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Janette Dillon

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*'Verbum Dei' and the rise of English*

The Word had potent kinds of meaning beyond the semantic for laypeople during the Middle Ages. While theologians throughout Christendom lectured on the traditional glosses to the Vulgate Bible (all in Latin, lectures and glosses as well as the bible), laypeople received the incarnate Word in the form of the sacred host, accepting that the words of consecration were uttered in a sacred other language which they could not understand. Understanding the words that were spoken was unimportant to participation in the mass. What the congregation needed to grasp was the sacramental power of the Word, its transforming mystery. The Latin liturgy, at once so remote from and so familiar to ordinary people, functioned via this paradox both to comfort the faithful with the repetition of words heard only and always in this sacred context and to underline their awareness of the ineffable mystery of God. A dialogue between the young Mary Tudor, wondering about the role of the congregation, and her almoner emphasises two different senses of 'understanding':

In my God, I cannot see what we shall do at the Mass, if we pray not.  
 Ye shall think to the mystery of the Mass and shall harken to the words that  
 the priest say.  
 Yea, and what shall they do which understand it not?  
 They shall behold, and shall hear, and think, and by that they shall  
 understand. (Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, p. 14)

Outside the church, the Latin Word of the bible might continue to cast its quasi-magical spell. It could be used to ward off or exorcise evil spirits, to cast out devils, to protect against sickness or injury (Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 27–57; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, ch.8). Nor did the precious words even need to be uttered, far less understood. They could be written down and sewn into the clothes or sealed in a little amulet to be worn around

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the neck. Even learned clerics are to be found confirming popular superstition: 'Sacred words bound to the body are marvellously protective', the writers of the fifteenth-century *Malleus Maleficarum*, approved by the pope, assure their readers (Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 92).<sup>1</sup> The most highly revered text for such purposes was the first verse of St John's gospel. As late as 1603 Samuel Harsnett notes Catholic priests still using this text as a test of witchcraft: 'If S. Johns Gospel being put in a Casket, and applied unto her, she rubbe, or scratch any part of her body, and cry it burnes, it is an evident demonstration, that the enemy dooth lurke in that part' (*A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, p. 24).

The written text of this verse, when used as a charm in the medieval period, would naturally be in Latin, but in the familiar English of the Authorised Version it reads 'In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'<sup>2</sup> It is easy to see why this text was valued above all others: it is a self-reflexive text, the Word pronouncing on its own value and authority. The Word, it insists, does not simply issue from God, but *is* God, the point of origin, the absolute.

The Word, however, like mankind, experienced a fall from grace. According to Augustine, Adam's knowledge of God had been direct and unmediated, a truth transmitted inwardly without the need for material signs: 'God watered [the soul] by an interior spring, speaking to its intellect, so that it did not receive words from the outside.'<sup>3</sup> Yet Augustine also recognises a spoken language, beginning with Adam's naming of all living creatures (Genesis 2.19–20), and identifies this *Ursprache* as Hebrew, thus creating a continuum between the language of Eden and the language of scripture. Even this language, however, is subject to corruption in the primal myth of Eden, since it is the language shared by Adam, Eve and the serpent, the language used so eloquently first by the serpent to tempt Eve and then by Eve to tempt Adam. For Augustine, himself a teacher of rhetoric before his conversion, the Fall demonstrates the dangers inherent in language: as soon as it becomes a set of material signs, a potential gap opens up between words and truth, and that gap can be exploited by an appeal to the rhetorical pleasure of the signs themselves. It is here, then, that the Christian anxiety about the relationship between words and truth begins, an anxiety which is central to discussions about language, theology or both down to at least the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup>

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If the myth of the Fall was central to the thinking of medieval commentators on language, the myth of Babel entered equally deeply into the thinking of Renaissance writers.<sup>5</sup> Before Babel, according to the biblical account, 'the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech' (Genesis 11.1). But then, as in the Garden of Eden, mankind's *hubris* destroyed the state of nature. God saw his people struggling to build 'a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven' (11.4) and punished their pride by dividing their unitary language into a plurality:

So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (11.8–9)

After the loss of a single language, words became not merely material signs but arbitrary material signs. The single prelapsarian relation between word and thing gave way to a purely nominal, contingent and plural relation. No word could now offer a better claim than any other to denote a particular concept, and the making of language was reduced to a merely human activity. The *Ursprache* that had bound word to meaning was gone. Now the potential corruption in language was even greater than in Eden, and eloquence had become even more suspect. Words had to be understood as able to speak lies as well as truth and to look like truth even as they spoke their lies.

