



THE PENGUIN
SHORT HISTORY
OF ENGLISH
LITERATURE

STEPHEN COOTE



Stephen Coote

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OF ENGLISH LITERATURE



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Old English Literature

I

This is a chronicle of how men and women, for more than a thousand years, have expressed themselves in a literature of extraordinary fertility and a language of matchless resource.

The origins of that language reach back to the remote fifth century when conquering tribes of Jutes, Saxons and Angles first brought to the country the various dialects of a Germanic tongue now called Old English. Many of the words the invaders used survive in our vocabulary today. We have no difficulty recognizing *mann*, *wif* and *cild*. We are familiar with the *hus* in which they *libben* or live, the *mete* they *etan* and the *waeter* they *drincan*. The *bok* you are reading describes a history almost as old.

Though pronunciation has changed and modern English has freed itself of nouns that must be declined and adjectives that reflect their gender, Old English had several qualities which uniquely fitted it to survive and grow. Its users were willing to borrow words from the Latin culture of the Christian church and to absorb the Scandinavian vocabulary of later Viking raiders. Old English thus drew on European traditions, while her poets further enriched their 'wordhoard' with an imaginative range of synonyms. These last tell us a great deal about Anglo-Saxon life. In a world of war, gold and honour, the king was the heroes' treasure keeper and 'victory lord'. His warriors were his 'shield bearers' fighting in the 'iron-clad ring'. Over the heaving 'whale's road', riding the 'water's back', sailed the broad-bosomed longships with crews of 'Spear Danes' eager for fame.

Such fame was a principal preoccupation of the poet or *scop*, seated at his chieftain's hearth and regaling the company with records of their history. *Wisdith*, in a poem that dates perhaps from the early seventh century, offers a detailed inventory of the men who rose and fell in the great period of warrior migration a hundred years before.

While presenting this panorama of the past however, *Wisdith* also portrays himself in the timeless and masculine role of the Old English bard. His name implies that he is the widely travelled one, the man whose albeit imaginary journeys have disciplined him to received wisdom. Suffering, loneliness and the experience of good and evil have made *Wisdith* a man apart and the singer of songs who can reveal to his audience the glory and pathos of their uncertain world. This is the world created again by the stoic author of *Deor* (?seventh century), and both men look to the lord of the 'mead hall' for generous gifts in return for immortalizing his fame.

The communal and oral nature of such poetry accounts for a number of its characteristic features. All of these made it easier for the bard to improvise his work and his listeners to understand it. For example, each line, divided into halves of two stressed and a varying number of unstressed syllables, is symmetrical and alliterative. Such patterns appeal directly to the ear. Vivid poetic diction and the frequent use of parallel expressions for a single idea set the verse apart from normal speech and mark it out as a special mode of discourse, a means of imagining the world. Lastly, many set-piece passages describing such events as fights or feasts are composed from verbal formulas that were clearly part of a traditional and unwritten inheritance on which all poets could draw.

Such are some of the formal characteristics of this verse, but if Old English poetry is marked by artifice it is also characterized by deep emotion. The following lines from *The Battle of Maldon* (993) in which a band of warriors face certain defeat suggest these qualities well:

Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will,
 the heart fiercer, as our force faileth.
 Here lies our lord levelled in the dust,
 the man all marred; he shall mourn to the end
 who thinks to wend off from this war-play now.
 Though I am white with winters I will not away,
 for I think to lodge me alongside my dear one,
 lay me down by my lord's right hand.

This passage conveys the ideal of warrior loyalty, the love of fame and honour embodied in the Germanic and originally pagan forms of

the warrior life. It also suggests the reverence for conventional wisdom and the recognition of an uncertain and even malign universe which characterize the longest and most famous Old English poem, the epic *Beowulf*.

