The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism

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In the 1960s Mary Douglas defined waste as “matter out of place”—objects or substances that have outlived their function in human society but linger in it or at its margins, as uncanny and unwelcome detritus (36, 41, 165). Working with that definition, but expanding from ecosystems that are obviously human—cities, homes, streets, landfills—to imagine larger ecosystems, Alan Stoekl has considered the problem of energy waste as a global challenge, arguing that people need to abandon their overconsumption of energy resources to “embrace a social commitment beyond the narrow desires of the self” (198). Likewise, Ursula Heise has suggested that scholars must “shift the core of [their] cultural imagination from a sense of place to a . . . more systemic sense of planet” (Sense 56). Responding to Douglas’s theory of “waste” and to Stoekl’s and Heise’s notions of global ecosystems as not just human, Patricia Yeager has recently called for a new ecocritical consciousness, one that is “oceanic” and “liquid” (524–25). This oceanic, liquid consciousness must recognize that any separation of the human ecosystem from the rest of the world is an insidious fantasy: human cultures are permeated by and implicated in the fluid ecosystem of the world’s oceans. To pretend otherwise is to invite our own demise.

The idea of a “liquid,” global ecosystem may sound decidedly contemporary, but, as this essay will reveal, the concern with waste as a problem of collective resource use goes back to a moment in the late Middle Ages when the relation of individual energy use to collective material welfare was under active critical study. In particular, this essay historicizes waste by considering how land use and personal energy use have long been quietly at its core. It will excavate three premodern discourses on waste—legal, penitential, and...
poetic—to reveal how medieval notions of ownership, possession, and use evolve in the Middle Ages to lay the groundwork for the notion of waste that emerges in later periods.1

Although waste appears frequently in medieval discourses, current criticism has largely ignored its presence there, for two reasons. First, waste appears “piecemeal” in medieval texts, rarely as a central theme or affixed to an organized interpretive schema (Milsom and Shanks cxc). There are, however, two important exceptions to its piece-meal representation: the poems Wynnere and Wastoure (c. 1352) and Piers Plowman (1360s–80s). Like many other poems of the so-called alliterative revival, which share a formal commitment to alliteration and a thematic commitment to sociopolitical critique (Turville-Petre 1-22, 31–32), these two poems depict the world as degenerate. In these particular poems, degeneracy is an ecosystemic problem, a problem of resource use and distribution, a problem of waste.

Using aesthetic devices available in poetic form—alliteration, personification allegory, genre switching, dramatic staging, and episodic structure—these poems create what I call a poetics of waste to expose the true nature of waste as a socioeconomic problem. My use of poetics is meant to evoke its origin in ποιēσις, meaning “making,” “creation,” or “composition” (“Poiesis”). These two poems deploy the formal resources of literary language to compose a coherent but complex idea of waste in the late Middle Ages from its incarnations in legal and penitential discourse. These resources allow the poems to achieve a conceptual synthesis that does not emerge either in the law or in penitential manuals. This essay explores how they do so and suggests that when medieval thinkers tackle a miasmatic socioeconomic problem such as waste, poetry offers them their most useful tools.

The second reason for the underexamination of waste in current criticism is the assumption of scholars that waste means in the Middle Ages roughly what it means now. But waste derives from the Latin vasto, “to empty” (“Vasto”). The Latin verb describes land being despoiled, emptied of its contents. The corresponding noun, vastitas, means “the wastelands”—deserted, emptied places (“Vastitas”). In Middle English, waste is often used in one of these two senses—as a verb denoting devastation (“Wasten,” def. 1a and 1b) or as a noun denoting a kind of physical place (“Waste,” entry 1, def. 1). But it is also used as an adjective meaning “purposeless” or an adverb meaning “in vain” (“Waste,” entry 3, def. 2b; entry 4). The modern meaning of waste as “matter out of place” emerges only toward the end of the Middle Ages (“Waste,” entry 1, def. 5b), and the change appears first in poetic discourse.

Three historical circumstances help to contextualize the intensive poetic focus on waste in the fourteenth century: real-estate contractions, population decline, and wartime taxation. These circumstances combine with legal changes to push landed nobility toward protoprivate property. The law De Donis Conditionalibus (1285) allows land to be passed to heirs according to the owner’s wishes, leading, by the middle of the fourteenth century, to increasingly rigid and exclusionary modes of property holding among the upper classes (Biancalana 177, 136). At around the same time, the statutes of Mer ton (1235) and Westminster (1285) allow the assarting (proprietary overuse) of moors, heaths, and pastures (2-3; 94).2 Foresting statutes allow for the afforesting (privatizing) of woods for private use throughout the late Middle Ages (McKechnie 171, 175).3 These trends mean that fewer people have access to land for farming, for culling peat, for harvesting pannage, for hunting, and for lumbering.4 While the land supply shrinks, so does the population: famine, shortages, and plagues ravage England repeatedly during the Hundred Years’ War, dramatically reducing the population (Bennett and Hollister 326;
Ackerman)—of agricultural workers in particular, so that the available land has no one to work it (Karakacili 26–27; Schlauch 417). As a result, labor crises and food shortages occur in agricultural areas. At the same time, the Hundred Years’ War has cost tremendous sums of money in taxes, so that the government is seen as a profligate destroyer of the wealth of England (Schlauch 417–19). Thus, by the middle of the fourteenth century, a tripartite crisis of labor, land, and confidence in the government underpins the emergence of the critical ideology of waste.

Legal and Penitential Waste

In tension with the move to allow the landed classes to use land more aggressively and to hold land more securely, the law generates a partial countermeasure: the increasingly systematic prohibition of the act of land waste. This prohibition originates in Magna Carta (1225), which understands waste as an “emptying out” of lands held temporarily by a guardian for a minor heir (Statutes 22). If a guardian rips out all the trees, tears down buildings, abuses workers, overfishes ponds, overhunts forests, dams up rivers, or in any other way detracts from the value the land will have to the heir when he reaches his majority and takes possession, that guardian commits waste and must forfeit the lands in question (Statutes 22; Bracton 410–11). Thus, the central drive of this early statute is to protect the proprietary interest (the heir) against abuse by a possessory interest (the guardian)—to make sure that land remains profitable and useful to its proprietors.

