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Visualizing Piers Plowman

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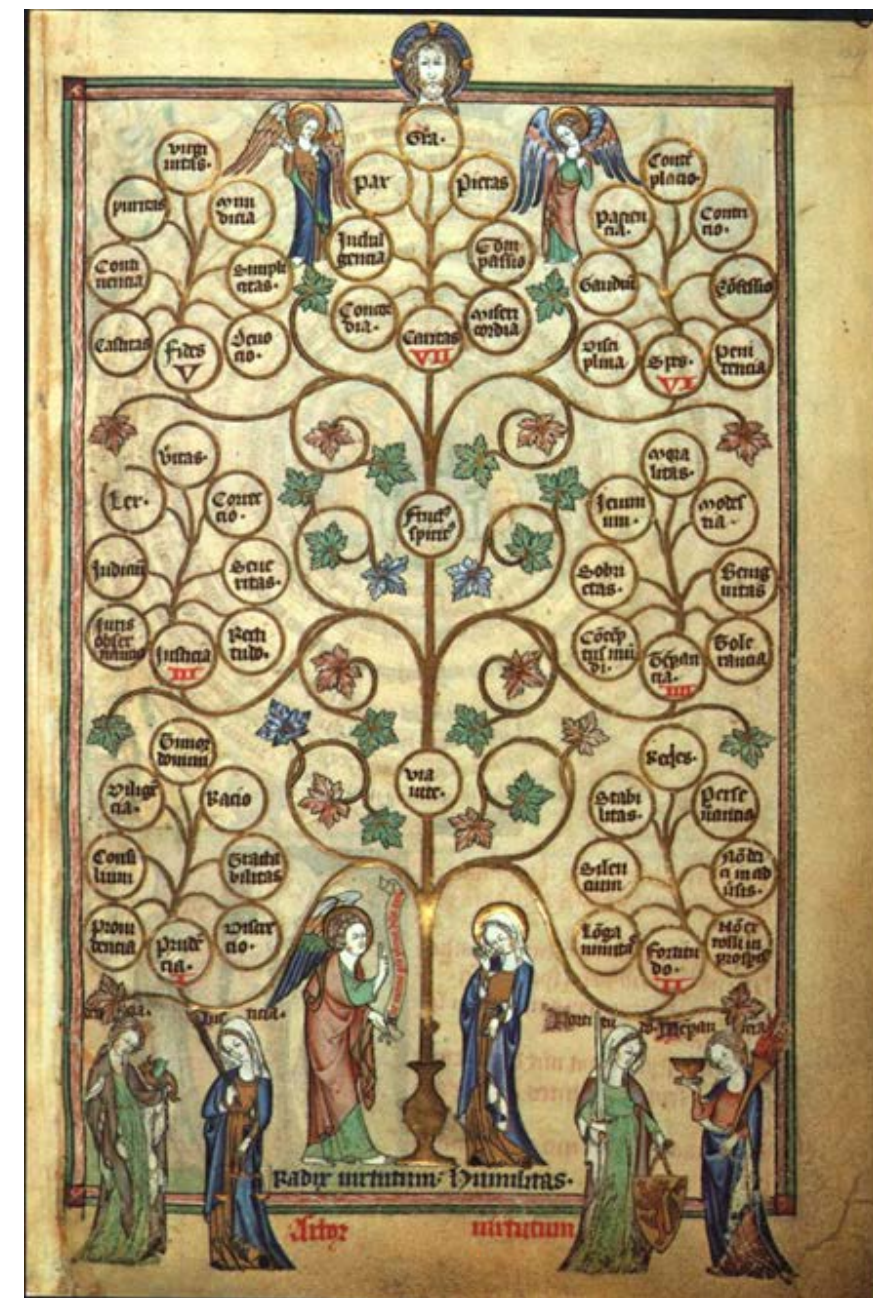
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Why Visualize?

