

“Phil-fog”: Celts, Theorists and Other “Others”

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WHEN PROMINENT Anglo-Saxonist Allen Frantzen’s numerous blog posts on feminism and its (in his view) attendant evils came to the attention of medievalists on social media, the furor and disappointment over his misogyny branched into a number of productive conversations about representation and exclusion within medieval studies as a whole, but with a particular emphasis on Anglo-Saxon studies. One of the persistent issues that emerged from this discussion, largely conducted online, was that rather than Frantzen’s misogyny being aberrant, many scholars felt that a hostile attitude towards feminism and feminist criticism was often the norm, though usually expressed in a more covert fashion. It is tempting to view this hostility as yet another skirmish in the long-running theory wars, in which, according to the standard portrayal, English departments were fiercely riven along partisan lines: philologists and “traditional” literary scholars huddling behind a shieldwall, and a *mycel hæden here* of theorists of all stripes, having established a foothold territory, endeavoring to conquer all. As attractive an explanation as this war story is, in terms of the field of Old English I would position the theory wars not as the beginning of a schism between radically different approaches to the study of texts, but as a shift providing a convenient new

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binary opposition, philology versus theory, when antipathy towards once excluded categories (“Celts” and women, as shall be seen) had ceased to be a viable means of constructing the borders of the field.

In his witty and incisive review of the recent edited collection *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, Christopher Abram observes that “we might ask whether the whole concept of, the whole *desire* for, a monolithic heroic ethos is not the product of a certain masculinist tendency in some strains of Anglo-Saxon studies.”¹ In this essay, I will consider whence Abram’s proposed “masculinist tendency” derives its lineage, and how it has contributed to the invention and policing of an arguably false divide between “philology” and “literary theory” and the gendering of the former approach as masculine, and the latter as feminine. In a similar vein, one occasionally encounters the idea that strictly philological approaches are somehow a more “natural” approach to texts than literary or theoretical approaches.

As anyone who works on the early Middle Ages is well aware, medieval genealogies often contain obviously fictitious ancestors, included to explicate or validate current socio-political circumstances, in addition to tracing actual biological descent. The genealogy that I outline here may have much in common with this model: while I believe that the arguments I put forth in this paper have some truth to them, many of them are unprovable, and some will vehemently disagree with my conclusions, tentative as they may be.

There sometimes seems to be a sense that Old English [OE] and Old Norse [ON] are particularly “masculine”—perhaps even “macho”—fields, and that theory, especially gender and queer theory, is effeminizing and should be kept on the borders, if permitted at all. But it is only through this act of exclusion that the masculinization can take place: “masculine” or “butch” are meaningful only when set in relief against the opposing category (feminine, effeminate, queer). I suggest that this desire to claim and control the Anglo-Saxon past is paralleled by, and rooted in, nineteenth-century discourses about gender, emotion, and culture.

1. Christopher Abram, “Review of *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf,” *Saga-Book* 39, no. 1 (2015): 133–37, 136.

Medievalists working on the history of emotions have pointed out that scholars have tended to reconstruct past emotional norms in ways that reflect the culture of the scholar rather than that of the medieval culture being studied. One of the more striking ways in which this kind of transfer has happened occurred in the nineteenth century, when England needed a national literature that adequately aligned with the stiff upper lip and emotional repression of a proper Victorian gentleman. Two options presented themselves: the Anglo-Saxons, who settled in Britain and pushed the native Celtic-speaking inhabitants to the western and northern fringes of the island, and the Vikings, who claimed large areas previously under Anglo-Saxon control.² Masculinity was at the heart of this ideology; as Joanne Parkers frames it, “The Vikings and the Saxons seem to have competed, then, in the 19th century to be identified as the source of those masculine qualities (fairness, vigour, and straightforwardness) which were considered to lie at the heart of British national identity, and which were repeatedly invoked in pro-imperial rhetoric.”³

The burgeoning field of comparative philology offered a solution to this conundrum, in that both Anglo-Saxons and Viking Age Scandinavians spoke languages of the Germanic family, and this permitted the categories of Anglo-Saxon and Viking to overlap and blur together in the broader category of the “Teuton,” which also encouraged the folding in of the continental German-speaking populations—surely an attractive option for an empire ruled by a queen who was the daughter of a German princess and married to a German prince.

