

The Anxieties of Ecclesiastes in *Piers Plowman*, with Special Reference to Passus X (B-Text)

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Will's quest for knowledge of Dowel, the overarching theme of passūs VIII-XIV in the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, reaches a dilemma in passus X.¹ While Dame Studie and Clergy criticise the hypocrisy of theologians and church ministers who do not use their knowledge as a guide for moral living, Will questions the process of learning itself: what is the point of worldly wisdom, when even the most intellectually gifted, Solomon and Aristotle among them, are condemned to hell? The works of these great masters may have provided a way of understanding the natural world and its place in the cosmos, but Will judges them to be useless, and even detrimental, when considered as part of the divine scheme of salvation: 'And if I sholde werche by hir werkes to wynne me hevene, | That for hir werkes and wit now wonyeth in pyne - | Thanne wroughte I unwisly, whatsoevere ye preche!' (X. 386-88).² The celebrated wisdom of these figures is ironically exposed as its opposite, as Will's desire to learn from them how morality is manifested in the world risks leading him into dangerous territory. This anxiety appears to conflict with the medieval Christian belief that the world is an inherently rational reflection of God's will, and coming to a greater understanding of nature entails beginning to comprehend the divine intelligence pervading it.³ One of the concerns prevalent throughout the 'Dowel' section of *Piers Plowman* is the extent to which God's wisdom is revealed to humanity. If it remains hidden, then the process of arriving at conclusions based on scientific inferences about the world becomes untenable – God may assert His will as He chooses, in ways that cannot be rationally understood.

Solomon, 'the Sage that Sapience [made],' (X.378) is one of Will's primary examples of people who are damned despite their intellectual powers, and yet Will is still prepared to quote from Ecclesiastes, thought to have been written by

¹ 'In the first vision of Dowel, doubts about the real value of the intellectual soul cause the major crisis in the action,' Robert Worth Frank, *'Piers Plowman' and the Scheme of Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p.48.

² All quotations of the B-text are from *The Vision of 'Piers Plowman': a critical edition of the B-text based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17* ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995)

³ Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.183.

Solomon,⁴ in support of his argument. Other characters of the third vision – Wit, Dame Studie and Scripture – also refer to Solomon as an authority, showing his importance to the scriptural tradition despite his dubious moral status. Yet while these references to the book of Ecclesiastes (known also as Qoheleth)⁵ and its purported author have previously been considered to be a small part of Langland's overall argument, his allusions to Ecclesiastes and Solomon act as a major structuring principle behind this section of *Piers Plowman*. The questionable worth of earthly learning and the knowability of God's will are also causes of debate in Ecclesiastes, a book that was noted not only for its controversial subject matter, but also its erratic narrative voice. Ecclesiastes may be read as a correlative to passus X of *Piers Plowman*, which Langland draws upon in order to create a climate of doubt. Whilst the A-text ends before these problems can be resolved,⁶ and much of the material relating to Ecclesiastes is either removed or displaced in the C-text,⁷ the B-text is unique in showing how the despair of Qoheleth can be overcome through faith.

Ecclesiastes received much exegetical attention after the increased interest in the study of the Old Testament wisdom books, beginning in the thirteenth century. Langland's engagement with biblical wisdom literature has been illustrated by Mary Davlin, who lists Ecclesiastes as one of the five wisdom books referenced in *Piers Plowman*. She makes a convincing argument that, though these books do not necessarily provide source material for *Piers Plowman* beyond Langland's use of quotations, they offer intertextual links which reveal how Langland uses the forms and genre conventions of wisdom literature.⁹ Davlin's intertextual model is particularly relevant to the present discussion, for

⁴For discussion of Solomon's alleged authorship of the book, see, for example, Karlfried Froehlich, 'Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament in the High Middle Ages,' in *Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, 2 vols, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), I, p.530.

⁵Qoheleth is a title or epithet meaning 'gatherer.' R.N. Whybray suggests that this refers to the writer's reputation as a teacher or preacher, a gatherer of people. *Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: *Journal for the Society of Old Testament Study*, 1989), p.17.

⁶Frank speculates that Langland's personal difficulties with the subject matter may have prevented him from continuing with the A-text after this point, though he cautiously adds that these difficulties may in fact be literary, pp.57-8. While he argues that Langland escapes these conundrums in the B-text by introducing the dream within a dream episode, I alternatively suggest that the poet escapes entrapment by showing how Ecclesiastes, and the parallel story of Will's quest for knowledge, can be interpreted positively through the eyes of faith.

