

## INTRODUCTION

After the publication of Allen Frantzen's *Desire for Origins*, a considerable series of works on "The Current State of Old English Studies" appeared inspired by Frantzen's comment that Old English Studies needed to reinvent itself and introduce contemporary theoretical sets in the field. Not all the answers agreed with his hypothesis, but time has proved that something new has come out of those attempts. This issue of the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* did not have as a purpose to restrict itself, or even be devoted, to this point of view; the response has, however, been clear enough. Most papers do in fact give us a "new understanding of the past" through the application and discussion of new theories to the research on Old English and Anglo-Saxon culture in general.

The study of Old English literature, language and philology have experienced an overall transformation in the last decades that mainly respond to a crucial need for an innovation in methodological approaches. This has concluded in compelling results and new facets in our perception of the medieval and Anglo-Saxon worlds. The traditional views endowed us a contact with the sources that provided the student with a profound knowledge of pre-modern texts. Besides, the must for original research tools opened the field to conclusions, themes and hypotheses that proved a whole new series of perspectives had been left out; several were related to present-day concepts which had not been considered relevant for the Anglo-Saxon period and the individual that lived through those times. The theoretical sources that led to this advance are varied, ranging from historical, even archaeological, to linguistic disciplines such as cognitive linguistics, functional linguistics, metatheoretical renewals in the philological study and so on.

This improvement in the observation of the subject matter and the tools to carry out research were evident in so much as the information lost with traditional methods was sometimes biased and remained a mere set of data which lacked a humanistic setting. The tendency to place limits on philological research due to the constraints of a "scientific" methodology that did not take into account the fact that the literary and linguistic production was generated by human beings in their



social and personal context, however rejected the “personal” aspect for pre-modern periods. Thus, the introduction of new models of research in the study of Old English, combined with data obtained in more traditional works, results in an awareness of aspects of the Anglo-Saxon period left out until recently and a more coherent knowledge of the interactions within that society: their needs, their language, their mental states. They were frequently reduced to didactic-political concepts such as that of the *comitatus* (the bonds established between lord and warrior through the generosity of the lord in giving treasure) and it implied a coherent society that expressed an order of the world that must necessarily be unrealistic. No society lives in a state of social perfection; those who did not fit, those who did not agree would be extraneous agents in those societies. Obviously, even within this ideal society, and within our textual historical knowledge, the others were there; other nations, other groups, other sexes were there as well, though it is true that extracting from surface information will not bring forth a closer knowledge of the feelings and bonds among these peoples.

The study of the language and literature of this period and a good knowledge of the sources will surpass the superficialities of the historical moment. The interpretation of what lies under the surface of the text will lead to contact with the actual world, the individuals that were members of those societies. Thus, we will exceed the alterity of these historical stages with the present, through new methods of study that include a correlation with our modern states of mind, emotions, etc. These societies were not as far from our own state of mind and they, in most probability, had psychological concomitances with any other society, past and present. No single methodological set has been able to give us a greater feeling of closeness to our object of study than a wide variety of them. Restricted by the limits of our minds or our “a priori” ideas of this world, we forget to look at aspects and facts that were not just relevant, but the actual objects that generated the texts, speakers’ interaction, emotional backgrounds and concepts such as identity and self. The effect of phenomena such as population movements or the contact with incoming population was extremely relevant, though, until recently considered external to language change.

The subject of gender, constantly changing due to the pressure between the moralizing rules and the needs of the literary characters and the actual human beings living in this period are other aspects that required considerable attention. Those human beings that had to lose constantly in favour of new orders of the social, political and religious worlds, not to mention the outcast or even the monstrous had to be revised in terms of these societies and their states of mind. The fact that by the Anglo-Saxon period women were able to bequeath wealth is of extreme importance, though not considered yet from the right angle; the later loss of that wealth, as it happened with certain convents in the 10th or 13th centuries, implied continuous drawbacks for the situation of women. Even in the 15th century women had to fight, even forcefully, for their right to their inheritance, since their male kin asserted that they had a better right to it. The Anglo-Saxon woman had a role, but she was not just that role, it was an imposition, accepted willingly or unwillingly. Gender studies have brought new perspectives to our knowledge of the one sided



idea of the peace-weaver, and brought the proposal of the writing woman, one with a voice of her own, though still difficult to be heard.

