Daniel Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read Their Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Print, 248 pp., US$69.95/£56.00, ISBN: 9780812249941.

Review

Opening this volume, Daniel Donoghue invites the reader to consider the sheer arbitrary nature of the conventions that govern the textual display of verse. Modern readers, even those dealing with scholarly editions of verse in their source languages, expect verse layout to be delineated from prose – identifiable by line breaks for each line of verse. While these are conventions with medieval precedents, they are not the conventions of Old English verse which, to most readers, appear within their source manuscripts as indistinguishable from prose. It is Donoghue's proposal in this volume that the scribal practices of Anglo-Saxon England did not need to develop syntax markers for written poetics due to readers' deep cultural familiarity with the structural features of poetics as oral text.

Passing over the brief introduction, Chapter 1, 'How to read,' is a wide-ranging examination of reading as practice, taking in examples from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and up to and including modern Thai. While this may sound a grab-bag of cultural traditions, the chapter is well structured and cohesive as Donoghue explores how scribal practice and written conventions informed oral and silent reading, and the comprehension of content. Notable within this, though tangentially related to the topic of how the Anglo-Saxons read their poems, is Donoghue's challenge to the conventional interpretation of the famous Augustinian tale relating Ambrose's silent reading. Here Donoghue convincingly argues, through close reading, that there is no expression of surprise by Augustine in the passage, nor any implication that Ambrose's behaviour was considered to be anomalous.

This provides Donoghue a good grounding to seek out other examples in classical and medieval literature that seem to evidence the practice of silent reading. This is perhaps not as entirely successful as he might hope, and his argument that Hrothgars' examination of the sword-hilt in *Beowulf* is evidence of silent reading, as Hrothgar does not speak the inscribed runes aloud, seems largely speculative (pp. 22-3). That the *Beowulf* poet simply summarised the inscription cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of the practice. In contrast, the material on modern Thai script and learned reading behaviour insofar as it relates to *scriptio continua* is insightful and contributes well to the argument that classical and medieval scribal conventions did not necessitate that readers practiced oral reading. However, taken as a whole, the first chapter feels more of a secondary introduction to the topic at hand than an opening chapter on Anglo-Saxon reading practice.

From Chapter 2 the volume begins to engage more directly with Old English poetry and the interplay between orality and literacy. Here Donoghue engages with the theoretical underpinnings of the transition of old English oral poetics to literature. It is at the core of his argument throughout the book that orality and literacy are not clearly delineated, and that the modes are not exclusive. That Anglo-Saxon scribes did not develop the extensive system of punctuation with which we are familiar from Latin texts indicates that scribes expected readers to be thoroughly familiar with Old English verse syntax. In that context in-text syntax markers were unnecessary to the reading of poetry. By way of an 'exception that proves the rule,' Donoghue highlights the *Leiden Riddle* as a rare example of an Old English poem provided with verse structure via lineation. The verse is found in a manuscript composed in Latin, likely in Fleury, and imitates Latin verse convention. Donoghue raises two interesting questions here: would an Anglo-Saxon reader have recognised

this as verse, and could Anglo-Saxon scribes have adopted such practices had they been deemed necessary?

Which is not to say Old English verse lacked punctuation entirely, but rather that it was used frugally and lineation rarely if ever. It is in fact Donoghue's discussion of punctuation where this volume is at its most compelling (in this reader's opinion). Though technical in nature, the break-down of Old English verse formulas, syntax, and meter in chapter three is remarkably accessible (a feat for which Donoghue must be thoroughly commended). Primarily using *Beowulf* as his case study – though extending the theory to other texts – Donoghue argues that manuscript punctuation aligns with Old English verse syntax. This is the crux of Donoghue's assertion that Anglo-Saxon readers were immersed in a poetic tradition which allowed them to recognise verse syntax independent of prose and independent of what we perceive to be verse conventions. In essence, he rejects the idea that Old English verse was merely prose distorted to metrical constraints and suggests that the received tradition of Old English poetry allowed Anglo-Saxon readers to understand poetry as independent of prose (i.e. readers did not need to parse verse to prose in order to understand it). Extending this thought then to punctuation, Donoghue is able to demonstrate patterns of use within the texts in which such markers align with the verse syntax; moreover, that their paucity reflects that the inherent syntax of the verse negated the need for frequent scribal intervention.

Donoghue's book is striking, innovative, and convincing. It is also in many aspects hypothetical – what he terms 'less a conclusion than an opening up' (pp. 155-74) – and presumes a certain familiarity with philology, if not necessarily with Old English specifically. Nonetheless, the book will find its natural audience with those who study Old English verse and, in that context, provides valuable frameworks for

further exploring how Anglo-Saxon scribes understood their readers, and how those readers experienced poetic text.

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