

MICHAEL SCHILLING, ed., trans., *Ysengrimus. Mit einer Einführung und Erläuterungen herausgegeben und übersetzt von M.S.*, Sammlung Tusculum, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, 513 pp., €59,95, ISBN 978-3-11-066315-0.

With the Latin work *Ysengrimus* we are far beyond the bounds of classical antiquity. It is a long, poetical work from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, consisting of some 6500 lines (3250 disticha). The long poem may be characterized as an ‘animal epic’ or, underscoring its satirical qualities, a ‘mock epic’. It was written in the city of Ghent (Belgium) by an unknown author, who appears to have been familiar with monastic and ecclesiastical life (both in theory and practice), perhaps a monk. The date of composition can be established with some precision: between the spring of 1148 and August, 1149. In the five extant manuscripts that present the complete text, the work is subdivided in seven long books, but the structure seems relatively loose. It might best be described as a sequence of twelve episodes that can be read more or less individually.

Thematically the episodes are connected by the figures of the wolf Ysengrimus and the fox Reinardus, and their constant quarrels and mutual attempts at deceit. As a tale figuring ‘talking animals’ (some two thirds of the entire text consist of direct speech) the *Ysengrimus* inevitably recalls the ancient genre of fables, but there is also noticeable influence of the Bible and the Rule of St. Benedict, both of which are regularly cited or alluded to, not infrequently in a funny or ironical manner. Ysengrimus is often represented as a monk (or a bishop or an abbot), who in two scenes literally even enters a monastery and uses all textual means (including Scripture) to justify his main quality: his incessant lust for food and drink. Far from being the central hero, he is constantly ridiculed and in most of the episodes, the physically weaker Reinardus gains the upper hand. Ysengrimus is often dealt with harshly or even cruelly. In the end, he is literally stripped of his hide by some of his animal enemies, and thrown to the swine. The whole animal epic shows many passages that would seem rude or unpleasant to many modern readers (including many references to e.g. physical violence, obscenity and scatological elements). Medieval taste was, quite clearly, less scrupulous.

The Latin book was obviously intended for the pleasure and amusement of a specific target group. Given the numerous criticisms directed at the church, clergymen, and especially monks and monasteries, and the high quality of Latin, which also offers many linguistical puns and little puzzles, the intended reader must have been well versed in monastic affairs and well

educated. It seems safe to state that a '12<sup>th</sup> century monastic milieu' may be assumed for both the author and his readership.

The *Ysengrimus* was not only influenced by various earlier literary traditions, but by itself led to many vernacular works about the clever trickster fox Reynard, works in which the figure of Isengrin gradually receded into the background.

Plenty of reasons, then, to produce a new bilingual edition of this highly influential Medieval poem. Some translations are available, i.a. in Dutch from 1997 by Mark Nieuwenhuis, now freely online at <https://dbnl.org> > search for 'Ysengrimus 1997', a German one from 1955 (by Albert Schönfelder), and an English one from 1980 (by F.J. Sypher and Eleanor Sypher), while there are Latin texts by Voigt 1884 and Mann 1987 and a convenient bilingual edition in English translation Mann 2013 (in the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library). Still, a bilingual edition for a wider non-English audience was a *desideratum*.

The new German edition by Michael Schilling is, therefore, most welcome. After a short (34 p.), but instructive introduction that mostly deals with literary matters (structure and motifs, narrative forms, humor, and social criticism), Schilling offers a clean Latin text, adapted to the norms of classical Latin, and an unpretentious prose translation in plain, attractive German, that is helpful to readers who wish to understand the Latin original. Some 30 pages of notes and bibliography conclude the volume, that maintains the high standards of the famous Tusculum series.

The new edition is welcome and of high quality, but it remains doubtful whether it will actually reach out to a wider audience, or indeed, to readers who did not already know the work in advance. As a classical scholar only marginally acquainted with 12<sup>th</sup> century monasticism, I often felt I was missing something (a joke, an innuendo, a possibly ironical or, by contrast seriously critical remark). The meagre annotation rarely offered the help I felt I needed, and often I consulted these pages in vain. One wonders why not rather more was made of the notes. The format of the Tusculum series can hardly have been an obstacle here, as the series do include some volumes offering what amounts to a commentary.

Nor is the average reader given much practical assistance in the form of summaries, headings, or even regular blank lines as a means to isolate the equivalent of prose 'paragraphs'. One title for every single episode, that is about the help the reader receives. For the rest, he or she is confronted by a long, and often enigmatic text, arranged by the editor in massive textual blocks without any form of variation and without small helps to keep his or her interest going, let alone illustrations (which might have fitted in wonderfully here!). Honestly, I cannot image anyone of my students of classics getting to the end of the book as it is: most of them will probably

give up after thirty pages. If a wider, 21<sup>st</sup> century audience is to be interested for this complex text, much more seems to be needed.

One may hope that the obvious enthusiasm of the editor for the *Ysengrimus* will persuade him to pursue his important work and offer something more accessible to, particularly, young readers. In the introduction, he occasionally refers to modern 'comics' (cartoons, strips). So why not produce a series of comics as a sequel to the present edition? Perhaps even a TV series or cartoon film could be an option. This book that offers the text of the *Ysengrimus*, and *de facto* just the text, will mainly serve as a practical tool for specialized scholars of ancient and medieval animal tales.

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