LAURA ASHE. **The Oxford English Literary History** Vol. I **1000-1350: Conquest and Transformation**. Pp. xvii + 472. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Hardback, £35.

Together with Margaret Ezell's account of the later seventeenth century, published on the same day, Laura Ashe's new book is the first volume of the Oxford English Literary History to be released since 2005 and brings to seven the total published so far. When completed, the series will contain thirteen volumes spanning the thousand years from the first millennium to the second, along with a prequel by Andy Orchard covering the earliest English literature.

As Ashe describes in rich detail, the period from 1000 to 1350 was a time of transformation, with many features that are considered definitional of literature today, including fictiveness, interiority and an interest in emotions like love, emerging for the first time. Loosely speaking, it covers the period from *Beowulf* to Chaucer, which as Ashe regretfully comments in her introduction, 'has never been considered a literary 'period' but rather an interim – a sad epilogue that gives way to a tentative prologue'. In its coverage of the early Middle English period beside the late Old English period that preceded it, Ashe's work is unparalleled and it is difficult to overstate how refreshing it is to read an account of the period that sees its purpose as something other than confirming or challenging previous readings concerned with intercultural animus and literary loss. A second major innovation is the treatment in one volume of works written in England at this period regardless of whether they were written in English, French or Latin: English literature, for this volume, is not literature in English, but literature from England.

The book is, Ashe says, about 'the ideas that shaped people's lives in the High Middle Ages' and an attempt to illuminate 'how people thought'. Its essentials are contained in seven substantial chapters, each reading a handful of works in detail with reference to an often considerable penumbra of significant intertexts in English, Latin and French. The first provides a snapshot of English literary culture around 1000, arguing on the basis of close readings of certain of Ælfric and Wulfstan's works, including the *Sermo Lupi*, the annals for the reign of Æthelræd in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and *The Battle of Maldon* that writing in this period was marked by 'crisis', preoccupied by 'pessimism, eschatological panic and biting social critique'. 'English literature', had, in Ashe's words 'reached a dead end, and ideological void'. Chapter 2 introduces the major transformations Ashe sees as characterising the post-Conquest period, tracking them across texts in Latin, French and English, focusing particularly on changes in the understanding of kingship and the ways one might save one's soul. Chapter 3 focuses on the development of discourses about the self, with the Old English *Vision of Leofric* (c. 1050) acting as a counterpoint to the more developed interest in interiority evident in the mid-twelfth-century Latin *Life of Christina of Markyate* and the early Middle English guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1220). A chapter on chivalry follows, reading late-eleventh- and early-twelfth-century Latin crusade chronicles alongside various twelfth-century French works including the *History of William Marshal*, the romances of Chretien de Troyes and *Gui de Warewic*, concluding with a glance forward to the great late-fourteenth-century English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The fifth chapter examines the emergence of the concept of romantic love and the genre of fiction, with sustained discussion of twelfth-century French works including *Lais* of Marie de France and Thomas of Britain's *Tristran*. Chapter 6 begins with a recapitulation of the argument so far that sets the scene for the discussion of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in it and the final chapter. While Chapter 7 focuses on the emergence of a sense of Englishness in these centuries, it looks at the emergence of a public sphere through which ideas could percolate from Latin works to texts in French and English through consideration of a series of texts extant in Latin, French and English, including Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* and its vernacular descendants, Wace's *Roman de Brut* and Layamon's *Brut*, before

concluding with a short discussion of the *Owl and the Nightingale*. The final chapter's case studies include *Havelock* and the *Brut* chronicle, in both their French and Middle English versions.

By virtue of its novel periodisation and linguistic and cultural range, this book marks a watershed. It deserves to be read widely and repeatedly, its arguments considered and reconsidered. There are careful, telling comparisons of the treatment of particular themes in works from different centuries, like the treatment of the idea that society comprises three classes of people, those who work, those who pray, and those who fight in Ælfric's sermons and the fourteenth-century version of *Ancrene Wisse* in the Pepys manuscript; such comparisons have very seldom if ever attempted in previous scholarship. By virtue of its careful definition of key concepts like selfhood, individuality and privacy, it tracks with new precision their emergence in this transformative period. The readings of individual texts are invariably stimulating, and often iconoclastic, such as the reconfiguration of the *Battle of Maldon* as an early precursor of chivalry rather than the last survivor of a dying heroic culture and the suggestion that the famous image of Christ as a knightly suitor of the anchoress in *Ancrene Wisse* is not a borrowing of a romance trope but a religious author's critique of that genre's assumptions. Ashe is also particularly good on possible reasons for the emergence of more affective modes of piety, and how medieval ideas about love differ from our own. Much of its value, indeed, lies in its willingness to float big, challenging arguments and to make difficult decisions about where to draw boundaries. Challenging arguments to be challenged, however, and it is to this end that I want to direct the remainder of the review, paying particular attention to four aspects key to the book's conception: 'English', 'literary', 'history' and '1000-1350'.

As I have already mentioned, the stated scope of the book is 1000 to 1350. This differs (in provocative and exciting ways) from the traditional periodisation of English literary history, borrowed from linguistic studies, of Old English continuing to 1100 or 1150 and then giving way to early Middle English, before itself developing into Middle English proper around 1350. In their preface, the general editors observe, reasonably enough, that 'it would be possible to argue endlessly about periodisation', but note that 'each volume argues the case for its period as a period'. Despite this vicarious promise, the book never really directly addresses what makes its 350 years a coherent period, though the arguments of chapters 1 and 7 implicitly suggest the 'dead end' of eleventh-century English literature and the emergence of a public sphere and English national identity in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries are important bookends. Much then rests on these arguments; both are somewhat problematic for this reviewer. To argue, as Ashe does, that English literature was 'not … in a productively creative state for some decades before the Norman Conquest', seems, first, to fly in the face of the empirical evidence that around 150 manuscripts containing Old English survive from the eleventh century, more (probably) than survive in English from the rest of Ashe's period and almost twice the number in French that survive from anywhere in twelfth-century Europe. Of course, copying manuscripts is not the same as composing (literary) texts, but the sheer quantity of book production in this period cannot be so lightly ignored.

