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Speaking Without Speaking: The Safety of Allegory in *Piers Plowman* and the Consequences of Wycliffe's Writings

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a way of speaking controversial religious and social truth which can reduce the degree of consequences of directly stated truth, and analyses the use of allegory in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* as a relatively safer communication method compared to direct Wycliffite writings. It aims to find out a practical communication function of allegory used by Langland comparing it to the more direct writings of Wycliffe. *Piers Plowman* also includes dream vision, personification and symbolic figures to find out the distance between the author and the authority in revealing controversial truth. This paper follows a qualitative discourse analysis as well as a comparative method to study *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffe's *Bible* as main sources, and Peter Sutton's modern verse translation for best results. The findings reflect that Langland's use of allegory does not make it just a simple literary device. Through dream-vision, personification, symbolic and allegorical events, Langland discusses controversial issues without directly addressing them which provides safer boundary between the author and the corrupt authority. Conversely, the study finds the harsh difficulties faced by Wycliffe as a result for discussing theological and religious communication more directly in his translations. The study does not claim that Wycliffe was punished but that his task became hard for being immediately noticeable to the authorities. This study concludes that allegory can apply a filter between the author and the criticized party to make a difference in the degree of consequences and reveal controversial criticism while keeping the author comparatively safer.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, it is required to speak the truth when things are wrong and against human rights. However, the 'Truth' can carry heavy consequences for words in some cases, as seen in John Wycliffe's life. Therefore, it is important to know how people can still tell the truth while hiding it inside a story where it is safer, as in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*.

Medieval Literature has two specific literary masterpieces to compare together for a deep understanding of a magnificent strategic use of allegory. In William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, he goes through a character named Will in a dream vision narrative where the characters are symbolic and personified. On the other hand, Wycliffe's *Bible* is a production of direct public writing highlighting the false guidelines of the Church and revealing the true words of God from the Latin Vulgate by a team of associates working probably at Wycliffe's initiative.

Langland speaks his words by interacting with a vast number of dreamed figures. In his story, the character Will tries to find the 'true good' in Christian life. In his dreams, he learns step by step meeting different personified characters while revealing their actual characteristics like corrupted Pardoner "as he a prest were"; representing the evils and also holy characters who are honest and guiding like Piers the Plowman, Faith (Abraham), and Hope (Moses). Their actions and words reveal their characteristics which also match the contemporary real life representative of them.

John Wycliffe with his followers also translated the *Bible* into English at the same time as Langland's *Piers Plowman*. It seems a great move as ordinary people could read and understand their God's words directly from that point without relying on the priests. That triggered the Church noticing the threat against their religious domination. They took harmful actions against Wycliffe and also marked those as 'Heretics' who read or spread the English *Bible*.

Wycliffe and Langland, the two scenarios tell the same story, and demand the same change without matching each other's style. One is an open challenge against the authority for raising people's awareness while another hides inside a creative story. Consequently, the former author undergoes pain and suffering while the latter faces relatively lesser hassles.

The tough challenge is to defend the consequences of wrong words. Such difficulty is already digested by Wycliffe after his translation of the *Bible* into English. To remove such an outcome from one's words, this study is significantly beneficial to reveal methods of modifying words. And doing so, this study features 'allegory' as the weapon used in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Langland realizes the same situation of his time as Wycliffe does. Unlike Wycliffe, Langland uses symbolic, personified characters in an seemingly ordinary poem for people though its early readership stays among London clerks and administrators, and its dense Latin where he uses dream vision and allegorically spreads the same ideas

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as Wycliffe's.

The paper establishes its arguments on the following definitions:

• **Truth:** The paper uses this word for three different things: a moral claim ("the clergy are corrupt"), a doctrinal claim ("this is what the Eucharist really is"), and Langland's own trewthe, which means something closer to fidelity and justice. Pick one meaning and treat it as a claim the author makes, not a fact the paper has already proven.

• **Consequence:** Something bad that happens to an author or a text because of what was written, and that you can actually point to in the records. Table 1 sorts these into four kinds: punishment of the person, condemnation of ideas, control of the texts, and others taking the text over for their own ends. The paper also has to show the text caused the outcome, since events like the 1381 revolt were happening anyway.

• **Safe:** Less likely to get the author in serious trouble, compared with a named alternative. It never means untouchable. Safety here comes down to whether the author can be identified, whether a hostile reading can be pinned on them, and whether they can plausibly say they meant something else.

• **Controversial:** Something the people in power at the time actually treated as dangerous, not something we find edgy now. The paper needs to separate attacks on church doctrine, which was risky, from complaints about clerical greed, which was an accepted tradition. Wycliffe mostly did the first and Langland mostly the second, so they were not telling "the same story."

The aim of this study is to find the answers of the following questions-

• How does Langland's use of allegory in *Piers Plowman* act as an approach of revealing criticism towards the 14th century English religious or social practices while also avoiding painful consequences that Wycliffe faces from direct writings?

• What consequences did Wycliffe, and not Langland, face for direct speaking to share truth in public in 14th century England?

• How do direct and indirect discourses differ in consequence on communicating controversial truths with the society as in Wycliffe's *Bible* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*?

