

Hyer, Maren Clegg. 2025. *Textiles and Textile Imagery in Early Medieval English Literature: Traditions and Contexts*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. Pp. x + 246. ISBN 9781843847441.

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It is fair to say that this is a book many scholars of early medieval textiles have been waiting for. Using her decades of research experience and knowledge, Maren Clegg Hyer has written a *magnus opus* that is thorough and considered. Drawing together evidence from across a wide range of extant written sources, which incorporate cultures and traditions beyond those of early medieval England, the author examines (written) textile imagery as lived experiences within early medieval English society. In doing so, Hyer carefully mines her sources to draw out metaphorical meanings embedded in them, and sometimes so subtle they are hidden from modern eyes, to give us a more nuanced understanding of the culture of textiles within and across early medieval society in England.

In the acknowledgements, the author highlights the thirty years of research and thought that have gone into the work. She talks of those who have influenced and helped shape both her as a scholar and her ideas, which have culminated in the published volume. It is clearly apparent, right from this very first page, that this book is the author's "research baby" and that now it has grown up, she is letting it go out into the world, something I think most researchers can relate to.

The book is divided into five chapters plus an overarching introduction and conclusion. There is also a separate bibliography and an index. The bibliography is useful because it means the reader does not have to keep trawling through the footnotes to find the first full citation of references.

In the Introduction the author outlines how early medieval people had a knowledge of textiles and textile making that is lost to us today because of our removal from these processes, which started during the Industrial Revolution. As such, she argues that our understanding of textiles and the meanings imbued into them by past societies and particularly by that of early medieval England, the focus of the volume, is significant. She argues that this is because "textile imagery . . . played an important role in the imaginative corpus and social meaning of pre-industrial cultures" and that our removal from these processes leaves us without the social knowledge to understand them. However, she goes on to state that by developing our understanding of these, the textile process and textile metaphors,

people “may begin to ‘perceive’ the texts . . . left behind with very different eyes” (2). As such, the object of *Textiles and Textile Imagery* is to close the understanding gap through a close analysis of surviving textile metaphors in the written traditions of early medieval England (2).

The themes of each of the following chapters follow a set pattern. First an introduction giving an overview of the chapter’s focus. Here too, Hayer critically outlines the current state of scholar thought, how this developed and, where relevant, alternative viewpoints. She does not shy away from critically analysing controversial ideas and interpretations, often characterised by societal viewpoints of the day for example, those surrounding the word *wyrd* in chapter 4, “Spinning, Weaving and Forces of Nature” (123–31). Each chapter then moves on to a detailed examination and discussion of written evidence starting with potential origin sources such as Classical Greece and Late Antique Rome Germanic and later Viking territories on the Continent including Icelandic sagas and, less occasionally, Byzantium. Discussion then moves to sources from England, including Old English and Latin. Finally, each chapter ends with a brief conclusion drawing the evidence together and giving final thoughts. It needs to be said that there is a danger when using documentary sources of taking them uncritically, at face value. This is not the case here. Where necessary Hayer explains issues surrounding the use of certain sources for instance, sagas that while having long histories, were written down much later by Christian writers for Christian readers. Hayer explores the resulting contradictions along with changes made to texts over time, to help place both them and their contents within the wider world of textile metaphors and to draw them out through the discussion.

Chapter 1, “Process and Product: Spinning, Weaving, and Finishing Garments,” aims to bring together and embed archaeological, linguistic and textual evidence in a discussion of textile production methods, from growing the fibre through the processing to the weaving and the finishing of a fabric in its final functional form. Here the social, economic and gender associations are drawn out through examination of textile metaphors, including what they symbolize and their association with social constructs and sometimes quiet abstract ideas. It should be highlighted that this is not an overarching analysis of all textile archaeology or textile history of the period but an introduction to this large area of study as it pertains to the idea of textiles and textile imagery as metaphors. This chapter forms the evidential foundation on which the following chapters are built.

Chapter 2, “Weaving Peace, Weaving Life,” focusses on the metaphor of peaceweaving and peaceweaver, which appears in poetic texts within the Old English corpus. Here Hyer examines the literary, economic, social and cultural fluxes behind and within the metaphor. To this the author adds evidence from little known and previously undiscovered parallels in Old English and Anglo-

Latin sources to the ongoing scholarly discussion. She also places the metaphor within its material cultural context of weaving and assesses both the positive and negative attributes and behaviours associated with it through early medieval working practices. As a reader, I found this chapter riveting. The author's poetic and clear style of writing draws in the reader while making what could have been murky and difficult sources understandable and engaging.

