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Langland and the French Tradition: Introduction

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The idea for this cluster originated with a panel of the same name we organized at the Sixth International *Piers Plowman* Society Conference, held at the University of Washington in Seattle in July, 2015. We have chosen this particular title for reasons of critical history. It is meant to recall a seminally important work of mid-twentieth century Chaucer criticism, Charles Muscatine's *Chaucer and the French Tradition*. Muscatine's work is more than an exemplary New Critical discussion of Chaucer's stylistic debts to the French poets that preceded him: it stands at the head of a lively and important branch of criticism about Chaucer, from the scholarship of William Calin and James Wimsatt, to the important recent work of Ardis Butterfield, to the current robust conversation among Chaucerians on this topic into which this branch has flowered.¹ In Langland studies, by contrast, the name of this cluster is identical to a paper that Anne Middleton presented to the Cambridge University Faculty of English in 2000, for those lucky enough to hear it, or it might loosely recall John Fisher's essay, '*Piers Plowman* and

Chancery Tradition', which argues that the manuscripts of Langland's poem 'reflect Chancery practice' both in their script and in the orthography and morphology of the English language they use.²

The difference is palpable. At the moment Muscatine was writing his book on Chaucer's relationship to French literature, looking outward to the Continent, Langlandians fiercely debated the authorship question, looking deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the poem itself and into the vagaries of its textual transmission.³ Of course, scholars of Langland also looked toward the Continent, but they did so in a different way than Muscatine had, not least of all because Langland's poetry is so different from that of Chaucer, who wears his French influence on his sleeves. Langland's Latin influence was as obvious as Chaucer's French, and so scholars started there.⁴ More recently, Langland's interest in French literature has begun to garner attention, although the studies are still sporadic and focused primarily on the broad parallels between Langland's allegory and that of Guillaume de Deguileville or on the echoes one finds between Langland's poem and French romances.⁵ This essay cluster is certainly indebted to those studies, but it also attempts to add to that conversation what Muscatine and those that followed his work added to the study of Chaucer: a systematic concern with the French tradition that stems from the *Roman de la Rose*, passes through writers like Deguileville and the author of the *Roman de Fauvel*, and emerges in Langland's French contemporaries such as Eustache Deschamps.

Our aim here is not simply to reassert the 'antagonistic tradition' between Chaucer and Langland.⁶ Rather, our contributions seek to enrich cross-Channel studies by pulling away from the figure of Chaucer that currently dominates the conversation (hence our revisitation and appropriation of Muscatine's famous title). That said, our hesitation to use a title that posits 'Langland' against 'the French' suggests just how different this intervention in Langlandian scholarship will be from the one made by Muscatine nearly sixty years ago. The source of our discomfort is in the sense of nationalism that the coordinating conjunction seeks to dissipate but actually reinscribes, with Langland and his Englishness on one side and France on the other. The two terms emerge as whole and unproblematic, as if they were ideas whose meaning and difference from one another are immediately self-evident.

Recent critical work, however, has done much to trouble this very notion. On the one hand, our vision of French literature is no longer as monolithic; it attends instead to the varieties of French in different times and in different places, not just to the poor French of 'Stratford atte Bowe' spoken by Chaucer's Prioress but also to the difference that Chaucer's Picard dialect, for instance, can make.⁷ On the other hand, we have developed a vision of England as a place that is thoroughly multilingual and characterized by complex interrelations between English, French, and Latin.⁸ While contemporary scholarship on medieval England has retained the concept of a 'nation', it has done so by jettisoning the traditional definition and the ties between nation and language that one finds in the work of Benedict Anderson.⁹ Medieval scholars have embraced the perspective offered to us in our own era of what Wendy Brown calls 'waning sovereignty' — in which the borders of the nation-state are both physically and ideologically porous, undermining any sense of a monolithic cultural or linguistic unity — in order to better understand the multiple and competing claims of political and linguistic identity in Langland's England.¹⁰ It is time to apply that thinking to Langland himself.

The contributions in this essay cluster exhibit a truly variegated engagement with Langland and the French tradition. This engagement presents itself as three interlaced threads, running through the cluster: (1) Langland's relationship to both continental and insular French literary works; (2) his response to cross-Channel politics; and (3) his own use of French, directly and indirectly, within his poem.

Thus, Marco Nievergelt offers a rich comparison of Langland's revisionary poetics with that of Guillaume de Deguileville, linking both authors' highly self-reflexive literary projects back to the monumental influence of the *Roman de la Rose*. Sarah Wilma Watson's contribution examines Langland's use of the rhyme pair 'wicket/clicket' and its close relationship with 'guichet/cliquet' in the *Roman de la Rose* and Guillaume de Machaut, arguing that Langland appropriates these French sexualized terms for salvific purposes in what she terms his 'poetics of penetration'. Also looking at *Piers Plowman's* resonances with another monumental French text of the continental tradition, the *Roman de Fauvel*, Andrew Galloway argues for reading Mede as a feminized Fauvel-figure alluding to Isabella of France, whose French background and political machinations were a touchstone for the flourishing of a cross-Channel tradition of political satire. Elizaveta Strakhov's piece is similarly interested in Langland's use of topicality: she reorients traditional scholarly interpretations of the Rodent Parliament as a purely domestic political satire by reading it alongside Eustache Deschamps's use of the same animal fable to show how both authors use the fable to critique the Hundred Years War. Finally, R. D. Perry returns the cluster's focus back to the poem itself by investigating Langland's citation of French song. Showing that this is an original composition by Langland himself rather than a quotation, Perry suggests that Langland is pitting French verse against English alliterative metre in a self-reflexive rumination on contemporary literary forms. In further including Robert Grosseteste's *Le Chateau d'amour* and Nicholas Bozon into its purview, and investigating both domestic and cross-Channel politics, our essay cluster demonstrates the extent to which the 'French tradition' was not, for Langland, a distant overseas phenomenon, but rather an integral, encompassing feature of the literary environment in which he lived and worked.

