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**Peregrinajes with Piers Plowman: Translating the Embodied City of  
Angels with Cal State LA's Piers Plowman Students—A Collaborative  
Project by Michael Calabrese, Katie Rocio Luna, and the Piers Plowman  
Students of Cal State LA**

**Abstract**

With great pleasure Michael Calabrese and Katie Rocio Luna introduce a series of translations, composed by Cal State LA students, of the great 14-century Middle English poem, *Piers the Plowman*, written by William Langland. *Piers Plowman* recounts the wanderings of a man named “Will,” representing all of human desire. He’s an everyman on a complicated pilgrimage, experiencing a series of dreams that take him into internal confrontations with personifications of his own mind. In the selections that follow, you will see Cal State LA students, both undergraduate and graduate, interpreting various passage in *Piers Plowman* in creative/critical modern English translations of the original Middle English text. This collection of student work manifests the practice of “translation pedagogy,” where the classroom itself and student assignments draw upon individual students’ multilingualism, cultural backgrounds, and interests, in the service of adapting the Medieval poem and its language.

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MICHAEL CALABRESE AND KATIE ROCIO LUNA

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*Peregrinajes with Piers Plowman: Translating the Embodied City of Angels with Cal State LA's Piers Plowman Students—A Collaborative Project by Michael Calabrese, Katie Rocio Luna, and the Piers Plowman Students of Cal State LA*

With great pleasure, I introduce a series of translations, composed by Cal State LA students, of the great 14-century Middle English poem, *Piers the Plowman*, written by William Langland. *Piers Plowman* recounts the wanderings of a man named “Will,” representing all of human desire. He’s an everyman on a complicated pilgrimage, experiencing a series of dreams that take him into internal confrontations with personifications of his own mind like “Thought” and “Wit.” He encounters figures representing the institutions of his time, such as “Holy Church,” as well as human forces of sin and greed, including “Gluttony” and Lady Meed—a dangerous vamp in a red dress who embodies the selfish urge for wealth. He even meets forces like “Hunger,” who frightens people into working. *Piers Plowman* is a combative poem that challenged the corrupt authorities in church and state of its time, anticipating the European Reformation by 150 years. At this time of crisis and loss of faith in leadership, people did not know where to turn to find comfort, solace, and stability. Those themes are by no means unique to Medieval times, for they resonate in every reading community that could encounter this great poem. The human need for comfort, solace, and stability is transcultural and transhistorical. And our uneasy quest for justice and fairness never seems to leave us—or any society—in peace.

In the selections that follow, you will see my students interpreting various passage in *Piers Plowman* in creative/critical modern English translations of the original Middle English text. In the last 5 years or so, I have been writing extensively, including right here in *Text and Type*, about my teaching strategies concerning how to make a medieval poem from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century exciting for students in the 21<sup>st</sup>. In my own translation, and in a guidebook I wrote for *Piers*, I've worked very hard to make sure that its themes seem active, contemporary, relatable, and meaningful for modern audiences.<sup>1</sup>

The translations are divided into two sections of equal merit: critical and adaptive. In both sections the students have used the *Middle English Dictionary* to find complex meaning and connotations in the poem’s original words. Critical translations have dynamically rendered the complexity of the original text into present, relatable, modern English that makes the poem meaningful to contemporary reading audiences. In the adaptive translations, students have reimagined the words and images with sustained creative anachronism, using contemporary imagery and diction to create a *Piers Plowman* new and modern, yet true to the themes of the original. For example, one student re-imagines his chosen episode in *Piers Plowman* as a scene from *The Big Lebowski*. But in both categories, students draw upon their experiences—

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<sup>1</sup> See my three essays in the bibliography.

personal, cultural and linguistic. And they gesture to their histories, memories, families, faith, and ancestries and weave them into their work. Each of the students here has also written a short introduction explaining the particular choices they have made and what this project means to them.

I have asked my graduate assistant, Katie Rocio Luna (who is also a contributor to this project and whose work is found below) to write some words of introduction to the entire project from a student’s perspective. We hope our introductory comments provide a context for the reader to appreciate the creativity and innovation of these works of art. And we hope this collection brings great delight for both students and teachers. We also hope that our readers will explore, in their own teaching and writing, similar pedagogies that empower students both to break down the barriers of the past and future, and also to make any culture, history, or literature live again today in a vital, fresh, and dynamic way.

