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The Middle Dutch Brut: An Edition and Translation ed. by
Sjoerd Levelt (review)

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Grendel and his mother as metaphorical personifications of the great famine that afflicted Scandinavia from 536–537 CE onwards, in the wake of the so-called ‘dust veil event,’ a probable volcanic eruption that caused significant solar dimming and a concomitant reduction in summer temperatures. Gräslund has argued elsewhere that this famine—undoubtedly one of the greatest social traumas experienced by northern Europeans in this period—underlies the apocalyptic myths of Ragnarök as they survive in Old Norse-Icelandic traditions. *Beowulf* is thus part of a particularly Nordic apocalyptic imaginary that developed, in part, in response to this environmental catastrophe. It is an interesting conjecture, but the evidence in its favor (mostly what we might call speculative etymology) is not compelling. Nor is the idea that the dragon is another metaphorical personification, this time of Onela, king of the Swedes, likely to gain much traction with readers of *Beowulf*.

There is nothing pernicious in these interpretative moves, and some readers will find that the context provided by a fuller knowledge of the migration period in southern Scandinavia illuminates the poem in productive ways. However, there are problems with what we might call the archaeological approach to *Beowulf*. Digging down through the poem’s surface crust—the extant text—the archaeological critic identifies the observable stratigraphy of *Beowulf*’s prehistory, which is an important task. But as the goal of the exercise seems always to find the oldest stratum, many layers have to be excavated to reveal the material that the critic is looking for. Anything that gets between the digger and their goal can be labeled as ‘spoil’ and rejected. Perhaps what is left—after the Christian allusions and sermonizing and intertextual links to other Old English poems and the whole conception of the literary wholeness of the work as it survives have been rejected—will be a poem closer to the ‘original’ form of *Beowulf*—but that is not a *Beowulf* that anyone now can read. An architectural metaphor seems preferable: *Beowulf* is a construction, built in several phases by a number of different artisans over several centuries. Its foundations are important, and Bo Gräslund helps his readership understand the poem’s historical underpinnings in new and better ways; however, insisting that the superstructure should be demolished for a clearer view of the basement leaves us with a hole in the ground where *Beowulf* used to stand.

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SJOERD LEVELT, ed., *The Middle Dutch Brut: An Edition and Translation*. Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies Series. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. Pp. 165. ISBN: 978-1-80034-860-8. £80.

In recent years, scholars active in the research project *The Literary Heritage of Anglo-Dutch Relations, c.1050–c.1600* have set out to trace and comprehend the deep-rooted, continued contact between England and the Low Countries during the Middle Ages and early modern period. Among the academic works that spawned from this project

is also the book under review here, an edition and facing-page English translation of the 'Middle Dutch *Brut*' produced by Sjoerd Levelt.

This Middle Dutch *Brut* is not actually a translation of the Anglo-Norman prose *Brut*, but rather an amalgamation of various excerpts from the *Brut* and its translations. Furthermore, whilst originally composed as an individual work, this text is found as an inserted chronicle in a Dutch translation of the *Fasciculus temporum*, a universal chronicle first printed in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. In 1480, the printer Johan Veldener would translate this work into Dutch and add translations of chronicles to the text, one of which was a Dutch chronicle of Britain dubbed the Middle Dutch *Brut*. It is this text that is edited and translated by Levelt.

The edition is moderate in size and scope, yet manages to present the reader with the historical and literary context needed to appreciate the text and its intricacies through a well-written introduction. This introduction not only touches on a number of aspects related to the *Brut* and its printer, but also pays attention to the interest in British history in the county of Holland and the diocese of Utrecht as well as Veldener's connection with William Caxton. These extra bits of context help cement the understanding that the Middle Dutch *Brut* is not merely a translation of an English text into Dutch, but rather a literary Anglo-Dutch mixture that reflects the international nature of the printing process during the later Middle Ages.

