REVIEW

Sincerity in Medieval English Language and Literature. By Graham Williams. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. 256. ISBN: 978-1-137-54069-0 (eBook).

Reviewed by Heli Tissari (University of Helsinki, Finland)

This book concerns the history of the English language, but its topic is also relevant to other languages such as my own mother tongue, which is Finnish. I remember that when I apologized for something as a little girl, my parents sometimes told me that I did not really seem to regret what I had done. In other words, they taught me that the value of an apology lies in its sincerity rather than in just uttering the right words. This is precisely what Graham Williams discusses in his book *Sincerity in Medieval English Language and Literature*. To put it simply, he claims that the Anglo-Saxon ancestors of Present-Day English speakers did not think in this way before the advent of Christianity on the British Isles and that it actually took a long time before such ideas became part of English speakers' world view. In other words, he suggests that it was a new idea to them that people's words should agree with their inward feelings. One of the expressions he is interested in is *I am sorry*, which in fact does not have an exact equivalent in Finnish, since the Finnish word *anteeksi*, while conveying a direct apology, does not overtly refer to any kind of feeling.

The first chapter of Williams's book is titled "Introduction: Sincerity, Language Change and Medieval Literature". The title already tells us three things about the entire volume. Apart from treating the idea of sincerity, it deals with medieval literature and language change. I prefer to list the topics in this order, because Williams's ideas about language change are based on his readings of medieval literature. In this chapter, apart from listing words that referred to sincerity in Medieval English, he lists further concepts that are central to the book. He describes his niche as follows: "My perspective is positioned at an intersection of the history of emotions and historical pragmatics" (p. 3). His interest in pragmatics leads him to talk about speech acts. As regards speech acts, he creates a new term that is parallel to Austin's *felicity conditions*, namely *affectivity conditions*. He uses this term to describe the idea that an utterance is only valid if

it agrees with what the speaker feels. He prepares his readers for considering the idea that affectivity conditions are related to "cultural agendas to do with power, social structure and belief" (p. 27) and that they are carried onwards through ritual, mimesis, and reanalysis. A further key term he introduces is *courtesy*, suggesting that sincerity as an ideal spreads from the religious to the courtly sphere before it reaches a wider public. Moreover, he points out that thinking about sincerity requires an interest in the inner self. In literature, this means that "English narrators become increasingly omniscient and inward-looking" (p. 32). He concludes the introduction by emphasizing that due to the breadth of all this, sincerity cannot be understood in terms of one principal field. Rather, its study requires a combination of approaches.

In the second chapter, Williams moves on to discuss what kind of attitudes Germanic tribes had towards the relationship of language and emotion. The focus is on Anglo-Saxons, but he also takes into account Old Norse wisdom literature under the subheading "Odin's Counsel". The title of the whole chapter is "Before Sincerity: Pagan Beliefs of Language and Emotion". He summarizes the main message under the subheading "Binding Rituals: Oaths and True 'Love' in Action" where he presents a list consisting of four items (pp. 56–57): ideology, language, cognition, and action. In brief, he claims that the social ethic of the Germanic tribes, including the Anglo-Saxons, was bound to the idea of kin, and consisted of loyalty to the kin and to the battle lord. Language was one means of creating bonds between people, and such bonds tended to be created through rituals such as oaths. In other words, such language use was not random but followed set forms. Interestingly, he claims that "[o]nce made the oath becomes akin to a material object, which must then be held in the container of the mind" (p. 56). More generally, he makes the claim that material objects, for example, rings, played an important role in Germanic rituals. He also underlines the role of action. Basically the idea is that no matter what a person felt when uttering an oath, either one acted accordingly and kept the oath, or failed to keep the promise and betrayed the oath. Whether a betrayer felt sorry afterwards was not considered important. Another theme in this chapter is that language could be used to seduce a woman or deceive an opponent without particular moral scruple; rather, a man with a skilful tongue was considered wise. To consider the role of introspection, Williams also discusses *The Wife's Lament* which describes a woman's inner feelings of grief that do not exactly conform to the overall Germanic social ethic, suggesting that it was not completely impossible for Anglo-Saxons to be inward-looking and to talk about their private, subjective emotions.

