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REVIEW

Transforming Early English. The Reinvention of Early English and Older Scots. By Jeremy J. Smith. Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xvii, 294.

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Some books need to be written at a particular point in time, and Smith's *Transforming Early English* is such a book. Towards the end of the first quarter of the 21st century linguistics is experiencing a process of revision and reconstruction in response to both technological advances and intellectual reflections on its origins, history, and practice. It is witnessing a return of sorts to its 19th century roots, a shift from structural back to functional perspectives on language. Consequently, from its beginnings in *Neuphilologie* of the late 19th century, through the early 20th century split into linguistics and philology and initial attempts of the 1990s to reunify the two under the umbrella of *new philology*, it is entering an new phase, Smith claims, which can be described as *reimagined philology* (27–29).

At the core of this reimagining Smith locates the ongoing redefinition of pragmatics in a multimodal, material, and paratextual way. While classical pragmatics focuses on linguistics construction of discourse (11), its opening at the materiality of texts means a long overdue return to the focus for historical studies of language. The questions that the book attempts to answer, "What forms do medieval English and Scots texts take when they are received in later discourses? How far does such textual reworking reflect cultural and social changes?" (9) are therefore extremely relevant, as any answers will have immediate and crucial import on the field of linguistics in general. A linguistic text cannot be studied anymore without recognising both its sociocultural context and the meanings of its material form (spellings, scripts, fonts, and punctuation practices).

Chapter 1, "On historical pragmatics", sets the scene for the discussions of the following chapters, by providing an extensive overview of some key concepts associated with the *reimagined philology* Smith postulates. It contains a

discussion of the notion of literacy, forcefully rejecting the simplistic division into orality and literacy. Smith states clearly from the very outset that in particular literacy is a very complex concept, substantial changes in its nature being seen very early in the history of the written word, as indicated by the shift from a scroll to a codex. He views the phenomenon from numerous perspectives (public, private, silent, voice, social, etc.) (27), prefiguring the wealth of perspectives adopted in the more analytical chapters of the book. Smith also introduces here the increasingly popular concepts of discourse communities, communities of practice, and social networks, models of sociolinguistic interactions responsible for creation and transmission of language ideologies (30–31). All in all, apart for laying theoretical foundations for the discussion to follow, Smith succeeds admirably in presenting the state-of-the-art of modern philology in an accessible, reader-friendly way, perfectly suitable for a fresh initiate to the field.

Chapter 2, "Inventing the Anglo-Saxons", introduces the method of close reading of paratextual detail on which the book is built. It revolves around the history of interaction with Anglo-Saxon texts, with *Beowulf* being unavoidably the main course. Smith not only provides a useful overview of early editions of the poem and its parts; he also connects them with the role it played within the intentions of the editors, and multimodal devices they employed to indicate them. For example, Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin's choice of a roman font, favoured by 15th century humanist printers, is seen as reflecting his view of *Beowulf* as the Scandinavian equivalent of foundational epic poems of classical antiquity (47). From another perspective, the recognition and visual arrangement of the text into half-lines by Christopher Rawlinson, supported by the choice of an Anglo-Saxon-styled font (Junius's *pica Saxon* (55) vel *Saxon letter* of Moxon's (49)), corresponded with antiquarian interests of 17th century England. The chapter also touches upon earlier instances of interactions with Old English manuscripts (e.g., the Tremulous Hand of Worcester), and the function of runes and runic letters in Old English manuscripts and inscriptions; for Smith they are unlikely to be purely utilitarian (as, e.g., space-saving devices) and should rather be interpreted as expressing their socio-cultural context (76ff.).

Chapter 3, "'Witnesses preordained by God': The Reception of Middle English Religious Prose", is concerned with the afterlives of mediæval religious texts. Building his argument around the Vernon MS, assorted lollard writings, Thomas Wimbledon's sermon *Redde rationem villicationis tue*, and Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Crist*, Smith shows how a shift from intensive to extensive reading practices, combined with an increased interest of the laity in theological matters, leads to reworking of the textual content and its presentation. Thus, for example, sparse punctuation in some of the early manuscripts of *The Mirror* can be seen as indicative of scribal interpretive neutrality which leaves the discernment of the message of the text to the reader.

Whereas more punctuation would be connected with the development of an authoritative tradition of interpretation of the text and an orthodox regulation of religious practice, heavily reinforced by the popularisation of print. Smith raises also a very interesting point concerning a careful preservation of northernisms in Love's manuscripts, which can be viewed as a purposeful practice contrasting this orthodox text with the West Midland language of lollardy (114). These dialectal features disappear in printed editions of the 16th century, as issues of archetypicality yield to concerns about accessibility of the text. As Smith points out, this kind of practice may well be what lies beneath Samuels's Types I-IV of Middle English written standard candidates — special usages dominant in a particular textual tradition until suppressed by dialect muting (116).

Chapter 4, "The Great Tradition: Langland, Gower, Chaucer", shifts attention to central literary figures of the 14th century, William Langland, John Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer. It is a bit of an anticlimax of the book, as it mostly builds on the ideas already presented in the previous two chapters, providing more evidence for them rather than advancing new lines of discussion. Smith's main point is here the differing fates of the three authors in the modernising tradition, from a relatively quick loss of currency for Gower — to whom, in one of few 16th century mentions, Shakespeare refers in *Pericles* as *ancient Gower* (150) — through a development of an authoritative tradition with the growth of potential audience for Langland, to unabated popularity of Chaucer. Robert Crowley's editions of *Piers Plowman*, three in one year (1550), are illustrative of this phenomenon, gradually abandoning the principle of altering the text, and aligning it with the model(s) of new manuscripts that fall into the hands of the editor. This is reflected in punctuation practices, which with passing time become less metrical and more rhetorical and interpretative (though it is worth noticing that even those editions with little, and mostly conservative punctuation, replace outdated lexical forms, so that the text is at the same time private and a living one).

Chapter 5, "Forging the Nation: Reworking Older Scottish Literature", shifts the discussion north of the border, focusing on the changing reception of the two moral epic-romances with a focus on Scottish independence against the backdrop of relentless English hegemony, John Barbour's *Bruce* and 'Blind' Hary's *Wallace* (175). Each of the main editions of *Wallace*, which for a long time was the more visible and relevant of the two, differs in linguistic and paratextual features, reflecting varying concerns of their copyists, editors, and audiences. For example, the presentation of the English in the poem changes from strongly inimical in John Ramsay's manuscript of 1489, which refers to them as *old enemies* and *Saxons*, to Robert Lekpreuik's 1570 edition, which grants them the status of *southern neighbours* and *Britons* (182), only to return to Ramsay's negativity in Robert Freebairn's edition of 1758, prepared and published in a decisively Jacobite context.

Another *signum temporis* is the choice of qualities lauded by particular editors as claims to superiority of their work over that of their predecessors. Thus Andro Hart in the title of his 1616 edition combines appeals to authority (by calling his edition both *corrected* and *the best*), antiquity (*most ancient*), and authenticity (*Manuscript)* (184–185), conservative-minded editors of Freebairn's ilk chose to emphasise the equally conservative character of their work through the use of blackletter typeface, while towards the end of the 18th century this function is taken over by antiquarian elements on the title page (coats of arms, illustrations, line drawings of coins from Bruce's time, etc.) (192–194). This reflects similar practices in England, where some of the editions of Wimbledons's sermon of 1386–1387 use in their titles keywords/phrases such as *godly* (to indicate the character of the text and its audience) and *found in a wall* (to signal its potentially subversive content); *godly* is then dropped as it becomes too unambiguously attached to puritan theology (107–108). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Æneid* in Thomas Ruddiman's edition (1710), which Smith views as an attempt to elevate Older Scots to the status of a classical language by means of such editorial practices as a glossary, etymologies, or a grammatical section, familiar from contemporary editions of classical literature.

The final chapter, "On Textual Transformations: Walter Scott and Beyond", focuses on the creation of a romantic vision of the mediæval past (228) from the perspective of sir Walter Scott's 1804 edition of *Sir Tristem*, a romance preserved in the Auchinleck MS. and long thought to have been composed in Scotland. A very thorough discussion of this text in the context of early 19th century practices and beliefs about how a mediæval text should be presented to a contemporary audience serves as an introduction to modern textual criticism with its focus on explicit marking of corrections and alterations. Scott's *Sir Tristrem* is thus located at the crossroads between the two traditions. On the one hand it shares with its predecessors the rewriting sentiment (thus Scott provides the closing part to the poem, originally lost with the leaf it contained), as well as explicit appeals to the past in the form of the motto taken from Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and a premeditated use of blackletter typeface, which Smith calls antiquarian as well as aesthetically authenticative. On the other, Scott's edition is nothing but authoritative in the sense of faithfulness to the original — he contributes to the text an explicit division into *fyttes*, stanza numbering, present-day word divisions, modernisation of "ancient characters", capitalisation, and 18th century elocutionist/rhetorical punctuation, among others (225–227).

This mixture of the old and the new made Scott's edition an easy target for criticisms, especially from the direction of the emerging German *Neuphilologie* with its emphasis on authenticity of the text and explicitness of editorial interventions. Smith builds on this point to outline 20th century developments in

the field of textual criticism, closing this section with a choice of comments about the emerging phenomenon of on-line "image based editions" (235)

Smith's *Transforming Early English* is then a multi-faced book, in parts a textbook (chapters 1 and, in part, 6), in parts a detailed analysis of relationships between texts, their scribes, editors, and audiences (chapters 2 through 5, and, from a slightly different perspective, 6). Its governing theme, running through the pages and elegantly constructed arguments, is the idea of the fluidity of the notion of authenticity (236). The question of producing an authorial edition intended for an audience that no longer exists (157) defines his *reimagined philology*, and demands an answer that Smith is reluctant to provide, leaving the reader to establish their own relationship with his book, and via its mediation with authors, texts, and audiences long past. Thus, while he emphasises the necessity of viewing a text through its intended audience, it can be assumed Smith also encourages the opposite – viewing past audiences through the texts intended for them. This is the more relevant today, as the field of philology and its related sciences undergoes a major change in face of the fact that its subject matter is being appropriated and interpreted in ways far from canonical. While it is necessary to judge the intentions and ideologies behind these acts of appropriation and interpretation, and to recognise the more unsavoury aspects of the history of the field, it may be a refreshing thought that these acts of reimagining are not special and unique for us here and now, and that rereading and recreating works of textual culture have always taken place, and will take place in the future. It therefore seems fitting to recontextualise and appropriate one of the most resounding lines of Old English poetry, closing this review with Deor's universally relevant observation, *Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg*.