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Ila. Old English Literature: An Overview

Old English literature could be initially defined as the texts created in England, and in English, by the Anglo-Saxons (see Ia for a summary of the Anglo-Saxon period). It represents a relatively small collection of texts in comparison with other periods (e.g. Victorian literature), though chronologically it covers approximately one-third of the history of English, from the fifth-century to the eleventh century. A rough estimate suggests that there are around three million words surviving in Old English. These are extant in various manuscripts held around the world but predominantly in the major collections in the British Library, Oxford's Bodleian Library, Exeter Cathedral's Library, and Corpus Christi College's Library in Cambridge (see IVa and IVd). These manuscripts have been studied by scholars for centuries, and editions of the texts they contain have been appearing since the 16th century. Three million words may sound a large amount but we must recognise these are not unique words (many, for example, are repeated). Furthermore when one considers that Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* alone, with its 300,000 plus words, would account for around 10% of the entire Old English corpus we can see the parsimony of the collection. However, contextually,

compared with other languages from the early medieval period (with the exception of Latin), this is one of the largest extant corpora from that period. As Greenfield and Calder note:

Anglo-Saxon prose and poetry are the major literary achievement of the early Middle Ages. In no other medieval vernacular language does such a hoard of verbal treasures exist for such an extended period (c. 700-1100) (Greenfield & Calder, 1986, p. 1).

Yet we must recall that this is just what survives to us, nearly a thousand years after the close of the Anglo-Saxon period. Thus we need to make two assertions:

- 1) The surviving manuscripts must represent a fraction of what was originally recorded;
- 2) The manuscripts themselves, if they had all survived, still would only have covered a small amount of the ‘literature’ *created* by the Anglo-Saxons.

Let us consider the first statement. According to our current knowledge there are over 400 ‘manuscripts’ surviving that contain Old English material (whole codices and fragments). Most of these were compiled before the Norman Conquest but we also know that some scribes were still recording Old English material well into the thirteenth-century¹. Yet we can easily surmise that over the years many manuscripts have been lost or destroyed. Contemporary evidence from such writers as Alcuin (*c.* 735-804; see IIb) indicates that the great libraries of Anglo-Saxon England (such as

¹ See Swan and Treharne (2000), and <http://www.le.ac.uk/ee/em1060to1220/>.

that at York) could have originally held as many as 2,000 books. It is true that many of these would have contained material in Latin, but nevertheless the indications are that throughout the Anglo-Saxon period there were considerably more manuscripts available in the vernacular (i.e. the ‘common language of the people’ – Old English) than survive today (see IVd). We can list the reasons why this might be so:

- Viking raids during the period which destroyed monasteries and their collections;
- ill-treatment of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts after the Norman Conquest (e.g. manuscript pages were scrubbed and cleaned for reuse later);
- theft or accidental loss;
- natural damage (wear and tear, water damage);
- man-made damage (early use of chemicals to enhance legibility).

One major catastrophe (post-Conquest that is) that befell Old English was the fire of 1731 in Ashburnham House, in which many of the manuscripts collected by Sir Robert Cotton in the previous century were destroyed or damaged. We know from catalogues and descriptions of the holdings of the library that several were lost, and looking at some of the manuscripts that survived (e.g. the *Beowulf* manuscript) one can still see the damage caused by the heat.

Let us now consider the second statement made earlier. In the Anglo-Saxon period the rate of literacy was very low and was confined, we assume, to the monasteries, clergy, and some of the nobility. Indeed literacy itself only came to the English with the arrival of Christianity in the sixth century – and even then we are still talking about

the educated elite, not the bulk of the population of England (see IIg). Our understanding is that it was predominantly monks who recorded material, and undoubtedly they would have been mainly interested in religious writing (though not always as we can see in such manuscripts as the Exeter Book, see IIk). It is again very possible, therefore, that much of the literature of the Anglo-Saxons existed only in oral form, i.e. it was spoken, performed, and handed down through word-of-mouth from generation to generation by lay-people (see below). Over the years, unless these texts were recorded in manuscripts, they would have been lost.

