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Review of The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature

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Nicola Masciandaro has produced a learned book, based on his Yale dissertation, covering a large and significant topic. The book consists of three chapters, which cover three different aspects related to the subject of work in Middle English literature. After a philological excursus on select work vocabulary in Middle English, the first chapter attempts to reconstruct late medieval cultural attitudes toward work. In an attempt to probe more deeply into late medieval work attitudes, the second chapter analyzes three key texts that recount the origins of work—a history of masonry found in the Cooke MS (British Museum Add. MS 23198), John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1390), and Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Former Age" (ca. 1380–87). The final chapter, after short discussions of Gower's writings and *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1376–88), focuses on Chaucer's treatment of work-related themes in fragment 8 of the *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1388–1400). Chaucer and Gower do indeed have much to say about labor and its value, and attention given to the theme of labor in their writings is surely welcome. However, in a book whose subtitle suggests a general treatment of the concept in all of Middle English literature, it is curious that *Piers Plowman* receives so little attention and that other key texts like "Wynnere and Wastoure" (ca. 1352–70) do not appear at all.

The book begins well. In chapter 1, Masciandaro starts with a careful reflection on the nature of work. He argues that the idea of work contains both subjective and objective components. While a subjective component reflects the work experience of the worker, an objective component focuses on the product or service produced by the action of labor. Since

work has many identities, it acquired several names. This leads to a philological survey of Middle English work words. As a representative sampling, Masciandaro chooses *travail, labour, swink, werk*, and *craft*, along with the associated verb forms. This is a reasonable and reasonably comprehensive list to begin with. Masciandaro analyzes the semantic components of each word and then relates them in a table that attempts to construct labor's semantic field in Middle English (27). He discovers that class-based and status-based ideologies are revealed in this semantic field. "The preponderance of Middle English words for work that emphasize the difficulty and painfulness of work," he writes, "relates not only to Christian belief in the fallen nature of work and to the palpable experience of work's difficulty, but to status-conscious and especially upper-class conceptions of work as degrading and ignoble" (11), and in this he is surely on solid ground.

Masciandaro recognizes that the nature of the semantic field is complex, yet he finds meaningful patterns in the field. He finds the work words break into two complementary groups. The meanings of *travail, swink*, and *labour* tend to favor the subjective meanings of work. All denote hard, physical labor or servitude and suggest painful effort and exertion. All relate primarily to agricultural labor and suggest the pain and suffering involved in this toilsome occupation. In *werk* and *craft*, however, he finds words that emphasize the objective side of the concept. Both words emphasize the product or means of production of the work act. In addition, *werk* and *craft*, he believes, express the nature of work in a more positive light. Whereas *travail, swink*, and *labour* highlight drudgery and pain, *werk* "frees work, as it were, from its difficulty by stressing the creativity of its process and the tangibility of its product" (19). *Craft*, which is one of the Middle English words by which Latin *ars* could be translated, highlights not suffering but the intelligence and skill employed by trained craftsmen in their work. In addition, he posits that the Anglo-French words *travail* and *labour*, which come from the language of the ruling class, reflect the aristocracy's associations of labor with servitude and agricultural labor. In contrast, Anglo-Saxon, the language of the peasantry in the early Middle English period, gave us *werk* and *craft*, which reflect the pride of the native born artisans in their own productivity.

Of course, *swink* does not fit nicely into this conclusion. This Anglo-Saxon word aligns itself most closely with the Anglo-Norman side of the field. In addition, one wonders what the conclusions could have been drawn with a larger selection of the semantic field. For example, Masciandaro is silent on one of the most popular and productive work words in Middle English—*servise*—borrowed from Anglo-Norman in the thirteenth century but not widely attested until the fourteenth. *Servise* was a work term that applied to all classes of medieval society, not only to peasants and servants but also to clerics and knights. It could refer not only to the

labor of serfdom but also to the "labor" of lovers and to an act of worship. When applied to the work of the aristocracy and clergy, it appears to have had a quite positive connotation, unlike *travail* or *labour*. In addition, *servise* would have required an expansion of Masciandaro's grid. It emphasizes neither the subjective nor the objective sides of work but rather the relationship of the worker to the recipient of the labor.

