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**Mark Amsler.** 2021. *The Medieval Life of Language: Grammar and Pragmatics from Bacon to Kempe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 264 pp., 2 figures, 2 tables, € 106.00.

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The literature review with which this study opens sets out to demonstrate that disciplinary histories of linguistics have overlooked pragmatics and that, in the few instances where pragmatics has been considered, the focus has been limited to a small set of treatises that explicitly announce their interest in the workings of language. Mark Amsler proposes to lead his readers beyond this critical impasse by means of an argument that reassesses the place as well as the nature of pragmatics in later medieval culture. The major burden of *The Medieval Life of Language* is to demonstrate that pragmatic awareness can be detected in a range of text types beyond the explicitly theorizing works that have interested his colleagues. While the book does not always make for easy reading, both its methods and its results will deserve serious attention not only from the historians of lin-

guistics who are Amsler's primary addressees but also from a broad range of scholars working in the fields of historical linguistics, medieval literary criticism, and medieval history.

*The Medieval Life of Language* falls into three sections. Its first two chapters reveal pragmatics-type theorizing in scholastic writing about semiotics and the will. Amsler's star witnesses in Chapter 1 (pp. 31–83) are Roger Bacon and Peter (of) John Olivi, both of whom distinguish themselves from the traditions in which they write by affording special attention to the role that context plays in the production and apprehension of meaning. Bacon's work on the collaborative nature of communication and Olivi's work on sincerity are key foci of the analysis. During the discussion, Amsler shows that reflection on interjections is a trigger for proto-pragmatic analysis in these writers because the meaning of interjections cannot be derived from sentence grammar alone and is shaped by the context of their uttering. This point is picked up again and developed with further reference to scholastic authors in Chapter 2 (pp. 85–101).

In the book's next two sections, Amsler makes good on his promise to look beyond medieval language theory. The first port of call is Chaucer. Chapter 3 (pp. 103–138) traces the shifting valences of the interjection *allas* throughout a broad selection of Chaucer's texts and Chapter 4 (pp. 139–164) shows how the tricky plot and tricky speech of "The Miller's Tale" exemplify the theories of polysemy and equivocation developed in modern pragmatics. The book's final section turns to the documents of heresy trials. Chapter 5 (pp. 165–204) compares Bernard Gui's manual for inquisitors with William Thorpe's testimony of his own trial for heresy with a view to showing that both texts demonstrate a thorough awareness of the strategies of evasion and deflection that might be pursued by the accused party in such situations. Chapter 6 (pp. 205–239) develops these arguments with relation to descriptions of Margery Kempe's trials at York, where Kempe is shown to add calculated vagueness to the heretics' pragmatic strategies.

Amsler succeeds in demonstrating that medieval writers across three broadly differing text types held sophisticated understandings of the role played by context in the generation of meaning. The scholastic treatises, high art vernacular poems, and trial documents that this study analyses manifest a knowledge of the principles underlying modern pragmatics that long predates the foundation of the discipline. Whether this constitutes "metapragmatic" thought, as Amsler claims, is really a moot point, for how can one think like a scholar of pragmatics before the invention of the discipline? Amsler offers a variety of theoretically informed responses to this conundrum in an afterword (pp. 241–249). Another way of approaching the problem would have been to consider the vocabulary of linguistic analysis that medieval writers themselves developed. A suggestive start in this direction is offered in Chapter 6, where Amsler gives the gloss "struggle over dis-

cursive footing” (p. 218) for the Middle English verb *janglen*. Further leads might be picked up in the extracts and supporting materials assembled in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Medieval English Literary Theory 1280–1520* (Wogan-Browne 1999) and *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England: Texts and Translations, c.1120–c.1450* (Wogan-Browne et al. 2016). It is odd that neither of these books is mentioned in *The Medieval Life of Language* because their editors advocate an approach similar to Amsler’s where they suggest that ideas about language usage can be inferred from texts whose primary topic may not be language theory. Important work in historical sociolinguistics, for example Tim William Machan’s *English in the Middle Ages* (2003), is also overlooked.

The arguments presented in *The Medieval Life of Language* are at their most persuasive where they are most concrete. Chapter 3 on Chaucer’s use of *allas* is a fascinating study of that writer’s emotional awareness and subtlety of expression; amongst the various uses of the interjection that Amsler itemizes, his work on the “creepy” (i.e. insincere) *allas* that January deploys in “The Merchant’s Tale” is a particular treat (pp. 133–136). The heresy trial materials in Chapters 5 and 6 are also well chosen to suit the book’s main purpose. The pressured situations that these documents record show clever manipulators of language attempting to circumvent power through sheer pragmatic intelligence.

Elsewhere, the book’s claims risk getting lost in an abundance of detail. There is a tendency to reiterate rather than to conclude arguments at the end of sections. The long exposition of Bacon’s thought in Chapter 1 ends with a rehashing of the author’s debts to Aristotle and Abelard (72), for example, where a briefer statement of Bacon’s originality would have been helpful. Amsler is also generous to a fault in his provision of examples for the phenomena that he describes; even the otherwise engaging work on Chaucer’s *allas* in Chapter 3 suffers in this regard. A more selective presentation of the data would have been welcome throughout. Finally, more thought should have been given to the disposition of the book’s materials. Amsler’s treatment of the theory of interjections is split over Chapters 1 and 2, resulting in repetitions, and the general treatment of the topic of ‘contexts’ that opens Chapter 3 would have been better placed in the Introduction. These organizational problems stall the pace of reading and stymie incipient arguments that might have been developed alongside the book’s main thesis (for example, Amsler’s argument about the importance of interjections for early theorists of language).

This last reservation does not detract from the interest of the book’s constituent parts, which might conceivably be read independently of each other. Especially in its final sections, Amsler’s book offers a persuasive demonstration not only of the existence of a medieval pragmatics *avant la lettre* but also of the fresh analyses of familiar medieval texts that the terminology of modern pragmatics can facilitate.

## Works Cited

- Machan, Tim William. 2003. *English in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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