

PIERS PLOWMAN

WILLIAM LANGLAND

By Daniela Bartel and Irina Giesbrecht

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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 (→plague)

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

Piers Plowman

- Main character is Will → searches for Dowel, Dobet, Dobest
- Theophanic character → Piers Plowman
- Allegorical characters → Lady Holy Church, Truth, Faith, ...

Translation Passus I, 146-164

- FOR trewthe telleth that love
- Is triacle of hevene
- May no synne be on him sene · that useth that spise,
- And alle his werkes he wroughte · with love as him liste;
- And lered it Moises for the levest thing · and moste like to hevene,
- 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 Moises 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 hevye of hymself,
- Tyle it hadde of the erthe · yeten his fylle,
- And what it haved of this folde · flesshe and blode taken,
- Was nevere leef upon lynde · lighter ther-after,
- And portatyf and persant · as the poynt of a nedle,
- 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,
- No armor might obstruct it, nor any 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 so love is a leader by whom the law's 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.

Translated by: Donaldson, E. T. in Robertson, E. and S. H. A. Shepherd

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 → refers to Moses
- Another dream: Piers shows Will a tree and he wants to try its fruit → refers to the Garden of Eden
- Another dream: Will dreams he is in Jerusalem and sees the crucifixion

Biblical background

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

Dialectal Diversity in ME



Dialectal Diversity in ME

- 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 English, and in wrytyng 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*)

myswrite = miscopy
 mys-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)

North vs. South

□ voicing (f > v ; s > z):

- Southwestern: vor, vrom, vox
- Northern: for, from, fox

North vs. South

□ <ch> /tʃ/ vs. <k> /k/

- Southern: church, bench
- Northern: kirk, benk

North vs. South

□ Southern attitude towards Northern dialect:

- “a sense of cultural superiority” (Graddol et al.)
- Trevisa: “[...] so scharpe, slytting and frotyng, and unschape, that we Southeron men may that longage unneth undurstonde.”

North vs. South

□ Northern attitude towards Southerners:

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

North vs. South

□ Northern text:

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Piers-Plowman.html>

□ Southern Text:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE0MtENfOMU>

Thanks for your attention!

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