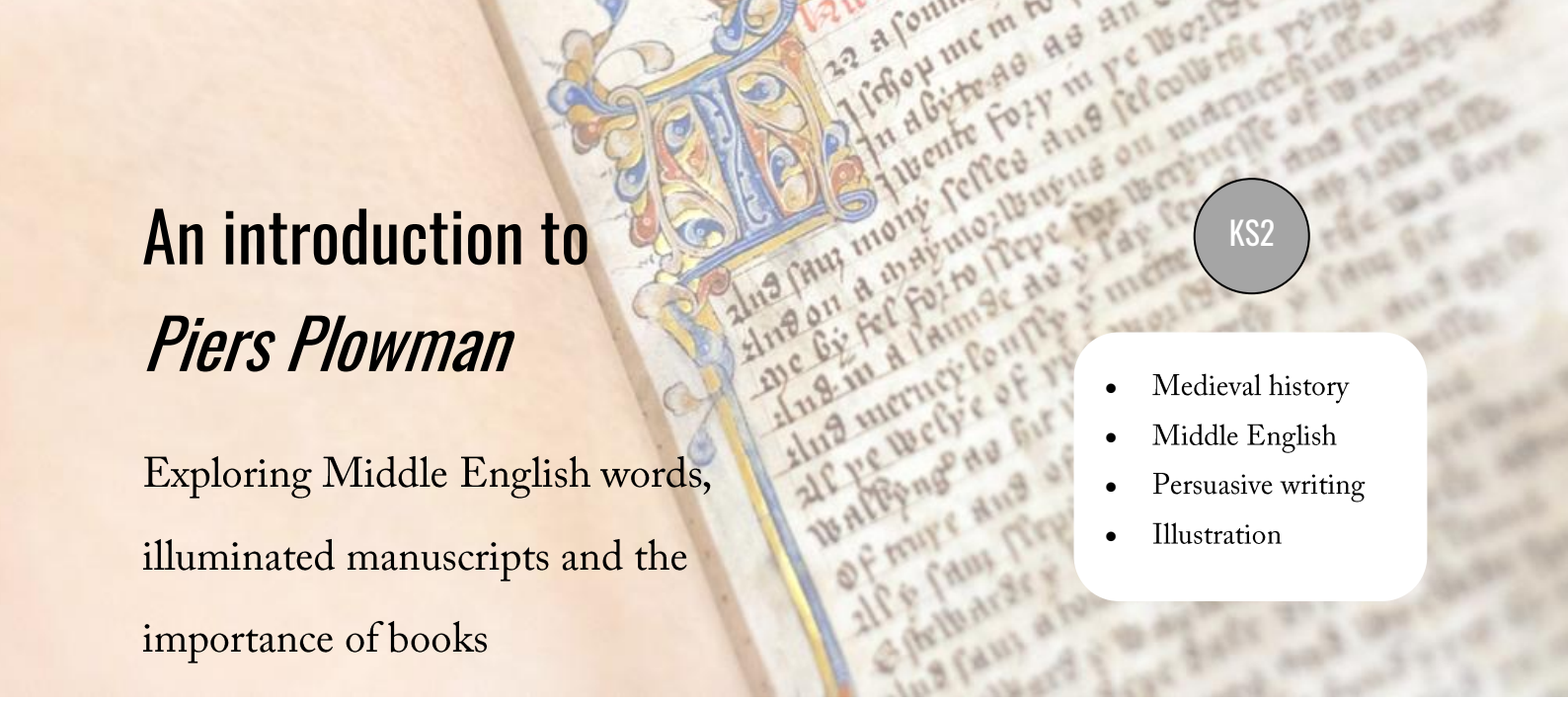

An introduction to *Piers Plowman*

KS2

- Medieval history
- Middle English
- Persuasive writing
- Illustration

Exploring Middle English words, illuminated manuscripts and the importance of books

At more than 7,000 lines of poetry, *Piers Plowman* is one of the most important pieces of writing that survive from medieval England. It was written over 600 years ago by a poet called William Langland, between about 1360 and 1390. Very little is known about Langland - we're not even sure that was his name. He was writing the poem for about 30 years and kept coming back to edit and change bits, leaving us - confusingly - with three separate versions, all of which are slightly different.

