

Piers Plowman Electronic Archive Teaching Resources

The Making of a Medieval Book Activity #1: Manuscript Copying

Suggested introductory discussion:

Medieval manuscript production. Medieval books were generally made from animal skin, not paper, and each copy was written by hand, often by monks but also by laypeople, especially professional scribes.

Practical activity:

This exercise brings home to students the process of manuscript copying, and how texts change from copy to copy even without the copyists meaning to introduce alterations.

Preparation: Copy by hand the following passage from George Economou's verse translation of the beginning of the C Text of *Piers Plowman*:

In a summer season when the sun shone softly
I wrapped myself in woolens as if I were a sheep;
In a hermit's habit, unholy in his works,
I went out into the world to hear wonders
And to see many strange and seldom-known things.

In Class: Hand your copy in to one of the students and instruct him (or her) to copy it by hand. Give him one minute and 20 seconds to copy the text. When time is up, have him pass his copy to the next student to copy. Continue until every student has copied the previous student's copy. (If the class is very large, students can be broken into smaller groups for this activity.) Take the final copy and compare it with the original (on an overhead document projector if available) to see where errors, misreadings, or unintentional changes occur.

Optional Extension:

Pass this text (or another of your choosing) around again, this time inviting students to "improve" or "edit" the text as they see fit. Scribes sometimes made extensive alterations to the texts they copied in an effort to make them more up-to-date, easier to read, or more to their liking aesthetically.