⁷See E. Talbot Donaldson, '*Piers Plowman*': *The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p.170.

⁸Beryl Smalley, *Medieval Exegesis of Wisdom Literature* ed. Roland E. Murphy (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), argues that Aquinas's *De regimine principum* (1267) was a turning point, after which masters placed a greater emphasis on sapiential books, pp.6-7.

⁹Mary Clemente Davlin, O.P., '*Piers Plowman* and the Books of Wisdom,' *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 2 (1988), 23-33 (32).

although Ecclesiastes is directly quoted only twice in the B-text, Langland mentions Solomon multiple times, and, on a more subtle level, he integrates the constantly shifting structures of thought found throughout Ecclesiastes into his poetry. In particular, the contentious nature of the book's discourse has affinities with the debate structure of *Piers Plowman*.

Ecclesiastes is a book of theoretical wisdom, concerned with exploring the problems of life with philosophical detachment and reflecting upon their meaning.¹⁰ It has the same generic colouring as Job, for its wisdom does not lie in providing proverbial instruction which may be passed down through the generations, but rather in the speaker's ability to question received wisdom and debate it, and how, it enables one to live a good life. Like the book of Job, it describes the spiritual quest of a disillusioned individual (referred to in the third-person at the beginning and end of Ecclesiastes as Qoheleth, 'the Preacher'), who despairs at earthly justice and wisdom but acknowledges that ultimate judgement lies in God's hands. Crenshaw, however, points to an important difference between the two books: Job acknowledged a presence in the universe, be it just or unjust, whereas the speaker of Ecclesiastes 'did not enter into dialogue with a living Presence.'¹¹ Although the words of the Preacher are addressed to a 'young man,' signifying a general audience who may be spiritually rather than physically immature, the book involves much debate within the self and does not include a single direct address to God.

It is a commonplace that many passages reveal tensions in the speaker's thought. There appear to be contradictions, such as, 'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun' (1:14) and, 'I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun' (8:17).¹² The speaker offers contending views about a variety of different subjects, including the nature of mirth, stating the aphorism, 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth' (7:4) shortly before saying, 'Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry' (8:15). The book also takes an ambiguous stance towards wisdom, which 'excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness' (2:13) even though the wise die under-appreciated, equal in status to fools (2:16) and in addition, being over-wise wearies the soul to the point of destruction (7:16). Medieval exegetes were keen to assign the more pious sentiments to Solomon, whilst placing any contradictions in the mouths of Qoheleth's enemies

¹⁰ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹² All scriptural references are taken from the King James edition of the Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

or sceptics,¹³ and in early twentieth-century criticism, scholars were prepared to deny certain passages authorial authenticity in an attempt to increase the coherency of the book.¹⁴ It is now generally agreed that the 'prologue' (1:1-2) and the 'epilogue' (12: 9-14), in which the speaker is referred to in the third person, are editorial redactions/interpolations.¹⁵ The latest criticism of Ecclesiastes acknowledges that the main speaker (the voice saying everything except for the prologue and epilogue) intentionally contradicts himself in order to demonstrate an on-going process of contemplation, weighing one thought against another 'in order to present reality in its complexity rather than to press home an unqualified conclusion.'¹⁶ Critics of Ecclesiastes are perhaps still too keen to identify the different aspects of the main speaker's thoughts as contradictions or binary oppositions, when in fact the same thought is being developed. For instance, when the preacher claims to have seen all the works under the sun, but then declares that man cannot find all of them, he refers in the second case to the judgements of God – the true consequences of the works – which are concealed from humanity. The speaker therefore expresses a range of intricate and nuanced views that are affected so fundamentally by the context in which they are placed, and by the light and shade of the argument, that the voice of the main speaker seems to fracture into several dramatic *personae* representing the pious, pointless and pleasurable aspects of life.¹⁷ We may draw an analogy here with *Piers Plowman*, of which Harwood says, 'Much of the power obviously lies in its being a processive and self-correcting work, not an orderly exposition of an initial vision or system.'¹⁸ Harwood also draws attention to the increased autonomy of Will's interlocutors from passūs VIII-XIII, who shatter the narrative into non-linear, subjective viewpoints.¹⁹ Like Qoheleth, Will debates with

¹³ In Jerome's exegesis of Ecclesiastes, contradictions are assigned to opponents of truth, whilst Luther interpreted the book as a dialogue between Solomon and his political associates. Katherine J. Dell, 'Ecclesiastes as Wisdom: Early Interpreters,' *Vetus Testamentum* 44:3 (1994), 301-29 (305-6).

