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CARDING WITH COVETOUSNESS IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

In the third vision of *Piers Plowman*, Dame Studie denounces people who treat their ‘wisdom and wit’ as commodities for sale: clerics who engage in corrupt legal practices in the service of great lords, minstrels who devise and perform obscene entertainments, and ‘freres’ and ‘faitours’ who dispute complex *questiones* and preach on difficult topics at St Paul’s in order to ‘plese ... proude men’ (B.10.71-3).¹ Early in this complaint, Studie describes the commodification of knowledge as a process like carding wool: ‘Wisdom and wit now is noȝt worþ a kerse,’ she says, ‘But if it be carded wiþ coueitise as cloþeres kembern hir wolle’ (B.10.17-18). Recent editors of the poem have explained these lines as a reference to carding raw wool, disentangling the fibres and straightening them out with a carder’s comb to prepare them for spinning.² The *MED*, too, takes Studie’s simile to refer to this kind of preparatory carding; indeed, the *MED* defines carding exclusively as a preparation for spinning, and all its illustrative quotations, with the exception of three from English-Latin word lists and one

¹ Quotations from A. V. C. Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman: A Parallel Text Edition*, 2 vols (Kalamazoo, 2011).

² See Mícheál F. Vaughan (ed.), *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (Baltimore, 2011), 185-6 (note to A.11.18); Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd (eds), *Piers Plowman* (New York, 2006), p. 141 (note to B.10.18); Derek Pearsall (ed.), *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C Text* (Exeter, 2008), p. 201 (note to C.11.15); Schmidt, *Parallel Text*, II, 584 (note to C.11.15). On carding as a preparatory process, see Penelope Walton, ‘Textiles,’ in John Blair and Nigel Ramsey (eds), *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products* (London, 1991), 323-4. On the tools for carding and combing, see also John Steane, *The Archaeology of Medieval England and Wales* (New York, 1985), 251-2.

from *Piers Plowman*, refer to carding and spinning together.³ Yet, as I will argue in what follows, this kind of wool carding is an incongruous figure for covetousness, and for the artful manipulation of ‘wisdom and wit’, and it seems more likely that Studie refers to a different and much later stage in the production of woollen cloth, where the material was combed to raise a nap.

Carding raw wool was low skilled, poorly paid work, often done by women in domestic contexts.⁴ These women were sometimes referred to as ‘kembesteres’ in Middle English.⁵ Heather Swanson discusses the low pay available to ‘kembesteres,’ and cites charitable bequests by drapers and dyers to the poor women who carded their wool.⁶ *Piers Plowman* itself identifies wool carding with the hard lives of poor women, in a unique C-text passage on ‘The wo of this wommen þat wonyeth in cotes,’ who must ‘carde and ... kembe wool,’ wash and mend clothes, clean and wind flax, and make candles from rushes for money to survive (C.9.78-83).⁷ This was subsistence work, with few opportunities for profiteering. Some medieval references to carding wool, moreover, present it as the antithesis of intellectual activity. Margery Kempe records that, after her interview with the Archbishop of York and his priests, many ‘ful worthy clerkys’ praised the ‘witte and wisdom’ she displayed

³ MED, s.v. ‘carden’ (a) and (b).

⁴ Images of women carding wool, using two square boards inset with teasel hooks, can be seen in the Luttrell Psalter (London, British Library, MS Additional 42130, fol. 193r), the Holkham Picture Bible (London, British Library, MS Additional 47682, fol. 6r), and in a narrative sequence that unfolds in the lower margins of the Smithfield Decretals (London, British Library, MS Royal 10.E.iv, fols. 137r-147r); in the Luttrell Psalter, one woman cards while another spins the carded wool, while the same woman cards and spins at different points in the Smithfield sequence.

⁵ MED, s.v. ‘kembestere,’ ‘one who combs wool or flax; esp. a female comber’.

⁶ Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), 30-1.

⁷ Judith Bennett, quoting this passage from *Piers*, comments on the ‘adaptability’ demanded from working women in this period, by contrast with the ‘stability’ of male agricultural labour; *Women in the Medieval Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (Oxford, 1987), 117-8.

in her answers to ‘so many lernyd men’. As she rides towards Beverley in the following chapter, however, certain ‘men of the cuntre’ tell her to ‘forsake this lyfe that thu hast, and go spynne and carde as other women don’.⁸ Wool carding, as these men imagine it, requires none of the ‘wisdom and wit’ for which Margery had developed a reputation; it is monotonous, physical labour, with no links to mental ingenuity.⁹ Closely identified with poverty, and sharply contrasted with intellectual endeavour, then, carding raw wool seems a problematic simile for the covetous abuse of wisdom and wit.

