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# Lies, Puns, Tallies: Marital and Material Deceit in Langland and Chaucer

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5. LIES, PUNS, TALLIES: MARITAL AND MATERIAL DECEIT  
IN LANGLAND AND CHAUCER

By Jamie Taylor

Augustine tells us that any lie must be always and universally despised, and throughout the Middle Ages, theologians and philosophers adhered to this hard-line stance. His *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium* define a lie as an intentional deception: that is, “any utterance whatever with the will to deceive” (*quaelibet enuntiatio cum voluntate fallendi*).<sup>1</sup> Even as discussions of lying expanded in the thirteenth century, as pastoral writers such as William Peraldus and Robert Mannyng named and defined an incredible variety of “sins of the tongue,” intention remained at the heart of lying in all forms.<sup>2</sup> These pastoral texts, Edwin D. Craun succinctly explains, “simply assume that spoken words are associated sufficiently in our minds with things, conceptions, and other signs that can direct us to them—or help us recollect them, as Augustine would insist.”<sup>3</sup> Lying was not only a deliberate act, it functioned within a strict signification system in which word and *res* were tightly woven together.

But medieval scholastics and pastoral writers recognized other forms of language in which word and *res* might not be so clearly or necessarily fused, and they debated the sinfulness of equivocation and other such verbal dissimulations and complexities.<sup>4</sup> Equivocation came into the scholastic picture through logic, in which *aequivocum* denoted polysemy and homonymy, without the pejorative senses that attached to *mendacium*.<sup>5</sup> In his discussion of Aristotle, for example, Boethius notes that things might go by more than one name; and later thinkers such as Petrus Alphonsus and Roger Bacon agree that a word might serve more than one meaning (*consignificatio*).<sup>6</sup> Read next to Augustine’s clear denunciation of mendacious speech, these philosophical discussions of equivocation expose critical fissures in medieval thinking about deception: that is, how to contend with the unavoidably imperfect relationship between word and referent while also remaining dedicated to strict moral codes about lying.

Significantly, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pastoral writers often articulated the inadequate equations between thing and sign by turning to economic and monetary metaphors. These metaphors express worry about the conditions under which clear links between intention, sign, and *res* might be disaggregated, maliciously or

<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *De mendacio* 4.4, trans. H. Browne, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (Buffalo, NY, 1887), 3:458.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Middle English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 31 (Cambridge, UK, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas G. Denery II, “Biblical Liars and Thirteenth-Century Theologians,” in *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, ed. Richard Newhauser, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 123 (Leiden, 2007), 111–28.

<sup>5</sup> E. J. Ashworth, “Analogy and Equivocation in Thirteenth-Century Logic: Aquinas in Context,” *Medieval Studies* 54 (1992): 94–135.

<sup>6</sup> Boethius, *In Categorias Aristotelis libri quattuor*, PL 64:164–65.

not. Thus William Peraldus opens his encyclopedic discussion of sins of the tongue by claiming that liars counterfeit the “coin of truth” and pass it off to unsuspecting people. Merchants, he says, are especially dedicated liars, since they “show one thing and sell another, as happens among scribes who exhibit a good handwriting and then write a sloppy one.”<sup>7</sup> Peraldus’s analogy here builds on longstanding associations between coinage and poetry, both of which rely upon and worry about exchange value between *res* and sign based on mutual agreement rather than anything intrinsic or stable.<sup>8</sup>

The parallel between scribal production and commercial deceit articulated by Peraldus surfaces in both Langland’s *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer’s “Shipman’s Tale” as a complex pun on “tallying.” Although *Piers* and the “Shipman’s Tale” are very different texts (in terms of audience, genre, and tone), Langland and Chaucer both exploit the polysemy of Middle English verb *taille* to explore how material texts might function as coin-like agents of deception. *Taille* means the act of tallying, or recording and reconciling, debts; tale or tale-telling (that is, both the object and the process); and, more crassly, a woman’s genitals or back end (her “tail”). The term can thus express conceptual overlaps between sexual, marital, and commercial equivalences and forms of valuation. In both *Piers Plowman* and the “Shipman’s Tale,” these overlaps offer an opportunity to think through how texts themselves might be understood as tools of equivocation, making equations between *res* and sign seem natural or obvious when they are anything but.

