

A NEW
CRITICAL
HISTORY OF
OLD ENGLISH
LITERATURE

Stanley B. Greenfield *and*
Daniel G. Calder

*With a survey of the Anglo-Latin
background by Michael Lapidge*

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Preface to the New Edition

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance given us in preparing this new, greatly revised version of Greenfield's *A Critical History of Old English Literature*. But first we should outline the areas of our separate tasks: Calder is responsible for the sections on Anglo-Saxon prose, Greenfield for the chapters on Anglo-Saxon poetry. As we note on the title page, Lapidge has contributed a survey of the Anglo-Latin background. Greenfield and Calder have read each other's work again and again, and each has made significant contributions to the other's part. Henry A. Kelly read the chapters on prose and made valuable suggestions. Jeannette Gilkison typed most of the book and offered us cheerful service, as she has often done. Matthew Miller and John Bernhardt put in long hours checking the many quotations and references, and to them we also extend our appreciation. The staffs of the University of Oregon Library and the University Research Library at UCLA have also been unfailingly helpful. We would especially like to thank Colin Jones of the New York University Press, who has given us considerable freedom to revise and expand the first edition as we saw best.

All translations in this book are our own, except that those of the Latin sources and analogues of the poetry are taken from

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Calder/Allen 1976. For a few translations of Latin background material we have used (and cited) other works. Part of this project was underwritten by research grants from the Academic Senate of UCLA. For all errors of fact and blunders of style that remain, we take full responsibility.

Eugene, Oregon
Los Angeles, California

Stanley B. Greenfield
Daniel G. Calder

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Preface to the Original Edition

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the aid and comfort afforded me by various people in the course of writing this *Critical History*. First, to Kemp Malone and Charles Dunn, for recommending me for the volume to the General Editor, Oscar Cargill, and to Mr. Cargill for his encouragement at various stages of the enterprise. Then, to James E. Cross and Dorothy Bethurum, who carefully read the Introduction and the chapters on the prose, making suggestions both as to fact and style that have proved invaluable. To the staff of the University of Oregon Library for their cooperation, and to Mrs. Roxanne Erb and Sue Hamilton for their kindness and diligence in typing the manuscript. I am indebted most of all to Arthur G. Brodeur, Thelma C. Greenfield, and Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., who painstakingly read the entire manuscript; their tactful suggestions have spared my readers many an unconscious ambiguity of meaning and many a graceless phrasing, as well as spared me many a later blush at factual oversights. Such errors of fact and difficulties of style as remain I must acknowledge as my own.

Eugene, Oregon

Stanley B. Greenfield

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Introduction

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). While some of the Germanic and Celtic nations produced works of high art, they cannot match the encyclopedic breadth of the Anglo-Saxons, who triumphed in almost every genre. They inherited a rich oral tradition from their Germanic ancestors; they absorbed the theological doctrine and rhetoric of their Christian Roman teachers. Yet they experimented and created new forms, while remaining true to this dual heritage. The result is a corpus of astonishing variety. We are fortunate to possess as many examples from these centuries as we do; if we had more of what must have been an even greater original creation, our wonder would grow in proportion.¹

The singularity of their accomplishment is not only to be measured against that of neighboring or related peoples; it is also noteworthy within the history of English literature. Old English prose and poetry furnish a sense of depth and continuity in English thought, since the basic Christian tradition underlies most writing from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries. Microcosm and macrocosm, *ubi sunt*, consolation, Trinitarianism—these are some ideas and motifs that Old English texts share with the works of writers like Donne, Milton, Arnold, and Tennyson. But despite

this community of thematic interest, Old English literature, for the most part, stands alone. While subsequent English prose may show some development out of its Anglo-Saxon origins, Old English poetry presents stylistically a unique body of material in which oral poetic techniques fuse with literary or rhetorical methods. Later poets, such as Hopkins and Pound, may have imitated a few of what they perceived as the striking qualities of Old English verse, yet this form of flattery still leaves the ancient patterns intact and unaffected. In truth, there is not a great deal of continuity from the Anglo-Saxon to what we have come to know as the "English literary tradition." What does exist is often artificial and contrived, and fails to evoke the spirit of the originals. When we review what the Anglo-Saxons did create within a span of four centuries, we must concentrate on it more or less by itself.