Carding, however, was also part of the finishing process for some fabrics made from woollen cloth (as opposed to linen).¹⁰ These fabrics would be fulled in a trough of water mixed with fuller’s clay, then washed and stretched out on a tenter. Finally, they were carded with a comb to raise a nap, a fine layer of soft fibres on the surface of the material. Anima describes the process in B.15, where the fulling trough becomes an image of the baptismal font, although he confuses the sequence slightly, placing carding ‘wiþ taseles’ before tenting:

Cloop þat comeþ fro þe weuyng is noȝt comly to were
 Til it is fulled vnder foot or in fullyng stokkes,
 Wasshen wel wiþ water and wiþ taseles cracched,
 Ytoked and yteynted and vnder taillours hande ... (B.15.451-4)

⁸ Barry Windeatt (ed.), *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London, 2000), 256, 258.

⁹ In his note, Windeatt draws out the misogynist implication of these heckles through a comparison with lines from Hoccleve’s ‘Remonstrance Against Oldcastle’, where the speaker describes women making ‘argumentes ... in holy writ ... thogh hir wit be thynne’, and tells them to ‘[sit] down and spynne’ instead. See M. C. Seymour (ed.), *Selections from Hoccleve* (Oxford, 1981), 64.

¹⁰ On carding as a finishing process, see Walton, ‘Textiles,’ 330-2.

This kind of carding was undertaken by ‘cloperes,’ tradesmen and women engaged in the cloth trade, rather than by the poor women who supplied them. The fifteenth century draper’s window from Notre Dame de Semur-en-Auxois, which depicts the process of fulling and tenting, also shows a male clothier carding a finished piece of cloth as it hangs from a frame.¹¹ This, I think, is the carding that Studie has in mind: the technique that ‘cloperes’ use to refine their luxury goods, increasing the value of their cloth and its allure to their customers, and not the work of the poor women who prepare their materials.

The examples in the *MED* suggest that carding referred more commonly to the preparatory work of ‘kembesteres’ than to this finishing technique applied by ‘cloperes’ themselves. Some manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* replace ‘cloperes’ with ‘kembsters’ in the line from Studie’s complaint, as though scribes were expecting this first, more widely used sense, rather than the second, more specialised one. The B text in San Marino, Huntington Library, MS 128, has ‘but ȝif it be cardyd wyȝ couetyse · as kembsters kembyn her wolle,’ while the equivalent line in the C text in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 104, reads ‘but hit be carpid wiȝ couetys as kemesters kenneȝ her wol’ (the substitution of ‘carping’ for ‘combing’ here suggests further confusion about Studie’s simile).¹² In the B text in Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201, meanwhile, Studie refers to a wool carder called Kytte: ‘But

¹¹ On this window, and the processes it represents, see Eleanora Carus-Wilson, ‘The Woolen Industry,’ in M. M. Postan and Edward Miller, with Cynthia Postan (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, vol. 2: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1987), 638-9. A detail from this window showing the clothier carding cloth appears on the wikipedia page for carding: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carding>.

¹² ‘San Marino, Huntington Library, MS Hm 128 (Hm and Hm2),’ ed. Michael Calabrese, Hoyt N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre with M. Gail Duggan and Patricia R. Bart and Daniel Pitti at the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* (<http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Hm>), fol. 148r. *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Douce 104*, introduction Derek Pearsall, catalogue of illustrations Kathleen Scott (Cambridge, 1992), fol. 50v.

it be Cardyd with coueytise / as kytte kembep wolle'.¹³ Kytte is the name of the dreamer's wife in the B and C texts (he calls to 'Kytte my wif' at the end of the crucifixion passus, at B.18.428 and C.20.472), and in the C text apologia the dreamer says that he lives with her in poverty 'in a cote' (C.5.2), so that her situation resembles that of the poor women 'þat wonyeth in cotes,' and who must 'carde and ... kembe wool,' for a living in C.9.¹⁴ This scribe, it seems, draws on his wider knowledge of the poem as he tries to make better sense of this reference to carding, associating it with the poorly paid work of 'kembsters,' as was conventional. In doing so, however, he obscures the implications of Studie's simile, which likens the covetous abuse of 'wisdom and wit' to the skilled tradecraft of clothiers.

