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Since March 2020...Rethinking Vulnerability, Taylor Swift's Pandemic Records, and *Piers Plowman's* Women

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Abstract

Our shared sense of vulnerability during the pandemic provides a valuable lens for considering the ways women's vulnerability has been used to undermine women's authority. Even strong women, such as Taylor Swift, find themselves subject to loss of authority due to the systemic oppression that works to devalue women in positions of social power. Swift's career creates an unconventional, but potent, link to the female figures in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* who are depicted as being vulnerable no matter their status. Building off the work of numerous feminist scholars and taking inspiration from Taylor Swift's music, this paper explores how vulnerability can become a resource for political and personal connection in a time of alienation and crisis.

Where to begin? This essay considers the shaky ground on which women’s authority rests in *Piers Plowman*. As I argue, in Langland as elsewhere, men undermine women’s authority because they benefit from women’s vulnerability. We frequently treat vulnerability as a lack, a condition of powerlessness that is pressed upon the dispossessed by more privileged others. Yet, as *Piers Plowman* affirms, vulnerability provides a common ground that can lead to a reformed vision of society. My analysis emerges from my experiences in lockdown since March 2020, and from the ways reading Langland in quarantine has revised my thinking about the persistent vulnerability of even the most culturally empowered women. As it happens, these changes in my thinking have emerged to a soundtrack, the “pandemic records” of Taylor Swift, *folklore* and *evermore*. Until COVID-19 confined me and the rest of us to our houses, I’d never known I was a fan. As the anxiety and exhaustion accompanying this global catastrophe dragged on, I found myself listening to Swift’s lockdown records on repeat.¹ And as streaming services encourage listeners to do, I found myself loving her back catalog in ways I had never anticipated. This new fixation is not, I should add, because *folklore* and *evermore* mark a collaboration between Swift and some heavyweight bros in indie music.² Rather, my interest lies in the shoddiness of women’s cultural authority, and the persistent vulnerability of manifestly powerful women such as Swift. Swift’s pandemic music shows how stories that value women’s vulnerability can foster new creative formations of community. Early on, however, reviewers seemed convinced that men’s artistic influence was central to Swift’s creative authenticity in *folklore*.³ With the arrival of *evermore*, there appears to be a more widespread appreciation for Swift’s songwriting.⁴ Yet the need, we might say, for a woman artist to make not one, but two, genre-shifting records—and during a deadly pandemic that has zapped the creative energies of most of us—reveals a collective desire to credit men for women’s exceptional achievements. Furthermore, the accounts of women’s vulnerability featured in Swift’s recent albums demonstrate how men use, and frequently produce, women’s dispossession to establish their own individual and structural empowerment. That said, chronicling women’s vulnerability allows Swift to use her social privilege to change how we see women’s cultural authority, including her own. In celebrating women who “had a marvelous time ruining everything,” Swift’s songwriting recalls Langland’s tendency to turn away from idealized women in *Piers Plowman*.

Langland does not become disinterested in powerful or venerated women; rather, I maintain, the diversity of women’s experiences represented in *Piers Plowman* renders the poem indispensable to a

This article is dedicated to those who have lost loved ones and friends without the ability to say goodbye, and without the ability to gather *in memoriam*. It is for those who have remained unvisited, untended, and *unsung*.

¹ Taylor Swift surprise-released *folklore* on July 24, 2020. Her follow-up surprise album, *evermore*, was released on December 11, 2020.

² This collaboration includes Aaron Dessner, guitarist for *The National*, Jack Antonoff, lead of *The Bleachers* as well as guitarist and drummer for *Fun*, and Justin Vernon, front man for *Bon Iver*.

³ As I argue at length elsewhere, when a man sponsors, produces, or represents a woman, it does not always lead to the kind of “attributed authority” that critics seem quick to give Dessner, Vernon, and Antonoff. Instead, as David Wallace argued long ago, and as he’s since demonstrated (critically with *Strong Women*, but this commitment is equally evident across his career as an editor and promoter of women’s scholarship), “reading as a feminist,” means taking women’s creative and critical endeavors seriously outside the parameters of masculine authority. For a representative review, see Jon Caramanica.