Sir Walter Scott gently parodies this variety of Victorian Germanomania in *The Antiquary*. Oldbuck, the eponymous antiquary in the novel, berates his nephew over the latter’s admiration for Ossianic lays:

2. “Vikings vied with the Saxons in the late 19th century to be identified as the source of modern Britain’s cultural, industrial, and political successes.” Joanne Parker, “The Dragon and the Raven: Saxons, Danes, and the Problem of Defining National Character in Victorian England,” *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 3 (2009): 257–73, 259.

3. Parker, “The Dragon and the Raven,” 262. While Viking men were lauded, female characters in Scandinavian sources were not always met with such admiration; see Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 154–55.

“do you recollect, now, any of these verses you thought so beautiful and interesting, being a capital judge, no doubt, of such things?”

“I don’t pretend to much skill, uncle; but it’s not very reasonable to be angry with me for admiring the antiquities of my own country more than those of the Harolds, Harfagers, and Hacos you are so fond of.”

“Why, these, sir—these mighty and unconquered Goths—were your ancestors! The bare-breeched Celts whom they subdued, and suffered only to exist, like a fearful people, in the crevices of the rocks, were but their *mancipia* and serfs!”⁴

Oldbuck collapses the categories of Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon into the ethnonym “Goths,” eliding the distinctions between these groups to supply a common Germanic ancestry that ruled, while the conquered Celts cowered in fear. Scott is writing fiction, but scholarly writing from the period is not always more circumspect; George Dasent explained the relative fortunes of Celtic and Germanic languages in Britain by claiming that “In language as in race the rule holds that the weakest must go to the wall.”⁵

While classical and medieval texts often depicted Celtic-speaking populations in ways that were highly racialized, this impulse flourished under the same influences that urged the Victorians to embrace a hybrid Anglo-Saxon/Norse heritage, with its promise of a distinctively Teutonic masculinity. The writings of the French scholar Ernest Renan were highly influential in promoting a view that speakers of Celtic languages were emotional, effeminate, and destined to be ruled by their stern, masculine, Teutonic neighbors. Renan proposed that “If it is permitted to assign sex to nations as to individuals, we should have to say without hesitance that the Celtic race . . . is an essentially feminine race,”⁶ and

4. Sir Walter Scott, *The Antiquary* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1808), 279.

5. George Dasent, “Latham’s ‘Johnson’s Dictionary,’” *Jests and Earnests: A Collection of Essays and Reviews*, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1873), 4.

6. Ernest Renan, “The Poetry of the Celtic Races,” in *Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Essays by Ernest Renan*, trans. W. G. Hutchinson (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 8.

considered the beauty of Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion* to derive in part from a shared sensibility between text and translator: "To render these gracious imaginings of a people so eminently dowered with feminine tact, the pen of a woman was necessary."⁷ For Renan, this femininity was related to what he saw as an underlying, pervasive strain of sorrow permeating Celtic literature:

Take the songs of its bards of the sixth century; they weep more defeats than they sing victories. Its history is itself one long lament; it still recalls its exiles, its flights across the seas. If at times it seems to be cheerful, a tear is not slow to glisten behind its smile; it does not know that strange forgetfulness of human conditions and destinies which is called gaiety. Its songs of joy end as elegies; there is nothing to equal the delicious sadness of its national melodies. One might call them emanations from on high, which, falling drop by drop upon the soul, pass through it like memories of another world. Never have men feasted so long upon these solitary delights of the spirit, these poetic memories which simultaneously intercross all the sensations of life, so vague, so deep, so penetrative, that one might die from them, without being able to say whether it was from bitterness or sweetness.⁸

Matthew Arnold adopted and expanded on Renan's arguments: "no doubt the sensibility of the Celtic nature, its nervous exaltation, have something feminine in them, and the Celt is thus peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret."⁹

The American historian Henry Osborn Taylor continued in the vein of Renan and Arnold. In a monograph published in 1911, he described

7. *Ibid.*, 16.

8. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

9. Matthew Arnold, *Lectures & Essays in Criticism: The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 347. For a discussion of Arnold's perspective and British colonialism see the chapter "An Essentially Feminine Race," in David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 42–57.

the “truculence and vanity” of Irish literature, opining that “a weak sense of fact and a lack of steady rational purpose are also conspicuous. It is as ferocious as may be. Yet, withal, it keeps the charm of the Irish temperament. Its pathos is moving, even lovely . . . the imagery has a fantastic and romantic beauty, and the reader is wafted along on waves of temperament and feeling.”¹⁰ When describing the Teutons, Taylor opens a chapter with a statement that “intellectual as well as emotional differences” separated Celts from Teutons, with “a certain hard rationality and grasp of fact mark the mentality of the latter.”¹¹ “The Teutons,” according to Taylor, “disclose more strength and persistency of desire than the Celts. Their feelings were slower, less impulsive; also less quickly diverted, more unswerving, even fiercer in their strength. The general characteristic of Teutonic emotion is its close connection with some motive grounded in rational purpose.”¹² By setting the Celts in opposition to the Teutons, and praising the Teuton’s strength and rationality, qualities deemed masculine, he effectively feminizes the Celts.

This view would come under scrutiny as the twentieth century progressed. In his 1955 inaugural O’Donnell Lecture, “English and Welsh,” given at Oxford, J. R. R. Tolkien criticizes this discourse:

In this legend Celts and Teutons are primeval and immutable creatures, like a triceratops and a stegosaurus (bigger than a rhinoceros and more pugnacious, as popular paleontologists depict them), fixed not only in shape but in innate and mutual hostility, and endowed even in the mists of antiquity, as ever since, with the peculiarities of mind and temper which can still be observed in the Irish or the Welsh on the one hand and the English on the other: the wild incalculable poetic Celt, full of vague and misty imaginations, and the Saxon, solid and practical when not under the influence of beer. Unlike most myths this myth seems to have no value at all.

10. Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind: A History of the Development of Thought and Emotion in the Middle Ages, in Two Volumes* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 1:128.

11. *Ibid.*, 138.

12. *Ibid.*

According to such view *Beowulf*, though in English, must, I should say, be far more Celtic—being full of dark and twilight, and laden with sorrow and regret—than most things that I have met written in Celtic language.¹³

Due to a variety of factors, not least of all the enthusiastic embrace of the concept of a common Germanic heritage by the Third Reich, a desire for an Anglo-Saxon past that was in some sense “purely Teutonic” eventually fell out of fashion among medievalists.¹⁴ That said, might part of the desire to see *Beowulf* as an early composition arise from a desire to position the cherished text as far away from Middle English, with its flourishing French vocabulary and Italianate borrowings, as possible? Is it somehow more “purely” or legitimately Anglo-Saxon if it is earlier? I am not asking here whether or not the scholarship on the poem supports an early date; rather, I am asking why it might be especially pleasing to some to conclude that it is early.

While few scholars would now endorse the blatantly misogynistic and racist perspectives that positioned Celts and Teutons in a binary opposition to one another, the desire to close off Anglo-Saxon (or, more broadly, Germanic) culture from pernicious, effeminizing influence remains, but here the Celtic “Other” has been replaced by the Theorist. The longstanding tendency to gender some forms of emotional expression as effeminate, primitive, and antithetical to the so-called heroic code has been replaced, I propose, by a mistrust of feminist and queer theory. This approach constructs philology as a masculine (consequently superior) pursuit.

