

Kathy Cawsey. 2020. *Images of Language in Middle English Vernacular Writings.* Cambridge: Brewer, xii + 210 pp., £ 75.00/\$ 99.00.

Reviewed by **Rory G. Critten**, University of Lausanne
E-Mail: rory.critten@unil.ch

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2022-0023>

While there is a well-known body of writing in Latin that describes medieval philosophies of language – that is, thinking about the nature of meaning, language cognition, language transmission, and the relationship between language and the world – there is no such theorizing in Middle English. This situation undoubtedly reflects the relative statuses of the two languages: Latin, not English, was the language of organized intellectual enquiry. But, Kathy Cawsey proposes, the very language in which language is theorized will shape the language philosophies developed, and it might be expected that speakers of Middle English could conceive of language otherwise. In the absence of overt theorizing about language in Middle English, Cawsey seeks to uncover the philosophies of language that speakers of English espoused by “reverse engineering” (5) images of language in Middle English texts with a view to uncovering the concepts of language lying behind them.

The book comprises a series of case studies in five chapters. The first three chapters model the practice of “reverse engineering” that Cawsey develops and offer analyses of images of spoken and written language. Chapter 1 addresses Chaucer’s concern about the reception of his work in the *House of Fame* via consideration of his adaptations of metaphors of communication employed by Latin authors; in each instance, Cawsey shows, Chaucer darkens the tone, so that, for example, the image of sound proliferating like ripples on a pond is repurposed in a description of a storm at sea, or a description of speech as air “tapped” becomes air “twisted” or “broken” (pp. 13–43). Chapter 2 turns to the depiction of debate in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, arguing that where scholastic practice relied on debate as a means of seeking truth, this poem shows debate’s less constructive potential (pp. 45–72). Chapter 3 suggests that the golden writing appearing at key moments in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* and the *Prose Merlin* represents an ideal kind of writing that is perfectly in tune with the world it describes, often in a prophetic mode; Cawsey contends that this perfect writing re-illuminates the unreliability of the other kinds of writing featured in the works (pp. 73–103).

The book’s fourth and fifth chapters turn to the political implications of the language images promulgated in Middle English texts. Chapter 4 looks at the stories of the recording demon, Tutivillus, arguing that the tale mobilizes a concept

of language as a writable object to control the behaviour of clerics and lay-people (pp. 105–139). Finally, Chapter 5 re-examines the instruction found in so many medieval texts that readers should “take the wheat and leave the chaff” (pp. 141–175). Cawsey shows that where the character Mischief in the morality play *Mankind* suggests that all parts of the plant are useful, he disrupts an image that runs to the heart of medieval reading practice. This points to an alternative valuation of narrative as a crucial component of an utterance’s meaning that might also be seen at play at moments in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

These chapters are clearly and engagingly presented. In particular, the analyses of Chaucer’s language imagery are suggestive of the value of re-reading that poet’s work along the lines that Cawsey traces. Not all of Cawsey’s arguments are equally convincing. For example, the idea of a church intent on repressing believers that underpins Chapter 4 feels rather old-fashioned in the wake of the work on participatory Catholicism by Eamon Duffy and others. The monograph’s guiding arguments also give pause for thought. It will be observed that Cawsey’s case studies draw on primary texts belonging to a broad variety of genres and that the chapters are not ordered chronologically. This approach reflects Cawsey’s conviction that thinking about language in Middle English cannot be described in a developmental perspective and will change from one situation to the next. Cawsey’s claim matches the evidence presented, which is undergirded by thinking about language that is indeed various. But the avoidance of any diachronic angle on these materials undermines the study’s initial argument according to which the forms of the language in which language is conceived might affect the language philosophies developed. In *Le Morte Darthur*, for example, does the interest in golden writing – which always appears miraculously, without being written out – in some way reflect the coming of print?

The other premise presented in the book’s brief introduction is more problematic. Cawsey suggests that focusing on Middle English texts will afford us the best insight into “what English people thought about the workings of language” (5); by the beginning of Chapter 1, the “English people” whose opinions are sought have become “‘ordinary’ English people” (13). Cawsey makes no attempt to address the varying cultural penetration of the works discussed: who read *The Owl and the Nightingale*, for example, and were they “ordinary”? More crucially, the notion that Middle English best expresses what English people thought misses the insights of canonical and more recent research into medieval English multilingualism that emphasizes, for example, the co-identity of the Latin clerics and Middle English writers whom Cawsey attempts to distinguish. Put bluntly, anyone who could write English in the Middle Ages could also write Latin and, probably, French. French, England’s other vernacular, falls entirely by the wayside here. The tensions resulting from this occlusion work their way into the book’s title,

whose odd phrasing implies what this study ignores: “Middle English” and “vernacular” are not synonymous.

Cawsey is at her most persuasive in chapters 1 and 5, where she sets her Middle English examples in direct conversation with the Latin philosophers of language. Elsewhere she is more reluctant to engage with this tradition and the scholastic writers instead appear more briefly as a foil against which the Middle English authors can be presented as unusually shrewd. Parenthetical comments hint that the situation is not so clear. Thus in the conclusion we are told that “audience seems to be more important in some of these vernacular case studies than in the Latin *auctores* (although some Latin rhetorical theories do pay attention to the audience)” (177). What is the reader to make of such hedging? If the claim is that Latin and Middle English theories of language differ, then the Latin theorists should be given due consideration throughout.

Precedent for Cawsey’s method of “reverse engineering” language attitudes from Middle English examples is afforded by *The Idea of the Vernacular*, edited by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and others.¹ But this vein in scholarship is rejected on the grounds that its findings are limited to considerations of how Middle English, as opposed to language as a whole, might work. A more persuasive monograph would have engaged constructively with the insights developed in *The Idea of the Vernacular* and its sister volume, which collects extracts from French texts written in England.² It would also have afforded greater attention to genre. What affects the nature of the thinking about language offered in the Latin treatises and implicit in the Middle English texts may have less to do with the languages in which these works are written than with their differing aims, towards abstraction on the one hand, and, on the other, towards the realization of more local rhetorical goals.

There is a long line of studies of language attitudes in Middle English literature running from the seminal work of N. F. Blake to the more recent scholarship of Ardis Butterfield, Tim William Machan, and the contributors to *The Idea of the Vernacular*. All this is ripe for re-evaluation and updating. That book remains to be written. In the meantime, scholars with an interest in the primary texts that Cawsey treats will be grateful for the case studies that she has assembled.

1 Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans (eds.). 1999. *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.

2 Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Thelma Fenster and Delbert Russell (eds.). 2016. *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England: Texts and Translations, c. 1120–c. 1450*. Cambridge: Brewer.