Examining these two instances of a “tally-tale-tail” pun helps widen our scope of what constitutes deception by considering the ways lies might mask themselves as polysemy and vice versa. More specifically, it alerts us to how vernacular poets understood material texts within a culture of increasingly complex forms of commercial transactions and valuations. Langland voices his tallying pun through Conscience, who sneers with misogynistic venom at Lady Mede’s argument that gift giving can be honest and virtuous.<sup>9</sup> For Langland, the economic and bodily pun exposes anxieties about the ways a material text might operate both as sign and *res*, obscuring meaning and exchange value even as it asserts both. Chaucer uses the same pun in the “Shipman’s Tale,” when the merchant’s wife scoffs at her husband’s dismay about her illicit affair with his friend.<sup>10</sup> There, in contrast to *Piers Plowman*, the pun permits a merchant’s wife to partially liberate herself from the misogynistic stranglehold that sustained stereotypes of women as deceptive, seductive objects of exchange.

<sup>7</sup> “Sextum malum est aliud ostendere et aliud uendere, sicut accidit in scriptoribus qui bonam litteram ostendunt et deinde prauam scribunt,” William Peraldus, *Summa de vitiis, Tractatus de avaritia*, Lyon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 678, fol. 47ra. I am grateful to Richard Newhauser for alerting me to this citation as well as to the forthcoming translation and edition by Siegfried Wenzel, Bridget Balint, Edwin D. Craun, and Richard Newhauser.

<sup>8</sup> Eliza Zingesser, “The Value of Verse: Storytelling as Accounting in Froissart’s *Dit du florin*,” *Modern Language Notes* 125 (2010): 861–72; see also R. Allen Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Poetry* (Norman, OK, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on “Piers Plowman”*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 2006), 310–11.

<sup>10</sup> Diane Cady, “The Gender of Money,” *Genders* 44 (2006), <https://www.colorado.edu/genders/archive1998-2013/2006/12/01/gender-money>.

Puns are, of course, different from lies.<sup>11</sup> Still, like lying, punning relies on intention, as Latin rhetorical treatises such as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* explain.<sup>12</sup> But because puns rely also on recipient recognition—that is, a reader or hearer must “get” the pun—authorial intention cannot provide a fully reliable or holistic metric for establishing either its sanctity or utility. To account for such interpretive openness, many texts turned to marginal illustrations and manculae to visually emphasize, explain, or interpret a pun, such that the page itself could be considered crucial to a pun’s functionality. “Thus mis-takeable words put speakers’ intentions at the mercy of the gods,” explains Jennifer Bryan, “and written texts at the mercy of book-makers and book-owners.”<sup>13</sup> The material text thus could be a critical “translation” mechanism between authorial intention and readerly comprehension. But it could also be a dangerous tool, subject to scribal duplicity and coin-like mystification.

Tallying is an old accounting practice, reaching back to early bookkeeping and recording systems when wooden sticks were notched, divided, and distributed to those involved in an exchange. Putting the sticks back together properly enacted a complete and accurate transaction.<sup>14</sup> In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, tallies began to function as promissory notes rather than records of exchanges, becoming a kind of “tale-telling.” As Tony Moore explains, “the key change was that the tally was not issued directly to the accountant after he appeared at the Exchequer of Receipt with proof that he had paid money, either into the treasury or to an assigned recipient. . . . Rather the tally was first delivered to the creditor at the Exchequer of Receipt before he had received any money from the accountant.”<sup>15</sup> Such future-oriented tallying came with several problems, particularly when such tallies were not fulfilled (that is, when the payer failed to pay). In those cases, tallies were translated into “fictitious loans” by which cancelled, unpaid tallies were formulated as ongoing debts. A fictitious loan was “a book-keeping entry, a fiction designed in the interest of clerks and creditors, to emend a fiction.”<sup>16</sup> Edward III ushered in the height of fictitious loans in the 1340s and 1350s, when he struggled to maintain the financial health of the realm. Around the same time, double-entry bookkeeping, by which credits and debts were recorded to include pending financial exchanges, developed to account for the complexities of international trade. Because double-entry bookkeeping permitted calculations of future resources and debts in addition to credits and exchanges already performed, it was, as John Ganim puts it, “a form of rhetoric as well as a technique.”<sup>17</sup> Late medieval modes of tallying and

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Bryan, “‘A Berd! A Berd!’: Chaucer’s Miller and the Poetics of the Pun,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 38 (2016): 1–37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 96; see also Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, 2002), 53.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Moore, “‘Score It upon My Taille’: The Use (and Abuse) of Tallies by the Medieval Exchequer,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 39 (2013): 1–18, at 11.

