SELIM. Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature. 30 (2025): 280–84.
ISSN: 1132-631X
https://doi.org/10.17811/selim.30.2025.280-84

Wilcox, Jonathan. 2023. *Humour in Old English Literature: Communities of Laughter in Early Medieval England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pp. vii + 343. ISBN 978-1487545307.

Reviewed by Samantha Zacher
Cornell University

As Wilcox wryly notes, "few die laughing from partaking of Old English literature" (297). Yet his study convincingly reveals that Old English texts do, in fact, offer a wide spectrum of humor—from subtle puns and ironic reversals to bawdy riddles and comic exaggeration. While the literature is best known for its elegiac meditations on exile, mortality, and Christian morality, it also contains genuine moments of wit, delight, and joy. Although overt laughter may have been discouraged in monastic or formal settings, Wilcox shows that laughter had a place—sometimes welcomed, even cherished—within the cultural and social frameworks of the time. Like today, Old English humor operated within unspoken rules: it could be satirical or exclusionary, but its effectiveness relied on shared knowledge, values, and expectations. As Wilcox puts it, humor "needn't be particularly kind" (9) to reinforce communal bonds—so long as it strikes the "right balance of empathy and alienation" (12). Humor, then, can be a community-building phenomenon—but also a fragile one, easily tipped into offense when it violates in-group norms. I appreciate that Wilcox's analysis pauses periodically to consider examples of texts that fall short of a joke, recognizing when levity or satire would overstep decorum and violate it aggressively. Overall, the study presents a nuanced and refreshing picture of Old English literature—one that recognizes its full emotional and rhetorical range.

The book's introduction offers a wide-ranging reflection on humor, drawing from both ancient and modern perspectives across philosophy, literary criticism, linguistics, and cognitive psychology. Classical thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero defined humor as the result of subverted expectations—"something contrary to one's previous expectations" (7)—a view echoed in contemporary theories. Modern scholars describe this effect in terms such as "cognitive dissonance," "benign violation," or "the clashing of conflicting scripts," all emphasizing the tension between what is anticipated and what actually occurs. Literary humor, Wilcox notes (9), often arises from three main types of incongruity: abrupt shifts in tone or register from high to low, or the reverse (as discussed by Bakhtin 1984), playful violations of social taboos (Douglas 1977), and precise comic timing (Hurley et al. 2011). While Wilcox primarily relies on incongruity theory in

analyzing Old English humor, he also integrates two additional frameworks (11): superiority theory (Bergson 1911), which sees humor as rooted in mockery or self-elevation; and release theory (Freud 1960), which interprets laughter as a form of emotional or psychological relief. Together, these approaches provide a rich, multifaceted lens through which Wilcox examines the function and complexity of humor in Old English literature.

Chapter 1 focuses on the Exeter Book riddles, many of which are overtly humorous—and sometimes downright bawdy. *Riddle 44*, for instance, plays on sexual double entendre, with plausible solutions being either key or penis. Given that the riddles in this manuscript were almost certainly recorded in a monastic scriptorium, the anatomical solution stands in stark, comical contrast with the expected decorum of the monastic setting. As Wilcox shows, however, the humor in *Riddle 44* goes beyond shock value, leaning into social satire: the fact that the male subject is described both as a *frea* ("lord" or "master") and an *esne* ("servant") produces a paradox that troubles perceived ideas about social status and sexual norms. Wilcox also highlights riddles in which humor explicitly stems from misdirection. *Riddle 51* describes what seems to be a team of swift, living creatures that leave dark tracks—only for the reader to discover the answer is a quill pen guided by human fingers. In such cases, laughter arises as mistaken assumptions are suddenly overturned. Across the riddles, humor operates on multiple levels: through misread clues, blurred boundaries between between animate and inanimate subjects and objects, and subtle challenges to assumptions about gender, social status, and identity.

Chapter 2 explores the runic *Riddles* (*Riddles 24*, *42*, *19*, *64*, and *75*/*76*) and *The Rune Poem*, focusing on how language itself becomes the source of humor. These riddles embed their solutions within the text, challenging readers to decode them through linguistic and visual cues—runes, anagrams, puns, and etymological links. While a reader's failure to solve the riddle might lessen the humor of the punchline, Wilcox argues that the playful, low-stakes nature of the riddles ensures that the overall experience remains one of linguistic delight. *The Rune Poem* operates similarly, using punning and wordplay not to demand solutions, but to delight in the incongruities and textures of language.

