

陈嘉著

A History of
English Literature
英国文学史

Volume 1



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by

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FOREWORD

This is an attempt to write a history of English literature admittedly with an innovative approach. The traditional as well as the more modern views in the West on literary movements, schools, traditions and influences in the field of English literature and on individual English authors and their major and minor works are here given due respect and serious consideration, but with the reservation sometimes to differ and occasionally to introduce new and totally contrary judgments from the viewpoint of historical materialism — i.e., the writers and their writings are to be given their proper places in each case in accordance with the roles, healthful or otherwise, that they play in the progress of history, social and literary. Of course, whether or how far have I succeeded in these pages in living up to the theory advanced above awaits judgment from my readers.

This history is written primarily for Chinese readers, in particular for Chinese college students majoring in English language and literature, with the aim to give them a historical survey of English literature from its earliest beginnings down to the 20th century. As many college students in China today are being introduced for the first time to English literature in any systematic way, biographical sketches of the major writers and rather detailed resumé's of their major works are generally provided in this history, before I enter into any serious discussions on the authors and their writings.

A companion-book providing students with selections from representative works of representative English authors, arranged chronologically and accompanied with introductory remarks and notes, is expected to appear at the same time as this history. It is hoped that the two books together, this history and "Selected Readings in

English Literature”, will give the students a rudimentary knowledge of English literature in its historical development.

In view of the vastly different levels of proficiency in the English language among English majors in Chinese colleges and universities today, a shorter history than this, written in simpler language, seems also necessary for the present. Such a book is now being prepared.

I wish to express my gratitude here to all my friends and colleagues as well as my former students who have given me their valuable suggestions in the course of writing this book. My indebtedness is due particularly to the participants at a conference held prior to the completion of the book, and they include Professors Li Funing and Yang Zhouhan (both from Beijing University), Wu Jingrong (Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages), Dai Liuling (Zhongshan University), Zhang Junchuan (Hangzhou University), Zhang Jian (Shandong University), Huang Hongxu (Hobei Normal University), Associate and Assistant Professors Sun Zhu (Fudan University), Liu Yulin (Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages), Long Wenpei (Fudan University), Liu Bingshan (Honan Normal University), Luo Yiyun (Sichuan University), Xie Chulan (Nanjing University), Yang Renjing (Nanjing University), and last not least, Messrs. Zhu Yuan (editor, the Commercial Press), Liu Zucui and Xu Baofa (both from the Ministry of Education), as well as my two graduate students Liu Haiping and Wang Xisu. I am grateful to them all for their invaluable suggestions and comments. Finally I want to thank the working personnel at the Commercial Press who are directly responsible for the publication of this book.

Chen Jia

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Chapter I

ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

1. The Historical Background.

Before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, the Celtic tribes lived in what is now Britain. In the middle of the first century B.C., Roman troops led by Julius Caesar invaded Britain, then Claudius conquered it in A.D. 43 and Britain became a Roman province till the beginning of the fifth century. During their rule the Romans built roads, walls, garrisons, villas, etc., and the Celts became either slaves or unfree cultivators of the land. Then, in early 5th century, as the Germanic races attacked and overran the Roman Empire, the Roman garrisons in Britain withdrew.

Not long after that, in the mid-5th century, the tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes (later known simply as Anglo-Saxons) migrated to England from the European Continent, or more specifically from western Denmark and the northwest coast of Germany. They settled down there and soon ruled over the whole of England, enslaving some of the native Celts while driving the others to the hills north and west, to Wales and Scotland and even Ireland across the sea. Thus began the Anglo-Saxon period in English history.

While still on the Continent, the Anglo-Saxons were in the later stages of tribal society. Their common occupation was agriculture, with a small number of them already set apart as professional soldiers or as hereditary military leaders. Some of these leaders gradually became thanes or the nobility and a few of them rose to be chieftains or even kings. Settlement in Britain hastened the disintegration of tribalism as the tribal chieftains and thanes had the possession of large

tracts of land and grew in wealth and power while the free farmers became more and more dependent economically.

