

'Sowrede' Eyes and Obscured Meaning: Wynnere and Wastoure as Spiritual Challenge

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Many scholars writing on *Wynnere and Wastoure*, a fourteenth-century alliterative poem, have noted a critical tendency to focus on one aspect of the poem's multiplicity of possible perspectives, to the exclusion of all others.¹ It is curious that after noting such tendencies, the majority of these critics either dismiss or marginalise in their own readings of the poem the Christian perspective of individual salvation, and the very real disjunction between it and the fourteenth-century economy. Such marginalisation occurs usually, but not exclusively, in favour of political or economic readings. This paper, at the outset, recognises the importance of these readings, which include those of A.C. Spearing and Thomas Bestul. Nevertheless, it also suggests that *Wynnere* urges moral attentiveness throughout, offering a spiritual perspective which is just as important as the political, social and economic. Numerous significant moments in the text demand that the spiritual consequences of the economy, consequences made conspicuous by their absence from the king's judgement of the debate, are given attention. An interpretation neglectful of such soteriological concerns, one which reads *Wynnere* as predominantly concerned with the temporal, runs the risk of ignoring the spiritual challenge implicit in the poem.

Bestul does concede in his monograph on *Wynnere* that 'the moral or religious consequences of thrift or extravagance' are 'touched upon' in the poem, but he understands the primary concern of the debate to be 'the larger social [...] consequences' of these economic concerns.² Spearing reaches a similar conclusion: 'The poem's religious implications are not finally brought to bear on its political and economic meaning.'³ Such selective interpretations merit revision, if we are to recognise the importance given by the poet to the vexed question of Christian salvation. Evidence for such a reading lies not only in the wealth of metaphorical language in the poem but also in its context – both the alliterative tradition itself and the manuscript in which the only

¹ STEPHANIE TRIGG, for example, observes that Gollanz's exclusively political reading dominated criticism for much of the twentieth-century, leading to critical neglect of *Wynnere's* language. See her essay 'Israel Gollanz's *Wynnere and Wastoure*: Political Satire or Editorial Politics?' in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G.H. Russell*, ed. Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986), 115–27. THOMAS H. BESTUL likewise notes that exclusively economic and political readings have led to critical neglect of genre and literary tradition in the poem. See his monograph *Satire and Allegory in 'Wynnere and Wastoure'* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1974).

² BESTUL, *Satire and Allegory*, 43–44.

³ A.C. SPEARING, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 134.

surviving copy of the poem is found (British Museum Additional MS 31042). Recognition of spiritual anxieties in *Wynnere* will lead to an understanding of one of its central concerns: the *disjunction* and even incompatibility between an efficient economy and the kind of good Christian practice that ensures individual salvation.

John Gardner stands alone of *Wynnere's* critics in arguing that '[u]ltimately, for this poet, the question is religious'.⁴ Although I agree with this observation, my argument diverges with regard to one significant point. He argues that the poet realises that 'the Christian standard is ideal, impossible perfectly to achieve in a fallen world', and that winning and wasting are two unavoidable characteristics of human life, necessary for an efficient economy and therefore to be accepted rather than lamented.⁵ I would argue that this compromise – 'One need not have "good" men to have a good society' – jars irreconcilably with *Wynnere's* satirical tone.⁶ The suggestion that the poet uses a neat symbiosis of winning and wasting to solve the spiritual anxieties he has raised in the poem is further problematized if the inconclusive nature of the poem is taken into account. For, as David Harrington has shown, the poem opens up questions but does not offer solutions.⁷ *Wynnere* recognises two incompatible facts: that both winning and wasting *are* necessary to the economy but that, simultaneously, such an economic system may have serious, specifically spiritual, implications. The poem's readers are urged to *lament* rather than benignly accept this potentially insoluble disjunction.