<sup>16</sup> G. L. Harriss, “Fictitious Loans,” *Economic History Review*, n.s., 8/2 (1955): 187–99, at 187.

<sup>17</sup> John M. Ganim, “Double Entry in Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale’: Chaucer and Bookkeeping before Pacioli,” *Chaucer Review* 30/3 (1996): 294–305, at 296.

double-entry bookkeeping straddled the line between sign and *res*, in that they both recorded exchange events and shaped how those events might proceed. A pun between tallying and tale-telling was thus structured into the process itself.

For Langland, the complex overlaps between tallies and tales point to the ways writing might be an exercise in fictitious accounting, in that it can only tenuously link sign and *res*, especially with respect to divine truth and salvific promise. Notably, in *Piers Plowman* the many “fals folk, and feithlees, theves and lyeres” are often peddlers, merchants, or sellers, such as Envy, who brokers sales among burgesses in London, and Rose the Regrater, who dupes ale drinkers with subpar product (IX.119).<sup>18</sup> Although Langland worries throughout *Piers Plowman* about material corruption and the salvific limitations of human expression, his most extended and profound investigation of the relationship between lying, intention, and exchange occurs in the Mede passus (II–IV), just after the dreamer encounters Holy Church in the first *visio*.<sup>19</sup> Holy Church counsels the dreamer that to save his soul, he must recognize that “whan alle tresors arn tried, treuthe is the beste” (I.85). Casting about to try to understand truth (at least in its most general outlines), the dreamer begs her to teach him the opposite, the nature of lies: “Kenne me by som crafte to knowe the false” (II.4). In answer, Holy Church gestures to the crowd milling around them, suggesting that they are surrounded by liars. Just as she points out False and Favel loitering to their left, Lady Mede appears, to the wonder of the dreamer and to the disdain of Holy Church. Gaudily attired, she easily displays her wealth:

Fetisliche hire fynGRES were fretted with golde wyr,  
 And thereon rede rubies as rede as any gleede,  
 And diamaundes of derrest pris and double manere saphires,  
 Orientales and ewages envenymes to destroye.  
 Hire robe was ful riche, of reed scarlet engreyned,  
 With ribanes of reed golde and of riche stones.

(II.11–16)

Holy Church explains that this stunning woman is “Mede the mayde,” a bastard whose father is a liar with a “fikel tonge” (II.25). Moreover, she is slated to marry Fals Fikel-Tonge, a union orchestrated by Favel and Liar.<sup>20</sup> Holy Church warns the dreamer to guard his conscience, lest he be seduced by Lady Mede’s lies and artifice; she then leaves him to fall asleep.

The proliferation of terms to describe deception in this scene—from “fikel-tonge” to “fals” to “favel” to “liar”—produces the unsettling sense that deceptive speech is not only everywhere, it is hard to define. In other words, the multiplicity and ambiguity of the terms and figures for falsehood (wordplay that works much like punning) enacts the troubling recognition that deceit can only be inadequately expressed

<sup>18</sup> All *Piers Plowman* quotations are taken from the B-text in *The Vision of “Piers Plowman”*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London, 1978), cited parenthetically by passus and line number.

<sup>19</sup> James Simpson, “Spirituality and Economics in Passus I–VII in the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 1 (1987): 83–103.