This study aims –

• To unfold a different purpose of allegory in *Piers Plowman* as a safe method of voicing.

• To situate Langland's work against Wycliffe and his fellows tracing how direct vernacular truth often met charges of heresy and pain.

• To argue that truth is not incidental but consequential which leaves the speaker unable to speak again if spoken wrong.

This paper focuses on extracting the safety features of allegory. It simultaneously studies William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffe's journey to translate the Latin *Bible* into English *Bible*. It mainly showcases the possibility of saying the truth without saying the truth. The key theory in this study is 'allegory' with auxiliary concepts like 'consequence of words'. The outcome of two major medieval literature, *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffe's *Bible* are compared together to find consequences they brought on their corresponding author(s). This study compares between the outcome of direct Wycliffe's writing and the symbolic writing style of Langland.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study focuses on Langland's *Piers Plowman*'s use of allegory and how it is a very powerful tool for speaking out the truth. There are plenty of previous studies that show how the poem uses allegory and how it promotes the parliament. Some papers question the real author of the work. This research is meant to track Langland's use of allegory and extract how it is used as a safe speaking mechanism. Past studies touch a vast area of *Piers Plowman*. However no one has yet considered the simple literary device allegory as a very powerful and landscape changing tool in literature. Available research only focuses on reviewing the text and its certain terminological aspects; however, they lack the real-world implementation and the silent reformability of allegorical verses.

Elizabeth Deering Hanscom, in her study "The Argument of the Vision of *Piers Plowman*", argues points such as the poem was never finished as Langland revised it three times but could not find a true finish while disagreeing with editor Skeat (Hanscom,1894). Then she highlights how *Piers Plowman* steps up the stairs to grow better by searching for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. She claims that Langland has not harshly mocked greedy monks, lazy priests, and money-hungry popes; instead, she kept believing in the Catholic Church itself, unlike John Wycliffe (Hanscom,1894). Therefore, she calls Langland a "bundle of contradictions," part reformer, part traditionalist, as he appears good in social matters in writing; however, he opposes real rebellion (Hanscom,1894, p. 48). It basically focuses on Langland's personality but lacks the impact of *Piers Plowman* and its allegorical verses.

"The Nature of the Relationship Between William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and the Wycliffite Sect" by Rosanne Paulette Gasse links the connection between the Wycliffites or the Lollards with *Piers Plowman*. She argues that both *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffite writings triggered similar issues like fair use of wealth, personal responsibility and true spiritual life. She says Langland and the Wycliffites held different views though they had one thing surprisingly close, which is good kingship. Langland's character, Conscience, and Wycliffe's 'dominion by grace' share similar concepts. She discusses solid evidence that proves Wycliffite writers read *Piers Plowman*. He later claims that Langland was not a Wycliffite yet. However, *Piers Plowman* still inspires Lollard writers though it was not Langland's intention (Gasse, 1989).

Matthew Giancarlo's "*Piers Plowman*, Parliament, and the Public Voice" specifically talks about how Langland popularized Parliament in his poem. He brings the trial

of Lady Meed and her argument with Conscience from Passus 2 to 4 to show a scene of parliament. There, the petition bill is submitted against Wrong by Peace. There is also the structural part of parliament, King, clergy nobles, and commons. He rejects Anna Baldwin's argument that Langland actually favored strong, unchecked royal power over parliament (Giancarlo, 2007). He also claims that Langland kept adding parliamentary concepts as he revised the poem. It mainly focused on whether the poem suggests Parliament or not but totally misses its powerful use of allegory.

Carruthers, with her "Allegory Without the Teeth: Some Reflections on Figural Language in *Piers Plowman*", shares a deeper dive into allegory as she finds different techniques of figurative writing in one box. She claims the term "allegory" actually hides at least four different methods, two of them, "obscuritas" and "pictura," can often look alike, though they work in opposite ways. She mainly studied two of them in her study. She brings the character of Anima from *Piers Plowman*, comparing her toothless/harmless soul, while Augustine's image of the church's teeth is for biting the heretics (Carruthers, 2005, p. 8). One clearly shows a "pictura" of a safe soul, while another shows something a little scary, as it is not supposed to have teeth but it does.

"'Ecce Rex': *Piers Plowman* and the Medieval Sermon" by Sarah Wood specifically focuses on Passus 19, text B of *Piers Plowman* and represents Conscience's speech to actual medieval sermons. Wood argues that Conscience's speech defining three sections: knight/king/conqueror or later do-well/do-better/do-best is a method of preaching manuals specifically recommended during medieval times. She also emphasized Conscience calling Christ "Christ" instead of "Jesus" and connected it to another actual sermon and preaching handbook (Wood, 2008). Although she pointed out a good part of the text while still missing the allegory.

The book, "The Cambridge Companion to *Piers Plowman*", edited by Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway, firstly talks about the real author of the text, as it has three to four versions: the A text, the B text, and the C text. The book slightly talks about the allegory, which he calls "complicated" (Cole & Galloway, 2014, p. 24). It also shows how new researchers find family background and the real institutions in the poem that help understand the poem better. Though it talks about how it is deeply shaped after real medieval religious and political institutions. There is no clear chapter on how the allegorical writing method is something most important.