A certain amount of vigilance is required if the reader is to recognise and grapple with the anxieties raised here, and I would suggest that the poem subtly encourages this. Harrington has already argued that the apocalyptic language of the prologue, presaging Judgement Day, 'arouse[s] moral attentiveness' in the reader.⁸ However, there is another important aspect of *Wynnere* which functions in a similar way, and which deserves more critical attention: its emphasis on sight and vision. The herald, for example, threatens to blind the two armies if they dare to continue in battle, for the king has ordered 'That no beryn be so bolde *one bothe his two eghne* / Ones to strike one stroke'.⁹ Another example comes at the end of Fitt I, when the narrator drinks so deep that both his eyes are 'sowrede' (WW, 215). And *Wynnere* accuses *Wastoure* of frequenting taverns and similarly blurring his eyes: 'Iche beryne redy with a bolle to blerren thyn eghne' (WW, 278). In a poem of some 500 lines, these three instances may seem incidental rather than significant. Nevertheless, it is important to note that line 215 is especially important since it is the only line in which the dreamer becomes an active participant; he is 'elsewhere no more than an observer of the events'.¹⁰ His only action in the poem involves impairing his own vision – figuratively as well as literally, I hope to suggest.

⁴ *The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Owl and the Nightingale and Five Other Middle English Poems*, ed. and trans. John Gardner (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 257.

⁵ GARDNER, *Alliterative Morte Arthure etc*, 260.

⁶ GARDNER, *Alliterative Morte Arthure etc*, 261. On the poem's satirical tone, see Bestul, *Satire and Allegory*.

⁷ DAVID V. HARRINGTON, 'Indeterminacy in *Winner and Waster* and *The Parliament of the Three Ages*', *Chaucer Review* 20.3 (1986), 246–257.

⁸ HARRINGTON, 'Indeterminacy', 250.

⁹ *Wynnere and Wastoure*, ed. Stephanie Trigg, Early English Text Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), ll. 126–7 (my emphasis). Subsequent references to this poem (hereafter WW) will refer to this edition and will be given in the text.

¹⁰ SPEARING, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, 130.

Although the dreamer at no point offers a moral commentary, and therefore makes no explicit judgement which we can question, the poet does evoke the concept of impaired sight and, implicitly, impaired judgement through reference to his narrator's quality of vision. Sarah Stanbury has argued that although 'sight is the object of knowledge, and the method for its attainment' it also 'represents the deception of the physical, seduction by the world of forms.'¹¹ Stanbury focuses in her monograph on the Gawain poet, and this quotation refers specifically to medieval mystical writing. Nevertheless, the emphasis on sight in *Wynnere*, coupled with its visual qualities, make her comments equally applicable here. The isolated instance of the dreamer's participation should be read as a warning. The poet alerts us to the impaired sight of the dreamer and in so doing urges us to pay extra attention to the subtleties of the debate, and to the poem itself. He encourages us to succeed where the dreamer fails and to be rewarded with comprehension. The equation of clear sight and spiritual knowledge is a central theme in Middle English literature, as Stanbury's monograph shows, and *Wynnere* is a work which deliberately engages with it.

To further illuminate this theory, it will be useful to address and assess the king's judgement at the conclusion of the poem, particularly if we bear in mind that the judgement is offered after the king has been blinding his eyes in the great hall alongside the dreamer. The judgement has received divided critical opinion, partly because the poem is unfinished – and therefore so is the judgement – but partly, and more importantly with regard to this paper, because it is unclear how we are supposed to interpret it.¹² Gardner believes that the king demonstrates both the wise kingship necessary to maintain harmony in a fallen world, and an understanding of the realities of earthly life.¹³ Similarly, John Speirs advances the view that the judgement provides 'the maintenance of a balance between [Wynnere and Wastoure] in relation to the ever-changing economy of a kingdom.'¹⁴ Other critics, however, have read more cynically. Harrington views the judgement as another contributing factor to the indeterminate nature of the debate as a whole; and Trigg draws attention to its temporal nature: 'the king has been unable to offer more than a narrowly practical and temporary solution'.¹⁵ Trigg's analysis is persuasive, but can be nuanced if one locates the insufficiency of the judgement not only in its transitory nature but also in its neglect of eschatological concerns. Reading the poem on an exclusively temporal plane may well mean falling into the same trap as the king, whose sight and judgement have both been blinded, and therefore impaired.

