The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England (review)

Richard F. 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

in its services since the fourth century. In the symbol of the cross, Christians have traditionally perceived the immensity of the human experience, the depredations of original sin, and the infinite love of God. As the essays in this volume make clear, the multifaceted symbol of the cross as a literary concept, physical object or inscription, and gesture played a profound role in the devotional culture of Anglo-Saxon England.

This volume is the second of three to come out of the *Sancta Crux/Halig Rod* project. At a variety of interdisciplinary seminars and conferences between 2001 and 2003, the project brought together scholars engaged in research on the influence and significance of the cross in Anglo-Saxon society. All but one of the papers in this volume were originally presented at the second project conference held at the University of Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies in July of 2002. The theme of that conference gave its title to this volume, which consists of eleven essays divided between three sections, each devoted to one aspect of the cross's "place" in the Anglo-Saxon world.

The first section, "The Cross in the Landscape," is comprised of three essays, each of which explores the ways in which the cross as a literary symbol, a physical monument, and a lexical entity mark the geographic and cultural landscape of early Anglo-Saxon England. Ian Wood's essay, "Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria," explores the connections between the stories of King Oswald's cross, Constantine's visionary cross, and St. Helena's discovery of the true cross. Wood examines the ostensible sources for Bede's account of Oswald's construction of a wooden cross before the battle of Heavenfield, arguing that Bede almost certainly had Emperor Constantine's vision before his victory at the Milvian Bridge in mind as he composed the account. Wood also notes that in the literary imagination of the Anglo-Saxons the visionary cross of Constantine and the true cross are frequently conceived of as *cruces gemmatae*. He suggests that the Anglo-Saxon image of a *crux gemmata* (e.g., in *Elene* and *The Dream of the Rood*) must have derived from a variety of sources, such as the accounts by early pilgrims to Jerusalem of a decorated cross on the site of the crucifixion and of the description of the reliquary of the true cross in the Latin *Inventio Sanctae Crucis*. In his 1915 study of the free-standing stone-sculpted crosses in the West Riding area of Yorkshire, W. G. Collingwood concluded that the earliest of these crosses were erected as part of the process of re-conquest and re-conversion of Deira by Bernicia in approximately AD 700. Elizabeth Coatsworth reassesses Collingwood's conclusions in light of more recent discoveries of pieces and fragments of sculpture in her essay, "The Cross in the West Riding of Yorkshire." Focusing her attention primarily on sculptural fragments found at Ripon (and therefore associated with St. Wilfrid and his extensive building campaign), Coatsworth argues the exact opposite direction of influence: that the dissemination of the free-standing stone cross form progressed from Deira to Bernicia in the late seventh century. In "The Cross in English Place-names: Vocabulary and Usage," Alexander Rumble examines the names of a number of locations in England which contain an element that appears to signify "cross." Rumble is quick to point out, however, that not all of these names refer to the cross as the instrument of Christ's crucifixion and begins his investigation with a discussion of various Old English words for "cross" found in these place-names and their likely meanings, which in some cases carry a different significance. Rumble's essay focuses only on those names that would appear to have derived from a reference to a standing cross, which itself would have served as a physical symbol or marker in the landscape. These markers fall into three categories: cru-

cifixes and roods, signs and symbols that may have taken the form of a cross, and specially designated "trees" which might have been crosses. Rumble points out that many of these markers were situated on country roads and may have served as landmarks for travelers, or possibly even as structures in which travelers could pray. In other cases, they may have been used to mark the boundaries of estates, particularly where those estates bordered or crossed roads. Rumble's essay demonstrates that although most of the physical "crosses" referred to in place-names no longer exist, their lexical vestiges evince the indelible impact of the defining symbol of Christianity on the early medieval landscape of Britain.