Although composed in a Christian court in seventh- or eighth-century Mercia or Northumbria, *Beowulf* is deeply sympathetic to the heroic tradition, to the culture of the hall and that view of human activity characteristic of the pagan world of southern Scandinavia two hundred years earlier. The poem thus reflects a life of fights and feasting, of ceremony, brilliant gold and sudden darkness. Here are pride in birth and physical strength, a world of sacred obligations, feud and vengeance. Beyond this, the forces of *wyrd* or fate seem to control man's destiny with mysterious omnipotence, while evil itself (personified in the poem by the monstrous Grendel, his dam and the dragon) is both primordial and powerful, something to be outwitted and destroyed by cunning and physical strength. However, while *Beowulf* contains many scenes of vivid action, it is principally conceived as a meditation on the heroic life, a philosophic vision of warrior man in his splendour and defeat.

The opening lines, for example, portray the funeral of a great king who as a young man crossed the waters to bring glory to an ailing country, just as Beowulf himself will later do. We watch the building of Hrothgar's mighty hall at Heorot, but even as this symbol of heroic society is celebrated, so we know it is waiting for the fire that will one day destroy it. Man's highest achievements are thus set against a background of inexorable change, and man himself is subject to time, weakness and age. Hrothgar has now passed his prime, and creatures of darkness prey on his fading glory.

Grendel and his dam are embodiments of primordial evil, the outcast forces of destruction who hate the order of Heorot with satanic jealousy. Hrothgar can no longer hold them at bay, and Beowulf in his shining 'war-gear' – the young hero from across the sea – is the only figure who can counter their power. When Grendel and his mother have been slain, a period of celebration ensues. There is rejoicing in victory and Beowulf's strength. Treasure is lavished on the hero and he returns home with his fame immeasurably increased. Hrothgar's words in the midst of proud success cannot however be forgotten:

Put away arrogance,
 noble fighter! The noon of your strength
 shall last for a while now, but in a little time
 sickness of the sword will strip it from you:
 either enfolding flame or a flood's billow
 or a knife-stab or the stoop of a spear
 or the ugliness of age; or your eyes' brightness
 lessens and grows dim. Death shall soon
 have beaten you then, O brave warrior!

This speech is the pivot of the poem. It combines a love of heroism and conventional wisdom with a view of man poised between the brightness of youthful achievement and the shadow of death. If the first half of the work is a record of glory, we now move to a more sombre view.

The last section of *Beowulf* describes the ageing hero's defeat in his struggle against the dragon. The whole encounter is suffused with pessimism and the meanness of the man who has stolen the dragon's gold. With his spirit 'gloomy, death-eager, wandering', Beowulf himself seems to realize there is something fatal in this last encounter, a corrosion of confidence that eats away at the heart of the heroic ideal. In the heat of battle, all his companions save one desert him. As the dying hero offers his kingship to his last loyal retainer, so the glory of a nation withers away. Death and exile wait for all, and heroism passes into poetic legend.

2

The anonymous author of *Beowulf* drew on traditional resources to present an all-involving view of man and the supernatural, war and peace, life and death. This helps give his work its status as a heroic elegy. Great churchmen such as Alcuin of York (735-804) however had long asked what verse fundamentally sympathetic to a pagan culture could have to do with Christian salvation. This was a serious challenge to the older tradition, and a passage from *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin by the Venerable Bede (probably 673-735), suggests how it was resolved.

Bede relates that when the harp was passed to the devout but unlearned Caedmon (late seventh century) he would rise from the company rather than expose his ignorance and distaste for pagan convention. One evening when this had happened and Caedmon had retreated to the cowshed, a figure appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to sing. 'What should I sing about?' the bewildered Caedmon asked. 'Sing about the creation of all things,' the figure replied. Bede says that Caedmon promptly improvised the following verses:

Now we must praise the Keeper of Heaven's Kingdom,
 The Maker's might, and His conception,
 The deed of the Father of Glory; as He of all wonders
 – The Eternal Lord – established the beginning.
 He first created for the children of men
 Heaven as a roof, the Holy Shaper;
 Then Middle Earth did Mankind's Keeper,
 The Eternal Lord, afterward ordain,
 The earth of men, the Almighty Lord.

