Amodio, Mark C. 2014: *The Anglo-Saxon Literature Handbook*. Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell. xvi + 412 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-631-22698-7. 27.99€

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "Handbook," on the second entry of the term, as "a book containing concise information on a particular subject; a guidebook." You do not need to revise its back cover to state that the book object of this review could be classified as such. Specially if this book constitutes, in the humble opinion of this reviewer, not *a* handbook but *the* handbook on Anglo-Saxon Literature, whose fate will be to become the standard introductory reference of our field.

In the academic world very few important things are produced without acknowledging—or challenging—what others have previously done. That is especially true in the academic genre of the handbook/companion/guide, where previous scholars have done a tremendous amount of work on the subject. If Bernard of Chartres stated back in the 12th century that scholars were just "nanos gigantum humeris insidentes," i.e. "dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants," it is clear that references such as Solopova & Lee (2007), North & Allard (2007), Treharne & Walker (2010), Stodnick & Trilling (2012), Lees (2013), or Godden & Lapidge's (2013) new edition of their classic companion, constitute important previous *enta geweorc* whose authors could be seen as those giants upon which contemporary handbook writers need to stand on, although none of the aforementioned references are mentioned in the bibliography, exception made of Godden and Lapidge's *Companion* in its first edition. Mark Amodio is no dwarf, but an academic giant who, as Newton stated popularizing Bernard of Chartres's saying, "has seen further by standing in the shoulders of giants." His handbook, though written in the tradition of the aforementioned references, not only *sees further* in the field but *sees through* the problems of its vastness, being thus a volume written

by, as Andy Orchard highlights in its back cover, "one of the finest teachers in the field. This is exactly the kind of book I wish I had read when I was a student, and exactly the kind of book I wish I had written myself." That is the feeling we all lecturers have: we are facing the book we all wanted to write and use with our students, to recommend to those interested in Anglo-Saxon Literature. Not *a* handbook, but *the* handbook. Let me describe, then, this volume and some of the reasons for such a statement.

The structure of the volume combines sections that traditionally tend to appear in handbooks with parts that present a new way to understand the information contained in them. After the standard introductory material (i–xix) typical of the "handbook" genre—Table of contents, Preface by the author, Acknowledgments, Note on the Text and List of Abbreviations—the reader will find the contents of the book organised in five different parts. Part 1, "Anglo-Saxon England: Backgrounds and Beginnings" (1–32), offers a rather innovative way to introduce the topic. Several theoretical concepts need to be explained first to give the essential context any introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature needs. As such context has to constitute a "brief and necessarily selective overview" (15), Amodio presents an accessible, brief and excellently written concise summary of the key points concerning the political, ecclesiastical, intellectual, linguistic and literary history of the period. Two final sections on orality and literacy ("Traditions: Oral and Literate") and on dating OE texts ("A Note on Dating Anglo-Saxon Texts") close this first part, together with a succinct but complete further reading list on the section's topics.

Part 2 starts the literary discussion and explanation. Here we see for the first time the structure that the reader will find in the rest of the handbook. Every text—or set of texts—discussed in the volume present the same organization. First, a small paragraph gives the precise codicological information of the text (MS, folio, lacunae, etc); then, the proper reading/analysis of the text follows.

With an allotted space of three-four pages for every text, a difficulty indeed if you have to write an analysis of the entire Anglo-Saxon corpus, Amodio manages quite successfully to give a concise, highly precise and superbly written account on the fundamental issues of every text, taking into account not only the most updated scholarly arguments but also the most original points of view in discussing them. At the end of every section a further reading list follows; this section could be a minor thing, but having a close look at it is enough to reveal Amodio's outstanding command of Anglo-Saxon scholarship: the list of references given always combine classical references in the field from the 1960s to the 1990s with contemporary essential academic work published in the first decade of the 21st century (2000s–2010s). The labour of selecting the references reveals the knowledge Amodio has of them, as he always gives the essential further reading works. Virtually no important aspect is left unrevised in the texts and no major critical bibliographical reference is missed in the reference list.

With this in mind, the contents of the book for parts 2 and 3 present the expected and customary division in Prose and Poetry. Hence, Part 2 "Anglo-Saxon Prose" (33–133) presents a full account of the OE prose corpus with the aforementioned structure. It covers the writings of King Alfred the Great (Alfred's Translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, of St Augustine's *Soliloquies*, of the *Prose Psalms* of the Paris Psalter and his Preface to Wærferth's Translation of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*), the *Vercelli Homilies*, The *Blickling Homilies,* the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Old English Orosius, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, *Apollonius of Tyre*, the *Old English Martyrology*, *The Life of St Guthlac, The Wonders of the East, The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, and The Life of St Christopher* (quite conveniently in a joint section), *Bald's Leechbook* and *Leechbook III*, the writings of Wulfstan and the writings of Ælfric of Eynsham (*Catholic Homilies, Lives of Saints, Colloquy*

on the Occupations, and a very appropriate and original section on Ælfric as Author).