Another word missing from Masciandaro's grid is *bisynesse*. This is surprising, because the word becomes a focal point in the discussions of Gower's *Confessio* and Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale." *Bisynesse* descends from the Anglo-Saxon *bisignisse*, which meant "anxiety" or "solicitude." However, the word seems not to have been widely used in Middle English until the late fourteenth century. Although it still carried some of the negative connotations of the Anglo-Saxon word, it had a much wider range of positive meanings, ranging from "business" and "occupation" to "diligence" and "industry." Because *bisynesse* reflected more nearly the meaning of Latin *negotium* rather than of Latin *labor*, it was a work word well suited to the merchant class. This may explain why Chaucer and Gower liked it so much. While this Anglo-Saxon word, like *labour* and *travail*, referred primarily to the subjective meanings of work, its subjective meanings were not negative but positive. "Leveful bisynesse," as Chaucer's Second Nun tells us, is the moral antidote to idleness and is praised by both the Second Nun and the Parson.[1]

As I noted earlier, Chaucer and Gower receive the majority of Masciandaro's attention in this book, but they play different roles. Gower, on the one hand, is portrayed as the champion of the merchant class and its pretensions to aristocratic wealth built not upon lineage but rather upon hard work and accomplishment. Chaucer, on the other hand, is the champion of true labor and the idealistic subjective work aspirations of laborers.

As for Gower, one need only glance at the *Vox Clamantis* (ca. 1374–85) to recognize his support of the social status quo and disdain for the aspirations of the classes who revolted in 1381. Book 4 of the *Confessio* has an extensive treatment of the value and history of labor as an antidote to acedia. In his treatment, Gower clearly separates intellectual labor from manual labor and thereby, in Masciandaro's opinion, supports "the propriety of traditional social boundaries between them and the superior status of the former" (88). Gower's work ideology is, argues Masciandaro, "quintessential[ly] bourgeois" (91). He champions the aristocratic value of *gentilesse* but divorces it from its aristocratic lineage. Thus, Gower's position is double edged: not only does he implicitly critique the privileged idleness

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1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, fragment 8, line 5 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the form *CT* 8.5), in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 262.

of the aristocracy, but he also legitimizes "forms of [mental] work that are not materially productive" and thus "exemplifies the characteristically bourgeois fusion of a desire for freedom from economic necessity with a vocational commitment to nonmanual occupations (mercantile, legal, etc.) as the means of earning such freedom" (93).

Masciandaro readily admits that Gower does not "express disdain for labor as intrinsically degrading" (93), but he also argues that "Gower voices an occupational ethic whose ideal agent is busy, virtuous, and rich, and whose personal right to the wealth he gains through work is rationalized not in terms of the use value or objective nature of the work but in terms of the moral merit he accrues by working busily and avoiding idleness" (120). It is true, of course, that Gower's treatment of labor falls under the rubric of acedia in the *Confessio*. In such a context, labor has a positive value primarily as an antidote to idleness. However, Masciandaro ignores the larger context of Gower's treatment of the subject. The *Confessio* is, after all, a book about love. Gower treats the vices and their corresponding antidotes primarily *in amoris causa*. The primary focus of Gower's attention in book 4 of the *Confessio* is not labor per se but love's labor. And here Gower rejects *bisynesse* for its own sake and makes a strong case that love's labor must be productive to be meritorious. In fact, in the end of the work, the Gower-narrator rejects love's labor because he is too old and thus cannot be a productive worker—that is, he cannot produce children.

