



## ***Old English Medievalism: Reception and Recreation in the 20th and 21st Centuries***

Edited by Rachel A. Fletcher,

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### **Book Review**

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*Old English Medievalism* is Volume XXI in D. S. Brewer's "Medievalism" series, which "[investigates] the influence and appearance of 'the medieval' in the society and culture of later ages." As such, it is a welcome third book in the series to focus specifically on later reception of the culture of pre-conquest England.

The fascinating diversity of postmedieval approaches to early medieval England represented by this collection—ranging from the study of postcolonialism and Old English poetry in nineteenth-century New Zealand to the fictional "Old English" concocted in Paul Kingsnorth's novel *The Wake* (2014)—are managed into four coherent sections: (I) "Reinventing, Reimagining and Recontextualizing Old English Poetry"; (II) "Invoking Early Medieval England and Its Language in Historical Fiction"; (III) "Translating and Composing in Neo-Old English"; and (IV) "Approaching Old English and Neo-Old English in the Classroom." Despite the designation of these later essays to a section devoted specially to the classroom, almost any of the contributions could find a pedagogical purpose in an Old English class, a class on medievalism, or a lesson on the literature of later ages that explores its influences in literary history.

For example, in the first section, M. J. (Jane) Toswell's chapter "Old English as a Playground for Poets?" examines the work of two less well-known twenty-first century poets, Christopher Patton, and

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Jeramy Dodds, alongside the already widely recognized echoes of Old English style in W. H. Auden's poetry. She concludes with an important caution: Since scholars of Old English are often delighted to find modern writer's interested in and influenced by our period, we are apt to celebrate them too unthinkingly. "Poetry that plays with Old English poetry is poetry for the *literati*" (34), who are therefore also most probably already privileged readers whose pleasure in poetry may entail sharing an elite "secret" with the author. There may be worse, she warns, at stake. Since the "temporally and spatially" distant medieval England allows poets an "untethered engagement" (35)—by which I take it she means one without historical accuracy or moral responsibility—with this literature, a poet may posture as "a teacher, a prophet, perhaps a vatic orator" (35), as if channeling the past to prescribe authoritatively about the present. Literary uses of the past, in other words, are always motivated. Our enthusiasm for their engagement with the past should not overshadow our careful examination of such motivations. This is, of course, not a new idea. It nevertheless forms a salutary reminder for our times and for our students.

Further chapters in the first section are devoted to reinventing and recontextualizing Old English literature. Victoria Condie suggests that, while *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) does not explicitly engage with Old English poetry, its soundscape nevertheless sets up "aural allusions" (38) suggestive of accentual verse. Her chapter thus makes a wider argument that "influence" is something more capacious, less linear and intentional, than is often studied. Martina Marzulla follows with a chapter exploring Hamish Claytons novel *Wulf* (2011), which structures a story about famous Māori chief Te Rauparaha as a retelling of the Exeter Book poem *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Reading this novel from a postcolonial perspective, Marzulla argues, illustrates one method to dissociate medievalist scholarship from nationalist narratives that connects, and suggesting that Old English language and literature are "surprisingly useful tools with which to trace New Zealand's colonial past" (67). Indeed, it may not be so surprising when we recall that Māori culture was already connected with the Anglo-Saxon past in the mind of Sharon Turner, who made direct comparisons in his grand and influential history. As early as the second edition of *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1807), Turner describes early medieval English kings as existing in "a New Zealand state of general warfare," and similar examples from later parts and later editions of this history illustrate the ethnographic and evolutionary view of culture that animated Turner's story of the British past. Condie's

chapter, in other words, suggests a fruitful avenue for further study, not only of the reception of Old English literature but of the elaboration of “Anglo-Saxon” culture in the very historiography that first imagined it. In the final chapter in this section, Fran Allfrey analyzes the way the British Museum exhibits and the National Trust displays at the Sutton Hoo site use Old English literature to frame their presentation of artifacts. Such displays, she argues “instrumentalize” Old English as script—as itself a form of artifact—that directs the gaze and the imagination of visitors at the expense of their complex textual and literary histories. This simplification can have both salutary and noxious effects: opening the interpretation of the past but creating a vision of “heritage” implicitly exclusionary. This section thus offers different approaches to connecting, or perceiving the connection between, Old English literature and the way we frame our perception of the past in our contemporary world.

