O'Keeffe O'Brien Katherine. ed. 1997: *Reading Old English Texts.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. xi+ 231 pp.

Reading Old English Texts focuses on the critical methods currently being used and developed for reading and analysing texts written in Old English. The book is arranged with nine chapters in charge of well known scholars. Moreover, each chapter engages with current work on Old English texts from a particular methodological stance. The authors are all experts in Old English language and literature. Each section includes a brief historical background and a definition of the method under consideration; furthermore, we find in this volume an illustration of the ways in which texts are read through this approach. The larger issues raised by the interactions between the separate chapters are a major focus of the Introduction written by the editor K. O'Brien O'Keeffe who give us a brief historical background to the approach.

From the very beginning O'Keeffe informs us about the main interest of the volume, and she says "This is a book about ways of reading Old English, each of which presupposes a set of interpretative practices" (1). It has been suggested that our fin-de-siècle looks back on a century of prodigious changes and on intellectual movements which present us with stunning changes in looking at the world. "Our challenge in looking forward" says the editor, "is to think of the ways in which these new perspectives help us to ask new questions in Old English" (17).

In chapter one, *The Comparative Approach*, M. Lapidge shows how the comparative analysis is accessible to any student of literature who is versed in at least two languages. The application of the comparative approach requires no lengthy apprenticeship in the vocabularies of the latest theoretical movements because this kind of analysis is immediate and direct and may be practised by any reader who possesses a wide literary culture, and in the case of Old English has been practised by critics of very various ability "since the time when Old English literature first emerged as a subject of interest in its own right" (20). Lapidge points out that this method has been practised since

Old English first came to light in the early nineteenth century and in various guises is flourishing today. (Frank 1987, Orchard 1995)

Traditionally scholars of Anglo-Saxon culture, such as W. P. Ker (1904) or H. M. Chadwick (1912) followed a "cultural relativism" (Viktor Zhirmunsky 1967). Once the New Criticism came to be practised by students of Old English literature in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, interest in the comparative works done by Ker and Chadwick among others, inevitably waned. Therefore, students of comparative literature were obliged to rethink the theoretical bases on which their discipline rested (Wellek 1963, Fokkema 1982), and was redefined with a wider conception of the discipline. "It cannot be confined to a single method: description, characterisation, interpretation, narration, evaluation, are used in its discourse just as much as comparison" (Wellek 1970). In the last three decades, the comparative method has embraced various post-modern critical approaches, semiotics, deconstruction or psychoanalysis to mention only three. The comparative method yielded significant results analysing motifs, types and themes, including those of kinship, commitatus, exile, community, drinking, feasting, the hall, treasures, weapons, beasts of battle, fate, "ubi sunt", consolation, "sapientia et fortitudo", and many others. (Greenfield-Robinson 1980). But it is in the study of literary genres that the comparative method has yielded more significant results, and Lapidge illustrates this assertion by considering four genres of Old English: gnomic, enigmatic, epic, and lyric verse.

The essay shows how the development of the comparative method involves more than placing two texts side by side. It is known that current comparative work in Old English has taken more culturally informed directions than in previous decades, and combines textual and cultural analysis. In order to prove this fact, Lapidge offers a demonstration of the comparative method in his reading of two apparently dissimilar epic moments in *Beowulf*: Grendel's descend into fear at the recognition of Beowulf's grip and Turnus realisation that he is about to lose his battle against Aeneas. Here, the purpose of the comparative approach is to accentuate the distinctive and individual features of a particular work of literature. Lapidge is optimistic about the future of this approach and he says: "Though it (the comparative approach) has a long and distinguished past, therefore, the comparative approach may also be said to have a bright future in Anglo-Saxon studies" (35).

