

SELECT TRANSLATIONS FROM
OLD ENGLISH POETRY

COOK
AND
TINKER

BOSTON, U.S.A., AND LONDON
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SELECT TRANSLATIONS FROM OLD ENGLISH POETRY

EDITED

WITH PREFATORY NOTES AND INDEXES

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Antiquam exquirite matrem

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PREFACE

THIS book is addressed to those intelligent students of English literature, whether under tutelage or beyond it, who have not been quite willing to accept the statement that Chaucer was the father of our literature and the creator of our language, and who have yet not been able to gratify their curiosity as to what might lie beyond, by reason of their inability to read the tongue of our pre-Chaucerian ancestors. We are persuaded that there are many who are quite aware that Beowulf was not the author of the poem which bears his name, who yet are uncertain how that poem compares in diction, in imagery, in character-painting, in variety of interest, and in loftiness of sentiment, with the *Iliad*, the *Æneid*, or *Paradise Lost*. We are convinced that there are those who are too well instructed to call Cædmon and Cynewulf *Seedmon* and *Syneewolf* who still have no clear conception as to the relation, whether in bulk or character, borne by the extant poetry of the one to that of the other. We feel sure that there are those who would prefer to appraise for themselves the qualities of our oldest literature rather than remain in helpless dependence upon the dry or rhapsodical estimates of the current writers upon the subject. So long as there are educated persons misled into imagining the missionaries

and civilizers of Europe north of the Alps as mere drunken savages or torpid churls, or into looking upon them as fatalists and ascetics plunged in hopeless gloom and continually occupied with images of the charnel-house, so long there is need that convenient opportunity be afforded to revise such opinions, and to frame juster views concerning those ancient students of Latin and Greek, those patriots who fought with Alfred, those scholars who founded the empire of Charlemagne by arts, as he by arms.

To this end their poetry should be rendered accessible. The prose can wait, if need be ; but specimens of the better Old English poetry, translated, where that is possible, rather than traduced, should be drawn from the cabinets of professional scholars into the light of day. He who will should have some opportunity to read for pleasure that which may be well written ; to admire what may be spirited, pathetic, or sublime ; to realize the variety of theme and treatment within the four or five hundred years which the period covers ; to compare poem with poem, and, if possible, century with century, or even writer with writer ; to trace the relation between our older literature, broadly considered, and the later ; and to do this unvexed, so far as may be, by misleading comment, while provided with brief suggestion on important matters, and especially with respect to the sources of fuller information.

(By two things, at least, this poetry at its best is characterized, by the sense of reality and the instinct of reverence. The poet writes with his eye upon the object, but it is with an eye that admires, that discerns

spiritual qualities and meanings, with the eye of the soul no less than that of the body. Here is vivid apprehension, profoundly imaginative insight, worshipful awe, and sometimes a masterly restraint in expression. Here is respect for simple manliness, admiration for magnanimity, homage for divine tenderness and self-sacrifice. The range is not small — from characterization of a lifeless object, like a bow, to that of the terrors of Doomsday and the music of archangels; from the turmoil of ocean, which

shouts aloud and groans in mighty pain,
While sounds the tramp of floods along the shore,

to the colors of an imaginary peacock, the fragrance of a blossoming forest, and the splendor of sunrise over the sea. To these poets heroic deeds are matters to be recounted with simplicity and sober enthusiasm, true kingship is sacred, the good things of life are to be duly enjoyed, the instinctive feelings of the breast before the mystery, the might, and the glory of nature are not to be restrained, while all is tempered by reflections upon an endless future and the due retributions attendant respectively upon evil conduct and right living. Here are pictured, or reflected, men bearing their part of life's burdens, doing the world's work in stoutness or humbleness of heart, not without consciousness of an infinite background for the performance, and infinite rewards for high service, yet with senses alert to sight, and odor, and sound, to the spectacle of an old churl tangled and tripped by the ancient representative of John Barleycorn, the artistry of a beautiful book, the gleam of armor, or the

thrill of harp-strings. (They tell tales, drink the mead, race horses across the plain, ply bow and spear, are loyal to their lords, defiant of their foes, hungry for honor; moreover, when they see death approaching, they face it with solemnity — if pagans, with fortitude and calm resignation; if Christians, with godly fear and joyful hope. Not savages these, not mere drunken churls, not cravens continually occupied with images of the charnel-house, but men who challenge our respect, and deserve it. It is of their poetry that we would fain present some fragment in modern rendering as little unfit as may be.)