Through the rest of the thirteenth century, other statutes broaden the scope of what it means to waste and specify new punishments for its commission. The most important of these, the 1278 Statute of Gloucester, defines waste as any act of overuse of land by a temporary holder of lands that are owned by someone else (48; Milsom and Shanks cxcii; Plucknett, Statutes 74). No matter who you are, if you possess lands that someone else owns and abuse those lands, destroying their future profitability, you commit waste in the eyes of the law. Waste law is thus designed to keep arable land viable and available for future generations at a broad scale, without necessarily favoring the wealthy, landed, aristocratic classes. Also, by specifying that monetary compensation is a penalty the law can levy against a waster (Statutes 48; Plucknett, Legislation 83), Gloucester suggests that the value of real estate can be represented in cash—that property and money are economically interchangeable—and that wastefulness is a problem as much of capital as of assets.

In the fourteenth century, penitential discourse—a genre of writing concerned with saving the soul by anatomizing and analyzing the seven deadly sins—further textures the idea of waste. Ayenbite of Inwyt (“Remorse of Conscience,” c. 1340) is typical: to address the vice of pride, it uses waste to indicate a destructive overuse not of real estate but rather of the resources of the human soul. As Ayenbite puts it, a prideful man “wasteth and dispendeth in folyes and in outrages . . . the guodes that ne byeth naght his, ac byeth his lhordes guodes, hwer-of him behouveth straitliche yelde rekeninge and scele” wastes and spends in follies and in madness . . . the goods that are not his own, but rather belong to his lord, and of which it behooves him immediately to yield reckoning’ (Dan Michel’s Ayenbite 18). The “goods” in question are abstract resources that give value to the soul: time, thoughts, will, love. Although the immediate source for this claim is the parable of the talents, and although the meaning of “waste” here is closer to “spend” than to “devastate,” the idea of proxy misuse—which animates the legal discourse—remains at the forefront. A man must give reckoning of his wastefulness because his goods do not belong to him; they belong to God. The sinful man, by wasting the goods of his soul, wastes the
soul that he possesses temporarily but that, ultimately, God owns. The law constructs waste as an act of physical despoliation; penitential discourse constructs it as a despoliation of the energetic resources of a soul.

The slippage of waste—its shuttling between physical land and the abstract resources of the soul—proves generative for Wynnere and Wastoure and Piers Plowman. Grappling with late-fourteenth-century shortages of land, population, and cash, these poems gather up and examine the ideas of waste in the law and in penitential discourse to reveal the dangers inherent in having too narrow a definition of the shared resources that give a community its ability to survive. The poems show that the resources of the human soul are not separable from the external world of work, production, and property; they suggest instead a flow between the soul and the physical world, a flow signifying that because no resource can be fully owned by a single person, all resources must be protected against waste. They suggest this not only in their expressed content but also, and more trenchantly, in their form.

The Poetics of Waste in Wynnere and Wastoure

The main narrative of Wynnere and Wastoure opens with two armies drawn up for battle. One army is led by a personification named Wynnere; the other, by Wastoure. Suddenly, a royal emissary intercedes to warn that neither army should step forward, lest either "disturbe" the "pese" of the prince (129). The danger that two armies assembled for battle might disturb the peace would be comically obvious to a readership accustomed to warfare with France. But the poem takes the idea of disturbing the peace quite seriously, returning to it when the leader of one army expresses outrage at accusations that he "prikkede with powere his pese to destourbe" 'rode with power to disturb the peace' (line 318). Medievalists have read the repetition of "disturb the peace" as evidence that the poem is engaged with the fourteenth-century Statue of Treasons (Trigg xxiv–xxv), but I would suggest that it is an English rendering of *vi et armis* ("with force and arms") and *contra pacem* ("against the peace"), the requisite formulas for bringing a suit of trespass (Arnold, Introd. ix; Milsom 82; Simpson 202). This repeated phrase is a cue that the poem stages not just a battle scene but also, specifically, a trespass trial.8

This trial is one of the governing tropes of the poem, and the unfolding action quickly fleshes out what kind of trespass trial it is. Wynnere, accusing Wastoure of mismanaging his own real estate, says, "His londes liggen alle ley, his lomes aren solde, / Downn bene his dowheouses, drye bene his poles . . ." 'His lands lie all fallow, his looms are sold, / his dovehouses have fallen, his pools are dry . . . '(234–35). Wynnere's allegations coincide with the legal definition of waste—allowing land to lie fallow and property to fall into disrepair, ruining fishing holes by overfishing them. Wynnere's initial charge against Wastoure is the opening move in a trespassory trial of waste.9 The dramatic staging of a trespass trial is the first formal step in this poem's poetics of waste.

Wastoure recognizes the trespassory nature of this charge and mounts a response that is perfectly in keeping with medieval trespass procedure. In nontrespass trials, defendants can only admit or deny guilt, but in trespass trials they can attempt a "special traverse" (Arnold, Introd. xvii).10 The type of special traverse at issue here is the demurrer, in which a defendant calls the sufficiency of the law itself into question, saying, "Yes, I committed the act in question, but it should not be prosecuted as a crime" (xxvi–xxix). A demurrer is not a claim of innocence on the part of the accused but a claim of error in the law. In response to Wynnere's charge, Wastoure deploys this legal device. He first
claims that Wynnerere is the criminal, blaming him for hoarding goods: “thou . . . / . . . hase werpede thy wyde howses full of wolfe sakes / The bemyys benden at the rofe, siche bakone there hinges / Stuffed are sterlynges undere stelen bowndes . . .” “you . . . / . . . have packed your great houses full of sacks of wool / the beams bend at the roof, so much bacon hangs there / sterlings are stuffed under steel bonds . . .” (248, 250–52). Wastoure makes this accusation to set up his primary defense, which construes the “waste” that he himself commits not as a crime but as a good deed: “What scholde worthe of that wele if no waste come?” “What would happen to that wealth if no waste should come to pass?” (253). Here, Wastoure reengineers the definition of waste, shifting it toward the penitential sense of “spending” but adding a positive valence, so that waste now denotes a prosocial financial outlay, a beneficial spending of “wele” rather than the wasteful emptying out of lands that Wynnerere decries. Indeed, in Wastoure’s view spending “wele” is a social necessity, so much so that he reframes the idea of not spending wealth as a charge against Wynnerere. His question “What scholde worthe of that wele if no waste come” means, in effect, “Really, Wynnerere, what should one do with wealth other than spend it?” The problem, Wastoure suggests, is with the law and with Wynnerere’s evocation of it, not with Wastoure.

