

INTERVIEW: «ON OLD ENGLISH STUDIES TODAY»  
A. BRAVO GARCIA & BRUCE MITCHELL

BRAVO: In this series of questions, I'd like to touch on the various fields of Old English studies in which you are particularly interested. Let me start with punctuation. Do you think that we can produce the definitive interpretation, the right reading of a poem, by means of modern marks of punctuation?

MITCHELL: The short answer is "NO". Before elaborating on this, I'd like to thank you for this opportunity of addressing your readers in Spain and elsewhere and to say that I shall do my best to answer your questions with fairness and frankness. Both are essential: distortion of another's views by careless reading (or for some worse cause) and silence when one sees what one takes to be errors are two failings a scholar should avoid. One must say what one thinks, come what may. Now for a longer answer to your question. We have no native informants and therefore no intonation patterns for Old English. Modern English punctuation is not designed for Old English. Its use demands that editors make decisions about the placing of stops and semi-colons without supporting evidence, for example when they meet the ambiguous demonstrative/relative *se* or ambiguous adverb/conjunctions like *\*a* and *\*onne*. Its use also breaks up what I believe to be the large unit of Old English poetry—the verse paragraph—by interrupting the flow of the poetry. My latest attempt to meet this problem can be seen in *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), where I punctuate the texts by using the stop at the end of the verse paragraph only, abandoning the semi-colon, and using the more flexible raised stop.

BRAVO: This leads me on to a more fundamental question: Have Old English poems fixed meanings?

MITCHELL: No poem has a fixed meaning. I recently wrote that “I am prepared to concede that most modern interpretations of *Beowulf* might have been felt or thought by one Anglo-Saxon or another.” But I understand the point of your question: some people write as if Old English poems do have fixed meanings. There is more than one piece of work bearing the title “The Meaning of the Poem X” or words to that effect.

BRAVO: Some of your expressions about allegory seem to reject this topic so frequently used in Old English criticism: “Allegory, like alcohol, is potent and addictive stuff.” Do you in fact reject the idea that Old English poems can be allegorical?

MITCHELL: By no means. There are several Old English poems in which allegory is made explicit and others in which it can quite reasonably be detected. But some allegorists write as if theirs was the only possible interpretation of the poem in question. I have argued elsewhere about the dangers of pan-allegorism.

BRAVO: It has been said that Old English poetry was orally composed and that consequently it is formulaic and not lettered. Do you agree?

MITCHELL: This view, as far as I know was a corollary of the strict oral-formulaic theory which I have just dismissed. To those who accepted it, Old English poetry was an oral art and critics were therefore bound to apply to it criteria suitable for the criticism of orally composed texts. I believe that Old English poetry should be judged by the same standards of criticism as any other poetry provided that the obvious differences in language, background, and cultural context, are properly considered. We must not close our eyes to new critical approaches. But equally we must build on the past. We must not jettison all the good work that has been done and disregard the foundations laid by those who preceded us.

BRAVO: A few years ago I was present at one of your lectures. The theme was “Old English as a garden from which one can at will pick blossoms of different kinds”. Can you explain this remark?

MITCHELL: The subject of the lecture was “Old English Poetry: Garden or Compost-Heap?” In it I argued that some modern critical approaches to Old English poetry are likely to destroy the great variety of flowers in the garden by reducing them to a uniform compost. Among the composters I numbered the strict oral-formulaists, the pan-allegorists, and the pan-Christianizers who see a Christian reference in every mention of a ruin, a ship, or whatever; to whom repeated half lines, which should be treated in their own context, must carry the same associations so that, because the phrase *heah ond horngeap* in *Andreas* 668 refers to the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, its use in *Beowulf* 82 makes Heorot a Christian symbol; and who argue (in the words of one of them) that “Anglo-Saxon man thinks of himself as a creature of God with a rational soul.” In *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* I have extended the garden image to Old English literature: in Part IV The Garden of Old English Literature, I offer Plants from the Prose and Blooms from the poetry.

BRAVO: When you say “What we need is more knowledge of Old English not the lucubrations of people ‘with a limited knowledge of Old English’”, are you rejecting the modern literary interpretations?

MITCHELL: Not necessarily. Not all of them. This quotation comes from Bruce Mitchell *On Old English* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 335, and should be read in context. But the basic point is clear: scholars who wish to pronounce on Old English literature or syntax or any other topic have a duty to achieve more than “a limited knowledge” of the language.

BRAVO: Is this compatible with what you wrote in “1987: Postscript on *Beowulf*”: “Feeling is not out of place when one is concerned with poetry.

indeed, when I contemplate the great variety of totally irreconcilable interpretations of *Beowulf* which have been produced by thinking, I am tempted to go further and to claim that feeling rather than thought should be paramount”?

MITCHELL: I believe so. I have always encouraged all my pupils, no matter how limited their knowledge of Old English to respond emotionally to the poetry. But I did not encourage them to submit articles for publication.

