

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The Biblical history of language

Ferdinand de Saussure and the structuralists, by making language the paradigm for large areas of inquiry, almost inevitably provoked a new interest in an age-old question: how, when, and where did language originate? This question elicited responses throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance – indeed, to the end of the eighteenth century, as the famous discussions by Rousseau and Herder attest. From the late seventeenth century on, however, the responses became increasingly speculative, largely because Genesis lost its status as the infallibly authoritative account of early human history.¹ No longer restricted by a unitary Biblical truth, linguistic speculations could increase and multiply, mixing the plausible with the implausible. To defend against the deluge, the inaugural bylaws of the Société de linguistique de Paris (1865) stipulated that no papers of any sort concerning the origin of language would be accepted. Now that the question has regained some of its former popularity, we may sympathize with the Society's position.²

Yet resuscitating this question has brought some earlier views into sharp focus and given them new interest. When we consider patristic and medieval comments on the origin of language, two things are immediately apparent. First, discussion focuses inevitably on the opening eleven chapters of Genesis, from the Creation to the Tower of Babel; second, Augustine's extensive comments on language dominate and provide the framework for later commentary. In Neil Forsyth's synopsis, Augustine's "system of symbolic interpretation" comes of age in *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he describes the effects on language of the Fall. "Adam and Eve found that now they could communicate only by the clumsy method of language and gesture. A dislocation of consciousness produced the distance between the inquiring intellect and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Biblical history of language*

the object of its search. The word of God was veiled, in order to exercise the seeker. This veil, the language of sign and symbol, was both the distance of the mind from God and the avenue by which the philosophic searcher might reach him.”³

The veil of language, according to context and the temperament of its beholder, may be understood as permeable or impermeable, translucent or opaque. All three of the later medieval poets with whom this book is concerned – Jean de Meun, Dante, and Chaucer – make use of, and significantly add to, the commentarial and Augustinian traditions. They differ, however, in their particular responses to these traditions. Dante is the most thoroughgoing Augustinian of the three; but Augustine and the tradition of Biblical commentary also had a profound effect on the way Jean de Meun and Chaucer thought about language, as both the tool and the resistant material of their craft.

These three poets are also of course indebted to the classical tradition, which intersects at many points with the Judaeo-Christian. Almost everything I have written on Chaucer explicitly or implicitly has concerned the myth of the Golden Age and declining world; once again, as I have come to realize, I am returning to that myth, though this time through the lens of its Biblical analogue in the opening chapters of Genesis. The authoritative summary of this material, in all of its wide-ranging manifestations, has now appeared in James Dean’s *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature*⁴; his thorough look at the larger picture allows me to focus more narrowly on its linguistic details, in four chapters that are meant to be cumulative but can also stand alone. This first chapter summarizes the patristic, rabbinical, and medieval Christian commentaries on language at the beginning of the world, in the first eleven chapters of Genesis; I also look at what these commentaries say about Pentecost and the promised renewal of language by the Word as the world nears its end. Chapter 2 analyzes Jean de Meun’s discussion of language in the *Roman de la Rose*, framed as it is by Genesis and the Ovidian myth of the Golden Age. Chapter 3 outlines Dante’s Augustinian review of linguistic history in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Commedia*. It then looks at the *House of Fame*, in which Chaucer upends Dante’s confident poetry of the redemptive Word; instead, like Jean de Meun, he resigns himself with skepticism and comedy to the ambiguities of fallen language. Chapter 4 describes the movement from

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Creation and Fall*

the *Second Nun's Tale* to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, as Chaucer's final, bleak reprise of how language and meaning disseminate themselves in the fallen world, a world in which the word can no longer be cousin to the deed.