Chapter 3, "Spinning, Binding, and Weaving: Magic and Death," explores ideas incorporated into the spinning, binding and weaving of magic, both good and bad, and violent death. Instead of this discussion turning into a stereotype, the author looks at not only the magical connotations associated with these practices but the magico-medical meanings that could be imbued into spinning tools and pieces of cloth and yarn. This last is an interesting topic in itself and its inclusion here will hopefully draw it to the attention of a wider audience.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Spinning, Weaving, and Forces of Nature." Within this chapter ideas of women as weavers of fate draw out comparisons with weaving the cosmos, of weaving creation and of cutting down life. This and chapter 3 were, for me, the two that least connected with the textile imagery, particularly of textiles as woven objects, in literature. This was because the sources, especially those from Greece and Rome demonstrated that these cultures had different concepts for yarn, magic, death and forces of nature with a focus on binding and tying rather than weaving compared to early medieval England. As a result, the connection between the metaphors in this extant literary corpus and that of the early medieval English corpus were few, making the discussion feel somewhat disconnected. However, despite this discontinuity in the analysis, the discussion was important and relevant because it showed exactly that, the differences and therefore the apparent lack of Greek, especially, sources available to those in England.

Chapter 5, "Woven Words," brought the work back to textiles. Here the tradition of using word-weaving imagery in Old English and Anglo-Latin literature is analysed and discussed. Their connection to shaping words to weaving are viewed as a way of accessing the bilingual tradition that early medieval writers were a part of, both within England and across the medieval Continent. Here these word-weaving traditions were used to help the early medieval English audience understand the written word and narrative through a material culture that resonated with them, that they regularly encountered. As such, works from across the early medieval world are used as a vehicle to demonstrate both the interconnectedness and the evolution of weaving with words within the early medieval English literary corpus. As with chapters 1 and 2, this final part of the analysis was written clearly and poetically, it draws the reader into the word-weaving realm of the early medieval English writer while the discussion places them in the world of the early medieval reader, helping to

draw out the often complex and subtle metaphors embedded in the original works.

The Conclusion briefly reminds readers of the outcomes of each chapter before drawing out what the overall result of this means to our understanding of society in early medieval England through and because of textiles. I will not want to give this away here, but I will state that it shows a deep-seated knowledge and understanding of textiles embedded socially throughout England at this time and demonstrates the rich potential of using these works in future textile research.

There are only six black and white illustrations within the main text. They all appear in the introduction and have been chosen to highlight particular points about the making process; women and work; and the skill, beauty and finesse of some of that work still extant. The first image shows the basic fibres and equipment, minus a loom, used in turning fibre into yarn and fabric in Anglo-Scandinavian York (10), while figure 3 is a re-enactor demonstrating how a warp-weighted loom works (14). Figures 4 and 5 are embroideries and tablet-woven bands. The first showing the eighth-century Maaseik pieces now housed in St Catherines Church, Maaseik, Belgium (16) and the second the early tenth-century Maniple discovered in the tomb of St Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral, England (18). The only image of a document is figure 2, which shows a detail from the probable mid-twelfth-century Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428. Here, the *Age of Woman* depicts older women spinning and turning yarn into skeins (11–12). A seventh black and white image from Cotton Claudius B. IV shows Sarah spinning and appears opposite the title page. The only two colour images are found on the front and back of the book's cover; a detail from the Bayeux Tapestry depicting Queen Edith next to her husband Edward the Confessor who lies on his death bed and women chatting while they warp a two-beam loom, from Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.171, fol. 263.

As a final word, this volume will be an excellent resource for those who research or want to know more about early medieval textiles but may not have a background in early medieval literature. For those who have such experience this book draws together numerous texts in one place, making it an invaluable go to source. While the price of £85 is not as steep as some academic books, it may still be one that researchers ask their local libraries to stock. Equally, for those whose work focuses primarily on early medieval textiles and / or early medieval sources, it will be one of those volumes you return to again and again. If this is you, it would be a good idea to have it on your own shelf.

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