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052149690X - Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker

Edwin D. Craun

Excerpt

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Introduction

Early in the fourteenth century, the English priest Robert Mannyng wrote down in his catechetical manual *Handlyng Synne* the story of a woman who cursed her daughter. As she was preparing to bathe in open country, she gave the child her clothes, bidding her to bring them as soon as she called. When she finished bathing and the child failed to come at her first call, she, “ful of yre and of wrap,” cursed her child with “þe deuyl come on þe, / For þou art not redy to me.” The devil immediately claimed the child “þat þou me betaghte [yielded] wyþ euyl,” manifesting his possession by maddening her on the spot. The literal sense of the woman’s words and the malicious fury which generated them gave the devil lifelong power over her child, who, in turn, was given a diabolical power of speech: she exposed the secret sins of everyone whom she encountered.¹

For Mannyng, the woman’s utterance is more than an instance of what J. L. Austin and John Searle would call the performative, of language which does something in the saying, as excommunication was sometimes believed to do.² Mannyng’s presentation of her speech shares with the speech act theorist interest in utterances as social acts, but it also manifests the late medieval discursive practice, to which priests were especially given, of examining utterances in ethical terms. What does a speaker will? How does what she signifies relate to what she believes to be true? What does she intend to be the effect of her utterance? What are the actual consequences for her, for listeners, for the subject of her speech? For clerics, speech and its instrument the tongue were powerful agents, as a literal rendition of our Vulgate epigraph, common in clerical literature, conveys: “Death and life are in the hand of the tongue.” In Mannyng’s world, a curse could inflict

¹ Robert Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, lines 1252–306.

² On excommunication, see Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, pp. 211–15, and Alexander Murray, *Excommunication*, pp. 7–33.

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demonic possession as surely as a false oath could enable a rich merchant to seize the small landholding of an economically marginal man or as the preaching of a divinely given word could avert the destruction of Nineveh.³ Given these social and religious consequences, Mannyng insists on seeing speakers, his audience as well as his figures, as moral agents responsible for vigilantly controlling their speech. His horrible tale, with its moral anatomy of the curse and its solemn prohibitions of cursing, is designed to be received and used by parents as a conscious counter to the urge to speak angrily to disobedient children (“*Ʒe wuyys þenkyp on þys cas*”), as a restraint on culturally induced habits of unreflective speech (“*For to leue Ʒour cursyng bold / Y shal Ʒow telle what me was told*”).

When late twentieth-century readers encounter late medieval texts like Mannyng’s which foreground utterances, we are quick to look for the inherent limitations of language. Since nothing puts language to the test as readily as speaking about God, let us take as an example the Middle English *Patience*, in which Jonah imagines angrily what sort of God would send him to the savage Ninevites. In a brilliant essay, R. A. Shoaf traces how the renegade prophet misrepresents the God of the poem in speech which exploits the temporality of utterances and the equivocity of words. Words uttered in time inevitably separate attributes which may be fused in God, so that Jonah can speak of God’s mercy releasing him from the whale while His justice sleeps (“*þou schal releue me, renk, whil þy ryzt slepez, / þurȝ myzt of þy mercy*”). Although Shoaf observes that Jonah “wants his God fragmented in just this way because he is impatient,” he chooses to develop not Jonah’s impatient use of words but “the adequacy of language to reality” as it is explored by medieval grammar.⁴ We, creatures (like Shoaf) of “the linguistic turn” in literary studies and students of recent scholarship on medieval theories of signification and fallacy, digest such a reading readily. But the text recurrently brings to the fore Jonah’s will in misrepresenting God and the consequences for him and for others of doing so – the ethical dimensions of his speech. In *Patience*, as in many late medieval narratives which are constructed around acts of speech, speaking puts the speaker, as well as – no, even more than – the spoken word, to the test. As Eugene Vance writes, for medieval poets “ethical questions

³ Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, lines 2670–720; *Patience* in *The “Pearl” Poems*, vol. II, lines 345–405.

⁴ R. A. Shoaf, “God’s ‘Malyse,’” pp. 261–79. *Patience*, lines 322–3.