If we accept both the significance of sight in the text and the king's judgement itself as evidence demonstrating soteriological concerns, we can illuminate the poem further through comparison of two significant moments where there is an imperative to 'look'. The first such moment occurs during the debate itself. In a particularly descriptive and evocative passage, *Wynnere* urges a *visualisation* of the Virgin Mary: 'But

¹¹ SARAH STANBURY, *Seeing the Gawain Poet, Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 128.

¹² Nevertheless, as Trigg points out in the introduction to her edition, it is unlikely that much of the poem remained. (*Wynnere and Wastoure*, xlii.)

¹³ GARDNER, *Alliterative Morte Arthure etc*, 261.

¹⁴ JOHN SPEIRS, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber, 1957), 287.

¹⁵ HARRINGTON, 'Indeterminacy', 253; TRIGG, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, xlii.

whoso *lukes* on hir lyre oure lady of heuen...’ (WW, 415, emphasis mine). Such visualisation, he argues, will facilitate greater spiritual understanding:

All þofe scho walt al þis werlde hir w[e]des were pore
For to gyf ensample of siche for to schewe oþer
For to leue pompe and pride þat poverte ofte schewes. (WW, 420–422)

Trigg rightly observes that this argument is ‘just about unanswerable’.¹⁶ Although it becomes tainted with hypocrisy when utilised by the avaricious Wynnere, the argument itself is, nevertheless, a strong one. As well as in the Bible – ‘It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 19:24) – it can be found in countless other works of the time. An anonymous song, written just after the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, warns:¹⁷

If thou art pore, than art thou fre.
If thou be riche, than woo is the.
For but thou spendyte well ere thou goo,
Thin song for euer is ‘well-ay-woo.’

Neglecting the example of Mary and hoarding or wasting riches on luxury rather than giving them in alms to the poor may lead to damnation in the afterlife. Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, a far better-known fourteenth-century poem, repeats the warning: be careful how much heed you take of material things in this life, ‘On aventure ye have yore hire here and youre hevene else’.¹⁸ The debaters in *Wynnere* are clearly aware of this too. Wastoure admonishes Wynnere: ‘Thou schall be hanged in helle for that thou here spareste’ (WW, 260) and Wynnere retorts that Wastoure will be burnt by hell-fire for his lascivious lifestyle (WW, 291-2).

The second significant moment where there is an imperative to look comes during the king’s judgement, when a very different scenario is visualised: Wastoure’s sojourn in Cheapside. ‘*Loke þi wyndowe be wyde,*’ the king instructs him, ‘and wayte þe aboute’ (WW, 475), so that those who will spend their money in the tavern can be lured inside. ‘*Schew hym of fatt chepe scholdirs ynewe [...]*’ the king continues; ‘*And luke thi knafe hafe a knoke*’ (WW, 481, 485, emphasis mine). He thus evokes two spiritually negative functions of sight: it is used first to lure consumers inside and then to ensure extra expenditure once they have been snared. One luridly described aim of all this is to make the customer drunk and then ‘*pik hym so clene [...] / [...] and pute owte his eghe*’ (WW, 486-487). The king thus instructs Wastoure literally to blear his customers’ eyes with drink. This is morally dubious in and of itself, but when coupled with similar imagery throughout the poem, the metaphorical meaning of impaired sight and judgement becomes clear.

Earlier in the poem such visualisation was used for spiritual ends, as a reminder of the salvation made available when Christian example is followed. Here, by contrast, the king uses it to encourage excessive drinking – ‘*Doo hym drynke al nȝte þat he dry be at morow*’ (WW, 478) – resulting in impaired sight and judgement and the stripping of wealth – ‘*pik hym so clene*’. Furthermore, as a consequence of his judgement even more

¹⁶ TRIGG, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, xlii.

