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Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun (review)

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texts—especially the *Christ I* and the *Love Ron*—that this reviewer especially appreciated.

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JOHN M. FYLER. *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 306. £50.00; \$101.00.

John Fyler's book is the product of wide reading and sustained reflection on the nature of medieval literary representation. Its roots lie in a project that sought to align the history of ideas with a critical interest in poetics and found important expression in studies like Marcia Colish's *The Mirror of Language* (1968), Brian Stock's *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century* (1972), and Winthrop Wetherbee's *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (1972). This genealogy suggests the deep perspective informing Fyler's work, not its belatedness or isolation from contemporary literary studies. Fyler's understanding of the interpretive stakes of his topic clearly registers the influence of turns in recent decades to theory and history. As Fyler notes, his study shares some common territory with James M. Dean's *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature* (1999), but his focus on medieval views of the origin and nature of language leads, I think, to a darker assessment than the pervasive trope of *senectus mundi*. For the imaginative and expressive possibilities that the question of language opened up for Dante, Jean de Meun and Chaucer are tied profoundly to loss, mourning, and the bitter freedom of disenchantment.

Fyler's opening chapter argues that medieval speculations about language are shaped decisively by Genesis 1 and the exegetical tradition established by Augustine and developed by other patristic and medieval commentators. Fyler identifies "three historical foci" in Genesis: the origin of language, the effects of the Fall, and the building of the Tower of Babel (p. 3). His analysis of the biblical text distinguishes God's (performative) language at the Creation from Adam's (denotative) naming of the birds and animals, the (mythological) language of his progeny after the Fall, and the (historical) languages generated after Babel by

human confusion and depravity. The parentheses here are mine, and Fyler rightly reminds us that his delineation of these phases is analytical rather than purely descriptive; the commentary tradition does not distinguish this hierarchy of languages consistently. But his analytical point remains crucial because it situates language within a structure of impossible loss. As he goes on to show, alienation, difference, and division follow from recognizing an unrecoverable origin for language. Fyler's analytical step turns away from a diachronic account of biblical commentary, but it takes the book toward its critical topic, which is the poetic exploitation and not merely the application of ideas about language. Fyler is thus able, for example, to note that the *Vetus Latina* used by Augustine translated Eve's name as *vita*, "the name 'Life' being imposed at the moment when death entered the world" (p. 15) and that the iconography of Lamech, the first bigamist, depicts the arts of civilization as a continuing enactment of division (p. 31). He shows how the classical dispute between natural and conventional language unfolds in the Middle Ages with local and idiosyncratic uses of language theory alongside systematic treatments of signification. This working out of literary implications subsequently ranges across topics such as Pentecost, dream theory, and linguistic equivocation with valuable insights into a variety of didactic and poetic texts.

The chief arena in which Fyler examines the use of medieval language theory is high vernacular literature, notably in the links between Jean de Meun, Dante, and Chaucer. The chapter on Jean supplements the narrative in Genesis with Ovid's etiological myths from the *Metamorphoses* and elegiac poetry, and rightly connects language and love as analogues, particularly in the matter of deceptive speech. Jean is, for Fyler, a powerful advocate of the view that language is conventional, dependent on an arbitrary and socially ratified (hence historical) association between sign and referent. In the *Rose*, Fyler takes the repeated topos of the Golden Age, the seemingly authoritative figure of Reason, and the scandal of her saying "coilles" to the Lover as a matrix for examining how language can be said to signify properly. The problem, as Christine de Pisan and other medieval readers recognized, is that God's creation of things occurred without sin, but man's use of things, including the decorum of naming them, occurs in a fallen world in which even a figure like Reason connects words to things *ad placitum*. Fyler's argument is that in the *Rose* proper naming has thus moved from a rational possibility in an Adamic world to a symptom of "the deluded nostalgia for

the Golden Age" (p. 95). If the argument elides the performative and denotative uses of language in Fyler's initial hierarchy, it nonetheless points to important conceptual shifts that inform meaning in poetic texts. The function of naming is to claim existence, while the uses we make of names (description, predication, analogy) are functions of intelligibility. As Fyler maps out Reason's conflicted position on words and things, he also demonstrates that intelligibility in a fallen, divided world becomes the abiding problem for medieval narrative poets.

