

Soper, Harriet. 2024. *The Life Course in Old English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. i + 267. ISBN 9781009315111.

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In *The Life Course in Old English Poetry*, Harriet Soper pulls our gaze along with the Old English poets to view the entirety of human life in all its unpredictable idiosyncrasy. This monograph, as the blurb claims, is the first book-length study of the whole life span in Old English poetry. The book builds on earlier research, including Sally Crawford's *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (1999), Susan Irvine and Winfried Rudolf's edited volume *Childhood and Adolescence in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* (2018), and Thijs Porck's *Old Age in Early Medieval England: A Cultural History* (2019). The monograph itself draws from and expands on Soper's earlier research, including her Cambridge PhD Thesis (2018), and the 2022 volume *Early Medieval English Life Courses: Cultural-Historical Perspectives*, edited together with Thijs Porck. It is in the 2022 collection that Soper introduces the theoretical framework which provides the focus for this monograph, the "life course," a position first defined in sociology, but then applied to medieval archaeology.

Soper's monograph carefully, and successfully, utilises a number of critical theories and approaches to aid in her analysis, including age studies, trauma theory, queer theory, disability studies, and new materialism. This is a heady list, but one that reveals the critical nuance to be found throughout the study. The most compelling example is in her claim that Old English poetry focuses on human aging largely via non-human aging. Combining a perspective informed by new materialism, and infused with trauma theory, Soper reveals how the Old English *Riddles* and their almost entirely non-human riddle objects comment on the human life course, not through anthropomorphising, but through a more interesting relationship she defines as isomorphic (the term *isomorphism* itself adapted from Jane Bennetts' 2010 *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*). An isomorphic relationship between the human and non-human suggests shared experience "without necessarily insinuating these are wholly imported or projected from the human realm" and that texts like the *Riddles* can offer "accounts of the lives of nonhuman entities while possibly commenting simultaneously on human ageing" (9). This interrelated reflexivity allows for a number of novel and convincing readings throughout the monograph, demonstrating the strength of Soper's approach and overall argument.

In Chapter 1, "Taking Shape: Early Life in the Exeter Book *Riddles*," Soper's vision of isomorphic relationships reveals its critical potency. By examining early life in the non-human and human riddle objects through this theoretical lens, she is able to demonstrate a clear concern in Old English poetry with how such initial stages of life involved progressive growth and the shaping influence of a nourishing environment. For example, she connects Isidore's description of a mother bear shaping its cub by licking it to imagery on the Melbury Bubb font and Franks Casket, all of which, Soper convincingly

argues, reveals a conceptual shaping or moulding role of parents in the growth of their offspring. This moulding context then allows for a novel understanding of the depiction of child-rearing found in the initial lines of the Old English poem *The Fortunes of Men*, particularly lines 5b and 6a, which describe the growth of the child's limbs. Further still, Soper showcases how this maturation along the life course is then punctuated by swift change, often violent, which leads to the focus of Chapter 2, "Becoming Useful: Young and Mature Adulthood in Three Verse Saints' Lives in *Judith*," on growth towards usefulness.

While clearly in dialogue with, and set within the context of, medieval discourses on the various stages of life, including, as Soper highlights, late-antique definitions like those from Isidore (*infantia, pueritia, adolescentia, iuuentus*), the picture in Old English poetry is much less clear. Instead, via her analysis of hagiographical texts, including *Guthlac A* and *Judith*, there is a clear concern with a progression, however varied and idiosyncratic between individuals, from an unruly youth in Soper's terms, towards an imagined state of mature usefulness. This developmental part of the life cycle which we might refer to as adulthood, often with a sense relative fixity, is in Old English poetry "contingent, variable, and often unpredictable" (175). Soper demonstrates this in showing how Judith's life course includes both substantial youthful unruliness and surprising usefulness, but which is cut short and doesn't follow a clear progression. Such a narrative focus problematises the conception of age always bringing wisdom. This is further seen in how *Andreas* as a poem focuses on a kind of nonlinear growth. Adulthood, when a person has grown towards their mature usefulness, is in Old English poetry varied and messy.

In Chapter 3, "Outliving Others: Old Age in *Beowulf* and Cynewulfian Epilogues," Soper seeks to utilise aspects of trauma theory to nuance critical discussions regarding conceptual old age in Old English poetry, particularly the ways in which such depictions involve amalgams of "grief, experience, wisdom, age, and speech" (101). The overarching argument of the chapter, that to progress to old age is to outlive, is convincing and compelling. Trauma theory is brought into conversation with this argument by interpreting the ways in which Old English poetry shows the making of poetry itself, the creative act of weaving words and ideas together, as a "means of negotiating trauma and loss" (175). Her reading is most convincing with regards to several Cynewulfian texts and the Old English poem *The Phoenix*, which she sees as exploring the narrative response of singing in the face of death. Such melodic actions by the aged, those who have outlived much, are then demonstrated to function as reconciliatory tools, a means of responding to the stark realities of death. Here is where Soper's use of theoretical perspectives is at its best.