Wynnerere’s response reflects the semantic pressures that Wastoure’s demurrer has brought to bear on waste by evoking the changes in the law during the thirteenth century, and so the poem deepens and complicates its emerging theory of what waste can mean and how it matters in society. Wynnerere says, “With thi sturte and thi stryffe thou stroyeste up my gudes” “With your agitating and your strife, you destroy my goods” (265). By asserting that Wastoure “destroy[s]” Wynnerere’s goods, Wynnerere achieves two rhetorical goals. First, “destroy[s]” insists that a violent crime of despoliation has been committed, not an innocent “misspending” of property.11 Second, by saying that Wastoure’s wastefulness destroys Wynnerere’s goods, Wynnerere makes clear that Wastoure’s management of his own lands impinges on Wynnerere’s economic well-being, reflecting the logic of the statutory laws of waste—misuse of resources held by one person can injure another. Wastoure may think he is simply spending his own goods, but his right to use them is compromised by the fact that their use impinges on other people’s goods. Through the semantic pressure the juridical contest puts on the concept of wasting, the poem shows waste to be, borrowing Yeager’s phrasing, a “liquid” crime—a crime without boundaries, the commission of which highlights the connectedness among people.

Wynnerere’s engagement with the ideology of waste through his critique of Wastoure grows shriller when Wynnerere insists that the crime of overspending has consequences, eventually, in real property. Wynnerere indicts Wastoure for his expenditures on his wife, arguing that they are paid for in land: “Lesse and ye wrethe your wifes, thaire willes to folowe, / Ye sellyn wodd aftir wodde in a wale tyme, / Bothe the oke and the assche and all that ther growes . . .” “Lest you anger your wives, to follow their wills, / you sell more and more wood in a great rush, / both the oak and the ash and all that grows there . . .” (395–97). Wynnerere’s description of selling “wodd aftir wodde”—oak, ash, and “all that ther growes”—depicts Wastoure cleaning out not just the old and strong trees but also the young trees and everything else that grows in the area, so that no profitable natural resources remain in the land.12 He goes on to claim that Wastoure intends to sell his lands to pay off his debts: “Nedeles save ye the soyle, for sell it ye thynken” “Needless for you to save the soil, since you think you’ll sell it . . .” (401). Land, Wynnerere insists, is the final casualty when money is misused. He contests Wastoure’s assertion that wasting (spending
money) is good for the economy and insists that all modes of overspending are deleterious to society because, ultimately, they all impinge upon the most basic shared resource: land. In effect, he responds to Wastoure’s demurrer by arguing that even if waste is legally redefined to include monetary expenditure it is still, at its heart, a crime in land. Profligacy among the upper classes will create shortages among all classes and put pressure on the contracted land supply.

The flection in what waste means in this poem, staged through a dramatic trespass trial and trespassory forms of pleading, is deepened by another poetic form: personification allegory. Traditionally, medieval personification allegory is seen as literalistic (i.e., personifications are defined by the actions that they perform) and moralistic (Bloomfield, “Grammatical Approach” 165, 170). More recently, scholars have realized that medieval personification allegory tends to disperse a general sense of indeterminacy throughout a poem (Paxson i). Though the ideas of moralistic literalism and indeterminacy may seem at odds with each other, Wynnere and Wastoure exploits both aspects of personification allegory to tremendous effect.13 The indeterminacy and slipperiness of waste in Wynnere and Wastoure highlight the dynamic complexity of waste as a socioeconomic and legal problem.

Since Wastoure is a personification, a figure whose actions both manifest and determine his essential character, the accusations of waste that are leveled against him and his rebuttals to them have an accretive and inexorable logic: because of the literalism of the allegorical mode, in which behavior is ontology, everything Wynnere accuses Wastoure of is waste—by definition. Likewise, everything Wastoure admits that he does is also waste. That central logic does not change throughout the poem, because Wastoure’s fundamental being does not change. What changes is not the fact that Wastoure wastes but the moral valence assigned to wasting and the range of discrete behaviors that waste can comprise. Because the term wastoure can signify “one who lays waste to lands,” as well as “one who overconsumes his own resources” and “one who squanders the resources of another person,” but can also simply mean, at least in Wastoure’s mind, “one who spends generously,” the poem attains a high degree of theoretical sophistication. The literalism of the personification-allegory mode sustains the moral indeterminacy at the poem’s core.14 Therefore, in the hands of the Wynnere and Wastoure poet, the personification allegory becomes a mode for staging a sophisticated meditation on what wasting can encompass.

Personification allegory thus complements the dramatic staging of a trespass trial and becomes the second major element in the poem’s development of a poetics of waste. Wynnere and Wastoure uses the allegorical figuration of the wastoure, in combination with a carefully staged trespass trial, to engineer a vision of the interconnectedness of land and money, creating a poetic meditation on the nature of the English economy as a land market and a commercial market, a meditation born of the synergistic overlay—what the poet calls “wrying” in the poem’s prologue—of legal forms on poetic ones.15

But it is not just legal discourses of waste that the poem overlays on poetic ones. In his final move against Wynnere, Wastoure aggressively appropriates penitential discourse, saying, “Wynnere, with wronge thou wastes thi tyme” (439). In making this claim, Wastoure draws decisively on penitential discourse, such as that in Ayenbite of Inwyte. By introducing the idea of waste as a misuse of personal energy, Wastoure suggests that the common law of property should not be the final arbiter of what constitutes a dangerous kind of waste. The waste that most deserves censure is the waste of one’s own life—the goods of the soul that are not ours but part of the liquid economy of energy that connects us
to God. *Waste* in this poem is an aggregation of meanings, derived from different discursive modes, all of which are shown—by poetic form—to interconnect.