CREATION AND FALL

Virtually all medieval accounts of language begin with the authorized account: the story in Genesis of its origin and rapid participation in the Fall. The Genesis narrative offers three historical foci for linguistic commentary, one before and two after the loss of Eden; they provide useful points of reference for categorizing the habitual concerns of medieval linguistic thought. The first is the origin of language – Adam's naming of the birds and animals in Paradise (Gen. 2.20); this episode raises broader issues of signification in general, and of the differences between man's language and God's. Next, showing the effects of the Fall, are the sins of Cain, the first murderer and city-builder, and of his descendants, especially Lamech the inventor of bigamy and his children, to whom we owe the arts of civilization (Gen. 4.19–24). The scholia on their words and deeds are akin to pagan remarks on the loss of the Golden Age, and take up such issues as the abuse of language for sophistry or even outright lying. The third and most notorious linguistic event is the building of the Tower of Babel and the consequent confusion of tongues (Gen. 11.1–9), in which the dismaying linguistic results of original sin, already evident in Cain's descendants, become hardened further into the division that will last until Judgment Day. Only then will the restored unity promised by Pentecost, the antitype of Babel, be achieved at last.

There are actually four languages, hierarchically arranged, at the beginning of Genesis. The first is God's, since the Biblical account of language begins even before the beginning of time, with John's elaboration on the first two words of Genesis, "In principio erat Verbum, / Et Verbum erat apud Deum, / Et Deus erat Verbum" (John 1.1) [In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God],⁵ and with God's speech before the creation of humankind, his "Let there be light" and assigning of names to Day, Night, Heaven, Earth, and Seas. The second language is Adam's, when he gives names to the birds and animals, and the third the speech he hands on to his

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Biblical history of language*

descendants after the Fall. The fourth and most depraved comprises our diverse tongues after Babel. We reascend only with difficulty even to Adam's fallen speech; his Edenic language, let alone God's true Word, is entirely or almost entirely inaccessible.

I take some risks in outlining this hierarchy with such clarity. It accurately describes Milton's portrayal of linguistic history in *Paradise Lost*, but may partially misrepresent the patristic and medieval commentaries on Genesis – and for that matter, Genesis itself – since they do not differentiate between these successive states of language in a unanimous or wholly consistent fashion. If, for example, Hebrew was in fact Adam's language, as almost all the commentators agree, then the Hebrew names for the birds and animals must be their true names, perfectly matching signifier and signified, and logic would suggest that we might recover a linguistic Eden, if not Eden itself, simply by taking a crash course in the true tongue. This is certainly not, however, what Clement V had in mind in 1311 when he asked that Hebrew be taught at every university, even though John Wyclif does argue that traces of Adam's power – the power to evoke obedience from the creatures he named – do survive in the language of magic and incantation: "I believe Hebrew sounds [*voces*] to have greater efficacy than manifold others."⁶ Dante is more akin to Milton when he changes his mind between *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *Paradiso* 26: in the earlier work Hebrew is Adam's language; in the latter, Adam speaks a language that alters radically after the Fall. By contrast, many medieval commentators take no account of linguistic change and decline when they discuss the gap between the Logos and human words: their sight is firmly set on the gulf between the divine and the human, not on calibrating relatively minor variations in the extent of that gulf. Genesis does, however, offer a number of cues for linguistic speculation, and the commentaries give us licence to use its text as the springboard for antiquarian theorizing. Milton is, after all, the heir of this commentarial tradition, which was in full force throughout the seventeenth century⁷; and Milton's medieval predecessors are often surprisingly modern in their linguistic concerns.

To be sure, any attempt to describe the origin of language faces a notable conceptual problem, akin to the definitions of God according to what He is not, or the difficulties Dante and Paul lament in describing Heaven: since their instruments of discourse are themselves affected by

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Creation and Fall*

the Fall, fallible human beings cannot easily contemplate, and certainly cannot easily describe, what the unfallen language must have been. Our efforts to do so, tinged by retrospective longing as they are, must participate in the quest that Derrida has so attentively undermined: the quest for a primal unity of sign and thing, an immanence in spoken language that writing keeps pallidly at a distance, and that our speech itself keeps deferring continually beyond our grasp. Earlier exegetes would agree with Derrida when he says that “The sign is always a sign of the Fall. Absence always relates to distancing from God.”⁸ According to Thierry of Chartres, God can only be spoken of metaphorically [*translatiue*].⁹ And the first language in Genesis, God’s, is of course not really a language, for the speech of Creation is not really speech in any human sense of the term. With his characteristic brilliance and thoroughness, reflecting the central position of the divine *Verbum* in his theology, Augustine asks a series of questions in *De Genesi ad Litteram* about God’s “Fiat lux”:

And how did God say, *Let there be light*? Was this in time or in the eternity of His Word? If this was spoken in time, it was certainly subject to change. How then could we conceive of God saying it except by means of a creature? For He Himself is unchangeable . . .

