

LIVING ON THE EDGE

A Study on Cultural Memory in Narratives
from Medieval English Literature Before and After the Black Death



MA Thesis

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Preface

Between the months of January and July in 2009, I was more than occasionally occupied with the subject of the Black Death. Morbid as it may sound, I have found the process of researching pieces of literature that were produced before and after the outbreak of such a calamity quite intriguing and at some times even amusing. However, if it had not been for the presence of a certain group of people who were willing to listen to my rantings, read the drafts in between, and offer their advice, the whole operation would have been much less enjoyable. Therefore, I would first of all like to thank my parents for making it possible for me to study at all. Without their help, I would have probably not been able to continue my education to such a degree, and the beauty of (Middle English) literature would have remained oblivious to me. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge my thesis supervisor Dr. Frank Brandsma for his guidance, suggestions and patience. I imagine that there are few thesis supervisors who would agree with a student travelling abroad for two months in the midst of their thesis research and who are willing to continue the supervision through means of electronic mail. Dr. Erik Kooper and Dr. Thea Summerfield should not go unmentioned as well, for if it had not been for their contagious enthusiasm during the lectures at which I was present as a first year bachelor student, I probably would not have been so intrigued by Middle English in the first place. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Merel van de Beek, Leonie Abels and David Vink. Merel for her valuable advice and opinion on my research, Leonie for her excellent knowledge of English and willingness to share this with me, and David for his reassuring trust that I could actually produce a study that was worthwhile. The result of all this various input, lies before the reader. May it be a pleasant read.

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Front page image: detail from *Triumph of Death*, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in c. 1562. Current location: Museo Del Prado, Madrid. Image from: <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/B/bruegel/death.jpg.html>

This day, much against my will, I did in Drury lane see two or three houses marked with a red cross upon the doors, and "Lord have mercy upon us" writ there; which was a sad sight to me, being the first of that kind that, to my remembrance, I ever saw.

Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, 7 June 1665

And I will smite the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast: they shall die of a great pestilence.

Jeremiah 21:6, King James Bible

Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind.

The Earl of Gloucester, *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene I

I. Introduction

Leafing through James Thompson's *Economic and Social History of Europe in the Later Middle Ages (1300-1500)*¹ in search of interesting information on the economic development and its subsequent influence on literature in the later Middle Ages, which was one of my first thoughts for my Master thesis, I encountered the chapter on the "Black Death" that bore the interesting remark that literature after the outbreak of the plague exhibited a heavy decline in quality. Thompson states that people had lost their manners and that even the language demonstrated a steady deterioration. However, it is the following sentence that left a mark, "Every student of the literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has observed this". (Thompson, 384) Since my main interest lies in the Middle English literature of the aforementioned period, I felt intrigued and slightly reprimanded at the same time. I had not yet noticed, nor had I ever been told, that the plague had impacted literature to such an extent that this had to be noticeable to anyone who had devoted any research and study to it for some time.

This brought back to memory an article that I had recently read in a Dutch newspaper, which described the very interesting phenomenon of the parallel between the dynamics of economy and films that are developed.² According to this article, during times of economic depression, production companies start to (over)generate feel-good, romantic comedies or straightforward action films where good prevails over evil, which are then more in favour and in demand with the public. When the financial tide seems to turn around to a strong and steady surge, people tend to appreciate more thought-provoking art house films. Essentially, in times of woe and despair, people want to see a film and be entertained on an easygoing level, whereas when people find themselves in a prospering situation, they are able to cope with somewhat more serious and

¹ Published in 1959

² Newspaper article "Filmmakers voelen actualiteit aan" by Joost van der Vaart, published on 5 February 2009 in *NRC Handelsblad*

critical affairs. This is how I eventually ended up with James Thompson's study. I was curious whether this development could be seen in medieval literature as well. The Black Death is a topic that combines all elements that kindled my interest. It influenced not only the economy, but also the arts, religion, language; essentially all components of culture were affected.

Thompson is right in saying that one of the biggest disasters that took place in history is the outbreak of the plague in Europe during the fourteenth century.³ Within a few years' time, at least one-third of the population was wiped out and some estimates would go even as far as stating that the Black Death, the name by which this pestilence was eventually referred to, took as many as half of Europe's inhabitants with it. It seems to me, or to anyone who has been fortunate enough to be born and raised in a prosperous and relatively safe time and place, that it is almost impossible to imagine the impact of such an occurrence, let alone the consequences of such a cataclysm. Imagine a situation in which society as you knew it no longer exists; all established rules (both written and unwritten) were defied in the face of the plague, and people deserted each other as quickly as they could, as soon as symptoms of the plague revealed itself on one person or the other.

In essence, one could argue that in such circumstances, the world seemed to have gone topsy-turvy. One of the interesting questions that springs from all this chaos is in what way did the outbreak affect the mentality of fourteenth-century society and, if affected, how does this show? A general and wide-held opinion is that societies are able to ventilate and overcome their feelings of unrest, oppression, pain or other forms of anxiety through creative outlets. These give people the possibility to voice their feelings (even collectively) in an imaginative way, thereby stimulating their own innovativeness and also offering themselves a way out of their distress, by turning something horrific into a work of art, which might be recognised by many. In other words, traumas might also foster potential for innovation and renewal. In his article on *The York Cycle*,

³ For this research, I am using the term Europe to cover the countries that are part of the EU as we know it nowadays in 2009.

Richard Beadle explains that “survival from plagues and other disasters has traditionally moved communities to great acts of collective expression, often artistic expression”. (Beadle, 86) Beadle goes on to demonstrate that the medieval English theatre that was developed through the York Cycle is a fine illustration of this phenomenon. If this assumption is true, this might imply that more proof of people dealing with the aftermath of the plague in an imaginative way exists.

In this study, my intention is to focus on literature produced in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England and to see if, and how the impact and effects of the pestilence are reflected in literary works from that period. By analysing and comparing works from before and after the Black Death, I hope to find a distinctive break and shift in mentalities, mirrored perhaps by a sudden change of popular themes or forms in literary works.

Moreover, it is interesting to try and discover how (and if) medieval English literature functioned as cultural memory for those who survived the plague, and whether this is traceable in the works that will be considered in this study. The selection of literature is based on its estimated date and genre.⁴ Since it is obvious that a homily would contain different information than the average love poem, the principle comparison will be made between several debate poems and dream visions, namely *The Owl & the Nightingale* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowles*, *The Land of Cokaygne*, *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman*, as well as two Middle English poems: *Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount* and *A Disputacioun betwix þe Body and Wormes*. Translations of the fragments discussed are provided if there was a proper translation available and in instances where reviewers and I deemed it necessary to supply the reader with some extra help. Whenever it concerns larger sections of text, the translation (if available) follows the example given. If only several lines are quoted, the translation is given in a footnote.

There were two reasons for choosing these works. Firstly, the debate poem is a much-loved and popular form of literature and poetry throughout the entire Middle Ages (as the amount of

⁴ Since these are medieval writings and anyone dealing with these materials will be familiar with the difficulties in locating the exact date of a written work.

literature produced within this genre shows) and secondly, it would be interesting, and not to mention necessary, to analyse texts within the same few genres, in order to bring some structure to the body of works that will be treated. I have chosen to focus on dream visions, since this was a favoured device used by medieval authors as a framework in which they could mould their tale and the everlasting approved and celebrated debate poem. Additionally, it might come to the reader's attention that the amount of secondary sources used is quite limited. The argument underlying this choice is also twofold. Firstly, my research concentrates on the comparison between seven primary works. Considering the amount of primary literature chosen, the comparison and discussion of these works are enough to devote an entire study to. By the same token, investigating a whole array of secondary sources with regard to all these literary compositions would be another study in itself, especially when considering the fact that studies on *Piers Plowman* alone can fill an entire library.

Bearing in mind the hypothesis that communities are prone to express themselves creatively after major disruptions, combined with the fact that the arrival and outcome of the plague is almost incomparable to any other form of disaster in Europe, it would be intriguing to compare the conclusions of the analyses of the medieval to works created during-, and as a reaction to the horrors of more recent years, such as both world wars or the famine in Ireland in a study of its own. Time has prevented me from doing exactly this in this same paper, but it would nevertheless be very interesting to examine several works from different time periods in contrast to each other.

First of all, an introduction to the Black Death and specifically the damage it did in England during its outbreak in 1348 will be given. The second chapter will discuss one of the most famous instances in which the plague is introduced to the public in literary form, namely Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I have chosen to focus on this particular piece of work to introduce the reader to an example of a literary account of the (in)direct consequences of the plague,

documented by a contemporary. In the following chapter there will be a short summary of all the poems so that the reader will be acquainted with the contents and background of the works. After having established what the literary compositions convey, the analyses of these works will be examined in contrast in chapter four. Ultimately, the findings of this study will be summarised in the conclusion and viewed in the context of the main question as posed in this introduction.

II. The Black Death in England

In this year 1348, in Melcombe, in the county of Dorset, a little before the Feast of St John the Baptist, two ships, one of them from Bristol, came alongside. One of the sailors had brought with him from Gascony the seeds of the terrible pestilence and, through him, the men of that town of Melcombe were the first of England to be infected. (“A 14th century chronicle from the Grey Friars at Lynn”, from Philip Ziegler's *The Black Death*)

According to this chronicle, the Black Death first hit England in the West Country, before spreading with a swift and steady pace throughout the rest of the country and what remained of Europe. If we believe the scribe who recorded this event, the plague set foot on land just before the 24 June in 1348, whereas other sources claim later dates, ranging from St Peter's Day (29 June) or the feast of St James (25 July). (Ziegler, 123) Be that as it may, what we do know is that during 1346, travellers from the East had already reported strange and grim events taking place, whole cities and regions from China to Armenia were said to be wiped out by an uncommon disease. A chronicler from Este wrote the following:

Between Cathay and Persia there rained a vast rain of fire; falling in flakes like snow and burning up mountains and plains and other lands, with men and women; and then arose vast masses of smoke, and whosoever beheld this died within the space of half a day; and likewise any man or woman who looked upon those had seen this. (Ziegler, 14)

There are several theories on how the plague reached Europe from Asia, be that by caravans and trade routes that led from Asia to the location of Crimea, or by vessels carrying spices and silk

from the Orient landing in Italian ports. According to the Sicilian chronicler Michele da Piazza who is quoted by John Aberth in his study *The Black Death: the Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, it was in Italy where the plague first landed in Europe:

It so happened that in the month of October in the year of our Lord 1347, around the first of that month, twelve Genoese galleys, fleeing our Lord's wrath which came down upon them for their misdeeds, put in at the port of the city of Messina. They brought with them a plague that they carried down to the very marrow of their bones, so that if anyone so much as spoke to them, he was infected with a mortal sickness which brought on an immediate death that he could in no way avoid. (Aberth, 1)

Starting in Asia as an endemic, “that is, a locally confined disease that, once established, is perpetually present in a given area” (Aberth, 2), it evolved into a pandemic, “a widespread disease – when flea, rodent, or human populations spread the disease far afield though faster, more efficient trade or communication networks”. (Aberth, 2) The plague, or the Black Death, was known to infect and kill victims at first sight; even the slightest communication between a victim and a (yet) healthy person, could lead to infection with the disease. Also known as the bubonic plague, a name referring to the boils, spots and tumours that grew on the body of the infected, this is just one of the three appearances in which the plague revealed itself. According to John Aberth in another study titled *On the Brink of the Apocalypse*, the bacterium *Pasteurella pestis*, is the cause of all evil. Once it has found and settled inside its host, for instance a flea, it may produce three types of symptoms. The first, which we already discussed and which was the most well-known, is that where a victim's body starts to show swellings in the lymph glands, which are part of the body's immune system. Whenever a victim got infected with this type of pestilence, chances were sixty percent that he would not make the end of the week. The second manifestation

of the plague was the highly contagious pneumonic type, where the bacteria nestled in the lungs and caused its victim to cough up blood. Those who showed symptoms like these had almost nil percent chance of survival and generally died within a couple of days. The third and last type is the most inauspicious of all. According to eye-witness accounts, those who got this infection could drop dead on the spot the very day they got sick or never wake from their sleep, without any other sort of symptoms that could warn its victim of its near impending death. (Aberth, 110-112) It is questionable whether these last symptoms were in fact the work of the plague, but as it seems to have occurred more often during the plague outbreak, we can only guess. A contemporary account from the Pope's physician at the court in Avignon shows that medieval doctors also saw a clear distinction between at least two types of infection. The physician Guy de Chauliac recounts his observations and the following results:

The mortality lasted seven months. It was of two kinds. The first lasted two months, with continuous fever and spitting of blood, and from this one died in three days. The second lasted for the rest of the period, also with continuous fever but with tumours in the external parts, principally the armpits and groin. From this one died in five days. It was so contagious, especially that accompanied by spitting of blood, that not only by staying together, but even by looking at one another, people caught it, with the result that men died without attendants and were buried without priests. The father did not visit his son, nor the son his father. Charity was dead and hope crushed. (Keys, 40)

From Italy and France in 1347 and to Spain and Paris in 1348, the Black Death, although never referred to as such by its contemporaries, but alluded to as 'the great mortality', 'the plague' or 'pestilence', steadily spread its shadow over Europe, until it disembarked in the ports of Bristol in

the summer of 1348.⁵ From thereon, it travelled through Ireland, Scotland and the Scandinavian countries in 1349 and 1350. According to Aberth, “the only large area seemingly untouched was Bohemia and Poland, perhaps because of relatively few trading contacts there.”(Aberth, 120)

However, to return to our primary focus in this study, England seemed to have been hit with full force by the disease. Even though, under the reign of Edward III, England was already a highly prosperous country, “it was under severe financial strain and the strain was beginning to tell” (Ziegler, 121). Taxes had been raised to soaring heights, in order to meet the financial demands of the Hundred Years’ war and the king’s creditors, both at home and abroad.⁶

According to Christopher Dyer, the English economy was flourishing during the (late) thirteenth century and, up until 1348, there was a huge increase in the demand for food, due to population growth and urbanisation. Even so, the late fourteenth century did bring new problems relating to labour and the number of men able to work seemed to take a plunge between 1330 and 1340. To make things worse, during the Black Plague of 1348/ 49, the workforce decreased by half and never fully recovered from this nigh fatal blow. This was due to other epidemic outbreaks, decline in birth rates and the migration of villagers and peasants to other parts of the country (mainly larger towns) where they seemed to have become active in other lines of employment. (Dyer, 24-25).

The plague did more than just influence the economical circumstances of mid-fourteenth century England. In his study *The Black Death*, Philip Ziegler gives detailed figures concerning the casualties in the bigger towns of each county in England. It would go too far to mention each municipality investigated by Ziegler, but the general picture he presents seems to reveal a grim reality. In Bristol, situated in the West Country and the place where the plague first arrived, the number of casualties was estimated to have been between thirty-five and forty percent of the

⁵ The first reference to the plague as ‘the Black Death’ occurs in the sixteenth century in a Swedish manuscript, referring to it as the *swarte döden* and half a century later it appears in a Danish source as the *sorte død*. In England the term came into use after 1666, to highlight the difference between the Great Plague of that year and the mid-fourteenth century plague outbreak. (Ziegler, 18)

⁶ Or, to be more precise, the Edwardian War that raged from 1337 – 1360.

population. Considering Bristol town council alone, it is known that from the fifty-two members it held, twelve names were crossed out in 1349. Bearing in mind the fact that members of the city council usually belonged to the higher ranks of society, and assuming these deaths were due to the plague, the death figures would in all probability have been a lot higher among the lower classes who lived in densely crowded and damp surroundings. (Ziegler, 139)

If we follow the plague route and travel through the South towards the East, we arrive in London, by then already the biggest and most important town in England, economically and politically. London is estimated to have contained around sixty-thousand inhabitants within its city walls before the Black Death. When including all the neighbouring villages, Ziegler calculates that this must have added roughly ten- to fifteen thousand to the total sum. How quick and ruthless the epidemic ravaged the town is illustrated by the fact that all the existing London graveyards were soon unable to hold the huge amount of bodies of those struck by- and succumbed to the disease. Two new graveyards were consecrated and one of these, opened by Sir Walter Manny, is said to have buried almost two hundred people every day between the months of February and April. Taking these figures at face value and employing them as an example of the casualties that fell during the worst months of the plague, one could estimate that approximately eighteen thousand people were buried in this graveyard alone. Astounding and bleak as this number might appear, it is still far below the observation made by the sixteenth century historian John Stow, who in his *Survey of London* claimed to have seen an inscription in this same graveyard that announced that:

A great plague raging in the year of our Lord 1349, this churchyard was consecrated; wherein, and within the bounds of the present monastery, were buried more than fifty thousand bodies of the dead, besides many others from thence to the present time, whose souls God have mercy upon. Amen. (Ziegler, 163)

It is important to bear in mind that Stow was criticised by both contemporary and modern scholars for this evidence that boasts such a huge amount of casualties. Nevertheless, it would not be far from the truth to have an estimated guess that the total sum of victims in London would lie between the twenty- and thirty thousand.

