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Speculum Vitae and the Form of *Piers Plowman*

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CONTRIBUTING to this collection is undertaking a dangerously imitative act. I'm going to try, as "þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest," to imitate something I hope our honoree would think worthy to read. This is certainly a shabby substitution, in which an act of homage equally presumes to emulate what has formed, guided, and educated its perpetrator over so many years. One can only entertain such a challenge in the hope that the homage is somehow going to mitigate the presumption.

The preceding paragraph is not just a "modesty topos," but also adumbrates my topic. In an intensely postmodern world, Anne Middleton's work persistently recalls to us a few home truths about the literary and why talking about it, teaching and thinking it (rather than something else), is for us neither simply a business nor a postmodern form of self-display but a persistent delight.

Imitation/mimesis is the most basic literary act: the poem presumes to find a form in words that communicates a shaped verbal understanding, appropriate to its occasion, its place and time, that reconstructs the "real." It seeks to subordinate randomly verbalized perception to principles, a form. Today, this is an impossibly "old-timey" formulation, so it is appropriate, rhetorically and otherwise, to begin with something equally passé, an annotator's footnote. This I offer only as a moment of siting that will provide a

springboard into something of a little more interest, in this case formal, the kind of verbal construction Langland undertakes in *Piers Plowman*.

I

Among the books hanging around the poet's library was certainly one inescapable piece of continental French, an international religious classic. This was Lorens of Orleans's *Somme le roi*; Lorens was a royal confessor and wrote the book for his patron Phillip IV about 1279. Robert Frank long ago signaled many general analogies between the *Somme* and Langland's typical argumentative moves, but the French work may be seen as more precisely generative of Langland's imaginative thinking. For example, he certainly alludes to the bravura passage in which Lorens establishes his pattern of septenary moral instruction in a central episode, "Herte highte þe herber" ("Tree of Charite," 16.15).¹

Yet no one seems to have internalized that Langland knew *La Somme* multiply, not simply as a French text but an English one. One of Lorens's very interesting innovations on the generally Peraldan materials that he is reformulating is a very small section of his discussion of Avarice, its "ninth branch." This is designed to outline professions of their nature sinful (and thus to be avoided); through them people seek financial reward for acts that are immoral, valueless, waste time, or provoke sin in others. Lorens is brief and circumspect and cites only three examples—whores, heralds who flatter the great, and professional thugs (hitmen, hired guns). This succinct treatment normally appears in the numerous Middle English versions of the *Somme*.²

1. See Édith Brayer and Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie, eds., *La Somme le Roi par Frère Laurent* (Paris: Société des anciens textes français, 2008), chap. 50, pp. 201-6; for a literal translation see *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 92-97. Langland, it must be added, also clearly knows and uses Lorens's source in the ordinary gloss to Cant. 4. *La Somme*'s description of the garden of virtues does not occur in the text that I introduce two paragraphs below, and thus was certainly known to Langland from the French. See Robert W. Frank, Jr., "*Piers Plowman*" and the Scheme of Salvation, Yale Studies in English 136 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 1-2 and *passim*, e.g., 63-65 nn.

All citations of *Piers Plowman* are taken from the Athlone Press editions and, unless explicitly marked otherwise, from the B Version: George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1960); George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1975; rev. 1988); George Russell and George Kane, eds., *Piers Plowman: The C Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

2. The discussion is brief enough to be cited in full here: "La noviesme branche d'avarice est en mauvés mestier. En ce pechant mout de gent en mout de manieres, comme ces foles fames qui por un pou de gahaing s'abandonent a pecchié; ausi comme cil heraut et cil champion e mout d'autres qui pur

Normally, Walter Skeat, who of course *did* know everything, realized that this formulation does not cover all cases and carefully signalled the fact, but did not follow it up, in one of his exemplary notes. The most widely dispersed of all English translations of *La Somme*, in at least forty-five surviving copies and fragments, is the poetic version called *Speculum Vitae*. In this passage, that translation innovates on the French source. The *Speculum*, work of an anonymous Yorkshire cleric c.1350–70, expands Lorenz's half-dozen lines into over 140 octosyllabic verses and offers more or less extended discussion of nine "crafts of folly," "sinful professions." Three of these, presented consecutively—and this is what Skeat recognized—sound particularly resonant in the context of *Piers Plowman*: Faytours (*Speculum* 7123–32), Sneckedrawers (7133–62; "Som men calles þam 'robertmen,'" line 7134), and Herlotes, "minstrels" in the broadest Hawkin sense of the term (7163–82).³

Certainly, this discourse represents some form of Middle English slang/invective, and it has to have been dispersed enough to have been both legally and poetically comprehensible. Nonetheless, *Speculum Vitae* is the only site, literary or otherwise, in which Langland could have found this material, could have found it organized together, and most importantly, could have found it within an analytical framework. The evidence for such an assertion may be easily assembled through the consultation of historical dictionaries, and it is, as Skeat pointed out, quite unequivocal, since it involves more than simply reliance on the same vocabulary. Langland shares with the poet of *Speculum Vitae* an elsewhere unattested understanding of the connotations or implications of this terminology.

Skeat's customarily economical discussion of Prol.44 "Roberdes knaues" alone should constitute definitive proof. He pointed out that the word is presented as an alternative synonym in *Speculum* for "sneckedrawers"—an otherwise unparalleled fourteenth-century Northern compound; Langland uses the southern equivalent "lacchedrawers" twice (C 8.286, C 9.193). Leaving

deniers ou pur preu temporel s'abandonent a mestier deshoneste qui ne peut estre fez senz pechié, et de ceus qui le font et qui les sostiennent"; chap. 36; Brayer and Leurquin-Labie, eds., *Somme le Roi*, 145. Compare *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 41/10–18, which refers to "wikkede craftes" and "wikkede craftes and vnsittyng"; and *Dan Michel's Ayenbite of Inwyt*, ed. Richard Morris and newly collated by Pamela Gradon, EETS o.s. 23 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 45/5–13, with "kueade creftes" and "crefte nazt oneste."

3. Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1886), 2:7. I cite this poem from Ralph Hanna, ed., *Speculum Vitae: A Reading Edition*, EETS 331–32 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1:237–42.

I have previously taken up issues germane here; see, on the function of marginals, "Will's Work," in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 44–53; and on time wasting, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 148–53, 258.

these usages aside, the terms occur only twice before *Piers C*, on both occasions in parliamentary statutes, and on both occasions, as in *Speculum Vitae*, as if synonyms.⁴ The statutes lack any precision about what the words signify (although the inclusion of the term “wastours” in the first usage is suggestive). But both Langland’s uses at Prol.44 and C 8.286 indicate that he envisioned behaviors like those described in considerable detail in the Yorkshire poem. There “sneckedrawers” do rob, in that they try to sneak into houses (testing the “snecke” or latch first), but their main interest is not in making off with items of value, but pilfering food (“wasting,” since not the product of their own labor). “Sneckedrawers/robertmen” are prepared, if interrupted, to offer lengthy extenuations of their derelict behavior, in hopes simply of a handout.⁵

Skeat’s persuasive findings may be further extended in an examination of the other two terms—and of the congruence of the two poets’ customary usage of them. The most usual Middle English sense of the noun *faitour* (and of its derivative verb *faiten*), is “deceiver, imposter,” a sense-development apparently shared only with Anglo-Norman. It customarily describes only deceitful vagrants, viewed as capable of a range of nefarious behaviors.⁶ Never outside *Speculum* and *Piers* does the term explicitly (and narrowly) mean something on the order of “sturdy (and thus feigning) beggar,” nor is the word ever accompanied by such a description as this:

Lithir wyles can þai fynde
 To make þam seme crokid or blynde
 Or seke or mysays to mens sight.
 So can þai þair lyms dight
 For men suld þam mysays deme,
 Bot þai er noght swilk als þai seme. (*Speculum Vitae* 7125–30)

4. See *Statutes of the Realm*, 10 vols. (London: Eyre and Strahan, 1810–28), 1:268, 2:32–33 (5 Edward III, c.14; 7 Richard II, c.5), with “Robertsmen Wastours et Draghlacche” and “Roberdesmen et Drawlacches,” respectively. Both statutes reaffirm the earlier 13 Edward I, c.4 (“The Statute of Winchester”; see 1:97) and concern the responsibility of nightwatchmen in towns for apprehending, and detaining overnight, suspicious persons—in the original statute only those “estrange,” from outside the municipal walls.

5. The association of Rob-names (Robin [Hood], as well as Robert) with such behaviors goes back to at least early thirteenth-century legal documents and simply represents a derivative of the proper name. See *MED*, Robert n., sense 1 (a), and compare Langland’s penitent thief, “Roberd þe robber” (5.461).

6. Thus, one of the limited number of pre-Langlandian citations, “faitours and yprocrites and iogolors þat desayues men” (Rolle, *Psalter* 30.16) or the four times repeated collocation “faitours et vagerantz (de lieu en lieu currantz)” of the 1383 statute I have cited in n.4.

—a definition that certainly resonates with a number of Langland's descriptions, perhaps most provocatively 6.120–28 and 7.90–106.

The term "harlot" is a bit trickier, since it has a lengthy English history. But the great majority of uses, from the early thirteenth century on, follow the sense of the Anglo-Norman etymon and mean simply "rogue, base fellow, vagabond." This general sense Langland, of course, knows, but a considerably narrower usage "entertainer," e.g., "Sholde noon harlot haue audience in hall ne in chambre" (13.433), is also well attested in the poem. "Entertainer" is actually the only sense of the word the *Speculum*-poet knows, and the lexical evidence would indicate that this extended usage originated, about 1300, as a Northernism (and thus a natural term for this poet).⁷ And *Speculum Vitae* also includes two lengthy passages germane to Langland's discussion of "God's minstrels"; these insist upon the active charity due the poor, rather than to "harlots" (8573–98, 15697–722). Indeed, the notion of a cleanly or godly *geste* (13.446) is inherent in the prologue to the *Speculum*—and even more explicit in the early text it there imitates, the opening of *Cursor Mundi*.⁸

I think, although a catalogue of unique and precise connections might be extended, this forms an adequate demonstration of Langland's knowledge of and reliance on the earlier poem. In the remainder of this study, I address the obvious corollary to this demonstration: what difference does it make that Langland had read *Speculum Vitae*?

II

In the most general terms, this poem provides useful background for imagining the English literary landscape, the world of Edwardian poetry (or of Thorlac Turville-Petre's Middle Middle English), into which *Piers Plowman* intrudes. As a preliminary assay at this issue, I put "the crafts of folly"

7. Compare, most flamboyantly, *Cursor Mundi* 27927, 27922–23 (ed. Richard Morris, EETS 68 [London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1874–93], 1546–48):

Pat man may se be lichur state: . . .
Harlot[s] sagh, speche o disur,
Rimes vnright, gest of iogolur.

See similarly, Rolle, *Form of Living* 369 (in *Prose and Verse from MS. Longleat 29 and Related Manuscripts*, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS o.s. 293 [Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1988], 12), incorporated within a lengthy Rolle citation at *Speculum* 5689.