Piers Plowman tells the story of a dreamer called Will, who falls asleep in the Malvern Hills in the west of England and sees a vision of the world as a 'fair field full of folk, wandering and working'. In his dream, Will sets out on a quest to find the character called Truth. Along the way he witnesses many strange and amazing scenes. Halfway through the poem Will meets Piers the Plowman, who gives the poem its name. Piers is an honest labourer who knows the way to Truth. He recruits the local community to help him plough his 'half-acre' (field), but things don't go to plan; the workers refuse to work, and are then attacked by Hunger. Instead, Piers leads Will on a new journey: to look for Do-well, Do-better and Do-best, and become a good person.

The poem uses devices known as allegory and personification. That means that ideas like Truth and Death are represented by characters, and that the story as a whole, rather than being necessarily realistic, represents ideas about morals and spirituality. At its heart, *Piers Plowman* is a Christian poem, written at a very religious time, and it asks how a person can lead a good life, love God and their community.

Allegory. A story, poem or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a moral or political meaning, e.g. the Hare and the Tortoise is an allegory teaching us that "slow and steady wins the race".

Personification. The representation of an abstract quality in human form, or the attribution of a human characteristics to something non-human, e.g. the Grim Reaper in many cartoons is a personification of death.

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Historical context

William Langland lived in eventful times and was deeply influenced by the social, economic and religious changes of the period.

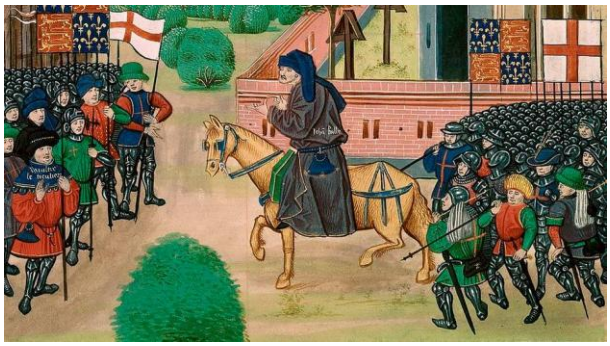
A medieval illustration of The Black Death

The late 1300s was a time of crisis. In the 1340s a plague known as the Black Death killed between 30% and 60% of Europe's entire population. Millions had died, meaning there was now a shortage of people to work on the land. Countryside workers suddenly found that instead of serving one landowner, as they always had done, they could travel around and ask for higher wages.

During this period, the Church and religion dominated people's everyday lives. Many people genuinely thought that the end of the world was coming (1400 was a popular date). New religious ideas were also springing up. A group called the Lollards argued that the Bible should be translated into English (at the time it was only written in Latin) so that common people, and not just priests and educated people could read it.

In 1381, all these tensions came to a head in the Peasants' Revolt. King Richard II (aged just 14), raised a Poll Tax to pay for the ongoing war against France, causing rebellions in Essex and Kent. Two armies of peasants marched to London, led by an ex-soldier called Wat Tyler and a Lollard priest called John Ball. The peasants broke into the city, killed important advisors of the King, and sacked royal houses and religious institutions.

All of these changes meant that working people of England (such as Piers the Plowman) were beginning to have more power and freedom. With this new power, they had to make moral decisions about what to do. This, in essence, is what the poem is about.



A fifteenth century illustration of John Ball addressing the rebels

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Introducing Middle English

Piers Plowman is written in Middle English - the form of English spoken between 1066 and 1500. In the medieval age, the English language was not yet fixed and there were different ways to spell and say words. To modern eyes the language can look difficult to read, but with a few tips you can begin to pick it apart.

'Will' on the Malvern Hills (Photograph: Matt Hass)

Some words are exactly the same in Middle and modern English, e.g. 'the', 'boy', 'hope', 'men'. Many words are similar but have different spellings, e.g. 'treuthe' ('truth'), 'prestis' ('priests'), 'charite' ('charity'), 'somer' ('summer'). Some words did not survive into modern English at all, e.g. 'chaffare' ('trade'), 'sithe' ('since').

Hand out Worksheet 1 to the class and let them have a look at some of the Middle English words on it.

Before they start trying to do the sheet, have a go at reading the Middle English words as a class. Don't worry too much about pronunciation, but in general just remember that there weren't silent letters in the same way there are in modern English. So, if a letter is there, pronounce it.

