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The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature by Penn
R. Szittyá (review)

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one, the shallow familiarity which has conspired the neglect of the *Cursor Mundi* will be deservedly shaken.

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PENN R. SZITTYA. *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*.
Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. xvi, 316.
\$40.00.

The two most necessary things to be said about this book at the start are that its title is misleading but that it is nonetheless a very stimulating and important study. Szittyá's title is a misnomer because more than half of his book is not about literature and because the part that is is not about "medieval literature" but almost exclusively about fourteenth-century English literature. The name Boccaccio, for example, appears just once—in a footnote. On the other hand, taken as a study of an idea complex, with applications to some monuments of Ricardian poetry, the book is excellent.

Szittyá's thesis is that antifraternalism was a "literary tradition," a "complex of hostile ideas about the friars," that can be observed in a variety of works in different genres composed between the middle of the thirteenth century and the end of the Middle Ages. Szittyá wishes to call the tradition "literary" because he believes that it was based on a common language and referred at least as much to itself as to concrete reality. Granted that many of the works in which the "literary tradition" appears are not literary creations, I would go along with this, although I think that it would be less confusing to speak instead of a polemical tradition. According to Szittyá, the tradition's creator was William of Saint Amour, and its two most seminal English exponents were Richard FitzRalph and John Wyclif. In the realm of real literature the tradition can be found in the poetry of Rutebeuf and Jean de Meun, in a number of minor English poems, in Gower, and in the two English giants, Chaucer and Langland. Given this plotting, Szittyá offers separate chapters—consistently with exemplary structure and distinguished prose—devoted to William of Saint Amour, FitzRalph, Wyclif, Chaucer, and Langland, and two connective ones, respectively, on

"William of St. Amour in England" and English antifraternality poetry exclusive of Chaucer and Langland but including French forebears.

Szitty's chapters on William of Saint Amour, FitzRalph, and Wyclif are likely to prove the most widely used and enduring because all three accomplish novelties and each one is splendid. Despite much that has been written about William, no analysis of his antifraternality polemic exists in any language that is as succinct and trenchant as Szitty's. Most impressively, Szitty demonstrates that William proceeded exclusively by means of an exegetical mode of expression and proposed an exclusively eschatological mode of attack; in so doing, he identifies an architectonic of terminological and thematic patterns in William's vast polemical oeuvre that no one had seen before. My sole demurrer (aside from the fact that the listing of William's works and editions thereof is incomplete) is that Szitty goes too far in insisting that William's consistent use of exegetical-eschatological types resulted in an attack that had "little to do with the friars and everything to do with the Bible." Although William certainly avoided offering concrete data, the reason was surely not that he had lost track of what he was up to or was oblivious of flesh-and-blood mendicant enemies but that he felt driven to use typological insinuations for tactical purposes.

It is easier to be original regarding FitzRalph because of the paucity of scholarship concerning his antifraternality, but this is not to take anything away from the orderliness and perspicacity of Szitty's synthesis. Not only does he present a lucid summary of the pertinent events and documents in the FitzRalph-mendicant controversy, but he offers an original and persuasive contrast between William of Saint Amour and FitzRalph in arguing that the former's antifraternality criticism was primarily moral and eschatological whereas the latter's was primarily ecclesiological—i.e., that FitzRalph saw no place for the friars in the divinely mandated structure of the Church.

I found the chapter on Wyclif to be the most intellectually exhilarating of all because it is most packed with stimulating connections, contrasts, and surprises. Although one does not immediately think of Wyclif as an "antifraternality," Szitty shows that Wyclif's antifraternality polemics were extensive and argues that in the long run they were probably more influential than FitzRalph's. Two main themes stand out in Szitty's analysis. One is that Wyclif's visceral hostility to the friars was based appreciably on his sense that most were worshipers of outward "signs" rather than intrinsically valid "things" (i.e., they were metaphysically corrupt nominalists, philosophically and morally repugnant); the other is that he viewed the friars as

an advance guard of Antichrist's army. Regarding the latter point, Szittyá demonstrates that Wyclif's eschatologically conceived antifraternal polemic was much closer in content and tone to William of Saint Amour's than to FitzRalph's and that scholars would do well to pay more attention to the role of eschatology in Wyclif's thought.

