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Review of Corinne Dale, *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles*. Woodbridge: Brewer, 2017. x + 217 pp. ISBN 9781843844648

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Reviews

Joanna Bellis, *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337–1600*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2016. xii + 300 pp. ISBN 9781843844280.

Although the Hundred Years War has been well researched by scholars over the years, representations of the war have not been extensively explored beyond 1453, the date typically thought of as the end of the war. Joanna Bellis' book is a thoroughly researched exploration of the English language and the linguistic construction of nationhood and identity in relation to the war. Tracing shifts in language from fourteenth- to seventeenth-century England, Bellis provides a novel perspective on the significance of war literature.

Bellis's study is predicated on the seismic impact on English of the Norman Conquest in 1066, which produced an English language that was (and remains) lexically mixed. Inevitably hybrid, language is not re-constructed so much as re-imagined. Tracing English anxiety amidst French strength, Bellis highlights that in both medieval and early modern literature, 'words and war developed an intense mutual identification' (p. 2).

Exploring various primary sources, including polemics, tracts, parliament rolls, letters and chronicles, Bellis attempts to challenge the reliance of previous scholarship on periodisation. Bellis emphasises instead the continuous connections between the medieval and early modern periods. She successfully manages to combine the intertextuality of two periods generally perceived as disparate. Moreover, by examining less popular works, Bellis succeeds in her aim to shed light on previously neglected texts.

The first chapter establishes the foundations of the book, plotting the overwriting of the English language through conquest. Indeed, Bellis suggests that linguistic conquest was more palpable than physical invasion. Indeed, as later asserted in chapter three, 'loanwords were spoils of war' (p. 129). This underpins the textual analysis which follows in subsequent chapters.

In chapter two, Bellis argues that the chroniclers of the Hundred Years War used language as a 'performative parallel front' (p. 77) of documenting the war. Their language was self-conscious and reflexive. Markedly permeable, the English language was fraught with too many French loanwords to attain a distinct national identity. English was deeply ambivalent and contradictory, often leaving writers 'uneasy about exactly where its boundaries lay' (p. 71).

Perhaps the most convincing chapter is chapter three, in which Bellis argues that language was constructed as a mimesis or mimicry of war. In the war poetry of Laurence Minot, John Lydgate and John Page, linguistic antagonism is an established undercurrent against both the

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French and their allies the Flemish. Bellis highlights poetry's awareness and fascination with conflict. The animosities with France were embedded in language and articulated through connections with the French, filth and deceit.

In the final two chapters, Bellis emphasises the typical Tudor self-fashioning of national as well as personal identity through the enduring influence of the Hundred Years War. The Tudor theatre became the literal stage for the 'ideological collision of past and present, mimesis and object' (p. 217). Both an over-arching and particular assessment, chapter five focuses on Shakespeare and the enduring mimesis of warfare in language. Sustained scrutiny is applied to the 1590s and Bellis highlights the how the extended conflict with France often emerged through the politicisation of literature.

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Corinne Dale *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles*. Woodbridge: Brewer, 2017. x + 217 pp. ISBN 9781843844648.

The Old English riddles of the Exeter Book have been the subject of a welcome deluge of ecocritically-minded research in recent years. The most distinctive contribution of Dale's *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles* is that she brings (Christian) ecotheology to bear on her analyses. This is welcome: until researchers started, in the wake of early ecocritical research, to realise that Old English riddles are a fabulous repository of insights into the relationships between early medieval people and the rest of the material world, research on Old English riddles had tended to be of the 'another solution to Exeter Book Riddle X' variety. Dale's introduction provides a useful sketch of the history of ecotheology, along with some of the key methodological questions to which ecotheology gives rise, and will be of interest to medievalist ecocritics well beyond Dale's immediate audience of Old Anglicists. The rest of the study is effectively a series of case-studies of different Exeter Book riddles, with each chapter focusing on a small group of riddles (along with comparative material, including riddles in Latin) and deploying the ecotheological perspective to varying degrees. The study broadly moves from contemplating the environment as a system to animals, then plants, then inanimate matter.

The first chapter explores how the riddles construct place (and displacement), drawing most prominently on the increasingly celebrated Riddle 60 (in the numbering of the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records). This riddle on the reed-pen begins a series in the Exeter Book focusing on natural materials. Dale argues that her chosen riddles displace the centrality of the civilised, manufactured hall that is so prominent in Old English narrative verse to offer an ecocentric meditation on place.

