

The Unity and Disunity of Poetics in *Piers Plowman*

by

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Spring 2007

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must acknowledge my advisor, Macklin Smith. He opened up the world of stylistics to me, and for the first time, I saw the true beauty of language and poetry. His passion for *Piers Plowman* was contagious, and I thank him for introducing me to this great work and for ushering me through all its tricky nuances. He is, and will always be, an inspiration to me—as a mentor, a writer, a poet and a friend.

Thanks also to Josh Miller, for helping me get this project off the ground and for the comic relief emails, to Scotti Parrish for your calming presence and encouragement, to my cohort for the support and the laughs, and to the entire English department for making the third floor of Angell Hall a warm and welcoming oasis on this big, sometimes cold, campus.

I could never have survived this year had those closest to me not been there, pretending to understand my ramblings in Middle English. Lauren and Gera, who could always be counted on to give me opinions on caesura placement, though they didn't know a caesura from a stave, thank you for accepting Piers the Plowman as our fourth roommate this year. Eric, thank you for letting me talk out my writer's block and for being genuinely interested in exactly what alliterative long-line verse is about. Lindsay and Allison, thank you for always asking about my writing and listening to my rants. Thank you all for pushing me to be a better writer and a better person—and for loving me no matter what.

Last, but certainly not least, my eternal gratitude goes to my family for establishing and cultivating my love of literature—thanks Mom, for reading to me when I was little, Père, for letting me steal your books throughout the years, and both of you, plus Ed, Sara (and Leo) for all those family dinner “Jeopardy” games where I learned more about life, history and love than I ever could in a classroom.

*‘Counseilleth me, Kynde,’ quod I, ‘what craft be best to lerne?’
‘Lerne to love,’ quod Kynde, ‘and leef alle othere...
And thow love lelly, lakke shal thee nevere.’*

Abstract

In William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the narrator, Will, yearns to understand God, and as he converses with his inner faculties and other allegorical figures, he learns that while he will never fully understand the divine, he can still develop his inner spirituality to get close to God. The medium for this rumination is very important; rather than convey his ideas in a sermon or a prose text, Langland writes in long-line alliterative verse. In metrical studies, one often asks *what* the prosody does, but the more important question is *why* the meter takes the form that it does. Numerous lines throughout the poem defy the norms of Middle English long-line alliterative verse, so examining why the language in these particular lines fails to conform to standard prosodic practices illuminates some of the poem's key points.

In order to grasp the complexities of the thematic content of the poem, one must also examine the verse structure. Langland realizes that mankind can never really comprehend God on earth. Human language can never properly express divine ideas; however, the form of the language can communicate layers of meaning that words themselves cannot express. Language can unify incompatible ideas, just as religion unites the divided; on the other hand, it can split up cohesive concepts, just as sin segregates congruous notions. Examples of the poetic novelties in *Piers Plowman* include complicated syntactic structures, multiple alliterative patterns, puns and a whimsical disregard for caesura rules. These innovations to the verse style in this poem serve a purpose: they hint at the levels of spiritual insight that man can never know on earth.

To illustrate these points, this thesis focuses mainly on Langland's embedded imperative clauses, with particular regard to those relating to Piers the Plowman and Dame Study since they are two key figures in Will's instruction. It also examines the multiple meanings of the word "suffre" as it appears in three of the embedded-imperative clauses. Secondly, it analyzes the arguable apex of the poem with the construction of Unity Holy Church, and it follows the poetic structure of the text as Unity crumbles. Each of these sections contains dense, problematic language that subtly articulates the layered convolution of the poem's religious discourse.

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Introduction

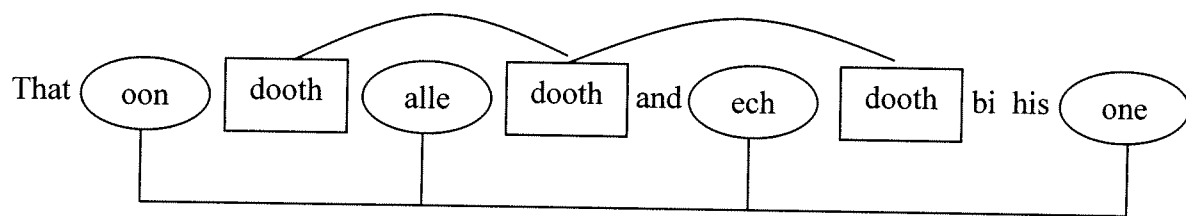
Combining the popular medieval dream-thought concept with biting allegory, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* presents an acerbic attack on the moral degradation of fourteenth century England. Written in Middle English alliterative long-line verse, the poem exemplifies the norms of this prosodic structure and yet deviates significantly from them. The language constantly thrusts the reader into this irreconcilable conflict, forcing him or her to grapple with complex ideas of religion while muddling through the equally confusing verse. Langland tries to understand God, but finds that one cannot fully comprehend the divine on earth; the inadequacies of human language lack the proper way to convey heavenly ideas. Thus, he tries to solve this unsolvable problem by manipulating the norms of his chosen prosodic structure.

First of all, it must be said that Middle English alliterative long-line verse naturally unifies and divides simultaneously. Sound unites three stressed syllables—three syllables, like the Holy Trinity—but in the prototypical line, the final stressed syllable is blank. The line is made up of two half-lines divided by a caesura—two parts as a whole, just as Jesus is both God and man in one. Specific to *Piers Plowman*, the dream-thought aspect contains three levels of consciousness—awake, dream, dream-within-a-dream—again, mirroring the Holy Trinity. Also, the poem contains two distinct languages—Latin and English—that are constantly blended together. All these features work together, though they seem oppositional, to form an uneasily unified structure.

Certain lines in *Piers Plowman* use additional poetic device to dig deeper into the theological implications of a statement. Inherently, religion unites naturally disunited concepts. For example, XVI.183 discusses the Holy Trinity:

That oon dooth, alle dooth, and ech dooth bi his one¹

The beauty of the line lies in the tension. The alliterating syllables (“oon,” “alle,” “ech” and “one”) connect through sound, but they are separated in line placement by the reoccurring word “dooth.” Juxtaposed with the repetition of the word “dooth,” the vocalic alliteration cannot run effortlessly together; one must hop over a new “dooth” each time to connect the sound patterns.



In this example, the form of the line shows the inherent paradox of the three-as-one Holy Trinity. Humans do not have the capacity to fully comprehend the ideal of the Trinity—the complete unity of three separate entities in a singular being—so it must be shown through the shape of language rather than the actual words themselves.²

The human soul is a mirror of the Holy Trinity as it has three faculties in one—memory, will and intellect. However, the fall of mankind tainted the soul, so while the Holy Trinity blends together flawlessly, humans cannot achieve that perfection. Instead, the faculties of the soul bicker and cause internal conflict. Langland expresses this tension through language divide in the following line:

¹ All quotations are from *William Langland: The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt. London: Everyman, 1995. This thesis focuses only on the B-text. I omit the hyphens that connect the embedded imperative lines since they are editorial additions and do not occur in the manuscripts found in the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*. Ed. Eric Eliason, Thorlac Turville-Petre and Hoyt N. Duggan. Vol. 5. CD-ROM. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2004.

² My advisor, Macklin Smith, discusses this line at length in his article, "Did Langland Read the Lignum Vitae?", *Writers Reading Writers: Intertextual Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Literature in Honor of Robert Hollander*, forthcoming from the University of Delaware Press.

Anima she hatte; [to hir hath envye] (IX.7)

“Anima” is Latin, so this line also contains two languages. Though Langland effortlessly incorporates the Latin, the language switch stands out, separating the word “Anima” from the rest of the line. The Latin “Anima” alliterates with the rest of the vowel sounds in the line, but pronoun referring to Anima in English (“she”) does not match the alliterative pattern. Also, the placement of Anima in the line is significant: Langland puts Anima at the beginning of the line, and he places that non-alliterating pronoun between the alliterating “Anima” and the rest of the alliterative pattern. He separates Anima both with the English-Latin switch and in his line structure. Anima is both in harmony and at odds with the rest of the words in the line, just as intellect, will and memory can work in tandem and yet, they never truly unified.³

Langland also uses poetic structure to show unity in different realms of creation. The following line alliterates three words whose meanings do not coalesce at all:

On aventure ye have youre hire here and youre hevene also (III.72)

Every single word in this line participates in the alliterative glide. Although heaven and earth are innately detached, the vocalic alliteration connects everything; with all the sounds in the line flowing smoothly together, the language refuses to differentiate heaven from earth. Heaven and earth can never really mix together, though through learning about God, one can try to live as heavenly a life on earth as possible. The direct meaning of words themselves cannot convey this idea, so the sound play gets the point across.

³ The tension of how Anima’s proper name and how her pronoun fit into the line foreshadows the Latin/English lines that present all of Anima’s names in Passus XV.

On the other hand, sin pulls apart naturally unified things. It creates tension—conveyed in the poem through dissonant sounds and the breakdown of alliterative patterns. For example, the corrupt theologian in Passus XIII devours large quantities of food, such as:

[And eet] manye sondry metes, mortrews and puddynges,
Wombe cloutes and wilde brawen and egges [with grece yfried] (XIII.62-3)

The foods do not alliterate—“metes,” “puddynges,” “cloutes,” “brawen” and “egges” do not follow any sort of pattern. The language conveys the theologian’s gluttonous behavior in the lack of alliterative pattern. The absence of cohesive sound structure suggests the underlying sin in the behavior. Just as language and poetic device can point to the essential religious ideas in the meaning of a line, it can also hint at the implicit sin of a line.

In addition to the uniting and disjointing aspects inherent in the verse form, Langland employs puns, intricate syntax, ambiguous caesura placement and multiple alliterative patterns to weave webs of divine meaning in earthly words. All the aforementioned features of the poem convey multifaceted levels of meaning. Fluid definitions of words add texture to otherwise basic lines,⁴ and entire books have been written about word play in *Piers Plowman*.⁵ The Anima line displays how macaronic lines can add layers of meaning. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I focus on how unconventional syntactic structures, ambiguous caesura placement and alliterative patterns express the layered complexities of religion.

⁴ In “Lele Wordes and Bele Paroles: Some Aspects of Langland’s Word-Play,” *The Review of English Studies*, 34.134 (May, 1983): 137-150, A.V.C. Schmidt writes, “In his effort to prevent words from breaking under the burden and tension of trying to communicate difficult truths, in his struggle to make words stay in place and stay still, Langland discovers, draws the veil from, their deceits as well as their depths” (141). Schmidt also writes, this time in *The Clerkly Maker: Langland’s Poetic Art*, Cambridge, Brewer: 1987 “...what on the surface may seem a fault (the propensity of some words to look and sound alike) can be turned to a source of strength and salvation through the *maistrie* of God” (108). Henceforth referred to as *Clerkly*.

⁵ See Mary Clemente Davlin’s book, *A Game of Heuene: Word Play and the Meaning of Piers Plowman B*, Cambridge, Brewer: 1989.

One can see this unconventional handling of language particularly in two different areas of the poem. In my first chapter, I analyze some of the embedded-imperative clauses scattered throughout the poem. Those of particular interest come from Piers the Plowman's path to Truth in Passus V, Dame Study's path to Clergy in Passus X and embedded-imperatives that include the word "suffre." Each of the clauses examined employs atypical syntactic structure, ambiguous caesura placement and multiple alliterative patterns to suggest the deeper levels of intricate religious discourse hidden below the surface.

