I. Introduction

*Piers Plowman*, a late 14th century alliterative poem attributed to William Langland, uses the human body to explore how we can understand our finite place within an infinite Christian schema. In revising, repeating, and reworking depictions of the human body, Langland enables us to identify connections between people and events throughout his poem’s narrative, one which spans across both human and biblical time. It is through these connections that we can begin to consider how the human body can both form and obstruct the path to salvation. In addition, Langland presents us with a repeated cycle of intellectual challenge and growth; Simpson, an eminent critic of *Piers Plowman*, even suggests calling the poem a Bildungsroman of “the soul’s education”. ¹ One of the defining features of *Piers

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**Plowman**, therefore, is its intellectually demanding and often opaquely abstract nature—a fact which draws us to the poem’s brief pockets of narrative action in which the body is comparatively comprehensible, recognisable, and familiar.

When Will, the narrator, falls asleep at the beginning of the poem, the visions he sees of nobility, friars, and peasants lead him on a quest to find Dowel—a person he believes will lead him to St. Truth and then to heaven. In questioning this host of characters, Will discovers that Dowel is not a person but a state of being: to ‘do-well’, accompanied by ‘do-better’ (Dobet) and ‘do-best’ (Dobest). Consequently, clergymen are exposed to Langland’s derision when their definitions of Dowel are found lacking or even antithetical to their lifestyles—many of which are founded on bribery and hypocrisy. Dowel epitomises how Langland uses the physical (bodily action) as a means of exploring the non-physical (repentance and salvation). To this end, Langland also uses personification allegories. As embodiments of emotions, states of being, or ideas, they physically as well as verbally enact the intellectual discussions that structure the poem. However, as the poem progresses, the allegories’ human existence becomes more and more problematic as religious and literary concepts. Near the end of the poem, we see Christ ascend the cross “in Piers armes” *[in Piers arm] (C.20.21), with Langland merging the two figures and defining Piers’s centrality to Will’s search for Dowel. The poem closes with Will sheltering in the Barn of Unity, assailed by vices and afflictions such as Sloth and Old Age. That Will’s final vision closes with Conscience’s decision to leave Unity in search of Piers speaks to the mirroring of physical action and spiritual understanding throughout the poem.

Although most of the narrative takes place in a series of multi-layered visions seen and dreamt by Will, *Piers Plowman* is also concerned with how we experience the physical world. From the opening lines, “In a somur sesoun whan softe was the sonne” *[In a summer season when the sun shone softly] (C.Prol.1), to the unploughed half acre of the eponymous Piers Plowman, the poem is concerned with places and the bodies that exist within them. In fact, this focus on bodies and bodily experience threads the poem’s textual and contextual history, connecting its disparate strands of scribal practice, contemporary economic legislature and workers’ rights, and profound theological shifts. This essay will examine each of these aspects in turn through the lens of Manuscript Douce 104, *Piers Plowman*’s only extant illustrated manuscript.

**II. Texts and Contexts**

In sum, there are fifty-two surviving *Piers Plowman* manuscripts whose analysis forms a large portion of the poem’s scholarship. Skeat’s landmark categorisation of these manuscripts into three distinct ‘versions’, resulting in editions of the ‘A-text’ (1867), ‘B-text’ (1869), and ‘C-text’ (1873), paved the way for examining *Piers Plowman*’s textual history. MS Douce 104, held by the Bodleian Library, is roughly dated 1427 and contains a form of the C-text. The C-text is the longest of the three versions,

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comprising a prologue and 22 passus (sections) on average, in comparison to A’s 11 passus and B’s prologue and 20 passus. With a ‘tradition’ (comprising of the circulation and copying of the poem) between 1379/1381-c.1385, the C-text “sometimes comes across as the more formally and ideologically conservative text, as if the poet reviser tacked a new political wind”.5 It is overall less polemical than the earlier B-text (1377-1379/1381) but much more expansive in scope as well as length than the initial A-text (1368-1374).6

