

Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 4

---

# Visible Song

## Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse

Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe

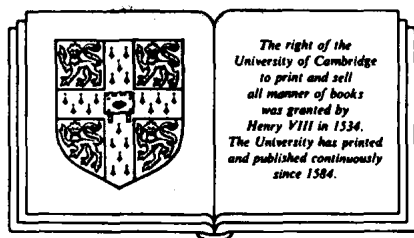


# VISIBLE SONG

TRANSITIONAL LITERACY IN  
OLD ENGLISH VERSE

KATHERINE O'BRIEN O'KEEFFE

*Professor of English  
Texas A&M University*



*The right of the  
University of Cambridge  
to print and sell  
all manner of books  
was granted by  
Henry VIII in 1534.  
The University has printed  
and published continuously  
since 1584.*

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK PORT CHESTER

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

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](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521375504](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521375504)

© Cambridge University Press 1990

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1990  
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*

O'Keeffe, Katherine O'Brien.

Visible song: transitional literacy in Old English verse /  
Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe.

p. cm. – (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England: 4)  
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-37550-9

1. English poetry – Old English, ca. 450–1100 – History and criticism.
2. Written communication – England – History.
3. Oral communication – England – History.
4. Anglo-Saxon – Intellectual life.
5. Literacy – England – History. I. Title. II. Series: Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England: v. 4.  
PR203.034 1990  
829'.1 – dc20 89-77383 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-37550-4 hardback  
ISBN-10 0-521-37550-9 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03264-3 paperback  
ISBN-10 0-521-03264-4 paperback

## Plates

*between pages 82 and 83*

- I London, British Library, Cotton Otho A. vi, 87v (Alfred's OE translation of the *De consolatione Philosophiae*)
- II Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. F. 1. 15, 57v (*De consolatione Philosophiae*)
- III London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, 156r (*Beowulf*)
- IV Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 422, p. 4 (*Solomon and Saturn I*)
- V Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41, p. 198 (*Solomon and Saturn I*)
- VIA Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 12, 3v (detail) (*The Metrical Preface to Alfred's Pastoral Care*)
- VIB Cambridge, Trinity College R. 5. 22, 72r (detail) (*The Metrical Preface to Alfred's Pastoral Care*)
- VII London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. vi, 32r (*The Battle of Brunanburh*)
- VIII London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. i, 141v (*The Battle of Brunanburh*)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN  
ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

4

---

VISIBLE SONG  
TRANSITIONAL LITERACY IN OLD ENGLISH VERSE

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN  
ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

EDITORS

SIMON KEYNES

MICHAEL LAPIDGE

*Editors' preface*

*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. It is the intention of the editors to encourage the publication of original scholarship which advances our understanding of the field through interdisciplinary approaches.

*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

## Preface

Writing is a technology which makes language visible. Despite the astonishing transformation involved in changing the heard into the seen, writing and reading are skills so fundamental to the conduct of life that they have become virtually transparent to us in the twentieth century (at least in developed countries). The assumptions and conditions of our own literacy are, for various historical and perceptual reasons, well hidden from us, but they must be brought to light if we are to understand the profound changes the growth of writing worked on early communities and individuals.

The present book sets out to examine one aspect of the growth of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its evidence in the manuscript records of Old English verse. I do not wish to argue here that any surviving verse in Old English was composed under purely oral circumstances. As the debate in the Old English scholarly community over the last thirty years has demonstrated, the circumstances for the composition of Old English verse remain an open question, and, I believe, an issue incapable of satisfactory demonstration. Precisely because the question of origin is unproductive, I do not ask it. The present book is not really concerned with composition as such, but about reception and transmission and what they may tell us about the interrelationships between 'orality' and 'literacy'. The copyists get all the lines.

My argument about the interrelationships between 'orality' and 'literacy' rests on several fundamental assumptions. First among them is that at some early point, verse in Old English was oral. From the time that Old English was first written, however, composition of verse in writing may be defined as 'literate' but only in a seriously restricted sense. The term is tendentious, since the nature and quality of that 'literacy' have yet to be

## *Preface*

established. It would be mistaken, I believe, to ascribe to the Anglo-Saxons the presuppositions and practices of our own literacy. Further, my argument assumes the possibility of one or more transitional states between pure 'orality' and pure 'literacy' and seeks to describe some of the features of an early transitional state characterized by what I shall call 'residual orality'. By this term I mean a state after the introduction of writing in a culture which nonetheless exhibits many features characteristic of 'pure' orality. And finally, I make the assumption that the special character of developing literacy before the Conquest may be described from the manuscripts of Old English and Latin verse.