8. See especially lines 115, 123, 251–56 (ed. Morris, EETS o.s. 57 [London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1874–93], 14 and 22).

temporarily to one side and consider the grossest formal attributes of *Piers*, that it is a dream-vision and that it proceeds, uniquely among such works, by multiplying visions. This initial formulation highlights Langland's decision to inflect whatever a handbook source like *Speculum Vitae* provided him against a considerably more secular model, at least in the first instance dependent upon imitating *Winner and Waster*.⁹

But however foreign to morally instructive literature dream-vision may appear, there are certain formal carryovers of conception, in this case addressing Langland's unparalleled decision to write a poem composed of multiple dreams. In the overall context of *Speculum Vitae*, describing "crafters of foly" is a vibrant and attractive piece of writing. Indeed, the passage stands out because this is precisely not how *Speculum Vitae* normally proceeds. The poem provides an immense filing system (and I doubt that it is to be a read poem, but a consulted one). It is formed of a largely static pattern of *distinctions*—following Lorens, the poet splits out a subject from what he imagines a totality (vice/virtue), subdivides it, lists its constituent parts, and analyses each in turn. Thus, *Speculum* mainly defines topics, for example this (complete) discussion of Wanhope, the eighteenth branch of Sloth:

Wanhope comes þan alderlast,
 In whilk þe fende haldes a man fast.
 For when a man in Wanhope es broght,
 In Goddis mercy ne traystes he noght,
 For hym thinke so mykell his mysse
 Pat he may neuer haf heuen-blisse.
 And in þat he may parchaunce
 Sla hymself thurgh þe fendes combraunce.
 Pus may þise sex vyces brynge
 A man vntil ane ille endyng. (5249–58)¹⁰

Presentations of the "crafts" resemble this passage only incidentally. The poet of *Speculum* is pretty obviously involved in category proliferation (as in the received division of Sloth into eighteen [!] parts). But equally, he cat-

9. For example, Langland's direct evocation, at the opening, of the earlier poem:

As I went in the west, wandryng myn one
 Bi a bonke of a bourne, bryghte was the sone. (31–32)

I regularly cite from Thorlac Turville-Petre, ed., *Alliterative Poetry of the Later Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1989), 41–66; for "Middle Middle English," see his *England the Nation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

10. A similar discussion of Wanhope as a sin against the Holy Spirit appears at 4355–62.

egorizes and synthesizes some quite diverse behaviors into types reflecting Avarice. Unlike Wanhope, however, the presentations of the "crafts of folly" describe, not an inner *habitus*, but external acts alleged to express it. In these descriptions, one gets narrativized "sin," but at least partially fixed through identification of a type, the "vocation"/"craft." These descriptions, then, vacillate between type and represented behavior, the often complex activities of these perps. Thus, the "crafts" resemble Langlandian personification simply conceived, ceaseless repetition of the same vignette, yet a vignette always mobile/motile, subject of a consuetudinal narrative, and one that engages not simply "allegorical" type but also social practice.¹¹

The "crafts" may stand out as different. But *Speculum* resolutely follows the definitional turn exemplified by Wanhope and through this choice, the English poet subverts much that he found in Lorens. For while *La Somme* is equally "mechanistic" in shape, it includes a certain "dynamism," an insistence on ascent, rising in virtue to meet divinity. *Speculum Vitae* only retains Lorens's persistently ascendant patterning in its praise of the last "degree," Temperance (14613–844). But both methods of argument, French and English, could be connected with normal forms of catechesis.

Frank indicated amply enough Langland's imaginative fascination with such topics—as well as his obvious irritation with them and his sense that they did not constructively engage his needs. They constitute the "bokes ynow" and friar teachers (Lorens was a Dominican) to which Ymagynatif directs the dreamer (12.16–19). The *Speculum*, an extremely sophisticated example of the genre, shows the problem: it is really like getting home from IKEA with a box full of wooden planks and finding that the (underexplanatory) instruction sheet is not there. (The problem is, of course, intensified here by the proliferation of "parts" and "branches" of the various sins and virtues—lots and lots of planks.)

Somme and *Speculum* may construct good Christians, but they do so by providing lists of "don't do this" alternating with lists of "instead do that."

11. Compare J. V. Cunningham, "The Literary Form of the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*," *Modern Philology* 49 (1952): 172–81, who argues a similar coalescence of personification and vocational type, that Chaucer's "estates" portraits imitate the allegorical figures painted on the garden wall in *La roman de la rose*. Certainly, *Winner*, with its depiction of allegorizable armies nonetheless including professional types (friars on Winner's team, for example), provides a further local analogy.

Of course, Langland's having noticed a piece of English expansiveness limited to a brief space in a very long and extensive French text might itself be recognized as a formally generative perception. It implies the author's at least double attentiveness: (a) "vernacular" English, of which *Speculum Vitae* forms a strident example, as always "translated," alluding to a frequently unvoiced polylingual surround; (b) the malleability and power of local argumentative detail, an awareness played out in the poetic operations of "revision."

Readers are supposed to gain from reading these a checklist of those actions recognizably evil (vices), so they can identify them, and then replace each from a list of actions recognizably good (virtues). Or, in the technical argot of hamartiology and of “Herte þe herber,” “pull up the weeds of vice in the garden of your soul and plant seeds of the virtues.” This had been the catechetical model, and the absorbing center of religious writing, for a century and a half, ever since the need for this kind of specifically parochial instruction had been promulgated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

The real problem with this is that you obtained your planks, identifiable pieces of salvation, with some recognition tokens as to what they are. But although you have the information that should allow you to recognize bad planks (or actions), whether you could do so, as you were about to perform them, seems to me moot. Further, while the rhetoric of catechesis assumes the efficaciousness of proliferating branches/planks—it is supposed to allow increasingly fine-grained and meticulous confessional self-examination—that is not necessarily its only effect. It may simply generate chaos, confusion, or Wanhope, a sense of sin’s ubiquity (cf. 14.323–26).¹² Worst of all, you are missing the instruction sheet about how to change those deviant planks out or what you would do to put them into the orderly form of the spiritual IKEA cabinet.