There are, however, a few moments where medieval texts are stretched a bit to fit the argument. For example, in the discussion of *Beowulf's* depiction of Ongentheow in Wiglaf's speech after Beowulf's death (ll. 2961–64a), Soper claims that "his vulnerable condition [is] here linked to his hair" (113), based on semantic focus on his grey hair ("blanden-feax") with relation to the subsequent loss of his armour and sword. Yet the act of an aged warrior being defeated by an opponent does not necessarily lead to reading him as vulnerable, nor is his old age necessarily the focus of these lines. While the reading is defensible, it is not as convincing as the rest of the chapter.

Chapter 4, "Getting Wasted: Deathly Conditions in Wisdom Catalogues and Doomsday Poetry," is somewhat more eclectic in its choice of texts, including wisdom poetry and poems with thematic ties to Doomsday, but Soper constructs through them a

nanced and novel analysis of death in Old English poetry. By situating death within the conceptual life course, this chapter reveals how it was perceived as antithetical to the vitality of full maturity (adulthood), as well as how experiences similar to death, including sleep and drunkenness, existed on a “continuum” focusing on compromising the “maximally active body” (173), on the loss of that vital force. This chapter was particularly strong in its engagement with wider classical and late antique material, and the demonstrable difference in perceptions of death as sleep, as peaceful in Greek and Latin traditions, compared to Old English poetry’s emphasis on death as weariness.

The final subsection, “Idle Hands Ruin and Uselessness,” however, reveals an occasional slip in the book, more noticeable in this chapter, to bring in snippets of modern theory in ways that don’t necessarily illuminate either medieval texts or modern theory. For example, on page 163 there is a fairly lengthy block quotation from Michel de Certeau on the “conceptual overlap between the indolent and the dead” which does little beyond revealing how Certeau’s modern theory is analogous to ideas in the medieval text being analysed. That they are similar is interesting, but this similarity is not revelatory or employed for further analysis. This can be compared to Soper’s excellent use of the twentieth-century philosopher George Bataille on page 168, which successfully employs modern theory to inform readings of *Riddle 25*.

Soper is to be congratulated for constructing what is the most interesting conclusion I have read in recent years. Instead of the expected monograph summation, Soper forges the entirety of the carefully constructed argument of the book into a critical tool, which is then applied to the enigmatic Old English *Rhyming Poem*. There are numerous critical insights here, from the “coherence” gained by viewing the text as describing a life course (179), to the ways in which the poetic application of both rhyme and alliteration highlight “antithesis, collision, and metamorphosis” (182), which are themselves tied to Old English conceptions of the life course.

The Life Course in Old English Poetry will, without doubt, become a cornerstone of research on human aging in Old English, and will provide a number of exciting avenues for further study. One example might be extending the isomorphic analysis to include depictions of specific locations and environments beyond the non-human objects of the *Riddles*. In Soper’s discussion of waste on page 165, she highlights the adjective *idel* in a description of ruins in the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, interpreting it in line with concepts of uselessness and connections with the death state. There are a number of texts that might benefit from such an isomorphic analysis connecting with ideas of aging, including poems like *Genesis A* and *Guthlac A*. In *Genesis A*, pre-Creation is described by the poet in line 6a as “idel and unnyt” (“empty and useless”), before God forms and shapes Creation. There is a clear emphasis here (and elsewhere) on God’s role as shaper, which echoes Soper’s argument about the nurturing role of parents in the development of young life. In *Genesis A*, God’s creation involves a facilitating towards usefulness, in that the useless pre-Creation is brought into efflorescence in the Garden of Eden, which the poet artfully describes in lines 206–20. Similarly, and connected to this, in *Guthlac A* the saint’s chosen location for his eremitic life is described in line 216a as “idel and æmen” (“empty and uninhabited”), a variation of the more common phrase “idel and unnyt.” In the poem, Guthlac is figured as a builder who transforms the *idel* location into a space of Edenic usefulness, where the earth itself bursts forth with vitality, “folde geblowen” (“the earth blooming,” l. 739b). These and other landscape environments, which progress along a potentially similar conceptual maturation, could helpfully be

analysed through Soper's approach, allowing novel visions of human, non-human, and cosmic life courses.

References

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