

**UCLA**

**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature. Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield (review)

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4d59v578>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 18(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

**Author**

Schoening, Kari M. (Diehl)

**Publication Date**

1987-10-01

Peer reviewed

Chaucer critics. Explorations of allegory and source, allusion and genre still outsell the flashier critical exports from the Continent. Whether this lack of controversial discourse within the study of English medieval literature is deplorable, desirable, or simply predictable is up to the reader to decide.

John Lancaster Murphy  
University of California,  
Los Angeles.

**Phyllis Rugg Brown, Georgia Ronan Crampton, Fred C. Robinson, eds.,** *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature. Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield.* Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 1986. Pp. xxi + 298.

It seems inevitable that a *Festschrift* compiled on behalf of Stanley B. Greenfield should celebrate him with a selection of studies which are intentionally representative of diverse critical approaches towards Anglo-Saxon literature. As author of *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* and as coauthor with Fred C. Robinson of a still-standard critical bibliography, Greenfield may well be acknowledged not only for his particular method of poetic analysis, but also for his conspicuous success as a promulgator of critical theory in general. The editors of *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature* have accordingly produced a collection of scholarship which incorporates most of the interpretative methods currently used in the study of Anglo-Saxon poetics.

The contributions to the volume are organized within the four categories of cultural criticism, stylistic/aesthetic criticism, philological studies, and source research (allegoresis is not represented). Two articles on the contextual analysis of verse formulas envelop the first section. They enclose a fine historical essay by Helmut Gneuss on the validity of Alfred's statement on the decline of learning in 9th century England, a paper by George Hardin Brown upon the appropriateness of the Old English verse form for the expression of Christian theology and paradox, and Ruth Mellinkoff's study, "Serpent Imagery in the Illustrated Old English Hexateuch." The first of the oral-formulaic essays, Peter Clemons' "'Symbolic' Language in Old English Poetry," reevaluates how the formula works in early vernacular literature. To Clemons, every formula is a symbol with culturally-determined semantic potential. This potential is activated when its audience

accepts the universality of the formula in terms of their own cultural values. Thus, formulas become emblems of commonly-held cultural mores, and are used to define the nature of typecast characters in the narrative. Clemons goes on to argue that with the "increasing Christianization" of England, the cultural symbols became less organic and more a sort of poeticizing discourse for religious concepts. His essay is paralleled by Alain Renoir's "Old English Formulas and Themes as Tools for Contextual Interpretation," which states that on occasion oral-formulaic themes may help to fill the "contextual vacuum" of Anglo-Saxon poetry. His point is that each formula has certain expectations it raises within its listeners. In the widespread "hero on the beach" formula, for example, the presence of the image indicates that a battle will follow. Theme informs interpretative context. When only one instance of a formula occurs in Old English, we can nonetheless determine its affective impact by looking at its analogues in other literary traditions.

In the second section, Daniel G. Calder questions Renoir's reasoning in "Figurative Language and Its Contexts in *Andreas*: A Study in Medieval Expressionism." He reminds us that the meanings of figurative language change in accordance with the individual poetic uses to which they are put. The semantic function of the formulas in *Beowulf* necessarily change when placed within the didactic environment of *Andreas*; one cannot be interpreted on the same terms as the other. With this established, Calder treats the dynamics of the figurative language within *Andreas* in a cogent study of the aesthetic artistry of the piece. Dolores Warwick Frese attempts a similar reevaluation of *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*, but she rests her merit judgments more upon the poets' use of theme than on their employment of language. Edward B. Irving, Jr.'s article on the dramatic interaction between Dreamer and Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* offers a few well-expressed insights into the psychology of the two characters. Marie Nelson closes this section with her application of Austin and Searle's speech act theory to *The Battle of Maldon* and *Juliana*.

Part Three contains four philological studies which exemplify both the ingenuity and the verbosity characteristic of this type of methodology. Roberta Frank and John C. Pope work with *Beowulf*. Frank is concerned with the poet's shifts between the two semantic meanings (poetic and prose) of "mere" and "sund." Pope comments upon the interpretation of "gehedde" in *Beowulf* 1.505 and its relevance to the characterization of Unferth. E. G. Stanley's offering to the volume consists of a series of textual notes on *Genesis*. Matti Rissanen provides a study of "sum" as a pronoun of indefinite reference in Old English poetry.

Source criticism is, perhaps, the oldest preoccupation in Anglo-Saxon literary analysis, and it receives three typical expressions here. James E. Cross, in "Identification: Towards Criticism," reviews his research on the Latin sources of the *Old English Martyrology*. Earl R. Anderson reappraises *The Battle of Maldon*, replacing the older theories of Scandinavian influence with a proposition that the poem's battle imagery and narrative detail are similar to that of the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (composed ca. 1040-2). The late Morton Bloomfield provides the closing essay of the *Festschrift*. In "Deor Revisited," he rejects arguments for a Boethian philosophy within the poem and reiterates his own theory (*PMLA* 79, 1964) that *Deor* is structured in much the same manner as a charm.

Like most *Festschriften*, *Modes of Interpretations of Old English Literature* contains articles of variable merit. With its emphasis upon stylistic studies, it fittingly reflects the forte of the man for whom it was gathered. This is not to say, however, that its treatments of other modes are of low caliber. Indeed, they almost all represent the feasible extent to which their separate methodologies may be employed. In order to have been thoroughly comprehensive, the collection ought to have included at least one allegorical approach. The value of typology for literary explication is understated, at best. Yet, these are excusable omissions in an anthology which, in honoring one critic, manages to celebrate the favored interpretative methods of his time as well.

K. Schoening  
University of California,  
Los Angeles