In the absence of a satisfactory description of the mental conditions of individual 'literacy' in Anglo-Saxon England and of the processes involved in reading, two sets of inferences, paradoxically from written records, may provide evidence of residual orality. These inferences may be made from the development and use of meaningful space in the copying of verse and from the persistence of variance in the written transmission of texts. Considered as a mode of communication, a manuscript is a channel for transmitting a visual code. And the process of transmission requires encoding (in writing) and then decoding (in reading). As literacy develops, spatial and graphic conventions (which I term 'cues'), when added to the basic alphabetic character set, assist decoding by adding further interpretative signals to the text. The development and growth of these cues may be used to chart the distance of a written message from the knowledge (or possibly memory) of a potential reader. Crudely, the more sophisticated the cues, the more 'literate' the reading community, that is, the more they rely on conventional visual phenomena (rather than memory) for constructing or reconstructing meaning. Economy argues that such cues only appear when they are needed. By contrast, the persistence of variance (a characteristic constituent of oral transmission) in written records of verse is a conservative feature pointing backwards to orality. Since the function of writing is to *fix* a text, certain kinds of variance in the transmission of Old English verse texts strongly suggest the continuance of oral techniques of reception in the reading of verse. If I am correct, the evidence of the transmission and reception of Old English verse has consequences not only for our understanding of the literacy of the Anglo-Saxons, but our reading of the texts themselves and, indeed, their editing.

## Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge my indebtedness to a number of individuals and institutions incurred during the research for this book. The bulk of the work on the manuscripts of Caedmon's *Hymn* and on the Anglo-Latin manuscripts was made possible by a Faculty Development Leave (1984-5) from Texas A&M University and a grant from the American Philosophical Society (1984). I am grateful to Clare Hall, Cambridge, for making me a Visiting Associate in the Michaelmas term of 1984. Subsequent work in libraries in England and France was assisted by an International Enhancement Grant and a College of Liberal Arts Summer Grant from Texas A&M University (1986). Professor Hamlin L. Hill, Head of the Department of English at Texas A&M, used monies from the Ralph R. Thomas Fund to underwrite my trip to Vercelli. The Interdisciplinary Group for Historical Literary Study at Texas A&M University provided released time from teaching in 1987 and 1988, which allowed me to finish writing and, even more important, provided a forum for exchanging and testing new ideas about historical literary research.

I am grateful to have received permission to work in the manuscript collections of the following libraries: in Cambridge, the University Library, the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, the Wren Library of Trinity College; the Durham Cathedral Library; the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh; Exeter Cathedral Library; Hereford Cathedral Library; in London, the British Library; in Oxford, the Bodleian Library and Corpus Christi College Library; the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Biblioteca Capitolare in Vercelli; and Winchester Cathedral Library. I should like to recognize as well the particular kindness and help of Dr Bruce Barker-Benfield, Assistant Librarian of the Bodleian Library; of Canon Giuseppe Ferraris, Librarian of the Biblioteca Capitolare, Vercelli; of

### *Acknowledgements*

Dr Timothy Hobbs, Assistant Librarian of the Wren Library, Trinity College; and of Mrs Alison Wilson, formerly Assistant Librarian of the Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

For permission to publish a photograph or photographs, I should like to acknowledge the kindness of: the Bodleian Library (pl. I); the British Library Board (pls. II and III, VII and VIII); the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (pls. IV–VIa); the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge (pl. VIb). Ch. 2 appeared in somewhat different form in *Speculum* 62; I am grateful to the publisher for permission to reprint it here.

Nicholas Howe and Edward B. Irving read early portions of the book and made many useful suggestions. Patrick W. Conner and David N. Dumville both kindly allowed me to use and cite chapters of their forthcoming books, for which I am extremely grateful. At the invitation of Michael Lapidge, I was able to test the arguments of ch. 4 in a paper read before the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, and I benefited a good deal from the questions and comments of its faculty and students. Dr Lapidge's generous thoroughness in reading the completed manuscript has helped me clarify the arguments throughout the book and saved me from many errors. Any which remain are mine alone.

I am grateful to my friends David R. Anderson, Jeffrey N. Cox, Emily S. Davidson, Margaret J. M. Ezell and Janet P. McCann for their encouragement and help during my work on the book. Hamlin Hill provided generous moral and financial support as well as unfailing good humour. Carol Reynolds and Linda Rundell, with warm friendship, helped keep mind and body together. William Rundell not only designed the algorithm and wrote the programme to calculate the entropy of Old English, he taught me to think in new ways about entropy and information. Without his contribution, this would be a very different book. My colleague and friend, Larry J. Reynolds, always took time from his own work to listen to brainstorming about mine – and still read every word of the book as it was being written. What is good in it reflects his thoughtful and temperate criticism.

