

Piers Plowman Electronic Archive Teaching Resources

Reading a Medieval Book Activity #4: Reading a Manuscript

This activity is aimed at students reading Piers Plowman in the original but who are not necessarily experts at reading Middle English. It introduces such novices to the culture of reading medieval books with an antiquarian interest, a practice that developed in the Renaissance with great collectors like Sir Robert Cotton and Matthew Parker. It allows them to recognize that they are not the first to find these “old” books difficult or confusing and provides an inroad into appreciating Langland’s late Middle English.

Provide students with a typescript of the first page of the Prologue of Manuscript Vc (main text only):

IN assomur seson / wan softe was þe sonne
Y shop me in-to schrobbus / as y a schephurde were
In abit as an Eremite / vn-holy of werkes
Y went forth in þe wordle / wondres to here .
And saih meny selles / and selcouthe þinges .
Ac on a may morwenyng / on maluerne hulles
Me by-fulle fort to slepe / for werynesse of wandring .
And in a launde as y lay / lened y and slepte
And merueylously me mette / as y may ȝow telle .
Al þe welþe of þis world / and þe wo boþe .
Walkyng as hit were / wyterly y sauh hit .
Of truthe and of trecherie / treson and gyle .
Al y sauh slepinge / as y shal ʒow telle .
¶ Estwarde y byheold / aftur þe sonne .
And sauh a tour as y trowede / truthe was þere-ynne
¶ Westward y waytede in a wyle aftur
And sauh a dep dale / deth as y leoue
Woned in tho wones / and wyckede spirites
¶ A Fayr felde ful of folk / fond y þer by-twene
Al manere of men / þe mene and þe ryche .
Worchyng and wandryng / as þe worlde askep .
¶ Somme putten hem to þe plouh / and pleyden ful selde
In setting and in sowyng / swonkon ful harde .
And wonnon that þeos wastourrs / wyth gloteny destruen .
¶ Somme putten hem to pruyde . and paraileden hem þer-aftur
In contenance of cloþyng / in meny kynne gyse .
¶ In preyeres and penaunces / putten hem menye
Al for þe loue of oure lorde / lyueden ful harde
In hope to haue good ende / and heueneriche blisse .

Point out that “u” and “v” are interchangeable, “þ” is “th,” and “ʒ” (here) is “y.” Ask students to read through the passage (if they have read *Piers Plowman* it should be at least slightly familiar) and underline words they would like to have glossed in order to understand it fully.

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On an overhead projector, pull up the image of the first folio of Manuscript Vc and explain that all the writing in the margins and above the lines is by a sixteenth-century (Renaissance) reader who was trying to gloss the difficult words.

Point out the words and phrases he selects for glossing (marked mostly by underlining), and the translations he assigns them. (They are very difficult to read in the image because of the handwriting, but the glosses are in the transcript.)

Y shop me in-to schrobbus	Gloss: I gan me or I crept in amoong bussches .
abit	Gloss: appareil
saih, selcouthe	Gloss: saw; selcouth or [part of gloss illegible] quasi seldom known or vnknownen (<i>Note: quasi = "as in"</i>)
Ac	Gloss: but
be-fulle, fort	Gloss: befell , chanced; for
me mette	Gloss: I drempt
wyterly y saugh	Gloss: aduisedly i sawe; witterly . quasi [part of gloss illegible] intent of wit .
trecherie	Gloss: gyle or deceit
wyle	Gloss: while
leoue	Gloss: beleue
Wonede	Gloss: dwelt
þe mene	Gloss: <i>common</i> sort
Worchynge	Gloss: woorking
pleyden, selde	Gloss: went to lawe; seldom tymes
swonkon	Gloss: labored
wonnon	Gloss: wan . got .
pruyde, paraileden	Gloss: Pryde; did apparell
kynne gyse	Gloss: maner faire
lyueden	Gloss: did live
heuenryche	Gloss: heuenly

Note that for the most part he is accurate in his translations (“me mette” does indeed mean “I dremt”), but he was thrown off by the grammatical ending of “pleyden” and mistook it for the preterit of “plead” (as in “to plead at the bar”); context tells us that it means exactly what we would assume it means: “to play.”

Have students compare this page with the glosses they find in their own textbook: many will be the same, but Vc is one of many C-text manuscripts that has “schrobbus” (shrubs) instead of “shroudes” (shrouds, robes). What a difference, creeping into bushes versus creeping into a hermit’s clothing!