Reading *Piers Plowman*

*Piers Plowman* is a late fourteenth-century work by William Langland, roughly contemporary with Chaucer and the *Pearl* poet. Like *Pearl*, it is an allegorical, religious dream poem, but much longer and more complex, and dealing with social issues rather than personal ones.

A few basic facts:
- It exists in three distinct versions, known as the A, B, and C texts. You are reading the B text.
- It is written in alliterative verse (similar in some ways to *Pearl* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). The Norton critical edition gives you the original and a modern translation on facing pages.
- It is divided into Visions (separate dream sequences) and Passus (Latin for "steps"—structurally, equivalent to "chapters").

General tips for reading:
- The narrator (whose name, we eventually learn, is Will) has a series of dream visions and sometimes a dream-within-a-dream. These dreams symbolically address various social and spiritual issues. Expect a lot of biblical/theological references and historical references. (The glossary on pages 627-33 may be helpful.)
- Hopefully *Pearl* has prepared you (as much as you can be prepared) for this general approach. However, this is a more complex and challenging work, and it also deals more with contemporary issues, so you may sometimes feel bewildered by the structure or symbolism. Not to worry; that's why we have class.
- As a guiding principle, think about what condition the dreamer is in or what he is thinking about when the dream begins, and how what he sees and hears in the dream might relate to that, and we'll take it from there.

Some resources:
- As noted on the syllabus, the Preface (xi-xv) and the Summary (beginning on 495) in our edition will prove useful, probably the preface early on and the summary alongside each part as you read it.
- Introduction to medieval allegory, link to some study questions: http://cola.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl512/allegory.html

Some specific things to watch for / think about on the back.
For Mar. 14: In Passus I, the dreamer gets instruction from Holy Church. Try to put into your own words a few of the lessons she gives him. Assuming that Holy Church is an authoritative figure telling him what he needs to know, why does the poem need to continue?

For Mar. 16: Passus II-IV form a self-contained narrative about the marriage of Mede. Be sure to read the footnote on p. 25 about what the word "mede" can mean and see if that helps make sense of what the issue is with her marriage. If you can, follow that through to the implications of Mede’s behavior for both the social world and the Church. Passus V begins Vision 2, includes a number of important elements:
- We meet the title character for the first time. What is your sense of what he may represent?
- In Passus V, a pilgrimage is planned. We have already seen Langland critical of pilgrimages. How is this one similar/different?

For Mar. 28:
- Before the pilgrimage, there is a plowing scene in Passus VI. Why must this be accomplished first? What does this sequence add to our sense of Langland’s social views?
- Piers then receives a pardon. What does this section add to our sense of Langland’s religious values and beliefs? Why does Piers tear up the pardon?
- We get a bit of the dreamer awake at the end of this vision. What has he learned? What is he going to do with it?
- Note that we are skipping most of the third dream, which runs from Passus VIII through Passus XII. As Vision 4 begins, notice that our dreamer is awake for a while (and notice for how long). How are things going for him in his waking state?
- An important new figure Will meets as he dreams again is Haukin (enters on p. 213). What is his problem?

For Mar. 30:
- This completes Haukin’s story. What does he learn from Conscience and Patience? Is he better off at the end of this Passus than when we met him? How (not)? What does Will or the reader learn from this section?

Watch for an inner dream from pages 273 - 281.

For Apr. 4: The going may get easier here as the dreamer witnesses Biblical history. (If not, bring questions!)

For Apr. 6: There is a lot of repetition in this Vision—of Christ’s life, a pardon, plowing. Think about why these are being reprise and how they are different this time. Also, consider the state the dreamer is in at the end.