



Walking the Walk: Experiential Learning, Pilgrimage, and 'Kynde Knowynge'

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Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, were right ynough for me....

“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” Chaucer’s *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*²

I teach *Piers Plowman* in the context of a medieval pilgrimage literature class. The popularity of fourteenth-century vernacular pilgrimage literature throughout Europe—from Dante and Deguileville to Langland and Chaucer— suggests how this ritual practice in the Christian West was increasingly becoming a means to facilitate affective piety, an important spiritual mode in late medieval Europe. These vernacular poems allow for an affective response by a wide audience. The notoriously difficulty of *Piers* lies in part in its distinction from other more structurally clear pilgrimage works, such as *The Divine Comedy*. In refusing to conform to expectations about pilgrimage as a linear, salvific process, *Piers* advances the idea of life as a muddled pilgrimage, making the reading experience likewise confusing. Participating in what Langland calls “kynde knowynge” [“natural knowledge”] (*Piers Plowman*, VIII.113)³ channels this confusion towards a richer engagement with the text. Teaching *Piers Plowman* in the context of experiential learning has offered my students a productive path to engage with pilgrimage on an empirical level. Students learn through reading *Piers*, writing about it, and participating in an active learning journey that, like *Piers*, enacts but also unsettles ideas of pilgrimage. Experiential learning opportunities I’ve established mimic, but also challenge, ideas of pilgrimage in ways that are consonant with *Piers*.

I braid a physical pilgrimage into my course entitled *Medieval Pilgrimage Literature*. In the first two class meetings, I lecture on the history of travel and pilgrimage in the ancient and medieval Christian worlds to help students contextualize the material historically. Lionel Casson's *Travel in the Ancient World* and Jonathan Sumption's *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* allow for a chronological and cultural introduction to pilgrimage. A detailed handout of travel in the ancient world and pilgrimage until the Reformation enables students to hook texts to a timeline. The continuities between pagan and Christian periods help students to see how roads used in the Classical period gave medieval pilgrims an existing highway system which they could trod for God.⁴

To help enhance the instructor's familiarity with background material and to situate pilgrimage historically, I recommend Diana Webb's *Pilgrims in Medieval England* and Brett Edward Whalen's *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: A Reader*. Webb's *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* has topical chapters (for example, *Indulgences and Jubilees*), each with an interpretative and explanatory essay followed by samples of original documentary material in translation. Of specific value for *Piers Plowman*, Dee Dyas's *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700-1500* provides a subtle and nuanced reading of *Piers*. James Simpson's *Piers Plowman: An Introduction Based on the B-Text* should be required reading, helpful to anyone, no matter how experienced with the poem. C. David Benson's lucid and engaging *Public Piers Plowman* introduces the idea of the "myth of the poet" and the "myth of the poem," concepts that situate the scholarship swirling about *Piers Plowman*.⁵ These written texts can be supplemented with on-line resources discussed below, ranging from visual images to lexicographical search engines.

Once I've introduced pilgrimage in my opening lectures, we begin to discuss the literary texts themselves. At the graduate seminar level, we begin with *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*,⁶ before turning to fictive accounts like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Deguileville's

The Pilgrimage of Human Life, *Piers Plowman*, selected *Canterbury Tales*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*.⁷ For undergraduates, the pedagogical landscape compels me to find shorter works clustered about the central focus of *Piers*. Reading a number of works prior to *Piers* enables the novice reader to more adroitly tackle and access the complications of Langland's allegory. For these upper-division (junior/senior level) courses, I assign *The Life of Saint Catherine* and *The Life of Saint Lawrence*, two Anglo-Norman works that introduce the concept of saints' lives and veneration of saints; Marie de France's *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*; *Piers Plowman*; and *The Book of Margery Kempe*.⁸ *Piers Plowman* can take up to one-fourth to one-third of a 14-week semester. At this point in their careers, students do not need to understand the complications of the various versions of *Piers*, so we focus on the Robertson and Shepherd edition of the B-text. Students appreciate the facing-page translation; if the Middle English is too difficult, they can turn to the Modern English. The apparatus is excellent, with abundant contemporary primary texts excerpted and sections of very important articles included in the back.

Students understand how Langland's poem uses pilgrimage thematically and structurally when it is situated within the web of other medieval pilgrimage works. By seeing how Langland is undertaking a project distinct from those of Dante or Deguileville, students must focus on what differentiates Langland's allegory. Dante the poet establishes a clear, linear structure that he follows, emblemized in the tripartite books *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. The dreamer in *The Pilgrimage of Human Life* has some clear-cut choices. The reader protests in dismay when the pilgrim-protagonist opts to meander onto the well-worn path of Idleness, rather than remaining on the clearly more virtuous, yet less flashy, path of Labor. Deguileville's binary makes the dreamer's journey obvious: of course, he clearly should have made the right — and righteous — choice.

After reading these two rich poems with their linear structures, the student arrives at *Piers*, a nuanced stew of morally thorny ambiguity. The confused Will stands in as a counterpart

for the bewildered student. Little progress seems to be made for both reader and Will, who falls asleep at key moments. Lacking the linear structure one might expect—the progression from one's home to sacred shrine on an actual historical pilgrimage—the poem coerces the student to "wand[er] by the weye" ["wand[er] by the way"] (l.467), like Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Langland's rhetoric likewise evokes a process of wandering with digressions, reversions, and interruptions. Even when a triumphal lesson is learned and all is joyously celebrated at the end of Passus XVIII, the poem insists on continuing. These final two Passus ultimately set *Piers* apart from its pilgrimage poetry brethren. Rather than seeing pilgrimage as linear—to death, to God, to resurrection—Langland forces his fourteenth-century Christian reader or listener and twenty-first century counterpart to understand pilgrimage not as a goal to be “achieved.” Rather, it is a difficult dance with steps forward and back, jerkily aimed towards a salvation one can only intermittently grasp while puzzling out the actions and intentions of one's own soul.

