

Response:
Langlandian Personification

Mary C. Flannery

With Rech-never and Recheles this lessoun he lerys
With Waste and with Wranglere, his owne pley-ferys,
With Lyght-honde and with Likorouse-mowth, with Unschamfast;
With Drynke-more and with Drawe-abak, her thyrst is y-past,
With Malaperte and with Mysseavysed - such meyny they hight,
That wolle do but a lytull tylle her dyner be dyght.¹

Though the above lines plunge us into the middle of a moralizing allegorical narrative, they in fact appear as interpolations in a very different kind of text: the unique version of *The Cook's Tale* preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 686. These and other interpolated lines not only complete Geoffrey Chaucer's otherwise unfinished *Cook's Tale*, but also derail its initial trajectory as a bawdy London set piece, transforming it into an allegorical warning to 'yonge men' to '[r]emembre you what myschefe cometh of mysgovernance' (lines 91-93). The riotous protagonist of the Cook's story, Perkyn Revelour, meets a sobering end at the side of his companion, '[t]he tone y-dampned to presoun perpetually, / The tother to deth for he couthe not of clergie' (lines 89-90).²

¹ 'The Cook's Tale', lines 19-24, in Bowers, ed., *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*.

² Exactly which character meets which fate is unclear: Bowers presumes that Perkyn is executed because, having 'neglected his education, he could not escape execution' (note to line 90); Pinti presumes that it is Perkyn who languishes in prison ('Governing the "Cook's Tale"', p. 385).

I take these interpolations as my point of departure for this response on the subject of Langland's personification not because they are Langland's, but because they have repeatedly been characterized as *Langlandian*.³ John M. Bowers remarks in the introduction to his edition of the MS Bodley 686 *Cook's Tale* that these verses 'seem to owe less to Chaucer...and more to Langland, with longer four-stress lines, heavy alliteration, and the introduction of allegorical personifications'.⁴ Likewise, in his study of the version of *The Cook's Tale* contained in MS Bodley 686, Daniel J. Pinti notes that the above passage takes readers 'further away from the immediacy of "real-life" London by associating Perkyn with quasi-Langlandian allegorical personifications'.⁵ Like Bowers, Pinti identifies the shift into personification allegory and alliterative verse as marking a kind of Langlandian turn within the Chaucerian text. Both personification allegory and alliterative verse are certainly more immediately reminiscent of Langland than they are of Chaucer.⁶ But, by way of a response to the arguments advanced in this issue by Tekla Bude, Claire Waters, and Julie Orlemanski, I would like to suggest that the most distinctively Langlandian quality of passages like this and other interpolations in the MS Bodley 686 *Cook's Tale* is in fact the *style* of its personification allegory—more specifically, the way that it persistently blurs the lines between realism and allegory, between words and their personified forms, and between 'types' and personifications of abstract concepts. The authors who have contributed to this cluster of essays on personification each identify key aspects of Langland's approach to the

³ The following discussion regarding what it is that makes these interpolations 'Langlandian' as opposed to 'Chaucerian' revisits some of the questions explored in the cluster of essays on 'Chaucer's Langland' in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 32 (2018).

⁴ Bowers, 'The Cook's Tale: Introduction', in Bowers, ed., *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*. See also Bowers' note to lines 19-24, which he describes as 'reminiscent of Langland's Piers Plowman [sic]', and Pinti, 'Governing the "Cook's Tale"', 381.

⁵ Pinti, 'Governing the "Cook's Tale"', p. 381.

⁶ A. S. G. Edwards also briefly mentions MS Bodley 686 in the context of his discussion of 'the broader links between the transmission of alliterative verse and the circulation of Chaucer manuscripts during the fifteenth century in London', though he notes that 'there seems nothing in the passage to link it to *Piers Plowman*'; see 'The Early Reception of Chaucer and Langland', p. 2.

trope that contribute to its distinctive style, and in so doing they offer us new means of finding purchase on this shifty subject.

