Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 13

The Textuality of Old English Poetry

Carol Braun Pasternack

The Textuality of Old English Poetry

CAROL BRAUN PASTERNACK
Professor of English Literature
University of California at Santa Barbara

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521465496

First published 1995
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Pasternack, Carol Braun.
The textuality of Old English poetry / Carol Braun Pasternack.
p. cm. – (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England; 13)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 46549 4 (hardback)
1. English poetry – Old English, ca. 450–1100 – Criticism, Textuality.
2. English language – Old English, c.a. 450–1100 Versification.
3. Wanderer (Anglo-Saxon poem). 4. Rhetoric, Medieval.
I. Title. II. Series
PR203.P37 1995
829'.1–dc20 94–33368 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-46549-6 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-46549-4 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03270-4 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-03270-9 paperback

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN
ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

13

THE TEXTUALITY OF OLD ENGLISH POETRY

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England is a series of scholarly texts and monographs intended to advance our knowledge of all aspects of the field of Anglo-Saxon studies. The scope of the series, like that of *Anglo-Saxon England*, its periodical counterpart, embraces original scholarship in various disciplines: literary, historical, archaeological, philological, art historical, palaeographical, architectural, liturgical and numismatic.

Volumes published

1 *Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion Iconography and the Art of the Monastic Revival* by BARBARA C. RAW
2 *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* by MARY CLAYTON
3 *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* by PATRICK SIMS-WILLIAMS
4 *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* by KATHERINE O'BRIEN O'KEEFFE
5 *The Metrical Grammar of* Beowulf by CALVIN B. KENDALL
6 *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* by CHARLES D. WRIGHT
7 *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* by M. L. CAMERON
8 *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* by ANDY ORCHARD
9 *The Old English Lives of St Margaret* by MARY CLAYTON and HUGH MAGENNIS
10 *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* by BERNHARD BISCHOFF and MICHAEL LAPIDGE
11 *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence* edited by MICHAEL LAPIDGE
12 *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* by PETER CLEMOES

In memory of my teachers, Daniel G. Calder and Stanley B. Greenfield

Plates

Between pages 32 and 33

I Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501 (Exeter Book), 65v

II Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501 (Exeter Book), 76r

III Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, 117 (Vercelli Book), 29v

IV Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, 117 (Vercelli Book), 49r

V Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, 117 (Vercelli Book), 52v

Acknowledgements

Two people taught me to care about the details of style and be adventurous in my ideas, and this book is dedicated to the memory of Daniel G. Calder and Stanley B. Greenfield. I consider this book to be the daughter of Calder's *Cynewulf* and Greenfield's *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, in that my book exhibits many of their analytical traits while also rebelling against their paternity in certain respects. My heartfelt thanks to them for leading me into the field of Anglo-Saxon studies and urging me again and again to do my work better. I also owe very special thanks to A. N. Doane, who was my senior colleague at the University of Wisconsin and collaborator on our conference, 'Con-Texts', and subsequent book, *Vox intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, and remains a great friend. Our collaborations and conversations were instrumental in the development of my ideas about 'inscribed texts'; in addition he read my typescript more than once, his comments helping me to refine my ideas and saving me from a number of potentially humiliating errors.

I owe many other people thanks as well. I am especially grateful to Louise O. Fradenburg for her unflagging moral support, reading of my manuscript, and questions that provoked me in particular to develop my ideas about the openness of traditional texts to innovation. I have had many fruitful conversations over the years with many other friends: Jay Clayton, Sherry L. Reames, Donald Rowe, and the members of the 'draft group' at the University of Wisconsin from 1985 to 1987; John Miles Foley, Dolores Frese, Allen Frantzen, Sarah Higley, Martin Irvine, Ursula Schaefer, Hanna Vollrath, among others on the Anglo-Saxonists' conference circuit; the participants in the 'Con-Texts' conference; Robert E. Bjork and Lisa M. Weston, who read and talked with me about my work when I was first developing my ideas in graduate school; my current colleagues, Patricia

Fumerton, Alan Liu, Julie Carlson; and, most especially, Sharon Farmer and Victoria Harrison, who never fail to listen well and be my firm friends.

