

Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Selected and translated
by R K Gordon



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R. K. GORDON

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INTRODUCTION

THIS book contains translations of English poetry which was composed, roughly speaking, between A.D. 650 and 1000, or, in other words, from *Widsith*, which is perhaps the oldest English poem, to *Maldon*, which is the last great poem before the Norman Conquest. The coming of the French brought such great changes in language and in literary fashions that the older poetry seems somewhat remote from us.

English poetry before the Conquest may be roughly divided into two classes, heroic and Christian. The heroic poems deal for the most part with Germanic legend and history. About these poems there is nothing distinctively English except the language. The stories they tell or mention, the kings and warriors they refer to, were known to all the Germanic peoples, not merely to the tribes which came over to Britain. The Christian poetry adapts and paraphrases the biblical narrative, records the lives of saints, or uses verse for general moralizing. These religious themes were as much the subject of poetry after the Norman Conquest as before. Chaucer tells us the life of St Cecilia as Cynewulf tells us the life of St Juliana. The Conquest changed the language and metre of the religious poetry, but the substance remained the same.

Of the heroic poetry we can form no final estimate, because we do not know the extent or worth of what has been lost. The ravages of the Danes from the end of the eighth century onward blotted out a flourishing literature in the north of England. Monastic libraries were destroyed. Practically the only Northumbrian poetry preserved has survived in a West Saxon translation and not in its native dress. There are indications that *Beowulf* was originally a Northumbrian poem. *Beowulf* has survived complete, not because it was necessarily the best of the old poems, but merely because it was luckier than its fellows. *Waldhere* and *Finnesburh*, of which we have only fragments, were probably in some ways better poems.

The heroic poems, *Beowulf*, *Finnesburh*, *Waldhere*, *Deor*, and *Widsith*, probably took their present form in the course of the seventh century. Their substance, however, comes from an earlier time, from the age which had just closed, extending from

the fourth to the sixth century and generally known as the Age of National Migrations, or, more briefly, as the Heroic Age. These poems reflect the tradition and spirit of that past time, and we can learn from them something about conditions of life in the Heroic Age, just as we see in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the Heroic Age of Greece. The way of living pictured in these English poems is not without nobility, and the impression they leave is a corrective to the brief historical annals of the time which tell largely of treachery and lust and bloodshed. No virtue is more insisted on in the poems than the loyalty a warrior owes his liege lord. This creed is well expressed in the words of Wiglaf when he exhorts his comrades to stand by Beowulf against the fire-dragon:

‘I remember that time when we were drinking mead, when in the beer hall we promised our lord who gave us these rings, that we would requite him for the war gear, the helms and sharp swords, if need such as this came upon him. He chose us among the host of his own will for this venture; he reminded us of famous deeds, and gave me these treasures, the more because he counted us good spear-warriors, bold bearers of helmets, though our lord, the protector of the people, purposed to achieve this mighty task unaided, because among men he had wrought most daring deeds, daring ventures. Now the day has come when our lord needs the strength of valiant warriors. Let us go to help our warlike prince, while the fierce dread flame yet flares. God knows, that, as for me, I had much rather the flame should embrace my body with my gold-giver. It does not seem fitting to me that we should bear shields back to our dwelling, if we cannot first fell the foe, guard the life of the prince of the Weders. I know well that, from his former deeds, he deserves not to suffer affliction alone among the warriors of the Geats, to fall in fight; sword and helmet, corslet and shirt of mail, shall be shared by us both.’

This personal allegiance is strengthened by the lord’s generosity, and the poems are full of praise for the lord who knows how to give freely. He is called ‘the giver of rings,’ ‘the bestower of treasure,’ ‘the gold-friend of men.’ Hrothgar is praised for his liberality to his followers and to Beowulf; and one of the reproaches brought against Heremod, of whom Hrothgar speaks, is that ‘he gave not rings to the Danes.’ The minstrels, Widsith and Deor, both receive grants of land from their masters. The sad exile in *The Wanderer* recalls ‘how in his youth his gold-friend was kind to him at the feast.’

