

Slavica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve and Else Mundal (eds.): *Along the Oral-Written Continuum. Types of Texts, Relations and Their Implications*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010. 478 pages. ISBN: 978-2-503-53407-7.

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Introduction

The book is an anthology of articles presented at a conference at Center for Medieval Studies at the University of Bergen in October 2007. The aim of the book is to debate and prompt further discussions of the implications of conceptualizing the oral-written continuum, a term introduced by Ruth Finnegan. This is done in three main parts, which altogether include 20 articles spanning 488 pages. The book is a valuable contribution to research of Old Norse medieval texts, seen in juxtaposition to a wide range of European textual material and cultural contexts.

The overarching aim of the book is to discuss the theoretical concept of the oral-written continuum and its usefulness as a systematizing tool. In the first part, the terms orality and literacy are discussed at a theoretical level, and three theoretical models are proposed by respectively John Miles Foley, Slavica Rancović and Leidulf Melve. These three models are applied on great variety of sources and media.

The broad main topic allows for a discussion of a great variety of specific issues, as is exemplified by the articles in the second part of the book. Judith Jesch studies the poetry of Sigvatr Þórðarson, from the beginning of the eleventh century, as an example of the intersection between oral and literate mentalities. Kristel Zilmer argues that rune stones belong to the interface between oral and written, because of the complex relationship between their linguistic, narrative, visual and material traits, which demonstrate ‘oral monumentality’ and ‘commemorative literacy’. Vésteinn Ólason debates how much of what we have from Eddic poetry today is shaped by the process of literalization. He acknowledges that the origin of the poems must lie in oral tradition, but that it is still significant that some of the younger Eddic poems were composed in a literary environment that possibly conditioned their literalization and the appearance of the whole collection. Judy Quinn studies the metaphor of “drinking in” knowledge, and its meaning in an oral culture.

She mentions that mythological sources on acquisition of knowledge are relevant for the orality-literacy debate, because beer is described as carrying both chanted genres and inscribed symbols. Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen discusses the position of curses along the oral-written continuum. He discloses some common elements in the way curses function in narratives, and based on that suggests that curses function partially as literary devices.

A couple of articles in part 2 are more explicitly concerned with the mode of reception of written texts. Else Mundal, for example, discusses the possible effects writing had on oral tradition and performances. She discusses the mode of reception of various genres, and the relationship between a genre, the legibility of a manuscript, the expectation of the audience and the way of performance (p. 11). Lucie Dolezalová comments on the mode of reception of *Summarium Biblie* and *Cena Cypriani* and argues for a certain degree of orality when these texts were transmitted.

The articles in Part 3, and some of the articles in part 2, relate the development of culture along the oral-written continuum, as conveyed by administrative writing (chronicles, letters and legal documents) to the use, function and development of literacy among kings, lawmen, and peasants. The scholars, thus, implicitly emphasize the significance of the temporal, geographical, social, political and cultural context of sources when discussing them as intersections of orality and literacy. Joseph Harris (p. 133) argues that the function of rune stones in specific contexts overrides the medium and also the relevance of positioning them on the oral-written continuum. Åslaug Ommundsen discusses what the difference between manuscript fragments can tell us about the culture where they originated – the nature of liturgical feasts and the change of legal practices. The social context is foregrounded as significant in all the articles in the third part of the book. Anna Adamska discusses literate mentalities in royal social contexts and emphasizes that in the Middle Ages it was the cognitive aspect of appropriating knowledge that was significant when reading, listening, writing, and not that much how these relate to orality and literacy. Theodore Andersson draws attention to the centrality of language in Charlemagne's cultural program, but his argument can be taken to a higher level as illustrative of the function and role of the vernacular within the language and literary polysystems in the Middle Ages, and the role of the monarch in that intercourse. The context of medieval Norway is commented on by Sverre Bagge and Jan Ragnar

Hagland. The former discusses the possible implications of the increased number of letters for the flow of information and centralization in Norway, while the latter is interested in the relative significance between written statements and spoken words, as expressed in individual documents in conflict situation. Other social contexts that are studied are medieval Sweden (Inger Larsson), Denmark (Bjørn Poulsen) and the Northern Low countries (Marco Mostert). All the authors discuss the process of literalization, the establishment of the vernacular and the function of different social groups in these processes. So even though not explicitly related, the studies may be seen as parallel, not only to each other but also to Michael Clanchy's grand study of those issues in the context of medieval England, to which most of them refer to.

