

PLOWING, BOWING, BURNING, JOURNEYING:
PENANCE AND SUBVERTING PENANCE IN MEDIEVAL
LITERATURE

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In passus 7 and 8 of the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, Piers offers to lead the pilgrims on their way to Truth, but he must first plow his half-acre. To speed their progress he requests their help; some agree, and some do not, so Piers calls Hunger upon them to urge their compliance, hoping thereby to find them more helpful to him and to themselves. To find Truth the pilgrims must show willingness to participate in their own salvation and in the general public good: as J. F. Goodridge argues, the primary need of that time, in an age barely surviving the aftermath of plague, constituted staving off famine (21). When Hunger falls asleep, workers and wasters return to pickiness and idleness: unlike Piers, the model of both social duty and attention to the fair field of personal spirituality, they lack commitment to the physical and spiritual labors that comprise the "good life." Once he has his soil tilled, Piers will then accompany the pilgrims, but he can't acquire a full pardon for them, only a promise that those who do well, who do their part, may ultimately reach Heaven. Piers tears up the pardon and turns aside to the contemplative life, and thus ends that vision. While the text suggests that penance entails the sacrifice one makes for the sake of others, no pardon, as Goodridge adds, can save a "lazy world" (23). Langland's goal at this point, Derek Pearsall argues, appears rather in his (and Piers's) "endeavour...to reintegrate the Christian community, to see the potential of the perfected imitation of Christ in every Christian life" (15); pardon may replace penance only for those already bent on their duty, on their contribution to the welfare of the holistic community, and only if that community as a whole subverts individual pleasures in favor of mutual salvation. For Langland penance and pilgrimage retain public as well as private components.

Historically and theologically penance follows and requires a subversion of self to sin: it may, for a time, as in Dante's purgatory, circumscribe a life, containing it, disembodying it to re-embody its better essence through suffering. Purgatorial suffering, sometimes necessary but always transitional, particularly that undertaken as satisfaction for sin following absolution, led nominally and narratively

to a state of bliss. Penance, for the dead or the living, re-placed sin, locating it spatially and temporally, for those who committed sin but did not commit to it, cordoning a sub-version of a life for a time determined by the sinner.¹

As sojourn, penance replaces a more frightening, more formidable journey, death, with a subversion of justice by mercy, but a mercy also subverted by interstitial pain and torment. "Motives behind [traditional] penitential practices," as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* notes, derive from "a desire to answer the Lord's invitation to imitate Him in carrying a cross" ("Penance, Practices of"), the notion from which pilgrimage evolves. Religious judgment of penance identifies sin as a dis-ease it must eradicate without analgesic, through bloodletting and penitential amputation of waywardness. Penance as pilgrimage subverts penance as sojourn: a dangerous but eroticized journey replaces a repeated or extended act of privation or an infliction of suffering by self or other, creating potential problems of satisfaction for the sinner.

Penance, often identified also as reconciliation, historically has oscillated between public and private event. Private penance increased in the early Middle Ages, and private confession gained greater importance in the process of purging sin; Christian pilgrimages to holy places began as early as the first century, and well before Augustine authorities held that a penitent could receive complete remission of sin by meditating at the tomb of a martyr.² The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw an increasing interest in the penitent's intention: in contrition, heartfelt sorrow for sin, and in satisfaction, the motivated physical act that replaces the eternal suffering of damnation. In the twelfth century further emphasis falls on what may be called "radical subjectivism," the focus of contrition fully on the individual's internal experience, plus commutation, allowance of individual choice in penitential activity: one may replace the intense and focused corporal punishment of earlier penitential practices with gentler alternatives, such as almsgiving or even pilgrimage.

