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Teaching my translation of *Piers Plowman: The A Version* at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA)

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Abstract

This essay explores how I taught, in its entirety, my *Piers Plowman: A Translation of the A Version: Revised Edition* (Calabrese 2023) for sophomore English majors, who had little or no prior experience with medieval literature. In the required, multi-sectioned English 3000 (called “tutorial”) students focus for an entire semester on one text of the professor’s choosing and read it slowly. No surprise that I choose *Piers Plowman* in my own translation, for *Piers* can teach students so much about genre, poetic form, voice, allegory, and a host of other devices and key literary concepts. Plus, its critical tradition and engagement in history are robust and thus perfect for introducing the students to academic research.

Prologue: What do I know?

This essay explores how I taught, in its entirety, my *Piers Plowman: The A Version, Revised Edition* (Langland 2023) for sophomore English majors, who had little or no prior experience with medieval literature. In the required, multi-sectioned English 3000 (called “tutorial”) students focus for an entire semester on one text of the professor’s choosing (across our diverse fields and periods) and read it slowly. We use the close-reading experience to discover a series of formal features (and literary terms) that English majors should know, and we use the library and databases to introduce basic research methods. So, no matter the text, the class teaches skills central to the practice and craft of the English major.

No surprise that I choose *Piers Plowman* in my own translation, for *Piers* can teach students so much about genre, poetic form, voice, allegory, and a host of other devices and key literary concepts. Plus, it has a long and robust critical tradition and is thus perfect for introducing the students to academic research. And, of course, I thought I knew a lot about the poem, having spoken, taught, and published widely on it for decades. But for all my accomplishments and bluster, from this class I learned more about *Piers Plowman*, more truths about its poetic power and relevance in the contemporary world and in the lives and hearts of students, than I ever imagined was possible, although it is also the case that I had long been predicting its particular relevance or resonance with the working class. CSULA is—not just to my mind but by any objective standards—one of the premier Hispanic and minority-serving institutions in the nation. Our student population is 69.4% Hispanic or Latino, 11.5% Asian, 5.56% White, 3.81% Black or African American, and 57% of our students are what we call first-generation: the first students in their families to attend college or university. I know that many are (like me), in fact, first-generation high-school students as well. We are a proud, urban, blue-collar, working-class campus. Many students have deep ties to the Tongva people who once (and have continually) tended this land, and to their own various ancestries and immigrant histories, rooted in Mesoamerica and elsewhere globally. CSULA, because of its diverse, hard-working students, is often ranked first in the nation in upward mobility.

I had taught my translation in its first edition once before, in 2020 in a senior class for majors, with great success, but I feared that that was maybe just good fortune, and I wondered if I could recreate the magical engagement from that course (Calabrese 2024). So, this current essay chronicles the next chapter in my student-centered *Piers* pedagogy, with a new audience but amazingly related results. For as it turned out, I had no cause for worry: the students provided the magic, right from the first moment of the first day and the first line of the poem. I was prepared to talk a lot in this class, but I just as often shut up and listened, as the students read each passus and took each episode, theme, and character to heart, opening up aspects of the poem that witness its perennial relevance and relatability.

Why the “whole” text of A worked

My *Piers Plowman: The A Version* was ideal in this setting: with 12 passūs total plus the Prologue, you can do around one reading a week, allowing time for in-class conferencing on paper topics and bibliography. For this reason, the A version is preferable to the B and C versions of the poem, although

I realize that those later versions are more commonly taught and, indeed, there's a whole critical industry on which version should be taught (Goodmann 2018). We also used the Middle English edition of the A Text by Míceál Vaughn, which permitted us constantly to compare the original language to the translated text. Let's talk manuscript witnesses, variant readings, and the work of an editor! Plus, to rupture the temptation to use unstable internet sources, I also assigned my guide, *An Introduction to Piers Plowman* (Calabrese 2016), and its "Narrative Reading Guide," a running commentary on each passus, designed for study of ABC together or individually.

