

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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William Langland (1330-1387) *Piers Plowman* (A, 268-281)

William Langland comes to us virtually without personal details. He was from the West of England, and was, as we can see from the present poem, immersed in the religious and social values of his time. He was also in sync with the aesthetic assumptions of contemporary serious poets—compliant in the long, talkative pentameter line, compliant in the framing of his most serious work in terms of dream and allegory. We have to imagine that Langland's own values are wrapped up in the allegorical clothing of his text, for *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is not only a history of the major events of the Christian story, but a revelation of the poet's understanding of Christ's significance.

Question: Sacred Text as Field for Freedom

Passus 18, our reading, opens on the picture of a world-trudging pilgrim dreaming of "Christ's passion and pain" and of His people, which includes one Piers the Plowman, a slightly tweaked version of our poet himself. Through the lens of dream, Piers allows allegorical figures—Peace, Love, Mercy, Righteousness—to play through an account of the tale of Christ's sacrifice. The Question I pose to you, about this Passus, is: *in what ways do you think the poet's self-presentation, manner of vision, and view of his savior belong to a period far outdated? In what ways is Langland's work fresh and part of your own world?*

Comparative Literature:

1. Chapters 5 and 6, of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1968) analyze two texts of mediaeval literature, and you would do well to consult this model of extended literary analysis. In many ways the Christian mediaeval imagination—allegorical, indirect, trading in symbols drawn from intense belief—is hard for us to read, harder either than ancient classical literature or even the difficult works of our own time, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Work* which requires a detailed commentary. Auerbach's book might help you appreciate the mindset of Langland. You might also like to read Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (1937), for a scary and profound twentieth century mediaeval type thriller, with some kinship to Langland's thought world.

2. In *Piers Plowman* Langland creates a character in search of the best way to lead the Christian life. The social perspective, under which that search is imagined as possible, is communitarian, and in a way conservative, supporting the reigning feudal structure of the time. You might think of other ambitious literary texts which attempt to construct and find value in a large social panorama of this sort. I think of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdottir*. Does literature seem to you of special value as an interpreter and forecaster of human societal possibilities?