaking, *as* executors make merry with a dead man's money while his soul pays the debt for sin in purgatory. Not only is sin *like* financial debt, therefore, but financial means can serve to pay the debt of sin. Here, all three cases (friars giving easy penance, debtors evading their creditors, executors misappropriating funds) share in common a failure to pay, a culpable deferral, and it seems not to matter whether the payment is literal or figurative, money or prayers, so long as it is made. If it is not made in the confessional, or to the creditor, or to the friar, it will be made in purgatory. This passage follows the same allegorical method at work in the *Apologia* and in the Half-Acre scene, where the polysemy of debt extends equally into spiritual and material relations; it also lays the blame for the Church's disunity and corruption on a kind of collective default, which the friars both exemplify in themselves and encourage in others.

At the poem's end, and with the Dreamer's own old age and death looming, the figure of Nede appears as an ideal that has gone wrong, in Langland's estimation – the ideal *almost* realized in the "love-knotte" of workers and craftsmen, all labouring as stewards to tend the goods of God. In the brief waking episode between the apostolic departure of Piers and the mission of Conscience to find him again, Nede accosts the Dreamer when he is heavy-hearted because it is lunchtime ("neyh the noen"); he is hungry but does not know where to find food (C.XXII 1–4). On the most basic level, Nede is simply an embodiment of the Dreamer's literal hunger. As such, he recalls the needful things that Holy Church explains are all that human beings require for survival, but also the brute reality that forces the

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wasters to work in the Half-Acre scene.[83] Precisely because Nede is a figure of the Dreamer's own need, he looks back to Passus V, when Reason asks the Dreamer, "hastow londes to lyue by [. . .] or lynage ryche / That fynde thy fode?" (C.V 26–27): both passages focus on the Dreamer's questionable ability to "fynde" food, playing on the idea of a "fyndynge" or provision for the friars. That Nede evokes Franciscan poverty is further supported by his appeal to the maxim known as the *ius necessitatis.* After first accusing the Dreamer of being a false beggar, Nede then demands to know why he has not taken what he needs, "to clothes and to sustinaunce," as determined by *Spiritus Temperancie* (C.XXII 7–8). As he explains, "nede ne hath no lawe, ne neuere shal falle in dette" (10): need has no law and cannot fall into debt. As scholars have pointed out, the maxim he invokes, *necessitas non habet legem*, originated in Roman law and reflected a broad consensus among medieval commentators that the truly or extremely needy can take what they need to survive without owing anything in return and without fear of prosecution. But the maxim was particularly associated with the friars in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as Penn Szittya has shown, and was quoted in the Franciscan Rule to justify the taking of alms in times of necessity.[84] Nede "speaks like a friar" throughout his speech, for instance, in his appeal to Christ's own "willful" poverty (49), and he later addresses Conscience as a whistleblower, from within the fraternal orders who claim need as their justification for begging (232–241).[85]

Nede has also been the subject of a long debate in *Piers Plowman* studies, in which scholars have tended to side either with the "anti-" or "pro-Need camp," as Jill Mann characterizes it. The pro- side argues not only that Nede's views are "entirely orthodox, and indeed commonplace" but that they express Langland's views generally about need, poverty, and necessity. The other side argues that Nede and his arguments are morally dubious and not intended by Langland to be taken as a guide for the Dreamer's conduct. Anne Middleton summarizes the two opposing views well when she wonders whether Nede's speech offers "an especially dangerous last temptation to willful self-deception, in encouraging the subject to represent his cupidity, even to himself, under a vocabulary of probity [. . .] or whether [. . .] it reasserts [. . .] a last glimpse of the fragile and elusive ideal [. . .] of holy simplicity."[86] The problem, as Mann explains, "may be expressed as the problem of why he advocates theft, while at the same time making the highest moral claims for the life of need, and why the *ius necessitatis* (as it is known) is introduced here."[87] Accordingly, the debate about Nede maps to some degree onto the debate about Langland's