The second chapter traces the poetic development of Passus XIX and XX. These two sections detail the construction and subsequent destruction of Unity Holy Church. Langland uses all the previously discussed poetic devices while narrating the erection of Unity to express ideas about piety and sin. Then, during the battle that ends in Unity's fall, the verse rushes through to the end, relentless and frenzied until Will awakes with a start at the end of his final vision. The poetic structures of Passus XX mirror the thematic conflict, and they relay the anxiety this section provokes. Also, Langland now uses poetic unity and disunity to express the Antichrist's strength and to foreshadow the fall of Unity. However, it is not all pessimistic; at the very end of the poem, sound play and line structuring suggest a hope that is never explicitly expressed.

I employ my own scansion system for *Piers Plowman*. I am greatly indebted to A.V.C. Schmidt's *The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* for presenting terminology and a base scansion code. However, I feel that, as William Blake so eloquently put, "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." Thus, my code goes as follows:

1 = full stave (stress and alliteration)

2 = blank stave (stress, but no alliteration)

3 = full stave of a second alliterative pattern

4 = mute stave with first alliterative pattern (alliteration, but no stress)

5 = mute stave with second alliterative pattern

This system allows for more numbers to be added as more alliterative patterns appear in a line.⁶

Also, the lines are not grouped into different classifications, for I feel that it limits how one scans the line and makes one susceptible to wretched stress and to ignoring multiple alliterative patterns.⁷

As the adage goes, one must know the rules before he or she can break them. Clearly, William Langland knows the rules of Middle English alliterative long-line prosody: he shows time and time again that he can write normative lines with the right number of stressed syllables that correspond with alliteration and a medial caesura. However, it is when the verse breaks the rules that it becomes interesting. These maverick lines really strike at the heart of the poem's meaning; they convey through the meaning of the words and—perhaps more importantly—through the form of the verse the layered complexities of religious thought.

⁶ If additional patterns are added, even numbers signify full staves and odd numbers indicate mute staves. For example, 6 would denote a full stave and 7 would designate a corresponding mute stave.

⁷ See Schmidt's categorization of different types of lines in *Clerkly*, 27-41.

Simple Proverbs in Complex Verse: Embedded Imperative Clauses

Some of the most syntactically strange lines of *Piers Plowman* contain embedded imperative clauses.⁸ Oddly, the scholarly community has largely ignored these clauses, possibly because of the inability to fit them into a typical metrical theory of Middle English prosody.⁹ However, the embedded imperatives warrant analysis since the syntax and alliteration stray so far from the norm. This chapter focuses in particular on the embedded imperatives in Piers the Plowman's path to truth at the end of Passus V, Dame Study's instruction in Passus X and the names of Reason's horse and of Piers's family. These embedded imperative clauses are often either the Ten Commandments or simplistic adages. Although the general meaning of the embedded imperatives is simple, the poetic complexities of these lines express layered ideas about Christianity that Langland cannot communicate in the meaning of his lines alone.

I chose these particular lines because they each contain abnormal syntactic structures and rich contrapuntal alliteration. However, I must mention that shorter, less complicated embedded imperatives exist in the poem. For example, the names of the figures who guard Anima in Passus IX are embedded imperatives:

Sire Se wel, and Sey wel, and Sire Here wel the hende,

Sire Werch wel with thyn hand, a wight man of strengthe (IX.20-1)

⁸ By my count, there are thirty of these lines in English and six in Latin.

⁹ As George Kane says, "In that dispersed and undocumented tradition [of Langland's alliterative long line and those of its other versifiers] there would be no consensus about a norm, or rules: the individual poet's conception of the verse form would be the accidental product of his special experience of it rather than a least common denominator" (89). "Music 'Neither Unpleasant nor Monotonous,'" *Chaucer and Langland: Historical and Textual Approaches*, London: Athlone, 1989, 77-89. Henceforth referred to as "Music."

Each of these embedded imperatives stays in one half-line, not crossing the caesural pause. Langland does nothing innovative with the syntax. However, these guardians represent actions that medieval people thought the soul controlled. Anima is a multifaceted character who has different names—so many that Will jokes that Anima is like a bishop.¹⁰ Another figure with multiple names also has an embedded imperative name—Do-wel. Though this clause is very short and uncomplicated, Do-wel is a complex allegorical figure. In Passus XIX, Will eventually discovers that Do-wel is exemplified in the life of Christ, but until then, each instructional figure he meets gives him a new definition for Do-wel, many, if not all, of which are at least partially correct. Such fluid identities are just one way that Langland gives allegorical figures layers of theological meaning. Langland also plays with syntax and alliterative patterns in other embedded imperative clauses to add textured meaning to his text, as this chapter will illustrate.

In Passus V, lines 560 to 639, Piers lays out the path to Truth for the people.¹¹ Most of these clauses present the Ten Commandments and other proverbs. The layered sound play,¹² the abnormal caesura placement¹³ and the chiasmic structures of some lines¹⁴ make these instructions very complex, suggesting the important theological implications of the instructions. Embedded

¹⁰ See XV.23-43.

¹¹ "Piers knows Truth well, and he knows the way to his place. It leads through Meekness, Conscience, Love of God, Love of Neighbour, and the Ten Commandments." J.A. Burrows, "The Action of Langland's Second Vision," *Essays on Medieval Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1984, 79-101 (85-6).

¹² "The play of alliteration and emphasis within Langland's verse suggests a dramatic engagement between language and the folk (or the readers of the poem). Over and again, the allegory attends to the capacities of language and understanding as well as to the possibilities of true comprehension, a belief that one is able to learn, say, how to receive grace" (85). Eugene Green, "Patterns of the Negative in *Piers Plowman*," *Allegoresis: The Craft of Allegory in Medieval Literature*, Ed. J. Stephen Russell, New York: Garland, 1987, 67-88. Henceforth referred to as "Patterns."

¹³ "Langland identified the caesural pause, in its essential grammatical character, as a function of meaning" (137). George Kane, "Langland and Chaucer II," *Chaucer and Langland: Historical and Textual Approaches*, London: Athlone, 1989, 134-149. Henceforth referred to as "Langland and Chaucer."

¹⁴ In *Clerkly*, Schmidt denies the presence of any chiasmic lines in *Piers Plowman*, but there are numerous examples that contradict this claim (33).

imperative clauses obviously issue commands, but these ones also literally form the path to Truth:

The croft hatte “Coveite noght mennes catel ne hire wyves
ne noon of hire servaunts that noyen hem myghte” (V.573-4)

How would one scan this first line? One could scan it as:

1 1 | 1 2
The croft hatte Coveite noght mennes catel ne hire wyves

The a-verse and the b-verse both contain six syllables, so this caesural placement is acceptable.¹⁵ But something seems off. The caesura pushes the direct object of this imperative clause away from its implied subject. The divide seems strange: with “noght” left unstressed, the a-verse simply commands the reader to “coveite.” So, let’s scan the line reading “the croft hatte” as an anacrusis and simply focus on the main clause:

(anacrusis not scanned) 1 2 1 2
The croft hatte Coveite noght mennes catel ne hire wyves

With this scansion, the line still contains four stressed syllables, the preferred number of metrical stresses in Middle English long-lined alliterative verse.¹⁶ Though, where does the caesura fall?

Typical scansions would place it between “mennes” and “catel” as such:

¹⁵ Schmidt (in *Clerkly*), Duggan and Inoue and require a medial caesura. Hoyt Duggan, “The Shape of the B-Verse in Middle English Alliterative Poetry,” *Speculum*, 61 (1986), 561-592. Any other references to Duggan come from this article. Noriko Inoue, “A New Theory of Alliterative A-Verses,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 18 (2004): 107-132. Any other references to Inoue come from this article.

On the other hand, in “A Reexamination of the Middle English Alliterative Long Line,” *Modern Philology*, 81.4 (1984): 339-360, A.T.E. Matonis argues that the strict medial caesura carried over from Old English poetry and that “the half-lines are less independent, more bound, and the rhythmical relationship between them is accordingly closer than it was in Old English”—basically, that the caesura’s importance diminishes in Middle English verse (346). Henceforth referred to as “Reexamination.”

¹⁶ See Duggan, 570.

1 2 | 1 2
 Coveite noght mennes catel ne hire wyves

The caesura seems out of place there, separating a possession from its possessor. “Mennes” and “catel” need to go together. Should the caesura go after “catel” then?

1 2 1 | 2
 Coveite noght mennes catel ne hire wyves

This scansion does not make sense either. The line could pause here, but this scansion leaves only one stressed syllable in the b-verse, a non-alliterating syllable at that, violating at least two “rules” of Middle English long-lined alliterative verse.¹⁷ Here is a final scansion that does not read “the croft hatte” as an anacrusis:

1 | 1 2 1 2
 The croft hatte Coveite noght mennes catel ne hire wyves

This scansion leaves only one stress in the a-verse and four in the b-verse, making the line completely unbalanced.¹⁸ However, the syntax naturally pauses at that point in the line, so the caesura seems to fit there well. It is the most natural caesura placement of all scansions presented.¹⁹ Regardless of where the caesura is actually placed, the fact that one could argue for

¹⁷ In most cases, I argue against the strict “rules” of Middle English long-lined alliterative verse as illustrated by Duggan, Schmidt in *Clerkly*, etc., but in this case, this scansion of the line strays from the norm far too much to be correct. Basically, this line violates these rules: (1) the syllable that carries the first stress of the b-verse and at least one of the two stressed syllables in the a-verse alliterate and (2) lines that lack alliteration in one of the half lines are defective and lines that contain more than two non-alliterating metrically syllables are impermissible. Summary of rules comes from “Reexamination.”

¹⁸ In *Clerkly*, A.V.C. Schmidt concedes that the half-lines “are not always of equal metrical weight”—though this flexibility only applies to extended a-verses (half lines with more than two stressed syllables). He does not allow for only one stress in the a-verse (30). Inoue also requires two stresses in the a-verse.

¹⁹ In “Reexamination,” Matonis points out that a seasoned scholar, a grad student, and a novice may scan the same lines in different ways, and she wonders if the scholar should dictate how someone else scans the line (354). Some

several different scansions means that the line itself is an incredibly tight unit that a caesura cannot naturally break up.²⁰

The caesura placement is significant because with a medial caesura, the line is balanced. When a line shifts the metrical norms so much, one takes notice. Considering this line is the one of numerous examples in a concentrated area, one must acknowledge that Langland intentionally twists prosodic standards to create a new layer of meaning in his line.²¹ Since the caesura falls before the embedded imperative clause, the imperative clause remains linked together in one fluid chain in the b-verse, emphasizing the unity of this clause. Also, the maverick structure of the line highlights the importance of its meaning in a way by making this line, as well as the other embedded imperative clauses, stand out from the normal metrical patterns.

Additionally, by combining an ambiguous caesura with contrapuntal alliteration, these two lines present a completely unified structure:

The croft hatte Coveite noght mennes cafel ne hire wyves
ne noon of hire servaunts that noyen hem myghte

In the first line, the primary alliterative stress falls on the “c” sound. It also contains unstressed running alliterative patterns with “n,” “t” and “h.” Especially in the first line, the patterns get

Langland scholars would scan this line as I originally did, but I believe that an average person reading this line would place the caesura between “hatte” and “Coveite.”