Within the three versions of Piers Plowman are non-homogenous ‘families’ (groupings) of texts. These families likely descended from scribal errors found in earlier manuscripts which, in turn, generated increasingly divergent copies.7 In a detailed and compelling article, Madrinkian argues that the errors descended from A directly into B arose from Langland’s use of a scribal manuscript (not his original one) to make the revisions. He suggests that scribal errors of the A-text were therefore incorporated into later authorial manuscripts, erasing clear distinctions between author and editor, and evidencing a much more “fluid conception of authorship” in medieval textual practice than we might expect.8 In any case, comparisons between the versions of Piers Plowman are incredibly fruitful in tracking the genesis of Langland’s approach to contemporary ecclesiastical and social developments. It is also important to emphasise that the different versions of the poem in surviving manuscripts are extremely liminal – that is, some manuscripts are a pastiche of different versions of the poem or contain scribal ‘emendations’. Frequently, modern editorial concepts are too rigid and lead to an incomplete understanding of the text’s iterations.9 Therefore, a textual and social continuum is the most useful model for understanding the text as a wider phenomenon.

Both Piers Plowman’s tradition and narrative coincide with tumultuous changes in late 14th century society. The poem appears at the intersection of new economic legislature (namely the work statutes of the 1350s and 1370s) and of religious upheaval, with John Wycliffe’s writings in the 1370s acting as a catalyst for the proto-protestant Lollard movement and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.10 Indeed, one reason for the general conservative shift from the B- to C-text is that Langland may have wanted to avoid association with the 1381 rebels.11 As such, the poem is extremely dynamic and yields valuable historicist readings. However, Piers Plowman also arrives at a time of fast-paced change for the English

5 Ibid. pp.185.
6 Ibid. pp.184-185.
7 Kane and Donaldson, editors of the Athlone editions of the poem, attribute these changes more specifically to ‘convergent variation’; a process which Madrinkian describes as involving a recognisable pattern of error made by scribes. The result would be disparate texts between or within families agreeing with each other through “pure coincidence” (pp.180).
9 Ibid.
10 These statutes, which will be discussed in greater depth later in this essay, curtailed social mobility and attempted to control peasants’ wages.
Baker analyses the in-depth grammatical analogy added to C versions of the text. She notes that this additional material may “be in response to the Rising of 1381 or possible to the power struggle between Richard II and the Lords Appellant later in the decade” (pp.55). Other notable revisions from the B to C text include the deletion of Piers’s unprecedented tearing of Truth’s pardon.
language and its many literary genres. Spanning dream vision, estates satire, and sermon (to name a few), Langland uses genre as a tool to further his satirical ends. We become conscious of the modes of writing he is using, and therefore of our own experience as readers. Since the poem is so intensely temporal in its textual and contextual history, we as readers are alerted to our own processes of reading and interpretation. This sensation informs just one of the many ‘meta’ levels of time that we experience in *Piers Plowman*.

### III. Bodily Experience as Reader and as Narrator

In a poem that is so frequently dialogic and abstract, we as readers attach onto as much concrete detail as possible. MS Douce 104’s illustrations of the human body are therefore extremely useful in tracking physical action throughout the poem. However, the body also limits us from immersing fully in the world of abstract thought and soteriological speculation. We can see this fact most clearly in the way that Will’s body causes the poem to keep faltering and restarting. Our understanding of the dreams, let alone of their significance, is often impeded by Will’s untimely waking. At first, these interruptions to Will’s vision suggest a hopelessness for humanity; we will never be able to gain a religious understanding because we are ‘held back’ by earthly desires and events. But this intense bodily-ness contrasts with Will’s presence when in the dreams. On the occasions that he manages to sustain the dreams without soon waking, Will barely acknowledges the presence of his own body: a fact perhaps rooted in the medieval belief that “liminality” and onlookers were incredibly powerful. This tension between waking and slumber, body and bodyless-ness is resolved as the poem progresses and Will becomes more involved in the narrative action. Langland begins to depict our earthly bodies not as hindrances to theological understanding but as powerful vehicles for spiritual growth (signified by Dowel) and didactic metaphors. By the end of the poem the Good Samaritan even uses the anatomy of a hand to explain the Trinity to Will (C.19.114-171).