As Bude remarks early on in her essay, '[a] personification is a slippery thing' (p. 11/00). This statement holds particularly true in the case of *Piers Plowman*, which describes very few of its personified characters in any visual detail (notable exceptions include Lady Meed, the confessing Sins, and Haukyn in the B text). Much of Langland's allegory consists of either the voices of various personified abstractions or montage-like episodes that, like the interpolated lines in *The Cook's Tale* in MS Bodley 686, flash a series of presumably embodied abstractions before our eyes without giving us any sense of what their bodies or personalities might look like. In the passage above, the spate of anthropomorphized vices compresses Perkyn's downward spiral into a mere six lines. This compression recalls similar moments in *Piers Plowman*, such as when Reason calls his servants Cato and 'Tomme Trewe-tonge – tel-me-no-tales / Ne-lesynge-to-laughen-of-for-I-loved-hem-nevere', asking them to saddle 'Suffre-til-I-se-my-tym'e so that he may accompany Conscience to confront Lady Meed before the King (B.4.16-23).⁷ One might equally compare the list of the 'seven sustren that serven Truthe evere' (B.5.618): Abstinence, Humility, Charity, Chastity, Patience, Peace, and Generosity (B.5.620-23).

Even more directly comparable with the allegorical interpolation in MS Bodley 686 is Langland's list of the rascals that Truth charges Piers to have no dealings with:

Jakke the Jogelour and Jonette of the Stuwes,
And Danyel the Dees-pleyere and Denote the Baude,
And Frere the Faitour, and folk of his ordre,
And Robyn the Ribaudour, for hise rusty words.

(B.6.70-73)

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all citations from the B text refer to Schmidt, ed., *The Vision of Piers Plowman*.

While the individuals enumerated in this passage veer more closely towards recognizable types than they do towards personifications of abstract concepts, ‘Perkyn Revelour’ and the companions he runs wild with in MS Bodley 686 would fit right into this crowd. (The fact that Langland also uses the diminutive ‘Perkyn’ several times to refer to his poem’s eponymous hero is almost certainly a coincidence, but a suggestive one.) Such passages give readers the impression that Langland’s personifications are, in Jill Mann’s memorable account, ‘constantly springing into life as a metaphorical verb briefly endows them with a quasi-human activity, and then sinking back into abstract nouns once more’ (which in turn makes it difficult for editors to ‘decide when to bestow the capital letter that, according to modern conventions, marks out a personification, and when to withhold it’).⁸ A. C. Spearing concurs (in a study cited by Orlemanski): ‘[T]he dividing line between what does and does not count as a character in *Piers Plowman* is blurred by the insistent tendency of Langland’s poetic idiom towards momentary humanizations, and the coexistent rapidity and fluidity of movement that leaves them behind as soon as they are created’.⁹ As an example, Spearing cites the revision of Wrath’s confession between the B and C versions of the text, which transforms the angry ejaculations of ‘Thow lixt!’ from outbursts that ‘lopen out’ of the mouths of furious nuns in the B text (B.5.161) to something Spearing describes as ‘small-scale personification’ in the C text: ‘Thus sytte they, tho sustres, sum tyme and disputen / Til “thow lixt” and “thou lixt” be lady ouer hem alle’ (C.6.137-38).¹⁰

The flexibility of Langland’s approach to personification—both within his poem and across different versions of it—keeps readers as well as editors on their metaphorical toes;

⁸ Mann, ‘Allegory and *Piers Plowman*’, pp. 79-80.

⁹ Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, p. 226. Quoted in Orlemanski, ‘Langland’s Poetics of Animation’, p. 12/00.

¹⁰ Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, p. 226. Citation from the C text taken from Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*.

Langland stretches the trope out almost to the point of evaporation, pinches it so small as to barely be noticed. In its fully fleshed-out form, personification is rare in *Piers Plowman*; as an idiom it is everywhere. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the most distinctive aspect of Langlandian personification is that there is often no ‘person’ whatsoever to speak of—that is, no ‘living body or physical appearance of a human being’.¹¹ Despite the fact that personifications tend to be described as embodied abstractions, physical or even virtual bodies often seem irrelevant to Langlandian personification, as they do to the interpolations found in MS Bodley 686.¹²

