Visualizing Piers Plowman

Heather Patnott

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Heather Patnott and Dr. Gruenler – Department of English, Hope College

Abstract
The complex narrative structure of Piers Plowman, a fourteenth-century, visionary poem attributed to William Langland and surviving in three versions, provides a struggle for both students approaching the poem for the first time and scholars who have been studying the poem for years. Often the poem is divided into passus, meaning steps, and sometimes split into two sections, the Visio and the Vita. These divisions are based on manuscript markings, but scholars disagree about their validity. Another way to break apart the poem, one that doesn’t rely on manuscript markings that may or may not be a result of scrivall corruption, is into the dreams and dreams within dreams of the narrator. A further complication of working with the poem is that the narrative is discontinuous and defies attempts to summarize it. The goal of my project was to examine shapes scholars have used to define the narrative structure of Piers Plowman in order to come up with a way to visualize the poem without denying its complexity. I worked with a future project in mind of the creation of a digital tool to help students and scholars alike explore the poem.

The Versions Compared
For the purpose of my project I worked primarily with the C-text, though I read scholarship pertaining to all three versions.

The A-text
-A prologue and 11 or 12 passus
-8 visions

The B-text
-A prologue and 20 passus
-8 visions

The C-text
-A prologue and 22 passus
-8 visions

Introduction
Will, the narrator and dreamer of the fourteenth-century poem Piers Plowman embarks on an inner journey on which he encounters allegorical figures which help and confuse him as he searches for truth and answers to questions close to his heart. The poem has a disorganized nature that has led scholars in the past to question whether Piers Plowman can be called a poem at all. C.S. Lewis commented in The Allegory of Love that Langland “is confused and monotonous, and hardly makes his poetry into a poem.” Despite the challenges that Piers Plowman presents, scholars have not given up the quest to understand it. Scholars have called the poem linear, spiral, and labyrinthine, but their discussion of why and how the poem is shaped in a particular way over another rarely seems to go beyond a passing observation. My project examines the successes and limitations of how the linear, spiralizing, and labyrinthine shapes fit the poem in an effort to provide a method for thinking about the discontinuous narrative that illuminates its exploratory nature and its essential aspect of a shared struggle between the dreamer and the reader.

Conclusion
Piers Plowman asks its readers for participation in exploration and questioning with the dreamer, and so when defining a shape for the narrative using a single image will limit interpretation. In light of this, any digital tool created in the future should also invite exploration from the readers.

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The Labyrinthine Shape
A labyrinthine shape captures the wandering and meditative sense of the poem. It’s easy to feel lost in the poem and sometimes uncertain of the direction that the poem is taking. Similar to the spiral shape, however, it would be difficult to diagram out, possibly even more difficult than diagraming the arcs of the spiral.

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The Spiralizing Shape
Describing poem’s narrative as a spiral shape would incorporate the repetition into its interpretation while still illustrating the continuous progress the Dreamer makes. The limitation of this image, though, is that it is not as precise for creating a diagram as the linear shape. It would be cumbersome to chart out every arc in the poem.

The Linear Shape
Describing the narrative structure of the poem as a linear shape highlights the continuous progress of the Dreamer in the poem and the constant looking ahead of the characters in the poem toward salvation and the end of time, but it does not take into a count the repetition of ideas, and is even misleading because the Dreamer’s progress is not always forward.

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