Speaking out of turn to Reason in passus 13, Will awakes from a dream within a dream. He says to himself “Slepyng hadde Y grace | To wyte what Dowel is, ac wakynge neuere!” [Sleeping I had grace to know what Do-well is, but waking never!] (C.13.216-17). We can read “grace” differently depending on who is performing it. “Grace” could refer to God’s grace, in which dreams are a way for God to actively teach a dreamer who watches on. Or Will could mean that he was granted an opportunity by God to learn about Dowel, the onus being on his own efforts this time. Alternatively, “grace” could be in the sense of manners and courtesy. In this interpretation, it is Will who created the opportunity to learn about salvation through his own graciousness. It seems that even within dreams there is a politics of performance. Furthermore, Will’s suggestion that in “wakynge” he can “neuere” learn about Dowel is intensely ironic, since in this passage he awakes from an inner-dream but is ultimately still asleep. The only person awake at this point is us, the reader. Langland is encouraging us to consider our own interpretations of the poem and what we hope to gain from reading it: do we have grace? Or, more importantly, have we begun to understand Dowel yet?

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12 I use ‘soteriological’ in the wide sense of ‘to do with salvation’.
Will’s body, while not absent in the poem, is defined by Langland almost entirely by the way it impacts others. We can observe that Will’s waking interrupts the narrative, but that does not give us any clearer indication of what Will’s body is physically like. The allegorical figure of Old Age is key to our understanding of the boundaries between the physical and the abstract in Langland’s poem. He is simultaneously part of Will’s body (along with mental faculties like Wit and Conscience) and an idea external to it (like Truth or Book). In the final passus of the B- and C-texts, Old Age assails the Barn of Unity before turning specifically to attack Will: “He boffeded me aboute the mouthe and beet out my wang-teethe” [And boxed me around the mouth and knocked out my molars] (C.22.191). In a typically wry manner, the focus of this passage turns immediately away from the devastating effects of age on Will’s self to the impact it will have on his wife, namely their conjugal relations: Will laments that his “lyme” [limb] that she “loued me fore and leef was to fele” [loved me for and enjoyed feeling up] (C.22.195) he can no longer “maken hit here wille” [make it do her pleasure] (C.22.197). However, this is the second time in the poem that Will has grown old. The first occurs at the beginning of passus 12, when Will follows Fortune’s advice and “foryet youthe and yorn into elde” [passed right through youth and ran into old age] (C.12.12). Effectively, we witness three lifetimes of Will: the sleeping dreamer, the fortune chaser, and the ageing husband. Will’s body delimits the shape of the poem but is never truly part of it. Therefore, Will’s body manifests the poem’s “Augustinian temporality”: a continual ‘present’ of which the past and the future are all versions. Will’s body is the intangible past, present, and future of the poem.

IV. Ambiguity, Interpretation, and Criticism
Connecting similar events, objects, and figures throughout time underpins the workings of biblical typology. Through typology, isolated ‘things’ can take on more spiritual significance than they would individually as they become part of a wider schema. Langland’s poem operates similarly. Personification allegories are in themselves one-dimensional: they personify one characteristic, and to expand upon or change that feature would be to lose their raison d’être. For example, if Gluttony were to take Repentance’s advice and practise moderation, he would no longer be gluttonous. However, we must distinguish between using personification allegories to interpret the poem and subjecting their existence as humans to critical analysis. In the former, we can see personification allegories as a physical route into spiritual problems, but with the latter we find that the nature of personification allegories is a thorny theological issue.

When Hunger attacks the “Wastour” (‘Waster’) and “Bretoner” (‘Breton’) at Piers’s command in passus 8, Langland creates subtle thematic and semantic connections. Will observes how Hunger “beet hem bothe he barste ner her gottes | Ne hadde Peres with a pese-loof preyede him bileue” [And he so beat both of them up he nearly busted their guts had not Piers with a peas-loaf called him off] (C.8.175-76). Here, he plays on the homophone of “a pese” that is the Middle English apēsen (Modern English ‘to appease’) to stress the emotional relief that comes with satisfying Hunger. By styling Piers

as entirely benevolent through this wordplay, in addition to “preyed” which has religious overtones, Langland begins to align Piers with significant religious figures. Indeed, Piers’s distribution of bread echoes Matthew 26:26 in which Christ shares his bread with the disciples. And later, at Conscience’s feast in passus 15, Langland clarifies to us that earthly food can also symbolise spiritual food. Therefore, Hunger’s actions in this passus are more than humorously exaggerated ways of getting people to work and more than a straightforward personification allegory. Here, the idle peasants’ hunger is a sign of their moral and spiritual deficiencies. Langland has created a schema in which personified traits contribute to a nexus of meaning outside of themselves.