⁴ For a representative review, see Chris Willman.

feminist consideration of women's imperfect authority—then and now. When Swift sings of the woman who breaks her lover's heart when he proposes marriage, “she would have made such a lovely bride, what a shame she's fucked in the head,” she captures the collective censure a woman meets when she humiliates or diminishes a man (2020b “Champagne Problems”). And while Langland's Lady Mede is doubtless corrupt, she is similarly derided, “For the mooste commune of that court called hire an hore” (B.iv.166).⁵ We might say Mede is to blame for her own condemnation, but the critical tradition repeats her rejection when she is characterized as a “vamp and a tramp,” and described as “as a courtly and beautiful lady who has slept with everyone” (Calabrese, 2016, 45; Ashe, 2020).⁶ We remain unforgiving in our assessments of women who thrive in the public eye, including a woman as seemingly “perfect” as Taylor Swift. To be sure, a woman as rich as Swift is afforded a begrudged type of credit for the power her cultural makings accrue through their sheer popularity. Nonetheless, Swift's artistic authority has long been met with skepticism, including from fellow musicians. Back in 2015, the #MeToo indie predator Ryan Adams made an entire cover album of Swift's *1989*.⁷ By Adams's own account, his decision to cover *1989* arose because he thought, “I hear more,” when he listened to Swift's record. He was quick to add, “Not that there was anything missing. I would just think about the sentiments in the songs and the configurations” (Browne). Even so, Adams's creative recasting sounded too much like the words of the man who repeats what his woman colleague says in a graduate seminar or conference session and expects to be credited for his/her good ideas.

And frequently the man *is* credited for her/his good ideas. Coming to my newfound fandom for Swift amid a pandemic made me realize how much this situation—not Swift's commercial success, notably, but her cultural authority as a creative artist—exemplifies the longer tradition of refusing to see women's influence in positive terms unless it conforms to an ideal of feminine perfection that is largely produced by men. My recognition of this insidious tradition has been aided by reading William Langland's *Piers Plowman* on repeat throughout lockdown. As medievalists know, *Piers Plowman* is not generally described as a poem about women's authority, despite the fact the poem features a litany of female personifications.⁸ Figures from Holy Church to Dame Study—though they wield considerable authority in the poem's imagined world—are usually taken to be artistic or analytic tools of Langland's

⁵ All quotations from the B-Text of *Piers Plowman* are from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*. 2nd edition and are cited parenthetically by passus and line number.

⁶ I cite Michael Calabrese and Laura Ashe because these statements are included in introductions to *Piers Plowman* meant for a wider, non-specialist audience. They also capture critical consensus, and are not particularly harsh in their respective treatments of Mede.

⁷ Ryan Adams released his *1989* on September 21, 2015. At the time, Swift remarked, “Ryan Adams is one of the artists who shaped my songwriting. My favorite part of his style of creating music is his ability to bleed aching vulnerability into it, and that's what he's done with his cover project of my album *1989*” (Goodman). In February of 2019, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy story in which numerous women, including musician Phoebe Bridgers, actress and ex-wife Mandy Moore, and an underage fan, accused Adams of emotional abuse and sexual misconduct. Adams denied the accusations, but then cancelled the scheduled release of a trilogy of albums as well as his touring dates for 2019. See Joe Coscarelli and Melena Ryzik. For Adams's denial, see Noah Yoo.

⁸ See Ralph Hanna III, “School and Scorn,” for his claim that *Piers Plowman* is taken to be “an extremely masculine poem” (243). As Hanna remarks, this observation began in a couple of earlier essays, his “Will's Work” and his “Brewing Trouble.” Helen Cooper argues that the poem features more masculine personifications because Will, the central consciousness of the poem, is male (33). See also Anne Middleton, who extends the masculinism of *Piers* to a reading of Chaucer's Pardoner.

creative genius. Even personifications whose meanings are hard to pin down, such as the notoriously slippery Lady Mede, are viewed as abstractions with little relation to actual women.⁹ This distance is part of a broader artistic tradition, which uses feminine figures to imagine and represent all kinds of conceptual contrasts.¹⁰ So Langland is doing nothing new—or nothing unconventional—when he sets Holy Church against Mede, or when he paints Dame Study as the domineering wife of her henpecked husband, Clergie.