Of course pilgrimage had its dangers: Morris Bishop paradoxically asserts, "When travel became reasonably safe in Europe, the church encouraged pilgrimages for the spiritual benefits they provided and sometimes as an alternative to punishment for misdeeds; [but] a trip to the Holy Land ensured a troublemaker's absence for a year or two and very likely forever" (149): pilgrimage ill-timed or ill-executed might subvert life altogether. While "[p]iety and devout reverence for the sites associated with the earthly ministry of Christ had always stimulated

pilgrimages...there were also voices warning against pilgrimages, casting doubt on their value"; partial-to-firm warnings come for instance from Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Bernard (Werblowsky 116-17). In the thirteenth century arrives the distinction between venial and mortal sins, the worst of which, if one died "unrepentant and unreconciled with the church," left one "excluded from salvation" (Martos 291-92), self-subverted. Scholastics also drew distinctions between imperfect and perfect contrition and temporal and eternal punishment (Martos 292). Duns Scotus (thirteenth century), following the legalistic tendency of earlier Scholastics, specified that the sinner "incurred a liability to punishment which remained even after [one's] receiving absolution: the "remnants of sin" remain until one has physically purged them (Martos 296). Pilgrimage as nominally penitential activity may range from satisfaction indulgence to self-indulgence, and individual pilgrims may have intended acts of serious penance, thanksgiving, or self-display. Chaucer's pilgrims nominally travel to seek, thank, and honor the saint "That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke" (GP 18). The knight, an experienced campaigner, fought, among his battles, "for oure feith at Tramissene" (62), "Ageyn another hethen in Turkye" (66), and in Alexandria (51); and as for the Wife of Bath, "[T]hryes hadde she been at Jerusalem. / She hadde passed many a straunge streem: / At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne, / In Galice at Seint Jame, and at Coloigne; / She coude muchel of wandringe by the weye" (GP 463-67). Too late for Crusades, the knight still does his martial pilgrimage for the good of his faith; the Wife travels, why? perhaps in search of a new husband, perhaps as penance for killing the old ones, perhaps to consult more learned Arabs on means to kill the young husbands she couldn't dispatch with sexual excess. Such sins would of course have required serious absolution, and so a reason for Rome after Jerusalem: only a pope had the authority to grant plenary indulgences, those that remit the full temporal punishment incurred through a serious sin (Martos 298). Subversion of suffering comes more happily to those with friends in high places.

Margery Kempe also journeyed on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Rome, and Santiago de Compostella. She does not say why, only that "the time had come that this creature should visit those holy places where our Lord lived and died, as she had seen by revelation years before" (96). On Mount Zion she receives communion, where "our merciful Lord Christ Jesus first consecrated his precious body in the form of bread...for in this place there is plenary remission" (108);

perhaps the journey serves that purpose, although it may as well serve, depending on how one reads Margery's adventures, as a greater opportunity for self-display on her world's holiest stage—by Margery's time *intention* rests thoroughly and more quietly at the heart of penitence. While “in the 8th and 9th centuries and even later, murderers or other capital offenders were compelled to go on pilgrimages that often lasted years...[accompanied by] corporal punishments,” in the 14th century Sir John Mandeville set out for the Holy Land “to see the world” (“Pilgrimage,” *New Catholic*). A ninth-century Irish verse exhorts, “Pilgrim, take care your journey's not in vain, / A hazard without profit, without gain; / the King you seek you'll find in Rome, it's true, / but only if he travels on the way with you” (*Codex Boernerianus*, in Carney 80-81). Thomas More composed a defense of pilgrimage as late as 1529, but for those for whom pilgrimage failed, purgatory lay ahead, the sojourn that awaited the traveler of the unsubverted journey.

Comparison quickly uncovers the unstable nature not only of purgatory as a place or idea, but of medieval notions of penitence generally. Idea and practice stand at odds. Post-mortal suffering subverts the indulgence in and effects of earthly pleasure, or it may overarch living penance imperfectly done. As permanent or purgative pain, it parallels earthly act: “‘Perch' io parti' cosi giunte persone,” Bertan de Born says in *Inferno*, canto 28, “partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso! / dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone. / Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso” ‘Because I severed those so joined, I carry— / Alas— my brain dissevered from its source, / which is within my trunk and thus in me / one sees the law of counterpenalty’ (139-42). Mandelbaum here translates *contrapasso* as “counter-penalty,” but one can hardly do better than Gilbert and Sullivan's refrain from *The Mikado*, “To let the punishment fit the crime.” The sub-version of the crime hardly subverts restitution: it hardens the crime into a permanent, terrifying replacement, a re-embodiment to be fully completed with the reattachment of the earthly body at Judgment Day. Mortal penance, on the other hand, bears many sorts of sub-versions; Purgatorial penance mirrors infernal in plan and intensity, but a quiet resolution accompanies it: it has its specific purpose and its specific and joyous end.

