

Essays in Medieval Studies 5

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page 59**"The Nakid Text":**

Glosynge as Distortion Thomas A. Goodman

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In *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* W. A. Pantin relates the story found in the Durham Cathedral Muniments of one Richard Helmslay, a Dominican, who preached in Newcastle in 1379-1380, attacking the secular clergy in general and in particular offering a new interpretation of the opening words of the twenty-first decree of the 4th Lateran Council of 1215, concerning annual confession. Interpreting the words *Omnis utriusque sexus* rather literally, Helmslay argued that all those of both sexes that is, only hermaphrodites had to perform their confession "at least once a year privately to their own priest"; presumably the rest of the lambs in the Church's flock could roam where they might. Helmslay was reported to Rome, and later recanted both at Newcastle and at the diocesan seat of Durham (164-165).

The humor in this incident, of course, turns on the way Helmslay took the Council's words literally, but in a manner quite other than they were intended. Helmslay's gloss of the text of what was by now a well-established doctrine caused a bit of a stir he became known in the Roman curia as *Frater Ricardus utriusque sexus* (165). His joke suggests one of the ways in which interpretation was a topic of the day. Confession was a matter of Church teaching strongly buttressed with a literature of its own, replete with manuals of sin and confession. By the time Helmslay preached, much of this material, such as the *Manuel des péchés*, was available in English, the latter under the title of *Handlyng Synne* by Robert Manly of Bourne, a work he completed in 1303. Nearer the end of the century, at the proposed close of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer sets the *Parson's Tale*, a work which is clearly part of this

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penitential literature, and which has lately been invoked, because of its position, as a guide to reading the preceding *Tales*, much as in its own time it was meant to serve as a normative guide for reading one's conscience (Patterson, Wenzel). To translate was to make a statement, to say that something deserved a wider audience, a new English-speaking audience, and to translate was to interpret. Thus Helmslay's twist offers a comic but nonetheless serious challenge to Roman authority, suggesting a penitential piety mediated not so much by Church authority as by personal conscience.

I would like to suggest some ways in which Helmslay's gloss indicates the intellectual climate, a pervasive and strikingly consistent set of interests among late-fourteenth century English writers. There is an overt interest in defining abstract concepts of virtue the stuff of theological literature, the sermon and the debate suggested for instance, by the titles we assign to the poems *Patience* and *Cleanness* or *Purity*. I would also argue that such efforts exhibit an interest in the limits of authority, intellect, and language itself. What follows is a suggestion of how usage reflects contemporary concerns, a topical footnote of sorts to the affinities that J. A. Burrow finds in his study, *Ricardian Poetry*. The rhetoric of anti-intellectualism, which has long been cited straightforwardly by historians as different as Pantin and Gordon Leff, has been too little studied by literary scholars of the period.

Recently I have been exploring in Middle English texts the use of what Raymond Williams for another era has labelled "key words." Late fourteenth-century usage of *clergie* and *queintise* suggests a suspicion of those who have learning and their abilities to manipulate language. I am thinking here of the Canon's Yeoman's words, "Oure termes been so clerghial and so queynte..." (VIII 752, ed. Benson), and those of the Miller generalizing upon Nicholas' seduction of Alison: "clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queinte" a compliment from which he will pull the rug in the infamous deflationary *ryme riche* of the next line (I 3275). I would like to further this argument for a contemporary anti-scholasticism by examining the relationship of *text* and *gloss* by the ways in which contemporary writers, both clerical and lay, set up the dynamic of these two terms. Far from the complementarity they enjoy in previous Scholastic practice, late Middle English usage

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evinces a priority of *text* that challenges the usefulness of clerical glossing, and a coincident degeneration in the use of *gloss* that suggests distortion rather than clarification.

Examples abound; a few will suffice. In the *Book of the Duchess* for instance the Dreamer sees the walls of his bedchamber "peynted, both text and glose,/ Of al the *Romaunce of the Rose*" (333-334). Here text and gloss form a figure of completeness, an integral whole, as they were supposed to do in ideal practice. But in fragment C of the Middle English *Romaunt*, not usually attributed to Chaucer, Fals Semblaunt criticizes the teaching of the mendicant friars, which, "if men wolde ther-geyn appose/ The nakid texte, and lete the glose,/ It myght soone assoyled be" (6555-57). Here, as in so many instances, text and gloss are polarized in their relative truth-functions. In *The Legend of Good Women* the God of Love upbraids Chaucer, speaking "in pleyne text, withouten nede of glose" for his own translation of this poem; again, the literal is prior and superior to the superfluous explanation (F 328; G 254). In the *Squire's Tale*, the knight affirms the magical properties of a sword by swearing of its abilities, "This is a verray sooth, withouten glose" (V 166). Here the opposition of *verray sooth* and *glose* shows the late Middle English sense of *glosyng* to be "practically synonymous," as Alfred David has said, with distortion of the text" (138).