I also wish to thank people connected directly with the production of this book. My research assistants, Janice Grossman, Jennifer Hellwarth and Claire Busse, beyond assistance with library and text, were helpful to talk with and enjoyable to work with. Michael Lapidge has been more than a series editor. I am very grateful for the painstaking care with which he read my manuscript, correcting many errors and urging me, paragraph by paragraph, to greater precision of expression. While this text is very much a social production, I nevertheless do take full authorial responsibility for any errors or outrages that remain.

In addition, I have a number of institutions to thank: the English Department at UCLA for the English Reading Room and the Lily Bess Campbell fellowship that helped me in writing my dissertation; the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies for a 'Recent PhD' fellowship from July 1985 to January 1986; the University of Wisconsin Graduate School Research Committee for a summer stipend in 1986; and the Regents of the University of California and the Santa Barbara committees who supported my work between 1988 and the present, through Faculty Career Development Awards, a Regents' Junior Faculty Fellowship, and other research monies. My thanks are due also to the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral for permission to reproduce pages in the Exeter Book and to the publishers Rosenkilde and Bagger for permission to reproduce pages from their facsimile of the Vercelli Book.

I have presented portions of this work previously and am grateful for the questions, comments and conversations that ensued at the conference on 'Commentary as Cultural Artifact' organized by Stephen G. Nichols at the UC Humanities Research Institute at the University of California at Irvine, and at a number of Old English Colloquium conferences at the University of California at Berkeley; and at meetings of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association, the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, the Medieval Academy of America, the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, and the Modern Language Association of America. In addition, I have used anew portions of two of my articles, 'Stylistic Disjunctions in *The Dream of the Rood*' (*ASE* 13, 1984) and 'Anonymous Polyphony and the Textuality of the

Wanderer' (*ASE* 20, 1991), and wish to thank Cambridge University Press for permission to use material in their copyright.

Finally, I wish to thank my family for being my family and making do with a daughter, sister, wife and mother who was and is always trying to do too many other things with her life: my parents, Vivian and Ernest Braun, who taught me that I could achieve whatever I set my mind to; my sister, Joy Braun, who gave me my first 'schoolroom' lessons and is a true friend; my husband, Kenneth Pasternack, who has been my steadfast support in pursuing my career, willing to move to new places, proofread, listen to my ranting, and care for our daughter during those extra hours when I have had to work; and my daughter, Sofia Pasternack, whose unflagging love for her mother and enthusiasm for life have nourished me more than I can say.

Abbreviations

ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
BT	Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout)
EEMF	Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile (Copenhagen)
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
PL	Patrologia Latina
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*

Contents

I

The textuality of Old English poetry

The modern reader knows Old English poetry as a discrete number of poems, each of which has a title (in all cases, inserted by modern editors), a definite beginning (even if it has been lost), a middle and an end (which may again be lost but which still exists as a supposed structural element). We may read such a poem in its own little book, accompanied by scholarly introduction, glossary and relevant appendices of sources or analogues, or we may read it in a collection, such as Pope's *Seven Old English Poems*, or in a volume with other poems all from the same manuscript, as in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records series. In all of these manifestations, the editors present the poems in a manner comparable to modern poems: not only giving each poem a title, printed above the text, but also presenting it in lines that visually mark units defined by rhythm and alliteration, in periods punctuated as modern sentences, and in verse-paragraphs as well. Even when a text is printed with others from the same manuscript, its separateness appears in the visual signs of a preceding blank space, a centred title which becomes a running title at the top of each page, and numbered lines which begin at the start of each 'poem'. This manner of presentation interrelates with certain beliefs about the creation of poems, their subsequent existence, and what and how they communicate.

It follows that modern scholars have been using the same questions to interpret Old English verse that they would apply to modern poems. The questions, then, shape the interpretation: they begin with the assumption that the text has a definite structure, a specific author, date when it was composed and so on, and then look for the evidence to support these assumptions. They ask what the meaning of a text is and in doing so expect to know exactly *what* the text is (where it begins and ends and what is in between). They ask about the date of composition and the associated

historical context. They ask about the author's distinctive style and whether other texts have the same style and author. They ask about the influence of one text on another. These questions have remained vexed, not because the reasoning is circular but because the circle does not take into its compass certain important facts.