And was there the material sound of a voice when God said, *Let there be light*, as there was when He said, *Thou art my beloved Son*? . . . And, if so, what was the language of this voice when God said, *Let there be light*? There did not yet exist the variety of tongues, which arose later when the tower was built after the flood. What then was the one and only language by which God said, *Let there be light*? Who was intended to hear and understand it, and to whom was it directed? But perhaps this is an absurdly material way of thinking and speculating on the matter.

What then shall we say? Is it the intellectual idea signified by the sound of the voice, in the words, *Let there be light*, that is meant here by the voice of God, rather than the material sound? And does this belong to the Divine Word . . .?¹⁰

Yes is the answer, of course. And for Augustine this eternal language, in which to utter is the same as to act,¹¹ establishes the origin and goal of all human discourse. The eternity and unity of the Word, set against the transience and partiality of human speech, become a characterizing

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Biblical history of language*

preoccupation of Augustine's writings. This preoccupation appears, for example, in his comments on knowing things "in the Word of God," as angels do, instead of knowing "the same thing in itself,"¹² and his remark in the *Confessions*: "we returned to the sound of our own tongue, in which a word has both beginning and ending. For what is like to your Word, Our Lord, who abides in Himself forever, yet grows not old and makes all things new!"¹³ It is central to his disquisition, in Book Fifteen of *De Trinitate*, on the relation of the Incarnate Word to human speech: the inner word, the word of the human heart, and not the outer, audible or legible one, is the true similitude [*similitudo*] of the divine Word. This inner word has powers that no human language has ("this is the word that belongs to no language, that is to none of what are called the languages of the nations, of which ours is Latin"), and we may apprehend it "not only before it is spoken aloud but even before the images of its sounds are turned over in thought . . . For when we utter something true, that is when we utter what we know, a word is necessarily born from the knowledge which we hold in the memory, a word which is absolutely the same kind of thing as the knowledge it is born from."¹⁴ Yet this likeness in a word – "that word of man, the word of a rational animal, the word of the image of God which is not born of God but made by God" – conceals "a great unlikeness [*dissimilitudo*] to God and the Word of God"; and even after the Last Judgment, when we shall be in the company of God again and have the powers of angels, likeness will be far from identity.¹⁵

God obviously makes allowance for our limited powers when He uses any human language, even a perfect one¹⁶; according to a commentary incorrectly attributed to Thomas Aquinas, "God truly speaks to us in human fashion just as a lisping [*balbutiens*] mother condescends to her son."¹⁷ Such divine condescension was once, if only for a brief time, hardly necessary, as Augustine argues in his fascinating reading of Genesis 2.5, "for the Lord God had not rained upon the earth." Now, Augustine says, God does rain upon the earth, "that is, he makes souls grow green again by his word; but he waters them from the clouds, that is, from the Scriptures of the Prophets and Apostles. They are, moreover, rightly called clouds, because those words which resound and pass through the beaten air, with the darkness of allegories also added as if they were covered in some manner by a mist, become like

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Creation and Fall*

clouds.” But before the Fall, God made the “plant of the field” and “herb of the ground,” that is to say, the human soul, green by watering it “by an inner spring, speaking in its intellect, so that it might receive words not from the outside, as if they were rain from the clouds spoken of above; but instead be filled from its own spring, that is from the truth flowing from its own innermost depths.”¹⁸