Seen as a whole, the book is structured to build from the opening discussion of theoretical issues, to empirical studies, and to consideration of possible administrative and legal implications of cultures' development along the oral-written continuum. Part one and three appear as relatively homogeneous, focusing respectively on theoretical approaches towards orality and literacy, and their social and cultural implications. In part two, however, which contains ten of the contributions, the span of sources discussed, questions asked and approaches used is indeed vast. The lack of total thematic coherence or explicit common denominators often characterizes anthologies of the kind. One of the consequences is that comparison across separate studies is not always feasible, even though a systematic approach towards the topic is exactly what the authors of the articles in the first part invite for. Because of the diversity, the aim of the book to comment on the concept oral-written continuum as a "head-on theoretical discussion" and as a "tool for navigating the rugged landscape of verbal forms" remains somewhat under-achieved. On the other hand, the same diversity serves to demonstrate excellently the richness of research on orality and literacy, when based on a vast span of material and cultural contexts. The editor of the book states that "the single over-reaching idea that binds all the contributions is that of the oral-written continuum" (p. 1) and the studies represent "the diversity and complexity of oral-literary relationships" (p. 2). This is indeed one of main assets of the book as a whole.

In the following, I will give a brief summary of the book as a whole. I will, however, not summarize each article separately, which is done clearly and thoroughly by Slavica Ranković in her introduction of the

volume. I will rather account for the theoretical perspectives and analytical methods used by the authors and the range of sources analyzed when the oral-written continuum is discussed. Conclusively, I will present some reflections on possible implications of the studies presented in the book, when these are read dialogically, and the insightful contribution of *Along the Oral-Written Continuum* as a whole. The structure of the review – commenting on theory, method, sources and implications – reflects the structure of the book itself.

Theory

The three articles in the first part of the book focus explicitly on theory, but present three different theoretical models for studying the orality-literacy continuum. The rest of the articles in the anthology do not include any explicit statement with regard to theory use.

John Miles Foley defines oral tradition as a medium, a technology, which facilitates studying oral tradition as parallel to textual and digital traditions. His main argument is that oral tradition and digital communicative situations, which he names eAgora, are similar and distinguish themselves from textual Agora. He argues that orality and literacy should not be seen as the ends of a dichotomy, but in the same time enumerates the differences between oral tradition and textual communicative situations, which produces an internal controversy for his initial anti-dichotomy perspective.

Slavica Rancović sets up another theoretical model, constituted of three axes: (1) the medium in which the text is composed, (2) the poetics of the text, that is the extent to which a given text adheres to the set of assumptions pertaining to oral and literate poetics, and (3) the degree of plurality of social forces reflected in the text (p. 59). These three axes define thus a frame, which is meant to probe the concept of continuum, and on which she plots several randomly chosen textual cultures: Serbian epic poetry, orally-derived *Íslendingasögur*, Bosnian Muslim epics, skaldic verse, Wikipedia and the Modernist novel, represented by Joyce's *Ulysses*. In my opinion, the universality of the model may be discussed, since a great degree of subjectivity and discursiveness is required for establishing all the three parameters of this model, and especially the second two. There is no objective and absolutely defined "set of assumptions pertain-

ing to oral and literate poetics”, as she suggests; plurality in a text may be due to plurality in social forces, but it may also be due to narrative and literary strategy. A valuable contribution of the article is, however, that the author demonstrates that various textual genres can be compared and related to each other in different ways, depending on the parameters of the discussion. She also clarifies that even though she discusses whole genres, separate works, and their different manuscript versions (for example, of *Njáls saga*) may be plotted on the scheme as well. She emphasizes that she is mapping relative positions, and not absolute parameters. Nevertheless, the argument seems characterized by a certain degree of *a priori* assumptions about the nature of texts, and also what is oral and literate, which could have been discussed to a greater extent.