Chapter 3 examines humor derived from sound and sound-play in Old English poetry, beginning with rhyme—an atypical feature in a poetic tradition grounded in stress and alliteration. Though rare, rhyme appears in select texts with striking effect. One such example is *Riddle 28*, which narrates the harrowing transformation of an object through a relentless series of actions: "cut, rubbed, plied, dried, / bound, wound, bleached, leached, / adorned, reformed, led from afar / to the doors of men" (Wilcox's translation, 96). The use of internal and end rhyme intensifies the sense of relentless motion and physical ordeal. The riddle admits two main solutions: a parchment book or an alcoholic drink made from

grain. If the former, the violence evokes a near-hagiographic martyrdom, rendering the humor minimal. But if the latter, the same process becomes comically grotesque, culminating in a scene of drunken judgment. Wilcox notes that the humor here relies on interpretive slippage—between empathy and satire. The chapter closes with *The Rhyming Poem*, which inverts the usual elegiac arc, portraying present suffering against a backdrop of past joy. While it does not offer overt comedy, Wilcox argues that the poem's rhyme-driven structure creates a subtle humor through the dissonance between sound and meaning. Form overtakes feeling, and the result, though melancholic in theme, may still provoke delight—or even laughter—from its tonal incongruity.

Chapter 4 examines humor in heroic poetry, focusing on how tonal incongruity can generate comic effect. For example, in *The Battle of Maldon*, verbal sparring comically delays action as Byrhtnoth twists the Viking demand for *gafol* ("tribute") into a sarcastic promise of "points and edges" as "payment." Byrhtnoth even uses Norse-derived words to mock the enemy, a joke likely to have been appreciated by an English audience. Turning to *Beowulf*, Wilcox highlights different aspects of dark humor and understatement. One of the most effective instances of the former occurs just before Beowulf's confrontation with Grendel: the hero quips that Hrothgar's court will no longer have to feed him (*feormian*), since he may soon become Grendel's next meal. The joke is deepened with wordplay—Beowulf remarks that Hrothgar will not need to "hide his head" (*hafelan hydan*), as Grendel will "intend to taste it" (*byrgean þenceð*), punning on *byrgan*, which connotes both "to taste" and "to bury." Wilcox also highlights understatement as a recurring comic device. For example, sea-monsters slain by Beowulf are described as *sundes þe sænre* ("slower at swimming"), a comically mild way to characterize creatures just slaughtered. Wilcox amasses many such examples where shifts in tone or register create humor or sarcasm. This builds toward a compelling discussion of laughter in *Beowulf*—not only the malicious glee of Grendel, but also the communal laughter that arises in the mead-hall. Wilcox suggests that the hall, dominated by a hyper-masculine warrior elite, also serves as a space where laughter might subtly undermine those very privileges—perhaps voiced, or at least imagined, by those on the margins of the poem's society: women, slaves, and servants.

Chapter 5 offers a brilliant exploration of mock-heroic humor in the Old English poems *Judith* (preserved in the so-called *Beowulf* manuscript) and *Andreas* (found in the Vercelli Book). In *Judith*, humor arises from the striking dissonance between the protagonist's pious demeanor and her transformation into a kind of monster-slayer. As Judith beheads Holofernes, she seems to echo Beowulf himself—who famously decapitates both Grendel and Grendel's mother, though he only manages to wound the dragon in his final battle. The poem also includes drunken slapstick scenes, marked by lively onomatopoeia, alongside a

deeper irony: the poet's heavy use of conventional battle imagery, despite the absence of an actual clash between the Judeans (Bethulians) and the Assyrians. A similar tonal incongruity appears in *Andreas*, particularly in one of Old English literature's most memorable moments of dramatic irony—when the apostle finds himself aboard a ship helmed by none other than Christ in disguise, a fact known only to the reader. Andreas proceeds to deliver a lengthy sermon in earnest on the wonders of Christ and the truth of Christianity to the Savior himself! The poem *Andreas* also includes numerous mock-heroic elements, portraying the apostle in the mold of a traditional hero and drawing heavily upon verbal formulae shared with *Beowulf*. While some scholars have suggested that the poem may be an intentional parody of *Beowulf*, Wilcox argues otherwise: "Rather than creating a specific parody of *Beowulf*, then, I see the *Andreas*-poet as deliberately exploiting the resonant web of traditional implication to do something different—namely, to create a Christian tale, drawn from a Latin source, in the trappings of heroic poetry" (182). Wilcox notes in these texts the persistent blending of high and low poetic elements to generate comedic effect.

Chapter 6 turns to humor in Old English sermons, a less fertile genre for comedy. Even so, Wilcox identifies strong examples in homilies such as *Vercelli 9* (HomS 4), *Vercelli 11* (HomS 36), *Napier 29* (HomU 26), and in other Christian didactic texts like the Old English *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, and the poem *Seasons for Fasting*. In *Vercelli 9*, for instance, humor emerges through comic exaggeration: the devil offers elaborate descriptions of heaven and hell, only to insist that no human imagination could ever grasp their true nature—an ironic play on negative capability. The poem *Seasons for Fasting* offers an example of Old English clerical satire, reminiscent of Chaucer's later work. It lampoons priestly excesses, especially through quips about drunken clergy who drink eucharistic wine to quench their thirst, then head to taverns. The humor hinges on taboo and incongruity, as the rowdy alehouse becomes a comic and degraded echo of the heroic mead-hall.

