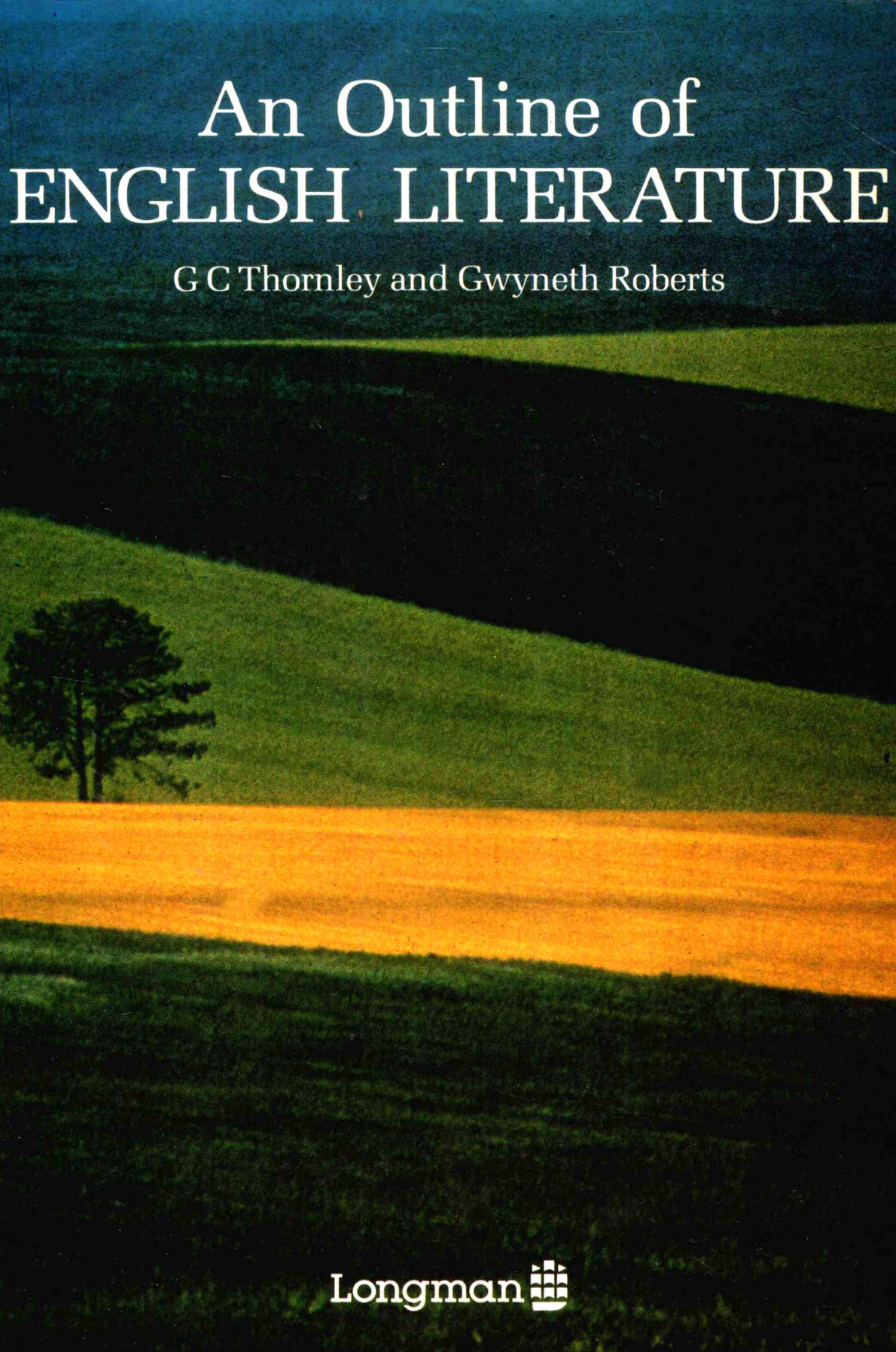
An Outline of ENGLISH LITERATURE

G C Thornley and Gwyneth Roberts



Longman

An Outline of English Literature

Frontispiece illustration for Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, 1719

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G. C. Thornley and Gwyneth Roberts

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Saint Mark, a detail from the Lindisfarne Gospels written and illustrated around A.D. 700. These, like much of the writing of that time, were written by monks in Latin. (A Gospel is a holy book.)

