

Lorden, Jennifer A. 2025. *Literary Form in Early Medieval England*. Cambridge Elements: England in the Early Medieval World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 69. ISBN 9781009328616.

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Jennifer Lorden's new monograph, *Literary Form in Early Medieval England*, is yet another well-researched, engagingly written, and impressively wide-ranging addition to the Cambridge University Press Elements series, England in the Early Medieval World. Like its forebears, this micrograph is ideal for keen undergraduates or graduate students looking to quickly get a handle on a topic of their interest, or for experienced researchers seeking to fill in some gaps around the circumference of their knowledge. Without sacrificing either scholarly rigour or affordability, Lorden's contribution is a very worthy new title. The multilingual and cross-temporal scope of the study is commendable and provides a particularly effective on-ramp for non-specialists.

The Introduction makes a persuasive case for the book's deft argument, that early medieval English literary forms were meaningfully recognisable by their audiences and signal "shared cultural understandings" (1) for us to interrogate, while not shying away from the fact that formal categorisation is potentially complicated by permeability, interconnectedness, and anachronism. Focusing on the various possible functions of forms and on audiences' engagements with them, Lorden goes beyond discussing writers' formal self-awareness to enter debates about reception, transmission, and adaptation in a lucid manner. The Introduction features a useful historical survey of the literature, a discussion of the relevant links between early medieval England and the Continent, North Africa, and Western Asia, and a thoughtful guide to terminology and the relevant scholarly historiography. Proposing to cover literary associations as various as formula, generic convention, type scene, and allusion, this promise is fulfilled by the subtle handling of the following material, divided into Chapters on Verse, Mixed Forms, Prose, Plain and Standard Styles, and Later Forms, followed by an Afterword and Bibliography.

The first substantial chapter guides us through perhaps the most canonical material discussed in the book, sensibly beginning with a discussion on Old English verse (particularly Caedmon's *Hymn* and the opening of *Beowulf*). The material on metre and formula is informative, as is Lorden's even-handed

treatment of the oral and literary contexts of Old English verse composition and reception. The material here covers areas of Lorden's expertise, including fictionality and devotional aesthetics (Lorden 2021, 2023, respectively). More discussion could have highlighted the recent turn towards intertextuality in Old English poetry. The implication of Lorden's argument is that the meanings created by formulaic and conventional composition and those created by specific borrowing and allusion are two kinds of the same associative meaning-making. This position deserves more comment, though I suspect the form of the *Element* is the limiting factor here, as she has persuasively written on such phenomena elsewhere (Lorden 2024). Notions of literary compositional technique in vernacular verse (characterised by "the aggressive allusiveness of Old English poems" [12]) might have also been fruitfully compared to those found in Anglo-Latin poetry.

When moving on to Anglo-Latin verse, Lorden makes important distinctions about manuscript lineation, teachers, traditionality, and metre by drawing examples from Aldhelm, Bede, and Frithgod. Aldhelm's idiosyncratic development of continuous octosyllables is highlighted, as are characteristics particular to a native speaker of a Germanic language composing Latin, and those which seem to suggest the influence of vernacular verse on Aldhelm's Latin poetry. Alcuin's style is regarded as Carolingian-influenced yet retaining a series of English features, and the first mention of the Latin hermeneutic style in the book connects it to the Benedictine Reforms.

Old English and Anglo-Latin are fruitfully brought together again at the end of the chapter, through translations (*De die iudicii* and *Judgment Day II*), macaronic verse (*The Phoenix* and *Aldhelm*), and verse riddles. Lorden harmoniously traces the development of *enigmata* in both languages, taking in her stride influences, translation, multiple (or lacking) answers, and thematic adaptation with snippets of just two Exeter Book riddles, demonstrating that "the Old English poetic riddle in particular suggests an assumed familiarity with other literary conventions its readers might know" (19).

As necessary as the first chapter is, the second is where Lorden's capaciousness and dexterity really shine. Approaching not only prosimetrical texts but also the *opus geminatum*, she shows the same ability to alternate between material that she demonstrates early medieval English writers possessed. Comparing the formal commentary of Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin on their twinned prose and verse works on the same topic, she shows Anglo-Latin authors were cognisant of the cultural expectations of forms and their juxtaposition. The extension of this idea to the Old English biblical poems is a welcome provocation. Aldhelm's walls-and-roof metaphor is explored for its implications about the function of adornment, affect, and pleasure, none of which are necessarily absent from prose. This is contrasted with Bede's claim that his prose is rather distinct from his verse

in its utility and accessibility. Alcuin's position is more like Aldhelm's in seeing the *opus geminatum* as two equal parts of a whole, though he adapts Bede's own work in his compositions.