For example 'sonne' (sun) is pronounced: *'son-nuh'*, 'harde' (hard) is '*har-de'*. A silent 'gh' in words like 'thought' and 'plough' is also pronounced, with a sound at the back of the throat, like the 'ch' in the Scots word 'loch'.

Next, go through the Tips to understanding Middle English provided in the box below. Are there any words on the sheet that this helps to decipher?

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Now, let the class try matching the Middle English words to their modern equivalents.

Tips to understanding Middle English

- Generally 'y' and 'i' are interchangeable. So 'sowynge' means 'sowing', 'clothyng' means 'clothing', etc.
- Some verbs start with 'y', e.g. 'ycrammed' ('crammed'), 'ythryveth' ('thrives'), 'yblessed' ('blessed')
- Often Middle English has different vowels than modern English. If you're struggling to identify a word, try it with a different vowel, e.g. 'mony' ('many'), 'whan' ('when'), 'chirche' ('church'), 'shep' ('sheep').
- 'D' and 'th' are sometimes interchangeable, e.g. 'fader' ('father'), 'togyderes' ('together').
- Sometimes the words are in a different order than in modern English, so you have to unjumble them! E.g. 'In a somur sesoun whan softe was the sonne' ('In a summer season when the sun was soft'), 'Wente forth in the world wondres to here' ('Went forth in the world to hear wonders').

If you want to hear an example of *Piers Plowman* read in the original Middle English then scholar Alaric Hall has recorded his reading of the opening of the poem (bit.ly/PiersIntro). He uses a slightly different version of the text, so it won't exactly follow the version printed here, but gives a flavour of how the language sounds.

Extension activity

If you really want to stretch your class, then show them the opening extract of the Prologue to *Piers Plowman* (page 11 below) and ask them to cover the right hand side of the page (or you can fold the sheets in half if that's simpler). Can they recognise some of the words from the worksheet?

As a class, attempt to read through the Middle English version. How much of it can they decipher without looking at to the modern English transliteration?

Once you've had a go, uncover the modern version, and read through it to see how well you did.

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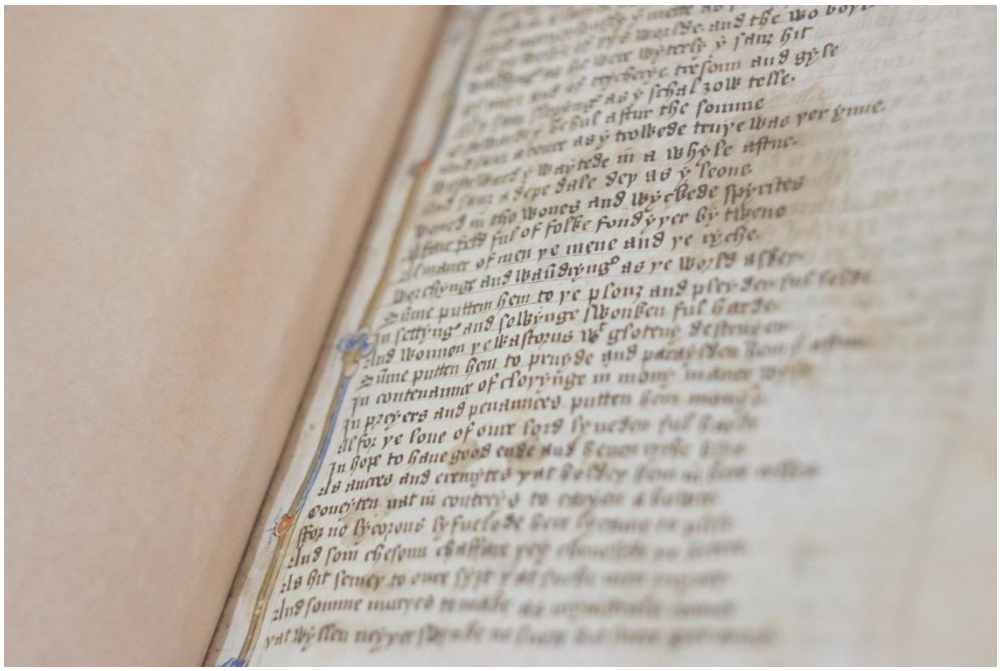
Medieval manuscripts

Ask the class how they think a copy of *Piers Plowman* in the late 1300s or early 1400s might have been produced.



