



**Daniel Donoghue, How the Anglo-Saxons Read Their Poems (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018)**

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Daniel Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read Their Poems*  
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In this book, Daniel Donoghue combines his expertise on verse syntax (cf. *Style in Old English Poetry*, 1987) and punctuation (cf. two papers published in 2006 & 2016) with scholarship on oral tradition and recent research in cognitive psychology, especially eye-movement studies, to improve our understanding of the reception of Old English poems in manuscript form by contemporary audiences.

In his introduction, Donoghue somewhat overstates the radical novelty of his approach, claiming in particular that his book ‘is the first to apply eye-movement studies to the reading of noncontemporary literature’ (p. 4). In fact, there is a clear continuity between this book and earlier works by Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (*Visible Song*, 1990) and Paul Saenger (*Space Between Words*, 1997): both are discussed by Donoghue, and Saenger already based much of his analysis on (earlier) eye-movement studies.

What is remarkable here is not so much the originality of the approach chosen, but rather the use of a wide range of up-to-date scholarship and primary sources in Latin and Old English to nuance, question and sometimes radically contradict earlier claims.

Donoghue’s central thesis is that Old English poems are written down in manuscripts the way they are (in continuous lines with sparse punctuation, rather than with an elaborate system of graphical cues to facilitate reading as in modern editions), not because they represent an early stage in the development of literate textuality, when readers had no other choice but to read aloud, but because they were designed that way and were fit to purpose that way, including for silent reading.

The claim is not quite as radical as it may first appear. Donoghue does not deny the importance of oral tradition at the time the four main poetic manuscripts were composed or that it played a crucial role in facilitating reading, on the contrary. Additionally, while he is keen to demonstrate that the punctuation of Old English poems is more systematic than previously acknowledged, he also recognizes that, collectively, the scribes copying poems did not use a common set of conventions in that respect.

However, he convincingly argues that Old English poems do not represent an intermediate stage in a necessary progression from orality to literacy. Rather, he suggests the existence of a cultural (scribal) milieu with a high degree of competence *both* in oral tradition and in literacy, who consciously rejected the possibilities offered by the visual cues found in Old English prose and Latin texts and instead deliberately designed practices suited to the specificities of Old English verse. If the tradition had gone on for longer, Donoghue argues, later manuscripts would not have started resembling Latin manuscripts or modern

texts, but would likely have systematized vernacular conventions of punctuation intricately connected to Old English metrical syntax.

There is no doubt that many aspects of this book will prove of great value to anyone interested in the contemporary reception of Old English poems and/or in the practice of reading in the early Middle Ages. I will only mention three: Donoghue's revisiting of famous episodes (Cædmon; Ambrose reading silently) and his use of scholarship on reading in various times and places to prove the existence of silent reading in ancient times (chapter 1); his discussion of verse syntax and how consequences of Kuhn's Laws (as discussed by Kendall and Donoghue himself among others) facilitate reading (chapter 3); and the discussion of how later, less canonical Old English verse, including poems using rhyme such as *The Death of Alfred*, relate to the arguments presented in the book (conclusion).

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