Nevertheless, as noted above, there are many manuscripts surviving that do contain Old English material; but it is open to discussion how these manuscripts would have been used. For the most part we believe that texts would have been read out from the manuscript to an assembled audience (see IVk). This is understandable as, already noted earlier, most of the population was illiterate. However, some texts (such as those by the poet Cynewulf where he inserts a runic cryptogram at the end) are clearly intended to be seen on the page (you cannot solve Cynewulf's puzzle without actually seeing the individual runes), and the numerous manuscript images and marginalia which appear in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts indicate their visible value.

Furthermore we must recognise the way texts were disseminated. A single manuscript copy was only of use to one institution, and therefore scribes copied these into other manuscripts for wider distribution. In the case of poetry the distinction between author and scribe is one that causes much discussion, but the general assumption is that the manuscripts that survive today are not written by the hand of the author but more by a copyist. This separation of the text from the author, and indeed the whole

discussion about who was the original author or authors of a text, is clearly different from the accepted norms in modern literature and challenge many ‘author-based’ theories (see IVk). In most cases we simply do not know who composed or wrote the original texts, and how far removed they were from the copies that survive. In addition, the notion of the fixed authorial text is a more modern concept and scribes clearly felt at liberty to alter the text they were copying (see IVe). The problems associated with this were clearly understood at the time – Ælfric, for example, urged future copyists not to make too many alterations to his text.

The material that does survive was recorded mainly during the period from the mid to late tenth century and early eleventh century. Indeed, the four main Old English poetical manuscripts (the Exeter Book, the *Beowulf* manuscript, the Junius manuscript, and the Vercelli manuscript) all were written in a fifty-year period around the year 1000 AD. Earlier material is much rarer, probably lost in the Viking wars of the late eighth and ninth centuries. It is only after the reconquest of England, initiated by Alfred the Great towards the end of ninth century, that there was an opportunity for the scriptoriums (i.e. the parts of the monastery charged with copying manuscripts) to flourish in safety, and for documents to be widely distributed and preserved. Later (post-Conquest) material in Old English does survive as well, notably in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which was still being maintained in the mid-twelfth century (see IIIa).

Now let us consider what actually does survive. Old English literature can be divided quite simply into prose and poetry. Drama, in terms of something written for a stage to be performed by actors, does not survive in Old English. However, there are

indications that certain religious ceremonies were elaborately choreographed involving multiple participants for an audience (e.g. processions and dedications – see Raw, 1991, pp. 230-31), and some elements of the surviving literature (such as those taking the form of a dialogue) could have involved more than one orator. However, this is a far cry from the later mystery plays (see IIII) or the theatre of Shakespeare, and thus when we talk of medieval drama we generally refer to material appearing well after the Conquest.

Old English texts themselves are usually presented to the student in modern editions, or textbooks (see IVj). Old English poetry is typeset as short lines with a caesura (metrical pause) marked by a gap in the middle of them (see IIh), thus producing two half-lines. Prose, on the other hand, runs continuously across the page, in common with modern practices. However in the manuscripts the text is continuous for both prose and poetry².

Only a small fraction of what survives would be considered poetry (*c.* 30,000 lines); the vast majority is prose (and we must remember that vernacular prose is outweighed by Latin writing from the period, see IIb). It is also accepted that poetry ‘came first’. This may seem a strange thing to say. Clearly, in everyday speech the Anglo-Saxons would have spoken as we do now, in something roughly equivalent to what we would call prose, that is language with the prosody of everyday speech, without specialised

² We refer to the literature (both prose and poetry) by lines, e.g. l. 7 means ‘line 7’, ll. 4-56 means ‘lines 4 to 56’. In the case of poetry we also refer to the half-lines (as ‘a’ and ‘b’), e.g. l. 56a or l. 56b means ‘line 56a’ (the first half of line 56), and ‘line 56b’ (the second half).

metrical patterns. Therefore in defence of the statement ‘poetry came first’ what we are really saying is that poetry was the first *literary* form in English, i.e. something that is designed to entertain or exact an emotional response.