¹⁷ See R.B. DOBSON, ed., *The Peasant’s Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 385.

¹⁸ WILLIAM LANGLAND, *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, 2nd edition (London: Dent/Everyman, 1995), 3.72. Subsequent references to the B-text of this poem (hereafter B) will refer to this edition and will be given in the text.

people will become bleary-eyed and impaired of judgement: ‘teche hym owt of the town to trotte aftir more’ (WW, 489). Such instruction represents sight not as spiritual knowledge, but as what Stanbury calls ‘the deception of the physical, seduction by the world of forms’. The king makes no mention of the poor, or of how the wealth could be used in aid of them. And although the poem lacks a conclusion, so that we cannot know for sure, it seems unlikely that these issues would have been addressed in the section of the poem which is lost, for the poet has been far too careful to present his concerns as exclusively temporal and earthly. In the light of this, I would argue that it is impossible for his judgement to be effectual because in making it he ignores the spiritual and focuses solely on the temporal. The insufficiency of the judgement can therefore be located in his partial vision.

Once the reader’s ‘moral attentiveness’ has been roused by the signposts of sight imagery, apocalyptic language in the prologue, invocations of hell by both debaters and the multivalent readings which can be construed, further moments in the text where a spiritual interpretation is implicit become more easily identifiable. Wynnere warns that, if Wastoure lives, he will ‘stroye’ the land (WW, 243); and this has usually been read as an explicit reference to economic destruction. Nevertheless, this warning can also be read metaphorically: the morally reprehensible practices of both Wynnere and Wastoure could lead to a spiritually degenerate country. The apocalyptic language of the warning in the prologue certainly supports such an interpretation. Wynnere’s reminder that ‘when this wele es awaye the wyne moste be payede fore’ (WW, 283) could simply mean that, for a fruitful economy, lavish spending must be balanced out by the saving of others. A metaphorical interpretation is also credible, however, suggesting that if ‘wele’, the *potential* to do good things, is wasted through lavish spending or through avarice, it must be paid for in the afterlife. When both debaters threaten each other with damnation, this is the theology which they are shown to engage with.

The concept of ‘wele’ gains further weight when it is returned to by the king in his judgement: ‘þe more þou wastis þi wele þe better þe Wynner lykes’ (WW, 495). Such waste will please Wynnere, not only because it will lead to increased wealth which he could then hoard, but also because Wastoure will suffer in the afterlife if he wastes his potential for good on earth. These examples deserve comparison with *Piers Plowman*, which (as we have already seen) warns that our actions on earth will have consequences after death. Linguistically, Wynnere’s emphasis on ‘wele’ also echoes the concept of ‘do-well’ that is integral to *Piers*. Wastoure’s repeated warning that Wynnere’s goods will revert to executors after his death (and will therefore be of no use to him) draws attention to the temporality of this life and its wealth, just as the description of fashionable, expensive dresses with their sleeves trailing in the mud (WW, 411) emphasises the corruptibility of material things. The hoard of food in Wynnere’s house, which will (if unused) ‘rote’, ‘ruste’ and ‘ratouns fede’ (WW, 254), has the same function.

Situating *Wynnere* firmly in the context of its time, particularly within the alliterative tradition, gives further cause for an interpretation which takes serious account of the poem’s soteriological concerns. Many critics have distinguished between *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman* – alliterative poems in a similar tradition – in terms of their principal concerns. As there is a critical tradition of prioritising economic, social and political concerns over religious anxieties in *Wynnere*, it has been treated very differently from *Piers*. Langland’s poem, most critics agree, is a religious work, despite its frequent recourse to material metaphors and descriptions. Nevertheless, as Schmidt

indicates in his introduction to the B-text, 'Langland seems to see the obsession with wealth as the special problem of his day, when the Christian Church itself was becoming engrossed in temporal possessions'.¹⁹ Although the importance of wealth in *Piers Plowman* is treated by critics in more of a religious context than it is in *Wynnere*, this is not an insignificant point of comparison. Nor is it the only one. The debate between Mede and Conscience, and the king's judgement of it in *Piers* is startlingly similar to the debate and its resolution in *Wynnere*. These similarities should encourage the reader to reconsider *Wynnere* in a more spiritual light.