Leidulf Melve comes up with another set of three theoretical premises, which elucidate the process of textualization in societies: (1) the significance of aural transmission; (2) centrality of performativity in the communicative process; (3) practical use of the texts and mode of reception. His model has four main variables: vernacular dimension, oral procedures (aural reception), textual hierarchy and discourse. Melve foregrounds the significance of the “interpretative society”, *i.e.* the interpreter, the mediator, the audience; it is the social practices between these participants that characterize and condition reception and reproduction.

The three scholars share the theoretical understanding that orality and literacy should not be regarded as absolute dichotomies and that they co-existed in a dynamic symbiosis in numerous aspects of medieval culture. This is a commonly accepted point of view in research, which necessitates and invites the formulation of theoretical models which can help systematize this dynamic symbiosis. Many scholars have provided such models, three of which are presented in this book. Having in mind the abundance of theoretical models and their stated universal value, I wonder why we keep producing new models, instead of using some of the old universal ones. This is not to say that I am against the development of new theoretical models, but I would like a better accentuation of the link between various models, and explicitness about the contributions of a new model to those already existing. This is especially relevant and necessary if various models are presented together in one book. The three articles together present numerous terms, definitions and models in research on orality and literacy, and the authors juxtapose, group and unify these in three theoretical models that do not relate to each other.

The three first articles in the book do, then, exactly what one of the authors Leidulf Melve (p. 74) characterizes as problematic with regard to research on orality and literacy:

Over the last decades, however, the field has become so heterogeneous that all common denominators seem to have vanished. Only a quick look at the number of terms used to characterize the different phases of the transition from oral to the written provides an example of a field of study that perhaps is in need of re-inventing itself conceptually so as to be able to communicate not only in an interdisciplinary landscape, but also within the same discipline.

Melve then suggests one way of conceptually re-inventing the field, but so do the other two articles in Part 1.

Melve raises another significant question, namely the function of a theoretical model. He suggests that a discussion should be theoretically informed and not theoretically determined. In the three articles, however, three models are established and various texts are plotted on these. The discussion of the empirical material could have served to contest or debate the model to a greater extent, instead of only being framed by the model.

Methods

In this section, I will pay attention to the methods used when issues concerning orality and literacy are discussed. There are two main questions that are relevant to discuss: (1) How are the terms 'oral' and 'literate' defined and what do they characterize, *i.e.* mentalities, origin, transmission, or mode of reception? (2) What types of different approaches, literary or socio-cultural, are demonstrated in the book and is contextualization, codicological, literary, or cultural-historical, regarded as relevant? Regardless of the fact that my own perspective on the anthology is new-philological, looking into these two issues is central, in order to clarify the premises for research and conceptualizing of medieval material.

The articles in the book provide many different answers to the first of these questions. 'Oral' and 'literate' are defined in different ways and applied to many categories, which remain, however, unrelated. Judith Jesch writes about oral mentality, Kristel Zilmer about oral tradition, Else Mundal is concerned with oral origin, while Lucie Dolezalová

comments on oral transmission. These terms are sometimes well defined and unambiguous in the specific contexts, but sometimes one and the same term may have different semantic spheres in different article-contexts. In other cases, however, the signification of the terms is ambiguous, such as for example “oral context of reception” or “oral competence”.

This takes us to the way the semantic fields of ‘oral’ and ‘literate’ are defined. According to Judith Jesch, oral mentality can be read in the “oral present” in Sigvatr Þórðarson’s poetry. Zilmer (p. 146) sees the influence of oral tradition on rune stones in the formulaic expressions, alliterations and oral skaldic poetry present on inscriptions. Else Mundal (p. 166) claims that *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* may have had their origin in oral story-telling because there were no models for these genres in European literature. Such a statement can obviously be nuanced, since allusions to European genres and learned tradition has been suggested for texts from both of these genres.¹ Lucie Dolezalová defines oral transmission as a way of transmission without physical copying of a text and claims that oral discourse is significant for the form and function of the texts she is studying. She claims that *Summarium Biblie*, a list of words which summarize chapters from the Bible, is a product of textual culture, but also conveys the availability of “oral competence” of the Bible. I agree that the comprehension of such a list would necessitate close familiarity with the Bible, but disagree with the characterization of such competence as “oral”. A list like that could have functioned as a visual/mnemonic help for the transmission of the literary material and the competence, which does not exclude, but does not necessitate orality either. Dolezalová (p. 309) argues also that the parodic character of *Cena Cypriani* may entail and indicate oral context of reception.

