

‘A true and good worker’:
Visions of the Ploughman

Paul Hardwick
Leeds Trinity University



William Blake, *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*
(1810 – detail)

Geoffrey Chaucer

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales

Modern English

When in April the sweet showers fall
That pierce March's drought to the root and all
And bathed every vein in liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower;
When Zephyr also has with his sweet breath,
Filled again, in every holt and heath,
The tender shoots and leaves, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,
And many little birds make melody
That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)
Then folk do long to go on pilgrimage,
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,
To distant shrines well known in distant lands.
And specially from every shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury went,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek
Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak

Original (late 14th century)

Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(so priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of engelond to caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

“Of Chaucer’s characters, as described in his Canterbury Tales, some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter.” – William Blake



Geoffrey Chaucer

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales



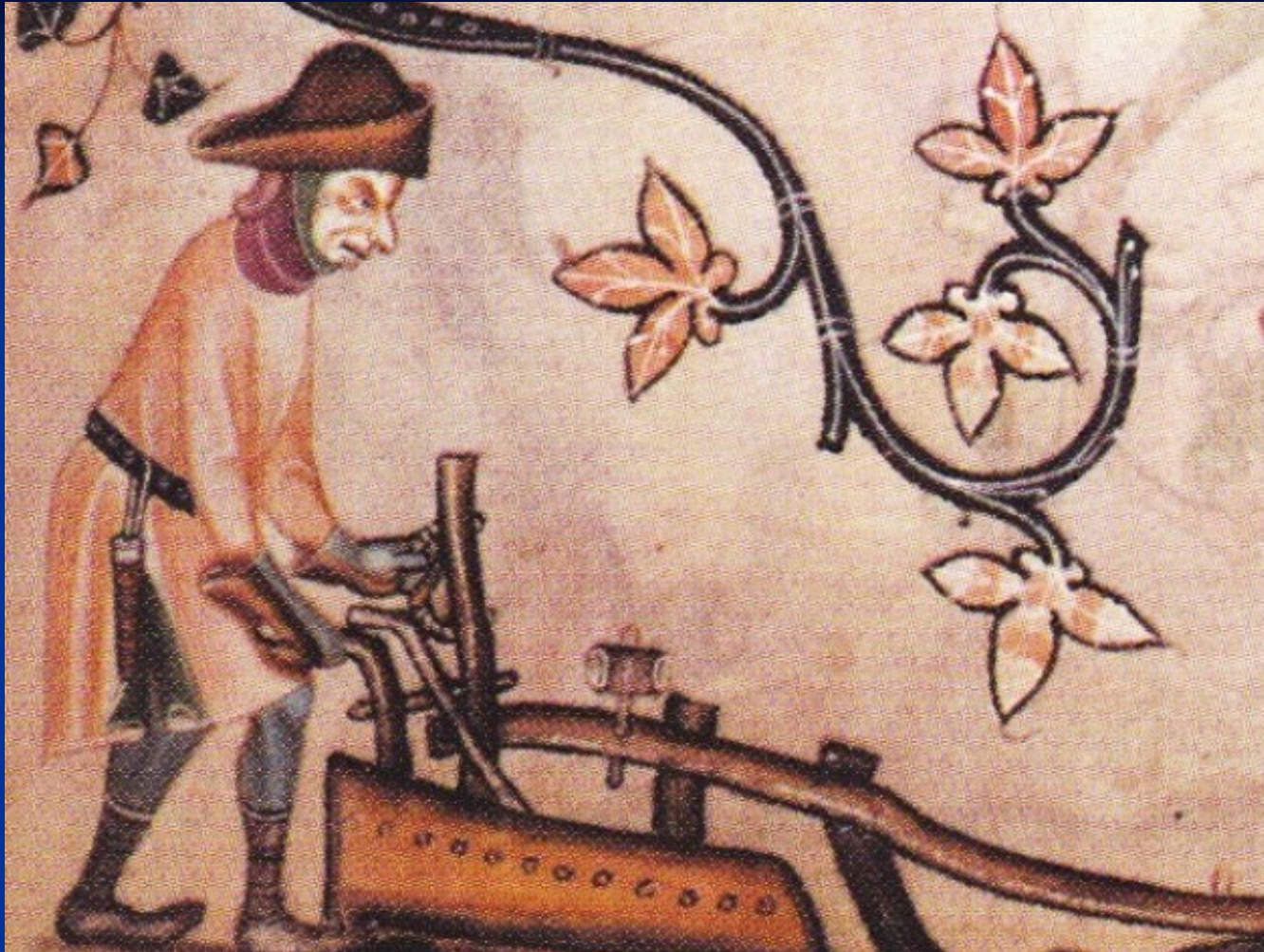
- With hym ther was a **PLOWMAN**, was his brother,
With him there was a PLOWMAN, who was his brother,
That hadde ylad of dong ful many a fother;
Who had hauled very many a cartload of dung;
A trewe swynkere and a good was he,
He was a true and good worker,
Lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee.
Living in peace and perfect love.
God loved he best with al his hoole herte
He loved God best with all his whole heart
At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
At all times, whether it pleased or pained him,
And thanne his neighebor right as hymselfe.
And then (he loved) his neighbour exactly as himself.
He wolde thresshe, and therto dyke and delve,
He would thresh, and moreover make ditches and dig,
For Cristes sake, for every povre wight,
For Christ's sake, for every poor person,
Withouten hire, if it lay in his myght.
Without payment, if it lay in his power.
His tithes payde he ful faire and wel,
■ He paid his tithes completely and well,
Bothe of his propre swynk and his catel.
Both of his own labor and of his possessions.
In a tabard he rood upon a mere.
He rode in a tabard upon a mare.