Spencer Strub, in his "Disciplining the Tongue: Speech and Emotion in Later Middle English Poetry", points out that Langland used the concepts of scorn and shame, but not to attack anyone, but only for learning. To him, the poets of his time fear that the true inner feelings of them do not match people's outward expressions and behavior. He explains it throughout Will's repeated harsh speaking, being corrected and feeling ashamed while learning. He also claims that Chaucer's Canterbury Tales use of 'mirth' enjoyment makes serious moral stories into entertainment like the story of Prioress and Manciple (Strub, 2018).

Furthermore, Nicolette Zeeman actually works on allegory in "The Arts of Disruption: Allegory and *Piers Plowman*" but argues that allegory focuses on tension and disruption, not simple lessons that other literature does (Zeeman, 2020). This makes her work only explain how allegory is used, not what it can potentially do. He claims that it shows a vice using virtues or vice versa. She also says that allegory does not provide one clear, tidy message, but it places different ideas, voices, or tales and lets them clash like Conscience and Reason arguing with each other, making tension among readers. She also argues that *Piers Plowman* uses violent gestures, like Piers tearing the pardon. Zeeman then conclusively compares *Piers Plowman* with French Grail Romances claiming this confusing landscape where the quest never fully ends.

All the studies yet existing suggest many opinions on Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Some claim it to support the parliament system; some argue on how Langland himself has no idea of what he is writing. Though some studies speak of allegory, they only highlight the complicated mess of it or how it teaches moral lessons. There are even works that go deep into finding connection between nature and Langland's text or even similarities in *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffite writings. Some find allegory used in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales following Dante's path but none discuss the idea that it can also be a way of telling truth without facing consequences that direct speech faces like in a movement. In general, these studies suggest opinions on either what the poem means or not but do not bring the single literary tool, allegory, to find the practicality of using it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This paper is designed with a qualitative writing mechanism. In this way, the contents are designed with critical analysis of non-numeric data. Several papers and texts are studied to find how *Piers Plowman* by William Langland uses allegory as a creative method of telling harsh truth against superpowers in a public society without being blamed for doing so. The system Langland uses is a literary device called allegory, an indirect method of referring to actual events. The study will analyze how it is a safety feature for Langland by comparing it to other authors' work which failed the safety check and faced punishments.

To prove such a claim that allegory is a safe way of sending messages to people of a nation, it is needed to dive deep into the term and how the tool is used inside the text. The research problems, the questions and the objective of this study clearly demand such a method for the best outputting result. To justify the actual benefit of using allegorical writings can only be possible to be found through qualitative method.

Data Collection Method

The data for this research are primarily taken with careful qualitative study of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*

and modern translations of Wycliffite writings ensuring all the linguistic and religious contexts. To understand the Medieval text better, Peter Sutton's *Piers Plowman*: A Modern Verse Translation was studied along the Middle English text. Along the main texts, many criticisms and analysis of *Piers Plowman* were also read for achieving extended knowledge on the topic.

Various secondary resources were collected which include scholarly books, research papers, journal articles, and other academic publications. To gather such resources various sources were surfed like Google Scholar, Research Gate, JSTOR and many more. Articles from renowned journals were also examined. This study is also designed after studying different terms and theories like "allegory," "truth," "safe speech," "consequence of words," "Lollard movement," and "church politics," all together to create a strong argument. Theories of Translation and Interpretation, Indulgences, religious reform movements, Old and New Testaments, Catholicism and Protestantism; and texts like; The Canterbury Tales were also studied for a better understanding.

Data Analysis Techniques

All the collected materials were studied qualitatively and comparatively. As the target of this study is to point out how allegory can work as a method of expressing controversial truth, therefore the study centered the use of language, character, situation, symbols, and themes of *Piers Plowman* using critical discourse analysis. Langland's personal characteristics are not a major concern of the study. The use of allegorical situations was mainly focused on which helped to indirectly address the religious and social issues. The intended meaning of the figures and episodes were calculated in relation to the criticism they expose on corruption, false religious beliefs, and social responsibilities.

The study discusses the deep study of selected areas of *Piers Plowman* and some related scholarly explanation alongside the main text. The primary text was compared to the secondary sources to find out any repeated ideas, different interpretations of the same idea and areas that support the argument. In places where it was difficult to understand the Middle English wordplays, Peter Sutton's modern verse translation of the main text was used as an explanation to understand the primary idea accurately. It is to be noted that Sutton's translated work was also examined for its authenticity and accuracy.

A comparative technique was also used for the comparison of Langland and Wycliffe. Wycliffe's writings and the Wycliffite *Bible* were studied as direct religious invitations. Langland's *Piers Plowman* on the other hand was studied as an indirect and allegorical expression of religious situation. This makes the study not what the two authors share in their works but a comparative study of their 'communication method'. It discusses how different methods of speaking can increase or reduce the consequence of the spoken word. Historical and linguistic backgrounds were only used in situations where the religious or cultural context needed to be clarified. These textual observations helped the final development of the questions and objectives of this study.

