

The Making of English  
Literature

THE MAKING  
OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

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"Watch what main-currents draw the years."

— TENNYSON.

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## PREFACE

THE author's main purpose has been to write a compact yet broadly suggestive historical introduction to English literature for use by students and by general readers. The method is somewhat different from that ordinarily pursued. In the first place, direct and separate discussion of general English history has been avoided, in the belief that so brief a book on literature ought not to turn aside for a moment from its proper aim of treating great literary works, personalities, and movements. Yet opportunity has been constantly sought to suggest and imply the historical background indirectly through the literary treatment, and an outline of historical facts and movements has been furnished in the Appendix. In like spirit, biographical details have been given mainly for the sake of their significant relation to the literature. This principle has been applied with moderation and restraint and with care to avoid forcing its application to unwise extremes.

Unity has been given to the discussion by a reasonable emphasis upon the great life forces which from age to age have determined the general character of English literature, and by a continuous endeavor to illustrate the working of those forces through a discussion of leading authors and works. The purpose has been to present the spirit of the literature as well as the essential facts, the great movements as well as the individual writers. Here again, the author has kept in mind the danger of extremes, and has sought to avoid urging general principles beyond the clear evidence of historical fact. Exceptions and indi-

vidual peculiarities have been duly noted, and the aim has been to make clear the relation of each writer to the general movement, whatever that relation might be. Within such limits, the discussion of great literary impulses is fully justified, and ought to prove suggestive and stimulating as well as unifying.

Each chapter marks a chronological advance on the preceding chapter, except in the last book. There, for reasons suggested in the text, the three chapters deal with three separate departments of the literature of a single period — prose, the novel, and poetry. The titles of the various books and chapters are in harmony with the purpose to make the volume a discussion of literature and literary movements rather than of general English history. Various helps to more extended study are given in an Appendix, where they may be easily referred to in connection with the treatment of each period, but where they will not interfere with the continuous reading of the text.

W. H. C.

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# THE MAKING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

## BOOK I

### *PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY (449-1066)*

#### INTRODUCTORY

LITERATURE is one of the fine arts—it is language used for those ends of emotion, imagination, and beauty which are sought by the painter, by the sculptor, and by the musician. More important still, literature—like all other art—is an outcome and an expression of human life—of human experience in the past, of human activity in the present, and of human aspiration for the future. In any historical study of literature, it is this intimate relation between literature and life that calls for especial emphasis.

The greater part of literature is directly or indirectly the product of individual men and women. Therefore the most immediate living fact to be regarded is the fact of personality. Behind the book is the man; and by knowledge of the man and his experiences, we may account for the character of the book. Behind all individual life, however, is the life of a whole people; and in the collective character and life of the race, we may discover the larger forces that have gone to the making of its literature. A thousand minor influences act and interact toward the production of the representative works of a racial literature, but these forces all spring ultimately

out of the racial life. This racial life is like a great river. It has many tributaries and many currents; but no tributary, however great, is so important as the main stream, and no cross-currents or counter-currents prevent the onward movement of the strong central flood. Nevertheless, the race undergoes many experiences and is affected by many influences; and if we can observe the forces that have strongly modified its life, we shall see some of the guiding impulses that have determined its literature — not otherwise. In a word, to arrive at the deepest causes of literary creation, we must consider the racial character and the potent influences that from age to age have shaped that character and determined the direction of its activities.

It is not to be supposed that a great guiding impulse will serve to account for a whole age and for all that is in it, for each individual genius and for all that he has achieved. To account for all literary phenomena, we should need to understand all the eddies and currents of racial and national life, all the startling and inexplicable facts of literary personality. All that we can assume is that there are great forces which give a certain degree of unity to the multitudinous variety of life and literature, and that these forces do mark for us the central current of the great literary stream. To observe the guiding impulses that have shaped the life of the English race will be to learn much concerning the secret of that long and stupendous process, the making of English literature.

## CHAPTER I

### ANGLO-SAXON PAGAN POETRY (449-670)

JUST how or when or where the literature of the English race began, no man can surely say. The Teutonic ancestors of the English came originally from the continent of Europe. They belonged to three related tribes—the Jutes, the Saxons, and the Angles—and dwelt in the Danish peninsula and along the coast of the North Sea to the southward. They began their conquest of Britain about the middle of the fifth century, and gradually extended their sway over what is now known as England—the land of the Angles. It seems altogether probable that these Teutonic invaders brought literature with them from across the sea, and that they still continued to cultivate it in their new home.

Racial and  
Literary  
Origins

We know little of the life and history of that early day, but of the general character of the people and of the ideals that guided their life and thought we can be reasonably sure. We find the mind of the race dominated by the conceptions of Teutonic paganism and its heart stirred by the passion for conquest and wild adventure. It was a mighty religious spirit, moving out along the lines of heroic achievement. The principal Teutonic deities were Tiw, the god of war; Woden, the strong and terrible father of the gods; Thor, the god of thunder; and Friga, the great mother. Their names still remain in our Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. The supreme religious virtue was physical bravery. The Valkyries, daughters of Woden, rode over the battle-field, selected those who were to die, and conducted the souls of

Pagan  
Heroism

the heroes to Valhalla, the hall of the slain, there to feast with the gods in immortal joy. It was a religion whose dominant note was one of war and heroism. It was, moreover, a gloomy religion. Over both men and gods, hung the boding shadow of Wyrð, or Fate, and the principle of evil was at last to overwhelm all in darkness and cold. The conception was a mythological reflection of the northern night and winter overcoming the more genial forces of nature. By such a religion and by such ideals was the race moved; and the oldest English literature finds here its primary guiding impulse.

