
REVIEWS

Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson, eds. *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Post Medieval Vernacularity*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. 277p.

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The Vulgar Tongue is a collection of fourteen distinctly different essays examining attitudes about vernacular-language use, spanning a wide variety of time periods and disciplines. As implied by the “post medieval” of its subtitle, even the more contemporary considerations of vernacular language, such as Larry Scanlon’s discussion of Langston Hughes as a vernacular poet laureate, make significant reference to medieval attitudes about the vernacular. The book offers a wide variety of subject matter, and possibly only serious students of vernacular language will find every essay ultimately useful. Nevertheless, the diversity of subjects treated in the collection’s three sections, and within each section, makes this book invaluable in different ways to scholars and language enthusiasts of the Middle Ages.

The collection had its genesis at a 1999 conference: “Vernacularity: The Politics of Language and Style.” Somerset and Watson divide the essays in the text along three time periods: 1100-1300; 1300-1500; and 1500-2000. In the introductory essay, Watson problematizes the very notion of “vernacular.” Is it some Adamic perfect mother tongue or just a further deviation from a more stable language, such as Latin? The first section groups essays not only for time period but for their “evangelical attitude toward the vernacular” (15). These works examine differing attitudes toward the “vulgar” aspect of vernacular language and its suitability for discussing religious ideas and the Bible. Meg Worley’s essay on Orm’s commentary and collection of homilies (the *Ormulum*) analyses Orm’s recognition that proper pronunciation of the vernacular in preaching is an important element for spreading the gospel to the masses. Claire M. Waters’ piece similarly discusses the vernacular as it relates to preaching. Using information from 13th-century preaching handbooks, Waters considers how preachers must establish an appropriate persona within their communities: one that is conversant in the intricacies of the vernacular but retains some greater authority from its exposure to Latin and more authoritative sources. Harvey Hames’ essay discusses Raymond Lull’s *Ars* which uses vernacular Catalan to develop strategies for Christians, Jews, and Muslims to find ways that they can productively discuss religion; of course, Lull’s

goal is ultimately to facilitate conversion to Christianity. For him, the use of a common tongue is necessary to find sacred ground upon which cross-cultural conversion discussions can proceed. The final essay in the first section is Sara S. Poor's treatment of Mechtild von Magdeburg's gendered use of the vernacular. Beyond questions of Mechtild's ability to employ Latin as a medium for her book, Poor emphasizes how Mechtild appeals to a wider general audience by using Middle Low German (her own vernacular). Mechtild not only rejects Latin but also the popular and authoritative Middle High German of the court in favor of direct access to a local, rustic audience.

The collection's second section includes five essays exploring the general topic of vernacular textualities. These essays discuss the dissemination of knowledge, anxiety about using the vernacular, community-defined vernacular use, and the possible objections to the greater access to knowledge created by vernacular writing. Gretchen V. Angelo explores the formation a particularly masculine vernacular used to exclude capable female readers by offending them through its content. These texts, such as Jean De Meun's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*, fulfill male audience expectations, while the misogynist content and tone make women unwelcome and female-reader concerns unimportant. Charles F. Briggs addresses the pedagogical concerns of some vernacular translators and their attitudes toward access to knowledge. Although there were significant objections toward translating texts for the laity, especially the Bible, Briggs argues that translation was merely the natural extension of students understanding the meaning of texts within the confines of their mother tongue. William Robins' essay discusses the mercantile use of vernacular language which developed in 14th-century Florence. Robins posits that the need for Florentine merchant families to keep record of how they managed risk in relation to danger, especially in their maritime trading, gave rise to a new use of vernacular language within the family (and the trade) resulting in a narrative of economic activity and contractual obligations. Andrew Taylor's piece examines possible functions of the vernacular inherent in Froissart's presentation of Richard II with a Picard-vernacular edition of his *Chroniques*. Is his presentation of a Picard-dialect version of the text a tribute to Richard and his Picard grandmother or a protest against an English king who speaks a less sophisticated dialect of French? Fiona Somerset's article contrasts attitudes toward public access in Ullerston's *Determinacio* and Arundel's *Constitutiones*. Ullerston's interest in the translation of religious texts (including the Bible) for the benefit of the public is set in opposition to Arundel's desire to constrain and control translation in a way that maintains the status of the clergy and religious texts.

The third and final section of *The Vulgar Tongue* includes four essays devoted to vernacular use in later ages that might be considered influenced by medieval attitudes. Dante's claim that the mother tongue is related to a sense of national (or ethnic) identity resonates throughout these essays. Jeroen Jansen analyses 16th- and 17-century Dutch attempts to stabilize and purify the Dutch language. Unlike nations with powerful vernacular-speaking courts, the French-speaking Dutch court provided no model for standardizing the Dutch language, so a model was sought in Dutch literature of the past: a Dutch vernacular less influenced by foreign loanwords. Jack Fairey's essay focuses on the development of national languages among Serbs and Romanians in Austria-Hungary, 1780-1870. Both the Serbs and Romanians shared a common ecclesiastical dialect, Church Slavonic, but each had numerous dialects of its particular ethnic vernacular. Fairey traces the development of a national identity for Serbs and for Romanians through their struggles to elevate and stabilize their individual vernaculars into national languages. Nandi Bhatia discusses how the colonial influence of Shakespearean drama was used by both Hindi and Urdu writers to elevate their respective languages, while also providing a venue for commentary on the colonization of India. By comparing national writers to Shakespeare and translating Shakespeare into Hindi and Urdu, Hindi and Urdu writers promote respect for their individual languages. In the final essay of *The Vulgar Tongue*, Larry Scanlon finds commonalities between Chaucer and Langston Hughes, both as poets laureate and promoters of their culture's vernacular. Scanlon emphasizes the subversive of vernacular writing and shows how these two poets gained respect for their language and people through vernacular poetry.

The essays provided by *The Vulgar Tongue* are dissimilar in their particular arguments but united in their ability to illuminate differing attitudes toward vernacular language and its importance to its speakers. The collection's breadth of information and the expertise of its contributors ensure the ongoing usefulness of *The Vulgar Tongue*. ✱