

Primary and Secondary Approaches to the Literary Past: A Book Review Essay

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*Listen, dear brothers,
I want to complain of a cruel murder;*

*Hear about the sorrow
That befell me on Good Friday.*

Translated from the Old Polish by Michael J. Mikos?.[\(1\)](#)

Beowulf refers so often to grief and loss, to their reconstruction in poems and the ways in which these are received by audiences, that I feel the loss of this knowledge again every time I read it.

[\(2\)](#)

[Friedrich A.] Schlegel tells us that the “completed, absolute Philology would cease to be philology”: it would “annihilate itself”.[\(3\)](#)

The two books presented here depict a yearning for reconciliation evident in Western culture. The first in its discussion of death and lamentation, the second in that of the irrecoverable loss of authenticity in our literary heritage. They both describe dynamic processes of retrieval, in ways that connect to collective memory. They seek to connect the specific with the universal, the personal with the archetypal; in the process of that they blend a wealth of significant texts and rituals (the prescribed patterns of philology can also be said to be rituals) into a pan-European cultural landscape. These two books are exemplary works of comparative scholarship and due to the amount of expertise required for their composition could have only been achieved as collected volumes. Their editorship and high production values in both cases have been vital in ensuring the highly scholarly and engaging result and their carefully chosen topics are complementary attempts to show how the literary past is both constructed and interpreted by scholarship. The fact that one is concerned with a primary and the other with a secondary treatment of their chosen material makes them particularly interesting as contrasting paradigms of scholarly practice.

Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature is an excellent addition to the Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe series, which already boasts many titles that increase our understanding of medieval culture in the region.[\(4\)](#) A great asset to the volume is the handsome rendition of foreign (or old) language passages throughout the essays, something that greatly enhances the reader’s involvement in the subject by offering a flavour of the original literatures. It is regrettable that many other publishers have abandoned such practice. The 13 essays presented in *Laments for the Lost* are given space to breathe and speak for themselves without an introduction but instead with an opening contextualizing essay [\(5\)](#) (which introduces the terms ‘lament’ and ‘elegy’ and explores their use in the history of literature), and a kind of a postlude, in itself another essay on the unbearable ‘nakedness of grief’.[\(6\)](#)

The essays are stand-alone masterpieces that not only enrich scholarship in their respective areas but also our perception of medieval Europe as a whole. They can be read independently by students and researchers needing information on a particular topic, however, consulting them comparatively would be of much greater benefit to the careful reader, who can construct (or re-construct) in the mind’s eye their own pan-European polyphonies of medieval lament. For example, one of the essays argues that ‘the language of lament is the language of the Psalms’ and that the Old English elegies were structured on ‘the syntax and structure of the lament psalms’, the habitual language of sorrow for the medieval people.[\(7\)](#) Another essay suggests that Old English elegies attempted to capture ‘the absent beloved as a text’, connecting to the already dormant tendency in the classical literatures ‘to preserve memory of the physical by means of text’ through the Christian idea of ‘the Word made flesh’.[\(8\)](#) Such counterpoints can be found in several other essays in this volume, especially those concerned with Marian grief.[\(9\)](#)

In any case, ‘reconstruction’ leads us to the next book. A distinguished scholar of comparative literature, Sean Alexander Gurd is ideally placed to be the editor of this volume, one that deals with all the questions, rewards and uncertainties of philological practice. His monograph *Iphigenias at Aulis: Textual Multiplicity, Radical Philology*

(10), proved radical enough to divide the philological world. Balancing between modernism and post-modernism (11), it has separated classicists into traditionalists and innovators.(12)

