

Faulkner, Amy, and Francis Leneghan, eds. 2024. *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*. Studies in Old English Literature 3. Turnhout: Brepols. Pp. 598. ISBN 9782503606651.

Reviewed by Richard Dance 
University of Cambridge
rwd21@cam.ac.uk

This rich, substantial and important anthology of essays about the English literature of the long Alfredian age derives ultimately from symposia held online in 2021. Most of its chapters (reasonably enough) focus on those texts conventionally regarded as having been produced by or under the aegis of Alfred himself; but it also embraces a generous set of wider cultural and intellectual contexts, including literature from Mercia and in Latin as well as other Old English prose from this broad period such as the *Martyrology* and *Bald's Leechbook*, plus a poem whose composition may (tentatively) be dated to it, *Andreas*. This impressive wealth of material is introduced in a perspicacious opening chapter, where the editors set out the stall for their book. While acknowledging the longstanding debates about Alfred's role and legacy that continue to loom large in the evaluation of the literary culture of this time, not least when it comes to the authorship of those texts that have been attributed to Alfred himself (something that is fruitfully addressed in several places in this volume), Faulkner and Leneghan make a compelling case for a more inclusive kind of literary history—one that not only re-situates and challenges our interpretation of some well-known texts, but which can also help “bring into the foreground works that have been for too long treated as peripheral” (38).

The four chapters in Section I, “Context,” begin with “Old English Literature before Alfred: The Mercian Dimension,” in which Christine Rauer treats several kinds of cultural contact—between English kingdoms (including earlier Mercian dominance in Kent) as well as between England and the Continent. She presents a “provisional list” of fifty texts “whose composition can plausibly be assigned to a Mercian context, in the broadest terms” (52; list at 65), and evaluates these profitably both in their own right (asking whether we can identify such a thing as a Mercian cultural identity) and as the background for West Saxon literary production. Picking up some of the same themes (including Mercian and international contacts), Robert Gallagher's “Writing Latin in the Age of Alfred” then reviews the small but remarkable (and relatively little studied) surviving corpus of contemporary Anglo-Latin compositions, alongside manuscripts containing earlier Latin works copied during the period, considering issues of

authorship, context and audience. Asser's *Vita* inevitably looms large, but there is a fascinating variety of other things, too, from charters and letters to liturgy and poetry. Next, in "The 'Thing-Power' of the Fabulous Alfred Jewel," Georgina Pitt provides a fresh account of this famous object in the light of "assemblage theory." Pitt accepts the argument that the jewel is indeed one of the *æstels* referred to in the *Pastoral Care* Preface, and in that light speculates about what it might have been like to use it and see it being used, and about its "persuasive agency" in the promotion of Alfredian ideologies. Lastly in this section, Nicole Guenther Discenza explores "Alfredian Geographies." This eloquent chapter summarizes the extensive references in Alfredian literature to places and peoples, finding "a high level of geographical literacy" which connected English readers to "virtually the entire known world" (130). The two places most often invoked are Rome and Jerusalem, but the latter is "disturbingly uprooted from its religious and ethnic history" (141), since its Jewish inhabitants themselves are erased.

Section II, "Textual Criticism, Source Study, and Style," contains six chapters. First is Greg Waite's superb "The Old English *Bede*: Some Reflections on Origins and Text," which studies the translation and transmission of this text, its manuscripts, their scribal stints and their language, drawing on his work (with Sharon Rowley) for a new edition. Amongst many significant conclusions, Waite shows that the extant copies of the text reflect relatively recent adaptation from the Mercian original (something which, *inter alia*, should caution us against assuming that the West-Saxonization originated in the Alfredian court). Moreover, it becomes clear that many of the departures from the sense of the Latin *Historia*, which we have tended to attribute to the translator, have in fact demonstrably arisen in the course of transmission by scribes, often as the result of error; crucially, for instance, it is not clear that "Geats" ever appeared in the original Old English version. Next, in her very interesting "The Idea of Decorum in the Old English *Dialogues*," Susan Irvine pursues references to the role of eloquence in transmitting divine wisdom in Wærferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* (and moreover in the frame passages of his own devising), including the remarkable (perhaps originally Irish) image of Gregory's golden mouth. She shows that this concern for verbal artifice manifests itself in Wærferth's own stylistic devices, too, especially his liking for word pairs and alliteration, which probably descend from Mercian tradition. Daniel Anlezark's "The Old English *Pastoral Care*: Date, Readership, and Authorship" then presents a striking new take on the authorship and transmission of the translation most emblematic of Alfred's reign, including by reading it in the underappreciated context of the episcopal reforms associated with Plegmund. Anlezark argues that, while it remains possible that Alfred was involved in the translation of the main body of the *Pastoral Care* (via dictation, following the practices described by Asser), the textual evidence suggests that he was not himself the author of either the prose

