

Reading the Anglo-Saxon Self Through the Vercelli Book. By Amity Reading. Medieval Interventions 7. New York: Peter Lang, 2018. Pp. xv +151. \$89.95.

In recent decades medievalists have challenged the theory that the Renaissance gave rise to ‘the invention of the self’, or subjectivity, by pointing to the competing claims of the twelfth century. In this tightly focused study, however, Amity Reading highlights a pronounced interest in selfhood and agency in a selection of Old English texts of unknown date copied in the tenth century Vercelli Book. Building on the investigations into the complex Old English lexis of mind-heart-soul by Malcolm Godden, Leslie Lockett and others, *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Self* explores how the authors of these texts use the language of subjectivity ‘for parenetic [i.e. hortatory] purposes’ (p. 17). The works under consideration are broadly linked by their concern with the interaction of the body and soul, both before and after death, as well as related themes such as baptism, penance, bodily resurrection and Judgment.

In the Introduction (pp. 1–32), Reading proposes that the Vercelli compiler was not only interested in eschatological themes (as argued by Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Milton McC.Gatch) but also in the ‘construction and performance of the self’ (p. 2). This theme is most evident, Reading argues, in the manuscript’s various iterations of the popular soul-and-body motif, which typically take the form of a dialogue between the soul and body after death. After tracing this tradition back to the vision of St Macarius and the *Visio Pauli*, Reading challenges Caroline Walker Bynum’s assertion that all medieval thinkers assumed a soul-body dualism, noting that Old English witnesses often present a more nuanced model of interdependence and collaboration. By focusing on the complex and sustained interaction of souls and bodies across the Vercelli Book, she seeks to demonstrate that this manuscript is ‘not a book *about* Judgment, but rather a guide *to* Judgment’, in other words ‘a handbook for Christian being’ (p. 20).

Chapter One (pp. 33–60) highlights the symbiotic relationship between flesh and spirit in Vercelli Homilies IV and XXII and the poem *Soul and Body I*. In a series of nuanced close readings, grounded in careful comparison with Latin sources and analogues, Reading shows how these texts illustrate both ‘positive and negative outcomes proceeding from the relationship between the soul and body’ (pp. 44–5). Homily IV, for example, describes the joyful reunion of soul and body on Judgment Day, while *Soul and Body I* takes a more positive view of the uses of the flesh than its Exeter-Book counterpart.

Chapter Two (pp. 61–83) narrows the focus to a single text, the verse saint’s life *Andreas*, connecting its metaphorical representation of baptism with the manuscript’s wider interest in resurrection and eschatology. Instead of reading this poem as a pious re-write of *Beowulf*, this chapter provides a welcome and stimulating analysis of *Andreas* on its own terms. Concentrating on ‘incomplete typological structures’ (p. 63), Reading shows how *Andreas* models the ‘continuing reform or renewal [...] of the Christian self’ (p. 63) through the ongoing conversion of its fallible hero.

The third chapter (pp. 85–116) discusses a group of texts linked by the themes of Ascension and Rogation, in both of which we witness the ‘participation of the Christian self in the community’ (p. 85). *The Dream of the Rood* is fruitfully read in the light of Ambrose’s teaching on baptism and Ascension. By consistently identifying Christ, the Cross and the Dreamer with each other, the poem creates ‘a sense of absorption, completion, unification, all of which are inherent themes of Ascension’ (p. 92). Intriguingly, Reading suggests that the compiler decided not to include an Ascension homily because *The Dream of the Rood* effectively already served as one (p. 104). Homilies X, XI, XXI, are found to be significantly more interested in ‘material, performative piety’ (p. 98) than their Latin sources, presenting images of celestial fellowship and completion that complement the imagery of the accompanying soul-and-body debates.

Chapter Four (pp. 117–46) looks at three more homilies, on the lives of Martin (XVIII) and Guthlac (XXIII) and the Purification of Mary (XVII), all of whom are presented as ‘examples of successfully constructed individuals to serve as models for the manuscript’s audience’ (p. 117). By downplaying the cenobitic and ascetic themes of their source, these *vitae* fashion a Christian ideal that could be imitated by clerical or lay individuals. Reading is in agreement here with Ó Carragáin and Charles D. Wright, both of whom have argued that the Vercelli Book was probably produced outside of—or in reaction to—the immediate influence of the Benedictine Reform.

A major strength of this book is its integrated treatment of the Vercelli prose and verse. By discussing familiar works such as *The Dream of the Rood* and *Andreas* alongside the lesser-studied homilies that accompany them in the manuscript, Reading provides many new insights into the practical theology contained within the Vercelli Book. It is a shame, then, that this book only offers a partial view of the manuscript’s contents. No mention is made, for example, of the two signed poems of Cynewulf in the Vercelli Book, *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene*, both of which feature epilogues in which an individual Christian self is presented as a model for imitation. The book also lacks a proper conclusion, in which the author might have drawn together more coherently some of the fascinating ideas discussed in its individual chapters. Twice in the third chapter (pp. 120, 139 n.19), for example, Reading takes issue with Donald Scragg’s theory that the items were selecting for copying in a haphazard manner. One would have liked to hear more of Reading’s own views on this topic.

Reading the Anglo-Saxon Self is a welcome addition to the burgeoning body of research into the contents of the Vercelli Book. It will inspire further investigation into this key witness to early English spirituality and deserves to be widely read. It also makes a significant and original contribution to the study of early medieval subjectivity, providing

plentiful evidence for a highly developed theory of Christian selfhood long before the twelfth century.

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