The term ‘literate’/written, be it mentality, literature, or transmission, is also defined and used in many different ways. According to Jesch (p. 114), literate mentalities are defined by the way in which the skald Sigvatr brings both past and future in the present, in a similar way as Augustine, who combines past, present and future in his search for “the eternal, unchanging truth” – the truth of God. Joseph Harris (p. 122) claims that written literature is characterized by authorship, the notion of ownership of a text, avoidance of formulas. Vésteinn Ólason, on the other hand,

1. See for example Torfi Tulinius 2002.

sees formulaic expressions in the poems in Codex Regius as related to literary tradition. He points out that the same formulaic expression, *ár var alda*, appears with initials on several occasions, and relates that to the literate consciousness of the scribe (p. 240). Gathering diverse material in a continuous master narrative is also seen as a step on the way from oral tradition to literature (p. 236). Intertextuality and foreshadowing what is to come may indicate that a text is composed or compiled in writing in connection with the production of the whole manuscript (p. 247). Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen sees the common elements – both use of the same formulaic expression, similar function in the narrative and similar magical traits – in the way curses are represented in different texts, as indicating their character as literary devices. They are part of vocal/oral tradition, but also have a function in the literary tradition.

These definitions are all legitimate and serve the purpose of the individual articles. The heterogeneity of the definitions, however, makes a dialogic reading of the articles difficult. The way ‘oral’ and ‘literate’ are defined in this book alone gives an idea of the existent heterogeneity of definitions in the field in general. The existence of numerous definitions, thus, accentuates the need for explicitness when characterizing anything as oral or literate. Ruth Finnegan, who introduces the term ‘oral-written continuum’, emphasizes the importance of defining what cultural aspect is signified when terms like oral and literate are used. These may characterize at least three phases in a communicative process – composition, performance, transmission over time – and there is no one-to-one relationship between these stages. Each of them has a number of variants as well - composition may be oral, prior to performance, or during performance, individual or in groups, or written. A performance may be based on a written text, read word for word, or more or less retold, or be purely oral. Transmission may occur orally by memorization, or paraphrasing, by means of reading publicly or in private, silently or voiced, or by means of translation, in writing or orally (Finnegan 1988: 172). The articles in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum* can obviously not be expected to convey a single notion on what is oral and literate. The lack of a more thorough methodological discussion of this issue is compensated by the presentation of variety and heterogeneity in research.

The second methodological issue which, in my view, could have been signposted, concerns the ways the analyzed sources are contextualized and also the significance of their contextualization. Several of the scholars

base their analyses on critical editions and are not concerned with further temporal or social contextualization. Judith Jesch, for example, contextualizes Sigvatr's poetry with the eleventh century, because that is when it was composed, without mentioning the dating of the manuscripts that the stanzas are preserved in, nor the relationship between the 'original' and preserved versions. Judy Quinn presents a literary analysis of Eddic and skaldic poetry. She is aware of the manuscripts they appear in, since she comments on corrections and their implications for the meaning of the text, but does not comment on what period her observations are relevant for, or what social and cultural context. Similarly, Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen does not seem to find it relevant to discuss the manuscript, temporal or social contextualization of the sources he is studying. Jürg Glauser comments on the significance of various lexical terms describing the production and consumption of written material, but does so based on editions rather than manuscript versions. I find this approach potentially problematic because he is concerned exactly with the awareness of writtenness of the material, which might have changed from one version of a text to another.