By the 7th century, seven kingdoms of fairly large territories emerged out of more numerous smaller kingdoms and there were wars among them. Of the seven Mercia and then Northumberland in the north flourished particularly in wealth and culture in the 7th and 8th centuries, and Wessex in the south became a more important centre of military and political power and assumed supremacy in culture and learning in the 9th and 10th centuries. Beginning from late 8th century the Danes came to invade England and for more than a century they made intermittent raids on the eastern coast of Britain and occupied for fairly long periods of time large areas of northeastern England. In late 9th century King Alfred the Great (A.D. 849 - 901?) of the Kingdom of Wessex successfully led the English people in a protracted war against the invading Danes who were threatening to overrun the whole country. The invaders were repulsed and gradually all the kingdoms in England were united into one.

In early 11th century the Danes again came to invade England and under Canute they conquered and ruled over all England for a quarter of a century (A.D. 1017 - 1042). Then, following the expulsion of the Danes the Normans from Normandy in northern France came to invade England in 1066, and under the leadership of William the Duke of Normandy who claimed the succession to the English throne they succeeded in defeating the English troops and conquering the whole of England. The "Norman Conquest" marked the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

In late Saxon England feudalism assumed definite shape, with the king at the top, then the earls and the thanes, then the freemen and last the serfs. Agriculture developed and trade expanded. Towns came into existence and wealth became more concentrated. With the Norman Conquest feudalism underwent further development.

The Anglo-Saxons were heathen upon their first arrival in England. In A.D. 597 the first missionaries led by St. Augustine came to England from Rome and converted King Ethelbert of Kent, and

within a century all England was Christianized. Churches were built and the monks were among the most learned in the country. The heathen mythology was gradually replaced by the Christian religion, but heathen concepts of nature and the supernatural persisted for a considerable period of time and often were curiously mixed with Christian views and expressions. This phenomenon found its expression not infrequently in literary works of the Anglo-Saxon period.

2. "Beowulf" the National Epic of the Anglo-Saxons.

The earliest poetry of the Anglo-Saxons, like that of many other peoples, originated from the collective efforts of the people, usually while they were working or resting from their labours. Then these stories based on history or legend or contemporaneous events would be narrated orally and often sung, during festivities and other occasions, chiefly for entertainment. Some of the more interesting of these narratives would pass from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation, and as they were told by different singers at different times, additions or deletions were introduced in the successive rehandlings of the oral tradition of each epic.

With the disintegration of tribal society and the appearance of class divisions, professional narrators or singers of these popular stories emerged. They were known as "scops" or "gleemen" among the Anglo-Saxons, the former being poet-singers who sang poetic tales of their own making while the latter mere retellers of epics already in circulation. At first these "scops" and "gleemen" also served as priests giving spells or citing incantations on various solemn occasions but later they became simply wandering minstrels travelling extensively from one chieftain's court to that of another, providing entertainment with their singing. Two of the earliest Anglo-Saxon lyrics extant, "Widsith" (probably of the 7th century) and "Deor's Lament" (probably of the 8th century), are good literary specimens that illustrate the life and social position of the later "scops" or "gleemen".

Because these popular narratives of the Anglo-Saxons in the earliest times existed originally in oral tradition and few of them seemed to

have been handed down in written form, "Beowulf" is possibly the only important single poem of this kind preserved to this day more or less in its entirety and has generally been considered the most monumental work in English poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period.

"Beowulf" probably existed in its oral form as early as the 6th century and was written down in the 7th or 8th century, though the manuscript of the poem now extant dated back to the 10th century. It contains 3183 lines of alliterative verse, being the longest of the early Anglo-Saxon poems preserved. The story in the epic is based on part-historical, part-legendary material brought over to England by the Anglo-Saxons from their original homes on the European Continent. So Beowulf the hero of the poem and his adventures are placed in Denmark and southern Sweden rather than in England.

The poem opens with a brief account of the line of Danish kings down to Hrothgar, Beowulf's kinsman who builds a splendid hall named Heorot to entertain his followers (lines 1 - 100 in the poem). A monster by the name of Grendel frequently comes to the hall at night and at one time devours as many as thirty warriors sleeping there, so that the hall is deserted after dark (lines 101 - 193). The news of Grendel's ravages finally reaches southern Sweden, where Beowulf, nephew to King Hygelac of the Geats and a man of great strength, hears of it and sails with fourteen companions to lend help to Hrothgar. They reach the Danish coast and are directed by the watchman to Hrothgar's abode (lines 194-319). There the Danish king tells of his friendship with Beowulf's father Ecgtheow and Beowulf states the purpose of his coming. Then the visitors are invited to a feast (lines 320-497). At the banquet one of Hrothgar's followers Unferth speaks tauntingly to Beowulf and our hero retorts by relating his successful contest with a certain Breca in swimming (lines 498 - 606). Thereupon Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, fills Beowulf's cup and the hero utters his determination to conquer the monster or die. Soon it grows dark and the king and his retinue depart, leaving Beowulf and his men to guard the hall (lines 607 - 665).