Translated, where that is possible, rather than translated — such has been our ideal, yet none can be more conscious than we how often the corruption of manuscripts, or textual problems as yet unsolved, or avoidable ignorance, or sheer incapacity and lack of literary feeling on the part of the translators — ourselves included — have obscured the qualities of the original, now by deficiency and now by excess. We are tempted to ask pardon of those who know; yet, on second thoughts, we ask rather for unsparing criticism in the form of better renderings of the same selections, or excellent versions of other pieces.

It will be seen that the book does not represent any particular theory of translation to the exclusion of others. Indeed, in view of the fact that opinions on the best medium for the translation of poetry are so divergent, the attempt has been made to exhibit a variety of media. Hence the latter range from prose to ballad measures, from blank verse to verse roughly imitative of the original

movement. In certain cases, as in that of *Widsith*, the translation is nearly literal; elsewhere, as in that of *The Ruined City*, the rendering is decidedly paraphrastic. Thus the book should be useful as an illustration of the different methods of translating our older poetry, and at the same time point the way to something better than its own present form.

The best Old English poetry is, we believe, fairly represented here by specimens, while pieces like *Widsith* and the *Charms* have been admitted not so much for their poetic interest as for their bearing upon the history of culture. It was of course impossible to do more than make selections from the longer poems, but, when possible, an entire composition has been used. The desire to present complete productions must excuse the apparently undue prominence given to a poem like *The Phoenix*.

The classification of the poems is naturally unsatisfactory. A chronological arrangement was manifestly impossible; an arrangement by authors was equally impossible. The word 'lyric,' in the classification we have adopted, must be understood in its widest signification. The cross-references may in some instances aid in counteracting the faults of our arrangement, in addition to such value as they may otherwise have.

We take pleasure in acknowledging our indebtedness to various publishers, particularly to Messrs. Cassell & Co. for permission to use the extracts from Morley's *English Writers*, and to The Macmillan Co. for similar permission to use Tennyson's *Brunanburh*; the *Beowulf* selections are from the translation published by Newson & Co. (New York, 1902), and the *Christ* selections from

Whitman's translation (Boston, Ginn & Company, 1900). The *Andreas* extracts are from Root's translation (*Yale Studies in English* III; New York, Holt & Co., 1899), and The Battle in the *Elene* from Lewis' *Beginnings of English Literature* (Ginn & Company, 1899). *The Battle of Maldon* was originally published in *Macmillan's Magazine* 55 371 ff.; *The Wanderer* in the *Academy* 19 355; *A Love-Letter* in the *Journal of Germanic Philology* 3 7 ff.; Hallam Tennyson's *Song of Brunanburh* in the *Contemporary Review* 28 920 ff. The other renderings appear here for the first time, and, with the exception of *The Dream of the Rood*, have been made especially for this book.

In the interests of uniformity, the editors have taken minor liberties with the extracts as respects punctuation, paragraph division, etc., and at times the spelling of a word. They are also, in general, responsible for the headings of the various sections, and even for the division into sections of poems like *Judith* and *The Phœnix*.

The topics of the subject-index will, we trust, prove suggestive to teachers and students, and may be productive of entertainment to the general reader.

YALE UNIVERSITY,
July 7, 1902.

