

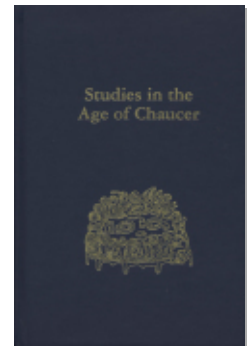


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Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England (review)

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SUSAN E. PHILLIPS. *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. Pp. x, 238. \$45.00.

Transforming Talk is a carefully researched book with a laudable objective to revise previous scholarship on gossip and its relation to authority. Sometimes Susan Phillips is successful in realizing her objective. Often, however, she falls short of her aim, failing to synthesize her observations into the sophisticated and ambitious readings that her perspicacity would lead us to expect. A major issue for much of the book is Phillips's puzzling reluctance to develop a more elaborate theory regarding the relationship between gender and gossip, even when both the texts and her own observations strongly suggest that ideas about gender play a crucial role in late medieval treatments of gossip.

The title tells us that *Transforming Talk* is about gossip in late medieval England, but Phillips's concerns are actually more specific than this, involving the relation between idle talk and the pastoral. The book investigates, in Phillips's words, "the intersection between unofficial speech, pastoral practice, and literary production in late medieval England" (p. 10). Thus, other gossip-related phenomena—like the increasing legal concern over defamation and scolding in late medieval and early modern England—are not extensively addressed in this work.

Phillips's engaging premise is that earlier studies have been mistaken in regarding gossip only as the resistant tool of marginalized groups. These studies—which focus on how medieval women used gossip to resist social oppression—fail to account for the influence of gossip on orthodox literary and religious practices. Phillips wishes to demonstrate that gossip in late medieval England was also a vehicle of canonical poets and ecclesiastical authorities, who used the discursive phenomenon of "idle talk" as a tool of literary and intellectual transformation. In the later Middle Ages, Phillips proposes, "transformation rather than transgression" (p. 5) best describes gossip's function.

The first chapter—which considers *Jacob's Well*, Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, and Wrath's confession from Langland's *Piers Plowman* (B-text)—is the strongest of the book. Here Phillips examines how preachers and moralizing poets both decried idle talk as a grave sin and, ironically, exploited its discursive characteristics for their own rhetorical ends. The chapter begins with a refreshing critique of recent scholarship on late medieval religious culture, arguing that an intense focus on her-

esy has led scholars to ignore the importance of more workaday problems, like the idle talk of parishioners. Idle talk, Phillips argues, poses a fundamental challenge to ecclesiastical authority because “it is not just the pastime of unruly congregations, it is the strategy of the clerics who instruct them” (p. 15). Noting the clerical need to hold an audience’s attention, as well as instruct them, Phillips outlines how, in their use of exempla, preachers and writers of penitential manuals often reproduced the idle talk they condemned. A section on Wrath’s Confession in the *Piers Plowman* B-text examines Langland’s consciousness that idle talk is embedded in confession “as it was both practiced and theorized by medieval authorities” (p. 42) and describes how authorities’ exhortation to penitents to produce highly detailed accounts of sin encourages parishioners to gossip about the transgressions of others. These are all interesting points and it is too bad that Phillips’s conclusion ventures only that exemplarity and confession are vulnerable to gossip because they both depend on storytelling.

Chapter 2—which aims to explore how Chaucer “uses idle talk not just as subject, but as method” (p. 66)—is praiseworthy for the fact that it broadens out from the *Canterbury Tales* to include one of the less-discussed dream visions (the *House of Fame*). And certainly there is much of value to say about gossip and its relation to Chaucer’s writing. Unfortunately, Phillips does not say enough. To begin with, she considers too many Chaucerian passages to provide a satisfying reading of any single one. The *House of Fame*, *The Man of Law’s Introduction*, the *Tales* of the Friar and Summoner, the Host’s interjections, *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* are all considered in a mere fifty-two pages. Moreover, Phillips disappoints in her unwillingness to issue larger claims about the texts she considers. Over and over again, exciting observations about Chaucer’s work devolve into very limited and modest conclusions. Her conclusion with regard to *The House of Fame*, for instance, is that Chaucer’s authorial strategy in the piece is analogous to the idle talk he describes, “augmenting, conflating, concealing, and multiplying” (p. 80) his classical sources to make them new. This is quite a limited conclusion. I wish that Phillips had presented us with some analysis regarding why Chaucer would want to conflate his technique with idle talk when it is actually part of a long-standing medieval tradition of classical source alteration.

It is also in the Chaucer chapter that we see the first sign of Phillips’s reluctance to formulate a more thorough reading out of the numerous,

very insightful observations she makes regarding the role of gender in late medieval treatments of idle talk. An interesting section on the Host's commentaries notes the Host's habit of converting the tales he hears into exempla and using these exemplary readings as a vehicle for his gender politics. Phillips makes another fascinating observation when she notes that while Chaucer explicitly associates gossip with women in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, most of the gossips in the *Canterbury Tales* are men. In her discussion of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Phillips proposes that "the Wife's mastery of gossip is less about women's inability to keep secrets than about idle talk's potential for narrative transformation" (p. 109). The gossiping men, the Host's obsession with gender, and the unruly woman who shows us how idle talk enables narrative transformation: all of this would seem to provide fertile ground for an analysis of Chaucer's take on the relation between gender and idle talk, and yet Phillips does not present us with anything but isolated observations.

Chapter 3—which considers Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* and Dunbar's *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*—features the same strengths and weaknesses as Chapter 2. Phillips begins with an excellent examination of how pastoral practice and idle talk intertwine in the opening conversation of the monk and the wife of *The Shipman's Tale*, describing how the two use language to transform their relationship from confessor and penitent to gossiping lovers. Unfortunately, Phillips ends here and does not address how this conversation relates to the rest of the tale. Her analysis of Dunbar's poem describes the *Wedo's* appropriation of confessional practice. Noting that the poem merges a variety of different literary traditions, Phillips proposes that confessional gossip is not only Dunbar's subject but also his method, allowing him to conflate a variety of different literary traditions. Phillips's reading ends here, and we are left asking why Dunbar would choose women as his vehicles for undermining the pastoral and what this suggests about his views on the relationship of both women and the writer to idle talk.

After the first chapter, chapter 4 is the strongest of the book. It addresses two early sixteenth-century English translations of French works, the *Fyftene Joyes of Maryage* (1507, 1509) and the *Gospelles of Dystaues* (c. 1510), both published by Wynkyn de Worde. Asserting that previous work on female friends has focused too much on the tavern conviviality so often associated with "gossips," Phillips argues that these literary characters can only be understood through the lens of baptismal sponsorship. What follows is a highly edifying genealogy of gossips,

tracing the different behaviors identified with literary gossips back to women's historical participation in the lying in and purification rituals of medieval childbirth.

Examining both the text and illustrations of the two translations, Phillips describes how both works raise the specter of women's pastoral instruction, and both foreclose on this possibility by making women's speech appear unproductive and ineffectual. Noting the emergence of unauthorized female textual communities in the later Middle Ages, Phillips proposes that the drunken gatherings of these "literary gossips" reveal deep cultural anxieties about the potential dangers posed by women's words. The strengths of this chapter also suggest problems with Phillips's original premise. By providing us with such a wonderfully thorough account of how "idle talk" could be mobilized to marginalize certain speakers and certain forms of speech, she returns us to the question of politics in a way that is not fully explained by her theory of gossip as transformation.

The responsibility for *Transforming Talk's* failure to fulfill its promise should not be laid entirely at the author's doorstep. With a couple of notable exceptions (like Holly Crocker's *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood* and Tison Pugh's *Queering Medieval Genres*), books produced by the newest generation of scholars of Middle English have failed to expand upon the pioneering feminist and gender studies work of the 1990s. The widespread absence of new gender analysis in Middle English studies—compared with its continued flourishing in the study of other literary periods and even in other areas of medieval English studies, like history—suggests that this is less a problem with new scholars than it is with the leadership in the field: that is, those who guide dissertations and determine what gets published. Authority and marginalization, it appears, are salient issues not only for medieval authors but also for those who study them.

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MARTHA DANA RUST. *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books: Exploring the Manuscript Matrix*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. 290. \$69.95.

In *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books*, Martha Dana Rust offers readings of several fifteenth-century manuscripts and their texts in order to illu-