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of semiosis bearing on our motives and intentions in the way we exploit the equivocality of signs are uppermost in importance.”⁵

To explore the ethical dimensions of speech in medieval texts, it is necessary for us to attend to the relations between interlocutors, relations eclipsed by the structuralist program of language as a self-contained system of difference and, before that, the Enlightenment preoccupation with referentiality, the relations of signs, things, and minds. Our analysis of specific utterances must embrace what speech does and is intended to do, how it is used by speakers in social situations to achieve certain effects. Such an approach is essentially rhetorical, although semiotic in the limited sense that it analyzes how texts invoke and use theories of the verbal sign. In Terry Eagleton’s terms, it sees “language as a practice rather than as an object” and so attends to human subjects, speakers and listeners.⁶ Late medieval texts particularly invite such a reading when they, like *Handlyng Synne* and *Patience*, include patently clerical discourse which analyzes utterances in ethical terms.

One of the most powerful discourses shaping the lives of late medieval Westerners was that on sin, constructed from the thirteenth century on, by the new, university-educated higher clergy, for priests, especially parish priests, to apply in preaching, in directing confessions, and in admonishing – ubiquitous pastoral means for effecting social formation. Emerging from the Fourth Lateran Council’s program to define the Christian community more sharply and to catechize and discipline individuals more effectively, it set forth what it claimed to be universally valid norms for conduct, it demarcated what was deviant, and it labored to awaken revulsion against the deviant.⁷ This discourse on sin, along with other types of pastoral discourse, was used to create a large and loose “textual community,” a social group in which a small literate core instructs the whole in

⁵ Eugene Vance, “*Mervelous Signals*,” p. 280.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 114.

⁷ In *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, R. I. Moore has argued that the clergy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the two centuries before the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), labored to draw – and enforce – sharper boundaries for the Christian community, which included conforming to a range of moral norms. This process involved defining, identifying, and labelling groups which deviated from communal beliefs and practices: lepers, Jews, heretics. While Moore does not consider the thirteenth century, his study of cultural formation provides a broad context for the Council’s directives on teaching basic norms of Christian belief and practice and disciplining those who violate them. I say “broad context” in part because he treats the church, especially the clergy, as monolithic.

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authoritative texts in order to establish systematic, text-based ways of constructing a moral self, of regulating human conduct.⁸

Sometimes this hegemonic discourse on the vices contained a sharply demarcated subdiscourse on deviant speech, the Sins of the Tongue: uncontrolled speech in general and specific verbal sins. Although most fully presented in encyclopedic treatises on the vices and equally vast collections of preaching materials (the sources, Latin and vernacular, described in chapter 1), it is found in many types of pastoral literature, especially collections of exemplary stories, lists of questions for priests to pose to penitents (*interrogationes*), and alphabetized topical handbooks of various kinds. In all of these pastoral genres, authoritative written texts, dominantly the Christian Bible, provide the basic norms, injunctions, prohibitions, and stories for constructing deviant speech and its types. In narratives like the half-breed's blasphemy in Exodus or Miriam's gainsaying of Moses' priesthood in Numbers, the Bible affixes labels to specific utterances (blasphemy and murmur in these cases), and it interprets the emotions, intentions, and fates of speakers. Particularly in the New Testament, it establishes norms for speech formulated according to the speaker's will and intentions and according to the social consequences of utterances. Absorbing these scriptural texts about speech, together with ten centuries of exegesis, this pastoral discourse is insistently ethical. In its most general sections, it can also be explicitly semiotic, concerned with how words are produced and interpreted, especially when it draws on patristic treatises on types of speech, like Augustine's *De mendacio*.

Despite its cultural power, this pastoral discourse has been little known and less examined, perhaps because much of it survives only in manuscript. *De lingua*, a vast, late thirteenth-century treatise on speech – Sins of the Tongue and divine eloquence alike – had not, I believe, been written about in modern culture until the early 1980s, save for Harrison Thomson's note dropping it from the canon of Robert Grosseteste's works.⁹

I began reading the literature on the Sins of the Tongue with an eye only for blasphemy, driven by curiosity about why Robert Henryson's Cresseid is punished so harshly for what my students call "mere words," her blasphemy against Venus and Cupid. I was bent on

⁸ On the nature of textual communities, see Brian Stock, *Literacy*, pp. 1–31, 88–240, 522–7.

⁹ *De lingua*'s chapter on blasphemy was a major source for my "Inordinata Locutio," pp. 135–62.