<sup>20</sup> See Elizabeth Robertson, “Measurement and the ‘Feminine’ in *Piers Plowman*: A Response to Recent Studies of Langland and Gender,” in *William Langland’s “Piers Plowman”: A Book of Essays* (New York, 2001), 167–94.

and recognized in language. In addition, we must note that even Holy Church acknowledges that Mede is not a liar per se but rather a liar by association: specifically, through genealogy and marriage.<sup>21</sup> Critics have long recognized both the absence of Mede's intentions regarding her own marriage as well as the obvious ways Mede is both object and agent of circulatory value, both a woman and a term transferred among men.<sup>22</sup> From the point of view of equivocation, Mede is polysemous, a figure that attaches to various meanings and conditions without the nefarious *intentio* required for lying. Were she to be attached to someone like Fals Fikel-Tonge, however, she would be caught in a marriage that would render her deceptive regardless of her intentions.<sup>23</sup>

The dream begins with the preparations for Mede's wedding to Fals, depicting an enormous crowd gathering to witness and authorize it. The implication here is that lying transcends social class and occupation: the crowd includes "alle manere of men," although it is particularly full of legal bureaucrats such as clerks, assizers, summoners, and sheriffs (II.57–61). Simony and Civil seem especially cozy with Mede, and they both accept money to perform the service. In addition, to authenticate the ceremony, Liar produces a charter that documents Guile's approval of Mede's marriage. But the charter actually exposes the material greed at the heart of the marriage: "Witeth and witnesseth, that wonieth upon erthe, / That Mede is ymaried moore for hire goodes / Than for any vertue or fairnesse or any free kynde" (II.75–77).<sup>24</sup> The charter thus codifies the troubling relationship between material and marital exchange, in which virtue or consent masks greed. In doing so, it inaugurates a problem that plagues the Mede passus: that is, how do material texts, particularly those designed to make meaning and exchange formulaic and stable, inevitably participate in a system of equivocation, even deception?

<sup>21</sup> M. Teresa Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in "Piers Plowman"*, *Piers Plowman Studies* 11 (Cambridge, UK, 1995), 1, points out that Langland clarifies Meed's associational status in his emendations. In A.2.15, the dreamer asks Holy Church, "What is this womman?" whereas in the B-text he asks, "What she was and whos wif she were," and finally in the C-text he asks, "Whos wyf a were and what was here name." See also D. Vance Smith, "The Labors of Reward: Meed, Mercede, and the Beginnings of Salvation," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994): 127–54.

<sup>22</sup> John A. Yunck, *The Lineage of Lady Meed: The Development of Mediaeval Venality Satire* (Notre Dame, 1963); Elizabeth Fowler, "Misogyny and Economic Person in Skelton, Langland and Chaucer," *Spenser Studies* 10 (1992): 245–74; and "Civil Death and the Maiden: Agency and the Conditions of Contract in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 70/4 (1995): 760–92; Clare A. Lees, "Gender and Exchange in *Piers Plowman*," in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, ed. Britton G. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington, 1994), 112–30; Joan Baker and Susan Signe Morrison, "The Luxury of Gender: *Piers Plowman* and *The Merchant's Tale*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998): 31–63; and Masha Raskolnikov, "Promising the Female, Delivering the Male: Transformations of Gender in *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2005): 81–105.

<sup>23</sup> James Hala, "'For She is Tikel of Hire Tale': Word-Play in the Lady Mede Episode of *Piers Plowman* B," *Proceedings of the PMR Conference* 14/1 (1989): 99–126.

<sup>24</sup> Emily Steiner, *Reading "Piers Plowman"* (Cambridge, UK, 2013), 45, argues that this charter gestures to another discourse found in medieval historical writing, in which "women who make too great a mark on political life tend to be accused of improvidence or licentiousness; conversely, these accusations have huge explanatory power, explaining how women can be historical actors in the first place, worthy of record." Thus, Steiner notes, scholars sometimes compare Meed and Alice Perrers, Edward III's mistress. See also Stephanie Trigg, "The Traffic in Medieval Women: Alice Perrers, Feminist Criticism, and *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998): 5–29.

The rest of the passus describes an absurd collection of the characters marching to Westminster for the wedding: Fals, Favel, and Mede join notaries, summoners, Simony, and Civil, all led by Guile, while Sothnesse rides ahead to warn Conscience about the retinue about to arrive in the king's court. When the crowd arrives in Westminster, the king instructs Conscience to put Fals, Favel, Liar, and Guile in jail, so the crowd of men flanking Mede flees, leaving her to face the court alone. The king offers her a chamber in which she can await her trial, and there she is approached by a confessor who promises her salvation in exchange for funding to reglaze a window in the church. In a stunning response, Mede agrees to renovate the church if the confessor agrees to forgive lechery:

“Wist I that,” quod the womman, “I wolde noght spare  
 For to be youre frende, frere, and faile yow nevre  
 While ye love lordes that lecherie haunten,  
 And lakketh noght ladies that loven wel the same.  
 It is a freletee of flesshe—ye fynde it in bokes—  
 And a cours of kynde, wherof we comen alle.  
 Who may scape the sclandre, the scathe is soone amended;  
 It is synne of the sevene sonnest relessed.  
 Have mercy,” quod Mede, “of men that it haunteth,  
 And I shal covere youre kirk, youre cloistre do maken,  
 Woves do whiten and wyndowes glazen,  
 Do peynten and portraye (who paied) for the makynge,  
 That every segge shall see I am suster of youre hous.”

