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REVIEWS

Gregg A. Smith, *The Function of the Living Dead in Medieval Norse and Celtic Literature: Death and Desire*. Lewiston, NY: The Edward Mellen Press, 2007. 151 pp. ISBN 978-0-7734-5353-1. £64.95

This welcome volume represents a fresh and lucid look at the nature and uses of the Living Dead in medieval Norse and Celtic literature. The author aims to shed light on his subject through a broader and deeper discussion than has been seen for some time. This is accomplished by comparative, interdisciplinary work spanning archaeological, linguistic, mythological and (primarily) textual evidence.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first aims to identify what exactly constituted the 'Living Dead' among the inhabitants of ancient Ireland and Scandinavia, namely the Celtic *Tuatha Dé Danann* and the Norse *draugar*, and to elucidate how they manifest themselves in the literature. This task is unquestionably difficult, as the dead reveal themselves in a number of different ways, influenced by diverse cultures, minds and manuscripts, reflecting what was no doubt a 'patchwork of beliefs' (p. 83). Despite this, Smith successfully highlights one dominant pattern, which defines his study. In the pagan world, the dead's frequent contacts with the living mean that they 'serve as conduits of otherworldly power' to the living world. This function was picked up by medieval Christian authors who used the dead as a literary reflex to fulfil thematic roles in the Christianized sagas.

Chapter 2 examines the historical background. Smith presents evidence that in the medieval period the dead were thought to exert a profound and tangible influence on people and agricultural life — a belief that was once expressed as death-cult worship. But much of his data is gathered from a rather perfunctory survey of the archaeological evidence. It would have been helpful to see more in-depth, up-to-date archaeological works in the bibliography. Indeed works such as Neil Price's *The Viking Way* are conspicuous by their absence.[1] Smith is certainly more confident (as he states in his introduction) on the literary side of things, and here he draws upon a wide range of sagas as well as (albeit more marginally) historiographical works such as *Heimskringla*, *Flateyjarbók* and the Irish *Lebor Gabála*.

This literary evidence all leads Smith to conclude that as the dead inhabited a separate but equally real world, they could be manipulated in literary works to 'fulfill thematic needs' (p. 69). Most usefully, the dead could present mankind with esoteric knowledge. A fascinating question that is raised but not fully explored is the question of exactly why death and dying

[1] Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Aun, 31 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002).

impart supernatural abilities. Smith sees this as a merging of pagan and Christian ideology: the dead's powers are a combination of the author's worldview and the necessity of fulfilling certain thematic requirements.

Chapter 3 continues in a similar vein, but focuses on the process of wish-fulfilment, which can be either beneficial or harmful to heroes. Through an in-depth study of certain sagas Smith shows how the dead are placed there to mould (for better or for worse) the evolution, accomplishments and transformations of heroes such as Cú Chulainn and Grettir. Our understanding of this is aided by two flow charts at the end of the chapter.

The final chapter moves away from the dead's role as wish-fulfillers to a more complex understanding of their uses. Smith discusses this through the paradoxical situation that occurs in several sagas, when the dead seek to exploit the power of a human hero, rather than the other way round. Smith claims that in these sagas the dead are no longer used for wish-fulfillment but exploited for a 'singular intent: the glorification of the human condition' (p. 136). The distinction is an interesting one, but Smith does not go far enough in explaining why exactly this might be the case.

However, for the most part this book is a strong, thought-provoking piece of work. It is unfortunately brief, at times superficial (for example, it does not take into account much consideration of medieval Welsh literature or wider Celtic genres such as Arthurian romance) and has a similarly under-developed bibliography. Yet it fills a much-needed gap in the scholarship on a subject that has recently been as silent as a grave. The strong comparative Norse/Celtic angle is of special interest and serves to highlight just how similar the cultural attitudes to death were in medieval Scandinavia and the British Isles. Indeed, Smith seems to have a good grasp of both literatures, which makes him a welcome rarity. This book should open up new avenues for research, and due to its simple organizational layout and concise prose it would also provide eminently suitable for an undergraduate reading list. As such it is both thorough and relatively accessible to the layman. In conclusion, leaving aside a few relatively minor quibbles, the author should be commended for illuminating an increasingly popular yet so far under-researched field.

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Janie Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity: The Adaptation of Latin Rhetoric in Old English Poetry*. Toronto Old English Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. xii + 238 pp. ISBN 978-0-0802-091574. £45

Anglo-Saxonists are peculiarly lucky that so much of their subjects' literature has survived, much more so in that it has survived in more than one language. For too long, though, the literary output of the Anglo-Saxons has been divided, at least in the minds of those who have concerned themselves with its study, into two distinct spheres. Despite the overwhelming likelihood that Old English and Latin were written, in the main, by the same people; despite the significant and still largely unexplored interdependencies between the two languages on almost every level from the philological to the philosophical; and despite the relative frequency with which one was used to render the other in translation, or was written beside it, above it, below it or around it, the two distinct camps into which scholars of Old English and Anglo-Latin have divided remain stubbornly uncooperative. Old English has tended to catch the attention of students of English literature in whose intellectual backgrounds the looming figures of Chaucer, Langland and the Green Knight have long since scared off the likes of Ald-