Carding as a finishing process takes place in a context where people might profit from dishonest practices. During the confessions of the sins, Covetise recalls his time in the cloth trade, describing how he and his wife would stretch 'riche' fabrics on a frame, increasing the volume for sale while weakening the quality (B.5.205-10), and how his wife would instruct 'spynnesteres' to 'spynnen ... oute' their wool to make this process easier (B.5.211-12). It is the clothiers, not their suppliers who profit from this malpractice: indeed, Covetise's wife miss-weighs the wool so that the 'spynnesteres' are paid less than they deserve. Carding to raise a nap is legitimate tradecraft, and distinct from the corrupt practices Covetise describes, but like them it increases the value of woollen cloth without adding anything substantial to it. Still more fundamentally, though, this kind of wool carding resembles contemporary abuses of 'wisdom and wit', because it involves taking a divine gift and manipulating it for private

¹³ 'Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 (F)', ed. Robert Adams, Hoyt N. Duggan, Eric Eliason, Ralph Hanna, John Price-Wilkin and Thorlac Turville-Petre with M. Gail Duggan and Catherine A. Farley at the [Piers Plowman Electronic Archive](http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/F) (<http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/F>), fol. 34r.

¹⁴ Actif also names his new wife as 'Kitte' in C.7, when he declines to join the labourers on the half acre because he has recently married, recalling the new husband in the parable of the banquet from Luke 14:20: 'I may nat come for a Kitte, so a cleueth on me' (C.7.303).

profit. In *Piers Plowman*, wool is understood to be a gift from God, for the benefit of the *commune* as a whole: in passus 1, Holy Church refers to ‘wollene,’ ‘lynnen’ and ‘liflode at nede’ as the three ‘nedfulle’ things that God provides for all humans to use (B.1.17-25); the process of carding, however, renders this divine gift into a luxury, for sale to the wealthy. Wit is another of God’s gifts to the whole community: in the pardon passus, the dreamer names ‘wit’ as one of the ‘tresores’ God provides to help ‘trewe folk’ (B.7.52-5); but the clerics and minstrels of Studie’s complaint exploit it for personal gain.

W. W. Skeat, the poem’s Victorian editor, glossed Studie’s simile in his notes, saying ‘We may put it more shortly thus. Ability, to be appreciated in these days, must allow itself to be “dressed” by Avarice, as wool is when it is carded’.¹⁵ The language of Skeat’s note is ambivalent, since ‘dressing’ wool might refer to carding the raw material, or to raising a nap on the finished cloth.¹⁶ Schmidt, who echoes Skeat in his own note on these lines (‘intellectual ability cannot now prosper unless “dressed” with ambition and greed’), still reads them as a reference to the preparatory process of carding, ‘the combing out of impurities in raw wool and the straightening of the fibres before spinning’.¹⁷ Yet, Skeat also gives a cross reference to his later note on Anima’s discussion of fulling, tenting, and carding, where he describes ‘the dressing of broad-cloth’ using teasels set into a frame. Here, ‘dressing’ clearly refers to carding as a finishing process, raising a nap on woollen cloth, and not to the preparation of raw wool.¹⁸ On this evidence, then, it seems that Skeat’s explanation for Studie’s wool carding simile is more accurate than those found in more recent editions of

¹⁵ Walter W. Skeat (ed.), *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1886), II, 147 (note to C.12.14).

¹⁶ According to the *OED*, ‘dressing’ might refer generally to the process of ‘treat[ing] and prepar[ing]’ things for use, or specifically to ‘finish[ing] (textile fabrics), so as to give them a nap, smooth surface, or gloss’. *OED*, s.v. ‘dress’, v. 11(a), 13(g).

¹⁷ Schmidt, *Parallel Text*, II, 584.

¹⁸ Skeat, *Three Parallel Texts*, II, 229-30.

Piers Plowman, but that his own ambivalent reference to ‘dressing’ wool has helped to perpetuate a misunderstanding among his successors.

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