In the world we inhabit, however, the Fall and Redemption of humankind have extensive linguistic repercussions, in the gap signalled by wordplays on the Word such as Aquinas’ hymn “Pange Lingua”¹⁹ and Dante’s announced intention to talk about human language “inspired by the Word that comes from above.”²⁰ When Augustine sets forth his scheme of providential history, he elaborates on his predecessors, who had argued that while Eve “conceived the word of the serpent,” Mary willingly accepted God’s Word: “For unto Eve, as yet a virgin, had crept the devil’s word, the framer of death. Equally, unto a virgin was introduced God’s word, the builder of life.”²¹ Marcia Colish has outlined in detail the Augustinian paradigm of history, in which human language falls farther and farther from its divine exemplar, until Christ the Incarnate Word, the second Adam born of the second Eve, graces us with the possibility of redeemed speech.²² For Augustine the Fall is centrally defined by its linguistic aspect, the lapse into dissimilitude. God says, as he creates man: “Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram” (Gen. 1.26) [Let us make man to our image and likeness]²³; but in Augustine’s memorable phrase, we now live in the fallen world far from God “in regione dissimilitudinis” [in a region of unlikeness].²⁴

Similitude and image, *similitudo* and *imago*, are crucial words in the Genesis text, and they link the origin of language with the Creation. Although Calvin argues that the two terms have identical meanings since “the Hebrues commonly use to repeate one thinge with diverse wordes,”²⁵ almost all patristic and medieval commentaries argue for a hierarchical distinction between them. But the Greek and Latin traditions offer contradictory accounts of that hierarchy. With the notable exception of Gregory of Nyssa, who uses the terms interchangeably, “similarity, even more than the image, is the dominant relation which links man to God in all Greek patristic thought.”²⁶ In the Latin tradition, by contrast, “image” is superior to “similitude.” Augustine thus

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Biblical history of language*

comments on Genesis 1.26 in *De diuersis quaestionibus* 51, and he also remarks in *quaestio* 74 on the differences between *imago*, *aequalitas*, and *similitudo*.²⁷ Aquinas argues “that the idea of image involves likeness, and that ‘image’ adds something to ‘likeness,’ namely the idea of being a sort of print taken from another”; *similitudo* is “preliminary” to image, “covering a wider class of things,” whereas *imago* involves “the properties of intelligent nature [*naturae intellectualis*].”²⁸

Even at the moment of Creation, the shift from unity to division, as from identity to image or similitude, has moral as well as ontological implications. Almost inevitably, and despite the need to emphasize the good of Creation, patristic exegesis reflects its Neoplatonic origins by marking out analogous hierarchies of original unity and subsequent loss. Divine language vs. human and thing vs. word are the linguistic correlatives of the human being Adam as both “*imago et similitudo*” of God, vs. woman created as the *imago* of man, but in some versions merely the *similitudo* of God.²⁹ The divide between One and Many of course exists even before the divide between divine and human. Jerome in fact argues that the omission of “And God saw that it was good” on the second day of Creation, the summation that appears on each of the other days, is intended to show us that “a double number is not good, because it divides from union, and prefigures the marriage contract”³⁰; and Bede associates this second day with the second age of the world, and with the division of tongues at the Tower of Babel.³¹ Guibert of Nogent only mildly embellishes the traditional reading when he relates “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” to the division within human beings between spirit (heaven) and flesh (earth); for Philo Judaeus had, long before, given a more literal gendered marking to this division: “The first man originally existed in a state of unity or oneness, and so long as he remained in this state, he was like both the world and God in his singleness . . . But this original state of oneness or singleness was interrupted by the appearance of woman.”³²

Although Philo differs in emphasis from the Christian patristic writers, they are all responding to the inconsistent Creation narratives of the Jahwist and Priestly scribes, which underlie the connection between the creation of woman and the invention of language. The Jahwist account, the earlier of the two by perhaps four centuries,³³ describes the creation of Eve and her naming in the context of Adam’s naming the animals and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Creation and Fall*

birds (Gen. 2.18–24): in part because of this context, the Jahwist writer implies that Eve is subordinate to Adam, and sufficiently differentiated from him that he can assign her a name.³⁴ The Priestly account, on the other hand, which comes first in the Genesis text, appears to suggest, or can at least be taken to suggest, that male and female, both subsumed under the term *adam* or *homo*, are coeval and implicitly equal: “Et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam: ad imaginem Dei creavit illum, masculum et feminam creavit eos” (Gen. 1.27) [And God created man to his own image; in the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them]. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s barbed comment is on the mark: “The first account dignifies woman as an important factor in the creation, equal in power and glory with man. The second makes her a mere afterthought. The world in good running order without her. The only reason for her advent being the solitude of man.”³⁵

