LANGLAND'S CONCEPTION OF FAVEL, GUILE, LIAR, AND FALSE IN THE FIRST VISION OF *PIERS PLOWMAN*

I. The allegorical fiction of Passus II of *Piers Plowman* presents us with the separate personified characters of Favel, Guile, Liar, and False. The distinctions that are implied by these characters are evidently subtle distinctions, and thus hard to perceive at any time. It is not to be wondered at if they have become somewhat blurred at a distance of six hundred years. Here is indeed a point at which the imaginative credibility of Langland's fiction is sorely tested. But if we are to trust this fiction then the distinctions of fictional status signify real distinctions in the literal meaning. It is the purpose of the present article to identify these distinctions and the relationship between them by a consideration of each of the personifications in turn.

II. The name Favel at once poses difficulties, and we have to choose between alternative derivations. *OED*, s.v. *favel*, sb. B.3 defines Langland's meaning as "a mere personification of cunning or duplicity", and derives the word from OF *fauvel* which means "a fallow-coloured horse". From the *Roman de Fauvel* (1310) the fallow horse became "proverbial as the type of fraud, cunning, or duplicity" (*OED*, B.2). *MED*, s.v. *favel* n. assigns the meanings "flattery, insincerity; duplicity, guile, intrigue", and derives the word from OF *favele* which means "story, fable, lying, deception", ultimately from L *fabella*. These various meanings are not carefully distinguished from one another, and it is perhaps inevitable as a result that they should all appear in one way or another in the commentaries on the first vision, J. A. W. Bennett glosses *Fauel* as "Fraud",[1] and A. V. C. Schmidt glosses it as "Deceit".[2] Schmidt is here following T. P. Dunning who has "taken it here as an element in hypocrisy, though it really means hypocrisy in general, and as such, includes guile and lying".[3] But none of these glosses can be accepted as it stands, as we shall see from a detailed examination of Langland's fiction.

The marriage of Meed and False is designed by Favel. It is Favel who contrives to bring the pair together; as the A text has it (II.23) he "haþ forgid hem togidere".[4] The use of the verb *forgen* is instructive, for it means "to plot or contrive" (*MED*, 4(a)). Favel is thus fittingly described as the match-maker (B II.65-66):

> Ac Favel was the firste that fette hire out of boure
> And as a brocour broughte hire to be with Fals enjoyned

Favel also provides the horses for the journey to Westminster (II.163). In the C text, however, it is Guile who borrows the horses (C II.176).[5] It is an action that is indeed more suited to Guile, for it has to do not so much with

the designing of the union between Meed and False, but with the execution of the design. Hence we see that Favel commands the action of Guile in distributing bribes to secure support for the marriage of Meed and False before the court at Westminster (II.144-48).

It is through his fair words that Favel contrives to bring together Meed and False (A II.23), or to delude the couple (B II.42):

> Favel thorugh his faire speche hath this folk enchaunted,

or simply Meed herself (C II.43);

> Fauel thorw his flaterynge speche hath Mede foule enchaunted,

into an acceptance of the match. Favel's victims are enchanted or held spellbound by his flattery. Strictly speaking, False can hardly be described as a victim of Favel; it is Meed rather who is deceived by his blandishments. Hence B's *this folk*, that is, Meed and False, is corrected in C to *Mede*. The deceitful intention of Favel in his flattery is also made clear. In the enfeoffment of Meed Favel uses "fikel speche" (B II.79) or "a fals speche" (C II.83). In the C text (II.25-26), where Favel is made the father of Meed, he is described in the following terms:

> Oon Fauel was her fader þat hath a fykel tonge
> And selde soth sayth bote yf he souche gyle.

Favel and False are persistently associated with one another throughout the fiction of Passus II. Favel is introduced along with False in answer to the dreamer's request for knowledge of the false (II.6). The two are linked together in the enfeoffment of Meed in all three versions of the poem; False "the feffement ... hath ymaked" (II.73) and Favel "feffeth by this chartre" (II.79). They are thanked for their bribes (II.149-50) and together are seen to be happy at the outcome (II.158). They ride together to Westminster with Meed in their midst (II.184-85). The King promises to exact vengeance upon them and their companions (II.193-96).