In the terms of the New Testament, however, the Word was redeemed for the faithful through its incarnation in Christ. The sacrifice of the Crucifixion atoned for the Fall, and the mass, with its regular celebration of that sacrifice, offered every believer the chance to receive the redeemed word made flesh. Indeed, it was the utterance of the holy words over the host that transformed it into God's body. Pentecost offered proof that the Holy Spirit could again fill words with a grace that transcended the barriers of individual languages. And such grace occasionally inspired medieval saints: St Vincent Ferrer was famous for the fact that his preaching could be understood in all languages, and the miraculous comprehensibility of Margery Kempe is further discussed below (p. 24). This was a theological, not a rational, view of language, which had faith in the possibility that even though words could not, of their own accord,

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frame the radically singular truth of God, they could function as vehicles for that truth if it sought them out by grace.

Although there could never again be one language across all the earth, Latin, the language of the Vulgate Bible and the liturgy of the Western church, in use throughout the Christian world, gradually acquired authority by long association through the Middle Ages. Jerome's Latin bible was not in any sense an 'original' text; it was a translation. But it was by the late Middle Ages a translation so ancient, so familiar and so uncontested that it was invested with the aura of the authentic. And while it did not unite all the peoples of the world, it did unite the Christian peoples of the West and became the language not only of the church, but of scholarship, teaching, international relations and the vast majority of European written texts.

The obscurity of Latin to laypeople came to seem part of its power and purpose. St Augustine, writing of the Greek and Hebrew texts at a time when Jerome's Latin translation was still relatively new, argued that obscurities in the original texts were there to combat pride and to prevent readers underestimating the worth of the meaning discovered (*On Christian Doctrine*, p. 37). It is not surprising, then, that when the Latin text was challenged by the desire for vernacular bibles, the Augustinian argument was recycled. Pope Gregory VII's letter, written in 1080 in response to a request from the Duke of the Bohemians to celebrate the divine service in the vernacular, justifies the obscurity of the now established and canonical Latin text along precisely these lines: 'it is clear to thoughtful men that it has quite rightly pleased Almighty God to have sacred Scripture obscure in certain places, lest it be perhaps debased and brought into contempt if it should be openly exposed to all, or lest, wrongly understood by common men, it should lead them into error' (Harrison, *The Description of England*, p. 35, n.33).

William Harrison quotes the text of this letter (in Latin) in his *Description of England* (published in 1587) as part of his own Protestant attack on traditional papal hostility to church services in the vernacular, which England, to Harrison's relief, has finally instated. Conducting the mass in an alien language, then, was clearly perceived by Harrison's time as a matter of papal policy rather than an accident of history. The medieval church, however, encouraged the laity in the belief that a sacred event was appropriately expressed in a language surpassing common understanding:

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It was part of the power of the words of consecration that they were hidden, too sacred to be communicated to the 'lewed', and this very element of mystery gave legitimacy to the sacred character of Latin itself, as higher and holier than the vernacular. Moreover, since the words of scripture and the liturgy came from God, they were held to convey power even to those who did not fully comprehend them. One author, writing to help lay men and women participate properly in the Mass, compared the beneficial effect of such uncomprehending hearing at mass to that of a charm upon adders! (Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 217–18; cf Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, pp. 131–4)

Mikhail Bakhtin's work has underlined the way Latin shaped the growth and consciousness of vernacular languages in the Middle Ages. Latin, he argues, and the sacred words of scripture in particular, invaded European vernaculars as the controlling authority against which they came to know and assess themselves. 'Under cover of holiday and festival merrymaking', vernacular languages attempted to dislodge Latin from its position of ideological dominance<sup>6</sup> and at the same time came to see themselves more clearly: 'one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language' (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 77, 12). The particularities of different languages became visible, available for representation. Every utterance was underpinned by an awareness of potential otherness, not only the otherness of a different language, but the otherness of different discourses within a single language. Utterance itself, as Bakhtin shows, becomes inherently dialogic, engaging always with other possible forms of utterance that it does not voice.

Medieval manuscripts display this dialogic quality spatially as well as verbally. The text is characteristically framed by glosses, decoration and other marginalia which enter into a potential dialogue with it that may explore, supplement, question or parody it, while never fully dislodging its higher authority (see further Camille, *Image on the Edge*). And not only written culture but performance culture plays across the boundary between authorised material and 'commentary' on it. Vernacular difference irrupts into liturgical space in music and drama: obscene vernacular tenor parts twine with Latin top parts (Camille, *Image on the Edge*, p. 26); Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate and even Mary the mother of Jesus, speak in German within the Latin Benediktbeuern Passion play (Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, pp. 203–23). Robert Weimann, in *Shakespeare and the*

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*Language and stage*

*Popular Tradition in the Theater*, explores medieval staging practices in similar terms. Relations between *locus* and *platea*, the area of fixed location and the area of unfixed space, offer another realisation of this characteristically dialogic playfulness. As the margin frames the central text of a manuscript page, so the *platea* frames the narrative of the fixed *locus*. Playtexts move back and forward between ‘straight’ linear narrative or exposition and a freer, more direct and improvisatory mode of address, moving physically closer to the audience as they free themselves from the fiction they enact. The actors playing directly to the audience from the *platea* temporarily unfix the reality of the action within the represented fiction, so that more than one perspective on reality may come into play.