In these nine lines Caedmon has drawn heavily on the traditional 'wordhoard', but epithets previously reserved for pagan warriors have now been applied to the Christian God. When Caedmon was taken before St Hild, Abbess of Whitby, she and her learned advisers were so impressed by this that Caedmon was made a lay brother and offered instruction in order that he might versify the whole Christian story and so teach the people.

For Bede, concerned above all to show the operation of the divine in English history, Caedmon's discovery of his vocation was an act of God. What his account more certainly shows is how an important cultural problem was exposed and then solved by a creative intuition, an imaginative leap we may well choose to call inspired. In Caedmon's 'Creation-Hymn', two apparently contradictory cultures were reconciled and Old English poetry was joined to the great tradition of European Christianity. An enormous artistic advance had been made, and scholars sometimes refer to this as the Caedmonian revolution. What is less often recognized is the role played in this process by St Hild. A woman of commanding personality, and respected as such by Bede, the intelligence and foresight with which she used the important place offered her by her society require that she too be seen as a central figure in the making of English literature.

Though Bede goes on to describe how Caedmon versified a wide range of biblical events, modern scholars suggest that the remaining eighth-century Christian poems in Old English are the work of Caedmon's followers. One such poet is known by name. The verse of Cynewulf (late eighth or ninth century) lies firmly within contemporary patterns of Christian devotion and scholarship, motifs to which the poet in such works as *Elene* brings both his culture's natural regard for able women and an often skilful use of the formulas of Germanic heroic verse. These last were also used by the anonymous author of *Genesis* who delighted in describing God and the angels in terms of a warlord and his warriors, while heaven itself becomes an image of the earthly mead hall.

In *Exodus*, the flight of the Israelites and the crossing of the Red Sea are again imagined in terms of epic poetry, but to these effects the poet adds traditions of scriptural interpretation learned from the church fathers. Beneath the adventure there lies a serious spiritual purpose. Just as the Israelites are shown gaining the Promised Land, so Christians may enter the kingdom of God. Events in the Old Testament thus prefigure those in the New and teach all men of their salvation. This method of allegorical interpretation was to be of great importance to writers for many centuries to come, and they applied it not just to the Old and New Testaments. The whole world could be seen as an image of spiritual truth. In *The Whale*, for example, the great beast represents the Devil who lies in wait for unwary men, swallows them and drags them down to the depths of hell. Even wholly imaginary animals could be made to serve religious instruction. In *The Phoenix*, the fabulous bird, leaving its earthly paradise to die and be reborn, becomes an image of Christ's Passion and Resurrection.

Such works suggest how the church and its poets believed the true function of art was not simply to release feeling but to teach others and enhance devotion. A poem might give pleasure but it should also do something spiritually useful. It should help its hearer to pray and so assist in the most important duty of life – the pursuit of salvation. It is against such a background that we should read the masterpiece of Old English devotional verse, *The Dream of the Rood* (c. 700).

Rood is Old English for a cross, and this most famous symbol of the Christian faith appears in the narrator's dream encrusted with

gold and reaching out over the whole world. At once bleeding and glorious, the cross is an image of shame and redemption – a uniquely powerful fusion of Anglo-Saxon culture with New Testament love. Christ is portrayed as the young warrior striding to embrace death and victory, while the cross itself takes on the burden of his suffering. When it speaks to the narrator of Christ's eager sacrifice and its own humiliation, the poet's skilful handling of words and emotion – his rhetoric – makes us feel we are present at the Passion itself:

I was reared up, a rood.
 I raised the great King
 liege lord of the heavens,
 dared not lean from the true.
 They drove me through with dark nails:
 on me are the deep wounds manifest,
 wide-mouthed hate-dents.
 I durst not harm any of them.
 How they mocked at us both!
 I was all moist with blood
 sprung from the Man's side
 after He sent forth His soul.