Though in beginning her *Prologue* the Wife of Bath would assert experience over authority, she makes immediate and frequent recourse to the latter, seeking to turn its edge to her own purpose. And she also sets text and gloss in opposition. Having botched the gloss of her first exemplum of the Samaritan woman, she moves directly to a central point of her theology:

Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;
That gentil text kan I wel understonde. (III 26-29)

Intellectual speculation and explanation, verging on distortion, as she suggests in the phrase "withoute lye," are bootless for her own understanding of God's text in *Genesis* 1:28. A bit later, she challenges clerks again "Glose whoso wole" (119) to explain the purpose of what she calls euphemistically "oure bothe thynges

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smale," again setting her own experience, the text of her life, against the authority of scholarly clerks.

After her tale, the Friar coyly praises her for having touched "In scholematere greet difficultee" but it is best, he suggests, to leave such to the clergy (1272). For his tale of a summoner, of course, the Friar is roundly quitted with a story that turns on fraternal compulsion to gloss a text. Visiting the sick and ill-tempered Thomas, Friar John of the *Summoner's Tale* promises to rehearse the sermon he has just this morning preached

Nat al after the text of hooly writ;
For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose. (III 1790-92)

Glosing Scripture is the means here of laying open its difficult truth to the laity, while at the same time distancing the lay audience from the text. In the gap the friar provides himself between scriptural text and exposition, he ensures himself the space to turn the text to his own purpose.

Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn
There have I taught hem to be charitable,
And spende hir good there it is resonable;
And ther I saugh our dame A! Where is she? (1793-97)

Of course the friar wrenches 2 *Corinthians* 3:6 out of its context and omits the second half of the verse, that "the spirit gives life," very much in the style of the Wife of Bath. Employing that is, exploiting the gap between true text, which is the letter, and the gloss, a less dangerous version of the truth, the friar can lead people to be charitable in the financial sense of his gloss, not the spiritual sense of the letter. At this point in his proem, of course, the sight of

Thomas' wife distracts him from instruction, a moment that gives us a gloss on his text and his person.

When the friar returns to his sermon he states openly,

I ne have no text of it, as I suppose,
But I shall fynde it in a maner glose

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that Christ had friars in mind when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Thus, for Friar John, text and gloss are not even a natural conjunction, for *lettre sleeth*. The difficulty, the danger of Scripture makes the gloss a necessary mediation for instructing the laity. The ridiculous *dénouement* of the tale, wherein the friar is forced to remain faithful to the letter of Thomas' condition accompanying his donation, parodies the Pentecost, as several readers have noted (Levitan, Levy). The conclusion effectively glosses the friar's character for us as no strict statement could, and also picks up Friar John's earlier rhetorical question concerning small donations with a good Chaucerian pun: "What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?" (1967)

But we must let the friars have their say. One of the most interesting of the refrain-poems found in the Vernon manuscript also speaks to the distance between *text* and *glose*. The fifth of eight stanzas reveals the speaker to be a friar. "Who says the Sooth, He shall be Shent" is a poem of bitter disenchantment and trenchant sarcasm whose tone is similar to the anti-courtly poems of the late sixteenth century.

[Th]e mon that luste to liuen in ese,
Or eny worschupe her to ateyne,
His purpos I counte not wor[th] a pese,
Witterli, but he ordeyene
[Th]is wikked world hou he schal plese
Wi[th] al his pouwer and his peyne:
[Y]if he schal kepe him from disese,
He mot lerne to flatere and feyne;
Herte & mou[th] loke [th]ei ben tweyne,
[Th]ei mowe not ben of on assent;
And [y]it his tonge he mot restreyne,
For hos sei[th] [th]e so[th]e, he schal be schent.
(Brown, Number 103)