²⁰ See V.566, V.570, V.573, V.583, V.589, and V.592 as well.

²¹ In “Langland and Chaucer,” Kane writes that “[Langland’s] syntax will impose a strong logical break at the caesura of an end-stopped line; or a syntactical unit beginning at the caesura will overrun the line end and finish at the next caesura, or at the next line after that, or even at some other point arbitrarily set by his arrangement of meaning. *He uses the caesura to punctuate, or as a point to insert a parenthetical statement or a resumptive subject or object, to enable parataxis, or to suggest the informal grammar of conversational give and take.* Sometimes he develops the caesural suggestion of a two-part line rhetorically by parallelism or chiasmus. *So the caesura becomes a component of style.* To describe the effect of his line subjectively, it is less often of a melodious fluent progression than of constantly demanding nervous interest” (137). (emphasis is mine)

muddled together; two patterns often fall in one word (“croft,” “hatte,” “coveite,” “noght,” and “catel”). In the second line, the unstressed “n” alliteration from the first line becomes the primary alliterative pattern, and “noon” and “noyen” are stressed:

4 1 2 | 1 2
ne noon of hire servaunts that noyen hem myghte

This shift from unstressed to stressed places additional emphasis on the negation in the second line: the build up of the more subtle mute alliteration in the first line works creates a wave of sound, so when the “n” alliteration is actually stressed in the second line, it strikes the reader in a more powerful way.

The whole embedded imperative clause runs across two lines, seemingly breaking up the fluidity of the clause. However, the sound play—particularly with the “n” alliterative pattern—compensates for the necessary line break. If not literally in the same line, the alliteration makes sure that the reader formulates the unity of the clause. This embedded imperative, like many of the others, presents one of the Ten Commandments. Thus, it makes sense that the clause forms a cohesive unit—humans use religion to attempt to unify their souls, which after the fall of mankind, split into different faculties. The concordance of the clause conveys this desire for inner unity.

Another of these embedded imperative lines reads as follows:

4 1 4 | 1 5 3
And so shaltow se “Swere noght but if it be for nede

1 2 | 1 2
And nameliche on ydel the name of God Almyghty” (V.570-1)

Langland uses contrapuntal alliteration in these lines as well: in the a-verse, he alliterates on “s” sounds, and in the b-verse, he alliterates “n” sounds. Between the “n” sounds, he embeds a minor third sound pattern with the “b” sounds.²² The multiple alliterative patterns pack the line with repeated sounds, but Langland does some interesting things with the placement of the words.

And [so **shaltow se Swere**] noght but if it be for nede

With the primary “s” pattern, Langland alliterates parts of the introductory clause to the embedded imperative main clause. This device draws the word “swere” away from the imperative clause. The “s” sounds are completely separate from the other sound patterns in the line; they all lie in the a-verse.

This “s” pattern highlights a problem in caesura placement. As with line 573, it would appear that the caesura falls directly before the embedded imperative main clause begins:

4 1 4 | 1 5 3
And so shaltow se “Swere noght but if it be for nede

However, the four “s” words in a row create a poetic wall that seems to block the caesural placement:

4 1 1 | 1 5 3
And [so **sh**altow se **Sw**ere] noght but if it be for nede

This problem did not occur in line 573 because the final word of the a-verse (“hatte”) provided a buffer between the alliterating words in the a-verse (“croft”) and the b-verse (“Coveite”). In this

²² See Schmidt's *Clerkly*, 63.

line, the very tightly bound “s” pattern seems to force the caesura over, placing it in the middle of the embedded imperative clause:

4 1 4 1 | 5 3
And [so **sh**altow se **S**were] noght but if it be for nede

Though this caesural position seems slightly awkward, it also makes more sense considering the placement of the “s” alliterative pattern.²³ Though this scansion only leaves one stressed word in the b-verse, it is the most plausible scansion.²⁴

The b-verse provides a different type of sound play:

And [so **shaltow se Swere**] noht but if it be for nede

Here, the line shifts from placing all the alliterating words together to a chiasitic pattern, in which the “n” alliteration and the “b” alliteration do not mix together, but rather cross each other. This structure splits up one alliterative pattern (“n”) with another pattern (“b”). The chiasmus simultaneously separates the “n” words since they are on opposite positions in the b-verses and connects them since the chiasitic structure works as a frame for the entire b-verse.

The caesura may separate the imperative verb from the rest of the clause here, but its placement makes the alliterative connections even stronger. It allows for the closely packed a-verse and for the chiasmic structure in the b-verse, both of which strengthen the line as a whole.

²³ Schmidt writes in *Clerkly* that "Langland evidently is unwilling to sacrifice natural speech-rhythms to the requirements of ornament" (63).

²⁴ Duggan writes each half-line must contain two stressed syllables (570).

Sometimes one must sacrifice one thing—such as the unity of the embedded imperative clause—in order to aid another—like the cohesiveness of the entire line, rather than just one section of it.

The switch from the primary “s” alliterative pattern to the secondary “n” alliterative pattern places less emphasis on swearing and more emphasis on the word “nought”—after all the “s” sounds, the new “n” sound stands out more. The “s” sounds have a relatively soft sound: it soothes the reading, and makes the sin of swearing seem less abrasive. Interestingly, though this sound play places emphasis on the negation of the statement, “nought” is not stressed. Since the entire meaning of this statement—one of the Ten Commandments—hinges on “nought,” it seems odd that Langland does not stress that word. In leaving “nought” unstressed, the stressed words in the b-verse are “Swere” and “nede.” However, since swearing is generally considered a sin, in what situation would someone actually need to swear?

Ironically, these lines fall less than twenty lines from when Piers swears to never take money for leading people to the path of salvation and truth: “Nay, by [the peril of] my soule! quod Piers and gan to swere, / I nolde fange a ferthyng, for Seint Thomas shryne!” (V.557-8). Since Langland sets up Piers as an authoritative figure in this work, perhaps he wants the reader to understand that the oath Piers takes really *was* necessary (“for nede”). It seems to speak to Pier’s resistance to accepting money for helping people—as the friars and pardoners of the Church did at this time—more than to the fact that he swore. It contrasts him with the greedy clergy, allowing the reader to accept his suggestions on how to lead a pious life. Also, Piers does not swear on God’s name; rather, he swears on the epitome of Church avarice.²⁵ The placement of these two lines close together reconciles the incongruous notion that one can sin by swearing

²⁵ Schmidt’s note on “Seint Thomas shryne” in his edition of the B-text: “Pilgrims offerings had made it a veritable treasure-house” (430).

by showing when it actually is necessary and how to do it. A final example of Piers's embedded imperative instruction reads as follows:

1 1 | 1 1 4 2
 Thanne shalt thou see "Seye sooth so it be to doone

5 1 5 3 | 5 1 5 2
 In no manere ellis noght for no mannes bidding" (V.583-4)

These last enjambed lines take on another unique metrical structure. Langland uses two primary alliterative stress patterns, "s" in the first line and "n" in the second. He also employs a non-stressed consonance pattern on the "t." This line provides another example of how Langland pulls the main clause towards the beginning subordinate clause, this time connecting "thanne," "shalt" and "thow" to "seye" and "sooth":

Thanne shalt **th**ow see "Seye sooth so it be to doone

Langland begins the primary "n" alliterative pattern in the second line at the end of the first line with enjambed alliteration ("doone"). In the second line, he really emphasizes the negation by writing "noght" and by repeating "no." Langland uses the negation of the line and the sound play of "manere" and "manne" to create a chiastic structure throughout the whole line, bringing it together as a cohesive unit.

In no manere ellis noght for no mannes bidding

Why use negation as a key component of the line's structure? "The value of the negative, then, is that in its broad functions it offers access to those impulses that move the spirit, that direct it toward a full acceptance of faith, that deflect it as well toward a self-regard pernicious

for communion.”²⁶ Indeed, one sees that idea shown here. The inner-most chiasmus is made up of two words of negation. It pulls the reader’s attention inward, but at the same time, it pushes outward; the first word of this chiastic structure is “no.” Negation remains a key part of the poem; though inherently divisive, the language used with the negatives helps unify the poem.²⁷

Piers the Plowman is not the only authoritative figure to use embedded imperative clauses to provide moral directions. As already noted, other pedagogical figures use the Do-wel imperative, but Dame Study utilizes other embedded imperatives as well. It is odd that Dame Study, a figure associated with scholarly intellectual pursuit, employs Piers’s simple maxims, but Langland’s point seems to be that the proper way to Clergy is through moral intent rather than intellectual pride.

Interestingly, Dame Study’s imperatives come right after Wit’s explanation of Dowel in Passus X. Study lambastes Wit for using “swiche wise wordes to wissen any sottes!” (X.8). Wit defers to her, and the Dreamer asks Dame Study to help him find Dowel. She directs him to her cousin, Clergie,²⁸ saying:

5 5 1 1 | 1 5 3
Til thow come to a court, Kepe wel thi tunge

1 4 2 | 1 2
Fro lesynges and lither speche and likerouse drynkes (X.165-6)

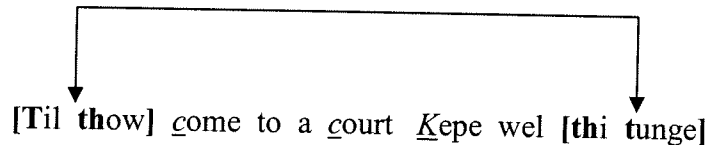
²⁶ Green, “Patterns,” 69.

²⁷ In “Patterns,” Green writes that “the sheer array of negatives in Langland’s allegory throughout its voices and patterns speaks for a wondrous generosity, a capacity to disclose with continuous energy the field of folk arguing its way toward a consummate vision, toward a harmony of word and deed” (85-6).

²⁸ In *Medieval Arts Doctrine on Ambiguity and Their Place in Langland’s Poetics*, London: McGill, 2000, John Chamberlin explains that “Clergie is in one sense Learning, husband to Scripture in B.x, but as one of the guests present at the banquet with Conscience in B.xiii and later, in Passus XX, as one whom Conscience calls on for help during the siege of the Unity Barn, he is rather the order of clerics. The Middle English word had both meanings, and Langland is clearly interested in the interrelation between them” (58). Henceforth referred to as *Arts Doctrine*.

In X.165, the main clause begins in the b-verse. A strong alliterative connection exists between the a-verse and b-verse, but this connection neither bends nor breaks the caesura—rather, it seems to strengthen it. The full stave directly preceding the caesura balances out the full stave directly following the caesura. Also, the two full staves in the a-verse provide a good metrical balance to the line.²⁹

Contrast the multifaceted sound patterns, precise word choice, and line structure of the aforementioned Passus V lines to the clean structure of X.165. No amalgamation occurs in this line; instead, Langland creates a chiasmic structure where the “t” pattern frames the “c” pattern:



The a-verse connects to the b-verse in two ways: through both dual alliterative patterns and the chiasmus. These device bind the two half-lines into one complete line: the chiasmus creates a framework as the “t” alliteration surrounds the “c” alliteration. The alliterative patterns may be split, but the whole line is neatly unified. The caesura and separate alliterative properties divide the two half-lines and yet the chiasmic structure brings the two halves together as a whole.

