

ANGLO-SAXON MENTALITIES AND OLD ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews scholarship to date and traces developing trends in the investigation of Anglo-Saxon mentalities: concepts of the mind and the textual representation of the mind, the self, and consciousness. The multidisciplinary nature of the topic and recent studies are considered, along with an exciting new development in the academy, Cognitive Literary Studies, where cognitive science is brought to bear on literary analysis. This method of investigation factors not only cultural practices but also innate mental structures into representations of the mind. The future of Old English literary studies relies on combining current scholarly modes, such as interpretive, philological, and source studies, with emerging developments outside the field and even beyond the humanities.

KEY WORDS: Mentalities, Anglo-Saxon literature, mind, Old English language.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se realiza una revisión de la literatura académica hasta el momento presente y se trata de buscar las corrientes que se desarrollan en la investigación de las mentalidades anglosajonas: conceptos de la mente y las representaciones textuales de la mente, el sujeto y la conciencia. Se toman en consideración la naturaleza multidisciplinar del tema y estudios recientes, junto con un novedoso y excitante desarrollo en lo académico, los Estudios Literarios Cognitivos, en tanto en cuanto la ciencia cognitiva ejerce influencia en el análisis literario. Este modelo de investigación implica no solo prácticas culturales sino también estructuras mentales innatas como representaciones de la mente. El futuro de los estudios literarios del inglés antiguo se sostiene sobre la base de la combinación de los modos investigadores actuales, tales como el interpretativo, el filológico y las fuentes de estudio, con desarrollos que surgen fuera del campo e incluso más allá de las humanidades.

PALABRAS CLAVE: mentalidades, literatura anglosajona, mente, inglés antiguo.

Old English literary studies have always been primarily interdisciplinary, embracing not only literary and philological studies, but also deploying ideas and methodologies from the many other disciplines, including history, cultural studies,

palaeography and codicology. The field has continued to expand its frames of reference in the twenty-first century by borrowing and combining new critical tools to attempt to answer new types of questions about Anglo-Saxon literature and its context of production. A dominant thread within this multi-pronged mode of inquiry is the exploration of notions of identity. Along with investigations into Anglo-Saxon ideas about national identity and group affiliation, there has arisen a growing fascination with personal identity. In particular, scholars are now considering more energetically matters that might be grouped together under the rubric 'mentalities'. This term refers to Anglo-Saxon ideas about the mind and the self, how these two entities interact in the individual person, and the implications for interpreting texts produced in this culture.

Scholars have taken up this line of inquiry, brought to the fore long ago by Peter Clemoes' study of the similarity between patristic and vernacular mind motifs in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* (Pearsall and Waldron 62-77; Clemoes) Malcolm Godden's article, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Mind' brings philosophy of mind into the discussion, by arguing that the poets of these two texts recognise two separate 'centres of consciousness', the mind and the self (Godden 271-98). Later studies have investigated this distinction further, contributing to recent debate on the culturally specific idea of the self in the fields of the social sciences¹ by bringing Anglo-Saxon evidence into the discussion (Green 211-18; Jagger; Harbus 77-97). While many studies of the mind and the self have been lexical or at least linguistic in origin (Phillips; Ogura; Low 11-22; Stewart 51-62), and others have approached medieval mentalities via poetic language and style (Morse; Matto; Ford 205-226; Herman and Childs 177-203) several studies more explicitly incorporate a range of ideas and methodologies from disciplines such as philosophy and psychology. For example, Michael Lapidge has demonstrated the *Beowulf*-poet's interest in the workings of the human mind, and Soon-Ai Low has shown the psychological focus of *Guthlac B* (Lapidge 373-402; Low 625-636). My book, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry* argues more broadly for a cultural focus on the mind evident in Anglo-Saxon poetic texts (Harbus, "Medieval").

