

interpretations that would more fully acknowledge the importance of literary works that document repeatedly and across a number of genres how disguise allows a displacement of the woman's body, a temporary wandering out of its assigned cultural context, which might significantly alter the parameters of that mold.

As it stands, *Clothes Make the Man* provides a useful point of departure for readers wishing to think further about the substantial implications that female cross dressing holds for feminist medieval studies.

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1 *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 10-11.

2 *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26, 2 (1996): 297-320.

3 For recent bibliography on Joan and transvestite saints see Susan Crane, "Clothing and Gender Definition;" for bibliography on *Le Roman de Silence* see Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), notes to Chapter 4 and *Arthuriana* 7:2 (1997), ed. Regina Psaki. Also pertinent are a number of the essays in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie et al. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997).



Alfred P. Smyth. *King Alfred the Great*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995. xxv + 744 pp.

Alfred P. Smyth's biography, *King Alfred the Great*, has as its aim the representation of the king as a great man and ruler, "a man of profound learning by the standards of his age" (600), a king who "strove to follow the path of 'righteous kingship,'" who was not "a pious wimp, but . . . a leader already well schooled in the knowledge of power and responsibility of his office" (601-2). Smyth's concluding paean praises Alfred as well for "the qualities of a great all-rounder . . . qualities of moderation which were indicative of his great humanity" (601). In order to create this picture, Smyth must remove as primary evidence of Alfred's character and life *The Life of King Alfred*, purportedly written in 893, before Alfred's death, by Bishop Asser, a Welshman associated with Alfred's court. He argues instead that Asser's *Life* was written in the late tenth century as a forgery under Asser's name: "It was inevitable that such a gifted

ruler, imbued with such obvious principles of Christian piety, should have been held up as a model of Christian kingship by a later generation of writers in Anglo-Saxon England" (601). Although much of his text (approx. 220 pp.) is given over to discrediting Asser's *Life*, in the remaining two-thirds Smyth builds an alternative picture of the king based on readings of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred's will, a document called the "Fonthill letter," and texts that have been ascribed to Alfred, such as his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*.

Smyth's book has been very controversial, to say the least. His rhetoric is highly polemical, characterizing the work of highly respected scholars with terms such as "arrant nonsense," with the result that his reader is tempted to dismiss his own argument point-blank. At times he makes assertions crucial to his argument with little or no evidence to substantiate them and then uses those assertions as a platform to support other arguments. He has not done his homework in certain areas that are central to his arguments. And his book is much, much too long, not simply because it is 602 pages of small print, before the endnotes, but even more because Smyth's writing is very repetitious—a good copyeditor could certainly have cut it down to 400 pages. I won't go into details here because others have already. The longest review is by Simon Keynes, at 23 pages (*Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47.3, July 1996, pp. 529 ff.) (the work of Keynes and Lapidge on Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is a primary object of Smyth's attacks). There have been other devastating reviews by Bernard S. Bachrach (*Journal of Military History* 61.2, April 1997, pp. 363–4), D. R. Howlett (*English Historical Review* 112.448, Sept. 1997, pp. 942–4), and David A. E. Pelteret (*Speculum* 73.1, Jan. 1998, pp. 263–5). Michael Altschul, although not a specialist in Anglo-Saxon studies, has written much more favorably, in particular praising Smyth's attention to evaluating source materials (*American Historical Review* 102.5, December 1997, pp. 1463–4). Barbara Yorke's review is the most balanced among those I read, questioning Smyth's arguments on a number of points, but welcoming his questioning of "Asser's set-piece scenes" as representing "vignettes from Alfred's life" and Smyth's attention to problems in the transmission of Asser's text, and praising his account of Alfred against the Vikings and his use of Frankish materials. Though Yorke lands in favor of a "genuine" over a "pseudo-Asser," she also concludes that it "is no bad thing" to have one's "preconceptions challenged" (*History Today* 46.12, Dec. 1996, p. 58). My review will consider only issues related to feminist studies of Anglo-Saxon history.

