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Chaucer's Language (review)

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ture"; Kristina Hildebrand, "Her Desire and His: Letters between Fifteenth-Century Lovers."

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SIMON HOROBIN. *Chaucer's Language*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. x, 198. \$24.95; £14.99 paper.

There are several good books that offer a conspectus of Chaucer's language, but it has been some time since a dedicated handbook approachable by students has appeared (at least in English). In some respects, the likes of Ralph Elliott's *Chaucer's English* (1974) and David Burnley's *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (1983), though both excellent, now appear too demanding for undergraduates who may be coming to the serious study of Middle English for the first time; and the emphases of teaching and scholarship have inevitably shifted somewhat in the meantime. Simon Horobin's admirable new book successfully meets the needs thus exposed: its adroit, patient exposition, which explicitly assumes no knowledge of Middle English or of "technical linguistic terminology" (p. ix), provides not only a practical guide to form and sense but also (as is to be expected from an author at the cutting edge of Middle English language scholarship) makes for a commendably lucid point of entry to the critical attitudes and theories that inform current research.

In the preliminary chapter ("Why Study Chaucer's Language?") Horobin argues with characteristic cogency and effectiveness for students' engagement with Middle English literature in its original form. He explores the fundamental similarities and the cautionary differences between Chaucer's language and the English of today at a practical level, with a demonstration of the tools available to the student in translating sample passages (glossaries, *MED*), and the sounding of *caveats* over some familiar "false friends." In tandem with this, he highlights the importance of context in determining the connotations of Chaucer's words and the significance of the variant forms manipulated by English authors before the solidification of a written Standard. The emphasis

placed on both these aspects (context and variation) forms a key strength of the book as a whole.

Chapter 2 introduces the place of Middle English in the multilingual England of the period. Perhaps inevitably given the space at his disposal, Horobin's presentation of the history of Middle English literature is in some respects rather brief; as is often the case with student handbooks, he tends to downplay textual activity in English at the earlier end of the period (especially the twelfth century), though he effectively counters any impression that Chaucer "invented" literary English. His discussion of scholarly approaches to the rise of written English in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is, moreover, commendably careful and nuanced; he introduces a range of social and intellectual contexts, and makes a good case for utilitarianism (rather than nationalism *per se*) as a driving force. Chapter 3 brings us in earnest to the language itself, with quick guides to the Middle English dialects and the issue of standardization, including an up-to-date presentation of the stages in the development of London English. The characteristic features (and origins) of Middle English vocabulary, grammar, and spelling are then introduced, in sections that work as "tasters" for the fuller chapters to come dedicated to each topic (students needing a short survey of the basics can therefore turn here first). The evidence of the manuscripts themselves is also given due weight and is used to characterize Middle English scribal culture (as well as highlighting the sorts of interpretations made by subsequent editors) with a degree of detail and sensitivity unusual in a book for beginners.

Descriptive guides to each level of Chaucer's English begin with chapter 4, "Spelling and Pronunciation." After a patient introduction to phonemes and graphemes (and their possible relationships), and the rhyming and comparative evidence for Middle English phonology, the sounds and stress patterns themselves are set out. Due time is taken over the variants available to Chaucer and the apparent motivations for the occurrence of the less usual (especially rhyme). Chapter 5 moves us on to "Vocabulary." The elements derived from foreign sources are introduced in turn, primarily Latin, French, and Old Norse (though I did not understand why "neck" was presented as an instance of the latter [p. 69]). Their occurrence in Chaucer's lexicon next to words of native origin is then treated in more detail, with a particular focus on lexical field competition; a range of interesting examples illustrates the choice between synonyms in different contexts. Horobin's presentation

here is subtle and penetrating, taking account not only of likely shades of connotation, but indicating the considerable interest to be had in examining Chaucer's sources (especially for the *Romaunt*), and identifying changes in diction across his career. Chapter 6, "Grammar," is largely descriptive, taking each part of speech in turn, but it presents a useful range of details (including the rarer/more marginal forms and how Chaucer exploits them); again, there is some helpful discussion of style and connotation, especially for *thou* vs. *ye*.

Chapter 7 ("Language and Style") begins the task of drawing together the material described in the foregoing chapters, to enable a more holistic discussion of Chaucer's linguistic tones and strategies. This chapter constitutes a fascinating introduction to "levels of style," including a knowledgeable and sensitive use of Chaucer's own comments on the subject, and a number of case studies of particular words and contexts. The primary focus is on poetry, but there is also a tremendously engaging section on Chaucer's prose, which introduces such issues as the "curial" style alongside some skillful source criticism. Chapter 8, finally, presents a very readable foray into "Discourse and Pragmatics" as applied to Chaucer. The topics covered include forms of address, politeness strategies (including the concept of "face"), discourse markers, and an entertaining section on swearing; there is then a final, synoptic discussion, which illustrates how Chaucer constructs a range of styles by manipulating these pragmatic conventions.

Middle English texts are presented cleanly and clearly throughout, with underlined words glossed in the right-hand margin. Annotation is kept light, constituted in the main by the short sections at the end of each chapter, which offer suggestions for further reading. There is also an Appendix of six annotated excerpts from Chaucer's texts; these provide further brief examples of the types of analysis taught in the book, and offer useful additional materials for the student to play with.

In sum, this is an excellent resource for those undertaking study of Chaucer's language for the first time. It contains a deceptively large amount of information for a slim volume, and presents it skillfully and with patient deference to the beginner. It has the air, in fact, of deriving ultimately from a very good introductory lecture course, and is none the worse for that. Its discursive, abundantly exemplified approach, indicative of an author impeccably well versed in the Chaucerian corpus, puts it very much in the same tradition as the books by Elliott and Burnley, appropriately and imaginatively updated for the modern student. Just

occasionally I felt that more explanation could have been provided to meet the needs of absolute beginners, especially as regards grammar: I found no explanation of “case,” for instance, even though it is referred to in passing as a concept, and case categories appear in the paradigms on pp. 97 and 100. In this connection, the Glossary of Linguistic Terms (pp. 192–93) strikes one as being too short realistically to aid the struggling novice (perhaps for fear of putting off nervous students by proffering too many technical terms in one place?). It also seems a pity that facsimiles of relevant manuscript folios could not have been introduced to accompany the discussion of scribal outputs and variant readings, adduced particularly at pp. 46–50. But these are quibbles. Attentive readers of this book will find themselves in command not just of the traditional “handbook” materials relevant to the study of Chaucerian English (grammar, phonology), but they should also come away with the linguistic tools required to analyze Chaucer’s texts in close stylistic detail, and most importantly will find themselves stimulated by Horobin’s canny examples to try their own hands at doing just this. The book will accordingly be a boon to undergraduates, particularly (but not only) those preparing for examinations that require detailed commentary on passages of Middle English. Issued with careful direction by teachers, its contents should also be of no little benefit and interest to high school students encountering medieval English for the first time.

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KATHRYN KERBY-FULTON. *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. lii, 562. \$50.00.

Books Under Suspicion “explores censorship and tolerance of controversial revelatory theology in England from 1329 to 1437” (p. 2) and the “history of dissent *before* Wycliffism” (p. 30). Yet Wycliffism remains on the table throughout most of this book, beginning with the assertion that this particular heresy “represents a confluence of several different, indeed larger, kinds of struggle and dissent” (p. 4). Quite rightly, Kerby-Fulton states that “Wycliffism . . . would have looked [to medieval