

Professional Development Grant Report

“‘Thorw here words awoke’: Speech Acts and the Structure of *Piers Plowman*”

Conference of the International Piers Plowman Society
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Restatement of professional enhancement opportunity

I traveled to the International Piers Plowman Society conference held at Miami University in April 2019 and presented a paper as part of a multi-session thread on the role of the voice in *Piers Plowman*. The complete conference schedule can be viewed at:

<https://www.piersplowman.org/conferences/ipps-2019-conference-schedule/>

Brief review of the professional enhancement opportunity

My paper, “‘Thorw here words awoke’: Speech Acts and the Structure of *Piers Plowman*” was accepted to the conference of the International Piers Plowman Society, held this year in Miami, as part of a thread of papers addressing the role of speech and voice in *Piers Plowman*. My paper responded in particular to thread’s call for papers that would show how “Langland’s voices tell us . . . about medieval theories of language and knowledge, hierarchies of intelligence, and/or the material circumstances of reading in the Middle Ages.”

My paper addressed the role of speech acts in imagining allegorical landscapes such as that against which the action of *Piers Plowman* plays out, considering how specific utterances of language are used to construct and dismantle the series of dream visions (and dream-within-dream-visions) that make up the text of the poem. Using J. L. Austen’s observation that spoken language often goes beyond describing or referring to the world, to effecting changes within it, I argued that speech acts in *Piers Plowman* are a mechanism by which such dreamscapes are brought into existence and then dissolved. Wil, the dreaming narrator at the center of the dream-vision(s), moves across boundaries between the dreaming and waking world in response to various modes of linguistic action, whether participation in a scholastic debate, response to a

ritual speech (e.g., his recitation of the Creed launches one of his visions), or the promise of a course of action (e.g., the poem ends with his commitment to a life of metaphorical pilgrimage).

One significant intervention of this paper is to apply a methodology rarely used in medieval studies to a significant work of medieval literature. Work in this vein has the potential to uncover new evidence for a medieval understanding of language, especially in the functional scope of language as a social, interpersonal vehicle, rather than only a representative one. Taking this approach to early literature allows me to consider how speech act theory might be expanded from its development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to interrogate the linguistic sensibilities of other cultures. Furthermore, for a relatively early-career academic, the Piers Plowman Society—which convenes only biannually and typically gathers a number of significant scholars of Middle English literature—was an excellent opportunity to receive feedback from a variety of thoughtful perspectives and from people working in a range of methodologies.

Summary of findings, outcomes, or experiences

My paper was well received, and led to questions both within and beyond the panel on the matter of speech acts in medieval literature as well as my understanding of the implicit linguistic theories of *Piers Plowman*. I found the conversations about this central medieval text informative, both for my understanding (and occasional teaching) of the text itself, and for my ongoing revision of the ideas into a longer work (see below). I also appreciated the opportunity to meet a number of established scholars whose work I use and admire. In particular, questions raised about the way *Piers Plowman* suggests a performance of the self via the performance of speech acts, as well as questions getting at the possibility of a “medieval speech act theory,” has

galvanized me to account for those problems and possibilities in the longer article version of this argument.

Conclusions and recommendations

Following the Piers Plowman conference, I gave a paper at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI, applying the same method to a related set of texts—that is, other fourteenth-century medieval dream visions, which I also read through the lens of speech act theory. I am now at work combining these two papers into a longer article, which I intend to submit to the journal *New Medieval Literatures* in the coming year. I have also been invited to present this research at the University of Arkansas Medieval and Renaissance Studies/Middle Eastern Studies Colloquium, in December of this year, under the provisional title “False Collusyon and Gret Affray: Speech Acts in Medieval Allegory.” The opportunity to formulate and deliver this argument to a group of scholars closely familiar with the topic, with support from this Professional Development Grant, has been instrumental in the development of a longer piece I hope to see published in the near future.