Gurd responded with another superbly audacious effort, having gathered around him the team who produced the book under review. With its reviews of textual criticism, interpretative authority and philological traditions and movements, *Philology and Its Histories* is both arresting and heavyweight, and it delivers the substantial promises for a thorough and rigorous consideration of its topic that Gurd's excellent introduction makes (pp. 1–19). The eight authors who participated in this volume have written passionate, innovative and challenging essays, which indeed deserve 'to be read slowly and with celebration' (p. vii). Gurd daringly takes on the Italian philological monument of the 1980s by the neo-Lachmannian Sebastiano Timpanaro (1923–2000), *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann* (13), something that the high calibre of his team can justify. By Lachmann's method philologists refer to the stemmatic approach to texts, named after Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) but refined by Paul Maas (1880–1964). The method has had opposition in the past, most notably by the great Italian philologist Giorgio Pasquali (1885–1952) (14), who objected to its mechanic nature. This book explores further objections, and the boundaries and complexities of *Nuova Filologia* from its beginnings with Pasquali to its various international and interdisciplinary modifications. Ironically, as Erasmus may not have used the Erasmian pronunciation, Lachmann 'did not strictly use this method in his editions of medieval vernacular texts'.(15) Of course, the questions of philology and its traditions also bring up questions on the nature of discipleship. The third essay of *Philology and Its Histories* illustrates this aspect aptly by alluding to a comment of philologist, teacher and poet Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), who was impressed (or unimpressed!) by the fact that the students of Pythagoras had to be silent (*akousmatikoi*) for their first five years learning with him before they were allowed to express themselves verbally when they were regarded learned enough to do so (*mathematikoi*). (16) The questions that surround the idea of an intellectual canon, the nature of knowledge and the legitimacy and indeed the freedom of academic expression are as pertinent in our day. Finally, the compact but powerful bibliographical section at the end is an additional strength to the book and will be of much interest to scholars, especially graduates looking for new ways of conducting their future scholarship. As with *Laments for the Lost*, the typography in this book is extremely skilled.

Although so far I have concentrated my thoughts on the intensity of the scholarship these two books have to offer, their legacy is greater than their sheer intellectual prowess. These books are more than just pretty jewels that adorn the crown of world scholarship. While all these scholars in their own fields are already engaging in intricate debate concerning their specialisms, in these volumes they bring the debate to the younger scholars who are the future of the disciplines they serve. In both books not only important research questions are discussed but through them are implied crucial professional questions, indeed questions of professional honesty and transparency. This reviewer would heartily recommend these books to students and junior faculty for this very reason: often in our practice we find that students are unsure about the different schools of scholarship in existence in the different university traditions, departments, disciplines and sub-disciplines and they can end up pursuing certain brands of scholarship not because of personal or scholarly inclination, a mild or more fervent temperament, or an obvious strength in an academic area but simply because they followed the easiest course of action through being misinformed. The socio-economic factors influencing decisions and the increasing pressure on universities to recruit and retain students means that the pure scholarly interest of prospective students, and especially PhDs, can become secondary to other concerns. In a fairly muted professional culture surrounding these issues, it is to the honour of Norwegian scholars that they write about these problems openly.(17)

Scholarship should not be about joining different camps, prescribing to dogmas and accepting given wisdom. It should not be about 'the academic caste' or about making learning into a commodity.(18) Originality of thought and the advancement of the Humanities are not served by these. But in the imperfect world in which we live, if one has to make such compromises and choose certain courses of action at a cost, it would be good to do so from a position of knowledge. How will this be obtained if not through debate about the nature of our disciplines? We cannot have new wine in old skins, or in our case new content in old form. The vehicles of discourse are illuminated in the books under discussion, with the intention not of

rejection but of transformation. New PhDs need to come to the arena ready for the challenges ahead. They need to learn not only how to be chosen but how to choose their path.[\(19\)](#)

Books like *Laments for the Lost* and *Philology and Its Histories* speak of the struggles of the human mind to make sense of the past and give expression to its wonders. The former speaks of them implicitly. The latter shouts them from the rooftops. They not only create superb scholarship but also revise the rules of engagement, consider the necessary limitations and the conditional freedoms inherent in our practice and assert their position in the random, pluralistic, fragmented but equally inflexible academic world. They will both tower over the humanities for many years, support new scholars, fight to be heard, and define and map out the aims we share. Their editorship has ensured it.