or verse prefaces; and furthermore that the patterns of variation visible in spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and Biblical citation, which often coincide, attest to significant changes in the personnel committing the text to vellum during the course of its creation. Next, in “Refrains and Repeated Verse Lines: Patterns in Sung Verse in the *De consolazione philosophiae* and the Old English *Boethius*,” Karmen Lenz focuses on the (unusual) whole-line repetitions and end-stopping in the verse portions of the Old English *Boethius*, which she sees as mimicking the melodic refrains in medieval traditions of setting the Latin metres to music. She posits that both were ways of investing Boethius’ text with liturgical or homiletic meaning, and of encouraging memorization and reflection on the divine; similar effects are moreover identifiable in some of the instances of repetition in the Old English prose *Boethius*. Then, in “The Singularity of the Old English *Boethius*,” Adrian Papahagi expertly compares the English and continental receptions of the *De consolazione philosophiae*, in particular its several renderings into Old English and Old High German, and thereby casts new light on engagements with Boethius’ work in England. Set next to the St Gall tradition (which grew organically, from sparse early glossing to Notker’s “Mischprosa” translation and commentary, always with a basis in the classroom), and indeed the extant Old English glosses (including the continuous gloss version in Corpus 214), the idiosyncrasies of the free Alfredian prose rendering stand out all the more vibrantly. Finally in this section, Leslie Lockett’s chapter (“Latin Commentaries on Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae* as a Source of Added Material in the Old English *Soliloquies*: A Preliminary Study”) mounts the compelling argument that the translator of the Old English *Soliloquies* was the same person who produced the *Boethius*, and hence that they had been influenced by and remembered the Latin commentaries on the *De consolazione philosophiae*. Working with four annotated manuscripts of the Latin Boethius, Lockett identifies *scholia* that agree in their ideas and images with the *Soliloquies* translator’s departures from Augustine’s text. Her case studies are learned and enthralling, and they include a possible explanation for one of the Old English translator’s most interesting original interventions, about the soul being able to recall its earlier existence.

The first of five chapters in section III (“Vernacular Philosophy and Theology”), Erica Weaver’s “Bending Minds in the Old English *Boethius*” makes the case that, in redesigning the dialogue in its source as an internal one (between the mind and its own faculty of wisdom), the Old English *Boethius* is oriented as a “handbook” for the mind, part of the “broader investment in cultivating mental discipline” (342) that Weaver identifies in Alfredian prose. In this light, especially notable is the text’s concern to distinguish between helpful and harmful fictitious tales, which it effects by moralizing its source material. In “Easing Unease in the Old English *Soliloquies* and *Boethius*: A Mystical Turn,” Michael Treschow

accepts (like Lockett) that these two texts are by the same translator. He argues that setting aside the question of who that person was enables a sympathetic re-reading of their shared spiritual and contemplative focus on the easing of troubled minds, as preparation for a mystical (Neoplatonic) engagement with the divine presence, a quest for rest and tranquility with God. Moreover, Treschow builds on work by Ponirakis to illustrate further that the translator of these Old English texts was aware of Eriugena's thinking. Next, M. J. Toswell investigates "The Ninth-Century Psalter in England." Her chapter is a skilful and eye-opening survey of engagements with the Psalms in pre-Conquest England (focusing on but not limited to the ninth century) in comparison with the evidence from the Continent, and offers a fruitful consideration of the role of the psalter in the literary culture of the period. Key topics in this wide-ranging piece include psalters as *de luxe* manuscripts for individual use, their relationships with Gregorian chant and the litany, their roles in prayer, the use of breviary psalters, and the ways psalms were glossed and translated into Old English. Sticking with the Psalter, Emily Butler ("Examining Dualities in the Old English *Prose Psalms*") homes in on the Old English *Prose Psalms*, and in particular on their introductions. Butler demonstrates how these texts build on their sources (including the pseudo-Bede *Argumenta*) in order to stimulate reflection on the inner, spiritual life using external experiences, encouraging the reader to identify with figures from Biblical history. She explores images of threat and tribulation, which are often presented as paired contrasts, and the language used to denote these concepts, with reference to ideas of the domestic and the foreign (including attitudes to Judaism), and the spiritual versus the bodily. Lastly in this section (although in its subject matter it is an outlier) is "King Alfred as the Skipper in *Andreas*," in which Richard North extends the arguments in his recent edition (with Mike Bintley) of *Andreas* to suggest some further reasons for associating it with Alfred's reign. He speculates that Christ's depiction in the poem as a temporal king mirrors elements of Alfred's own biography as described in Asser (even if, as he admits (443), "not all of these parallels are distinctive to Alfred"), and moreover suggests that Christ's disguised appearance as the ship's captain on Andrew's opening sea journey is designed to recall Alfred's naval experience and the seafaring imagery found in the translations associated with him.