In their formal structure, *Somme* and *Speculum* imply that getting saved is mechanically automatic. In essence, you are presented with a series of discrete acts, bad and good, and asked open-endedly to make the latter into rules of spiritual conduct. The only problem comes when you ask, as Will does, “How?” (1.84), when you turn the issue from spiritual act/conduct into a question about spirituality. Of what would that instruction consist? To what in you would it appeal? And if the going catechetical model is as I describe, Ymaginatyf’s advice probably deserves about the same restive response as Langland’s dreamer gives it. It’s surely “true” in a veridical sense, but it’s not Truth, a spiritual explanation.

Piers Plowman is certainly unique in the imaginative drive it brings to this question, the need to formally innovate to remake Christian edification. But the poem is far from unique in wanting to engage the issue. The salient contribution of Nicholas Watson’s well-known article on vernacular writing is its demonstration that the type of vernacular works that passed from the scene after 1409 were large catechetical handbooks of instruction.¹³ For

12. Compare, for example, the tumble of Rolle’s *Form of Living* 323–98 (ed. Ogilvie-Thomson, 11–13), cited at *Speculum* 5575–834, as a literal “form” for organizing one’s confession.

13. See Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” *Speculum* 70

Watson, here engaged in provocateurism, this demise of genre depends upon an external disruption, Arundel's interventions designed to restrict vernacular discussion. I would suggest a different formulation, that few people were writing catechetical materials like *Speculum Vitae* after 1409 because precisely of generic demise. One "genre/kind" of instruction had successfully performed that literary labor that, within its generic limits, it was capable of performing; or, stated otherwise, the genre had exhausted the questions that it appeared capable of answering. As a result, those seriously engaged needed to explore alternative ways to pose religious issues, to innovate generically. The problem is one internal to a particular form of literary representation—and of authors' and readers' response to a representation deemed insufficient, no longer addressing perceived concerns, and thus requiring replacement.

Viewed this way, it is informative that *Speculum Vitae* may be exactly contemporary with the last great Middle English catechetical endeavor, archbishop John Thoresby of York's catechism of 1357.¹⁴ Around Langland, and some of it certainly known to him, are species of religious writing that try to translate, as I've put it, "What?" into "How?," catechetical instruction in spiritual conduct into instruction in spirituality. Lollardy, with its intense interest in personal responsibility for internalizing biblical injunction, always takes top billing, but it, too, is very far from unique. Already in the 1340s, Rolle's *Form* and Latin *Emendatio Vitae* attempt to redirect conduct inwardly; instructively, to find an overt model, Rolle had to regress, to move back beyond Lateran IV, to twelfth-century Victorine theology.

Rolle's impulse was followed, in Langland's imaginative lifetime, by Walter Hilton and *The Cloud*-author.¹⁵ But similar activities were equally prominent in London, where one can find about 1370 a laicized version of *Ancrene Riwe* (another archaic text revived); and in the 1380s, production of the innovative *Chastising of God's Children* and *Cleansing of Man's Soul*. Similar efforts occurred in Langland's West Midland homeland, most immediately evident in the texts gathered in Oxford, University College, MS 97.¹⁶ Langland is a great deal more *au courant* than either Gower or

(1995): 822–64. The argument is unduly sweeping and, to an extent, factually inaccurate, as the two mid-fifteenth-century redactions of the full *Speculum Vitae* would indicate.

14. See Anne Hudson, "A New Look at *The Lay Folks' Catechism*," *Viator* 16 (1985): 243–58.

15. It is no accident that persistent critical strains seek to connect *Piers* with (or assess it within) such circumambient generic innovations: for example, Pamela Gradon, "Langland and the Ideology of Dissent," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 66 (1980): 179–205; or Malcolm Godden, *The Making of "Piers Plowman"* (London: Longman, 1990). In terms of my argument here, such efforts confuse the analogue with the object.

16. See A. I. Doyle, "University College, Oxford, MS 97 and Its Relationship to the Simeon Manuscript (British Library Add. 22283)," in *So meny people longages and tonges: Philological Essays in*

Chaucer, both cranking out yet more catechetics (*Le mirour de l'omme*, *The Parson's Tale*) that rely mainly on thirteenth-century handbooks.

But whatever the degree of contemporary spiritual innovation, these efforts equally inherited the formal problems I have been describing, not unique to *Somme* and its derivatives and congeners. Were one to prejudice the issue no further than to call *Piers Plowman* “extended narration” or “long poem,” one should realize that composing through the mechanical segmentation of a topic (following Anne’s intervention at her own day-conference, “constructing an array”) provided the only circumambient narrative mode available to Langland. It is that followed in such predecessor texts as Robert Manning’s *Handling Sin*, *The Northern Homilies*, *The South English Legendary*, or *The Prick of Conscience*. All impose on their subjects a mechanical shaping structural device, in the case of *The Homilies* and *Legendary*, for example, the liturgical year, and then develop the constituent chunks the organizational category throws up.

As a result, these poems, like *Speculum Vitae*, work by segmented narrative blocks. They may reach temporary, episodic climaxes (the triumph in martyrdom of a saint in the *Legendary*, for example), but then they stop, they refocus and repeat (what is fundamentally the same with different names), return to the same ground-zero opening. Quite universally, these might be described as jerk-start narratives, lacking at major structural junctures transitions, rhetorical flagging, or overt cross-reference. One might notice—but only for a brief moment—the analogy of such works with *The Canterbury Tales*, which also engages in segmentation and only unifies its parts under a claim for the multiplicity of the imagination. Thus, the prevailing model for “long poem” when Langland initiated his project was one of multiple allegedly analogous narrative segments, no single one achieving something like final closure (but only repetition or reiteration), and laid end to end to form “long poem.” Suspiciously similar, it must be said, to many descriptions of the eight-dream form of Langland’s poem.

There did, however, exist an alternative to such iterative structuring, one whose effects and influence Anne Middleton has provocatively argued out.¹⁷

Scots and Medieval English Presented to Angus McIntosh, ed. Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh: n.p., 1981), 265–82; and Jill C. Havens, “A Narrative of Faith: Middle English Devotional Anthologies and Religious Practice,” *Journal of the Early Book Society* 7 (2004): 67–84.

