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a recognition of the 'grey' areas of Dante's thought which instead of passing black and white judgements on humanity, engage with the problematics of being human in a vivified and eschatological context which is not simply driven by a desire to make a social point but is instead engaged in an exploration of human and divine nature.

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Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150–1400*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. x + 287 pp. ISBN 978-0-5211-9922-3. £58.00.

In her introduction to *Imagining an English Reading Public*, Katharine Breen explains that her book will chart the 'translation' of the Latin concept of *habitus* into a Middle English 'habit' that 'lies at the heart of — and conditions — late-fourteenth-century contests over vernacular authorship'. (As later chapters explain, medieval grammarians claimed that *habitus* — which in this context can be loosely defined as the conscious cultivation of virtue — could be acquired only through the study of grammar, and therefore of Latin.) These 'contests' are initiated by the 1381 revolt, in which William Langland's *Piers Plowman* was subjected to a radicalized interpretation. 'After 1381', Breen explains, 'English authors had to confront the fact that their texts were potentially available to anyone who could read or even speak the mother tongue'. She labels the result for Middle English authors a 'shift in imagined audience' (p. 10).

In the development of her thesis, Breen shows that she can be an intelligent, industrious researcher. However, there are some serious problems with her presentation and interpretation of this research. The most serious is that she has buried, in the next-to-last section of her last chapter, an acknowledgement that her thesis is untenable — at least for her main example, *Piers Plowman*. I can only assume that this acknowledgement was exacted by a reviewer, but what I find disturbing is that having made it, Breen did not then revise her claims about post-1381 literature.

Obviously, I must now substantiate my own claim about Breen. To do that, I provide a close reading of parts of Chapter 5, which is titled '*Piers Plowman* and the Formation of an English Literary *Habitus*'. In this chapter, Breen examines Langland's revisions of the C-text as an attempt to 'habituate' potential non-latinate readers and thus avoid the kind of misinterpretations exhibited by the 1381 rebels. In doing so, she encounters two examples that seem to point in the opposite direction, suggesting that Langland was seeking to limit rather than broaden his audience. In an effort to minimize the impact of these examples, she employs increasingly questionable strategies.

The first example is Conscience's complicated grammatical metaphor in the third passus of the C-text. Breen describes the metaphor as 'a gatekeeper or shibboleth' (p. 187), one that 'sorts authorized from unauthorized readers based on their grammatical knowledge and mastery of difficult syntax'. She seeks, however, to soften this conclusion, noting that the rendering of the grammatical terms into English suggests 'that English can be an appropriate vehicle for activating or developing a virtuous *habitus*' (p. 189). Breen then turns the focus back to the less educated, 'lower-common-denominator' audience, pointing out that Conscience, and his ally Reason, only confuse the king with their grammatical terms, while Will later comments that education is expensive. Accordingly, she concludes, Reason and Conscience 'give Will conditional permission to continue writing in hopes that the specifically literary

reading his dream visions demand can stand in for the linguistic and moral work of habit-formation usually carried out "in Cloystre or in scole" (p. 198).

Breen's paraphrase of Reason's and Conscience's words to Will is not supported by citation from or reference to the text, other than the 'cloister or school' quote (which is not attributed but derives from Reason's sermon to the realm; B.10.300, C.5.154). The only likely source I could find are these lines, which come just after Will has concluded his apologia in Passus 5 by hoping he may yet attain God's grace:

'Y rede the', quod Resoun tho, 'rape the to bigynne
The lyif þat is louable and leele to thy soule'.
'3e, and contynue!' quod Conscience; and to þe kyrke Y wente. (C.5.102–04)

Apart from occurring two *passūs* away from the dilemma they supposedly resolve, nothing in these lines matches Breen's paraphrase of them. They do not concern writing, dream visions, or an attempt to habituate the wider population; they conclude with Will going not to his desk but to church. Thus, the gatekeeping function of the grammatical terms in Passus 3 remains intact.

The second challenge to Breen's thesis comes in the section titled 'Haukyn's Habit' (pp. 209–16). Here she acknowledges that Langland's fullest exploration of the difficulties facing those who lack grammatical habituation occurs in the B-text. Haukyn the Active Man, 'yhabited as an heremyte' (B.13.284), offers a compelling example of the frustrations of human sin, yet he is replaced in the C-text by a weakened and de-personalized figure, Activa Vita. Breen concludes this section with the observation that 'over the course of Langland's revisions, good *habitus* become more closely associated with a highly literate elite ... and more of a long-term administrative goal than an immediate personal imperative' (p. 216). I can see this statement only as an acceptance that Langland responded to the 1381 revolt by directing his text to a more, not less educated readership.