St. Bonaventure, an important 13th-century theologian and mystic, explains in his *Lignum Vitae* (*The Tree of Life*), that "Imagination aids understanding." Medieval texts often use tree images as containers for holding ideas, such as the virtues and vices or, in the *Lignum Vitae* itself, the life of Christ. These trees had a twofold purpose of providing a tool for the memory and of categorizing the ideas. A shape for visualizing the narrative structure of *Piers Plowman* would serve a similar purpose as an aid for interpretation.

The Limitation

In an article for the Chaucer Review, Stephanie L. Batkie writes that, "What the poem requires is not a static, omniscient reader, but one who will continually struggle with the problem of encapsulating knowledge of the divine in a usable form." She stresses in her article the significance of a shared experience, between the reader and the dreamer, of the struggle to understand, and she argues that this shared struggle is an organizing feature of the poem. Providing a single shape for visualization will offer a "static" reading, and will not open up as much opportunity for struggle. Ideally then, a digital tool for the poem would incorporate multiple shapes to provide that experience of exploration and struggle for the reader with the dreamer.



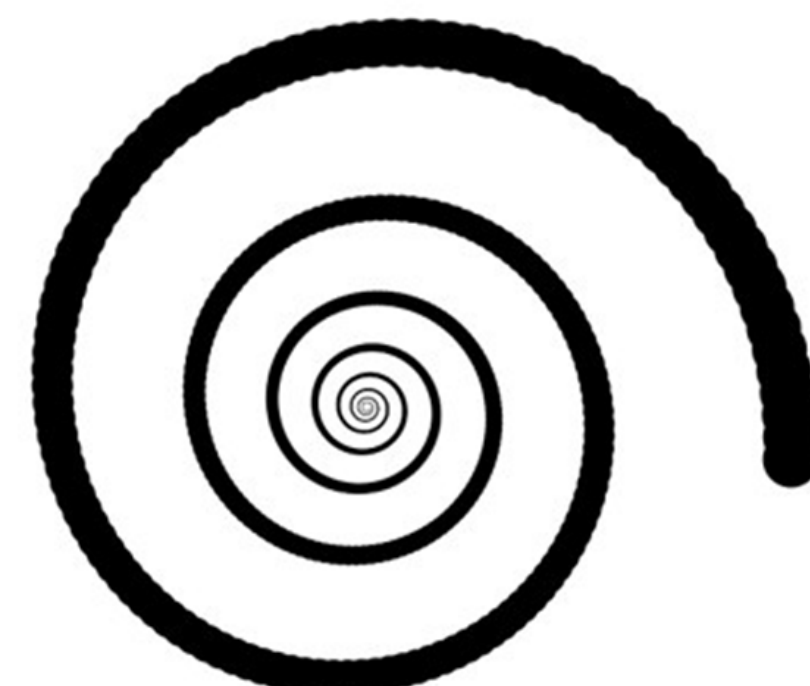
BLArundel MS 83II fol 129r
http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/medieval/images/DE_LISL7.jpg

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 account the repetition of ideas, and is even misleading because the Dreamer's progress is not always forward.

The Spiraling 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.



<http://static.urbantimes.co/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/spira-l-1.jpg>

Visualizing *Piers Plowman*

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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 scribal corruption, is into the dreams and dreams within dreams of the narrator. A further complication of working with the poem is that the narrative itself 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	The B-text	The C-text
-A prologue and 11 or 12 passus	-A prologue and 20 passus	-A prologue and 22 passus
-3 visions	-8 visions	-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 the 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's* form presents, scholars have not given up the quest to understand it. Scholars have called the poem linear, spiraling, 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, spiraling, 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.

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 diagramming the arcs of the spiral.



<http://www.unmuseum.org/labchur.jpg>



Depicted on the left (Conscience) and on the right (Reason) are two key allegorical figures who appear throughout the poem.

Conscience.
MS Douce 104 fol.15r.
<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/msdouce104f015r.jpg>



Reason.
MS Douce 104 fol. 19r.
<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/msdouce104f019r.jpg>

Conclusion

Piers Plowman asks its readers to participate 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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