Vernacular works surviving in both verse and prose are discussed, highlighting the Old English adaptations of Boethius' prosimetrical *Consolation of Philosophy* (the first translated entirely into prose, and a latter version versifying in correspondence to the Latin *metra*) with a focus on what the Verse Preface to the prosimetrical translation has to say about versification. This is, apparently, quite the opposite of Bede's view, though Lorden cautions us that writers' interjections are often conventional. We are taught to be wary of *leas* ("false") stories, as "the translation itself declines to diminish the role of verse," and "audiences are reminded not to take the work as mere entertainment" (25).

The rest of the chapter discusses the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the poems therein, including as they appear in the *Chronicon* of Æthelweard. There are insightful remarks on the poems on the death of King Edgar and their various incarnations across different Chronicle versions, and how, in the bursts of verse in the annals, the Chronicle "becomes a commentary on itself" (27). Lorden's analysis of *The Death of Alfred* is novel, too, and forms part of the temporal progress of Chronicle verse she tracks, nodding often to Trilling (2019). The adaptation of English verse into Latin in the *Chronicon* is a wonderful way to cap the chapter, and Lorden insightfully demonstrates how Æthelweard mediates between two conventional verse traditions. The parallel between apologia for versification and for translation is a helpful one, and we are left with the notion that "functionally similar forms might be rhetorically positioned differently in the texts that contain them" (29). The vernacular Charms would be another fruitful example of multilingual prosimetra.

In the third and fourth chapters, Lorden defends the subtle varieties of prose styles, from the explicitly ornamented to the intentionally plain. In the third chapter alone, she manages to take in her stride translation, sources and authorities, prefaces and framing devices, interjections, epilogues, and manuscript contexts. Ornamented prose seemed to appeal to a wider audience in the vernacular but a narrower one in Latin, in both cases "offering much more than a little flourish on their otherwise bland content" (29). Lorden provides a concise yet thorough contextualisation of the traditions and histories of the flourishing of vernacular prose associated with Alfred and with Ælfric, especially spotlighting their indebtedness to Latin learning. Discussion of Ælfric features generous speculation on audience and reception dynamics that further connect the two chapters on prose, following Wilcox (1994), Gittos (2014), and Clayton (2000) in particular. The Benedictine Reform is used as a hinge to link Ælfric's more straightforward style, for the edification of the laity, with the hermeneutic

Latin of Byrhtferth (but in a tradition stretching back to Aldhelm), which “served to linguistically reinforce the monastic identity” of the Reformers (32).

The Lives of Swithun by first Lantfred and then Ælfric are further well-chosen examples of Lorden’s argument. Lantfred’s approach is revealing from a generic perspective, and Ælfric’s additions, alterations, and prose style suit his non-monastic audience, while also deploying Lantfred’s authority: “the different linguistic and social context of Ælfric’s vernacular life demanded different conventions and conventional details from the Latin” (34). Brief mention of Wulfstan and his adaptations of Ælfric is followed by the instructive comparison of the vernacular *Soul and Body* poem and Homily IV on the same topic, appearing together as they do in the Vercelli Book.

In the remainder of the third chapter, Lorden combines discussion of structuring devices with manuscript contexts, continuing to model how fruitful such approaches can be in discovering how they guide audiences to read across a variety of vernacular prose genres. In the Old English Lives of Malchus and Mary of Egypt, frame narratives scaffold audiences’ devotional engagement with depictions of lust. *Apollonius of Tyre* is situated amongst litanies, homilies, and devotional poems in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 201, where such a compilation may have clarified the relevance of Christian virtues in the pagan story. Finally, Lorden explores the various negotiations of voice, sources, and authority represented by the prose translations associated with King Alfred. The central text is the Old English version of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, and Lorden shows how the reconstruction of the Old English *Soliloquies*, especially the addition of vernacular material before, in the middle of, and after the main text of the original, tells us not only about the reading of the compiler of the Old English *Soliloquies* but also of their concerns for the audience’s understanding of this challenging philosophical text.

Taking a detour from form, the fourth chapter of the book addresses simplicity and straightforwardness in the “so-called ‘plain style’” and “so-called ‘Standard Old English’” (41). A note on the relation of form, style, and dialect may have been useful, clarifying these labels and why the plain style only applies to prose, and explaining why (for example) glosses, glossaries, or inscriptions would not have been just as good a fit for a chapter in a book on form.