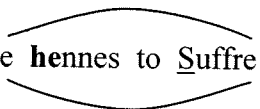
Going back a few lines, the first embedded imperative line of Dame Study’s directions also displays an odd syntax:

1	4	1		5	1	3
“Aske the heighe wey,” quod she, “hennes to Suffre						
1	1		1	2		
Bothe wele and wo, if that thow wolt lerne” (X.159-60)						

²⁹ Inoue dictates that “the a-verse must have a pre-caesural stress, which *always* falls on the verse-final word” (109) while Duggan writes that the first syllable of the b-verse must alliterate with the a-verse (570).

The intense vocalic alliteration in the a-verse of X.159 begins Dame Study's directions with a poetically dense half-line that none of the following lines live up to: nothing after this half-line attempts anywhere near as cohesive a pattern. The b-verse begins not with an immediate stress on the vocalic alliteration of the a-verse, but rather with a mute stave on the secondary "s" alliterative pattern. This diversion from the main vocalic alliteration creates an additional break in the line after the caesural division of the line. Furthermore, Langland squeezes the post-caesural primary full stave between the secondary alliterative pattern:

quod she **hennes** to Suffre



This framing of the primary full stave in the b-verse insulates the vocalic alliteration, effectively stifling it. While most embedded imperative lines have strong connections between the a-verse and the b-verse, this line divides the a-verse and the b-verse into separate and distinct units, rather than two halves that merge seamlessly into a whole line.³⁰ Each half-line is internally unified—the vocalic alliteration binds the a-verse, and the secondary "s" alliterative pattern connects the b-verse—but the line as a whole is disjointed. As opposed to the last line, which displayed how a line can contain an unyielding divide between the a-verse and the b-verse, this line shows how the syntax can create perfectly unified a-verses and b-verses, while refusing to link them together.

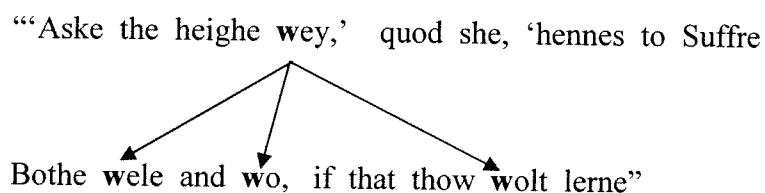
Since these lines present Dame Study's first directions to Will, one thinks that Langland would present these lines clearly. However, this line is the only one of all the embedded imperative lines in the poem that Langland enjambes, and he stops the line directly after the

³⁰ See V.566, V.574, V.589 and V.592 for examples of embedded imperative lines that closely link the a-verse and b-verse.

imperative verb.³¹ This enjambment is interesting for two reasons: first of all, it places another level of importance on the word “suffre.” Langland cuts off the verb from its main clause, leaving the verb dangling at the end of the line. Thus, “suffre” becomes both the end word of a line, giving it an extra prominence besides the significance it receives as a full stave for a secondary alliterative pattern.

The verb tense lends an additional level of significance. The imperative verb ends the line with a sense of urgency—it commands the reader’s attention as Dame Study’s directions literally command the Dreamer. The enjambment makes the reader disregard the rest of the main clause continued on the next line, and certainly, is X.160 not simply superfluous information? The verb tells the reader and Will to “Suffre”—that is, to experience—and life’s experiences naturally include both “wele and wo.” The separation of the imperative verb from the rest of an unnecessary qualifying statement destroys the unified syntax that the embedded imperative lines usually contain.

Also, with the embedded imperative lines, Langland generally employs multilayered translinear poetics, creating incredibly complicated syntaxes.³² However, with X.159-60, Langland not only enjambes the line in a very awkward place, but his translinear connections are feeble at best. The only connection lies with the “w” sound:



³¹ Some of the clauses run onto a second line, but X.159 is the only enjambed line.

³² See V.570-1.

The “w” sound, although, does not really factor into X.159: the stress on that word lies on the vowel sounds (“ey”), fitting the pattern of that a-verse. Besides the enjambed imperative clause, this “w” sound is the only thing that connects the two lines. The shaky translinear connection supports the notion that the second line is unnecessary: had the two lines been more unified, one would connect the enjambed imperative verb to the qualifying second line more readily.

Next, take note of Langland’s word choice. The verb he enjambs—“suffre”—has multiple meanings. The Middle English Dictionary lists this particular usage under this definition for “suffre”: “To undergo (pain, sickness, sorrow, hunger, thirst, etc.), experience (battle, shipwreck), suffer (poverty, misfortune, etc.).”³³ Obviously, the intended definition is “experience,” but one cannot ignore the fact that this word has an overall negative connotation. Also, the word stands out in the line. It does not fit into the primary vocalic alliteration; instead, it ends the line with a rougher sound than the light vocalic noises in the rest of the line. An imperative verb, placed at the end of a line, separated from its clause, orders the Dreamer and the reader to suffer—a powerful statement indeed.

So, why not end the sentence with “experience” instead? It conveys the same idea, but with no potential confusion. Also, it fits into the primary vocalic alliteration:

“‘Aske the heighe wey,’ quod she, ‘hennes to Experience’”³⁴

All things considered—the enjambment, the distinctly different sounds that distinguish “suffre” from the rest of the line, the notable word choice and the separation of the verb from its the main clause—Langland appears to emphasize human suffering. However, he appears to consider it a good thing: after all, Dame Study, a positive figure, instructs the Dreamer to “suffre.” Also,

³³ Middle English Dictionary (henceforth referred to as MED) s.v. 1(d)

³⁴ This hypothetical word substitution adds syllables to the b-verse, but it does not exceed Duggan’s “maximum of nine” syllables in the b-verse (573).

Langland qualifies this command in the next line, including something positive (“wele”) with the negative (“wo”). Langland seems to regard suffering as a learning tool, something that must occur in order to live a good Christian life: after all, Christ suffered on the cross in order to save humanity. Interestingly, in Passus XIX, Piers uses the cross—a symbol of Christ’s suffering—to construct Unity Holy Chirche.³⁵ Thus, Langland ironically connects his separation of the word “suffre” from the rest of the clause to the erection of a structure called Unity later in the poem.

Langland notably uses the word “suffre” in another embedded imperative line earlier in the poem. In Passus IV, Conscience refuses to marry Lady Mede unless Reason supports the marriage, so the King orders Conscience to fetch Reason. As Reason prepares to go with Conscience by saddling his horse, Langland presents the first case of these embedded imperatives:

1 1 1 | 1 1
 And also Tomme Trewe tonge tel me no tales

 1 1 | 1 2
 Ne lesynge to laughen of for I loved hem nevere

 1 1 | 1 5 4 3
 And set my sadel upon Suffre til I se my tyme (IV.18-20)

Langland first imperative clause (“tel me no tales”) comes after a name with rich alliterative properties (“Tomme Trewe-tonge”). The a-verse lumps all full staves together, whereas the b-verse splits them:

And also [Tomme Trewe tonge] | [tel] me no [tales]

³⁵ See XIX.324-31.

In fact, Langland places all the alliterating syllables in a row, even crossing over the caesura, except for the last one:

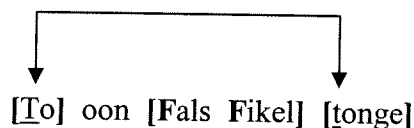
|
And also [Tomme Trewe tonge tel] me no [tales]

Why does he separate “tales” from this tightly bound pattern? “Tales” in this line means “lies” and perhaps Langland separates this word from the rest of the alliteration because Tomme Trewe tonge, implicit in his name, does not lie. Compare this line to the one describing Tomme Trewe tonge’s counterpart, Fals-Fikel-tonge in Passus II:

1 1 2 | 1 2
To oon Fals Fikel tonge, a fendes biyete (II.41)

Here, the alliteration is nowhere near as bound as in the previous line. First, let’s look at both of the a-verses:

[And also] [Tomme Trewe tonge]


[To] oon [Fals Fikel] [tonge]

In IV.18, Langland groups the alliteration separately, beginning with vocalic alliteration before moving to the primary “t” alliterative pattern. On the other hand, the a-verse has a chiasmic pattern in II.41. This a-verse, though it does contain an interesting poetic structure, is less cohesive than IV.18 because the alliteration is divided: the placement of “tonge” directly before the caesura ends the a-verse with a blank stave instead of a full stave as in IV.18. The word placement right around the caesura creates very different results in each of these lines:

II.41: blank stave – caesura – non-alliterating article

IV.18: full stave –caesura – full stave

The lack of alliteration around the caesura in II.41 separates the a-verse from the b-verse slightly more than the very cohesive alliteration around the caesura in IV.18. In line II.41, the chiasmus simultaneously unifies and separates the alliteration: though Langland places the “f” alliteration together, he completely separates the “t” alliteration. Also, while this a-verse works as a tightly knit unit since chiasmus creates a framework, the line as a whole seems less unified. On the other hand, in IV.18 the alliterating patterns form closely connected units that cross the caesura, so the line as a whole is more unified, but this a-verse is more divided.

Now, how do the b-verses match up?

[tel] me no [tales]

a fendes biyete

As previously mentioned, the b-verse for IV.18 separates “tales” from the rest of the alliteration because it does not thematically fit into the line. The b-verse of II.18 only contains one full stave to IV.18’s two full staves. The lack of another full stave is not a problem, but in comparison to IV.18, this line feels lackluster.³⁶ For example, each of the b-verses has four syllables—two stressed, two unstressed—but IV.18 is more balanced, perhaps because each word has only one syllable, or perhaps because the final word alliterates with the rest of the line, giving some closure to the line. This balance also unifies the line—the final full stave gives the line closure, whereas II.41 feels incomplete.

The first major embedded imperative statement in the entire poem occurs next:

³⁶ This one full stave is hardly a problem, as Duggan only requires that the first stressed syllable of the b-verse alliterate with the a-verse (570).

1 1 | 1 1 1
 And set my sadel upon Suffre til I se my tyme

This scansion is hardly fixed: like many of the embedded imperative lines, there are several places where one could place the caesura.³⁷ The conventional scansion would probably look like the one above; however, with that scansion, the stress on “se” would probably be subordinated in order to have only two stresses in the b-verse.³⁸ Also, the a-verse is truncated, rushed, and unbalanced. So, in the interest of preserving at least some “rules” of Middle English long-lined alliterative verse—and steadying the line—how should one scan the line? Perhaps the caesura falls after “suffre”:

1 1 1 | 5 1 3
 And set my sadel upon Suffre til I se my tyme

This scansion would certainly fit into the scansion norms, while keeping the stress on “se” intact. It balances out the line a little more: extended a-verses fit into long-lined alliterative poetry norms, while b-verses tend to be shorter. However, does this caesura placement make sense? It does not seem right to break up the imperative verb from the rest of its clause. In this case, the caesura placement ends the a-verse with the imperative verb “suffre” before the qualifying bulk of the main clause in the b-verse: in delaying the conclusion of the main clause until the b-verse, the pause creates suspense. Also, now the b-verse seems tacked on and rushed. Though the line discusses a horse named “Endurance” or “Patience,” no matter how one scans the line, the syntax

³⁷ See V.570, V.573, V.589, V.592, VI.79, VI.80—other embedded imperative lines that have ambiguous caesuras.

