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Piers Plowman the A Version: Prologue, lines 57-85

Abstract

The Prologue, which is where the selected passage originates from, introduces us to Will and the location of the vision—an unknown land with a tower on a hill, a prison below, and a mass of people in between. At this moment in the poem, Will is looking at the people in between and focusing on the friars that he sees. The idea of corruption in the church is a major theme in *Piers Plowman*, and I felt it had great potential for a more modern translation because corruption is still very much present in our world today. When writing my translation, my main goal was to keep the essence of Piers—his anger at the injustice and corruption occurring—while using more modern language that could be understood by anyone regardless of religious background. I chose not to do a critical translation with some contemporary choices because when I read an ancient text I enjoy seeing remnants of the time that it was originally written in, and I wanted to preserve the feeling that the text is older but still available to modern readers.

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Piers Plowman the A Version: Prologue, lines 57-85

The Prologue, which is where the selected passage originates from, introduces us to Will and the location of the vision—an unknown land with a tower on a hill, a prison below, and a mass of people in between. At this moment in the poem, Will is looking at the people in between and focusing on the friars that he sees. This passage appealed to me because I was interested in the vivid and gritty description of corruption inside of the clergy. This idea of corruption in the church is a major theme in *Piers Plowman*, and I felt it had great potential for a more modern translation because corruption is still very much present in our world today.

When writing my translation, my main goal was to keep the essence of Piers—his anger at the injustice and corruption occurring—while using more modern language that could be understood by anyone regardless of religious background. I chose not to do a creative translation with too many contemporary flourishes, because when I read an ancient text, I enjoy seeing remnants of the time that it was originally written in, and while reimagination is useful and fun, I wanted to preserve the feeling that the text is older but still available to modern readers. I also enjoyed using the *MED* to find the most accurate translation possible, so doing a critical translation was a more enjoyable experience for me. I made my translation contemporary and relatable by directing my attention towards a modern reader who was not raised religiously. *Piers Plowman* cannot exist without the religious content, and my translation is not meant to de-catholicize the poem, just make it more understandable, because the poem can be appreciated by people from every walk of life. Most of my choices were direct translations, but, when possible, I tried to change religious terminology into terms more universally known to be involved with corruption, such as “scams” or “con artists.” I did this because as someone with no background in the history of friars or pardoners, the subtext of their inherent corruption was completely lost on me my first time reading, and I wanted the themes of greed and corruption to be available to all readers.

This scene in particular should be relatable to anyone reading it because everyone has had the experience of being scammed. Whether it be a spam call or email or someone on the street asking for money when they may not need it, life makes it hard to determine when people are telling the truth and when they are trying to trick you, and that’s exactly what this passage details. It’s a classic con scheme—just one wrapped inside of a specific religious context—and when you take the specific context away the passage transforms into something universally experienced.

As a student of the Humanities, I found this assignment fascinating because I was able to use my pre-existing knowledge of human history and literature alongside my understanding of the present to create a translation that would be informative for people of my generation, and hopefully all generations. This translation interacted with myself and my education by giving me a first-hand experience of the process that goes into creating easily accessible versions of ancient texts. When reading texts that have been translated, I can now better appreciate the creative choices from the translator, and I can evaluate what makes a translation

successful and what makes it unsuccessful by comparing creative choices with direct translation. If nothing else, this assignment gave me a great appreciation of all the work that goes into translating texts for students like myself to study.

I found there the friars, all the four orders,
Preaching to the people to feed their own bellies
Interpreting the gospel as they pleased,
Wanting nice clothes to wear, they said whatever they wanted.
These so called masters dressed as they liked,
For their money and merchandise walked hand in hand.

Now that charity works in retail, and you can pay to have your sins forgiven,
Many horrible things have happened as a result over the past few years.
Unless Holy Church brings it back together,
Then we will soon see more mischief than ever before.

There preached a con artist pretending to be a priest,
He pulled out an official looking form, complete with a bischops seal,
And said he had the power to pardon all their sins,
Of falseness, feasting, and broken vows.
Suckers fell for it and hung on his every word,
And came up kneeling to kiss his bull.
He blessed them with his document, and fooled their eyes,
While he, with his phony form, stole their earrings and rings.
Would you give your gold to feed the gluttons,
And lend it to these lustful losers?

But were the bischop blessed and worth the height of his hat,
His seals would not be used to deceive the people.
I do not believe it is the bischop's fault that this wicked fraud preaches,
Because the con artists and priests split the profits
That would go to the poor, if they were not there.
Parsons and priests complained to their bischop,
That their people have been poor since the plague,
To get a license and permission to move to London,
To sing for simony because silver is sweet.