Instead of assigning victory to Wastoure’s demurrer or acceding to Wynnere’s demands for legal action against property misuse, *Wynnere and Wastoure* never reaches a clear verdict on waste: the manuscript breaks off before the prince passes judgment. Thus, the moral valence of *waste*—as an offense against property, against one’s own soul, or against both—and the efficacy of the common law in dealing with it remain open issues. Open, that is, until William Langland composes *Piers Plowman*. Langland is keen to reexamine legal waste, first by reworking the poetics of waste that the *Wynnere and Wastoure* poet has devised through his allegorized trial scene and second by offering the explicit critique of the law that *Wynnere and Wastoure* stops just short of—a critique that is rooted yet more securely in penitential discourse. Indeed, *Piers Plowman* picks up where *Wynnere and Wastoure* leaves off—both thematically and formally—by imagining a trial scene in far more ominous shades and by designing a personification allegory whose boundaries threaten to overwhelm any stable sense of what waste can mean, how it might be represented in a poem, and how human law might strive to curb it.

**The Wastours and the Workers in *Piers Plowman***

Like *Wynnere and Wastoure*, *Piers Plowman* begins its development of a poetics of waste by staging a trespass trial of allegorical personifications—in terms even more explicit than those of *Wynnere and Wastoure*. In the fourth section, or passus, of the poem, a battered farmer named Peace appears before a king, demanding redress for injuries Wrong has done him. This scene echoes the opening scene of *Wynnere and Wastoure* by enacting a trespass suit: Peace (pacem Regis) is violated and brings Wrong—an Englishing of *transgressio*, the Latin term for a trespass—to the king’s court (Giancarlo). Peace accuses Wrong of nearly every type of trespass: taking his wife, assaulting his maid, stealing his animals, maintaining a posse to attack Peace’s men, breaking down his barn, taking his wheat, and clobbering him on the head (4.37–46, 65–66). By charging Wrong with breaking down his barn and depleting his labor force, Peace accuses him of waste among his various trespasses. Having established that waste is one of the trespasses for which Wrong is on trial, the poem urges the reader to expect him to be punished: “Conscience and the Kyng kneugh wel the soothe, / Ant wisten wel that Wrong was a shewe evere” (Conscience and the king knew the truth well, / and they knew well that Wrong was always a shrew) (66–67). But at this point, something shifts. Mede (“pay-out”) proffers Peace “a presaunt al of pur golde” (a gift all of pure gold) and Peace immediately drops the charges and prays the king for mercy on Wrong: “[Pitousliche Pees thanne] preyede to the Kinge / To have mercy on that man that mysdede hym ofte” (Pitifully Peace then prayed to the king / to have mercy on the man that often did wrong by him) (85–86). Technically, this exchange is appropriate: according to the law of trespass and to the practice of personification allegory, Mede does exactly what she should do, and Peace is correctly placated by the act of paying damages.

But the poem registers a score that is not settled by this monetary compensation:

“Nay,” quath the King tho, “so God give me blisse, Wrong wendith not so awey er I wyte more. Lope he so lightly awey, laughen he wolde, And eft the boldere be to bete myn hewen. But Resoun have reuthe on hym, he shal reste in my stokkis As longe as I lyve. . . .” (91–96)

“No,” said the king then, “as God gives me bliss,
Wrong will not go hence thus before I
know more.
If he loped away so lightly, he would laugh
and be ever the bolder to beat my servants.
Unless Reason has pity on him, he shall
remain in my stocks
as long as I live....”

Despite the king’s assertion that he will put
Wrong “in the stocks,” no further punish-
ment ensues. Recognizing the limitations of
the king’s power, Resoun laments that “Mede
hath the maistrie to mote in this halle” ‘Mede
has mastery to rule in the king’s hall’ (118),
and Wrong gets away. Whereas Wynner and
Wastoure deployed poetic devices for staging
meditations on the nature of waste without
decisively condemning either waste or the law
that regulates it, Piers Plowman seems eager
to condemn waste and to show the impotence
of human law to prevent or regulate it.

The residual lack of judicial satisfaction
in passus 4 spills over into passus 5, when we
find Conscience preaching to a field full of
people. He decries the behavior of a personifi-
cation called Wastour, who drains the shared
economy of resources by his selfish con-
sumption: “He bad Wastour go werche what
he best couthe / And wynne that he wastide
with sum maner crafte” ’He bade Wastour to
go work at what he knew best / and win back
what he spent through some kind of work’
(5.24–25). He preaches against Wastour’s vice
of self-indulgent consumption, but he asso-
ciates that vice with a refusal to work, a re-
fusal to produce: if one is going to consume
or “waste,” one must also earn that consump-
tion by “wynn[ing].” Piers Plowman, then,
picks up the logic and vocabulary of Wynner
and Wastoure and sides with Wynner in sug-
gesting that a person who only consumes is
unequivocally a drain on the shared economy.
For Conscience, waste-
ful consumption is a symptom of a more
sinister, moral problem: the refusal to work
for the collective good.19 Ruminating on the
demographic crises of its period, Piers Plow-
man construes waste as a problem of labor
shortage, not just of misused real property.