17. See Anne Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*,” in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1982), 91–122. Further provocative comments on the subject appear throughout D. Vance Smith, *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century*, Medieval Cultures 28 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

This is the directed and progressive unfolding of romance. As genre, romance deals with action as a kind of voluntary discipline; it assumes a relatively transparent self, that mind is legibly measured by external behavior, and that the hero comes to his own (his country, his inheritance) through a sequence of implicitly educative, yet largely repetitive adventures.¹⁸ Of course, romance poets assume what may be true as well of the repeated visions of Langland's poem, that a suitable *habitus* of virtue only achieves clear formation through progressively less errant reiterations of the same.

But this alternative clashes strikingly with the presumptions of *Speculum Vitae* and a range of similar English narratives, dating back so far as the 1280s (in Anglo-Norman to the 1230s or 1240s). As I have indicated, the Northern poem resolutely excises a progressive structure resembling that of romance—Jacob's ladder as the way to Heaven. In *La Somme*, each rung is scaled by the eradication/extirpation of one vice and its replacement by the corresponding virtue.

Speculum Vitae's excision follows rigorously upon the poet's rejection—common in predecessor and companion writings—of romance as a fit narrative mode altogether. For the poet, mindful of Matt. 12:36 and its commonplace glosses, the genre represents merely "waste"—the misuse of spiritual and intellectual talents better reserved for pursuing virtue directly. Romance is what, in their most august moments, Herlotes, one of the "crafts of folly," transmit. Moreover, *Speculum Vitae* includes the most compulsively detailed analysis of time-wasting available in any language.¹⁹

But the *Speculum* also complicates seriously the notion of "timely" narration. One might contrast the "crafts of folly" with a second passage, also an original narrativization in this poet's treatment of Avarice. This expansive description of Okir (usury), like that of the "crafts," avoids described inner *habitus* in favor of meticulous description of social practices. The discussion, monumentally swollen from the rendition in *La Somme*, describes for 200 lines highly realized rural market behaviors, price manipulations gener-

18. For provocative studies outlining such structural features, see R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), 219–57; Larry D. Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 73–80; Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987).

19. The topic is already implicit in Chretien's *Yvain*, with its interest in self-indulgent/wasteful and public/managed time. In *Speculum*, devoted from the outset to avoiding *vayne carpyng* (line 36), discussions of this issue appear at at least 447–68, 3651–54, 5039–60, 6445–50, 7269–96, 7610–18, 8557–90, 9621–30, 9882–94, 10357–64, 10421–72, 13171–204, and 15199–206. The topic equally intrigues Langland; compare, for example, his framing of the C version "biographical passage" at 5.27–28 and 92–101 (and B 1.138–41); or Study's diatribe, replaying a number of *Speculum Vitae* concerns, 10.30–80.

ally associable with trade in grain and livestock (6163–6340). This portrayal simply inverts the complaints against “crafts of folly,” because this tricky price-fixing relies upon oppressively careful attention to time and season, commodifying time as form of profit.

One could see this as that “projective use of time” that Will invokes at C 5.93–98 as “ofte chaffarynge.” But the real difficulty there, and with Will’s formulation generally, concerns whether this “useful time,” as Langland renders it in *Piers Plowman*, has itself been subsumed by spirituality’s opposite. This social discourse of avidly pursuing “profit” turns out to be the grammar of Coveitise, his *donet* (5.207). In the poem, the effects of this language become particularly dire when they disrupt clerical instruction, sending clerics off to be clerks (Prol.83–111). From *Speculum Vitae*, I think Langland might have intuited that great joy and frustration of his poem, that narration itself might always engage one in a double-bind of use and uselessness, profit and waste.

III

Iterative structure and a definitional bent are not the only properties of pre-*Piers Plowman* instructional literature or dream vision. To return to the latter, one may identify some narrower formal constituents, peculiarly inflected in *Piers Plowman*. Poems associable with this formal structure may be characterized by a shared interest in described landscape, in meeting an interlocutor (*Piers* most usually follows its predecessor *Winner* in constructing these as contentious conversations), and in frequently describing the (allegorized) abode such a figure inhabits.

One recognizes the unusualness of Langland’s handling here. His poem and its title-figure, especially, are not associated with the Frenchy *locus amoenus*, but with a largely undifferentiated landscape, initially a field only plane, flat, or level (“fair,” Prol.17).²⁰ As I have already indicated in discussing the

20. See Elizabeth Salter, “*Piers Plowman* and the Visual Arts,” in *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art, and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 256–66, 340–42. The undifferentiated open locale again reflects *Winner and Waster*, where the speaker awakes

One a loueliche la(u)nde þat was ylike grene (48),

bordered by two contending hosts. And just as in Langland’s landscape, in the distance

At the creste of a clyffe a caban was rerede (59),

“cabin” here carrying its usual alliterative sense “pavilion,” with suitable heraldry. As in Langland’s first vision, the sight conveys a promise of royal judgment (“and [wende] to wiete or I went wondres ynewe”

vacillation between type and action in *Speculum* portraits, the character of the interlocutor in the poem has been programmed to shift between allegorical abstraction and socially realized figure (e.g. Wit in passus 9, fat friar [yet more specifically William Jordan?] in 13). And the poem at least toys with a dream as an educative experience, the speaker seeking instruction in various allegorical houses, alleged to offer definitive information (down to "feip̄ in a fenestre" 18.15 and Dowel's "inne" 8.4).

Piers Plowman's dream in multiplicity allows a continuity in a mazelily repeated, yet potentially highly specific, mode that is not the property of many earlier long narrative poems. *Piers* achieves this effect through its one constant, the presence of its inquiring, *How?*-seeking dreamer. From the start, he is a figure invested in a search for a new (spiritual) language—a task initially enunciated in the thoroughly unpointed and potentially self-indulgent "wondres to here" (Prol.4). This figure has been conceived as a mirror to the incipient narratives describing "crafters of folly" in *Speculum* "portraits." One might compare, for example, Langland's evocation of the trio "lyar/ lollere-lachedrawer-lewd hermit" at C 8.286 and 9.193.

