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Cædmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede
(review)

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thirteenth-century male-authored model of female sanctity, which was characterized by mystical union with God and manifested in corporeal signs (such as stigmata, bleeding, and miraculous lactation) and severe bodily asceticism. (Amy Hollywood has shown that the identification of women with somatic piety appears initially only in men's writings about female mystics, not in female mystics' writing about themselves; later generations of female mystics adopted the trope for themselves. See Amy Hollywood, *The Soul of Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* [Notre Dame, 1995].) Isabelle, a royal monastic patron and benefactor to the poor, more closely resembled the sixth-century Queen Radegund. Despite a handful of miracles, Isabelle exhibited no powerful and graphic evidence of divine connection, of the kind that contemporary male authors used to further their own authority. Rather, Isabelle, monastic founder, wealthy patron, princess, and writer of rules, represented institutional forms of power.

Perhaps her role as abbess at Longchamp empowered Agnes to take up the role of hagiographer and, like a male confessor, represent herself as the holy woman's confidant, using the saint's authority to bolster her own. If the peculiar rule Isabelle negotiated prompted Agnes to write like a male mendicant, Isabelle's status as a royal laywoman allowed her to live like one. As Field shows, Isabelle remained "between court and cloister," subject to neither claustration nor vows of obedience to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Like the *fratres minores*, then, but unlike any of their approved female counterparts, Isabelle was able to live a communal religious life (residing at Longchamp) without being cloistered, and like them, she was able to pursue her religious vocation without separation from the world.

Allen J. Frantzen and John Hines, eds. *Cædmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede*. Medieval European Studies 10. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007. Pp. 265. ISBN: 9781933202228. US\$44.95 (paper).

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Co-editor John Hines writes, "The story of Cædmon is a rich example of the powerful connective and interactive valency between language, literature, society, and material life as elements of the cultural whole" and the

text is “a powerful demonstration of how philology, critical reading, the histories of literature and society, and the material history that is archaeology, can be combined to give us a deeper and richer understanding not only of Bede’s objectives in telling this story, but of the context in which he is writing” (220). This tenth volume in West Virginia University Press’s *Medieval European Studies* series comprises six essays (plus an extensive and valuable bibliography) that explore various ways in which the brief episode in Bede provides both the invitation and the material for a broader examination and understanding of the world in which the text was composed.

In a succinct preface, the editors provide an excellent summary of the *Cædmon* story and some traditional critical approaches to it and then move to a brief discussion of interdisciplinarity in medieval studies. They write, puzzlingly, that “this collection claims to break no theoretical ground concerning interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary work, although we believe that it does further this endeavor” (7). Furthermore, they write, “Rather than experiment with recent interdisciplinary theory, in its many varieties,” the authors “seek to advance cross-disciplinary dialogue by using a single text as a focus on Bede’s world and the operations of material culture within it” (9). The collection, they hope, will “help Anglo-Saxonists compare methods and claims made within the disciplines of archaeology, literary and textual criticism, medieval science, history, and theology” (9). Here we have both the collection’s strength and its weakness: although the range of allied disciplines is broad, the discussions often require the reader to go very far afield of the primary text.

The first essay, “Material Differences: The Place of *Cædmon’s Hymn* in the History of Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Poetry,” by Daniel P. O’Donnell, examines the hymn alongside analogous creation poems before considering the degree to which Bede saw his subject as innovative and daring. O’Donnell rightly notes that the history of Bede’s texts and analogue hunting have been marked by scholarship designed to question authenticity or originality; he offers a lengthy discussion of several analogous texts (among them Mohammed’s *Call*, Aldhelm, and the anachronistic nineteenth-century African *Ntsikana*) and related scholarship. What we learn is that the *Cædmon* story demonstrates more differences from than similarities to these analogues. While interesting as revisionist information that places our primary text in the company of others concerned with poetic inspiration, divine empowerment, and so forth, the approach is an uneasy one: we are, essentially, asked to understand a text by what it is not. For O’Donnell, since Bede shows no “essential connection between *Cædmon* and the traditional

Germanic verse that preceded him,” his significance for Bede “appears to be far more revolutionary” (36). Cædmon is not just “a new model for poets trained in the old ways” but “somebody who does not so much appropriate as obliterate the old ways of doing things” (36). Yet, even if the analogues prompt such a conclusion, O’Donnell reminds us that the hymn is structurally “a very Germanic poem,” and we move to a thoughtful—even if hardly original—discussion of the Germanic and Christian dimensions of the hymn’s diction, in which O’Donnell examines Bede’s rather conservative (or stereotypical) Latin translations for Cædmon’s “supposedly most novel epithets” (47). In sum, O’Donnell argues that “despite Bede’s emphasis on Cædmon’s uniqueness,” his poetry is not “particularly innovative from an aesthetic point of view” (49), and that Bede’s description, paying little or no attention to formulas and diction, suggests that “Cædmon was a superb technician” (50).