Our interest in the mental states of the Anglo-Saxons, outside the standard roles of loyalty, friendship, and fighting, has changed with a closer insight of processes such as the idea of the self. Discourse analysis, socio-linguistics, philological and cognitive approaches disclose new facets about those people who lived in a period on constant warfare. Their interests and awareness of their own self, individuality, nationality, gender differences and the concept of the other still existed.

From the linguistic point of view, discourse analysis has been proposed and produced a series of studies with appealing possibilities. The flexibility of this paradigm allows us contact with its concern with emotional, contextual and social layers within the linguistic structure and its semantic patterns. It introduces a renovation of the notion of register as a context expression related to sequences of content. D. Fernández comments in this number on her application of this approach to Old English texts that “supplementary considerations within each variable allow for a critical rendering that proves to be more feasible to explain those issues of social inequality and authority in the text pointed out by previous research.” The concepts of power and inequality are relevant for the study of this period, since it is characterised by the pressure of a novel construct of reality constituted by the introduction of Christianity into a pagan context and its imposition without a separation between both the religious and the secular worlds. The process of Christianization was an indication of power and control because they had to do it through war with the non-Christian kingdoms.

The need to resort to disciplines other than the merely literary and linguistic ones in order to observe and study pre-modern mentalities is a constant in current research on Old English. A good understanding of mental attitudes is a requisite for both literary and linguistic conceptualizations, something that most linguistic paradigms had not accepted in their traditional perspectives. But a diachronic analysis of language does necessarily require a thorough observation of these parameters. Language only changes in its interaction and this is influenced by the participants’ mental states, and so it is recognised by Cognitive studies: “More specifically, the impact of cultural ideas about the mind on textual production has been established as a dynamic worthy of closer investigation, itself drawing upon questions of long pedigree” (A. Harbus).

The mythological understanding of the text is more traditional than the previous methods, but, as before, the contextualisation of the texts adds to the facts and ideas and establishes a relation to power: “both myths were created in their present form in the Christian era for the express purpose of transforming supernatural protagonists into demonic, disease-inflicting beings that were being displaced by the true God” (K. Olsen).

Socio-linguistics has also opened fields and features in studying population movements and language contact, traditionally considered external to language itself, but whose influence on change and evolution has proved to be extremely relevant. Milroy’s social network theory applied to Scandinavian loanwords in English and interdisciplinary perspectives has resulted in “the possibility of correlating



independent variables, like social rank, not only with the linguistic output under concern, but also with the tangible evidence of certain loanwords like the Norse-related loan “cast,” whose social context of usage may be reconstructed thanks to archaeology” (D. Pérez).

The use of the metaphor is a means to analyse the development, form and function of conceptual values present “in Old English language, literature, society and iconography.” (Javier Díaz) Again the tendency to study Old English outside the limitations imposed by a single field leads to the postulation that the “understanding of the past” in the present century is well aware of the requirement to reach a profound interaction among several fields; “The Mind-as-Body Metaphor is the result of the global conceptualization of one whole area of experience (i.e. the internal self and internal sensations) in terms of another (i.e. physical perception)” (Javier Díaz).

The comparison of the original text with modern recreations of it, brings to the fore the fact that those readings are biased by a lack of knowledge and confront the textual hero with his own translation of it. Nevertheless, this alterity between the original and the result opens up possibilities of analysis sometimes left unseen in the distance from the historical past. Taking these past manuscripts to their present elaboration elicits differences in the construal of the text. It does, however, add to our understanding of the textual matter; these approaches expose the limitations of research exclusively conceived as a complete separation from what was observed in the contents of the original copy and the minds that generated them and the present copies and the states of mind and contextualization that conceived them. The relevance of contextualization and the use of other disciplines in the study of the literary and linguistic production of pre-modern periods can be observed very well in this rupture from alterity; “In fact, as soon as the Old English text was accessible for the average reader through modern translations [many abridged, simplified versions appeared, which paved the road to later parodies, adaptations and imaginative rewritings. This process of “vulgarization” of *Beowulf* has, however, run parallel to its legitimation as one of the central pieces of the English literary heritage and corner-stone of Old English Studies; actually, the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship is intimately connected to what in Foucauldian terms can be termed as the “archaeology” of this poem” (María José Gómez).