Other scholars in the book contextualize their sources and use the contextualization as part of their argument. Vésteinn Ólason's analysis is based on the manuscript, in which his sources are preserved, namely the Codex Regius. He studies the composition and structure of the manuscript as a whole, together with the graphical appearance of the page (initials), and the intertextuality between the poems themselves, in order to say something about the degree to which the poems, as we have them today, may have been shaped by scribal literary activities. The study of textual and material aspects of the manuscript reminds this reader of Kristel Zilmer's approach towards rune stones. In her article, Zilmer argues for the necessity of an integrated analysis of all aspects of a rune stone – linguistic, narrative, visual, gestural, material and physical. In this way, rune stones should be regarded as signs of Viking age communication, where the relationship between verbal and graphical signs and blank space is to be interpreted in the communicative context. Zilmer's approach brings to mind one of the main principles of New Philology, namely that all aspects of a manuscript should be taken in consideration when a manuscript and the texts within in are studied. Åslaug Ommundsen is also concerned with manuscript context of her material when studying fragments containing excerpts of St. Hallvard's legend. She

explains the differences between them as complying with the different grading of the liturgical feasts at the different places of origin, and claims that the change in the value given to narrative elements indicates difference in legal practices in different spatial cultural contexts. Else Mundal also argues that the appearance of the manuscript is relevant for the discussion of the mode of reception. Even though relevant when discussing the implications of a manuscript context, her discussion appears somewhat general. More specific examples would have accentuated her argument and explicitly legitimated her concern with contextualization.

This difference in methodological approaches elucidates that the discussion about orality and literacy, however these are defined and whatever they signify, is conducted on different levels. These are both legitimate and have substantial history in research. However, I would argue that an awareness and explicitness in the premises of an analysis is significant, not only in order for the discussion and analysis to be clear, but also in order for different studies to be comparable, juxtaposable and valuable for further research on the topic. This also is significant for the coherent representability and explicit positioning of an anthology of articles, containing a wide range of studies. Even though each of the individual contribution is elucidating on its own, an editorial explicit juxtaposition of the methodology of these would have strengthen their individual potential, as well as the degree of coherence of the book as a whole.

Sources

The book as a whole presents studies of a rich and varied span of sources, which all illustrate the topic about orality and literacy in the Middle Ages. It also opens up for a possibility to juxtapose and comment on the relationship between various genres, script systems, languages and texts when it comes to orality and literacy. This is sometimes done in the individual articles, but is not pursued in the book as a whole.

Most of the articles study sources written in the Latin script, but a couple comment on runic inscriptions as well. Joseph Harris juxtaposes rune stones and *erfikkvæði* as vehicles of commemoration, and pays special attention to the Skarpåker stone and the Karlevi stone. Kristel Zilmer

studies the Karlevi stone, Gärby stone and Nöbbele stone, but does not juxtapose the runic writing system as such, to the Latin script. Her focus on materiality, however, may serve as a bridge between runology and new philology, as already suggested.

The book presents studies of both Latin and vernacular sources. Latin sources are discussed by Áslaug Ommundsen, who studies fragments containing excerpts of St. Hallvor's legend, and Lucie Doležalová, who studies versions of *Summarium Biblie* and *Cena Cypriani*. Theodore M. Andersson discusses the relationship between Latin and vernacular in the time of Charlemagne. Jan Ragnar Hagland is concerned with the same issue in Norway. He argues that judged by the number of documents written in vernacular vs. those written in Latin, the vernacular seems to have been well established towards the end of the fourteenth century. Even then, the influence of Latin terminology and grammar on the vernacular is very noticeable.

Many of the scholars study Old Norse sources, prose and verse. Else Mundal comments on the mode of reception of *Íslendingasögur*, Icelandic contemporary sagas, kings' sagas, *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, giving examples from a few texts, such as *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, *Porgils saga skarða*, *Sturlu þátr*, and *Karlamagnús saga* (p. 10). Jürg Glauser studies Old Norse translated literature, exemplified by *Karlamagnús saga*, *Þiðreks saga*, *Strengleikar*, *Möttuls saga*, *Elís saga*, *Tristrams saga*, as well as Icelandic romances, represented by *Viktor saga*, *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*, *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Flovents saga*, *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, and *Ectors saga*. As already mentioned, Joseph Harris studies the commemorative function of funeral poetry. Judith Jesch comments on the poetry of the eleventh century skald Sigvatr Þórðarson. Judy Quinn studies both Eddic and skaldic poetry, while Vésteinn Ólason comments on Eddic poetry in their manuscript context. *Bósa saga*, Eddic poetry and skaldic poetry are studied by Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen.

The last part of the book contains studies of not only literary, but also documentary sources. Anna Adamska studies a polish chronicle, the so-called Chronicle of Great Poland, written around 1295 by a canon of the cathedral chapter in Poznań, which describes Duke Przemysław, who ruled between 1239 and 1257, and a chronicle from the Cistercian monastery Aula Regia in Zbraslav, which describes Venceslas II, king of Bohemia (1283–1305) and of Poland (1300–1305). Theodore M. Ander-

sson comments on bibliographical documentary sources about Charlemagne. Other documentary sources that are analyzed are Norwegian letters (Jan Ragnar Hagland), as well as information about letters in kings' sagas (Sverre Bagge), Swedish laws (Inger Larsson), Danish (Bjørn Poulsen) and Frisian (Marco Mostert) letters and charters.

Summary and beyond

From the previous discussion, it is clear that each and every article in the book is a valuable contribution to the set topic of discussion. Together, the articles illustrate the richness and thematic vastness of the field. But such vastness also presents a challenge – the challenge of pursuing an academic dialogue based on common premises in order to achieve both a more nuanced and a more coherent understanding of orality and literacy in the Middle Ages. I wish to conclude this review by suggesting two possible implications of the articles in the book, read as interplaying and in dialogic relationship to each other. These demonstrate the important contribution of the book as a whole, which adds on the insightfulness provided by the individual articles.

The first common denominator I see is the idea of hermeneutical and cognitive understanding and appropriation as a central element of writing and reading in all media, scripts, and languages in the Middle Ages. This idea accentuates the fact that writing of any kind and reading in any form happens in a context, and that the context, the process (writing or reading) and product (any written text) are interrelated and condition each other. Several of the scholars writing in the book touch upon these issues, but only implicitly.

Foley accentuates how creation in oral tradition and digital culture are characterized by navigating through a net of information, and how reception and understanding are creative processes in themselves, which demand awareness, choice and internalization. Rancović (p. 54) argues that “every stage of the creative process – composition that sometimes involved dictating, transmission, reception and even copying – all had aspects of orality”. She thus stresses the hermeneutical and cognitive aspects of a creative process. Joseph Harris brings the term “intersemiotic translation” into the discussion, as defining the translation of the oral medium to the written. He argues that this process is dynamic, that it

probably happened in both directions, even though we do not have direct evidence of that, and that the translation as a product is inseparable from its intended context (p. 133). Judy Quinn claims that hearing and comprehending are two different processes. In many Eddic poems, there is a difference between hearing, catching (*nema*) and using (*njóta*). She states that the idea of eating and drinking, or digesting knowledge is common in oral tradition and that learning depends not only on remembering, but also on assimilation, and being attentive (p. 186, 215). Analysis of skaldic poetry conveys the same idea – that bare receiving knowledge is different from internalizing it and exploiting it (p. 224). I read Quinn’s analysis as suggesting that hermeneutical and cognitive understanding was significant in oral culture as well, but am prone to discuss whether this is characteristic of oral culture only.² Kristel Zilmer draws in a specific example from the Gärby stone, where the inscription reads that it has been cut out rightly and is meant for anybody who can *ráða*, i.e. interpret it.³ Åslaug Ommundsen shows how the transmission of the legend of St. Hallvor seems to have been influenced by the cultural mentality (different grading of liturgical feasts at different places and difference in legal practices) at a certain place and time. This, once again indicates that textual transmission incorporates a hermeneutical process which necessitates adaptation to the new context. In her discussion of the literate mentalities of lay rulers, Anna Adamska claims to find reflection of Aristotelian theory of cognition in medieval chronicles. This incorporates a three stage-process of reception – *audire, intelligere, memorie commendare*. It seems then that in the Middle Ages, it was not the mode of reception that was significant, but the hermeneutical cognition process of internalization and making something one’s own.

