Anglo-Saxonists, Latinists, history buffs, church people and many non-specialists will enjoy this book. Poetry lovers will remember Fulk’s article about Beowulf’s name, published with Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* (Fulk and Harris 2002). Now Fulk pairs with Cain, in an approach they characterise as attention to the corpus, not the canon, to survey the scope of Old English Literature. Anderson briefly meets them for one chapter on saints’ legends. The book joins the Blackwell Histories of Literature series, which plots literary developments of a period against wider cultural contexts, a procedure which seems routine until you see what happens when they apply it to Old English literature, with their bold decision to include contemporary Latin literature as a defining context. The authors hail Lapidge’s (1991) advance in Anglo-Latin studies, backing his implication that the two corpora affected one another because ‘the Latin and the vernacular were copied together in Anglo-Saxon scriptoria’ (p.vii).

The Latin works indeed enrich understanding of the familiar Anglo-Saxon writing. King Alfred’s translation of the fifth century Boethius’ *De consolatione philosophiae*, set against the philosopher’s own work, brings alive ninth century Europe’s subtle changes in Christian thought. For example what would you say was the relationship between *wyrd* and *forethonc*? Boethius and Alfred both start with *forethonc* [Providence] a concept familiar to adherents of Intelligent Design. It is ‘divine reason, the plan for the world conceived in God’s omniscience’ (pp.36–57). Would you agree with Boethius that as you see the plan unfold in your own life, you can label it as *wyrd* [Fate]? Alfred did not: for him it worked more like remote control. There had to be a range of intermediate actors between oneself and God, perhaps angels, stars or the lives of other creatures. More fascinating detail about *wyrd*, and about how Alfred and Boethius differed on the Wheel of Fortune, appears in the major chapter on the Alfredian period. This is the only chapter presented as an era, for the rest of the chapters are organised by genre.

The treatment of genre is inspired. The authors interrogate every form from a fresh start, and identify new genres. Even readers new to Old English will be able to appreciate and apply insights about the development and demise of favourite text types, about the dynamics and complexity in English genres. The sermon seems straightforward, but to distinguish it from the homily involves fine discrimination about what time in the church year to deliver it, whether its focus was a person or an idea, who wrote it and why. As
the purpose of the homily comes to prominence, as the homilist’s idiosyncrasies are revealed, as we see him relating to the historical context, as we analyse the style with techniques from both prose and verse, the treasures emerge. To see the homilists working word by word through what they confronted in their society, through their anxieties, through their theories about what causes trouble, is to sit beside them as they feel the fear, or the faith, or the relief.

The notion of genre is shaken until the very threads separate. What is an annotation? Is it doodling or graffiti? Is it a major form of text in its own right? Visitors to the Crescent Moon exhibition of South East Asian Islamic art and civilisation will remember how annotations acquire their own importance in Islamic writing and reading. Scholars add to books of the *hadith* exquisite annotations, to increase reader knowledge and enjoyment, arranging them carefully on the page to delight the eye. Loving families annotate allegorical interpretations to diagrams of ship architecture, as talismanic cloths to encourage good luck for the traveller. Fulk and Cain invite us to experiment with this sort of extension to the notion of genre. So the brief note appears as a new genre. Notes on the age of Christ’s mother at the time of the Annunciation and of her death (p.42) are not seen as intrusive, but as reflective, interpretive and talismanic.

There is a new agenda (p.47) to reinterpret augural formulas, charms and riddles in terms of the service they performed for the Anglo-Saxon church, rather than as contrarian to church philosophies. Charms are actually hard to distinguish from prayers, and often in fact call for the recitation of prayers (p.43). Aelfric freely admits in the Boswell Psalter that witches have knowledge of disease (p.43), but he warns against using their knowledge. Fulk and Cain ask why churchmen would issue such a warning if nobody was visiting witches. They reason that the old wisdom survived side by side with Christian practice as an amalgamated system where charms sat comfortably alongside the church genres.

