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## The Performative Letter, from Medieval to Modern

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### The Performative Letter, from Medieval to Modern

*Michael Heyman*

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Sometimes letters seem to behave badly. They can be eaten, in

alphabet soup and Alphabits™ cereal; they can build structures unrelated to letters, with wooden alphabet blocks; they can be a physical impediment or challenge, as with the alphabet superhero "Letterman" on *The Electric Company* who, in Superman-style, used to leap a capital T and run "faster than a rolling O"; they can even become abstract art, as in the urban institution of "tagging," or signing a name in outlandish, highly stylized and often-unrecognizable graffiti letters. While these functions of letters may seem counter to what might be taught in school, we should ask if the letters are *really* misbehaving. Perhaps they are just getting back to their roots. In fact, I hope to argue here that they are actually fulfilling a function of the alphabet that harkens back to a more fundamental and older role—of letters stepping outside of their abstract function of phonetic representation to become material objects. They are also things to be eaten, to be played with, to obstruct us, to build with, to exist independently as art and as physical testimony of our existence—objects that not only act (or are acted upon), but also cause a material effect. Karen Coats, in her essay, "P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet," would call this use of language "performative" and distinguish it from a "constative" role, or one that is more abstract. The distinction is a useful one, not only, as Coats does, in showing the trends of the alphabet book and the re-emergence of the more radical role of language in constructing reality, but also in showing how written language has always combined these roles.

The modern performative role of language is only a remembering of the beginnings of written language itself. If, as Coats claims, during the eighteenth century the performative role may have become less dominant in alphabet books, it was only a temporary lapse, a falling away from the performative role that seems, historically, to be the conceptual norm for language. It is better to look at the late-twentieth-century use of performative language as a rebirth—a return to a broader, more concrete conception of language. In this paper, I will give a brief overview of the performative use of written language before its twentieth-century incarnation, and how the first real revision of the dual **[End Page 100]** model occurred long before twentieth century children's literature,

with the advent of Victorian literary nonsense for children.

Before getting into early medieval texts, let me first flesh out better definitions of Coats's terms, "constative" and "performative." Coats, borrowing Shoshana Felman's term "constative," refers to the use of language as abstraction. She writes, "it is an epistemological tool, an abstract way of 'knowing' the concrete world" (90–1). In other words, the letter's constative function is to construct signifiers and thus become a less direct way of labeling an already-existing "truth." A *performative* use of language, on the other hand, conceptualizes language as a physical entity unto itself. Like a child's wooden letters, performative language has heft, can be stacked and chewed and sawed in half, and most importantly, can *create* things unrelated to language. And it does all of these things, in part, because it has been disassociated from its role of abstract reference to language. At the same time, though, because this *is* a part of written language, after all, the reality created by performative play with language becomes material reality: the world is dependent, is *created*, based on the words.

Although much of my focus on the performative letter will be on medieval and renaissance period texts, I will briefly discuss the beginnings of alphabetic writing, for it is here that we find the performative roots. Before alphabetic writing, written characters were primarily pictographs, similar to early Egyptian hieroglyphics. At this stage, written language was thus a relatively direct representation of reality. Egyptian hieroglyphics, however, over time developed into a syllabic system, where within any given syllable, the vowel was undefined. The "pictures" no longer represented the object they...

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