BRAVO: In the last few years in some places teachers are introducing computers to teach Old English grammar and syntax. What does a teacher like you, who has written a monumental *Old English Syntax* and (with Fred C. Robinson) *A Guide to Old English* for students, think about this?

MITCHELL: Anything which encourages more people to learn Old English has my support. In *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England*, I try to teach the language by comparing it with Modern English and by introducing Anglo-Saxon literature, history, archaeology, arts and crafts, place-names, the heroic life, and the impact of Christianity, through Old English quotations and texts. But in an age when all young people are computer-literate, computer programmes can, I am sure, play a part. Indeed, I have seen stimulating programmes which go far beyond teaching merely grammar and syntax. But some of them involve spending a long time on one poem. The acid test must be: How soon can a user read Old English with some understanding? I don't see much point in programmes which involve paradigm exercises as if Old English were a spoken language or which put superficial gimmickry (\*mimickery?) before solid learning.

BRAVO: You have spent more than forty years studying and teaching Old English. Can you tell us the development of Old English studies in these last decades?

MITCHELL: A full answer to this question would require more space than is available here. I gave my own reactions to these developments in “1947-1987 Forty Years On”; see *On Old English*, pp. 325-44.

BRAVO: Let us speak about the future. What is your opinion about the recent critical studies on language and literature, the new organization and projects related to Old English?

MITCHELL: This question too demands a long and difficult answer which I have already to some extent given in “1947-1987 Forty Years On”. Here I shall try to answer it by imagining the reactions of the great Henry Sweet, who died in 1912. If he were re-incarnated, he would blink with astonishment at the developments in the study of semantics, syntax, and other aspects of the language; of Anglo-Latin; of manuscripts and sources; of history and literature; of archaeology, arts, and crafts; of methods of teaching; and of the uses to which computers are now being harnessed. He would no doubt be very pleased at most of the work which has been and is being done. He would — perhaps he is now looking through my eyes — be disappointed at the general absence of annotated or critical bibliographies (as opposed to mere lists) and especially at the fact that the new series of annotated bibliographies announced by Boydell and Brewer “covers Old and Middle English literature outside those major subject areas already served by existing bibliographies”. Which major areas of Old English literature, he might reasonably ask, are “already served” by annotated bibliographies? He would not be impressed by the fact that such work is now in many quarters apparently regarded as a service industry, not “real scholarship” like that involved in producing yet another esoteric interpretation of *The Wive’s Lament* or some other literary text. He would share some of the disquiet I have expressed above and elsewhere about some current developments in Old English literary studies and would nod with approval (as I do) at the answer Fred C. Robinson gave in reply to the last question you asked in your interview with him (*Selim* 1 (1991), 143-7). And finally he would, I think, regard as something

approaching the scandalous that, when time is available for a plethora of new literary “interpretations”, Klaeber’s *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records have not been revised since 1950 and 1931-1953 respectively and that for the First Series of Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies* we still have to rely in 1994 on Thorpe’s edition published in 1844.

BRAVO: Finally I shall, if I may, ask a more personal question. What was your reaction on finding that in the phrases “the progressive isolation of his work” and “his frank disregard for ‘the new methodologies and their institutionalization as disciplines’”, the word “his” meant “Bruce Mitchell’s”?

MITCHELL: These are quotations from an excellent resume by Thomas N. Hall in *Old English Newsletter* 26.2 (1993), 10-11 of a review of my contribution to Old English studies by Christina von Nolcken in *Modern Philology* 89 (1991) 25-35. I am grateful for her compliments and good wishes. But she presents a false diagnosis of my attitudes and motivation. I am able to bear the suggestion that I am the only man in step with equanimity but I have to say that I have never felt “threatened” by “the new developments” and have never had a “fear” of being “undervalued”. I do not concede the truth of the comment that “[he] seems to have thrown all his usual fair-mindedness to the winds” (p. 32) in my attacks on the new methodologies and in judging them by their results. How else can methodologies be judged? I venture to suggest that anyone who wishes to retain any scholarly integrity has a duty to remain isolated from the demand defined by von Nolcken (p. 33):

The demand that those entering the profession quickly establish themselves encouraged them to seek the wide-reaching hypothesis, the argument that dazzled. In their haste they also all too often worked at the expense of the data and without due regard for previous scholarship.

If to have produced *A Guide to Old English* (first alone and then in happy collaboration with Fred C. Robinson), *Old English Syntax*, *On Old English*, *A*

*Critical Bibliography of Old English Syntax*, and *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* (with its new system of punctuation and its new form of glossary), and to be producing (again in collaboration with Fred C. Robinson) *“Beowulf”: A Student’s Edition*, is evidence of “progressive isolation”, then I am content to be isolated or (as I could put it) to have my feet on the ground in the narrow way rather than my head in the clouds above the broad way.

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