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0521022010 - Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker

Edwin D. Craun

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The four major Middle English narrative poets – Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, William Langland, and the *Patience* poet – build into their texts central figures who voice and contest the clerical discourse designed to analyze and control the speech of all Western Christians: that on the Sins of the Tongue. Drawing extensively on manuscript sources, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity* examines for the first time how this socially powerful discourse uses Augustinian sign theory and scholastic ethics to demarcate deviant from salvific speech and what rhetorical resources it offered the medieval priest to convert deviant speakers – liars, blasphemers, slanderers. Then it analyzes how *The Canterbury Tales*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Patience* use different strains of this pastoral discourse not only to expose the destructive power of speech in political and social life, in entertainment, in love, and in religious experience, but also to judge clerical claims to authority and efficacy in formulating and applying codes for speech.

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# Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature

Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker

EDWIN D. CRAUN

*Washington and Lee University*



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For Marlys, Meg, and Liz,  
and  
in memory of  
Carol Craun Nicholson (1951–1993), librarian

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Sticks and stones can break my bones,  
but words can never hurt me

Playground jingle

Mors et vita in manu linguae

Proverbs 18:21

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## Acknowledgments

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Several years ago, when I returned to a crowded manuscripts reading room after three years of working elsewhere, the man staffing the desk recoiled: “Oh no, not you again – pardon me, I didn’t mean to imply . . .” Clearly the making of this book created debts which I ought to acknowledge, not the least of which are to libraries. For access to manuscripts in their keeping, I am grateful to the following: the Bodleian Library; the British Library; the Bibliothèque Nationale; the Syndics of the Cambridge University Library; the Master and Fellows of University College, Oxford; the Master and Fellows of Oriel College, Oxford; the Principal and Fellows of Jesus College, Oxford; the Master and Fellows of Caius College, Cambridge. Several sections of the second chapter appeared in *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989), and I am grateful to the editors for permission to publish a revised version here. The staff of the Bodleian Library was heroically patient with many inquiries and orders as I was finding my way around in hundreds of texts on the vices. So was the staff of Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, throughout this eight-year project; Betsy Brittigan in Inter-library Loans and Jo Ann Wilson in Circulation were indefatigable.

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## Note on quotations and translations

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When quoting from manuscripts and early printed books, Latin and vernacular, I have expanded abbreviations, but have preserved the punctuation, capitalization, and spacing (the latter as nearly as possible) of the original. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted, except for those of the Vulgate Bible, taken from the Douai version because it adheres closely to the syntax of the Vulgate.

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## Standard abbreviations

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|          |  |
|----------|--|
| CCSL     | <i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i> (Turnholt, 1954 ff)  |
| CSEL     | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> (Vienna, 1866 ff)                                  |
| DML      | <i>Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources</i>   |
| Du Cange | <i>Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis</i> , Charles du Fresne Du Cange, ed. (1840) |
| EETS     | Early English Text Society   |
| MED      | <i>Middle English Dictionary</i>   |
| OED      | <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>   |
| OLD      | <i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>   |
| PL       | <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus, series latina</i> , J. P. Migne, ed.                                  |