Ethical Consideration

The study follows a legal system of academic and ethical principles for collecting all the materials. As the study is completely based on the analytical study of scholarly texts, there were no human participants or surveys involved to collect any data or opinion. *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffe's writings were taken as the primary literary and historical materials and used for comparative study. Secondary sources like books, articles, and research papers of scholarly explorers were also treated as critical and contextual evidence.

The study gives effort to acknowledge the ideas and interpretations of the scholarly thoughts following proper APA style citation and referencing. The secondary resources were paraphrased for a more academic look instead of directly entering them while also keeping the actual meaning of them with proper credits. The important arguments of scholars were identified when it felt important so that readers can justify the information themselves.

This paper carefully avoids the misrepresentation of the primary text as well as the secondary resources. The focus on different interpretations of *Piers Plowman* was given before discussing the points like allegory, religion, reform or even Langland's own perspective towards the Church. Some of the materials were accessed through academic databases while some were legitimately collected paid sources for the purpose of this research. The study also recognizes that the translated sources might differ from the actual source in the original Middle English language therefore those were treated only as supporting materials instead of using them as complete replacement of the original texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main concern of this study is not whether Langland and Wycliffe had exactly similar goal. Instead, this study is focused on the method through which they tried to spread religious and social controversial messages.

Allegory in ***Piers Plowman***

The analysis begins with the poem of William Langland, *Piers Plowman*. The poem is suggestion towards allegorical social communication. Langland does not try to reveal the truth by saying directly that, "this particular priest is corrupt" or anything like that at all. Rather, he creates a 'dream vision' in his poem where he represents a world and shows its states like social problems, moral qualities and forms of corruption in that specific dream world. He presents these problems by personifying characters and events within his dream world. In the prologue, it begins with Will falling asleep on the Malvern Hills where he sees a "feld ful of folk", society between hell and heaven, meaning a place full of people of different types.

(Langland p. 7). The dream is set as the setting of the poem and represents the real social world in it.

The Allegorical Beginning with the Prologue

Piers Plowman uses allegory from the beginning rather than using it in some parts of writing which makes the use of allegory very extensive. The poem presents a massive world in its dream form which includes people from ordinary workers, merchants, pilgrims to religious figures like clerks, and even political bodies which include lawyers, officials and people associated with the Church. Langland does not even describe these figures by associating them to the real-world historical figures. Instead, they are just used as characters and go on with their life naturally in their own world. The people in the field become the representation of medieval society, not just a new physical location. He also does not claim it to be directly those people in the real world.

This is how he becomes able to criticize the different parts of the society without directly addressing them. This allows him to stay away from direct political accusations. In the prologue, he represents the misuse of religious figures like Friars are described as preaching for profit and sharing the Gospel as their own financial requirements. Pardoners are asking people for money for removing sins while also claiming religious authority. Thus the poem reveals the religious corruptions but it does not directly call on individuals, instead it makes a story in another world of dream (Langland pp. 3-4).

The text itself suggests to the readers that interpretation is necessary for reading this. Langland suggest readers to interpret meanings themselves by saying, 'What this metels bymeneth, ye men that ben murye, Devyne ye -- for I ne dar" (Langland p. 6). He also says 'Ac for drede of the deeth I dar noght telle truthe, How Englisshe clerkes a colvere fede that Coveitise highte,' (Langland, Passus XV p. 128). Here he fears death and prefers to say nothing about the corrupt dove of greed however, immediately goes ahead and tells the reader exactly what it is. This is very important and the poem does not hide the criticism completely; instead, it suggests interpreting the layer between the critical concept and the expression. Langland suggests the audience must realize the actual social reality under the fable.

Lady Meed as Real World Social Problems

The next important example is Lady Meed in Passus Two where she appears not as a simple woman character but as a personified figure for reward, payment and the earnings of the world. To introduce the idea, she was brought with elaborate clothings and wealth. Her association with falsehood and corruption was later revealed. Fals is presented as her father. Her connection with politics and religion shows examples of bribery and dishonesty. (Langland pp. 12-14). The personification becomes clear as Conscience, a personified character, later reveals the true nature of Lady Meed. He describes her as a person who destroys justice, helps the false people, and influences clerks which protect corruption and many more claims against her. Instead of speaking about the problem in his society, Langland uses this story to represent the concept of bribery using actions and dialogues with personified characters (Langland pp. 21-22)

Lady Meed has been read as alluding to Alice Perrers, Edward III's mistress, among other topical referents (Trigg 1998; Galloway 2016). The same fable was preached openly by Bishop Thomas Brinton during the Good Parliament, whichever of the two borrowed from the other. If contemporaries could identify the referents, the allegory was pointed rather than protective

The text simultaneously reveals such corruption using the surrounding characters of Lady Meed like Fals, Favel, Symonye and Cyvyle. These characters or personified words directly communicate the actual meaningful characteristics of the real world.

Direct Approach of Wycliffe and the Wycliffite writings

The data from the second most concerning sources include John Wycliffe and the Wycliffite writings to religious matters. This is an important part for this study, especially his attempt to reveal the true religion and make it available to ordinary English speakers to open a criticism area of Church teaching and authority. The development of the religious movement is a result of these Wycliffite writings and translations. Scholars show that these Lollard writings triggered debate on political, religious and intellectual fields. And it became easy due to the new easily readable translation of the *Bible* into English for the ordinary people (Copeland).

