

Joseph Pucci (ed.): *The Poetry of Alcuin of York. A Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. London/New York: Routledge 2024 (Routledge Later Latin Poetry). XII, 480 p., 2 maps £ 140.00/\$ 190.00. ISBN: 978-0-367-34213-5.

Joseph Pucci is one of the most prolific and generous curators of late antique and early medieval poetry in contemporary scholarship. His many books and articles have examined the reception of classical literature in the age of Augustine and beyond.<sup>1</sup> In 1997, he undertook an extensive revision of Karl P. Harrington's "Medieval Latin," a sprawling anthology first published in 1925, which he thoroughly updated and expanded for modern classrooms.<sup>2</sup> More recently, he founded the "Routledge Later Latin Poetry" series with David Bright and Scott McGill. Since its inception in 2017, this book series has published eleven volumes of English translations of the works of Latin poets active between the fourth and eighth centuries, both pagan and Christian. Ranging from Juvenecus's verse rendering of the Gospels from the age of Constantine to the poetry of Alcuin composed at the court of Charlemagne, these books offer not only clear and accurate translations of difficult texts, but also comprehensive introductions that provide cultural context as well as discussions of metrics and Latinity. While Pucci has already composed the introduction and notes to two volumes in this series, his most recent offering is a bountiful translation of the poems of Alcuin of York (c. 740–804), arguably the most prolific and important Latin poet of the Carolingian age.<sup>3</sup>

Pucci's introduction (pp. 2–37) to "The Poetry of Alcuin of York" is much richer than one would expect. Alcuin's life took him from his native Northumbria, where he emerged as a gifted teacher in the city of York, to the impe-

- 1 See most recently J. Pucci: *Augustine's Virgilian Retreat. Reading the *Auctores* at Cassiacum*. Toronto 2014 (Studies and Texts 187); and S. McGill/J. Pucci (eds.): *Classics Renewed. Reception and Innovation in the Latin Poetry of Late Antiquity*. Heidelberg 2016 (Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften. 2. Reihe. N. F. 152).
- 2 *Medieval Latin*. Edited by K. P. Harrington. Revised by J. Pucci. With a Grammatical Introduction by A. G. Elliott. 2nd ed. Chicago 1997.
- 3 Ausonius: *Moselle, Epigrams, and Other Poems*. Translated by D. Warren. With an Introduction and Notes by J. Pucci. London/New York 2017 (Routledge Later Latin Poetry); and Prudentius' *Crown of Martyrs, Liber Peristephanon*. Translated by L. Krisak. With Introduction and Notes by J. Pucci. London/New York 2020 (Routledge Later Latin Poetry).

rial court at Aachen, where he served Charlemagne directly as the author of official correspondence and capitularies. In 796, he assumed the abbacy of St. Martin's in Tours, where he spent the last eight years of his life. Pucci dispenses this information efficiently before moving on to the meat of the introduction: a masterly survey of all the writings associated with Alcuin, both authentic and doubtful. His literary output was prodigious, comprising dozens of works on a wide array of themes, including Adoptionism, astronomy, exegesis, hagiography, letters, liturgical works, pedagogical treatises, political works, and theological writings. Pucci assesses the state of research for each of these categories, thereby providing an invaluable guide for scholars new to Alcuin's work. He also highlights the lack of attention that many of these texts have received, which extends an invitation for future inquiries into his writings. A list of over fifty texts dubiously or falsely attributed to Alcuin speaks eloquently to his authority among medieval readers. Indeed, as Pucci notes, "[t]here has never been a time when Alcuin's words were not read or his influence not felt" (p. 5).

There follows an overview of Alcuin's poetry. By all accounts Alcuin was an excellent Latinist who largely conformed to classical norms of grammar. His poetic vocabulary was not dissimilar from the Christian poets of Late Antiquity whose verses he knew so well. The corpus of his poems is enormous: 339 individual pieces numbering 6,692 lines of Latin verse. The manuscript transmission of Alcuin's poems was haphazard and piecemeal because he never curated a collection of his own verses during his lifetime. In 1617, André Duchesne edited sixty-one of them from a lost ninth-century manuscript from St. Bertin. More than a century later, in 1777, Froben Forster published a larger corpus of Alcuin's poems organized by theme, which Jacques-Paul Migne reprinted in the nineteenth century in his *Patrologia Latina*. In 1881, Ernst Dümmler created what has become the standard edition of this corpus as part of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series. While Dümmler's edition is not flawless, it serves as the primary basis for Pucci's translations for all but one of Alcuin's poems. The exception is the 1658-line *Versus de Patribus Regibus et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae*, which was edited in 1982 by Peter Godman in the Oxford Medieval Texts series.<sup>4</sup>

4 Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York. Edited by P. Godman. Oxford 1982 (Oxford Medieval Texts).