If God's peasant pays attention to the ploughshare as it goes along, and if he thus carries on the work of cultivation with his hand, then the fruit which in due course the fertile field will bear and the grape will stand abundant in their due seasons. Now, however, scarcely a farmer wishes to do such work; instead he wickedly loafs everywhere.

An evil disposition is widespread among the common people, and I suspect that the servants of the plough are often responsible for it. For they are sluggish, they are scarce, and they are grasping. For the very little they do they demand the highest pay. Now that this practice has come about, see how one peasant insists upon more than two demanded in days gone by. Yet a short time ago one performed more service than three do now... God and Nature have ordained that they shall serve, but neither knows how to keep them within bounds. Everyone owning land complains in his turn about these people; each stands in need of them and none has control over them. The peasants of old did not scorn God with impunity or usurp a noble worldly rank. Rather, God imposed servile work upon them, so that the peasantry might subdue its proud feelings; and liberty, which remained secure for freemen, ruled over the serfs and subjected them to its law.

The experience of yesterday makes us better informed as to what perfidy the unruly serf possesses.

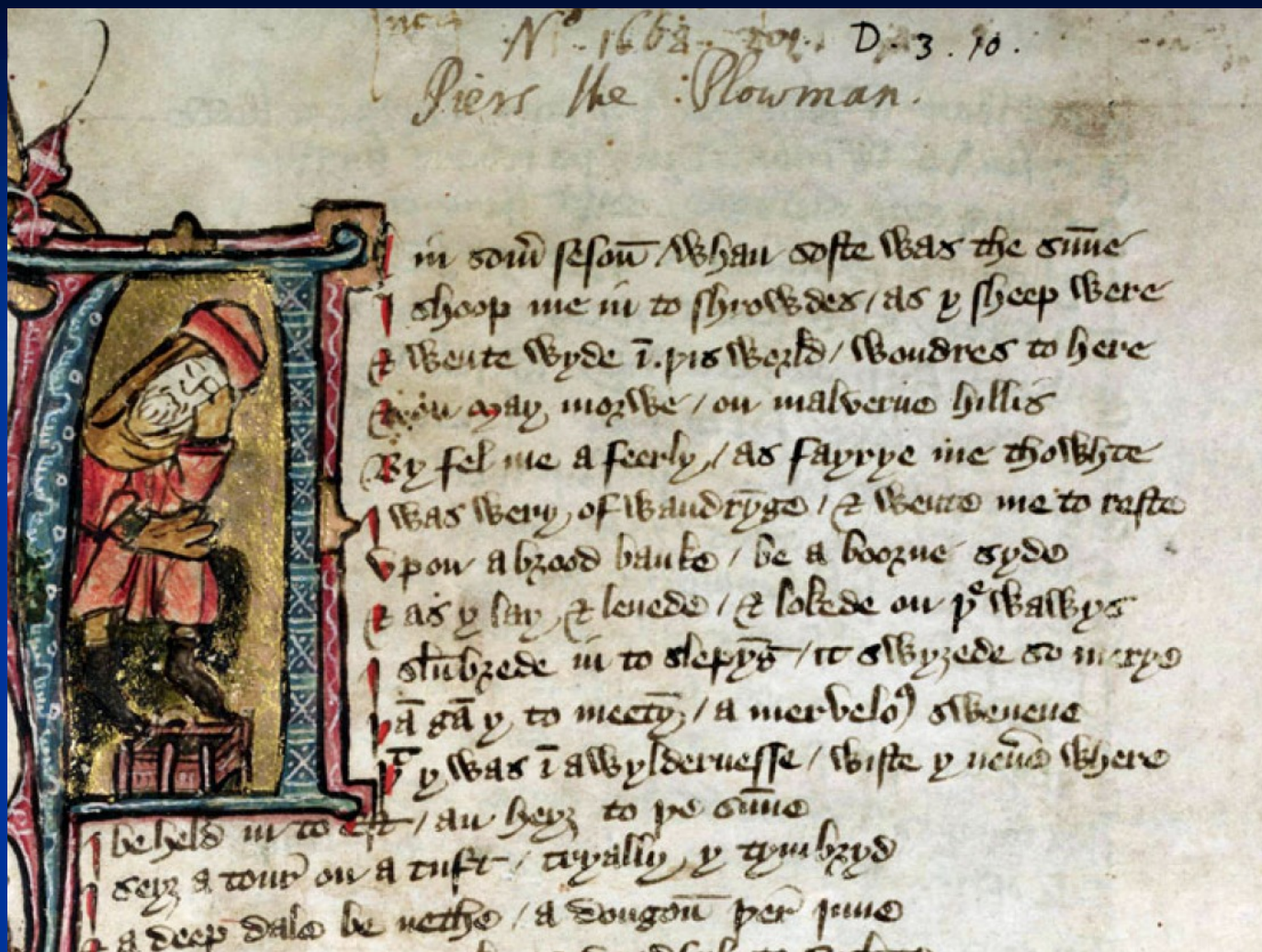
John Gower (1380s)