Scott DeGregorio’s “Literary Contexts: Cædmon’s Hymn as a Center of Bede’s World” is a strong, original piece that seeks to counter a long-standing critical practice of isolating the Cædmon episode by placing it in the larger contexts of the *Ecclesiastical History* and of the corpus of Bede’s writings. Starting with Bede’s last known written work (the letter to Egbert), DeGregorio moves quickly to his treatment of Bede’s attitude toward the vernacular. Allowing for Bede’s consistent commitment to Latin as integral to Christian culture, he skillfully shows how Bede was entirely aware of the great potential for the vernacular in the spread of the faith. What makes the Cædmon episode unique is that “it is the one and only instance in Bede’s oeuvre where he goes so far as to depict *the use of the vernacular in action*, inasmuch as he presents the Whitby cowherd actually employing his native tongue to versify sacred history” (59). DeGregorio recalls Augustine’s view that pagan, classical texts could be serviceable in Christianity, and so Bede, especially in his exegetical writings, suggests that the Church make use of all available means—including vernacular expression—to battle unbelief and error. From here, he places the Cædmon episode in Bede’s long-standing concern with monastic reform (69). In the face of what Bede saw as a decline of monastic life and culture, DeGregorio argues, the Cædmon episode contributes to an “evocation of a glorious monastic past” (76). By juxtaposing the Cædmon story and that of the destruction of the Coldingham monastery, Bede illuminates the corruption of monastic life by insincere aristocratic secularizers and shows the remedy. DeGregorio closes by noting that modern scholarship has often emphasized dimensions of the story that were not Bede’s principal concerns. “Indeed,” he writes,

“whatever else the story may accomplish, Cædmon in Bede’s portrayal becomes a powerful foil for exposing the corruptions of contemporary monasticism, lacking as it does the discipline and zeal he attributes to his exemplary cowherd-turned-monk” (79). This essay stands out for the way in which it advances a strong argument from established primary texts.

Faith Wallis’s “Cædmon’s Created World and the Monastic Encyclopedia” examines important questions about Bede and his understanding of what constituted the world. She states that architectural metaphors are nearly the sole means of describing the physical cosmos in Old English literature and that the only metaphorical image in Cædmon’s hymn is the naming of heaven as a roof (91–92). “For Bede,” she argues, “cosmology, *computus*, and the Creator’s provision for the ‘sons of men’ converged in specifically architectural images of the world that placed special emphasis on the heaven-roof, its construction, its motion, and above all its permanence and stability” (95–96). In the essay’s central section, Wallis shows how Bede’s writings, both computistical and exegetical, participate in the medieval notion that *computus* and exegesis are “facets of a single Christian program of knowledge, which we might call the ‘monastic encyclopedia,’” a system that Wallis states is framed by Augustine in the *De doctrina* and enacted in the “monastic practices of instruction, reading, and prayer” (99). Bede, as Wallis notes, is well known as the first commentator on the construction of the biblical Tabernacle and Temple; further, she states that in medieval monastic culture, architecture was a “widely used trope for monastic *meditatio*” in its symbolic meaning of building thoughts about God (101). She offers an impressive discussion of texts from Bede and other medieval thinkers (among them Benedict, Gregory, and Aldhelm) who used building and structural terminology in their writings and understood their direct applicability to religious life and thought. Since, for Wallis, such phrasings suggest a direct participation in the “monastic encyclopedia,” they direct us, too, to see that Bede saw Cædmon, in using the world-hall image, as an exponent of that program. In this, she states, the cloister was opened to the onetime cowherd and to Old English poetry as well (110).

“All Created Things,” from co-editor Allen J. Frantzen, reassures us, with warmth and good humor, that although they are indeed present, “lamps, cracks around doors and windows, and the location of cemeteries are not the sorts of things that draw readers to Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*” (112). And right he is. But this essay attempts to show that Bede’s miracles, beyond the literary and spiritual queries they have invited, “inadvertently call our attention to the everyday world and the ordinary objects

in it" (113). Frantzen writes that we expect Bede's miracles to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity and its symbolic system and that many of the miracles do. Bede, he says, "uses miracles to show how humans should be properly connected to the things around them" (122). After discussing some well-chosen miracle passages from the lives of Wilfrid, Cuthbert, Adamnan, and Owine, Frantzen briefly surveys the recent work of archaeologists to show how important Bede's *History* has been in the study of material culture. When we return to the Cædmon text, however, we read, "The command to sing of 'the beginning of all created things' ('principium creaturarum') cannot be limited to a celebration of God's power over all the material world. Inevitably, the praise must extend to 'omnia,' to all, in its measure, number, and weight, whether axe, adze, dormitory, fish nets, doors or windows." Thus, Cædmon's hymn "seems to refer only to the new tradition of sacred vernacular verse, not to the old tradition that forms its second voice" (147). Frantzen concludes, citing co-editor John Hines en route, that while Bede and his contemporaries have passed away, the objects of their world remain and are emerging from their hidden state at a greater rate than ever before. "Surely," he writes, "it is time for Anglo-Saxonists reading texts to look for these things and then to look at, rather than through, them to see what they can tell us about the matter of Bede's world" (149). What is unclear, though, is what we might hope to gather and how we might use such information. The broad scope of this essay is impressive, but it stops short of asserting precisely why the time has come for such effort, a directive that those interested in the texts would surely appreciate.