Similarly teachable, perhaps, are the lessons about fictional reimagining of past languages. In the next section of the book, Judy Kendall’s chapter is illustrative. Continuing the analysis begun by Oliver Traxel’s essay, which precedes it in *Old English Medievalism*, Kendall examines the use of a pseudo-historical version of English in which Kingsnorth composes his whole work. Traxel offers a “systematic linguistic analysis” (99) of this imaginary English, concluding that counter to Kingsnorth’s claim that he has “updated” Old English to make it more recognizable to modern readers, he has in fact produced an archaized modern English—working in the opposite direction, and somewhat inconsistently.

Traxel makes some effort to insist that his linguistic analysis—highlighting what might be perceived as shortcomings in Kingsnorth’s imaginary language creation—should not be taken to discredit the novel. This essay thereby sidesteps an important conversation about the ideological goals and effects of constructing a specifically *linguistic* past for England, a practice that, as Traxel rightly notes, appears quite new in historical fiction (114). Kendall likewise notes the narrative possibilities opened or foreclosed using pseudo-language, even if this language would not stand up to “scrutiny among linguists” (121): its immersive evocation of the past and its challenges to the reader unversed in medieval languages.

Even in essays explicitly focused on linguistic and literary analysis of imagined languages, it ought to be acknowledged that language myths are intricately bound in beliefs about cultural authenticity and historical continuity. In this way, as Toswell’s essay

already reminded us, the ideological implications of Kingsnorth's "shadow language" cannot be ignored. Some of the features of Kingsnorth's faux-Old English seem to me suggestive of regional British Englishes (like those of the East Midlands associated with the Lincolnshire fens where *The Wake* is set). Likewise, this language includes features of colloquial speech often associated with rural areas—the use of "what" in place of "that" as a determiner, for example, or the use of a "historical present" tense in reported speech ("of England *he saes* I can tell *thū naht*") (29) that his characters use apparent past singular verb forms with a plural subject *they locs*, *they belyfs*, *they macs* (they looks, believes, makes). How such dialects "mark" characters as sympathetic or otherwise tells us a great deal about the politics of language in Great Britain that Kingsnorth taps into when he imagines, as he does, that "the best way to tell new stories is to reclaim old words."<sup>1</sup> The key distinction that emerges in the political disposition of dialect is an opposition between the rustic and the sophisticated, the regional and the global, where the latter are seen as "sophisticated" in the transferred and pejorative sense, "deprived of naturalness" or "mixed with some foreign substance" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Kingsnorth's "shadow language," in other words, is marked for class at least if not more than it is marked historically. It conflates the past with the rural, engaging the assumption that each can be understood in terms of the other: the past is natural and simple, the rural is traditional and authentic. These features leverage linguistic stereotypes to retell an already ideological story of an English national hero (who, as some research has suggested, was probably Danish) with a long history of fictionalization reaching back at least to Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake, the Last of the English*, if not to medieval chronicles themselves.

