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Inventing English: A Portable History of English (review)

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Love songs in folklore are always generic (to be sure, this circumstance, obvious to modern folklorists, might be easily misconstrued by the neighbors, for “common people’s” views on art are usually naive). In a different context, DuBois states that traditional singers were expected to stay out of discussion about the formal study of folk music: “A singer’s aura of authenticity could easily be damaged by a display of cognizance” regarding such things (p. 170). The same attitude should probably prevail in all dealings with informants; in this case the difference between content and form is immaterial. It is well-known how uneasy story tellers are when pressed about the veracity of fairy tales. In comparing Guðrún’s lament and *Sonatorrek*, DuBois says: “Although both saga and lament claim to derive from the actual life experiences of a ninth-century Icelandic chieftain, either or both are just as likely the products of the imagination of a thirteenth-century compiler” (p. 46). Isn’t Egill more “real” than Guðrún? Two pages later we read: “Although the text could easily refer to any number of mourning fathers, its accompanying narrative consistently ties it to Egill” (p. 48). DuBois may not have realized that reference to “any number of mourning fathers” is of paramount importance for understanding the nature of introspection in literature and of lyric poetry as a relatively late genre. On p. 159, the German word *Einfühlung* ‘empathy’ is explained, as though *ein-* in it means ‘one,’ but this is perhaps the result of unfortunate wording. The book is almost free from misprints. The only conspicuous one, in the material over which I have sufficient control, is *Guðrúnarqviða* consistently spelled without the second *r* (the same in the index).

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INVENTING ENGLISH: A PORTABLE HISTORY OF ENGLISH. By Seth Lerer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. viii + 305; 18 illustrations. \$24.95.

Seth Lerer’s *Inventing English* is a highly personal book. He describes it as “less a history of English in the traditional sense than . . . an episodic epic: a portable assembly of encounters with the language” (p. 2). Seeing language itself as a highly personal matter, whether for himself or his readers, he describes the book as tracing a “course between the individual experience and literary culture, between the details of the past and the drama of the present, between the story of my life I tell here and the stories you may make out of your own” (p. 3). In this vein, Lerer returns frequently to the details of how his own youth and education affected his conceptions of English and helped to define his interest in it. And the casual, witty, and sometimes provocative style in which the book is written provides a very apt vehicle for this very personal account.

By his own admission, Lerer’s interest is in “literary culture.” Accordingly, he only touches on issues like grammatical gender and historical adjectival inflections, variable phonological and morphological rules (including geographically-conditioned variants in the Great Vowel Shift), and diachronic changes in English structures, such as the late Anglo-Saxon leveling of declensions and conjugations or the range of expansions to the English verb phrase in the early modern period. His focus is instead on how the English language of any one period could serve as an appropriate, even transcendent, vehicle for literary expression, particularly through its lexis. To this end the book is structured by a series of chronologically arranged chapters devoted to the accomplishments of a sequence of great men: Cædmon, the *Beowulf* poet, Chaucer, Caxton, John Hart, John Milton, Dr. Johnson,

Noah Webster, and Mark Twain. By collapsing distinctions between a language as an abstract, variable code and the stylistic uses of that language, Lerer suggests that Chaucer “usurped a nation of new words, and in the process, made himself a lord of language that no king . . . could become” (p. 84), describes an example of Chancery English as “an essay in the arts of narrative” (p. 122), and illustrates African American Vernacular English with selections from a number of poems (pp. 220–34). His readings of the rhetoric in several scenes from Shakespeare’s plays are particularly elegant.

For all its personal focus, *Inventing English* offers a familiar history of the language. The literary uses of English, for example, dominated in the earliest historical accounts—and of course for both Dr. Johnson and the first edition of the *OED*—as did, by extension, emphases on the role of particular individuals (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Twain) in directly changing the language. Similarly time-honored are value judgments of Middle English as “the most variable of languages” (p. 99) and of American dialects as “a celebration of American identity” (p. 195). So, too, even as references to “insurgent English” (p. 83) in the Middle Ages resonate with a contemporary notion of vernacular politics, an overall narrative that minimizes the persistence and inevitability of variation across and within time and that ends, essentially, with modern American English is again traditional. These very traditions become complicated, of course, with the development of sociolinguistics in the past fifty years and the global dispersion of English in the past several centuries. Ordinary language uses (in newspapers and on playgrounds) drive untargeted changes in language structure far more than literary uses drive targeted ones, while with a conservatively estimated 1 billion speakers of English as a first or second language, in a plethora of indigenous, post-colonial, and what Braj Kachru calls expanding-circle domains, contemporary English embodies structured synchronic variation (i.e., sociolects and regional dialects) that well exceeds that of any point in the language’s history.

When I began to read this book the very practical question I had was: “Can I use this in a history of the language course?” And I’d say, given the book’s entirely reasonable, avowed aims, the answer is “no”: there’s not enough internal history (whether in the form of paradigms or of rules on variation) and its brief comments on Indo-European and Primitive Germanic and silence on English today in Africa, Asia, and the antipodes do not provide sufficient sociolinguistic breadth for classroom discussion. The strengths of *Inventing English*, however, are clear: a lively and readable style, coupled with a strong narrative line and terrific literary insight. The book would work very well, I think, either as an alternative to popular accounts like Kate Burridge’s recent *Blooming English*, or as a useful supplement in a survey course on British literature.

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THE PLACE OF THE CROSS IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND. Edited by Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly. Publications of the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, 4. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2006. Pp. xx + 172. \$85.

Veneration of the cross on Good Friday is thought to have begun in the seventh century when Rome adopted the practice from the Church in Jerusalem, which possessed a fragment of the True Cross and had included devotions to the cross