Chapter One

Old English literature

The Old English language, also called Anglo-Saxon, was the earliest form of English. It is difficult to give exact dates for the rise and development of a language, because it does not change suddenly; but perhaps it is true to say that Old English was spoken from about A.D. 600 to about 1100.

The greatest Old English poem is *Beowulf,* which belongs to the seventh century. It is a story of about 3,000 lines, and it is the first English epic.[1] The name of its author is unknown.

Beowulf is not about England, but about Hrothgar, King of the Danes, and about a brave young man, Beowulf, from southern Sweden, who goes to help him. Hrothgar is in trouble. His great hall, called Heorot, is visited at night by a terrible creature, Grendel, which lives in a lake and comes to kill and eat Hrothgar's men. One night Beowulf waits secretly for this thing, attacks it, and in a fierce fight pulls its arm off. It manages to reach the lake again, but dies there. Then its mother comes to the hall in search of revenge, and the attacks begin again. Beowulf follows her to the bottom of the lake and kills her there.

In later days Beowulf, now king of his people, has to defend his country against a fire-breathing creature. He kills the animal but is badly wounded in the fight, and dies. The poem ends with a sorrowful description of Beowulf's funeral fire. Here are a few lines of it, put into modern letters:

[1]*epic*, the story in poetry of the adventures of a brave man (or men)

alegdon tha tomiddes maerne theoden
haeleth hiofende hlaford leofne
ongunnon tha on beorge bael-fyra maest
wigend weccan wudu-rec astah
sweart ofer swiothole swogende leg
wope bewunden.

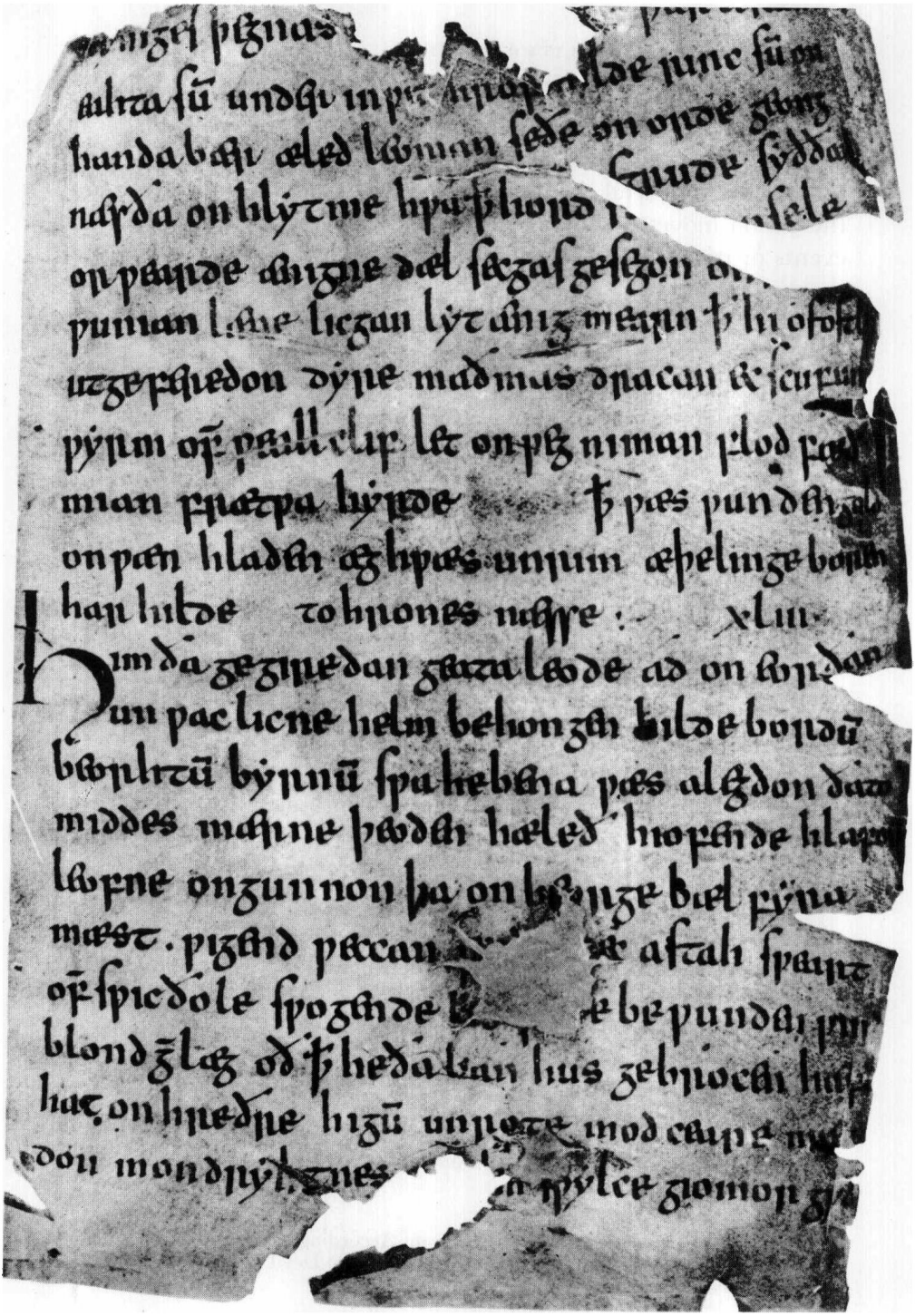
The sorrowing soldiers then laid the glorious prince, their dear lord, in the middle. Then on the hill the war-men began to light the greatest of funeral fires. The wood-smoke rose black above the flames, the noisy fire, mixed with sorrowful cries.