The four essays in the second section of the book, "The Cross in the Church," consider the place of the cross in the liturgy of the Anglo-Saxon church and in certain texts and rituals associated with popular religious practices. In "Hymns to the Cross: Contexts for the Reception of *Vexilla regis produent*," Inge B. Milfull examines the genesis, composition, and intended use of the famous hymn by Venantius Fortunatus. She argues that the hymn was likely to have been composed originally as a processional hymn for the ceremonial reception of the gift of relics of the True Cross to the convent of the Holy Cross in Poitiers in AD 569. As far as its adoption and use in the Anglo-Saxon church are concerned, Milfull suggests that there is no evidence that the hymn was sung in the Office in early Anglo-Saxon England. In the period following the Benedictine Reform, Milfull finds the hymn not only in a variety of hymnals but also in school books used to instruct novices in the singing of the Office. Interestingly, Milfull concludes that although the hymn held a singularly important place in the liturgy of Holy Week, the text must also have been appreciated as an evocative poem in honor of the cross as the locus and instrument of Christ's passion, since manuscripts of the *Carmina* of Venantius Fortunatus were transmitted to Anglo-Saxon England. Karen L. Jolly in her essay "Tapping the Power of the Cross: Who and for Whom?" discusses a variety of remedies which mention the cross in prayerbooks, computistical and natural science texts, and medical treatises. She examines the manuscript context, vocabulary, and structure of these texts in order to determine how, why, and by whom they were composed and used. In the course of her survey, Jolly discovers that there is evidence of the use of these texts in both liturgical and popular religious contexts. She concludes that it is difficult to determine what constitutes a strictly secular or religious text and calls for a more fluid definition and application of the terms "secular," "religious," "laity," and "clergy" in the context of these Christian ritual remedies. In "The *Crux Usualis* as Apotropaic Weapon in Anglo-Saxon England," David F. Johnson plumbs the textual evidence of Old English literature for examples of the use of the gestural "sign of the cross" as a weapon against the depredations of the devil. Johnson divides the evidence into two subsets: the admonitory and the apotropaic. The first group includes passages, such as Ælfric's "Exaltation of the Cross" and his sermon on "Auguries," which instruct Christians to make the sign of the cross and then explain its efficacy. The apotropaic texts variously represent the sign of the cross as shielding one from harm (*Andreas*), repelling danger from oneself or another (Ælfric's "Life of Saint Martin"), healing oneself or another (Ælfric's "Passion of St Julian and his Wife Basilissa"), and serving as an offensive weapon of aggression against evil (legend of St. Margaret and the dragon). From his survey of the representations of the gesture of the cross, Johnson concludes that the Anglo-Saxons had a deep understanding of the metaphorical and typological significances of this seemingly invisible invocation of God's power on earth. In

perhaps one of the most original and groundbreaking essays of the collection, Karolyn Kinane examines "The Cross as Interpretive Guide for Ælfric's Homilies and Saints' Lives." Kinane argues that Ælfric was acutely aware of the range and limitations of his audiences' interpretive abilities. To overcome this deficit, Ælfric used the familiarity and universality of the cross in his *Catholic Homilies* and *Lives of the Saints* to illumine both the literal and spiritual understandings of his texts. Ultimately for Ælfric, the cross as devotional object and interpretive tool guided his audience away from the created world and toward God.

Four essays on "The Cross in the Text" round out this volume. In "Guthlac of Crowland and the Seals of the Cross," Jane Roberts examines the representations of the cross in Felix's *Vita Guthlaci* and the Old English prose and poetic versions of the saint's life. Roberts points out that in all the legends Guthlac is singled out at birth; he is "sealed" as a "miles cristi" with the sign of the cross by a miraculous hand descending from the heavens even before he is baptized. In the legends of Guthlac, Roberts argues that the cross is represented as both a "seal" of protection and a weapon, as the "sword of Christ," with which the saint fends off demons. Calvin B. Kendall examines the relationship of the carved standing cross at Ruthwell and the dream-vision poem as "things" in an Augustinian sense in his essay, "From Sign to Vision: The Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood.*" Kendall begins his essay with a wide-ranging consideration of other carved standing crosses and earlier accounts of visions of the cross, including Constantine's two visions, in light of the literary tradition of speaking objects. Kendall argues that the relationship between the Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood* is analogous to the relationship between Constantine's celestial vision of the cross and the emperor's later dream vision. Kendall argues, however, that the interconnections between the Ruthwell cross and *The Dream of the Rood* are more complex than these earlier examples since the cross "speaks" in both. Kendall analyzes the responses of each to the "voice" of the sign, demonstrating that each, the carved cross and the poem, is a record of the artist's inspired response to the sign of the cross. In "Hiht wæs geniwad: Rebirth in *The Dream of the Rood,*" Elaine Treharne proposes a new source for the poem's vision, Cyril of Jerusalem's "Letter to Constantine." In a close reading of the poem, Treharne untangles the two themes of baptism and narrative voice to demonstrate the complex interplay of the poem's multiple levels of significance. Treharne argues that the twin themes meet in the half-line "hiht waes geniwad" and provide a key to the possible reception of the poem. Treharne argues that the poem's baptismal imagery reflects an affective piety that might have prepared the catechumenate (or the penitent) for acceptance into the communion of the church by being baptized. In the final essay of this volume, "The Cross in Cambro-Latin Historical Writing in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," Nicholas J. Higham examines the role of the cross in three Welsh and British texts: the ninth-century Pillar of Eliseg, the entry for AD 516 in the *Annales Cambriae,* and the maternal lineage of King Owain. Through a close reading of these three texts, Higham demonstrates the extent to which the cross was inscribed in the landscape and the narratives of the political interactions of Wales and Anglo-Saxon England. Higham argues that texts as diverse as these should not be read in isolation of each other as they were written in the context of intense political and cultural exchange with Anglo-Saxon England.

