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Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 1, lines 149-183

Abstract

Through the close reading of *Piers Plowman* in its original Middle English, I gained a stronger grasp of the material that helped me develop a translation that reflected my own views and beliefs while using language and vernacular that honors who I am and who I come from. This assignment was engaging and confidence building for me personally, but it also emphasized an important lesson in rhetorical writing that can be implemented in how we navigate everyday life: do things with purpose and be able to articulate why, whether it invites scrutiny or not. The scene from *Piers Plowman* that I chose to translate features the allegorical character, Holy Church, imparting the last of her nuggets of wisdom and knowledge to Will, the protagonist whose dream visions guide us through the epic poem's deliberations on virtue, sin, and the pursuit of a righteous life. An imperative of my translation was to incorporate a specific dialect and tone that could resonate with audiences of different cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences while maintaining the ideals of the original work that are just as relatable, over 600 years later.

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DAVID MORRIS

Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 1, lines 149-183

Dr. Calabrese's assignment created a range of possibilities regarding the independent interpretation of a 14th century literary epic and exhibiting creative control over our translation. Through the close reading of *Piers Plowman* in its original Middle English, I gained a stronger grasp of the material that helped me develop a translation which reflected my own views and beliefs while using language and vernacular that honors who I am and who I come from. This assignment was engaging and confidence building for me personally, but it also emphasized an important lesson in rhetorical writing that can be implemented in how we navigate everyday life: do things with purpose and be able to articulate why, whether it invites scrutiny or not.

The scene from *Piers Plowman* that I chose to translate features the allegorical character, Holy Church, imparting the last of her nuggets of wisdom and knowledge to Will, the protagonist whose dream visions guide us through the epic poem's deliberations on virtue, sin, and the pursuit of a righteous life. An imperative of my translation was to incorporate a specific dialect and tone that could resonate with audiences of different cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences while maintaining the ideals of the original work that are just as relatable, over 600 years later. Holy Church's nod of approval for Will to "talk that real shit and make your bread the honest way" implements colloquial speech that is unlikely to be uttered in an actual church but reflects a universal lesson on the value of honesty and trustworthiness that one might hear from a mentor, family member, or an unhoused person at a bus stop.

I wanted my translation to be understood by friends, blue-collar workers, older folk, fellow students, music aficionados, and many others from groups I identify with. Also, like the great social activist and intellectual Cornell West, I tend to start on the chocolate side of town, and so I decided to employ African American Vernacular English as well as slang to imbue the translation with a voice of my own and a manner of speech that's both natural and familiar. To the priests that Holy Church criticizes as figures of hypocrisy more concerned with the appearance of piety and purity I say, "You be infected with sin," using the habitual "be" that goes against conventional grammar but is true to a form of English that is rich and expressive. The language of the neighborhood. The rhythm of my southern grandparents.

As an English major pursuing a single subject credential with the hope of becoming a high-school teacher, I try to approach every course with an analytical mind, asking what can I extract and use from the work of my professors? What can I use from my time at CSULA when developing lesson plans for potentially disengaged teenagers with questionable attention spans? Well, this kind of creative assignment is something I'm 100% sure I'm interested in using. Working on my translation was invigorating and offered a sense of ownership that can be difficult to come by in a medium where a binary system of right/wrong is often used to determine our grasp of material. I can hear Dr. Knighton now telling me not to sweat the "quantitative stuff." And he's absolutely right.

There are pieces of me in my translation, and I will encourage my future students to also “talk your shit” when they’re thoughtfully analyzing a literary work and to “make [their] bread the honest way” once they depart the classroom and enter adult life. I think success is measured by the quality of one’s work, actions, and how they’ve lived. It’s one of the many things Langland and I agree on, and I hope I carried that message in my translation.

To the Virtuous Go the Spoils

My advice to those of means, have compassion for the less fortunate.

You may have knowledge and influence, but humble yourself in labors of the Lord.

For the same judgements of sin you make unto others,

Will be used to measure your spiritual weight when you depart the body.

So talk that real shit, and make your bread the honest way,¹

And be as innocent as a baby crying in church;

For if you don’t love faithfully and help those in need,

Blessing others as an extension of the blessings God distributes,

Your name will be worthless in the house of God and in the hour of judgement

Same as the fool who brings a knife to a gunfight.

For James the gentile judged in his books,

That faith without cultivation can’t be taken to the bank,

It’s dead as disco unless you dance to Donna’s music.²

Faith without function finds itself furloughed in Hell,³

It’s about as useful as a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest.⁴

Many priests have pure bodies, and their hands be soft as a baby’s bottom;

¹ “Talkin’ shit” has multiple meanings, but prefacing it with “real” means someone is speaking truth. “Bread” is slang for money.

² The idea that disco was ever dead is blasphemous. Donna Summer is a legend.

³ The notion of believing oneself to be temporarily laid off from existing in the world while burning for an eternity in hell felt like a wicked paradox.

⁴ An attempt at some crude humor one might hear on a jobsite.

Their spiritual organs callus as they pursue selfish gains.

Unkind to kin and all Christians alike,

Feigning acts of giving yet whining to receive:

ONE MORE TIME FOR THE PEOPLE IN THE BACK

Faith without function finds itself furloughed in Hell.

You priests that cleanse your bodies of imperfections,

'You be' infected with sin, creeping and crawling from every crevice and corner,⁵

So tight has the cloak of greed woven itself into your cold skin.

That is no cloth of the Trinity, but a garment stitched in Hell,

Causing the ignorant to believe "it's not in you, it's on you."⁶

These are the words written in the Gospel:

"Give and it shall be given unto you," for I provide all necessities;

That is my gift, A Love Supreme, born of my grace⁷

To massage the tired and weary, exhausted by sin.

The path to love is the route our Lord desires us to take,

And it leads you on a Stairway to Heaven.⁸

Therefore, I mean what I say and I say what I mean,

When all the stores of sin have been sampled, Truth stands alone.

⁵ "You be" is used in Black English "in which the uninflected verb from *be* is used to indicate that something occurs frequently or habitually."

⁶ Used as an opposite to the phrase "it's not on you, it's in you," which means that a person's strengths or treasured possessions aren't material—they're internal qualities.

⁷ Reference to John Coltrane's masterpiece. He believed that his ability to play the saxophone as well as he did came from a higher power.

⁸ Led Zeppelin reference. Jimmy Page's guitar solo is transcendent.

I put you up on game, there's nothing better than Truth,⁹

But now I'm late for my 3 o'clock, so farewell and God be with you.

⁹ Putting someone "up on game" means giving them knowledge, truth, or facts.