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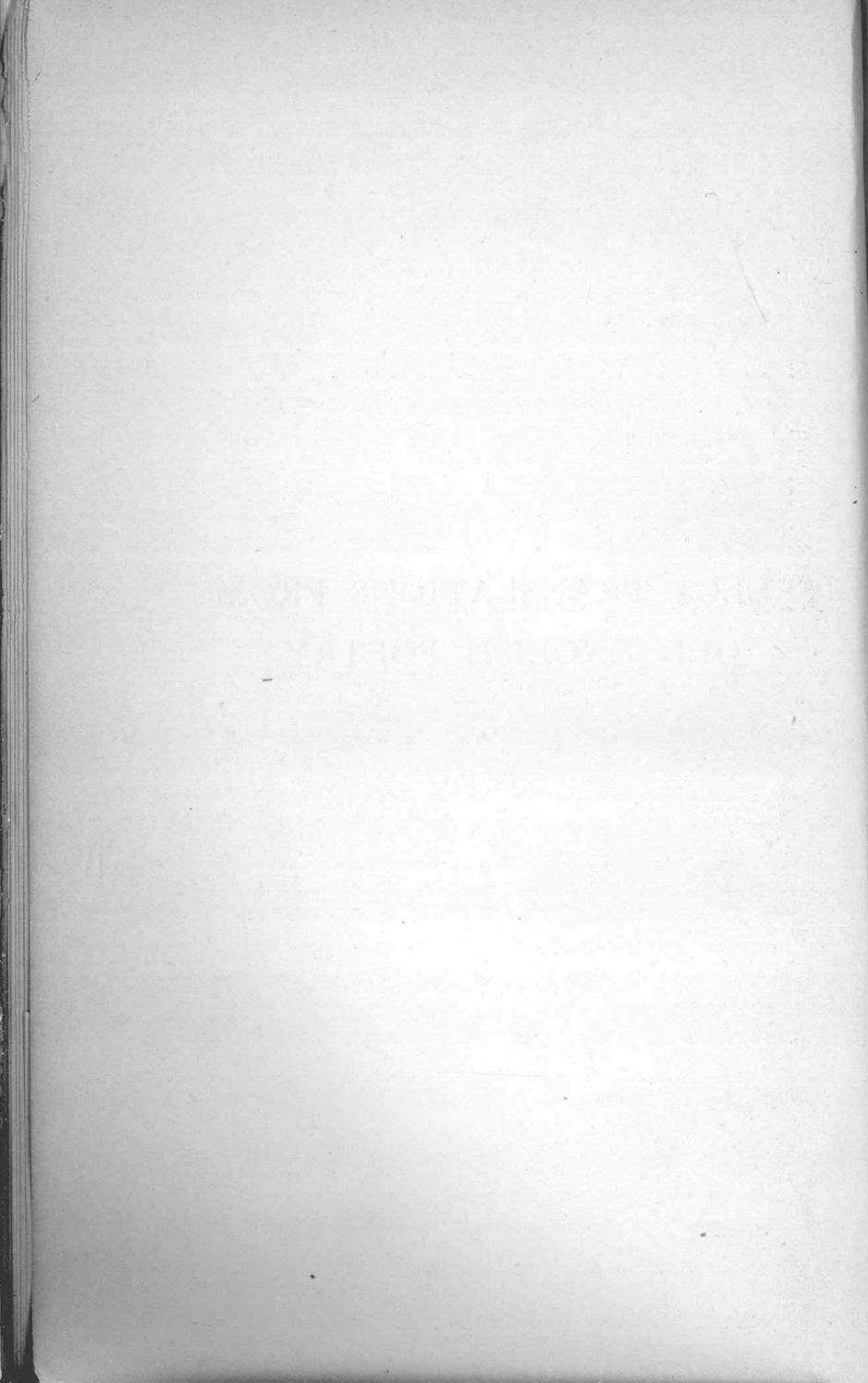
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SELECT TRANSLATIONS FROM
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I

EPIC AND HISTORICAL PIECES

WIDSITH

Widsith, the Far-traveler, designates the wandering minstrel who is here supposed to speak. The poem is of historic and legendary rather than æsthetic interest, notwithstanding the poetic quality of one or two passages. Ten Brink (Paul's *Grundriss* 2 538 ff.) recognizes four chief divisions of the poem: (I) 1-9; (II) 10-49, 131-134; (III) 59-63, 68-69, 75-81, 82-87(?), 88-89, 109-130; (IV) 50-58, 64-67, 70-74, 90-108, 135-143. Of these I forms an introduction, II is a list of legendary kings, III is called the Eormanric catalog, and IV the Ealhild lay. According to Ten Brink, the nucleus of III may belong to the sixth century, and have originated in the peninsula of Schleswig-Holstein, the original home of the Angles; IV to the end of the sixth century, about which time it probably passed over to Mercia, in Britain; the union of III and IV may have fallen between 650 and 700; and the fusion of this latter combination with II may be referred to the eighth century. Other scholars have held somewhat different views.

The catalog of names (see 18, 20, 24, 25, 27-29, 31, 33, 35, 45, 48, 49, 58, 60, 63, 93) contains references to some of the characters in *Beowulf*.