In the earliest days of the Anglo-Saxons, pre- and post- migration, this poetry would have been learnt by the poet (or *scop* to use the Old English term) and then performed from memory (see IIh); probably early on this consisted mainly of ‘lays’, i.e. shorter poems of a narrative nature. Oral performance was in effect the only option open to the poet, as outside of a few runic inscriptions, it appears that illiteracy was almost universal. We would describe early Anglo-Saxon England therefore as an ‘oral society’, i.e. the spoken word was the predominant form. With the coming of literacy brought by the Christian missionaries in the sixth century and the subsequent rise of the monasteries this was to change. The word and rule of God had to be recorded, interpreted, and disseminated and that required a literate society. In the course of events, some of the monks also recorded secular texts, such as prose documents (see below) and apparently non-religious poems.

In other entries in this collection we will look more closely at the nature of Old English verse, and at some of the major texts. But for now, a few introductory details are worth noting:

- most of the poems are anonymous;
- the names of two poets are known to us – Cædmon and Cynewulf;
- most of the poetry that survives is contained in four manuscripts, and thus in general only one extant version of each survives;

- although we can date these four manuscripts, we cannot, with any certainty date the original composition of many of the poems.

Old English prose, as we noted above, outweighs poetry by a factor of over 10:1. Elements that distinguish prose from poetry are the lack of metrical patterns (Old English poetry has very strict rules), and a simplified syntax (especially word-order), and vocabulary. The earliest prose that survives is very straightforward in its structure consisting of short simple sentences (see IIe). However, later on in the period the prose becomes much more elaborate with developed use of clause structures, and with writers such as Alfred the Great, Ælfric, and Wulfstan, we see it elevated to a true literary form (IIe and IIf).

The range of prose material that survives is extremely impressive. As Janet Bately notes:

One of the most significant literary achievements of the Anglo-Saxons was the establishment of vernacular prose as an acceptable medium both for the dissemination of knowledge on a wide range of subjects and for the provision of moral instruction and entertainment (Bately, 1991, p. 71).

Bately also outlines some of the lost prose texts of the period; but even taking this into account, compared with other contemporary cultures in Western Europe, the Anglo-Saxons are unrivalled in the amount of material they recorded in their own language. We have law codes (the earliest from around 600, though surviving solely in a post-Conquest manuscript), historical texts (such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*),

scientific and medical texts, charms, proverbs, homilies, saints' lives, liturgical texts, history books, genealogies, catalogues, wills, writs, charters, letters, glosses to Latin texts, and translations of classical texts and the Old and New Testaments. In addition, as noted earlier, a lot of material (both prose and verse) exists in Latin written by Anglo-Saxons (see IIb), and this survives in many manuscripts. But even then they occasionally provided translations of these Anglo-Latin text in English, the most obvious example being the Venerable Bede's early history of England which originally was composed in Latin (appearing in 731), but was translated into English at the end of the ninth century (see IId).

The rise of prose is generally attributed to educational policy of Alfred the Great (849-99- see IIe). Faced with the destruction left behind by the Vikings, Alfred launched a learning programme, at the root of which was a series of key texts that he had widely disseminated. Most importantly, recognising the needs of his countrymen, Alfred chose to produce these texts in English, i.e. the language that most people could understand. This laid the foundations of English literary prose, and importantly established English as an acceptable language in which to write material of value to court and clergy, thus rivalling Latin.

In summary, we can also make a few introductory remarks about Old English prose:

- it is used mainly for factual information – and consequently it is often hard to argue that all of Anglo-Saxon prose has a literary appeal;
- the range of material recorded is extensive;

- many Anglo-Saxons (such as Bede, Alcuin, and Aldhelm) composed prose in Latin;
- English (or vernacular) prose really only begins as a literary form under Alfred the Great;
- a single prose text can survive in many versions in different manuscripts.