To do well in this world, one must misuse speech to conceal, not to reveal, and so hide intention, truth itself, what lies in the *herte*, separating it from what one speaks, for whoever speaks the truth shall be destroyed. In the second stanza, the speaker echoes the distance he has advised between heart and mouth in our familiar terms:

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[Th]us is [th]e so[th]e I-kept in close,
And vche mon make[th] touh and queynte;
To leue [th]e tixt and take [th]e glose,
Eueri word [th]ei colour and peynte. (13-16)

Here again is gap between text, now a metaphor for truth in any form, and a gloss that conceals, not reveals, that truth, a gap that is encouraged by the corruption of the world: ideally text and gloss would not be disjoint. The history of Middle English *queynte* is conveniently parallel to that of *glose* here; the meaning of both words broadens in the late Middle Ages from positive fields suggesting recognition and revelation, respectively, to negative fields of concealment. We may recall the Canon's Yeoman's smug assertion that "Oure termes ben so clerghial and so queynte" (VIII 752). Consistent with the polarization of *tough* and *queynte*, *tixt* and *glose*, the speaker uses diction usually reserved for describing features of the consummate verbal art, rhetoric: "Ever i word thei colour and peynte" a line that suggests a concealment distinct from the true purpose of rhetoric. "Falshede is called a sotiltee," he concludes, using a

word drawn from the diction of scholastic argument. Against the ways of the world he sets the efforts of the friars:

For let a frere in Godes seruise
 [Th]e pereles to [th]e peple preche,
 Of vre misdede & vre queyntise,
 [Th]e trewe tixt to telle and teche;
 [Th]jauz he beo riht witti and wyse,
 [Y]it luytel thonk he schal him reche (49-54)

In fact, he will be persecuted. In his conclusion the friar speaking in this poem leaves out the idea of *glosing* altogether, suggesting that it can only mean distortion of the *trewe tixt*. This understanding is very different from the ideal dynamic of reading and interpreting espoused by other contemporary religious voices.

The intellectual climate in which the polarization of *text* and *gloss* must be situated is in the response or, better, the reaction to Scholasticism of such varied religious figures as Richard Rolle, John Wyclif, and Richard FitzRalph, Archbishop of Armagh, who

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claimed, according to Professor Gwynn, to have "destroyed the English sophisms of Occam and Burley" (Pantin,132). All of these men among others argue for a greater priority of the text over the gloss of Scripture than had been offered previously, the same kind of primacy evident in the sometimes colloquial "literary" examples we have already examined. Confidence in the Scholastic marriage of theology and Aristotelian logic in the encyclopedic effort of a *Glossa Ordinaria* has eroded, and foremost among those who rejoice at the divorce of theology and philosophy effected by Ockham are some of the most learned and yet anti-scholastic clerics, for whom glossing means self-serving interpretation.

FitzRalph describes what is usually termed his 'conversion' from philosophy to theology in the most affective language, addressing God as "Solid Truth":

For previously, I used to think that through the teachings of Aristotle and certain argumentations that were profound only to men profound in vanity I used to think that I had penetrated to the depths of Your Truth, with the citizens of Your Heaven; until You, the Solid Truth, shone upon me in Your Scriptures, scattering the cloud of my error, and showing me how I was croaking in the marshes with the toads and frogs. For until I had You the Truth to lead me, I had heard, but did not understand, the tumult of the philosophers chattering against You..."
 (Hammerich 20; Pantin 133)

What were the components of the Thomistic synthesis, FitzRalph recasts here as the antithesis of Christian and pagan, very much in the vein of the Fathers. Such language suggests a widespread contemporary nostalgia for the early days of the Church.

Similarly the mystic Richard Rolle of Hampole attacks his school-trained detractors:

But those who are taught by means of wisdom which is acquired, not infused, and are puffed up with complicated argumentations, are disdainful

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towards [Rolle], saying 'Where did he learn? What doctor did he attend?' They do not believe that the lovers of eternity can be taught by the doctor within, to speak more eloquently than those taught by men, who all the time study for the sake of vain honour" (ed. M. Deanesly 240).

The rivalry between Athens and Jerusalem, instituted by the classically-trained Fathers, has here become an intramural contest.