One benefit of teaching the whole story is that it has an ending—sort of. Medievalists will know the complexities here: some manuscripts have a passus 12, and one of those has the patched up ending by John Butt, where a so-called friend of the poet (Butt) fills in for a deceased Will (Langland or the character?!) and brings the poem to an abrupt inconclusive conclusion, honoring King Richard and praising the Blessed Virgin Mary (12, 100–118). I included all 12 passūs and Butt's coda in my translation. Before Butt's intervention, the A text ends with Will wanting to die after meeting Hunger and Fever, two dangerous friends. Fever luckily explains that Will's time has not yet come, and still the whole of passus 12 has an intriguingly apocalyptic feel about it—here more personal than universal. Both religious and secular students in the class were interested in "apocalypticism" and the end of times (see for example the speeches of Conscience in passus 3, 264–280; and Reason in passus 4, 111–131¹ and—Butt's bizarre, prayerful wrap-up notwithstanding—they were anxious all semester to see how Will's rambling search for truth and salvation would possibly conclude. Must he die before he reaches his goal? Will he finally find truth and salvation? I told the class that the B and C versions of the text end with the coming of Antichrist (Antichrist? Cool!) and a battle between the armies of Holy Church and Pride. And I provided them with a translation of passus 20 from the B text, which I had composed as work in progress. When you teach A, you can't pretend that the B and C versions don't exist, and you can't cram them in, but a selection, especially the great siege against Holy Church in BC 20/22, can provide an extra special coda and a fascinating paper topic for curious students.

Concerning the (potentially) unsatisfying ending of A itself, students said that the poet must have failed—or Will failed—ultimately to control human appetite and to inspire charity, despite a series of assays. Listen to Holy Church, learn to love, avoid greed, confess, get married, study, think, think deeper, protect your soul, study, study more, read the Bible, etc. None of it worked, they said. The poem offers a sequence of failures, leaving both the individual and the community lost and by no means "saved." In some sense, in tracing the trajectory of A, my students intuited the BC continuations, anticipating that Will himself would be bound in any hypothetical continuation for more trauma and struggle. And they theorized that the life of Christ himself, his Incarnation and battle with D/death, must be more fully explored before Will, and the readers through time, can realize the ethical future they long for—and can understand ultimately what "Dowel" means.

What's *not* lost in translation?

If my teaching was successful by any measure, that success is linked to the demotic choices I made in crafting my translation. I started from the premise that my students, my first-generation mostly students of color, mostly Latine students in East Los Angeles, already have within them the ability to

¹ All reference to the poem are to *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (Calabrese 2023) by passus and line.

understand *Piers Plowman* without background books about parliaments, revolutions, plagues, wars, famines, friars, and reformations—premature or otherwise. It’s critically important to study those things, but doing so could delay direct engagement with the poem almost infinitely. Rather I focused on relatability, presence, and vitality, so that the concrete realities of the text would be discernible, legible, and directly meaningful to my students and their lives (Langland 2023, xi–xviii, xxxv–xlvi; and Calabrese 2022, *passim*). My “Introduction” to the translation, the frequent footnotes, and my 2016 guidebook supplied much of that background, but I see these resources (and the infinite body of supporting resources our community has created) as secondary to a personal engagement with the text itself.

So, my translation works to re-create the poem for a modern audience. I use slang, Italian-American idioms; I sprinkle in some Spanish, refer to movies and songs; and I leave the Latin in the text for my bilingual students. And so—in dramatic opposition to most other translations—set the poem free into my voice and my students’ voices. Let an example or two depict my style. When the King asks Meed if she’ll marry Conscience, my Meed says, “Oh totally my lord. . . God forbid otherwise” (3, 103). Should Meed sound like a “Valley Girl”? Does this famed So-Cal rhetorical mode “fit” with the rest of her character? Is the depiction—the poet’s or mine—mocking or potentially empowering? Is it OK if Meed does *not* sound like this later, when like a scholar she cites scripture in feisty debate with Conscience? Do real people sometimes strategically switch rhetorical registers? These are all good questions, provoked by my rendering some lines in a dialect born about 15 minutes away from our school, up the 101 freeway. One daring piece of “Valspeak” provided some intense class discussion about female voices and power in the poem. Elsewhere I call Meed a *mujer* (2, 82) translating the poem’s related term *molere* into a relatable concept in Modern Spanish.

In the confession of Glutton, I put “chicharrones” (5, 156) on the bar menu, as a nod to a common snack. I wonder if they ate fried pork skins (or something close) in Medieval England? Maybe, but it isn’t in the poem—until I put it there, and it makes the scene relatable in East LA (and most everywhere) today. In passus 4, recounting Wrong’s crimes, I say he “took Margaret’s maidenhood, ignoring her ‘No!’” (4, 37), thus connecting the scene to discussions of consent and sexual violence in a way the students will appreciate. In passus 1, when Will realizes he is talking to Holy Church, I register his reverence as follows: “Well, I got down on my knees, and I began to pray” (1, 77), a direct reference (with one change) to the great SoCal anthem, *California Dreamin’* (The Mamas & the Papas 1965).

These translation choices all fall somewhere between fun, self-indulgent, provocative, ingenious, poignant, and timely. And I employ them just enough to animate the text in creative ways that invite readers to confront *Piers Plowman*, its bizarre characters, and its social justice lessons in ways that no prior translation has attempted. I wrote not just for my CSULA students but for all reading communities, and we should never doubt how culturally savvy modern students are with old song lyrics (Spotify?). These bold translation choices can provoke some teachable moments about language, time, alterity, spirituality, carnality, voice, violence, and injustice—and provide some funky “easter eggs” for students and their (potentially nostalgic) teachers as well.

Procedures and assignments: one step at a time

Each week we had either a response paper or a translation quiz (15–20 lines in class with the *Middle English Dictionary*). The first paper was an expanded version of the quizzes, with students translating and commenting upon a 30-line passage, using the *MED* to explain and justify their choices. They so enjoyed exploring the range of meanings that could apply to any one ME word, and they often “overruled” the *MED*’s designation of a word’s meaning—and overruled me too in rendering individual words and lines different from (and sometimes—don’t tell—better than) the way I had. In this sense my translation was less an authoritative document than a series of possible manifestations of moments in the text. Consider how Nicholas Gutierrez, bound I believe for law school, *added* some clever Latin to the courtroom scene in the “trial” of Wrong in passus 4 (way more interesting than how I translated it):

Audi alteram partem: “God knows,” objected Wisdom, “that would not be the best deterrent; He is disposed to make amends if he can, so release him on bail. Stand bail for him! And bring him deliverance from his wickedness. He’ll amend his *actus reus*, and all will be better *ad infinitum*.” Wit agreed and proceeded to use the Socratic method to mount a rhetorical question: “Wouldn’t it be better if some compensation were to reduce the inflicted torment? Surely wickedness mustn’t be punished without recompense for the plaintiff?” (4, 74-80)

The second paper was a “research assignment” where they had to read one article, summarize, and evaluate it, while offering in their responses a new analysis and quotations from their readings in the A text. They enjoyed meeting my colleagues, so to speak, by reading some favorite essays, including the great offerings in the *Approaches to Teaching Langland’s Piers Plowman* (Goodman 2018).

The Prologue got them working... Lady Meed got them hooked on fashion

The students immediately engaged with the Prologue. Its final street scene with restaurateurs hawking the dinner and wine menu (Prologue, 97–111) recalled a late-night street scene in LA, where fruit vendors, hotdog stands, and taco shops animate the street and the hungry crowds. And the survey of the religious figures in the Prologue, some corrupt some worthy, provoked students to recall their different churches and the degree of faith or suspicion with which they apprehend their leaders, who either tend their flocks nobly or seek personal wealth and profit. Those from Evangelical churches gravitated toward the satire against friars, pardoners, and their corrupt practices. And students in the Catholic tradition were fascinated by the Proto-Reformation history revealed in these critiques. And all students know what friars are, because the California Catholic experience is based in the Mission System, where the fraternal orders served the forces of colonial conquest (friars thus prompting other teachable moments for sure).

The “winners and wasters” of the Prologue really resonated with my working-class students. Most of them, as first-generation college students, have to labor to feed their families, and so the

dignity of physical work is immediately legible. These students have, like their parents and ancestors, put themselves to the plow, and they do what's right for their families. The wasters are their own natural nemesis: they are either the privileged who only consume, or family members committed only to pleasure and other forms of reckless irresponsibility (including sadly alcohol abuse and drug addiction) that amplify their families' burdens. On a lighter note, I called fancily dressed friars "*fashionistas*" (Prologue, 60), and students were eager to discuss the pressure they feel in a world of high-fashion power, where people are judged by their shoes and purses. Lady Meed's "red scarlet dress" and "costly attire—ferocious in fur" (Passus 2, 13, 8–9) accordingly got some discussion going about clothes and status in LA—and what to find at cheaper places like TJ Maxx and Nordstrom Rack.

Student reflections after the last acre was plowed: Religion: making the personal the critical

I composed these reflections one winter afternoon during the term break. Then I realized that this essay needs some retrospective from the students themselves. Luckily, some of that heroic 3000 crew are taking a class with me again in Spring 2024, and they agreed to be interviewed and to have their ideas and names recorded here. With great pride in fact, they offered these reminiscences, which substantiate—more authentically than I can—all my assertions about *Piers*:

Ethan Lee and Salvador Valencia recalled the violence of Hunger's attack on the "wasters," getting them to work (7, 152–70). "Hunger is real in LA," these students recounted, among the working poor. But the city also has a massive homeless population, and students are besieged every day by beggars, compelling them to distinguish, just as Piers Plowman himself must, the deserving poor from the fakers and wasters who exploit the charitable, thus depriving those in true need. The drama that plays out on the half-acre when Piers struggles to determine who will work with dignity and who will exploit the community gets played out, said Messrs. Lee and Valencia, every day for them on the mean streets of LA.