Dante serves as the counterweight to Jean's skepticism over signification. Fyler generally views him as a poet who absorbs and redeploys the language doctrine of the commentary tradition. He reviews the passages in the *Commedia* where Dante employs the metaphor of language to describe his characters and his own art. Speech, Fyler says, "takes part in the degradation of the Fall, and the eternal reprobation of the damned in Hell," delineates the levels of Purgatory, and manifests in Paradise "the nobility of an effort pushed to the limits of human powers" (p. 119). His particular focus on Adam's language in *Paradiso* 26 interprets the imagined language of Eden as a necessary condition for fallenness, "a perfect language" whose loss furnishes a cause for mourning (p. 122). In other passages, differences in language reflect both alienation and human community, particularly in vernacular speech. Fyler ends the chapter by reading Chaucer's *House of Fame* as an informed, subversive engagement with the *Commedia* that "reveals his awareness of and response to Dante's concerns" with linguistic slippage (p. 145).

Fyler's extended treatment of Chaucer in the final chapter concentrates on *The Second Nun's Tale* and *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*. As Joseph Grennen and others have shown, these two tales represent a consummate moment of Chaucerian poetic construction—a composite martyr's legend from Christian antiquity written before the *Legend of Good Women* (F426, G416) and then partnered with an alchemical "modern instance" that breaks into the frame of the Canterbury pilgrimage yet replicates the structural divisions of the earlier work. Fyler locates a concern with historical process in these tales and sets that concern against the nostalgia for a Golden Age that he finds in the Clerk, Merchant, Squire, and Franklin of Fragments IV and V. The end of the *Canterbury Tales* (Fragments VIII–X) thus stages both the decay of language and the world and an approach to the silence of spiritual truth and being out of which language originally appeared. Tracing this double movement allows Fyler to offer fine insights about Chaucer texts that have attracted considerable scholarly attention and

to bring to the fore their resonance with Jean and Dante. His final section, on the maxim “wordes moote be cosyn to the dede” (I.742), reads the efforts to attain proper speech in the *Tales* against Dante’s single volume bound with love (*Paradiso* 33.86), and it tracks the dispersal of language and writing into troping, counterfeit, and mere style.

Language and the Declining World presents a learned and elegant model for reading within an intertextual tradition of commentary and poetic influence. Tradition, as Fyler conceives it for Chaucer, is manifest in a “general dependence on a background of discussion and commentary” (p. 155); the same broad principle applies to Jean and Dante. Moreover, the links between the three poets mark a historical line of influence and transmission. One might object that Fyler’s interpretive framework takes certain features of influence for granted. Speculation about language, particularly in the High and late Middle Ages, extended further than the question of origins. If learned commentary forms a background to vernacular poetry, we would like to see not just the major sources but also important intermediaries, such as Guyart Desmoulins’s French translation of Peter Lombard’s *Historia Scholastica*, which Fyler brings to bear on discussion of *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*. Dante certainly operates within dominant forms of language doctrine, as Fyler shows, but the development of his views in earlier works as well as the *Commedia* is highly complex, and the *Paradiso* ends as much with the failure of language (“A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa” [33.142]) as the alignment of desire, will, and divine love. Chaucer might seem in some ways too easy and obvious a destination for the book, but here Fyler shows the practical value of his approach and his careful attention to the absorption of ideas and poetic resonance. The trajectory he traces for language explains how Chaucer’s famous evasions and indeterminacy are not just aesthetic effects but the consequence of a profound vision of a fallen world and failed language.

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ALEXANDRA GILLESPIE. *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv, 281. £53.00; \$95.00.

Most books in the area of manuscript/early book studies make for dense reading. Marshaling codicological or transmission detail into a coherent