Szittyá's chapter on "William of St. Amour in England" carries with it some nice research triumphs and useful assemblages of data but will be of interest primarily to specialists, his brief reading of *The Romance of the Rose* will surprise no one familiar with the approach of Robertson and Fleming (the latter's book on the *Romance* goes unmentioned—an impropriety, even if the motive was to avoid being caught in crossfires between Lakes Cayuga and Carnegie), and his review of the nonmajor English poetic tradition (including Gower) is an expertly marshaled yet still rather uninteresting arrayal of proofs for the recurrence of both Saint Amourian–eschatological and FitzRalphian–ecclesiological formulae. Unfortunately, the chapter that might have been of greatest interest to readers of this publication, the one on Chaucer, is a minimally altered reprinting of an article Szittyá published in *Studies in Philology* in 1974 and at any rate only a limited advance on a parodic reading of one Chaucerian tale: Friar John in *The Summoner's Tale* must be understood parodically as a false apostle. Finally, the Langland chapter is more ambitious, for it surveys antifraternal themes in all of *Piers Plowman* and then concentrates on the entire final passus, concluding that its two halves mirror each other in treating respectively the imminent death of the narrator and the imminent end of the Church. Szittyá's Langland reading is strong and significant; nonetheless, I found myself wondering whether a still stronger Langland reading would come at the end of a different book, one more explicitly on eschatological than on antifraternal traditions.

To end where I am on firmer terrain, Szittyá is incorrect in assuming that antifraternalism began with William of Saint Amour: it began with the first appearance of the friars, and even William's central *penetrans domos topos* was used a generation before him by a Parisian predecessor, Philip the Chancellor. More troubling are Szittyá's assumptions that one can generalize about universal "moods" by citing one or two texts (e.g., FitzRalph's age was not eschatologically inclined because FitzRalph was not) and that the resuscitation of a polemical convention makes it likely that the intrinsic proposition conveyed was not deeply felt. Yet the strengths of this book vastly outweigh its weaknesses. Know this: in these times *The Antifraternal*

Tradition should penetrate the libraries of all those laden with divers cares about antifraternal thought and culture.

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EUGENE VANCE. *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. Pp. xvii, 365. \$35.00.

This variegated volume brings together several of the essays Eugene Vance has published over the last decade on a wide range of medieval texts along with some new writing and proposes answers to the question, "What historical assumptions about signs, language, and discourse governed the production of—or were transgressed by—the medieval poetic text?" (p. ix). Vance has been prominent in recent years among those arguing for the applicability of semiotic approaches to medieval texts and he argues here that "the major thread of coherence in medieval culture was its sustained reflection, within the three branches of the *trivium* . . . upon language as a semiotic system—more broadly, upon the nature, the functions and the limitations of the verbal sign as a mediator of human understanding" (p. x). Because the ten essays move from Augustine to Spenser and voice ten different complex arguments, such a brief review risks degenerating into mere paraphrase. I have accordingly though reluctantly omitted any treatment of three essays, on *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the French drama, and *The Faerie Queene*, to each of which the interested reader is enthusiastically directed.

The first two chapters treat of Augustine, chapter 1 the *Confessions*, and chapter 2 Augustine's writings on signs and language more generally, focusing on his dissatisfaction with the inability of temporal human language to signify God's nontemporal truths, as a consequence of which he "implanted in the Western consciousness an aesthetics of transcendence that haunted medieval poets of every major genre" (p. 49). Vance quite reasonably recurs to this notion often in the essays which follow, but his reasons for reading some of the texts which follow and not others in terms of Augustine's aesthetics of transcendence are not entirely clear to me and seem to arise less from historical or textual evidence than from habits of