

Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R.D. Fulk

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BOOK REVIEW

Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R.D. Fulk, edited by Leonard Neidorf, Rafael J. Pascual and Tom Shippey, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2016. 440 pp., £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781843844389

For a dead methodology, Philology sure is productive.

The decline in the academic power and prestige of the discipline, which J.R.R. Tolkien noted soon after World War I and later lamented in his 1959 valedictory address, has continued unabated for just about a century, to the point where Tom Shippey, one of the co-editors of the volume reviewed here, could write without hyperbole, “we have a long way to go to get back to the philological levels reached in, say, the 1890s.” (to which I would add, “or those of the 1980s”).¹ The trend lines would seem to indicate that the methodology will be extinct in another academic generation or two.

Against that gloomy background, however, this Festschrift for Robert D. Fulk stands out as a beacon of hope as much as does the honorand, for both the volume and the career of the person it celebrates show unequivocally how remarkably effective Philology is at producing new knowledge about old texts. This is the source of my hope: upon reading these twenty essays, even scholars indoctrinated to believe that philological approaches are outdated, exhausted, or ideologically suspect cannot help but recognise that the methods are enormously powerful intellectual tools that could, in an era of scarce resources, advantage them over their academic competitors. It would not be the first time that self-interest led to preservation.

A small irony, then, would be that the Fulk’s intellectual career, as discussed by both Leonard Neidorf in the volume’s introduction and Tom Shippey in its conclusion, has tacked so strongly against the winds of academic fashion. As Shippey notes, one of Fulk’s first publications, “astonishing in its boldness” (401–2) challenged the consensus about the date of *Beowulf* that the 1980 Toronto Conference had worked so hard to manufacture, and Fulk similarly risked offending the powerful when he pointed out all the flaws in Ashley Crandell Amos’ critique of the linguistic tests used to determine the dates of Old English texts.² Fulk’s technical research has also served to reanimate the ideas of older, primarily German, scholars whose memories were unwelcome in contemporary academia, not only for their presumed politics, but also because finding their work to have enduring value calls into question powerful identity-producing assumptions about and narratives of progress in literary studies. If our intellectual predecessors were right despite operating within ideologies that we now find wrong, we are forced to confront the possibility that our own presumed ideological superiority is no guarantee of correctness.

It is a further irony, then, that the essays in *Old English Philology* show how progress can be achieved in literary study by “standing upon the shoulders of giants” rather than discarding, ignoring or simply being unaware of hard-won technical knowledge of previous scholarly generations. Every essay in the collection illustrates the ways that rigorous, accurate, and linguistically up-to-date analyses of syntax, semantics, prosody, orthography, sources, influences, cultural knowledge and literary history can help solve long-standing problems in Old English studies.

Fulk’s scholarship has been so wide-ranging that although all of the essays are tied closely and explicitly to his work, it is difficult to identify a single thread running through the entire

¹Shippey, ‘Response.’

²Amos’ tragic early death had made it politically difficult to critique her conclusions aggressively.

collection beyond the use of philological methods and a focus on Old English. A group of seven essays focused on metre (those by Rafael Pascual, Thomas Cable, Leonard Neidorf, Jun Terasawa, Geoffrey Russom, Mark Griffith, and Donka Minkova) is followed by an analysis of syntax (by Aaron Ecay and Susan Pintzuk) and then three pieces whose primary concern is lexical and semantic analysis (by George Clark, Anatoly Liberman and Haruko Moma). Stefan Jurasinski's discussion of the *Handbook for Use of a Confessor* is the only essay primarily concerned with textual and cultural history, and Christopher Cain's orthographic analysis of *e-caudata* in Old English texts is also *sui generis* within the collection. A group of six essays on poetry follows (by Dennis Cronan, Daniel Donoghue, Charles Wright, Megan Hartman, Andy Orchard and Rory Naismith), and the collection is wrapped up with Shippey's discussion of "*Beowulf* Studies from Tolkien to Fulk."

All of the essays in the collection are characterised by technical virtuosity and literary insight. Unfortunately, limitations of space prevent me from discussing all of them, but there is not a clunker in the group, and all demonstrate the power of the creative application of philological methods. The seven essays focused on metrical issues are illustrative. Building upon Fulk's *A History of Old English Meter*, they engage with Old English texts at different levels of abstraction but always with complete philological rigour. Pascual shows that the much older, four-position metrical theory of Eduard Sievers is to be preferred to the approach of A.J. Bliss. Cable argues that Fulk's technical contributions to metrical analysis have the potential to lead to an understanding of how Germanic verse developed from common Indo-European. Neidorf compares the texts of Old English poems preserved in more than one copy in order to demonstrate the validity of emending texts based on metrical criteria. Terasawa demonstrates that subjunctive forms are suppressed for the sake of metre in *Beowulf* and other Old English verses. In an article more important than its title suggests, Russom shows that a complete descriptive theory of Old English metre can be built up from the word-foot hypothesis and the understanding that Old English verses consist of two word-based feet: from these two foundations "distinctive characteristics of the meter largely reduce to distinctive characteristics of late Proto-Germanic and Old English" (100). Griffith argues that Old English alliterative poetry was not "completely dominated by the nominal and that its alliterations were not governed *solely* by metre" (118), and that there was some flexibility within the overall system, allowing the outgrowth of rank, which was the most important regulator of poetic lexis in Middle English alliterative poetry. Minkova examines the fit of "resolution" to the phonology of Old English and investigates the possibilities for continuity of the practice of metrical resolution in the Middle English *Poema Morale*. Taken as a group, the essays illustrate the immense importance of Fulk's *History of Old English Meter* and the many productive ways in which the insights developed there can be applied to address my additional significant problems in literary studies.


Similar coherence is to be found not only in the groups of essays on lexical and semantic matters and those on Old English poetry, but also in the collection as a whole. Philology done well unites all the essays, as it does all of Fulk's writings (helpfully listed at the end of the volume), providing a consistency of quality not always found in *Festschriften*. The book is meticulously edited and handsomely produced – D.S. Brewer is to be commended for resisting the contemporary tendency towards the false economy of printing in tiny, close-set type. This high quality may also be taken as a hopeful sign that the discipline may have a future brighter than the current situation.

We will know that future has arrived if, as Neidorf states in his introduction, this volume in Fulk's honour goes on "to become essential reading for students of Old English poetry" (12). That, however, is an extremely high bar, especially for a *Festschrift* composed by many different authors and written at such a high level of sophistication and technical

accomplishment. I do not rule out the possibility, but we have a long way to go before there is sufficient general philological knowledge among contemporary scholars to allow for such a happy eventuality. In the meantime, and on our way to that goal, the intellectual vitality of both the scholarship of R.D. Fulk and the essays written in his honour gives us some hope that reports of the death of Philology have been somewhat exaggerated.

Reference

Shippey, Tom, 'Response to three papers on "Philology: Whence and Whither?" given by Drs Utz, Macgillivray, and Zolkowski, at Kalamazoo, 4th May 2002'. *The Heroic Age* 11 (May 2008). <http://www.heroicage.org/issues/11/foruma.php>.

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