In the next passus the poet backs away,
temporarily, from the mandate on work and
attends to wastefulness as a twin problem of
consumption and hoarding—thus integrating
some of Wastoure’s complaints against Wyn-
nere into his poem. He does so, however, in a
decidedly nonlegal lexicon. Once Conscience
has condemned Wastoure, the poem anchors
its condemnation of wastefulness in peniten-
tial discourse, presenting the seven deadly
sins en route to church to shrive themselves.
This shift into penitential discourse not only
changes what waste can mean in the poem
but also suggests how desperately inadequate
the legal vocabulary of criminality is in ac-
counting for or dealing with the socioeco-
nomic problems that waste poses. Waste,
the poem recognizes, is not just a problem of
land, money, or goods; it is also a problem of
misspent human energy.

In this continuing reimagination of waste,
as a sin rather than a crime, two beings are of
particular importance: Glutton and Sloth.
The poem manifests a special interest in Glut-
ton by depicting him, en route to confession,
becoming distracted by the temptations of
a tavern, relinquishing his resolve to shrive
himself, and succumbing to gluttony. In the
scene that ensues, the reader witnesses Glut-
ton gorging himself and drinking himself sick:

. . . Glotoun hadde ygulpid a galoun and a gille.
He pisside a potei in a Paternoster-while. . . .
Whanne he drough to the dore, thanne
dymmede his eighen;
He thrumblide on the thresshewold and threw
to the erthe. (5.190–91, 199–200)

. . . Glutton has gulped a gallon and a sip.
He pissed a puddle in the time it takes to say a
paternoster. . . .
When he drew to the door, his eyes dimmed, he stumbled on the threshold and puked on the ground.

By making this wasteful Glutton the only one of the seven sins whom we see in action—the other vices merely describe their sinful behavior, while Glutton performs his—the poem highlights him as a particular source of ethical risk and trouble, representing him in flagrante delicto. This gruesomely performative representation of Glutton makes three contributions to Piers Plowman’s idea of wastefulness. First, it aligns gluttony with wastefulness explicitly through Glutton’s overeating and overdrinking—two kinds of consumption for which Conscience holds Wastour accountable in the previous section of the poem. Glutton has not simply “wast-ed,” or “consumed,” he has disgustingly gorged himself—“gulping a gallon” at the tavern. Gluttony, like wasting, is a practice of taking too much. Second, the poem represents the consequences of Glutton’s overconsumption as horrifyingly effluvial—overflowing, liquid, shifting, uncontainable. After his binge drinking, Glutton “piss[es] a pottel in a Paternoster-while”—that is, he pisses for the duration of a recitation of the paternoster prayer. He is introduced to us, then, as a figure whose excessive consumption results—immediately—in excessive by-product, purged in a decidedly sacrilegious manner, being timed to the recitation of the Our Father. Glutton’s effluviality intensifies when he vomits up what he has eaten: he has so overeaten that his body rebels, creating waste matter from his wasteful consumption. In showing Glutton as an overeater and overdrinker who is also a generator of waste matter, the poem recognizes that the inevitable and immediate side effects of overconsumption are dross, ordure, and effluvia. Wasters, by overconsumption, make waste—in the modern sense—though the poem does not call Glutton’s dross “waste,” since that word does not yet carry that sense in Middle English. The third key facet of Glutton’s performance is to pave the way for the appearance of the final sin—Sloth.

In apposing Glutton with Sloth, the poem suggests a contiguity between excessive consuming and lazy, greedy hoarding. In his confession, Sloth vows that he will “yelde ayen” ‘give back’ what he has unfairly taken from other people, that he will give back “al that I wikkidy wan sithen I wyt hadde” ‘all that I wickedly earned since I had sense’ (5.229, 230). In this phrase, the poem casts Sloth much as Wastoure cast Wynne: as someone whose greedy hoarding prevents equitable distribution of “wele” wealth. In this apposition of Glutton with Sloth, the poem reframes Wastoure’s own paradoxical proclamation, toward the end of his demurrer: “Whoso wele shal wyn, a wastour moste he finde” ‘whosoever wants to earn money, must find a spender’ (Wynne 390). For both poems, there is no winning without wasting, and no wasting without winning. But sloth is a concept under tremendous pressure in the poem, signifying not only the wicked winning that is facilitated by gluttonous binging but also the refusal to work. This shimmering duality in Sloth’s nature, that he is both a sinful hoarder and a lazy, underproducing slug, moves the poem toward its most crucial intervention in the discourse of waste. In the wake of Sloth’s confession, the poem takes the unresolved socioeconomic paradox of Wynne and Wastoure—that winning and wasting are two sides of the same antisocial dialectic—and resolves it through an investigation of a supervening socioeconomic absolute: work. Glutton consumes and does not work; Sloth hoards and does not work. Their refusal to work becomes the archetypal and most dangerous form of waste. Overconsumption and hoarding are merely its surface manifestations.

What is wasted by this refusal to work, in the cases of Glutton and Sloth, is time. The stakes of time wasting, however, are felt not only in the fate of the soul—as they are
in penitential discourse—but also, and perhaps more important, in the material world of production, consumption, and labor. In *Piers Plowman*, wasted time creates material shortage. The poem makes that plain when Piers the Plowman appears before the assembled people and requests that all present help work his symbolic half acre of land. This passage begins with Piers’s articulation of the medieval social philosophy of the three estates, according to which society is divided into workers, fighters, and churchmen. He says to a knight:

I shal swynken and sweten and sowe for us bothe
And ek laboure for thi love al my lif tyme,
In covenaunt that thou kepe Holy Kirke
and myselfe
Fro wastours and fro wikkide men that wolde me destroye. . . .

In this injunction to the knight to fulfill his social obligation, Piers uses the term “wastours,” a plural noun of description, rather than the singular “Wastour.” This shift from singular, proper noun to plural, common noun indicates that the term now encompasses a broad category of people. In *Piers Plowman’s* economic imagination, “waste” can be anyone’s offense; the poem underscores the range of behavior that constitutes waste by asposing “wastours” with “wikkede men,” an amorphous category of evil people who would “destroye” mankind. The poem seems here to understand waste as a catchall offense against a salvific and communal work that Piers wants his people to perform. Indeed, working the half acre is presented as the antidote to society’s problems, because it is incompatible with the crime of waste and its moral correlates, gluttony and sloth.

