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Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 7, lines 171-196

Abstract

This translation assignment provided an opportunity to dismantle the mystique around Middle English and allowed for me and my classmates to add to the conversation started by William Langland in the late 14th century. In Passus 7, Piers struggles to motivate the now complacent field of folk to work as they have swapped their farming implements for mugs of ale at the tavern. Exasperated and out of options, Piers summons Hunger to lay waste against the wasters, swindlers, and “fakers” who have been idling away and threatening the safety of the community by ignoring their obligations to tend the crops. The context of this particular episode shared historical parallels with the era of the Great Depression, and specifically the Dust Bowl, which affected much of the Great Plains region in the United States. Building from this parallel, I decided that translating the dialogue between Piers and Hunger in the style of 1930s parlance would be not only thematically appropriate but creatively intriguing as an adaptation.

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Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 7, lines 171-196

This translation assignment provided an opportunity to dismantle the mystique around Middle English and allowed for me and my classmates to add to the conversation started by William Langland in the late 14th century. In Passus 7, Piers struggles to motivate the now complacent field of folk to work as they have swapped their farming implements for mugs of ale at the tavern. Exasperated and out of options, Piers summons Hunger to lay waste against the wasters, swindlers, and “fakers” who have been idling away and threatening the safety of the community by ignoring their obligations to tend the crops. The context of this particular episode shared historical parallels with the era of the Great Depression, and specifically the Dust Bowl, which affected much of the Great Plains region in the United States. Building from this parallel, I decided that translating the dialogue between Piers and Hunger in the style of 1930s parlance would be not only thematically appropriate but creatively intriguing as an adaptation. This episode could have easily been contemporized in a present day adaptation, so the task of researching the speech of 1930s Midwest America proved to be a rich and interesting exercise. It felt empowering to use the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) to initially translate the original text to Modern English to then, using various resources on Depression era slang, apply my individual flair to this ancient text.

Translating the text granted me an elevated perspective of the decisions made by Langland and required me to deeply engage with the context of the episode and the poem more broadly. Navigating the MED made decision-making for my creative interpretation extensive and justifying a particular decision—such as using *lentejas* (lentils) instead of *pesyn* (peas)—more unique and gratifying. Just because I had committed to applying this specific conceit for my interpretation did not mean I had to omit more personally significant creative decisions. Creating translations requires both a critical understanding of the work and the creative spark to tweak the original piece in intentional and thought provoking ways. Enabling students to contribute to the Barthesian “hypertext” by drawing on their own fields of knowledge is one of the most valuable aspects of the humanities as it promotes connection and collaboration. It was an enlightening experience to see the creativity in my peers’ drafts and how their unique adaptations reflected their areas of interest and profound passions. It is truly special to feel the weight of authorship as a student in an assignment. Undergoing the preparation and maintaining the attention to detail required to creatively adapt Middle English sharpened my skills as an analytical and creative scholar. This translation assignment demonstrates the importance of making ancient texts more accessible to students since they serve as vessels for rich interpretation and help students develop their sense of authority in the field of classic texts.

Fear-stricken swindlers deluged into barns,
And tirelessly threshed, from dawn to dusk,
Even Hunger struggled to be so cross with them again,

Accepting Pier's gift of a pot of *lentejas*¹ he made.
The whole Hooverville of dilly-dalliers grabbed their spades
And got to ditch diggin' and dung flingin' to put the kibosh on Hunger.

Thousands of the blind and weepy-eyed gathered round
The boastfully blind and hobbling crowd milling about the high-gear road².
Hunger mended their bones with a freshly baked breadline³ loaf,
And just then the helpless felt a soothing Laudanum⁴ relief across their bodies ,
Becoming house dogs⁵ of Piers' flock,
Pleading with Piers for mercy to let them hang around a while longer,
Cravin' his corn, hoping to get Hunger to make tracks.
Proud of their toiling, Piers gave every Joe a job,
Passing around luncheon meat and front money if they deserved it.

Pity washed over Piers, and he kindly asked Hunger to scam
Homeward bound to his own spot, and remain there indefinitely –
“But now that I think about it,” said Piers “before you go,
What is best to do about these tramps and no-goodniks⁶?
For I have half a mind to know, with you gone, their work will turn to wasting;
They will find trouble, even if they are all meek now,
For they work hard with an empty stomach;
And they are my road brothers and sisters⁷ in blood, for God cares for us all.
Truth instructed me once to love each one of them,
And keep them afloat, with whatever they need.
Now if were to be a college man and if you were certain of what is best,
How might I run them, and make them
scoot.”

¹ Lentils; this translation is both a fair substitution for the original “pesyn” or peas as both are pulses and a nod to a nostalgic childhood dish - *arroz con lentejas* or rice and lentils.

² Obsolete term for highway, referring to the advent of faster automobiles with more gears.

³ A line of unemployed individuals waiting to receive food from a soup kitchen.

⁴ A powerful opiate sold as a painkiller in the early 1930s.

⁵ An unemployed person who does chores or tasks for money.

⁶ A low-life or no-good person.

⁷ Male and female drifters