D. Scragg in chapter 2, *Source Study*, shows how source studies work in a textual culture in which borrowing ideas was the dominant intellectual practice. We know that Old English literature did not have authors, in the modern sense, and the Anglo-Saxon culture did not have a concept of ideas in the way that copyright law construes them as intellectual property. In this milieu source study seeks to make discriminations. The main interest in source analysis is to establish levels of borrowing for further studies of the stylistic difference of a particular Old English text and "let us see what forms the poets imagination imposes on his given material and gives us the clearest idea of the poet he is" (Irving 1983).

Scragg points out that in the first half of this century source studies were essentially historical and were wedded to a rather mechanical reflex of positivism, but in the last decades, he says, source analysis is most interested in cultural concepts and principles, looking for the vehicles for transmissions of ideas, the manuscripts moving to and from the continent or the traces of intellectual exchange with the Irish or the Continent. On the other hand, the term "source" must be confined to written texts or material that may be thought to have reached the author in written form, even if no manuscript copy survives (40). Old English source studies began in the nineteenth-century as an adjunct to establish an authoritative text, and an author's sources were seen as a "scientific" evidence. Scragg writes very briefly about various international projects associated with sources such as *A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* by Helmut Gneuss, which aims to describe the contents of all manuscripts written or owned in England before 1100. Another project mentioned by Scragg is *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* SASLC, organised in the United States; this project aims at a scrupulous search for evidence of knowledge of all classical, patristic, and Carolingian texts in Anglo-saxon England; at the same time, the project tries to correct and improve the volume written by Ogilvy (1981 (1967)). The approach remains similar to that of Ogilvy in that the Latin authors are listed alphabetically, but the scope of the inquiry is much wider taking in oral and written material and evidence from booklists as well as from surviving manuscripts. The work is supported by detailed bibliographical lists and though the entries are by individual scholars they follow a standard formula. The completed work is expected to be published in four volumes and also perhaps electronically, as Scragg says

"This work will become one of the most significant works of scholarship of its generation." (53)

Alongside SASLC there is another international project *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici*: *A Register of Written Sources Used by Authors in Anglo-Saxon England*. This project and SASLC project are complementary; the first one works backwards from texts written in England to their sources in English, Latin or Greek, while SASLC works forward from Latin authors to Anglo-Saxon England. All these projects can provide vital information, says Scragg "such vital information as that which distinguishes transgressive texts from those which support the dominant ideology can be best gained from an insight into the materials that Anglo-Saxon authors worked with" (56).

D. Donoghue in his essay *Language Matters* looks at the claims of philology and linguistics in their studies of Old English and the apparent division between these disciplines. Donoghue points out that current practitioners of philology consciously distance themselves from the claims of positivism, erecting, testing and modifying their hypotheses with clear understanding of the subjectivity involved. Donoghue examines the dichotomy between philological and linguistic approaches to Old English language and Old English texts, illustrating how both combine in contemporary writing on Old English and how both continue et renew and reinvent their engagements with the subject. Philologists direct their work to textual editing and to compiling reference works such as grammars and dictionaries, they study mainly Old English narrative poetry taking into account empirical data and they keep their theories on a descriptive level (Mitchell 1985). Linguistics, on the other hand, move from a sampling of fata to a theory in the hope of establishing rules "with sweeping explanatory power"; linguistics prefer prose with identifiable dates as the closest approximation to the spoken language. In fact, in 1992 were published three books that blurred the traditional division; R.D. Fulk's *A History of Old English Meter*, Richard M. Hogg's *A Grammar of Old English*, *and The Cambridge History of the English Language vol. 1* edited by Hogg. In these books we can appreciate the fusion of the two methodologies in different ways and actually Hogg admits that he does not find the philology-linguistics debate helpful, and sees instead a symbiotic relationship between the empiricism of one and the theoretical orientation of the other.

Donoghue works in his essay through an argument on Kuhn's Law, both to illustrate the specific process of thinking in an approach through language, and to demonstrate some ways in which such an approach connects itself with current questions in palaeography and editing. As Donoghue says: "It would be wise for those revisiting Kuhn's Law *Satzpartikelgesetz* to consider not just metrical and syntactic theory but also a specialised kind of reception theory to which the manuscript context might point" (75).

N. Howe presents in his assay *Historicist Approaches* the various ways in which scholars of Old English literature have use history in the service of their reading and he examines historicist approaches in two planes: the kinds of narratives they use and the ways in which they deploy their evidence. He analyses briefly theories and forms of historicism and he considers three well known books written by Girvan (1935), Huppé (1959) and Tolkien (1936). The volume written by Girvan presents a portrait of social conditions in seventh-century England as a theoretical model and then he finds these same conditions depicted in *Beowulf*. Huppé, on the other hand, draws its exegetical-patristic framework from Augustine's writings in order to set Old English poetry within the Christian ideal of "caritas" in an Anglo-saxon audience. Both critics believe that the text must be read within the accepted hegemonic ideas and forms of its culture. Tolkien, however, studies Beowulf as a historical poem about the pagan past, but he thinks that this epic poem is above all a literary text because his author has written it with a poetical and not with a historical interest. In the last decades critics, as Robinson (1985), follow philological-formalist methods and they depart from verbal texture of the poems. Howe agrees with this methodology and suggests in the article that modern readers must guard against the overly generalised and all-encompassing forms of reading used by critics such as Girvan or Huppé.

To illustrate the ways in which historicist reading can illuminate an Old English text, Howe presents AElfric's *Colloquy* and in his reading shows the ways in which historicism attempts to negociate the gap between past and present. We can appreciate in his essay a protest against "dead" history. He points out that the facts that may well help us best historicize Old English texts come first from the language in which these same texts are written and then from the physical manuscript contexts in which they survive. Howe tell us:

> Anglo-Saxonists must turn to the language itself and perform a kind of linguistic ethnography or archaeology, a reading of the culture through its words and its grammar. In a direct sense, historicist criticism of Old English texts is most likely to be illuminating when it grounds itself in a sense of the language and yet also ventures beyond the self-imposed proscriptions of traditional philology (89).

A. Orchard examines various models for approaching the distinction between oral and written elements in Old English in his essay *Oral Tradition*. Orchard shows the ways in which the hypothesis for orality in Old English argued on the basis of Homeric and South Slavic poetry that formulas were the guarantee of oral origin. Last century some German scholars have noted that Old English verse is fundamentally formulaic relaying heavily on repeated words and phrases. These theories were wholly submerged in the immediate wake of the widespread application of the so-called "oral formulaic" theory to Old English poetry in the 1950s and 60s. The logic of this theory relied on Milman Parry and Albert Lord who had sought to demonstrate that Homer was an illiterate bard. In 1953 Magoun applied oral formulaic theory to *Beowulf* and suggested that the poem was an oral text composed entirely of formulas, large and small; therefore, *Beowulf* is formulaic and not a lettered poem. In the last two or three decades, however, many critics have suggested that Old English verse does not rely simply on the verbatim repetition of inflexible formulas, but rather on the recognition of related formulaic systems. More recently, critics have suggested that orality and literacy are interacted in subtle ways.

Orchard tries to show how this method can be extended to Old English prose texts. In his study about Wulfstan's sermons, the author states that repetition occurs at the level of phrase, theme and larger passages. Orchard also studies the repetition technique in some *Exeter Book* riddles, 30, 36 etc., some of them are the product of a written transmission while others may reflect some oral elements; this fact shows the difficulties in determining how repetition and variance function in a scribal culture and the contradictory inherent in any study of the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon England. His further brief analysis of the *Metrical Preface* of the *Pastoral Care,* which may be Alfred's work, shows how the metrical text demonstrates some oral elements

besides his "literacy". To sum up, Orchard's main interest is to show how Old English texts reflect the complex interaction between orality and literacy.

P. E. Szarmach presents, in his essay about the recovery of the original texts, a theoretical discussion and a contribution to the decline and fall of the "absolute" text; he shows how the various choices an editor can make in preparing an edition affect what we can read in the text and how the text means. Szarmach points out that reading Old English texts requires an understanding of how any text we read has come into being in the way we read it. He says that it requires some understanding of the manner in which texts came to be preserved, how they were transmitted, the circumstances under which they were copied, and the relevant factors under which they received the printed form which aids our reading. Szarmach divides his essay in four sections: The one and the many: Optimism and recensionism, Instability of texts, The special case: oral literature, and Towards an electronic future for editing. Szarmach, in dealing with the editions of Old English texts, analyses two main traditions of textual criticism, the "optimist" edition, (the editor presents the best text of a given work), and the "recensionist" edition or "eclectic" text; in this case the editor attempts to recreate the author's texts choosing readings from various witnesses. Szarmach points out that these methods are practically irrelevant for Old English studies and a theoretical bother because in most cases we have only one text. When the author is referring to the "instability of texts, he presents three examples: in the first one, he study the different interpretations given by Thorpe and Godden in their editions of *Aelfric's Catholic Homilies* and how the different treatments of the text can influence the meaning. In the second example he shows the editorial interpretations of the terms "Mod-thrydo waeg" in *Beowulf* l. 1931b; the problem is to know how many verbal units we have in this expression or weather this terms represent the name of a female character. In the third example the author analyses the opening of the *Wife's Lament*, an ambiguous text as there is no "consensus omnium" whether the feminine singular forms "geomorre" and "mynre sylfre" are referring back to a woman or to an allegorical figure rendered in feminine grammatical form. The possible existence of a female voice means "that the poem could be the earliest such poem in the Middle Ages, antedating by hundreds of years a more ready documented later medieval tradition" (136). In the third section of his article, Szarmach presents the fact that Old English literature is basically an oral literature, and

therefore editors must be aware that there is another level of mediation beyond those which a lettered transmission history imposes; the editors and the readers, is suggested, must keep in mind that there was an oral tradition in Old English literature that had its impact on the written tradition.

Finally, Szarmach tell us about the future of the electronic editions and he suggest that the product will contain five grand categories: text, glossary, intertext, graphics and bibliography; at the same time, modern technology makes possible the inclussion of other categories such as sound, video, etc. On the other hand, Szarmach points out that the creative editor has moved "to the fore directing meaning intrusively", as the editors may affect the meaning of the texts they edit on the grand level of version or on the local textual level of word choice. "If the computer is the wave of the future" he says, "then the user/ reader will have his/ her day, and democracy, not expertise, will rule" (143).

Clare Lees in her essay *At a crossroads: Old English and feminist criticism* analyses the relationship between feminist criticism and Anglo-Saxon studies in four sections: Feminist origins and omissions, History, methodology, difference; Gender, genre and identity, and *Elene*'s voice. It is known that feminist criticism, mainly in its more radical forms shares with other postmodern theories a certain scepticism about narratives of origins. In the last three decades, however, feminist critics have participated in many studies about the relation between feminism and Old English texts. Lees offers a preliminary sketch on the history of feminism in Anglo-saxon studies. The author explores the ways in which feminist approaches to Old English texts draw attention to the presuppositions of the discipline; her analysis of feminist scholarship on Old English addresses questions of method. She addresses a critical methodology issue: how the feminists negotiate between the methods and techniques of conventional studies and the strategies of feminist theory and praxis? Her question is relevant for Old English studies since it addresses the ways in which political desire and objective technique may be made to work productively together. Lees in the last section of her essay suggests that reading women also requires reading men, and the representation of masculine warrior culture in the surviving texts points out to the constructed and gendered aesthetics of the canon of Old English writings. Lees suggests that Cynewulf's *Elene* can be read following various strategies of feminist criticism to produce readings which show the

operations of gender and agency in Old English literature. The author explores the relation between gender, genre, and the formation of belief in culture, her reading of *Elene* points to how both genre and gender intersect in Elene's representation as a Christian figure and how the meaning of that figure is further nuanced by exploring the connections ad disconnection between allegory and gender.