From this perspective, the poem opens in a starkly definitional mode, one that might be associated with beginning a search for an adequate spirituality. The speaker assumes the "habite" of the "heremite vnholly" (Prol.3) and, in so doing, opens a space in which the re-invention of holy language might occur. "Shoop me" (Prol.2) refers, not simply to a literal habit, perhaps a shrouding of identity, but to creating/constructing a speaker. Necessarily, whatever the newness of self-invested "habite," the poem's creative process must derive from discourses that pre-exist the speaker, the verbal "wondres" he hopes to encounter. Yet the fair field the dreamer immediately views (and is sucked into) functions as a tabula rasa, a blank slate, onto which he can literally (as Chaucer's Knight has noticed in his lines 886–88) plough/write his reordered version of the languages he has received.²¹

The ensuing prologue functions exactly as such a textual entry should, as a "pre-nouncement," both of method and of theme. Like the "heremite vnholly," it plays between the discipline one might associate with the spiritual life and a considerably more inchoate and possibly troubling set of procedures. On the one hand, the method of the Prologue is remarkably inovert

84). See R. V. W. Elliott, "The Topography of *Wynnere and Wastoure*," *English Studies* 48 (1967): 134–40; and Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*, 143–44, particularly noting the expansive description of A 2.40–48.

21. For the trope (the dreamer, after all, sustains his dream by verbal inquisition, before it is complete enough for him to wake and write it down), see Stephen A. Barney, "The Plowshare of the Tongue: The Progress of a Symbol from the Bible to *Piers Plowman*," *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973): 261–93.

and shrouded, a rambly and inconsequential imitation of the arbitrariness of visual notice: “And somme” 33, “faste aboute yede” 40, “I seiȝ” 50, “I fond” 58, etc. Through such rhetorical gestures, the speaker deliberately undoes, and frees his poem from, the hypercategorized forms of catechesis.

Yet, with the model of “crafts of folly” in mind, one may perceive beneath these surface moves at least allusions to a carefully considered program. The description begins with the most conventional of detail, a bow to the traditional “three estates” (with the new aristocracy of mercantile wealth as a pendant fourth group, lines 20–32). But it then immediately evokes *Speculum*’s “crafts,” Herlotes, Faitours, and Robertmen (33–45); in the process, the poet alludes (“Faiteden . . . fouȝten” 42), to the poem’s grounding in forms of verbal aggression. These figures are succeeded by their more commonplace (and more plausibly respectable) by-forms in the poem, lollerish fake pilgrim/hermit and fake mendicant instructor (46–67), the latter rendered socially visible by the failure of available catechetics (described at 83–111).²² Finally, the speaker provides a foretaste of the poem’s central scene and abiding emphasis, the conception of “pardon” (68–82). This poem will emphasize acting, rather than schematizing, penitential self-abnegation.

The prologue thus achieves legibility by its precision of reference to a precedent text. This paradoxically unstructured specificity in turn implies a literary community; the poem requires an audience capable of recognizing a shared text, and presumably neither thoroughly surprised nor baffled by what follows. Langland’s unmarked allusiveness does presuppose an audience to whom the text is legible (perhaps given surmises about Langland’s target cadre, as an inflection of “Statute discourse,” over and above the poetic source).

Further, the Prologue emphasizes and identifies as that problem driving the poem a crisis about instructional language. Those best qualified to offer such materials, clerks at least moderately learned (and thus, widely employable), desert their teaching posts. They have been replaced by friars, latterday Lorenses who fail to attend to the efficacious spirit of the gospel. Moreover, the poem’s language is absolute in condemning what is simultaneously ubiquitous (“wipoute noumbre,” 20.270) and dissolute (“alle þe foure ordres, / Prechyng . . . for profit,” Prol.58–59). Into this vacuum, the speaker, a “crafter of foly,” errant and visible to the world, like the friar, inserts himself.

Langland relies here upon two features of the “crafts”—both their open availability and their narrativity. First of all, the three “crafts” in which Lang-

22. For *lolleres*, see Anne Middleton’s discussion of the term as indicating publicly ostentatious religious display: “Acts of Vagrancy: The C-Version ‘Autobiography’ and the Statute of 1388,” in Justice and Kerby-Fulton, *Written Work*, 242–43, 276–88, 291.

land is most invested are predicated upon having a public presence (which "competent" instructors deny potential hearers). In *Speculum Vitae*, Faitours, Herlotes, and Sneckedrawers all practice outdoor trades. They, like the "hermits that inhabiten by the heigh way" (C 9.189, 204), alternative to the patient poor, invisible in their cotes and deprivation, are out there to draw attention. They require, not furtive sinfulness, like the Okirer's canny contracts, but ceaseless open, public display. Only in this way may they "continue," attract the living they seek (cf. C 5.39 and 104).²³

Second, the "crafts" of *Speculum* are ceaselessly engaged in activities necessitated by the failure of catechesis, forms of self-composition. If useful spiritual language does not appear publicly current, then it has to be constructed from resources at hand, and in *Speculum Vitae*, this is a language ostensibly personal or biographical. Substantial energies in this "crafty" account get invested in complex "back-stories." The crafts, Herlotes most overtly so, are committed to narrative self-dramatization in the interests of sympathy (and pay).