Traditionally, artists working in languages with grammatical gender, such as Latin, have taken advantage of feminine inflections, rendering virtues including *prudentia* and institutions including *ecclesia* as women.¹¹ For a long time, scholars insisted that feminized figures were nothing more than grammatical expressions, and that any cultural authority such figures were imagined to wield was at best a fanciful representation, and at worst a linguistic joke.¹² No one really believed that women could be imagined as exemplars of qualities including Wisdom or Temperance—and if Prudence or the Church were figured as women, that representation had more to do with men’s love for a particular virtue or revered establishment than it did with any actual woman’s resemblance to a lauded quality or powerful institution. This insistence has endured despite the fact that, almost thirty years ago, Helen Cooper overturned the assumption that Langland’s female personifications were simply an extension of grammatical gender (31-48). As she brilliantly affirms, Langland’s use of the vernacular freed *Piers Plowman* from the usual claim that personifications reflect the gender of their assigned terms in Latin or in romance vernaculars (33). Equally important, Cooper argues that Langland does not associate the feminine with abstraction, and notes that “the very process of personification, of making into a person, invites that person to be imagined in human and therefore gender-specific terms...[which means a] feminine personification invited development in female terms” (35).

Despite this affirmation, Cooper also suggests that Langland’s women characters are negligible compared to the variety of men who populate the poem (32). It is certainly true that there are more men than women in *Piers Plowman*; nevertheless, women are some of the most memorable characters in the poem, and they share features across the poem that I maintain cast new light on the poem’s reformist vision: Langland’s emphasis on a common human vulnerability, or a basic inability to organize selfhood according to a defined linear trajectory, requires Will to continue to search for Truth despite repeated failures. Some characters fail more fully than Will: as I argue elsewhere, Langland’s representation of Mede’s vulnerability urges us to rethink how we view women’s compromised authority in *Piers Plowman* (Crocker 93-104). Throughout, Langland does not shy away from detailing how certain forms of social corruption allow individual women to gain influence in a world largely made by and for men, as feminist scholars Clare Lees and Stephanie Trigg have demonstrated. The dreamer may wish to distance himself from Mede’s shady practices, yet given Will’s social frailties and spiritual failures, the dreamer has more in common with Mede than he might initially admit. With her practices of personal corruption and individual dissolution, Mede also models Will’s spiritual condition.

⁹ For an argument that compares Mede to Alice Perrers, maligned mistress of King Edward III, see Stephanie Trigg.

¹⁰ See Marina Warner for a long view of this tradition.

¹¹ Barbara Newman argues that artists in the Middle Ages (including Langland) created a “goddess culture,” which represented different elements of religious thought about the relationship between human and divine.

¹² Masha Raskolnikov takes up the persistence of this idea in relation to Langland’s allegory.

Equally important, as Colette Murphy, Elizabeth Fowler, and other feminist scholars have urged us to notice, Holy Church's imperfections arise despite, or perhaps as a consequence, of her manifest cultural power. Her huffy denunciation of Mede is more than petty jealousy; rather, with her insistence on hierarchy, "I oughte ben hyere than [heo]—I kam of a bettre" (B.ii.28), Langland details how elite women compete for the scarce power allotted to them within a patriarchal domain. To reveal women's imperfections is not, I suggest, to condemn women, or to abandon them in favor of other actants. Rather, Langland tracks a host of social problems as they affect different sorts of women, affirming, as the feminist theorist bell hooks puts it, "women's varied and complex social reality" (44). Although Langland admits women's experiences are dissimilar, the hardships women face are a constant theme throughout the poem. Who can forget the challenges faced by the women of Glutton's household, when he returns drunk and ailing from his night of carousing? The women are left to perform the dirty, domestic labor supporting men's public activities: "With al the wo of this world, his wif and his wenche / Baren hym to his bed and broughte hym therinne" (B.v.358-59). As this sorry episode confirms, moreover, women are bound to men no matter how demeaning those activities might be. The wife may "enwyte hym tho how wickedly he lyvede" (B.v.364), but she is powerless to change his behavior or her situation.