Then the first adventure begins. Before Beowulf and his compan-

ions get ready to go to sleep, the former puts off his armour and declares not to use his sword in the coming combat. Soon enough Grendel bursts into the hall and very quickly eats up one of the warriors and comes directly to Beowulf. The hero then engages in a terrific battle with the monster as the hall rings with the sound of their combat. Eventually Beowulf tears an arm and a shoulder off the monster who runs away, mortally wounded (lines 665 – 833). The victor displays Grendel's torn arm and the Danes show their admiration by telling stories of the heroes of the past. Then Hrothgar comes and rewards Beowulf with rich gifts (lines 834 – 1062). At the feast that follows, Hrothgar's minstrel sings of old tales (lines 1063 – 1159), and the queen appears and thanks Beowulf and presents him with a valuable necklace which is later worn by Hygelac and becomes the property of the Franks after the latter's death (lines 1160 – 1232). Hrothgar and Beowulf now retire while a number of warriors stay on in the hall for the night. Then Grendel's mother comes and carries off Aeschere, the king's chief councillor (lines 1233 – 1306). Beowulf is sent for and Hrothgar tells him of the tragic event and describes the abode of the monsters and Beowulf promises to avenge Aeschere (lines 1306 – 1396).

The second adventure opens with Beowulf and his companions setting out for a pool and upon arrival he plunges into the water and reaches a cave underneath. There he engages in a long struggle with Grendel's mother and finally succeeds in killing her with a magic sword of the ancient giants hanging in the cave. He cuts off her head as well as that of her son Grendel lying dead nearby. With these as his booty he returns to the shore of the pool where his companions are still waiting, already in despair about his life (lines 1397 – 1631). The victors march back to Heorot and are welcomed by Hrothgar who eulogizes the hero but then enters into a lengthy moralizing discourse on the evils of pride (lines 1632 – 1784). The next day Beowulf bids farewell to Hrothgar who rewards him with further gifts and the visiting warriors embark to return to their native land (lines 1785 – 1921). Then, after a laudatory account of the virtues of Hygd, King Hygelac's young wife, we are told of the meeting between Hygelac and Beowulf at which

the latter first speaks digressively of the relations between Hrothgar and his daughter Freawaru and son-in-law Ingeld, and then gifts are exchanged between uncle Hygelac and nephew Beowulf (lines 1922-2199). After a lapse of time Hygelac dies and his son succeeds to the throne but is soon killed in battle by the Swedes. Then Beowulf is chosen king and he rules gloriously over the Geats for fifty years (lines 2200 – 2210).

The third and last adventure of our hero takes place in his own country. A dragon has kept guard over a hidden treasure hoarded for many years but suddenly finds part of the hoard stolen by a runaway slave, and in revenge he starts to ravage the land with the fatal blasts of his fiery breath. Beowulf, now an aged king, resolves to fight with the dragon himself (lines 2210 – 2349). But before the description of the battle, lengthy digressions are introduced. First there are reminiscences by our hero, as he recalls how at a battle in the land of the Frisians Hygelac lost his life while Beowulf himself escaped by swimming, how upon his return therefrom he refused the throne offered him by Hygelac's widow-queen Hygd, how young Heardred succeeded his father Hygelac but was soon slain by the Swedish king Onela and finally how Beowulf some time later avenged the death of Heardred by participating in a feud that led to Onela's death (lines 2349 – 2396). Then, the main thread of the story is resumed with an account of Beowulf taking with him twelve companions and approaching the shore dwelling of the dragon, but a second digression is inserted as the old king recollects the more remote past of his family history: how one brother of Hygelac's, Haethcyn, then the king of the Geats, accidentally killed another brother Herebeald, how their father Hrethel died of grief in consequence, how subsequently in a war with the Swedes Haethcyn and the Swedish king Ongentheow, Onela's father, were both killed, how Hygelac the third brother died among the Frisians, and how there Beowulf killed Daeghrefn a warrior of the Hugas (lines 2397 – 2509). Then when the main narrative is picked up again, Beowulf orders his men to wait outside while he goes down to the mound of the hoard where the dragon lives. There he is attacked by the dragon