The old language cannot be read now except by those who have made a special study of it. Among the critics who cannot read Old English there are some who are unkind to the poem, but *Beowulf* has its own value. It gives us an interesting picture of life in those old days. It tells us of fierce fights and brave deeds, of the speeches of the leader and the sufferings of his men. It describes their life in the hall, the terrible creatures that they had to fight, and their ships and travels. They had a hard life on land and sea. They did not enjoy it much, but they bore it well.

The few lines of *Beowulf* given above do not explain much about this kind of verse, and it may be well to say something about it. Each half-line has two main beats. There is no rhyme.[2] Instead, each half-line is joined to the other by alliteration[3] *(middes|maerne; haeleth|hiofende|hlaford; beorge|bael; wigend|weccan|wudu; sweart|swiothole|swogende)*. Things are described indirectly and in combinations of words. A ship is not only a ship: it is a sea-goer, a sea-boat, a sea-wood, or a wave-floater. A sailor is a sea-traveller, a seaman, a sea-soldier. Even the sea itself *(sae)* may be called the waves, or the sea-streams, or the ocean-way. Often several of these words are used at the same time. Therefore, if the poet wants to say that the ship sailed away, he may say that the ship, the sea-goer, the wave-floater,

[2] *rhyme,* ending two or more verse lines with the same sounds. Two lines *rhyme* when each has the same vowel sound bearing the last stress (beat) – e.g. *pay* and *day* or *pay* and *weigh* as last words. Any sounds after that vowel are exactly the same – e.g. *meeting* and *beating;* but the sound before that vowel is different – e.g. *state* and *weight* are rhymes but *meet* and *meat* are not true rhymes.

[3] *alliteration,* two or more words beginning with the same sound.



A page from Beowulf including the lines given here in the text.

set out, started its journey and set forth over the sea, over the ocean-streams, over the waves. This changes a plain statement into something more colourful, but such descriptions take a lot of time, and the action moves slowly. In Old English poetry, descriptions of sad events or cruel situations are commoner and in better writing than those of happiness.

There are many other Old English poems. Among them are *Genesis A* and *Genesis B*. The second of these, which is short, is concerned with the beginning of the world and the fall of the angels[4]. It is a good piece of writing; the poet has thoroughly enjoyed describing God's punishment of Satan and the place of punishment for evil in Hell.[5] Most of the long *Genesis A*, on the other hand, is dull, and little more than old history taken from the Bible and put into poor Old English verse. Other poems taken straight from the Bible are the well-written *Exodus*, which describes how the Israelites left Egypt, and *Daniel*. Another poem, *Christ and Satan*, deals with events in Christ's life. There is a good deal of repetition in this work.