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interpreting this corner of “medieval culture as ‘another’ culture, admitting that it is not our culture and that the criteria for evaluating it must be sought within itself.”¹⁰ Then the puzzling centrality of acts of errant speech in late medieval English and Scottish narratives prompted me to read about the various deviant types, some still central in our culture, like the detraction/slander of John Gower’s lover, others almost invisible to modern eyes, like Jonah’s murmur in *Patience*, still undetected as a pastoral Sin of the Tongue after several generations of scholarly interest in the text. Simply to juxtapose the pastoral texts with the fictive was to become aware of how pastoral discourse shaped structure, supplied images and terms, suggested the moral psychology of characters, and even, as in the case of *Patience* and Gower’s “Tale of Ahab and Michaiiah,” provided the tale itself as an exemplification of a deviant type. Often these juxtapositions illuminated what was obscure to modern readers. Yet even as I began constructing them, I was directed by more than curiosity about the radical otherness of certain late medieval texts and was practicing more than intertextual reading. As the rhetorical theorist Paolo Valesio reminds us, “No dedicated and continued observation is free from ultimate belief.”¹¹ And ultimate belief is surely shaped in part by public discourse on what matters to us.

The modern Benedictines, according to Paul Gehl, “took up themes of silence in answer to the propaganda excesses of the two world wars.”¹² As I have been reading and writing about the Sins of the Tongue for over a decade, several cultural debates have prompted me to look more analytically, and to look in certain ways, at pastoral discourse. From articles in *Time* to books by ethicists like Sissela Bok, writing on calculated deception in law, medicine, and political life has encouraged me – especially through its pleas to return to a more rigorous ethical analysis of speech – to examine how deviant types like lying had been constructed out of a scholastic moral theology rooted in Augustinian notions of will, intention, and social consequences (set forth in chapter 2, part II). This orientation was reinforced by the Iran/Contra hearings (perhaps more so, by the journalistic coverage), with their crude exchanges over what constitutes a lie and under what circumstances lying might be justified. More recently, the popular resurgence of speech norms,

¹⁰ Gurevich, *Popular Culture*, p. 216. Edwin D. Craun, “*Inordinata Locutio*,” and “*Blaspheming*,” pp. 25–41.

¹¹ Paolo Valesio, *Novantiqua*, p. 20. ¹² Paul Gehl, “*Competens silentium*,” p. 128.

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seen variously in the death threats against Salman Rushdie, in the revulsion against rap lyrics about killing cops, and in campus speech codes, has prompted me (much as it has David Lawton in his recent *Blasphemy*) to consider how the deviant is defined and how people are persuaded to accept that definition. What functions of speech are regarded as normative? By what social groups? What sign theory underlies such judgment? How does each aberrant type deviate from normative social practices? How does the dominant discourse establish authority for its metalinguistic claims? How does it model itself as normative discourse? In pursuing these questions, my second chapter moves beyond Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio's largely descriptive approach to each pastoral treatise as systematic ethical instruction in the only extended study of the Sins of the Tongue, *I Peccati della lingua*.

This discourse was constructed not simply to promulgate what is normative and errant, but to convert the errant speaker, particularly as it was used in preaching, directing confession, and other acts of oral instruction. In keeping with its basic Augustinian sign theory, it presents itself as a social instrument designed to achieve certain effects. Therefore, my second chapter (again moving beyond Casagrande and Vecchio) also examines its rhetoric, the means of persuasion (to adapt Aristotle's definition of rhetoric) which it makes available to the priest: its *topoi*, its means of establishing authority, its figural language, its ontological gestures.¹³ By way of example, I use only one deviant type, lying, since, in the words of John Gower's *Genius* "He [the tongue] hath so manye sundri spieces / Of vice, that I mai nocht wel / Describe hem be a thousandel."¹⁴ In this rhetorical analysis, I have benefited from the work of Jacques Le Goff, Roberto Rusconi, Thomas Tentler, and other social historians (chiefly French) on the social uses of some pastoral genres, especially as construed from the texts themselves. Apart from that and some studies of treatises on preaching, I have chiefly worked alone in the largely uncharted area of pastoral rhetoric. Current rhetorical theory is too radically ahistorical (Valesio's *Rhetorics* is an example) to be of much use in examining a discourse so self-consciously produced by a newly ascendant reformist elite.