Chapter 7 explores humor in hagiographic literature, revealing a surprisingly broad spectrum—from refined, decorous wit to moments of genuine comedy. The chapter focuses especially on female saints' lives that press against the boundaries of social and religious taboo. These include stories of women such as Eugenia and Euphrosyne, who cross-dress, enter male monasteries, and become respected members of the community (Eugenia actually rises to become Abbot), as well as the dramatic transformation of St. Mary of Egypt, a former nymphomaniac turned desert ascetic and spiritual guide to male monks. Wilcox shows how monastic authors often employed subtle irony and narrative playfulness—what he calls "decorous delight"—to make these saints both relatable and admirable without compromising their sanctity. At the same time, he highlights more exuberant, even slapstick moments, in which saints face

absurd trials or perform miracles with comic flair. Such episodes, while potentially irreverent, reinforce moral values and elicit communal joy. Wilcox underscores that this humor was calibrated for performance contexts—monastic refectories, pilgrimages, and devotional gatherings—where laughter fostered engagement and solidarity. Ultimately, the chapter argues that humor in saints' lives is not only compatible with reverence but enhances the emotional and spiritual texture of hagiographic storytelling.

Chapter 8 focuses on *Apollonius of Tyre*, the only surviving romance in the Old English canon. Wilcox shows how the text repeatedly alternates between scenes of terrifying peril—sea storms, shipwrecks, kidnappings—and moments of emotional relief, such as joyful reunions and witty exchanges. This ebb and flow of narrative tone not only heightens the emotional stakes but also creates space for delight and gentle laughter amid darker episodes (including a distinctly not-funny examples of incest). Particularly notable are scenes where characters deploy humor as a coping mechanism—light-hearted quips, ironic observations, or cheeky banter—that underscore their resilience and humanity. Wilcox argues that this interplay of horror and happiness is not accidental but structural: the comic moments punctuate the narrative's more somber or suspenseful stretches, offering the audience emotional release and reinforcing the communal resonance of the tale. In so doing, the text's humor both intensifies and tempers the romantic adventure, crafting a more dynamic—and relatable—storytelling experience.

There are several additional aspects of the book that deserve praise, beginning with its careful and coherent organization. Each chapter builds meaningfully on the last, gradually expanding our understanding of Old English humor through a wide range of genres. Riddles, unsurprisingly, play a central role in the study, appearing in nearly every chapter. Each time, Wilcox uses them to illuminate a new facet of how Anglo-Saxon humor functions. The riddling framework proves especially fruitful—not only because riddles are clearly marked as games (even when their tone is serious), but also because elements of riddling are absorbed into other genres. As Wilcox shows, texts like *Apollonius of Tyre* (discussed in Chapter 7) borrow riddling dynamics to enrich their humor.

Another commendable strength of the book—one I have mentioned but not explored as fully as I might—is Wilcox's sustained attention to the audience. Throughout the chapters, he consistently pauses to ask who the intended audience of humor in a given text might be. He proposes, for instance, that humor could empower those on the margins: women, servants, slaves, and craftsmen might find pleasure in stories that gently mock the heroic elite and their masculine bravado. Or, in the case of saints' lives featuring cross-dressing women, female readers or listeners might momentarily experience a sense of liberation through laughter. In the conclusion (298), Wilcox thoughtfully recaps

the many divergent audiences he envisions, demonstrating just how deeply he considers humor's impact beyond elite monastic circles.

I have very few criticisms of this expansive and deeply learned study. If one thought lingered while I read, it is that Wilcox may not give quite enough weight to indeterminacy and paradox as engines of Old English humor. In his treatment of riddles, for example, Wilcox often distinguishes between the false focus and the ultimate solution. But might some of the humor arise from the very refusal of resolution—an invitation to entertain multiple meanings simultaneously? One of the things I value most about *Beowulf* is precisely this interpretive suspension. Take, for instance, the poet's terse remark *hine fyren onwod* ("sin entered him"), which ostensibly refers to the wicked Heremod, but which becomes even more intriguing if it also—or instead—glances at Beowulf, the closer grammatical referent. This is not a critique so much as a testament to the generative quality of Wilcox's work: his book opens up new and fertile ways to think about humor, even in the texts we already know and love.

Jonathan Wilcox's *Humour in Old English Literature* is a work of mastery and a deeply satisfying read—it is as pleasurable to read as its title promises. It offers a transformative reassessment of the Anglo-Saxon canon by uncovering the depth, range, and cultural function of humor in texts long regarded as austere or unyieldingly solemn. Rather than existing in tension with piety or moral seriousness, laughter often served to deepen meaning, offering moments of delight, catharsis, and subtle resistance. Wilcox's book will change how scholars and students characterize the Old English literary canon, offering a strikingly different sense of just how humorous, satirical, and playfully self-aware these texts can be.

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabeleis and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bergson, Henri. 1911. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Translated by Cloudesely Brereton and Fred Rothwell. New York: Macmillan.

Douglas, Mary. 1977. *Implicit Meanings: Essays on Anthropology*. London: Routledge.

Freud, Sigmund. 1960. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by James Strachey. London: Routledge.

Hurley, Matthew M., Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, Jr. 2011. *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Received 14/06/2025)