Towards the upper East coast, Norwich, the largest city after London in fourteenth-century England, seems to have been hit even worse than most country towns. Although evidence from this area produces contradictory figures (one source goes as far as to claim that almost ninety percent of the population fell victim to the plague), Ziegler is convinced that it would be no more than fair to state that Norwich did certainly lose over fifty percent of its inhabitants.

Up North, in the Yorkshire region, the mortality rate seems to have been (slightly) less disastrous than in other counties in England, considering the data in the record accounts of the archdeaconry of York. These sources show that the city of York, the third biggest town in England at the time, lost thirty-two percent of its clergy, which is a relatively small number compared to the other figures we have come across so far. Although there is also a mention of a huge flood that afflicted the city in the same year, this is by no means an explanation for the high mortality rate, especially when one compares the number of victims in York to those in other municipalities in the vicinity. Comparatively, Pontefract had a death rate of forty percent amongst its clerical staff while it was not troubled by the overwhelming flow of a nearby river. (Ziegler, 140-188).

Overall, these figures affirm and maybe deepen the preconceptions people might already have had about the impact of the Black Death. However, it is vital to bear in mind that all these numbers of casualties, how astounding and bizarre the rates might seem, also represent men and women who were once someone's parent, relative, spouse, friend, or neighbour. Behind these clear and neat sums lies a whole array of tragic stories and untold miseries, which might be even more difficult to comprehend (if at all) than these facts and figures. A glimpse at the devastation

and (practical) consequences the plague caused in everyday life is offered by the canon of Leicester Abbey, who narrates about the following events:

A great number of sheep died throughout the whole country, so much that in one field alone more than five thousand sheep were slain. Their bodies were so corrupted by the plague that neither beast nor bird would touch them. The price of every commodity fell heavily since, because of their fear of death, men seemed to have lost their interest in wealth or in world[ly] goods. At that time a man could buy for half a mark a horse which formerly had been worth forty shillings.⁷ [...] Sheep and cattle were left to wander through the fields and among the standing crops since there was no one to drive them off or collect them; for want of people to look after them they died in untold numbers in the hedgerows and ditches all over the country. So few servants and labourers were left that nobody knew where to turn for help. (Ziegler, 181)

It would not be too exaggerated to state that this Black Death was a disaster unparalleled by anything before. Still, people did manage to survive and share their experiences with those who came after them, either in speech or by means of the written word. Considering the written evidence we have come across up till now, it is time to turn to the more literary samples of work, to see if writers entrusted their observations and feelings as easily to parchment in a poetical form as they did when recounting the mere facts.

⁷ One pound consisted of twenty shillings during the late Middle Ages.

III. The Plague in Literature

Men of letters have many advantages over physicians. They can embroider their stories to make the final result more interesting. They know their language constructions and have a wider and more flexible vocabulary. They can also make their descriptions dramatic. For instance, they may time their descriptions at crucial moments. (Keys, 35)

One of the most well-known and dramatic descriptions of the biggest plague outbreak during the Middle Ages is the vivid account that Giovanni Boccaccio presents to his audience in the introduction of his masterpiece, the *Decameron*. Although modern scholars do have some doubts as to whether this account reflects his own experience, it is also possible that Boccaccio must have heard it from someone who did and took the effort of writing it down. (Keys, 41) Be that as it may, what Boccaccio presents is a detailed description of how the plague affected people and society as soon as it reared its ugly head. He starts as follows:

I say, then, that the sum of thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had elapsed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when the noble city of Florence, which for its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence. Some say that it descended upon the human race through the influence of heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God's righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next.⁸ (50)

⁸ For the quotations discussed here, I have used the Penguin Classics 1972 edition, translated by Prof. G.H. McWilliam. For a version in Italian, the edition by Prof. Vittore Branca can be recommended.

Boccaccio swiftly introduces the disease, by explaining where it might have originated from and also recording the various reasons that people believed to lie underneath this outbreak of deadly pestilence. Having set the time, place and context of this story, he also accounts of what made this disease so much more extraordinary than other maladies:

But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach. [...] For not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims. (51)

Not only did the plague hit- and kill people like a ruthless assassin, it also managed to wreck social constructions that were fundamental to society. Besides creating a catastrophe regarding the scale of the casualties, it also eliminated unwritten rules and codes for moral behaviour intrinsic to human survival:

These things [...] caused fears and fantasies to take root in the minds of those who were alive and well. And almost without exception, they took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings, by which means they all thought that their own health would be preserved. [...] This scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted

their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children as though they did not belong to them. (52-54)

Parents abandoned their children to take care of themselves, family refused to come to the aid of their afflicted kin, neighbours deserted each other as quick as possible: all these actions suggest that people resorted to their own primal instinct to survive, thereby forsaking all others in view of their own continuance. This situation, as Boccaccio illustrates, sounds like that of a (developed) society that has lost some of the most important pillars on which it rests, namely caring for those who are not able to take care of themselves, thereby revealing a state that approaches complete anarchy:

In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city. For like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased. (53)

Even though one could interpret the last sentence as a positive twist to things, Boccaccio probably meant that there were now several options available to people. He notes that they either let go of all restrictions imposed on them by society and maybe even common sense, by overindulging in everything that they were not allowed under normal circumstances, or they chose to bar themselves from other humans and restrict themselves to a sober diet, as a way of both escaping the affliction and showing atonement for the sins of mankind. The third option seems to be a

consensus between the two aforementioned. Instead of eschewing all worldly pleasures or by acting purely on their instincts, there was also a group that held the opinion that:

[...] there was no better or more efficacious remedy against a plague than to run away from it. Swayed by this argument, and sparing no thought for anyone but themselves, large numbers of men and women abandoned their city [...] and headed for the countryside, either in Florentine territory or, better still, abroad. (53)

Needless to say, despite all precautions (or the lack thereof) in these groups with different opinions, there were always people who fell victim to the disease. However, the last alternative mentioned, escaping town and heading off to some secluded corner of the earth, seemed to work in some cases. The protagonists of Boccaccio's *Decameron* follow this route: ten youngsters, seven women and three men, all of whom have lost a (close) family member or friend to the plague, gather themselves and leave the town of Florence in exchange for less harrowing surroundings than a city where the dead are being carted off every day. The eldest of the ladies, Pampinea, reasons that:

[...] the country air is much more refreshing, the necessities of life in such a time as this are more abundant, and there are fewer obstacles to contend with. For although the farmworkers are dying there in the same way as the townspeople here in Florence, the spectacle is less harrowing inasmuch as the houses and people are more widely scattered. (61)

They retire to a non-urban area in one of their country estates and try to make the best of it, “until such time as we discover (provided we are spared from early death) the end decreed by Heaven for

these terrible events” (62). To kill the time, each member of the group tells one story for each night that they pass in the villa and although they spend fourteen days in total, two days are set aside each week for either chores or rest (considering the Sunday), thus leaving ten days during which each member of the group tells his or her tale to entertain the rest.

This frame story that Boccaccio devised (a hundred tales told by the narrators in his own story) is just one of the examples of how the plague is considered in a literary text. There are certainly numerous other works of literature centred around and elaborating on the same topic, such as Guillaume de Machaut’s *Le jugement dou Roy de Navarre*. Furthermore, Chaucer mentions the plague briefly in *the Pardoner’s Tale*, by introducing Death to his audience as follows:

Ther cam a privee thief, men clepeth Deeth

That in this contree al the peple sleeth,

And with his spere he smoot his herte a-two,

And wente his wey with-outen wordes mo.

He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence [...] (ll. 675-759, *The Riverside Chaucer*)

However, to return to the research question, what makes it interesting is to find out whether texts, that seemingly do not have the plague as their main motif, but that, in one way or another, appear to be inspired by the disease, contain different subjects as their main focus to those who are more aware of the existence of the deadly pestilence. By comparing these different sources, I am to discover any change of effect or sub-themes incorporated in these texts, such as those introduced previously. Before we take a closer look at the following topics, let us consider the words of Boccaccio when he describes what he believed to be the effects of the plague on the ethos of man, or rather, in this case, women:

As a result of this wholesale desertion of the sick by neighbours, relatives and friends, and in view of the scarcity of servants, there grew up a practice almost never previously heard of, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how gracious or beautiful or gently bred she might be, she raised no objection to being attended by a male servant, whether he was young or not. Nor did she have any scruples about showing him every part of her body as freely as she would have displayed it to a woman, provided that the nature of her infirmity required her to do so; and this explains why those women who recovered were possibly less chaste in the period that followed. (54)

This description coincides with what Boccaccio continues to observe in the change of attitude during the outbreak. He paints a portrait of the peasants, who “like the townspeople, they too grew apathetic in their ways, disregarded their affairs, and neglected their possessions” (57).

Having observed all these remarks by Boccaccio on the influence of the outbreak of the plague on the Florentine community, let us now turn to the aforementioned texts, namely *The Owl & the Nightingale*, *the Parliament of Foules*, *The Land of Cokaygne*, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, *Piers Plowman*, *Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount* and *A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes* to see, after a brief description of each text, whether they show any traces of the changes in mentalities that Boccaccio beheld in the townspeople of Florence.

IV. Pre- and Post-Plague Literature

This chapters serves as an introduction to the literature corpus under investigation.

Text	Date
<i>The Owl & the Nightingale</i>	last quarter of 13 th century
<i>Parliament of Foules</i>	1382
<i>The Land of Cokaygne</i>	1330
<i>Wynnere and Wastoure</i>	1352/ 70
<i>Piers Plowman</i>	1377/ 79 (B-text)
<i>Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount</i>	last quarter of 13 th century
<i>A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes</i>	early 15 th century

The reason why I have chosen these specific texts does not constitute a specific element shared by all. What most of the materials do have in common is that they contain either a dream vision or a debate, or a combination of both. It is interesting to try and focus on works that belong more or less to the same genre (roughly speaking), to see whether comparisons of these materials show a development or a sudden change overtime, which cannot be explained by means of genre differences. The popularity of certain texts has also been taken into account, as far as this can still be judged, seeing as we are forced to manage by means of remnants of manuscripts alone. Even so, what remains can still be a silent witness to that which was once considered in vogue. Nevertheless, this argument does not apply to all the chosen texts. For instance, *A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes* is only found in one MS and yet, regardless of the argument that entire libraries containing manuscripts were lost forever while these texts may have been popular

when they were written, the reason why I incorporated this poem as well is because of its sheer originality and the fact that it seems to contain and reveal for instance fascinating new insights into the writer's attitude to life and death.

Consequently, the texts are grouped together in sets of two or three in the following manner: the first group, *The Owl & the Nightingale* and *Parliament of Foules* both contain the elements of a dream-vision and a debate between several birds that seem to represent and symbolise different groups and opinions that were part of society of that time. *The Owl & the Nightingale* stem from before the plague, whereas *Parliament of Foules* was created by Chaucer after the plague had done (most of) its damage in England. This structure applies to all three sets: the first text discussed is created before the Great Plague of 1348 while the second composition, and in one case the third, has its origins in the time that followed the plague immediately, or some time considerably later (up until the fifteenth century).

The second group is also the largest, consisting of *The Land of Cokaygne*, *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman*. The first text, which was probably already much in favour in its own time, is an inverted ideal of Utopia, which was also one of the main reasons for selecting it for this study. It shows a world gone topsy-turvy in the positive sense and, from a certain point of view, seems to resemble a dream-vision as well, since it provides a setting in which events take place that could never happen in reality or that would be deemed highly unorthodox and unfitting. *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman* resemble one another more strongly, since these are definitively dream-visions structured around a debate (or several, in *Piers Plowman*) between different people, classes, if you will, that were part of English society in late fourteenth-century England. *Wynnere and Wastoure* was composed shortly after the plague and shows a society that was still strongly influenced by the (immediate) effects of the epidemic, whereas the same arguments apply to *Piers Plowman*, adding to that the fact that the latter piece was already a noted text in Langland's (the author of the work) time and that he kept revising it throughout his life,

adding bits and pieces that he deemed relevant for his contemporaries to know. One of the versions, the B-text, is of such quantity that it contains a bulk load of information on the appearance of society, as well as the most striking features that proved to be compelling (or frustrating) enough to devote an entire work to them.

The third and final group, consisting of the Middle English lyric *Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount* and the debate *A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes*, seems to be the odd one out, or at least its first poem is. The motive behind choosing these two texts has to do with the fact that both poems seem to encapsulate the existing *Zeitgeist* of their age, albeit partially. The *Ubi Sount* theme central to the first poem, had always been a favourite with medieval audiences and was already prevalent during the Anglo-Saxon period. *A Disputacioun* reflects the medieval public's love for debates, but it also includes something new that, to me, shows a significant change in how people might have dealt with mortality after the plague outbreak.

Overall, the texts are chosen because of their apparent genre, the framework in which they are presented, the message they try to convey and last, but certainly not least, because of their originality, humour, beauty and the way in which all of them are reflections of an age that was already turbulent enough, with or without a mass outbreak of a plague epidemic.

The Owl and the Nightingale

This literary debate is generally believed to originate from the twelfth- or thirteenth century in England and survives in two manuscripts, MS Cotton Caligula A. ix, and MS Jesus College 29. Both date from the thirteenth century, of which the Cotton Caligula manuscript is the elder of the two. The unknown author composed this verse in more or less 2000 lines, using octosyllabic couplets. (Treharne, 370) The narrative structure of the poem consists of a debate between an owl and a nightingale. It begins with the nightingale insulting the owl and telling her to clear off, since the nightingale loathes the very sight and sound of the owl. The owl defends herself, by proposing

a duel between the two of them which the nightingale declines. However, as they are still verbally assaulting each other, a discussion slowly unfolds where both birds propagate the qualities they either embody or awaken in people by their singing and presence. They accuse each other (for instance) of being a fiend for shunning light and only revealing themselves when the sun goes down (the owl) or of luring and inspiring people into superficial and uncouth behaviour by the frivolous melody they produce (the nightingale). All kinds of topics are touched upon in their discussion, ranging from love, sin, to proper versus immoral behaviour; thus, subjects that would very well fit the company of theologians, but the birds also do not shun affairs that would be considered less high-brow. Between their arguments, King Alfred is often quoted as an authoritative source to underline their reasoning. Although there is no definitive outcome, both birds agree to ask the judgement of a certain “Maister Nichole of Guldeforde” (ll. 191) who may decide upon the ultimate winner of the debate.⁹

Parliament of Foules

A fourteenth-century poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, in the form of a dream vision, wherein not two birds, but a whole company of birds gather on the day of St. Valentine to choose their mate.¹⁰ This poem can be found in fifteen manuscripts, most of which are in the possession of either the library of Cambridge or the Oxford Bodleian library. Chaucer composed his poem in approximately 700 lines, using the rhyme royal as the narrative meter and introduces himself as the narrator of the story, in which he falls asleep while reading ‘olde bokes’, specifically the *Somnium Scipionis* by Cicero, in pursuit of (more) knowledge in love. In his dream, Chaucer the narrator encounters Scipio, who shares his knowledge of the meaning and brevity of life. As they travel through the heavenly spheres, they encounter the temple of Venus which depicts scenes of legendary and ill-

⁹ According to some scholars, this explicit reference might be a hint as to who the author of *The Owl and The Nightingale* might have been.

¹⁰ That alone in itself makes the poem interesting, since this is the first reference as far as we know to Saint Valentine’s Day as being a day especially for lovers or those who are seeking a lover.

fated couples doomed as a result of their amorousness. As soon as they pass through this sanctuary, they encounter a gathering of birds outside, hosted by Mother Nature herself. She gives three different eagles the chance to explain and defend why they are the most suitable mate to a hen-eagle, who is ultimately allowed to postpone her decision for a year, thanks to Nature. The narrator wakes up from his dream and concludes the poem by stating that he is still not any wiser, and, while returning to his books, continues his quest for sapience. (Benson, 383-384).

The Land of Cokaygne

Consisting of 190 lines, this poem parodies the Utopian ideal of the perfect world. Found in the Harley MS 913 and kept in the British Library, this composition shows a world where all established rules (both morally and scientifically) are put to practice in reverse. The text is considered to be from around 1330 and although this work does not classify and fits the genre of a dream-vision such as *Wynnere and Wastoure*, it is nevertheless sort of a daydream that probably appealed to an (medieval) audience, maybe especially those who were accustomed to scarcity and hardships. (Treharne, 430) The author introduces his public to this miraculous country by explaining the geographical location, and continues by saying that he would rather find this new Eden than end up in Paradise, where he reckons that there is not half as much food, wine, pleasure and people. The scenes that are strikingly outlined speak highly to the imagination: well-cooked geese flying around and straight into one's mouth, an abbey that is highly reminiscent of the house of the witch in *Hans and Gretel*, monks who can choose their fair share of nuns for more than just spiritual communion, all surrounded by rivers overflowing with sugar and spice and everything nice. The only drawback to it all is that in order to gain access to this country, one must wade through a huge amount of swine's dung for seven whole years. According to Elaine Treharne, this was "in non-orthodox homiletic literature, a punishment of one hell set aside especially for liars" (Treharne, 431).