Notes

1. Cited by Anna Czarnowus, 'Mary, motherhood, and theatricality in the Old Polish Listen, Dear Brothers and Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 129–147, at p. 133 (where full bibliographical details) and p. 147 (for whole poem).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Anne Savage, 'The grave, the sword, and the lament: mourning for the future in Beowulf', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 67–80, at p. 67.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ian Balfour, 'The philosophy of philology and the crisis of reading: Schlegel, Benjamin, de Man', in *Philology and Its Histories*, pp. 192–212, at p. 198.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. I give here a handful of examples: B. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe* (TCNE 6, Turnhout, 2005); A. Mänd, *Urban Carnival: Festive Culture in the Hanseatic Cities of the Eastern Baltic, 1350–1550, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe* (TCNE 8, Turnhout, 2005); *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, ed. W. Scase (TCNE 10, Turnhout, 2007); *Broken Lines: Genealogical Literature in Medieval Britain and France, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, ed. R. L. Radulescu, E. D. Kennedy (TCNE 16, Turnhout, 2009)[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Anne L. Klinck, 'Singing a Song of Sorrow': tropes of lament, in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 1–20.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Derek Pearsall, 'Postscript/postlude/afterward', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 299–306, at 299.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. M. J. Toswell, 'Structures of sorrow; the Lament Psalms in Medieval England', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 21–44, at 21.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Mary K. Ramsey, 'Dustceawung: texting the dead in the Old English Elegies', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 45–66, at p. 66.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See Amy N. Vines, 'Lullaby as lament: learning to Mourn in Middle English Nativity Lyrics', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 201–223; Elizabeth Towl, "'Son, dey þou nat without þy modyre": the landscape of suffering in *The Lamentacioun of Oure Lady*', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, pp. 243–263; Anna Czarnowus, 'Mary, motherhood, and theatricality in the Old Polish Listen, Dear Brothers and Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale', as above.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Sean Gurd, *Iphigenias at Aulis: Textual Multiplicity, Radical Philology* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. For a different aspect of the space between modernism and post-modernism see *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh, 2009).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. For instance, one of the monograph's fierce critics called the book 'rich and important', while keeping an intellectual distance from the work: Robin Mitchell-Boyask, 'Review of Sean Alexander Gurd, *Iphigenias at Aulis: Textual Multiplicity, Radical Philology*', *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (1 February 2006). A more favourable reviewer considered the same book to be 'one of the most exciting': Paul Allen Miller, 'Iphigenias at Aulis: Textual Multiplicity, Radical Philology (review)', *Symploke*, 13 (2005), 344–346, at 344.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Sebastiano Timpanaro, *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann* (Rev. ed., Padua, 1981). Also, Sebastiano

Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann's Method*, ed. and trans. Glen W. Most (Chicago, IL, 2005).

[Back to \(13\)](#)

14. See Giorgio Pasquali. *Filologia e storia*, (Florence, 1998; 1st ed., 1964); Giorgio Pasquali, *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo*, (Florence, 1988; 1st ed., 1934), where his response to Maas. [Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Nadia Altschul, 'What is philology? Cultural studies and ecdotics', in *Philology and Its Histories*, pp. 148–63, at p. 155, n. 27. [Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Christopher S. Celenza, "'Philology" and "Philosophy" at the University of Florence', in *Philology and Its Histories*, pp. 75–106, at p. 88. [Back to \(16\)](#)
17. Ivar Bleiklie and Roar Høstaker, 'From individual pursuit to organised enterprise: Norwegian higher education policy and the postgraduate curriculum', *European Journal of Education* 29 (1994), 305–22; Arne Mastekaasa, 'Educational transitions at graduate level: social origins and enrolment in PhD programmes in Norway', *Acta Sociologica* 49 (2006), 437–53; Svein Kyvik, Berit Karseth, Jan Are Remme and Stuart Blume, 'International mobility among Nordic doctoral students', *Higher Education*, 38 (1999), 379–400; Svein Kyvik and Olaf Tvede, 'The doctorate in the Nordic countries', *Comparative Education*, 34 (1998), 9–25. [Back to \(17\)](#)
18. Cf. Val Burris, 'The academic caste system: prestige hierarchies in PhD exchange networks', *American Sociological Review*, 69 (2004), 239–64; Paul Cooper, 'The gift of education: an anthropological perspective on the commoditization of learning', *Anthropology Today*, 20 (2004), 5–9. [Back to \(18\)](#)
19. Cf. Noela Murphy, John D. Bain and Linda Conrad, 'Orientations to research higher degree supervision', *Higher Education*, 53 (2007), 209–34; Grit Laudel and Jochen Gläser, 'From apprentice to colleague: the metamorphosis of early career researchers', *Higher Education*, 55 (2008), 387–406; Bruce M. Shore, Susan Pinker and Mary Bates, 'Research as a model for university teaching', *Higher Education* 19 (1990), 21–35. [Back to \(19\)](#)

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