This categorical description of wastours as people who refuse to work also hearkens back to the prologue’s description of the fair field of folk: “Summe putte hem to the plough, pleighede ful selde, / In settyng and sowyng swonke ful harde, / Wonne that thise wastours with glotonye destroiyeth” “Some men set themselves to the plow, played very seldom, / in setting and sowing seed, they worked very hard, / they earned what these wasters destroy with gluttony” (20–22). Thus, the very first section of the poem sets up a constellation of ideas that gains its fullest articulation only in the later passus:

Ye ben wastours, I wot wel, and Treuthe wot
the sothe;
And I am his holde hyne and aughte hym to
warne
Whiche wastours in this world his werkmen
distroyeth.
Ye eten that hy shulde ete that eren for us alle!

You are wasters, I know well, and Truth
knows the truth;
and I am his dear servant and must warn him
which wasters in this world destroy his
workmen.
You eat what they should eat who work for
us all!

A waster is not necessarily a devastator of land, nor even a projectile-vomiting glutton. *Piers Plowman’s* poetics of waste, deployed through personification, through switching discourses between legal and penitential, and through poetic apposition, shows that a waster is anyone who refuses to labor for the good of the community.

This idea that waste is a refusal to work, rather than an act committed *vi et armis* or *contra pacem*, the idea that waste can be an omission rather than a commission, is
intimately linked to *Piers Plowman*'s ongoing skepticism about the power of the king's law to successfully regulate waste, a skepticism initially voiced during the trial of Wrong. Now, the poem presents an even more conspicuous failure of the law—embodied in the knight—to convince the wasters to take to the plow. As befits his station as keeper of laws and social order, the knight tells Wastour to "abigge be the lawe, be the ordre that I welde!" 'obey the law, by the order that I wield!' (7.151). In keeping with his wastefulness, Wastour replies slothfully, "'I was not wonid to werche,' quath Wastour, 'now wile I not begynne!'" "I was not accustomed to working," said Waster, "and I won't start now!" (5.152). Wastour's reply, petulant and self-evident—naturally, he was not used to working and would no longer be Wastour if he started now—signals, for the second time in the poem, the incapacity of the king's law to put a stop to waste by compelling his labor force to work.

There is a note of desperation here: the poem wonders what is to be done when the king fails, when the knight fails, when all human jurisdictions fail to curb waste. What can be done when no regulatory power can stop waste and when people refuse to pull their weight for a larger economic collectivity? How can people be urged to consume less, produce more, and thus cease to be wasters? How can medieval England respond to its massive labor crisis and make good use of its material and energetic resources? How, indeed, can society create accountability for "liquid" ecosystems of energy and matter?

The poem ventures an answer, though it is a dark one: embrace the ecological disaster. Once Piers realizes that no human law will move the "wastours" to overcome their wicked ways and get to work, he resorts to more-desperate tactics. He invites Hunger to come to his aid: "Awreke me of thise wastours,' quath Peris, 'that this world shendith!'" "Avenge me on these wasters," said Piers, "that debase this world" (7.158). Hunger obliges Piers by eating everything in sight. Hunger's rapacious consumption creates a famine, which makes all of Piers's previously slothful workers suddenly quite willing to labor. Yet this apparently good result contains a bizarre paradox: by inviting Hunger to create famine, Piers has fulfilled the logic of the act of waste—an overconsumption that leads to shortage and privation. Heretofore the hero of the poem, Piers has brought about the consequences of waste: he has realized the situation he purported to fear, in which everyone would suffer through the act of one waster's overconsumption.

What is yet more horrifying than the idea that Piers would willingly and knowingly invite a waster like Hunger into his flock is what happens in the aftermath. Seeing the suffering Hunger has wrought, "Thanne hadde Piers pite, and preighede Hungir to wende / Horn into his owene erde and holde him there evere" 'then Piers had pity, and prayed Hunger to go / home into his own yard and keep himself there forever' (186–87). But Hunger will not go home. Piers, a powerful figure throughout the poem, has no more power to stop his wasting than had the knight or the king to stop the wastours. Finally, Piers's people are forced to give Hunger their best food and ale, until he falls asleep from gluttony: "Thanne was folk fayn, and fedde Hunger with the beste / With good ale and glotonye thei gart him to siepe" 'Then the people were eager, and fed Hunger with the best / with good ale and gluttony they sent him to sleep' (284–85). Ironically, gluttony itself becomes the cure for waste, by making Hunger sleep. But this cure is only temporary. As soon as Hunger is sated, Wastour again refuses to work, and the cycle of wasteful consumption begins again: the people only want the best food, and they do not wish to work for it. Seemingly, nothing can keep earthly people from wasting: neither famine nor human law.

In this nightmarish vision, people can no more learn the lesson of moderate consump-
tion than they can learn that productive labor is necessary to the sustenance of society. People are wasters to the core, unable to extricate themselves from the cycle of overconsumption and underproduction and unable to find any authority—be it the law of the king or the scourge of Hunger—strong enough to end that cycle. The hotly debated and irresoluble crime of Wynnere and Wastoure has become the arch sin of Piers Plowman, by which humankind will destroy itself through a failure to recognize the continuum that exists between self and others, as well as between energetic resources like time and material resources like land. If people consume with reckless abandon, refusing to work either for the good of the world or for the good of their souls, the world will be wasted—devastated, emptied out by Hunger and all that he signifies.