## ENGLAND BEFORE 1400

Three languages, Latin, French and English, were in use in England up to about 1400. Each recorded use of a given language makes statements about the speaker or writer, the audience and the context. Individuals competent in all three made choices according to the moment of speech or writing. Jocelin of Brakelond, for example, describes how Abbot Samson in the twelfth century ‘was a good speaker, in both French and Latin . . . could read books written in English most elegantly, and . . . used to preach to the people in English, but in the Norfolk dialect, for that was where he was born and brought up’ (*Chronicle*, p. 37). As an abbot and a monk he needed Latin to read theology, to preach to the clergy and to communicate with other monks or with high-ranking or non-English-speaking clerics; as a member of the social elite he needed French to converse with king and court and with other members of the nobility; and as a churchman with a responsibility to teach the laity about God he needed idiomatic English in order to make himself understood. The twelfth-century Canterbury Psalter demonstrates the same hierarchy visually. It presents the Latin text in large and beautiful script, using elaborately ornamented capitals; two further versions of the Latin text in slightly smaller script, still with ornamented capitals; Latin glosses in an even smaller script in the margins and interlined with the main Latin text; and finally, in the same size script as the glosses, but interlined merely with the secondary Latin texts, English and French translations.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, this hierarchy cannot be imposed as a reductive

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grid on the written texts of the period. There is, as Elizabeth Salter has demonstrated, 'no simple answer to the question of who read and wrote English poetry during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' (*Fourteenth-Century Poetry*, p. 22). Salter shows that the choice of English or French cannot be predicted from 'the nature of the patrons, the intended public, or the subject-matter' (p. 23), and discusses the coexistence of the two vernaculars, sometimes even within the same poem, in late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century manuscripts such as Digby 86 and Harley 2253.

The development of English in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is also fuelled by a growing nationalism, which champions the English language as the appropriate language for the English people. Though French had been the language of the court since the arrival of the Normans, hostilities with the French now helped to reinforce the claim of English to be the national language. This anti-French feeling informs the prefaces to some English poems of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries (Salter, *Fourteenth-Century Poetry*, pp. 26–8) and expresses an attempt to speak from a position of national unity which strives to overcome the class divisions associated with different languages. Thorlac Turville-Petre, arguing for the growth of a concept of national identity during the period 1290–1340, considers that language emerges as 'the clearest form of self-definition' for the English nation in this period ('The "Nation" in English Writings of the Early Fourteenth Century', p. 137). As the poem *Of Arthour and Merlin* puts it:

Right is that Ingliche understand  
That was born in Ingland.  
Freynsche use this gentil man  
Ac everich Ingliche Ingliche can.  
Mani noble ich have yseiye  
That no Freynsche couthe seye.

(It's proper that those born in England should understand English. These well-born people use French, but all the English know English. I've seen many a noble who couldn't speak French).

Statements such as this, Turville-Petre argues, function polemically rather than serving as neutral statements about who speaks what language in England. 'What is strikingly new in this period', he concludes, 'is the conviction that national sentiment is most properly expressed in English, and that the people of England, those who



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most loyally represent the nation, are the *lewed*, “tho that in this lande wone / that the Latyn no Frankys cone” (those who live in this country who know neither Latin or French) (Mannyng, 1, lines 7–8)’ (‘The “Nation” in English Writings of the Early Fourteenth Century’, p. 138–9).

Kings, predictably, understand the political advantages of addressing the nation through this unifying homage to the English language. Edward I claims in 1295 that the French are planning to wipe out the English tongue in England (Prestwich, *English Politics in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 90), and the Chancellor’s opening speech to Parliament in 1377 voices the same fear (whether real or strategic) that invasion by enemies may not only destroy king and country, but ‘drive out the English language’ (Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350–1400*, p. 52). The move towards the adoption of English in high places accelerates during the fourteenth century, and by the end of the century English has become the language in which pleadings are made in the king’s court, teaching is conducted in grammar schools and kings take their coronation oaths (see further Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350–1400*, pp. 51–2; Dillon, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp. 36–41). It is the normal language of social intercourse at the highest level. Froissart’s expression of admiration for Richard II’s French reading skills is sufficient indication that fluency in French could no longer be taken for granted even at court. By the reign of Henry V, the currency of the phrase ‘the king’s English’ confirms the ideological usefulness of language conceived as a unifying force that cuts across class barriers and as a right worth fighting for.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the upward mobility of English, however, fourteenth-century language continues to reflect social ranking beneath all the jingoistic talk of unity. While the French/English opposition primarily mirrors the distance between court and nation, the Latin/English polarity particularly highlights the fundamental division between clergy and laity. The overwhelming majority of surviving written texts from the medieval period are in Latin and on theological subjects, which is an indication of the domination of education by the church. Most educated men (and most of the educated *were* men) received their education as the result of an intention to dedicate them to a career in the church, and medieval Latin texts make no clear distinction between the concepts of literacy and clerical status. Not only is there an overlap between the words ‘*clericus*’ and ‘*litteratus*’, since literacy implied clerical status and vice



