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Review Essay: Lerer, Seth. *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature*

Raymond P. Tripp Jr.
University of Denver

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is certainly present. Indeed, there may well be a tendency to review this book from the perspective of literary scholarship, but it should not be regarded as of interest only to literary scholars. *Prophecy* is essentially a *religious* phenomenon, and these essays can also serve as springboards for exploration of topics in medieval theology. For example, medieval stories describing the figure Merlin as a prophet raise the theological issue of how to distinguish true from false prophets since Merlin's personal life and prophecies do not fit the mold of the biblical prophets. Indeed, five systematic commentaries assessing Merlin's alleged prophetic status had been written by the end of the twelfth century (pp 159–60). Or again, the appropriation of biblical descriptions of Old Testament prophets by medieval Hebrew poets to describe their own work (pp 145–9) says something about medieval views on the thorny theological problem of the proper use and interpretation of biblical texts.

Contained in this anthology is one essay nominally devoted to the Renaissance period — 'After the Middle Ages: Prophetic Authority and Human Fallibility in Renaissance Epic'. Its content, however, is disappointingly thin with respect to the theme of the relationship between poetry and prophecy.

The highly specialized and technical character of the selections makes this book appropriate for use by graduate students as well as by scholars. Extensive notes that can serve as a bibliographic resource for further study and research are appended.

Janine Marie Idziak
Loras College

Lerer, Seth. *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1991. xii + 268 pp. \$35.00.

Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature reviews itself. After a long warm-up on the methodology to be used, the author repeatedly reminds the reader of what he has just said, what he is saying, what he will say next, and how all will fit into his full argument, which is restated once more in the conclusion: 'The theme of this book has been that writing is a social practice and a cultural mythology in Anglo-Saxon England and that Old English poetry and Anglo-Latin history draw on both to represent the past to their readers' (p 195). Evidence for this view, however, seems narrow: 'Scenes of reading and writing [that is, where 'literacy' itself is discussed or central to the action] are the loci for that representation, as the past of myth or history or Scripture is invoked in cryptic texts and their heroic or scholarly interpretation. In Hrothgar's moment with the hilt, Daniel's beholding of the text, the student's decipherment of the riddle, or in Bede's and Asser's notions of a charm or manuscript initial lie the venues for reflections on the self, society, and the created world' (p 195). One feels that Lerer is not writing his book, but writing about the book he planned to write. The formidable romanticism of the oral-formulaic school may account for this rhetorical caution and a style marked by politic editorial timidity.

Lerer's thesis, however, that much if not most Old English literature is literate, not oral, though hardly new, is undeniably correct, as the much better case

he could have made by arguing from a broader basis would show. It is hard to question his commonsense argument that works that implicitly discuss literacy cannot very well be oral. It is easy, however, to question the etiology, meaning, and effects Lerer assigns to 'literate' literature, as well as the validity and sufficiency of his critical philosophy.

Lerer remains old fashioned in spite of his eclectic debt to contemporary criticism. He preserves a reader struggling with language as the ordering principle in a meaningless world. Even God survives as cryptic 'textuality'. Locating meaning in mysteriously autonomous linguistic mechanisms, however, verges on verbal idolatry; and gratuitous 'new historical' debunking of yesterday's religion into today's social mechanisms of desire and power does not advance his argument.

These philosophical shortcomings entail methodological weaknesses, and literacy engages the evolution of consciousness, what C. S. Lewis has called, in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1964 p 42), 'the psychological history of the West'. Literacy is first a result, then a cause; it cannot explain itself, or even the ideological uses to which it might be put, since it is only one of the many co-conditioned concomitants of rationalism-materialism; but Lerer does not draw upon the wide literature dealing with the complex cyclical reappearance of literacy in western cultures.

In spite of its prolixity, technical deficiencies, and impertinent cultural warfare, however, Lerer's book should — if any book can — resolve the questions. Much Old English literature is about reading and writing and, therefore, ought to be literate.

Raymond P. Tripp Jr
University of Denver

Moore, R. I. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990. viii + 168 pp. \$42.95 / \$21.95.

The Formation of a Persecuting Society contests a number of current scholarly interpretations concerning the causes and significance of persecution in the high medieval west. Moore rejects outright the conventional characterization of persecution as somehow inevitable or natural in medieval society, the product of inherent social fears or simply the random acts of private individuals. Rather he sees persecution emerging after AD 1000 as a deliberate systematic repression of specific categories of people targeted by the ruling élites of church and state. Prior to the eleventh century, according to Moore, groups such as Jews, heretics, lepers, and homosexuals were not subject to such concerted attacks.

Why the sudden change? The author locates the basic cause in a major shift in the character of high medieval society, part of a general transition from local feudalized ways of life to more centralized regimes that sought to legitimize their political and religious authority by eliminating those defined as deviating from rigidly formulated norms of belief and conduct. In short, the formation of a 'persecuting society' is directly related to a far-reaching extension of power and influence by the