¹⁴ See George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908); Hinckley J. Mitchell, "'Work" in Ecclesiastes,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 32 (1913), 123-138.

¹⁵ Dell, 308; Whybray, p.23.

¹⁶ Whybray, p.13.

¹⁷ In 'The Voices of Ecclesiastes,' Michael Payne argues that Ecclesiastes displays the interactions between Vanity, Vitality and Piety within Qoheleth's mind, *College Literature* 13:3 (Fall, 1986), pp. 285-91 (288). The present essay is indebted to this idea.

¹⁸ Britton J. Harwood, 'Piers Plowman: Fourteenth-Century Skepticism and the Theology of Suffering,' *Bucknell Review* 19 (1971), 119-36 (120).

¹⁹ Britton J. Harwood, 'Dame Study and the Place of Orality in Piers Plowman,' *English Literary History* 57:1 (Spring, 1990), 1-17 (6).

aspects of his own psyche throughout the third vision,²⁰ his quest for knowledge of Dowel leading to a fragmentation of meaning.

The attribution of Ecclesiastes to Solomon, and the view that Solomon is the main speaker in the book, is at odds with the troubled nature of the content of Ecclesiastes. Solomon's reputation for possessing both practical wisdom and an extensive memory demonstrates his talent for uniting like with like²¹: in the judgement of Solomon (1 Kings 3: 16-28), he exposes the cohesion between the maternal role and emotional reaction, and in meeting the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10: 1-13) he is able to access his bank of knowledge and answer all of her queries in a meeting of minds. Ecclesiastes, on the contrary, shows the reasoning process of a mind at its most turbulent, placed at a sceptical distance from the actions of the world. Qoheleth speaks against conventional wisdom and authority, and yet the book is attributed to the very embodiment of earthly knowledge in all its glory.²² The internal contradiction between learning, and the mind's rebellion against it, is drawn out in *Piers Plowman* B.X, wherein Will veers from paying obeisance to Dame Studie to declaring the pointlessness of scholarship. Still, Langland does not merely mirror the voices and structures of Ecclesiastes. Dame Studie's speech is a vital part of Langland's re-evaluation of the biblical text: it examines the natural processes of the world that Qoheleth declares *hebel* (vanity, uselessness, absurdity),²³ and offers a more positive view of life.

Dame Studie enters the third vision after Will has received definitions of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest from Thought and Wit. Following Will's request to know 'Wher Dowel and Dobet and Dobest ben in londe' (VIII.125), Wit discusses the moral philosophy of space and time, describing the location of these actions within the soul and explaining why acting at the wrong time has lamentable outcomes. It is little wonder that Dame Studie chastises him for his speech: Will is spiritually unready, and he is also too intellectually underdeveloped to understand the philosophy of space and time. In effect, Wit has brought Will

²⁰ James Simpson argues that the poem is indebted to Aristotelian psychology, *'Piers Plowman': An Introduction to the B-Text* (London: Longman, 1990), pp.97-9. Passus X is less explicitly psychological, yet Louise Bishop asserts that Dame Studie is a faculty of mind as well as a personification of training in the liberal arts, 'Dame Study and Women's Literacy,' *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998), 97-115 (97). A.V.C. Schmidt identifies a different type of allegory at play, which he names 'noetic' allegory, wherein the 'knowing' faculties of mind, rather than moral and spiritual qualities, are personified. 'Langland and Scholastic Philosophy,' *Medium Aevum* 38 (1969), 134-56 (134).

²¹ James Wood, *Wisdom Literature: an introduction* (London: Duckworth, 1967), pp.49-50.

²² Crenshaw, p.35; Wood, pp.68-9.