³⁸ Duggan states that “a-verse rhythms are far more flexible” than the b-verse (570).

ironically forces the reader to rush through reading the horse's name.³⁹ Though the line discusses a horse named "Endurance" or "Patience," no matter how one scans the line, the syntax ironically forces the reader to rush through reading the horse's name.

In this situation, the horse represents the body, while Reason synecdochically stands for the soul.⁴⁰ Langland characterizes the body as "Endurance" or "Patience," but he chooses neither of these words; instead, he names the horse—and thus the body—with an embedded imperative phrase ("Suffre til I se my tyme"). Why does Langland purposely give the horse and the body a more complicated name than its rider and the soul, who is definitely a more important allegorical character, not to mention that the soul is more important than the body? Langland uses poetic device to elevate the importance of the body in order to unite the body and the soul⁴¹; however, his hurried syntax in the clause "Suffre til I se my tyme" enforces the body's relative unimportance as compared to the soul. After all, the soul remains after the body dies—a person's physical life may pass quickly, but the soul lives on.

Langland uses the word "suffre" in an embedded imperative line for a third time when he presents Piers's family in Passus VI:

³⁹ Gerald Morgan states that "Reason's horse Suffre-til-I-se-my-tyme is not patience, but the caution that is also and integral part of prudence" (357). That reading makes the syntax of the line particularly ironic since the quick flow of the line lacks any sort of cautious undertones. "The Meaning of Kind Wit, Conscience, and Reason in the First Vision of 'Piers Plowman,'" *Modern Philology*, 81.4 (1984): 351-358. Henceforth referred to as "Meaning."

⁴⁰ See J.A. Burrows's article "Reason's Horse," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 4 (1990): 139-44. He writes that horses exist in an "iconographic tradition [that] would strongly support identification of an allegorical horse with the flesh" (141). Burrows goes on to say that Langland himself makes this connection with his Good Samaritan who rides "on [his] capul that heighe *Caro*" (XVII.108).

⁴¹ The word "*Caro*" contains multiple layers of meaning beyond just the body: "In the Bible the word *caro* is sometimes used by synecdoche for the physical and spiritual aspect of either an individual human or humankind at large... "In this context *caro* must mean more than "flesh" since the incarnation is not simply the joining of divine spirit to human flesh but the full and perfect joining of God and man. Jesus had a human soul as well as a human body. Therefore this context exegetes pointed out that the word *caro* is used by synecdoche for 'man with a soule'" (214-5). Thomas D. Hill, "The Problem of Synecdochic Flesh: *Piers Plowman* B.9.49-50," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 15 (2001): 213-217.

Lat God yworthe with al for so His word techeth (VI.78-82)⁴²

1 1 | 1 2
Deme hem noght for if thou doost thou shalt it deere abugge
2 1 4 | 1 2
Lat God yworthe with al for so His word techeth

Dame Werch whan tyme is Piers wif highte
This exception could be because in medieval times, a wife's social status was defined by her husband's. The reader already knows about Piers's goodness, so that reflects on his wife's character. See Elizabeth Fowler's article "Civil Death and the Maiden: Agency and the Conditions of Contract in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum*, 70.4 (Oct., 1995): 760-792 and M. Teresa Tavormina's book *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in Piers Plowman*, Cambridge: Brewer, 1995 for more about the idea of marriage in *Piers Plowman*. Henceforth known as "Civil Death" and *Kindly Similitude* respectively.

As in V.573, the daughter's name contains only one stressed syllable in the a-verse. Next, the son's name also has a singular stressed syllable in the a-verse, but more notably, it runs across three lines, making this clause the longest of the embedded imperatives in the poem.

These lines also contain multiple translinear poetic devices; thus, the lines work together in harmony, expanding the structure from each individual line to a unified section of lines. For example, an unstressed vocalic alliteration pattern runs through each of the lines:

Dame Werch whan tyme is Piers wif highte
His doughter highte Do right so or thi dame shal thee bete
His sone highte Suffre thi Sovereyns have hir wille
Deme hem noght for if thow doost thow shalt it deere abugge
Lat God yworthe with al for so His word techeth

The only stressed word with vocalic alliteration is "highte" at the end of line 78. This stressed end-word creates an enjambed, unstressed alliterative pattern in the next line. Another pattern of running alliteration occurs with the "d" alliteration, and this time all of the syllables have metrical stress:

Dame Werch whan tyme is Piers wif highte
His doughter highte Do right so or thi dame shal thee bete
His sone highte Suffre thi Sovereyns have hir wille
Deme hem noght for if thow doost thow shalt it deere abugge
Lat God yworthe with al for so His word techeth

Why give these particular allegorical figures complicated, embedded imperative names? Contrast the complicated, intricate syntax of Piers's family's names with the relatively simplistic structure shown when discussing sinners. Earlier in Passus VI, Piers continues to educate the people. He explains that he will provide food to everyone, except for those with professions looked down upon by the church:

1 1 | 1 2
 Save Jakke the Jogelour and Jonette of the Stuwes,

 1 1 | 1 2
 And Danyel the Dees pleyere and Denote the Baude,

 1 1 | 1 2
 And Frere the Faitour, and folk of his ordre

 1 1 | 1 2
 And Robyn the Ribaudour, for hise rusty wordes (VI.70-4)

Nothing is unusual about each of these lines individually. However, Langland presents four normative lines (11 | 12) in a row,⁴⁴ and that in itself is odd. The ten lines directly preceding these ones all have varying sound patterns—some contain extended a-verses, others have contrapuntal alliteration, but no patterns directly follow each other.⁴⁵ The lines that follow this section also contain more complicated poetic structures, leaving these simplistic lines stuck in

⁴⁴ The archetypal line in Middle English long-line verse takes this form. In *Clerkly*, Schmidt puts them in his "Standard" or "Type I" category, classifying them as "Normative" (32).

⁴⁵ Scansion of the lines 59-69:

59: 51551 | 5153 (enjambement/running secondary vocalic alliteration to 60)
 60: 11 | 12
 61: 14141 | 33
 62: 11 | 12
 63: 514 | 153
 64: 11 | 12
 65: 411 | 451443 (running vocalic alliteration to 66)
 66: 5151 | 153
 67: 411 | 12
 68: 142 | 422
 69: 11 | 1453

the middle. Langland likes to use normative lines with parallel structures to discuss ordinary people.⁴⁶ Why does he use unsophisticated structures in these lines?

Each of the people in the aforementioned lines sin continuously, not just occasionally as everyone else. It is easy to sin, just as it is easier to write the normal type of lines in alliterative long-lined verse.⁴⁷ Also, the relative lack of poetic unity in these lines, especially compared to depictions of figures like Piers's family, insinuates the transgressions of these figures. On the other hand, the intricate syntax of the embedded imperative lines is much harder to construct—especially since these lines defy most of the “rules” of Middle English alliterative long-line verse. As for Piers's family, since these figures represent ideals of how one should conduct themselves in various aspects of life, it only makes sense that the lines identifying them would contain complicated syntax and sound play.

As one can see, the poetic devices used in the embedded imperative clauses presented here really strike at the heart of the poem's layered depiction of difficult religious ideas. The unusual syntax of these lines forces off-center caesura placement, which in turn creates unity in certain lines while dividing others. Also, the repetition of the word “suffre” in three different embedded imperative clauses clues the reader into the idea of suffering as key to Langland's theological viewpoint. With these embedded imperative clauses, one can really see how the complex language of the poem conveys ideas about religion that cannot necessarily be explicitly stated in words.

⁴⁶ See V.308-17, V.320-3 and II.110-3 for other examples.

⁴⁷ In “*Piers Plowman* and Poetic Tradition,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 9 (1995): 39-56, Helen Barr writes, “In *Piers* the absence of alliterative decoration and courtliness is marked. Where any such embellishment appears, it stands out from its context. For instance, in the adoption of traditional alliterative poetic diction, together with the strict aa/ax pattern in the description of Meed's arrival at court, verbal elaboration is associated with corruption” (42).

As previously shown, embedded imperatives clauses in *Piers Plowman* add rich poetic texture to this already profound text. However, as dense as the poem is, Langland has some ideas that he cannot express through language itself. This inability to communicate the subtle nuances of theological discourse leads to these innovative poetic techniques. Odd syntactic structures, combined with multiple alliterative patterns, suggest what thematic meaning cannot properly express.

The Rise and Fall of Unity

Passus XIX and XX narrate the construction of Unity from the life and Passion of Christ, and the subsequent destruction of Unity by the Antichrist. The poem reaches a spiritual ideal with Unity's erection, only to have the Antichrist annihilate the newfound religious peace. As Conscience's summary of the life of Christ makes clear, this entire sequence follows God's providential order: however painful and discouraging the actions of the Antichrist, all who do well may still attain justice and eternal life. Verse structuring in these two sections appropriately wrestles with the process of attaining—and then, it seems, losing—redemptive peace, joy, and harmony. Words alone cannot convey this depressing loss and its implications; rather, one must look at the structure of the prosody in order to fully perceive all the text's nuances. Thus, observe how the verse subtly hints at sin and the rise of the Antichrist's forces in these two sections. Even in building Unity, the sound play foreshadows Unity's fall. The tension between unity and disunity—and between piety and sin—culminates in this end of *Piers Plowman*.

Passus XIX opens with the seventh vision. Piers appears as a Christ figure, bloody from the cross. Will and Conscience dialogue about Jesus's sacrifice for man, and soon the conversation turns to Jesus's birth, and the gifts brought to him:

1 1 | 1 2
Kynges come after knelede and offrede

7 3 1 4 2 | 7 1 752
Ensense mirre and mucche gold withouten mercy askynge (XIX.75-6)

The first line is much more straightforward than the second with its normative metrical pattern, single alliterative pattern and basic syntax—ostensibly cleaner than the second. Nouns (“ensense,” “mirre,” “gold” and “mercy”) congest the second line, while verbs (“come,”

“knelede” and “offrede”) move the first line along. The two lines connect through enjambed mute vocalic alliteration between “offrede” and “ensense.” The second line’s syntax stays simple, but it adds an additional stressed syllable to the a-verse; however, it notably contains three alliterative patterns, making the sound pattern significantly more complex.

None of the stressed syllables in the a-verse of XIX.76 alliterate. No alliterative pattern immediately receives preference;⁴⁸ rather, syllables from two different alliterative patterns (“ensense” and “mirre”) and the word “gold” receive stress, although the latter does not connect to anything else in the line. Also, the vocalic sounds are mute, even though they connect XIX.75 and XIX.76. He emphasizes the importance of the gold by stressing this syllable as well as pointing out how different it is from the incense and the myrrh by not linking the word to any other word through sound in this alliteratively intricate line.

Traditionally, myrrh represents humanity and mortification of flesh, incense signifies divinity and prayer, and gold corresponds to royalty and love.⁴⁹ These meanings correspond with the alliterative properties. The only two nouns that alliterate are “mirre” and “mercy,” and the link between humanity and mercy is clearly important. Also, two alliterative patterns (vocalic and “s”) connect “ensense” and “askynge”—is not prayer asking God for something? Lastly, “gold” does not connect to anything through sound, and the next lines further explain the implications of the offerings:

‘That o kyng cam with Reson, covered under sense

The seconde kyng siththe soothliche offrede

Rightwisnesse under reed gold, Resones felawe.