Throughout *Piers Plowman*, women are dependent on men for their stature and stability. This dependency is true for elite women, Holy Church and Mede, but it is equally the case with the middling daughters and wives who populate the poem. Near the poem's conclusion Will's family is pictured as dutifully going to church, but the way the scene arranges domestic life is heavily gendered, featuring a wife and children who visibly reinforce Will's household authority. In passus 6, Piers Plowman's family members are characterized by their allegorical function: his wife, "Dame Werch-whan-tyme is," affirms household measure, while the daughter, "Do-right-so-or-thi-dame-shal-thee-bete," reveals household hierarchy (B.vi.78, 79). These names are preposterous, but they express the operation of a domestic arrangement designed to maintain women's physical vulnerability and social subservience, qualities even more pronounced among those living on society's margins. When women are counted among the shiftless, the bawds, the brewers, the prostitutes, Langland registers a vast underclass of women, whose physical exposure to risk and social position of alienation are dismissed as a sign of their moral unfitnes.¹³ The poem famously dispatches those who will not perform honest labor. Notably, at the end of passus 5, the "commune womman" abandons the upcoming pilgrimage to follow the corrupt pardoner. In passus 6, Piers condemns "Jonette of the Stuwes" as one type among the no-goods he will leave behind as he leads the others to Truth. But in representing women's undomestic and unreproductive labor—that which is illicit, compromised, and dangerous—Langland details the different sorts of vulnerability that various women experience as a way of tracking his society's many faults.

Importantly, as the poem's condemnations reveal, women are exposed to material harms in order to prop up a moral universe that thrives on their spiritual and physical dispossession. The infamous tapsters, Rose the Regrater and Bretoun the Brewster, are alewives, neither empowered nor privileged, but maligned for a craft that they practiced—frequently on the side—to supplement meager

¹³ See Hanna, "Brewing Trouble," and Calabrese (2006) for analyses of Langland's critical attitude towards these sorts of disreputable women. In her classic study *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England*, Ruth Mazo Karras, also notes Langland's negative treatment (35 and 90).

household resources, as Judith M. Bennett's research demonstrates (168-69; 178-83). Rose the Regrater demonstrates this craft's involvement in corruption, since her brewing practices violate regulations specifying the quality of ales: "Peny ale and puddyng ale she poured togideres / For laborers and for lowe folk, that lay by hymselfe" (B.v.216-17). As Langland's description makes clear, she knowingly cheats her poor customers, and saves better ale for her social betters. Though it might be easy to see Betoun the Brewster's encouragement of Glutton's excess as her own form of moral dissolution, "I have good ale, gossib, quod she, 'Gloton, woltow assaye?'" (B.v.303), it is more likely that her own precarious financial condition leads her to peddle as much drink as her customers can imbibe. Nevertheless, her representation as a temptress, Bennett rightly notes, makes her "a wicked woman, an unchristian encourager of vice, and a profiteer at the expense of others" (172). Given Rose's marriage to Covetise, she appears rather straightforwardly to be a support for sin; whereas her fellow tapster, Betoun, secures winnings at the expense of more vulnerable others. Langland details the corruptions that these women practice, but he also represents the hardships that these women face and cause.