The bulk of this hefty volume comprises Pucci's translations of Alcuin's poetic corpus ("The Poems," pp. 40–383). Each translation begins with a headnote that provides information about the meter and genre of the poem, its content and purpose, its manuscript witnesses and textual tradition, notes on its attribution to Alcuin, the context of its composition, and references to the ways in which previous editors treated it in their respective editions. While Pucci is a Latinist, his instincts are historical. His attention to the circumstances in which each poem was composed is especially valuable to readers new to Alcuin's poems. Some of these headnotes are so robust with information that they are longer than the translations they introduce.

Alcuin's corpus of poems comprised several different meters and treated a diverse array of topics. As a poet, Alcuin composed primarily in elegiac couplets and hexameters. According to Pucci, "[r]oughly 52% of the collection is elegiac, 43% is hexametrical, with the remaining 5% owed to the other meters" (p. 31). Alcuin put these meters to use for an impressive range of subject matter. His epic celebration of the political and ecclesiastical history of Northumbria (carm. 1) is the most ambitious of his poems, but it has only survived in a single manuscript from the twelfth century and its origin and purpose remain obscure. Alcuin also composed verse epitaphs for bishops and monks (carm. 2, 88, 113, and 123), recast prose saints' lives in hexameter (carm. 3, a *vita* of the missionary saint Willibrord), penned an elegiac response to the sack of Lindisfarne in 793 (carm. 9), tailored verse inscriptions by the dozen for monasteries and churches (carm. 33, 86, 88–91, 93–96, 98–110, 112, 114, and 117), rendered prefaces for bibles and afterwords for biblical commentaries (carm. 65–71, 76, and 78–79), and in one case appended a poem to a letter to summarize and emphasize its contents (carm. 10).

Alcuin wrote for a wide audience of learned readers. He addressed many verses to secular and religious leaders like Charlemagne and members of his family and court (carm. 13–14, 16, 26, 27, 37–42, 45, 72–75, 81–83, and 85) as well as Pope Leo (carm. 15, 25, 28, and 43). His poems also cemented friendships with a far-flung network of abbots, prelates, teachers, and students, including Paulinus of Aquileia (carm. 17–20 and 30), Theophilactus (carm. 21), the enigmatic Marcarius (carm. 31), Candidus Wizo (carm. 44), Friducinus (carm. 46), Monna (carm. 47), Arn (carm. 48, 84), Aethelheard (carm. 50), Hrabanus Maurus (carm. 51), Credulus (carm. 54), Anglibert (carm. 60), Richbod (carm. 87), and others unnamed (carm. 29, 34–35, 52–53, and 55). Several of the poems in Alcuin's corpus were didactic in pur-

pose, like the 200 hexametrical monostichs on the cloistered life (carm. 62) and a short poem for monks praising moderation in sleep (carm. 97), as well as a handful of animal fables with Christian morals (carm. 49, 57, 59, and 61). One of Alcuin's most popular poems in the manuscript tradition was a charming debate between winter and spring (carm. 58). Although it was heavily dependent on Virgil, Pucci notes that this piece was "the earliest debate poem in Latin" (p. 219). Alcuin also wrote riddles in verse (carm. 63) and a number of hymns (carm. 121).