This overview includes examples where the hermeneutical, cognitive, appropriating aspect of communication is suggested for interaction in oral cultures, in the interplay between oral and written, and in intralingual textual transference from one context to another. The idea has been pursued by others. A major contribution to the topic is Rita Copeland’s (1991) study of the history of medieval translations. She is mainly concerned with medieval translations from Latin into French and

2. Mary Carruthers (1990) shows how comprehending and remembering entailed digesting, appropriating and in textual culture.
3. The difference between reading and interpreting runes stones has been pointed out by Terje Spurkland (1994) as well.

English, and the change in the relative status between these languages and literary traditions through time. Besides emphasizing that all text-producing activity incorporated a hermeneutical element of appropriating something old in the creation of something new, which was adapted to its intended context, Copeland also accentuates that the degree of hermeneutical interpretation and innovation varied enormously depending on the context and the intended function for the product. This, I think, is worth keeping in mind when discussing any text-generating or reception process in the Middle Ages. Such hermeneutical internalisation and reproduction has been discussed by many other scholars with regard to compilation and composition of texts,⁴ copying, writing and reading of manuscripts,⁵ and glossing.⁶ Inspired by all of these, I have elsewhere been concerned with the hermeneutical element in the process of translating *Elís saga* from Old French to Old Norse, and in the consequent intralingual transmission process (Eriksen 2010).

A second major contribution of the book is that it elucidates the interaction between various languages, literary and social systems in the Middle Ages. The different contexts described in the book may be seen as subsystems of a medieval European polysystem, as suggested by Even-Zohar (1990). Vésteinn Ólason (p. 252) concludes his article by claiming that vernacular poetry recorded in the European Middle Ages “does not originate in two different worlds, one literary and the other oral, but has found its form in a long-lasting interplay of these different modes of creation and expression”. The link between the orality-literacy discussion within Old Norse studies and studies of other vernacular literatures is significant. Nevertheless, Vésteinn Ólason’s comment remains very general, and in need for further elaboration. Jürg Glauser comments indirectly on the link between Scandinavian and European awareness of writtenness, since he studies the translated *riddarasögur*. He does not, however, trace how the terms he is interested in change in the translation/transmission process from one cultural context to another. And he does not juxtapose his results to parallel scholarship of European material on the same topic. The last part of the book includes studies of many European contexts – Poland, the Frankish empire, Norway, Sweden,

4. Minnis 1984.

5. Dagenais 1991.

6. Reynolds 2004.

Denmark, The Northern Low Countries, but the relationship between these is neither commented in the articles, nor in the book as a whole.

To recapitulate, the main issue discussed in the book is the term 'oral-written continuum' and its usefulness for the study of a wide range of sources, representing different script systems, languages, genres, forms and function; they are written in different geographical, temporal and social contexts in the European Middle Ages. The studies are performed according to different theoretical and methodological principles. This sometimes hinders their juxtaposition, but in the same time illustrates the numerous modes in which the topic may be approached. Even though, the theories, methods and sources commented on in the book are not always explicitly related, they elucidate the complexity of the issue. The book contributes by offering (at least) two major insights. First, many of the articles illustrate that the relationship between orality and literacy was dynamic and that the transference of texts from one form to another, from oral to written, from written to oral, from one language to another, and from one context to another always incorporated an element of hermeneutical cognitive interpretation and appropriation, the significance of which could vary. Second, the articles demonstrate that similar processes were taking place in different contexts in Europe; all these contexts were interrelated and functioned as subsystems of a grander European polysystem, where literature and social development conditioned each other. Keeping this relationship in mind may necessitate and inspire greater exchange of research models and dialogue between Old Norse studies and other medieval philologies. Such cooperation may bring about new insight on the 'oral-written continuum' in the Middle Ages.

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