²³ Whybray, pp.63-4.

onto a university education before he has even mastered the basics. Before Will is qualified to grapple with questions on metaphysics, morality and scripture, he must be instructed in the arts and natural sciences. Studie enables Will to gain an understanding of the natural order through a curriculum of the trivium and quadrivium, which together form the seven liberal arts. Whilst the trivium instructed the pupil in the relationship between parts within systems of dialectic, symbol and language, the quadrivium revealed the inherent order throughout creation by exposing a numerical scheme underlying universal mechanics.²⁴ These disciplines have a family relationship to Langland's personification, Scripture, a 'sib to the sevene arts,' (X.152) since they prepare the mind for the study of theology.²⁵ The quadrivium served not only scriptural exegesis, but also scientific investigation: from new translations of Aristotle's previously unknown works (including his *libri naturales*, such as *Physics* and *De Anima*, his *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Metaphysics*), the three philosophies (natural, moral and metaphysical) were born, and became a central focus of the medieval university curriculum.²⁶ Aristotelian natural sciences, alongside the seven liberal arts, formed the Bachelor of Arts degree from the twelfth century onwards. Masters students then pursued the moral and metaphysical sciences, with theology standing as the final and most difficult stage of education for the university scholar.²⁷

The portfolio of subjects Dame Studie professes to teach, and the fields that she fails to mention, are a telling indication of her stance toward the debate about the role of learning in the salvation of the soul. Studie tells Will that she taught Clergy, and instructed Scripture, his wife, in the following ways:

[...] I wroot hire [the Bible],
 And sette hire to Sapience and to the Sauter glosed.
 Logyk I lerned hire, and [al the Lawe after],
 And alle the musons in Musik I made hire to knowe.
 Plato the poete, I putte hym first to boke;
 Aristotle and othere mo to argue I taughte.
 Grammer for girles I garte first write (X.171-77).

In this section of her speech, Studie does not obviously distinguish between the trivium and the quadrivium: for instance, she mentions the preliminary study of

²⁴ Quadrivium subjects included arithmetic (pure number), music (application of number in time), geometry (study of magnitudes) and astronomy (magnitudes in motion). Morris Kline, *Mathematical Thought from Ancient to Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.202.

²⁵ Paul Abelson, *The Seven Liberal Arts* (New York, 1906), pp.8-9; Simpson, p.105; Grant, 2001, p.32-4.

²⁶ Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.43; p.47.

²⁷ Grant, 2001, pp.101-2.

logic alongside the more advanced area of music. She remarks on grammar, but rhetoric is subsumed into the study of Greek philosophy and poetics. There is no hint here that Aristotle produced works of natural science. Indeed, quadrivium subjects of geometry, astronomy and arithmetic are not mentioned. However, some of these subjects are noted later in the passus, set in an altogether darker context:

Ac Astronomye is hard thyng, and yvel for to knowe;
 Geometry and Geomesie is gynful of speche;
 Whoso thynketh werche with tho two thryveth ful late – (X.209-11).

After mentioning sorcery and alchemy, Studie concludes:

If thow thynke to dowel, deel therwith nevere!
 Alle these sciences I myself sotiled and ordeynede,
 And founded hem formest folk to deceyve. (X.215-17).

Although magic and the occult did not have a place on the university curriculum,²⁸ here astronomy and geology are mentioned alongside the dark arts. Her tone of disapproval concerning astronomy and geology contrasts with her endorsement of theology, a subject she does not understand and nonetheless believes to be worthy of one's highest attention. On one level, she is stressing that the sciences are difficult subjects, to which the student must dedicate a lot of time and effort in order to thrive at a later stage. Additionally, as Chaucer shows in the 'Franklin's Tale,' astronomy and geometry were thought to be used in the occult practice of magical science.²⁹ Read within the context of Dame Studie's speech between lines 182 and 215, however, Studie's suspicion of the sciences seems to rest primarily on the faithless attitude its students are free to adopt. This problem is not exclusive to the natural sciences, for she rebukes Caton's *ars deluditur arte* mentality (X.193), which advocates using rhetorical devices for persuasion, regardless of the truth. The sciences of geometry and geomancy are also 'gynful of speche' (X.210), ingenious yet slippery. These practices are contrasted with theology: whereas the student can only understand the obscure subject of theology through insights granted by faith, other sciences may be pursued for the purpose of creating deceptions and trickery, causing their practitioners to develop a false view of the world.

As well as having the potential to lead one towards untruths, knowledge without a basis in faith can result in a negative, determinist philosophy. The link between scientific and divine determinism is evidenced by medieval biblical

²⁸ Grant, 1996, p.137.