Some of the problems facing the historian of this literature are self-evident: the necessity of filling in historical background; of determining how much culture is "literary," or important for literary understanding; of assessing the relevance of Latin writings composed by Anglo-Saxons; of explaining certain linguistic features; and of establishing a proper sequence for the presentation of the works.² More properly the domain of the literary historian is commentary on poetic and prose styles, on genres and traditions, on metrics and prosody, as well as assessment of individual works and authors. Complicating the task are chronological problems with most of the poetry (the major surviving manuscripts all date from c. 1000) and a good deal of the prose, the anonymity of the authors, and the great amount of borrowing from tradition and from one or two named writers.

Since this book is a drastic revision of an earlier work, it will be useful to detail the major alterations which we have introduced. First, we have eliminated the initial chapter on Anglo-Latin prose, replacing it with Michael Lapidge's general survey of Anglo-Latin literature, written specifically for this revision with an eye toward providing a background for Old English literature.³ Second, we have tripled the amount of space devoted to Anglo-Saxon prose. This reflects the growing scholarship on prose texts, and the sense that they are important in their own right, as well as providing a broad cultural backdrop for the study of Old English poetry. Prose

has for too long been the step-child of Old English literary studies. Third, it has been our intention to encompass the whole of Anglo-Saxon literature; many prose and poetic texts are included which did not make an appearance in the first edition: *The Grave*, *The Rime of King William*, the penitentials, and various religious tracts, to name a few.

Our intention has also been to incorporate as much as possible of the scholarship and criticism that has blossomed in the past twenty years. Thus the book is three things—a synopsis, a critical reading of texts, and a history of the criticism. All of this has had to be accomplished in a severely compressed fashion, but on occasion—the readings of Caedmon's *Hymn*, Ælfric's homily "On the Lord's Prayer," or some of the "Elegies," for example—we have permitted ourselves more scope for treating textual and interpretive problems. In addition, we have tried to account for some of the renewed interest in the history of the discipline, seen as a history of tastes, styles, and attitudes;⁴ the quickening of interest in the study of Anglo-Saxon literature in relation to other arts and sciences;⁵ the reassignment of authorship for more than one prose text; and the explosion of Christian-allegorical and oral-formulaic studies. To assist readers in this endeavor, we have added a lengthy bibliography, so that they might know what, in our opinion, to read first, before turning to the definitive Greenfield/Robinson compilation.⁶ Our bibliography is arranged alphabetically by authors/editors and keyed to abbreviated footnote references.

Perhaps the study of Old English literature still finds that its primary question is the same one Alcuin asked nearly twelve hundred years ago: *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?* "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" This famous remonstrance, made in a letter written in 797 to Hygebald, bishop of Lindisfarne, concerning the monks' fondness for listening to heroic song in the refectory rather than to spiritual wisdom, still forces us to consider how we should understand and describe that extraordinary corpus which emerged from the encounter between an unlettered Germanic tribal aesthetic and the remnants of the classical tradition, itself transformed by the Christian religion. Old English literature is a palimpsest, and few periods in the history of English literature offer the literary historian a greater challenge—to comprehend and ap-

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preciate the layers as they accumulated over many centuries, understanding its historical context and yet using modern critical techniques.

NOTES

1. On the losses in the medieval period, see Wilson 1952. On extant materials, see Ker 1957. On continuity, or the lack thereof, see Chambers 1932; Wrenn 1958; Wilson 1959.