(III.51–63)

Mede uses “haunten” twice, subtly linking lecherous urges to material greed, since “haunten” means to covet both sex and goods.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, when she agrees to reglaze and whitewash the church, she offers a plethora of verbs to demonstrate the number of equivocal terms to describe the processes (“covere,” “maken,” “whiten,” “glazen,” “peynten,” “portraye”). Like the unsettling multiplicity of terms and figures for falsehood depicted when Mede is introduced to the dreamer, here the multiplicity of terms unsettlingly suggests that material objects (windows and walls) might be vehicles for equivocation and polysemy, or perhaps even deceit.

Indeed, the activities most desired by the confessor—particularly whitewashing—can themselves be recognized as forms of textual deception. As David Coley has shown, glazing was conceptually close to glossing, a textual activity potentially illuminating or obfuscating, revealing or misleading.<sup>26</sup> The dreamer thus excoriates Mede's idea that she might be glazed (or glossed) into the window, since “Ac God

<sup>25</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “haunten (v. (1)),” 3b–c, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/med/>.

<sup>26</sup> David Coley, “‘Withyn a Temple Ymad of Glas’: Glazing, Glossing, and Patronage in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,” *Chaucer Review* 45/1 (2010): 59–84. The fifteenth-century debate poem “Meed and Much Thank” overtly and pejoratively sees mede as a form of glossing, repeatedly calling the richly dressed (and male) Meed a “gloser” and a flatterer. See *Twenty-Six Political and Other Poems (Including “Petty Job”) from the Oxford MSS. Digby 12 and Douce 322*, ed. J. Kail, Early English Text Society, o.s., 124 (London, 1904), 6–9. For an important discussion of the multiplicity of glossing as an authorial and compilatory activity, see Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1984), 190–204.

to alle good folk swich gravyng defendeth—/ To writen in wyndowes of hir wel dedes—/ An venture pride be peynted there, and pomp of the worlde” (III.64–6). Whitewashing involves duplicity more overtly. Juliet Fleming explains that whitewash (a combination of lime, water, and glue) freshened wall surfaces by painting over scenes of writing or drawing, thereby covering, rather than erasing, older text.<sup>27</sup> Critically, then, whitewash is a form of preservation as much as erasure, a representational economy in which something might be hidden but present at the same time as something new is produced. To use Mede’s term, whitewashing might be understood as a form of textual “haunting,” and it exposes the inevitable equivocation at the heart of textual production (in that texts can obfuscate and reveal at the same time). And to extend her logic, such textual haunting must be forgiven, since it, like the haunting of lechery, is merely a “freletee of flesshe” and “a course of kynde” (III.55–56). She thus subtly argues that we must forgive and accept the equivocation performed by material texts. She recognizes the ways material texts, financial exchanges, even language itself can operate “deceptively,” in that they can reveal *res* and intention even as they misrepresent or cover over them, and she suggests such deception should not necessarily be condemned. Still, the dreamer pushes against Mede’s call for forgiveness, and he worries that whitewashing and glazing both might obscure not just older texts, but conscience itself (even though he promises that God cannot be duped by these material processes). “For God knoweth thi conscience and thi kynde wille, / Thi cost and thi coveitise and who the catel oughte,” he warns. “Forthi I lere yow lordes, leveth swiche werkes” (III.67–69).

