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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2408702f>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 32(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Stephan, Annelisa

Publication Date

2001-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Mary Swan and Elaine M. Treharne, eds., *Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) x + 213 pp., plates and ill.

Old English in the twelfth century? The title is deliberately provocative. Old English (OE), after all, is supposed to have come to a halt with the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. The contributors to this essay collection, however, show that OE, in its written form at least, was not yet a dead letter in the twelfth century—this despite the well-documented decline in English’s prestige as a written language, the decay of OE scribal tradition, and the acceleration of linguistic change. Although the first writings in Middle English (ME) appear soon after 1100, OE texts continued to be copied and used throughout the twelfth century. This volume examines some of these late writings, illuminating why and for whom they might have been created.

In assembling this collection, the first to concentrate on English texts from the post-Conquest period, editors Mary Swan and Elaine M. Treharne have an ambitious aim, to “redefine the limits of Old English scholarship” (7) and “extend the chronological and contextual parameters of scholarly debate on Old English” (10). As Treharne points out, twelfth-century OE texts have been “marginalized” by Anglo-Saxonists because they fall outside the traditional chronological boundaries of OE studies and because, as copies of older material, they are seen as less “original” or “authentic” than pre-Conquest ones. Swan and Treharne remind us, however, that “the notion of an ‘original’ text and its author is the product of a twentieth-century print-culture mentality, and does not reflect the fluidity of a manuscript culture in which texts are made and remade as they are read or heard and rewritten” (7). One could also add “as they are remembered,” for Loredana Teresi’s essay on mnemonic transmission of OE texts shows through close textual analysis that at least one late twelfth-century composite homily is likely to have been composed from memory.

All of the studies in *Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century* are based on painstaking work with manuscripts, many of which have yet not been dated or localized. Setting the tone is Treharne’s examination of five representative manuscripts, which reveals that English

writings were marginalized in *scriptoria* of the twelfth century: physically, they were small, economical, and serviceable, much like modern paperbacks. This “marginalization” is one reason why it is so difficult to assign a place of origin to virtually all of the English manuscripts from the century. It is also difficult to pin down the reasons that OE was copied in the twelfth century. Susan Irvine’s thesis statement that twelfth-century OE manuscripts had “the provision of works in Old English as their central function” (41) is not as tautological as it first seems: at least some twelfth-century copying may have been motivated by antiquarian interest in pre-Conquest artifacts. However, Irvine is able to demonstrate that some twelfth-century OE manuscripts were compiled from a variety of sources, including post-Conquest ones. This suggests that practical motives, such as providing vernacular material for preaching, for private reading by monks, or for the religious edification of Latin-illiterate nuns, were paramount.

Other essays in the collection examine how post-Conquest social and political factors influenced text production in the twelfth century. While Ælfric’s homilies continued to be popular until the end of the century, for example, those by Wulfstan were much less so, according to Jonathan Wilcox, because of Wulfstan’s penchant for using the language “of kingship, of law, and of chaos,” which was no longer appropriate to the social circumstances in England in the twelfth century. The Norman Conquest also led to a decline in the popularity of homegrown Anglo-Saxon saints and a focus on saints with “first-grade status,” such as Cuthbert. Unfortunately, the nine surviving prose saints’ lives from the twelfth century give philologists little to chew on. Joana Proud, for example, discovers that English-language saints’ lives continued to be popular enough through most of the century to merit some recopying and reuse, but beyond that she is unable to conclude much of anything. Susan Rosser, in her examination of the *Life of Martin*, the single twelfth-century saint’s life to differ in any significant way from its exemplar, is forced to conclude that the copyist was simply trying to shorten the text “to make the text comparable in length to the other hagiographic items in the same part of the manuscript” (141). Yes, the omitted sections refer to monastic discipline, raising the possibility that this theme may have declined in popularity from the eleventh to the twelfth centuries, but it is impossible to go beyond speculation when the only evidence is silence.

The most illuminating essays in the collection are those that examine

the linguistic evidence provided by the manuscripts. One central question is the degree to which OE was a foreign idiom during the twelfth century (by 1300, we find this notation in one OE manuscript: “non apreciatur propter idioma incognita”, 145n.) Wendy Collier’s examination of the annotations to Latin and OE manuscripts made in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries by a monk at Worcester Cathedral Priory, known as the “Tremulous Hand” for his shaky script, shows that OE was comprehensible to him only with some effort. In student fashion, the Tremulous Hand relied on Latin “crib” texts for some OE passages, inserted Latin interlinear glosses, and sketched dotted lines between words where the original scribe had run letters together. He also inserted pronunciation aids, such as superscript Middle English (ME) *i* above the OE verb prefix *ge*. The Hand’s use of Latin to understand *written* OE, however, does not mean that *spoken* OE had suddenly died. Rather, the Hand was apparently using the language of his education, Latin, to compile teaching and preaching material in the language of his people, English. Without any recent English books to work from, the Tremulous Hand “had to do what he could with the old texts in the Cathedral Library” (207).

Perhaps the most interesting essay is Roy Michael Liuzza’s, on scribal habit. Liuzza states that the problem with ME-era comprehension of OE texts was less phonology and morphology than orthography—the West Saxon *Schriftsprache*, the basis of OE scribal tradition and our normalized grammars, “masked both dialectal variation and the development of the changes which distinguish Middle English from Old English” (144) and was up to two centuries behind developments in the language. Taking on the conventional wisdom that late copyings of earlier texts are “useless to the editor and inscrutable to the philologist” because of their “intractable” and downright “chaotic” orthography (144), Liuzza suggests understanding the scribal task as a combination of “literatim transcription,” the reproduction of silent shapes abstracted from their meanings, and “aural transcription,” the reproduction of words heard by the scribe in his or her “internal dictation.” In the work of a scribe copying the OE Gospels around 1200, Liuzza uncovers a complex mix of strategies. On the one hand, there is considerable linguistic updating, including the substitution of modern vocabulary, the introduction of relatively consistent representations for /g/ vs. /j/ and /k/ vs. /tʃ/, and systematic revision of the verbal morphology, such as substituting ME verbal ending *-en* for OE *-on*. On the other

hand, Liuzza finds an apparently incongruous retention of outmoded noun inflections, such as the dative plural ending *-um*. This suggests that the scribe switched to literatim transcription when faced with the unfamiliar. In this case, then, literal reproduction was a function of incomprehension, not reverence for the original.

Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century does not provide any remarkable new insights, but it represents a series of small leaps forward in the field. The audience for the book, aside from dedicated Anglo-Saxonists, is likely to include codicologists and those interested in what the examination of manuscripts can tell us about the society in which they were produced. Students of OE, especially those used to normalized text editions, are recommended to Treharne's and Liuzza's essays to get a taste of the frustrations and the rewards of working with the manuscripts.

ANNELISA STEPHAN, Germanic Languages, UCLA