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Franciscanism: those who consider Nede to be a positive exemplar tend also to emphasize the Franciscan elements of the poem as a whole, while those who, with Robert Adams, see Nede as a precursor to the Antichrist tend to see the figure as an embodiment of Langland's anti-mendicant and anti-fraternal views. I think that we are meant to read Nede the same way we are to read Rechelesnesse: neither as a saint nor a villain, but as an element of the Dreamer's consciousness and as one of the constitutive elements of Franciscan spirituality that Langland is here probing, the failures of which he subjects to rigorous criticism. In other words, Nede is not a positive exemplar, but he does nonetheless support the case for Langland's Franciscanism.

In the figures of Rechelesnesse and Nede, Langland advances an ideal by means of a critique of its failure to be ideally or perfectly actualized in human life. This method contributes greatly to the difficulty of interpretation, for it leaves us with an element of undecidability: recklessness is a virtue, but in practice it often becomes self-serving indolence. Need is an essential element of human nature, the experience of which brings us closer to God and clarifies the usefulness of material goods. But, given sinful human nature, need leads equally to desperation and greed. Langland's fear that the ideal of holy simplicity might amount to a kind of theft, insofar as the mendicant does not produce or contribute to the community's material resources for his "lyflode," is, as we have seen, the poem's abiding concern as it attempts to formulate a practicable Franciscan economy. The unjust steward embodies this fear, in that his misappropriation of the goods he is tasked with managing looks a lot like the debt remission he offers to his Lord's debtors – so much so that many readers consider both the "squandering" mentioned at Luke 16:1 and the debt remission to be acts of theft. We may recall, too, that in fourteenth-century statutory law, errors of accounting in the management of debts were also classified as crimes of theft.[88] In this light, it is neither troubling nor surprising that Langland, once again, interrogates the position and the claims of the radical debtor – in this case Nede – in order to call the friars, and all sinners, to "lyueth aftur 3oure reule" (C.XXII247).

The *ius necessitatis* expresses succinctly what Joseph Canning has called the "paradox" of the Franciscan doctrine of poverty in its historical context. A *ius* that has no *legem*, so to speak, the maxim was used to support the Franciscan claim to have a *right* to have *no rights* to property. The Franciscan vow of "perfect" poverty was not only a vow to a limit one's food, drink, and clothing to the bare minimum required for survival,

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but also to rely entirely on "God's provision," which may come in the form of alms, for that minimum.[89] What the maxim expresses is not that necessity is lawless but that it obeys no human law, which is the law of property and ownership; rather, necessity is governed by natural law, which precedes and transcends human law. Natural law governed the economy of Eden and human life in the state of innocence, whereas human, or positive, law was created after the Fall as a way of coping with the effects of sin. According to the Franciscans, "positive law is *approved* but not *instituted* by God, as Christ and the apostles recognise the law of Caesar."[90] The aim of the Franciscan vow is to restore a perfect way of life by voluntarily rejecting all legal rights and ownership, even as, they claimed, the community of Jesus and his apostles was governed by a "voluntary natural equity, accepting Caesar's laws but also living together by a law of *caritas*."[91]

The cornerstone of the Franciscan rejection of rights is the concept of *use*, for it is use that allows for the preservation of life without property.[92] Use also names the relation between the steward and the goods he manages, in the sense of the parable of the talents or of the unjust steward. Nede's claim that need "neuere shal falle in dette" is, on one level, a statement of fact that to live under natural law is to live as Adam did before the Fall, using but not owning, and therefore to live without debt. In a state of Edenic perfection, governed by the natural law of common use, the refrain of *Redde quod debes* is redundant because no debts can be incurred. But this is a strange and difficult claim in any context outside of Eden, for the friars did not claim to be sinless, although they wanted the legal status of sinlessness. In effect, then, they wanted to make possible a life of apostolic perfection by decoupling the terms of sin from those of debt, to live in penitential charity without borrowing or exchanging in the economy of penance.[93] On this level, then, the claim that to live in need is to live without debt is both dangerous and misleading, for it suggests that the renunciation of property actually removes the debt of sin.