Ultimately, the king fetches Mede from her bower and offers Conscience as a potential husband, suggesting that Mede’s circulatory flexibility and her potential to be fastened to liars might thus be obviated, since conscience, as Isidore of Seville reminds us, always unites thought, sign, and *res*.<sup>28</sup> Although Mede agrees to the union, Conscience angrily refuses. His multiple insults turn on a “tale-tail” pun, emphasizing its crassness to focus particularly on Mede as a peddler of lechery and lies alike. “She is frele of hire faith and fikel of hire speche,” he says, “And maketh men mysdo many score tymes” (III.122–23). She manipulates people’s trust through treasure; she teaches both wives and widows to be wanton; she poisons popes and impairs Holy Church. He continues, “For she is tikel of hire tail, talewis of hir tonge, / As commune as the cartwey to (knaves and to alle)—/ To monkes, to mynstrales, to meseles in hegges” (III.131–33).

The argument between Mede and Conscience is an argument about the virtues and pitfalls of equivocation, which affects both Mede and Conscience. Indeed, Conscience is especially subject to equivocation, as Langland points out in passus XV. Citing Isidore, he tells us that Anima is also known as Animus, Mens, Memoria, Ratio, Reason, Sensus, Conscience, Amor, and Spiritus, depending on the context, and he notes that Conscience/Anima is “a sotil thyng withalle—/ Oon withouten tonge and teeth” (XV.12–13). Conscience’s misogynistic anger directed at Mede thus whitewashes over his recognition that, like Mede, he has no intrinsic or natural value, but rather exists within an ongoing program of signficatory exchange and contex-

<sup>27</sup> Juliet Fleming, “Whitewash and the Scene of Writing,” *Shakespeare Studies* 28 (2000): 133–38.

<sup>28</sup> *Liber sententiarum*, PL 83:634. See the citation and discussion of Isidore in Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 113–14.



tual circulation. Personification allows Langland to animate the costs of equivocation: Mede's bodily *res* becomes subject to crude, misogynistic dismissal, and Conscience's bodily *res* is partial, open, incomplete.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the multiplicity of terms that describe but never perfectly reflect conscience exposes how personification, like equivocals, can only approximate their referents. Both Mede and Conscience turn to the material text itself—a glazed window, a whitewashed wall, or a Bible page—to try to anchor themselves and their authority to something “real” or “stable.” But Langland repeatedly reveals the material text to be deceptively seductive, a crucial instrument of, but unavoidable impediment to, the “tresor” Holy Church dangles in front of the dreamer.

In his “Shipman’s Tale,” Chaucer addresses the same problem—that is, the fragile equivocations between truth, exchange, and language—by deploying the very same pun. But he offers a playful rather than anxious take on it. For Chaucer, equivocation provides interpretive opportunities rather than reveals the devastating inadequacies of human expression and the material page. Marital deception is structurally central to the “Shipman’s Tale,” a fabliau in which a merchant from St.-Denis is cuckolded by his wife and friend, the monk Daun John. In addition, the mercantile milieu of the tale suggests Chaucer means to tie fabliau deception directly to commercial deceit. As Roger Ladd points out, “Chaucer portrays merchants outside *The General Prologue* as consistently failing to receive or produce the truth value of reliable discourse.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, although Chaucer describes his merchant as a “worthy man” and notes that “so estatly was he of his governaunce,” he also says he cannot remember his name: “But sooth to seyn, I noot how men hym calle” (“General Prologue,” 279, 281, 284).<sup>31</sup> Chaucer calls attention to the ways the merchant slips beyond his own powers of language to indicate that merchants especially expose the inevitable distance between *res* and sign. In contrast, Chaucer’s portrait of the Shipman emphasizes his ability to narrate and record (and thus stabilize in text) ephemeral currents: “But of his craft to rekene wel his tydes, / His stremes and his daungers hym bisides, / His herberwe and his moone, his lodemenage, / Ther nas noon swich from Hull to Cartage” (“General Prologue,” 401–5). Still, despite the Shipman’s powers of “reckoning,” Chaucer notes, “Of nyce conscience took he no keepe” (“General Prologue,” 398).<sup>32</sup> For Chaucer’s Shipman, as for Langland’s Conscience, the unifying force of conscience does not provide a fail-safe metric by which data can be fully “rekened.”

Like the Mede passus, the “Shipman’s Tale” begins by establishing the frictions between valuation and exchange via a woman’s beauty and courtesy: “Swiche salutaciouns and contenaunces / Passen as dooth a shadwe upon the wal. / But wo is hym

<sup>29</sup> James J. Paxson, “Gender Personified, Personification Gendered, and the Body Figuralized in *Piers Plouman*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998): 65–96.