This interconnectedness of Dutch and English is further emphasized in Levelt's extensive discussion on the sources used by Veldener and the *Brut* translator, which takes up the majority of the introduction. Based on the selection and rewriting of these sources, Levelt characterizes the Dutch *Brut* as a propagandistic (Lancastrian) chronicle of England, made for a Dutch-speaking audience that was interested in the politics and history of England. Through a multitude of examples, he argues that Veldener negotiated between his Dutch and English sources, aiming to compose a mixture of Dutch and English views on the history of Britain and its effect on the history of the Northern Netherlands. Since the Middle Dutch *Brut* and the Dutch *Fasciculus*—despite their success and popularity during their own time—have received little scholarly attention, Levelt's discussion is most welcome and sure to serve as a basis for further research.

In the analysis of these sources we also find interesting remarks concerning the depiction of King Arthur in the Middle Dutch *Brut*. His role is, however, diminished and limited. Furthermore, some of the information that is included does not match up with the Anglo-Norman *Brut* or later histories like Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. For example, Arthur's reign is said to have ended in 486, which is a significantly different date from that of the *Brut* (546) or the *Historia* (542). Levelt manages to conclude that the Arthurian elements in the Middle Dutch *Brut* were largely borrowed from the Dutch *Spiegel historiael*, a verse translation of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* by Jacob van Maerlant. Supposedly, it was easier for the Dutch-speaking Veldener to paraphrase the verse lines from Maerlant into prose than to translate afresh from Latin, French, or English.

This edition itself is designed for comparative research like the type done by Levelt himself. The English translation is readable whilst simultaneously designed

with literality in mind. The Dutch text is presented in a diplomatic edition that stays true to the original orthography and interpunction, which is based on a selection of surviving copies of the original 1480 print (a list of surviving copies is listed in an Appendix). Furthermore, the layout of the edition matches that of the print, which is very impressive. Veldener was an innovative printer, who in his *Fasciculus* made use of diagrammatic horizontal visualizations of royal lines of succession—an effort for which he had to use movable prints to also include illustrations. This is one of the most intriguing aspects of any copy of the 1480 edition and also one of the remarkable features of Levelt's edition.

The desire to stay close to the original printed presentation, however, has a negative effect, which reveals itself through the explanatory notes that Levelt has added separately. Often, one page will have close to ten explanatory notes, yet these are not presented alongside the text, forcing the reader to repeatedly move back and forth between parts of the book. More importantly, the elements that require an explanation are not marked in the text itself (for example with an end note); rather, the explanatory notes simply lists the verse in which the element is found. As a result, when one reads the text, it is unclear when an element of the text requires further information to be understood fully or correctly. Accordingly, whilst the information in the explanatory notes is useful, in particular to one unversed in the history of England, its presentation is less favorable.

Nevertheless, Levelt's work should be applauded as his edition grants access to a text for both Dutch and non-Dutch readers that deserves more scholarly attention for its special place in the literary culture of the early printed tradition. The Middle Dutch *Brut* is a telling example of the international, multilingual dynamics of the Anglo-Dutch relations of the printing culture of the later Middle Ages. For those interested in these aspects, *The Middle Dutch Brut* is a welcome addition and edition.

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ANDRZEJ PLESZCZYŃSKI and GRISCHA VERCAMER, eds., *Germans and Poles in the Middle Ages: The Perception of the 'Other' and the Presence of Mutual Ethnic Stereotypes in Medieval Narrative Sources*. Explorations in Medieval Culture 16. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Pp. xxvi, 434. ISBN: 978-90-04-41778-6. \$228.

A close look at the developments and mechanisms of stereotyping and othering is a well-timed and important task of historical scholarship in the midst of ongoing warnings about 'fake news' and parallel realities in contemporary political and social discourses. The editors explain that they have chosen to focus on the 'Polish-German bi-national barrier . . . to create a counterpart to the modern period [because] [d]espite generally friendly actual relations between both countries, present animosities arising from historical experiences and, in many cases prejudices, can still be recognized' (p. 2). Today, national stereotyping and prejudices are so ubiquitous that sometimes it feels that they have always existed and that their driving forces and motives have