Yet Chapter 5's next, and last, section immediately tries to smooth over the closing admission of the previous one. 'Despite this [i.e., Langland's] retrenchment — or perhaps because of it', Breen begins, 'Langland's C-text revisions present the search for a workable vernacular habitus as a major problem in *Piers Plowman*' (p. 216). The chapter's closing summary confusingly mixes acknowledgement of C's greater reliance on elite literacy with insistence that it was reaching out to the unlettered more than earlier versions, while periodically folding both B and C into assertions such as that Langland's 'unhabituated readers are invited to use the poem as a makeshift means of acquiring a vernacular *habitus*' (p. 221). (At no point does Breen discuss how uneducated readers were meant to engage with the large amount of allusive Latin in C as in all versions of *Piers Plowman*.)

In her introduction, Breen claims that her study

examines these [post-1381] writers' attempts to adapt or 'translate' the established conventions of Latin reading into usable vernacular forms as well as their efforts to compensate for the fact that their readers, unschooled in Latin grammar, could not be counted on to have satisfied any prerequisites before picking up their texts. (p. 10)

Breen let this statement stand on page 10, despite having acknowledged, on page 216, that 'over the course of Langland's revisions, good *habitus* become more closely associated with a highly literate elite'. And if Breen's contention doesn't hold for *Piers Plowman* it basically doesn't hold for the whole book. This is because the canon Breen cites as exemplary of the 'shift in imagined audience' consists of only three works: *Piers*, John Mirk's *Instructions for*

Parish Priests, and Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. Yet Mirk's *Instructions* is a standard pastoral manual intended, obviously, for priests (although, admittedly, for ignorant ones), while Chaucer's *Astrolabe* presupposes a reader with the money and time to invest in acquiring and learning to use a complex astronomical instrument. On this showing, the late fourteenth-century 'crisis' Breen attributes to English literature in general really applies only to *Piers Plowman*, and Chapter 5 reveals that it doesn't apply to *Piers Plowman* either.

Breen's book has other problems as well. Her exposition is often jumbled, and thus hard to follow. The appropriateness or relevance of texts she chooses to analyze can be hard to see, and the ground of her commentary and arguments keeps shifting. She never establishes a stable definition of *habitus* (at times, it seems that any move to denounce vice or praise virtue can be labeled 'habituation'), while her model of *habitus*-acquisition is unsatisfactory. Her claims for what primary texts allegedly reveal often exceed anything I can see happening in the sources as quoted. As we have seen, in order to make her argument she sometimes misrepresents primary texts via paraphrase or cherry-picking of examples. There are also important gaps in her coverage: hardly any consideration of the programme of educating the laity in religious observance that followed the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 — surely a major early effort at lay 'habituation' — and no attention paid to England's other vernacular, French, or to the pragmatic realities of manuscript access and reading modes.

In reviewing problematic books, one traditionally looks for and highlights the areas in which useful contributions are being made. In this case, so much of Breen's analysis seems like ventriloquism — the author making the texts say what she wants them to say — that one can never feel confident about her readings. I can only hope that in her future work, the author will combine her considerable abilities with a more rigorous approach to the material.

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Peter Brown, *Authors in Context: Geoffrey Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi + 254pp. ISBN 978-0-1928-0429-7. £8.99.

This affordable paperback aims to be both 'compact and comprehensive', to offer 'a wide-ranging account of the medieval society from which works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* sprang'. I opened it hoping to find a book that would be a good starting-point for undergraduates struggling to make sense of Chaucer's world, and was partly satisfied.

There are seven chapters, all of which combine history with literary analysis: 'The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer', 'The Social Body', 'The Literary Scene', 'Society and Politics', 'Intellectual Ideas', 'Science and Technology' and 'New Contexts'. The book's greatest strength is that it provides summaries of relevant contextual information that can be hard to find so helpfully and succinctly presented elsewhere: there are excellent accounts, for example, of the Peasants' Revolt, guilds, named individuals in Chaucer's circle, the four humours, and the Hundred Years' War. The best of these involve a sensitive examination of their relation with Chaucer's poetry. Anyone wanting to know about Chaucer's response to the Black Death or Lollardy should find this book a great place to start. More on religious practice beyond Lollardy would not have gone amiss, but it is hard to criticise omissions from such a short book. Some of the more literary material also reads as fresh and interesting: the analysis of how the Wife of Bath uses social networks and navigates textual culture is invaluable, and the section on 'Personal Identity' under 'Society and Politics' will be a good resource for helping students to think