¹³ The term "ontological gesture" comes from John D. Lyons' masterful *Exemplum*, p. 14, where it is defined as the reality a rhetoric claims to share with readers/listeners in their culture.

¹⁴ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, III, 466–8.

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My third chapter examines how this discourse on deviant speech is appropriated in *Patience*, the first of four extended Middle English narratives I treat. Such a dominant discourse permeates medieval texts of all genres in which some figure or a narratorial voice judges the speech of others. For example, Detraccio, “þe werldys messengere,” serves as the go-between of *The Castle of Perseverence*; in another Macro play, *Mankind*, the quartet of New Guise, Mischief, Nought, and Nowadays labors to manipulate Mankind with the seemingly spontaneous speech which he labels “japyng.” I have chosen *Patience* and the other three narratives because, in them, clerical figures (priests, parodies of them, catechizing laics) mount the pulpit in order to label, interpret, and, often, seek to control the errant speech of the “medieval sinners” who take center stage in fourteenth-century English fiction.¹⁵ These whole texts – or crucial segments of them – are dominated by the deviant speaker and the pastoral rhetoric of control. The narrator in *Patience* constructs his whole exemplary tale around Jonah’s two bouts of murmur, speech which creates a false god out of the circumstances and emotions of the moment. John Gower’s not altogether likely pastor, Genius the priest of Venus, directs the confession of a lover who gleefully uses deceptive speech to discredit his younger, more sexually experienced rivals (chapter 4). William Langland peoples the first four visions of *Piers Plowman* with somewhat authoritative, but non-priestly, figures – Will the Dreamer, Study, and Piers himself – who adopt pastoral discourse on *turpiloquium* (lewd talk) and *scurrilitas* in order to turn magnates against the seductive speech of the minstrels whom they foster with their power and wealth (chapter 5). At the end of *The Canterbury Tales* as we have it, Geoffrey Chaucer juxtaposes two catechists addressing the pilgrims on deviant speech, the ventriloquistic Manciple who subversively preaches verbal restraint in his mother’s crudely prudential and disjunctive “clerical” idiom and the Parson who embeds a discourse on “the sinnes that comen of the tonge” in his instruction on confession. With each narrative, I examine how the clerical figure appropriates traditional topoi, similitudes, *sententiae*, and *exempla* – the resources pastoral texts make available on that particular deviant type or on verbal restraint in general – in order to achieve certain rhetorical effects with his audience.¹⁶

¹⁵ The term “medieval sinner” is Mary Flowers Braswell’s in *Sinner*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Although each narrative I consider up to “The Manciple’s Tale” presents a different type of deviant speech, I do not aim to treat representative Sins of the Tongue. These are simply the

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In the first two of these chapters, particular types of pastoral literature supply rhetorical paradigms for the clerical speaker. *Patience* is presented as an *exemplum*, a narrative which manifests a generalization in particular actions and utterances. In the *Confessio Amantis*, Genius interrogates the lover on types of sin, probing and instructing in ways dictated by *interrogationes*; the lover's confession follows the model *formae confessionis*, forms for penitents to use in making a "complete" confession. Then Genius tells exemplary tales in order to convert the lover from his deviant practices. *Piers Plowman*, in contrast, presents a loose melange of pastoral rhetoric on a specific sin directed to a particular social group (*status*), a rhetorical practice developed by thirteenth-century writers on preaching and directing confession.

In all four texts, the pastoral figure promotes an alternative to the deviant word, even a remedy for it: the narrator's own self-abnegating scripturalism (and the voice of God itself) in *Patience*, the truth-telling speech of confession in the *Confessio Amantis*, the preaching of "goddess wordes" in *Piers Plowman*, the Manciple's self-serving close-mouthedness, the Parson's pastoral discourse on sin as a penitential instrument. All these versions of pastoral discourse make its claims: to give authoritative instruction in verbal norms, to identify the deviant, to convert the sinful speaker. But the fourteenth-century narrative poet, as John Burrow has discerned in studying poetic style, builds preachers into loosely woven texts;¹⁷ in them, he juxtaposes the pastoral with other discourses and develops social relations between the preacher and other speakers. These complex contexts place the hegemonic pastoral discourse on deviant speech so that it is not only produced but, variously, extended, affirmed, recuperated, contested, subverted, and even trashed. In the process, its claims to be a metalanguage and its rhetorical efficacy – its two fundamental means of social formation – are measured and judged, sometimes straightforwardly by fictional figures, always obliquely by the poet.