2. For the history and culture of the OE period, see Stenton 1971; Hunter Blair 1956; Whitelock 1979; Campbell, Jas. 1982. All have excellent bibliographies, and Whitelock 1979 not only has a general introduction but comments on different sections and on specific works translated therein. For further historical and cultural bibliography, see Bonser 1957. Of the many grammars and introductory texts, we recommend Quirk/Wrenn 1958; Cassidy/Ringler 1971; Mitchell/Robinson 1982. The definitive study of OE syntax is Mitchell 1985. The standard dictionary is Bosworth/Toller 1882; Clark Hall/Meritt 1960 provides a concise dictionary. A concordance to all OE prose and poetry is Healey/Venezky 1980. Of previous histories of OE literature we may cite Malone 1967; Anderson, G. 1966 (with some reservations); Wrenn 1967. Calder 1982 reviews nearly all the surveys and histories of OE literature.

3. It is, to date, the only complete history of Anglo-Latin literature, even though condensed. Since some of the Anglo-Latin material impinges on OE prose and some of the poetry, there is inevitable overlap between chapter 1 and those following.

4. On the history of the discipline, see Adams, E. 1917; Stanley 1975; Calder 1979b; Berkhout/Gatch 1982.

5. On the interrelationships of art and literature, see Leyerle 1967; Schroeder 1974.

6. See Greenfield/Robinson 1980.

CHAPTER 1

The Anglo-Latin Background

Most surviving Old English literature was composed and transmitted by Christian churchmen. This statement probably holds true even of apparently secular literature, but it is unquestionably true of the obviously ecclesiastical literature: homilies, saints' lives, translations of Christian-Latin texts, ecclesiastical legislation, prayers. Any literate person in the Anglo-Saxon period would have been trained by the Church, either in a monastery, cathedral, lesser canonry, or small minster. If we are properly to understand Old English literature, we must know something of the circumstances and context in which it was composed; in short, we must study the Anglo-Saxon church.¹

In Anglo-Saxon times, the language of Christianity was Latin. The word of God *per se* was transmitted in a Latin Bible. The sacraments of baptism, marriage, and burial were conducted in Latin, as were the Mass and other church ceremonies, such as the consecration of a king. In monasteries, all parts of the Divine Office (that is, the daily cycle of prayers and hymns) were in Latin; moreover, monks were obliged to speak the language among themselves. Learning to read and write necessarily implied the study of Latin, and a critical examination of Old English literature should best begin with some reflections on the workings of the

Anglo-Saxon school. Since most of our rather sparse evidence pertains to monastic schools, we may consider a typical monastic education.

The young oblate or novice was received into the monastery at approximately the age of seven. From the outset he was expected to participate in the Divine Office, even though he would not at first have been able to understand a word. Since the Office consists almost entirely of psalmody and hymnody, the beginner would first have committed the Latin psalter to memory. His teacher would have aided memorization by means of literal explanations: hence, presumably, the complete Old English interlinear glosses of Latin texts in many Anglo-Saxon psalters. So too with the hymns. Because they were mostly composed in late antiquity and presented greater syntactical difficulties than the psalms, they were often recast in simple Latin prose and then provided with word-for-word interlinear glosses.²

By the time he had committed to memory long tracts from the Latin psalter and hymnal, the young student was ready for the rules of Latin grammar. In the early Anglo-Saxon period the teacher would have relied principally on the *Ars Minor* of Donatus, a fourth-century Latin grammarian, together with various Late Latin commentaries on Donatus. However, since these works were meant for Latin-speaking audiences and did not meet the needs of English-speaking students, a number of Anglo-Saxon scholars compiled Latin grammars of their own: Boniface and Tatwine in the early period, Alcuin and Ælfric in the later.³ At this stage the student would also have received some elementary instruction in Latin metrics; here again, since the metrical treatises handed down from late antiquity hardly sufficed for speakers of a Germanic tongue, Aldhelm, Bede, and Boniface set about composing elementary metrical treatises for their Anglo-Saxon students. The novice was expected to speak as well as read Latin, and apparently learned to do so from Latin "colloquies," that is, model dialogues between master and students concerning business of the day, intended to impart the vocabulary necessary to discuss daily affairs; in the later period Ælfric and his student, Ælfric Bata, composed such pedagogical exercises (see chapter 3).