Although Herlotes tell tales, romance lies and waste, professionally, those tales composed by Faitours and Sneckedrawers are considerably more interesting, accounts of being "forced by circumstance." In essence, both groups pretend to (confessional?) biography, but their self-authored accounts of themselves are persistently queried in *Speculum* as every bit as fictive as Herlotes' romance. These accounts represent the very opposite of contrite efforts at veridical self-revelation, for they offer yet more lies, narratives that didn't happen. *Speculum Vitae* groups the thoroughly explicit Heralds here, since they are really no better than Herlotes; they invent panegyric accounts of what their masters should have done (but didn't).²⁴ Similarly, Faitours write their stories, of debilitating accidents or genetic defects, on their bodies; Snecke-/Latch-drawers or Robertmen offer accounts of their social victimization to extort food from the intimidated or the unwary. But all, at some point or another, use unprogrammed outdoor wandering as a form of self-composition, and in their backstories, they double one narrative form already persistently doubled.

23. Compare faitours "to mens sight" *Speculum* 7127 (they require public display and thus being out and about), or the sneckdrawer/robertsman at the door in 7135–36; or

Herlotes walkes thurgh many tounes
With specked mantels and burdouns,
And at ilk mans hous ga þai in
Þare þai hope oght for to wyne (7163–66; ultimately, they must "stand on þe flore" 7169 to perform).

24. Interfacing with the discussion of God's minstrels, 13.421–59.

After all, the very form of dream-vision itself relies upon a doubled time-scheme. It presents a narrative simultaneously present to both writer and reader and yet also a memory of the past. Truly “romynge in remembraunce” (C 5.11), dream poems only repeat (and perhaps clarify) the imaginative urge—the “back-story”—that initially willed them into existence.

Here, the most provocative figure—and the one most closely interfacing with Will’s career in the poem—is Robert the Robber, the Sneckedrawer.²⁵ In the *Speculum* account, these “robertmen” are playing with latches in hopes of finding unlocked houses where they might pilfer food. But, shameless souls, they are thoroughly capable, when caught where they don’t belong, to offer elaborate accounts of past wrongs inflicted upon them in hopes of coercing charity (rather than the stocks they might deserve).

At some level, this vignette has thoroughly constructed the narrative form of *Piers Plowman*. The poem, unlike those circumambient poetic objects I have mentioned, describes only one thing and is focused, whatever the apparent vicissitudes of its surface narrative, through an Aristotelian “single dramatic action.” This is coming in from sleeping rough—and not so coincidentally, dreaming, fantasizing pasts, both biographical and thoroughly imaginative—and rambling, getting your foot in the door somewhere.²⁶

25. On *Zeuan-zeilde-Azeyne*, generated as Robertsman’s double in C 6.308–10, see Ralph Hanna, “Robert the Ruyflare and His Companions,” in *Literature and Religion in the Later Middle Ages: Philological Essays in Honor of Siegfried Wenzel*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser and John A. Alford, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 118 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995), 83–85. Our honoree’s still unpublished Gayley Lecture draws attention to other possible affiliations underlying Evan’s Welshness. There she cited 4 Henry IV, c. 27: “Mischiefs which hath happened before this Tyme in the Land of Wales, by many Wastours, Rhymers, Minstrels, and other Vagabonds” (*Statutes of the Realm*, 2:140). According to this regulation, such individuals should not be fostered, nor allowed to make “commorths.” Middleton argues that, in the statute (and perhaps *Piers Plowman*), wastour represents a Welsh term *gwestwr* (< *gwest-gwr* “hospitality man”), a vagrant who exacts free room and board, the commorth, from well-to-do houses and who might go about as a publicist, political prophet, or bearer of tidings. See further R. R. Davies, *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 91–92, 285, on bardic “commorth” and capacity to spread sedition.

26. One might, in this regard, consider the behavior of the poem’s least ironized personification, Pacionce, introduced as he

in þe paleis stood in pilgrymes cloþes
And preyde mete, *pur charite*, for a pouere heremyte. (13.29–30)

Deferentially, he is not *at* the door, but at a remove (in the palisaded courtyard), and his prayer is not entirely for himself, but for the benefit “charite” will confer on the giver. Unlike “crafters of folly,” Pacionce has no back-story, only an indifferentiable succession, a true *habitus*, of “angres”/anguish borne sweetly, and he only stands, a reminder that many of the poem’s greatest actions, Piers’s response to tearing the Pardon, for example, involve no motion at all. (I am further reminded of Rolle’s “I haue loued for to sit” [*Form* 829, ed. Ogilvie-Thomson, 23]; cf. the figure of poetic competence, *Ymaginatyf*, at 12.1–2.) But the real proof of the pudding might be the disruption of conventional

This narrative is the one promised from the poem's opening by Langland's favored Psalter verse, "Domine, quis habitabit . . . ?" (Ps. 14:1). (In this modality, the projected narrative should depend upon an outcry no "crafter of folly" would appear to consider undertaking, penitential tears [see 5.595–604].) Yet simultaneously, the topic underwrites the extraordinary deliberation of Langland's climax, Jesus's gospel life most compellingly narrativized as The Light at the Door of passus 18 (the hero another wandering Faytour-figure, Incarnation as fleshly disguise of poverty, with one hell of a back-story behind it).²⁷

Obviously, Langland's presentation has been predicated upon Jesus's identification of himself as "the door" in John 10. In this gospel parable, Jesus is the true priest/good shepherd, both exemplary model and exemplary process of a teaching proper to salvation. He is the door that allows others to enter, but also the proper way of entering a ministry, an appropriate life of Christian instruction. This is a passage conventionally in the later Middle Ages deeply imbricated in antimendicant debates, in which these orders are identified as hireling shepherds, mercenary teachers, and confessors. They attempt to sneak in, intrude themselves by any entry except the proper door. Language that allows an entry through the door, the perhaps self-indulgent new narratives composed by "crafters of folly," provides the poem's hopefully licensed alternative (as at C 5.50, rewriting the suspicious C 5.29). Examples so fill the poem (and with the flexibility of metaphorical, or analogically metaphoric narrative) as to scarcely require exemplification.²⁸

Langland's poem thus oscillates between two discrete formal functions. First, the Aristotelian "single dramatic action" of the poem is to enter, get in the door, "get straight." Without its gospel connotations, it is analogous to the conventional action of, for example, Chaucerian vision, like *The House*

catechesis Pience enacts in the following passus, and the entire performance resembles another outcry "piercing" a palisade (10.468), a *pater noster*, which is the full narrative subject of *Speculum Vitae* (see 14.47–50).