These and other studies demonstrate that, like other types of inquiry, considerations of pre-modern mentalities can fruitfully draw upon fields in addition to literary and linguistic ones. They can canvass the complex subject of mentalities in a more multifaceted way than more traditionally historical studies (Clarke; Radding 577-597). The nature of the topic insists more than most on the importation and deployment of other disciplinary ideas and methodologies. Philosophical and psychological studies of the mind and the self, both medieval and modern, have proven particularly useful for shaping and informing debate on how Anglo-Saxon writers configured the mind, thereby bringing to light the implications of those ideas for

¹ On the culturally-specific self discussed without specific reference to Anglo-Saxon England, see Shweder and Bourne 158-199. For the Spanish/English comparison, see Martín Morillas 1-21.

literary and socio-cultural interpretation. Similarly, the growing imperative to historicize literary production and analysis insists on the mutual consideration of cultural and historical context and the literary text. 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. Historians of mentalities such as Marc Bloch and Michel Foucault have long since established the value of investigating the cultural structures that determine mental activity, in order to demonstrate how closely related the two are and how they fluctuate together.²

In response to these and many other transdisciplinary developments within literary studies in general, a new and vigorous field of inquiry has arisen in the academy, bringing cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology into literary analysis. This new field, called “Cognitive Literary Studies,”³ has a fresh perspective to offer anyone interested in literary interpretation, and is especially invigorating in any attempt to understand texts produced in remote cultures, such as those written in Anglo-Saxon England.

The cognitive approach to literary criticism focuses on the mental processes at work during meaning-making, especially the cognitive logistics of interpretation in the mind of the recipient, but also the historically-situated processes undertaken by the producer of the text. It brings cognitive science to bear on literary studies in order to explore the relationship between mind and meaning from the perspective that the mind and its products are the result of both culture and biology. This new line of inquiry has so far resulted in the creation, since 1998, of a new discussion group of the Modern Language Association and the production of a number of influential monographs and journal articles on the field (Stockwell; Semino and Culpepper; Gavin and Steen; Herman; Richardson; Spolsky, “Richardson’s”). One of the most productive scholars in this field is Mark Turner, who sees classical rhetoric and cognitive neuroscience as the foundations of Cognitive Literary Studies. Turner seeks to claim that “the everyday mind is the essentially literary,” and that language is not the origin but the product of parable, the consequence of the way our mind is hardwired for story (Turner, *Literary* 7, 168; Turner and Fauconnier 397–418).

Turner, who successfully integrates the literary with the scientific inquiry, demonstrates how Cognitive Literary Studies provides a counterpoint to what might be called “Literary Cognitive Studies,” where literary texts are deployed by cognitive scientists as data for their inquiries into the mind from the evidence of its culturally-based products. In other words, they are already investigating how the mind works by look at the products of specific minds in specific cultures. It makes

² Hutton specifically describes this branch of enquiry “not as a history of ideas but a history of the mind” (238).

³ An MLA Discussion Group since 1998; formally ratified in 2000.



sense for scholars whose primary training is in literary studies to approach the matter from the other side, by using the tools provided by cognitive science to explore literary texts and their production. Lisa Zunshine has shown very convincingly how the particular aptness of the novel for the exploration of human consciousness can be deployed within Cognitive Literary Studies to examine the workings of the human mind and levels of intentionality (Zunshine 270-91; Spolsky, "Richardson's" 127-146).

A recent turn in the cognitive literary movement that has particular relevance for the study of remote culture is the appropriation of ideas from evolutionary psychology. In this schema, mental structures, determined by evolutionary development, play out in cultural practices and products, with the result that cognitive universals may be manifest in these products, which include literary texts (Jackson 161-179). Reuven Tsur argues that developments in literary history are determined by deep-seated universals in cognitive functioning, that "rigid conventions are fossilized cognitive processes" (84).

One such universal is the physical embodiment of the mind: mental functions and states are the result of brain activity, which is physically situated with the human body. The concept of embodiment has been popularised by the widely influential work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, where they argue that the way the mind works arises from the fundamental fact that it exists in a physical body.