Manuscript of *Piers Plowman* courtesy of Senate House Library (Photograph: Harpreet Kalsi)

The first printing press didn't come to England until William Caxton brought one over from mainland Europe in 1476, nearly 90 years after the first version of *Piers Plowman* was produced. That means that at the time it was written, every copy of *Piers Plowman* (and indeed any other book), had to be copied by hand by a team of scribes. As you can imagine, this was a long and painstaking process.

Show the class the two images of early *Piers Plowman* manuscripts on page 10. What do they think? Are they surprised that spellings weren't always copied across consistently? Bonus credit can be offered to anyone who can read a line! (N.B. Electronic versions of these images are available at: bit.ly/PlowmanMS and bit.ly/PlowmanMS2.)

As well as being time consuming to copy books by hand, it was also an expensive process. Books were therefore symbols of great wealth and were held in high regard. You can see in these manuscripts that some colour has been added to some lines, some letters embellished, and some illustrations added. The illustrations on pages 5 and 6 are also from a version of *Piers Plowman*, dating from the 14th Century.

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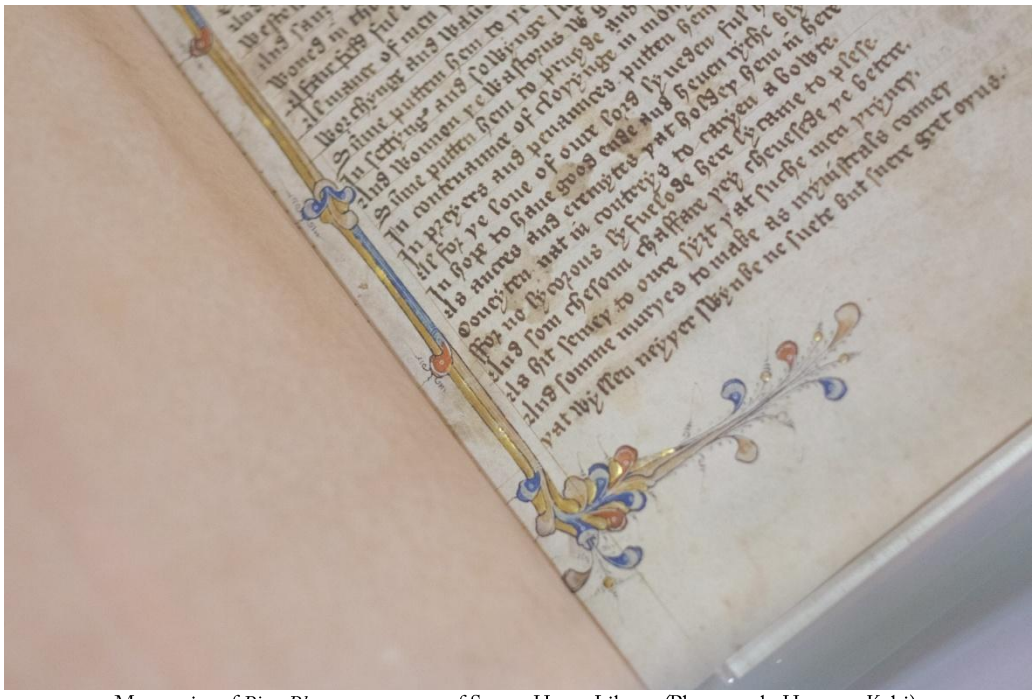
These decorations were often part of medieval manuscripts, and documents with these drawings and designs were known as Illuminated manuscripts. The more decorative they were, the more time scribes had to put into drawing them, and the more expensive they were.

Many monks would dedicate their lives to reproducing copies of the Bible. They would delicately add detailed illustrations in coloured inks and gold leaf to show how important a book it was.



Manuscript of *Piers Plowman* courtesy of Senate House Library (Photograph: Harpreet Kalsi)

A quick Google image search for medieval illuminated manuscripts will bring up lots of examples to show the class. Talk through some of the features that you can identify from these designs. Alternatively, take a look at images of the Book of Kells bit.ly/KellsMS, a beautiful early Medieval manuscript and again see what methods are used to embellish the text.

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Activity: Illuminating thoughts

Despite the effort involved in producing books in medieval times, people still created them, and some people would spend enormous amounts of money buying copies.