I am not proposing that at some point in the last century a group of influential Anglo-Saxonists held a meeting wherein they decided to switch over *en masse* from an explicitly racialized and gendered discourse to one that worked more subtly. This is not to say that the literatures and languages of Celtic-speaking peoples have subsequently

13. J. R. R. Tolkien, “English and Welsh,” in *Angles and Britons: O’Donnell Lectures*, ed. Henry Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963), 1–41, 12.

14. Eric Gerald Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1964).

been embraced by English departments or scholars of Old English. Anglo-Saxonists often have some training in Old Norse-Icelandic and a basic familiarity with the Eddas and the better-known representatives of the *Íslendingasögur*. There are sound reasons for an Anglo-Saxonist to do so, given the linguistic and geographic proximity of Old Norse-Icelandic and Old English. However, aside from some skaldic verse (none of which is preserved in manuscript form until much later than the Anglo-Saxon period) and runic inscriptions, there is no temporal overlap between the literature of Anglo-Saxon England and that of Scandinavia. In contrast, there has been comparatively little scholarship bringing Anglo-Saxon literature into dialogue with the contemporary literatures of early medieval Ireland and Wales. There has been some progress in this area in recent decades, but it remains the norm that Anglo-Saxonists are unlikely to have training in, or familiarity with, Celtic literary traditions. This modern lack is not a deliberate snub, but reflects a number of intersecting factors, including the Victorian inheritance that saw a diametric opposition between speakers of Celtic and Germanic languages.

In his afterword in *The Dating of Beowulf*, Allen J. Frantzen criticizes:

A preference for “ahistoricizing, formalist approaches” found in much feminist, gender, and post-colonial criticism, which bulks large relative to its modest contributions to knowledge of the text, its language, or its contexts. Some of this criticism is hostile to the heroic ethos itself, regards masculinity as toxic, and invites the view that *Beowulf* is an anti-heroic poem populated by weak men. The poem’s date matters to these claims, for it is more probable to find a self-doubting hero and failing heroic ethos at the end rather than the beginning of a tradition, or even in the middle.¹⁵

Frantzen uses this intricate logic to support an early date and a “masculine” poem, but how do we decide when a “tradition” that almost certainly had its roots in oral literature properly “began”? Furthermore,

15. Allen J. Frantzen, “Afterword: *Beowulf* and Everything Else,” in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 235–48, 245.

given *Beowulf*'s unique position in the Old English corpus as a lengthy, secular poem, what precisely is the tradition to which it belongs? It is arguably the only poem of its kind that survives in Old English literature—as opposed to the comparatively more numerous biblical retellings—so might one therefore reasonably infer that *Beowulf* is in fact the “last survivor” of an older, oral tradition? The anxiety over the date of the poem is telling.

It is indeed fascinating to contemplate what *Beowulf* might have looked like had it been produced in an alien culture that lacked gender roles—an act of truly speculative fiction, along the lines of Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*—however, this is not the poem that we have. One may quibble over what gender *is* (and scholars do), but refusing to acknowledge its existence and the influence it exerts on societies and texts is a questionable practice. A desire for an origin in a cultural moment in which gender was not constructed and did not exert influence is a desire for an origin point that did not ever exist; furthermore, a society in which the dominant social code, heroic or otherwise, went entirely unquestioned by its members is another thoroughly implausible model. Indeed, at an earlier point in his long career, Frantzen himself appeared to criticize the absence of feminist/gender theory in the field of Old English, stating of “The Wanderer,” “The Seafarer,” and “The Wife's Lament” that “these are texts more or less related to the heroic code—a social institution which could be—but rarely has been—seen in gender-conscious ways.”¹⁶

An academic of my acquaintance who works on medieval Scandinavian literature recounted a conversation he had with a colleague, during which his colleague asked him why he wanted to use literary theory in his work, explaining that doing so was like “inviting a strange French man to have sex with your wife.” This quip is obviously lighthearted, but it neatly distills some of the attitudes that circulate freely in the academy, but these days are rarely made explicit—at least not in print. In a letter he wrote to a colleague in 1999, Peter Foote, the esteemed scholar of

16. Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990),

medieval Scandinavian literature and culture, described a similar, though not exact, relationship between theory, scholarship, and text:

Not long ago another university teacher, a young man, told me and others that his students had a six-month course reading sagas in translation. But before they began, he said, they demanded a literary theory. This caused me some wonderment and I said lightheartedly that I thought the best introduction to reading *Íslendingasögur* was reading Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*, with some time spent on the geography, history and laws of early Iceland; but if that was not quite practical, then six months spent in personal engagement with two or three short texts in the original would be a better education and lay a sounder foundation for further interest. He was not persuaded, even when I reminded him of Lord Chesterfield's remark that engagement with learning was "like wrestling with a fine woman."¹⁷ However little our first-hand experience of such wrestling may be, we can take the simile to imply a constant grappling with a desired object—as scholarship was, is and ever shall be, much to be lauded and enjoyed.¹⁸

Like modern Beowulfs grappling with a proliferation of nameless Grendel-dams in submerged lairs, the philologist must subdue, or perhaps seduce, a recalcitrant, resisting, feminine text/object. Needless to say, this conceptualization imposes a masculine and heteronormative overlay onto the practice of scholarship, encouraging the scholar to view herself, himself, or themselves as a man who rolls about with "fine" women on occasion.

17. The quote that Peter Foote attributes to Lord Chesterfield is more commonly attributed to George Savile, Marquis of Halifax. Peter Foote, "Bréf til Haralds," in *Kreddur. Select studies in early Icelandic law and literature* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004), 200. The quote appears with some frequency in literary criticism; for example, Richard Altick concludes the introduction to his *The Scholar Adventurers* with reference to the Marquis's words. Richard Altick, *The Scholar Adventurers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), 15.

18. Foote, "Bréf til Haralds," 200. I thank Richard Cole for bringing this quote to my attention.

I am reminded of the “Scholar’s Mistress” in Fritz Leiber’s classic horror novel *Our Lady of Darkness*. The novel’s main character is Franz Westen, a science fiction and horror author living in 1970s San Francisco. Westen contemplates a pile of books occupying his bed:

Only a month ago it had suddenly occurred to him that their gay casual scatter added up to a slender, carefree woman lying beside him on top of the covers—that was why he never put them on the floor; why he contented himself with half the bed; why he unconsciously arranged them in a female form with long, long legs. They were a “scholar’s mistress,” he decided, on the analogy of “Dutch wife,” that long, slender bolster sleepers clutch to soak up sweat in tropical countries—a very secret playmate, a dashing but studious call girl, a slim, incestuous sister, eternal comrade of his writing work.¹⁹

Throughout the novel Westen addresses his papery mistress as though she were a person, and this anthropomorphized heap of texts takes on an increasingly uncanny air, culminating in a dramatic conclusion in which the scholar’s mistress, now animated, attempts to murder Westen. This figure, Westen gleans, is the same as, or at least a manifestation of, the black-clad, veiled female figure who haunted Thibaut de Castries, a fictional occultist with whom Westen had become obsessed and whose curse he had unknowingly brought upon himself through ownership of a journal by one of de Castries’ doomed protégés. What lessons might one glean from Leiber’s tale?

I introduce Leiber’s text not to suggest that characterizing texts as

19. Fritz Leiber, *Our Lady of Darkness* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1977), 4–5. There is a passing reference to this in Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman’s *The Fall of the Kings*: “Basil’s was a largish room, furnished with a wooden bedstead, a table and a chair, and scores of books and papers piled and drifted on the floor, against the wall, in the corners, and spread out on the mattress like an eager lover.

‘The scholar’s mistress,’ observed Campion, folding his body down onto the bed.”

Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman, *The Fall of the Kings* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2002), 53.

passive and feminine will summon forth a malevolent spirit bent on tormenting and destroying the scholar who does so, but instead to ask, where does this leave women or genderqueer scholars, regardless of on which side of the theory war lines they pitch a tent? If scholarship is conceptualized as an act that a scholar carries out in the manner that a man “wrestles” with a “fine woman,” this promotes a paradigm in which scholars do to texts what (hetero- and bisexual) men do to women. There is nothing obvious, natural, or biological about what scholars do to the texts we study. This paradigm promotes viewing the male scholar as the norm and texts as objects that are anthropomorphized, gendered, and feminized (and thus enacting a more subtle objectification of women scholars). If the academic sphere is one in which male persons do things to feminized objects, where does this position scholars who are not heteronormative men, not only vis-à-vis the texts, but also as a body within a field in which they are an aberration? This leads to my next point, the prevalence of sexual harassment in the academy.

I would not want to draw too close a comparison, and certainly one may conceptualize scholarship in ways that some might find troubling without engaging in activities that do more direct forms of harm, but it is at least worth considering whether this “masculinist tendency” contributes in some way to the culture of sexual harassment that has been prevalent at many universities and is well-represented in several important centers for the study of the Middle Ages. We are at an odd juncture where it is often seen as more unseemly—even more unprofessional—for scholars to openly discuss instances of sexual harassment or assault within the field than to commit those acts.

We have a system in which a certain amount of keeping quiet and looking the other way is required to advance to a long-term or permanent position. By the time someone has achieved adequate professional success to have some leeway in discussing these matters, or even in avoiding working with those whom one knows to be predatory, one is thoroughly implicated in the system of silence. Moreover, if successful scholars are not themselves reliant on the goodwill and recommendations of predators, they are at least reliant on the goodwill of individuals who may themselves have close ties and collaborative relationships with people whose predatory behavior has driven scholars from the discipline.

One often comes across the “but he’s such a good scholar” defense, in which observations that an academic has engaged in sexually predatory or harassing behavior are met with protestations about the quality of his scholarship, as though the one justifies the other.²⁰ It is difficult to imagine this excuse being used in other circumstances without invoking the comedic: “Did you hear? Professor Y murdered someone in cold blood!” “Well, yes, that is true—but his recent monograph on *Beowulf* is just so awfully good.” It is as though the garden of brilliance may be watered only with the tears of humiliated young women. PhD students who have been sexually harassed by a professor or are aware that a senior academic has a reputation for behaving in such a manner are advised to work with those individuals anyway for the sake of their careers, in order to have that letter from “such a good scholar” on file with Interfolio.com, thus implicating another generation of scholars in a web of complicity.

In the preface to his seminal monograph *Desire for Origins*, Frantzen writes, “My thesis . . . is that engagement with political controversy has always been a distinctive and indeed an essential motive for studying language origins and therefore for studying Anglo-Saxon. The corollary to my thesis is that disengagement from politics and an attempt to justify the study of linguistic origins for their own sake are innovations in the modern Anglo-Saxon scholarly tradition; these developments . . . explain why Anglo-Saxon subjects have failed to retain a place in the mainstream of modern intellectual and political life.”²¹ The displacement of Anglo-Saxon from “the mainstream of modern intellectual and political life” that Frantzen pointed to twenty-seven years ago has not been remedied in the intervening decades, despite many valiant efforts on the part of Old English scholars (or Peter Jackson’s attempts to wrangle as many films as possible out of Tolkien’s writings on Middle-earth). Once secure in its place as the Ur-English literature, the teaching of Old English as a language is being edged out of the curriculum,

20. I am using male pronouns not because I think that there are no instances of sexual harassment by female scholars, but because this pattern of predatory behavior and subsequent defense is one that is more typically seen in cases of sexual harassment by male academics.

21. Frantzen, *Desire*, xiii.

and the literature seems poised to follow. Old Norse, always uneasily included in this family tree, fares even less well in the traditional English department that has often been its home in North America and even independent Scandinavian departments are at risk of being folded into Germanic or European Studies programs, a process that seems likely to result, whether or not by intention, in their demise. It is perhaps a natural response to this marginalization to blame the relatively newly-arrived theorists for this current precariousness, but this seems to me to be a false assumption. The powers that see OE and ON as a useless, even decadent, indulgence²² are no more likely to smile benevolently upon the inclusion of, for example, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, or Judith Butler in the curriculum. Neither the meticulous, painstaking process of philology nor the questioning of power and societal critique that characterizes much theoretical work will be welcomed by a system that wants its flood of “alternative facts” to be accepted without question.