There are numerous references to pilgrimage throughout *Piers Plowman*, most notably in Passus V (lines 515-536), when a figure covered in badges from all the most famous pilgrimage shrines in Europe and the Holy Land appears. Asked where Truth is, he claims not to know who that is. His signs of pilgrimage are empty, devoid of true spirituality and inner knowledge of God. Langland suggests *place* pilgrimage – pilgrimage to a real, specific, and geographical location—fails to help souls in their search for Truth. Langland emphasizes that the negotiation of *life* pilgrimage – the journey from earth to heaven—is what fundamentally drives—or should drive—each Christian's life, rather than a quotidian progression from one physical shrine to another. Yet for students, the practice of a physical pilgrimage deepens classroom discussions. The contrast between sitting in a climate-controlled classroom while contemplating medieval pilgrimage and contending with tight shoes and sunburn on a place pilgrimage lends weight to Langland's distinction between mystical and corporal pilgrimage. Through the actual practice of place pilgrimage in an experiential learning environment, students can deepen their

understanding—both cognitively and somatically—of this tension between place and life pilgrimage.

Mapping the Path for Experiential Learning: Reading Actively

Holy Church admonishes Will in the opening Passus to develop his natural knowledge: “It is a kynde knowyng that kenneth in thine herte/ For to lovye thi Lorde lever than thiselve” [“It’s a natural knowledge that’s nurtured in your heart/ To love your Lord more dearly than you love yourself”] (I.142-3). Later, Will confides in Thought that he desires more of Dowel’s natural knowledge: “More kynde knowynge I coveite to lerne” [“More natural knowledge I need to learn”] (VIII.113). In classes using experiential learning, the student can imbibe information in a traditional way, yet move (literally) beyond it to a knowledge that is more “kynde” [“natural”]. As John A. Alford has pointed out, Will’s education “represents that of the learning process: Wit...joined with Study...leads to Clergy...which resides with Scripture...and all of these together contribute to Imaginatif.”⁹ While these figures “represent educational institutions...Langland recognizes the usefulness of acquired arts of learning in pointing beyond themselves, to a kind of knowledge that is more profound, more experiential, and more ‘natural.’”¹⁰ Though not precisely coinciding, David A. Kolb’s classic model for experiential learning finds parallels in Will’s pilgrimage to knowledge.¹¹ These aspects include the following four elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In my classes, concrete experience manifests itself in physical and place pilgrimage. Reflective observation arises out of note-taking, jotted down both during and after the concrete phase. Abstract conceptualization emerges out of classroom discussion and writing. Contact with material culture works as a form of active experimentation.

Throughout all the last three phases, reading experientially fuels a dynamic learning process. Pilgrimage studies increasingly focus on narrativity and materiality as part of the New Medievalism as articulated by Bloch et al. in the 2014 volume, *Rethinking the New*

Medievalism.¹² Whereas Old Philology emended texts according to an imagined ideal and fixed original text, New or Material Philology contextualizes the material conditions surrounding the literary text to recognize the variability and equal status of textual versions. Part of the material conditions for a pilgrimage is the act of pilgrimage itself. Pilgrimage structures *Piers Plowman* in that it is divided into Passus (step/s), so that the reader participates in a pilgrimage of reading. In his alliterative verse, Langland ties together concepts that often have only an initial sound in common. Yet this yoking propels the reader forward, much as pilgrimage itself, an ambulatory exercise, urges the physical pilgrim on. What words will be joined in this verse line? What lies beyond the next bend in the road? Reading and walking are analogues for one another in shaping past memory into present experience. Reading a pilgrimage text educates, controls, and affects the reader. Pilgrims “write” through walking, making the experience concrete in the memory. By seeing a poem as a pilgrimage route for her personal pilgrimage, the student learns to look for stopping points along the path of reading. This approach is particularly helpful with such a difficult poem. The difficulties of the text[s] foreground the necessity for reader engagement.

Material Philology permits the student to see how relics venerated by pilgrims emanate “thing-power,”¹³ a concept that has emerged from a new theoretical approach called by different names, including New Materialism[s],¹⁴ “ecomaterialism,”¹⁵ material ecocriticism, the “material turn,”¹⁶ or vibrant materialism. All of these approaches concur that “*things matter*...they possess integrity, power, independence and vibrancy.”¹⁷ Objects function as “full-fledged actors.”¹⁸ The material pilgrimage text of *Piers Plowman* functions in the manner of a healing relic. Likewise possessing vibrancy, the very materiality of diverse versions suggests multiple and variant readings. “[N]o author ... control[s] the shape of his texts once they are distributed,” as Jan-Dirk Müller argues,¹⁹ but a pilgrimage poet like Langland does not *desire* to control that reception—the very meaning in the text is its *variance* among recipients. These diverse versions of the poem intimate how written verse can be used as a powerful strategy for artistic creation to

spiritual ends. The ethical imperative of the narrative demands that the reader engages with it.