In the first vision of *Piers Plowman* the king tries to initiate a marriage between Mede and Conscience, in order to prevent Mede uniting with Fals Fikel-tonge. Nevertheless, Conscience is adamant that he will not wed Mede, for although he acknowledges her positive side, heavenly reward, he fears and despises her as 'mede mesureless' (B.3.246), dangerous to the kingdom and a potential source of corruption: 'Ther she is wel with the kyng, wo is the reame –' (B.3.153). The issues which arise in the debate are similar to those in *Wynnere*. Mede is ambiguous; she can be both beneficial and harmful. Saving and spending can be positive actions, but they become the vices of avarice and prodigality if utilised to excess.

Another striking similarity between this passage and *Wynnere* is the ineffectual nature of the king's judgement. Spearing accurately concludes that in *Piers Plowman* the judgement is 'a triumph of good advice and good intentions, but with no guarantee that society can really be reformed on this basis.'²⁰ The king makes many fine promises, but as Conscience points out: 'It is ful hard [...] herto to brynge it, / [And] alle youre lige leodes to lede thus euene' (B.4.183-4). Any action will have to be delayed until the next council (B.4.189). Langland simultaneously creates the illusion of finality and leaves the debate in suspense. It raises, one might argue, more questions than it answers. This is of course comparable to the indeterminate nature of the debate in *Wynnere*, which also gives an illusion of finality through the king's judgement.

This begs the question: why are critics inclined to read the judgement in *Wynnere* as a compromise, a symbiosis, rather than regarding it as insufficient, as is usually the case with the judgement in *Piers Plowman*? I suggest that the divergence in interpretation is based on the assumption that the concerns in *Wynnere* are temporal, whereas in *Piers* they are spiritual. Ruth Roberts, for example, argues that 'while Langland attempts to reconcile gain and expenditure with a path to salvation, the subject matter of *Wynnere* is dissociated from divine judgement'.²¹ For Roberts, *Wynnere* works on a temporal plane unlike *Piers*, whose concern is decidedly soteriological. Thus where *Wynnere* is able to compromise pragmatically, *Piers* cannot. Ultimately, in the latter poem, 'material gain is inherently incompatible with the divine economy.'²²

The manuscript context of *Wynnere* – the single text of the poem appears in Robert Thornton's fifteenth-century 'London' miscellany – provides further justification for a reappraisal of this assumption, which has not only affected readings of *Wynnere*

¹⁹ SCHMIDT, *Piers Plowman, B-Text*, xxxviii–xxxix.

²⁰ SPEARING, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, 141.

²¹ RUTH R. ROBERTS, 'Models of Winning in the B-text of *Piers Plowman* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*', *MARGINALIA* 4 (2006).

²² ROBERTS, 'Models of Winning'.

itself, but also its comparison with other works in the alliterative tradition.²³ As Aisling Byrne argues, ‘the economically expedient [poem] envisaged by Lois Roney and others, which accepts the necessity of both winning and wasting to the ‘circular flow of economic phenomena’, would be out of place in the London manuscript. Thornton’s manuscripts are uniformly and uncompromisingly moral rather than expedient.’²⁴ Although Karen Stern believes the manuscript to be more biased towards the secular than the spiritual, she classes both *Wynnere* and *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* as secular in order to reach this conclusion.²⁵ This is a taxonomy which should be reconsidered, particularly as Stern herself notes that Thornton seemed to have a predilection for edifying material, and concedes that ‘the distinctions between religious and secular material are somewhat blurred by the fictional character of much that is ostensibly ‘religious’ and the moralising nature of the “secular”.’²⁶ I would therefore agree with Byrne: it is remarkable that the manuscript context, with its distinctive mingling of spiritual and temporal concerns, has not been significantly brought to bear on the poem.