Carol B. Pasternack deals with the applicability of post-modern theories to the reading of Old English texts in her essay *Post-Structuralist theories: the subject and the text*. It is known that structuralism broke the idea that texts directly represent culture or society, and that the meaning in language is constructed rather than natural and is constructed differently for each language and culture. Post-structuralist theories (Derrida's deconstruction, Barthe's and Kristeva's semiotics and textuality, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the subject and Foucault's study of culture) are based on the principle that rather than any natural or universal concept, the relational structure of thought generates meaning, and that structures of thought are structured into and by the linguistic system of a culture and so can be analysed as texts. In her essay, Pasternack study five sections: Deconstruction and the textual basis of perception, Semiotics and textuality, The post-structuralist subject, An Archaeology of culture through texts, and The Anglo-Saxon subject in *Beowulf.*

The author shows how a number of these approaches, semiotics and textuality, psychoanalysis, deconstruction etc., have provoked new forms of historical analyses, not only of the Old English texts themselves, but also of the culture which produced them and the culture which receive them. She focuses her essay on the subject and the text taken into account the post-structuralist thought.

In her reading of the poem *Beowulf*, the author addresses the vision of the heroic past using post-structural analyses of the language and an acceptance of the contradictions individual words seem to embrace, and urges a form of historicism in which past and present are constructed to reflect on each other.

Peter Baker opened his essay *Old English and computing: a guided tour*, asking whether the computer had produced a theoretical revolution in literary studies or had merely enabled scholars to do more effectively what they had

being doing all along. His essay is divided into six sections in order to cover the various electronic resources used in Old English studies nowadays: The *Dictionary of Old English* and the electronic text; Ansaxnet: the global conversation; Hyportext, The World-Wide Web and the electronic edition; Ready reference: the database; Digital imaging and the electronic *Beowulf*, and finally Conclusion: back to the beginning.

Baker presents a brief survey of the history of the computer in Old English scholarship that goes back to the 1960's and 1970's. J.B. Bessinger produced two well known concordances: *A Concordance to Beowulf* and *A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*). The most ambitious of these projects, however, was undertaken at the University of Toronto under the direction of Angus Cameron who proposed to generate an electronic database containing everything written in Old English, 3.000.000 words contained in the 2000 surviving Old English texts. The result was published in two works, *A Michrofiche Concordance to Old English* (1980) and *A Michrofiche Concordance to Old English: The High Frequency Words* (1985). *The Michrofiche Concordance* made an immediate impact in the world of Old English scholarship.

Baker's survey prompts the question whether these resources mark a revolution in studies within Old English or whether they merely allows us to do more of what we were doing before and more quickly; his answer is a cautious "yes" an a provocation to further discussion. It is obvious that the computer offers rapid access to unprecedented quantities of information and it permits us to look at information in new ways, but as Baker says:

> It cannot tell us what information is important, if it can organise information, it cannot tell us how it should be organised. Such decisions remains the province of human thought, and it is from thought -aided but never led by the tools we make- that all theoretical revolution must arise.

In conclusion, O'Keeffe states that "this is a book about ways of reading Old English," and in other paragraph she says "The approaches presented in this volume are offered not as a prescriptions for method, but rather as overviews of ways of reading and invitations to explore further work" (16). These aims no doubt have been achieved by the volume, certainly we are

dealing with a timely book taking into account the interest in the theory, method, and practice of critical reading in recent years.

Moreover, the essays have a presentation and explanation with a scholarly and didactic approach; *Reading Old English Texts* is a very good book for the student of Old English language, literature and culture; in fact, they are concerned to explain their method and its application to a broad undergraduate scholarship who can discovered many suggestions for future works.

Finally, we are faced with a brief bibliography organised in different sections to facilitate the subsequent desire for further reading.

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