Langland pays careful attention to the ways that poverty degrades spiritual life, along with the human condition more generally.¹⁴ This focus has important feminist implications. Indeed, starting from the standpoint of those whom Anne M. Scott calls "the most vulnerable in society" (147) should prompt us to rethink our approach to women in Langland's poem. To approach the poem in this way requires we consider the abstract and concrete, or, what Langland details and what he dismisses. Elizabeth Robertson's work continues to remind us that the feminine is central to all aspects of Langland's project, from poetry- to soul-making. And the work of such medieval historians as Judith Bennett, Ruth Mazo Karras, Sharon Farmer, Jeremy Goldberg, and Cordelia Beattie remains relevant to Langland's representations of women, since these scholars trace how non-elite medieval women dealt with the daily precariousities of their lives as wives, daughters, or servants whose labors assisted those of men.¹⁵ Examining the intersection of poetics and history—particularly with regard to Langland's women—furnishes a way to see how *Piers* amplifies certain aspects of women's vulnerability. For instance, there is an insistence, particularly on the C-Text, that poverty is most movingly identified with women's domestic experience in late-medieval England, an element of the poem receiving scant attention.¹⁶ To be poor, as Langland's description makes clear, is simply part of the mundane daily labors of many women:

Woet no man, as Y wene, who is worthy to haue
 Ac that most nedden aren oure neyhebores, and we nyme gode hede,
 As prisoners in puttes and pore folk in cotes,
 Charged with childrene and chief lordes rente;
 That they with spynnyng may spare, spenen hit on hous-huyre,
 Bothe in mylke and in mele, to make with papelotes

¹⁴ See Kate Crassons for a comprehensive treatment of Langland's representations of poverty.

¹⁵ In particular, see essays by Sharon Farmer, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Judith Bennett in the collection, *Single Women in the European Past, 1250-1800*, as well as studies by P.J.P. Goldberg and Cordelia Beattie.

¹⁶ A laudable exception is Emily Steiner (91), though she does not connect this example to the potential for feminist politics in the poem.

To aglotye with here gurles that greden aftur fode.
 And hemsulue also soffre mucche hunger,
 And wo in wynter-tymes, and wakyng on nyhtes
 To rise to the reule to rokke the cradel,
 Bothe to carde and to kembe, to cloute and to wasche,
 And to rybbe and to rele, rusches to pylie,
 That reuthe is to rede or in ryme shewe
 The wo of this wommen that wonyeth in cotes;
 And of monye other men that moche wo soffren,
 Bothe afyngred and afurste....(C.9.70-85)¹⁷

To be sure, this sympathetic portrait of poverty forms part of an idealized picture of the domestic— notwithstanding its difficulties—that recalls the household arrangements of Piers and Will, both earlier and later in the poem.¹⁸ Notably absent in this underexamined depiction of women’s domestic hardships is the moral corrosion evident in Langland’s renderings of other women.

When *Piers Plowman* critiques the “miswinnings” of Mede, as well as the variety of prostitutes across the poem, it shows that taking a satirical perspective on human society does not provide a reprieve from the conditions of spiritual rot that the poem presents (Lawler). Rather, the poem shows us how or why these women become corrupt; the fundamental vulnerability of their social position, in other words, is integral to the foundational change that Langland relentlessly pursues. The suffering women bear, which is evident even in the most moving rendering of women’s care work, is a condition that many other women seek to avoid via their illicit labors. And why wouldn’t they? Vulnerability is not a condition we should wish upon anyone. Theorists including Stacy Alaimo and Bonnie Honig have recently cautioned against the turn towards vulnerability in cultural theory. As Alaimo declares, “I would like to destabilize the associations between vulnerability and femininity” (94). Honig argues this “mortalist humanism” inhibits the formation of a politics, since as she claims, “an ethics of mortality and suffering is no adequate replacement for a (post)humanist politics with agonistic intent” (17). Judith Butler apparently agrees, since, near the end of her recent book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, she claims, “neither vulnerability nor care can serve as the basis of a politics” (Butler 2020, 186). These theorists imagine vulnerability as a condition born of subjugation, which is imposed, as Langland’s *Piers Plowman* reveals, to prop up the powerful.

Then as now, we might *all* agree that vulnerability is a condition that a reformist politics should struggle to overcome; it would be the height of injustice to insist that someone else’s precarity might be galvanized to organize a social reform movement. Yet as Langland’s representations of women equally demonstrate, those who are vulnerable are frequently easy to overlook because they don’t make “virtuous” victims. Mede, the alewives, and the prostitutes fend for themselves in hostile conditions that exploit their vulnerabilities. To turn away from these women, or to suggest they are worthy of condemnation, is to pretend we can maintain a differentiating distance, only to realize that illusory distance does not protect us from the human weaknesses the precarity of Langland’s women exposes. Given the differentiating distance that living through this global pandemic has imposed, I

¹⁷ This passage from the C-Text is cited from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-Text*.

¹⁸ M. Teresa Tavormina details Langland’s reliance on the familial structures supported by heterosexual marriage.

suggest that acknowledging our common vulnerability, even in its most alienating, belittling instantiations, provides a form of community that might help us see our way forward. With this common vulnerability in mind, we can see our way to rethink Taylor Swift. While she is one of the most powerful recording artists of our time, her “quarantine masterpiece[s]” cast light on the ways that Langland represents women’s vulnerability. Together, her two latest creative efforts remind us to rethink those social arrangements that continue to cut people off from one another (Sivitz).

To be sure, Swift is *the icon* of cultural privilege, a white, blonde, pop-princess whose every move is chronicled by fans and press alike. Yet the scrutiny she receives, particularly about her sexual attachments and political affiliations, continually calls into question her authority as well as her artistry. If Swift has thematized this scrutiny, playing up public fascination with her personal life in order to magnify her pop-persona, she has also complained about the creative bind she faces. She is rarely, and then only recently, afforded the artistic respect her commercial success might otherwise command. Only when Jack Antonoff remarks on how important it was for Swift to endorse his work as a producer does her comprehensive control over her own career—particularly the musical choices she makes—become evident: “Taylor’s the first person who let me produce a song,” Antonoff says. “Before Taylor, everyone said: ‘You’re not a producer.’ It took Taylor Swift to say: ‘I like the way this sounds’” (Rosen). Antonoff does not take credit for Swift’s musical trajectory, and a good bit of his success is attributed to “his reputation as a generous collaborator who rejects the sexism and Svengalism that has often shaped power relations between male producers and female performers” (Rosen). Instead, Antonoff’s comments point to Swift’s openness to an artistic process that makes vulnerability part of the effort to put a creative artefact into the world.

By valuing the stories of imperfect women, Swift makes vulnerability into a creative resource, which potentially has the power to resist or undo the subjugation cultural theorists rightly warn against when they think about conventional connections between femininity and vulnerability. Swift’s response to *Reputation*’s lack of award recognition, captured by the director Lana Wilson in the 2020 documentary, *Miss Americana*, shows that Swift will never dispatch vulnerability completely, given that audiences always retain the critical power to respond to her creative work.¹⁹ With *folklore*, Swift affirms that being vulnerable is a valuable part of what it means to be human right now. If *Betty* details the wrongs a teenaged lover might regret, *My Tears Ricochet* contemplates an ex-lover’s hateful attachment. With *evermore*, Swift emphasizes how shared fragility might bring us together during a global pandemic that has at this writing killed 2,975,733 people worldwide (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine). The songs chronicle moments of beauty and reverie, heartbreak and pettiness, from the woman in *Champagne Problems* who rejects a hopeful suitor, to the woman in *No Body, No Crime* who murders an unfaithful spouse. Even if she remains an object of gossipy speculation, Swift features women characters who continue to make, suffer, enjoy, destroy, and affirm their imperfect, precarious, precious lives with others.

¹⁹ See the opening scene of *Miss Americana*, in which Swift waits to hear if her album, *Reputation*, received Grammy nominations. When she learns it did not, she says, “I just need to make a better record.” More recently, the documentary, *Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions*, was released on Disney+, November 25, 2020. The latter film chronicles Swift’s creative process on that record, including her work with the album’s noted collaborators, Dessner and Antonoff. Between them, these two documentaries work to establish Swift’s creative control and cultural authority.