Piers Plowman represents these continua between self and others and between energy and material goods through a formal strategy, one that appears in Wynnere and Wastoure only in an inchoate form—when Wastoure blurs the distinction between Wynnere and himself by accusing Wynnere of wasting his own time and by asserting that whoever wants to win money must find someone willing to waste it. Other than the slippages between its main characters, Wynnere and Wastoure is a remarkably linear poem, a continuous scene in which a single argument unfolds. By contrast, Piers Plowman’s vision of waste is episodic and fragmentary, distributed among several passus. Wynnere and Wastoure’s narrative linearity tends to promote a gradual, steady accumulation of understandings of waste, so that each new nuance flows from the last one, through the poetic structure of Wynnere’s legal argument with Wastoure. By contrast, Piers Plowman’s distribution of “waste” among several passus creates a more disjointed mode of understanding: to grasp the socioethical import of the Hunger scene fully, one needs to recall the harsh condemnation of wastours earlier on. Then, to understand why Wastour gets so much attention from Conscience and Piers, one also needs to hold the memory of Glutton and Sloth in mind. The appositive and episodic logic of the poem creates a kind of meditation that is far more unsettling than the one in Wynnere and Wastoure. The poem enforces an interpretive paranoia designed to keep a reader in a state of heightened sensitivity to waste as the behavior that can come from any direction and be embodied by any character, be it Wastour, the wastours, Hunger, Glutton, Sloth, or Piers himself. This paranoia, gratified by the poem’s relentless looping back to the inevitable truth that people destroy themselves and their fellow human beings by overconsumption and underproduction, constantly reaffirms the feeling of eerie futility that typifies the poem and distinguishes it from Wynnere and Wastoure, with its more exploratory tone.

But Piers Plowman’s poetics of waste—its formal composition of waste as a concept—does not end here. As Langlandians well know, William Langland wrote not only the early, A version of his poem, to which I have referred throughout this essay, but also two more versions, B and C, which revise A and continue for approximately ten additional passus. Despite Langland’s will to revise his poem, his treatment of waste and wastours remains largely constant. Wastours appear as arch-villains in the prologues of both later versions, and in both B and C Piers excoriates Wastoure during the plowing of the half acre. Each version associates wastefulness with gluttony and sloth; each keeps the representation of Glutton constant—down to his piss-ing of the paternoster. Both include Hunger’s ravening and Piers’s inability to curb it.

Despite the consistent role of waste across the three versions, Langland’s emphasis shifts in the later versions, most obviously in his amplification of Sloth, whose description swells to larger proportions in B and gigantic proportions in C. This shift in emphasis is symptomatic of a broader change in the later
versions: as J. A. Burrow has shown, B and C are obsessed with the ideas of wasting time and wasting words, perhaps indicating Langland’s own increasing discomfort with the idea of spending his life as a poet rather than performing some other labor, either physical or spiritual. Langland’s ratcheting up of his attention to the waste of time and words in the later versions is not limited to himself. As in the A version, so in B and C the poem focuses on the idea of misspent energetic resources (time, words) in conjunction with misspent material resources. This is made clearest in C, when we read that one should “Ne spille speche ne tyme, ne myspende noyther / Meble ne unmeble, mete nother drynke” ‘Waste neither speech nor time, nor misspend either / nor movable nor unmovable wealth, neither meat nor drink’ (10.187–88). This last version of his poem, then, urges decisively that energy and material goods are inextricable and that the wasting of one must be imagined with the wasting of the other. B and C heighten the reader’s awareness of how soul waste—embodied in the now hypertrophic Sloth—destroys the material resources by which a community sustains itself.

Although waste is not as prominent in the last ten passus in B and C as it is in the passus that correspond with those in A, the association between material waste and energetic waste, between individual misconsumption and collective loss, returns at the end of B and C with a vengeance. In the nineteenth passus of B and the twenty-first of C, Piers has returned “to the plow” but is blocked by Pride, who is accompanied by an army bent on attacking “Conscience and alle Cristene and Cardinale Vertues” (19.338, 340 [B text]; 21.337, 339 [C text]). At this point, Pride and a “lord that lyveth after [lives according to] the lust of his body” announce that they will “wasten on welfare and on wikked kepynge / Al the world” ‘waste on their own happiness and on wicked hoarding / the whole world’ (19.357–58 [B text]; 21.356–57 [C text]). Pride, the sin that promotes waste in Ayenbite, threatens to annihilate the goods of the whole world, in order to sate his and his lord’s “lust.” Soon, Sloth appears with an army of corrupt priests. Together, they pool their arrows, which take the form of sacrilegious oaths—paradigmatic instances of wasteful speech—and assault the Church of Unity, nearly bringing it down (20.227 [B text]; 22.227 [C text]). At the end of the siege, Pride and Sloth team up to make one final charge against Conscience and the Church of Unity. Seeing his own powerlessness to defend the people against these sins, Conscience abdicates his position as ruler of the church and says he will go in search of Piers (20.381–86 [B text]; 22.381–86 [C text]). At this point, with the Church of Unity abandoned by Conscience and left to the predatory machinations of Pride and Sloth, Will awakens, and the poem ends. The B and C versions, I would suggest, arrogate more significance to Sloth early on to set up this final scene, in which Sloth combines with Pride—together embodying the wasteful refusal to work for the common good and the narcissistic sense of one’s own right to squander resources that are not one’s own—to destroy the Christian social world.

Despite the horror of the A version’s vision of waste and the vertiginous bleakness of the endings of B and C, there is something partially redemptive in all three of these visions of waste. In deploying his episodic style and in distributing various wastours across his sprawling poem to spread an interpretive paranoia about waste, Langland also creates a formal reflex of the effluvia and spillover that threaten to drown us in Glutton’s piss-and-puke aria. As they read about wastours, his readers are made to feel effluvial, excessive, and overflowing by the act of navigating the poem’s slippery and liquid narrative arcs. They are made to feel, through the poem’s diffuse plot and interwoven narrative threads, a poetics of waste—a formal composition that aesthetically renders the undeniable connectedness of all people. If energy, money, and land
are liquid, always overflowing their boundaries, and if the discourses (legal and penitential) that seek to manage those resources are likewise liquid, we can, Piers Plowman suggests, fall back on poetry’s ever-shifting form to help us see and understand those resources’ liquidity. To answer the question “What do we do about waste?,” the poem turns to literary form as a way of broadcasting the problem and raising consciousness about it.

