PIERS PLOWMAN
WILLIAM LANGLAND

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Historical and cultural context
- The Hundred Year’s War (1337-1453)
- The ‘Black Death’ (1348-1351)
- Statute of Pleading (1362)
- Parliament opened in English (1362)
- Peasants’ Revolt (1381)
- Lollards

Historical and cultural context
- Rise of the English language
  - open hostility with France (Patriotism?)
  - waning of the feudal system
  - emerging of the ‘Middle Class’
  - increased social mobility
  - economic and political opportunity (guilds)
  - necessity for people to understand the law

Historical and cultural context
“[...] and that reasonably the said laws and customs shall be most quickly learned and known, and better understood in the tongue used in the said realm, and by so much every man of the said realm may the better govern himself without offending of the law [...]”

(Statute of Pleading 1362)

Historical and cultural context
- The Peasants’ Revolt (1381)
  - consequences of the ‘Black Death’
  - about 30% of the population died
  - poor suffered most
  - shortage of labor
  - three poll taxes (1377, 1379, 1380)
  - “general spirit of discontent arose” (Baugh & Cable)
**Historical and cultural context**
- Changes in social and economic life led to the reestablishment of English
  - English to appeal to the lower classes (Lollards)
  - French is replaced in the law courts and in Parliament
- English is used in schools after 1349
  - Easier for the children
  - Not enough competent teachers

**English Literature 1150-1400**
- Literature = writing in general
- 1150-1250: Period of Religious Record
  - Still in French
- 1250-1350: Period of Religious and Secular Literature in English
- 1350-1400: Period of Great Individual Writers
  - Chaucer (Canterbury Tales, Troilus and Criseyde)
  - Langland (Piers Plowman)
  - Wycliffe (Bible translation, controversial prose)
  - Anonymous writer (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, poem Pearl)

**Religious context**
- Christians: it was common for people to live in communities (parishes) and to go to church
- John Wycliffe (1320-1384): English theologian and founder of the Lollard Movement
- Lollardy: political and religious movement
  - What the Bible doesn’t specify, isn’t truly Christian.
  - The Bible should be available in vernacular language so that everybody can read it.

**William Langland**
- Was born in c. 1330
- One of the most significant poets in British Literature
- Piers Plowman was written c. 1360-1387
- All that we know about him is what we can find in his writings

**Piers Plowman**
- Written c. 1360-1387
- Is considered to be one of the great early works of English Literature
- May be autobiographical, written from a Catholic point of view
- Is a dream vision, actually contains eight dreams, with two additional dreams within the dreams
- Deals with the search for the true Christian Life
- Uses allegory to make the reader think harder and face more problems
Translation Passus I, 146-164

- FOR trewthe telleth that love
  - is truistle of heavene
- May no synne be on him sen ·
  - that speak that speke,
- And alle his werkes he wroughte
  - with love as he list
- And leyed it Alain for the
  - lowest thing · and moste like to
  - heavene,
- And also the plante of pees ·
  - moste precious of vertues.

For Truth tells us that love -
Is the trustiest medicine in
Heaven;
No sin may be seen on him - by
whom that spice is used.
And all the deeds he pleased to
do were done with love.
And [he] taught it to Moses as a
matchless thing, and most like
Heaven,
And also the plant of peace,
most precious of virtues.

Translation Passus I, 146-164

- For hevene myghte noughte
  - holden it · it was so hevy of hym-
- self,
- Till it hadde of the erthe ·
  - yeten his fylle,
- And what it haved of this folde ·
  - fleshe and blode taken,
- Was neuere leef upon lynde ·
  - lighter ther-after,
- And portatyf and persant · as
  - the poynt of a needle,
- That myghte non armure it lette ·
  - ne none heigh walles.

For heaven might not [be able
to] hold it, so heavy it seemed,
Till it had with earth alloyed
itself.
And when it had of this earth
taken flesh and blood,
Never was leaf upon linden
lighter thereafter,
And portable and piercing as
the point of a needle,
That might not obstruct it, nor
ever high walls.

Translation Passus I, 146-164

- For-thi is love leder · of the
  - lordes folke of hevene,
- And a mene, as the maire is ·
  - bitwene the kyng and the
  - comune,
- Right so is love a ledere · and
  - the lawe shapeth
  - Upon man for his mysdedes · the
  - merciment he taxeth.
- And for to knowe it kyndely · it
  - comseth bi myght,
- And in the herte, there is the
  - hevede · and the heigh welle.

Therefore Love is leader of the
Lord’s people in Heaven.
And an intermediary as the
mayor is between community
and king.
Just as love is a leader by whom
the law is enforced
Upon man for his misdeeds – he
measures the fine.
And to know this naturally, it’s
nourished by a power,
That has its head in the heart,
and its high source.

Biblical background

- One dream: Will and others are in search of Truth,
  - Piers wants to show them the way if they are willing
to help him plow his acre. But not everybody is
satisfied, which makes him angry
- Æ refers to Moses

Another dream: Piers shows Will a tree and he
wants to try its fruit
- Æ refers to the Garden of
Eden

Another dream: Will dreams he is in Jerusalem and
sees the crucifixion

Piers Plowman’s final appearance: he has become
St. Peter and the earth has become his acre

Dialectal Diversity in ME
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- Great variety of dialects
- Not only in spoken language but also in written language
- No recognized literary standard
  - Writers wrote in their dialect
  - Awareness of other dialects

Dialectal Diversity in ME

“And for ther is so gret diversite
In Englissh, and in wirtyng of oure tonge,
So prey I god that non myswrite the,
Ne the mys-metre for defaute of tonge.”

(Chaucer’s prayer in Troilus and Criseyde)

- Miswrite = miscopy
- Mis-metre = get the metre wrong
- Defaute of tonge = mistake in the dialect

Dialectal Diversity in ME

- Differences within counties
- Distinguishing features:
  - Pronunciation
  - Vocabulary
  - Inflection

Dialectal Diversity in ME

- Ending of plural, present, indicative of verbs:

  - OE: {-th} with some variation of preceding vowel
  - Southern ME:  - eth  (loveth)
  - Midlands ME:  - en  (loven)
  - Northern ME:  - es  (loves)

Dialectal Diversity in ME

- Present participle (before {-ing} was introduced)

  - Southern:  lovinde
  - Midlands:  lovende
  - Northern:  lovande
North vs. South

- Pronunciation:
  - OE: ā
  - Northern: ā (stane)
  - Southern: ō (stone)

- Voicing (f > v; s > z):
  - Southwestern: vor, vrom, vox
  - Northern: for, from, fox

- <ch> /tʃ/ vs. <k> /k/:
  - Southern: church, bench
  - Northern: kirk, benk

- Southern attitude towards Northern dialect:
  - “a sense of cultural superiority” (Graddol et al.)
  - Trevisa: “[...] so scharpe, slytting and frotying, and unschape, that we Southeron men may that langage unneth undurstonde.”

- Northern attitude towards Southerners:
  - Language of the government, difficult to understand
  - Giraldus Cambrensis (12th century): Southern language = “more archaic and [...] less agreeable” (Baugh & Cable)

- Northern text: [link]
- Southern Text: [link]
Thanks for your attention!

Bibliography