27. And a not so covert allusion to another, fully human, narrative of errant readiness (to receive grace), the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), subjected to expansive treatment at *Speculum* 10455–60, 10783–800, 11832–48, 11909–22, and 12053–54.

28. Most obviously, in the poem's evocation of a trip to Truth's tower, but equally a journey into your "herbe-herber," where Truth also dwells (5.605–8). Passus 20 indicates the alternative version, in which the house is the self and the soul within (cf. 9.1–60). Thus, incursion is also the path Sin takes, as witness the pernicious instructional figure *penetrans-domos* (20.340), for whom see Penn R. Szitty's discussion of William of St Amour, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3–10. For the poem's reliance on metaphoric narrative, see particularly J. A. Burrow, "The Action of Langland's Second Vision," *Essays in Criticism* 15 (1965): 247–68; and a number of Jill Mann's papers, perhaps especially "Eating and Drinking in Piers Plowman," *Essays and Studies* n.s. 32 (1979): 26–43.

of *Fame* (the house where all is allegedly explicated). Yet equally, the method of the poem, directionless wandering, “a wikkede wey but whoso hadde a gyde” (6.1), established by the quality of the speaker and by the position of asking “How?,” is enabled by a form of self-creation in provocative disguise and banishment. Through this form, the poem addresses both the lost IKEA instructions, the limits of catechesis, as well as the more pressing social problem, the absent responsible clerical instructor. *Speculum Vitae* thus suggests a way of qualifying what has conventionally been taken as poem’s fundamental narrative ground since Elizabeth Salter’s important intervention.²⁹

Speculum’s “crafters of folly” animate the imagined and focused voice that produces *Piers Plowman*. After all, there is nothing inherently criminous about these houseless or homeless figures Langland appropriates. Indeed, the “crafts” manage to blur considerably one’s notion of wrong-doing. Southwark whores, after all, were protegées of their bishop;³⁰ tollgatherers and hangmen are necessary legal officials; and figures like heralds and champions, potentially valued and valuable members of lordly retinues. In *Speculum* and its handbook ilk, they become pariahs because they fall outside that organizational schema that defines “proper Christian life.”

Rhetorically, these books, as I have described them above, claim for themselves an exclusive and totalizing schema that includes all possible proscription and positive injunction. But there is one feature the three figures who so fascinate Langland share: their verbalism. This certainly, because pre-defined as nothing but “waste” and “lies,” represents a voice that speaks from outside any account *Speculum* would claim as worthy of notice. But—and I return to the idea of forced entry, breaking the door, again—that feature also allows these voices to interrogate what lies inside the catechetical scheme but can speak no language that is really therein intelligible, except as an already excluded negative.

The vivacity of “crafters of folly” provides an entry into something else, something that is not the category thinking of catechetical instruction. These

29. Elizabeth (Salter) Zeeman, “*Piers Plowman* and the Pilgrimage to Truth,” *Essays and Studies* n.s. 11 (1958): 1–16. Pilgrimage represents the poem’s limit-case, not its norm (and Salter joins many unduly idealizing readers), as directed type of the more basic feature “wandering,” following Prol.19, the ground-form of the poem. Moreover, in its most striking iteration in the text (the site of Burrow’s intervention), the pilgrimage/plowing of passus 6 comes to bear a suspicious resemblance to unfocused wandering. Medieval fields got ploughed in a centrifugal circle or spiral (working away from any stable or fixed central point); see George C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 44–50. In any event, as model this is qualified by Piers’s apparent rejection of works alone in passus 7 and replaced at 19.332–35 by a much more indefinite sense of where Piers plows, “as wide as þe worlde is” (see Prol.4 and 20.380–81).

30. See John B. Post, “A Fifteenth-Century Customary of the Southwark Stews,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 5 (1977): 418–28.

are figures outside the injunctive or proscriptive force of catechetical language; all they can speak, whether it is Will or passus 20's lawless Need, is pure affect, the desire to "continue." Yet simultaneously, they bear a voice that speaks against "bokes ynow." What Langland learned from texts like *Speculum Vitae* is the appropriate deployment of such a voice. In the poem's account, it remains recognizably what it has been in pre-existing discourse, the social wheedle that seeks a handout on the basis of some claim to a self-indulgence licensed by past indignities suffered (something like, say, C 5.35–43a). But equally, this voice raises some legitimate query as to why "crafts of folly" are possibly questionable things to be/have been doing, the accrual of the personal debt of sin. Like Robert and his C version mate Zeuanzælde-a3eyn, the voice comes to recognize, to see the bad plank from the IKEA box while it's being pulled it from the carton, and then voices how, if one so desired, one would find the restored plank, live out some penitential alternative.³¹

Inflecting Langland's form against its partial inspiration in *Speculum Vitae* uncovers some of *Piers Plowman's* distinctive narrative moves. Quite against C. S. Lewis's Olympian dismissal, "fragments but not a poem," Edwardian segmented narrative forms constructively underwrite a great deal of the poet's enterprise. Equally, his poem is representative of its historical moment in its decentering invocation of a voice alternate to the overtly catechetical, its reliance on those ostracized in one of its direct Edwardian sources.

31. Alternatively, one could inflect this conclusion in the spirit of Anne's contributions in "William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15–82; and "Langland's Lives: Reflections on Late-Medieval Religious and Literary Vocabulary," in *The Idea of Medieval Literature: New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard*, ed. James M. Dean and Christian K. Zacher (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 227–42: the construction of a model life somewhere between the extremes promised by *The South English Legendary*, the preternaturally holy youth or les enfances of Judas or Pilate.