<sup>30</sup> Roger A. Ladd, “The Mercantile (Mis)reader in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Studies in Philology* 99/1 (2002): 17–32, at 18.

<sup>31</sup> All Chaucer citations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd ed., with a new foreword by Christopher Cannon (New York, 1987), and cited parenthetically in the text by fragment and line number.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the multiplicity of the term *rekene*, particularly alongside *taille*, in Middle English, see Jonathan Hsy, *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature*, *Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture* (Columbus, OH, 2013), 46–47.

that payen moot for al!" (7.8–10). The wife's social currency is mere "shadow," something for which the merchant persistently pays (that is, financially and emotionally) but for which he receives nothing substantial in return. Just as Mede's recognition of lechery as a kind of "haunting" situates a woman's body as the cornerstone of the relationship between material exchange and erotic desire, so too does the wife's "shadowy" physical beauty and courtesy reveal how ineffable desires can only be incompletely translated into material objects. In contrast, Chaucer describes the monk's hospitality gifts as "some manere honest thyng"; that is, they are actual items that are not duplicitous because they do not refer to shadowy ideals beyond themselves (7.49).

The tale's opening salvo about the female body as shadowy object of exchange is comically realized when Daun John and the wife collude behind the merchant's back. As the wife forlornly wanders in her garden one morning, Daun John asks her what's wrong. She responds with a standard fabliau complaint: "In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf / That lasse lust hath to that sory pley," she says (7.116–17). The ensuing conversation is so full of oath taking, in which the monk and wife repeatedly promise one another to keep their complaints secret from the merchant, that we must assume their intentions are to deceive one another. And indeed, after suggesting she might find sexual satisfaction elsewhere, the wife tells Daun John she needs one hundred francs to pay for new church clothes, which he readily promises. Then he grabs her:

This gentil monk answerede in this manere:  
 "Now trewely, myn owene lady deere,  
 I have," quod he, "on yow so greet a routhe  
 That I yow swere and plighte yow my trouthe  
 That whan youre housbonde is to Flaundes fare  
 I wol delyvere yow out of this care.  
 For I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes."  
 And with that word he caughte hire by the flankes  
 And hire embraceth harde and kiste hire ofte.

(7.195–203)

Helen Fulton points out that the negotiation between the monk and the wife "exactly parallels the bill of exchange," a formal loan system in which one party receives a loan in one currency and the other party repays the loan elsewhere in a different currency.<sup>33</sup> The two currencies here, "frankes" and "flankes," are rhymed to insist on their close exchangeability. Yet by turning to the bill of exchange as a model, Chaucer challenges any all-too-easy equation of francs and flanks. Because the currencies transferred by bills of exchange were by definition different, they could never be perfectly equated, and such loans were especially vulnerable to unpredictable fluctuations in exchange rates. Savvy merchants could make a profit by manipulating the difference in their favor. Like a merchant profiting from the differences in exchange rates, the wife profits from her recognition that francs will never be able to be reckoned with flanks, an inequality the monk fails to see.

<sup>33</sup> Helen Fulton, "Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 36/2 (2002): 311–22, at 318. See also Kenneth S. Cahn, "Chaucer's Merchants and the Foreign Exchange: An Introduction to Medieval Finance," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 81–119.

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When the merchant finally confronts his friend's and his wife's duplicity, the wife scoffs at his outrage by turning to the marital debt as a source of self-possession and enjoyment alike. First, she says, he can reconcile any debts and losses on her "taille," taking advantage of the "tally-tail" pun to recuperate the kind of agency Mede never seems to be able to assert. The wife then tells him to laugh and enjoy the fact that her body can settle any unequal exchanges or financial losses:

. . . And if so be I faille,  
 I am youre wyf: score it upon my taille,  
 And I shal paye as soone as ever I may.  
 For by my trouthe, I have on myn array  
 And nat on wast bistowed every deel.  
 And for I have bistowed it so weel  
 For youre honour, for Goddes sake, I seye  
 As be nat wrooth, but lat us laughe and pleye.  
 Ye shal my joly body have to wedde.  
 By God, I wol nat paye yow but a bedde.