The editors of this volume, Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly, are to be commended for the high standard the essays in this

collection set for future studies in the field. As a whole, the essays draw on an impressive range of scholarly expertise and represent an exemplary achievement in interdisciplinary studies of Anglo-Saxon culture. In some few cases the essays reflect their genesis as conference papers and yet maintain a sophistication of approach to problems and issues of historical source study. This collection, and indeed all three *Sancta Crux/Halig Rod* volumes, will be mandatory reading for anyone interested in the devotional culture of, and especially the cult of the cross in, Anglo-Saxon England.

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CREATION, MIGRATION, AND CONQUEST: IMAGINARY GEOGRAPHY AND SENSE OF SPACE IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE. By Fabienne L. Michelet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xii + 297; 9 illustrations. $99.

This volume studies representations of space in Anglo-Saxon poetry, historical and geographical writings, and the Cotton *mappa mundi* (London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.v. I, fol. 56v). Focusing on three tropes—creation, migration, and conquest—Michelet argues persuasively that the control of space is a central theme in Old English literature.

Chapter 1 introduces two key theoretical concepts, the "spatial *imaginaire*" and the "mental map." The Anglo-Saxons' spatial *imaginaire* can be reconstructed from "the geographical descriptions, the cosmological models, and the wider spatial imagery found in Old English literature" (p. 9). Mental maps entail six characteristics that delineate this *imaginaire:* distance and boundaries; centrality and marginality; knowing and appropriating places; "othering" as a means of denying rival claims to disputed land; origin narratives that authenticate one's territorial ambitions; and the close relationship between possession of a space and personal, social, and political identity. *Creation, Migration, and Conquest* focuses on these strategies throughout.

In the second chapter, Michelet turns to Old English poetic creation narratives. "Creation" is here understood in a broad sense, including not only stories about the origin of the world (such as *Cædmon's Hymn* and *Genesis A*) but also poems that describe the establishment or expansion of territory (Constantine's defeat of the Huns and Goths in *Elene,* Scyld's subjugation of neighboring tribes in *Beowulf,* and the saint's seizure of the barrow in *Guthlac A*), works that display God's power over creation (*Christ and Satan, Genesis B, Riddle 40,* and *Order of the World*), and also *Widsith,* which "linguistically seizes a geographical extension, an imaginary continental homeland" (p. 44). Parts of this discussion seem forced; despite the arguments advanced on pages 40–44 and 52–53, it is difficult to see how our understanding of *Widsith* and *Guthlac A* is advanced by reading them primarily (or even secondarily) as creation narratives. On the other hand, the readings of *Genesis A, Genesis B,* and *Christ and Satan* on pp. 55–72 are not only original but extremely convincing.

The dwellings of *Beowulf* form the subject of the third chapter in *Creation, Migration, and Conquest.* Michelet urges that the traditional view, which posits a dichotomy between civilized and monstrous dwellings, is only partly correct because, for all their differences, the two actually mirror each other. For example, the poem's monsters live in halls that are constructed (not natural), and these offer their inhabitants shelter and contain precious artefacts; in short, they are