Just a few years after *Piers Plowman* was produced there was such controversy over producing a version of the Bible in English that the man responsible was declared a heretic, and after he died, the Pope ordered his body to be dug up, cremated and his ashes to be thrown in a river. All this over the publication of a book!

Discuss with the class the importance of books. Why are books important? What can they teach us that we can't find out elsewhere?

What about stories, like that of Piers the Plowman? Are they important too? What can we learn from reading about other people? Why do we still read stories like *Piers Plowman* even 600 years after they were written?

As the class discuss these points, jot down their ideas on the board.

Once they've finished, explain that they are going to create an illuminated manuscript outlining the importance of books. Their manuscript will be beautifully decorated to show how important their ideas are.

Ask pupils to pick their favourite points from those that have been gathered on the board and to copy them down, adding some more of their own.

When they have collected half a dozen points, give them a piece of A5 paper; this is going to be their manuscript.

In pairs ask them to help each other design their manuscripts (this can help those who are less confident with drawing). They can try drawing illustrations or including other designs, such as illustrated letters, and borders that could decorate their manuscript, and show the importance of their message. Remind them to refer back to the examples you've looked at earlier for inspiration.

After sketching out their ideas in rough, ask the class to copy their finished message and finalised designs onto a piece of paper, and share with the rest of the class.

FAIR FIELD

thisfairfield.com

Conceived and produced by multi-award-winning arts company Penned in the Margins, *Fair Field* re-imagines *Piers Plowman* for the twenty-first century through site-responsive performances in Ledbury and London; an exhibition at the National Poetry Library; educational workshops; online resources and more. Commissioned by Ledbury Poetry Festival and Shoreditch Town Hall, *Fair Field* is supported by Arts Council England, Jerwood Charitable Foundation and King's College London.

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Worksheet 1

Join up the Middle English words and their definitions

Middle English	Modern English
ylered	alike
whykyng	marvellously
ascuth	taught
dale	winking
merveylousliche	clearly
seigh	working
witterliche	again
ac	incredible
selkouthe	saw
ylyche	valley
worchynge	but
ayeyn	demands

Can you guess the definitions for these Middle English words?

Middle English	Modern English
Y	
waytede	
togyderes	
scole	
folilche	
ageynward	

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Answer sheet 1

Join up the Middle English words and their definitions

Middle English	Modern English
ylered	taught
whykyng	winking
ascuth	demands
dale	valley
merveylousliche	marvellously
seigh	saw
witterliche	clearly
ac	but
selkouthe	incredible
ylyche	alike
worchynge	working
ayeyn	again

Can you guess the definitions for these Middle English words?

Middle English	Modern English
Y	I
waytede	waited
togyderes	together
scole	school
folilche	foolishly
ageynward	in return