and his sword fails him when he uses it to pierce the monster's scales. Beowulf now falls under the threat of the fiery breath of the dragon and is in great danger, but one of the companions Wiglaf, son of Weoxstan, rushes down to help while the other companions flee into a wood. In the meantime Beowulf strikes at the dragon on the head, but his sword breaks and the dragon seizes him by the neck. In the nick of time Wiglaf succeeds in wounding the dragon and Beowulf kills the monster with his knife (lines 2510 - 2709). But the old king is himself mortally wounded, and as Wiglaf brings the treasure out of the hoard, the king gives his last orders about his own funeral and presents the faithful companion with his armour and necklace and then dies (lines 2709 - 2842). The cowardly warriors now return and Wiglaf rebukes them and sends a messenger to the people to announce the king's death. The messenger in his speech foretells the disasters that are to follow Beowulf's death, recalling the former wars with the Franks, the Frisians and the Swedes and prophesying future strife with these enemies now that the hero is no longer alive to protect his people. Then the people arrive at the scene of the fight and carry away the treasure hoard. Wiglaf repeats Beowulf's dying instructions, and the dragon is thrown into the sea as a funeral pyre is built on which Beowulf's body is burned. Over his remains a huge mound is piled up and the dragon's treasures are placed therein. Twelve warriors ride round the barrow lamenting the death of Beowulf and praising his virtues as a great and good king: "of all kings he was the gentlest and most gracious of men, the kindest to his people and the most desirous of renown" (lines 2842 - 3183).

Except for occasional digressions when the hero recalls past events or when some gleeman sings a tale, "Beowulf" as a poem centres on the narration of the exploits of the heroic figure Beowulf, including his adventures with Grendel and his mother in Denmark and with the dragon in the land of the Geats. In other words, it is a long verse narrative on the theme of "arms and the man" and as such belongs to the tradition of a national epic in European literature that can be traced back to Homer's "Iliad" and Vergil's "Aeneid".

Another characteristic of the epic tradition to be found in "Beo-

wulf” is the part-historical, part-legendary origin of the story. It’s part-historical as quite a number of the characters either appearing or mentioned in the poem are real persons lifted from the pages of history, including King Hrothgar of the Danes (based on “Historia Danica” of Saxo Grammaticus) and King Hygelac of the Geats (based on “Historia Francorum” of Gregory of Tours and “Gesta Regum Francorum” as well as “Liber Monstrorum”), both of whom play rather important roles in the development of the tale. Besides, several digressional episodes in the epic, those about Finn and Hnaef (in the gleeman’s lay) and about Ingeld and Freawaru as well as the one about the wars between the Swedes and the Geats, all have their historical basis. And these historical figures and events place the poem in the historical period of the disintegration of tribal society, when there were tribal wars as well as inter- and intra-family feuds among the rulers. But the hero Beowulf is essentially a legendary figure. His name cannot be found in any historical document, and all that scholarly research can do has been to try to identify him with Beowa, a deity in Northern Mythology known to have killed sea monsters and dragons, or to compare him with Sigmund or his son Sigurd (alias Siegfried) in the “Edda” or “Volsunga Saga” or “Nibelungenlied”, though his relations with Hygelac and the Geat people and with Hrothgar and the Danes all appear to be rather realistic reflections of the social conditions of the tribal age during which the poem must have been first conceived and sung. Also, Beowulf’s fights with Grendel and Grendel’s mother and the dragon, all with a distinctly mythical or fabular character, have their parallels in other European legends, and they also illustrate the common desire of the tribal people in ancient times to conquer the mysterious forces of nature that wrought havoc upon human society.

There can be little doubt that the development of “Beowulf” as an epic, from its oral tradition to its present written form, took up several centuries. The fact that the locale of the story is set in Denmark and southern Sweden shows all too clearly that the tale was brought over by the Angles, Saxons or more likely Jutes from their Continental homes upon their immigration to England. Therefore,