The Franciscans argued that evangelical poverty transcended human law, and yet, as their use of the *ius necessitatis* indicates, they relied on human law, specifically canon law, to make that very argument. In response to the attacks from the secular masters of Paris, the friars developed an essentially "defensive strategy" to define their position and role in the Church; similarly, with John XXII, the friars were faced with "an aggressive lawyer-pope" who "systematically attacked the fundamental positions of their order with legal arguments," and so the defense took

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an explicitly legal form.[94] The Franciscan order, also, by the fourteenth century, was materially and financially sustained by a series of legal solutions deriving from the distinction between use and property, including Innocent IV's bull *Ordinem vestrum* (1245), which transferred the goods used by the friars into the ownership of the papacy.[95] As Canning explains,

> The core of the Franciscan charism, lived by St Francis and his early disciples, was one of simple poverty described by no rules but expressed in straightforwardly evangelical terms. But because the Franciscans lived in the world, and because they gained papal privileges guaranteed under canon law, they entered into the realm of law. Canon law became inescapable. This is why the defenders of the originally simple idea of evangelical poverty became enmeshed in a web of legal arguments characterized by their complication and obscurity. But, of course, the Franciscans had brought this problem upon themselves by accepting papal privileges. By following this route they had embraced a paradox.[96]

Langland's depiction of Nede highlights this paradox. Like Rechelesnesse, who also appeals to the *ius necessitatis* in his allegorical discourse on the merchant and messenger on the road to salvation (C.XIII 43a), Nede combines the spiritually beneficial with the morally dubious elements of the principle he personifies. Nede echoes Holy Church's sound teaching on "needful things" and the importance of temperance but undermines his case for the needy man's right to sustenance with the terms "cacche" and "sleithe," suggesting that the *ius necessitatis* justifies theft and deception.

In her defense of Nede, Mann reads the doubleness of Nede and the *ius necessitatis* not as a paradox but as a means of reconciling justice and mercy, and thus as "[legitimating] the salvation of Humankind."[97] Tracing the role of need as it evolves over the course of the poem, Mann's analysis then focuses on Langland's invocation of Christ's cry from the cross, *sicio*:

> Human need calls forth Christ's compassion, but divine need has an even more important role to play. It takes the form of thirst [which] is developed into a thirst for souls, to be satisfied by the drink of love. [. . .] Langland does not forget that "Sicio" represents, first and foremost, a real physical thirst. And his own brilliant stroke is to connect it with the *ius necessitas*. If we relate this [*sicio*] passage to the speech of Need at passus [B.20], we can see why Need is justifying theft (or taking what one needs) rather than begging. Citing the three bodily needs specified by Holy Church – food, drink, and clothing – Need insists on the "law of kynde" as a justification for satisfying thirst. [. . .] It is the *ius necessitas* that justifies the Redemption:

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> the physical need represented by Christ's thirst overrides the old law by which the devil claimed possession of human souls because "nede hath no lawe." The important thing about *necessitas non habet legem* is that it is a legal principle that suspends the law. It is thus, for Langland, a perfect way of reconciling justice and mercy, of overturning the law while at the same time fulfilling it.[98]

This reading, so careful and insightful in some respects, fundamentally mistakes the role of the law in Langland's Harrowing scene: in fact, the devil claims possession of human souls not by the old or Hebraic law but by breaking the law, "with gyle [. . .] with treson and tricherie" (C.XX 313, 319).[99] By contrast, as we saw in the previous chapter, Langland takes pains to present the Harrowing as a completely legal transaction, in which Christ claims the souls in hell *not* by suspending the law or by claiming exemption from it, but by "rihte" because the devil has "no trewe title" (C.XX 324). Christ's death on the cross does not paradoxically both overturn *and* fulfill the law; rather, Christ's death simply fulfills the law by paying the debt of sin ("So that lyf quyte lyf"). Debt payment allows the fulfillment of the law to be, at the same time, an act of mercy.

