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Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 3, lines 34-65

Abstract

My first encounter with *Piers Plowman* was in Professor Calabrese's English 3000 course in the fall semester of 2023. It was a class dedicated to having students interact solely with the text as an opportunity to delve past surface level understanding. I developed new insights in critical reading and was encouraged to collaborate with my peers. My classmates were from diverse backgrounds; yet we had a commonality: we were immersed in the cultures of Los Angeles—cultures that continue to expand because there are communities of ever-growing ethnic backgrounds, immigrants, religions, and subcultures in the area. The practices and mannerisms we brought into this space were tools for envisioning the world of *Piers Plowman: Los Angeles Edition*. Revising my original translation from the course for this publication involved revisiting the text, both the Middle English and Calabrese's translation of *Piers Plowman: The A Version*. Coming back to the poem years later has allowed me to bring in fresh ideas into my translation, and in the process, reflect on how *Piers Plowman* relates to my "everydayness."

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Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 3, lines 34-65

My first encounter with *Piers Plowman* was in Professor Calabrese's English 3000 course. That was in the fall semester of 2023. It was a class dedicated to having students interact solely with the text as an opportunity to delve past surface level understanding. I developed new insights in critical reading and was encouraged to collaborate with my peers. The discussions we had were significant; the ideas and thoughts of others made me reimagine the narrative outside of my interpretations. My classmates were from diverse backgrounds; yet we had a commonality: we were immersed in the cultures of Los Angeles—cultures that continue to expand because there are communities of ever-growing ethnic backgrounds, immigrants, religions, and subcultures in the area. The practices and mannerisms we brought into this space were tools for envisioning the world of *Piers Plowman: Los Angeles Edition*. Revising my original translation from the course for this publication involved revisiting the text, both the Middle English and Calabrese's translation of *Piers Plowman: The A Version*. Coming back to the poem years later has allowed me to bring in fresh ideas into my translation, and in the process, reflect on how *Piers Plowman* relates to my everydayness.

I decided to build on the bilingual nature of *Piers Plowman* as my homage to the text. Originally written in Middle English and Latin, the text in my translation makes use of both English and Spanish. I grew up attending a Spanish speaking Christian congregation, where there was an intersection of religion and culture. My background allowed me to engage with the passus in a modern way, and uniquely develop the critique of corruption and egocentric vs generous intention. I attempted to amplify the lewdness of the scene because of the indecency bribery represents, as it's an obstruction of equality in favor of self-benefit. Corrupt people plague institutions, not only churches. Langland was able to create a literary work that future readers could use to expose the injustices of their own world.

I translated a scene from Passus 3 that involves Lady Meed, a friar, and Will. Meed is a woman whose pride is her self-image. After her wedding is interrupted, she meets a friar who does business by exploiting the name and power of the church. With his status he's able to grant requests in exchange for compensation. He suggests writing Meed's name on a church window to give people the impression she's virtuous and charitable. When their deal is completed, the abrupt voice of the protagonist, Will, interjects. The scene ends with him preaching about avoiding self-gratifying behavior. His voice is one I've heard before in my own life: the voice of my mother. My church congregation used to have a box where members could leave donations, and I witnessed her generosity there. Even when there wasn't much to give, she'd pull out an offering from her purse, as she wanted to teach us the obligation of charity. I'd recommend future students to not steer away from texts that seem out of reach in comprehension or relatability. There are unique ways to connect, and in the process, literature continues to live through our interpretations.

Then approached a confessor, costumed as an *hermano*; ¹
 To Meed the maiden he willingly submitted,
 And whispered, confessionally,
 “Those taught and those not, have each lounged by you,
 And Falsehood has shadowed you these eleven winters,
 I shall pardon you myself, for some *dulce*,²
 And become your *comerciante*, *entregando tus mensajes*³
 Among the religious and the lawful, Conscience will weaken.”⁴
 Then Meed, for her misdeeds, agreed on knees,
 And stripped off her sin, Immodestly, as I see it;

She fed him her story and handed him sweet dough,
 To have him plead for her, and be her frontman as well.
 After her soul was stainless, he conveniently suggested,
 “We have a window under construction and the cost is burning holes in our pockets;
 Would you glaze the gable, and engrave your name there,
 Your soul would be for heaven to have.”
 “Oh, I know,” said the woman, “there isn’t a window or alter
 That I wouldn’t fabricate or mend, and then autograph, So that everyone could see, I am a
 sister of your house.”

Dios mio, forbid all good from such engravings:
 “*Que no sepa tu mano izquierda lo que hace la derecha*:
 Never let your left hand
 Know what business your right hand is doing.”
 Rather, intimately give generosity without involving pride
 Neither for public attention or spiritual redemption; *porque Dios sabe*⁵
 Who is gracious and kind, *o de otra manera codo*.⁶

For that reason, I advocate you all to surrender
 Writing your good deeds on windows,
 Or making a scene when donating to God’s men;
 By fate, such worldly praise will be your only profit.

1 William Langland uses the word “frere,” meaning friar, a word used to describe a religious official. Growing up in a modern Latin American church, all religious men were not called friars, but *bermanos*.

2 What’s sweeter than money? Langland uses the word “whete,” which according to the *MED*, is wheat grain or crop. Commonly used in bread, I thought of *pan dulce*, but shortened it to *dulce*.

3 The friar is offering to be Lady Meed’s “bawdekyn,” defined as a “go-between” by the *MED*. Similarly, a *commerciante* is a businessman; he’s the one who does negotiations and handles affairs. He intends to “arnde,” meaning to deliver a message; *entregando tus mensajes* in Spanish.

4 “The religious and the lawful” is my take on Langland’s line, “clerkes and knyghthis.” It conceptualizes the role of these figures in a modern way. There aren’t many clerks and knights around anymore, but readers can still connect to the idea of what they stand for today.

5 *Porque Dios sabe* is Spanish for “because God knows.”

6 *Codo* is Latin American slang for *codicioso*, meaning greedy. It is socially frowned upon behavior.