This frequent absence of any visualizable embodied presence attached to the mobilized nouns that populate Langland’s poem undercuts the arguments of scholars such as Walter S. Melion and Bart Ramakers—the editors of a recent (and substantial) collection of essays on personification—that personification is a fundamentally ‘visual’ mode. Melion and Ramakers invoke what they view as ‘the essentially visual character of personifications, be they created materially for us to see or evoked virtually for us to imagine’.¹³ But this visibility is only infrequently found in *Piers Plowman*, which may perhaps be the reason why, with one striking exception, surviving manuscripts of Langland’s poem do not contain extensive programmes of illustration.¹⁴ Voice, not visibility, is a much more central element of Langlandian personification, as Bude’s exploration of the animacy and vibrancy of nonhuman matter in *Piers Plowman* makes clear.¹⁵ Bude brings New Materialism to bear on questions concerning the agency of the nonhuman in an effort to consider how ‘a material

¹¹ *OED*, s. v. *person*.

¹² For personification as ‘embodied abstraction’, see e.g. Cooper, ‘The Afterlife of Personification’, p. 98.

¹³ Melion and Ramakers, ‘Introduction’, p. 6. See also Baskins and Rosenthal, eds., *Early Modern Visual Allegory*.

¹⁴ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 104 is the only *Piers Plowman* manuscript to contain an extended series of marginal illustrations (seventy-two, a not insignificant number in a vernacular manuscript), most of which depict the poem’s personified characters, and many of which are accompanied by identifying labels either beneath or alongside the images. For discussion of these illustrations, see Scott, ‘The Illustrations of MS Douce 104’.

¹⁵ The significance of sound and hearing in *Piers Plowman* has been recently explored in Batkie, ‘Of Poets and Prologues’, and Lears, ‘Noise, Soundplay, and Langland’s Poetics of Lolling’.

Piers Plowman might help us to ‘construct new ways of thinking and acting ethically in the world’ (p. 32/00). By focusing on the multiple materialities at play both in Langland’s poem and in the historical moment that gave rise to it, Bude draws attention to the ways in which the nonhuman world impresses itself on human language and action. This enables Bude to show how Langland uses sound and speech rather than visual, corporeal detail to activate what she (drawing on the work of James Paxson) terms the ‘substance-ness’ of his personified figures.¹⁶ As her essay demonstrates, Langlandian personification is a product of Langland’s interest in exploring ‘complex material relations and realities’ and their embeddedness in language, rather than his interest in simply putting abstract ideas in human form (p. 19/00). As a consequence, in *Piers Plowman* personification frequently becomes disembodied—the materiality of sound, rather than the sight of the material body, animates abstract concepts.

The ‘queering’ effects of sound, its ability to replace the visual ‘with a sound-body that is inchoate and always passing away’, may arguably be seen at work in the later interpolations found in MS Bodley 686, which introduce what appears to be the only line of dialogue into this version of *The Cook’s Tale* (Bude, p. 31/00).¹⁷ Perkyn and his allegorical ‘pley-ferys’ arrange to meet at a certain spot in order to play at dice, an activity that funds Perkyn’s largesse among his companions (and any women they happen to encounter). The description of these activities is punctuated by the exclamation, ‘Yet let us be mery, while our sire is aslepe!’ (line 34). Exactly who utters this exclamation is unclear. Pinti maintains that these lines ‘give Perkyn a voice, which only encourages the reader’s perception of Perkyn as a disruptive presence’.¹⁸ But the fact that this utterance follows on the heels of a description

¹⁶ On personification as a kind of ‘substantialization’, see Paxson, *Poetics of Personification*, p. 42.

¹⁷ While two proverbial sayings are quoted in the version of *The Cook’s Tale* found in MS Bodley 686 (at lines 62-63 and 73-76 in Bowers’s edition), and although Bowers’s punctuation suggests that the Master may have quoted one of them during his dismissal of Perkyn, it is debatable whether either of them is spoken aloud.

