



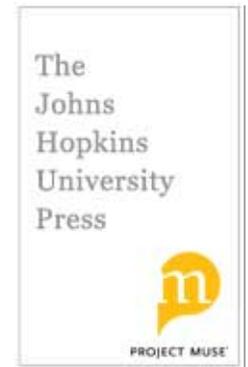
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*The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later
Middle Ages* by Christine F. Cooper-Rompato (review)

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The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages. By Christine F. Cooper-Rompato. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-271-03616-8. Pp. x + 217. \$75.00.

In this impressively researched, focused study, Christine Cooper-Rompato investigates medieval witnesses to the phenomenon of *xenoglossia*, “the sudden, miraculous ability to speak, to understand, to read, or to write a foreign language” (1). Note that Cooper-Rompato distinguishes *xenoglossia* from *glossolalia*, the miracle of speech other than or beyond the human, and investigates only the former. Associated ever after with the Pentecost miracle account in Acts 2, *xenoglossia* serves at once to facilitate the spread of Christianity and to mark its recipients as divine vessels, both of which functions Cooper-Rompato finds operative in the hagiographical literature that she interrogates in the book’s first half. Moreover, *xenoglossia* holds out the possibility of perfect translation and even the reversal of Babel, since the divinely inspired “translator” would seem capable of achieving absolute verbal equivalence. As an indicator of divine favor, *xenoglossia* permeates hagiography to an underappreciated extent, although its ubiquity raises questions concerning the degree to which it has become merely a generic expectation as opposed to a putatively veridical occurrence. In the book’s second half, the author considers the influence of this *xenoglossic* legacy, especially the cases of female saints, on *The Book of Margery Kempe* and certain of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. According to Cooper-Rompato’s analysis, informed by feminist and translation theory, the hagiographical record manifests a clear gender bias with respect to *xenoglossia*, with women’s gifts of miraculous language being “more limited in scope and duration than men’s, to the point that they often appear almost ‘mundane’” (2). Among the reasons for the discrepancy, Cooper-Rompato cites the possibility that we are dealing in some cases with “lived experience,” by which she means that a less-than-perfect literacy somehow acquired by a given woman is, in the absence of firm etiology, being ascribed to divine infusion. Especially in the case of Latinate as opposed to vernacular literacy, the relative paucity of female gifts may also indicate the hagiographer’s desire to control female literacy and thus oppose any challenge to masculine authority over the language of the Church (16). Naturally, Cooper-Rompato acknowledges the expectation of some asymmetry in that men historically and doctrinally possessed preaching responsibility; essentially, it could only have been the case that hagiographers would imagine “highly gendered” experiences reflecting “their expectations of men’s and women’s appropriate social behavior” (21). Because women receive less substantial gifts, however, they serve to raise issues of linguistic agency, issues of intimate interest to Kempe and Chaucer as they work to create their authorial personae.

Although female saints receive relatively slight gifts of vernacular speech in comparison with their male counterparts, in some cases they experience notable gifts of Latinity, whether as directly infused *sapientia* or by means of accelerated

learning through miraculous tutelage. Bridget of Sweden receives the most substantial gifts recorded, her Latin being sufficiently advanced that she reportedly aids her confessors in translating her *Revelations* from Swedish. In her case the xenoglossic trope serves to guarantee the accuracy of the translation, but even here, in the case of the greatest gift of Latinity to a woman, her failure to rewrite the visions herself or to translate them on her own implies a necessary subordination to clerics possessing traditionally acquired Latin. In this battle of *sapientia* versus *scientia*, Cooper-Rompato sees the saint's life "split by two desires: at the same time that the hagiographers admire the knowledge afforded by sapientia, they are also invested in demonstrating that the gift does not provide the range of literate abilities that clerical study can" (60). Another "split" within the genre of the *vitae sanctorum* lies, of course, in the realm of the miraculous itself: to what extent are the xenoglossic gifts to be greeted as veridical? Without entirely discounting the possibility of the miraculous, as she need not nor indeed cannot do, Cooper-Rompato seeks alternative ways of understanding unexpected female literacy, whether as hagiographical rhetoric or invented explanation. The genre thus combines "the lived experience of historical figures" with "the imagination and desire of hagiographers and communities, mediated through several layers of interpretation" (73).

In turning to issues of literary influence, Cooper-Rompato considers first how xenoglossic tropes inform *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In the wake of Karma Lochrie's and Lynn Staley's arguments on the importance of translation as a concept in Kempe, Cooper-Rompato interrogates scenes of translation in the *Book*, from Margery's miraculous communication with a German priest following thirteen days of prayer to the miracle of the *Book* itself, written poorly both verbally and graphically by a first scribe and subsequently "translated" by a second scribe. The interplay of these three voices necessarily impinges upon issues of authority in the *Book*, and authority remains very much at issue when Margery's confession to the German priest suffers challenge. She arranges a demonstration in which she publicly relates a story from scripture that she learned from clerks, and then the German priest translates it into Latin for the clerical audience. Cooper-Rompato considers this a second-hand gift of Latinity; it can be considered a second-hand act of preaching as well. Such matters need to happen at some remove to free Margery from accusations of Lollardy; indeed, Cooper-Rompato cites the case of a young girl in Nivelles whose ability to speak Latin marks her as demonically rather than divinely inspired, an accusation likely also to be made against the already suspect Margery were she to speak Latin. The remainder of the chapter considers the visibility or invisibility of the means by which Margery makes herself understood on her various travels, interpreters only being explicitly acknowledged "when what she has to say is paramount" as opposed to what she hears from others (136).