It is hard not to see Kingsnorth's use of Old English in this context, set in a society with its way of life "falling apart,"<sup>2</sup> as connected to his public championing of parochialism as opposed to globalism, his anxiety about the death of a "distinctively English" way of life, as giving voice to a sort of Romantic eco-conservatism if not outright ethnonationalism, by retelling the story of England in "old words."<sup>3</sup> If, as Kingsnorth himself has claimed, the language is the most important aspect of his book, it seems unwise to offer linguistic and literary analyses of his work that do not similarly examine his motivations. Also in this section, Karen Louise Jolly's attention to these "worrisome" implications of Kingsnorth's novel in the third chapter, "Reimagining Early Medieval Britain: The Language of

Spirituality,” is thus an important addition to the analyses by Traxel and Kendall. Jolly points out the role of language myths in the quest for “pure” indigenous Englishness (143). She contrasts Kingsnorth’s attempt to explore history through language with those of Umberto Eco and J. R. R. Tolkien, turning her analysis to the potential in fiction of presenting alternative, historical worldviews—of “translating” beliefs from age to age as from language to language.

James Aitchison’s essay, which rounds out the discussion of “Historical Fiction” in this section, diverges from the others in not discussing *The Wake*. Instead, Aitchison compares his own novel, *The Harrowing* (2016), to Philip Terry’s *Tapestry* (2013) and Justin Hill’s *Shieldwall* (2011). Considering the overlapping *modes* in which historical fiction operates—past-as-fable, past-as-trauma, and past-as-spectacle, to name just a few, Aitchison draws attention to the way that narrative strategy often dominates choices about the representation of the past, beyond any attempt to represent a consistent vision of the past.

The two final sections of *Old English Medievalism* are especially relevant to the classroom as they attend to the production of neo-Old English, which is to say composition in, or translation into, Old English in works like Peter Baker’s version of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Æðelgyðe Ellendæda on Wundorlande* (2015). In Section III, Fritze Kemmler reviews the linguistic and literary considerations in the translation of modern texts into Old English. Denis Ferhatović examines the language of food in Baker’s *Æðelgyðe*, drawing attention to the way that this translation thematizes cultural and historical difference (195) and offers nuance to reconstruction of the reality of early medieval food culture (206). Rafael J. Pascual attempts to illustrate his theories of Old English verse in an original neo-Old English composition retelling the death of Theoden in Tolkien’s *The Fall of the King* and follows his poem with advice to teachers considering using composition in Old English as part of their pedagogy.

In the penultimate chapter in Section IV, a group of authors draws attention to the influence of Henry Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Primer* on Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson’s well-established textbook *A Guide to Old English* (first published by Mitchell in 1965). This connection, they argue, illustrates the close continuity of Old English pedagogy with late-nineteenth-century language learning—the chapter pursues Sweet’s principles, especially those normalizing impulses connected to linguistic imperialism. The authors thus offer a meticulously traced “genealogy of thought” (240) that shows precisely

how—with no evidence of conscious bias on the part of Mitchell or Robinson—dated and questionable assumptions about the world can be subtly writ in our language pedagogy. The final chapter, by Gabrielle Knappe, investigates the use of neo-Old English in television, which appears to be part of a recent trend toward “linguistic realisms” (246). Knappe offers a taxonomy of the functions of fictional Old English dialogue as well as the challenges posed by bring this historical language to script and screen, not to mention the challenges afterward of bringing those linguistic representations back, from “screen to school” (250).

Overall, then, this book offers a series of diverse essays in clear dialogue with each other. They reflect on Old English study in its recent cultural contexts, making an articulate case for more critical assessment of the ideological legacies entangled with the field. They also offer practical, pedagogical guidance. This book could readily and usefully be integrated with a course on Old English—either as contextual reading for advanced students or as the basis of whole lessons that teach Old English through lenses more familiar to modern students.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Paul Kingsnorth, “England’s Uncertain Future,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/englands-uncertain-future>.

<sup>2</sup>Kingsnorth quoted in Mark Brown, “Paul Kingsnorth’s *The Wake*: A Novel Approach to Old English,” *The Guardian*, November 9, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/09/paul-kingsnorth-the-wake-novel-approach-old-english>.

<sup>3</sup>These attitudes are all explicit in Kingsnorth’s own essay for *The Guardian* cited in note 1. In this essay, Kingsnorth attempts to distinguish his defense of English identity as an embrace of parochialism counter to either hard right or liberal views.