After the novice had learned the rudiments of Latin grammar

and meter, he proceeded to those Latin texts which constituted the medieval curriculum, a course lasting some ten years. The novices read the texts with minute attention: word for word, line for line. Probably the master dictated a passage and the students transcribed it onto wax tablets; by class on the following day they had to learn the text thoroughly. They then erased the passage and replaced it with the next. The curriculum-texts came in order of difficulty. Of course, those studied would have varied from place to place and from time to time;⁴ and our information for Anglo-Saxon England is incomplete.

Nevertheless, we may deduce from surviving booklists⁵ and manuscripts⁶ that the Anglo-Saxon curriculum included study of the following texts—listed in order of difficulty: the *Disticha Catonis*, a collection of two-line moral maxims by an unknown Late Latin poet; the *Epigrammata* of Prosper of Aquitaine (died c. 455), a collection of some 106 epigrams, each of which is a metrical version of a moral maxim by St. Augustine; the *Evangelia*, a hexametrical version of the gospel narrative of Christ's life by the early fourth-century Spanish priest Juvenius; the *Carmen Paschale* of the fifth-century poet Caelius Sedulius, whose poem is, like Juvenius', an account of Christ's life, but with extensive allegorical and typological amplification; the *Psychomachia*, by the fourth-century Spanish poet Prudentius, an allegorical account of the struggle between the Virtues and the Vices; the early sixth-century Roman poet Arator's *De Actibus Apostolorum*, a hexametrical account in two books of the lives of SS. Peter and Paul as told in the biblical Acts of the Apostles; and the *Poema de Mosaicae Historiae Gestis* by Alimus Avitus of Vienne (fl. 500), a hexametrical version of Genesis, as far as the Crossing of the Red Sea.⁷

The curriculum may have included other texts as well. In particular, Vergil's *Aeneid* and Lucan's *Pharsalia* seem to have been known throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, and in the later part, the *Satires* of Persius and the *De Consolatio Philosophiae* of Boethius come to the fore. But the staple of the curriculum remained the Christian-Latin poems. Study of these poems would have determined the tastes of the literate Anglo-Saxon and affected the form of Old English literature. Specific examples of such influence are the translation of the *Disticha Catonis* into Old English (see chap-

ter 3); the collections of maxims in verse (*Maxims I* and *II* and *Precepts*); the number of surviving Christian allegories (*The Seafarer*, *The Phoenix*, and *Physiologus*); and the large proportion of Old English biblical verse-narrative, including all the poems of the Junius manuscript (*Genesis B* is very largely based on Alcimus Avitus) and *Judith*.

When the student had completed his secondary education in curriculum texts, he pursued either the study of the scientific quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and harmony), or, if he became a monk, spent the remainder of his life reading Scripture and the patristic authorities. There is little evidence that the quadrivium was widely studied in Anglo-Saxon England, but meditation on the writings of Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory would have been the lifelong occupation of a monk.

The large body of surviving Anglo-Latin compositions proves that schools flourished in Anglo-Saxon England. The English were among the earliest non-Latin-speaking peoples in Europe who had to master Latin after their conversion to Christianity, a task which they undertook with great zeal. As a result, many Anglo-Latin writings spread throughout Europe during the early Middle Ages. Proud of their achievement, the Anglo-Saxons often composed a Latin which is characterized by a lavish display of vocabulary designed to impress by the arcane nature of its learning; it abounds in obscure, learned-sounding words, such as archaisms, grecisms, and neologisms. Because this vocabulary often derived from certain Greek-Latin glossaries known as *Hermeneumata*, the style is usually referred to as "hermeneutic."⁸ This *recherché* style commended much Anglo-Latin literature to medieval audiences, but also makes it seem alien to modern literary taste. Nevertheless, we must remember that the literate Anglo-Saxon expressed himself in both Old English and Latin; if we are to understand properly the context of Old English literature, we must have some notion of the range and nature of Anglo-Latin literature.⁹

We shall begin this survey of Anglo-Latin writings with early Southumbria (Mercia, Wessex, and Kent), before moving on to consider Northumbria. We may assume that Latin schools were first established in England with the arrival in 597 of Augustine and the Roman monks dispatched by Pope Gregory the Great. The