Such an argument also requires some definition of 'literary' and also what kinds of things 'literature' might be or do to achieve its assumed goal of being 'productively creative'. Surprisingly, no explicit definition is offered in this book, and, equally, no clear definition emerges implicitly. On the one hand, the writing of 'English literary history' is said to involve 'moving through the writings of medieval England', a description that hints at an inclusive definition of literature as 'anything written'. The book indeed quotes one legal document, the Latin foundation charter of Eynsham Abbey from 1005, and compares its treatment of eschatology to that of sermons by Ælfric and Wulfstan, but in general this genre, along with letters, inscriptions and other workaday writings are not found discussed here; sermons receive some, but ultimately restricted, treatment. On the other

hand, where evaluative comments do occur – as for instance in the description of Thomas of Kent being 'spectacularly daring and clear-sighted' in his *Tristran*, a work which is valorised as marking 'a great development for fictional narrative' – they are couched in terms applicable to narrower twenty-first-century ideas of literature. Detailed consideration of whether some or all of the texts from this period can be considered 'literary' and the products of a 'literary culture' is wanting.

If the precise nature of the 'literary' in this period is unexplored in this literary history, so too is how the historical part of literary history might best operate. As we have seen, Ashe conceives of the book primarily as a kind of social history, an attempt to illuminate 'how people thought' during the High Middle Ages. The people she is interested in are 'the English', and her geographical scope is 'England', and these entities, never explicitly defined, are invoked as if coterminous with their contemporary meanings. While some of the case studies in Chapter 6 do attempt to demonstrate the movement of motifs and ideas across this 'England' in this period, such as from the Latin prose meditation on Mary's witnessing of Christ's Passion *Quis dabit* (c. 1200) to the French *Plainte de la Vierge* in the third quarter of the thirteenth century to Richard of Maidstone's late-fourteenth-century Middle English *Lamentation of Mary to St Bernard*, social diffusion (modelled, questionably, as translation from Latin to French to English) is taken as a proxy for geographical diffusion and the mooted lines of transmission often span considerable periods of time. Ashe is working here to establish that the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw the transmission of ideas 'through all three languages, in all parts of England, to all kinds of audiences, in ever-expanding conversation', but while such examples may show this to be true in general terms, they do not substantiate assumptions that certain works or ideas were known across 'England' at a given point. For Ashe, Byrhtnoth, the heroic leader killed in the *Battle of Maldon*, is 'a warrior in Ælfric's and Wulfstan's world', but, though, as an ealdorman, he may have known them or at least of them, one is left to wonder how far their mental worlds really overlapped. The extent to which 'England' and the 'English' are assumed as analytical categories, and not seen as themselves in need of historicisation, in the book is therefore problematic, and the unconvincing arguments thus created occasionally enhanced by a casualness with regard to the date of works – the *Poema morale* is given as late-twelfth-century on p. 97 but early-thirteenth-century on p. 348; the date at which Ashe sees French-English bilingualism as becoming normal for elites is not given explicitly until p. 67 is implausibly given as before 1100 – and an almost total disregard of research on manuscript studies and textual transmission. It is literary *history* only loosely.

A final set of concerns relates to the handling of language in the book. Ashe asserts that during the period 'bilingualism was common, if not close to ubiquitous in the upper levels of society, and trilingualism was not rare among the higher clergy'. This meant that 'communities were effectively bi- and trilingual even when individuals were not', a view that allows the book to approach criticism of the writing of the period virtually as an exercise in Comparative Literature and underpins Ashe's confidence in the easy diffusion of ideas and tropes throughout 'all England'. This idealism downplays the complexity of real-life multilingual societies, where individuals usually have ranging competencies in speaking, comprehending, reading and writing different languages, and where all instances of language use are to some extent marked (to take a concrete example: Ireland is officially bilingual, but many people do not understand Irish; most people's competence in Irish is lower than their competence in English; and in many situations using Irish conveys something in addition to its literal meaning). More broadly, one might wonder at the decision to include works in French and Latin at all. As the general editors acknowledge, except in Ashe's book and Orchard's projected prequel, 'we have confined ourselves to the English language', meaning that writings from the late Middle Ages and Renaissance in Latin, still then a major language for elite culture, have been excluded. It is almost as if each book has a quotient of texts it must include and if English works

cannot fill this need, those in other languages may be drawn in. This methodological decision thus raises a question latent in the consideration of the periodisation of the book and its notion of 'literary history' above: is its proper purpose to describe the various writings from the period and the criteria by which they were evaluated at the time, or is it to describe the emergence of 'literature' as we know it? Ashe arguably succeeds admirably in the latter, but the idiosyncratic twists and turns that different genres took but which didn't prove productive in the long run yet which are potentially equally revealing about social history, receive much less attention here.

It is vanishingly rare in the early-twenty-first century academy to get an opportunity to map a 350-year tranche of literary history properly for the first time. Over the past twenty years, considerable effort has gone into clearing away oudated preconceptions about the period between *Beowulf* and Chaucer; Ashe has taken the opportunity offered by that clearance to survey the land anew and written a compelling guide a transformative period. This is a book whose arguments will be considered, weighed and debated repeatedly over the next two decades.