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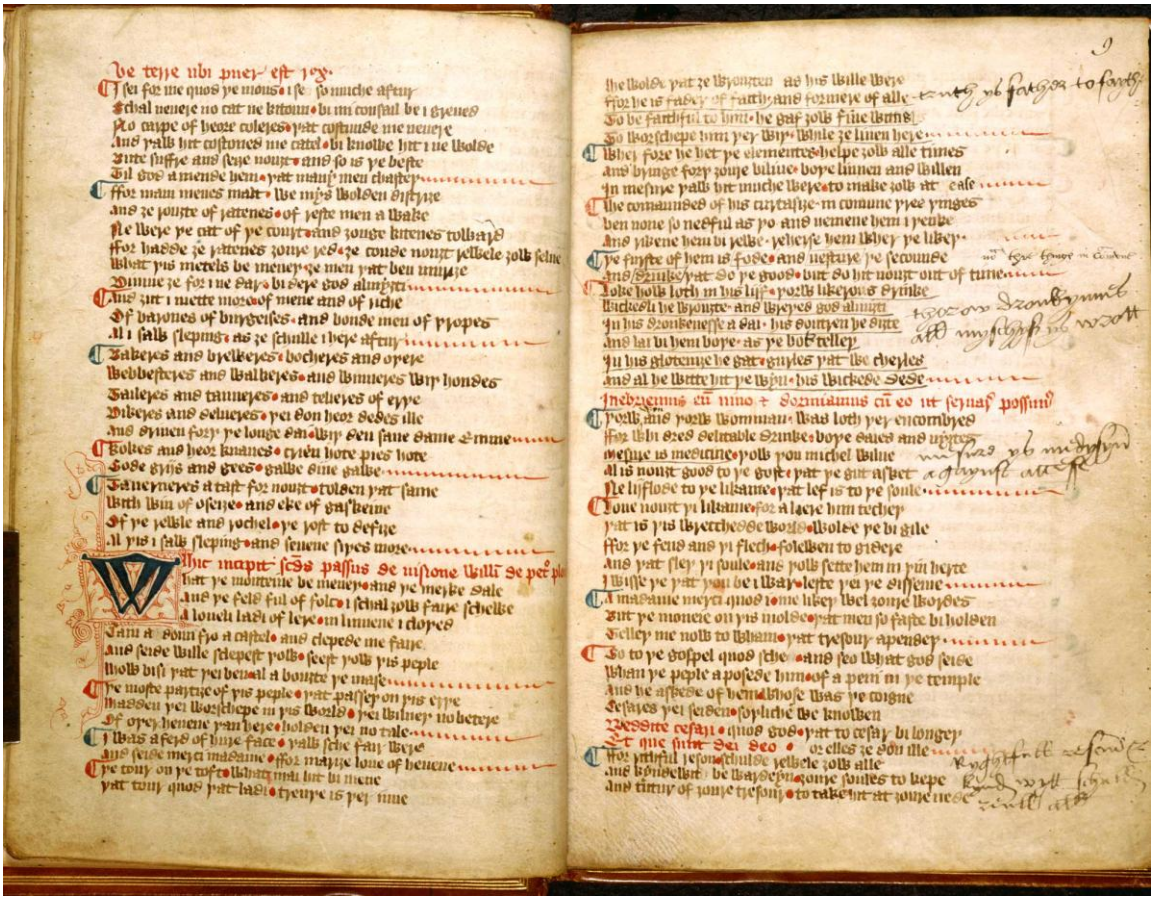
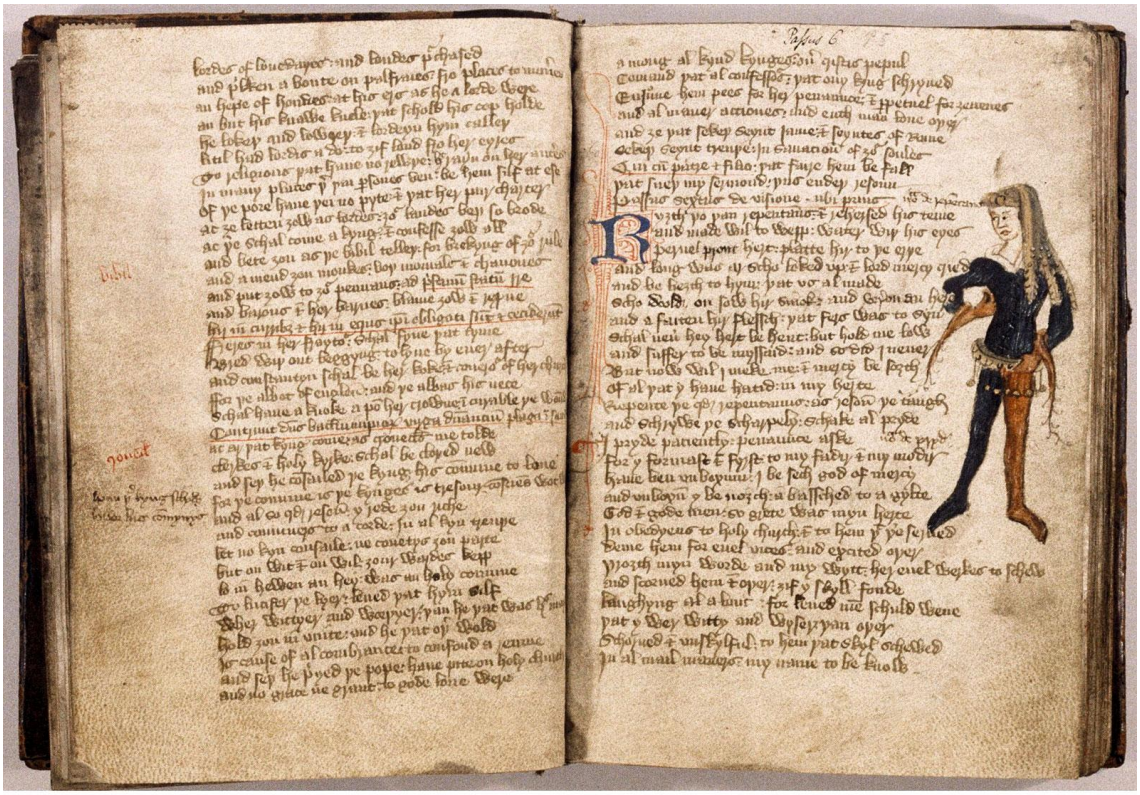