This idea is embraced in a similar way in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, where the role of cognitive processes in the creation of linguistic meaning is the focus on inquiry. F. Elizabeth Hart, for example, insists upon the relevance of a theory of "the material embodiment of the subject in and through language" (21). By showing language to be "imaginatively embodied," cognitive linguistics can supply "a new, metaphor centred model of language... that situates the subject within its material world both inside and outside the text" (2). In other words, the reading subject is both culturally and cognitively situated by immediate context. This useful contribution to literary theory and interpretation brings together key ideas from the fields of linguistics, philosophy, cognitive psychology and literary and cultural theory to provide a compelling new way of understanding how textual meaning can be both coherent and unstable. Hart's later work succinctly describes the value of Cognitive Literary Studies as investigating 'the mind's substantive indebtedness to its bodily, social and cultural contexts' and human cognition as "a set of highly imaginative —not logical but figural— processes" (331).

Paul Hernadi looks at the causal relationship between mental functioning and literary texts from the opposite direction, arguing that literature has played a precise role in the development of human nature. His and other articles published in a special issue of *Poetics Today* devoted to Cognitive Literary Studies approach these issues with a keener appreciation of historicist principles, bringing together the idea that literature is the product of both a biologically-created mind and one that is culturally constructed. The editors have created a section entitled "Cognitive Historicism: Situating the Literary Mind," in which articles "address the complex interrelation of evolved neurocognitive structures and contingent cultural en-



vironments with an eye to specific examples of cultural change” (Richardson and Steen 5).⁴

This analysis of literary meaning-making via the tension between embodied universals (biology) and contextual variables (culture) is an exciting and fruitful new departure for literary studies, especially for scholars interested in pre-modern literatures. The representation of consciousness in earlier literary texts, for example, is one area where some exceptionally interesting insights have been presented.⁵ Scholars are asking questions such as:

How does the embodied mind show up in earlier texts, and what cultural factors are at work to cause it to show up in the precise way that it does? (Jackson 175)

As yet, Cognitive Literary Studies as an approach has barely touched Anglo-Saxon scholarship or medieval studies, which leaves a range of opportunities for new research in the field. Scholars analysing Old English texts might consider embracing the opportunities of “delineating the models of mental operations that influenced writers working in earlier historical periods” (Richardson and Steen 6). Ellen Spolsky has identified the study of diachronic variability as a core potential of Cognitive Literary Studies:

One of the hardest questions indeed turned out to be how it is that literary systems (both of production and interpretation) change through time, leaving us in the situation of being able to read and appreciate *Beowulf*, for example, but with no chance of that three-thousand-line poetic epic being written now. (“Cognitive” 164)

Spolsky demonstrates the important contribution to be made by the cognitive approach in seeking to understand how systems of literary meaning that rely on culturally-determined mental patterns are nevertheless intelligible beyond that immediate context of textual creation and reception. She argues that cultural patterns constrain human brains—that history mediates knowledge—but that generalised mental processes allow intelligibility to be retained despite cultural change (166). Cognitive Literary Studies provide a new way of viewing the inter-relationship of literary text and socio-historical context. Elsewhere, Spolsky has put into practice this approach, in her analysis of Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (Spolsky, “Why and How”), but remains one of the few scholars who interpret medieval literature with the cognitive approach.

⁴ The critique of this special issue of *Poetics Today* by Hans Adler and Sabine Gross, published in the following issue of *Poetics Today* 23.2 (2002): 195-220, was roundly critiqued itself by both Ellen Spolsky (*Poetics Today* 24.2 (2003): 161-83), and the editors of the special volume, Alan Richardson and Francis F. Steen (*Poetics Today* 24.2 (2003): 151-59).

⁵ See, for example, the publications of Lisa Zunshine, mentioned above.

Another scholar who has touched on medieval vernacular literature is Mark Turner (“Cognitive” 10), who identifies what he had termed “conceptual blending” (now a significant idea in the cognitive field: “the mental operation of combining two mental packets of meaning”) in *The Dream of the Rood* (14-15). Turner treats the multiple blending of the Cross with an articulated expression of its history, the Cross with Christ, the dreamer and the Cross, and the Cross and a thane, in this poem, and as “a spectacular example of blending” (14). Turner demonstrates that value of applying the cognitive lens onto older texts, while himself stopping short of blending his own more broadly-focussed argument with either recent criticism on this poem or engaging with the text specifically. While a more complete cognitive literary analysis of this and other Old English texts remains to be done, Turner offers a timely reminder of what literary scholars, “highly attuned to the intricate workings of creativity, invention, language, visual representation, and the construction of meaning” (18) have to offer cognitive science.