From a very different quarter Wyclif argues for knowledge of Scripture before all other kinds of learning in his work of the late 1370's entitled *On the Truth of Sacred Scripture (De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae)*. We are "to believe no one

else on any topic except to the extent to which he bases himself on scripture" (Wyclif 1905, 382; Kenny 62). Scripture for Wyclif, as for Langland, is not a static page-text, but a dynamic of text and individual understanding. And the need to reach an understanding of "the written book, and the sacred sense" is as much a matter for laity as for clergy (Wyclif 1905. 189; translated in Kenny 61):

Some worldly folk *puffed up with learning* treat Scripture lightly and irreverently, despising its logic and style; they are like the gentiles who thought Christ a fool for his humility and patience. But the faithful whom he calls in meekness and humility of heart, whether they be clergy or laity, male or female, bending the neck of their inner man to the logic and style of Scripture will find in it the power to labour and the wisdom hidden from the proud. (Wyclif 1905. 117; Kenny 63; emphases mine).

I should add that here Wyclif attacks a straw-man: part street-preaching friar, and part Franciscan and/or Oxford scholastic. As in much of his reformist polemic for example, his invective against clerical absenteeism Wyclif knows well whereof he speaks. While his sense of the supremacy of scriptural style and logic has in it the traditional ring of the early fathers, such as

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Jerome, he broadens the base of the scriptural community, at least leveling if not eliminating the special mediating status of the clergy as professional glossers. This strain of spiritual populism is clearest in the *Mirror of Secular Lords*, the date of which is uncertain, wherein Wyclif, arguing from the examples of Christ and the apostles, states that the "faith of Christ must be unlocked to the people in each of the languages of which the Holy Spirit has given us knowledge" (Wyclif 1910.75; Kenny 65). Such a statement introduces not only translation, but also the politics of translation.

Furthermore, Wyclif offers the understanding of language as sign, not reality:

The language of a book, whether Hebrew, Greek, Latin, or English, is the *vesture* of the law of God. And in whatever *clothing* its message is most truly understood by the faithful, in that is the book most reasonably to be accepted. *For mere language*, whether on earth or in heaven, *is remote from the message and law of God*, since the division of tongues was introduced by God and the devil as a punishment for the sin of pride of the builders of the tower of Babel (Wyclif 1883. 701; Kenny 65; emphases mine).

We only understand the law of God via languages that are all equally remote from its reality, and so are all equally relevant to the purpose of understanding that law. Wyclif establishes the mediating status of language as sign, rather than universal or particular, much as Ockham suggests in the *Seven Quodlibeta* that, as common signs, words are not individuals (Wm. of Ockham, I.) (III. 1). Ockham, the ultimate English Scholastic, and Wyclif, the ultimate rhetorical anti-scholastic, held very different epistemologies, but not such very different views of language. Similarly, Chaucer and Langland, both conservatives and, as such, hardly sympathetic to Wyclif's views, are nonetheless occupied with the status of language as a medium of truth.

It remains for me to recover as far as possible the process whereby topics of scholastic discourse, in Janet Coleman's words,

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"filtered down into... non-scholastic literature, to enlighten an enlarged readership in the issues that confronted them as private, individual Christians and as servants and citizens devoted to the public weal" (17), the ways in which such issues become the stuff of what has been hitherto called vernacular, secular poetry perhaps such categorization is all too exclusive. The issues of clerical learning and authority are a matter of current idiom. But further, to write poetic fictions treating issues of theology and philosophy in terms of personal piety, as Langland did, is to locate one's writing in the most demanding intellectual discourse of the day. Similarly, Chaucer's game of competing authorities in *The Canterbury Tales* and the playfulness with which he refers to the eroding dynamic of text and gloss reflect in small one of the foremost matters of contemporary piety and the philosophy of language.

To take up once again the example with which I began: to mistranslate the words of the Lateran Council, as Helmsley did, is to disempower the language of Rome's decree. His gloss is consistent with the text-turning challenges

and appeals to authority of Chauntecleer, Alisoun of Bath, and that most scholastic of anti-scholastics, that most fraternal of anti-fraternals, John Wyclif. Such usage as Father Helmslay's is a pointed reminder of an awareness voiced by the author of an early fifteenth-century Wycliffite concordance to the New Testament: "In Englisch also as in Latyn ben wordis equivouse, that is, whanne oon worde hath manye signyficiaciouns or bitokenyngis" (Angus McIntosh 292). From whatever viewpoint, the efficacy of language, and the nature of its potential authority and integrity in the face of its apparent fluidity, form the horns of the problem of learning in the process of salvation a crucial step, in the words of Chaucer's Parson, "Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage/ That highte Jer-susalem celestial" (X.50-51).

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