²⁹ Schmidt, p.445.

exegesis. In particular, commentaries on Ecclesiastes, which was often read in the context of Aristotle's *libri naturales* as an exploration of physical science,³⁰ showed a tendency towards revealing a determinist mechanism at work in the natural world and in the study of the natural world. Natural philosophers interpreted Ecclesiastes 1:5 – 'The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteneth to his place where he arose' – as a basis for a deterministic philosophy that heavenly bodies control man's destiny, prompting William of Auvergne to argue against this explanation in his writings.³¹ Even some modern criticism detects a fatalistic note in the processes of nature as described by the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. The somewhat disheartening interpretation of passage 1:5-7 offered by Robert H. Pfeiffer describes how, 'The sun, the wind, and the rivers run their appointed course monotonously on a fixed track, constantly returning in their circuits to the starting point, driven to a tedious repetition of the same process, doomed to eternal futility.'³² The anxieties underlying this interpretation are either that life is pointless, or that God has hidden the meaning of life from humanity. The first chapter of Ecclesiastes reiterates that humanity cannot fully comprehend the labours of cyclical natural processes such as the passage of the sun, winds and rivers, and that 'no new thing under the sun' can ever take place (1:9). This is a world without divine revelation, a post-lapsarian state where everything is weighed down by continual effort. The world understood as such is *hebel*, emptiness: 'vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity' (1:2). Crenshaw explains, 'Since God's works cannot be altered, and none can discover what the creator is doing now or intends to do in the future, the nerve of life atrophies.'³³ Furthermore, there is little point in revivifying this nerve, since trying to find out more about nature and morality is also vanity.

The attitude of despair and scepticism awakened by viewing the world as under control of natural and divine determinism is one that Dame Studie is cautious to prevent. She makes allusions to chapter one of Ecclesiastes, showing how the message of Qoheleth could so easily change with the addition of one new element – faith.³⁴ In guiding Will beyond her limited knowledge to the

³⁰ Smalley, p.17.

³¹ Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), p.17.

³² Robert H. Pfeiffer, 'The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes,' *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 53:2 (1934), 100-109 (103). Ecclesiastes 1:5-7 is as follows: 'The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth towards the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continuously, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.'

³³ Crenshaw, p.123.

³⁴ Greta Hort is correct in her assertion that Studie teaches Will to 'think soberly, according to faith,' though she does not recognise the allusion to Ecclesiastes. *Piers Plowman' and Contemporary Religious Thought* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), p.102.

character of Theology, who combines intellectual understanding with the truths of faith, Studie enacts Anselm's principle of faith seeking understanding.³⁵ Theology's higher understanding is grounded in love, which prevents one from taking a view of the world that, at best, results in scientific scepticism and, at worst, despair. Love also encourages one to invest faith in God's power to reward those who merit salvation. Indeed, Dame Studie asserts that humanity can play a part in its own salvation purely by loving God: 'For there that love is ledere, ne lakked nevere grace' (X.188). Studie's expression of the law of love is particularly powerful when she reverses the negativity of Ecclesiastes: she uses the word 'lethi' (empty, vain, a Middle English equivalent to *hebel*) as part of a conditional clause – work is 'lethi' unless accompanied by love, 'It is no science, forsothe, for to sotile inne. | A ful lethi thyng it were if that love [therinne] nere' (X.185-6). In this assertion, Studie implicitly criticises Will for pursuing Dowel for the sake of gaining knowledge, rather than for his own spiritual well-being.³⁶ Furthermore, Langland subverts the proverb,³⁷ 'there is no new thing under the sun' (Ecclesiastes, 1:9) to suggest that love gives meaning to the pursuit of wisdom, and indeed, is that which is most worthy of pursuit: 'Forthi loke thow lovye as longe as thow durest, | For is no science under sonne so sovereyn for the soule' (X.207-8). This formula is echoed by Trajan in passus XI, who shares Studie's urge to review the faithless, loveless world of Ecclesiastes: "'Lawe withouten love," quod Troianus, "ley ther a bene - | Or any science under sonne, the sevene arts and alle!"' (XI.170-1).³⁸ Studie therefore uses her pedagogical skills to re-assess the pessimistic voice of Qoheleth,³⁹ adopting the role of preacher and teacher to expound a New Testament ethic.

³⁵'Fides quaerens intellectum:' faith provides the context, foundation and limits of reason. Anselm derives this principle from Augustine. Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm's 'Proslogion'* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Though it is tempting to read Studie's argument here as Okhamist or Semi-Pelagian, the debate about Langland's alliances to the Okhamist/Nominalists or the Augustinians, and indeed this very division of fourteenth-century thought, is not as clear cut as many (for example Denise M. Baker, 'From Plowing to Penitence,' *Speculum* 55:4 (1980), 715-725) have suggested. David Aers, *Salvation and Sin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p.56; p.92.

³⁶Frank writes that Studie 'warns against trying to know the ways of God instead of having faith and caring for the soul,' p.55. See also D.W. Robertson Jr and Bernard F. Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p.120 and Pamela Raabe, *Imitating God: The Allegory of Faith in 'Piers Plowman'* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, c.1990), p.89.

³⁷Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), p.12.

³⁸Also worth mentioning here is Clergy's comment in passus XIII: 'For oon Piers the Plowman hath impugned us alle, | And set alle sciences at a sop save love one,' (XIII.124-125). Clergy, schooled to a higher level than Studie, finds it subsequently more difficult to integrate the principles of faith and love into his personal philosophy, quoting Piers Plowman rather than as an academic source than as a role-model for life.

³⁹Harwood, *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp.64-67, and Bishop comment on Studie's preoccupation with the voice as a pedagogic tool.

Although Studie's speech is effective in preparing Will for his encounter with Clergy and Scripture, he is soon filled with doubt about what kinds of behaviours or activities merit God's grace. Will has been told about the importance of love and faith, but at this stage of the poem he cannot put these principles into practice. Without a founding belief in salvation for the lovers of God, he is destabilised by differing interpretations of Scripture – the very presence of questions about the meaning of the Bible propels Will into doubt. Representing the desiring part of the soul,⁴⁰ Will seizes on any information that may be of use to him. He even describes his quest for knowledge of Dowel in terms of gain: 'For more kynde knowynge I coveite to lerne,' (VIII.110). Dame Studie recognises Will's covetous nature, grouping him with new-fangled flatterers and fools who view knowledge as part of a system of economics: 'Wisdom and wit now is nocht worth a kerse | But if it be carded with coveitise as clotheres kemberen hir wolle' (X.17-18). Studie aligns Will's greed for knowledge of things beyond him with material culture. While she is able to reverse the negativity of Ecclesiastes thanks to her faith, Will is analogous to the pessimistic narrative voice in Qoheleth which pursues the unattainable, 'I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven' (1:13), and, in finding that wisdom cannot be attained through consumption of the richest and most potent resources in the land, despairs at the 'vanity' of the world. In discovering that he and Scripture have contrasting interpretations on the subject of salvation, Will declares the debate void. Time is precious, with Judgement Day drawing ever closer, and Will feels that he is not getting maximum returns from Scripture's teaching: "'This is a long lesson," quod I, "and litel am I the wiser!"' (X.371). This leads Will into his dilemma about the value of learning in general. He seizes on Solomon and Aristotle as examples of learned men who have been damned despite the quality of their wisdom, giving special attention to Solomon's reputation as a teacher and preacher:

Maistres that of Goddes mercy techen men and prechen,
Of hir wordes thei wissen us for wisest in hir tyme –
And al Holy Chirche holdeth hem bothe [in helle]! (X.383-5).

Within the same part of his speech, Will recognises that Solomon was condemned because of his fixation with worldly riches and knowledge:

For many men in this moolde moore sette hir herte

⁴⁰Simpson, p.95. As Ralph Hanna comments in 'Will's Work,' *Written Work* ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), the narrator repeatedly falls into the danger of following his untrammelled will and jeopardising the validity of his work, p.27.

In good than in God – forthi hem grace failleth
 At hir mooste meschief, whan [men] shal lif lete,
 As Salamon dide and swiche othere, that shewed grete wittes,
 Ac hir werkes, as Holy Writ seith, was evere the contrarie. (X.391-5).

Despite arriving at this conclusion, only 33 lines later Will contradicts himself. He affirms that God's scheme of salvation is an enigma, quoting Ecclesiastes 9:1 and providing a Middle English gloss on the Vulgate text:

That Salomon seith I trowe be sooth and certein of us alle:
Sunt iusti atque sapientes, et opera eorum in manu Dei sunt.
 Ther are witty and wel libbynge, ac hire werkes ben yhudde
 In the hondes of almyghty God, and he woot the sothe – (X.428-31).