The Luttrell Psalter (mid-14th century)



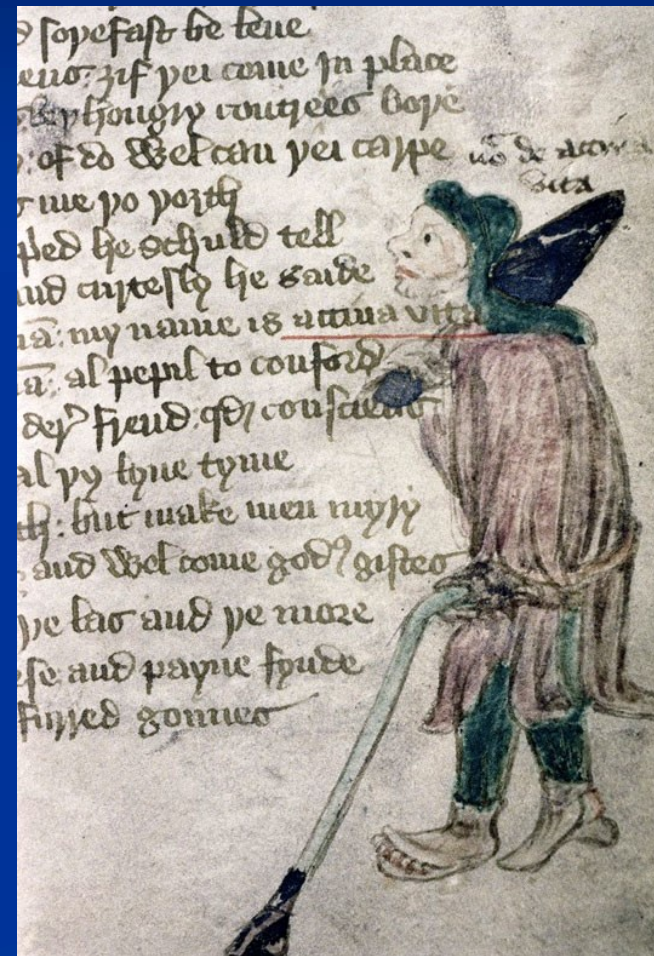
Lincoln Cathedral misericord
(late 14th century)



William Langland, *Prologue to Piers Plowman*
(1360s-1380s)

Piers Plowman

early 15th-century manuscript



Early 20th-century illustrations for children:

Garth Jones for Florence Converse, *Long Will* (1903)

John R. Skelton for H. E. Marshall, *English Literature* (1909)



I will come down from the hill-top.



'Langland dreamed a wondrous dream.'

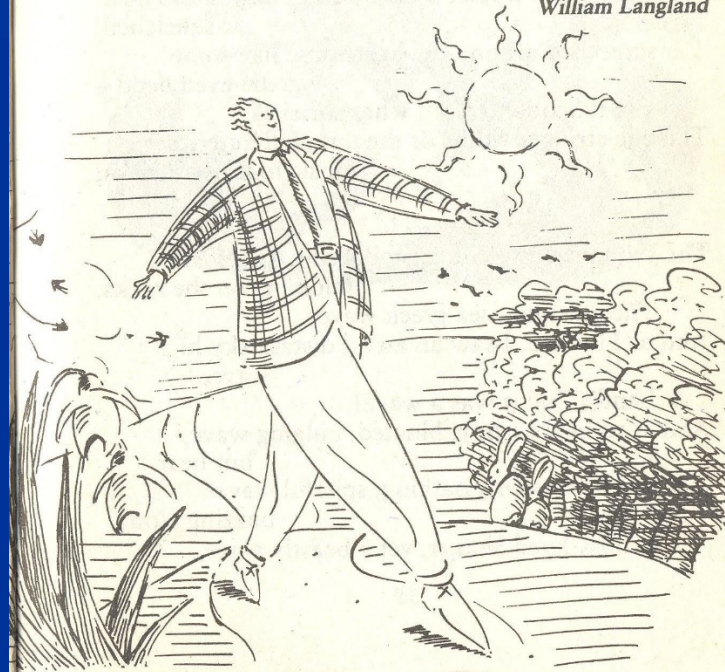
From *This Poem
Doesn't Rhyme*, ed,
Gerard Benson (1990)