Cooper-Rompato concerns herself with three of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: the *Prioress' Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Squire's Tale*. Between the *Prioress'*

Tale and its *Prologue* she finds two competing stances with respect to authority and argues Chaucer's implication in each: with the modesty and ineffability topoi of the *Prologue* the prioress seeks complete evacuation of agency by invoking Mary, whereas the *Tale's* emphasis on the rote learning of the young martyr "mirrors the voice of the writer or translator who claims a divine gift that enhances the little he has already learned" (147). Cooper-Rompato makes a subtle argument with respect to the *Man of Law's Tale*: since the story of the impeccable Custance's abandonments at sea clearly owes imagery and plot to the genre of the saint's life, then the insufficiently explained manner by which the Northumbrians manage to understand her "Latyn corrupt" ("corrupt Latin") when she shows up on their shores is to be read as an ongoing miracle of xenoglossia. This argument seems reasonable enough, yet the absence of clear explanation and the presence of other genre codes within the tale come to complicate any firm assumption of xenoglossia. Thus within the section the author moves from "Chaucer is very clearly implying that she receives a gift of xenoglossia" (164) to something less clear: "Is there an invisible interpreter (historical narrative), a gift of xenoglossia (saint's life), or an ignored linguistic barrier (romance)?" (171). The narrative's failure to explain how Custance's "Latyn corrupt" is "nevertheless" ("algaes") understood does read as odd, especially considering that the tale offers explicit answers to such questions as how Custance can survive so long at sea (God provides in one instance; in the second she is well-provisioned by her reluctant banishers) and fight off a determined rapist (again, God gives her strength, as he did with David against Goliath). Nevertheless, Cooper-Rompato's argument necessarily loses some force in this section, being built largely on the absence of narrative explanation. She nonetheless presumes that Chaucer intended to be ambiguous on the matter and thereby to force attention to larger issues surrounding translation, which she then seeks to prove by reference to the *Squire's Tale*, the four magical devices of which pertain more or less directly to translation. Following Carol Heffernan and Kathryn L. Lynch in seeing the two halves of the *Squire's Tale* as gendered—the first part centered around the masculine knightly realm, the second around the feminine garden—Cooper-Rompato then finds, as with the *Prioress' Tale*, two attitudes toward translation: in the masculine half the narrator as translator "presents himself as a humble and ineffectual conveyor" (176), whereas in the feminine half magical translation results in the perfect rendering of bird song into human speech. In fact, the rendering may be too perfect, since the bird's speech mirrors or even parodies courtly diction. These extremes—impossible translation versus immaculate translation—imply Chaucer's interest in "a fundamental question about translation in general: can it reproduce an original in its word and sense, or must it necessarily rewrite and recast its sources?" (186). My only quibble with this well-grounded argument is that in the case of the *Prioress's Prologue* the motifs of modesty and ineffability serve to mark her "feminine" authorial position, while in the *Squire's Tale* the same motifs—indeed, verbally linked motifs—occur in the "masculine" half. Certainly the same motifs

may serve different functions for the two narrators, but I wanted more explanation as to how; the distinction offered between the prioress as narrator of a religious text and the squire as narrator of a romance (179) does not quite serve to explain the rather different readings of the very similar topoi.

Cooper-Rompato's volume, the first book-length study of medieval xenoglossia, would be useful to anyone interested in language and translation as gendered phenomena, though it would be most useful in my estimation to the student of medieval hagiography, for whom the author's abundant citation of primary source material (and corresponding Latin footnotes) could well prove invaluable. Cooper-Rompato demonstrates the importance of xenoglossia in the saint's life and makes a solid case for its relevance to hybrid genres; readers interested in the formation of Kempfe's and Chaucer's authorial subjectivities would find much of interest in the respective chapters.

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The Reformation in Rhyme: Sternhold, Hopkins and the English Metrical Psalter, 1547-1603. By Beth Quitslund. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Aldershot, Hants., and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7546-6326-3. Pp. x + 329. \$114.95 (cloth).

Scholarly study of the metrical psalms as literature nicely reflects the changing emphases in critical scholarship in the past eighty years or so. Before that, psalm studies centered on religious history, sometimes more narrowly on the history of liturgy or hymnody, on national cultural history (especially in Scotland), on musicology, and of course on bibliography. Then from the mid-1930s on, for about forty years, there was a spate of doctoral dissertations (the first two in Germany) approaching the metrical psalms as literature. These attended mainly to questions of prosody and other artistic aspects and to the place of psalm-writing in the oeuvre of poets more highly regarded for their other works. Since the mid-seventies, those of us involved in that earlier wave have watched the increasing sophistication of such studies (see for example reviews in *Christianity and Literature* 38.2 [Winter 1989]: 81-82 and 54 [2002]: 609-11 of books by Rivkah Zim and Hannibal Hamlin, respectively). Still, the primary interest was in placing metrical psalms within a larger framework of poetic achievement, either for the sixteenth century in the case of Zim's book and, more recently, work on several women poets, or for later poets in the case of Hamlin, Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (*Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* [1979]), and others.

Beth Quitslund takes an entirely different tack. She is interested in tracing the development of what came to be known as the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter