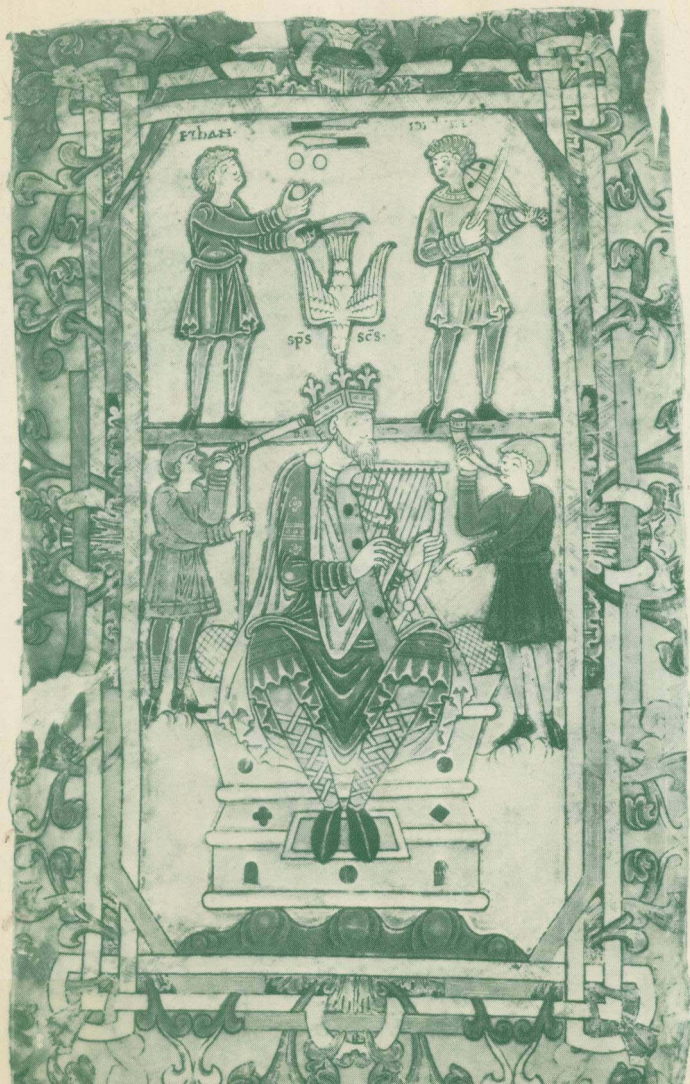


The Art and Background of Old English Poetry

Barbara C. Raw



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of Old English Poetry

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Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Old English poetry are taken from *The Anglo-Saxon poetic records*, edited by G. P. Krapp and E. van K. Dobbie (New York 1931-53), 6 volumes, by kind permission of Columbia University Press.

Footnotes have been limited to specific references; books and articles which have influenced the work in a more general way are listed in the Bibliography. The translations of the verse passages are intended to be literal rather than elegant; they are included simply as an aid to readers with a limited knowledge of Old English.

I The manuscripts of Old English poetry: the material and its limitations

The only poetry which has survived from the six hundred years between the coming of the Anglo-Saxons in the mid-fifth century and their defeat by the Normans in the mid-eleventh is some 30,000 lines, considerably less than Chaucer's total output in verse. The main sources are four large manuscripts of the late Anglo-Saxon period: the Vercelli and Exeter books which date from the second half of the tenth century, the *Beowulf* manuscript from about the year 1000, and the Junius manuscript of the second quarter of the eleventh century.¹ A few isolated poems have been preserved in liturgical or historical manuscripts.

Of the four main manuscripts only one, the Junius manuscript, seems to have been written according to a coherent plan. The original design was for a lavishly illustrated copy of three Old Testament poems, *Genesis*, *Exodus* and *Daniel*, probably a presentation copy. The material in this first section of the manuscript, which includes the stories of the creation and fall of man, of Noah and Abraham, the crossing of the Red Sea and the saving of the three youths from the fiery furnace, corresponds very closely to the Breviary readings during Lent and to the prophecies read during the vigil service of Easter, and this suggests that the book may have been intended for reading during Lent. The poems are divided into fifty-six numbered sections, and if one section were read each day the material would last either from Septuagesima to the day before Palm Sunday or from Sexagesima to Holy Saturday. At some stage a fourth poem, called *Christ and Satan*, was added to the three Old Testament items by a different scribe and without any provision for illustration. This poem is unlikely to have formed part of the original scheme, but it must have been added at an early date because it contains an ornamental initial by an artist who worked on the illustrations to *Genesis*. It celebrates the triumph of Christ over the devil in his resurrection and ascension and would have

¹ For information on these manuscripts and on editions of the texts see Bibliography, Sections 1 and 2.

provided a fitting climax to a series of Lenten readings by adding material suited to the Easter period.

The Vercelli book, like the Junius manuscript, contains only religious literature: a collection of twenty-three homilies and six poems. Unlike the Junius manuscript, the first part of which is written with a regular number of lines to the page and with a uniform system of initials and section numbers, the Vercelli book shows considerable variation in spacing, in the use of headings and initial capitals, and even in the number of lines to the page, suggesting that the manuscript was copied over a period of time as suitable material came to hand. The contents are not arranged in any logical order and although the verse texts, two of which are saints' lives, are not inappropriate in a collection of homilies, they have no particular connection with the items which precede or follow them. It seems that the grouping of the texts indicates the sources from which they were taken. If this is so, then the first two verse texts, *Andreas* and *The fates of the apostles*, were probably already linked in the manuscript from which they were copied; of the other poems, *Soul and body I*, *Homiletic fragment I* and *The dream of the rood* were probably taken from a second source and *Elene*, which is placed apart from the other two groups of poems, from a third.

The Exeter book differs from the two manuscripts already mentioned in being a collection of both secular and religious poetry. In contrast to the other manuscripts of Old English poetry which contain a small number of fairly substantial poems, the Exeter book contains many very short poems. The manuscript opens with a group of fairly long religious works: the first three, known collectively as *Christ*, treat the three manifestations of Christ at his nativity, ascension and second coming; the other long poems are a life of St Juliana, two lives of St Guthlac, an allegorical poem on the phoenix, and a poem called *Azarias* which is close to parts of the poem *Daniel* in the Junius manuscript. The shorter poems include a number of descriptive and elegiac works—of which the best known are *The wanderer* and *The seafarer*—some gnomic poetry, several admonitory pieces and a collection of ninety-five riddles. It is thought that the collection may have belonged to Æthelweard, the patron of Ælfric.²

Most of the short secular poems which have survived are in the Exeter book, but the major secular works are scattered through several manuscripts. Chief among them is the *Beowulf* manuscript which contains in addition part of a biblical poem in heroic style (*Judith*), and three short prose works: *The marvels of the east*, the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and a homily on St Christopher. The manuscript contains some coloured drawings illustrating *The marvels of the east*. Other important secular works are the six poems in the manu-

² *The wanderer* ed. T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, pp. 1–2.

scripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *The battle of Maldon*, the fragments of *The fight at Finnsburg* and *Waldere*, and the *Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*. The manuscripts of *The fight at Finnsburg* and *The battle of Maldon* no longer survive: the former, which was at one time in the library at Lambeth Palace, is known only from an edition printed in 1705 by George Hickes, and the latter, which was destroyed in the fire in the Cotton library in 1731, is preserved in a copy made by John Elphinston in 1724, now in the Bodleian Library.