“Show me no treasure, but tell me this only:
How may I save my soul, thou that holy art
held?”

from The Vision of Piers Plowman

‘After sharp showers,’ said Peace, ‘how shining
the sun!
There’s no weather warmer, than after watery
clouds.
Nor any love that has more delight, nor friendship
fonder,
Than after war and woe, when Love and Peace are
the masters.
Never was war in this world, nor wickedness so
cruel,
But that Love, if he liked, could bring all to laughing,
And Peace, through patience, put stop to all perils.’

William Langland



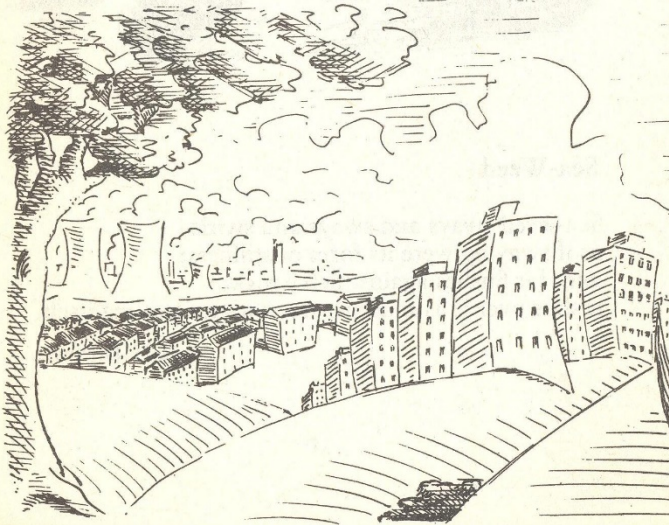
Freedom

I am going where the green grass grows
And fields flaunt their wild flowers;
Where swallows swoop and skim under the shallows
And the clear river shimmers
In summer sunshine.

Behind me lies the dust of dreary city
And the toiling troubled traffic;
People pushing past;
Litter lying unlovely in lay-bys.

High on the hills hawks hover
And larks rise singing sonatas to the sunrise.
Where the grass blows in the wind
I shall lie and listen to the birdsong and
Silence.

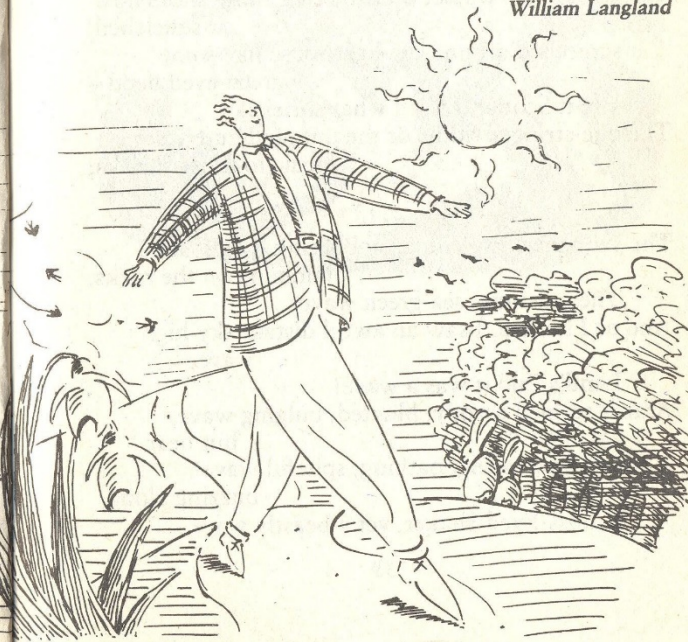
Mary Dawson



from The Vision of Piers Plowman

'After sharp showers,' said Peace, 'how shining
the sun!
There's no weather warmer, than after watery
clouds.
Nor any love that has more delight, nor friendship
fonder,
Than after war and woe, when Love and Peace are
the masters.
Never was war in this world, nor wickedness so
cruel,
But that Love, if he liked, could bring all to laughing,
And Peace, through patience, put stop to all perils.'

William Langland



“If others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called
a vision rather than a dream” – William Morris (1890)





p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk