

DANIEL DONOGHUE. *How the Anglo-Saxons Read Their Poems*. Pp. 238. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Hardback, £58.

Anglo-Saxon England was a world where someone's word carried great weight. If a promise was made, and broken, then that would carry with it a social stigma that could last a lifetime. In an intellectual landscape where some could read, and many could not, any study of Anglo-Saxon England needs to recognise the dominance of the spoken word; and look for its presence in those written sources available to us. This is the great issue in studying early medieval writings. Our access is governed largely through works that reflect an elite ecclesiastical and aristocratic culture. We only see the smallest glimmer of the social and intellectual reality; and yet we must use these manuscripts as our window and gateway into the deep past. This is further complicated when we consider the differences in language, between the vernacular and Latin, and what that can mean for the Anglo-Saxon reader/listener/interpreter. Moreover, what of the evidence that we can never really see? Most famously, we have *Beowulf*, but how was it delivered? How was it spoken? How was it performed? The Ruthwell Cross is a powerful monument to Anglo-Saxon Christian belief. It is inscribed with lines from the *Dream of the Rood*, but does this make it a text? Is it for a reading audience? Or for the Lord himself? The question over what a text is, what counts as poetry or literature, is still as relevant today as it was for the early historical interpreters of Anglo-Saxon England.

Donohue's book is a welcome addition to this field of study. It is written with great fluency and demonstrates throughout the author's mastery of Anglo-Saxon poetic material and relevant scholarship. There are aspects of this book that are excellent. The fast pace of the

prose leads the reader through a huge variety of different thoughts, and although it is not entirely clear how each builds upon the other, the final summative statements are persuasive. Donohue likens researching Anglo-Saxon oral poetry to astrophysicists studying dark matter, something that ‘can be known only indirectly’ (p. 6). This is an imaginative opening into a complex topic, and one that is unafraid of dipping into different areas of research and study to build a multifaceted network of observations and ideas. Ultimately, I think Donohue is right to argue that scribes were making active choices in how they presented Anglo-Saxon poetry, and that this has important consequences for the field.

The book is divided between four chapters, with a substantial introduction and conclusion. The introduction is well-written, and opens up the topic through a discussion of poetic features and the oral nature surrounding any Anglo-Saxon writing. As Donohue notes ‘[t]he conventions governing the display of verse are so well established that it takes some effort to recognise their utter arbitrariness’ (p. 1). It requires a leap of imagination, an unshackling of received learning, to see beyond these familiar ordering systems. Anglo-Saxon poetry, in manuscript form, written without these familiar conventions does not look like poetic verse at all. Modern editing has translated it into something we expect poetry to look like, yet as Donohue recognises ‘the manuscript presentation was adequate to the task for the first generations of readers’ (p. 2).

The first chapter looks to Caedmon and St Augustine and thinks about how Anglo-Saxon read. The opening section on Caedmon is excellent, portraying a close familiarity with Bede and the Anglo-Saxon world, and analysing the account with great care. Donohue paints an image of this familiar anecdote that compels us to reconsider the realities of intellectual life

and poetic performance, for Caedmon appears exceptional in the first sense for ‘*nil carminum aliquando didicerat*’ (p. 12), before then taking biblical stories and turning them into poetry, transforming his instructors into an audience for his skill: ‘*doctores suos uicissim auditores sui faciebat*’ (p. 13). The discussion of Augustine, and the deconstruction of silent reading, is less clear. Although Donohue makes important points, recognising the immediate context for Augustine’s writing, I still believe the famous depiction of Ambrose’s silent reading is just that; a remarkable moment that meant something quite important and dramatic to Augustine. In viewing it as a meme, Donohue challenges the way it has been viewed, but is not in my mind fully successfully in dismantling it. The wider discussion of silent and audible reading is thought-provoking, and draws on Euripides’ *Hippolytos*, Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, *Beowulf* 1687-98 (Hrothgar studying the *run-stafas*), *Juliana*, Cynewulf’s runic signatures, Aldhelm’s *Riddles*, Ibn al-Haytham’s *Kitab al-Manazir*, modern day Thai writing and neural imaging. The variety of evidence chosen, and the inclusion of modern parallels (as well as scientific studies) demonstrates the excellent depth of knowledge and understanding; it does however make it rather more difficult to see exactly what is being argued, and what each piece of evidence builds towards.