The poem continually catalyzes transformation, as Ursula Peters has argued, to affect both poet and reader.²⁰

When students in a pilgrimage literature class such as this subsequently encounter *The Canterbury Tales*—whose pilgrimage frame serves as a contrast to tales illustrating common challenges everyday folks experience, from marriage to greed to sin— they imbibe the lesson of Chaucer’s Parson, not unlike that of Langland: we are on a *life* pilgrimage, not (just) a *place* pilgrimage. Chaucer’s cornucopia of genres sets out the various lives we *could* enact, while Langland’s poetry makes us *live* the spiritual confusion of souls challenged with moral and ethical dilemmas. Only through reading the poem, an experience of language, does the medieval and modern reader complete her individual pilgrimage, becoming the true pilgrim of the poem, intellectually experiencing the ritual informing so much of medieval culture.

Reflective Observation: Experiential Learning Through Writing

“Writing about Langland is like a monster that’s eating my brain.”²¹

How can one get students to write—itself a form of experiential learning—without their worrying about having that monster eating their brain? A professor and noted Langland scholar confessed to her students that no one should have to write about *Piers* until she had studied it for twenty years. Higher education today precludes this option. To guide students to the point of writing about *Piers*, it helps to show how the poet himself views writing. Recognizing Langland's editorial process might help students to engage with their own craft in an aware and experiential manner as opposed to simply grinding out another paper.

Piers is deeply committed to the concept of process, progression, and change through addressing spiritual, social, and poetic matters. The self—just like the text—is neither whole nor finished but under constant revision, as reflected in multitude of aspects of Will (Wit, Anima, Imaginative) and the variety of versions of the poem (the A-, B-, C-, and Z-texts). Theologically,

pilgrimage is a ritual wedded to the idea of purification and amendment or correction of the soul.²² Recurring in Langland's work as both word and concept, *amendment* carries theological and spiritual connotations, as well as those having to do with craft and self-improvement.

Langland reminds us of amendment repeatedly as a process the soul should endeavor to enact.

Imaginative tells Will how he tried to make him think of his mortality:

And how fele fernyeres are faren, and so fewe to come,
 And of thi wylde wantounesse [whiles] thow yonge were —
 To **amende** it in thi myddel age, lest mighte the faylled
 In thyne olde elde....
Amende the while thow might — thow hast ben warned ofte....
 It is but murth as for me to **amende** my soule."
 [And how many are your yesteryears, and so few yet to come,
 And of your wild wantonness when you were young —
 To **amend** it in your middle age, lest might fail you/ In your old age....
Amend yourself while you may — you have been warned often....
 It's merely mirth to me, to **amend** my soul]
 (XII, 5-15; my bold face)

Amendment is clearly a powerfully important concept. Imaginative encourages Will to amend himself three times, and then chastizes him for his versifying. Will excuses himself by saying, "Catoun confortd his sone that, clerke though he were,/ To solacen hym sumtyme — as I do whan I make" ["Cato comforted his son, clerk though he was,/ To solace himself sometimes — so I do when I write"] (XII, 21-22), that is, when he creates poetry. Like Will, the student — by engaging emotionally and spiritually with the meaning of the text through writing — in a sense "co-creates" with Langland in a spiritual and intellectual exercise. Requiring frequent drafts of work from the students allows them to replicate Langland's creative process of amendment and revision.

In addition to research-based papers and assessments interpreting the written material, assignments for the class can be experientially based. Should the course include an actual, physical place pilgrimage, the students can document it in the form of photos and a blog. Writing about their experiences on place pilgrimage constitutes the final leg of the journey—that of reflecting, selecting, and meditating on physical and internal peregrination. Students can record everything from organizing the trip and gathering material needed for the excursion to noting experiences both physical and emotional on the journey to the pilgrimage site. Once at the shrine—sacred or secular—students could be assigned to sit quietly for some time to jot down their reactions to the space, as well as their spiritual responses or quotidian thoughts.

Keeping a semester-long journal helps students to document their responses to the material; a final project could ask them to re-read the journal, analyzing it as a pilgrimage to their own knowledge. Writing a piece of creative non-fiction in which they reflect on an experience in their lives that functions literally or symbolically as a pilgrimage sparks student interest. Secular examples abound, such as visits to the Berlin Wall, Nazi concentration camps, the killing fields of Armenia and Cambodia, or the Viet Nam War Memorial on the US National Mall. An annual visit to one's grandparents or a once in a lifetime trip to Graceland may stir up emotions comparable to those of the pilgrim heading off to a holy shrine. Among the many non-Christian pilgrimage goals include Jerusalem's Western Wall, Mecca, or Kusinara, India, where Buddha is said to have entered the Great Passing Away.²³

Creative options allow for some students to exercise their imagination, while also requiring a sound understanding of the material studied. A student could be required to tell an incident in the pilgrimage of Langland's *Will* in the voice or style of a different writer such as Dante or Marie de France. Through the experience of becoming a pilgrimage writer herself, the student embodies the activity of the pilgrimage poet, experiencing the anguish and joy of writing pilgrimage.

Concrete Experience: Kinetic Learning through Undertaking a Place Pilgrimage

Using experiential learning while teaching *Piers Plowman*—specifically, taking students on a pilgrimage—can make them active agents of what may seem like an irrelevant and ancient practice by rendering it a somatically vibrant event. Undergoing an actual pilgrimage functions as a vernacular act of experience so that students themselves understand ritual process. The act of becoming pilgrim actors themselves textures students' learning. It enables them to viscerally engage with medieval pilgrimage literature, consisting of a wide variety of genres, from theological commentaries, itineraries, and interior reflections to remembered travelogues, visionary constructions of the Holy Land, and poetic fantasies. Like their medieval counterparts reenacting a saint's passion through ritual and liturgical drama, contemporary students participate more fully as creative performers through physical movement and consequent reception of art, architecture, and material space.

