

**Coker, Matthew D. 2023. *Supernatural Speakers in Old English Verse*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press. Pp. 154. ISBN 9781641894128.**

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Matthew D. Coker's monograph offers the first single-authored, book-length study of a surprisingly neglected topic in early medieval English literary studies: supernatural speech and speakers in Old English poetry. Coker's monograph will be of huge interest to the field, not only for its extended treatment of an enthralling theme but for the remarkable insights that it generates along the way. Old English poets—or at least those analyzed in detail in this book—really do appear to single out supernatural speech for special attention and can be shown to compose these speeches with heightened poetic effects.

Most notably, Coker identifies a clear link between the versified words of powerful supernatural speakers and the use of hypermetric lines. There are, of course, nuances, subtleties and caveats to this larger claim. While the poetic use of hypermetrics to perform supernatural speech acts is the overarching observation that Coker returns to throughout the study, he also highlights how supernatural power and poetic power converge through a range of sonic effects beyond the hypermetric. As a starting point, Coker recognizes that Old English verse, far from being uniform or generic, exhibits dazzling stylistic variations from text to text. He then focuses specifically on four categories of sonic effects—extra alliteration, rhyme, compounds and prosody—which cluster in supernatural speeches most consistently. It is evident that Coker has surveyed the corpus of Old English poetry and has helpfully listed the number of apparently supernatural speeches in each discrete poem along with the percentages of supernatural speech comprising each text. This meticulous research allows the author to put forward persuasive arguments about the wider importance of supernatural speech in Old English poetry, but he does home in on three poems—*Genesis A*, *Christ C* and *Guthlac A*—for sustained, rigorous analysis. The rationale for prioritizing these narrative (rather than monologic or dialogic) poems is that they provide the reader with in-text contexts for different kinds of supernatural speakers and present these speeches as distinct from narratorial style. There is also an explicit preference for these earlier poems—once believed to belong to the Cædmonian group—because they are said to be in tune with the oral origins of Old English verse, displaying traditional poetic devices.

A more problematic aspect of the corpus selection—which informs the monograph’s conceptual framing in a broader sense—was the author’s definition of what, exactly, should be considered supernatural in this literary and cultural context. This, in turn, determines whose speeches should be marked out as supernatural in character or quality. Coker does attempt to provide us with a definition but relies too heavily upon the rather basic one provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, s.v. *supernatural*, A.2 rather than A.1). I do agree that this choice is intuitively correct, encompassing as it does “superhuman supernal figures (such as God, angels, and fallen angels) and speaking things which are not ordinarily endowed with the gift of speech, such as the Cross of Christ in *The Dream of the Rood*” (27). However, a choice as important as this for a book on this topic could have been probed much further. This would have enabled the author to get to grips with how early English writers themselves understood the supernatural and, ideally, this formative aspect of the book should have been placed in conversation with previous scholarly studies of the natural and supernatural world in Old English literature (most obviously Jennifer Neville’s (1999, 1–3) definition of the *natural world*—or, rather, her argument that Old English poets did not necessarily recognize *nature* as a separate term or concept) and possibly also in contention with historical claims (such as Robert Bartlett’s 2008, 1–34) that the term for, and concept of the *supernatural* was not invented until the thirteenth century.

Although I did not, therefore, emerge from this book with a clearer sense of how Old English poets thought about the supernatural as an idea or phenomenon per se, I did gain a far greater understanding of how those poets expressed supernatural power through form and style. Coker achieves this through four impressively researched and clearly articulated chapters. The first chapter presents the reader with large-scale statistics drawn from the aforementioned three poems, with some preliminary hypotheses about style based on the findings. The author’s exhaustive scholarship and astonishing eye for detail are on full display in this initial chapter. As part of the transition from thesis to book, however, I did wonder whether some of this material could have been moved to an appendix with a more succinct summary of the salient findings in the chapter itself. The reduction of these Old English poems to data presented in long lists, tables and diagrams will appeal only to a very select group of specialists. Those with less patience and a more literary interest in supernatural speech and its poetic effects—including, perhaps, curious undergraduate and postgraduate students—may find themselves skimming through much of this chapter. The following three chapters offer more discursive, engaging analyses of *Genesis A*, *Christ C* and *Guthlac A*. In chapter two, Coker contends that, in *Genesis A*, authoritative speech acts demonstrate God’s power over the devil, demons and the material world. God’s words are equivalent to his deeds, in the same way that

a good heroic king fulfils the terms of his boast, and God intervenes in this world by calling his creations to order. God's poetically powerful speech acts, which coincide with hypermetrics, thus order material or social reality. The third chapter looks at how the poet of *Christ C* displays a unique sensory focus on the mighty sounds at the end of the age. In this poem, Christ steps down from heaven into our world and his words are never dialogic but are pronouncements of dooms and decrees. Coker contends that this powerful speech attempts to produce a profound emotional response in the Christian audience. The fourth chapter examines *Guthlac A*, arguing that the demons in this poem are supernatural speakers who can deploy persuasive speech. This speech exemplifies the dreadful intensity of demonic temptation and yet demons lack divine authority, meaning that their strong words can tempt but not compel one who resists their language. In *Guthlac A*, the authoritative word of God is conveyed through loyal warrior bands of angels who carry out his words faithfully and God gives Guthlac the power, too, to answer the demons with authority.

The manner in which the monograph surveys, studies, analyses and reflects upon its primary sources cannot be faulted. This book is the product of deeply admirable scholarship. The use of secondary sources is commendable, too. What I would say is that Coker mainly cites more traditional, well-established secondary studies—focusing primarily on familiar and conservative approaches to literary poetics, style, dating and influence. Personally, I would have liked to have seen some engagement with recent, critical and theoretical studies of the natural world and nonhuman or other-than-human speech in Old English literature. I am thinking in particular of incredibly interesting discussions that Coker carries out about how vernacular poets represent nature as sentient and responsive to divine speech (66–67) or how the poetic concept of speech-bearing may or may not help to create the human condition (105–14). These discussions would have benefited from, and made very welcome contributions to, recent theoretically informed research in these areas.

Ultimately, though, this is a learned, detailed and often insightful book that provides the reader with a comprehensive study of, and introduction to, supernatural speakers in Old English verse. A monograph on this captivating topic is long overdue and Coker has filled this scholarly gap with an erudite examination of how Old English poets distinguished powerful, supernatural speeches through extraordinary sonic effects. As such, this monograph also sheds new light on the variety, versatility and indeed the power of the earliest English verse.

**References**

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