Chapter 2 takes us to Riddles 12, 38, and 72, on the ox, exploring human-animal relationships and the way in which the riddles use these to explore suffering and servitude of both humans and other animals; Dale also (rather equivocally) explores the case for reading riddles 4 and 52 as ox-riddles. Chapter 3 is a close analysis of Riddle 26, on the Gospel book, and the principal new angle that it brings to the study of this popular poem is that it inverts the scribal practice of adding a colophon to a text: whereas colophons bring the usually

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anonymous scribe out of the shadows and recognise his labour, Riddle 26 calls our attention to the other animal and material inputs to the codex. Perhaps surprisingly, this chapter engages less clearly with ecotheology than most. Given the centrality of scripture to the Abrahamic religions, one wonders whether there was ecotheological research waiting to be adduced here — or whether, conversely, Riddle 26 can do more to fill a gap in ecotheological thought than Dale appreciated.

The fourth chapter turns to trees, assessing the riddles' attitudes to forms of life more alien to humans than other animals. Dale helpfully notes the longevity of trees and their role in constituting place (they are, for example, implicitly very different plants from agricultural crops, whose lifecycles are generally shorter and more directly shaped by humans), yet also develops an argument for human emphathy with plants in the Exeter Book riddles (not to mention in *The Dream of the Rood*), developing a range of perspectives on how humans saw themselves in trees.

I pause on chapter 5, which takes us into inanimate material, as a convenient case-study of Dale's approaches and strengths. This chapter is probably the fullest investigation so far of Riddle 83, to which Dale confidently ascribes the solution 'coin' or, more precisely, 'ore that has been turned into money'. The book is not as precise in its engagement with the Old English text as one might wish: the fragmentary fourteen lines of this riddle include some words and phrases of uncertain meaning and some difficult (perhaps impenetrable) syntax, which Dale skates over. Plausible though Dale's preferred solution is, I would suggest that we could only be 95% confident in the correctness of a broader claim like 'ore and/or things into which ore is transformed'. Dale devotes some literary-critical attention to the riddle's use of the rare past tense verb *āgētte* (pp. 127–28). Rather oddly, she bases her discussion on glosses in Richard Marsden's *Cambridge Old English Reader* and in Henry Sweet's *Student's Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon* while making no reference to the comprehensive and cutting-edge *Dictionary of Old English*. The *DOE* explains that *āgētte* could come from *āgītan*, whose meaning is not certain: the other three certain attestations refer, in an alliterative formula, to death by spears, while the derived noun *āgīta*, which occurs twice in the Old English *Consolation of Philosophy*, seems clearly to mean 'waster, spendthrift'. But *āgētte* could also come from *āgēotan* ('pour'), either by emendation or because the forms of the two verbs were collapsing in Old English. Dale does not seem to be aware of these complications; if she were, I think she would probably come away less confident that we really know what is afoot with this word, and in Riddle 83 generally, as a result. On the other hand, Dale's readings are plausible overall and her ecocritical/ecotheological angle certainly helps her sustain a longer and more productive discussion of this riddle than most previous research. She contrasts the riddle with the principal biblical description of mining, Job 28.1–11, and convincingly argues that Riddle 83 imputes to ore more agency in the face of human oppression than does the Job passage — one of many occasions when she finds that Old English riddles develop a more ecocentric understanding of the world than the Bible. She goes on to associate Riddle 83's scepticism as to the usefulness of money with *Beowulf*'s melancholic portrayals of the burial of metal wealth and the power of fire, situating the riddle in a wider literary context, and she argues that Riddle 83 portrays ore getting revenge for the suffering it undergoes while being smelted: once humans have violently turned ore into money, it causes them harm in its role as the root of all evil.

Accordingly, in chapter 6, Dale analyses Riddle 27 (virtually universally agreed to be on mead) and emphasises that this riddle not only positions mead as dominating the humans who

produce it (as does Riddle 11, on wine), but moreover that Riddle 27's elaborate tour of the process of mead's production positions the human mead-maker as just one actor in a sprawling network of interrelating species and substances. Thus in chapter 5 Dale provides us with new and valuable readings of Riddle 83, exploring ramifications there and in the subsequent chapter for how we read other parts of the Old English corpus — but closer philological reflection on her argumentation reveals possibilities and problems that Dale has missed.

The study closes by putting the Book of Job — in which God is fond of asking Job questions that undermine Job's anthropocentric view of the created world — into dialogue with Riddles 84 (water) and 1–3 (storm). In discussing how these sources ask us to contemplate the nature of human knowledge, Dale begins to open up epistemological questions that are fundamental to the ecocritical project, and to show how the Exeter Book riddles do the same.

There is no doubt that this book will be consulted by almost all future commentators on the Exeter Book riddles. Although the intensity of its engagement with ecotheology varies, the work also stands as an important incitement to eco-theorists of the Middle Ages to look to ecotheology for insights, and in turn to challenge ecotheology by testing it against a literary culture which was in an intense dialogue with Abrahamic thought.

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