Lorden’s insights on Late West-Saxon—the supraregional ecclesiastical *Schriftsprache* of the tenth and eleventh centuries—as well as on the “Winchester vocabulary”—as she later notes, “less of a fully standardized form of the language than a ‘professional’ liturgical terminology” (47, quoting Gretsch 2001)—undermine the notion that these styles or dialects were, in fact, simplifications. Returning to the writing of *opera geminata* and how writers describe their beliefs about plainer styles, Lorden explores how Bede’s preface to his prose life of Cuthbert makes claims to clarity and accessibility which imply greater historical

veracity. Such a humility topos belies the community building and negotiation of audience expectation that the preface achieves. Likewise, but for different purposes, Alcuin delineates how his prose *Life of Willibrord* was fit for reading aloud in church, while the verse was better suited for individual reading. Lorden uses this example to clearly demonstrate the distinct functions of different styles. The comparison of Bede with Ælfric again shows Lorden's enviable capacity to work across our period, demonstrating how Ælfric's own pretensions to simplicity (slightly different in his Latin than in his English) show "a sensitive attention to the audience he addresses" (45), demonstrated by his opinion that "sed simplicem Anglicam, quo facilius possit ad cor pervenire legentium vel audientium ad utilitatem animarum suarum" ("simple English . . . can more easily penetrate the heart of those either reading or hearing for the use of their souls") (46).

The chapter's final move is to return to what the plain style can tell us about the nature of the contract between writer and audience. The considerations of these textual communities in this chapter are particularly welcome. Warning that "we should not always believe the claims these texts make about themselves" (46), Lorden crystallises her argument in a characteristically lucid way: "[p]lain style, then, exists to some degree in theory as much as in practice, and its practical applications were far from simple" (47). In this vein, she finds that the Winchester vocabulary produces texts with a style simultaneously accessible and learned, and closes the chapter with a truism on "the impossibility of accounting for form apart from its complex social, historical, and political contexts" (48).

The fifth and final chapter invites us to consider later forms of English written after the Norman Conquest (and taking account of the Danish one, too). A thoughtful introduction to English post-1066, Lorden employs a series of provoking textual examples that demonstrate the survival of formal structures in English literature into the thirteenth century. Before jumping into texts, she remarks usefully on the historical context, on adaptation versus original composition, and on the alliterative revival (or the lack of a need for one).

Spotlighting *Sanctus Beda* (or the First Worcester Fragment) is a wonderful conduit for Lorden's rumination on continuity and loss, a catalogue poem and an elegy where both forms (as well as its metre and tropes) hark back to a past evidently not entirely extinguished. The example of *The Grave* from Bodley 343 is equally germane, and Lorden contextualises it as a multilingual and collaborative production. Combining Old English Soul and Body themes with a post-Conquest shift to the debate form, *The Grave* shows that at least one reader could recognise earlier vernacular conventions and extend them with related contemporary ones. In *The Soul's Address to the Body*, we are confronted with a similar "recombination of forms" (56) in the mixed formulaic and romantic

elements, though, as we have learned throughout Lorden's book, the adaptation of literary forms was far from alien to early English literature.

Lorden chaperones us through the post-Conquest fate of two genres. William of Malmesbury's translation of Colman's lost vernacular prose life of Wulfstan is a memorable anecdote used to unite the historical facts of the relative lack of twelfth-century manuscripts containing vernacular saints' lives and of Norman writers appropriating English cults. In historiography, the later Chronicle poem *The Rime of King William* and Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum* exemplify different ways that post-Conquest writers "chronicle recent events [and] retell and reframe the more distant past, drawing upon existing texts and forms in order to do so" (57). The former employs rhyme at the expense of alliteration, and the latter transforms vernacular material into a new historical, linguistic, and political context. By turning the clock back a little to 1066, Lorden draws our attention again to important caveats about periodisation and "progress" that speak to all of our work.

The Afterword returns to key questions that this book has opened up: the relationship between originality and what seems formulaic, the functions of form, and how audiences understand literary products through the recognition of convention. We are again directed to consider the common yet sophisticated formal innovations in early English literature, and how association and allusion were key heuristics for medieval audiences, just as they are for modern ones. Her parting shot on the restrictions of academic departments and popular ideas of the dark ages is another clarion call, rounded off on a humble note: "much of the story of English literary form remains inevitably as yet untold" (62). The Bibliography is, like the micrograph as a whole, both accessible and academically rigorous.

Literary Form in Early Medieval England is remarkably well-formed, a rich Tardis of a book deserving of its place in this increasingly popular series. Foremost of the many strengths of the book is Lorden's ability to wrap her arms around a diverse, multilingual, and cross-temporal corpus of texts in a variety of genres, providing generous and enticing introductions to texts, their contexts, and useful comparanda, without ever leaving the reader with whiplash. Chapters on mixed forms and late forms are highlights, for me, of a book packed with dense detail and inspiring premises yet eminently readable. The literary historiography of texts in both Anglo-Latin and Old English (and even some early Middle English) is consistently well-balanced, making clear the parallel and interconnected developments of contemporary traditions in the two most developed literary languages of early medieval England. I suspect this will be one of the most enduring features of the book, which confidently clears the ground for further urgent research in this area, and it is in this context that I will most fervently recommend this book to my students and colleagues.

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