REVIEWS

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds. *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. 506p.

Elizabeth Holtze
Metropolitan State College of Denver

"What could be more natural for an English writer than to write in English?" What, indeed? This wonderful anthology by Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor, and Evans begins with this very question (3), and its answer becomes a part not only of the answer to the seemingly simple question (that Latin, French, and Anglo-Norman were real alternatives) but also the reason for the volume itself. The simple answer, too, becomes more interesting as examples and discussion proceed.

The editors have compiled selections from fifty-seven prologues and extracts illustrating the position of medieval texts that speak to three connected issues: the idea of author, the idea of reader or audience, and, lastly, the idea of reading itself. The dates named in the title, 1280 to 1520, cover the period in English history from the early Plantagenets to the early Tudors, although the vast majority of the selections were written in the 1300s and 1400s. In each of the three sections the editors, sometimes in collaboration with other scholars, reproduce individual texts in the original Middle English from a single surviving source, supplying marginal notes on the Middle English and endnotes that explicate references. Preceding each text is a careful description that includes in separate paragraphs the date and location of its composition; the author, his or her sources, and comment about the content; the likely original audience for the text; a brief bibliography of modern editions of the text itself and related sources and/or criticism; and, finally, the single manuscript or early book source, including its location and description, from which the quoted text is taken. The editors' decision to reproduce the readings of only a single manuscript has the advantage of allowing very specific description and provenance, which are often quirkily interesting: "A careful (if irregularly written) early-seventeenth-century copy of a fifteenth-century manuscript" (234). This choice, however, circumvents the necessity of establishing a definitive text from all surviving manuscripts, including a critical apparatus for each, an effort probably beyond the scope of this volume since most selections are already avail-

able in critical editions. The editors chose particular manuscripts to be reprinted in *The Idea of the Vernacular* based upon interesting individual features, age, or, sometimes, availability (xvii).

Introductions to each individual prologue contain much valuable ancillary information beyond locating the individual selection in time and place. For example, the comment on the text from the prologue of Lydgate's *Troy Book* goes beyond mere summary of the longer complete prologue to call Lydgate's subject, "Europe's most important foundation narrative," and the section on bibliography lists both editions of Lydgate's source, Guido delle Colonne, and important studies of Lydgate's work, life, and the larger tradition of the Troy story in Britain.

The selections themselves are a mixed bag of familiar authors and familiar texts, less familiar authors and less familiar texts, and familiar authors with less familiar texts. So, William Caxton is represented by his prefaces to Christine de Pizan's *Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyvalrye* and Geoffroy de la Tour-Landry's *Book of the Knight of the Tower* (both in the section on readers and audience), and a Dutch version of Reynard the Fox (in the section on images of reading itself), while his more famous comment on editorial choices of lexicon, *egges* or *eyren* ("Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte?"), from his *Preface to the Eneydos* is absent, although parts of it are discussed in one of the introductory essays (12). Each of the three sections of primary source material opens with a discussion of their order and content: why each text is located as it is, and what generalizations may be drawn from the group of texts as a whole. These introductory essays to the three sections contain many interesting generalizations and give helpful (although sometimes provocative) direction to the twenty-first-century reader about to read about medieval writers and readers.

The idea of collecting prologues in itself is not new (see, for example, *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, Harvard Classics, Vol. 39. NY: Collier, 1910 — which begins with Caxton). However, this book is the first to bring together in one place so many medieval English prefaces written in the vernacular, a compilation of inherent usefulness. And it is first in another important way: the editors label their work a study of "Middle English literary theory" by using that very phrase in the title of their book. They do not mean by this, simply, that we in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can read these prologues through the lens of post-colonial culture studies or deconstruction, but that the various authors and readers of these medieval texts were similarly sensitive to similar issues. I am persuaded by the elegant explication of cultural and deconstructive readings of these prologues; I am not persuaded that the medieval authors and readers themselves were aware of being a part of such a unified tradition of literary theory.

The editors meet potential objections head-on in the essays that precede and follow the groupings of primary texts. They point out elements shared by many of the texts (for example, the habit of medieval authors humbly to claim dependency on earlier sources, or the common theme of *translatio studii et imperii*). They also qualify some claims of a vernacular theory: "These discussions are so heavily situated — not only in the texts in which they occur but also in the social and ideological issues evoked by those texts and their use of the vernacular — that they require to be read in quantity, in careful relation to their cultural situation and, above all, with a sense of their strategic function, if their theoretical implications are to be teased out of them" (316). A slippery task.

Surprisingly missing from the literary critical discussions of the idea of *author* is an acknowledgement of the possibility that the authors of some prefaces might self-consciously talk in a voice other than their own [although one footnote directs readers to discussion of "authorial persona" elsewhere (15, n. 10)]. So, for example, the discussion of the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* rightly notes that he — called Chaucer — positions himself sometimes in the courtly love tradition and sometimes in the classical literary tradition (14). It does not mention the possibility that this first-person narrator may be different in opinion and talent from the Chaucer the poet, author of this and other texts that bear his name. I know of no Chaucerian who would be happy to argue that the manifold foibles present in the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* were also present in Chaucer the poet or, similarly, that the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* is the same as, for example, the narrator of *The Canterbury Tales*. Nor, I am sure, would the editors of this text.

Editor Ruth Evans does discuss a different, elementary issue: the problem of whether or not prefaces should be studied as things apart from the texts they are intended to introduce. This problem is often very troublesome, as evidenced by the ongoing argument among classicists over whether or not the story of Cupid and Psyche can or should be read outside of its setting in the middle of Lucius Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. In the concluding essay in the volume, "An Afterword on the Prologue," Evans convincingly argues that prefaces are "simultaneously implicated in the writings they preface … and yet also outside them" (377).

Despite some few demurs, I heartily endorse *The Idea of the Vernacular*. It is an important book. In addition to the resources and ground-breaking essays already noted, it contains two useful maps, a forty-page bibliography, and lists of alternative ways of arranging the primary texts (by date, by genre, by area of provenance, by author's profession, by intended audience). Best of all is an extraordinary fifty-

six-page glossary of Middle English terms useful in establishing the lexicon of vernacular theory.

The Idea of the Vernacular begins by acknowledging that not long ago most medievalists agreed with D.W. Robertson in assuming that every text was an allegory, which held a single truth (xiii). Or, to paraphrase what W.H. Auden is purported to have said, we should not ask if a friend had read a good book lately but rather if the friend had been read by a good book lately. After encountering the fascinating arguments in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, no reader will ever again be as sure as Robertson and Auden once were. ❋