A detailed and largely consistent fictional portrait of Favel thus emerges from an analysis of Passus II in all three versions of the poem. The distinction of the roles of Favel and Guile may not at once have been completely clarified in Langland's mind, nor perfectly articulated, to judge by the changes introduced in the course of revision. Nevertheless it is evident that it falls to Favel to be the immediate moving force of the marriage of Meed and False. His role in many respects is to be compared with that of Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*, for Pandarus too is "swich a meene / As maken wommen unto men to comen" (III.254-55).[6] It is cunning that is above all to be discerned in the conduct of Pandarus, as we see from the stratagem that he formulates to deliver his niece as a lover to his friend (*TC*,I.1058-71). And it is cunning too that Langland intends to portray in the figure of Favel. Cunning is what the name Favel means, but

cunning as distinguished from duplicity and not united with it. Langland's allegorical fiction shows that it is the *OED* definition and derivation of *favel* that are here correct, and not the ones supplied by *MED*. Favel is conveyed to Westminster "vpon fair speche" (A. II.130) or "on a flaterere fetisly atired" (B II.166),[7] that is to say, Favel is not flattery but is supported by flattery.

The identification of Favel and cunning is confirmed by the definition of cunning (*astutia*) that is provided by Aquinas. Cunning is a sin of means, which are feigned and specious, and not of the end, which may be good or bad (*ST*, 2a 2ae 55.3).[8] In Passus II the means is the marriage scheme itself, whereas the end, appointed by covetousness and not by cunning, is the acquisition of material reward. The true function of cunning resides in the very act of devising such plots or schemes as the marriage of Meed (*ST*, 2a 2ae 55.4):

Dicendum quod ... ad astutiam pertinet assumere vias non veras, sed simulatas et apparentes, ad aliquem finem prosequendum vel bonum vel malum. Assumptio autem harum viarum potest dupliciter considerari. Uno quidem modo in ipsa excogitatione viarum hujusmodi; et hoc proprie pertinet ad astutiam, sicut etiam excogitatio rectarum viarum ad debitum finem pertinet ad prudentiam.

It is of the nature of cunning to conceal itself, for cunning can hardly be cunning that reveals itself to be so. Thus Langland insists upon the false speech or flattery of Favel. Flattery is speech in praise of another with the intention of pleasing, but without regard to the mean of virtue (*ST*, 2a 2ae 115.1). Chaucer's Parson says of flatterers that they "been the develes enchauntours; for they make a man to wene of hymself be lyk that he nys nat lyk" (*CT*, I 615), and *enchaunten* is the very word that Langland uses to describe the activity of Favel in deceiving Meed. Flattery is to be seen, therefore, as part of the nature of cunning or its habitual means. But flattery in its turn is to be distinguished from the execution of the particular stratagems devised by cunning. As we shall now see, such execution belongs to the province of guile.

III. The name Guile does not immediately suggest to the modern reader the distinction that Langland intends between Favel and Guile. Nor can it be said that the definitions offered by the dictionaries lend any obvious assistance. *OED* defines *guile* sb. as "insidious cunning, deceit, treachery" (1) and "an instance of this; a deceit, stratagem, trick, wile" (2). *MED* defines *gile* n. (3) as "a crafty or fraudulent trick; a plot; stratagem, wile; a lie" (1.(a)) and "the quality of deceitfulness, dishonesty, treachery" (2). Under 2 *MED* supplies a reference to C II.158, where Guile carries out the command of Favel. If Guile is the quality of deceitfulness his subordination to Favel is altogether baffling. The relationship between the two demands a narrower definition of Guile.

In the A version Favel contrives to bring Meed and False together, Guile overmasters or dominates Meed, and Liar arranges that the two lie

together (A. II.23-25). This logical and potentially significant fictional sequence disappears from the B and C texts, where only the roles of Favel and Liar remain, and both in a somewhat modified form (B II.42-43, and C II.43-44). Why is this? The answer seems to be that the role of Guile is being defined with increasing precision, or at least a good deal more restrictively. It is by cunning and flattery that Meed is properly said to be deceived, and not by guile.

At II.70 Guile gives the charter recording the conveyance of property to Meed and False, that is, Favel makes the endowment (II.79) and Guile delivers it. Here it is apparent that Guile carries out the plan of Favel. At C II.126 Theology accuses Simony of giving Meed to False "as Gyle tauhte"; here *tauhte* would seem to mean "directed, enjoined" (*OED*,4), and points to an act of execution. Guile is commanded by Favel to distribute bribes in order to win support for the marriage of Meed and False, and in particular to bribe the notaries, who draw up the legal document, and False Witness, who may then be relied upon to misrepresent the nature of the contract (II.144-48). Favel provides horses for the journey to Westminster at II.163-64, but in C (II.176-78) it is Guile who arranges for a sheriff to convey Meed gently in a litter. The purpose of the journey, as Skeat pointed out long ago,[9] was to get to Westminster in good time to bribe the legal officers there. It is especially appropriate, therefore, that Guile should take care of the practical arrangements for the journey, and that he should show such solicitude for the welfare of Meed. Guile it is who acts as a guide to the great company on the journey to Westminster (II.188), and in the C text (II.198-99) Langland has drawn attention to this role by a slight expansion:

> Ac Gyle was forgoere to gyen al this peple
> For to wisse hem þe way and with Mede abyde.

In his flight to escape the punishment decreed by the King, Guile falls into the hands of merchants. He is locked up by them in their shops in order to display their wares, and is dressed up as an apprentice (II.212-15). Here the subordinate role of Guile is once again underlined. The punishment that is appointed for Guile is that his head is to be cut off (II.202). This punishment gives us a special insight into Guile's nature, for it is directly proportioned to that nature. Such fitting punishment (*contrappasso*) is applied consistently by Dante to the impenitent sinners who occupy the higher and lower regions of hell, and is to be seen also in the slight nick that Gawain receives from the third stroke of the Green Knight's axe in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[10]

It would seem from the revisions introduced into the B and C texts that Langland had not at the beginning entirely clarified in his mind the relationship between Favel and Guile. But there can be no doubt that it is Favel who conceives of the scheme to marry Meed and False, and that it is Guile who has the subordinate role of seeing that this scheme is effectively

carried out. Now this is precisely the distinction that Aquinas draws between cunning (*astutia*) and guile (*dolus*): "Et ideo dolus importat quamdam executionem astutiae; et secundum hoc ad astutiam pertinet" (*ST*, 2a 2ae 55.4). At II.70 Langland refers to "Gile with hise grete othes". The significance of the oaths is that guile is the use of words in order to deceive as distinguished from fraud which is the use of deeds (*ST*, 2a 2ae 111.3 *ad* 2). It is the case, however, that guile may also refer to deeds as well as to words (*ST*, 2a 2ae 55.4 *ad* 2). The meaning of Guile seems to have been generalised by Langland in this way, and so the reference to Guile's oaths is omitted from the C text (II.70). As a result the roles of Guile and Liar are more sharply differentiated.

As cunning is opposed to prudence, so guile is opposed to simplicity (*ST*, 2a 2ae 111.3 *ad* 2). Guile is in fact nothing other than duplicity, and consists in an outward pretence that contradicts the true intention (*ST*, 2a 2ae 109.2 *ad* 4). The fitness of Guile's punishment can now be appreciated, for there is no place for duplicity in our social relations. The social debt that we owe to others in our dealings with them is that of simplicity or singleness in our intentions and in our expression of them (*ST*, 2a 2ae 109.3 *ad* 1).

IV. The name Liar seems to offer no problems, for what we have here is indeed "one who lies or tells a falsehood; an untruthful person" (*OED*). But it is important to recognize the need to adhere strictly to this definition, especially since *MED* does not do so in providing the glosses s.v. *lier*(e n.(1) (a) "a liar, slanderer, deceitful person". A somewhat greater significance is attached by Langland to the role played by Liar in the course of the final revision of his poem. At C II.6 the presence of "fikel-tonge Lyare" is specified in the company of False and Favel, whereas it is not in either the A or the B texts. Similar references to Liar are also introduced into the C text at II.77 and 205.

Liar plays a supporting role to Favel in bringing about the marriage of Meed (II.43). The word that Langland uses of Liar's activity is *ledynge*, that is "arrangement, management" (*MED*,2(c)).[11] At II.69, in an addition to the A text, Liar announces the charter delivered by Guile. It is to be noted that the words of the charter are not such as a liar would utter, for they state the sinful reality that a liar would aim to conceal. Thus, for example, it is declared (II.75-77):

> Witeth and witnesseth, that wonieth upon this erthe,
> That Mede is ymaried moore for hire goodes
> Than for any vertue or fairnesse or any free kynde.

Here is not a question of the significance of the allegory, but of the nature of literary representation, since it is as necessary for the reader of the poem to be made aware of the fact of lying as it is for the character within the poem to be led astray by it. This lack of naturalism is one consequence of a

mode of discourse that is essentially objective, and can be paralleled by Chaucer's representation of hypocrisy in the confession of the Pardoner.[12]

Civil bids that a long cart be made of Liar in order to convey the rest of the followers, such as false beggars and impostors, on the journey to Westminster (II.182-83). The literal meaning is that fraud is sustained by lies. Skeat's edition of the A text reads (II.156):

> And make Liȝere a long cart to leden alle this othure,

that is, that Civil bids a cart be made to transport Liar. But this reading has poor support among the manuscripts of the A version (only VH), and Kane accordingly reads (A II. 143):

> And makiþ of lyere a lang carte to leden al þis oþere.

Although Bennett observes (p. 131) that "Liar is elsewhere (68 etc.) a person, and to make a cart *for* him would seem more appropriate", it makes very little sense to think of Liar as being conveyed in a cart. Sheriffs, assizers, and flatterers are all persons, and yet they serve well enough as means of transportation. The important point about Liar as a personification is the relationship in which he stands to Favel and False and to others in their company. Liar does not convey Favel and False, but their hangers-on. Liar is to be put in the pillory (II.204-5), for it is clearly fitting that lies should be exposed. He runs off to avoid his punishment, but is everywhere reviled, until pardoners take pity on him and he finds a welcome among doctors, spicers, minstrels, and friars (II.216-33).

The role of Liar is to help to bring about the marriage of Meed and False designed by Favel. This he does partly in association with Guile, although his role is somewhat more indirect. At the same time he assumes increasing prominence in the course of Langland's successive revisions of the poem. All these fictional elements may be elucidated by reference to the analysis of lying (*mendacium*) in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Lying consists in the intention of falsifying the true relationship between sign and signified. It is to be distinguished from the mere expression of falsehood, which may be the result of error, and from deceit, which may or may not be its effect (*ST*, 2a 2ae 110.1). It is on such grounds as these that we are able to distinguish between lying and duplicity, for lying is the intention to express falsehood, whereas duplicity has the intention to deceive. Although thus notionally distinct, lying and duplicity (as truth and simplicity, to which they are opposed) are really identical, since it is only through lies and deceptions that duplicity fulfils its intention (*ST*, 2a 2ae 111.3 *ad* 2). This distinction between lying and duplicity explains the indirectness of the activity that Langland attributes to Liar, for the immediate effect of lying is to sustain duplicity.

The distinction between a lie and a deceit is also important for an

understanding of Langland's fiction, and Aquinas further clarifies it in the course of the first article on lying (*ST*, 2a 2ae 110.1):

Quod autem aliquis intendat falsitatem in opinione alterius constituere fallendo ipsum, non pertinet ad speciem mendaci sed ad quamdam perfectionem ipsius, sicut et in rebus naturalibus aliquid speciem sortitur si formam habeat, etiamsi desit formae effectus; sicut patet in gravi, quod violenter sursum detinetur ne descendat secundum exigentiam suae formae.

