Victoria Symons. *Runes and Roman Letters in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 99. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. x + 266 pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-049474-7. E-ISBN: 978-3-11-049192-0. ISSN 1866-7678. Price: € [D] 109.95 / US\$ 154.00 / GBP 100.00.

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Victoria Symons's first monograph is a straightforward and comprehensive study which looks at various instances of runes appearing in combination with Roman letters. The focus of the book is on the use of single runes or small groups of runes in Old English literary texts and consequently much of its content is also devoted to re-examining previous scholarship. Other types of runic material (such as short texts, alphabets and rune-rows, also frequently appearing in conjunction with Roman letters in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts) are mentioned but not examined in any depth. Yet within these limitations, Symons produces a thorough investigation of the literary material and its relationship with runic characters. This examination is structured in an unexpected but remarkably functional way. The structure is also what sets the book apart from other analyses of runes in Old English literature and makes the monograph an improvement on previous discussions. This is exemplified in the introduction, which loosely provides a general explanation of the development of the runic alphabet (which has become standard in most runological works) but focuses mostly on the writing systems (runic and roman) of Anglo-Saxon England, their origin, and how they evolved from the fifth century until just after the Conquest. Though this discussion does not seem irrelevant considering the purview of the study, the significance of this spotlight on writing becomes gradually clearer throughout the book and shows the clever organisation of the whole.

The first chapter examines the different uses of runes in Old English manuscripts, but instead of simply listing the different types, it takes the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501) as a case study. This is a multifunctional approach as it gives an overview of the material discussed and introduces a codex which is important both for the study of English literature and runic usage in this literature. One of the pitfalls of such an approach, however, is that the reader's impression of runes in manuscripts is based mainly on the work of one (or perhaps two) scribes. Symons does refer to other manuscripts where necessary to expand on certain functions, but this does little to nuance the image of the Exeter book as the prime example of runic usage. While the Exeter material certainly shows frequent (in comparison to other manuscripts) and wide-ranging use of runes, one manuscript can hardly be considered representative of a whole tradition.

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The second chapter focuses on interpreting (or reinterpreting) the runic riddles and *The Husband's Message*, the latter included in the same category due to its cryptic nature and comparable use of runes. It employs literary analysis to discuss these examples of the riddling tradition and to connect them through their runes and solutions. Symons argues that every one of these texts can be interpreted as focusing on aspects of writing and the written word. The mixing of scripts serves to exemplify this focus and aid the reader in coming to this conclusion; the difference in form from the Roman material works as a signpost.

The third chapter takes this focus on the written word even further and discusses Cynewulf's signatures in the context of the materiality of writing. Here Symons suggests that the runes are included for reasons beyond the mere preservation of the name of the poet, Cynewulf. Due to the varying formats in which the characters of the name appear and the different interpretations needed to make the runes work within the poetry, she thinks the poet is using them as a reminder not to take things at face value. The runes point to themes of signifiers, meaning and interpretation which reflect on the epilogues (in which the runes appear) as well as on the poems in their entirety. Although Symons is more consistent in her analysis than many others who have come before her, occasionally the many layers of interpretation needed to make sense of the runes (sometimes based on a single occurrence of meaning elsewhere) make it rather convoluted. In the second half of this chapter, she compares Cynewulf's signatures with other types of scribal colophons and authorial signatures. This leads to an interesting investigation of the association between material goods (books, objects) and the author/maker's name in runes, which adds another and, I think, very valuable dimension to the discussion. This idea is then further used to contemplate the physicality of the written word and Cynewulf's intention to present his work as a physical object of which he considered himself the maker.

The fourth and penultimate chapter discusses the runes in the poem *Solomon and Saturn*, and begins by considering the magical properties frequently attributed to runes by past scholars. Symons treats this subject thoroughly and with great attention to detail. She provides a good overview of all the major elements which have been perceived as "magically runic" and more generally "magic" (predominantly the charms) in Anglo-Saxon culture. The greatest contribution of this chapter is again the comparison with elements of Latin culture which were likely to have been well known in medieval England. Her conclusion is therefore sound and far-reaching: "It is the physical nature of writing—the ability to possess it and make it visually appealing—that particularly encourages the attribution of power to the text itself rather than its meaning" (p. 149). She continues her analysis of *Solomon and Saturn* from this perspective and finds that the two independent Old English translations and reworkings of this poem, as well as a number of ninth- and tenth-century amulets and charms, confirm a belief in the inherent power of the written word during this time period.

The final chapter investigates Old English runes in the context of rune lists and alphabet poems. The chapter begins by providing the standard descriptions of

the rune poems and the *Abececlarium Nordmannicum*. This feels like a rather long and unimaginative section, which is not helped by the fact that the overview is mostly a summary of other scholars' opinions, though some of these views are questioned later in the chapter. Readers are, however, rewarded for their patience by the interesting conclusion that the Old English rune poem is more comparable to non-runic acrostics than to the Scandinavian runic poems. The following section then discusses the relationship between the Old English rune poem and the alphabet psalms, using a wider investigation of medieval culture (not just Anglo-Saxon England). It draws a number of useful parallels which seem to merit further investigation. Symons, however, does not take this much further than the basic comparison and, having concluded that the Old English rune poem is more literary than educational (in contrast to the Scandinavian rune poems), ends the chapter with an analysis of the visual ambiguities in the Old English rune poem. Clearly the focus of the chapter and the book is on the Old English material, yet in this case the limitation put on this specific analysis also undermines it to some extent. Furthermore, it gives the impression that nothing new can be said about the Scandinavian poems, which seems unlikely.

The book ends with a conclusion which draws together all the different chapters and strands, followed by a very short chapter on medieval writing and the Internet. This final chapter discusses the idea that many of the characteristics of medieval writing also appear in the way information is distributed on the Internet. Whether the chapter really adds much to the book is debatable, but the suggestion is interesting and it is to be hoped that this is intended as an avenue of future research.

More generally, the quantity of material and scholarship included in this monograph is impressive and makes it an excellent reference work. Symons also manages to incorporate the scholarship well and thus avoids making the book seem like a literature review. It is, however, sometimes difficult to find the author's own voice in this collection of opinions. She is at her best when she expands upon previous scholarship by adding comparisons to different contemporary practices (chapter 3) or different types of literature (chapter 5), or when she methodically debunks commonly accepted myths (chapter 4). Symons makes a clear general point that many of the uses of runes in Old English literature have a connection to literacy, or a belief in the power of the written word. Occasionally, though, she is perhaps overly persistent in her attempt to find this focus in every occurrence of the combination of runes and Roman letters. It seems that in some places this prevents her from testing other theories more thoroughly and coming to more nuanced conclusions. Nonetheless, this book is the best and most complete discussion of the topic produced to date and is refreshing in its lack of bias. It gives the reader a good insight into the different types of material which exist within the Old English corpus while also providing an insight into how runes fit within their immediate (Old English literary) and wider (medieval literary) context.