



Callander, D.: *Dissonant Neighbours: Narrative Progress in Early Welsh & English Poetry*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2019. xii + 258 pp. ISBN 978-1-78683-398-3. £45.

David Callander's excellent study takes a long-overdue comparative approach to early medieval Welsh and English poetry, represented in recent scholarship almost solely by (as Callander rightly notes) the 'excellent and underappreciated comparative work of Sarah Higley, who brought early Welsh and Old English nature poems together that we might see them better apart' (p. 1). Callander's work, like Higley's, offers a comparative perspective that is both fruitful and methodologically responsible, and together they will be foundational reading for anyone working in this field. Yet the beauty of Callander's approach is that these two studies share little else in common. *Dissonant Neighbours* does not rehash ground on which Higley has previously trod, focusing instead on the role of narrative in early Welsh and English poetry ('early' being defined as prior to around 1250, a cutoff point for which Callander makes a sensible case in his introduction). The divergence between Callander's and Higley's books is a welcome illustration of the rich rewards that a comparative approach can provide, and one can only hope that *Dissonant Neighbours* will encourage the publication of many similar studies in the future.

Dissonant Neighbours makes a compelling argument not only that 'there is indeed early Welsh narrative poetry' (p. 47) but also that its nuances and those of similar English poems can be fruitfully illuminated through comparison with one another. The introduction sets out the book's comparative approach, defines its terms of analysis, and surveys the corpus of works to be studied, including a discussion of the difficulties of dating both early Welsh and Old English verse that concisely sums up the major issues without getting bogged down in controversy. The book's four main chapters focus on poems of secular battle, eschatology, the early life of Christ, and lists. One of this book's major strengths is the care with which it approaches each individual poem, offering important new conclusions at the same time as it shies away from easy stereotypes about Welsh or English poetry as a whole. For this reason, many of Callander's conclusions are too nuanced to lend themselves to convenient summary, and even more so than usual this review can only flag a few highlights from a book that should be read fully in order to appreciate its findings.

Chapter 1, 'Battle', turns to the Welsh secular battle poems *Gweith Argoet Lhwjfein*, *Gweith Gwen Ystrat*, *Ar vn blyned* and *Kat Godeu* and the Old English *Fight at Finnsburg*, *Battle of Maldon* and *Battle of Brunanburh* as well as the battle sections of the early Middle English *Lazamon's Brut*, finding (roughly) that Old and Middle English secular battle poems are more narrative than their Welsh counterparts. Analysis focuses largely on markers of narrative progression

(such as *þa* ‘then; when’ and *þonne* ‘then; when’ in Old English and *pan* ‘when’, *hyt* ‘until’, and *yny* ‘until’ in Middle Welsh), finding that these are largely absent in the Welsh material and used much more frequently in narrative sequences in the English verse, particularly adverbial *þa*. Other areas of investigation include these poems’ use of initial summary (more frequent in Welsh than English), person (English favours third; Welsh favours first), and direct speech (more frequent in English than Welsh). Callander’s careful analyses will be of value even to specialists in Old English and Middle Welsh literature uninterested in his comparative approach, as his conclusions throughout *Dissonant Neighbours* highlight differences not only between the two literatures but also between individual poems. For example, ‘*Brunanburh* shows that, although the narrative impulse is extremely widespread in Old English poetry, the tradition also has the potential for poems with lower narrativity, even when describing battle’ (p. 33).

Chapter 2, ‘Narrative at the End of the World’, focuses on eschatological poetry, which holds unique challenges for a narrative approach. Callander makes a convincing case for the value of considering future-reference or predictive narrative as true narrative in his examination of poems focused on Judgement Day: the Old English *Christ III*, *Judgement Day I* and *Judgement Day II*; early Middle English *Doomsday*, *Les XV Singnes de Domesdai* and the *Ormmulum*; and Middle Welsh *Yrymes Detbrawt* and *Arwydon kynn Dyd BraGt*. Topics of investigation include temporal marking and progression, time-reference and direct speech, and repetition and progression. Callander’s conclusions resist easy categorization: he finds, for instance, that Welsh and early Middle English eschatological poems are often more progressive and less repetitive than their Old English counterparts. Chapter 3, ‘Tense and Eternity: Retelling Christ’s Birth and Early Life’, is structured in two halves. The first is an extended study of the ‘Miraculous Harvest’ story in the Welsh *Iesu a Mair a’r Cynhaeaf Gwyrthiol*, while the chapter’s second half treats the shorter Welsh poems *Cwyn y Pererin* and *Geni Iesu* alongside the Middle English *Wolle ye iheren of twelte day*, *Nu þis fulles singet*, and *Gabriel fram evene-king*, all of which are thirteenth-century works focused on the Nativity and the Annunciation. An extended study of *Iesu a Mair*, which Callander deems ‘the first great Welsh narrative poem’ (p. 112), helpfully considers its unique narrative features — particularly the importance of direct speech and aspects of prose style — in light of its numerous European analogues. The chapter’s second half notes the absence of material treating Christ’s childhood in Old English poetry before turning to the thirteenth-century material, in which Callander finds narrative brevity which may perhaps be explained by widespread Christian knowledge of the Nativity and Annunciation.

Chapter 4, ‘List and Narrative’, recuperates the neglected poetic list for narrative study. The chapter again falls in two halves, the first an extended study of the early Welsh *Y GofeissGys Byt* (on Alexander the Great’s conquests) and the second treating a wider range of lists in early Welsh verse [*Englynion*

Cylchu Cymru, the *Gododdin*, *G6a6t Lud y Ma6r*, *Goreu y6 Dyn*, *Plaeu yr Reiff*, *Arwydon kynn Dyd Bra6t*, *Kanu y Cwrwf*, *Kat Godeu*, and *Preideu Annwn* and Old English catalogue poems as originally defined by Nicholas Howe [*Widsith*, *Deor*, *Fates of the Apostles*, *Precepts*, *Maxims I*, *Maxims II*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, and the *Menologium*]. *Y Gofeiss6ys Byt* — likely due to its close relationship with its source, Orosius — emerges as an outlier among the Welsh material because its list is not itself a narrative sequence, but leads to one, a feature it shares with the Old English poems. Other Welsh poems show narrative progression in the lists themselves, but little elsewhere. The usefulness of a comparative approach is again made clear: ‘the lack of narrativity in the Welsh list units highlights narrative sequences not yet perceived in the English poems’ (p. 178).

The book is followed by four very useful appendices, which contain texts and translations of *Gweith Argoet Llwyfein* (1), *Yrymes Detbrawt* and *Les XV Singnes de Domesdai* (2), *Iesu a Mair a’r Cynhaeaf Gwyrthiol* and *Geni Iesu* (3), and *Y Gofeiss6ys Byt* and *Y Gododdin: awdlau LXIX* (4), each marked up to demonstrate the narrative sequences Callander discusses. This book is accessible to as wide a readership as possible. Translations from all languages are provided, and every chapter opens with a brief précis of each poem discussed for those who might be unfamiliar (except Chapter 4, where the numerous texts are introduced as they are first discussed). My quibbles are editorial: this book would be easier to use if it had visual distinctions between different levels of subheadings and footnotes rather than endnotes. *Dissonant Neighbours* moves the field of comparative Welsh/English studies forward in exiting ways, and I can only hope that it will be read as widely as it should.

List of References

- Higley, S. 1993. *Between Languages: The Uncooperative Text in Early Welsh and Old English Nature Poetry*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
Howe, N. 1985. *The Old English Catalogue Poems*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde.

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