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versa, but the concepts of literacy and competence in Latin are inseparable, since Latin was the language of education. Only the self-taught might learn to read English without first learning to read Latin.

There is, not surprisingly, no Latin word denoting a capacity to read in the vernacular, and English equivalents are so heavily influenced by Latin usage that it is usually impossible to be certain whether a word such as 'unlettered' (or '*illiteratus*'), for example, indicates absence of Latin or total illiteracy.<sup>9</sup> The very terminology by which the literate establishment continued to identify its own knowledge of Latin as the only literacy, and refused to share the name of literacy with the vernacular equivalent demonstrates the degree to which language is always politically engaged. Such a refusal to realign the uses of language with the changing pattern of learning expresses a deeper refusal to realign power structures. The thinking is circular and deeply conservative.

Literacy, in whatever language, is a political issue. Nicholas Orme points out that, even as the foundation of free grammar schools expanded in the fourteenth century, education was still largely unavailable to the lowest class by virtue of the fact that a serf needed his lord's permission to send his children to school, and a fee was usually demanded before such permission was forthcoming. Orme goes on to argue, however, that 'this restriction on the education of villeins was not primarily intended to keep them illiterate, since their literacy in itself could have harmed no one. It existed rather because schooling presupposed a career in the church or in some trade or profession, and hence departure from the manor and the acquisition of free status' (*English Schools in the Middle Ages*, p. 50).<sup>10</sup> The second part of this quotation from Orme, however, undermines the assertion that opens it by showing exactly how education of the lower classes did threaten the ruling class. Any route which leads to freedom and power for serfs necessarily threatens the feudal interests of the lord of the manor. Literacy cannot be isolated, and considered as a phenomenon 'in itself'. It is necessarily political, and fourteenth-century lords knew it.

Serfs knew it too. Books and learning were one focus of attack, alongside clerics and secular lords, during the English Rising (Peasants' Revolt) of 1381. The rebels attacked the university archives in Cambridge, and set fire to them in the market square. An old woman called Margery Starre tossed the ashes away, crying 'Away

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with the learning of the clerks, away with it' (Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages*, p. 192). Walsingham reports that the rebels similarly compelled schoolteachers to swear to give up teaching children Latin grammar (*Historia Anglicana*, vol. II, p. 308).<sup>11</sup>

Latin and the church may well have seemed to the rebels to be a mutually sustaining power structure that functioned by excluding the lower ranks of society from access to its workings. As long as the bible and the literature generated by it remained in Latin, the church's authority was unassailable, since laypeople had no access to the sacred texts other than as mediated by representatives of the church. It was therefore in clerical interests to maintain a linguistic barrier that put some distance between the laity and the Word of God, thus reinforcing their own control. Similarly, as long as the court maintained French and Latin as the languages of government (spoken and written) it effectively insulated itself from most of the population.

Yet before the 1380s the church had worked precisely to break down the barrier of language at strategic points, recognising that any real attempt to expand lay understanding of the faith must address the laity in its own language.<sup>12</sup> Archbishop Pecham's Constitutions of 1281 ruled that parish priests should instruct the laity in English in the basics of the faith at least four times a year, and Archbishop Thoresby had this scheme of instruction adapted into English by John Gaytrick in 1357 in the form that came to be known as the *Lay Folk's Catechism*. The church, in responding to the needs of the laity in this way, also had to recognise the needs of the non-Latinate, and in some cases semi-illiterate, clergy, who needed material in English to help them fulfil their duties. John Mirk's *Festial* explicitly highlighted the problem some clergymen faced of having to deal with overconfident laymen who shamed them with questions concerning the offices of the church which they were not equipped to answer. His text simultaneously addressed the beleaguered clergyman and, more indirectly, the parishioners hungry for instruction. Primers were produced in English, together with rhymed English versions of the most important prayers, so that they could be understood as well as learned more easily. More popular vernacular or macaronic forms, like lyric and drama, also helped to convey the church's message to the people. Richard Morison, a sixteenth-century Protestant writing c.1538 or earlier to advocate the need for an anti-papal propaganda campaign, pointed to the medieval church as having