In this comparison, the vernacular *Bible* is a significant option. The translation of the Latin *Bible* into English by Wycliffe and his fellows made the biblical guidance of life available to the great number of English speakers of the period. Scholars argue that the Wycliffite movement is the reason that made it possible to question and interpret religious authority (Copeland).

Wycliffe's method of talking to mass people, even though his most controversial positions were argued in Latin, for academic and ecclesiastical readers, made it open to question the authority within existing controversy over authority. Wycliffe and his followers did not follow any method like Langland where they would write stories about the authority to reveal their truth or in general, make the reality visible to people. Instead, their writings and activities directly influenced the readers without having them interpret their criticism like Langland's. These writings directly made debates over the doctrine, the Church's wealth, Church authority and biblical explanation of the religious figures.

Actions Against Wycliffe and The Followers

Wycliffe did not have to serve severe punishment. Neither was he imprisoned nor did he go under punishment immediately after raising his accusations. His situation can be found as more complicated. Step by step as he

walked into his goal, he faced ecclesiastical oppositions, doctrinal condemnation, restrictions one after one and lived under heavy political pressure. His followers on the other hand faced deadlier persecutions (Rashdall). As Wycliffe died in 1384, condemnation of his ideas stayed the same as before and it continued till 1415 by the Council of Constance. In 1428 it was Wycliffe's exhumed remains that were burned, as the Council of Constance had ordered in 1415, and the ashes were thrown into the River Swift and his ideas were destroyed along (Urquhart). It asserts that the questionable realities were presented in dream vision through allegory, personification in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* where he used symbolic actions and fictional dialogues. Wycliffe and the Wycliffite tradition on the other hand spread the controversial religious concepts more directly with theological arguments, vernacular religious writings, preaching, translation of the verses of original *Bible* into English and through criticism of religious authority. This differentiates the way of both the parties while also shows similar goals and awareness developing wishes.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings suggest that William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is not just a simple allegorical poem from a general literary view. Instead, it has a hidden goal of pragmatic communicative impact. Perhaps it creates a gap between the author and the controversial topic being revealed. The distance does not necessarily remove the criticism inside it but completely opens a new way how the criticism may reach the readers.

Dream Vision and Indirect Voicing

Dream in Langland's work is the first layer of indirect speaking. Will does not go on a journey of exposing truth by writing or voicing in front of the people. Rather, he watches dreams and, in his dreams, he again watches dreams and sees extraordinary events. In the prologue, the opening says to the reader that Will sleeps and sees a "merveillous swevene," which is in Middle English and in modern English it means a "marvelous dream" or an "extraordinary vision" (Langland p. 2). This makes the readers aware that the upcoming story is just a vision rather than a direct opinion or explanation of the society they are living in.

This strategy is a matter that deserves focus as the first filter of safety for the argument of this study. When a writer directly calls a specific authority corrupt, the statement can be taken as direct accusation. However, in a dream narrative, the criticism is just framed under a fictional and symbolic language where it is less direct. The writer can make his character go through multiple events of imagination and place an argument. This is not a guaranteed method that can secure complete safety to the writer. A reader may still be able to understand it. *Piers Plowman* indeed tries to make it understandable which opens some of its satire. This shows that allegory is not a perfect method of disguising. Rather, the position is in between which makes the writer serious talking but not always directly being able to be called an accuser.

But, the rebels of 1381 invoked *Piers Plowman* in their letters, and Justice (1994) reads parts of the C revision as Langland's response to that appropriation. Pearsall (2003) likewise finds the reformist edge of the C text muted, perhaps to guard the poem against misappropriation. Lollard writers adopted the Piers figure for openly Wycliffite polemic. An early C-text manuscript, Huntington Library MS HM 143, carries corrections and erasures that scholars have analyzed as censorship of the poem itself (Bowers 2005; Calabrese 2005).

Personification and Reality

Personification is another central area of this study which is even stronger for the argument of the safety mechanism of speaking. Langland frequently converts abstract ideas into personified characters that can speak, act, give opinion and so on as a human can. Scholars like Zeeman find that this personification makes the figures in *Piers Plowman* more complex who can actually hold a combination of different kinds of discourses which may produce multiple meanings. (Zeeman).

The best example for the concept is the character of Lady Meed. She is represented as a problem in society and morality. However, Langland gives the problem a real human like body, voice, relationship with others and even a role in the court. She is presented as a rich wealthy person that reveals her material gain. Her relationship with Fals also shows the connection of her with wrong and corrupt rewards. Researchers therefore find her character very complicated, who represents reward or worldly gains in a personifying form (Slefinger).

This is a great method that Langland followed which changes the effect of accusation severely. Instead of simply saying that "bribery controls legal institutions," Langland uses Lady Meed in a personified form to show the reader how she interacts with the authorities like clerks, judges and others.

Langland uses the same approach with Fals, Favel, Symphony, Cyvyle Conscience, Wrong and almost all the characters. He left the place open for his readers to recognize similar social practices through their actions. This is the actual practicality of allegory in the poem. The figures are imagined and unreal while the situations they show are completely real and recognizable in the real world.