Masciandaro's most ingenious argument concerns the meaning of Chaucer's lyric "The Former Age." This lyric appears to run against the grain of Chaucer's normal work ideology. In most of Chaucer's writings, it is obvious that Chaucer, much like Gower, was imbued with respect for productive work and *bisynesse*. In this lyric, however, the persona is nostalgic for the Golden Age of Saturn, with its simple pleasures, peaceful lifestyles, and pastoral idleness. At the same time he argues that corruption, violence, and extravagant expectations entered human history with the coming of the Age of Jupiter and man's "swety bysinesse."[2] Thus, in this lyric Chaucer seems momentarily out of sync with his normal, cheerful belief in the value of human labor. Masciandaro, however, marshals textual evidence supporting the idea that the persona in this poem is not Chaucer at all but a despairing curmudgeon who voices "the discontent of the civilized with civilization" (107). If this is true, the intent of the lyric is not a critique of labor at all but rather a stinging indictment of a selfish and nostalgic aristocrat. Indeed, the tone of "The Former Age" is much harsher than that of, say, a key source passage in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (ca. 524), which, of course, Chaucer had translated. In addition, Masciandaro's interpretation has the merit of making Chaucer's work

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Former Age," in Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 28.

ideology coherent across the canon of his work. Nevertheless, Chaucer did not leave us with a fictional narrator for the poem as he did for the poetry in *The Canterbury Tales*, and Masciandaro's interpretation has the distinct disadvantage of turning upside down the "literal and more obvious" meaning of an independent lyric (111).

Masciandaro finds that fragment 8 of the *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's most extensive treatment of the subjective nature of work, which the poet presents as "a subjective necessity [and] an intrinsic requirement of the human person" (127). In the "Second Nun's Tale," Masciandaro argues, Chaucer underscores the limits of the traditional valorization of work primarily as the antidote to idleness. These limitations disallow "any specifically personal relation to one's work" and encourage "a confusion of work with simple busyness" (128). Masciandaro sees the Second Nun as burdened by the limitations of her monastic work ethic, and this may well be true. Certainly the Second Nun presents her highly polished work as merely the product of an effort to keep busy, yet it seems forced to interpret the Second Nun as a dull drudge. On the contrary, the translation of the "glorious lif and passioun" of St. Cecilia seems a work filled with pride of authorship (*CT* 8.26), and Masciandaro himself suggests that beneath the prologue's conventional appeal to the monastic work ethic is the "self-assertive wish for an authorship conventionally unavailable to women" (133). Thus, if Chaucer indeed was attempting to show the limitations of the old monastic work ethic, he did so by putting it in the mouth of a lively and obviously self-aware literary artist, who also happened to be a nun.

If the Second Nun has to hide her pride of authorship under the guise of performing her moral duty, Masciandaro argues that Chaucer's alchemist, the Canon, has no such impediments and embodies the principle that there is "joy in labor over and above its stress" (134). How else can one explain his dedication to a profession that was so obviously—at least to Chaucer and his Yeoman—unhealthy as well as fraudulent? The attraction of alchemy, although completely unproductive as labor, was that it promised a self-fulfilling kind of occupation that was both intellectual and technological. Thus, the Canon is shown to be following one of "the most basic human impulses," that of the desire for "creative manual work" (136). The tale, then, while discrediting alchemy as a practice, does not discredit the idealistic work aspirations of its practitioners. Nevertheless, by telling his tale, the Yeoman not only exposes the tragic self-deception of the Canon but also effectively exorcises the enchantment of alchemy. Yes, Chaucer seems to say, work should be self-gratifying, but there is a radical disconnect between this legitimate aspiration and the squalid ethics of its practitioners.

Masciandaro ends his book with a nod to Chaucer's ideal workman, the Plowman, that "trewe swynkere" (*CT* 1.531). Although plowmen have almost no role in this well-written and productive study, Masciandaro

has made a good start in uncovering a truly important aspect of Middle English literature. But the topic is a very large field to plow, and in this work the author has covered only a modest portion of the estate. One hopes that the second edition will work an even larger area.

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