Kerby-Fulton and Despres identify homophones as part of the “play” of a medieval scribe-illustrator, who may use “puns as heuristic prompts and exegetical tools” to provide critical commentary in the margins of manuscripts.17 We can also view Langland’s pun on *apēsen* as a type of “critical commentary”; the appeasements of workers in the half-acre episode touches on the topical issue of pay and labour rights in the late 14th century. Previously, the 1348 Black Death had led to a significant reduction in the “labour market”, resulting in the Ordinance of Labourers in 1349.18 This legislature froze pay rates and consequently inhibited social mobility.19 Furthermore, these effects were compounded by the 1351 Statutes of Labourers Act which came into effect shortly after; labourers were prevented from leaving their “original masters” and non-disabled beggars were heavily penalised.20 Baldwin locates these problems within a wider societal shift from a feudal to a money-based society: a transition which became increasingly incompatible with feudal principles, such as that of “truth”, that had previously underpinned the three estates model of society.21 We can consider Hunger’s role as indicative of a social crisis, one in which state policy and religious principles intersect.

As with Hunger, once biblical ideas are personified, they take on additional spiritual possibilities. However, their human bodies hold up less well under critical scrutiny. Since the Sins are personified, we can speculate as to whether they can have recourse to penance, and therefore salvation, as all other humans can. Orlemanski discusses the limitations of personification allegory in the poem using Jakobson’s framework of metonymic and metaphoric poles.22 She argues that in directly representing the Seven Deadly Sins, the metaphoric (what the sins stand for – unchanging and perennial evils) and the metonymic (the sins’ function as characters in a narrative) are at odds.23 As people they technically can be redeemed and saved, but as allegories for sins they fundamentally cannot be. The spiritual and the concrete, therefore, do not align.

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20 Ibid. pp.84.
23 Ibid. pp.167.
Imagining personifications of physical objects in the poem is no less difficult. After the Crucifixion, both the B and C texts contain a commentary by “Book” (B)/“Boek” (C). Schmidt, editing the B text, and Pearsall, editing C, both identify Book’s “two brode yes” [two broad eyes] (C.20.239) as the Old and New Testaments. Significantly, Book’s opening apostrophe is to swear “By godes body” [By God’s body] (C.20.241). Perhaps we are supposed to take this statement as a reference to Christ’s body since only 190 lines earlier we witnessed his ascent of the cross. Alternatively, we could view Book as the “body” in question, with the Bible being one of the most prevalent physical manifestations of God’s teaching. I argue that picturing Book as a character is even more complicated than imagining Hunger or Gluttony. Unlike the Sins which are unique and abstract, the Bible spans histories, families, events, contains the word of God and his followers, and traces time from its creation to the Day of Judgement. How can we imagine a character composed of so many voices, times, and bodies? Furthermore, as readers we must extrapolate outside of the narrative to wonder how a wholly good (e.g. Book) or wholly bad (e.g. the Sins) character can exist as a human without being liable to salvation or transgression. We could assume that as an author Langland has given the Sins no opportunity to do good or Book no opportunity to do evil and thereby has ensured that the abstract concepts are free from jeopardy. But this argument only works insofar as the characters exist solely in the narrative and are not living ‘people’ of whom the narrative is a snapshot. The personification allegories lead us to question the very premise of what fiction or narrative even is.

V. Generative Texts

“propreliche to telle hit, | Al this in Engelysch, hit is ful hard” [to tell it properly, all this in English, is very difficult] (C.16.118-19)

The quotation above is spoken by Patience in passus 16 when Hawkyn (Activa Vita) says he cannot understand Latin. Patience cannot find words that encompass all the meanings of the Latinate scripture: a linguistic problem also found by Middle to Modern English translators. The problem is that if we cannot say what a word means exactly, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine how we can physically enact it, as with Dowel, or physically represent it, as with Mede.