Having assessed the starting point, so to say, Williams proceeds to discussing what he calls "The Christianization of Language and Emotion", which is the subtitle of his next chapter, "God Who Knows the Heart". The idea that God sees what is inside a person, that is, knows people's hearts, is one key to unlocking

what his book is about. If a Christian believes in a God who knows the heart, sincerity concerns not only relations between people but, above all, the relationship between a human being and God. To put it differently, the main issue will then be whether God will see the right things, in this case, the right feelings, in a person's heart. This particularly applies to prayer. The gist of this chapter is that when Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, they were taught not just to observe their new faith in word and action, but to agree with it inwardly, with their minds and hearts. However, in the beginning this was mainly relevant to people who wanted to devote their entire lives to God in monasteries. For these reasons, this chapter focuses on homilies, prayers and saints' lives, but it also connects a person's relationship to God with their relationships to other people. For example, Williams summarizes the teachings of homilies on sincerity as follows:

> The contexts of sincerity as outlined in these homilies are essentially two: (1) devotional performances made in speech (whether that be as private or public prayer) must be aligned with the heart; and (2) likewise, all speech to fellow men and women should derive from the same love of God and Christ as in devotional performances. (p. 106.)

Williams also sees a link between earlier Germanic wisdom concerning emotions as potentially creating dangerous hydraulic pressure inside a human being and the Christian idea that one should releasethis pressure as prayers to the Christian God. He exemplifies this through a reading of *The Wanderer*.

In the new Christian context, sincerity of course also means sincerity of contrition and confession. Accordingly, Williams dedicates the fourth chapter of the book to "Sincerity in Contrition". The subtitle of the chapter, "From Confessions to Apologies", helps the readers to look forward to a discussion of apologetic expressions, including *I am sorry*. One of the topics of this chapter is that in early texts, it is not necessarily clear that people used expressions such as *me repenteth* to confess that they had done something wrong. They could equally well express other kinds of regret, for example, simply express their frustration at something that they felt had gone wrong. This is a topic that runs through the whole book more generally, that the words and expressions relevant to the story of sincerity need to be understood in their original context where their meaning may not correspond to our first impression. To put it differently, a change in thinking and language use, or vice versa, does not simply proceed from one framework to another, but there is plenty of variation. A macro-step consists of many micro-steps, and the micro-steps crisscross in all directions. In this chapter, Williams describes, among other things, variation in apologetic vocabulary. On a higher level, he focuses on the movement of sincere apologies from the monastic to the courtly environment, from religion to romance and, finally, to

private letters. At the same time, he discusses the novel "idea that if you feel bad about a wrong committed against someone else that saying as much to that person in itself should be grounds for them to forgive you" (p. 128). This could be compared with the Germanic soldier whose apologies after betraying their war lord would not have been highly esteemed.

The development that Williams treats in the fifth chapter is parallel rather than sequential to the move of apologies from prayers to private letters. It is expressed in the subtitle "From *caritas* to *affectio maritalis*". To clarify, here he discusses how the Christian understanding of sincere love moves from the monastery to the court, and furthermore to vernacular romance and private letters. Admittedly, the focus is no longer on religious teaching, but shifts to the worldly sphere, under the main title "Sincerity in Love". The first part of the chapter deals with courtly love. Williams suggests that sincerity was a key element in a new understanding of how to love. To put it differently, the development in question was not only a development of how to understand but also and, in particular, how to act or even perform love, for instance, when wooing. One way Williams expresses this is to refer to Chaucer's expression *hadden pris* 'had currency' – he claims that certain words had special value and that it was possible to learn these words by reading suitable literature, for example, Lydgate's *Temple of Glas*, or Ovid's *De Arte Amandi*. Furthermore, he explains that when the idea of sincerity in love was introduced in romantic narratives, the protagonists' sincerity usually seemed to be taken for granted; however, later authors also became explicitly aware that even sincerity was a language game that could be played and thus also doubted. Although the title of the chapter highlights marital love, which is indeed exemplified, for instance, with the help of the story of *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, the chapter does not only focus on marriage but suggests, among other things, that the idea of sincerely recommending people in letters was borrowed from Anglo-Norman to English.

The final, sixth chapter of the book presents a question. It is called "Conclusion: What is Sincerity?". In this rather brief chapter, Williams summarizes the book and introduces follow-up questions. Two terms central to the summary are *subjectification* and *intersubjectification*. Williams uses them to remind the reader that sincerity in love originally had to do with loyal service rather than genuine feeling, which means that its understanding has moved from outwardly objective to inwardly personal (subjective) and to interaction between subjects that feel and express themselves. He suggests that since it is possible to analyse the development of apologies in this way, we could also trace the histories of other expressions such as thanking, considering the idea of sincere thanking. Furthermore, he suggests that it would be worthwhile to study "to what extent the notion of divine authority has influenced English elsewhere in its history" (p. 228), which he sees in terms of Tantucci's notion *extended intersubjectivity*.