Contrapasso subverts the act of sin, incising the nature of sin rather than re-casting it, revising the understanding of its causes and effects, temporarily in purgatory, permanently in hell. Its envisioning

by those who stand at a safe distance from its enactment, for example Dante and his audience, ranges from the morbidly humorous to the dead-serious, and one's subjection—though not subjugation—to it depends on interventive influences from the lowly to the blessed: Beatrice can save Dante the purgatorial suffering he imagines suitable for his weaknesses, but Dante cannot save Vergil the permanent suffering his philosophical orientation has chosen. Penance, whether commuted by almsgiving or a more complete intervention of papal or divine indulgence, has its own complex politics.

While earthly authorities may dictate penance for the living, purgatorial penance for the dead swags between Divine Judgment and human free will. In one of the most moving moments in all of the *Commedia* (*Purgatorio* cantos 20 and 21), after an earthquake and a polyphonous shout of glory Statius emerges amidst the outstretched souls of the avaricious and prodigal, striding toward Paradise: he ends his penance not at God's command, but when he feels, and as a saved soul knows, his purging complete. The souls in Hell never purge, because they do no penance: they dwell in the permanent sub-version of their sin, perfectly and horrifically circumscribed by their own choice, the self first defined by and finally enclosed by an exclusive, beloved evil.

Though the intervention of Mary and Beatrice may save him from Purgatory, nowhere in the *Commedia*—not even when he faints at the circumstances of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno*—does Dante more fully feel the weight of his own sin than in *Purgatorio* 11 and 12, the terrace of the prideful, those who labor along under great boulders that direct their faces to the ground beneath them. Hearing the voice of Umberto Aldobrandesco and then of Oderisi the manuscript illuminator, Dante the pilgrim bends his own body to the shape of theirs to listen, in physical as well as spiritual empathy. In canto 12, as Vergil hurries him along, Dante mentions that his thoughts remain behind him: he can not easily escape the sense of culpability and the need for penance, not for a beloved evil, but for one that has haunted him as it always has artists and poets. The desire for fame and to expiate received and perceived political ills lingers, requiring contrition and if not indulgence, penitence. That sin, its practice repeated over years, perhaps outweighs a largely symbolic and unconsummated (if not fully appropriate) love.

No one verbally constructed purgatory more fully than Dante, yet other medieval visionaries, encumbered with frightened and variable

notions of doing the time for doing the crime, found subversions of permanent or ultimate suffering in forms of penance ranging from legalistic to creative *quid pro quo* to firmly-fixed faith to rather pleasant pilgrimage to the exchange of simple if vigorous labor.³ The notion of penance remains constant, ubiquitous; its practice or embodiment varies astonishingly with the power of the individual imagination, the power of fear to generate horrifying images or the power of inertia to forget, deny, or readily forgive self-indulgence. Those fearsome images hardly begin or end with Dante.

A Revelation of Purgatory by an Unknown, Fifteenth-Century Woman Visionary (1422) provides another excellent example of late-medieval notions of post-mortal penance. It shows that even simple peccadilloes such as over-attentiveness to eating, dress, and pets—at least for members of religious orders—constitutes seriously punishable sin. The anonymous *Revelation* relates a brief series of visions characteristic of medieval apocalypses or visions of hell or purgatory. A nun gives to her confessor an account of her dream-vision of a deceased member of her order, one Margaret by name. The dead woman appeared to her to show the seriousness of suffering that takes place in Purgatory and to beg her sisters' prayers and that masses be said for her soul so that she might more quickly find release to heaven. The nun saw three great fires in whose midst appeared "al maner Cristen men and wommen þat lyved in this world," but "men and wommen of ordyr me thogt in þat sygt þay had moste peyne" (60). In the greatest of the fires she spotted the spirit of Sister Margaret, who endured such pains as the young nun feared to describe and the fear of which led her to waken. After rising to say psalms and a litany, she tired and returned to sleep, only to see a second vision of Margaret, her skin rent and burning, fire leaping from her mouth. A small, burning dog and cat followed her steps. Margaret at first seemed to threaten the dreamer, but then she identified herself and asked the young nun to have series of masses sung for her soul to quicken her release from Purgatory, at which point the dog and cat led her back to her punishments. Margaret assured the dreaming nun that she would see her again the next night.⁴ Of hell Margaret would tell nothing, other than that both in hell and purgatory the "worm of conscience" is the worst punishment. She assured the nun that she would ultimately be led to paradise and be "washed in the well of grace and cleansed and be anointed with oil of mercy" (66).