The Institute for Pilgrimage Studies at the College of William & Mary annually organizes a Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage for students; George Greenia, Professor of Hispanic Studies, has enthusiastically and generously regaled pilgrimage scholars with his organizational wisdom for this daunting journey.²⁴ More modestly, I regularly plan a pilgrimage for my students so that they can experience physically, emotionally, and spiritually the process that they had only intellectually encountered in the classroom. To prepare students for a place pilgrimage, it helps to have them read the accounts of historical pilgrims' journeys detailing the hardships of voyage and travel. Possibilities include works by Felix Fabri, the late fifteenth-century Dominican, or the Anglo-Saxon Saewulf. Jewish and Muslim travelers' accounts likewise provide diverse religious perspectives, though the trials the traveler experiences may vary little from that of the Christian palmer.²⁵ Students can gauge and compare their own trials to those of their medieval brethren.

One year I took students to the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the Christ of the Hills Monastery in Blanco, Texas. At the time, it was associated with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). We left San Marcos, Texas, passing Purgatory Road, and

drove along the Devil's Backbone. At last on the hillside we saw a dozen white crosses. The monk I had contacted suggested parking at the bottom of the hill, so that we could orient ourselves inwardly as we climbed. It was only a short distance, but above we were rewarded with a panoramic view of the Texas Hill Country. The transition from university along the Dantean purgatory pathway to a religious enclave allowed us to adjust our orientation from a strictly secular analysis to becoming attuned to religious sensitivities. Our pilgrimage was underway.

In 1985 an Icon of the Virgin Mary was discovered weeping tears of myrrh by one of the monks. In fact, the present church was already being built when the icon began to weep in an older, smaller, original church building, which became the shrine. The monks took this as a sign that the icon wished to stay housed in that building. The day we arrived, the shrine was flooded with the scent of incense. Although only about 18" by 12", the icon dominated the room. It lay in a frame surrounded by jewelry—crosses, rings, bracelets—left by pilgrims. Along the bottom edge of the frame was a strip of aluminum foil, which protected the frame and icon that pilgrims kiss. Above this foil lay about two dozen cotton balls, collecting the myrrh as it dripped down. The icon wept daily, in general, though in no particular pattern we were told, and sometimes several times in a day. Although it was not weeping while we were there, the shrine did inspire a sense of respect and divine mystery.

As my class and I left the hilltop monastery of Christ of the Hills, one student said, "It's a glimpse of medieval life in the Texas Hill Country." Indeed, in the heart of Texas one can find a window into the Middle Ages, even if the monk we were meeting had to be paged and the gift shop took credit cards. I should add that the monastery subsequently came under investigation when several monks were convicted of sexual abuse; the icon has since been exposed as a fraud.²⁶ Surely Chaucer's Pardoner would not be surprised to hear that.

Options abound for local place pilgrimages one can undertake. There is, for example, is the most famous Texas pilgrimage site of all, the Alamo. It's even called the Shrine. "Saints'

relics” are laid out in glass covered cases as though in reliquaries—Colonel Travis' razor and Jim Bowie's wallet. The faithful walk in a reverent hush through the mission, where men are required to remove their hats. I have also recommended that students go on a labyrinth walk.²⁷ Churches throughout the United States are rediscovering the spiritual uses of this twelfth-century mystical tool. The idea behind the church labyrinth is that it represents the artistry of God as a kind of cosmic labyrinth. The linear, unicursal path promises moral surety in the instability of this world. Those students who walk the labyrinth find it a remarkable experience. As it is practiced today in labyrinth workshops, the pilgrimage is made into an aestheticized experience, appealing to all the senses.

On a study abroad program to Canterbury, I have taken students on an eight-mile segment of the Pilgrims' Way. The section between Wye and Chilham is particularly bucolic and conducive to meditation. As we walk, I tell my students how the Pilgrim's Way from Winchester to Canterbury was on the south side below the height of the Downs, the rolling hills in southern England, in order to dry out the muddy path with what sun there was. We celebrate our arrival in Chilham by enjoying a pint at the White Horse pub. After the train ride back to Canterbury, we wander the streets, packed like Coney Island. A long-haired guy plays a slinky Didjeridoo. Acrobats toss flaming wands up in the air. There are mobs of people. We make our way to Mercery Lane and through the gate topped by a green statue of Jesus Christ, in time for Evensong at the cathedral. In the Middle Ages, Canterbury Cathedral was a “theater of memory” where pilgrims reenacted Thomas's martyrdom and cultic history.²⁸ For my students, after the service, we likewise pass on through to the spot of St. Thomas' relic sanctuary, now designated by a lit candle showing where his bones had once been housed. And people, of differing faiths and walks of life, gaze in meditation. Many students claimed that day to be a highpoint of the trip abroad. Undergoing this journey empowered my students to become true pilgrims themselves.