As the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* obliges us to relive the agony of the Crucifixion, so his art stirs our pity and gratitude. We become ever more conscious of human sin. At the close of the work, when the poet's vision has faded, he offers a final and moving image of himself as a devout Christian alone on the worthless earth and longing to be reunited with the cross in heaven.

The heroism, sense of transitoriness and ardour for salvation that characterize *The Dream of the Rood* are also seen in some of the Elegies, that mighty handful of poems gathered in the Exeter Book, one of four manuscripts dating from about the year 1000 in which the greater part of Old English verse is preserved. The names by which these eighth-century poems have come to be known are *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Ruin*, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Each concerns loss and isolation, and coldly through the greatest of them blows a salt-edged wind and a knowledge of the heaving wastes of the sea. These build to a sense of universal desolation:

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A wise man may grasp how ghastly it shall be
when all this world's wealth standeth waste,
even as now, in many places, over the earth
walls stand, wind-beaten,
hung with hoar-frost; ruined habitations.

Such pessimism remains profoundly moving, but as we come to know more intimately the rhetorical image of themselves that these poets fashioned, so we can also begin to see how the narrators of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* were deeply responsive to the Christian view of existence as this was formulated towards the much feared end of the first millennium. Aware of the anger of God towards the sinful soul, these poets present exemplary Christian images of themselves as strangers and sojourners in a corrupt and corrupting world. The author of *The Seafarer* in particular suggests that the true image of the righteous man is of a traveller or pilgrim on his way through the snares of mortal life to the eternal and heavenly Jerusalem. Such an image not only underlies some of the finest Old English poetry, but was to be developed by many of the greatest writers of the Middle Ages.

3

It is recorded that Alfred the Great (reigned 871–901) was keenly interested in Old English verse, but Alfred's literary concerns are principally associated with the revival of written prose and hence that crucial cultural achievement: the preservation of a body of advanced thought on which others could draw to describe their world. Books – rare, valuable and open to only the tiny minority of the literate – were now to take on their vital role as the repositories of what is known.

In Alfred's Wessex, the writing of such books was an urgent matter. Repeated Viking raids, cutting ever deeper into the kingdoms of England, had resulted in the sacking of churches and the burning of libraries. The centres of knowledge were being destroyed. When Alfred had finally forced the Vikings into retreat, he realized that to

build his kingdom afresh he would have to develop its language and revive the learning once preserved by churchmen such as Bede. Literacy was clearly essential to this, but since Latin (for centuries the international medium of scholarship) had fallen into decay over most of England, the native tongue would have to serve. Its use in government and the law, in church matters and education, would stretch the resources of Old English to their limit and be a powerful force for national unity.

When peace was at last assured, Alfred wrote to the bishops saying that it seemed best to him, provided it did so to them, that they now 'turn into the language we all understand certain books most necessary for all men to know'. To revive the traditions of knowledge, Alfred would, with the help of scholars from England and abroad, translate the wisdom of the Latin and Christian classics into the language of his time. These translations include the *Dialogues* of St Gregory (trans. c. 880), one of the most influential fathers of the church. The fact that Alfred chose to translate this collection of saints' lives suggests he was determined to create for his people – such young men at least as could be spared from the army or the production of food – a literature of exemplary Christian conduct. Alfred's version of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* further shows how he wanted to place his own rule and that of his senior administrators on a firm intellectual basis, for *Pastoral Care* describes the moral and spiritual qualities required of those who have the government of others.

To provide his subjects with a sense of historical continuity, Alfred had an edited translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* prepared. This work tells, with a critical concern for accuracy unique in its time, the history of England subsequent to the arrival of St Augustine of Canterbury as a missionary in 597. This event had helped establish the Roman Church as the focus of the country's European culture, and Bede's illustration of the then common belief that history is a moral pattern shaped by the hand of God would be a fundamental notion influencing writers for centuries to come. Finally, two further translations by Alfred himself reveal his more personal concerns. His version of the first fifty of the Psalms expresses the emotional side of his piety, while his work on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (the book which, more than any other, handed down the classical inheritance of reason to the Middle Ages) shows Alfred's interest in developing a language for abstract and critical thought.