¹⁸ Pinti, ‘Governing the “Cook’s Tale”’, p. 382.

of Perkyn's activities with his allegorical companions makes its point of origin impossible to pin down—it floats somewhere between Perkyn and his companions, and between the individual and a collective voice. If Perkyn's surname establishes him as (in V. J. Scattergood's words) 'an identifiable literary type', this line makes it difficult to distinguish him from the more obviously allegorical members of his 'mayny'.¹⁹ In this respect, the exclamation goes even further in 'allowing Chaucer to locate Perkyn in "oure sitee" even as [the author of these interpolations] locates him simultaneously in the self-consciously artificial environment of personification allegory'.²⁰

As Waters's essay demonstrates, attending to the role played by sound in the construction of Langlandian personification also opens up new ways of approaching the trope in non-Langlandian texts. As part of her examination of the personification of sloth in *Piers Plowman* and William of Wadington's thirteenth-century *Manuel des pechiez*, Waters demonstrates how voices and sounds enable William to generate a figure of sloth that 'hovers between the individual and the general' as 'a persona readers might inhabit, illuminating the interaction between the fictive humanness of personification and his readers' efforts to sustain or restore their own humanness' (p. 3/00). This pre-Langlandian move seems to anticipate Langland's approach to personification. Waters illuminates the ways in which sloth itself is a slippery concept in both Langland's and William's texts, one that both invites and resists personification. One of the *Manuel*'s chief arguments regarding sloth is that its slipperiness—its vagueness as a concept, and its deceptive appearance of harmlessness—renders it a particularly dangerous sin, one that threatens to divest humans of their humanity and deprive them of salvation. The fact that sloth is so much a matter of 'not-doing' both makes it a particularly important sin to represent effectively, and particularly challenging to

¹⁹ Scattergood, 'Perkyn Revelour and the *Cook's Tale*', p. 21.

²⁰ Pinti, 'Governing the "Cook's Tale"', p. 381. Boyd makes the similar argument that the 'allegorization' of these interpolations 'disrupts the tale's spatiotemporal context' ('Social Texts', p. 91).

do so. Waters explores the ways in which William's depiction of sloth as a *perecous* (slugabed) talking himself out of attending church 'bring[s] the sin to life while also highlighting the close connections between bodily laziness and mental slackness, physical and spiritual sin' (p. 12/00). The humorous picture that William paints facilitates a sense of sympathetic identification with Sloth even as it warns the listener that decisions *not* to act in one's own spiritual interests can set off a chain of events leading to death and damnation. Comparing the *Manuel*'s depiction of the *perecous* with the figure of Sloth in *Piers Plowman*, Waters observes that 'Langland, like William of Wadington, had no difficulty conceiving of a given figure in both individualized and abstract terms' (p. 23/00). But whereas William rendered the *perecous* accessible to his readers by making him vocalize the amusingly familiar habits associated with sloth, Langland's Sloth possesses multiple voices, encompassing that of the neglectful priest as well as that of the neglectful layman. That said, Waters sees in the figure of Will an echo of the *perecous*, one that recalls the dangers that sloth can pose to preachers as well as to their lay audiences. But in identifying the in-between quality of the *Manuel*'s personification of sloth, Waters also puts her finger on what seems to fascinate Langland about the trope—namely, the sense that 'personification can work as or even more effectively when it refuses to define where exactly it falls in relation to the human: is it an aspect of human nature? an instance of human behavior? a possible path for an individual human being?' (p. 26/00)

It is in these kinds of gaps around humanity and the human body that Langlandian personification operates. But by focusing on those rarer moments when Langland offers his readers in-depth impressions of embodied personifications, Orlemanski's contribution to the cluster shows the extent to which this mode of operation is a function of Langland's homiletic and didactic project. As she also shows, this unavoidably leads to complications: the very thing that seems to lie at the heart of personification—its reliance on and rendering

of bodies—is also what makes it problematic in the context of a work that aims at least partly to elucidate the virtues of denying bodily needs and appetites. Desperate dilemmas arise in the B text’s dialogue between Haukyn and Patience, where bodily needs and appetites assert themselves urgently, which is doubtless one of the reasons for Langland’s transformation of Haukyn into the relatively more abstract figure of Activa Vita in the C text. This ‘anxiety about the corporeal resources of personification allegory’ resurfaces in the scene depicting the infiltration of the Barn of Unity, where metaphorical and actual scenes of bodily healing foreground the literal body’s problematic needs and vulnerability (p. 31/00). As Orlemanski’s analysis shows, while the insistence of the body throughout *Piers Plowman* reflects the poem’s efforts to render the immaterial materially apprehensible, it is at those moments when bodily need is most clearly at issue that bodiliness threatens to destabilize the poem’s message. When a personification is meant to figure ‘the state of being an embodied subject’, the trope itself begins to break down completely (p. 12/00). Orlemanski observes that, at these moments, ‘Embodiment is shown to be not something conjured by the liveliness of language but an entailed condition, a heavy fact, that weighs down the associational leaps of analogy’ and sets the representational function of body and soul in tension with ‘the logic of personification’ (pp. 12/00, 3/00). Thus, when the Sins confess in passus five of the B text, their simultaneous roles as similitudinous embodiments of vice and as confessing subjects and ‘ensouled bodies’ are brought into conflict with one another (p. 14/00). Can these vices ever truly repent? Can they ever be absolved?