In MS Douce 104, Mede’s ambiguity generates a range of illustrations; she appears in no less than four different outfits, making her the most frequently depicted figure in the poem. More specifically, Mede’s range of clothes reflects the poem’s attempt to pin down what ‘mede’ is and whether it denotes a gift or a payment. The implications of this decision will significantly affect how we understand our relationship to God – namely whether salvation is something we are owed or something we must work for. This problem arises in the King’s court when Mede is tried for bribery. She first appears in a sumptuous red gown and “crouned with a croune, the kyng hath non better” [crowned with a coronet as good as the king’s] (C.2.11) as in figure 1. Immediately we are confronted with an extremely powerful figure. However, her “croune” does not originate from divine ordination but from bribery and corruption. We get our first inkling of this fact when Will describes how “Here aray with her rychesse raueschede my herte” [Her raiment and riches ravished my heart] (C.2.16). As

24 Many thanks to Dr. Cosima Gillhammer for our invaluable tutorial discussions about personification allegory and the illustrative similarities between Friar Flattery and the friar holding a pardon (discussed later).
Pearsall comments, “it is her aray that ravishes the dreamer, not her beauty”. Her swooping gown and plunging neckline indicate the seductive power of this particular interpretation of Mede. Even the King’s priest is not immune to Mede’s bribery, pledging her soul a safe passage to heaven if she pays to fix a broken window in the church (C.3.51-54). In a further depiction of Mede (fol. 011r), however, the Douce artist illustrates Mede wearing her hair bound in rolls and dressed in a white gown, both of which are traditional artistic markers denoting purity and maidenhood. It is no coincidence that this change in Mede’s physical appearance coincides with her attempt to defend herself to the King. She argues that:

Hit bycometh for a kyng that shal kepe a reume
To yeue men mede that meeekliche hym serueth,
To aliens and to alle men, to honoure hem with yeftes
Mede maketh hym by loued and for a man yholde.

[It becomes a king that shall rule a realm to give meed to the men that humbly serve him, to honour with gifts all men, his own and foreign; Meed makes him beloved and taken for a real man].

(C.3.265-68)

The artistic markers of her clothing reflect her self-styled moral purity. Mede pictures herself as an integral part of feudal relations between a “kynge” and his loyal subjects: a set of transactions that are not just necessary but meritorious. We must decide for

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Reading (as) a Continuum

Figure 1. fol. 008r: “Lady Mede, richly clothed in red, and wearing a crown”.
ourselves whether we believe Conscience’s or Mede’s argument in this passus and draw our own lines between just reward and bribery.27

Simpson observes that Mede’s position in the narrative can be sustained only as long as her name is “semantically ambiguous”.28 He positions this discussion of the differences between wages and gifts in the context of religious salvation. “[I]f the reward God gives is a wage, then humans deserve it and God is obliged to give it,” he explains, but “if the reward God gives is a gift, then humans have not deserved it and God is not obliged to give it.”29 The former is similar to the Pelagian school of thought, which holds that humanity is not stained by original sin and that sin comes about by free will. Simplistically, by resisting sin we would be ‘earning’ salvation and therefore God would ‘owe’ it to us. The latter is Augustinian; humans are stained by original sin and therefore have no capacity to choose good. From this position, any and all salvation bestowed by God is a gift.30 Unlike A and B, the C-text extends this distinction by also using the terms ‘mede’ and ‘mercede’. Temporal relations, in addition to morality, characterise the differences between these two terms, where mede is something given before work and mercede something given after.31

MS Douce 104’s illustrations operate as critical readings of the poem, foregrounding central themes such as Mede’s ambiguity. Camille traces the advent of marginal illustrations back to the practice of meditatio (memorising and ‘meditating’ on texts by reading them aloud).32 He identifies a crucial shift in emphasis from the text as a source for the spoken word to a text’s visual layout and presentation (ordinatio). Whereas letters had once been the illustration themselves, elaborate and allusive, it became increasingly necessary for them to become “recognizable as part of a scanned system of visual units, [and so the] possibilities for [their] deformation and play became limited”.33 Thus, illustrations were, in effect, pushed outwards from the centre of the page into the margins of manuscripts.34 From their (literally) marginal position, glosses and illustrations became a means of analysis or criticism for the texts they accompanied, creating a tripartite dialogue between the text, the criticism, and the reader. In the case of MS Douce 104, it has been proposed that the scribe was also the illustrator, which adds another interpretative layer to our reading of the poem and the text it contains.35