One of the towering achievements of this volume is the fact that Pucci makes most of Alcuin's poems available in English translation for the very first time.<sup>5</sup> This is no small task. Pucci is transparent about his translation method, which aims "to create an idiom for Alcuin that sounds agreeable to contemporary ears" (p. 34). For the most part, he achieves this aim admirably. The care with which he undertook this work and the labor that underwrites translating a poetic corpus of this magnitude is clear from his account of the thought that he put into a single two-word phrase:

For example, at carm. 26.12, Alcuin uses the phrase *Hippocratica secta* to describe the doctors at court. *Secta* is perhaps more straightforwardly rendered as "disciples," the word Godman uses in his translation. But "disciples" doesn't pick up the connection of *secta* to *secare*, "to cut," "sever," "divide," or "detach," and thus loses the energy this verb supplies. I forbear using "sect," a word too often associated in English with fanaticism, but I resist Godman's "disciples" and settle instead for "clique," in order to emphasize the ways in which *secta* points up a group "cut off" by practice rather than by training (p. 35).

Pucci's translation is often pleasing and sometimes alliterative. Take, for example, his rendering of *aequorei potus hausere Britanni* (carm. 1.88) as "the sea-soaked Saxons slaked their thirst" or *Quae te dura coquit, iuvenum fortissimo, cura?* (carm. 1.99) as "bravest boy, what burden burns your heart?" Very seldomly, however, Pucci renders the Latin with an old-fashioned phrase or term that gave this reader pause, such as "a divvy of the dirt" (carm. 1.424: *pars pulveris almi*) or "when I didn't cotton to wickedness" (carm. 1.472: *criminibus tantum penitus servire solebam*) or "dray" (carm. 62.25: *quadriga*). But these instances are

5 The primary exception is *Versus de Patribus Regibus et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae*, which Godman (note 4) translated and published alongside his Latin edition in 1982.

few and far between across hundreds of pages of translations characterized by crispness and clarity.

Pucci is renowned as an award-winning and inspiring teacher, so it is perhaps no surprise to find that some of his students contributed translations to this volume, including two *carmina figuratae* by Brett Caplan (carm. 6) and David Sacks (carm. 7). These figure poems feature dense blocks of text that can be read horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. They survive together in a single manuscript from the ninth century, but Alcuin likely produced them in the late eighth century, when they formed part of a suite of figure poems presented to Charlemagne by Alcuin and his pupil Joseph the Scot. The topics of these poems are the honor owed to the Holy Cross (carm. 6) and a panegyric of the great king himself (carm. 7). Both translations are marvels to behold. Likewise, Xuanru Liu and Livia Hoffmann helped with the translation of two of Alcuin's letters pertaining to his poetry, which appear in Appendix 1 (pp. 394–396 and 396–397, respectively).

The five appendices are as generous with information as the rest of the volume. The first appendix presents English translations of fifteen of Alcuin's letters that pertain directly to poems translated in the book ("Letters of Alcuin Pertaining to His Poetry," pp. 384–410). The second breaks down which poems in Dümmler's edition are single poems and which poems in fact contain multiple poems gathered under a single number ("Poems in Dümmler/Strecker by Type," pp. 411–412). The third appendix identifies the meter of each poem and its length in lines ("Individual Poems by Meters and Numbers of Lines, With Summary of Meters," pp. 412–420). The fourth is an index of the 200 or so manuscripts that preserve Alcuin's poems ("Census of Manuscripts by Depository, With Digital Links," pp. 420–436). While this list is not comprehensive, it gives the reader a firm sense of the haphazard preservation of these verses in the manuscript tradition. The fifth appendix offers some notes on short poems that may be Alcuin's work and thus should be considered in a future edition of his verses ("Prolegomenon to a New Edition," pp. 436–439). The volume concludes with a bibliography (pp. 440–467) that begins with every piece of writing associated with Alcuin, including dubious and doubtful works, alongside their printed editions.

"The Poetry of Alcuin of York" is by far the longest and most ambitious addition to the "Routledge Later Latin Poetry" series. It is also the most generous in its treatment of the poet's context and his other surviving works,

both in verse and in prose. For scholars and students alike, this volume offers a treasure-trove of information about the thoughts and concerns of a Carolingian teacher and abbot. Not since the publication of Paul Dutton's "Carolingian Civilization. A Reader" more than two decades ago has a collection of translated texts brought to life the age of Charlemagne with such vividness.<sup>6</sup>

- 6 Paul E. Dutton (ed.): *Carolingian Civilization. A Reader*. 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ont. 2004 (Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures 1). The first edition appeared in 1999.

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