While the focus of the course describe above has been Christian medieval pilgrimage, I have taught *Piers* in other contexts likewise interlaced with pilgrimage, though not confined to a "conventional" goal such as a religious space or one infused with a sacred aura. Non-conventional pilgrimage sites can prove as or even more useful for elucidating Langland's arguments. The inclusion of *Piers* Prologue-Passus VI has proved vital in my course devoted to issues of sustainability, ecocriticism, and material ecopoetics in which we analyze waste (garbage, filth, excess) in literature. The material waste and economic excess endemic to Passus II-IV with Lady Meed shows how the poor and powerless become exploited by the unscrupulous:

For these aren men on this molde that moste harme worcheth
 To the pore peple that parcelmele buggen;
 For they poysoun the peple priveliche and oft
 Thei rychen thorw regraterye and rentes hem buggen
 With that the pore peple schulde put in here wombe.
 ["For these are the ones in the world who work most harm
 To the poor people that purchase small portions;
 Because they poison the people privily and often
 They get rich through their retail sales and buy rental property
 With what the poor people should be putting in their bellies"] (III.80-84).

The financial exploitation of the disempowered can easily be seen in protests against the privileged 1% and Occupy Wall Street movement: "Langland castigates in the late fourteenth century what has sprouted full-blown in late capitalism: free-floating money corrupts."²⁹

Teaching *Piers Plowman* in spring 2016 when Bernie Sanders was running for president on a platform protesting wealth inequity, and as the Panama Papers were being made public, exposing offshore companies, resonated greatly with my students. Langland's protests against corruption are, sadly, always all too relevant no matter which semester I teach the poem.

Two pilgrimages were undertaken in two separate versions of this waste course, though not to “classic” pilgrimage shrines. The first was a trip to the Cathedral of Junk, sitting in a suburban neighborhood of south Austin, Texas, fashioned by a self-taught artist. Consisting of thousands of pieces of “junk”—everything from toilets to old CD’s—the attraction has been used for weddings, birthday parties, and just the casual visitor. While a cathedral generally consists of a sacred space, this refuse pile of rejected garbage, sustainably reused by the creator, soars to lofty heights. It can even inspire a sense of wonder and awe when read in the context of *Piers*: the angel’s admonition to the Commons not to “strip law bare” (*Prologue* 137), reminds the careful medieval and modern reader to provide gleanings for the poor and disenfranchised. The Cathedral of Junk perhaps perfectly realizes a Judeo-Christian ethos of charity, literally showing how “[t]he stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22)—or even the television or car bumper that had been tossed out.

Piers himself suggests that devout activity can be seen in humble and quotidian activities. "Ac ye myghte travaille as Treuthe wolde and take mete and huyre/ To kepe kyne in the felde, the corne fro the bestes,/ Diken or delven or dyngen upon sheves,/ Or helpe make mortar, or bere mukke afelde" ["But you could work as Truth wants you to and earn wages and bread/ By keeping cows in the field, the corn from the cattle,/ Making ditches or dikes or dinging on sheaves,/ Or helping make mortar, or spreading muck afield"] (VI.139-142). This speech provokes Wastoure to immediately become wrathful. Wasters cause destruction in Passus VI, where they “affect others who want to work.”³⁰ To help us think about the role each one of us has in producing and possibility minimizing waste and our roles as wasters, I trekked with my students to a dumpster located at a nearby historically black university that has trademarked the slogan: “Green is the new Black.” The Dumpster Project,³¹ generated with students, resulted in Dr. Jeff Wilson—aka Professor Dumpster—living in a dumpster for a year to make a case of sustainable and small living. One of my students, Matt Hudson, found the integration of physical pilgrimage—to the dumpster itself—and *Piers Plowman* powerfully effective.

The class's visit to Professor Jeff Wilson's ambitious experiment on sustainability at Huston-Tillotson University provided an exciting opportunity to see what living on less might actually look like. While *Piers Plowman's* focus is set on the archetypal manifestations of "wasteful" sins such as gluttony and greed, Professor Wilson's renovation of a dumpster into an actual living space points to a subversion of what we normally associate with waste. By transforming a dumpster into what amounts to a homely bedroom, Professor Wilson suggests a more intimate relationship between the things we like to nurture and stay connected to and the things we'd rather forget and throw away. Getting inside the dumpster with my classmates and discussing how much space one person might actually need played a practical part in our visit: we were able to see first hand the curious setbacks one might actually face in such an honest approach to sustainability.

This reflection indicates how Matt subtly engaged with Langland's poem in the context of issues vital for our planet's survival. For my student Andres, the physical pilgrimage to a humble dumpster "transformed the dumpster project (for me) from the theoretical to the real. It was no longer just something I had read about, or some cool idea.... Occupying the space and meeting the professor made it all real suddenly." Experiential learning catalyzed authentic insight. Just as the humble ploughman Piers becomes an avatar of Christ, or the privy in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* becomes a shrine to the murdered clergeon, this pilgrimage to a dumpster intended for refuse becomes an odyssey to an ethical life.