As anyone familiar with Piers Plowman will recall, Wastour is not the only personification that spills over its initial episodic boundaries: Holy Church, Conscience, and Piers himself all appear in different sections of the poem, often separated from their previous appearance by many intervening episodes. Wastour’s narrative effluviality is not unique. But the poem recognizes something in the aesthetic and socioeconomic project of Wynnerne and Wastoure and amplifies it: the figure of Wastour—in its semantic range and its refusal to be pinned down morally by the narrative—embodies the theory of personification allegory that governs the poem. As I outlined earlier, each personification contains every possible meaning its name denotes and, simultaneously, stages the impossibility of ascribing steady meaning to that word. Wynnerne and Wastoure builds its exploration of waste around this idea; Piers Plowman, however, raises it to the level of a modus legendi, a way of reading: with an awareness that all personifications in the poem mean everything and nothing, that they are all wastours of the narrative itself, constantly refusing to produce a unified, gratifying meaning for the whole work and instead forcing a reader constantly to reencounter the slipperiness of the poem’s logic and organization, its effluviality and excess.

Wynnerne and Wastoure and Piers Plowman marshal poetic resources as means for synthesizing and forming an ideology of waste and its consequences for human society. Piers Plowman goes on to show how wasteful behaviors, if unchecked, will lay waste to the human soul and to the material world, leaving only a trail of effluvia in their wake. The writers of these two poems do their ecocritical thinking about waste through recognizable, even conventional formal techniques of medieval poetics—personification allegory, dramatic trial scenes, discursive code switching, and, in Piers Plowman especially, the use of effluvial narrative boundaries. For these early ecocritics, poetic form offers a mode of staging meditations on complex, multilayered social problems for which a fully articulated critical vocabulary in other medieval discourses does not yet exist.

That medieval people are actively concerned about these ecological economies of matter and energy is a reality that ecocritics often overlook (Heise, “Greening” 289), but engaging with how early ecocritical writers wrestle with the interrelation of land, money, time, energy, and poetry making may offer contemporary ecocriticism new strategies for analyzing current ecological crises. Understanding not only the history of the ecocriticism of waste but also that history’s reliance on literary form as a key analytical tool may help us think in new ways about how we, in turn, represent ecological crises and about the inseparability of form from a historicized ecocritical ethos.

NOTES
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1. Lynn White argued in 1967 that the ecological crisis had its origins in the Middle Ages, when a set of
technological innovations changed land use for the rest of Western history.

2. Pastureland, moors, and heaths are highly profitable and necessary for the subsistence of farmers (Rackham 291).

3. This behavior was not always met with equanimity by the people whom it affected. Jean Birrell notes that “people threw hedges and ditches round legally rented purprestures in the New Forest in the 1330s . . . and men from five villages threw down enclosures and burned hedges in the forest of Galtres in 1348” (48).

4. “If the rich suffered injury in their property [from afforestation], the poor suffered in a more pungent way: stern laws prevented them from supplying three of their primary needs: food, firewood, and building materials. On no account could they kill deer; while difficulties surrounded the taking of timber from the woods” (McKechnie 175).

5. “Waste” also occurs in the thirteenth-century Cursor Mundi, which claims that “Ai to spell and naught to spede / wasting it es o Godes sede” “Ever to spill and nothing to gain, / it is wasting of God’s seed,” meaning that fruitless talking gets one nowhere in the journey to salvation (lines 23849–50).

6. This and all other unattributed translations are mine.

7. The wasted resources are specified as “the virtues of the body and the thoughts and the conscientings and the wills of the soul” (Dan Michel’s Ayenbite 19). Later, the work warns again, “Thus wasteth the wrecche his time and his wyttes and his guodes and wreteth God and harmeth his bodi and more his zaule” “Thus the wretch wastes his time and his wits and his goods, and enranges God and harms his own body and, more, his soul” (52).

8. Maura Nolan reads the poem as a staging of a court of chivalry.


10. S. F. C. Milsom treats trespass law more fully, including its relation to other late medieval legal developments (25–50).

11. Indeed, Magna Carta uses “destruction” and “waste” interchangeably to describe the misuse of land (Statutes 22), as does Bracton (410).

12. Since lumber is a key source of revenue, the “wasting” of trees from a piece of property is a paradigmatic type of criminal waste. See the 1382 case of William Brook, in which he and others are accused of cutting trees down vi et armis and contra pacem (Arnold, Select Cases 338).

13. David Harrington also suggests that Wynnere and Wastoure “aims at a high degree of indeterminacy,” instead of allowing its readership to settle comfortably into any single moral interpretation.

14. Lavinia Griffiths makes a similar point about the nature of the personification allegory in Piers Plowman (103).

15. “Wyse wordes and slee, and icheon wrytheth othere” ‘Clever words and slick ones, and each one overlays the next’ (Wynnere and Wastoure 6).

16. Piers Plowman is frequently taken as witness to a literature of social protest that existed in late-fourteenth-century England (Justice 102–40; Hudson; Kerby-Fulton, “Response”; Lawton; Middleton, “Narration” 94–114; Fletcher; Cole; Galloway).

17. Langland registers the equivalence of “transgression” and “trespass” in the first passus of his poem: “And taken transgressores and teighen hem faste / Til treuthe hadde terminated here trespas to the ende” “And take transgressors and tie them tight, / until truth had determined their trespass to its full extent” (94–95).

18. All quotations from Piers Plowman refer to the A version in Schmidt’s edition unless otherwise noted.

19. Langland’s growing interest in defending his eremitic life as a mode of work seems to have in part motivated his revisions to the poem (Hanna).

20. As J. A. Burrow has demonstrated, B and C show an increasing anxiety about the use of time. I will return to this point later in my analysis.

21. Anne Middleton suggests that the assertion of one’s lack of work habits refers to a technical way of opting out of the labor economy under the terms of the Statutes of Laborers (“Acts”).


23. Anne Middleton suggests that the episodes in the poem encapsulate literary and lived experience at once (“Narration”).

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