An important thing to notice is that the poem's figures can be directly connected to contemporary social figures. It means the story is not dependent on only any specific figures like connecting Lady Meed to a particular identifiable woman, Conscience to a similar lawyer, Fals to a historical liar. The function is broader and they can be related with anyone like them in any society that matches the same features.

The Cat and the Mice: The Politics of Fear

The mice realize a cat is a great threat for their community.

One of the mice finds an idea that if they could tie a bell around the neck of the cat, their community will know when he is near and can stay safe. However, the problem is there are no mice brave enough to mark the task as done. One mouse suggests that it is better to abandon the idea as removing the cat's threat may work but another cat might come soon (Langland pp. 5-6). While on the other hand, B Prol. suggests a rat proposes the bell, and a mouse advises letting the cat be, since without it the rats could not rule themselves. (B Prol. 146–208).

This famous story is not just a simple children's fiction. It hides a language of fear, some figures with powers, and authority. The fear of the animals shows the community is dimmed under stronger power or authority. Their disability shows that they are perhaps fearing the consequence of confronting the authority directly. The desire to rule the society by keeping the fear alive points to the strategic plan of the corrupt rulers to stay in power and hence the idea is satirized by Langland in his poem.

Critics have long read the rat parliament as an allegory of the Good Parliament of 1376, with the cat as John of Gaunt and the kitten as the young Richard II. The Prologue itself glosses the kitten with "Ve terre ubi puer rex est" (woe to the land where the king is a child).

Langland does not directly call anyone of authority a threat. Instead, he invites his reader to find themselves by saying "devyne, for I ne dar" (Guess (or interpret) it yourself, for I do not dare to) and ask them to find what the dream means. (Langland p. 6). This concept does not make the satire invisible but makes a thoughtful path for readers who can recognize the criticism. This perfectly points toward the main argument of this paper which says allegory does not need to completely hide the truth in order to make the voice comparatively safer. In the story, the cat is dominating the mice, and the mice are afraid and this is the reader's responsibility to understand who the cat is in their case.

Lady Meed: The Social Problems

Lady Meed shows an even clearer picture of social, legal, political, and religious criticism. First of all, she appears to the reader as a beautifully dressed woman. Then she appears to be both wealthy and powerful. However, little later Will learns that she is deeply connected with falsehood and corruption. Those who benefit from her wealth stay around her. Her marriage to Fals represents the relationship between dishonesty and financial status (Langland pp. 12-16). It gets clearer as she intersects with different institutions in the story like Lawyers, clerks, officials and religious figures.

Conscience's response to Lady Meed makes the criticism more powerful in their allegorical world. Refusing to marry Meed describes the bad side of her and the problems she causes to justice and truth (Langland pp. 21-22). This makes the poem a combination of indirect form but direct moral force. This is allegorical but morality is criticized which is clear and understandable. The poem makes the meanings available through the symbolic figures and events for readers to go through and understand. This makes the words of Langland comparatively safer.

Allegory as Indirect Speaking

The use of allegory does not make the talks anonymous but instead it at least does make the voices indirect which makes the route to the communication more complex. There are no direct personal accusations nor names with tags of corruption. Allegory can make several layers between him and the argument which reduces the direct harsh feedback of the corrupted authority. Langland's accusation goes in a filter like author to dreamer to symbolic figure to dramatic events to readers interpretation to contemporary matches of the figures and stories.

Langland in his prologue presents the pardoners as corrupted then friars as exploitative; the workers as peasants, and the officials as dishonest figures. The difference is that he did not directly say it instead, he made it in a dream landscape. The story, therefore, represents a large area of social corruption rather than a single named authority in the poem (Langland pp. 2-7). This already proves the practical value of a simple literary device for communicating controversial truth with a safety measurement kept in mind.

In the Prologue the narrator says he both can and cannot say more about the papal court (B Prol. 111), the rats dare not look about for fear (Prol. 152), and the narrator declines to interpret the fable himself (Prol. 210). In B.11 the dreamer wishes he dared "avowe" his dream among men, and Lewte answers that the law lets laymen speak the truth.

Direct Approach and Consequence in Wycliffe's Case

The discussion of Wycliffe shows the other angle of this comparison. Wycliffe's attempts include direct theological and institutional debates. His writings directly reached the eyes of the Church as his writings directly questioned the Church's authority, religious property, ecclesiastical abuse, wrong moral teachings and many more wrongs they were doing. People started understanding the accusations and the Wycliffite writings later raised recognisable movements as they moved towards a more reformist position (Copeland). It does not mean that all the Wycliffite writings completely avoided any literary filters. Instead, they did employ some dialogues and other structures in some of their writings. The study does not even compare between literary and non-literary areas. This is just the communication method.

Words that directly challenge theological concepts can clearly be considered as a direct theological debate. A translation that can make it easy for common people to directly understand the biblical teaching expands the access of the text. The practices of the Church being questioned directly cause controversy. All these together make the approach of the whole Wycliffite community

more identifiable for the Church authority as a threat.

