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### **Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 2, lines 38-58**

#### **Abstract**

This is a translation of Passus 2 from lines 38-58 in the A Version. Visitors from all walks of life and all across the land have taken up all the lodging in town, forcing the rest to camp at the outskirts. They have all come to witness Simony and Civil pervert the sanctity of marriage by uniting the opulent Lady Meed to the devilish False. Their union would mean the total corruption of money, economic exchange, and wealth itself, plunging the world into a hell of greed and skullduggery. With this translation, I wanted to lift the tone of dirtiness, depravity, and sleaze that is evoked in the original passage and expand upon it in my translation, which mixes mechanical and governmental terminology with sexuality and disgust.

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*Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 2, lines 38-58*

This is a translation of Passus 2 from lines 38-58 in the A Version. Visitors from all walks of life and all across the land have taken up all the lodging in town, forcing the rest to camp at the outskirts. They have all come to witness Simony and Civil pervert the sanctity of marriage by uniting the opulent Lady Meed to the devilish False. Their union would mean the total corruption of money, economic exchange, and wealth itself, plunging the world into a hell of greed and skullduggery. With this translation I wanted to lift the tone of dirtiness, depravity, and sleaze that is evoked in the original passage and expand upon it in my translation. During the creation of this translation, I always thought of the song “Professional Widow” by Tori Amos as the type of atmosphere I wanted to construct. The harpsichord provides a classical air to the song, but its melody feels like what would play in a dim, seedy bar. The heavy, industrial drumbeat further weighs it down, while a groaning riff provides some menace. In the opening lyrics, Amos sings, “Slag pit / Stag shit / Oh honey bring it close to my lips, yeah,” juxtaposing biological and industrial waste with sensual consumption. This contrast can especially be seen in the latter half of the poem as I mix together mechanical and governmental terminology with sexuality and disgust.

Another inspiration was extreme and taboo cinema. This includes more tame and mainstream pictures from the 70’s: grindhouse films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Mario Bava’s giallo work, including *Blood and Black Lace* and *A Bay of Blood*. More extreme examples include *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* and *Martyrs*. I wouldn’t say my translation is extreme or taboo, as I think that would have very quickly ruined it, but those concepts were guiding my hand as I wrote. When it came to the style of the verse, I wanted to be creative with it and push the boundaries of what I could change while still maintaining continuity with the source. It was an exercise of reading comprehension as I needed to understand the original passage intimately to be able to adequately capture what Langland was trying to say. In general, I wanted to be more offbeat with my word choices and syntax, similar to writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Janet Frame. Maintaining the alliterative aspect as much as I could also required more ingenuity with the words I chose. Combined together, I believe I achieved a playful verse that dances on your tongue when you speak it aloud.

I’ve chosen to rename the characters, more so because it was another opportunity to think up something new. Meed became Profit and False became Rook, conjuring more imagery of games, cheating, winning, and losing. Flattery became Doublespeak, as I wanted to use a more contemporary term that roughly means using manipulative language for power. Simony especially felt like an archaic term; by renaming them to Snake Oil I wanted to equate the character more with the snake oil salesman trope, a con artist who makes money selling bogus curatives. Finally, Civil is more simple, being renamed to Syst to maintain the systemic aspect of the character while including disgust since it sounds like cyst. I wanted to bring attention to this passage because I believe it highlights a continuity between eras that I have only realized recently—that medieval literature can be just as low-down and nasty as what we

have today. Before studying anything medieval, I associated it with Arthurian romance, chivalry, and honor. I didn't deny that the people of the Middle Ages were just as average as us, but I thought that the things that make us painfully human would be excluded from the lofty literature written by scholars and clergy. But this connection would only serve as a bridge, allowing us as a modern audience to better understand the themes Langland was conveying—themes of greed, economic exploitation, the corruption of holy institutions—and how these things are enabled through political systems. Ultimately, I wanted to blur the lines of history, showing how our humanity has persisted after all this time, for good and for ill.

An engorged town vomited the excess towards the outskirts  
A legion of pink-skinned locusts swarmed the field,  
They flooded uphill, a pile of men reaching the mid-morning sun, They erected a circus, with  
Babel-like pride; and a peripheral tentative tent city, With kaisers,<sup>1</sup> courtiers, and visitors  
about,  
For adjudicators and process servers, sellers and buyers,  
For the sages, the dunces, the workers, the polis<sup>2</sup>  
All to behold what the decree foretold,  
As to whom Profit<sup>3</sup> would be pawned off to;  
A sentence to be roped to Rook<sup>4</sup> in marriage  
Then duplicitous Doublespeak<sup>5</sup> walked her to Rook,  
As contracted, to be a ward of Rook forevermore,  
Subordination by relinquishment,  
Relinquishment by subordination, in bed and kitchen,  
At Sir Snake Oil's<sup>6</sup> behest,  
Snake Oil and Syst<sup>7</sup> both stepped forward,  
And revealed the Rook-written writ,  
He begins, aloud to the crowd,  
“Listen and witness, people of the polis,  
That I, Doublespeak, bind Rook to Profit  
To operate overindulgence and all arrogance, in wealth and want,  
With the dominating high office of hypersex;<sup>8</sup>  
Together crowned by the covetous industrial complex  
Funded by edacious<sup>9</sup> exploit and expropriation;  
I swear them into our long line of leeches,  
To delight in the Devil's debauchery;

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<sup>1</sup> Another word for king—have to keep the alliteration.

<sup>2</sup> A term for the ancient Greek city-state. The term used here means more of a general body of people.

<sup>3</sup> Meed

<sup>4</sup> False

<sup>5</sup> Flattery

<sup>6</sup> Symonye

<sup>7</sup> Syvyle

<sup>8</sup> A made-up word.

<sup>9</sup> Voracious or given to eating.

By our blessed lethargocracy<sup>10</sup> I link them together,  
Endowed for generations to come,  
All the attachments of the apathetic apparatus,  
Extending to the annals of Annihilation

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<sup>10</sup> Another made up word, a combination of lethargic + the suffix -ocracy.