Bibliographic Note: I want to offer a special note of thanks to my colleague at the University of Connecticut, Kathleen Tonry. As the formal respondent to the paper I gave at the Sewanee Medieval Colloquium in 2025 at the University of the South (in which I read from the student translations we offer in this *Text and Type* contribution), Kathleen contextualized my pedagogy—and the work of my students—in relation to Writing Studies scholarship that foregrounds creative linguistic adaptation. I was thrilled to learn that something I had developed strictly through “experience” was also recognized from a more theoretical perspective by Writing Studies scholars, who themselves draw on years of practice and pedagogical research. So special thanks to Kathleen, who herself has done distinguished work in activist pedagogy, for the support she has shown to my work and the critical bibliography she has provided, to which I can now refer my readers.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Calabrese  
Los Angeles, May 2025

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see the essay by Lu and Horner, and also the classic essay by V.A Young, in the bibliography. Kathleen draws my attention in particular to this quote from Lu and Horner that seems apropos to the student translation we have compiled here: “[W]e define a translingual approach as one that recognizes difference as the norm, to be found not only in as the norm, to be found not only in utterances that dominant ideology has marked as different but also in utterances that dominant definitions of language, language relations, and language users would identify as ‘standard.’ As we and our colleagues have argued elsewhere, a translingual approach is best understood as a disposition of openness and inquiry toward language and language differences” (585). Young’s essay is a brilliant performance in Black dialect in answer to a Stanley Fish essay on the importance of standard English mastery in composition. As Young writes in dialect: “See, dont nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression. Everybody mix the dialect they learn at home with whateva other dialect or language they learn afterwards. That’s how we understand accents; that’s how we can hear that some people are from a Polish, Spanish, or French language background when they speak English. It’s how we can tell somebody is from the South, from Appalachia, from Chicago or any other regional background. We hear that background in they speech, and it’s often expressed in they writin too. It’s natural’ (111). I like to think that my students, from one of the most multilingual colleges in America, take their part here in the acts of linguistic cultural self-expression explored by these and many other scholars in Writing Studies.

It is with great honor that I assist Dr. Calabrese in contextualizing our work for all our readers who seek to experience and learn from our brilliant Cal State LA *Piers Plowman* community, both from our undergraduate and graduate programs. Some students participating in this translation project have read *Piers* for the first time in Dr. Calabrese's English tutorial course (ENGL 3000) and translated from that initial experience. Other students, however, have intimately befriended *Piers* in Dr. Calabrese's *Piers* undergraduate course and/or the graduate *Piers* seminar (ENGL 5400) following their first *peregrinaje* with *Piers* in Dr. Calabrese's Ancient to Medieval literature undergraduate course (ENGL 3300) prior to producing their own translation. Regardless of the level of familiarity with which we as students have approached this Medieval 14<sup>th</sup>-century poem, each and every one of us have found in Will an everyman that invites us to reflect on our identities both inside and outside of the classroom setting. You will be pleased to see how we as students have taken advantage of this opportunity to not only consider the lessons the poem offers us, but also to explore the ways in which our own authorship creates a welcoming entrance for future *Piers Plowman* readers.

As Dr. Calabrese has previously mentioned, our collective project is sorted into two permeable categories: critical translations and adaptive translations, which often collide and complement each other. Most of the translations you will encounter in this project are critical renderings that trope upon Dr. Calabrese's claim that *Piers* inspires a visceral response as we inject the poem with our embodied experiences, be it linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, etc., recreating the poem at a whole new level. These critical translations enable us, as students, to tap into our lives as mostly first-generation, working-class college students looking for guidance from our parents, our friends, our professors, and the various communities that have helped us blossom into the scholars we are today. We draw your attention to the lectures our parents provided us with, the other bodies of literature we love, the music that plays in our mind as our eyes graze the pages of our books, the varieties of English and Spanish that intermingle with each other, and the gossip that makes Los Angeles our beautiful city of booming knowledge creation.

In the next section, what we call adaptive translations, the authors here ask us to invite *Piers* into our homes, be it through the familiar, contemporary imagery of video games, folklores, Hollywood films, and California cultural history. The adaptive translations my peers have produced demonstrate the unique interpretation and translation of the bodily focus of the poem through familiar forms of media. As you will see here, one of my peers has tempted us to consider how horror can be an unlikely avenue for hope through his interweaving of video games and Native American folklore. Another translator has invited us to insert ourselves into the story's conflicts through his adaptation of the poem as a scene from *The Big Lebowski*, where we ourselves can play the part of the radical literary student looking for a place in a society that continuously fails to recognize the value of humanities scholars. Another peer invites us to see *Piers* as a Chandleresque pulp fiction poem in which we, just like Will, are ordinary people looking to our quotidian life for guidance in this everchanging world. Another recasts the Hunger episode in the language of 1930s Depression era California. Still another author tries to make a rivalry between female forces in the poem relatable by turning it into a modern high school hallway scene from *Mean Girls*.

Collectively, our interpretations are distinct from each other because of the unique experiences from which our translations are birthed. Nevertheless, as a reading community, we align in our quest to make *Piers* accessible to curious readers who follow us. Regardless of

the type of translation we chose to produce, each of us carefully fostered a relationship between our lived experiences and *Piers* through utilizing the *MED*'s definitions as a guiding tool. In these translations that patiently await their curious readers, we hope that you find an inkling of yourself, not only in our translations but also in the grand social web that *Piers* invites us to reflect upon. Hang tight and enjoy the ride!

Katie Rocio Luna  
Los Angeles, May 2025

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