The changes made to the Vulgate text in translation are significant. Firstly, Will places the *sapientes*, the 'witty' in order of priority over the *iusti*, the 'wel libbybge,' as if to assign greater importance to the plight that he and Solomon share than to those who do good works but are not intellectually curious. Next, he suggests that the intent of God almighty is almost malicious: by changing 'et' (and) to 'ac' (but), he interrupts a continuous thought and implies that there is a moral discrepancy between humanity's view of the world and God's. Furthermore, he asserts that the works are 'yhudde,' unavailable to intuitive knowledge, 'kynde knowynge.' If good works are hidden in God's hands, how can one know how to do well? God can therefore punish us in accordance with a system that we do not understand. The *Glossa Ordinaria*, surrounding the Vulgate text with exegetical marginalia, falls silent at Ecclesiastes 9:1 – annotations disappear, leaving a blank area on which Will can inscribe his own interpretation.⁴¹

Will adapts his source text to tell a different story, biased towards his own concerns, and he also gives only one of Qoheleth's multiple opinions on the matter of divine justice; Ecclesiastes 8:12-13, for example, suggests that God's judgement works in accordance with humanity's concept of justice. Will's selective quotation of scripture is reminiscent of Lady Mede, who also quotes 'Salomon' and 'sapience' partially, so as to give a distorted view of reward value (III.332-6). It is apt that in the C-text, Langland attributes this part of Will's speech to Rechelesnesse, who is still more willing to make bold and careless statements regarding human destiny. Rechelesnesse adds an additional level of anxiety to Will's sentiment that 'wit ne wisdom wan nevere the maistrerie | When man was at meschief withoute the moore grace' (B.X.450-1) by

⁴¹ The *Glossa Ordinaria* shows that St Jerome comments on the *canis vivus, leo mortuus* passage that follows, but does not contain any annotations of the passage Will quotes. Strabus, *Glossa Ordinaria* I in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. P. Migne, 221 vols, (1844-1865), CXIII, p.1124.

highlighting prevalence of chance over merit, declaring that the gift of God is 'grace of fortune' (C.XI.283).⁴²

In both the B- and C-texts, Rechelesnesse's appearance is closely connected to Will's reckless decision to abandon his pursuit and follow Fortune, loosing many years before eventually finding Dowel in the principle of patient poverty. Donaldson argues that it is Rechelesnesse's speech in the C-text about the virtues of poverty that places Will on the right track.⁴³ Rechelesnesse may represent two kinds of carelessness: the negligence of *wanhope* (despair), and the *carpe diem* philosophy of St Francis or the apostles, 'who, casting their burdens upon the Lord, forbore to suffer anxiety for worldly things.'⁴⁴ Rechelesnesse's attitude, both hedonistic and devout, is similar in tone to the voice of Ecclesiastes which promotes the pleasures of life, saying, 'There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God' (2:24). Yet his emphasis on poverty in the C-text also shows that Franciscan recklessness is not simply a selfish pursuit, but part of fourteenth-century socio-religious fabric.

It is precisely this element of wider social awareness that Ecclesiastes is missing. The Solomon of Qoheleth may believe that the righteous judgement of God addresses the imbalance and hypocrisies on earth, but he is also preoccupied with obtaining immediate pleasures and luxuriating in negativity to the point of self-indulgence. Although Wood suggests that wisdom literature is 'humanistic,' transcending the boundaries of culture and, by extension, individuality,⁴⁵ Crenshaw is correct in highlighting the self-centeredness of the central character in Ecclesiastes, which threatens to destroy the ameliorative didacticism that medieval exegetes were so keen to assign to the text. In *Piers Plowman*, Trajan presents Solomon as a figure who did not practice what he preached:

Although Salomon seide, as folk seeth in the Bible,
Divicias nec paupertates [...]
 Wiser than Salomon was bereth witnesse and taughte
 That parfit poverté was no possession to have,
 And lif moost likynge to God (XI.268-72).

⁴² 'Piers Plowman': the C-text ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994).

⁴³ Donaldson, p.170.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.172.

⁴⁵ Wood, p.5.

⁴⁶ Crenshaw, p.127.

Here, it is implied that Solomon was not condemned for his idolatry,⁴⁷ nor was his damnation an arbitrary, inscrutable act by God. Rather, he went to hell because he could not invest in the ideal of poverty, the means by which an individual can escape the burdens inflicted by society and become a wise fool, in a state of suffering that brings one closer to God.