The existing remnant of this pagan literature stands quite by itself in Anglo-Saxon literary history. In bulk, it is almost insignificant. A mere handful of  
**Earliest Literature** poems, only one of which is of any considerable length, makes up the extent of its treasures. Yet it bears unmistakable evidence of the spirit which created it. It has been worked over by Christian hands, and the old gods have vanished from it; but the heroic spirit of Teutonic paganism is still there, and Wyrð still hangs like a dark cloud over the life which it depicts. Brief space will suffice to make such a survey of its substance and character as will illustrate its pagan tone and give additional insight into the conditions under which it was produced.

Certain portions of the so-called *Charms* represent a form of folk-poetry that may be as old as the Teutonic race, and some of their lines carry us back to a  
**The Charms** period too remote even for conjecture. They embody the folk superstitions of a remote heathenism, handed down among the common people and so tenacious of life that the church of a later time could not abolish them and was driven to baptize them into Christian service. In their present form they belong to a much later period and contain an unusual amount of Christian interpolation.

They form a group of about a dozen short poems or verse incantations to be recited on various occasions, and they are accompanied by prose directions as to certain ceremonies to be performed in connection with the recital. Among others are charms for bewitched land, for a stitch or sudden pain, for swarming bees, for lost or stolen cattle. In the charm for bewitched land, one line appears to address some long-forgotten earth-goddess:

Erce, Erce, Erce, eorþan modor,  
Erce, Erce, Erce, mother of earth,

and a little further on is an appeal to the earth itself:

Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor,  
beo þu growende on godes fæþme,  
fodre gefylled frum to nytte.  
Hail to thee, earth, of all men the mother,  
Be thou growing in the bosom of god,  
Filled, for the use of men, with food.

The conception of earth as being made fruitful in the embrace of the god is thoroughly pagan, and illustrates the way in which the *Charms* reflect old popular superstitions.

Aside from certain portions of the *Charms*, probably the oldest piece of Anglo-Saxon poetry is that known as *Widsið* or the *Far-Traveler*. It purports to be the song of a *scop* or poet, who is called *Widsið*, and who relates his travels in many lands and the great events which he has heard of or seen. The persons and events referred to give evidence of the antiquity of the poem. Its literary value is small; but as the earliest complete poem of the literature, and as a description of the life of an Anglo-Saxon *scop*, it is of priceless worth. It is thus that our first English poem begins:

Widsið maþolade, wordhord onleac,  
se þe monna mæst mægþa ofer eorþan,  
folca geondferde: oft he on flette geþah

mynelicne maþþum. Him from Myrgingum  
æþelo onwocon.

Widsið spoke, his word-hoard unlocked,  
The man who o'er earth the most of nations  
And people had traversed: oft took he in hall  
A friendly gift. From the folk of the Myrgings  
His origin sprang.

After the recital of his wanderings and experiences, it is thus that the poet concludes :

Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað  
gleomen gumena geond grunda fela,  
þearfe secgað, þoncword sprecað,  
simle suð oþþe norð sumne gemetað  
gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,  
se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran,  
eorlscipe æfnan, oþ þæt eal scæceð,  
leoht and lif somod: lof se gewyrceð,  
hafað under heofonum heahfæstne dom.

Thus wandering on through the wide creation,  
The minstrels travel through many lands,  
Tell their need, speak their thank-word,  
Ever south or north with some one meet  
Who is skilled in songs, unsparing in gifts,  
Who before the host his fame would raise,  
Manfully act until all shall depart,  
Both light and life: who lives for honor  
Hath steadfast glory under the stars.

It is the warrior blood as well as the poet blood that speaks in such words as these. And such is the typical Anglo-Saxon *scop*—a man with the fierce nature and roving disposition which made his kinsmen the fighters and adventurers and conquerors of their time, which made them also the true ancestors of a race that has been without a superior upon the field of battle and has conquered and colonized to the ends of the earth. Here, also, is the spirit that delights to sing as well as to conquer—



the spirit that has made England even greater in the realm of poetry than in the arena of action.

In *The Lament of Deor* we have still another poem dealing with the *scop* and his experiences. Deor, like Widsið, has tasted the joys of the poet's life, but he has lived to see himself superseded and his rewards usurped by a rival more skilled or more fortunate. He gives utterance to a bitter personal grief; but he strengthens his heart with the thought that as the heroes of story have endured great sorrows, so he may endure his. Of the names mentioned, some are found in *Widsið*. Some also appear in the Germanic legend of *Gudrun*, thus furnishing one of the rare points of contact between the early poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and that of the Germans and Scandinavians. The poem is remarkable for being in strophic or stanza form. It is doubtless the oldest lyric in the literature. In each of five stanzas the poet mentions the sorrows of some famous person and closes with the refrain:

þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg.

That passed over, so also may this.

In the sixth and last stanza, he discloses the nature of his own personal grief and closes with the same refrain. The poem bears with it the atmosphere of the old pagan heroism, and the poet displays the same enduring temper that animated his warrior kinsmen.

The chief business of the *scop* was not to enlarge upon his own joys and sorrows, but to celebrate in epic song the deeds of the heroes. This is well illustrated by the three poems yet to be considered. The first of these is a mere fragment of about fifty lines known as *The Fight at Finnsburg*. It introduces us abruptly into the very heart of a fierce and bloody conflict, and breaks off again in the midst of its spirited description. We have no pictures of old Teutonic battle that