⁴⁸ Kane writes in “Music” that “the dominant pattern will always be the pattern of metrical accents corresponding to the semantic content of the line” (83).

⁴⁹ See Schmidt’s note on page 343 of *Translation*.

Gold is likned to Leautee that laste shal evere,

And Reson to riche[ls] – to right and to truthe

‘The thridde kyng tho kam, and knelede to Jesu,

And presented hym with Pitee, apperynge by mirre;

For mirre is mercy to mene, and mylde speche of tonge (XIX.86-93)

Of these lines, XIX.89 contains the most striking poetic features.

2 1 1 | 1 2
Gold is likned to Leautee that laste shal evere

The meaning of the words link gold to loyalty, but alliteration distinctly separates them; “gold” does not fit into the main “l” sound pattern. Though the line begins with a blank stave, a full stave lies in-between the blank stave and the full stave that are thematically connected, further weakening the nouns’ connection. Also, note the types of words that alliterate. A passive verb construction (“[is] likned”) separates two nouns (“gold” and “Leautee”). All of these words receive stress, but with both stress and alliteration, “likned” and “Leautee” become the principal components of the a-verse, rather than the two nouns. By placing both metrical stress and sound play on a passive verb rather than on the noun “gold,” Langland specifically slights the word. The alliteration cheekily contradicts what the line directly states, suggesting the divide between coveting earthly treasures and rejecting wealth in favor of spiritual rewards.

One would think that a line about lasting loyalty would contain more poetically unifying devices; however, blank staves frame this extended line. While the final blank stave fulfills long-line alliterative norms, the first blank stave complicates it. They subtly suggest that the

loyalty will not indeed last forever, again undermining the connection between material wealth and loyalty to God.

The poem goes on about the life of Christ, and Conscience finishes the story by introducing a messenger of Christ, Grace. Grace proceeds to give people different skills. The poetics of these lines foreshadow the subsequent destruction. First of all, the structure of lines about Grace's gifts is uncharacteristically simplistically, with anaphora, Biblical parataxis and clusters of normative lines. These lines mirror the depiction of sinners in Passus VI. One line, however, sticks out:

5 1 5 1 | 2 2
And some to devyne and divide [of] noumbres to kenne (XIX.241)

The nouns of the a-verse mirror each other. They contain the same amount of syllables, and each contains the same sounds and stresses the second syllable “v” sound while keeping the first “d” sound mute. However, no sound pattern connects the alliteration of the a-verse to the disjointed b-verse.⁵⁰ The word “divide” fittingly comes right before the caesural pause and before the division of the precise alliteration in the a-verse and the sloppier b-verse.

Why segregate the a-verse from the b-verse in X.241, the only occurrence of this phenomenon in these otherwise normative section? The line references computing numbers, a skill that someone who works with money would need. It subtly connotes that working with money breaks down the unity of one's self. The sin of greed divides the soul—one wants something on earth immediately while he or she eschews the divine rewards that will come later. With this line, unlike XIX.89, sound play, or lack thereof, accentuates thematic intentions.

⁵⁰ As previously mentioned, Duggan and Schmidt in *Clerkly* insist that alliteration must cross the caesura. On the other hand, in “Reexamination,” Matonis refutes the claim that “lines that lack alliteration in one of the half lines are defective and lines that contain more than 2 non-alliterating metrically syllables are impermissible,” rightly pointing out that a huge analysis of Middle English works would need to be undertaken to prove this point (348).

After Grace dispenses his gifts, he makes Piers his agent, and gives him a field to plow and oxen named after apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They plow the field, and then horses—Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory and Jerome—harrow the field. Compare the depictions of each group:

<p>That oon was Luk, a large beest and a lowe chered, And Mark, and Matthew the thridde, myghty beestes bothe; And joyned to hem oon Johan, moost gentil of alle, The pris neet of Piers plow, passynge alle othere</p>	}	Apostles
<p>And yit Grace of his goodnesse gaf Piers foure stottes—</p>		
<p>Al that hise oxen eriede, thei to harewen after. Oon highte Austyn, and Ambrose another, Gregori the grete clerk, and Jerom the goode. Thise foure, the feith to teche, folweth Piers teme, And harewede in an handwhile al Holy Scripture</p>	}	Important Clerics

The lines about the apostles are strikingly unremarkable.⁵¹ Secondary alliterative patterns in the b-verses of XIX.266 and XIX.268 add texture, but overall, the lines contain nothing particularly innovative, especially after one looks at the following lines about important early figures in the Christian church:

Al that hise oxen eriede thei to harewen after
Oon highte Austyn and Ambrose another

Gregori the grete clerk and Jerom the goode
 Thise foure the feith to teche folweth Piers teme

And harewede in an handwhile al Holy Scripture

⁵¹ Scansion for these lines:

XIX.265: 112 | 12
 XIX.266: 112 | 135
 XIX.267: 11 | 12
 XIX.268: 111 | 153

Dense vocalic alliteration in three of the five lines makes each of them intricately connected lines in and of themselves, but it also frames this whole passage, making it one cohesive unit. Also, the inner lines contain multiple embedded sound patterns. First, look at XIX.272:

Gregori the grete clerk and Jerom the goode

Not only does the main “g” alliterative pattern bridge the caesural break, but the embedded secondary “r” alliteration also crosses over from the a-verse to the b-verse. Langland connects the “r” sound found in both names to the “r” sound in “grete,” albeit mutely, to subtly correlate these men to greatness, something he furthers when he alliterates the main “g” sound in each of their names to “goode” at the end of the line. Next, two particular sounds reverberate in XIX.273:

Thise foure the feith to teche folweth Piers teme

Unlike the last line where the two sound patterns are within the words, here they switch off between two sound patterns before making one the dominant alliterative pattern. The sounds go as follows:

T **F** T **F** T T T **F** T T

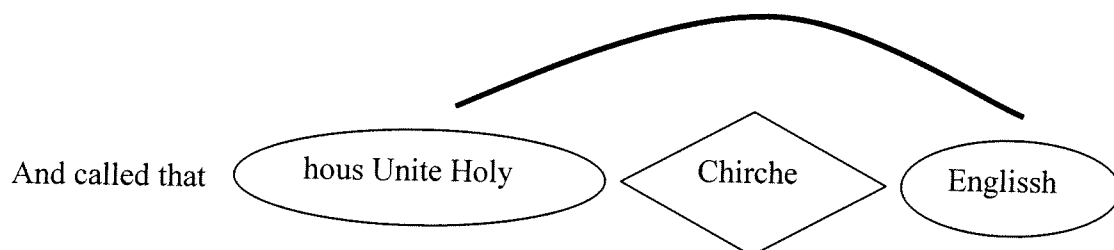
The multiple, interlaced sound patterns found in the lines about important early clerics directly contrast with the aforementioned normative lines about Jesus’s favorite apostles. Why?

Collectively called the Great Doctors of the Western Church, these men hold a very high distinction in the Church. Of anyone on earth, these men probably learned the most about the divine as humans can possibly know without direct contact with God. Jesus educated the apostles directly, so they have a clearer path to heavenly knowledge. Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory and Jerome, on the other hand, did not have the luxury of talking to Jesus himself; they educated themselves purely with accounts written by other men. Their task is much more arduous, and these lines acknowledge their considerable efforts by utilizing layered alliterative patterns.

Next, they plant the Cardinal Virtues and finally, we arrive at the culmination of the entire poem: the erection of Unity. Vocalic alliteration appears in the first line about Unity:

4 3 1 1 | 4 3 4 4 2
 And called that hous Unite Holy Chirche on Englissh (XIX.331)

Vocalic alliteration joins Unity and holiness. Yet, something does not quite fit. Right around the caesural break, three syllables with vocalic alliteration pull the two half-lines together. However, the “c” sound breaks the even vocalic alliteration, separating “Chirche” from “Unite,” “Holy,” and “Englissh” and breaking the overall flow of the line.



Through alliteration, the lines around Unity’s erection foreshadow its eventual fall. Though Unity’s creation fulfills Will’s desire for spiritual unity, Langland never intends for this peace to

last long. Thus, the sound play hints at what cannot explicitly be expressed—the eventual apocalyptic end of the poem.

Amplifying this disconcerting disconnection inherent in the Unity line, the two lines directly preceding this one about the construction of the church lack consistent syntactic or alliterative correlation in any way:

...Grace bigan to make a good foundement

1 1 | 4 3 3
And watlede it and walled it with hise peynes and his passion

4 4 1 2 | 4 2 2 4
And of al Holy Writ he made a roof after (XIX.328-30)

The second line makes learning a key part of the structure of the church. “Holy Writ”—a set of instructions⁵²—forms the roof, an integral part of the foundation. The alliteration is very weak in this line; the main vocalic pattern only gets one stressed syllable. The rest of the stressed syllables do not alliterate at all. It makes one question the stability of Unity. In the previous line, nothing connects the a-verse to the b-verse, save for a weak mute stave just after the caesural pause:⁵³ the two half-lines have completely separate sound patterns, which is odd because Grace constructs Unity in this line. The disconnected alliteration suggests an inherent defect in Unity; since the sounds of the words are not unified in the construction, how can the structure itself be completely sound? These lines employ alliteration to develop ideas of Christian spirituality. Those on earth cannot be completely unified: only in heaven can three be one in the Holy Trinity. That same plurality in a singular being cannot be replicated on earth, neither within the human soul nor in a human construction, such as a church.

⁵² MED 1(a)

⁵³ See Schmidt’s notes on T-Type lines in *Clerkly* (39).

Passus XIX ends with Will waking up, and Passus XX begins with Will falling into the final, ultimately apocalyptic vision. Running “w” alliteration connects Passus XIX to Passus XX, poetically joining the final two visions.⁵⁴ Alliteration unites the final two visions, but other poetic devices in Passus XX of *Piers Plowman* are notably incongruous. Langland intersperses lines unified through alliteration or syntax with lines that these same poetic devices pull apart. The tension between these stylistic choices mirrors the thematic war between the Antechrist’s forces and Conscience over Unity. As the lines go on, the poetic disunity grows, foreshadowing the fall of Unity.

This passus begins when Will awakes from his previous vision, and he feels

4 2 4 2 | 4 1 4 4 2
 Hevy chered I yede and elenge in herte (XX.2)

The tension of this line sets the tone for the rest of this section. The line contains many vocalic sounds, but only one receives metrical stress.⁵⁵ Instead, various embedded consonants receive the stress—the metrical prominence goes to the somewhat harder consonants, whereas the alliterative emphasis lies in the softer, lulling vowels. Friction lies between the underlying vocalic alliteration and the metrically stressed, yet unconnected, syllables. In this line, Will is desolate, so the gentler vocalic sounds run together soothingly, but the fact that Langland purposely stresses the harsher consonants is apropos to the thematic contents of the line—and to the following passus. The compromised cohesion in the line prefigures the fall of Unity, but the undercurrent of vocalic alliteration provides hope.