In this book I shall attempt to construct a different hermeneutic circle which is truer because it takes into account the format of the verse as it exists in the manuscripts, the formulaic quality of the diction and the structure that the words convey aurally. These features contribute in essential ways to the poetry's textuality; that is, to the conventions and codes through which the Old English poetic texts communicate with readers. Their textuality differs from that of both oral and printed compositions. I will use the term 'inscribed' to discuss these texts, since they inherit significant elements of vocality from their oral forebears and yet address the reader from the pages of manuscripts. I do not use the term 'written', because that word has implied a textuality in which not only is the poet absent from the text's performance but, in addition, the reader constructs an authorial voice through the text, identifying the thoughts and the particular words with the author. The reader's construction of such a relationship between the English vernacular text and the author may have begun in Chaucer's time, but it was not fully realized before the development of copyright law, three centuries after the invention of the printing press.[1]

This book, then, contributes to a discussion about the territory between the oral and the written that has been carried on by M. T. Clanchy, A. N. Doane, John Miles Foley, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, Ursula Schaefer and Brian Stock, among others. In 1979 Clanchy undertook to present 'the growth of a literate mentality' that, he argued, happened in England between the Norman Conquest in 1066 and the demise of Edward I in 1307.[2] In doing so, he took the important step of distinguishing between the production of written documents, including the ability of certain people to make them and read them, and reliance on those documents over and against 'oral recollections of old wise men'.[3] Literacy, as he described it, was a social and cultural as much as an individual phenomenon and one

[1] On the relationship between printer, author and text in the eighteenth century and the idea of the author, see M. Rose, 'The Author as Proprietor: *Donaldson v. Becket* and the Genealogy of Modern Authorship', *Representations* 23 (Summer 1988), 51–85.

[2] Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, p. 2. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

which developed very gradually. Brian Stock similarly described literacy as a social phenomenon that developed in England and Europe in a complex pattern over centuries. In his analysis, earlier in the Middle Ages orality and literacy co-existed, 'sometimes working together, sometimes working in separate spheres of thought and action'. But gradually, beginning in the second half of the twelfth century, 'a new hermeneutic environment emerged in Western Europe' that included oral performances but was characterized by references to written texts.[4] Literacy, in this way of thinking, is defined not by the presence or absence of texts made up of letters on pages but by the uses made of texts.

A number of scholars have been attempting to locate Old English poetic texts on the spectrum between the oral and the written texts of full literacy. Placing them at one end, A. N. Doane characterizes most Old English poetry as 'writing at the interface' with orality: 'That it is writing at all is accidental, extrinsic to its main existence in ongoing oral traditions; hence it was never intended to feed into a lineage of writing'.[5] Furthermore, he contends, contemporary audiences would have received the texts as oral: 'The fiction operative for the semiliterate audience of secondary orality, the audiences within the oral/written interface, is that the text, now in writing, whether derived from a real oral performative situation or a feigned one, is oral and stems from telling and action, not from writing or imagination'.[6] Arguing for the other end are Martin Irvine and Seth Lerer. Irvine acknowledges that 'Old English poems belong to two cultural archives simultaneously, orally based poetic tradition and Latin textual culture',[7] but he emphasizes the textual culture, claiming that the textuality of the poetry 'inscribes an orally based social past, but both constructs the written image of orality and cancels its pretextual valence in the act of inscribing it'.[8] Lerer goes one step further, venturing that 'What we have come to think of as the inherently "oral" quality of early English poetry – its origins in formulaic composition or its transmission in the public contexts of instruction or entertainment – may . . . be a literary

[4] B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), p. 10.

[5] Doane, 'Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts', p. 86. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

[7] Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality', p. 185. See also Irvine's *The Making of Textual Culture*, in which he presents his argument in greater detail and a fuller context.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

fiction of its own'.[9] I locate it in the middle because, as I will attempt to explain in the course of this book, on the one hand, the readers decipher letters on pages, and, on the other hand, they need to listen to the rhythms, syntax and meaning of the words to perceive the verse's structure. All in all, they construe meaning through a dynamic that is more clearly seen through orality than through writing. The texts themselves, I will argue, indicate how they operate, through the predominance of aural over visual cues, the absence of the author, the presence of implied tradition and the use of language common to many texts. They do not function in the same ways as printed texts, and they share enough with oral practices to make hypothesizing oral ancestors and oral cousins worthwhile. I shall therefore put orality in my circle of reasoning as an influence on the poetry's textuality.

