

INTERVIEW: "ON OLD ENGLISH STUDIES TODAY"

A. BRAVO GARCIA & FRED C. ROBINSON

BRAVO: I know you are associate editor of *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile*. Tell us about the importance and aim of the series.

ROBINSON: When it was founded under the patronage of Sir Winston Churchill a few years after World War II, the series was intended in part as a means of preserving the contents and appearance of precious English manuscripts which, it was feared, might be destroyed in subsequent nuclear wars. The idea was to have exact facsimiles of these manuscripts dispersed throughout the world so that if the library containing the manuscript were vaporized, the other libraries in other parts of the world would have copies and the text and format would be saved. Over the years this rather apocalyptic rationale for *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile* has given way to a more practical one. The editors of the series seek to make available to scholars the world over the primary evidence for the study of Anglo-Saxon culture. The importance of the series has perhaps been perceived more clearly than ever in recent years when we have witnessed an increasing awareness of the need to study Old English texts within their manuscript contexts.

BRAVO: Professor E. G. Stanley and you are the editors of the forthcoming volume in the series, volume 23. Can you give us some information about the texts comprised in this volume?

ROBINSON: Yes, gladly. In this volume we seek to present facsimiles of all poetic texts which have not previously been published in facsimile. This includes some major poems like *Meters* from the Old English version of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* and the poem *Solomon and Saturn* as well as *The Battle of Maldon* and poems from the Anglo-Saxon *Chronicle* and the numerous shorter poems included in volume 6 of *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. We also include all verse texts found in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions, both runic and non-runic. In addition to providing readers with copies of all these texts, the volume displays dramatically the variety of different forms in which Old English poetry is preserved: in vellum manuscripts, in seventeenth-century transcriptions of manuscripts which no longer survive, in inscriptions, and in a few cases in modern printed books (e. g. *The Fight at Finnsburg*).

BRAVO: You are one of the International Advisers to the *Dictionary of Old English*, the other three advisers being Professor E. G. Stanley of Oxford, Professor Helmut Gneuss of Munich, and Professor Roberta Frank of Toronto. Can you tell us something about the present state of that project?

ROBINSON: Yes, the *DOE* is making impressive progress. I have just finished reading proof on one of the last sections of entries for the letter *B*. The letters *C* and *D* have already been published in microfiche. The staff and apparatus (including extensive electronic equipment) which have been put in place at the University of Toronto and are producing this work are very impressive indeed. I believe this dictionary will be one of the twentieth century's greatest scholarly achievements and will certainly be a landmark in the history of Old English scholarship. As you probably know, this project has suffered three tragic deaths of three young scholars who were crucial to the success of the *DOE* -Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, and Sharon Butler. And yet the dedicated and hard-working scholars there

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have regrouped each time and gotten the project on track again. The present Chief Editor of the *DOE*, Antonette di Paolo Healy, who has just been named Angus Cameron Professor of English, has the project firmly in hand and is working with her excellent colleagues at a high level of quality and efficiency. But financial support for the project is a constant problem.

BRAVO: Turning to Old English literary scholarship today, I think you insist in your writings on the priority of “close reading” over historical or allegorical interpretations. Is that not so?

ROBINSON: Yes, I believe in close reading supported by solid philological evidence. Knowledge of the language -both synchronic and diachronic- is essential.

BRAVO: In this case you disagree with the arguments of Robertson, Huppé, etc., who defend allegorical readings based on the use of patristic sources.

ROBINSON: I believe that allegorical readings of medieval secular literature have been excessive. I do not deny the existence of allegory in medieval literature, but believe that when writers then intended that something should be understood allegorically they made this clear. Modern scholars don't have to search for it.

BRAVO: Which critical method is most frequently used today in the analysis of Old English literary texts in America?

ROBINSON: I would say close reading and interpretations based upon textual criticism. A new interpretation will often begin with a new solution to an old textual crux; there are also some allegorizing interpretations, of course, and in Old English studies there has been a recent effort to resuscitate the oral-formulaic theory, although there does not seem to be much new to be added there. Here and there one begins to see attempts to apply some of the currently fashionable

critical ideologies to Old English studies -semiotics, feminism, deconstruction and all that. I suspect there will be a flurry of this but that it will not come to much.

BRAVO: In my opinion your “philosophy” of Old English literary study can be found in your “thoughtful and thought-provoking” book *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*. Is that correct?

ROBINSON: I would like to thank you for the adjectives you attach to my book. Yes, I attempted to read the poem closely and philologically and in the context of its cultural history, and this is the approach that seems to me most appropriate when reading Old English poetic texts.

BRAVO: In the journal *English Studies* we read the statement “... he who has not read Robinson has not read *Beowulf*.” Do you agree with the reviewer?

ROBINSON: I am very grateful to the reviewer for saying that, and I am very grateful to you for quoting it. If it is true, I rejoice.

BRAVO: As far as I know, *The Guide to Old English* by you and Bruce Mitchell is the most popular introductory text for Old English students. Why?

ROBINSON: Well, we have certainly been pleased by its reception. On the one hand, I suspect that students of Old English are confident that any book that Bruce Mitchell has a hand in has got to have something going for it. But also, I think it is significant that Bruce Mitchell says of the *Guide*, “It is the book that I would like to have had when I was first learning Old English.” We tried to write it from the point of view of the student. If we have a formula, that is it.

BRAVO: Quite recently Alvin Kernan published a fascinating and provocative book called *The Death of Literature*. We will probably agree that there is still vitality in literature, but don't you think that Old

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English literature is endangered by faculty politics and by literary criticism itself?

ROBINSON: I think that the study of all literature is endangered by these recently fashionable poses which are called “theories.” René Wellek’s *The Attack on Literature* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982) and Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Harper & Row, 1990) leave no doubt that the “literary scholars” who have claimed center stage in the eighties are undermining the study of literature; they encourage neglect of literary texts in favor of indulging in theoretical claims that literature is an illusion, that language is a game of deception and that no expression through human language is possible. The one branch of English literature which is least vulnerable to this attack, however, is, I believe, Old English, because scholars and students of Old English literature have never been persuaded to abandon the primary texts and go over to “theory.” If we medievalists continue to put literature in the center and to explore what the great writers of the past have had to say, then I believe we can be a light unto other literary scholars, showing them the way to recover from this malaise of nihilistic “theory” which has poisoned literary study in the past decade.

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