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 schrobuss / 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 morwenying / 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 &#541;ow telle .
Al þe welþ of þis world / and þe wo bope .
Walkynge as hit were / wyterly y sauh hit .
Of truthe and of trecherie / treson and gyle .
Al y sauh slepinge / as y shal ȝow 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
Wonede 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 .
Worchynge and wandryng / as þe worlde askeþ .
¶ Somme putten hem to þe plouh / and pleyden ful selde
In settyng and in sowyng / swokon ful harde .
And wonnon that þeos wastourts / wyth gloteny destruen .
¶ Somme putten hem to pruyde . and paraileden hem þer-aftur
In contenaunce 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 heueneryche blisse .

Point out that “u” and “v” are interchangeable, “þ” is “th,” and “ȝ” (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.
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 busses .
abit  Gloss: appareil
saih, selcouthe  Gloss: saw; selcouth or [part of gloss illegible] quasi seldom known or vnknownen (Note: quasi = “as in”)
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: common sort
Worchynge  Gloss: woorking
pleyden, selde  Gloss: went to lawe; seldom tymes
swonkon  Gloss: labored
wonnon  Gloss: wan . got .
pruyde, paraileen  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 dreamt”), 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!