

**Parker, Eleanor. 2022. *Winters in the World: A Journey through the Anglo-Saxon Year*. London: Reaktion Books. Pp. 240. ISBN 9781789146721.**

Reviewed by María del Carmen Muñoz Rodríguez   
University of Seville

*Winters in the World: A Journey through the Anglo-Saxon Year*, written by Eleanor Parker and published in 2022, is one of the first volumes dedicated to exploring the cycle of the year as it was conceived in Anglo-Saxon times. The passing of the seasons was a topic of major importance in early medieval England, for the different changes occurring in nature had a strong impact on the functioning of the human world. This influence is reflected in the texts of the period, as shown by the considerable number of works in which the role of the always-changing nature is of an unquestionable relevance for the understanding of the rhythms of Anglo-Saxon life. However, despite the importance this topic seemed to have for this civilization, there have been few previous attempts to approach its research in its full cultural dimension. Examples of this endeavour would be *The Origin of the Liturgical Year* by T. J. Talley (1986), which offers an analysis of this subject from the very specific angle of Christian practices, and P. S. Langeslag's *Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North* (2015), whose specific focus is set on interpreting the symbolic functions played by the seasons in medieval literature. On its part, Parker's *Winters in the World* offers a more ample approach to the matter. As it is remarked in its preface, this book was conceived as an introduction to the Anglo-Saxon year and, by extension, to the literature of the period too (7). Actually, Parker draws on a huge and varied range of textual sources encapsulating the sense of time. Thus, by interweaving the analysis of famous pieces of the literary corpus with other less known texts documenting a large variety of cultural traditions and social practices, this volume manages to provide a complete and vivid understanding of the cares of the year as experienced by the inhabitants of early medieval England.

Considering the wider and presumably non-specialised readership addressed by this publication, Parker's writing style is accessible yet precise, without sacrificing scholarly accuracy for the sake of approachability. In this sense, the etymological explanations provided are suitable for the better interpretation of an entire set of medieval traditions which are deeply interrelated with the turn of seasons, rendering their presentation both informative and amusing. In terms of structure, the information encoded in this volume has been divided into four different chapters, one per season. This is how the readers are to be submerged in a wonderful journey through the progression of the year as they read its pages. Interestingly, the order followed by this study is not the expected one, as it neither begins with the month of January nor starts with the renewal of the natural cycle in springtime. In fact, the departing point of this volume is the chapter entitled "Winter", dedicated to the coldest period of the year.

This choice is not aleatory at all, for winter's presence in Anglo-Saxon literature is

meaningful. Parker carefully explains how many of the texts describing the world in this specific season do not just take pleasure in the physical representation of the hostile weather outside, but also build an encompassing and powerful metaphor of the unknown, this is, of the vast unknowable lying beyond human control. This time of the year is equally associated with feelings of misery and grief, as it was also conceived in some of these ancient texts as an oppressive force or, in the author's own words, as an "invading warrior" (41) that humans must fight back. Thus winter, or rather, surviving winter, is interpreted as a symbol of human gaining of knowledge, endurance, and experience. The author also provides readers with instances of the Anglo-Saxons' positive appreciation of this season, for the snows of winter are presented in some contemporary writings as necessary for the blossoming of nature to come afterwards. In this same line, the importance attributed to this process of transition among the seasons is equally put on show by Parker's highlighting of the spiritual relevance of the vernal equinox, marking a peak in the religious festivals of both the ancient pagan Germanic and Christian traditions on which the hybridized Anglo-Saxon culture relies.

In the chapter entitled "Spring", the notions of renovation and freedom conventionally associated with this time of the year are studied in connection with some canonical texts like *The Seafarer*, *Guthlac A* or *The Husband's Message*. Some pages are similarly devoted to exploring the bittersweet character of this season by pointing out at the chaos it used to bring about, for spring was often the time in which the Anglo-Saxons started their war campaigns. As it is explained, the outburst of different armed conflicts was equated in the collective imaginary to the energy of the disturbing storms and winds through which nature was submitted to changes and, ultimately, renovated. In a similar way, the author explores in this chapter the religious nuances of spring as the season clearly dominated by the celebration of Easter and how the Anglo-Saxons had adopted the Catholic Church tradition of placing the dates of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ in the liturgical calendar in such a way as to conform to the perfect circle of nature.

The chapter "Summer" is in turn devoted to the study of the benign character of the months involved. Considering the harshness of winter and the havoc and turmoil of spring, Parker explores how summer was regarded by the Anglo-Saxons as a peaceful interval in which communal joy was at its utmost. In fact, as the estival season was the period in which more hours of light were enjoyed through the day, there was an implied parallel between nature's serenity and safety and the social tranquillity and cheerfulness this brought in for humans. The author illustrates with textual evidence the way in which this idea, extensively exploited in literature, crystalizes in the poetic motif of the bright summer landscape evoking notions of well-being, peace, and sheer happiness at this time of the year. Likewise, she elaborates on the origin and symbology of some important festivities connected with the notions of accomplishment, abundance, and gratitude—such as Rogationtide, Ascension Day and Whitsuntide—and which were equally celebrated in this warmest season.

The final chapter of this volume, "Autumn", is reserved to the period of the year whose perception has changed the most all through the centuries. Parker first explores the relevance of the proverbial harvest time and the atavistic fascination with the invisible power making crops grow, enthusiastically reflected on the imagery of medieval texts. She also points out how, paradoxically, the Anglo-Saxons equally related autumn

---

to decline and decay. In a similar way, the human body was symbolically read as a natural creation which gradually shrivels until reaching the “winter” of old age. Besides resorting to this universal cliché, autumn is, on the other hand, attested as a time for intense spiritual activity, concentrating on the Advent weeks in preparation for the great feast of Christmas. Interestingly, the volume closes by linking this fourth season to the Norman Conquest of England in the year 1066, a traumatic event marking a new beginning in the history of the nation and which Parker, echoing classic medieval studies, explicitly terms as the “autumn of Anglo-Saxon England” (228).

*Winters in the World: A Journey through the Anglo-Saxon Year* completely fulfills the promise made in its introduction since, without simplifying the subject in question, it succeeds in rendering the study of the cycle of seasons in Anglo-Saxon England enjoyable by all kinds of readers. Parker’s compelling analysis of the understanding of the passing of the seasons according to the Anglo-Saxon mindset cleverly combines elements of literary analysis and cultural studies. In a certain way, it could be argued that this insight even incorporates some appreciations belonging in the critical paradigm of modern ecocriticism, as its pages re-examine the effects of the seasons on the natural scenarios of Anglo-Saxon writings. As Parker herself claims, the complex perception of the passing of time and the transience of life is at the core of all civilizations’ concerns since, despite the number of centuries gone by, “the cycle of the seasons, to which poets have so often turned as a reminder that nothing in this world is stable, is in fact one of the great constants in life” (232). Engaging and thoroughly well-researched, this book definitely makes a substantial contribution to the study of the cultural heritage of early medieval England.

(Received 29/03/2023)