Alfred's revival of literacy was sustained by many others. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (c. 871–1154), for example, is a laconic record of contemporary national events and thus an important source of information for Alfred's and subsequent reigns. It survived the Norman Conquest, and entries in the version from Peterborough (one of the seven centres at which the *Chronicle* was kept) continue into the harrowingly described reign of King Stephen (1135–54). While the narrative rarely rises to the level of literary interest, what is chiefly remarkable about the work is its very simplicity at a time when Latin authors in England and abroad were striving for elaborate rhetorical effect.

Conscious artifice and a concern with style and fluency were clearly of interest among later writers of Old English prose. This is particularly true of those associated with the Benedictine revival which took place during the reign of King Edgar (959–75). In this prolific period, during which many of the manuscripts in which Old English verse survives were written, the learning fostered by Alfred was placed on a firm foundation after the troubles that succeeded his reign.

The importance of Benedictine monasteries as institutions for preserving scholarship can hardly be overemphasized. The value placed on learning by St Benedict himself (the founder of Western monasticism) resulted in the making of digests or *florilegia* of the classical writers and theologians. These traditions of literacy were then passed on by an educational system based on the *trivium* or the skills of Latin grammar, rhetoric (the techniques of shaping language into persuasive and effective forms) and logic, the rational ordering of ideas. Such are the foundations of medieval and later scholarship. They were brought to bear on Old English by the ecclesiastical requirement to preach in the native tongue. For many centuries the sermon, educating people in what were held to be their spiritual, social and political duties, was an important force in preserving and developing the language. A quantity of alliterative prose sermons survives from the tenth century. Some of these, forcibly decrying the evils of the age, see further Viking raids as a divine punishment foretelling the end of the world.

It is the particular mark of Old English prose in this last great period however that it proved itself capable of dealing with almost any subject, be it history, romantic adventure such as we find in the

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translation *Apollonius of Tyre* (c. 1050), righteous indignation or the subtleties of theological argument. The lucid, powerful homilies of Aelfric (d. 1020) and Wulfstan (d. 1023) reveal a complete mastery of the medium and show how fifty years before the Norman Conquest southern England especially had, along with a remarkable body of poetic achievement, the most advanced prose literature of any region in Europe.

Medieval Literature

I

After the battle of Hastings, Old English ceased to be the main language of advanced written thought and public record. Latin and the Norman French of the conquerors became the principal tongues of church affairs and secular administration. A language without a common written standard is vulnerable however, and between the early twelfth and fourteenth centuries Old English lost many of its more complex grammatical characteristics. Nonetheless, contact with the Normans themselves greatly increased its vocabulary. By about 1350, some 900 words had been borrowed, and while much of the basic language of existence (*life, love, work and death*, for example) remains Old English in origin, many of the new words suggest increasingly refined aspirations. Among these words are *courteous, honour* and *noble*. Such changes mean that linguists refer to the speech of the period between about 1150 and 1350 as Early Middle English.

These subtle linguistic movements are paralleled by changes to the literature produced during the next three centuries that are equally far-ranging. Several works of devotional prose allow us to trace this development. In the central section of *The Ancrene Riwe* (c. 1200) for instance – a guide for anchoresses or women who had entered on a life of cloistered seclusion – the anonymous author creates a moving passage in which he suggests how Christ comes to the erring soul as a knightly lover to his lady, offering to die for her redemption. A profound change in spiritual life has clearly taken place, prompted here by the spiritual needs of women. Unlike Old English literature, the finger of an angry God no longer points to the sin-fraught exile. Love has largely superseded fear, and explorations into undiscovered regions of the heart offer fresh possibilities for introspection. An emphasis has also been placed on the humanity of Christ and the imagery of human passion.