Though Langlandian personification can, on such occasions, be fully embodied and visual, it is also precisely at these moments when Langland seems most eager to probe the gaps between abstract and concrete, and to play with the processes of substantialization that constitute personification.²¹ And while Langlandian personification can make use of

²¹ Paxson, *Poetics of Personification*, p. 42.

embodied knowledge and experience, that knowledge and experience evokes the effects and agency of nonhuman materiality as often as it draws on human perspectives. This renders Langlandian personification distinctly uneasy, and quite literally on edge—it is no accident that scholars who address the topic directly resort to terms like ‘liminal personifications’, ‘small-scale personification’, or ‘quasi-personifications’ in their discussions of *Piers Plowman*.²² By drawing our attention to this quality of Langlandian personification, these essays demonstrate how it can be at once elusive and instantly recognizable, even when it appears in a manuscript of another author’s work.

Works cited:

Manuscripts

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 686

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 104

Primary Sources

The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions, TEAMS, ed. by John

M. Bowers (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute, 1992), online at

<<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/bowers-canterbury-theses-fifteenth-century-continuations-and-additions>> [accessed 18 June 2019]

Langland, William, *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Douce 104*

(Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992)

_____, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. by Derek Pearsall

(Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008)

²² For ‘liminal personifications’, see Bude, p. 18/00. For ‘small-scale personification’ see Spearing, p. 226. For ‘quasi-personification’, see Davis, ‘*Piers Plowman*’ and the Books of Nature, p. 21.

_____, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edn (London: J. M. Dent, 2003)

Secondary Sources

Baskins, Cristelle Louise, and Lisa Rosenthal, eds., *Early Modern Visual Allegory:*

Embodying Meaning (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)

Batie, Stephanie L., 'Of Poets and Prologues', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 32 (2018), 245-70

Bowers, John M., 'The Cook's Tale: Introduction', in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, TEAMS, ed. by John M. Bowers (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute, 1992), online at
<<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/bowers-canterbury-theses-fifteenth-century-continuations-and-additions>> [accessed 18 June 2019]

Boyd, David Lorenzo, 'Social Texts: Bodley 686 and the Politics of the Cook's Tale', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 58.1 (1995), 81-97

'Chaucer's Langland', essay cluster in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 32 (2018), 237-389

Cooper, Helen, 'The afterlife of personification', in *Medieval Shakespeare: Past and Presents*, ed. by Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 98-116

_____, 'Gender and Personification in *Piers Plowman*', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 5 (1991), 31-48

Edwards, A. S. G., 'The Early Reception of Chaucer and Langland', *Florilegium*, 15 (1998), 1-22

Lears, Adin E., 'Noise, Soundplay, and Langland's Poetics of Lolling in the Time of Wyclif',

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, 38 (2016), 165-200

Mann, Jill, 'Allegory and *Piers Plowman*', in *The Cambridge Companion to 'Piers Plowman'*, ed. by Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 65-82

Melion, Walter S., and Bart Ramakers, 'Personification: An Introduction', in *Personification: Embodying Meaning and Emotion*, ed. by Melion and Ramakers (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 1-40

Paxson, James J., *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

Pinti, Daniel J., 'Governing the "Cook's Tale" in Bodley 686', *The Chaucer Review*, 30.4 (1996), 379-88

Scattergood, V. J., 'Perkyn Revelour and the *Cook's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 19.1 (1984), 14-23

Scott, Kathleen, 'The Illustrations of MS Douce 104', in *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Douce 104* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), pp. xxvii-xciv [slightly adapted from her article in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 4 (1990), 1-86]

Spearing, A. C., *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).