Wynnere and Wastoure

Another dream-vision in which the two protagonists, aptly named Winner and Waster, plead their cases before the king in hope that he might favour the one above the other. The text is preserved in MS Additional 31402 in the British Library in London, and although the manuscript dates from the fifteenth century, general consensus nowadays agrees on a period around 1350 and 1370 for the creation of *Wynnere and Wastoure*. It consists of roughly 500 lines with the conclusion, including the final verdict of the king, missing. The style of the text is alliterative. According to Elaine Treharne, alliteration grew in popularity again in the fourteenth century. (Treharne, 535)

The narrator begins by referring to Brutus who founded and conquered Britain, and as it is a dream-vision, he continues by falling into a slumber while lying on the banks next to a creek. In his vision, he sees two armies that are, each in their own turn, lead by Winner and Waster respectively. Winner's army consists of various ranks of clergy (both the pope and several orders of friars are represented) and gentry, whereas Waster's battalion boasts men of arms and plenty of bowmen. As they both approach the king, they begin their discussion, in which Winner blames Waster for being an indulgent spendthrift, squandering money that he did not earn himself on lavish paraphernalia while Waster criticises Winner for his hoarding of money and possessions, arguing that it is better to spend money while one is alive than to stockpile it until after one's death, when the only good it will do is that executors, relatives and church are able to squabble over the remaining sum. They essentially both represent a vital element of the economy: Waster calls people forth to enjoy live in the present and spend as much as you have to keep things going, whereas Winner urges to be prudent with money and to consider carefully on what schemes and objects people bestow their coinage.

Piers Plowman

Found in more than fifty manuscripts, all of which date from the late fourteenth century, this dream-vision by William Langland was already popular in its own time. Although it was clearly favoured by his contemporaries, Langland never ceased to work on the text and kept revising it throughout his life. This has resulted in four different variants of the text, namely the A, B, C and Z version. The B-text is mostly used as the basis for editions made for a wider audience, since this version, preserved in MS Cambridge Trinity College B. 15. 17, is considered to be the oldest complete version. According to W.W. Skeat, the A-text (which is, by date of composition, the oldest) is incomplete and seems to break off at Book 11. (Treharne, 547-48) Therefore, considering its date and completeness I have chosen to focus on the B-text, since the C-text appears to be a complete revision of the B-text and is fixed at a later date as well. Even though a revision of a text might imply that the later, thus the C-text, is a better one, the motive for choosing the B-text can be narrowed down to two basic reasons. One, its fixed date lies more closely to the outbreak of the plague in England. Two, there is some disputation whether or not the C-text is finished, and seeing that there is a complete version at hand, it would seem more logical to work with the text that has a beginning and an end, instead of one which has not.¹¹

This allegorical narrative poem uses social satire to criticise the clerical world of Langland's time, more or less in the same manner as Chaucer did, by ridiculing the (uncouth) practices of the clergy. Yet Langland is unique in his critique, for he does not only mock all the misbehaviour and errors that he observes, he offers some very practical alternatives and solutions to the problems as well. The poem consists of eight visions, which are subdivided in passus.¹² The amount of visions and passus depends on the texts, for instance, the B-text contains only seven passus instead of the usual eight. (Treharne, 548) The narrator Will, after falling into a slumber

¹¹ A note to say that I am also fully aware of the debate that exists amongst medieval scholars whether Skeat's categorisation of the A-, B-, and C-text is chronologically correct. Since my specialisation does not lie in the research of *Piers Plowman*, I have chosen to accept Skeat's conclusion and index, for the time being.

¹² i.e. passus is the Latin noun for 'steps'

next to a brook, experiences a dream in which he sees a tower on a hill and a dungeon in a valley, with “a fair feeld ful of folk” (l. 17) in between. From thereon a quest for the true Christian life begins (vaguely reminiscent of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*) and during his journey, Will is aided by the humble ploughman Piers, the name bearer of the text. During their voyage, the narrator encounters three allegorical figures by the names Dowel, Dobet and Dobest whose lives turn into the subject of Will’s research.

Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount

This Middle English poem, which is found in several manuscripts, amongst which the Auchinleck MS and Oxford Bodleian Library Digby 86, bears the notorious ‘Ubi Sunt’ motif that was already quite popular during the Anglo-Saxon period. The version that will be treated in this study is taken from the Digby MS, which is estimated to date from the later part of the thirteenth century.

(Treharne, 328) In the poem, the audience is addressed by a speaker who narrates his tale in the first person. The speaker starts off immediately by posing the question where those are who were before us, “Were beþ þey biforen us weren” (ll. 1), those who led the hounds and hawks, the ladies with their rich attire. The first three stanzas continue in this manner, the speaker sums up all the pleasure and delights in which people might lose themselves for a short time, until all is snatched away from them in a blink of an eye. Although those who amused themselves with riches, music, laughter and dance, thought themselves to be in paradise, they now find themselves burning in hell for their pride. From the fifth stanza on, the narrator urges his audience to withdraw themselves from comforts and take consolation in the thought that suffering on earth means an eternal reward in heaven. One should not succumb to the lies of the fiend: by using the cross as his staff and righteous faith as his shield, man can overcome the temptations in life. The poem rounds off with an invocation to Mary, to aid mankind in their battle against sin and to help them earn their bliss without end in the afterlife.

A Disputacioun betwix þe Body and Wormes

In this lesser-known poem from the British Museum MS Add. 37049, we are faced with a debate, which was a highly popular literary form in the Middle Ages. The element that marks this poem as extraordinary is that the disputation is not between the body and the soul (which is the case in most of the other bodily debate poems), but between the carcass of what was once a beautiful young noblewoman and the worms inhabiting it in its current state. Estimated to date from around 1450, written in a rhyme-royal metre and consisting of 218 lines, the poem tells of a pilgrim who has fled the city “in þe ceson of huge mortalite/ Of sondre disseses with þe pestilence” (ll. 1-2) and while saying his prayers in a church on his pilgrimage route, his attention is drawn to a new tomb built for a lady. (Rytting, 218) While pondering this object, he falls into a slumber and dreams of the body of the deceased discussing its fate with the worms that are feeding on it. The body chides the worms for gnawing on what remains of her and recounts the days in which she was adored by men from the highest ranks, while the worms reply that their are merely doing their job by cleaning up the mess and by pointing out that they are the only creatures who are willing to come as near, since she is now so repugnant and repelling. Yet, the corpse does not give in yet and calls on her former lovers to come to her aid, which the worms welcome wholeheartedly, since there is not a single person that they have not had. Famous men, the fairest of women, royal beasts or filthy insects, all are brought down to nothing but ashes and bones (as far as applicable). Eventually, the body concedes and takes comfort in the thought that when Christ returns, all dead bodies will be resurrected and made wholly new again. The poem ends with the narrator waking from his dream and recounting that he has written it down, because a holy man to whom he related the vision, told him so. He implores his audience to take heed, live a wholesome life and to bind themselves to Christ, instead of worldly pleasures. (Aberth, 176)

V. Pre- & Post-Plague Literary Comparisons

The Owl & the Nightingale (Pre) VS Parliament of Foules (Post)

<i>The Owl & the Nightingale</i>	last quarter of 13 th century
<i>Parliament of Foules</i>	1382

The Owl & the Nightingale

One of the first elements that seems noticeable in *The Owl & the Nightingale* is its many references to King Alfred's proverbs on the matters which the birds debate.¹³ For instance, when the nightingale accuses the owl of behaving as if she has something to hide by only flying out at night, she quotes King Alfred saying "For Alvred King hit seide and wrot: 'He schunet þat hine vul wot'" (ll. 235-6), which translates roughly as 'he that knows himself to be foul, slinks away'. In total, Alfred is quoted twelve times on matters such as social behaviour, in a very practical and straightforward manner, varying from advice to keep out of trouble by avoiding people who are bickering and lessons such as that a sweet voice alone cannot hold anyone's love for a very long time. The overall picture that springs from this poem are the two birds as allegorical figures who discuss life's great oppositions such as youth and old age, wisdom and passion, free will and predestination, while they underline their arguments with Alfred's wise words.

Drawing further upon the idea of the birds as allegorical symbols, it would be reasonable to steal a glance at a medieval bestiary to see what it has to say with regard to the figures of the owl and the nightingale. According to the twelfth-century *Aberdeen Bestiary*, the nightingale may be compared to a poor matron: "[a] poor but modest mother, her arm dragging the millstone around, that her children may not lack bread, imitates the nightingale, easing the misery of her poverty with a night-time song, and although she cannot imitate the sweetness of the bird, she matches it in her devotion to duty." (*Nightingale*. "The Medieval Bestiary", par. 2) This same

¹³ I have not yet found any other literary work that quotes King Alfred so extensively as a source of wisdom.

source also gives information on the owl and interestingly enough, sheds a positive light on the otherwise negatively portrayed *noctua*, stating that:

In a mystic sense, the night-owl signifies Christ. Christ loves the darkness of night because he does not want sinners - who are represented by darkness - to die but to be converted and live. The night-owl lives in the cracks in walls, as Christ wished to be born one of the Jewish people. But Christ is crushed in the cracks of the walls, because he is killed by the Jews. Christ shuns the light in the sense that he detests and hates vainglory. In a moral sense, moreover, the night-owl signifies to us not just any righteous man, but rather one who lives among other men yet hides from their view as much as possible. He flees from the light, in the sense that he does not look for the glory of human praise. (*Owl*. "The Medieval Bestiary", par. 2)

It might be too blunt a statement, but considering the points of debate between the owl and the nightingale, one interpretation could be that the nightingale represents the worldly and at the same time 'common sense' values, whereas the owl embodies the opinions of the religious and ecclesiastical body of thought.

However, besides the fact that from this poem one could distillate the diverse opinions that different social classes in the thirteenth century might have held, another interesting detail is the clear distinction that is made by the nightingale between sins of the flesh and those of the spirit. While the flesh entices people to drunkenness, wantonness and lechery, it is the spirit that lures people into malice and envy and, that rejoices in another man's downfall, fosters pride and takes little heed of mercy and pity:

Forþan hi beoþ tweire kunne:

Sun arist of the flesches luste,
 An sum of þe gostes custe
 þar flesch draheþ men to drunnesse,
 An to wrovehede and to golnesse,
 þe gost misdeþ þurch niþe an onde,
 Amd seopþe mid murhþe of monne shonde,
 An 3eoneþ after more and more,
 An lutel rehþ of milce and ore;
 An sti3þ on heþ þurþ modinesse,
 An overhoheð þanne lasse (ll. 1395-1406)

The nightingale continues to defend the sins of the flesh by illustrating that if a young girl goes astray by following the will of her wild ways and young flesh, she can easily make up for these errors by marrying her lover, so that she can appear at day with him to whom she crept secretly before during the night. Interestingly enough, the owl responds by saying that although the nightingale might defend the case for young girls, it is the owl who hears the complaints of the women, who are maltreated by their husbands who run after other (and younger) ladies. It is intriguing to hear how the owl is commenting on men behaving badly: she argues that if men treat their wives so inferiorly, the woman in question will naturally look for love and comfort in the arms of another. As they lay the blame on both man and woman, their stance on who is to blame in an extra-marital affair is surprisingly enlightened.¹⁴

Nevertheless, it appears that both birds take a lenient view on sins. Although they do condemn these and discuss the dramatic consequences of sinful behaviour, the errant nature of mankind is not overtly stressed. Better yet, the misfortunes that the birds discuss, strikes one as the

¹⁴ It would go too far to cite all the examples from this poem, but for those who are interested: the main arguments lechery and whose to blame are found between lines 1400 – 1500.

usual sorrows in life which none can escape, rather than these being the results of man's horrid behaviour. The view they give on life is pretty straightforward, without being too idealistic and pessimistic.

Moreover, the last twenty lines features some social critique on the higher clergy as well, when both the owl and the nightingale agree on the fact that bishops often fail to recognise, listen to, or reward good men capable of giving sound advice, but that they favour their family and friends (thereby ignoring the poor and needy) when distributing money:

þeos riche men wel mucche misdoð,
 þat letþ þane gode mon,
 þat of so feole þinge con,
 An 3iveþ rente wel misliche,
 An of him letþ wel lihtliche
 Wið heore cunne heo beoþ mildre (ll. 1770-1775)

Although they both criticise the bishops, there is no hint of critique on the lower clergy, such as monks, nuns or friars. It is interesting to note that these are also some of the last lines, before the owl and nightingale fly off to have their cases judged, without any clue of which of the two might be the winner. This seems to be a case in which a story or tale is not given any closure and the audience is left to ponder the varying possible outcomes, as is the case in most debate poems from the Middle Ages.

According to Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Owl and the Nightingale* fits into a long-standing literary tradition in the court of Henry II, who was responsible for an environment in which writers such as Walter Map and Nigel Wireker were given the opportunity to develop their work and in which the genres of social satire and *jeux d'esprit* were able to flourish. (Bloomfield,

999) As a final remark that might be interesting to ponder, Christopher Canon argues in his essay on “The Owl and the Nightingale and the Meaning of Life” that the birds not only represent the allegorical figures as discussed earlier, but that both the nightingale and the owl are in fact female and thus (also) embody the medieval female stereotype of the quarrelling woman whose only aim in life seems to slander others. (Canon, 12) He refers to Andreas Capellanus who writes in his *De Amore* that: “All women are also free with their tongues, for not one of them can restrain her tongue from reviling people, or from crying out all day long like a barking dog over the loss of a single egg, disturbing the whole neighbourhood over a trifle.”¹⁵ Canon continues his argument by stating that not only do the birds represent female voices, “but that what they actually talk *about* most is women (from lines 1043-1111 and again from lines 1336-1603). [...] These birds generally accept medieval misogyny’s major premises.” (Canon, 13) Be that as it may, I am not entirely convinced about the misogynist intentions of the author, since (and this has been pointed out earlier) both men and women are subject to discussion and I find that it is the woman who comes away more unscathed than her male companion, thus making this poem rather avant-garde, considering its date and context.

Overall, the main themes that catch the eye in the debate between the birds is the extensive usage of King Alfred's quotations as a guideline for proper behaviour and the distinction they draw on bodily sins and spiritual ones (i.e. gluttony vs. pride) and their corresponding viewpoint. Also, although there are some critical remarks towards the clergy, these are only directed at those who were high up in office. There is no hint of disapproval towards the lower ranked clerics, such as monks or friars. Finally, its opinion concerning women is highly nuanced and refreshingly positive, compared to what one might expect from a medieval text.

¹⁵ “Est et omnis femina virilingosa, quia nulla est quae suam noverit a maledictis compescere linguam, et quae pro unius ovi amissione die tota velut canis latrando non clamaret et totam pro re modica viciniam non turbaret.” Ed. P.G. Walsh, London: 1982.

Parliament of Foules

This brings us to the corresponding post-plague text: Chaucer's *Parliament of Foules* wherein all manner of birds gather to seek out their mate. The beginning of this poem is already substantially different to that of *O&N*. Instead of quoting a former and native ruler, the text begins with a Latin saying, translated from Greek and borrowed from a classical source, namely Hippocrates.¹⁶ While he is searching through old books in the hope to attain some ancient wisdom, Chaucer the narrator continues to present himself quite explicitly to the reader.¹⁷ The book in this poem is said to be *The Dream of Scipio*¹⁸, a narrated vision by the character Scipio Africanus Minor, a speaker in Cicero's *Republic*, who is visited by his (adoptive) grandfather in a dream. The vision ends with Scipio asking his grandfather for advice on how to lead a good life so that he might come into that heavenly happiness. Africanus answers that he should firstly recognise and acknowledge his own mortality and, aided by this humbling knowledge, devote himself to labour and advise for the common good. (ll. 71-84) Shortly afterwards, the narrator drifts off into a slumber and subsequently encounters Africanus in his own dream.

Although this seems pretty logical in the beginning, as Robert Worth Frank Jr. aptly points out in his article on *Structure and Meaning in the Parliament of Foules*, it is somewhat unexpected that even though Africanus shows up in Chaucer's dream, the rest of his vision takes place in the garden of Venus and in a courtroom where the debate revolving around love is staged. (Frank Jr., 532) Better yet, Chaucer even invokes Cytherea (Venus) to guide him through his dream and poem. (l. 113) Not exactly what one would expect of someone who just finished a classical and highly moral tale, with explanations on the heavenly spheres and the content of the galaxy. Although both Venus and Scipio share their classical background, Scipio is foremost associated with scientific knowledge, wisdom and the search for the meaning of life, whereas

¹⁶ *O&N* stands for *The Owl & the Nightingale*, an abbreviation which I will use now and then.

¹⁷ Although this is not necessarily the exact same person as the historical Geoffrey Chaucer himself, it might be a way in which the author chooses to show himself to the audience.

¹⁸ Latin title: *Somnium Scipionis*

Venus is more likely to be known for her amorous escapades. Especially note the way she is introduced in this poem: from the rational Scipio with his quest for a greater understanding of the world, the audience finds a semi-naked Venus in a temple, accompanied by a set of unfortunate lovers.