The attempt to analyse functional aspects of texts that are neither fully oral nor fully written raises certain questions, fundamental to defining their textuality, that some scholars have been attempting to address. In 'Hearing from Books', Ursula Schaefer grapples with the question of how someone accustomed to oral performances could decipher a text without the presence of the poet and his or her gestures and intonations. She believes that although the verse necessarily presented words cut off from the poet's voice by writing, it maintained from orality the significance of the voice; as a result, the poet had to supply a 'vicarious voice' by fictionalizing a speaker.[10] This invention of a fictional first person supplied the first step toward fully written discourse in which texts are more 'autoreferential', supplying what the readers needed to decipher their meanings, than they are extrareferential, as they were in oral discourse, requiring familiarity with relevant traditions.[11] In *Visible Song*, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe examines the physical appearance of Old English verse in its manuscripts, both its visual display and differences between versions of the same text. She addresses the questions of whether these texts required from readers different kinds of knowledge or the employment of different

[9] S. Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln, NE, 1991), p. 4. See also Kiernan, 'Reading Cædmon's "Hymn" with Someone Else's Glosses', *Representations* 32 (Autumn 1990), 157–74, who argues that Cædmon's 'Hymn', as it is transmitted in the (Alfredian) Old English translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and in subsequent modern editions, is itself a kind of fiction, a translation from Bede's Latin prose into Old English poetic form that began as a marginal gloss of the Latin rather than as an oral remnant written into the margins of Latin manuscripts.

[10] Schaefer, 'Hearing from Books', p. 124. [11] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

codes and conventions from those used to decipher fully written texts, and of what role the scribe played in relation to the poet or author. O'Keeffe argues 'that early readers of Old English verse read by applying oral techniques for the reception of a message to the decoding of a written text'[12] and that scribes drew on their familiarity with oral-formulaic methods of composition, recomposing the verse as they copied it. The 'collaborative' nature of the verse, as O'Keeffe points out in her conclusion, throws into question the issue of 'authorial intention'[13] and thereby our accustomed goals of interpretation.

The fundamental nature of these questions incites controversy and concern similar to the critical turmoil stirred up in the earlier debate about whether Old English verse was oral. Francis P. Magoun, Jr, began the debate in 1953 with his article on 'The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry', in which he asserted that 'the recurrence in a given poem of an appreciable number of formulas or formulaic phrases brands the latter as oral, just as a lack of such repetitions marks a poem as composed in a lettered tradition'.[14] The 'formulaic character' of the poetry could hardly be denied, but scholars did debate whether formulaic language was necessarily linked to orality. Larry D. Benson demonstrated that texts connected with a 'lettered tradition',[15] such as *The Phoenix* and *The Meters of Boethius*, could have a high density of formulas and urged that 'we should assume written composition' for texts connected with 'written sources' and 'poems, such as *Beowulf*, with qualities contrary to what oral composition might lead us to expect . . . the sophistication of its diction and structure'.[16] Among the issues at stake were aesthetics and originality. An oral performance might be polished by the succession of previous performances of that poem or one of similar themes,[17] but could it express

[12] O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, p. 21. [13] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

[14] F. P. Magoun, Jr, 'The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry', *Speculum* 28 (1953), 446–67, at 446–7.

[15] Benson, 'The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry', p. 334.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 340.

[17] See Benson, *ibid.*, who expresses the concern that the 'poet who composes extemporaneously . . . cannot be held to the same aesthetic demands that we make of a poet who composes in the literary way on parchment in his cell . . .' (p. 337). This sense that poetry composed during performance is not as polished is answered by R. F. Lawrence, in an essay published in 1966, the same year as Benson's: 'The Formulaic Theory and its Application to English Alliterative Poetry' (in *Essays on Style and Language*, ed. R. Fowler (London, 1966), pp. 166–83).