Of course, for patristic and medieval commentators the two Creation narratives are a single one, the work of Moses; and what we now see as discrepancies between them are to be understood as merely apparent discrepancies, variants within a single unified account that require interpretative reconciliation. Even recently, Pope John Paul II’s 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* argues that there is no “essential contradiction between the two texts.”³⁶ Once one rejects the notion that Genesis 1.27 describes a single androgynous human being,³⁷ the usual exegetical maneuver to make these two texts congruent is to distinguish, as Augustine does, between the seminal creation (*informatio*), the “seminal reasons” [*rationes seminales*], of the human being (*ha’adam* or *homo*), and the formation in time (*conformatio*) of the two sexes (*vir* and *femina*).³⁸ Andrew of St. Victor argues that the plural “them” [*eos*] in Genesis 1.27 shows that the original human was not an androgyne, but that, although the woman was not yet divided from the man, she was “substantially pre-begotten” [*materialiter praeseminata*], her bodily creation proleptically referred to in this text that shifts so abruptly from “him” to the “male and female” of “them.”³⁹ Significantly, Jesus echoes this verse in his argument against divorce: “Have ye not read that he who made man from the beginning made them male and female?” (Matt. 19.4).⁴⁰ This Genesis verse also becomes a crucial authority for the equality of all human souls, as in Peter Lombard’s heavily Augustinian commentary on 1 Corinthians: the image of God is not in the body, but in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87215-7 - Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

John M. Fyler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Biblical history of language*

the “rational mind, where there can be knowledge of God, and where there is no sex, . . . because in either sex the image of God is fulfilled, from which image woman [*femina*] is not disjoined, just as she is not excluded from the grace of the renewal and the reformation of the image of God.”⁴¹ Thus Jean de Meun’s Genius and the narrator of Chaucer’s *Troilus* (5.1835–40) explicitly state that women and men both are made in the image of God.⁴²

Even so, this verse becomes entangled in opposing currents of Biblical exegesis, notably in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as Philippe Buc has shown.⁴³ On the one hand, and certainly the majority view, given extra weight by the widespread influence of Isidore and the *Glossa Ordinaria*, female is subordinate to male in Paradise as well as after the fall, though this subordination to a genial prelacy differs entirely from the violence of post-lapsarian servitude, epitomized according to Peter Comestor by the wounds of defloration.⁴⁴ But such a reading of Genesis 1.26–28 is countered in the course of the thirteenth century by Dominicans such as Hugh of St. Cher and Nicholas de Gorran, who argue that there was no prelacy in Paradise⁴⁵: dominion over the fishes of the sea does not extend to *prelatio* over other human beings. And already in the twelfth century Andrew of St. Victor and others posit an original equality between male and female,⁴⁶ in line with the ameliorating commonplace – in Hugh of St. Victor, Abelard, Peter Lombard, and the *Bible Française*, and repeated in the *Parson’s Tale* – that Eve is, significantly, created from Adam’s side, not his head or his foot.⁴⁷

Even with such divergent interpretations, the harmonizing impulse in Biblical commentary accords with the text it comments on; for the Genesis narrative insists on similitude, likeness bridging a gap of difference, in God’s creation of man.⁴⁸ The question of similitude in turn dominates the account of man’s relationship to the rest of creation, because the search for a mate for Adam “like unto himself” [*simile sibi*]⁴⁹ provokes Adam’s first use of language:

And the Lord God said: It is not good for man to be alone⁵⁰; let us make him a help like unto himself. And the Lord God having formed out of the ground all the beasts of the earth, and all the fowls of the air, brought them to Adam to see what he would call them: for