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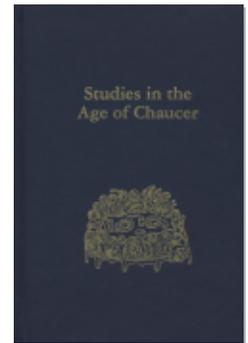
*English in the Middle Ages* by Tim William Machan (review)

Simon Horobin

*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 27, 2005, pp. 334-337 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2005.0024>



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To return to the rather occluded subject of “nation”: actually, the essay that might have the most to say about it is the one most insistent on its impossibility, or at any rate its emergence only under the most threatened conditions. This is Claire Sponsler’s concluding analysis of Froissart’s reported story of Anglo-Irishman Henry Chrystede, a most arresting example of “the confusions of ethnic identity and national affiliation that shaped English life in the late fourteenth century” (p. 307). Fittingly, Thorlac Turville-Petre, who wrote a pioneering study, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford, 1996), provides a short afterword. He demonstrates a good deal of reserve about the “national” part of it, though, suggesting that the circumstances of 1290–1340 were peculiar ones, and that for Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet issues of European culture trump questions of national identity.

Kathy Lavezzo is to be congratulated for assembling a provocative collection, by a number of our most stimulating practitioners, working at top form on issues of political consciousness and the state of polity in late medieval England. Incidentally, this volume is evidently among the last to be issued by the influential Minnesota “Medieval Cultures” series, a considerable disappointment, given the success of its thirty-four published volumes in raising questions of vital contemporary importance to members of our profession.

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TIM WILLIAM MACHAN. *English in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. x, 205. \$65.00.

In the opening chapter of this book, Tim William Machan sets out the theoretical framework that underpins the subsequent chapters. His principal thesis is that an understanding of the status of a language and its use must be based on an integrated study of its sociolinguistic context, what Einar Haugen terms its “ecology,” rather than relying on the work of independent and isolated disciplines. This commitment to an interdisciplinary method, and an ability to apply the theoretical insights

of modern linguistics to Middle English, is the key strength of Machan's approach.

In chapter 2, Machan applies this methodology to a detailed study of the Proclamation of Henry III, placing it within its historical and political contexts. This document is a key text in histories of the language, frequently cited as evidence for the emergence of English as an official language, the development of the London dialect, and ultimately of standard written English. Rejecting the traditional scholarly assumption that identifies the document's use of English as a nationalistic appeal, Machan argues that the English of the Proclamation was a rhetorical strategy by Henry to manipulate the hostility to foreigners fostered by his Baronial opponents. Building on his earlier discussion of the ecology of English, Machan argues that connections between language and national identity that have become naturalized and accepted in many modern societies are anachronistic when applied to medieval society.

While the chapter's focus on this single document is justified by the depth of analysis and the lack of previous discussions of this kind, other contemporary uses of the vernacular are dismissed rather too briefly. Other examples of early Middle English writing are mentioned but are quickly rejected as contributing little to the status of the language or its speakers. There is also little attempt to engage with the opposing arguments of Thorlac Turville-Petre's *England the Nation* (Oxford, 1996), which identified these texts as responsible for fostering an identification between the English language and national identity.

In the following chapter, Machan discusses ME dialects, arguing that the ecology of ME prohibits any correlation between regional variation and social stratification. While it is apparent that speakers of ME were aware of the differences between regional varieties, and it is likely that these differences had sociolinguistic significance, we should not assume that this is identical to that of present-day English. Machan also tackles the question of the emergence of standardized varieties in ME, arguing sensibly that the institutional structures through which a standard language is codified and maintained were lacking in the ME period. Surprisingly, however, Machan accepts without question the identification of a Central Midland Standard, cultivated by the Lollards for the dissemination of their texts.

In chapter 4, Machan explores the social significance of regional variation within the ecology of ME, focusing on the use of Northern and Norfolk dialect in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*. Machan draws on social net-

work theory to argue that Chaucer's Reeve was weakly tied to the social networks to which he was connected, and thus likely to accommodate his own variety to that of the other pilgrims. While Chaucer's use of dialect in *The Reeve's Tale* is an understandable object of study, its literary and fictional nature complicates Machan's interpretation of its significance. It is disappointing that Machan ignores the huge amount of primary, nonliterary evidence for ME dialect variation provided by the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (Aberdeen, 1986), and its associated studies, where issues such as the sociolinguistic implications of translation between dialects might have been pursued.

This chapter also considers register variation and its social significance, demonstrating how Middle English associated particular varieties with social and moral qualities, through an extended analysis of the bedroom scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In both cases the texts chosen, *The Reeve's Tale* and *Sir Gawain*, are well known and much studied. The importance of Machan's contribution is his ability to apply modern sociolinguistic models, such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, and politeness theory, to find new meanings in familiar texts, while also situating such discussions within a broader theoretical framework.

In the final chapter, "After Middle English," Machan charts the changing status of English from the fifteenth century to the present day. Here he takes up again the vexed question of standardization, locating the beginnings of this process in the emergence of Chancery English. Machan is disappointingly uncritical of John H. Fisher's arguments, providing only a vague qualification to the view of Chancery English as a standard language. I would have liked to see Machan extend this analysis, drawing on current linguistic theories of standardization, such as those of Einar Haugen, and recent work on Chancery English by Michael Benskin, to apply the same mixture of skepticism and theoretical insight that characterize his earlier discussions to the issue of standardization.

This is an important book that breaks new ground in providing an account of the status of English in the Middle Ages informed by modern sociolinguistic theory. Machan's considerable expertise and knowledge of the literature and social and political history of the Middle Ages, and of contemporary linguistics, make this a book rich in detail and convincing in its arguments. Machan's book has much to offer scholars inter-

ested in English historical linguistics and medieval literature, and will be essential reading for students of these disciplines.

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PEGGY MCCRACKEN. *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 178. \$38.95.

“Blood seems to be everywhere in medieval culture.” So begins the preface of *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*. From this simple observation, Peggy McCracken spins out her argument that medieval culture mapped gendered values onto blood as it manifested itself in menstruation, parturition, battlefield gore, martyrdom, and genealogy. In particular, the romances that described these phenomena did so in ways that naturalized ideologies of gender for medieval audiences. As the book’s title suggests, women’s blood—the blood of menstruation and parturition—is generally, but not exclusively, represented as polluting (the curse of Eve), while men’s blood—whether shed on the battlefield or figured in genealogy—is associated with power and agency (the wound of the hero). Thus, according to McCracken, the negative and private values attributed to women’s blood (which must remain unseen) are essential to figuring the positive and public values associated with male blood, these opposing values providing a template for the medieval gender system.

The book’s premise seems simple enough; it is suggested by the cover, which depicts a scene of bloodletting from an historiated initial entirely in black and white except for a single stream of red blood issuing from the incision, a motif that is picked up by the words “curse” and “wound” in the title in blood-red letters. Working out the textual elaborations of this hierarchical gender system, however, proves more complex. The sexual economies—particularly the exchanges of women—depicted in romances depend on blood to create a nexus of beliefs, values, and practices connecting ideas about virginity, martyrdom, adultery, and juridical combat. If, as the first chapter argues, the symbolic potential of