⁵⁴ Translinear poetics connect the following sections: there is enjambed alliteration between Passus VI and VII (within the same vision), running alliteration between XIV and XV (linking the fourth vision to the fifth) and running alliteration between XVII and XVIII (tying the fifth vision to the sixth).

⁵⁵ Kane postulates in “Music” that “what distinguishes Langland’s use of the line is his evident perception that alliteration can have a substantive phonetic existence independent of the metrical accents of the line” (79).

Soon, the Antichrist enters and plans his attack on Unity:

Antecrist hadde thus soone hundreds at his **baner**,
And **Pride** it **bar** **boldely** **about**e,
With a lord that lyveth after liking of **body** (XX.69-71)

XX.70 is terse and straightforward with four stressed “b” sounds⁵⁶ in a row and only one unstressed syllable as a buffer between full staves. Enjambed alliteration connects these two lines. Nothing comes between the alliteration because XX.70 lacks a full caesural pause. The most logical place for a caesura is between “bar” and “boldely,” but that pause is forced and awkward.

And Pride it **bar** | **boldely** **about**e

The fact that the last three words are all full staves makes one not want to split up the stressed sounds that are obviously bound together. Thus, the momentum of the line simply builds until the line—and the alliterative pattern—stops abruptly. Then, in the next line, Langland cuts off the “b” alliteration in favor of lulling “l” sounds. However, he cannot abandon the forceful “b” alliteration; XX.71 ends with the word “body.” The forceful repetition of stressed “b” sounds, one after another, pushes the Antichrist’s forces forward and shows that they cannot be stopped.

With the Antichrist’s advance, Conscience herds people into Unity, and he calls upon Kynde for help. Kynde responds by sending harbingers of death:

Kynde Conscience tho herde, and cam out of the planetes,

And sente forth his forreyours—feveres and fluxes,

⁵⁶ “P” is a voiceless consonant and “B” is its voiced equivalent. In Middle English, the distinction between the two sounds blurs.

Coughes and cardiacles, crampes and toothaches,
 Rewmes and radegundes and roynouse scalles,
 Biles and bocches and brennyng agues,
 Frenesies and foule yveles—foragers of Kynde
 Hadde ypriked and prayed polles of peple;
 Largeliche a legion lees hir lif soone (XX.80-7)⁵⁷

The alliterative and metrical patterns of these lines are alarmingly normal. These normative lines run past the reader smoothly, making Kynde's impending massacre uneasily simple. Though Conscience convinces Kynde to stop, Greed still tempts those still living, and note the poetic structure of those lines:

Thanne cam Coveitise and caste how he myghte
 Overcome Conscience and Cardinale Vertues (XX.121-2)

Again, possible destruction comes in metrically, alliteratively and syntactically uncomplicated lines. As one has previously seen, plain normative lines discuss sinners, while complex syntactic structures deal with layered concepts of Christian ideals. Earlier, normative lines suggested that sinning is easier than leading a virtuous life, but here, the normative lines indicate that the

⁵⁷ Scansion for these lines:

80:	112 12
81:	11 11
82:	11 12
83:	11 12
84:	11 12
85:	11 12
86:	11 11
87:	111 12

destruction of key components in religion—such as the Cardinale Vertues—can happen very easily as well.

In the following section, lines about one of the seven deadly sins employ translinear poetics:

Thanne cam Coveitise and caste how he myghte
Overcome Conscience and Cardinale Vertues,
And armed hym in avarice and hungriliche lyvede.
His wepne was al wiles, to wynnen and to hiden;
With glosynges and gabbynges he giled the peple.
Symonye hym suede to assaille Conscience,
And preched to the peple, and prelates thei maden
To holden with Antecrist, hir temporaltees to save;
And cam to the kynges counseille as a kene baroun,
And kneled to Conscience in Court afore hem alle,
And garte Good Feith flee and Fals to abide,
And boldeliche bar adoun with many a bright noble
Muche of the wit and wisdom of Westmynstre Halle (XX.121-133)

The bolded lines in particular illustrate the more complex poetic forms utilized. The line about Greed's arsenal contains dense vocalic alliteration; like many other such lines, all of the words in this line, save for the final blank stave, alliterate. Also, the repetition of "and" at the beginning of each line from XX.129-132 builds the actions of Greed, without allowing the reader to pause.

Anaphora lends a sense of structure to the lines as well, and this overall framing structure conveys the fast-paced action of the struggle.

Why bind Greed's decidedly negative attributes so tightly together with sound? Greed greatly aids the Antichrist's attack, and tight-knit vocalic alliteration enforces Greed's thematic strength. Conscience confirms Greed's strength, by lamenting that Greed is not on his side: "Allas quod Conscience and cryde tho wolde Crist of his grace / That Coveitise were Cristene that is so kene to fight" (XX.140-1). Also, the very structured vocalic alliteration suggests that the new unifying power of the world will not be the Church (Unity, which eventually falls), but rather avarice—a decidedly evil and divisive power that can never actually unify the world. Thus, if the Antichrist wins, the apocalypse is eminent.

The next few lines fit a normative pattern, but then vocalic alliteration reemerges in XX.128, although the sound play is not nearly as extreme as in XX.123. In fact, it oddly lacks clear cohesion between the a-verse and the b-verse:

1	1		4	2	2
To	holden	with	Antecrist	hir	temporaltees to save

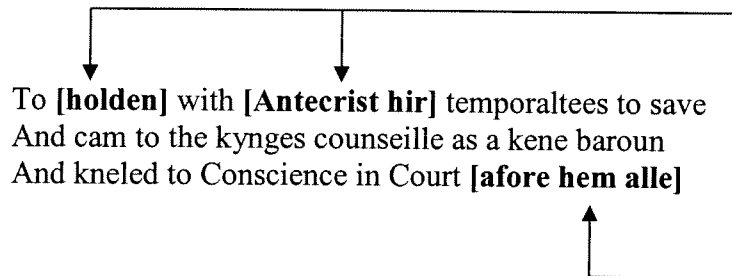
Save for the mute stave ("hir") that begins the b-verse,⁵⁸ the vocalic alliteration only occurs in the a-verse. Also, unlike most of the vocalic alliteration lines, Langland places no ornate alliteration on multiple unstressed syllables throughout the line. The lack of unity in this line furthers the point that if the Antichrist wins, he will ultimately divide the world.

After this divisive line, two lines connect through running "c" alliteration:

And cam to the kynges counseille as a kene baroun
And kneled to Conscience in Court afore hem alle (XX.129-30)

⁵⁸ Another example of what Schmidt calls a T-Type line in *Clerkly*.

The metrics of these lines are very straightforward, but especially after the disconnected XX.128, these lines nicely fit together. Then, the last three words in XX.130 hark back to the previous vocalic alliteration:



By connecting these lines, the less cohesive XX.128 becomes part of a larger framework as the vocalic alliteration surrounds the running “c” alliteration.

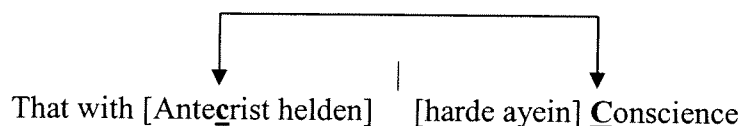
Another line about the Antichrist that contains vocalic alliteration is XX.216:

That with Antecrist helden harde ayein Conscience

Observe the tightly packed vocalic alliteration that pushes on the medial caesura from either side.

That with **[Antecrist helden]** | **[harde ayein]** Conscience

Also, note the stress on the “c” sound in “Antecrist” and in “Conscience.”



XX.216 is almost too cohesive; the close connections between the a-verse and the b-verse weaken the caesura considerably. This new cohesion in a line about the Antichrist furthers the idea that as the unity of the Church dissolves, the Antichrist gains power.

Next, a brilliant shift in alliteration matches a sad thematic shift:

And garte Good Feith flee and Fals to abide (XX.131)

Note the shift from “g” alliteration to “f” alliteration in the a-verse and how that change carries over into the b-verse. Interestingly, the sound transfer occurs in the middle of an allegorical figure’s name, “Good Feith.” By separating “good” from “feith” through sound, and by alliterating “feith” with “fals,” the power shifts from proper Christian values (having faith in God) to the Antichrist’s values (falsehood). The caesural pause between “Feith flee” and “Fals” marks the break; it separates the reign of Good Feith with that of Fals.

The war wages on, and Conscience sends Age to battle Despair, and he eventually attacks Life. Will reprimands Age for his poor manners, and Age assaults Will. Will calls out for Kynde to help him. Kynde tells him to go into Unity and to master a skill; unfortunately, Will is not sure which skill to master, so he says:

‘Counseilleth me, Kynde,’ quod I, ‘what craft be best to lerne?’
‘Lerne to love,’ quod Kynde, ‘and leef alle othere’ (XX.207-8)

These lines present the culmination of Will’s instruction. Unlike the intense syntactic structures presented in other instructional sections like Piers’s path to Truthe in Passus V, the poetic structure of this line is comparatively simplistic. Granted, enjambed “l” alliteration connects the two lines, and both lines contain embedded mute alliteration (“be best” in XX.207 and “alle othere” in XX.208); however, the syntax of the lines is very basic. While most of the layered,

convoluted ideas of faith that Will learned thus far were presented poetically complicated, the pinnacle of the Christian faith lies in love of God—a very simple concept. Accordingly, this key epiphany employs an undemanding syntactic arrangement.

Unfortunately, the war escalates, and corrupt priests almost bring down Unity:

4 1 1 | 2 4 4 4 1
And brode hoked arwes Goddes herte and hise nayles

4 4 2 4 1 | 4 1 1
And hadden almost Unitee and holynesse adown (XX.226-7)

Dense vocalic alliteration runs across both lines. Full of mute staves that add to the alliterative pattern, almost every word alliterates; indeed, in the second line, every word *does* alliterate. In the first line, the only full stave that does not correspond with the main alliterative pattern is “Goddes,” one case of religion trumping poetic device.⁵⁹ In light of the fact that two lines about the near fall of Unity utilize thick alliteration, the blank stave that does not fit the alliterative pattern (“Goddes”) works: the Antichrist almost succeeds by taking Unity, and God is conspicuously absent.

Another alliteratively insulated line lies below:

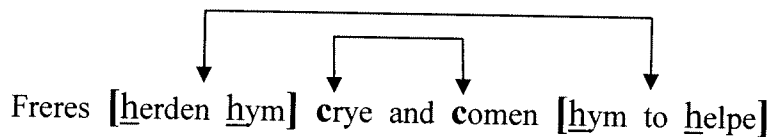
5 2 5 1 | 5 1 5 3
Freres herden hym crye and comen hym to helpe (XX.230)

⁵⁹ Many instances occur in the poem where Langland places stress on “God” rather than the primary alliterative pattern of the line. Take for example this line from Passus IX:

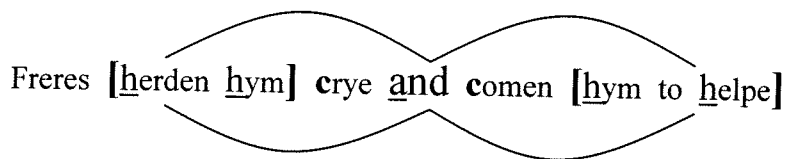
1 1 | 2 4 2
Allas! That drynke shal fordo that God deere boughte

The stress on the b-verse falls on “God” rather than on “deere,” the word that fits into the primary alliterative pattern. Langland seems to poke fun at his own craft: God is above man’s poetic ingenuity; thus, the word “God” receives stress over the alliterating word. Likewise, in IX.7, Langland appears to use this tension to give Anima an extra prominence. Also see VI.225, IX.204, X.45, X.383, X.475, XI.253, XI.407, XIV.325, XV.93, XVI.217, XVIII.75, XVIII.132 and XIX.434.