Trajan's speech draws attention to the notion of patient poverty which is developed throughout Passus XI. Reson plays a major part in showing Will how even God is subject to the principle of patience. Will's view of the natural world as crafted by Kynde reveals how reproductive beings in the animal kingdom follow their God-given natural instinct, their 'kynde,' bearing offspring at the appropriate times of year. Will laments that humankind appears to be an aberration in this orderly scheme: 'Ac that moost meved me and my mood chaunged - | That Reson rewarded and ruled alle beestes | Save man and his make' (XI.368-70). Here, we may be reminded of Wit's distinction between those who 'wercheth in tyme' (IX.184) by producing offspring within matrimony and those who, like Cain, 'Conceyved ben in yvel tyme' (IX.121). There is a disjunction in time between humankind and the rest of nature, and between humankind and God, which manifests itself in ignorance of human destiny. This theme is prevalent in both *Piers Plowman* and *Ecclesiastes*, as stated by Whybray: 'Qoheleth believed that man's attempts to order his life by God-given wisdom were frustrated by the limitations which God imposed upon that wisdom: in particular, that he had kept him ignorant of the *appropriate times for action*.'⁴⁸ However, the vital difference between *Ecclesiastes* and the ethic of *Piers* is that Qoheleth considers only the suffering of the self; *Piers*, on the other hand, suggests that suffering, or patience, is bound to the law of love, and is discoverable in both the mundane and the celestial. Humanity must labour continually to be in time, and in harmony, with the rest of creation, but this is a labour of love. While the voice of pleasure in *Ecclesiastes* urges people to enjoy the 'good' in their labour as one might enjoy food and drink (2:24), *Piers* is not concerned with personal benefits, but suggests that the hard task of living a good life is pleasing to God and to wider society.

Reson's answer to Will's query as to why he allows humankind to make misdeeds at once affirms the mysterious ways of God, and suggests that suffering is a common experience to the divine craftsman and His people:

Why I suffre or noght suffre - thiself hast noght to doone
[...]

⁴⁷ Schmidt, p.448.

⁴⁸ Whybray, p.67

Who suffreth moore than God?' quod he; 'no gome, as I leeve.
 He myghte amende in a minute while al that mysstandeth,
 Ac he suffreth for som mannes goode, and so is oure bettre. (XI.376;
 379-81).

These lines suggest that God has the absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) to control the universe in accordance with His will, but for the sake of humanity, He compromises His power, entering into a covenant (*potentia ordinata*).⁴⁹ God therefore allows people free will, knowing that not everyone will do well, and sin will be the result. A human agent suffers because she or he continually fails to meet the ideal of ordered existence that is discernible in nature through reason and education. Therefore, free human beings may feel that their ignorance of the right way to act distances them from God, and makes Him unknowable, yet this very situation is born from God's love and patience, which bind together Creator and created. The shared suffering of God and humanity is most apparent in the figure of Christ in passus XVIII and his counterpart, Piers Plowman, who exchanges manual labour for the spiritual labour of perfect poverty.

Studie's lesson in love and faith and Reson's lesson in suffering enable Will to reflect on the moral dimensions of space and time many lines after Wit first introduced him to these concepts. This educational process enables him to see that the processes of the world are not mere 'vanity,' but invested with a divine presence, and to realise this is to have 'kynde knowynge.' Although the Qohelethian voice of pessimism is overwhelmed by a careful exploration of the moral laws that govern the universe, the presence of doubt and anxiety have nevertheless enriched the text by leaving room for arguments to be developed and counter-arguments to be presented. Wisdom entails allowing for multiple interpretations, and permitting seeming contraries – such as God's love for His creation and its capacity to suffer, and humankind's love for God and its capacity to sin – to co-exist. Having the freedom to choose from multiple options also increases the chances of running into error. Will may only attain the wisdom of Dowel by repeatedly stumbling in his quest and, as we have seen in the case of Rechelesnesse, the best decisions are sometimes made after the worst mistakes. Wisdom is the ability to learn from error, to endure it patiently, and thereby to grow cognitively and emotionally: 'To se muche and suffre moore [...] is Dowel' (XI.410).

⁴⁹ This distinction is famously used by William of Ockham. Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, 3 vols, London: T&T Clark, 2006), I, p.229-30.