It is Swift's willingness to value imperfect women that recalls *Piers Plowman*. Although many of them are personifications, Langland's women are certainly not saints. Yet, as Swift's sensitive portrayals attest, such flawed characters should not warrant dismissal, or even condemnation. Rather, across her recent albums, Swift affirms that our faults reveal forms of vulnerability that might help us find each other even in our most isolated, exhausted, and overwhelmed moments. If Judith Butler sounds a pessimistic note about vulnerability's political potential—"none of us should seek to be saints" (186)—it is because, at the same time we seek justice for the vulnerable ones among us, we also hold them to a standard of perfection that is itself an idealizing fiction.²⁰ For too long, we have looked for "perfect victims" to front our social reform movements, and "perfect heroines" to personify the ideals that we hold dear. Langland's beleaguered housewife might capture our idea of vulnerability in late-medieval life; yet, as most of his poem shows, it is the Rosie Regraters and the Betoun Brewsters who are equally subject to those conditions of precarity in dire need of reform in fourteenth-century England. Swift might index contemporary ideals of women's fame, wealth, and beauty, yet despite (or as a consequence of) her stardom, she has had to sue to find redress for a sexual assault claim, and she is currently re-recording her first six albums after her masters were sold without her knowledge.²¹

Even the most powerful women occupy a shaky cultural ground that they share with the dispossessed and discarded. After spending the better part of a year in some form of quarantine—with family and friends distanced and some also tragically deceased—it seems more important than ever to reassess our connections to the vulnerable among us. Here too, *Piers Plowman* is instructive: rather than present his personifications as abstract principles, Langland shows the harried, compromised, and frequently imperfect conditions that limit and sometimes thwart our most hallowed ideals (Study is pedantic; Conscience is vindictive).²² Late in the poem, the cardinal virtues are represented as grains that Grace plants in the human soul; the four gospels, the Church Fathers, and the Old and New Testaments become the animals and instruments that Grace uses to cultivate and sow these seeds.²³ With this move, Langland does not discard women, or belittle women's authority;

²⁰ The full claim is baffling in its lack of concern for existential vulnerability, which Butler herself theorized as "precariousness," which, in *Frames of War*, she contrasts with "precarity," which she describes as "the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (25). In *The Force of Nonviolence*, her remarks imply that acknowledging our common vulnerability is just a cultivation of personal virtue in the thinnest performative terms, what might in popular culture be called "virtue signaling": "I would surely like to be a better person and to strive to become that, in part by acknowledging my apparently profound and recurrent fallibility. But none of us should seek to be saints, if what that means is that we hoard all goodness for ourselves, expelling the flawed or destructive dimension of the human psyche to actors on the outside, those living in the region of the 'not me,' with whom we dis-identify" (186).

²¹ For the story and significance of Swift's sexual assault case, see "Taylor Swift sexual assault case"; for the story of her back catalog, see Anastasia Tsioulcas. Swift released *Fearless: Taylor's Version*, on April 9, 2021.

²² Louise M. Bishop provides brilliant analysis of how Langland's representation of Study engages cultural anxieties regarding women's relationship to reading and/in the vernacular. Also see, Nicole Nolan Sidhu, who offers an invaluable account of Study in the context of medieval gender comedy. Paul Strohm, considers Langland's Conscience in the context of a longer tradition of representation. Also see, Sarah Wood, who analyzes the different modes of religious discourse that Conscience employs.

²³ See David Aers, who argues the poem's "organicism" means that Langland moves away from conventional depictions of human virtue. See also, Calabrese, "Posthuman *Piers*?" and Tekla Bude for similar analyses of the unlikely bodies that populate Langland's moral landscape. As I maintain in my developing book, *The Feminist Subject of Late Medieval*

rather, he shows how such qualities might transform common creaturely vulnerabilities into sources of strength, or *virtues*, that link all bodies in the reformed world he imagines.²⁴ That this vision fails, is mostly due to Will's persistent attempt to see himself as beyond the frailties the poem chronicles via its imperfect characters, especially women.

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Literature, to imagine an unconventional formulation of human subjectivity is simply to imagine women (not men) as models for our corruptible, vulnerable, earthly experiences.

²⁴ James Simpson notes this organic operation of "vertue" in his discussion of the "plante of pees" early in the poem (B.i.152). My most recent book, *The Matter of Virtue*, considers the ways that "vertues" endow women with unexpected ethical powers.

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