The next night the dreamer saw Margaret again "in her worst clothes as she went on earth and in the greatest fire of the three" (66). Seven devils dressed her in a fiery red gown full of sharp hooks and encircling worms and pitch and tar, and they wrapped a great, hissing adder about her head while the dog and cat tore at her legs. A devil announced that she was suffering so because of earthly pride, presumably love of showy clothing, and from excessive love of her pets. Other devils pulled out her tongue and her heart and tore at them with hot iron rakes, explaining that they were punishing her for wrath and envy, forswearing, backbiting, and slander.

Two devils then cut off her lips with razors, struck her heart with an iron hook, melted about her stinking lead and brimstone, and forced her to eat food full of snakes and to drink venom because of her gluttony, misspending, and waste. They cast her into freezing black water and then into fire, then left her covered with worms because of her sloth and gluttony. To reinforce this point two other devils poured down her throat molten gold and silver, which ran out through her stomach.

Margaret was then thrown into a great brass bath full of "al maner of stynkyng thyng" (68) for coveting and lechery, from which punishment she continued to cry horribly. The narrator notes that at that point she saw all sorts of people punished for their sins, particularly for the special sins they loved best, but those guilty of lechery suffered most, especially those of the Church, a hundred times as much as others. She spares no detail in her description of their punishments. Anchorites, both males and females, were thrust into fire, raked with hooks and sprayed with venom, and they had their heads shot through and wrapped round with adders and serpents for their having listened to "idle words" rather than "good words." Even for simply showing their faces publicly, the women had their heads covered with veils of fire.

Margaret emerged from her vessel, saying that those who had prayed for her had helped ease her pains, and she added that one does best to call on Mary and to fast according to Marian rites to win release most quickly from the pains of purgatory. But Margaret had not yet gained freedom from suffering: flame still flickered from her mouth and heart, and the fiery animals still dogged her footsteps.

The flame, Margaret explained, resulted from her having spoken oaths, and the animals continued to follow her as a result of her too-great devotion to her pets, for "sho sett hyr hert to mych on such foul wormes" (78).⁵ She added that additional masses said in her behalf and

further cleansing in the two great fires of purgatory would eventually prepare her for heaven.

On the following night the narrator had a final vision in which a devil drew Margaret into the middle fire, where she turned from black to red, and then into the great fire, where she turned from amber to white. She told the narrator that Jews and Saracens and other heathens go directly to hell and never come to purgatory to be saved.⁶ Some good Christians, she noted, those contrite folk who have done penance or those too easily shriven on earth, need not suffer the great fire, but are purged by the middle fire alone. A day of penitential suffering on earth, she added, counts for a year of Purgatory. Some pass only briefly through the first fire and then go quickly into the bliss of heaven, and some, already sufficiently cleansed by suffering on earth, may go directly to heaven. Margaret received then one final punishment, the worm of conscience, for a pilgrimage that she promised but failed to make. After that final penance, in the presence of a devil, a "fair lady" and a "fair young man" weighed her in a balance and declared her forgiven of her sins. The lady then invited Margaret to be anointed with the oil of mercy and washed in a well by a white chapel, from which she rose to enter through a golden gate into the joys of heaven.