Frank Jr. argues that Chaucer inserted this abrupt break in expectations both to shock his audience, and to lay out the structure of the poem in which love is discussed by several voices that hold contrasting opinions. (Frank Jr., 534) As Frank Jr. states himself: “the morality in the poem, then, is not morality for its own sake. It is ‘literary’ morality which serves a literary purpose. That purpose is to state, within a comic framework, one attitude toward love, the disapproving attitude of the moralist, and to contrast it with other contradictory attitudes.” (Frank Jr., 533) Also, an important difference between *O&N* and *the Parliament* is the warning that Africanus gives to Chaucer, “syn erthe was so lyte/ And ful of torment and of harde grace/ That he ne shulde him in the world delyte” (ll. 64-66) As far as I can tell, no such advice is spoken about in the debate between the owl and the nightingale. Even though one might argue that Chaucer ends up in the garden of love and the temple of Venus where almost all seems to revolve around love and pleasure, it is significant to bear in mind that all the couples that Chaucer sees depicted in Venus’ shrine became (in)famous as a result of the fact that all of them met rather pathetic ends. Nevertheless, it is striking that although the birds in the *O&N* do cover almost every range of topic in life, none of them seems to propagate the notion of *Memento Mori*. Whereas Chaucer, who presents the reader with a blend of classical knowledge, intertextuality, humour, lavish descriptions of the creation (the birds and the garden) and several viewpoints on love, also drops an inkling of admonition when Africanus warns Chaucer the narrator to take heed and not to trust in worldly comforts. Also, as my thesis supervisor Frank Brandsma has pointed out, it seems that whereas the birds in *O&N* merely voice different and opposing opinions, the several figures in

*PoF*¹⁹ actually proceed to distribute advice to the reader. This element of direct counsel is entirely lacking in *O&N*.

The overall picture that the reader gets from Chaucer's narrative is that of an author who is trying to proclaim himself the reputation of being a highly learned man, reading through his ancient books and scattering old sayings throughout the text. It is telling to observe that Chaucer's references to knowledge and wisdom are almost entirely from the classical sources, except for Dante who was more or less a contemporary of Chaucer, whereas the main source of sagacity in the *O&N* stems from Alfred's sayings and common-sense insights.²⁰ Also, another striking detail is the portrayal of Venus. As most of Chaucer's audience was (and is) probably aware of, Venus is indeed the goddess of love. To have her introduced as a lady of delights would not be inappropriate. Yet, the way Chaucer describes her in *The Parliament* is highly sensuous:

And on a bed of golde she lay to rest,
 Hir gilte heres with a golden threde
 Y-bounden were, untressed as she lay,
 And naked fro the breste unto the hede
 Men might hir see; and soothly for to say,
 The remenant wel kevered to my pay
 Right with a subtil coverchief of Valence,
 Ther was no thicker cloth of no defence. (ll. 265-273)

Basically, Venus is draped over a bed and practically naked apart from a cloth that covers her up from the waist down and the overall atmosphere is virtually dripping with sensuality. Although I

¹⁹ *Parliament of Foules*

²⁰ This might even be a difference between an oral culture and a written one, since Chaucer refers to books all throughout his poem, while the owl and nightingale only mention books two or three times. Whenever they quote Alfred, their text is: "As Alfred *says*". Not: As it is *written*.

am not sure whether this was commonly acceptable, it is reminiscent of what Boccaccio writes about looser morals amongst women after the Black Death (chapter I).²¹ Even though a vividly exciting description certainly does not indicate ongoing debauchery in society, the fact that Chaucer's overt sensuous depiction was more easily accepted after the plague than beforehand could certainly be a possibility. From line 280 onwards, Chaucer relapses back into his spectacular name-dropping modus of ancient celebrities and contemporary stars, from Dido to Isolt and Cleopatra to Troilus. This is a difference to the *O&N*, since the only notable public figure they refer to is, as one might have guessed, King Alfred.

This raises the question as to what the intended public was that the author of *The Owl & the Nightingale* and Chaucer were aiming for and whether there was a considerable shift in their target group which found its cause in the outbreak of the plague. Chaucer's constant referring to antique (anti)heroes could imply two things: firstly, that his public knew all the names mentioned in the text and would thus experience a moment of recognition and instantly know the background behind these names, resulting in a deeper understanding of the message that Chaucer was trying to convey through his work. Alternatively, Chaucer could have been trying to educate his readers by summing up large numbers of classical characters, placing them in a setting that would make clear to the public that these were names of famous and unfortunate lovers. Droning on about all relevant facts and historical personalities, much like a schoolmaster, it is almost as if he is trying to teach the crowd some essential or potentially useful knowledge. It does not seem too irrational to imply that, when vast amounts of people died during the plague, the group of fatal victims also included those belonging to a (highly) educated background, who took their knowledge with them to the grave. Consequently, this left the survivors bereft from these living and wandering sources of knowledge. Perhaps the new nobility, rising up from the ashes of what was left or from what had previous been the middle classes, needed instruction on what was considered to be common knowledge to those who were still fortunate enough to live amongst the higher ranks in society. As

²¹ Venus as a goddess was usually, if not always, depicted semi-naked.

there was also a huge increase in demand for books on etiquette and courtesy, this could very well imply that the new aristocrats lacked the necessary baggage to perform according to their new role in society. (Thompson, 384) As Chaucer himself rose from being a son of a wealthy wine merchant to the position of poet at the King's court, he must have known how it was to change class as well as the adaptations and knowledge required for this switch.

Nevertheless, besides the two options discussed, there is also a possibility that Chaucer did not bear in mind the education or knowledge of his audience at all and that he himself was simply flaunting his knowledge to impress his readers, who, in their turn, could boost their social prestige by reading Chaucer's book. Another example of this might be his reference to "Aleyn, [...] Pleynt of Kynde" in line 316, where *De planctu naturae* by Alanus de Insulis is mentioned. A twelfth-century philosophical treatise on Nature lamenting mankind's stray from her laws, thereby giving themselves over to unnatural and perverse types of love and relationships, this was a popular work throughout the Middle Ages which, according to Richard Hamilton Green in his essay on the aforementioned poem, has had "an influence on later vernacular poetry" (Hamilton Green, 649). Bearing this in mind, this work might have been the medieval equivalent of any other impressive modern author, such as James Joyce, of whom many have probably heard, but who has actually been read by but few, and understood by even less. Consequently, Chaucer's reference to Alanus de Insulis seems to be an instance of intertextuality where both author and possibly, the reader, are showing off their highbrow literary knowledge, since the mentioning of this philosophical work is interesting, but, essentially, does not add much more depth to the story of Chaucer itself. Then again, even if Chaucer was boasting his literary skills and intellectual capacity, this could still benefit his audience. If they did not know what Chaucer was referring to or writing about, this could entice them to read these works themselves and try to find out why all these classical names were so important in the context of Chaucer's dream vision.

After an excessively long account of all the birds that are present in the court of Dame Nature, there is a remark in line 403 that struck me, “But which of yow that love most entryketh”, which translates roughly as ‘But which of you that is most ensnared by love’. This made me wonder whether the reasons for marriage might have changed as well, however slightly, after the Black Death. It goes without saying that even in the Middle Ages, some people would find themselves in the position of being lucky enough to marry for love, but it would also be reasonable to argue that most people did not. If politics and the necessity of heirs of a certain bloodline were not the grounds for marriage, then pure practicality was the main motive in most cases. Yet, bearing in mind that after the plague, labourers were able to request more payment in return for their work thus improving their living standards, this could also imply that people found that they were not only in demand work-wise, but also in matters of the heart.

To put it another way, if the economical position of women improved after the plague, it would be interesting to assume that the same development is to be seen in the relational sphere. Women could find themselves to be able to choose whom they wanted to marry, instead of being forced to do so due to economic or social pressure. Those who were merely the wives-of would now be wealthy widows, while daughters ended up as heiresses. Either way, women were much-needed as another pair of hands to work, considering the huge decrease in the labour force. In Cordelia Beattie's study on “Women’s Work Identities in Post Black Death England”, she compares three official documents which show that women were “conceptualised [...] in relation to their marital/ sexual/ social statuses, [yet their] occupational and economic statuses were also important.” (Beattie, 18) The texts that are researched are a nominative poll tax return for the city of Lynn in Norfolk from 1379, a court record containing a disputed marriage case in 1394 in the city of York, and another legal document of a case in which a woman was brought before the King's Bench in 1386, due to trespassing. (Beattie, 3) Without wanting to delve too much into the details of Beattie's extensive research, the interesting outcome of the comparison of these three documents

show that although women were most definitely part of the workforce, especially after the Black Death, there were also still some strong differences in the way this was viewed by society.

(Beattie, 19) According to Beattie herself, “[...] in post Black Death England, women's work was needed. However, that they were generally hired for lower-status, lower-paid jobs than men suggests the existence of gendered ideas about work.” (Beattie, 19) Putting the last element aside for now, it is clear that women's position on the labour market did improve, however relatively unimpressive it may have seemed.

The same upward trend seems to have taken place amongst nobility as well. In Colin Platt's chapter “Impoverished Noblemen and Rich Old Ladies” in his research *King Death*, it is stated that “Already in the late 1370s and 1380s, when the nobility's demographic crisis was at its worst, only about half of England's noblemen left sons to take their places. Moreover, of the [...] 30 percent of landowners who died with no surviving child of either sex, fully 60 percent were succeeded by female collateral relatives [...]” (Platt, 50) Even though both these researches do not explicitly mention the fact that women were now free to marry whoever they wished (which was probably still not the case for many), it does show that women had an economic status and thus more financial weight, which might have included other privileges in the personal sphere as well.

Throughout this text we have seen that, whatever his intentions were, Chaucer manages to refer to whole series of classical names, persons, texts and even philosophies, around which he has woven his own story of a bird debate. Even so, despite all the ancient wisdom, glory and fancy details, he also feels the need to point out that all this is just temporarily and that everyone should bear in mind that this life on earth is relatively small and insignificant on a larger scale.

Notwithstanding this *Memento Mori* moment, the audience is also treated to a lavish description of the garden of Venus, with the good goddess herself lying around bare-chested, which could reflect a change in attitude towards- and about sexuality, be it even in a literary text such as this. Taking this thought further, the improved economical position of women might also have enhanced their

liberty to choose their marriage partner, which is one of the main points in the *Parliament of Fowles*, seeing that the female bird who cannot decide who to choose as a mate, is given another year of repose.

II. *The Land of Cokaygne (Pre) VS Wynnere and Waster (Post) & Piers Plowman (Post)*

<i>The Land of Cokaygne</i>	1330
<i>Wynnere and Wastoure</i>	1352/ 70 ²²
<i>Piers Plowman</i>	1377/ 79 (B-text)

Land of Cokaygne

In this next set of texts that will be discussed, *The Land of Cokaygne* is one of the most amusing ones to read. Introduced as situated somewhere west of Spain, this plot of land offers unlimited possibilities to everyone who is able to find it, so that they may indulge in all their wishes. It is interesting that the text mentions Paradise in lines 5 and 6, “þo3 Paradis be miri and bri3t/ Cokaygn is of fairir si3t”²³, since the rest of the description of Cokaygne sounds very similar to that of an(other) Eden. For instance, it is telling that food is mentioned throughout the text as being abundant and fully present for everyone who wishes to enjoy it. Better yet, one does not even have to hunt and prepare his own food, “for þe gees irostid on þe spitte/ Flee3 to þat abbai, God hit wot,/ And grediþ: ‘Gees al hote, al hote!’”. (ll. 102-104)²⁴ Furthermore, there is said to be no death and conflict, “þer nis baret noþer strif,/ Nis þer no deþ, ac euer lif”. (ll. 27-28)²⁵ In essence, Cokaygne is an earthly paradise, but without the saintly and celestial atmosphere that one would expect. Instead we are given full view of all the earthly pleasures that are present and which can be indulged in without having to fear divine retribution. All needs and desires are instantly met, without any of the negative consequences this would have in actual society.

If we accept the notion that this is a collection of fantasies of how life ultimately should be like, let us assume that the situations described in *The Land of Cokaygne* are in fact either opposites or an exaggeration of how life was or could be in (early fourteenth century) medieval

²² In line 206 it is written that the king has fed and fostered both Wynnere and Wastour for 25 years. Seeing as Edward III reigned from 1327 to 1377, this text seems to be written down (or composed) in 1352, only three years after the Black Death reached England. Treharne places the text somewhere between 1352 and 1370.

²³ “Though Paradise is fair and bright/ Cokaygne is a finer sight.”

²⁴ “The geese roasted on the spit/ Fly to that abbey, God knows, /And cry out: ‘Geese, all hot, all hot!’”

²⁵ “There is no conflict or strife;/ There is no death, but life forever”

society. So, if the situation described is one where food and drinks are freely available and up for grabs wherever you look, this could imply that the actual circumstances were much less convenient and that nourishment was scarce and certainly not abundantly present for each and everyone. If we take this train of thought and apply it to the rest of the text, lines 83 and 84 are remarkable since they say that: “þer beþ foure willis in þe abbei /Of triacle and halwei”²⁶, especially if one bears in mind that Cokaygne is basically an Utopia with no death or strife (lines 27 and 28), then why would there be any need for a fountain that brings forth medicinal potions? Although it seems contradictory, this could be a glimpse into the author’s mind, revealing that, in his ideal world, free medication would be available to everyone in case of any emergency. Maybe the idea of a world where there is no sickness at all is too hard to imagine, even in an idealised universe. It seems to be the only reference in the entire text that reminds the reader of the fact that not everything is pure pleasure and delight. There are no moral lessons to be found nor are there any warnings, except perhaps for the last fifteen lines of the text, where it is explained how people can gain access into Cokaygne:

Whose wil com þat lond to,	Whoever wants to come to that land
Ful grete penaunce he mot do:	Must do a very great penance:
Seue yere in swine is dritte	Seven years in swine’s dung
He mote wade, wol ye iwitte,	He must wade, well may you understand,
Al anon vp to þe chynne,	All the way up to his chin,
So he schal þe lond winne (ll. 177-182)	So he can deserve this land. (Dunn&Byrnes, 192)

According to Elaine Treharne, the punishment of standing in pig’s dung for seven years seems to resemble a retribution for another category of sin: “To stand eternally in dung was, in non-orthodox homiletic literature, a punishment of one hell set aside especially for liars.” (Treharne, 431) This could be interpreted as a warning for those who wished to enter such a land, that the

²⁶ There are four springs in the abbey/ Of ointment and healing potion

only way to ‘reach’ it was to let your imagination run wild, with the possible result that you might one day have to pay the price for it.

Another point in the text that seems paradoxical with regard to the rest of the contents is that when the monks say Mass, the glass windows in the church miraculously transform into crystal ones, so that the monks may have more light during the service (ll. 113-116).²⁷ Immediately after this magical transformation, however, the monks put away their books and fly into the air, until they encounter a maiden with whom they subsequently start amusing themselves. At one hand, the author reveals that in Cokaygne the churches are even better lit so that the monks may say their masses more properly, but then again, these same monks are also airborne and happily engage in all the pleasures that the world offers. It is as if the author wants to make sure that people understand that these flying hooded men are indeed monks, by stressing the fact that they certainly do hold church services. If they were only frolicking around, then their identity would be less clear, less important and subsequently less comical. Mentioning the church, the cloisters and the Mass seems to set a relevant context in which the audience would expect a certain set of events, but instead, the author and clerics go completely wild within this given frame of reference, thereby proving this to be a world gone topsy-turvy.

The aspect that is the most curious to me, however, is the penance one must endure before entering the land of Cokaygne. It is unclear to me whether there is any such thing that one does penance before sinning (which, basically, is all what the land of Cokaygne is about, although it must be stressed that the activities that take place here are all considered to be bodily sins and not spiritual ones), except when bearing in mind the reasoning behind traditional penance. A person sins, thereby removing himself from God and slimming down the chances of ever getting into heaven. The sinner therefore confesses and follows the prescribed instructions to get back in line and make all things well again. That way, one may enter heaven. Viewing the process from this

²⁷ Whan þe monkes geep to Masse, /Al þe fenestres þat beþ of glasse/ Turneþ into cristal bri3t./ To yiue monkes more li3t.

perspective and remembering that Cokaygne is a (phantasmal) paradise, it almost seems to make sense that one has to gain some credit before entering this place of enduring bliss. Maybe we could go as far as suggesting that Cokaygne was how, in the early fourteenth century, people imagined or hoped heaven to be like. Then again, this could simply be a parody on existing texts that offered a glimpse into the eternal pleasures that heaven would give. Instead of being lavished with spiritual rewards, one could freely indulge in all physical amusements.

Principally, *Land of Cokaygne* revolves around a fantasy that shows a desire for a place where food, drinks, casual sex and more riches than one could ever wish for, are completely up for grabs for every person who is willing to endure the penance beforehand. All these elements may be enjoyed without having to fear the wrath of God, bodily deterioration, sickness or sorrow, and throughout the entire text no warnings are given nor is there any morale to the tale, except for the fact that one has to endure seven years of swine dung before entering this land. Compared with what we have seen up till now, it does not show much or any resemblance to the other texts. Nevertheless, it is an interesting and an amusing poem, which might reveal a bit more than initially seems to be the case. It is especially interesting with regard to the works that will be discussed and specifically those who were composed after the plague.