Abstract Conceptualization: Experiential Learning through Technology

Experiential learning can be aided through technology, from the use of databases to transforming the classroom into a virtual shrine in which artistic images festoon the screen. Langland alludes to the immensely popular shrine of Walsingham, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, early in the *Prologue*: "Heremites on an heap with hoken staves/ Wenten to Walsyngham, and here wenches after" ["A heap of hermits with hooked staffs/ Went off to Walsingham, with their

wenches behind them”] (*Prologue* 54-5). This line alone allows the teacher to discuss what hermits are. Additionally, the word “staves” opens up a discussion on the common dress of a pilgrim by which he would be instantly recognizable—with the staff, sclavein (tunic), and scrip (pouch). “Wenches” suggests numerous connotations to modern students, mainly pejorative ones. Here you might bring up the *Middle English Dictionary* online in the classroom and show students how to use it. There are negative connotations to “wench(e)” such as in Passus XIX where the sexual inference is deliberate: “Righte so Pieres the Plowman peyneth hym to tulye/ As wel for a wastour and wenches of the stuwes” [“Just so Piers the Plowman takes pains to plow/ As well for a waster and wenches of the brothel”] (434-5). But Langland also uses the word to categorize Mercy: “...[Where] out of the west coste a wenche, as me thoughte....Mercy hight that mayde...” [“Where out of the west a wench, as I thought....Mercy was that maid’s name”] (XVIII.113, 115). Just as hermits and wenches should avoid one another while on holy pilgrimage to a shrine with a drop of the Virgin’s milk, students can see that they should avoid making “false friends” among cognates between Middle and Modern English.

A poetic work like *Piers* functions both as a primary source document and as an imagined pilgrimage text. In reconstructing the past, historians find the use of creative works problematic. Yet observations by students due to their acquisition of knowledge of historical context provide a means for opening up *Piers*. The practical and historical aspects of pilgrimage ground for the student the allegorical superstructure Langland constructs in *Piers Plowman*. Dee Dyas has created, through the Centre for Christianity and Culture at Universities of York and Nottingham, a CD-Rom that can help contextualize *Piers* in terms of patterns of pilgrimage and issues of person and place. I found it extremely useful with its ample visual material.³² One student pointed out that “primary source documents” include everything from *Inquisitions Post Mortem* to personal letters (the Pastons).

Experiential learning includes the manipulation and viewing of material objects that enhance students’ understanding of medieval pilgrimage. Pilgrim badge reproductions students

pass around the classroom allow for tactile learning; “obscene” ones prove particularly provocative. The Kunera Database³³ has hundreds of pilgrim badges one can show in class. Images of shrines and cathedrals capture students’ imaginations. For example, the page on Pilgrimage in Medieval Art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website³⁴ allows the instructor to show diverse crafted items stemming from pilgrimage practice. Ivory plaques to reliquary caskets allow for spontaneous discussion about visceral and visual items that shaped pilgrim spirituality. Images from the *Belles Heures* of Jean of France³⁵ permit an exploration into private devotional practice. Women in particular used Books of Hours for interiorized pilgrimage, thus opening in the classroom the question of women and spatial practice. Projecting such images constructs a visual journey for the student, transforming the classroom into a jewel-like shrine.

Active Experimentation after Concrete Experience: Linking Students’ Long-standing Interests with *Piers*

This course is ideal for team-teaching should an institution support it. One can easily engage colleagues from virtually any department in the Humanities to guest-lecture on their discipline’s approach to pilgrimage or on topics relating to pilgrimage in their special field – whether art history, classics, religion, anthropology, modern languages, music, or history. I regularly invite a colleague from the Anthropology Department, who teaches a course entitled *Magic, Ritual and Religion*, to participate in a discussion with the students about Victor and Edith Turners' seminal theories about pilgrimage and subsequent reception.³⁶

Variant course content for a pilgrimage class could expand its horizons to incorporate medieval Islamic and Jewish pilgrimage (see Ibn Battutah, Benjamin of Tudela, and Rabbi Rabbi Pitachia) in order to understand the complex permutations of pilgrimage as a concept not limited to a strictly medieval Catholic tradition. One can go beyond the medieval period to include various works of pilgrims from other eras, such as Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The concept of spatial relocation leading to a new self lies at the heart of traditional religious pilgrimage, but is

also present as a motif, overt and structural, in much American literature, such as William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* and the Puritan Mary Rowlandson's spiritual journey during her captivity.

A viewing of “road movies” builds on the pilgrimage ethos. Films centered on the journey to Santiago de Compostela evoke strong positive responses in the classroom. *The Way* (2010; dir. Emilio Estevez) starring Martin Sheen demonstrates how pilgrims can possess diverse motives for making the grueling trek across northern Spain. *The Milky Way* (1969; dir. Luis Buñuel) follows the story of two pilgrims from France to Santiago. Given Buñuel’s playfulness, however, my students found it difficult to understand, though quite amusing and even fun. *A Canterbury Tale* (1944; dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger) ties the sacred aura of Canterbury to World War II England. Since no film of *Piers Plowman* yet exists, an assignment could entail having a student or students write a screenplay or even film a scene.

Multiple examples exist illustrating how pilgrimage continues to resonate in our culture. For example, September 11th has revived pilgrimage in a “deliberately specializing way,”³⁷ rendering it a meaningful term in our contemporary discourse. The field where the plane crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania has been called “sacred ground.”³⁸ The Statue of Liberty has been called a “newly resonant icon” and a “sacred site,” with those visiting it designated as “pilgrims.”³⁹ Ground Zero itself has been called “holy ground.”⁴⁰ Mourners “deserve a formal place to end their pilgrimage.”⁴¹ One article described how wreckage of the World Trade Center was carried to Afghanistan and buried at an air base there. These pieces were referred to as “relics.”⁴² This is not to suggest that pilgrimage is uncomplicated; in fact, Ground Zero has become a “contested site”⁴³ in terms of how the space has been memorialized. Pilgrimage may be an archaic element within our supposedly secular society, but still manifests itself as a cultural necessity for our grieving nation. Witness the makeshift shrine to the Boston Marathon bombing victims of April 15, 2013. One visitor to the memorial commented on how the “pilgrimage is about moving on.”⁴⁴