Footnotes

- 1 See Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*; Wimsatt, *Chaucer and his French Contemporaries*; and Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*.
- 2 See Middleton, 'Langland and the French Tradition'. Fisher's essay originally came out in 1988 but also appears in his later collection: Fisher, *The Emergence of Standard English*, p. 109. Fisher famously argues that Chancery standardized the English language in line with a Lancastrian 'language policy'; see his essay 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England' in that same volume. His findings have recently been called into question, especially by the work of Gwilym Dodd, 'The Spread of English in the Record of Central Government, 1400–1430', 'The Rise of English, the Decline of French: Supplications to the English Crown, c. 1420–50', and 'Trilingualism in the Medieval English Bureaucracy: The Use and Disuse of Languages in the Fifteenth-Century Privy Seal Office'.
- 3 We hardly mean to imply that the authorship question has been an unproductive avenue for Langland criticism: it produced sustained interest in the text as well as in the issue of authorial self-presentation that continues to influence Langland and, more broadly, Middle English scholarship. For a discussion of the authorship question and a bibliography, see Middleton, '*Piers Plowman*', pp. 7, 2224–27, 2429–31; see also her discussion in 'Introduction: The Critical Heritage', especially pp. 6–8. We also do not want to suggest that the authorship question was occurring without any kind of New Critical discussion of the poem. T. P. Dunning's important essay, 'The Structure of the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*', for instance, came out the year before Muscatine's study. It would, however, be a few years after Muscatine's work that Morton

- Bloomfield made the poem's form an indispensable part of the critical conversation; see 'Symbolism in Medieval Allegory' and '*Piers Plowman*' as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*.
- 4 The works are almost too numerous to mention but for important interventions, see Alford on Latin as a structuring device in 'The Role of the Quotations in *Piers Plowman*'; Clopper on the importance of the Franciscans in *Songes of Rechelesnesse*; Schmidt on the difference between Latin and French wordplay in *The Clerkly Maker*; Zeeman on the intellectual and institutional discourses of desire, both in Latin and some in French, in '*Piers Plowman*' and the *Medieval Discourse of Desire*; and Karnes on the influence on Bonaventuran meditation in *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*.
- 5 On romance, see Turner on Langland's understanding of the relationship between romance and history in 'Guy of Warwick and the Active Life of Historical Romance in *Piers Plowman*' and Zeeman on Langland's jousting Christ and the Grail romances in 'Tales of Piers and Perceval'. For brief discussions of the influence of Deguileville and French allegory on Langland, see Steiner, *Reading Piers Plowman*, pp. 11–15 and Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman*, pp. 8–9. For a more sustained discussion of allegory and what Langland does to his French and especially Latin models, see Mann, 'Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature', and *Langland and Allegory*. Finally, Rebecca Davis's recent book, '*Piers Plowman*' and the *Books of Nature*, traces what Langland inherited from the Latin *Natura* allegories of Bernardus Silvestris and Alain of Lille as they are transformed by Jean de Meun and Deguileville, as well as the inspiration Langland draws from Robert Grosseteste's *Chateau d'amour* in his creation of the figure of Kynde.
- 6 See Bowers, *Chaucer and Langland*.
- 7 See, in particular, Lusignan, *A chacun son français and Langue et société dans le nord de la France*; Léglu, *Multilingualism and Mother Tongue*; and the essays in Gregory and Trotter, eds, *De mot en mot*, and Kleinhenz and Busby, eds, *Medieval Multilingualism*. On Chaucer's Picard dialect, see Butterfield, 'Chaucerian Vernaculars', p. 28: 'It could be that Chaucer's pillow talk was conducted in Picard'.
- 8 See, in particular, the essays in Wogan-Browne and others, eds, *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain*; in Ingham, ed., *The Anglo-Norman Language*; and, most recently, the essay cluster 'Competing Archives, Competing Histories', by Baswell, Cannon, Wogan-Browne, and Kerby-Fulton.
- 9 See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. See also the comments in Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, pp. 25–35. Butterfield describes her work on pp. 34–35 as follows: 'rather than seeking to claim nationhood for the Middle Ages, this study is interested in seeing how the Middle Ages helps the current quest to dismantle or at least re-evaluate ideas of nationhood'. See, however for a study that does link language and nation, while revisiting and revising our understanding of medieval nationalism, Bellis, *The Hundred Years War in Literature*.
- 10 See Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.

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