We know the names of two Old English poets, CAEDMON and CYNEWULF. Almost nothing now remains which is certainly Caedmon's work. He was a poor countryman who used to stay apart when his fellows sang songs to God; for Caedmon was uneducated and could not sing. One night an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to sing God's praise. When he woke, he was able to sing, and part of one of his songs remains.

Cynewulf almost certainly wrote four poems, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*,[6] *Christ*, and *Elene*. The last of these seems to have been written just before Cynewulf's death; for he says in it, 'Now are my days in their appointed time gone away. My life-joys have disappeared, as water runs away.' Cynewulf's poems are religious, and were probably written in the second half of the eighth century.

Other Old English poems are *Andreas* and *Guthlac*. The second of these is in two parts, and may have been written by two men. Guthlac was a holy man who was tempted in the desert. Another of

[4] *angel*, a servant of God in Heaven. According to old accounts, *Satan* and other angels disobeyed God and became the Devil and the Devil's servants in Hell.
[5] *hell*, the place for punishment for evil.
[6] *Apostle*, one of the twelve men chosen by Christ to preach to others.

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Part of a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript, showing Jerusalem

the better poems is *The Dream of the Rood* (the rood is Christ's cross.) This is among the best of all Old English poems.

Old English lyrics[7] include *Deor's Complaint, The Husband's Message, The Wanderer* and *The Wife's Complaint.* Deor is a singer who has lost his lord's favour. So he complains, but tries to comfort himself by remembering other sorrows of the world. Of each one he says 'That passed over; this may do so also.'

There are many other poems in Old English. One of the better ones is a late poem called *The Battle of Maldon.* This battle was fought against the Danes in 991 and probably the poem was written soon after that. It has been highly praised for the words of courage which the leader uses:

> hige sceal the heardra heorte the cenre
> mod sceal the mare the ure maegen lytlath
> her lith ure ealdor eall forheawen
> god on greote a maeg gnornian
> se the nu fram this wigplegan wendan thenceth.
> *The mind must be the firmer, the heart must be the braver, the courage must be the greater, as our strength grows less. Here lies our lord all cut to pieces, the good man on the ground. If anyone thinks now to turn away from this war-play, may he be unhappy for ever after.*

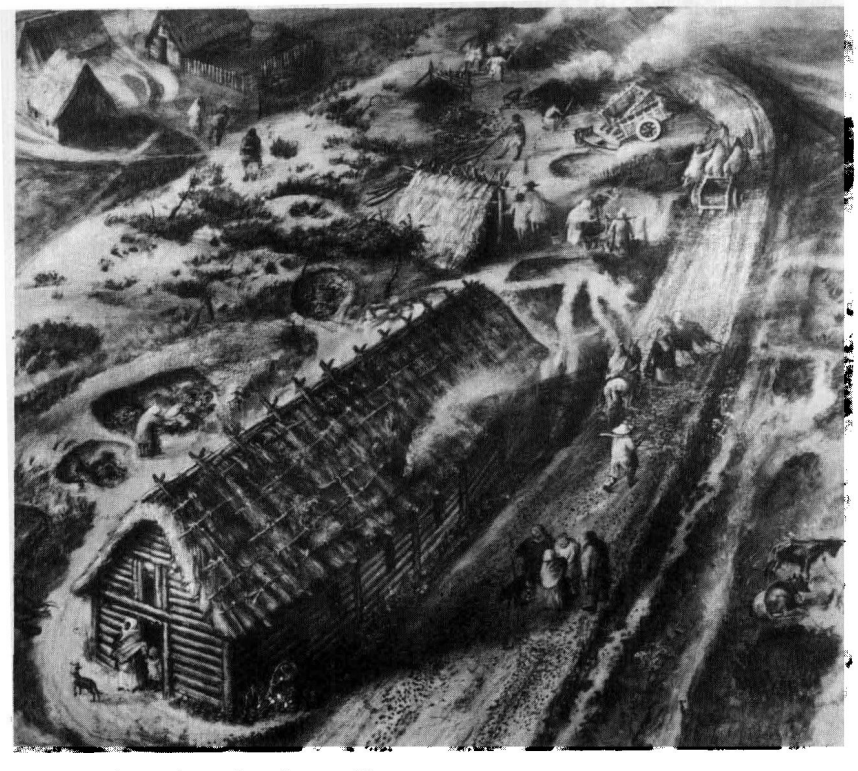
In general it is fairly safe to say that Old English prose[8] came later than Old English verse; but there was some early prose. The oldest *Laws* were written at the beginning of the seventh century. Some of these are interesting. If you split a man's ear, you had to pay 30 shillings. These *Laws* were not literature, and better sentences were written towards the end of the seventh century.

