

Piers Plowman Electronic Archive Teaching Resources

The Making of a Medieval Book Activity #2: Using the Archive

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 activity demonstrates for students how copies of the same text differ, and how those differences affect our reading of the literature.

Preparation: Make copies of this text from the standard Kane-Donaldson B-text Prologue (lines 78-82). Here is the edited text and a translation:

Were þe Bisshop yblessed and worþ boþe hise eris
His seel shoulde noȝt be sent to deceyue þe peple.
It is noȝt by þe bisshop þat þe boy precheþ;
Ac þe parissh preest and þe pardoner parten þe siluer
That þe pouere peple of þe parissh sholde haue if þei ne were.

If the bishop were blessed and worth both his ears,
His seal would not be sent to deceive the people.
It is not by leave of the bishop that the boy preaches,
But rather the parish priest and the pardoner share the silver
That the poor people of the parish should have if it weren't for them.

If no overhead projector is available, copy the relevant lines from the Archive's transcript of Manuscript F (lines F1.71-76) into a word processing program and make paper copies for students. The text and a translation are as follows:

But where þe blessynge bisshop / worþ boþe his eryl
His seel sholde not be sent / to disseyve þe peple
But it not be þe bisshop / þat so þe boy precheþ
But þe parsoun er þe preest / ys cawse of þe gilte
For þe prest & þe pardoner / shulle departen þe syluer
þat þe pore men of þe parschȝ ; sholde haue if þey nere

But if the blessing bishop was worth both his ears
His seal should not be sent to deceive the people.
But it [is] not by the bishop that the boy so preaches,
But the parson or the priest is cause of the guilt,
For the priest and the pardoner shall share the silver
That the poor men of the parish should have if it weren't for them.

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In Class: Distribute copies; explain that the passage attacks priests and pardoners for taking the money meant for the poor (without the permission of the bishop, who is powerless to stop them). Also point out that “þ” means “th” and “ȝ” means “gh.”

On an overhead projector, pull up the Prologue of Manuscript F (<http://piers.iath.virginia.edu/exist/piers/docs/B/F/3/scribal/0>). (Or distribute paper copies.) Point out the differences in wording, especially in line 80. In F this line runs: “But it not be þe bisshop / þat so þe boy prechep.” The meaning is the same, but the words and spellings have changed, and the scribe has accidentally left out the “is” that should come after “it”! Then point out the new line that the scribe composed directly after line 80: “But þe parsoun er þe preest ys cawse of þe gilte” (translation: But the parson or the priest is cause of the guilt—i.e. is guilty). This new line states outright the accusation that the other version only implies.

Finish the lesson by pointing out how someone who read the F manuscript would have had the attack on priests made obvious to him: he couldn’t miss it, where a reader of a different manuscript or even of the edited version printed by Kane and Donaldson would have to do more work to understand the meaning of the passage. Point out that even the edited version doesn’t give us what Langland himself wrote: it is, at best, a reconstruction of what he might have written!

Optional Extension:

If time allows, pull up the image of the manuscript page for students to look at. Have them find the lines discussed and try to match the letter forms in the type-written copy with those in the image.

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Kane-Donaldson B-Text Prologue

Were þe Bisshop yblessed and worþ boþe hise eris
His seel shoulde noȝt be sent to deceyue þe peple.
It is noȝt by þe bisshop þat þe boy precheþ;
Ac þe parisshe preest and þe pardonere parten þe siluer
That þe pouere peple of þe parisshe sholde haue if þei ne were.

If the bishop were blessed and worth both his ears,
His seal would not be sent to deceive the people.
It is not by leave of the bishop that the boy preaches,
But rather the parish priest and the pardoner share the silver
That the poor people of the parish should have if it weren't for them.

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Archive Manuscript F

But where þe blessynge bisshop / worþ boþe his eryn
His seel sholde not be sent / to disseyve þe peple
But it not be þe bisshop / þat so þe boy precheþ
But þe parsoun er þe preest / ys cawse of þe gilte
For þe prest & þe pardoner / shulle departen þe syluer
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