Wynnere & Wastour

This poem is reminiscent of *The Owl & the Nightingale*, since it also revolves around a debate between two allegorical figures representing opposite principles. During their debate, several themes pass by, most of which interesting enough to merit further examination. Firstly, the text starts with an allusion to the mythical story of the founding of Britain by Brutus, “Sythen that Bretayne was biggede/ and Bruyttus it aughte”(l.1) and, in lines 10 to 16, it is King Solomon (not Alfred) who is quoted to add a dash of credible wisdom to the text:

Forthi sayde was a sawe of Salomon the wyse,
 It hyeghte harde appone honde, hope I no noþer,
 When wawes waxen schall wilde and walles bene doun,
 And hares appon herthe-stones schall hurcle in hire fourme,
 And eke boyes of blode with boste and with pryde,
 Schall wedde ladyes in londe and lede hem at will,
 Thene dredfull Domesdaye it draweth neghe aftir. (TEAMS)

(translation)

And so there was a saying of Solomon the wise,
 Which will soon come to pass, I expect nothing else,
 ‘When waves grow wilder and walls tumble down,
 And hares crouch on hearth-stones, making their forms,
 And men of low birth with boasting and pride
 Marry noble ladies, and lord it over their wives,
 The dreadful day of Judgement begins to draw near.’ (Wessex Parallel Web Texts)

There are several aspects in this fragment that are of interest, for instance the reference to Solomon. It is certainly not uncommon to quote old and ancient authorities to spice up a text in medieval (English) literature, but I find it intriguing that Alfred is not mentioned at all in this entire poem. Whereas both the owl and the nightingale could not get enough of him, it seems that the good old king is simply ignored or perhaps maybe even disregarded by the time this text was produced. Moreover, who could have forgotten all the references by Chaucer to anything classical in his *Parliament of Fowles*, and considering that Brutus and Solomon are one of the first few characters to which we are introduced in this poem – as well as the fact that, later on, Augustine

and Aristotle are also mentioned (line 316) – this could signify a shift in the middle-fourteenth-century focus.

Let me elaborate: perhaps it was the case that people felt disappointed in the knowledge they possessed during the outbreak and in the aftermath of the Black Death, that had offered no comfort, aid, nor explanation to them. In their misfortune and desperation to make some meaning of this, people might have abandoned their contemporary knowledge and started to look for wisdom in old and classical texts. They turned to the roots of ancient wisdom, perhaps in the search of answers, perhaps out of sheer helplessness.. Anglo-Saxon wisdom had become the past perfect tense and the Classics became the simple present.

Also, the second element to consider is the contemporary developments commented on by the narrator, which could very well be consequences of the plague epidemic. Take for instance line 14, in which it is said that men of low birth are marrying noble ladies. Although it is introduced as a saying of Solomon and therefore this situation was already applicable in the eight century BC, it must have been quoted on purpose by the author.²⁸ A situation wherein the death toll among nobles had been disastrous enough for aristocratic women to marry below their own status in order to continue their bloodline, is not unlikely, especially considering the figures as shown in chapter 1. Besides, the author's gloomy outlook on the present age is further emphasised by the following lines in which he portrays a situation in which he laments the decline in the quality of artists, wisdom and amity:

[...] now es no frenchipe in fere bot fayntnesse of hert,

Wyse wordes withinn that wroghte were never,

Ne redde in no romance that ever renke herde.

Bot now a childe appon chere, withowtten chyn-wedys,

That never wroghte thurgh witt thies wordes togedire,

²⁸Solomon is estimated to have lived and reigned during the 8th century B.C.

Fro he can jangle als a jaye and japes telle,
 He schall be levede and lovede and lett of a while
 Wele more than the man that made it hymselven. (ll. 21-28)

(translation)

[...] now there is no shared friendship, but faintness of heart,
 Wise words unspoken that were never expressed,
 Or read in any romance that any man heard.
 But now a mere boy whose beard had not grown,
 Without the wit to string together words in a line,
 If he can chatter like a jay and tell a few jokes,
 Will be listened to and praised, and applauded in time
 Much more than the writer whose works are his own. (WPWT)

It is telling to read and experience the melancholic atmosphere that this division of work encapsulates. Also, his lamenting over the deterioration of performers reveals an insight into the (entertainment) world after the Black Death. If we take this description for granted, then there would have been a serious lack of professional performers, minstrels even, who could tell a tale properly and entertain a crowd. Furthermore, few would be left who could teach the newcomers.

Another feature that seems worth mentioning is the manner in which the king is portrayed in the poem. After the introduction, the narrator recalls an event where he wanders through the country, finds a river, lies down and falls asleep, subsequently dreaming of a vision where besides whole arrays of armies, there is also “a comliche kyng crowned with golde” (l. 86) which is supposed to be Edward III who reigned England for fifty years from 1327 onwards. Assuming that the author is referring to King Edward III and not just to a stereotype monarch, it strikes me that

the way in which he is depicted here and throughout the rest of the poem, is positively good. Whereas the clergy, nobility and merchants are all represented in this text as harbouring both positive and negative elements and bearing in mind all the literary satires and critique on essentially every layer of society after the plague of 1348, it seems as if the Crown is never verbally attacked. This raises the question whether people really did not blame the royalty since they were ordained by God to their position, or that people felt (and knew) that they could not ventilate their negative feelings and doubts about the king for their own safety, thereby content themselves by blaming others.²⁹

If we turn to the debate between Wynnere and Wastour, who are subsequently representations of the merchants and clergy (Wynnere) and the gentry and lower nobility (Wastour), the entire discussion could essentially be brought down to two points of argument: firstly, Wynnere chastises Wastour for spending everything Wynnere earned without doing an honest day's work himself and secondly, Wastour, in turn, blames Wynnere for being a stingy miser and hoarding his money instead of pumping it into the economy. However, line 273 and onwards bear these interesting remarks:

Ye folowe noghte youre fadirs that fosterde yow alle
 A kynde herveste to cache and cornes to wynn
 For the colde wyntter and the kene with gleterand frostes,
 Sythen dropeles drye in the dede monethe.³⁰
 And thou wolle to the taverne, byfore the tonne-hede,
 Iche beryne redy with a bolle to blerren thyn eghne,
 Hete the whatte thou have schalte and whatt thyn hert lykes,
 Wyfe, wedowe, or wenche that wonnes there aboute.

²⁹ The others, meaning another class outside their own.

³⁰ March

Then es there bott “fille in” and “feche forthe,” florence to schewe,
 “Wee hee,” and “worthe up,” wordes ynewe.

Bot when this wele es awaye, the wyne moste be payede fore;

Than lymphis yowe weddis to laye or youre londe selle. (ll. 273-284)

(translation)

You do not follow your fathers, who fostered you all,

To gather a good harvest and bring in the grain

Before the freezing winter with glittering frosts

And the rainless drought in the dead month.

And you will go to the tavern, where wine-casks are tapped,

And ever waiter serves you till you can't see straight,

You order your drinks, and also what you fancy,

Wife, widow, or girl, whatever can be got.

Then nothing but “Fill it up!” and “Fetch out your money”,

“Wey-hey!” and “Up you get!” and not a word more.

But when you've had your fun, you have to pay the wine-bill;

Then you must take out mortgages or sell off your land. (WPWT)

Besides a comical insight into phrases that were apparently used by drunken nobility in the atmosphere of a tavern, this complaint also reveals something else, namely that the aristocrats who were in charge and who possessed lands, were not acting according to their role. Wynnere is reprimanding Wastour for not following the examples their fathers set them and instead of managing the estates, all they seem to do is spend the family fortune on drink and women. In

essence, Wynnere is telling Wastour to play his part, since the latter seems to have grown passive and only interested in pleasure instead of ordering others to cultivate his lands.

Another example of Wastour's inclination to delights is also revealed in the description of the over-extravagant meal that Wynnere describes which is served at the table of Wastour. Between lines 330 and 355 the audience is presented with a whole array of the most luxurious and unheard of dishes, such as barnacle-geese, boar's head, pheasants, swans, rabbits, woodpeckers, pastries, snipes, all of which richly decorated and covered in what have you to make it even more appealing. As far as the medieval cuisine in late medieval England is concerned, it is not completely clear to me as to what was considered to be normal during mealtime at the table of a noble household, but even so, this feast meal still seems highly extravagant in all its luxury. Either the author of this text was cooking things up as he went along, thereby making Wynnere's complaint all the more justifiable, or this scene might reflect the tendency of those who had the money to afford it, to overindulge in all that was nice. It is almost as if we are brought back into the land of Cokaygne, especially if one bears in mind that this poem is in fact a dream vision.

Even so, the text is still concerned with the debate between two allegorical figures who want to win their argument and considering the fact that the people represented are real figures in society of fourteenth century England, it would be too harsh just to disregard this lavish food description as entirely phantasmal. Admittedly, Wynnere might be overdoing it, but it is nevertheless telling that excess was still present and perhaps even more so amongst the survivors of the plague. Another sign of this tendency to overindulge is, again, presented by Wynnere, who comments:

That are had lordes in londe and ladyes riche,
Now are thay nysottes of the new gett, so nysely attyred,

With side slabbande sleeves, sleght to the grounde,
 Ourlede all umbtourne with ermyn aboute (ll. 409-412)

(translation)

Those who had been lords in land, and noble ladies
 Have become fashion victims, finely dressed
 With broad trailing sleeves let down to the ground,
 Lined and trimmed around with ermine borders (WPWT)

Thompson also mentions the development that took place after the Black Death, explaining that “the new high society was ignorant of good manners [...], even fashions reflected the decadent conditions of the age. [...] The *nouveaux riches* had a passion for display, for garish colours, for excessive dress, for the wearing of many jewels.” (Thompson, 384) If Thompson’s statement is accurate, this would tie in with Wynnere’s comments on the manner in which Wastoure (the nobles) are dressing themselves according to the latest fashion.

Wastoure defends himself by lashing out to Wynnere when commenting on his reputation as a money grubber and warning him of the sin of hoarding:

For gode day ne glade getys thou never.
 The devyll at thi dede-day schal delyn thi gudis;
 Tho thou woldest that it were, wyn thay it never;
 Thi skathill sectours schal sever tham aboute,
 And thou hafe helle full hotte for that thou here saved (ll. 440-444)

(translation)

Because you will never get a good or happy day.

The devil when you die will distribute your goods,

Those that you want to have them will never have the chance,

Your crooked executors will scatter them about,

And you will burn in hell for what you saved here (WPWT)

What we are presented with up till now are essentially three main points of critique: the nobility are given a bad press due to their lack of responsibility and failure of playing their part in society, while spending money in the most outrageous manner. Meanwhile the merchant class (roughly speaking) are blamed for holding on to their money for dear life, even if it means that this does not help the economy in any way. These are all interesting insights into medieval English society after the Black Death. However, there is another aspect to the poem which must not be overlooked entirely.

An element that makes the trustworthiness of this dream-vision questionable is a remark that begins in line 213, where the narrator turns from being only a spectator into a participant:

The kynge waytted one wyde, and the wyne askes;

Beryns broghte it anone in bolles of silvere.

Me thoghte I sowpped so sadly it sowrede bothe myn eghne.

And he that wilnes of this werke to wete any forthire,

Full freschely and faste, for here a fitt endes. (ll. 213-217)

(translation)

He glanced to one side and sent for the wine;

His men brought it at once, in bowls of silver.

I drank so deeply myself it made me blind drunk.

And if you want to listen to more of this work,

It's time to fill up my wine-cup, for here the fitt ends. (WPWT)

Apart from the fact that this is an interesting literary device that turns the narrator's voice from being objective into (doubtfully) subjective, it is also a handy tool with which the performer signified a break in the text and that he would welcome a cup of wine or another drink, before he continued this tale.³¹ Nevertheless, as for the speaker being reliable, his credibility does seem to diminish after his confession of inebriation. The same situation occurs again in line 367, where the speaker again asks for his cup to be filled, but without the comment that he is besotted. Warren Ginsberg comments on this line, stating that: "The repeated lines seem to be a stylistic remnant of the minstrel's art; certainly the fitt divisions perform little formal or structural function as the poem is too short (barely longer than a single fitt of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) and its action too continuous to require the pauses. The lines calling for wine are part of the poet's overall fiction, reminding us of the dreamer's presence, with the address to the readers at line 31" (Ginsberg, 36). This observation notwithstanding, it is still a captivating portrayal which the author gives us of problems that seemed to exist between several classes in society.

Ultimately, the poem breaks off in the MS before a final decision is made, but the king does manage to listen to both parties and decides to send them off to Paris and Rome (Wastour) and a shopping district in London (Wynnere) where they may both continue their lives accordingly. Interestingly enough, the king also urges both Wastour and Wynnere to continue their work and livelihood to the utmost. He tells Wastour to spend as much money as he can, for Wynnere will only be the more pleased when he does: "The more thou [Wastour] wastis thi wele,

³¹ As far as intended authors and narrators could possibly be objective. Perhaps this is just a way of emphasising the presence of the narrator and the notion that texts should never be wholly trusted, especially if the author confesses himself to be roaring drunk. Overall, what we have here seems to be an unreliable narrator.

the better the Wynner lykes”. (l. 495) The situation is almost ironic: although *Wynnere and Wastoure* are constantly at each other’s throats and accusing each other of either covetousness or debauchery, one cannot live without the other. However, besides all this, the arguments that both of them use during the debate contain highly informative and interesting insights into life after the Black Death on how people from different social classes and backgrounds behaved and how this was met by other groups in society.

What we have seen up till now is that, whereas *The Owl and the Nightingale* keep referring to Alfred as their ancient source of knowledge, by the time *Wynnere and Wastoure* was written, he has been entirely discarded and replaced by other and older figures of authority that are now the distributors of wisdom. The remark in this text of the times being dire indeed, since noble women are married to men of lower ranks, is very informative and by all means quite accurate as well. As we saw in some of the statistics given in the paragraph on the *Parliament of Foules*, many noble families were left with no male heir, as a result of which all the lands were passed on to the closest living female heir. If no suitable men of rank to hold an estate were available, it seems plausible that a few suitable men with title and eligible for marriage were.

Moreover, this poem features the first instance in which the quality of artists is heavily criticised and compared to what the standard was before the plague. This ties in completely with Thompson's remark on the decline in language after the Black Death, that “familiar speech became rude, lewd, even obscene [...]” (Thompson, 384). Continuing with Thompson's observations that “the *nouveaux riches* had a passion for display, for garish colours, for excessive dress [...]” (Thompson, 384), this is again underlined by the Wynner's remark that Wastour is splashing out on clothes that are extravagantly decorated and lavish. Another new phenomenon that is absent in the texts discussed before *Wynnere and Wastoure* is the critical attitude towards all levels of clerics. Whereas in *The Owl & the Nightingale* the birds are both complaining about the bishops, in *Wynnere and Wastoure* none of the ecclesiastical members of staff come away

unscathed. This could imply two things: that the quality of clerics plunged downhill after the Black Death due to the massive death toll (as we have seen in the first chapter on the Black Death in England) and that people were reasonably upset about this, or that corruption and bad behaviour on behalf of the clergy had always already existed, but that now people were finally finding the courage and the freedom to voice their discontent. Another fine example of social critique may be found in the next literary composition that will be analysed, namely:

Piers Plowman

Bearing in mind the enormous length of this poem, it would benefit both the research and the reader to divide this analysis up by themes. These subjects range from the material and mundane (such as labour and food) up to the more highbrow and spiritual affairs (such as viewpoints on sin and thoughts on the afterlife). Since the text is so large and bursting with information, I have chosen to summarise the main themes at the beginning of this paragraph. This consequently differs from the examination of the other works, in which the recapitulation is given at the end of the analysis.

First of all, Langland describes the current economic climate in post-plague England, demonstrating that the standards for labourers have significantly improved to such an extent that now they are essentially and exclusively messing about, instead of doing an honest day's work.

Moreover, *Piers Plowman* also reveals the consequences the Black Death had on the ecclesiastical world and on religious practices in general. Consequently, the lack of people caused a shortage of manual workers and clerics at the same time. As a result, plenty of food was left for everyone, which probably triggered the growing emphasis on *contemptu corpori* and self-restraint. It seems that this same development also ignited the shift to the focus on the afterlife becoming a more central theme, as the text of *Piers Plowman* will show.

The poem's elements that I found most interesting are Langland's remarks on the decline of knowledge. He chides both the clerics for their inefficient Latin proficiency and (professional) artists for their poor performance. Also, the way in which he approaches sin is highly intriguing, seeing that he treats it as a disease, referring to Piers Plowman as doctor who has come to cure the sick. That, in itself is an obvious reference to Christ, who himself said that he had come to heal those who needed it. Moreover, the whole tone of the text on the subject of sin is not a very indulgent one and fascinatingly enough, the speaker explicitly mentions that the plague may not be used as an excuse for bad behaviour. Finally, Langland's commentary on labourers and their conduct seems to boil down to the fact that society, as Langland probably used to know it, was changing and that the social mobility that was (further) ignited by the plague, was not as God had ordained in the beginning.

