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# REVIEWS

Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, eds. *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. 272p.

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A mystical air hangs about *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing's 2006 impressive compilation of topological essays having England as its locus and devoted to "studying place in space and through time." Readers accustomed to literatures offering glitzy, New Age, Sedona perspectives on "places of power," and likewise readers enthusiastic about texts providing pop-cultural applications of feng shui, will likely find the book's mysticism subdued. But those approaching *A Place to Believe In* from more scholarly English literary medievalist perspectives, as most readers probably will, may find the book's emphasis on the (uncanny) propensity of physical spaces to provoke psychological and intellectual responses and physical reactions from their human occupants, to be decidedly, intriguingly mystical. In any case, Lees, Professor of Medieval Literature and the History of the English Language at King's College London, and Overing, Professor of English at Wake Forest University, have assembled a valuable set of inter-related, interdisciplinary essays that offer fascinating "biographies" of landscapes, intelligent histories of (putative) appropriations of geographic spaces by human occupiers, and challenging explorations of how anthropocentric meaning(s) can be generated by and attached to geophysical sites and architectural spaces.

*A Place to Believe In* is comprised of a very useful introductory essay and three significant and well-organized "parts." In the introduction, "Anglo-Saxon Horizons: Places of the Mind in the Northumbrian Landscape," Lees and Overing justify their book's association of essays ranging in historical focus from before the common era into the 21st century, in geographic setting from Britain to Germany to the American Pacific Northwest, and in substantive and generic concern from linguistics to geography to literary cartography to archaeology, from gender studies to religious studies to hagiology to travel narrative to environmentalism to nature writing. The essays, Lees and Overing contend with conviction, all successfully intend to map both a physical environment and a mental terrain with the purpose of revealing the

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continuities between material world and immaterial mind by which purpose and meaning can be constructed.

“Place Matters,” the first of the book’s three parts, focuses on first-millennium England, the terrain of Northumbria, Roman and Anglo-Saxon incursion into Britain, and the development of Old English social and religious cultures. Devoted to the description of Northumbrian landscapes, “Place Matters” examines, in a manner that will be of particular interest to early medievalists, how human involvement with the geophysical features of northern England precipitated the development of medieval cultural invention and self-definition. Fred Orton, in “At the Bewcastle Monument, in Place,” ingeniously explores how Roman fortifications at Bewcastle contributed to the evolution of culturally distinct Old English social systems. Ian Wood, in “Bede’s Jarrow,” demonstrates that a recognition of the Venerable Bede’s monastery’s physical location in “littoral” Jarrow, on the coast of Northumbria, may be of less importance in appreciating Bede’s historical influence than is recognizing his “literal” location, the settings he constructed and claimed in his writings. And in “Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts,” Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley argues convincingly that an awareness of the England’s changing liminal geologic spaces, shorelines and riparian boundaries, is crucial to an understanding of the nature of cultural transformation in Anglo-Saxon England.

The second part, titled “Textual Locations,” concerns literatures from the close of the Old English period through the Middle English period. Whereas the first part of the book is devoted to powerful but somewhat conventional explorations of male-dominated architectural structures—the fortress and the monastery—and the appropriations of the northern English landscape in masculine terms, the second part investigates how female subjects employ mystical religious experience and verbal self-expression to improvise and defend embattled “feminized spaces” in the midst of patriarchal European cultures. Perhaps the most remarkable part of the book, “Textual Locations” should be attractive to readers with special interests in gender studies and female spirituality and monasticism. Stacy S. Klein, in “Gender and the Nature of Exile in Old English Elegies,” compares *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* to *The Wife’s Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, finding that the male exiles long to return to the locus amoenus of the mead hall, while the exiled female speakers indicate that Anglo-Saxon heroic culture, for them, is little more than prison. Ulrike Weithaus, in “Spatial Metaphors, Textual Production, and Spirituality in the Works of Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301/2),” well demonstrates how Gertrude of Helfta’s Christian mystical writings, which emerged from medieval Germany monastic locations, provide a context for understanding Christian spiritual resurgence and mystical

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writings by women in England and throughout northern Europe. In “Strategies of Emplacement and Displacement: St. Edith and the Wilton Community on Goscelin’s Legend of Edith and *Liber confortatorius*,” Stephanie Hollis reveals how the 12th-century monk Goscelin appropriates both the narrative of 10th-century Edith of Wilton’s life and the location of her nunnery home to promote his own social and spiritual well-being. And Diane Watt, in “Faith in the Landscape: Overseas Pilgrimages in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” effectively argues that Kempe appropriates and transforms the European landscape in her book to mold a supportive background to enhance her spiritual journeying.

The collection’s third part, “Landscapes in Time,” investigates imaginatively and hauntingly how human-altered geophysical features and architectural structures, even—or especially—in ruins, can function as texts that can be topologically construed by latter-day observers to provide tentative, partial access to long-past cultural formations. In “Preserving, Conserving, Deserving the Past: A Meditation on Ruin as Relic in Postwar Britain in Five Fragments,” Sarah Beckwith ruminates on the ruins of St. Mary’s Abbey, an ecclesiastical structure representative of all structures destroyed by war and time, and suggests that the ruins correlate objectively with the fragmentary memories and partial understanding of human observers of such structures. Kenneth Addison warns, in “Changing Places: The Cistercian Settlement and Rapid Climate Change in Britain,” that the accelerating deterioration of ancient ecclesiastical structures across Britain is indicative of the destructive impact of human-caused ecological degradation. And finally, in “Visible and Invisible Landscapes: Medieval Monasticism as a Cultural Resource in the Pacific Northwest,” Ann Marie Rasmussen creatively explores how conceptions of sacredness of place enunciated in medieval English monastic literatures provide a conceptual framework and a vocabulary that contemporary writers employ to valorize the threatened natural landscape of northwestern North America.

Taken severally, the eleven essays comprising Lees and Overing’s *A Place to Believe In* are generally challenging, intellectually energizing and, yes, mystical. This is a happy collection, however, the significance of which seems greater than the sum of its excellent parts. The topological insights that can be generated by comparisons between and among the essays make *A Place to Believe In* enlightening and even profound reading. ✱