The second chapter continues the theme of challenging received wisdom and intellectual expectations. If silent reading does not really exist then the division between orality and literacy needs to be questioned as well. This chapter is effective in challenging the absolute division between spoken and written, and Donohue draws well upon the work of Albert Lord. The discussion of the continuum model however would have benefitted from greater depth and space before the chapter moves on to the Anglo-Saxon evidence. This would have allowed a stronger backdrop against which then to measure the source analysis. In tackling so many falsehoods the actual analysis becomes a touch diluted.

The third and fourth chapters are the strongest in the book. Chapter Three sees Donohue focus on verse syntax, and here he develops a nuanced interpretation of the way in which '[v]erse syntax complements pointing and other visual cues to the degree that it obviates the need for a fully elaborated system' (p. 126). The analysis of Hans Kuhn's *Gesetzen* are excellent, and although the argument made can be challenged, this is a confident and nuanced examination of verse syntax and punctuation. Chapter Four is where Donohue's careful analysis and reasoned evaluation appear most clear. Here he turns to eye-movement studies, and this allows for a new way of looking at the familiar evidence: '[m]y investigations have led me to think that the scribes of a thousand years ago, in trying to display a temporal art in spatial terms, were grappling with some of the same issues that cognitive sciences are addressing' (p. 129). This chapter is grounded well in both manuscript research and eye movement studies, with references to the saccade, regressions, fixation, fovea, parafovea, perceptual span and optimal viewing position. Beginning with *Beowulf* 101-04, which demonstrates 'a fixation on each letter-block assembled by the scribe' (p. 137), Donohue moves on to *Guthlac A* from the Exeter Book, before returning to *Beowulf* again, interweaving analysis of the two. As the chapter proceeds the discussion becomes more focussed on the manuscripts themselves, with an excellent discussion of the Exeter Book. The ideas presented here are the strongest and most thought-provoking of the entire volume, and the confident exploration of cognitive science alongside palaeographical analysis leads to a persuasive interpretation. The conclusion does rather more than summarise the preceding points: it offers important observations of its own, asking important (and necessary) questions, and recognises different elements of vernacular verse across the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries (see p. 169). The book closes with an analogy as carefully crafted as the

dark matter that began it, the Anglo-Saxons of the eleventh century who could read the poems of earlier periods did so in a manner that we might read Milton or Shakespeare.

There are issues here. Although Donohue's engagement with a vast body of scholarship is impressive, the book would have benefitted from a more focussed engagement with the historiography in each chapter to make it clear to the reader just how different some of his ideas and approaches really are. Although the division between chapters is an appropriate one, the internal structuring of each chapter is never quite as clear as needed. In part this is because the book moves at a frenetic pace, but also because the arguments made move across different thought-patterns and research areas. It reads as an historical study, a linguistic analysis, as well as an enthusiastic myth debunker. There are so many different points being made that it can be difficult to settle on exactly what it is that Donohue is arguing, beyond the concluding thoughts on verse syntax which are persuasive (see pp. 155-174). This is a book that requires careful study, reading, and rereading, but is worth the endeavour.

To close, this is an impressive study of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and one that asks important questions of familiar topics. The great strength to the work is not just Donoghue's mastery of the material, but rather how he thinks about, and interprets, the surviving evidence. Some parts are deeply complex, others highly readable and fluent, and when finished the argument appears perfectly plausible. This is then an important statement on Anglo-Saxon poetry, and one that will provoke much comment, discussion and debate.

Anthony Smart

*York St John University*