The working class

The poem starts in a scene setting that follows all the conventions of the genre: a narrator who dresses or disguises himself as a shepherd (why, he does not explain) and wanders around Malvern Hills during the month of May, who falls asleep out of weariness by the sound of a brook. He then slips into a dream in which he sees a tower on a hill and a dungeon below, allegorical symbols for heaven and hell, with in between a fair field full of folk consisting of both poor and rich people, labouring as they should:

Thanne gan I meten a merveillous swevene--

That I was in a wildernesse, wiste I nevere where.

A[c] as I biheeld into the eest an heigh to the sonne,

I seigh a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,

A deep dale bynethe, a dongeon therinne,

With depe diches and derke and dredfulle of sighte.
 A fair feeld ful of folk fond I ther bitwene--
 Of alle manere of men, the meene and the riche,
 Werchyng and wandryng as the world asketh.
 Somme putten hem to the plough, pleiden ful selde,
 In settinge and sowyng swonken ful harde,
 And wonnen that thise wastours with glotonye destruyeth (ll. 11-22)

The way in which the scene is depicted is reminiscent of how Chaucer introduces the gatherings of birds to his audience, where each one of them is introduced as doing what they should be doing, acting according to their nature. Even more, there are scholars who argue that Chaucer even based his Plowman in the Canterbury Tales on Langland's *Piers Plowman* and if this is the case, maybe Langland even inspired Chaucer in his description of the gathering of people.

First, the element that attracts most attention in this fragment is the mentioning of 'thise wastours' in line 22, which are said to be gluttonous destroyers. It is interesting to remark that the wastours embody the labourers and the peasants in this poem, whereas in *Wynnere and Wastoure* they represent the nobility and higher clergy. Funnily enough, these wastours are also said to be gluttonous, not because they squander their money all over the place, but because these workers are hardly motivated to attend their duties with care.

The church and the spiritual

Another phenomenon that seemed to be the result of the plague, is one of a more spiritual, ecclesiastical even, nature. Consider the whole hoards of friars which the speaker describes, who are roaming the country while preaching the gospel as they see fit, being heavily criticised by the narrator:

I fond there freres, alle the foure ordres,
 Prechyng the peple for profit of [the wombe]:
 Glosed the gospel as hem good liked;
 For coveitise of copes construed it as thei wolde.
 Manye of thise maistres mowe clothen hem at likyng
 For hire moneie and hire marchaundise marchen togideres.
 Sit charite hath ben chapman and chief to shryve lordes
 Manye ferlies han fallen in a fewe yeres.
 But Holy Chirche and hii holde bettre togidres
 The mooste meschief on molde is mountyng up faste. (ll. 58-67)

It would be intriguing to think that after the plague, there was a gap left to fill for the clergy and that friars jumped at the opportunity, since they could travel around on foot, whereas monks were confined to their cloister. This could potentially amount to the same situation as the narrator describes in *Wynnere and Wastour*, when professional entertainment saw a heavy decline in quality after the Black Death, the same might occur within clerical surroundings.³² If we recollect the numbers of deaths among clergy as discussed in chapter 1, there must have been a huge demand for clerics during, but also after the pestilence. Seeing that priests were not that readily available, people had to content themselves with those who survived and who were willing to venture into a new career as a parish priest. Ziegler puts it quite aptly when stating that “it does not seem that the new recruits who took the place of the dead were spiritually or, still more, educationally of the calibre of their predecessors” (Ziegler, 270). Even more so, he also recounts an interesting case wherein “in the diocese of Bath and Wells a priest was admitted to holy orders even though his wife was still alive and had not entered a cloister on the somewhat shaky grounds that she was an old woman and could remain in the world without giving rise to any suspicions” (Ziegler, 270).

³² Fascinatingly enough, Langland also comments on what he perceived to be the poor quality of performing artists in his day. See lines 10.038 through 10.043.

Ziegler continues to comment on the popularity of friars, which ties in with the remarks of the narrator in *Piers Plowman*: “The mendicant friar, descending as from heaven on a beleaguered village, was greeted with an enthusiasm which his better-established colleague [the priest] rarely knew.” (Ziegler, 275) As the text in *Piers Plowman* says itself in line 83, the friars were experienced as a nuisance to priests as well, seeing that their parishes were already reduced in size, even without friars luring people out of the church:

Persons and parisshe preestes pleynd hem to the bisshop
 That hire parisshe weren povere sith the pestilence tyme,
 To have a licence and leve at London to dwelle,
 And syngen ther for symonie, for silver is swete. (ll. 83-86)

Line 84 shows that the economic consequences of the plague were also felt deeply within the church. Not only the amount of parishioners was hugely diminished, but with that, the income of the parish priests as well. Where there are less people, there are obviously less tithes and therefore less funding for the church.

Another religious peculiarity seemingly inspired by the plague was that of the so called flagellants. Although Langland does not mention these directly in his text, he does express his distaste of pardoners who were also known to behave as flagellants would, beating and whipping themselves, as atonement for the sins of mankind. According to Langland, who does not describe any flagellant-like behaviour when depicting the pardoner, but who does point out some of the other behavioural aspects of pardoners that shows his critical stance towards their presence:

Ther preched a pardoner as he a preest were:
 Broughte forth a bulle with bisshopes seles,
 And seide that hymself myghte assoillen hem alle
 Of falshede of fastynge, of avowes ybroken.

Lewed men leved hym wel and liked hise wordes,
 Comen up knelynge to kissen his bulle.
 He bonched hem with his brevet and blered hire eighen,
 And raughte with his rageman rynges and broches.
 Thus ye gyven youre gold glotons to helpe,
 And leneth it losels that leccherie haunten
 Were the bisshop yblessed and worth bothe his eris,
 His seel sholde noght be sent to deceyve the peple.
 Ac it is noght by the bisshop that the boy precheth
 For the parisshe preest and the pardoner parten the silver
 That the povere [peple] of the parissche sholde have if they ne were. (ll. 68-82)

In merely fifteen lines we are given an observation on some of the religious practices that occurred in Langland's time, after the plague, including his relentless criticism. Line 68, in which a pardoner preaches as if he were a priest, allows me to consider whether this huge increase in numbers of friars was due to a lack of priests, thus enabling the wandering friars to fill the gap or whether it was by authority from Rome. One would think that the Pope would not be overly pleased with the practices of the friars either. Yet consider the following response by pope Clement VI to a petition offered to him in 1351 by senior clergy, pleading for the dissolution of the orders of mendicant friars or that they should be restricted in their services.³³

And if their preaching can be stopped, about what can you preach to the people? If on humility, you yourselves are the proudest of the world, arrogant and given to pomp. If on poverty, you are the most grasping and the most covetous. If on chastity- but we will be

³³ i.e. by prohibiting the friars to preach or hear confessions

silent on this, for God knoweth what each man does and how many of you satisfy your lusts. (Pope Clement VI, quoted in Ziegler, 275)

If even the Pope himself lashes out in accusations like these towards his own staff, than Langland's description of the ways of the clergy suddenly does not seem too far-fetched.³⁴

Freedom of speech

Besides his critique on friars and pardoners (the latter were also a problem for the Catholic Church, regarding all the decrees that were written in order to either restrain or reduce their authority and practices), the fact that he is apparently free to voice his complaints so vehemently without fear of (divine) retribution seems almost modern. This leads us to the fourth element that is worthwhile to consider, namely the freedom of speech. It is intriguing to wonder whether Langland is simply portraying the corruption of the church which had been occurring through all ages, but that the time and place in which he was living enables him to voice his sentiments publicly, or it could be that his account of a series of unfortunate events within the clerical world is in itself a direct consequence of the Black Death.³⁵ Also, Langland openly questions the authority of the Pope up to a certain extent. In passus XIII, the narrator wishes that if only he would know an educated fellow to write (which is a strange remark, since he himself writes down all the visions that he encounters), then he could draw up a complaint to the Pope, so that he could send a remedy for the plague:

That he sente me under his seel a salve for the pestilence

And that his blessyng and hise bulles bocches myghte destruye:

³⁴ The number of times where clerics, and especially friars, are criticised throughout both passus XII and XIII is staggering. Langland keeps hammering on the corruption of friars to such an extent that it borders on the brink of tiring. Yet, it would be interesting to wonder whether this relentless criticism is a new phenomenon that occurred more heavily after the plague.

³⁵ More critique is found in Passus XIX, where this time, the cardinals in Avignon are subject of discussion (ll. 19.420-19.430)

[...]

For hym and for alle hise, founde I that his pardoun

Mighte lechen a man--as I bileve it sholde.

For sith he hath the power that Peter hadde, he hath the pot with the salve:

Argentum et aurum non est michi: quod autem habeo,

tibi do: In nomine Domini surge et ambula.

[...]

Ac if myght of myracle hym faille, it is for men ben noght worthi

To have the grace of God, and no gilt of the Pope. (ll. 13.248/9 & 13.252/4 & 13.255/6)

First of all, it is fascinating to wonder whether the public would really believe that a papal bull, blessed by the Holy Father himself, would have had the power to end the plague. Next comes the astounding insight that Langland is actually questioning why the papal blessing does not put a stop to the epidemic and how come the God-given authority of the Pope is not working when it comes to a widespread sickness, such as the plague, and which was believed to be a punishment for the sins of mankind. Even though the speaker in *Piers Plowman* seems to be a pious and devout believer, it is nevertheless striking to see this critique on the church and its leader so openly presented. It seems as if people had serious questions on life and religion in general and that they were not satisfied with the usual answers given to them. The challenging of the Pope's authority seems quite revolutionary to me, considering the fact that the Pope is claimed to be God's representative on earth. If he is not able to break the spell of the deadly pestilence, maybe that is saying something more about his position as a human being, than about his God-ordained status.

The material world

If we continue to look at *Piers Plowman*, it seems that the situation after the great outbreak of the pestilence also had great material advantages, at least for some. Let us consider line 226 and onwards:

Cokes and hire knaves cryden, “Hote pies, hote!

Goode gees and grys! Go we dyne, go we!”

Taverners until hem tolden the same:

“Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,

Of the Ryn and of the Rochel, the roost to defie!” (ll. 226-230)

Again, we are presented with a situation that seems to derive straight from the *Land of Cokaygne*, where both food and drinks are abundantly present. Although this is a dream vision, Langland is also clearly commenting on his own society as he perceived it to be and therefore, I believe that this description of rich fare and lavish wines is not so much a wish of the protagonist, but the actual and current circumstances. Langland would gain no profit by describing an utopian ideal. If he is writing a social satire, he has to portray actual situations which he can criticise. It would be non-constructive to describe a non-existing situation or event so that it would only provide him with a framework in which Langland would be able to condemn them. Moreover, it is interesting to wonder whether Langland consciously uses the same phrases to describe the nourishments as the narrator does in *Land of Cokaygne*, to underline his argument and to appeal to the knowledge of his readers who, after all, belong to a society gone wrong and topsy-turvy.

Another element that emphasises the argument that food and drinks were plentiful, is the advice that the lady who descends from the tower (which is an allegorical representation of the Holy Church) gives to the narrator in lines 1018/ 9, where she comments that “Of woilene, of

lynnen, of liflode at nede/ In mesurable manere to make yow at ese”³⁶ and in line 1035, the lady stresses her advice again, saying “Measure is medicine, though thou muchel yerne”.³⁷ Temperance has always been regarded as a virtue within societies that have a foundation firmly built on Christianity, but it seems as if in this text it is not only heavily stressed, but also juxtaposed to the current circumstances, as if moderation is almost the opposite of the actual situation. Holy Church gives the example of Lot who, in his lechery, indulged in drinking and ended up impregnating his daughters. She continues by stressing that the flesh is fickle and therefore not to be trusted: “Leve nought thi likame, for a liere hym techeth/ That is the wrecched world, wolde thee bitraye/ For the fend and thi flessh folwen togidere”.³⁸ Again, this concept of disregarding the desires of the flesh is not entirely new, but it seems as if this *contemptu corpori*, the notion of forsaking the body and earthly subjects (and objects) increased in popularity after the Black Death, since all that was material, mortal and profane had proven to be of no avail at all during the plague. Add to this the fact that there were now fewer people left with more food at their demand than they could ever dreamed of, this call for moderation and forsaking earthly goods seems almost logical, yet paradoxical at the same time.³⁹

Views on sin and death

Likewise, whereas there was an overstock in food, potentially enticing people into sin, it appears that this development went hand in hand with the fact that people became increasingly more focused on the afterlife. In line 1084 the protagonist asks in what manner he might save his soul, “How I may save my soule, that seint art yholden”, thereby clearly marking the difference between his wordly body and his immortal spirit. This brings back the debate between *The Owl* and *the Nightingale* in which both birds also discern a difference between bodily sins and spiritual

³⁶ With woollen, with linen with food at your need/ In reasonable measure to make you at ease

³⁷ Measure is medicine though thou yearn for much

³⁸ Believe not thy body for him a liar teacheth/ That is, the wretched world which would thee betray/ For the fiend and thy flesh follow thee together

³⁹ In Passus XIV, moderation is praised again as a virtue and the case of Sodom and Gomorra is presented as what the consequences are of over-indulgence. (ll. 14.073-80)

wrongs. However, whereas the owl and nightingale are inclined to be more lenient to those who commit sins of the flesh, it seems as if Langland is voicing that all that the body entices you to do is wrong, besides the basic necessities of some food, clothing and shelter. There are no more comforting words spoken nor is there any tolerance.

Another example that shows this new and hardened stance on bodily sins is a remark made by Lady Meed, who is introduced to the audience in Passus II as a counterpart of the Scarlet lady in the book of Revelations. This introduction alone is telling, given the speaker and her reputation (Burrow, 113):

It is a freletee of flesh, ye fynden it in bokes
 And a cours of kynde. wherof we comen alle
 Who may scape the sclaundre, the scathe is soone amended
 It is synne of the sevene sonnest relessed (ll. 3055-3058)

Lady Meed claims that frailty of the flesh is the first of the seven sins that is forgiven. This is highly reminiscent of the debate between the owl and the nightingale, who seem to take a softer stance on those who lose themselves in physical pleasures, than on those who pride themselves to be better, since spiritual sins are condemned more strongly by both birds. If we remember the warning that Holy Church gave, to forsake all that the flesh entices one to, and regarding this comment by Lady Meed, it seems that Langland is clearly distancing himself from those whose opinion seem to be more lenient on bodily sins. Not only does he disapprove of such practices, he also clearly stigmatises those who hold looser morals, by putting these words into the mouth of one of the figures who represents several vices. According to J.A Burrow, Lady Meed could either be “the sin of covetousness, or else bribery and corruption, or else ‘the power of money’” (Burrow, 113). Both ways, the lady is up to no good and people who share her opinions, should think twice and recant their ways. The main focus now seems to have shifted from the earthly (how to lead a

proper life and avoid excessive sinning) towards life after death (how to keep, or at least, make your soul spotlessly clean so that you might be allowed access into heaven).

Downfall of wisdom

Along with this (renewed) interest in the afterlife, Langland also reveals the decline of knowledge that appeared to be prevalent after the Black Death had taken its many victims. In line 1141, we find an interesting remark by the personified Holy Church, for she chides the narrator for lacking a proper knowledge of Latin: “To litel Latyn thow lernedest, leode, in thi youthe”⁴⁰ and subsequently throws a Latin sentence at him, which does not only leave the speaker slightly puzzled, but the audience as well: “*Heu michi quia sterilem duxi vitam iuvenilem*”!⁴¹ It seems plausible to assume that the complaint of Holy Church is a valid and reasonable one. If we bear in mind the huge mortality rate among clergy as seen in chapter 1 and the findings by Ziegler on the lack of proper clerical staff, then it seems almost natural that there were also few left with a sound knowledge of Latin who were able to pass it on to another generation. Fewer clergy would mean fewer teachers and even less transfer of knowledge. According to P.A. Sorokin, in his study on *Man and Society in Calamity*, citing a source written by the Minor Friar Johannes of Winterthur, “in the years 1348 and 1349 [...] abbeys, priories, guardianships, professorships, and readerships, and other posts, are bought by ignorant, young, inexperienced and stupid people” (Sorokin, 113). It might go too far to imply that the quality of Latin was severely reduced after the Black Death, but it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the outbreak of the plague and all the people and their knowledge that consequently perished, only did more damage to the decline of the proper usage of Latin, while at the same time supporting the rise of the vernacular.⁴² Admittedly, the complaint

⁴⁰ Too little Latin thou learnest man, in thy youth

⁴¹ “Alas me, because of the fruitless command of youthful life.” This translation is my own, in want of any better English renderings. Yet, suggestions for improvement are much appreciated.

⁴² More comments on the problem of poor Latin knowledge (mainly when it concerns priests) are found in passus XI, lines 11.301 – 11.316.

and concern that no one possessed a decent knowledge of Latin was already prevalent in King Alfred's time, but this development was only intensified this progress of language corruption.