As can be seen from the fate of *The fight at Finnsburg* and *The battle of Maldon* manuscripts could disappear even as late as the eighteenth century; many more must have been lost through the dispersal of the monastic libraries in the sixteenth century, and even before this date the survival of manuscripts written in Old English, and particularly of verse manuscripts, was largely a matter of chance. Much Old English poetry probably existed only in oral form. There must, for instance, have been a large body of historical narrative which was never put into writing but which survived into the twelfth century to be used by Latin writers such as William of Malmesbury, who states that he obtained much of his information about the Anglo-Saxon kings from popular songs.³ The lists of heroes in *Widsith* and the references in *Beowulf* and *Deor* to figures such as Weland, Sigemund and Eormannic give some indication of the wide range of pre-Christian heroic poetry which once existed; these poems too are unlikely to have been recorded for they were disapproved of by the church, which had a virtual monopoly of writing, but they continued to be recited even in monasteries. In about 797 the monks of Lindisfarne were rebuked by Alcuin for listening to tales of Ingeld instead of to the commentaries of the fathers; two hundred years later Dunstan of Canterbury was criticized for having learned the vain and frivolous songs of his heathen ancestors.⁴ Religious poetry fared better, though even here much has been lost: Bede states that Cædmon composed a vast corpus of biblical poetry and Bede himself and Aldhelm of Malmesbury are said to have been accomplished composers of religious poetry in English, yet all that remains of this is the short hymn on the creation by Cædmon and the five lines of Bede's death song. Whereas much secular poetry failed to survive to modern times because it was never written down, religious poetry disappeared because the language and script in which it was written became unintelligible. The Exeter book, which was used at one time as a cutting-board, shows the hazards to which vernacular manuscripts were exposed, and there are many examples in mediaeval library catalogues of books which are de-

³ For a full discussion of what poetry has been lost see R. M. Wilson, *The lost literature of medieval England*, chs. 1-3.

⁴ *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, ed. P. Jaffé, p. 357; *Memorials of St Dunstan*, ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls Ser. 63, p. 11.

scribed as old, illegible and worthless, almost certainly because they were written in Old English and in insular script.⁵

The poems which have survived were composed at different periods and in different parts of the country, but these distinctions have been largely obscured because the poems have been transposed into a literary dialect—predominantly late-West-Saxon, though with some non-West-Saxon elements—which is common to all the manuscripts. In the Exeter book the language is so uniform as to suggest that when the poems were first assembled in the late ninth or early tenth century there was a deliberate regularization of the linguistic forms.⁶ In the *Beowulf* and Vercelli manuscripts, on the other hand, the language varies from one item to another, allowing one to distinguish between those linguistic features which were introduced by the scribes and those which belong to an earlier stage in the transmission of the poems. *Elene*, for instance, shows some features which are characteristic of the Hatton copy of Alfred's translation of the *Cura pastoralis*, a manuscript which can be dated to between 890 and 897, and it can therefore be argued with some confidence that the poem has passed through an Alfredian copy.⁷ Six hundred lines of the *Genesis* in the Junius manuscript can be shown on linguistic grounds to have been translated into Old English from an Old Saxon poem of the second quarter of the ninth century, fragments of which are preserved in a manuscript from Mainz, now in the Vatican library.⁸ In *Beowulf* there are many lines where the metre requires the restoration of an early uncontracted form for the contracted form found in the manuscript, suggesting that a version of the poem may have been in existence as early as about 700, though it should be remembered that the traditional nature of poetry probably ensured the preservation of archaic forms long after they had disappeared from normal speech. In other cases poems can be dated on external evidence. *The battle of Maldon* must date from after 991 when the skirmish between the Danes and the English at Maldon took place. The late poem on the site of Durham must date from after 1104, when the relics of St Cuthbert were moved to the new cathedral, and from before 1109, because it is referred to in Symeon of Durham's *Historia Dunelmensis ecclesiae* which was completed in that year.⁹ Most poems, however, can be dated only within very wide limits and even where a close connection can be shown between two poems, for instance *Beowulf* and *Exodus*, it is usually impossible to state with any certainty which was the earlier.

⁵ N. Ker, *Catalogue of manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon*, p. xlix.

⁶ K. Sisam, *Studies in the history of Old English literature*, ch. 6, 'The Exeter book'.

⁷ *Elene*, ed. P. Gradon, pp. 10–13.

⁸ These lines are known as *Genesis B*, the rest of the poem as *Genesis A*.

⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. van K. Dobbie, vi, pp. xlv–v.

In appearance the manuscripts of Old English poetry differ enormously from modern poetic texts. They are invariably written in continuous lines, as though they were prose, and normally very little is provided in the way of punctuation or capital letters. In the Junius manuscript, which is more carefully written than the others, the half-lines of verse are marked by a point, and in some places a more elaborate system of punctuation, derived from that of liturgical manuscripts, indicates the inflections to be used when reading aloud.¹⁰ In the Exeter and Vercelli books, on the other hand, the points vary considerably in frequency, and regular metrical punctuation is rare. The poems have no titles, and the divisions between poems are indicated simply by extra spacing and the use of large capital letters. In the Junius manuscript the three Old Testament poems are divided into numbered sections which are distinguished like the poems themselves by extra punctuation and large capitals. Since the numbers run in a continuous series through these three poems the division between them can be made only on the basis of the subject matter, though each poem does begin at the head of a fresh page. In the Vercelli book, where again both poems and sections of poems are marked by extra punctuation and large capitals, two poems, *The dream of the rood* and *The fates of the apostles* do not even begin on a new page: the second of these poems is divided from *Andreas* by only a single space instead of the more usual double one, raising the possibility that the scribe considered it to be the concluding part of this poem. In the Exeter book again the divisions between poems and between subsections of poems are not clearly differentiated, though there is a tendency to use more elaborate punctuation, double spacing and more extensive capitalization at the beginning and end of the longer poems than is used for short poems or sections of poems. Occasionally a poem ends with a word such as *finit* or *amen* to provide a clear indication of where the division comes. Such indications are found at the end of *Christ and Satan* in the Junius manuscript, *The fates of the apostles* and *Elene* in the Vercelli book, and *Christ I*, *The phoenix*, *Juliana*, *The seafarer*, *Vainglory* and *The partridge* in the Exeter book.

This lack of concern for visual boundaries between poems and for a visible distinction between verse and prose arose because the poems did not belong to a written but to an oral tradition. They are categorized as verse because of their strict rhythm and alliteration, not because they are set out on the page in short lines. No titles were needed, for the opening lines served to define their themes, and in many cases a conventional opening formula indicated clearly enough where a poem began in the manuscript. We know that some poems

¹⁰ G. C. Thornley, 'The accents and points of MS Junius 11', *Trans. Phil. Soc.* (1954), pp. 178-205.

were composed while being recited while others were more probably composed in writing, but in all cases there was the same emphasis on the poem as something to be performed. In many cases poems must also have been transmitted orally rather than in writing and this may account for two striking features of the period: the lack of any record of the authors of most of the poems, and the lack of any conception of an authoritative text.

Many poems begin with a phrase such as *ic gefrægn*, 'I have heard', or claim autobiographical status, yet in only three cases can poems be attributed to a named poet. The nine-line *Hymn* composed at Whitby about 680 by the poet Cædmon and the five lines known as *Bede's death-song* are both preserved as part of prose narratives in which their origin and authorship is described. Apart from these two short compositions, the only poems whose authorship is known are two in the Vercelli book and two in the Exeter book. These four poems (*The fates of the apostles*, *Elene*, *Christ II* and *Juliana*) all end with a passage where the author, Cynewulf, has woven the initials of his name into the text by using runic symbols whose names are essential to the meaning. His purpose was not primarily to claim authorship, but to seek the prayers of others for the safety of his soul, and it was probably for this reason that he devised a form of signature which could not easily be lost or changed.

Her mæg findan	forepances gleaw,	
se ðe hine lysteð	leoðgiddunga,	
hwa þas fitte fegde.	ƿ [feoh] þær on ende standeþ,	
eorlas þæs on eorðan brucap.	Ne moton hie awa ætsomne,	
worlðwunigende;	ƿ [wynn] sceal gedreosan,	100
ʌ [ur] on eðle,	æfter tohreosan	
læne lices frætewa,	efne swa ʌ [lagu] toglideð.	
Ɔonne ʰ [cen] ond ƿ [yr]	cræftes neosað	
nihtes nearowe,	on him ʸ [ned] ligeð,	
cyninges þeodm.	Nu ðu cunnon miht	105
hwa on þam wordum wæs	werum oncyðig.	
Sie þæs gemyndig,	mann se ðe lufige	
þisses galdres begang,	þæt he geoce me	
ond frofre fricle.		

Fates of the apostles 96–109

Here the man who is wise in thought and who takes pleasure in poetry may discover who composed this song. F (wealth) stands at the end: men enjoy it on earth. They cannot always keep it while they live in this world; our joy (UW) on earth will turn to dust, and then the fleeting ornaments of the body will vanish like water (L) flowing away. When torch (C) and ink-horn (Y) pursue their craft fearfully by night, hardship (N) will oppress them, the ser-

vice of the king. Now you can perceive who has been revealed to men in those words. May the man who receives pleasure from the course of this song remember to implore help and comfort for me.

At the end of *Juliana* Cynewulf completes his runic signature with an explicit plea to be remembered not simply as a poet but by his name:

Bidde ic monna gehwone
gumena cynnes, þe þis gied wræce,
þæt he mec neodful bi noman minum 720
gemyne modig, ond meotud bidde
þæt me heofona helm helpe gefremme,
meahta waldend, on þam miclan dæge.

Juliana 718–23

I beg each man who recites this song, that in his pride he should remember me in my need by my name, and pray the judge that he, the guardian of the heavens and lord of power will grant me help on that great day.

For Cynewulf, the pleasure he had given through his compositions demanded a return in the form of prayers of intercession, something quite different from the material rewards expected by other poets. His demand for a continuing recompense rather than a once and for all payment implies that he believed that he had a permanent claim on his work. In general, however, poetry seems to have been considered as common property: each poet contributed to a continuing tradition, whether the telling of a story or the expression of an ideal; he modified the work of others and, presumably, expected his own work to be modified in turn.

A study of those few poems of which two texts survive shows that alterations were not confined to modernizing the language or to the removal of dialect forms.¹¹ Even in the poem *Soul and body*, where the Exeter and Vercelli texts are relatively close, there are changes in vocabulary and syntax, and in the case of *Azarias* and *Daniel* the differences are considerable. The two texts of *The dream of the rood*, the first in the Vercelli book, the second carved in runes on the edges of an eighth-century stone cross at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, are sufficiently close for it to be certain that they are versions of the same poem, but the exact relationship is unclear. It is likely that the Ruthwell inscription consists of extracts from a longer text for not only is it more concise than the corresponding sections of the Vercelli text: some lines are too short to scan correctly. There is no proof

¹¹ For a detailed comparison of some of these texts see Sisam, *Studies*, ch. 2, 'The authority of Old English poetical manuscripts'.

however that the text from which the extracts were made was a straightforward Northumbrian equivalent of the late-West-Saxon Vercelli text, nor is there any evidence that the opening and closing sections of the poem, which are not represented on the cross, existed at the time when the Ruthwell inscription was carved: the poem may well have been completely re-shaped in the ninth or tenth century. Cædmon's *Hymn* is particularly interesting in this respect. The seventeen copies of the poem, four in the Northumbrian dialect and thirteen in late-West-Saxon, show that already in the eighth century there were two quite different versions of the end of line five: *eordu bearnum* (LWS *eorðan bearnum*) and *aelda barnum* (LWS *ylða bearnum*). The first of these readings, which is unique to this poem, is probably the original, and the more familiar *aelda barnum* was probably substituted as a result of oral transmission of the poem.¹² In reciting a poem, even one with the authority which Cædmon's *Hymn* must have had, it would have been easy to forget a phrase and to replace it by some more familiar one which fitted the metre and alliteration.

The conditions under which Old English poetry has been preserved place special difficulties in the way of its interpretation. The first problem concerns the meaning of the poems in relation to the society which produced them. Our response to these poems depends partly on our understanding and experience as twentieth-century readers and partly on our appreciation of the meaning they had for their original audience: but whereas with later literature we usually know where, when, by and for whom a work was composed, in the case of Old English poetry we normally know none of these things. The poems are preserved only in the form in which they were known to copyists of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, but many of them can be shown to have existed a hundred or more years earlier. The interpretation of the poems therefore depends on an understanding of their meaning both at the time when they were transcribed and the time when they were composed. But a further difficulty arises here, for we can date the poems only within very wide limits: to say, for instance, that *Beowulf* was composed during the eighth century is not very helpful, for the period includes both the Northumbria of Bede (d. 735) and the Mercia of Offa (d. 796) and the poem would be interpreted differently according to which choice one made. Moreover a poem like *Beowulf*, which treats the exploits of Scandinavian heroes of the late fifth and early sixth centuries, must derive from stories which had been handed down orally over a long period of time but we cannot get behind the written text to reconstruct an earlier oral version. The issue is not simply one of date but of environment. It has become fashionable to interpret *Beowulf* as a strongly Christian poem and to assume a high level of theological

¹² C. L. Wrenn, 'The poetry of Cædmon', *PBA* 32 (1946), pp. 277-95, especially 282-4.

knowledge in its original audience. This might be reasonable if we could be certain that the poem originated in a monastic environment of the kind which produced Bede, but although there is evidence that heroic songs were recited in monasteries there is no sign that Alcuin interpreted them as religious allegories. If we turn to a later period we find that there is evidence from the West Saxon royal genealogy and from a charter of the time of Athelstan for a knowledge of *Beowulf* or of something very close to it in court circles of the late ninth and early tenth centuries, but we cannot assume that a secular audience of this period, even after the educational efforts of Alfred, would have been as alert to religious symbolism as are some modern critics: they are far more likely to have been interested, as were Byrhtnoth's *comitatus*, in those things which were part of their daily life: loyalties and rewards, the winning of reputation, techniques of fighting and the ethics of the blood-feud.¹³ The difficulty cannot be evaded by treating the poems without reference to their environment as though their words were all-sufficient, for the meaning of those words depends not only on their immediate context in a particular poem or in the poetry as a whole, but on the way in which they were used in the society to which the poems belonged.

The second problem concerns the criteria by which we evaluate the poems. We possess only part of the poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period, and we have no means of knowing whether what remains is a representative selection, for there is no evidence that the compilers of the anthologies did not simply copy what came to hand. There may have been several long heroic poems comparable to *Beowulf* or it may have been unique: we do not know. It is therefore impossible to talk of what is typical except in relation to what has been preserved, or to assert with any confidence that a poet is being original or innovatory. Moreover, our ideas on originality differ greatly from those we assume to have operated in the Anglo-Saxon period. The poems show that formulae—set phrases which conformed to the rhythmic pattern of the verse—played a major part in the composition of Old English poetry. Sometimes these phrases were used mechanically, but to a skilful poet they offered the possibility of unexpected variation of a kind impossible in poetry which had no traditional phraseology; because they were already part of the accepted language of poetry they drew a prepared response from the audience, and by using them in unfamiliar contexts the poet could deny this expectation and provoke new thought. This emphasis on the traditional, together with the

¹³ For a recent discussion of these questions see E. John, '*Beowulf* and the margins of literacy', *Bull. John Rylands Univ. Lib.* 56 (1974), pp. 388–422 and the references given there, especially K. Sisam, 'Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies', *PBA* 39 (1953), pp. 287–348, especially 339–45, and R. Reynolds, 'An echo of *Beowulf* in Athelstan's charters of 931–933 A.D.?', *MÆ* 24 (1955), pp. 101–3.

assumption that poetry was a matter of craftsmanship rather than inspiration, is far removed from our modern approach. Attitudes to literary form were equally different from those to which we are accustomed. Many Old English poems seem shapeless to the modern reader, either because they have no well-defined ending or because of their digressive, encyclopaedic structure. There is good evidence that throughout the Middle Ages this gratuitous giving of information was welcomed, but it is still difficult for us to judge it.¹⁴ We may assert after studying the extant poetry that the Anglo-Saxons liked digressions and that they preferred their poems to be written in an elaborately repetitive and formulaic style, but we are still left with the problem of how to evaluate poetry composed within conventions which are quite foreign to us: we cannot assume that something is good just because it was fashionable. Finally, our statements about the poems have to depend almost entirely on inferences from the text, and this means that we are forced to place tremendous pressure on it, scrutinizing each word in order to extract the maximum information from it. In so doing we tend to assume that the author and his original audience pondered the words equally intently. It is true that even when one is improvising one can still choose one's words, and even poets who never committed their work to writing must have tried out ideas and phrases in private before incorporating them in a recitation before an audience, but reflection is difficult for the listener who, unlike the reader, cannot halt the words while he considers them: there is no spoken text in the sense in which there is a written one. It is easy for the modern critic with his printed text and readily accessible works of reference to read too much into these poems. One must return here to the social context. In the hall, recitation must have been the chief form of entertainment, though reading aloud certainly occurred; a monastic community on the other hand encouraged private reading and meditation as well as reading in public.¹⁵ The interpretation we give to each poem must depend, at least to some extent, on the context to which we assign it: there can be no one method of interpretation.

¹⁴ G. Shepherd, 'The nature of alliterative poetry in late Medieval England', *PBA* 56 (1970), pp. 57-76.

¹⁵ Alfred's mother read aloud to her children, see *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, rev. D. Whitelock, ch. 23. For private reading in Benedictine houses see *Benedicti regula*, ed. R. Hanslik, *CSEL* 75 (1960), ch. 48, pp. 114-19.

2 The art of poetry

Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period was not, as it is in some societies, a thing apart, its themes carefully distinguished from those appropriate to prose, its authors men of exceptional sensitivity and inspiration. Rather, it was the natural form of expression for material as diverse as the straightforward instruction of poems like *The seasons for fasting*, the proverbial wisdom of the gnomic poetry and the celebration of historic events in the *Chronicle* poems and *The battle of Maldon*. It was equally appropriate for public entertainment in the hall and for the intimacy of private prayer. For some, the art of poetry was a craft to be learned, and the professional poet, the *guma gilp-hlæden* of *Beowulf* for instance, or the much-travelled Widsith, was highly esteemed and lavishly rewarded. The ability to recite, however, and possibly too the ability to compose, was not confined to a specialized class but extended from the nobility down to the peasants. The remains of the six-stringed lyres found in the funeral deposits at Taplow and Sutton Hoo indicate that the kings and nobles of the seventh century counted music among their accomplishments,¹ and one of the most vivid accounts of courtly entertainment is the description of the old king, Hrothgar, telling stories of the past and playing the harp (*Beowulf* 2105–10). King Alfred is reported by Asser to have learned Saxon songs by heart and to have recommended the learning of them to his children, and the historian Bede was known to his contemporaries as an accomplished poet in the vernacular.² Bede's account of Cædmon reveals how widespread the ability to recite was.³ The farm servants at Whitby abbey were apparently in the habit of entertaining themselves by reciting to the music of the harp; the cattle-herd, Cædmon, who had never learned any poetry, was so conscious of his inadequacy that he used to leave the house and go out to the cattle-

¹ R. Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ch. 7, 'The Sutton Hoo Lyre, *Beowulf* and the origins of the frame harp', pp. 188–97, and *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, I, p. 451.

² Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, rev. D. Whitelock, chs. 22, 23, 75, 76; *The manuscripts of Cædmon's Hymn and Bede's Death Song*, ed. E. van K. Dobbie, p. 120.

³ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Bk. IV, ch. xxiv, pp. 414–21.

sheds when he saw the harp approaching him as it made its way round the company and each in turn was expected to recite to its music.