With such a large collection of prose and poetry (compared with other vernacular languages from the period) it is impossible to generalise about the nature of Old English literature. Therefore in subsequent chapters we have singled out the main styles and collections. Sometimes these groupings are self-evident, sometimes they seem forced. Yet these are the standard categories under which Old English is studied, taught, and written about in scholarly texts. Throughout this book we also adopt a range of approaches, but in keeping with most studies, we are advocating a ‘context-based’ approach, namely looking at the text or writer in terms of the possible historical and social context. To this end then one should not ignore the introductory essays on Anglo-Saxon history and culture; and consider Old English as part of the evolving story of English language and literature (as this book attempts to show), and their relationship to other contemporary languages (IVa) and literature (especially with Old Norse literature - see McTurk, 2005; and O'Donoghue, 2004).

Further Reading

Although Old English first appeared in print in the sixteenth-century, the majority of texts were only properly edited for the first time in the nineteenth century. Two series stand out from this period: the German editions by Christian Grein *et al* entitled *Bibliothek der Angelsachsischen Prosa* and *Bibliothek der Angelsachsischen Poesie*, and in Britain with the publications of the *Early English Text Society*. The latter has survived to become the dominant series, and runs into several hundred editions. These in turn are divided into the ‘Original Series’ (abbreviated OS), the ‘Extra Series’ (ES), and the ‘Supplementary Series’ (SS). In the late nineteenth and twentieth century editions of individual texts proliferated, often via University Presses; but also teaching texts which anthologised key poems or prose extracts appeared. Such primers and teaching collections (some of the earliest coming from nineteenth century scholars such as Henry Sweet³) were designed to meet the needs of emerging English departments, as Old English became ingrained into the syllabi. Nowadays there are plenty of teaching texts to choose from which bring together editions of Old English literature. We have listed the major textbooks used in section IVa on the ‘Old English Language’, and in addition other key reference works such as dictionaries, thesauri, and online resources.

In keeping with its academic nature, most studies of Old English literature appear in academic monographs and research journals⁴. The latter are often difficult to access

³ E.g. Sweet, H. (ed.) 1975, *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, 15th edn. revised by D. Whitelock, OUP, Oxford; or Sweet, H. (ed.) 1965, *Anglo-Saxon Primer*, 9th edn. revised by N. Davis, OUP, Oxford.

⁴ The key journals in this field are: *Anglo-Saxon England* (abbreviated ASE), the *Old English Newsletter* (abbreviated OEN), *The Year’s Work in English Studies* (YWES),

outside of major university libraries, so for this book we have tended to concentrate on books that are readily available. There are some key introductions to the period which one should try to get access to, and these are referenced throughout this book. Notably these include: Donoghue (2004), Godden & Lapidge (1991), Fulk & Cain (2005), Lambdin & Lambdin (2002), Liuzza (2002), and Pulsiano & Treharne (2001, especially pp. 3-10 for a general overview). It is also strongly advisable that one invests in a copy of *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Lapidge *et al.*, 1999). When attempting to find secondary material of interest students could look to the online bibliography at <http://www.oenewsletter.org/OENDB/index.php>; and the annual listings in *ASE* and *YWES*.

When researching a subject in Old English the introductory guides and bibliographies of the journals noted above are good starting points, plus some of the various routes suggested elsewhere in this book (i.e. under specific areas, or through the language reference works and online sources listed in IVa). To this we should add key texts like Greenfield and Robinson (1980), Hollis & Wright (1992), Poole (1998), and Waite (2000). Students should also consult the *International Medieval Bibliography 1967-2001* (http://www.brepolis.net/imb_en.html), and generic titles such as the *MLA Bibliography*, or journal contents listings under such resources as the ISI Web of Knowledge, OCLC FirstSearch, JSTOR, or PCI Contents Index.

The Heroic Age (<http://www.heroicage.org/>), *Anglia*, the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Medium Ævum*, and *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*.