

Vincent Arriaza
California State University, Los Angeles

**Holy Church: Sistine or Sixteen?:
Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 2, lines 1-30**

Abstract

When first encountering the living embodiment of Holy Church in *Piers Plowman* Passus 2, one might expect divine insight or moral clarity. Instead, we meet a figure whose righteous posture quickly unravels into a petty, almost comical tirade. This contrast between her spiritual status and emotional immaturity sets the tone for one of the poem's central themes: the tension between surface righteousness and deeper hypocrisy. My translation of the A-Text highlights the hypocrisy of Holy Church through a blend of critical and adaptive strategies. By rendering Middle English into present-day youth slang, I expose Holy Church's tone for what it is: less moral sermon, more hallway gossip. This approach draws out the poem's social dynamics in a way that resonates with modern day readers, especially students encountering medieval literature for the first time.

Recommended Citation

Arriaza, Vincent. "Holy Church: Sistine or Sixteen?: *Piers Plowman the A Version*: Passus 2, lines 1-30." *Text & Type*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2026. CSU Open Journals. Available at: <https://journals.calstate.edu/textandtype/issue/view/568>

Articles printed in *Text & Type* are published by CSU Open Journals under a Creative Commons (CC) copyright license. Authors retain ownership of all rights under copyright in all versions of the article. Specifically, the journal uses a CC BY-NC-SA license. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

Holy Church: Sistine or Sixteen?:
Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 2, lines 1-30

When first encountering the living embodiment of Holy Church in *Piers Plowman* Passus 2, one might expect divine insight or moral clarity. Instead, we meet a figure whose righteous posture quickly unravels into a petty, almost comical tirade. The narrator, Will, seeks guidance on how to tell true virtue from falsehood, and Holy Church responds with a bitter monologue targeting Lady Meed—a beautiful, well-dressed woman she accuses of corrupting justice and morality. Yet rather than delivering a high-minded theological critique, Holy Church’s rant feels deeply personal. She speaks more like a jealous rival than a saintly guide. This contrast between her spiritual status and emotional immaturity sets the tone for one of the poem’s central themes: the tension between surface righteousness and deeper hypocrisy.

My translation of the A-Text highlights the hypocrisy of Holy Church through a blend of critical and adaptive strategies. By rendering Middle English into present-day youth slang, I expose Holy Church’s tone for what it is: less moral sermon, more hallway gossip. This approach draws out the poem’s social dynamics in a way that resonates with modern day readers, especially students encountering medieval literature for the first time. Translation becomes a method of interpretation: a way of making the poet’s commentary on moral posturing accessible and fresh without losing the original message.

One line that especially benefits from this lens is Holy Church’s complaint: “lacked my lore to lordys aboute.” The Middle English Dictionary defines “lacked” as “to disparage” (MED, s.v. lacked Def 2A), which I translated as “totally trashes my doctrines, to any and all who listen.” This framing modernizes the diction while clarifying the emotional charge behind her words. Her issue with Meed isn’t just theological—it’s territorial. The use of valley-girl-inspired slang underscores how personal her grievances truly are, and how shallow her moral superiority appears.

Even more striking is her accusation about Lady Meed’s lineage: “Out of Wrong sche wexe, to wrotherhele manye.” The verb “wexe” carries a dual meaning—both “to grow” (MED, s.v. wexe Def 1A) and “to become pregnant” (Def 3B). I translated this line as “...carrying more than just her father’s name,” preserving the grotesque implication of incest and exposing how Holy Church weaponizes language as innuendo. The ambiguity mirrors the way rumors and moral panic often function in society—without proof, but with devastating effect.

If I were to teach Middle English translation, I would emphasize how characters like Holy Church are not just distant relics but recognizable archetypes. As a first-generation college student, I’ve felt the disorientation academic language can bring. This project helped bridge that gap. My adaptive translations built my creative confidence, while my critical engagement with the MED gave me tools to read closely and translate thoughtfully. By teasing out emotional subtext and reframing it with a contemporary voice, I’ve illuminated the poet’s critique of moral hypocrisy, power structures, gendered morality, and the politics of spiritual

authority in society today. In doing so, my translation not only interprets the poem—it amplifies the themes already present.

Yet I fell to my knees and asked her for grace
And said “Have mercy; for the love of Mary in heaven
She who bore that blessed child, that bought us on the cross
Teach me by your virtue to spot falsehood. “Look on your left half, and look where he stands
Both False and Flattery, and their goons.” I looked on my left as the lady had told me to
And I became aware of a woman wondrously clothed,
Trimmed with fur, the purest on earth,
Capped with a crown, no king has a better one:
Of the purest jewels that a prince ever wore;
Robed in red scarlet, adorned with gold ribbons;
There is no queen more elegant who lives.
“Who is this woman,” I said, “so wonderfully attired?” “That is Lady Meed, the maiden, she has bugged me frequently,
And totally trashes my doctrines, to any and all who listen.
In the pope's councils, she is as tight knit as myself,
And she should not be, for Wrong was her father;
Out of Wrong she was raised, carrying more than just her father's name, to the misfortune of many.
I ought to be above her, for I come from richer blood. "Tomorrow will be the marriage made of
Bribery and Falsehood;
Flattery with his silver tongue has tied them together.
Tomorrow the marriage will be made, like as I tell you;
I can let you know—if you wanna know—who's all coming
That belong to that posse, the classy, the sassy and the trashy.
Keep your eyes peeled for them if you can, and stay away,
If you intend to live in the bliss of Truth;
I can't stay much longer; I leave you to God
And advise you, despite your desires, just try to be a good dude.”

Works Cited

William, Langland. *Piers Plowman: The A Version*. Ed. Miceal F. Vaughan. John Hopkins University Press, 2011. Print. p. 66-67. Versus 34-63.

Middle English Dictionary. University of Michigan. 2001. Web. September 2024.