VI. Generative Images

“Oene frere Flatrere is fiscicien and surgein” [One Friar Flatterer is a physician and surgeon] (C.22.315)

27 Simpson, J. (2007) introduces and discusses this distinction very clearly.
29 Ibid. pp.71.
30 Locating the poem’s exact religious standpoint is a point of critical contention. Mede features significantly in this discussion, alongside Piers’s tearing of the pardon in the B-text. Robert Adams (1983) argues that the poem is semi-Pelagian; David Aers (2009) provides an extremely thorough analysis of the wider theological forces at work in the poem and its contexts.
33 Ibid. pp.20.
34 Ibid. pp.20.
As discussed earlier, the figures of Piers and Christ are closely related in the poem. When Langland depicts the Crucifixion, he says that Christ ascends the cross in Piers’s “armes” (C.21.12). In many ways, the illustrations have prepared us to receive parallels between characters; they further our understanding of the text by generating connections through time. In MS Douce 104, the False Friar of passus 15 stands looking upwards with hands raised (see figure 2). And in the final passus, Flattery, who masquerades as a friar, stands very similarly (see figure 3). A hood falls over their heads in both cases, but whereas the False Friar’s mantle is short and white, Friar Flattery’s is long and brown.

Contemporary religious thought is integral to our linking of these two figures and the significance of their ecclesiastical attire. In *De Civili Dominio* (1376-1378) and *De Officio Regis* (1379) John Wycliffe argued for the disendowment of the Church. 36 These treatises added to a longstanding and volatile dispute about whether the Church should also be paying taxes. Necessitated by the continuation of the Hundred Years’ War in 1369, taxes steadily increased to the point that in 1371 Parliament demanded that the clergy must not be exempt. 37 Langland’s writing is in a similar vein to Wycliffe, and makes no attempt to hide his contempt of the greed and hypocrisy that he perceived in the Church. When Will and Patience sit at a side table in Conscience’s feast in passus 15, the False Friar gluttonously consumes wine and rich food at the high table, despite having just delivered sermons recommending moderation and charity. In contempt, Will declares “Y schal iangle to this iurdan with his iuyste wombe” [‘I’ll rap with this potbellied piss-pot] (C.15.91). The alliterated staves in this line – “iangle” (rap/ prate), “iurdan” (piss-pot), and “iuyste” (potbelly) – strongly associate the False Friar with urine and chamber pots. Either we are to read the False Friar as the wasteful by-product of a Church partially corrupted by

Figure 2. fol. 111v: “Flattery, dressed as a Friar and holding a bottle”.

Reading (as) a Continuum
Figure 3. fol. 067v: “A false Friar, in a white habit”.

Reading (as) a Continuum
bribery and hypocrisy (he is the urine), or we could read him as the producer of urine, dispensing insincere sentiments under the guise of ‘practising what you preach’. If we take Scott’s suggestion that Friar Flattery holds a vial of urine, we can infer that he has in some way distilled the sinful essence of the False Friar, which he later uses to inebriate his patients in the Barn of Unity. 38 Thus, connections in the text are facilitated by the images of MS Douce 104 to ensure we see the endemic corruption in Langland’s Malvern Hills.

Contrary to Scott, the Bodleian Library identifies the liquid in Friar Flattery’s vial as medicine. 39 This interpretation would allow us to make a connection between Friar Flatter and friar of fol. 044v who holds a pardon in a similar posture, see figure 4. Indeed, each uses their held object as a way of relieving spiritual pain – a transformation of the physical into the symbolic much like the Dowel lifestyle. Styled by Langland as both a friar and doctor, Flattery is called for in passus 22 when Conscience’s potions are too “scharp” [painful] (C.22.306) for the sick in the Barn of Unity. The harsh truth of the potions’ penance is substituted for the numbing medicine Flattery provides; he gives one of his first patients, Contrition, “a plaster | Of a pryue payement” [a plaster made of a private payment] (C.22.363-64). We are told that Conscience’s original motive for applying salves to the wounded was to make “men do penauose | For here mysdedes that thei wrouht hadde | And that Peres pardon ypayd, redde quod debes” [men do penances for the misdeeds they had done, and made sure Piers’ pardon was paid, ‘pay what you owe’] (C.22.306-08). Friar Flattery’s “pryue payement” is an inadequate form of repentance, and disingenuously grants an ‘easy way out’. The illustrations enable us to form a contrast between the straightforwardly damnable and spiritually corrosive medicine of Friar Flattery and the much more nuanced signification of the pardon. In the B-texts, Piers tears the pardon when the friar reads it to him: an action that has generated extensive scholarship because of its almost incomprehensible motives. 40 However, if we equate the friar’s pardon with Friar Flattery’s vial – which I believe we are encouraged by the illustrator to do, given their striking visual similarities – we can read the pardon as a quasi-ominous symbol. Thus, the illustrations of MS Douce 104 allow us to consolidate our