One possible explanation for this critical neglect, both of the manuscript context and of the eschatological concerns in the poem more generally, is the subtlety of the *Wynnere* poet’s approach. *Wynnere*’s sister poem, *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, has been judged less accomplished than *Wynnere* and this is largely because it is far less complex.²⁷ The two poems certainly engage in similar arguments: Youth and his profligate lifestyle could be aligned with Wastoure while Medill-Elde and his avarice resonate with the figure of *Wynnere*. Nevertheless the addition of Elde, and his emphasis on the temporality of this life, makes explicit that which is only ever implicit in the arguably more sophisticated *Wynnere*: ‘That all [es] vayne and vanytes and vanyte es alle’.²⁸ The wealth we waste or accumulate in this world ultimately means nothing. There is no challenge presented to the reader. In terms of subject matter these two poems can and should be considered together; the emphasis on the spiritual in a poem which shares many similar concerns to *Wynnere* can be used to shed light on *Wynnere* itself. However, in terms of style, and the sophistication of the *Wynnere* poet’s approach, a more useful point of comparison is *Piers Plowman*. Anne Middleton argues that the manuscript context of *Piers Plowman* demonstrates an equal concern with the secular (particularly the historical) and the religious.²⁹ Ultimately the poem is concerned with how one can negotiate the two, when a symbiosis is frequently frustrated. *Wynnere*’s manuscript context, as discussed above, demonstrates a similar concern.

²³ On the poem’s context in Thornton’s London manuscript, see *Wynnere and Wastoure*, ed. Trigg, Introduction, xiii–xviii.

²⁴ AISLING BYRNE, ‘*Wynnere and Wastoure* in Robert Thornton’s ‘Up Sodowne’ World’, *MARGINALIA*, 8 (2008). Byrne cites LOIS RONEY, ‘Winner and Waster’s “Wyse Wordes”’: Teaching Economics and Nationalism in Fourteenth-Century England’, *Speculum* 69.4 (1994), 1070–1100: 1099.

²⁵ KAREN STERN, ‘The London “Thornton” Miscellany: A New Description of British Museum Manuscript 31042’, *Scriptorium*, 30 (1976), 201–18.

²⁶ STERN, ‘“Thornton” Miscellany’, 210.

²⁷ It has been posited that these two poems were written by the same author. For a summary of the critical debate centred on this claim, see M.Y. OFFORD’s introduction to her edition of *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), xxxiv–xxxvi.

²⁸ *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ed. Offord, l. 640.

²⁹ See ANNE MIDDLETON, ‘The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*,’ in David Lawton, ed., *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), 101–123.

David Harrington has already argued that *Wynnere* should be interpreted as indeterminate.³⁰ This paper develops his argument and posits that the poem's unresolved, even enigmatic nature is located *specifically* in its exploration of the irreconcilable relationship between the secular and spiritual, making a reading which takes account of both perspectives necessary. It is this complexity, which the poem shares with Langland's *Piers Plowman*, that makes *Wynnere* so accomplished.

Looking to the culture of readership more generally, Janet Coleman notes that:³¹

As the fourteenth century progressed the scholasticism of a university elite changed its focus somewhat and fixed its attention on personal morality in the world and its relation to heavenly reward. As a result, the topics of scholarly controversy were opened up to individuals of a wider, increasingly literate public concerned with their personal salvation.

Wynnere is a spiritual challenge to which the reader must rise, if the poem is to be fully comprehended. Its poet demands moral attentiveness, and the reader who gives this discovers that the poem is as concerned with, and troubled by, soteriological issues as other literature of the period. *Wynnere and Wastoure* is not a work as wide-reaching and complex as *Piers Plowman*. Nevertheless it shares the same anxieties and explores them in a strikingly similar, enigmatic way.

³⁰ HARRINGTON, 'Indeterminacy'.

³¹ JANET COLEMAN, *Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350–1400* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 15.