Similarly, Part 3 deals with "Anglo-Saxon Poetry" (135–332) with the same aim of exhaustion and in-depth analysis. After an initial section on the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, which gives the necessary contextual and thematic common features shared by the extant corpus of Old English poetry, this part proceeds with a thorough analysis of that corpus itself, organized in the traditional manuscript division. Thus, once Cædmon's Hymn & Bede's Death Song have been described as "foundational" pieces of this OE poetic tradition, this section revises the Junius Manuscript (*Genesis A, Genesis B, Exodus, Daniel* and *Christ and Satan*, the poems of the Vercelli Book (*Andreas, Fates of the Apostles, Soul and Body I* (and *II*), *Homiletic Fragment I, The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene*), the Exeter Book in its entirety and complexity (*The Advent Lyrics* [*Christ I*], *The Ascension* [*Christ II*], *Christ in Judgement* [*Christ III*], *Life of St Guthlac, Guthlac A, Guthlac B, Azarias, The Phoenix, Juliana, The Wanderer, The Gifts of Men, Precepts, The Seafarer, Vainglory, Widsið, The Fortunes of Men, Maxims I, The Order of the World, The Rhyming Poem, The Panther, The Whale, The Partridge: The Old English Physiologus, Soul and Body II* (and *I*), *Deor, Wulf and Eadwacer*, the Exeter Book Riddles, *The Wife's Lament, Judgement Day I, Resignation* [*A* and *B*], *The Descent into Hell, Almsgiving, Pharaoh, The Lord's Prayer I, Homiletic Fragment II, The Husband's Message,* and *The Ruin*), the equally complex and thematically dense poems of Cotton Vitellius A.xv (*Beowulf* and *Judith*, whose section is by far the longest piece of the handbook) and a final miscellaneous section on poems from various manuscripts (*The Metres of Boethius, The Metrical Psalms of the* Paris Psalter, *Solomon and Saturn I and II, The Menologium, The Rune Poem*, The Poems of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, *The Battle of Brunanburh, The Battle of Maldon, The Fight at Finnsburh, Waldere* and *Durham*).

We could say that these two sections constitute the novelty, as the information contained in them does not tend to appear in

handbooks and companions, which are keen on discussing the topics and themes of Anglo-Saxon Literature rather than the texts themselves; perhaps the only exception to the handbooks mentioned at the beginning of this review could be Johnson & Treharne (2005), which offered a combined approach. This sort of textual-based explanation is rather more prone to be included in anthologies of translated texts such as North, Allard and Gillies (2011), Treharne (2010) or even the classic Bradley (1982) volume. For the aims of this handbook these first two parts are essential and somewhat mandatory; hence, the perfect complement to this previous exhaustive analysis of the texts had to be a discussion of their interpretation and research themes; that is precisely what Amodio includes in Parts 4 and 5: critical approaches and themes.

Part 4, "Critical Approaches" (333–360), follows then this aforementioned main trend. After stating, in a brief section labelled "The Alterity of Anglo-Saxon Literature," the "inherent otherness" (338) of the literature composed in this period, Amodio proceeds to give a succinct account on the guidelines that build the theoretical framework of the main critical approaches—in his opinion—to Anglo-Saxon Literature: Source Studies, Manuscript Studies, Grammatical and Syntactic Studies and Theoretical Perspectives, a section in which he deals with the issue in more detail by mentioning specific "perspectives" or areas of theoretical analysis ("Christianity," "Germanic legend," "Gender," "Psychological" and "Oral-traditional"). The approach is somewhat brief, similar to what you could find in some recent volumes devoted to revising key concepts, like those by Solopova & Lee (2007) or Franzten (2012). Amodio is totally aware of the fact that "anything like a complete treatment of the history of Anglo-Saxon literary criticism falls well beyond the scope of [his handbook]" (338), so his brief key-concept oriented approach is more than adequate to his aims.

As a complement to this, Amodio offers a final part—Part 5, "Themes" (361–380)—in which he revises, with brevity but with lots of wit, some "major and minor themes that percolate through

the poetry and prose extant from the Anglo-Saxon period" (361). He begins with a caveat defining his conception of "theme" in "Anglo-Saxon Thematics" and continues with a revision of some of those themes that follow his description: "Heroism," "The End of the World," "The Transitory Nature of Life," "Fate," "Wisdom," "Otherness" and "Oral-Traditional Themes." The reader has again the same *déjà-vu* feeling of facing a key-concept entry-like section (Frantzen 2012 is the reference that comes to mind) and one wishes to have read more on every topic, but the aims are very specific and the scope of these two parts is limited; the result is, then, highly interesting and complementary. The absence of a "further reading" section in Parts 4 and 5 constitutes the only drawback of these two parts. Due to the brevity of the sections, having done something similar to the reference sections found in the main parts of the handbook would have been much helpful to the reader. Including such a section is my suggestion for further editions.

The volume is closed (381–412) with the customary and useful cross-reference sections: a general "Bibliography" with all the references used, an "Index" of key words and names and an "Index of Manuscripts."

All in all, as I said before, Amodio's handbook is destined to be *the* handbook on Anglo-Saxon Literature from now onwards for his quality, concision, exhaustiveness and width of scope. I mentioned how this sort of textual-based explanation is typically included in anthologies of translated texts; when you finish reading Amodio's excellent sections on, for instance, *Guthlac* or *Deor*, you wish to have the text there with you to be instantly enjoyed and devoured with Amodio's critical insights fresh on your mind. It is true than we can all very easily go to our shelves and pick one of the aforementioned anthologies or any other edition of those OE texts, but as a reader I would find perfection if I just had a complementary volume with Amodio's translations of the texts he described so brilliantly. Let this be a *wishful thinking* sort of suggestion to Wiley-Blackwell and the author himself.

At the beginning of this review I quoted the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s second entry of the term "Handbook;" the first entry reads as follows: "the manual of medieval ecclesiastical offices and ritual." As members of the "order" of Anglo-Saxonists, we are most lucky to use Amodio's handbook to perform our rituals and offices when celebrating—in all the meanings gathered in the OED entry for the verb "celebrate"—the teaching of Anglo-Saxon Literature in due form.[1]

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