Section IV is entitled "Royal Authority and Legislation," and also contains five chapters. In "*Ælfred se casere*: Kingship and Imperial Legitimation in the Old English *Orosius*," Omar Khalaf builds on his own previous account of the Old English *Orosius* as a collection of moral exempla, and focuses here on the reshaping of the ideological agenda in the final three books of the translation, specifically its presentation of Julius Caesar. Khalaf argues that Caesar's personal and military successes are recast by the Old English author to highlight their similarities with Alfred's career (as described especially by Asser and the *Anglo-*

Saxon Chronicle)—hence representing him as a precursor to Alfred, who becomes a new Caesar extending a sort of imperial dominion over the *Angelcynn*. Emily Kesling then considers “The Winchester Scribes and Alfredian Prose in the Tenth Century.” Developing Malcolm Parkes’ findings about the scribes who copied key Old English prose texts in the tenth century (two of whom were involved in multiple productions), Kesling sees a conscious effort by these copyists, almost certainly based in Winchester (perhaps at Nunnaminster), to promote the memory of Alfred as an internationally connected, imperial patron and polymath; and she argues that this strategy would have harmonized with the agendas of Alfred’s successors on the throne. In a similar vein, in “Chronicle Compilation and West Saxon Succession,” Courtney Konshuh examines the Parker Chronicle in the political and intellectual contexts of the royal court under Edward the Elder. Considering how Edward’s laws remoulded his father’s legislation, Konshuh reads the Parker compilation as a deliberate attempt to bolster the legitimacy of Alfredian kingship, taking into account not only the conquest of territory beyond Wessex but also (often overlooked) factors such as an initially contested succession (the rival claimant being Edward’s uncle, Æthelwold). Remaining with Edward’s reign, Stefan Jurasinski’s chapter, “The *Domboc* in the Laws of Edward the Elder,” is the first of two to focus on the legal culture of the period. Jurasinski’s contribution offers a fascinating re-examination of I–II Edward in their English and broader western European contexts, and explores some fundamental questions about the reception and (re)interpretation of the Laws of Ine and Alfred in Edward’s codes, including the relationship between written law and *folcright*. Sometimes these codes seem to have misunderstood their sources, a phenomenon that perhaps extends to the word *domboc* itself, which Jurasinski plausibly argues was never intended by Alfred to refer to his own (or other secular) legislation. Finally in this section, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (“The Wayward Tongue of *Folcleasung*: Oaths, Bodies, and Communal Truth”) takes a deep dive into Alfred 32, with its exceptional bodily mutilation penalty for the crime of *folcleasung*. This difficult term has previously been understood as something like “(public) slander” but, through the careful analysis of the contexts for this text, including identifying a source in the mid-ninth-century *Pseudo-Isidore Decretals*, O’Brien O’Keeffe argues that *folcleasung* refers specifically to the crime of delation, the malicious bearing of false witness; and the severity of the punishment corresponds to how dangerous this crime was felt to be for a justice system founded on individuals swearing to the truth of statements.

The collection is rounded off by an engaging Afterword, Malcolm Godden’s “Why Did the Anglo-Saxons Switch from Verse to Prose?”. This characteristically erudite and insightful piece, which wears its considerable learning lightly, amounts to a lively reconsideration of English literary culture in most of the pre-

Conquest period. It identifies an important question which has never been posed quite so directly before: why was there apparently a shift in practice from the earlier period, when poetry was routinely used to render scripture and other Latin materials into English (Godden touches *inter alia* on Cædmon, Biblical verse, *The Dream of the Rood* and Cynewulf, and wonders also about Bede's lost version of parts of John's Gospel), to the dominance of prose from the later ninth century onwards? In seeking answers, Godden ranges over a stimulating variety of possible contexts and factors, before concluding that it was a remarkable change of fashion or taste, "a new focus on written texts and private reading" (589), that led to the ascendancy of prose. His contribution makes for an appropriately thought-provoking final element in a hugely accomplished and ground-breaking collection, which all those interested in the literatures of pre-Conquest England will want to get to know.

(Received 12/03/2026)