The same wide social spectrum is found among professional entertainers. On the one hand there are the poets such as Hrothgar's minstrel, distinguished figures who were probably permanent members of a court, and who were equal in rank to the members of the *duguð*; on the other were travelling minstrels, jugglers and acrobats, though little is known of this second group. There is a brief description in *The gifts of men* (82-4) of the entertainment provided by an acrobat, and the homilist Ælfric distinguishes between two kinds of entertainer: the *scop*, whom he equates with the Latin *poeta*, and the *gleoman*, a word he reserves for the Latin *mimus* or *scurra*.⁴ The *Beowulf* poet had used the two words as synonyms but it seems clear that by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period the noun *gleoman* and the related verb *gliwian* had acquired a pejorative sense; the Canons of Edgar suggest this disreputable side of poetic entertainment when they state: 'We læraþ, ðæt ænig preost ne beo ealuscop, ne on ænige wisan gliwige.'⁵ Two centuries earlier however, Aldhelm seems to have seen nothing wrong in acting the part of a minstrel, when he sang on the bridge at Malmesbury in order to attract an audience to whom he could preach.⁶

Apart from these few references, our knowledge about the profession of poet in the Anglo-Saxon period is derived almost entirely from the poetry itself. The gnomic poetry includes several references to singing, playing the harp, and composing poetry, among them a brief description of the minstrel, sitting at his lord's feet, his plectrum moving swiftly across the strings:

Sum sceal mid hearpan æt his hlaforðes
fotum sittan, feoh þicgan,
ond a snellice snere wræstan,
lætan scralletan sceacol, se þe hleapeð,
nægl neomegende.

Fortunes of men 80-84

One shall sit with the harp at his lord's feet, receive treasure, and always swiftly twist the strings, let the leaping plectrum, creating harmony, sound loudly.

Two other poems indicate the poet's status. *Deor* is the lament of a minstrel who has lost the favour of his lord and been dispossessed of

⁴ Ælfrics *Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. J. Zupitza, p. 302.

⁵ *Ancient Laws and institutes of England*, ed. B. Thorpe, ii, p. 256.

⁶ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton, Rolls Ser. 52 (1870), p. 336.

the lands he once owned. *Widsith* tells of a poet who, although attached to a definite court, goes out to prove himself, rather as Beowulf does, visiting the tribes and heroes of Northern Europe and reciting and composing in return for gifts. The nature of these gifts reveals something of the relationship between lord and poet. Eormanric, whose court Widsith visits, gives him a ring; his own lord, on the other hand, gives him land; his ancestral estates:

Ond ic wæs mid Eormanrice	ealle þrage,	
þær me Gotena cyning	gode dohte;	
se me beag forgeaf,	burgwarena fruma,	90
on þam siex hund wæs	smætes goldes,	
gescyred sceatta	scillingrime;	
þone ic Eadgilse	on æht sealde,	
minum hleodryhtne,	þa ic to ham bicwom,	
leofum to leane,	þæs þe he me lond forgeaf,	95
mines fæder eþel,	frea Myrginga.	

Widsith 88–96

And I was all the time with Eormanric, where the king of the Goths was generous to me with his wealth; the ruler of the city-dwellers gave me a ring in which was reckoned to be six hundred pieces of pure gold, counted in shillings; when I returned home I gave it to my lord and protector Eadgils as a reward for my dear lord because he, the ruler of the Myrgings, gave me land, my father's estates.

Like Beowulf, who gives Hygelac the gifts he had received from Hrothgar as a reward for his services in Denmark, Widsith gives Eadgils the ring he obtained from Eormanric. In both cases the motive is the same: the retainer gives to his lord not out of courtesy but precisely in return for the ancestral lands which are his due now that he has proved his worth.

The two classes of poet, the popular and the courtly, were united in the person of Cædmon, the first composer of vernacular religious poetry in England. The songs sung by his fellow servants were probably of a fairly popular kind. The miraculous gift Cædmon received in his old age was not his sudden and unexpected proficiency as a performer, for most of his companions could do as much, but his acquisition overnight and without visible tuition of the ability to express what he learned in the highly-ornamented language of the *scop*. Cædmon was believed to have been divinely inspired but it was his *craft* or technical skill which testified to that inspiration and which, to judge from Bede's assertion that he was taught not by man but by God, was usually something which had to be consciously learned.