The increasing prominence that is given to Liar in the course of the successive revisions that produce the B and C texts is intended to underline the point that the union of Meed and False depends upon the falsification of the true significance of material rewards as given by God and as designed to serve man's spiritual needs.

V. The *MED* glosses Langland's use of False at A II.22 (B II.41) as "deceit, deception, treachery, fraud, wrong-doing" (s.v. *fals* n. 1.(a)), and thus distinguishes it from "intentional falsehood, lying; untruth, falsity, error" (2.(a)). It is surely right to do so. As we have seen, the intimate association of False and Favel is established at the beginning of Passus II; by Favel is meant cunning, and by False the resultant deceit.

The objective meaning of False is underlined by his lineage, for he is "a fendes biyete" (II.41). We may recall here that Wrong is the father of falsehood (I.63-64). At II.130-31 False is described by theology as treacherous in his deeds and "a bastard ybore of Belsabubbes kynne"; in the C revision "the fende is his syre" (C II.143), a lineage more strictly in accord with that already provided. At II.121 False is described by Theology as a *gilour*, that is, a deceiver: "thow hast gyven hire to a gilour"; but at C II.126 the line has been emended to read: "thow haste gyue here as Gyle tauhte". The revised version would seem to have been prompted by the desire to eliminate the possibility of confusion between False and Guile. On the journey to Westminster False is conveyed "on a sisour that softeli trotted" (II. 165). The literal meaning is that deceit is promoted by the compliance of jurors. The King commands that Falseness be put in chains (II.201). By attempting to restrain deceit in this way the King hopes to show that honesty has been restored to the administration of public affairs. Falseness in fear flees to the friars (II.211), where no doubt he meets up with Liar again (II.230-33).

False, then, is the outward effect of Favel which is brought into being by means of Guile and Liar. The marriage of Meed and False makes of material reward a deceit, that is, it becomes corrupt gain. It is ultimately brought about by Wrong, the father of falsehood. The particular wrong in this case is that covetousness against which Holy Church warns the dreamer (II.51) and which Aquinas identifies as the source of the vices of cunning and guile (*ST*, 2a 2ae 55.8). The significance of Wrong's part is

clarified by Langland in a slight modification and a small addition to the description of Wrong in the C text (I.66-67):

> That tristeth in tresor of erthe he bytrayeth sonest;
> To combre men with coueytise, þat is his kynde and his lore.

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Notes

1. J. A. W. Bennett *Langland: Piers Plowman* (Oxford, 1972), p. 238.
2. A. V. C. Schmidt, *William Langland: The Vision of Piers Plowman* (London and New York, 1978), pp. 17 and 18. The present study is immediately of the B text, and reference to it is to Schmidt's edition.
3. T. P. Dunning, *Piers Plowman· An Interpretation of the A-Text* (Dublin, 1937), p. 77, n. 12. This matter is retained in the second edition, revised and edited by T. P. Dolan (Oxford, 1980), p. 54, n. 17.
4. Reference is to G. Kane, *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London, 1960).
5. Reference is to D. Pearsall, *Piers Plowman by William Langland: An Edition of the C-text* (London, 1978).
6. Reference is to F N. Robinson, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, second edition (London, 1957).
7. This is the reading of the B archetype, but not of G. Kane and E. T. Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London, 1975).
8. Reference to the *Summa Theologiae* is to the edition of T. Gilby and others, 60vols (London, 1964-76).
9. W. W. Skeat, *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*, 2vols (London, 1886), II.37.
10. See my article, "The Validity of Gawain's Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *RES*, NS, 36 (1985), 1-18 (pp. 14-15).
11. Schmidt provides the gloss "(through) L's instigation" (p. 18), but there is a failure here to distinguish between the roles of Liar and Favel.
12. See my article, "The Self-Revealing Tendencies of Chaucer's Pardoner", *MLR*, 71 (1976), 241-55 (pp. 249-50).