Alfred lived from approx. 848 to 899 and governed Wessex and Kent beginning in 871 until his death (he may have become an overlord for Mercia as well when Mercia was recovered from the Danes and governed jointly by Æthelred and Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd). As one would guess, a number of women were associated with Alfred and have roles in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. Their traces can also be found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred's will, and certain charters.

Three women are the objects of stories in Asser: Alfred's mother; his step-mother and then sister-in-law, Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald; and a queen Eadburh, daughter to Offa of Mercia and queen of a prior king of Wessex, Beorhtric. Because one of Smyth's goals is to prove this *Life* a forgery and thereby discredit the veracity of its stories, under his pen all of these characters retreat deeper into the shadows. Smyth reveals the logical flaws and folk elements in their stories in order to undermine Asser's credibility and, conversely, uses the fallibility of the text that he claims in order to obviate any need to analyze any implications of the stories. Thus, while the second chapter of the *Life* insists on the solid significance of Alfred's mother, Osburh, by way of providing a lofty genealogy, Smyth dissolves her significance by showing a contradiction between distant convergences in her genealogy and that of Alfred's father (Alfred's father's includes one more generation—Creoda—between Cerdic and Cynric than Alfred's mother's does).

Eadburh is a more complex and intriguing case. The *Chronicle* and the *Life* attest that one Eadburh was the daughter of Offa, an early eighth-century king of Mercia, who managed politics and marriages so as to dominate a large part of Britain. He apparently assisted Beorhtric against his rival for the throne of Wessex, Alfred's grandfather, Ecgberht, and maintained his domination over Beorhtric and Wessex by marrying Eadburh to Beorhtric. The *Life* presents an exaggerated tale of Eadburh's wickedness and shameful demise to explain why Wessex did not by custom recognize the king's wife as queen and how significant it was when Alfred's father consented to have the young Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald, consecrated as queen when he married her on his way back from a pilgrimage to Rome. Smyth plausibly theorizes that a folktale of Eadburh may have circulated as a way of expressing resentment against past Mercian domination of Wessex, but he also uses the folktale structure of the story to dismiss both its validity in general and the validity of Asser's *Life* specifically. He discounts the importance of Judith as well by asserting that the *Chronicle* does not "mention . . . Judith having been given full recognition in Wessex for her queenly status," even though it does state that Charles gave his daughter to Æthelwulf "to cuene" (since he died the same year, there was little other chance for more recognition). He diminishes Judith even more thoroughly by pointing out that the *Chronicle* does not name her (it calls her "daughter of Charles of the Franks") and by theorizing that Judith and her supposed queenship appear in the *Life* because of a Frankish source (178-9).

Smyth's managing of this material contrasts significantly with a learned and thoughtful essay by Janet Nelson on the same chapter of Asser's *Life*, "Reconstructing a Royal Family: Reflections on Alfred, From Asser, Chapter 2" (*People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. Ian Wood and Niels Lund, Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991). Nelson also recognizes the contradiction between genealogies, the folk elements in Eadburh's story, and the account of Judith's consecration as queen in the Frankish Annals of

St. Bertin, but she draws on these elements plus a rich array of evidence from other sources in order to discuss the work being done by the particular constructions in that chapter. She takes into account the complexities of early medieval royal marriages, including competition among spouses and brothers for inheritance and power and the increasing pressure to narrow inheritance patterns to patrilineal descent. Smyth is interested in none of this. He cites Nelson's essay only to dismiss it in his note with the statement, "Nelson's arguments were founded on the assumption that the *Life* of Alfred afforded genuine contemporary testimony on Alfred's family" (632, n. 32). This statement is almost accurate—accurate in that she does assume that the author truly was part of Alfred's household but misleading in that she does not take the stories at face value but evaluates them as constructions intended to serve Alfred's political purposes. Smyth appears unaware of the body of scholarship on Anglo-Saxon marital patterns. He assumes that any subsequent marriage by Alfred's father occurred on the death of his prior wife (11), even though the same article he cites by Nelson suggests that Osburh may have been alive at the time of the king's marriage to Judith though perhaps a partner in a marriage of lesser status and never queen as such. Significant of his disinterest in this area, Smyth never cites Pauline Stafford's "The King's Wife in Wessex" (*Past and Present* 91, 1981) nor Margaret Clunies Ross's "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England" (*Past and Present* 108, 1985).