I dedicate this book to my father, Raymond F. O'Brien, whose interest in reading and misreading began this all.

## Abbreviations

AIUON	<i>Annali, Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli: sezione germanica</i>
ANQ	<i>American Notes and Queries</i>
ASC	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
BL	London, British Library
Catalogue	N. R. Ker, <i>Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon</i> (Oxford, 1957)
CCCC	Cambridge, Corpus Christi College
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CL	<i>Comparative Literature</i>
CLA	E. A. Lowe, <i>Codices Latini Antiquiores</i> , 11 vols. and supp. (Oxford, 1934-71; 2nd ed. of vol. II, 1972)
CR	Chaucer Review
CUL	Cambridge University Library
EEMF	Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELN	<i>English Language Notes</i>
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
JMH	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
MÆ	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
MS	<i>Mediaeval Studies</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>

### *Abbreviations*

<b>PBA</b>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<b>PMLA</b>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<b>RB</b>	<i>Revue bénédictine</i>
<b>RES</b>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<b>SN</b>	<i>Studia Neophilologica</i>
<b>TCBS</b>	<i>Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society</i>
<b>TPS</b>	<i>Transactions of the Philological Society</i>
<b>TRHS</b>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>

# Contents

<i>List of plates</i>	page vi
<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	1
2 Orality and the developing text of Caedmon's <i>Hymn</i>	23
3 Speech, writing and power in <i>Solomon and Saturn I</i>	47
4 The writing of the <i>Metrical Preface</i> to Alfred's <i>Pastoral Care</i>	77
Appendix: Formulaic systems in the <i>Metrical Preface</i> to Alfred's <i>Pastoral Care</i>	96
5 Poems of the <i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i>	108
6 Interpreting, pointing and reading	138
7 Reading and pointing in the major poetic codices	155
Appendix: Pointing in the Exeter Book	188
8 Conclusion	190
<i>Bibliography</i>	195
<i>Index</i>	200

# Figures

1	Variant orthography of randomly sampled words in <i>Beowulf</i>	<i>page</i> 20
2	Pointing in the Latin paraphrase of Caedmon's <i>Hymn</i>	42
3	Pointing in Caedmon's <i>Hymn</i>	43
4	Significant variants in <i>Solomon and Saturn I</i>	61

# 1

## Introduction

Modern readers of Alfred's translation of the *De consolazione Philosophiae* are often struck by his assimilating into the Old English version his own late ninth-century preoccupations and intellectual pursuits. The Alfredian *Consolation* is a thoroughly English work, shaped by the virtues and limitations of the native language of its translator. Alfred's temporal concerns and his desire for a coherent programme of English education based upon the translation of those Latin works 'most necessary for all men to know' define the character of the text, especially in the king's editorial comments and his simplification of Boethius's philosophy.<sup>1</sup> But the process of translation also took place at a level even more elemental than that of idea or syntax or word through the reduction or omission of the visual information contained in the written Latin text. The Old English text of the second redaction (that including the metres) incorporates none of the standard graphic cues, for example, capitalization, lineation, punctuation, which ensure the readability of the *metra* in the contemporary Latin manuscripts. The omission – certainly not conscious, but just as certainly habitual – of these cues is the first clue which the otherwise silent Old English manuscripts provide us for examining reading and literacy in Anglo-Saxon England.

London, BL, Cotton Otho A. vi is the unique copy of the second

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of scholarship on Alfred's *Consolation*, see M. Godden, 'King Alfred's Boethius', in *Boethius: his Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. M. Gibson (Oxford, 1981), pp. 419–24, and A. J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, 1986), pp. 43–66 and 125–8. For the Latin sources available to Alfred, see J. S. Wittig, 'King Alfred's *Boethius* and its Latin Sources. a Reconsideration', *ASE* 11 (1983), 157–98. J. M. Bately discusses Alfred's expectations for his programme of education in *The Literary Prose of King Alfred's Reign: Translation or Transformation?* (inaugural lecture, University of London, 1980), p. 7.

## Visible Song

redaction of Alfred's translation of the *De consolatione* (see pl. I). Ker assigns the manuscript to the mid-tenth century and considers it the work of one scribe.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript only barely survived the Cotton fire, and most of its leaves are so crumbled, charred and shrivelled that punctuation is difficult to detect and spacing and proportion impossible to determine. Yet despite the manuscript's unfortunate condition, it is possible to identify the textual format in the burned sections, and to distinguish other graphic cues in the later leaves.

The scribe of Otho A. vi habitually separates prose from the metres by leaving a space at the end of each discrete section of text. The section (whether prose or metre) is marked terminally by heavy punctuation (.,.), and the rest of the line is left blank. Each new section was intended to begin with a large capital, three or four lines high, but the capitals were never filled in.<sup>3</sup> This arrangement is the manuscript's only concession to the distinction between prose and verse, and exists, perhaps, as a consequence of the later substitution of metres for most of the original Old English prose paraphrases. As modern readers turn the leaves of this sadly damaged manuscript, they see line upon line of unrelieved text, little blank space, few capitals, and extremely light pointing. The significance of the formatting, a consequence of the text's paucity of visual information, only emerges distinctly by contrast. Were one to place alongside the Old English *Consolation* in Otho A. vi any tenth-century English copy of the Latin *De consolatione*, the difference in formatting, especially the care devoted to the spatial arrangement of the Latin text, would be immediately striking.

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin exploring the implications of the formatting of the Latin *De consolatione* is Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. F. 1. 15, pt 1 (see pl. II). This deluxe text of the *De consolatione* was copied at St Augustine's, Canterbury in the second half of the tenth century.<sup>4</sup> It is a beautiful specimen of Latin scholarly literacy. The book was designed to present both text and commentary, with space ruled for the text approximately 14 cm wide and that for the commentary 6.5 cm wide. Signes-de-renvoi in the text direct the reader to the margins for

<sup>2</sup> *Catalogue*, no. 167.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, 35r, 40r and 46r. *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ed. G. P. Krapp, ASPR 5 (New York and London, 1932), l-li, provides a table of small capitals in the manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> T. A. M. Bishop, *English Caroline Minuscule* (Oxford, 1971), p. 7 and pl. VII.

commentary. The *metra* are carefully set off from the prose text. Each *metrum* begins with a large ornamental green capital, and each verse within it begins with a capital in orange. Prose sections begin with a violet capital initial. The first line of each *metrum* and each prose is in capitals. *Metra* are written one verse to a line, with the exception of *metra* in dimeter, whose verses are set out in two columns.

While Auct. F. 1. 15 is unusual in the fine quality of its design and execution, it is hardly unique among English tenth-century manuscripts of the *De consolacione* in its highly visual layout. All of the surviving tenth-century copies (CUL, Kk. 3. 21, Cambridge, Trinity College O. 3. 7, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 6401A, 14380 and 17814) distinguish verse from prose by writing the *metra* one verse to a line and beginning each verse with a coloured capital initial.

One might dismiss the difference between the formatting of Otho A. vi and that of the Anglo-Latin manuscripts by remarking that Otho A. vi is unique in transmitting the Old English metres of the *Consolation*. However, while it may be the only surviving copy of the Old English metres, it is otherwise an unremarkable manuscript, certainly not unique in its formatting of a text with both prose and verse. The manuscripts of the West Saxon translation of the *Historia ecclesiastica* (for Caedmon's *Hymn*),<sup>5</sup> those of Alfred's translation of the *Regula pastoralis* (for the *Metrical Preface*),<sup>6</sup> those of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (for the six *Chronicle* poems),<sup>7</sup> to mention but a few, all transmit Old English works in both prose and poetry, but make no distinction in the formatting of verse and prose.

In contrast, throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, Latin manuscripts written in England regularly distinguished verse from prose through the use of a set of conventional visual cues.<sup>8</sup> That this should be so for Latin and not for Old English raises some important questions about the writing (and reading) of each language. Why, in the same centres and at the same time, did conventions for writing verse in the two languages differ so funda-

<sup>5</sup> These are: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tanner 10; Oxford, Corpus Christi College 279; CCCC 41; CUL Kk. 3. 18.

<sup>6</sup> These are: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 20; CCCC 12; Cambridge, Trinity College R. 5. 22; CUL, li. 2. 4.

<sup>7</sup> That is, those poems composed in so-called 'classical' verse. The manuscripts are: CCCC 173; BL, Cotton Tiberius A. vi; Cotton Tiberius B. i; Cotton Tiberius B. iv.

<sup>8</sup> See O'Keeffe, 'Graphic Cues', p. 144.