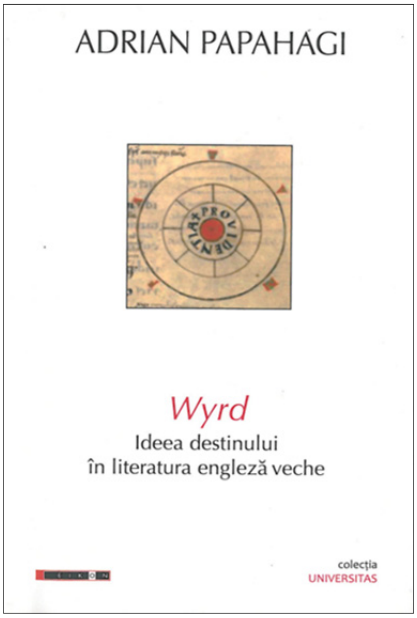
STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXII, 1, 2017, p. 275 – 276
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOK REVIEW

Adrian Papahagi, *Wyrd. Ideea destinului în literatura engleză veche* [*Wyrd. The Idea of Destiny in Old English Literature*], Cluj-Napoca, Eikon, 2014, 430 p.

The present volume is an extended analysis of a single concept in Old English literature, namely that of *wyrd*, slowly revealed to be subtler than a mere Anglo-Saxon approximation of fate as the author follows it across a corpus of literature understood in the older and more generous sense that accommodates translations and glosses alike. The book under review pleasantly surprises the reader with its many openings towards a variety of research interests ranging from philosophical studies and cultural theory to literary studies, philology, religion and mythology, as well as history. In an age increasingly concerned with transnational literature, this volume offers a welcome insight into prenational literatures that sheds a different light on the issues of crisis, (self-)exile, nostalgia, assimilation, and migrating meanings that mutate in different cultural contexts. Old English literature is revealed to be rich, nuanced, and just as familiar with hybridisation as more overt contemporary writings since it attempts to negotiate three attitudes towards the question of free will and divine intervention, namely Augustinian orthodoxy, Christian Neo-Platonism, and the pagan Germanic underlayer manifesting itself in the archaic vocabulary, especially in alliterative verse.



Over the years, Adrian Papahagi has demonstrated an active interest in medieval studies, publishing in prestigious journals such as *Scriptorium*, *Medium Aevum*, *Note&Queries*, and *Neuphilogische Mitteilungen*, to name just a few. Another remarkable contribution to the field is his 2010 volume dedicated to the Latinate and English tradition of *Consolatio Philosophiae*, the Boethian opus also treated in *Wyrd*. Maintaining the same rigorous approach, yet benefitting from a more generous corpus thanks to the Dictionary of Old English published by the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, the study under consideration offers a philologist's perspective on how nuances of thought can be lost or reconstructed in instances of culture clashes, tracing the words' mutating meanings in different cultural contexts. One of the volume's many merits is its unprejudiced and balanced treatment of sources, even of those written in objectionable contexts, such as the 1930s findings of Gehl, Brandl, and von Kienle. Both the Romantics who exaggerated the pagan elements and those taking Anglo-Saxon litera-

ture to be fundamentally Christian are read just as carefully while maintaining a critical distance from both. As the author adopts a perspective from inside the culture he discusses, it is remarkable how close he comes to the image of the medieval man as seen by C. S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*, a master of taxonomy. If he is anyone's accomplice, it is not a historian, a critic or a theorist in particular, but the culture he wishes to do justice to.

The very structure of the book suggests its desired exhaustiveness. The author takes no shortcuts, as evidenced even by a quick glance at the table of contents, as the methodical approach calls for a rigorous structure that leaves nothing unaccounted for in its right place and at the right time. The analysis is close, detailed, systematic, and the conclusions are carefully discussed, without bold leaps. It is this method that secures the accuracy of the study and recommends it as a landmark in the field. Indeed, the author deftly moves across languages and cultures, tackling texts directly in Latin, Old English (and several dialects at that, as in the case of the Aenigmata anglica), Greek and Old German, while just as naturally providing footnotes relevant for further study in French or comparing the English and Swedish translations of *Waldere* and *Widsith*. An excellent knowledge of grammar allows the author to explain how other translations have missed the mark, such as the Genitive singular "wyrdi" mistakenly translated as the plural "wyrda", thus reducing "wyrd" to mere "events". Even copyist mistakes are accounted for, as when the issue raised by the so-called "open a" of manuscripts is brought up. One of the book's most interesting findings clarifies why Beowulf, the central hero of Anglo-Saxon literature, is never described as *fæge* (doomed to die), not even in his dying hour. *Wyrd,* this Shakespearean "thing of darkness" that even Christian marginalia reluctantly accept to mention, is indomitable but impersonal, and it can only be avoided through feats of courage. Thus, the artisan of one's own death escapes its reach. A necessary distinction is also made between the wheel included by Anglo-Saxon copyists in *Consolatio Philosophiae* and the medieval wheel of fortune, as the former is an innovative insular hierarchical system where the more removed one is from *providentia* and valour, the closer they are to *wyrd*. The scholarly influence of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* is also exposed as responsible for the image of the Parcae imposed over the Norns of the Icelandic Edda, which wrongly led some to assume *wyrd* was a triad of vengeful goddesses.

Interestingly, the book seems to address a hybrid audience. While by no means a book for the general audience because of its academic rigour and insistence on discussing texts in their original at all times, the volume is intended for researchers interested in areas as diverse as translation theory and practice, religion, cultural politics, and philosophy. Given the awareness of the ways in which language can distort thought demonstrated by the present study, having it written in Romanian rather than English indicates an interest in enriching the development of medieval studies in the author's country. Indeed, it was implicitly written with such an audience in mind, given the way the author occasionally makes use of examples familiar to the Romanian public, such as when he mentions Alecsandri's version of *Miorița* to problematize the assumption of *Beowulf*'s archaic underlayer. Given that the author also teaches Old English literature at academic level, the present volume's illustrative and instructive approach can be seen not only as an informative account of in-depth research, but also as a walkthrough in the field so as to encourage new scholars to join the stage, if not on adjacent topics, at the very least using a similar method. Time-consuming though such readings may be, they are an investment well worth making.

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