By bringing ideas and methodologies from cognitive science, scholars might attempt to understand not only how the minds of Anglo-Saxon peoples worked and how they understood mental states and functions, but also the concomitant implications for textual production and the creation of linguistic meaning. While these and other questions must address themselves to the written products of this culture, clearly findings from cognitive psychology, evolutionary biology, and the history of ideas must be brought into play. With this opening up of the field, texts become key sources of information with relevance beyond their own immediate literary meaning. More specifically, scholars of Anglo-Saxon England might probe more fully early medieval theories of mind, and analyse individual vernacular texts or groups of texts for what they reveal about the life of the mind below the level of consciousness. This approach might entail interpreting how cognitive functions are understood, how mental states are represented, and how behaviour is explained in terms of assumed underlying mental states. This approach entails asking questions such as: “What sort of inferences regarding mental functioning are contained in the written texts?”; “How is meaning determined and constrained by assumptions about the mental state of the text’s recipient?”; and “To what degree are modern readers cognitively and culturally prepared in a way that differs from Anglo-Saxon readers?”

The poetic and prose texts produced in Anglo-Saxon England, especially the comparisons offered by translated texts and the associative logic of poetry, lend themselves to this type of analysis. For example, the tendency to refer to the mind rather than to the person as the site of emotion and the recipient of fate in Old English poetry⁶ suggests not just a distinctly different conscious way of viewing human perception and the outcome of events from our own, but also an uncon-

⁶ For example, “min hyge geomor,” “my mind was sad” (*The Wife’s Lament*, line 17b); and “ne mæg werig mod wyrde wi”standan,” “the weary mind cannot withstand fate” (*The Wanderer*, line 15). Citations of Old English poetry are to the ASPR edition and translations are my own.

scious, culturally-determined mind schema that is both alien to us and yet sufficiently recognisable for the text to make sense to us. Indeed, the accessibility of the Old English idea is demonstrated by recent work on the philosophy of emotions that describes how emotions function in thought processes (Damasio). Similarly, by analogy with our own experience of conceptual blending, we are able to identify and comprehend the blends described by Turner of *The Dream of the Rood*, even though we might not use them ourselves in non-literary contexts, or certainly not in Old English. The Anglo-Saxon literary corpus, and in particular its fictional representations of consciousness, is readable to us, but only via the process of linguistic and cultural relocation that operates through translation into Present Day English. Nevertheless, a core degree of intelligibility remains, stemming from our temporal proximity to the Anglo-Saxons in terms of evolutionary biology, and because we share the human experience of an embodied mind and a hard-wired predisposition for narrative. This is not to discount the impact of literary training and the way our expectations are determined by prior reading experiences. We are accustomed, for example, to encountering fictionalised consciousnesses and shifting perspectives—even dream sequences and religious visions—in literary texts, and interpret them in this context.

Texts for which known Latin sources and analogues exist provide further insight into cross-cultural intelligibility and specific ideas and mental states underlying the transformation in the translation process. Culturally variable theories of knowledge, consciousness, and the emotions constrain the possibilities available in the translation process, just as the different lexicons and syntactic structure of the host and target languages constrain linguistic possibilities. Old English translated texts offer a wonderfully rich opportunity for exploring the mental processes at work in the interpretation and linguistic refashioning of a text, because they play out the act of meaning-making within cultural transformation. Old English literary translation is under-represented in scholarly endeavour to date; here is an additional reason to engage with this part of the extant corpus.

Some scholars would depict the future of Old English studies in a less than positive light. In addition to a continued commitment to the ongoing projects such as *The Dictionary of Old English*, and associated publications and editorial undertakings, and the growing exploration of Anglo-Latin literature, the future liveliness of Old English scholarship lies in developing fruitful and exciting new avenues of inquiry, such as those offered and just beginning to be explored via Cognitive Literary Studies. By continuing to exploit new transdisciplinary opportunities such as this one, Anglo-Saxon studies can remain relevant, interesting, and viable in our modern world and competitive academic context.

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