Fulk and Cain have used, where possible, scholarship from the last 15 years, giving a new look to a discipline whose earliest pioneers are reverenced as part of its corpus. The Early English Text Society names are still there, but they appear beside recent scholars. The book promulgates an innovative approach to the study of reading and writing, turning over old flagstones to reveal alternative practice. In the field of Old English literary studies, reportedly facing a crisis of relevance, waves of fashions have lapped at the edges of the discipline, never completely embracing it as their own. The authors celebrate the texts’ resistance to what they describe as the homogenisation of critical practices. The same resilience which enabled the Anglo-Saxon texts to survive the front line of *Liedertheorie* (p.230), protects them from recruitment in support of specific readings of Biblical controversy. What is the nature of the texts’ resilience? It is
the factor that presents the most problems, the fragmentary incompleteness of the texts. Any satisfactory appreciation of the texts requires persistence and intricate building work to construct, or reconstruct, at best conjectural versions of purpose and context. This delicate, specialist work often falls outside the scope of scholars who are not prepared to live alongside the texts with patient intimacy.

As the reader enjoys page by page new revelations about the historical context of the writings, the Anglo-Saxon world seems closer and closer. This renders one unprepared for the shock of how others interpret the place of Anglo-Saxon texts in our lives. Apparently, not everybody hears the texts speaking for themselves, and not everyone experiences ‘philological fascination’. This is the point where groups of readers align themselves with the corpus or with the canon. Literary scholars might seek the canon. Others revel in the corpus. Fulk and Cain provide an addictive intensification of the corpus. Those buying into the canon open themselves to current debates about the notion of ‘true literature’, which people try to distinguish from ‘texts’:

… the VCAA was backing away from moves to reduce the role of true literature after an angry reaction from parents to the study of non-traditional ‘texts’ (Wallace 2006, 4).

The improving role of true literature is not a new concept for Old English readers, whose whole field was in the nineteenth century directed by a presumed link between standardised English and morality (Blake 1996).

A similarly moral theme is that of copying and sharing, and plagiarism panic. Sometimes the pastiches produced from internet searches are discussed as if such a thing had never happened in history, yet a millennium ago, the Anglo-Saxons welcomed the explosion of possibilities provided by the technology of writing. They thoughtfully, respectfully and cheerfully recycled tropes and figures from others’ written works (p.77). The enjoyment of an allegory or a metaphor was not spoiled if others enjoyed it later.

Translation is another major theme. From Alfred’s Preface to the Pastoral Care, his translation of Gregory the Great’s Cura pastoralis where he tackles word for word, versus sense for sense translation, source-oriented versus target-oriented translation. Readers can muse on current translation theories addressing urgent modern problems. For example, Alfred leaves culturally ambiguous terms untranslated (p.78), echoing Gentzler’s (2001, 192) issues of non-translation.

Unless the reader finds fault with the standpoint taken on the literature or the context, there appears little to criticise. The editing seems meticulous and the witty style will have
wide appeal. The paperback edition is affordable, although not cheap. The format undoubtedly conforms to the series mould, and therein perhaps offers a tinge of disappointment. Footnotes crammed into the rear end make for a cumbersome trip. If you start from the body of the book, you interrupt your flow to check the back. More irritatingly, clumped footnotes normatively prevent browsing backwards. Bottom of the page footnotes could have tempted the reader into the text from any direction.

The next book on this subject might be an anthology to activate the ideas which have exploded here. Such a collection might include, alongside annotated excerpts, charts and tables of timelines and cultural events, textboxes of biography, and textual notes and queries. Something like Freeborn (1998) would be handy, with the photoversion of the authentic text, a word for word translation, and a complete translation.

Fulk and Cain explore arcane translation complexities in peeling back the Latin alongside the English, and they give new dignity to every genre when they bring that active, literate world back to life. While the publishers’ website blurb says that the book ‘[d]emonstrates that Anglo-Saxon studies is uniquely placed to contribute to current literary debates’, many who enjoy the texts and fragments on their own terms, may be excited that the book teaches a newly intense kind of interpretation and appreciation of how the Anglo-Saxons wrote.

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REFERENCES