The pastoral speech code was not the only one to be woven into late medieval texts. A romance like *Amis and Amiloun* celebrates

types which interest the major Middle English poets the most. More obviously, I do not aim to treat all of the sins, some twenty-four in the most widely read pastoral text, Guillaume Peyraut's *Summa de vitiis* (more, in some other influential texts). Casagrande and Vecchio devote the last half of *Peccati* to the major Sins of the Tongue, surveying their genesis and treatment in the most influential theological, as well as pastoral, texts after the Fourth Lateran Council.

¹⁷ John Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry*, p. 37.

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chivalric reasons for shunning lying or keeping an oath, while, in the *Roman de la rose*, the God of Love teaches commandments to his new vassal (Do not gossip. Rebuke those who malign women.) so that he will gain a reputation as a man worthy of being loved.¹⁸ Medieval culture was as plural in its codes for speech as figures in fourteenth-century English fiction are in their responses to the pastoral code. Nevertheless, pastoral discourse on deviant speech had an uncommon power because of its composition by a militant literate elite, its claims to govern all speech, its authorities (biblical, patristic, philosophical), its use in confession (the gateway to the Eucharist), and its advocacy by (supposedly) every priest as a religious teacher. To examine its discursive character – that is, its semiotic foundation and, especially, its rhetoric – is to begin to decipher its social functions. To examine its production and placement within English narratives is to see how some literate late medievals judged its universalizing claims amid the contemporary Babel of contending discourses.

¹⁸ *Amis and Amiloun*, lines 914–24, 936–48, and 1093–104. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, II, lines 2011–264. Another example: in a manual on the art of speech, the powerful legal counsellor and civil servant Albertano da Brescia advocates using a classical rhetorical device, the seven circumstances of speech, to screen potential utterances for any damage to one's social standing or commune (*De arte loquendi et tacendi*, pp. 94–118). On Albertano's concern for protecting his commune, see James M. Powell, *Albertanus of Brescia*, pp. 56–70.

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I

The pastoral movement and deviant speech: major texts

THE PASTORAL “BATTLE OF OUR LORD AGAINST THE VICES”

As literacy increased among Western Europeans in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, so, Brian Stock argues, did scripturalism, the practice of using the written word to establish norms and values and so to control conduct. Then scripturalism was used to shape fairly small reformist communities like the Cistercians and the followers of Peter Waldo: “textual communities.” In the thirteenth century, beyond the reach of Stock’s studies, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and its offshoots, local synods, designed a movement of pastoral care to practice scripturalism within a far larger community: the entire Western Church.¹ Its cadre of religious teachers were parish priests and mendicants, evangelists whose orientation differed greatly from that of the inward-looking monks who had dominated the church in the preceding centuries.² Its central texts were catechetical formulas like the Creed, the Seven Works of Corporeal Mercy, the Seven Sins, and, behind them all, the Christian scriptures. Its basic scripturalist activities were preaching, directing confession, and admonishing individuals. This movement also produced its own texts, pastoral writing which presented catechetical material for priests to use in the religious/social formation of themselves and the laity.

Although vast in quantity and varied in type, this pastoral literature constructs a “corporate social definition” of sin, one for all Christians to know and to use in governing their conduct.³ In it, sin in general is

¹ Stock, *Literacy*, pp. 1–31; also *Listening for the Text*, pp. 1–5 and 23–9. Although Stock’s eleventh-century textual communities and the pastoral movement throughout the West differ greatly in size, number of texts, and number of literate teachers, I think it is useful, for several reasons, to think of the Christian community which the higher clergy sought to reform as a textual community: a highly literate core created pastoral materials for the community; cultural formation was its goal; its catechetical materials were based on written authorities.

² André Vauchez, “Présentation,” in *Faire croire*, pp. 10–11.

³ Jonathan Hughes, *Pastors*, p. 143. See Thomas Tentler, “Summa,” pp. 122–3.