The essay that follows, Christopher Loveluck's "Cædmon's World: Secular and Monastic Lifestyles and Estate Organization in Northern England, CE 650–900," is a clearly defined archaeological discussion that makes no pretense to be other than what it is. Loveluck terms the Cædmon story "a most fortunate piece of 'theater' within which to explore most of the recent developments" in material culture study (150) and "an avenue to illustrate the positive use of textual and artistic evidence in archaeological interpretation" (163–64). Much to the point, he says, "The characters and circumstances of the Cædmon story, and its context within the *Ecclesiastical History*, reflect the material foundations of secular and ecclesiastical lives, and the extents of their social networks during the late seventh century" (150). Through detailed treatments of excavations (and the scholarly results they have produced), including the Whitby locale most directly associated with Cædmon, Loveluck considers the close relationship between

secular and monastic social communities in England and especially “the interaction between those members of the aristocratic elite playing secular and religious roles” (187), an interesting parallel point to that raised by DeGregorio concerning Bede’s call for reform. Loveluck also discusses “the transformation of social and settlement identity” (189), in which secular estate centers became monasteries (and vice versa), and the consequences of “the close interaction between secular and ecclesiastical elites” (190).

The volume closes with co-editor John Hines’s “Changes and Exchanges in Bede’s and Cædmon’s World,” ambitious in its attempt to fuse linguistic and archaeological concerns but, unfortunately, a very diffuse discussion. Hines begins with some beautiful explications of Bede’s Latin phrasings, often showing in his own translations a far higher sensitivity to the language than standard translations. When he moves to relating the Cædmon episode (including the death scene) to medieval hymnody and offers yet another analogue, a Psalm (not already suggested by O’Donnell, he notes), the discussion wanders. In a particularly cloudy passage, he states that many Psalms move through expressions of doubt and so forth, toward an end that is “not of the exhortatory, prospective kind represented by the subjunctive of the Lord’s Prayer—‘Hallowed *be* Thy name,’” but, rather, one in which the “mood of the verb is rather the indicative, announcing a situation that is already as it should be” (198). Aside from the fact that the theological framework (and setting) for the Lord’s Prayer is substantially and significantly different from that of the Psalms, this is an odd observation, especially when it leads us to this conclusion: “That is not how Cædmon’s hymn ends. Bede presents Cædmon’s life and work as a poet as something more genuinely dramatic—participating in changes and exchanges in the course of time—and so growing towards the positive spiritual closure consummated at his earthly death and entry into glory” (199). Strangely, in a discussion that began with such concern for language and precision, we are never told what constitutes the genuinely dramatic or what in contrast to Cædmon’s or Bede’s life and work is less so. As in the O’Donnell essay that opens the volume, we have again here the curious practice of describing the primary text in terms of what it is not, and from this Hines concludes, “The story of Cædmon is thus considerably more than the showcase for another of the miracles of Book 4 of the *Ecclesiastical History*” (199). The essay goes on to describe the construction of Wearmouth and Jarrow and then onward to yet another (anachronistic) analogue, to the seventeenth-century Henry Vaughan, and to economic matters, but with little help for the reader to connect the topics.

Hines ends with an important claim: that the readings in the volume are “not the result of an unsympathetic deconstruction that looks beyond [Bede’s] conscious religious beliefs to the pragmatic social and material interests involved in how he transmitted the story” (220). The central religious and spiritual dimensions of the text are, however, rather sidelined in much of the volume—a serious matter, but one that may be due in large part to the focus cited in the title. Hines claims that “we can appreciate Bede’s spirituality all the more when we understand how it was rooted in a substantial and realistic appraisal of the world” (220), and this is partially true. But the aims of material study and the aims of theological and spiritual inquiry—though not always or necessarily at cross-purposes—are not so easily reconciled. There is much value to interdisciplinary work and to the lively discussions it can generate; the material, though, needs to be readily accessible to the wide audience such discourse seeks. The issue with the volume is the age-old matter of audience and focus; in some cases, readers may often wonder whether a discussion seeks to further our understanding of Bede’s text by reaching out to other disciplines: the world outside the text illuminates the text. In other cases, the opposite may stand: the primary text (if that term is applicable) stands only as a tool to understand what lies outside it. The strongest essays in this volume are those that respect the boundaries set by one or the other approach and do not pretend (or attempt) to do more than they reasonably can do without losing purpose. The volume as a whole demonstrates the vitality of the Cædmon episode and its enduring power to spur interest and inquiry, though readers should be prepared for some challenging assumptions of generosity.

Sabine von Heusinger and Annette Kehnel, eds. *Generations in the Cloister: Youth and Age in Medieval Religious Life/Generationen im Kloster: Jugend und Alter in der mittelalterlichen vita religiosa*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008. Pp. 200. ISBN: 9783825811730. €29.90 (cloth).

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Generations in the Cloister grew out of a panel of the same name at the 1995 International Medieval Congress in Leeds. In this essay collection, according