Moreover, considering the fact that most texts dating from after the Black Death that we have seen up till now show a significantly more substantial amount of Latin phrases, sentences and sayings, compared to that from before the plague, this is a very interesting phenomenon when juxtaposed to the notion that Latin was in fact deteriorating. This emphasis on using and scattering Latin throughout a text might indeed imply that authors were flaunting their skills which had become more and more exceptional. It could also be an attempt to educate the masses, or it could be a combination of both. Besides, this also raises questions as to what audience Langland was aiming for when (re)composing *Piers Plowman*, by inserting a dozen or more Latin phrases in the B-text that are either biblical or ecclesiastical. It might imply that he had a select group in mind, but it could also be hinting at Langland reaching for a wider array of readers and simultaneously trying to educate them in several areas. Additionally, the overt usage of Latin also boosts a text in prestige and signifies that what we have here, is a distinguished text for particular readers.

Regarding sin as sickness

Another completely different yet intriguing aspect that we may find in *Piers Plowman* is the recurrent references to sin as a disease. Rosanne Gasse argues in her article on “The Practice of Medicine in *Piers Plowman*” that it was generally held that “natural disasters like plague and destructive wind storms are believed to be divine warnings to improve human social behaviour” (Gasse, 178). Again, a reference that underlines the belief of misbehaviour as the root of the plague, is to be found in line 5013, where the personification of Reason teaches people that “these pestilences were for pure synne”.⁴³ Interestingly enough, this explanation is preached by Reason and not by a clerical figure (although Reason is standing in front of a bishop while

⁴³ He proved that these pestilences were purely for sin. Another reference to the pestilence as a warning sign occurs in Passus XX, ll. 20.096-20.109

proclaiming his news). Let us consider the following theory: behind a scourge like the plague lies the wrath of God, due to the wrongdoings of mankind. Consequently, epidemics served as a way to give people a chance to better their lives (if they survived). If this was indeed the case, it seemed to have had quite the opposite effect. Instead of forcing people to undergo a serious reality check, contemplating their sins and resolving to amend their ways, it seemed that people lost themselves in extremes. As we can see in the text of *Piers Plowman*, people lived as they wanted: eating, drinking, feasting and hardly working, indulging in all the bounty left after the waning of the plague. Alternatively, they lost themselves in religious frenzy (think of the flagellants whipping themselves through town) and started to attach less than reasonable meaning to all that was worldly, shifting their focus to the afterlife.

Bad behaviour as a result of the Black Death

It seems that the plague, despite its possible admonishing nature, was also used as an excuse to behave badly, or, in any way, inappropriately. According to Langland: “Late no wynnyng forwanye hem while thei be yonge/ Ne for no poustee of pestilence plese hem noght out of reson”⁴⁴ (ll. 5035/ 6). Apparently, the plague was used as an argument for people not to behave reasonable anymore. It is tricky to attach too much significance to this remark, especially since reason is a word that contains such a broad and general definition. Nevertheless, it should not be glossed over in its entirety. It seems plausible to think that a calamity such as the outbreak of a plague is able to beguile people out of their wits or their usual line of reasoning, since the events taking place during the Black Death seemed to go entirely against everything that people deemed sensible and understandable. In Sorokin's study of the manner in which societies tend to react to catastrophes such as war, famine and pestilence, it is claimed that in the latter case, “grave pestilences [...] produce different and even opposite ethic-religious effects in the behaviour of different elements of the population concerned: in one case they induce demoralisation and

⁴⁴ Let no wish for wealth spoil them while they be young/ Nor for power of the pestilence please them out of reason

irreligiousness; in another they lead to moral and religious exaltation” (Sorokin, 180). He also refers to a contemporary chronicler, John of Reading, who “complains bitterly [in the plague year 1349] of the Mammon of unrighteousness which has taken possession of the regulars, especially the mendicants, who, having become unduly rich through confessions and legacies, were seeking after earthly and carnal things” (Sorokin, 175).

Let us look at some consequences that Langland himself presents in passus X, where he writes that: “Freres and faitours han founde [up] swiche questions/ To plesse with proude men syn the pestilence tyme [...] Ne beth plentevouse to the povere as pure charite wolde/ But in gaynesse and glotonye forglutten hir good hemselve” (ll. 10.071/72 & 10.082/83) Again, we have the critique on friars, but what is noteworthy, is that those who have money, seem to have lost the goodwill to let those who are less well off participate in their bounty. Instead they are indulging in their richness by spending money on fancy pastimes and extravagant meals.

Upward mobility

As has been said before, the plague did more than just wreak utter havoc. It also seemed to open up new possibilities for groups of people who had been confined, or condemned even, to a life of poverty before the outbreak. This new social mobility that was prevalent seems to have met much criticism by Langland.⁴⁵ He seems slightly obsessed with the fact that labourers, i.e. non-skilled workers, were now able to go around and ask for much higher wages than they ever dared to do before the plague. Yet, it occurs to me that it is not so much that the speaker in *Piers Plowman* is raging against the opportunity that these workers now had, since there was plenty of labour, but only a few workers. From this perspective, the speaker would be criticising something that was essentially nobody’s fault. The seemingly biggest point of frustration to him is that people are not

⁴⁵ Langland also complains of other professions who do not know how to do their job properly anymore in Passus XIV, ll. 15.355 and onwards.

acting according to their place in society. From line 6303 onwards, the narrator describes how beggars (who usually cannot be choosers) refuse any food that is not to their liking:

Ne no beggere ete breed that benes inne were,
 But of coket and clermatyn or ellis of clene whete,
 Ne noon halfpeny ale in none wise drynke,
 But of the beste and of the brunneste that [brewesteres] selle. (ll. 6306-6306)

The situation described here is that the lowest of the low, the unskilled labourers, who can only work with their hands and who are dependent on the generosity of those who hire them, are turning their noses up at the food that was usually given to them and are demanding bread and drinks that were commonly reserved for those who were (much) more well-off. By displaying this behaviour, they are rebelling against the established (pre-plague) feudal society and its embedded hierarchy, and thus indirectly, they are revolting against God.

Nevertheless, although Langland might not be too happy with this course of events, it is undeniable that circumstances did progress for certain groups of people. As Sorokin states: “as a result of the depopulation of England by the Black Death, the wages of farmhands doubled or trebled, and there was a widespread improvement in their general condition. Serfdom sharply declined, and many a serf became free- that is, climbed to a higher rung of the social ladder.”

(Sorokin, 112)

Focus on Christ

A final note on the contents of *Piers Plowman* is found in the last Passus of the B-text, where the narrator describes that:

I wole bicomme a pilgrym,

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 countrepledeh me, Conscience. Now Kynde me avenge,
 And sende me hap and heele, til I have Piers the Plowman!" (ll. 20.381/6)

This everlasting search for Piers Plowman, who basically seems to be a metaphorical figure representing Christ, appears to echo a longing for an ideal religious authority, which, according to A.V.C. Schmidt, “[is] no longer to be found within the visible institutional framework” (Schmidt, 350). Clearly, although Langland is admonishing and lecturing his audience, while describing the current situation he found himself in, he has also lost hope of finding solace and answers from the established holy administration and has set his mind and heart to the person of Christ.

Tying all these loose strings together, a highly informative account emerges, recounting the way in which several layers in the society of Langland's time looked and functioned. Comparing this to what we have seen in *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the matters both the texts are treating and commenting on certainly convey quite a few parallels. Think of social mobility as a seemingly new phenomenon, or the decline in the quality of performers. Likewise, both poems are far from positive when it comes to the clergy and both writers seem to be astounded and somewhat repulsed by the display of riches exhibited by certain groups of people. Let us continue then to the next and final set of poems, to see whether any more similarities or new insights will emerge.

III. Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount (Pre) VS

A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes (Post)

*Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos
Fuerount* last quarter of 13th century

*A Disputacioun betwyx þe
Body and Wormes* early 15th century

In this *Ubi Sount* poem, the text can be basically divided into three parts. The first three stanzas consist of a summary of all the splendour, beauty, earthly pleasures and lavishness in general, which the speaker is describing (or lamenting almost) as glories of the past, while wondering where all beautiful ladies and proud men have gone:

Were beþ þey biforen us weren,
Houndes laden and haekes beren,
And hadden feld and wode?
þe riche levedies in hoere bour,
þat wereden gold in hoere tressour,
Wiþ hoere bri3tte rode,

Eten and drounken and maden hem glad,
Hoere lif was al wiþ gamen ilad;
Men keneleden hem biforen.
þey beren hem wel swiþe heye,
And, in an twincling of on eye,
Hoere soules weren forloren. (ll. 1-12)

The fourth stanza offers a less blissful explanation, when the speaker answers that since they already enjoyed an earthly paradise and as a result they are now writhing in anguish and are tormented by the fires of hell. Consequently, the following four stanzas are devoted to warning its audience that they should set their minds on the heavenly rewards they will earn if they forsake earthly pleasures:

Dre3y here, man, þenne, if þou wilt

A luitel pine þat me þe bit,

Wiþdrau þine eyses ofte,

Þey þy pine he ounrede;

And þou þenke on þi mede,

Hit sal þe þinken softe. (ll. 25-30)

Strikingly (and slightly strangely) enough, the speaker is encouraged to suffer in this life while on earth, so that in heaven he might gather the spiritual fruits of his earthly woes. The audience is instructed to take up their weaponry and fight the good fight, so that they may be “god[‘s] champion!” (l. 34), which only underlines the notion of life on earth as a spiritual battleground between the forces of good and evil even more. Better yet, in the seventh stanza, the poet contemplates Christ’s death on the cross and those who read or hear this poem are not only supposed to be strengthened by this meditation, but also called upon to avenge Christ’s offering, by repaying him with one’s own life. The ninth stanza offers a glimpse into what this heavenly reward might actually entail, by stating that in the afterlife, there will be day without night, with no vengeance, quarrelling and strife, and one shall be able to dwell with God in peace, rest and joy without end.

Again, snippets of *The Land of Cokaygne* seep through (day without night, endless joy and no conflict), which is not that surprising, since the aforementioned is a satire on the ideal of Paradise.

Finally, the last and tenth stanza is a prayer and invocation to Mary, queen of heaven, to act as a guardian for those who are tempted and as a shield to defend people against the devil. It is interesting to ponder whether Marian influences became less after the Black Death, but this might very well have nothing to do with the outbreak of the plague and that this has to be considered as a development on its own. Nevertheless, it does seem striking that in all the post-plague literary works that have been discussed up till now, there is either no- or hardly any mention at all of Mary, mother of God, while the popularity of Marian veneration was alive and booming during the twelfth and thirteenth century.

Also, the reader or general public is instructed on how to defend themselves against the temptations of the devil:

Of ri3tte bileve þou nim þat sheld

þe wiles þat þou best in þat feld

þin hond to strenkþen fonde;

And kep þy traytre seien þat word.

Biget þat murie londe (ll.37-42)

It is noteworthy that the religious imagery used here is that of a weapon arsenal; as if the religious have a battle to fight against Satan. Even so, the tone that speaks from this stanza is considerably proactive. It teaches that Christians have a choice when it comes to dealing with the world's temptations and that, although the main emphasis lies on the rewards in heaven, one should take up arms to both defend himself and to keep the enemy aloof.

Overall, the focus or aim of this poem is to move people's gaze and preoccupation from that which is earthly and temporary to a subject that is more divine and eternal. Even so, the earthly riches described in the first few stanzas are not specifically condemned. The speaker recounts the splendour of the past and emphasises that all these are not everlasting and worthless when one journeys to the grave. Nonetheless, the main tone of the poem is one of nostalgia rather than condemnation. It is more a lament with a moral, than a very religious and moralistic text offering a gloomy outlook on life. Instead of looking forward, its gaze is fixed on past and present: on those who once were beautiful, young and dashing, are no more. As George Kane argues in research on Middle English religious lyrics: "The effect of this poem is [...] mixed, but nevertheless relatively successful; it awakens not only fear of death but also a romantic sorrow for past splendours, in order to banish them with good counsel." (Kane, 116) The three aspects that made those in the past stand out, namely riches, beauty and youth are ultimately juxtaposed to what comes next: suffering, sin and woe. The lesson that is to be learned is that one should not cling too much to earthly goods, but seek everlasting treasures in heaven.

In short, what we observe here is the reminiscence of past splendours, which once filled people with joy, but have since seemingly vanished into thin air. Therefore, the audience is urged to aim its gaze towards heaven and bear in mind that all that is earthly is also transient. Man should thus seek its treasures in heaven. Yet the most interesting aspect of this whole poem is not the *Ubi Sunt* motif which is to be found in texts throughout the whole of the Middle Ages, but the nostalgia that speaks from it. The beauty and riches from bygone days are not condemned at all, they are just recounted as an example of what might happen if one attaches too much trust to- or has too much faith in earthly objects. When comparing this to the other texts, the trend that is starting to show is that, in most of the pre-plague texts, a notion of mortality and spiritual matters presiding over the worldly is always present, yet the latter is never entirely condemned, whereas in the post-plague texts, terrestrial subjects are discussed in a condescending manner, while mankind

is mainly urged not to over-indulge in any physical pleasure, thereby stressing the gravity of sins and especially physical misbehaviour, such as gluttony, lechery and extravagance. One could almost say that all that is attached to bodily issues is frowned upon, whereas more incorporeal subjects are thought to be more worthy. This could be a reaction to the excess that was present after the Black Death and it could also be a way of coping with the disappointment in all that could not help during the plague pandemic. All that was worldly, be it knowledge, medicine, doctors, priests, etc., seemed to be of no help at all. Therefore, a conclusion that might be drawn is that everything under the sun is rather worthless in the end. It seems like a harsh and a too narrow-minded judgement, but when one is traumatised and has just survived a disease that killed at least one third of the people around you, it is easier to choose a line of thought that, however bleak it may be, gives you some notion of understanding how to get to grips with the facts, instead of facing the terrifying and absurd reality that there was basically no logic behind it all.

Having said all that, and putting these conclusions just aside for a moment without disregarding them wholly, the time has come to have a closer look at the last text.

A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes

The next and last poem that is examined in this research is also one of the most extraordinary compositions that I have yet come across. As might have become evident up till now, both dream visions and debates are popular genres, while the literary devices employed by writers tended to convey their message to their audience. *The Owl & the Nightingale*, *Parliament of Foules* and *Wynnere and Wastoure* are the other examples that we have seen so far, but the main aspect that makes *A Disputacioun* stand out, is the mere fact that the debate takes place not between two living beings, but between a corpse and the worms that are feeding on it. This is almost like a parody on the popular body and soul debate that was commonly known in medieval literature, where it

was typical for “the soul [to chastise] the body for sinning while it was alive and [to describe] the body's incipient decomposition” (Rytting, 217)

However, in this poem it is not so much the soul accusing the body of sinfulness and the other way round, this time it involves an already decomposed body who is complaining and trying to persuade the worms not to gnaw on its remains. Also, as Jenny Rebecca Rytting argues, another element that is intriguing to this poem is that “the body seems to be a specific person with a distinct personality, rather than an abstract representation of 'the flesh'”(Rytting, 218). Instead of having a general personification such as the speakers from *Wynnere and Wastour*, it seems that the body here is an actual persona with its own distinctive voice. This seems like an example where the focus on general, communal identification which was common for medieval society, has shifted to the personal and individual perspective that became one of the distinctive features of the renaissance.

As recounted earlier, during the first few stanzas, we are introduced to a pilgrim who leaves the country to flee the pestilence and to clear his conscience by doing a pilgrimage at the same time:

In þe ceson of huge mortalite
 Of sondre disseses with þe pestilences
 Heuely reynand whilom in cuntre
 To go pylgramege mefeld be my conscience (ll.1-4)

En route he finds a church which he enters to say his prayers. While kneeling inside, he sees a newly made sepulchre with a coat of arms emblazoned on it, hinting that the body inside is of noble blood. In the fourth stanza, it is revealed that the body of a woman is contained within the tomb, as the speaker describes the fashion in which her appearance is depicted on the tomb. The

speaker, rather abruptly, falls asleep, and dreams of the dialogue between the corpse of the lady and the worms, feeding on her flesh.⁴⁶ The body starts to address the worms directly, speaking in the first person. She recounts how fresh and sweet her body once was, and how personable, beautiful and high-ranked she was conceived to be during her lifetime. In fact, especially her noble birth is stressed four times alone in the fifth stanza, thereby emphasising the grim contrast between her glorious past and her present state of being. Essentially, the way in which the body is presented to us is that at this moment, she has both metaphorically and literally, hit an all-time low.