Langland employs a chiastic structure with this line where the secondary, and mostly mute, vocalic alliterative pattern creates a barrier around the primary “c” alliterative pattern. This structure unifies the line as a whole, but it also causes problems with the caesura.



The caesura falls directly in the middle of the chiasmus, which creates a nice symmetrical balance. The words in the line all fold into the middle word (“and”), and the entire line literally hinges on it. Interestingly, that hinge word alliterates with the vocalic alliteration on the outside of the chiastic pattern.



The overall effect muffles the “c” alliteration at the center of this line, an apt choice, since the cries for help ultimately fail as Unity eventually falls. Also, Unity’s destruction comes at the hands of a friar, so the “freres” in this line foreshadow the gloomy end of the poem.⁶⁰

A few lines down, Need advances:

⁶⁰ “...to Langland the friars were intimately the deceivers of men and women, recipients of alms freely given to sustain work thought heavenly.” F.R.H. Du Boulay, *The England of Piers Plowman: William Langland and His Vision of the Fourteenth Century*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1991, 80. Also, Justine Rydzeski, in *Radical Nostalgia in the Age of Piers Plowman: Economics, Apocalypticism, and Discontent*, New York: Lang, 1999, writes, “The penetration of Unity Holy Church by the Antichrist friars at the end of *Piers Plowman* is ironic, for the type of brotherhood ideally shared by clerics such as friars, assuming they are not corrupt, is the sort of fellowship on which Christian society is based” (76).

1 1 1 | 2 2
 Nede neghede tho neer and Conscience he tolde (XX.232)

As a self-contained unit, the a-verse is tightly bound by sound. It contains three full staves with further embedded sound connections: the first two words contain “d” sounds and all of the full staves use the same vowel sounds.

Nede neghede tho neer

However, in the context of the rest of the line, nothing connects the a-verse to the b-verse; no sound patterns bridge the caesural pause. Why set up the b-verse as such? Take a look at the next line:

5 5 1 1 | 1 2
 That thei come for coveitise to have cure of soules

Langland begins the primary “c” alliterative pattern of XX.233 with the first stressed word in the b-verse of XX.232. In addition to this enjambment of the stressed syllables, Langland ends XX.232 with a “t” sound that carries over—albeit, in mute staves—to XX.233.

Why situate the line as such? The clump of “n” alliteration discusses Need and his approach, and by isolating the “n” sounds in the a-verse of XX.232, Langland separates Need and Conscience. Though, in the next line, Langland’s running alliteration associates Conscience with the words that explain Need’s actions (“Conscience,” “come” and “coveitise”). The simultaneous separating of Conscience from Need through word placement in the line and uniting of Conscience and Need’s actions through alliteration blurs the lines between positive

figures (Conscience) and negative ones (Need). It calls into question Conscience's role as Truth's proxy,⁶¹ and it prefigures Conscience's role in the fall of Unity.⁶²

As the attacks get worse, Conscience makes Peace the gatekeeper of Unity, and he holes himself up in the church:

In Unitee Holy Chirche Conscience held hym (XX.298)

Beautifully matching form to meaning, a chiastic structure literally places Conscience within Unity.



Vocalic alliteration frames the “c” sounds of “Chirche” and “Conscience.” The unity the chiasmus in this line creates makes Unity feel like a solid structure. Consequently, although the Antichrist's forces keep advancing, lines like XX.298 to give hope that the Christian Church could again unify against the evil.

At the very end of the poem, the Antichrist's forces take control, and as Unity falls, Conscience cries out for Piers the Plowman and for Grace all before Will wakes up. Strangely, Langland ends his maverick masterpiece with incredibly plain lines:

‘By Crist!’ quod Conscience tho, ‘I wole bicomme a pilgrym,

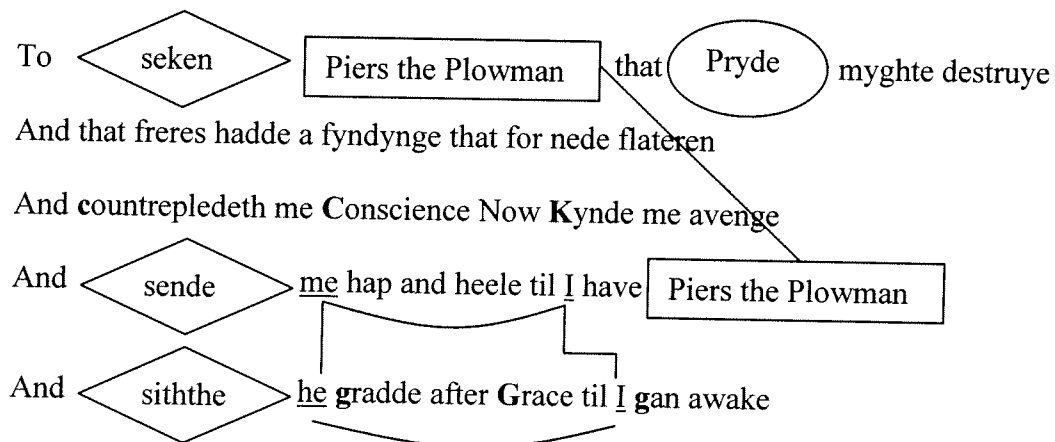
⁶¹ In *Kindly Similitude*, M. Teresa Tavormina writes that “...figuratively, such a proxy relationship could be read as indicating that Conscience is the representative of Truth within each soul, and the very means by which the soul knows Truth” (35).

⁶² Morgan writes in “Meaning” “that Conscience admits of failure is evident from the end of the poem itself, for Conscience makes the mistake of letting the friars into Holy Church” (354).

And walken as wide as the world lasteth,
 To seken Piers the Plowman, that Pryde myghte destruye,
 And that freres hadde a fyndyng, that for nede flateren
 And countreplede me, Conscience. Now Kynde me avenge,
And sende me hap and heele, til I have Piers the Plowman!
 And siththe he gradde after Grace, til I gan awake (XX.381-7)⁶³

The alarming normalcy of these lines makes the Antichrist's conquering of Unity a bit too easy. No struggle occurs; no knotty syntax clogs the lines. Rather, the apocalypse comes with calm poetic ease—a scary vision indeed. The only line that has any poetic complexity is XX.386, which contains two alliterative patterns (vocalic and “p”). Aptly, it is a line of hope—Conscience wants luck and health until he can find Piers—a model spiritual leader—again.

Though all of these lines in and of themselves are very plain, the overall structure of the last five lines showcases Langland's skill.



⁶³ Scansion:

381: 11 | 12
 382: 11 | 12
 383: 11 | 12
 384: 11 | 21
 385: 11 | 12
 386: 211 | 4433
 387: 11 | 12

First of all, along with the anaphora, “s” sounds begin three out of four lines, adding sound repetition to this rhythmic structure. Next, there is an uncompleted chiasmus of sorts with “Piers the Plowman” and “Pryde.” “Piers the Plowman” repeats, but Pride does not; in fact, no other “p” sound connects to Pride. This exclusion of one of the seven deadly sins adds a more hopeful undertone to the end of the poem. Lastly, Langland connects different allegorical figures through sound and through pronoun placement. In switching from Conscience as the first person pronoun in XX.386 to Will in XX.387, the distinction between the two figures blurs. Also, as discussed previously, sometimes voiced consonants and their unvoiced counterparts alliterate in Middle English, and it appears that Langland alliterates the voiced “g” sound with the unvoiced “k” sound. Thus, he links “Conscience” (and Will, with his pronoun connection to Conscience) and “Kynde” to “Grace.” Since Grace is the last allegorical figure mentioned, the poem ends on a much more optimistic note than originally presumed—God can absolve human sin and the pious can still reach heaven.

Conclusion

Though it is tempting to remain lost in the deep allegorical textures of *Piers Plowman* or in the metrical intricacies of the poem, one must take a step back and look at how they work together to form intersections of layered theological ponderings. By marrying dense allegory to a dynamic prosodic form, the poem dives into recondite layers of spiritual significance. Delving deeply into how original syntactic structures work with the meaning of words peels back another layer of the moral ideology of the poem. For example, look at how uniting form and meaning changes one's reading of the following line:

Of alle manere of men the meene and the riche
To marien this mayde was many man assembled
As of knyghtes and of clerkes and oother commune peple (II.56-8)

If one simply read this line, “alle manere of men” are united. However, the alliterative patterns tell a different story. In the first line, the final stressed syllable is a blank stave, as most final stressed syllables are in Middle English alliterative long-line verse. Why is noteworthy in this line? Well, if Langland discusses “alle manere of men,” should not the rich be included as well as the poor (“meene”)? Through sound play, Langland seems to exclude the rich from the rest of men. He continues this idea in II.58: though he alliterates “commune” with “knyghtes” and “clerkes,” the noun that “commune” modifies does not fit into the alliterative pattern (“peple”). After segregating the rich from the rest of mankind, Langland now points out the difference between the average person and the other classes. Overall, he implies that the rich, and the people in power, such as the nobility and the clergy, cannot be lumped together with the regular folk. Without examining the alliteration in these lines, one would never have noted the subtle, but important, point of the lines.

The embedded imperative clauses epitomize form and content working in tandem to create layers of meaning. They often include ambiguous caesura placement, odd syntactic arrangements and multiple alliterative patterns. Some others—notably, the use of the word “suffre” in three different embedded imperative clauses—incorporate word play as well. Langland alters typical Middle English long-line alliterative verse in this fashion to get his metaphysical points across in a way that his words alone cannot achieve. The crux of his argument—and of his prosodic innovations—lies in the embedded imperative clauses.

Poetic disunity representing sin exists primarily in Passus XIX and XX. Found especially in bizarre alliterative patterns or in stressed syllables that notably do not fit into the main alliterative pattern of the line, the poetic devices of these lines cleverly suggest what is not explicitly stated. Perhaps most importantly, Langland employs sound play and syntax to foreshadow the fall of Unity, even hinting in its construction that it will not stand long. Then, after this disaster, he structures his final lines to inject some optimism into the nihilistic end of *Piers Plowman*.

The unity of form and theme is an important aspect of *Piers Plowman*, and obviously this thesis only hits the tip of the iceberg. Additional critical analyses of the Tree of Charity, the interplay of Latin and English, the three states of consciousness, and many other complex aspects of the poem support the close-readings of Langland’s lines in this thesis. The thematic tension between unity and disunity, sin and grace, resonates in the poetry, and while the broad, thematic arches of the poem stand out, the prosodic structure of the long-line alliterative verse medium adds myriads of additional meanings, enhancing the intense spiritual discourse in words or phrases. When Langland alters the norms of this medium, he succeeds in adding even more layers to the formula.

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