Smyth follows a similar path of considering a story in order to discredit it and the *Life* when he discusses the famous incident of Alfred's mother offering a beautiful book of vernacular poetry to whomever of her gathered children could learn it first. First Smyth compares the story to similar stories characterized as apocryphal or legendary in order to establish its folktale-like structure. This story he classifies as "Youngest brother alone succeeds on a quest," transformed from military to intellectual contest by the influence "of the early medieval monastic scriptorium in which the hagiographical tale of Alfred was invented" (182). He then examines the chronological and biographical details for plausibility, looking to Alfred's probable age at that time, the date when he believes Alfred's mother, Osburh, would have disappeared from court life, the wide-spread ages of Alfred and his brothers, and other statements in the *Life* concerning Alfred's education. He concludes that for Osburh to have been present, Alfred would have had to be too young (six years or even younger) to read or memorize "whole books of poetry" (183), that only one brother was young enough to be present at such an event and so *sibi et fratribus* would misrepresent the situation, and that his ability here to read and learn the vernacular verse contradicts a statement that he was "illiterate (*illiteratus*) until the age of twelve or beyond" (184). Smyth concludes, then, "the impossibility of this episode having really happened" and that "its immediate purpose . . . was to underline Alfred's supposed superiority over his brothers" (185). But, as with the Eadburh story, because he is so intent on discrediting the *Life*, Smyth neglects

important relevant scholarship and bypasses possibilities for learning from the story. Essential to analyzing this story is scholarship on orality and literacy. Although in one note Smyth refers to the scholarship of Jack Goody and of Walter Ong, he seems unaware of important work by M. T. Clanchy and others establishing that in the Middle Ages “illiteratus” referred specifically to the inability to read Latin. Smyth repeatedly denigrates Kenneth Sisam for stating that “nothing in Asser’s *Life* suggests that Alfred wrote with his own hand” and for asserting that Alfred “dictated his translations to his scholarly amanuenses.” Whereas Smyth asserts that Sisam’s statements “showed . . . a remarkable lack of understanding of the importance of literacy on the development of individual intellectual thought” (229), Smyth here belies his own ignorance regarding the status of writing as a skill separate from reading and composing. This area of scholarship is essential here because knowledge about the separate elements in medieval literacy makes sense of the involvement of women in teaching vernacular texts and of Alfred’s status as “illiteratus” until he had learned Latin reasonably well. Although Smyth recognizes that the story of Osburh encouraging Alfred and his brothers to learn the book of verse does indicate “that it was considered appropriate for an author to portray aristocratic women in pre-Conquest England as being personally involved in the education of their sons,” characteristically he does not follow through on this idea because it does not contribute to specific knowledge about Alfred himself, as an individual great man.

It is Smyth’s intent to prove Alfred the great man that undermines his work. Large sections of his book are very interesting, and some of his arguments suggest directions for thought that would be worthwhile to feminist medieval studies. His readings of Alfred’s writing are subtle enough to bring out certain dominant patterns and concerns in Alfred’s thought. And his emphasis on relationships between the West Saxons and the Mercians in Britain and the Franks on the continent could serve to thicken our ideas about the continuities and discontinuities of these cultures and is compatible with patterns of marriage and female monasticism that cross the channel. Be that as it may, Smyth values stories that give true-to-life details about Alfred’s own greatness, not about how he participated in or was shaped by larger social structures and cultural developments, and this valuation does not serve feminist studies very well. Smyth’s “great man” approach means less emphasis on community and on the significance of marital and other familial connections. Another historian might have told us more about how West Saxon-Mercian marriages shaped the “Alfredian dynasty” and Alfred’s own daughter Æthelflæd’s powers in relation to her father’s and brother’s. This historian offers feminist studies only little glimmers between the lines, dimmer than those in the primary documents.

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