



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



Old English Liturgical Verse: A Student Edition.

Edited by Sarah Larratt Keefer. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press. 252pp.

Reviewer(s): Harley Sims

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (June, 2011), pp. 72-79.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/sims%20review.html>

Old English Liturgical Verse: A Student Edition.
Edited by Sarah Larratt Keefer. Peterborough, Ontario:
Broadview Press. 252pp.

by Harley Sims

Teachers of introductory Old English courses have a range of pedagogical resources available to them online, out of print, and currently on the market. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson's *Guide to Old English* and Peter S. Baker's *Introduction to Old English* seem the modern pillars of university bookstores, though no doubt most venerable are the textbooks of Henry Sweet, whose *Anglo-Saxon Primer* and *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse* remain excellent and often reprinted since first appearing in the late-nineteenth century. Because relatively few titles have been reissued or found their way into new editions, however, library shelves offer a hoard of forgotten gems. As is certainly the case with Latin, many academics will have developed a fondness for a particular textbook during their own coursework however long ago, and may seek to reproduce the title for their classrooms if it is no longer offered by publishers. Few instructors nowadays will have heard of Robert J. Kispert's *Old English: A Introduction* and Albert H. Mackwardt and James L. Rosier's *Old English Language and Literature*, both very good, and published within year of each other in 1971 and 1972, respectively.

By their nature, introductions to non-living languages are less prone to obsolescence than critical studies, and many would likely still serve their purpose if pressed back into service.

Where more recent pedagogical material increasingly differs from that of yesteryear is in three assumptions:

1. that students who come to Old English do so with little to no training in linguistics or languages other than English
2. that they will acquire little to none thereafter
3. that they require a great deal of encouragement and patience to be led through what is understood to be an extremely difficult and intimidating subject.

Implicit in these assumptions is the waning position of Old English language studies in English departments everywhere, something often lamented publicly by Anglo-Saxonists themselves. It is, then, something of a *pharmakon* in the Derridean sense—that is, both an antidote and a poison—that many new publications are dedicated to facilitating the study of Old English, as well as ingratiating themselves with students by conceding the difficulties of the task. There can be little doubt that many English students—particularly graduate students—take Old English only because they must, and it is arguably for these reluctant souls that the introductory material of the present and future is tailored. In this vein, Broadview Publishing has released three Old English titles that offer unprecedented accessibility to students: *A*

Gentle Approach to Old English, an accompanying *Reader*, and *Old English Liturgical Verse: A Student Edition*. Of these three, the latter is most novel, and is the subject of this review.

Sarah Larratt Keefer's *Old English Liturgical Verse: A Student Edition* (henceforth *OELV*) is threefold in purpose. First, it "brings together a group of poems that are, with the exception of *Vision of the Rood* [sic], almost unknown and never studied as part of the Old English verse canon" (13). In fact, as Keefer later admits, they are rarely studied at all, describing scholarship on them as "scanty" (16); her own, three-decade-long list of publications easily dominates the bibliography. In (re)introducing the collection, Keefer affords them new titles from those affixed in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (*ASPR*), including the well-known "Dream of the Rood." Second, *OELV* presents its ten works as a poetic subgenre, reflecting aspects of Anglo-Saxon liturgical (that is, ritual- and prayer-based) practices—or reflections thereupon—from 600AD to shortly after the Norman Conquest. Finally, it introduces this poetry to students in two editions of each text: a 'semi-diplomatic' text with minimal emendation, followed by a critical text, which is reset into numbered lines, emended, punctuated, and set with diacritics. For the most part, these editions are facing-page, and their juxtaposition serves to illustrate the profound differences between the manner in which Anglo-Saxon poetry is preserved in manuscripts, and how modern editors have represented it. A facsimile of a

page from a manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 201) is included as well.

The apparatus is conventional and user-friendly. The general 'Introduction and Background' (13-41) provides a brief history of the liturgical practices and reforms of the Church in Anglo-Saxon England, as well as outlines many of the sources, variants, and treatments of the edition's ten poems in both medieval and modern times. A chronology of the eight consulted manuscripts is included, ranging from AD 975 to 1150. This is followed by the actual poems, each led by an introduction outlining its liturgical relevance and followed by a body of endnotes which elucidate underlined Old English words and passages in the critical editions. The bibliography precedes an appendix 'How Old English Poetry Functions,' which outlines the general characteristics of Old English verse, and a forty-page keyed glossary. Among the parsed headwords are provided the full declensions of the personal pronouns and the demonstratives *se* and *þes*, as well as the full conjugations of the verbs *bēon/wesan* 'to be'. It should be noted that although several of the poems contain passages from the Latin Vulgate, translations of these passages are provided in full under the respective poems' subheadings in the 'Introduction and Background' section, not as individually parsed headwords within the glossary. In any case, the Latin is welcome company where, despite its concomitant importance in Anglo-Saxon literary culture, Old English is now taught almost entirely in isolation from it.

The texts of *OELV* begin with three poems modeled after the *Pater Noster*, one each from the Exeter Book (11 lines), Corpus Christi College MS 201 (137 lines), and Junius manuscript (46 lines). All address God and praise Him for His works, though the *Corpus Lord's Prayer* is more eclectic in its incorporation of other material, including hymns and psalms. Following these is the *Baptismal Creed* (68 lines), a statement of faith delivered by candidates for baptism, and two doxologies, or utterances of praise: the *Old English Doxology* (62 lines) and *Titus Alphabet Doxology* (3 lines), entitled *Gloria I* and *II* in *ASPR*, respectively. The interesting situation of the latter is, despite its length, illuminated by the introduction. The two Kentish hymns, *Kentish Hymn of Praise* (44 lines) and *Kentish Great Miserere* (178 lines) make up the largest section of *OELV*, and are interesting for the Kentish language forms both preserve. The first hymn differs substantially from the latter, which relates the story of King David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 to contextualize a meditation on Psalm 50 (*Kentish Psalm 50* being the poem's name in *ASPR*). The verse is intercalated with twenty passages from the Latin Vulgate. The next poem, *Ah, Beloved Lord*—formerly but just as aptly named *Prayer* in *ASPR*—is fascinating for its numerous names and metaphors for God (for several stretches, one per line); many of these epithets will be familiar from better-known poems. Finally, there is the magisterial *Vision of the Rood* (156 lines), a stirring description of Christ's crucifixion as recounted by the Cross itself.

OELV is to be praised foremost for the variety it brings to the student market, whose Old English poetic editions are almost entirely dedicated to secular material. *OELV*'s poems are to be found heretofore only in varied sources, most of them expensive, specialist, and multi-volume. The book is indeed presented by the publisher as such a maverick, with the rear-cover endorsement by Rolf Bremmer holding that Keefer "intentionally breaks away from the modern Old English poetic canon established in the nineteenth century." The comment seems a little overly sensational, however, not only because current Old English readers evince a wider variety of readings than one might assume, but also because more studied 'canonical' poems such as *The Wanderer*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and, of course, *Beowulf*, hardly represent obsolete criteria of excellence. Even were this so, the verses contained in this volume are unlikely to be the ones to replace them; as Keefer acknowledges, *Vision of the Rood*, the volume's second-longest poem and 20% of its 784 total lines of verse, is already part of that canon, and is likewise included in Baker's *Introduction to Old English*, Mitchell and Robinson's *Guide to Old English*, and John C. Pope's *Eight Old English Poems*. The extant Anglo-Saxon corpus is not exactly drowning in poetry (*Beowulf* alone constitutes a tenth of it), but even in terms of explicitly Christian material, the 6-volume *ASPR* holds a greater variety and quality of titles than the current body of student editions and Old English readers might suggest. Students and their instructors are always able to explore this material using earlier resources, however (Marckwardt and Rosier's *Old English*

Language and Literature, for example, offers several long sections from *Genesis A*), and modern publishers can hardly be blamed for favoring as introductory poems the more lay material. In terms of prose, spritual texts remain well-represented among readers, if only because Old and New Testament passages offer some of the most comfortable translation.

In strictly practical terms, it seems a little unclear as to how *OELV* would be incorporated into an Old English curriculum. Traditionally, students would follow up an introductory course on the language with a course specifically dedicated to literature, usually poetry, and often as preparation for a full reading of *Beowulf*. Pope's *Eight Old English Poems*, for example, is a popular reader for that purpose, and contains almost the same amount of poetry as *OELV*. This makes the two possible alternatives, but instructors who consider using the latter must choose between a collection that includes the more canonical, varied, and celebrated texts of *Cædmon's Hymn*, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, and *The Wife's Lament*, and one that focuses on a relatively obscure collection of ecclesiastical meditations. Moreover, *Dream of the Rood* is in both, Pope's glossary and appendix on Old English Versification has much greater range, and *Eight Old English Poems* is more affordable. With under a thousand lines of verse and its elementary format, *Old English Liturgical Verse* could not stand as an alternative to *Beowulf*, which means that it would

have to serve either as the basis for its own, translation-light course, or as a supplementary text for a larger course on Anglo-Saxon ecclesiasticism.