Nicholas Watson speaks of

the need to think clearly about the way all such study has emotional designs on its object, whether the emotions are of love, anger, guilt, or anything else. I believe this need may be especially strong now, when those of us who work in historical disciplines often see ourselves—rightly or wrongly—as members of an endangered profession whose role it is to reaffirm the urgency of the past to an indifferent or hostile present. Especially if we work outside the geographical region we study, we have in our teaching and our scholarship to *represent* the past in the present, straddling the centuries in the intense but usually undefined belief that we enrich the self-understanding of our communities in the process. Since this self-conception is so much an emotional one—and since the task we assign ourselves, if we do view ourselves like this, largely

22. Comedian Stewart Lee recounts that Margaret Thatcher visited his university and asked a student what she was studying. Upon learned that the student was studying Old Norse, Thatcher is said to have replied, “Well, what a luxury.” Stewart Lee, “Comics Corner,” *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/3319436/Comics-corner-Stuart-Lee.html>.

depends on our ability to arouse emotion in others—it matters that historical scholars learn to theorize the affective component of the projects: or, to translate this, that we discuss whether we are right to care for or about the past, what this caring is, and what impact our feelings legitimately have on our scholarship.²³

Watson wrote this nearly two decades ago, but his plea rings out even more urgently now, and with special relevance for the field of Old English. I am not sure how we will make Old English a relevant, cohesive, supportive field, but it must be through allowing diversity of approaches (and persons). There is nothing wrong with preferring some methodologies to others, but all too often we end up applying an unfortunate kind of Russell Conjugation to the field:

My methodology is unimpeachably correct,
Your methodology is a bit eccentric,
His/her/their methodology is a threat to literary criticism/civilization as we know it.

Frantzen gave us “fem-fog”—the phrase that launched a thousand memes. In exchange I offer you “phil-fog”:

Phil-fog: the false impression that one somehow has direct access to a given medieval culture in its “pure” state, and that this connection can be corrupted by exposure to literary criticism or theory.

Should we avoid learning about Darwin’s theory of evolution because ignorance would somehow make us better medievalists? Medievalists who apply theoretical approaches to texts readily accept the importance of philology as a discipline, especially in the field of Old English. In contrast, recent publications demonstrate that a number of those who identify as strict philologists (though certainly not all!) feel under attack from gender studies and other theoretical models, despite the fact that these approaches are underrepresented in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies (as well as in Old Norse), as compared to, for example, Middle

23. Nicholas Watson, “Desire for the Past,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999), 59–97, 61.

English. We should be aware that at all times we are bringing our own individual baggage to the text. There is no pure literary criticism from which the self of the critic is wholly absent. Even if we invent time machines, no modern scholar will ever be able to experience an Old English poem in precisely the same way as, say, a ninth-century Mercian thane would. We can study the language and reconstruct the culture, but we are always going to be outside of it.

I do not suggest that concern over introducing anachronisms into the source material is entirely unfounded; however, there is a risk that in our haste to avoid anachronism, we may miss “chronisms” because they seem too modern (or at least, non-medieval) to our eyes. Nineteenth-century scholars examined Old English texts and discovered that they and Anglo-Saxons shared surprisingly similar values; likewise, twentieth-century academics saw their concerns reflected in the source material. In order to avoid the dangers of filling in the gaps in our sources with a single, possibly myopic, contemporary perspective, it is important that we triangulate with a variety of critical methods, thus increasing the likelihood that something resembling an accurate impression can be reached, or at least sought after. Philology is an intricate, elegant, beautiful practice, and it is at the root of everything that scholars of medieval literature do.

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