A medieval audience would likely have seen Margaret's punishments as both just and merciful, given her release—early pardon, in fact—to heaven. Chaucer's Prioress, of whose similar sins we learn in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, actually undergoes her pilgrimage; that penance—if we may call it so and if we follow Margaret's experience—should spare her that worst of punishments, the "worm of conscience," as long as she does it for appropriate reasons, for penance rather than self-display. Margaret's instruction to her sister extends for the audience a sense of subverting "justice" through penitential activity, particularly that of the living for the sake of the dead. Sadly Margaret confirms and affirms the deeply rooted anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiments of her time by referring all "heathens" directly to hell, beyond even the possibility of penance, and her instruction extends the responsibility of non-visionary living folk to make guesses about the status of the souls of the deceased.

Because *A Revelation of Purgatory* in many ways typifies medieval apocalypses that unveil visions of hell or purgatory, I think one may fairly claim that audiences of the time would have seen Margaret's punishment as both just and merciful. Religious folk must attain higher standards than their lay siblings. Repentance and suffering

in life and masses said for one's soul after death could relieve some purgatorial punishment, and as for the remainder, one should willingly suffer pains to cleanse the soul for entry into the eternal joys of heaven. Apocalyptic or eschatological concerns appear prominently in *The Canterbury Tales*—for instance, in the Parson's Tale, the Retraction, and in the very notion of pilgrimage (Emmerson and Herzman 153-54; Robertson 373)—and Chaucer as well as his audience lived in the tradition of Dante: fire-and-brimstone visions, frighteningly illuminated apocalypses, and of course the specter of the text of the Book of Revelation itself. Keeping in mind that revelations aim to guide us so that we know how to live so as to avoid punishment in the afterlife, and also that the literature of the Middle Ages is almost universally didactic and apocalyptic, we can read these purgatorial visions through the lens of Bosch-like parallel texts not only as an example of estates satire, but also as encouragement to avoid worldly attachments and focus instead on the joys of the life to come. Ideally one transcends rather than subverts suffering to reach salvation—yet an almost prurient interest in the details of the suffering seldom if ever disappears from immediate view. Medieval folk apparently negotiated the pains of pay and payback, whether coyly or forthrightly, in nearly every act of daily living. Those negotiations, both personal in their individualization, and matters of religious business in their textual and public representations, godfathered their understanding of the world as a place where dark presences lurked and watched. With luck and grace, or with terror and sorrow, a strong hand intervened at last.

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Notes

¹For a useful collection of medieval documents on penance see McNeill and Gamer. The introduction points out that “While the penitentials were primarily intended for the use of priests, it was sometimes found convenient to provide them in the vernacular...to make their contents comprehensible to the people.” The editors add that the “ideal [of penitential theory and practice] was founded in monastic asceticism; the reality in primitive brutality” (3).

²*New Catholic Encyclopedia* (“Penance, Practices of”; “Penance, Sacrament of”; “Pilgrimages”). For the textual history of early penance from the ancient Church to the beginning of the eighteenth century see McNeill and Gamer.

³Medievals, Martos explains, thought of God as a “king who issued commands for the welfare of his subjects, [and] sin was a violation of God’s law that demanded punishment” (287). As the practice of sacerdotal assignment of penitential activity expanded, penalties “were not the same everywhere but generally speaking they tried to make the punishment fit the crime, at least in intensity if not in kind” (286). Later fasting, abstinence, recitation of psalms, almsgiving, and pilgrimage replaced corporal punishments, the outward act a sign of inward contrition (288-91).

⁴As *The New Dictionary of Theology* somewhat backwardly notes concerning purgatory, “While there is no scriptural evidence that contradicts the doctrine, the scriptural basis for the doctrine remains unclear” (“Purgatory”). Purgatory as part of the Christian cosmos has gone in and out of fashion. For a complete study of its history, sources, linguistic background, and implications see Jacques Le Goff. Of the ultimate reason for the imaginative creation of purgatory, Le Goff asks, “Wasn’t the point of introducing a temporary Purgatory mainly to throw the inextinguishable fires of Hell into sharp relief?” (359). Purgatory thus models what we may suffer briefly but must hope to avoid perpetually.

⁵The reader may note similarities to Chaucer’s Prioress.

⁶The narrator apparently suffers from the same anti-Semitic or simply xenophobic prejudices as Chaucer’s Prioress.

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