In this light, the *ius necessitatis* cannot rightfully be applied to justify theft. Rather, the maxim expresses the idea that necessity precludes the legal possibility of theft: in cases of dire necessity, a human being is permitted to use the bare minimum of food, drink, and clothing, and you cannot steal what you are permitted to use. Describing the needy man's taking as an act of "[cacching]" or "sleithe" indicates, at the very least, a misunderstanding of the maxim. Even more troubling is Nede's assertion that "nede at greet nede may nyme as for his owne / Withouten consail of Consience or cardinale virtues" (C.XXII 20–21). Most critics of Nede have focused on his reckless dismissal of conscience and virtue, but it seems equally significant that he claims here the needy man may take the necessities of life *as for his own.* This is a direct contradiction of St. Francis's rule, which stipulates that the friars are to live *sine proprio*. Nede's claim that the needy man is entitled to appropriate the goods he requires for survival utterly undermines the purpose and basis of Franciscan poverty, the very poverty that, Nede claims, justifies his taking: Nede is a self-defeating figure.

As such, Nede evokes the kind of danger that rigorists like Peter Olivi weighed and considered precisely to avoid. One such danger that Olivi contends with in his *Quaestiones de Perfectione Evangelica* (questions

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8 and 16) is the role of "spiritual friends" – those who own the goods that friars are permitted to use, or who procure those goods with the money that the friars are not allowed to touch. Using a dialectical form, Olivi gives dramatic voice to both sides of the debate. In favour of the "mode of living" whereby the friars' daily needs may be met without sacrificing "claustral silence, peace, regular discipline and correction, and tireless prayer," Olivi presents twelve arguments aimed at showing the reasonableness and consistency of using goods provided by procurators.[100] On the other side, Olivi objects that the friars' reliance on spiritual friends "openly [mocks]" the abdication of rights and reduces it to a "monstrous ridiculousness."[101] Even if the use of procurators allows the friars to follow the letter of the law, so to speak, it violates its spirit, insofar as spiritual friends allow friars to avoid "external possession" while receiving "in internal consent and intentional recourse (*intentionali recursu*) [. . .] the security of total future use radically and efficaciously consisting in that obligation of rights or possessions and revenues."[102] Olivi concludes not only that such a "mode" infects the life of evangelical poverty with a dangerous impurity ("impuritatem") that might destroy the order from within, but that any order from the pope to follow this "mode" should be disobeyed. A pope who would mandate the use of procurators should be "resisted as Lucifer and the noonday devil with all [one's] power," following the example of Francis and in obedience to the higher law of Christ.[103] Less shockingly, but no less radically, Langland's depiction of Nede does not undermine the case for "holy simplicity," as some critics have contended, but he does show that the attempt to live outside the grasp of the law by means of an appeal to the law is doomed to fail; he also shows that the will to live *sine proprio* cannot be grounded on a desire to evade one's debts. The attempt to decouple sin from debt results inevitably in hypocrisy.

In his diagnosis of the friars' failure to successfully defend *usus pauper* against the attacks of the papacy, Agamben argues that the fatal flaw of the friars' position was precisely their appeal to the law.[104] For one thing, it is in "the very structure of law to claim what is outside itself."[105] But for another, the Franciscan appeal to the law defines poverty as a renunciation, and thus as a position founded on the will of the subject: for Langland, the will to renounce, bound by need, can only turn to renunciation's opposite, sinful self-preservation. As we have seen throughout this book, particularly with regard to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, acts of renunciation are also inherently economical and economy-producing because they engage the

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subject in relations of debt and credit. This is also Todeschini's insight about the elements of "deprivation and renunciation" that were decisive for the development of trade. What is needed, according to Agamben, is not renunciation but a definition of use as "the only possible relation" to a material world that is itself inappropriable. In this definition, it is not the individual who renounces *dominium* but the world itself that cannot be owned.

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