Manuscript of *Piers Plowman*, held at the British Library bit.ly/PlowmanMS



Pride, in jester's costume. William Langland, *Piers Plowman* (C-text), 1427.
Bodleian Library MSDouce 104, f. 023v-024r.

Manuscript of *Piers Plowman* from 1427, showing Pride in a jester's costume, held at the Bodleian Library. bit.ly/PlowmanMS2

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Piers Plowman - Prologue (excerpt)

In a somur sesoun whan softe was the sonne
Y shope me into shroudes as Y a shep were;
In abite as an heremite unholy of werkes
Wente forth in the world wondres to here,
And say many selles and selkouthe thynges.
Ac on a May mornyng on Malverne hulles
Me biful for to slepe, for werynesse of-walked,
And in a launde as Y lay, lened Y and slepte,
And merveylousliche me mette, as Y may yow telle.
Al the welthe of the world and the wo bothe,
Wynkyng, as hit were, witterliche Y sigh hit;
Of treuthe and tricherye, tresoun and gyle,
Al Y say slepynge, as Y shal yow telle.
    Estward Y beheld aftir the sonne
And say a tour - as Y trowe, Treuthe was there-ynne.
Westward Y waytede in a while aftir
And seigh a depe dale - Deth, as Y leve,
Woned in tho wones, and wikkede spiritus.
A fair feld ful of folk fond Y ther bytwene
Of alle manere men, the mene and the riche,
Worchynge and wandryng as this world ascuth.
    Somme potte hem to the plogh, playde ful selde,
In settynge and in sowynge swonken ful harde
And wonne that this wastors with glotony destrueth.
And summe putte hem to pruyde and parayled hem ther-aftir
In continance of clothynge in many kyne gyse.

William Langland
[*Piers Plowman* C-text]

Piers Plowman - Prologue (excerpt)

In a summer season when the sun was soft
I dressed myself in shrouds like a sheep;
In a habit like a hermit unholy of works
Went forth in the world to hear wonders,
And saw many strange and incredible things.
Then on a May morning on the Malvern Hills
I fell into a sleep, for I was weary from walking,
And as I lay on a lawn, I leant and slept,
And I dreamed marvellously, as I may tell you.
All the wealth of the world and also the woe,
Winking [i.e. blinking], as it were, I saw it clearly;
Of truth and treachery, treason and guile,
All I saw sleeping, as I will tell you.
    Eastwards I looked in the sun's direction
And saw a tower - as I know, Truth was inside.
Westward I waited a little while
And saw a deep dale - Death, as I believe,
Dwelt in those parts, and wicked spirits.
I found a fair field full of folk in between
Of all kinds of men, the poor and the rich,
Working and wandering as this world demands.
    Some set themselves to the plough, seldom played,
In setting and sowing and working very hard,
And earned what wasters with gluttony consume.
And some set themselves to pride and dress thereafter
In displays of clothing in many kinds of ways.

Transliteration © Tom Chivers

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Prologue commentary

It is a May morning - in medieval poetry this is the traditional time for adventures and dreams. The speaker of the poem is dressed like a sheep, and also in a habit (hooded robe) like a hermit. He is wandering in search of strange sights. Tired from walking, he falls asleep in the Malvern Hills and has a 'marvellous' dream. In the East he sees the tower of Truth, in the West a deep dale (valley) where Death lives. In between he sees a field full of people 'working and wandering'. He then zooms in on different professions, starting with (significantly) the ploughman who is 'swonken ('working') ful harde'.

The opening of P*iers Plowman* beautifully sets up the main themes of the poem. The field represents the world, caught between heaven (the tower) and hell (the valley). The field is home to all sorts of different people. Some are working, and others not. Later in the prologue we meet people praying, making money, begging, telling tales and deceiving one another. We, and the dreamer, are entering a world in moral crisis.

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