The question mark at the end of the chapter title could be seen to symbolize a certain critical attitude towards the previous one that he assumes in this chapter, admitting, among other things, that when authors focus on certain periods, they easily end up making erroneous suggestions about when particular features first appeared in literature. However, towards the end of the conclusion he also speaks for the advantages of traditional philology: "much is still to be gained from sitting down and properly reading historical texts in their entirety, even if one might also automatically locate and mine them for data using corpora" (p. 231).

Although every chapter is followed by a list of references, a full list of which also appears after the Conclusion. Moreover, the book contains an index which contains names of works and their authors, including a number of current scholars whose studies have been referred to in the book.

In my view, Williams has succeeded in writing a book that is balanced in terms of structure and content. While he could certainly have delved much deeper into many topics, he maintains a balance between explaining detail and moving onwards in the story. It could also be said that he has succeeded in telling a coherent story. It is easy to understand his claims and to follow how he proceeds from one section and chapter to another. He has also succeeded in choosing a topic that seems simultaneously relevant and relatively timeless. It is relevant to current linguistics, among other things, because what he discusses directly relates to the fairly new field of historical pragmatics. However, sincerity as a topic appears more universal, even if he himself explains that it might not be relevant at all as regards some other languages and societies. That in itself is an intriguing question that he provides for future research. On a large scale, he touches upon the relationship of language and emotion in a compelling way.

At the same time, I am aware of the fact that I relate to Williams's book in a certain way because my own parents brought me up to believe in the kind of sincerity that it discusses. I therefore doubt to some extent whether all speakers of English, even native speakers of British English, would see the matters in exactly this way, considering that not all people are brought up the same, and even if they are, they may disagree with what they are taught, or behave in an unexpected manner. It seems to me that Williams is not particularly critical of the "cultural agendas to do with power, social structure and belief" (p. 27) that he introduces in the beginning of the book.

To approach such doubts, one could, for example, formulate a further research question such as "to what extent do speakers of Present-day English actually follow the ideals of sincerity". It would of course be a challenging question to answer but could nevertheless be narrowed down to things like "do people actually say they are sorry because they feel sorry or because they think they should feel sorry". I suspect that many contemporary speakers of English could also find Germanic wisdom literature quite appealing and prioritize desired effects rather than sincerity

when they plan what to say and write. Otherwise, there might be no need of critical discourse analysis. Conversation analysis could also be brought to the picture to see when people apologize and why. Intriguingly, though, even critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis might have developed differently or not developed at all if the concept of sincerity did not exist.

To put it differently, this book discusses, among other things, the origins of numerous formulaic language behaviours. Even Williams himself touches upon the issue how they may and may not convey genuine feelings, and points to the possibility that sincerity becomes a game, so that the original idea is corrupted. This is interesting because he starts from the assumption that his Germanic ancestors created important social bonds through relatively set rituals that did not require corresponding emotions. It is of course important for the cynic to note that even formulaic behaviour can express true emotions. My interest in formulaic expressions of emotion originates in my having been trained as a corpus linguist, since many formulaic expressions occur, for example, in Early Modern English correspondence. Williams's book on sincerity therefore complements a corpus linguistic understanding of letter writing behaviour.

These critical comments thus actually concur with Williams's suggestion that sincerity should be approached from many angles rather than just one. To achieve a multicultural understanding, we would nevertheless need more studies not only of European languages and literature, but even views from the outside. It might necessitate the creation of more terminology that could be used neutrally to discuss many cultures and beliefs. Williams's own term *affectivity conditions* could be one to begin with.

To read this interesting book, one does not need to be a professional philologist specialized in Medieval English. It suffices to be familiar with current linguistic terminology and to have a general understanding of the spread of Christianity into Europe. I would in fact recommend the book to any linguist interested in understanding how Christianity has influenced the European notion and language of emotions. However, the book could equally well be used as an advanced course book at a department of English where it would help students to read medieval and Early Modern literature. As an Early Modern scholar, I am aware that the borderline between the two periods is rather fluid. Moreover, although Williams's topic may seem rather specialized, he addresses many issues that tend to occur in books dealing with the history of English, such as the fact that words and expressions that look familiar to us may have had a different meaning in a medieval context.