(7.415–25)

Her cavalier scoff that he should "score" her wifely loyalty upon her "taille" reclaims Conscience's devastating "tail-tally-tale" pun by putting her own "joly body" at the center of it. In doing so, she demonstrates her understanding of the personification poetics that trap Mede in a loop of polysemous equivocations. This wife is likewise trapped, but she can at least recognize the mercantile, circulatory structures that ensnare her and use them to pursue her own pleasures.

In the end, the merchant forgives his wife for her indiscretions and asks her to be more modest in her generosity: "'Now wyf,' he seyde, 'and I foryeve it thee, / But by thy lyf, ne be namoore so large. / Keepe bet oure good that yeve I thee in charge!'" (7.431–33). With that, the Shipman neatly ends his tale, promising more stories in the future by deploying the accounting model of fictitious tallies. "Thus endeth my tale, and God us sende / Taillynge enough unto oure lyves ende. Amen" (7.434–35). Here, he reprises the "tally-tale" pun to ask for sufficient tales to last until death so that the end-of-life accounting at Judgment Day will work in their favor.<sup>34</sup> The pun thus suggests a kind of sufficiency that can attach to tallies as much as to tales, claiming that both tallies and tales can solve the problem of equivocals by recalibrating incomplete or unequal relations to make them exchangeable. In other words, it seems to smooth over the gaps structured into the process of tallying.

However, although the most obvious sense of the final line is to promise enough tale-telling until our *lives'* end, the term "lyves" might also be understood as "leaves," the material pages of a book. Read this way, that there will be "taillynge enough" until our *leaves'* end, the Shipman's final line becomes a kind of rejection of Conscience's sneering insult at the end of passus III. For Conscience, Mede's inability to read to the end of her proof text exemplifies her troubling open-endedness, suggesting that the text's end, and thus its final and stable meaning, has yet to come.

<sup>34</sup> Deathbed judgments were often formulated through accounting language, in which sins and virtues were "tabulated" and "reconciled." See Rosemary O'Neill, "Counting Sheep in the C-Text of *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 29 (2015): 89–116.

He impotently tries to foreclose interpretive multiplicity by claiming the leaf as his own resource: unlike the always-circulating Medea, he has read until the end of the text, asserting textual closure to repress his own equivocal openness. In contrast, Chaucer ostensibly offers a comforting conclusion to his tale, in which “taillynge enough” and the tale’s end occur simultaneously. The pun is rendered mutually sufficient, the end of life/leaf truly one in which marital harmony and proper erotic exchange can be resumed, but the unhappy marital and signficatory equivocation of Medea and Conscience lurks, like a whitewashed text, just behind it.

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## 6. THE MEDIEVAL LIAR

*By Gyula Klima*

### THE LIAR PARADOX

In a philosophical context, when we are talking about “the Liar” or “the Liar Paradox” we are referring to a puzzling proposition claiming its own falsity (along with some piece of reasoning pointing out the puzzling character of such a claim), which raises some serious questions about the consistency of our ordinary notion of truth. Accordingly, the name is somewhat misleading. The Liar Paradox has nothing to do with the psychological conditions of lying, such as the beliefs and intentions of the speaker (for telling a lie is of course not simply saying a falsity, but rather it is saying something contrary to what one believes to be true with the intention to deceive), or with its ethical problems (for example, whether lying is always impermissible); rather, as it is commonly understood among philosophers, it is a problem of logical semantics.

If I say that I am lying, or, to dispense with the logically irrelevant factors of beliefs, intentions, and moral values, if I say that what I am now saying is false, is what I just said true or false? Clearly, what I said must be either true or false (but not both). However, if it is true, then it is false, because that is just what I said to be the case, and so it is not true; on the other hand, if it is false, then it is true, because then what I just said to be the case is not the case, so it is not the case that what I said is false, whence it must be true. So, what I just said has to be true if and only if it is not true, which of course cannot be the case.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PARADOX IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

The first formulations and attempted solutions of the Liar Paradox can be traced back to ancient philosophy. Eubulides the Megarian (fourth century BC) was first credited by Diogenes Laertius with discussing the paradox, which actually does not mean that Eubulides was the first to invent it. In fact, the paradox is also associated with Epimenides of Knossos (or the Cretan) a semimythical figure who supposedly lived in the seventh or sixth century BC. The source of this association seems to be

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