These same students also remarked that they themselves, upon reflection, were the best target audience for *Piers Plowman*, because as first-generation college students, they must ever be attentive to issues of labor and justice. Accordingly, they said as well that the Dream Vision genre was particularly fitting for the themes of *Piers Plowman*, for they related Will's dream-analysis burdens to their own constant challenges to interpret the world around them and its unfolding crises of injustice. Like Will, they encounter landscapes of anxious care and trauma, where it's difficult to distinguish the honest from the hypocritical. Notice that the students did not see "dream" as something aspirational or utopian, as in "dreaming of a better world" but rather more soberly as a reflection of their daily struggle simply to determine what's just and unjust, what's true and false, and what would constitute right action.

Another student, Juliana Solis, also recalled the Hunger episode, which signaled for her the continual presence of "hunger" as a reality both on our campus (where food precarity *is* a reality) and in the communities we serve. Even our students of humble means, she argued, should still think of those in greater need. So struck by the power of H/hunger in the half-acre episode, which ends with the dramatic warning about the coming of famine (7, 301–06) Ms. Solis displayed a touching and intuitive understanding of the poem's cry for Christian *caritas*.

Angela Alvarez, who takes her faith very seriously, engaged with the poem from a religious perspective; she found herself constantly meditating on where to turn for answers. What do we learn from Scripture (the character or the book?) what do we learn from our teachers (Clergy, Holy Church, and Dame Study in the poem); what is within ourselves, and what do we learn from lived experiences or from elders? So, Will's struggle and his many questions reflected Ms. Alvarez's sense of her own constant questing for answers. She was also fascinated by the role of what we called "addiction" in the poem's confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins in passus 5 (minus Wrath in the A text), which depict the dangers of irrational and chaotic behavior, often wrought by substance abuse.

For one student, Nina Seif, the confession scenes and the character of Envy (5, 58–106) demonstrated the inherent nature of human competitiveness, which she herself felt after a miscarriage when she saw a friend's gender-reveal post online. Though this was an intensely personal share, Ms. Seif insisted that I record it here, so that others could understand the reality and intensity of this emotion, this urge to feel "envy" uncontrollably, like the character in *Piers* who openly acknowledges the poison surging through his body and spirit, compelling his "envious" urges.

Jonathan Contreras says that Wrong's triumph, with Meed's help, in passus 4 confirmed to him that justice is a commodity that can be bought, a reality that he himself, growing up in East Hollywood, has seen manifested in LA, where a class of people simply are impervious to justice because of their status, celebrity, and wealth. Also, this episode about corruption and privilege, though not explicitly racial in the poem, signaled to him a well-known divide where communities of color, without the resources to manipulate truth, find themselves more often the target of law enforcement.

Taking a creative and different approach to Lady Meed, Bryan Chan was impressed with her wit, cleverness, and sense of fashion. Appreciating that she's rather sassy and combative, Mr. Chan said that even though it might be "easy to dismiss Lady Meed as a character reinforcing negative stereotypes," the poet's presentation of "a *femme fatale* as a symbol of something universally considered as currency opens a door for nuanced social commentary." From this perspective, modern readers can "find value in her, [for] much like Medusa, she can serve as inspiration for feminist work." Salvador Rodriguez remembered most the distribution of pardon for the deserving poor (Passus 8, 66–91). Though he describes himself as not religious, he deeply appreciated, on behalf of his pious mother, the pardon's recognition of the suffering poor and the sacrifice of working moms.

These intense and poignant responses will arise when you listen to the students and rely on them to celebrate the endlessly engaged themes of the medieval poem, which becomes not so "medieval" after all, if medieval means alien, unrelatable, or academically elite. A poem about violence, trauma, loss, and anxious care touches directly a working-class, precarious, and vulnerable community of students who, like Will, have the weight of the world on their shoulders as they seek security, fidelity, and justice in a world full of treachery, greed, and exploitation. I here thank all the students mentioned in this essay for these interviews and for their consent to publish their names and reflections.

These students made the poem their own, and your students, whatever their reading community, cultural background, and socio-economic status, can do the same. If my, sometimes demotic, translation of *Piers Plowman* helps to achieve this end, I am thrilled. But whatever version you use, make sure you have the students do the real "translating" in every sense of the term. They will teach you more than you ever knew, more than you thought was possible. And they will prove to you, as

they have convincingly for me at CSULA, that *Piers Plowman* remains real and consequential in the lives of its readers.

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