Wycliffite Writings and their Consequences

De civili dominio (On Civil Dominion) **— John Wycliffe, c. 1376–1377**

This Latin treatise argues that ecclesiastical and secular lordship must be justified by rightful Christian use and that the church should not possess wealth or authority in ways contrary to divine law.

Consequences: Wycliffe's arguments about lordship and church wealth led Pope Gregory XI to condemn nineteen propositions associated with the work in 1377. Wycliffe was summoned and briefly placed under restraint, although he was not formally tried as a heretic during his lifetime.

De ecclesia (On the Church) **— John Wycliffe, c. 1378–1379**

This is one of Wycliffe's most important ecclesiological works. It examines the nature of the true church, the authority of Scripture, the limits of papal power, and the relationship between spiritual office and moral worth.

Consequences: The work belongs to the period in which Wycliffe moved from criticism of abuses and church wealth toward more explicitly heterodox claims about the church and its sacraments. His later propositions were condemned at Oxford in 1382, and his writings were condemned by the Council of Constance.

De veritate sacrae scripturae (On the Truth of Sacred Scripture) **— John Wycliffe, c. 1377–1378**

This treatise develops Wycliffe's account of the authority, truth, interpretation, and sufficiency of Scripture.

De eucharistia (On the Eucharist) **— John Wycliffe, c. 1380**

This work is central to Wycliffe's rejection of the standard scholastic account of transubstantiation. Wycliffe argued for the continued presence of the substance of bread alongside Christ's body, a position that directly challenged the dominant sacramental theology of the late medieval church.

Consequences: The Eucharistic issue was the decisive point in the escalation of opposition to Wycliffe. In 1382 Archbishop William Courtenay's council condemned twenty-four propositions attributed to Wycliffe, and Oxford followers were required to retract their views or leave the university.

The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards **— anonymous Lollard authors, 1395**

The twelve propositions criticize ecclesiastical wealth, the priesthood, clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, ritual consecrations, clerics holding secular office, prayers for the dead, pilgrimage, images, confession, and warfare. The text was presented to Parliament in 1395 and posted at St Paul's Cross.

Consequences: The document publicly challenged the Church's sacramental, clerical, and institutional authority. Parliament took no action on the petition, but the ideas it expressed belonged to the body of Lollard teaching that was subsequently prosecuted under intensified ecclesiastical and royal repression.

Overall Consequences

Wycliffe himself died in 1384 without being tried as a heretic, although his writings were condemned during and after his lifetime. In 1382, Archbishop Courtenay's council condemned propositions attributed to him and forced Oxford adherents to recant or leave. The Council of Constance later condemned Wycliffe's writings, ordered his

books burned, and authorized the removal of his body from consecrated ground; the exhumation and burning of his remains occurred in 1428.

For Lollards, the key legal turning point was the English statute De heretico comburendo of 1401, which enabled the burning of convicted heretics. Britannica identifies William Sawtrey as the first Lollard martyr burned under this regime. The English Church and government harshly repressed the Lollards, followers of John Wycliffe, whose beliefs anticipated the Protestant Reformation. The accession of Henry IV in 1399 marked a period of repression, leading to the 1401 statute that ordered the burning of heretics. In 1414, a Lollard uprising, led by Sir John Oldcastle, was quickly defeated by Henry V, resulting in severe reprisals and the end of the Lollards' open political influence. The movement was driven underground, operating mainly among tradespeople and artisans.

In this point, the historical consequences they face can show how important the argument is. Wycliffe's doctrines were highly recognized as abused and criticized by the authority as well as taking measures against the whole community. Almost all his works were quickly taken under heavy custody and were burnt to completely remove them. But The Wycliffite *Bible* survives in more than 250 manuscripts, more than any other Middle English text, against roughly 50 for *Piers Plowman*. He got recognized as "heretic" and with the defence of the Church authority as they claimed him to be wrong by showing evidence like he did not translate the whole thing and only did some on purpose. Wycliffe's followers tasted even worse consequences even after his death (Rashdall).

This is the point that proves that direct speeches have a greater chance of facing punishment immediately in comparison to indirect speeches. Although the history is way more complicated for the conclusion as Wycliffe himself lived even longer and kept writing for years in the same way. Nevertheless, his direct writing style makes the Church take quick action against him and use their own defense which has weakened the Wycliffite impact itself.

Comparison with Previous Literature

The findings in this study support and extend the previous scholarly works reviewed in Chapter Two. They already cover a great number of fields in *Piers Plowman* which include the relation of the text with social, political, moral and religious issues. Hanscom describes the contradictions while Gasse shows the connection between the text and

Wycliffites around wealth, responsibility and spiritual life as well as kingship. This study does not reject any of the data but extends it further by exploring the method of doing such a great number of works. Carruthers's study talks about allegory and its different meanings while suggesting its different forms of figurative practices. This analysis supports this study that allegory is not a simple literary device. This study adds another solution to the existing study of what the consequences will be like.

This study extends the previous focus by extending allegory as a communicative method rather than considering it as a literary tool. Then it connects the personification with the social exposures which shows how real problems can be studied using imaginative characters. After that the study shows the consequence's temperature, not which writer was better than the other. It only compares direct communication to indirect exposure.