39 Flattery, dressed as a Friar and holding a bottle of medicine. (2018). Bodleian Library. Retrieved 21 Apr 2021 from https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e6865046-6257-4591-a731-548232c7c8dd/surfaces/9b5c7dca-f77e-4ae1-ab5f-f2d70f0c79b7/.
40 Piers does not tear apart the poem in the A or C-texts. Baker’s (2017) essay navigates the critical nexus that is discussions of the pardon. Robert Adam’s essay ‘Langland’s Theology’ is also valuable, including introducing the idea that God’s acknowledgement of “our best efforts” (pp.97) is itself a pardon. Alternatively, Simpson (2007) argues that the pardon offers “no conditional allowances [...] for repentance for sins committed” (pp.69). Barr (2014) offers an insightful overview of the possible meanings of the pardon and considers the variation between B and C-texts. She argues that if Piers’s tearing of the pardon “has any single dramatic point, it is to expose the presumption of trust in easy (ab)solutions” (pp.23).
Figure 4. fol. 044v: “Priest, tonsured, white gown, holding a pardon with seal”.
understanding of important theological issues by enabling us to compare and contrast key moments within the text.

**VII. Conclusion**

Although *Piers Plowman* is divided into multiple passus – Latin for ‘step’ – I think it is more useful to conceive of the poem as expanding rather than advancing. In both notions of Dowel Langland implies that the body is a vital touchstone for soteriological understanding; embarking on a quest to find Dowel, and ‘doing-well’ both involve physical action. As such, the outcome of the poem’s ‘search’ moves from the physical to the spiritual but its means remain roughly the same. The mechanical awareness of reading that MS Douce 104’s illustrations produce is mirrored in the poem itself, whose frustrating narrative pivots or untimely end of dreams reasserts Langland’s authorial power over us. It is this paradox of being immersed in the poem yet simultaneously aware of it that Martha Rust picks up on when she argues that illustrated manuscripts have a “unique function of lending immediacy to the verbal senses of the book” whilst pronouncing the act of reading “as a responsiveness that is crucial in bringing that immediacy into being”.  

Furthermore, the poem’s complex textual history is synchronous with a period of rapid change and political intensity. *Piers Plowman* is at once intensely anchored in the late 14th century and absolutely perennial; a temporal tension is continually felt throughout the poem. Will’s bodily experiences, MS Douce 104’s illustrations, and Langland’s use of personification allegory each bring *Piers Plowman*’s hermeneutics up to the reader and beyond.

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Illustrations

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*Flattery, dressed as a Friar and holding a bottle of medicine.* (2018). Bodleian Library. Retrieved 21 Apr 2021 from https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e6865046-6257-4591-a731-548232c7c8dd/surfaces/9b5c7dca-f77e-4ae1-ab5f-f2d70f0c79b7/.

*Lady Mede, richly clothed in red, and wearing a crown.* (2018). Bodleian Library. Retrieved 21 Apr 2021 from https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e6865046-6257-4591-a731-548232c7c8dd/surfaces/9b5c7dca-f77e-4ae1-ab5f-f2d70f0c79b7/.

*Priest, tonsured, white gown, holding a pardon with seal.* (2018). Bodleian Library. Retrieved 21 Apr 2021 from https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e6865046-6257-4591-a731-548232c7c8dd/surfaces/9b5c7dca-f77e-4ae1-ab5f-f2d70f0c79b7/.

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