The body pleads with the worms to leave her at peace out of courtesy, to which the worms reply that they are actually doing the body a favour. Since they lack the sense of smell and taste, they are the only animals in the kingdom even willing to go near such a corpse, with “orrybyll flesche rotyng and stynkyng” (l. 66)⁴⁷ and, by eating her remains, they are in fact cleaning and polishing the bones. This is the only instance wherein the poem is being overtly graphic, by describing the corpse's corrupted and decayed appearance. Interestingly enough, there are very few (highly) graphic descriptions of the results of the plague or the decomposing of bodies in literary works, besides Boccaccio's introduction to the *Decameron*. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the decaying body was popular in the contemporary art of that time, such as tombs that contained an image of both the body in all its glory and that of the carcass as it would look like after death. Perhaps writing down the physical details of victims, both alive and dead, would be considered too gruesome, unfit or maybe even disrespectful with regard to the deceased. In a reply to the worm's explanation, the body cries out for help to her former suitors and lovers, who have vowed to serve and protect her: “Now where be þe knyghtes cum forth in place/ And þe worschipful sqwyers both hye and base/ þat sumtyme to me offerd þour seruyse/ Days of þour lyfes of hertes frawnchsyse” (ll. 75-79). It seems bizarre, funny and macabre at the same time to imagine a

⁴⁶ A note on the sudden transition from the depiction of the lady's beauty to the speaker's slumber: according to Karl Brunner, who is cited by Jenny R. Rytting, it seems that six lines are missing from the MS, due to a mistake made by the copyist. This is however a theory that cannot be proved, seeing that this poem is only preserved in one MS, British Museum Add. 37049. (219)

⁴⁷ [Your] horrible, rotting, stinking waste (Rytting)

rotting corpse crying for the noblemen, those who had once devoted their lives and hearts to her, to come to her rescue. Even more ironic if one thinks that the only ones who are actually helping her are the worms, by keeping her company and polishing off her bones. The worms reply quite pleasantly that all her knights and squires are more than welcome to join her, since they could tackle them as easily as anybody else. In the eleventh stanza, the worms describe the great figures that once were, but which are now devoured by them. They sum up the nine worthies, the Trojan knights and four female beauties, the latter all known from the classical sources (Helen, Polyxena, Lucrece, Dido). This puts the body and her past in a rather dim perspective, although she must have been a beauty and quite renowned in her own time, when compared to the names the worms mention, her reputation does not seem to be so notable at all.

Moreover, the sixteenth stanza is also graphic in quite another way and contains some revealing insight as well, when the worms recount all the fleas, nits and stomach-worms she had to deal with when the body was still alive. According to them, this was already a foreboding of what would happen to her after death, since, in life, she was essentially infested with bugs already. I mentioned revealing, since these lines also tell how daily life was for an aristocratic woman. Even though she was high and mighty, this did not imply that the daily annoyances such as stomach worms, itching and bites caused by bugs, overlooked her. In lines 151 and 152, the famous 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' concept is recalled by the worms, thereby instilling even more humility into the body (and, by all means, the reader as well).

Now, from the twentieth stanza onwards, the tone of the body's voice seems to change. Instead of perpetually lamenting her past and eschewing the worms, it seems that she is undergoing her first penitential moment, by realising:

þat in my lyfe was I made lewyd and vnwyse
 With a reynawnde pryde so mykil for to mell

For myne abowndant bewte to so devyse
 To prowde hafe I bene to wanton and to nyse
 In worldly plesaunce gret delyte hafyng
 To be my comper none worthy þinkyng (ll.157-162)

(translation)

That all my life I was a fool.
 With a reigning pride too much to tell,
 I thought of myself as a beautiful jewel
 And was wanton and frivolous, as a rule,
 Having great delight in worldly pleasure,
 Thinking none to be my equal measure.

This is the first instance in which the body confesses her sins, by repenting of her vain, prideful and promiscuous behaviour that she displayed during her life. Even so, this moment of revelation into self-knowledge does not seem to impress the worms much, since they reply that if the body could have decided, she would be alive all the same, and still sporting her attractive physical features. The worms refer to the Bible, by paraphrasing verse 30 from the book of Proverbs, chapter 31: “þat þe fayrnes of women talde/ Is bot vayne þinge and transitory/ Women dredying god sal be prayed holy” (ll.174-176).⁴⁸ This reprimanding creates another change in the voice of the body. She accepts the worms' criticism and turns her gaze to the public, by addressing the audience directly and telling them to view her circumstances as a warning. Those who still have the luxury of time, should think ahead and prepare to meet death.

⁴⁸ The King James version of the Bible reads: “Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.”

And þat þos on lyfe may hafe space to be redy
 To rememor in þe same wyse also
 Contynewly þinkyng in þe tyme to cum þerto
 What he shal be and also what is he” (ll.181-184)

(translation)

And that those in life may have space to prepare,
 To consider in the same wise also,
 They should think, in the time before they go,
 Of their future states and their origins.

However, in the 25th stanza, there is another development in the chain of events. Up till now, we have seen that, at first, we have the description of the tomb of what once was a beautiful, rich, young lady, who is now lamenting her rather deplorable situation in which she finds herself. She then tries to persuade the worms to leave her remains alone, by calling in the aid of her former lovers and admirers, which is honed away by the worms who, very aptly, reply that they have defeated greater men than the handful of noblemen that the body calls for. The worms then explain that they have been with her all her life, thereby emphasising the basic sordidness of a human body, which is now only fully exposed until after one's death. Not only is this a matter of fact, it also sheds a new light on how people might view themselves. Instead of merely being a precious jewel, as the body herself says, human bodies are also a collection of bacteria, bugs and other creepy crawlies. Following this humbling and matter-of-fact view on the human figure, the body repents of her pride and neglect of her spiritual condition, by only paying attention (too much even) to her physical well-being. She then addresses those who are witness to the debate to take heed and not to fall into the same trap as the body did.

Nevertheless, instead of ending the poem with an emphasis on man's mortality, employing the well-known *Memento Mori* theme, the body consoles herself by stating that she will enjoy the company of the worms for a little while longer, until she is resurrected again on Judgement Day, on which all the deceased will be given a new and even better body than they ever had whilst alive on earth.

Let vs kys and dwell to gedyr eyermore
 To þat god wil þat I sal agayne vpryse
 At þe day of dome before þe hye justyse
 With þe body glorified to be (ll.195-198)

(translation)

Let us dwell together forevermore-
 Till I rise again at God's command
 On Judgement Day, and before him stand
 With this body to be glorified

Thus, instead of stressing mankind's transience state, the poem suddenly offers its public a glimpse of hope by reminding us that death is not the final verdict and that there is another life beyond the grave: not just spiritual, but quite a physical one. Even death seems to be a temporary state of affairs, according to this poem, and one may look forward to a new and better physique by which mankind shall be able to glorify its maker.

The last two stanza's are an elaboration on how the speaker wakes up from this dream vision and how he was urged by a holy man to write it all down, thereby summarising all the themes that the poem encapsulates. The aspect that is most compelling to me, in this body of text, is the

manner in which it combines the grim and harsh reality of life and the promising hope of an after-life, all intertwined in an insightful, moralist yet humorous debate. The start of the poem is particularly significant. It introduces a narrator who is fleeing the plague and sees a new tomb with (probably) a victim of the pestilence in it. When the vision begins, the author of the poem does not shun the more gruesome details, by enlightening us on how the worms are feeding on the corpse and how they in fact have been with her (and thus, with all of us) all her life. All these elements strike me as very realistic, besides the fact that a gathering of worms are actually having a conversation with a dead body.

Subsequently, we are presented with a more or less prescribed formula of lamenting, hindsight, repentance and admonition. However, as we would expect the poem to end, suddenly a new insight appears that not only leads to a change in the body's attitude to her death and its direct consequences, but which could also redefine the audience's attitude to life after death as well. Instead of ending the poem with a mournful remembrance of mankind's mortality, the promise of resurrection is offered. It is almost as if the audience are onlookers and that each part of human life is scrutinised: the glory of youth, the sordidness of death, the mutability of life, and then suddenly it seems as if the camera (so to speak) zooms out and we get a clearer view of the bigger picture, revealing the possibility that there is yet more to come.

Overall, this is a poem that almost resembles a parody on an already existing genre, namely the body and soul debate. Yet, it is not a parody, since it does not satirise its example, but in my opinion, even improves upon it. It is such a creative twist to what audiences would expect. Instead of a discussion between an earthly object and a celestial one in which the first blames the other for enticing it into sin and vice versa, we are now presented with what seems to be a very distinct voice who is arguing with the worms residing in her. It is graphic, funny, intelligent, realistic and rather gruesome at the same time. The *Disputacioun* text also shows references to classical names, but some more contemporary ones as well (Charlemagne, for example). However,

whereas this text very vividly emphasises both the *Ubi Sunt* and *Memento Mori* theme, it also promises an actual and tangible solution. Not just the bliss of everlasting joy someday in heaven, but a whole new and even better body than before. Bringing this together with all the other texts we have seen up till now, this one is by far the most optimistic. It gives advice without being overtly patronising or moralising and it warns readers to take heed and not to attach too much significance to earthly matters, without rejecting all of it. It is surprisingly nuanced and commonsensical in its tone and by combining a promise that has both celestial (the return of Christ) as terrestrial (a new creation) elements in it, this piece of work seems to combine all the positive aspects that we have seen in both the pre- as the post-plague poems.

VI. Conclusion

When I first started my thesis, my main concern was to focus on literature that was produced in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England and to see how the impact and effects of the pestilence were reflected in literary works from that period. I furthermore questioned whether literature from this same interval served as cultural memory to those who survived the outbreak and the onslaught of the Black Death.

As we saw in the first chapter, chroniclers that made accounts of the arrival of the plague in England, started referring to dates in a cyclic manner. Instead of just stating the day and month, which was already by then a usual way of dating a text, they named it the feast of St Stephen or the day of St James. In the light of the events that followed, this is an interesting development. It is almost as if people use other ways to remember a specific day when disaster strikes. Think of the way in which 9/11 is referred to by everyone, which is basically just a number of digits, but most people around the globe will now exactly what one is referring to without further explanation. Another example of this are the numbers 4/6, which does not ring a bell to many in the Western part of the world, but in China this immediately conjures up images from the protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

After the plague spread itself from Asia to the West through trade routes, it reached England in 1348. There, it struck a nation which was already under heavy economical strain due to population growth, urbanisation and a Hundred Years War that proved to be a bottomless pit, financial-wise. Figures have shown that the death toll varied per place, but that nevertheless, it was still exceedingly high. Ranging from thirty to over fifty percent in victims of a town's population, this was a disease unparalleled in numbers.

In the second chapter, Boccaccio introduces us to the immediate effects of the plague, by presenting a vivid and distressing account of what happened, from which different sort of consequences on many levels can be observed. The speed with which the plague hit its victims is astonishing. Even more startling is the manner in which people behaved towards each other, however closely connected by blood or law. People resorted to their primal urge to survive and simply deserted each other, for fear of infection and in hope of saving their own lives. All moral and social rules, codes if you will, were forsaken and neglected, thereby destroying the fundamental principles of behaviour that are elementary to hold a society together and specifically, to keep it running effectively. While people were dying everywhere, it seemed that those who survived or who were not yet infected, could behave and do as they themselves wished or pleased.

On the one hand, there were those who underlined the principle of 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die', while at the same time, others were seeking their comfort and help in religion, forsaking earthly pleasures and repenting of the sins of mankind. It goes without saying that there was undoubtedly a group of people that seemed unaffected and who continued living their lives as usual, yet this latter group is not the main focus of this research.

In chapter four, in which the poems and texts, showcased in chapter three, are discussed, we have seen that all the works show signs of both the *Carpe Diem* as the *Memento Mori* attitude. Whereas the pre-plague texts draw a distinction between bodily and spiritual sins, their attitude towards carnal sins is generally forgiving and tolerant. The literary compositions made after the plague are much more firm and harsh when judging those who (over)indulge in physical pleasures. Think of the way in which the speaker in *Piers Plowman* preaches against the sin of gluttony and lechery, whereas in *The Owl and the nightingale* both birds agree on little else besides the fact that the sin of pride is much worse than the sin of lust. In *Land of Cokaygne*, there are obviously no sins mentioned explicitly, but it would have been clear to the audience that this is a text in which

room is offered to all sorts of physical delights, without the fear of divine retribution. Yet, there is no hint of any spiritual wrongdoings in which people can freely indulge themselves, although I confess it would seem less pleasurably to freely allow your anger to run wild, than to dive straight into a pool of wine. This change in attitude towards physical misbehaviour is likely to stem from the fact that after the Black Death, there were more stores, crops and harvests to feed the actual amount of people that were still alive. Moreover, the 'eat, drink and be merry' attitude which we discussed before, was obviously prevalent amongst those who survived the ordeal and those who were now in possession of more wealth than before, liked to show it in a rather blatant way. It is interesting to see that in one of the sources quoted, where the canon at Leicester Abbey comments that people have lost their interest in worldly goods during the plague, it seems as if this apathy turned around completely after the waning of the pestilence. In all the post-plague literary works that have been analysed in this thesis, there is a strong sense of *contemptu corpori* and warnings for people not to chase, nor take refuge in worldly affairs. Instead, their main focus should be on living a good, modest and humble life, in order to gather winning points for after one's death. It is not life on earth that matters, or the riches that one could gather while alive. It is the life after one's death and the treasures in heaven that seem to be the main focus point now. The spiritual presides over the mundane. In this sense, this is still the same as in the pre-plague texts, where carnal matters are viewed to be less important than incorporeal issues. Yet, the difference in the texts from after the plague is that there is much more contempt and disregard for all that has to do with the physical and the flesh.

Likewise, most texts, be they pre- or post-plague, contain some form of criticism on the clergy. However, whereas the poems from before the Black Death show a critical stance towards mainly higher clergy, such as bishops, while in the works after 1349, all levels of clerics are subjugated to severe observations. This could have two underlying reasons. One, which is pretty certain, is that during the Black Death, a huge amount of clerics died together with all the victims

of the pandemic, leaving a whole collection of vacancies to fill. Since they were already dead and gone, all the old clerical staff could hardly educate their newcomers. Those who did fill the gap were either too young, incompetent or wholly unsuitable for the job. The second reason, in my opinion, is that people found it easier to voice their criticism, be it on either their neighbour or the Pope. Perhaps the devastation of the plague that seemed entirely haphazard had encouraged mankind's critical thinking and given him the courage and opportunity to voice his thoughts.

Together with the decline of quality in clergymen, there was also a noticeable downfall in language skills, both in ecclesiastical as in common speech. Both the writers of *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman* are complaining that no one knows his Latin properly anymore and, what is intriguing, that the abilities of professional entertainers are likewise deteriorating in comparison to those of their predecessors. The complaint that they cannot conjure up a good story with a decent rhyme in it is highly telling.

At the same time, alongside the decay of language, there was also a development of seeking out new knowledge from ancient sources becoming more prevalent. Although Latin might be impoverished after the Black Death, all the post-plague compositions show a huge surge in references to classical sources, be it books, mythical figures, philosophers or just plain old quotes.

This search for ancient knowledge coincides with the change in nature of the works we have seen. In case of the pre-plague poems, it strikes me that they are more neutral, so to speak, as in how they present their topics. Take for instance, the debate between the owl and the nightingale. All series of topics pass along the way, yet both the birds represent another side of the coin. It is as if the audience is given a whole array of choices and options and the author leaves it to them to decide which one is the best. Compared to *Piers Plowman* or *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the latter ones are much more didactic, advisory and moralising than the pre-plague texts. Instead of just leafing through a range of subjects in an encyclopaedia-like fashion, the post-plague texts read more like sermons at times. Do this, leave that, and rewards will await you in heaven. There is less

room for discussion and the manner in which subjects are covered appears more one-sided. It could be that this was an attempt to educate the reader, who was among the survivors of- or born after the plague, and who subsequently encountered an absence of sufficiently educated people and their knowledge.

What is noticeable in the post-plague examples is that the voices of the speakers seem much more distinct and personal, as opposed to representing an entire group of people or just a general but anonymous voice, such as can be found in *The Owl & the Nightingale*, *Land of Cokaygne* and *Ubi Sount* . In the *Parliament* the speakers are even known by name and reputation, such as Chaucer and Scipio. In *Piers Plowman* we also have a quite unique character who is voicing his opinion through the medium of a distinct persona, not a general or allegorical figure who is simply embodying the author's thoughts. Individuality is starting to develop through literature. The same goes for the body that speaks in *A Disputacioun* , which is also the latest and 'youngest' composition. This one seems to combine the notion of *Memento Mori*, with a sense of nostalgia, recounting past splendours, yet reminding the reader of its humble and earthly origin, but with a promising look toward the future as well.

Thus, the state of mind of those who wrote literature before the Black Death and the ones who followed in its aftermath, certainly show some interesting differences. The centre of attention has shifted, the sources from which they gather their inspiration, the message they try to convey to their public and the manner in which they represent their own point of view have all underwent some significant changes. It is nevertheless striking that, although several works were written some considerable time after the great plague, they are still referring to it and that their main subject revolves around the immediate consequences of the plague. When reconsidering Thompson's statement that literature after the Black Death exhibited a heavy decline in quality, it is tempting to agree with him, at first. Nevertheless, we cannot gloss over the fact that, despite some phenomena in post-plague literature that could be considered a regression, there were also,

ultimately, very promising developments. Regard the fact that some of the biggest and most well-known literary works from the Middle Ages stem from after the plague, such as the much debated *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It is vital to bear in mind that it is considerably more difficult to produce something good when one is still in the eye of a storm and that it takes an amount of time and some comfortable distance, before all the memories and remnants of a devastation as big as the plague, can be turned into something exceptionally good.

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