The most interesting piece of prose is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* an early history of the country. There are, in fact, several chronicles, belonging to different cities. No doubt KING ALFRED (849-901) had a great influence on this work. He probably brought the different writings into some kind of order. He also translated a number of

[7] *lyric,* a poem – originally one meant to be sung – which expresses the poet's thoughts and feelings.
[8] *prose,* the ordinary written language, not specially controlled like verse.

Latin books into Old English, so that his people could read them. He brought back learning to England and improved the education of his people.

Another important writer of prose was AELFRIC. His works, such as the *Homilies*[9] (990-4) and *Lives of Saints*[10] (993-6), were mostly religious. He wrote out in Old English the meaning of the first seven books of the Bible. His prose style[11] is the best in Old English, and he uses alliteration to join his sentences together.



A model of a late Saxon village

[9] *Homily,* religious talk.
[10] *Saint,* holy man.
[11] *style,* manner of writing; one writer's special way of using language.

William Caxton, who lived from 1422 to 1491, offering a book from his press at Westminster to a lady.

Chapter Two

Middle English literature

The English which was used from about 1100 to about 1500 is called Middle English, and the greatest poet of the time was GEOFFREY CHAUCER. He is often called the father of English poetry, although, as we know, there were many English poets before him. As we should expect, the language had changed a great deal in the seven hundred years since the time of *Beowulf* and it is much easier to read Chaucer than to read anything written in Old English. Here are the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*[1] (about 1387), his greatest work:

> Whan that Aprille with his shoures swote
> The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote
> *When April with his sweet showers has struck to the roots the dryness of March . . .*

There are five main beats in each line, and the reader will notice that rhyme has taken the place of Old English alliteration. Chaucer was a well-educated man who read Latin, and studied French and Italian poetry; but he was not interested only in books. He travelled and made good use of his eyes; and the people whom he describes are just like living people.

The Canterbury Tales total altogether about 17,000 lines – about half of Chaucer's literary production. A party of pilgrims[2] agree to

[1] *tale*, story.
[2] *pilgrim*, a person making a journey for religious reasons to a holy place.

An illustration from the opening of William Langland's Piers Plowman showing Piers Plowman dreaming

tell stories to pass the time on their journey from London to Canterbury with its great church and the grave of Thomas à Becket. There are more than twenty of these stories, mostly in verse, and in the stories we get to know the pilgrims themselves. Most of them, like the merchant, the lawyer, the cook, the sailor, the ploughman, and the miller, are ordinary people, but each of them can be recognized as a real person with his or her own character. One of the most enjoyable characters, for example, is the Wife of Bath. By the time she tells her story we know her as a woman of very strong opinions who believes firmly in marriage (she has had five husbands, one after the other) and equally firmly in the need to manage husbands strictly. In her story one of King Arthur's knights[3] must give within a year the correct answer to the question 'What do women love most?' in order to save his life. An ugly old witch[4] knows the answer ('To rule') and agrees to tell him if he marries her. At last he agrees, and at the marriage she becomes young again and beautiful.

Of Chaucer's other poems, the most important are probably

[3] *knight,* a man who – historically as a good fighter and leader in war – has the rank shown by the word *Sir* before his name.
[4] *witch,* a woman with unnatural (more than human) powers.

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