Widsith unlocked his word-hoard; and then spake
He among men whose travel over earth
Was farthest through the tribes and through the folks;

Treasure to be remembered came to him
Often in hall.

Among the Myrgings, nobles gave him birth.
In his first journey he, with Ealhchild,
The pure peacemaker, sought the fierce king's home,
Eastward of Ongle, home of Eormanric,
The wrathful treaty-breaker.

Of many things then he began to speak:

10 'Much have I asked and learnt of men in rule

Over the peoples; every chief must live

Following others in his country's rule

By custom, who would thrive upon his throne.

Of such was Hwala, once most prosperous;

And Alexander, wealthiest of all

The race of man, and he throve most of those

Whom I have heard of, asking through the world.

'Attila ruled the Huns; Eormanric

The Goths; over the Banings Becca ruled;

Over the Burgends Gifica. The Greeks

20 Were under Cæsar; Cælic ruled the Finns;

Hagena the Island tribes, and Henden Gloms;

Witta ruled Swæfs; the Hælsings Wada ruled,

Meaca the Myrgings; the Hundings, Mearcolf.

Theodric ruled the Franks; the Rondings Thyle,

Breoca the Brondings. Billing ruled the Werns;

Oswine the Eowas; over the Jutes Gefwulf;

Finn, son of Folcwald, ruled the Frisian race;

Sige here ruled longest over the Sea-Danes;

Hnæf ruled the Hocings; Helm the Wulfings; Wald

30 The Woings; Wod the Thuringians; and Sæferth

The Scygs, and Ongentheow the Swedes; Scaefthere

The Ymbers; Sceafa the Lombards; and Hun
The Hætwers; Holen ruled over the Wrosns.
Hringwald the Herefaras' king was named.

‘Offa ruled Ongle; Alewih the Danes;
Of all these men he was the proudest, yet
He over Offa won no mastery,
But, earliest among men, while yet a child,
The greatest of the kingdoms Offa won.
None of his age won with his single sword
More lordship; he enlarged by Fifeldor
His bounds towards the Myrgings, and thenceforth
Angles and Swæfs were forced to be as one.
Hrothwulf and Hrothgar, uncle and nephew, held
Peace with each other longest after they
Cast out the race of Vikings, bowed the point
Of Ingeld's sword, hewed down at Heorot
The host of Heathobards.

40

‘Thus far I traveled through strange lands, and learnt 50
Of good and evil in the spacious world;
Parted from home-friends and dear kindred, far
The ways I followed. Therefore I can sing
And tell a tale, recount in the mead-hall
How men of high face gave rich gifts to me.

‘I was with Huns and Hreth-Goths, with the Swedes
And Geats, and with the South-Danes. I have seen
The Wenlas and the Wærnas, and have been
With the Vikings. And also I have been
Among the Gefthas and the Winedas
And Gefflegas; with Angles, and with Swæfs
And Ænenas; with Saxons and with Sycgs,
With Swordmen, with the Hrons, and with the Deans,

60

With Heathoræms and with Thuringians,
With Throwends, with Burgundians; there I had
A circlet given to me by Guthhere,
A welcome treasure for reward of song;
That was no tardy king! With Franks I was
And Frisians and Frumtings; with the Rugs,
And with the Gloms, and with the Rumwealhs;
70 So was I with Albuin in Italy;
He of all men was readiest of hand
In shaping praise, most liberal of heart
In sharing rings, bright collars, Eadwin's son.

‘And I was with the Serkings and the Serings,
And I was with the Greeks and with the Finns,
With Cæsar, master over joyous towns.
Wiolane I saw, and Wilna, and the realm
Of Wala; with the Scots I was, and Picts,
And with the Scrid-Finns, and the Lid-Vikings,
80 With Leons, Lombards, Hæthens, Hæreths, Hundings.

‘And I was also with the Israelites;
With the Ex-Syrings, Hebrews, Indians,
And with the Egyptians, Medes, and Persians,
And with the Myrgings; with the Mofdings then,
And once more with the Myrgings. Then I saw
The Amothings, East-Thuringians, and the Eols,
Istas, and Idumingas.

‘And I was
With Eormanric, and all the while the king
Of Goths was good to me. Chief in his burgh,
90 A collar of six hundred sceats of gold
Counted in coin, he gave me — beaten gold;
Which I, home coming, in requital gave