Discussion of Implications

The text includes multiple ways of understanding *Piers Plowman*, allegory and all the medieval critical writings on controversies. The first lesson is that the literary device allegory should not be understood as a simple writing style anymore. Instead, this should be considered as a new possible writing method for expressing truth that is harmful to be said directly. Allegory is not only about making the writing beautiful, mysterious or difficult, but it should have a practical communicative function. It allows any type of criticism against powerful corrupted authorities.

Secondly, direct speaking should not be taken as weak words. Allegory does not reduce the impact and meaning of criticism. This can sometimes make even better output as the reader has to find out the relation between the fictional world and the real world which may increase the value of their own finding to their own selves.

An example like the cat and the mice episode could be simply said as a political fear. The true character of Lady Meed could also be revealed word by word explaining her characteristics. But the interesting story makes it both hard for the authority to track back while making it more investigateable for the reader.

The third implication is about the audience. Langland uses Middle English which calls for a specific vernacular audience. The writing does not only rely on technical theological language, but it also shows the corruption through visible criticism using characters and actions. It is important because the target audience should understand it in the first place, which Langland did very well.

The fourth implication concerns Wycliffe. Although the proof is not clear enough to justify Wycliffe as a clear victim who went through immediate punishment because his writings were direct. His history is very complicated to be examined, especially at this time. He even did get some political support in different cases, kept working on his writings and was not even jailed directly (Rashdall). That does not mean that his works remain safe and become things of practice by the authorities. Instead, these were burned and vanished as much as possible. His followers were charged with even harsher persecution which continued after his death too (Ward).

Wycliffe's work directly strikes the smoothly working Church patterns. His writings, teachings and the biblical translation interrupted the existing struggle of who can actually interpret the actual Christian truth. This made the Wycliffite movement an identifiable reformist movement. History is clearly showing actions against the movement one after another (Rashdall). Langland on the other hand presents his criticism using Will's vision. The poem shows each corruption sometimes as persons, sometimes in situations, debates and even in animals and symbolic relationships. The poem teaches that truth can be said without always reproducing it directly in public which is highly relevant to this study.

Personal sanction, institutional condemnation, suppression of a text, and hostile appropriation are different outcomes, and the two cases score differently on each. Langland's safety is inferred from the absence of records, but almost no documentary record of Langland survives at all.

The evidence consequently agrees that Langland's allegorical approach may have worked as a protective ornamental and rhetorical mechanism in expressing truth against any type of corruption. This comparison with Wycliffe makes the argument clearer that Wycliffe faces comparatively worse impact than Langland possibly because of his writing style.

Consequences Reconsidered

Once the four kinds of consequence defined in the

Table 1: Four Kinds of Consequence Compared

Consequence	**Langland and** *Piers Plowman*	**Wycliffe and Wycliffite writing**
Personal sanction	None recorded, although almost no documentary record of Langland survives	Wycliffe never imprisoned; followers forced to recant from 1382 and executed from 1401
Condemnation of propositions	None recorded	Propositions condemned in 1377, 1382, and 1415
Control of texts	Scribal intervention in at least one early manuscript (HM 143); survives in more than fifty manuscripts	Translation and reading restricted from 1409; the *Bible* nonetheless survives in more than 250 manuscripts
Appropriation	Invoked by the rebels of 1381 and adapted by Lollard writers; printed as a work of reform in 1550	Taken up by Lollards and later by Protestant reformers; Wycliffe condemned posthumously and exhumed in 1428

findings are distinguished, the contrast between the two cases looks different, as Table 1 shows.

Wycliffe was a named Oxford theologian with powerful patrons. Langland's identity is so obscure. Anonymity or obscurity is an obvious, if not alternative, explanation for Langland's non-prosecution.

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Use of Generative AI

Generative AI (Anthropic's Claude) was used in preparing this manuscript, and revising the draft, locating and verifying secondary sources, formatting, and reference management. The authors set the direction of the argument, verified all quotations and citations against the primary and secondary sources, incorporated external peer review, and take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and conclusions of the submitted work.

CONCLUSION

This study compares the literary methods of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffite writings to examine how allegory functions as a pragmatic safety mechanism when speaking controversial social and religious criticism. The research highlights how Langland used indirect communication, symbolic animals, and dream visions to create a safe distance between himself and corrupt authorities, focusing on allegory, personification, dream vision, and speech consequences. This protective layer allowed him to criticize contemporary cultural, political as well as religious issues while securing the space to revise his work without facing immediate, severe censorship and punishment. In contrast, Wycliffe's direct and reformist approach quickly exposed his identity and theology to church authorities, resulting in rapid suppression and destroyed texts. While none of the methods offered absolute protection, allegory significantly reduced author's visibility and the immediate risk of counteraction compared to direct speech. Furthermore, this research builds upon previous scholarship by studying allegory not only as a literary riddle or moral teaching tool, but as a strategic defense mechanism for truth-telling. The research is limited by its exclusive focus on medieval texts, the exclusion of other renowned allegorical works across different eras, and its qualitative, interpretive methodology, suggesting valuable directions for future investigation.

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