After seeing how pilgrimage still pervades our contemporary American culture, I encourage students to think about integrating their particular interests with the material we have read for their reports. All their research integrated *Piers* within the context of an already established passion of the student, thus making writing about Langland less stressful for them. In an honors undergraduate seminar, I had students majoring in departments from all over campus. A theatre history student created a costume board for pilgrim dress and handed around swatches of material, tying it into the “shroudes” [“clothes”; literally “shrouds”] (*Prologue* 2) of Will. A discussion of clothing inevitably leads us to discuss how the soiled dress of Haukyn the Actyf Man [Active Man] functions on both the literal and allegorical levels (XIII.272-459). A premed student giving a report about medicine contrasted healing relics with the medical practice Haukyn resorts to: “the souter of Southwerke, or of Shoredyche Dame Emme/ [For] Goddes worde [ne grace] gaf me nevere bote,/ But thorw a charme had I chaunce, and my chief hele” [“the shoemaker of Southwerk or the Shoreditch woman, Dame Emma./ For neither God’s word nor his grace ever gave me help,/ But through a charm my cure occurred, and I recovered my health”] (XIII.339-41). When we looked at the pilgrim *pastourelle* and *cantigas*, a music composition student presented a history of early music, introducing us to such concepts as monophonic versus polyphonic music and pitch intonation. At one point he even had us singing in response to the *Kyrie*. As Kathleen Ashley and Marilyn Deegan point out in their sumptuous new volume *Being a Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago*, music was “one of the most powerful practices of pilgrimage.”⁴⁵ In addition to playing music from rituals performed at shrines or pilgrim songs (*cantigas*) so students can hear what pilgrims may have heard while walking, the instructor can point out how in Dante’s vision of Christ’s death, the cross inspires music and not language (*Par*.XIV.118-132). Likewise, at the conclusion of Passus XVIII (lines 407-424), language gives way to the transcendent and divine music of the spheres. A tonal foundation supports the linguistic architecture of poetry.

One student majoring in Special Education passionately explored disability in the Middle Ages, a topic integrally linked with pilgrimage given all the ailing people eager for cures. Wit teaches Will how Holy Church should tend to “[Fautes and] foles that fauten inwitte” [“Infants and idiots in whom inwit is lacking”] (IX.68), while Christ argues for tending to the poor and “croked” [“crippled”] (XI.192). One of the more impressive reports involved stained glass windows. This student went on a tour of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in San Antonio where her father was the contractor undertaking reconstruction work. She ended up interviewing the owner of a stained glass company, thus enabling her to better contextualize the condemnation of Meed's comments as prideful in Passus III: “Ac God to alle good folke suche gravyng defendeth—/ To writen in wyndowes of here wel-dedes,/ On aventure pruyde be peynted there and pompe of the world” [“But God forbids such engraving to all good people—/ Inscribing in stained glass the story of their beneficence,/ Lest pride be portrayed there and pomp of this world”] (64-66). These reports, cultivated from the life interest of students, integrate *Piers* organically, thus making the monstrous specter of the poem less menacing. Linking medieval culture with students' personal lives is not simply an exercise in making old literature "relevant" and therefore worthy of study. As one student comments, “Overall, I really just learned how pilgrimage is everywhere! It really does drive home that the topic is literally seen in almost everything, past and present!”

Conclusion

Teaching *Piers Plowman* in the context of pilgrimage can enhance one's pedagogical tools – through the use of unusual “texts” such as the physical act of walking. Teaching *experientially* allows students of differing backgrounds to develop their own authority. Asserting her authority through experience was a radical gesture for the Wife of Bath (III.1-2). I think as scholars we tend to be uncomfortable with trying to understand the past through experience. Yet some cultural artifacts from the past, such as pilgrimage, can be understood on multiple levels. One of them is through actual experience itself, the kind of “kynde knowynge”

[“natural knowledge”] for which Will searches. Only then can students bear witness to a ritual process, one that informs the literature produced in the medieval period.

Other Possible Primary Texts:

Elene in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. S. A. J. Bradley. London: J. M. Dent, 1991. 164-197.

Egeria's Travels. Trans. and ed. John Wilkinson. London: SPCK, 1971.

Hugeberc of Hildesheim. *The Hodoeporicon of St. Willibald*, translated by C. H. Talbot, from *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986: 92-106.

Ruiz, Juan. *The Book of Good Love*, Trans. Elizabeth Drayson MacDonald. London: J. M. Dent, 1999.

¹ Many thanks to Thomas A. Goodmann and James A. Kilfoyle for offering constructive suggestions for this essay. Source suggestions thanks to Suzanne Yeager, Shamma Boyarin, and Shayne Aaron Legassie. Students like Matt Hudson and Andres Lopez contributed enormously.

² *Experience, though no written authority /Were in this world, is good enough for me...*(III.1-2) Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition, edited by Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987); an interlinear translation of *The Canterbury Tales*, from which this translation comes, can be found at <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/tr-index.htm>.

³ All quotes and translations from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁴ Some good general books for background on pilgrimage include the following: Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: Dent, 1977) and *Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997); Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975); Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage, c. 700-c.1500* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁵ Diana Webb, *Pilgrims in Medieval England* (Hambleton Press, 2001) and *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London: Tauris, 2001); Brett Edward Whalen, *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700-1500* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001); James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction Based on the B-Text. A Fully Revised Edition* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); C. David Benson, *Public Piers Plowman: Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

⁶ William Meltzer, trans., *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela* (Italcia, 1993).

⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno; Paradiso; Purgatorio*; all translated by Allen Mandelbaum (NY: Bantam, 1984); Guillaume de Deguileville, *The Pilgrimage of Human Life*, translated by Eugene Clasby (New York: Garland, 1992); Langland, *Piers Plowman*, edited by Robertson and Shepherd: this is my edition of choice; it has a facing-page translation and excellent apparatus; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, edited by Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005); Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, translated by Lynn Staley (NY: Norton, 2000). I have varied the course by using texts that are listed under "Other Possible Primary Texts" appear at the close of this essay.

⁸ *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths: Two Exemplary Biographies for Anglo-Norman Women*, translated by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, and Glyn S. Burgess, (London: J. M. Dent/Everyman, 1996), includes Clemence of Barking's *Life of Saint Catherine* and Anonymous's *Life of Saint Lawrence*; Marie de France; *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*, translated by Michael J. Curley (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1997).

⁹ John A. Alford, "The Design of the Poem." In *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, edited by John A. Alford (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1988): 46 [29-65].

¹⁰ Simpson 134.

¹¹ David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2014).

<http://proquest.safaribooksonline.com/book/social-sciences/9780133892512>. Web. Accessed 1 July 2015.

¹² R. Howard Bloch, et al., eds., *Rethinking the New Medievalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.)

¹³ For more about the field called, variously, new materialism or ecomaterialism, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁴ Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 7 [1-22].

¹⁵ Jane Bennett, "The Elements," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 4.1 (2013): 109.

¹⁶ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Introduction" in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁷ Jeffrey J. Cohen, "Introduction: All Things," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, D.C.: Oliphant Books, 2012), 7.

¹⁸ Iovino and Oppermann, "Introduction," 4, quoting Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 174.

¹⁹ Jan-Dirk Müller, "The Identity of a Text," in Bloch, et al., 148 [136-150].

²⁰ See Ursula Peters, "The *Pèlerinage* Corpus in the European Middle Ages: Processes of Retextualization Reflected in the Prologues," in Bloch, et al., 218-235.

²¹ Anonymous student evaluation comment.

²² Susan Morrison, *Excrement in the Late Middle Age: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 72.

²³ Thanks to the anonymous reader who suggested a number of these examples.

²⁴ <http://www.wm.edu/sites/pilgrimage/>.

²⁵ Possibilities include: Felix Fabri, *The Book of the Wanderings of Felix Fabri*, translated by Aubrey Stewart, multiple volumes (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1986); *Jerusalem Pilgrimage 1099-1185*, edited by John Wilkinson with Joyce Hill and W. F. Ryan (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1988), with numerous narratives, including the Anglo-Saxon Saewulf; Elkan Nathan Adler, ed., *Jewish Travelers in the Middle Ages: 19 Firsthand Accounts* (NY: Dover,

1930/1987); Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* (NightinGale Resources, 2004); Ibn Battutah, *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, edited by Tim Mackintosh-Smith (London: Picador, 2002); Rabbi Pitachia. *Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon*, translated by. A. Benisch (London: Trubner & Co, 1856):
<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp26098>. Web. Accessed 22 June 2015.

²⁶ <http://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/felonious-monk/>.

²⁷ See Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1995).

²⁸ Anne F. Harris, "Pilgrimage, Performance, and Stained Glass at Canterbury Cathedral" In *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles* edited by Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe, 2 volumes (Leiden: E. J. Brill Press, 2004): 267 [245-281].

²⁹ Morrison 2015 71.

³⁰ Morrison 2008 145.

³¹ See both <http://greenisthenewblack.org/> and The Dumpster Project <http://dumpsterproject.org/>.

³² *Pilgrimage. A CD-ROM Teaching and Learning Resource*. CD-ROM. From Christianity & Culture at St John's College, Nottingham and the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, 2006. See <http://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/>.

³³ <http://www.kunera.nl/Default.aspx>.

³⁴ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pilg/hd_pilg.htm.

³⁵ <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/54.1.1>.

³⁶ Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978); see *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, edited by John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991).

³⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122.

³⁸ Francis X. Clines, "At Rural Crash Site, a Museum in the Making," *The New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2001: B8.

³⁹ Barbara Stewart, "Tourists Defy Slow Season and Line Up for Ferry as Liberty Island Reopens," *The New York Times* December 21, 2001: A21.

⁴⁰ Galen Guengerich, Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2001.

⁴¹ Editorial, Unsigned, "The Pilgrimage to Lower Manhattan," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2001.

⁴² Amy Waldman, "New Yorkers Carry Aid, and Relics, to Kabul," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2001: B3.

⁴³ Herbert Muschamp, "With Viewing Platforms, a Dignified Approach to Ground Zero," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2001: B8.

⁴⁴ Jack Encarnacao, "Making Final Pilgrimage," *Boston Herald*, June 24, 2013.

http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/local_coverage/2013/06/making_final_pilgrimage. Web. Accessed 21 August 2013.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Ashley and Marilyn Deegan, *Being a Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago* (Farnham and Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2009), 216. Cantigas available on CD. See also Alfonso X, King of Castille and Leon, *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, The Wise: A Translation of the "Cantigas de Santa Maria,"* translated by Kathleen Kulp-Hill; introduction by Connie L. Scarborough, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, vol. 173 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000). Other music related works include William D. Paden, trans. and ed., *The Medieval Pastourelle*, Vols I and II (New York: Garland, 1987).

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