The poems reflect also another side of life in the Heroic Age—the frequency of feuds. *Beowulf* has many references to bitter tribal fights. The feud of Hrothgar the Dane and Ingeld the Heathobard is settled by Hrothgar giving Freawaru his daughter in marriage to Ingeld, but Beowulf tells Hygelac how the feud will break out again. There is, too, the tale of Finn of which Hrothgar's minstrel sings in hall and of which we have another glimpse in the *Finnesburh* fragment. Hygelac is slain in an expedition against the Franks and Frisians, and his son Heardred is killed fighting against the Swedes. Nor do the poems refer only to tribal strife. There is frequent mention of quarrels between kinsmen. Unferth is taunted by Beowulf with having slain his brothers and the treachery of Hrothulf is clearly foretold in *Beowulf*. Men were driven abroad by such feuds, or by the love of adventure and gain. So Beowulf goes to the Danish court to cleanse the hall of the monster Grendel and is rewarded with princely gifts.

Some of the pleasantest passages in *Beowulf* are those which describe the daily life of princes and warriors. The scenes in Hrothgar's great hall, Heorot, where men talk and drink mead and listen to the minstrel's song, and where the queen Wealtheow moves with courtesy among her guests, are full of simple dignity.

The style of these poems has a just claim to be called epic. It differs from that of the Homeric poems in degree but not in kind. The range of style is considerable. It can be swift and grim, as in Beowulf's struggle with Grendel or the great fight in the hall of Finn; or it can possess a strange beauty as in the picture of the mere where Grendel's mother lives. The voyage of Beowulf and his men to Hrothgar's court is a good example of steady, dignified narrative. The elegiac note also is often heard. 'There is no joy of the harp, delight of the timbrel, nor does the good hawk sweep through the hall, nor the swift steed stamp in the court. Violent death has caused to pass many generations of men.' One mark of the style is the comparative absence of similes but the frequency of descriptive phrases, known as Kennings, as, for example, when Beowulf's boat is called 'the foamy-necked floater.' These are sometimes of great beauty, and sometimes show the same kind of ingenuity which appears in a more expanded way in the *Riddles*.

The best introduction to the Christian poetry is the famous story of Cædmon told by Bede. 'This man had lived a secular life till he had reached old age, and had never learned a song. And so often at the feast, when it was decreed for the sake of

mirth that each in turn should sing to the harp, when he saw the harp coming near him, then in shame he rose from the banquet and went home to his house. One time when he had done this, and had left the house where the feasting was, and had gone out to the cattle-stall, for the care of them was entrusted to him that night, and had duly laid his limbs to rest there and fallen asleep, there appeared a man unto him and hailed him and saluted him and called him by his name: "Cædmon, sing me something." Then he answered and said: "I cannot sing, and so I left the feasting and came hither because I could not." He who spoke to him again said: "Nevertheless, thou canst sing to me." He said: "What am I to sing?" He said: "Sing me the Creation." When he received that answer, then straightway he began to sing in praise of God, the Creator, verses and words which he had never heard before. This is the order of them:

Now must we render praise to the Ruler of heaven,
 To the might of God and the thought of His mind,
 The glorious Father of men, since He, the Lord everlasting,
 Wrought the beginning of all wonders.
 He, the holy Creator, first fashioned
 The heavens as a roof for the children of earth.
 Then this middle-earth the Master of mankind,
 The Lord eternal, afterwards adorned,
 The earth for men, the Prince all-powerful.

Then he rose up from sleep and clearly remembered all he had sung while he slept, and straightway added in the same metre many words of the song worthy of God.' He was received into the monastery of Whitby under the Abbess Hilda, and there he passed his life in making poetry. 'He sang first of the creation of the world and the beginning of mankind and all the story of Genesis—that is the first book of Moses—and afterwards of the Israelites leaving the land of Egypt and of their entrance into the promised land, of many other stories from the holy scriptures and of Christ's incarnation and of His passion and His ascension into heaven, and of the coming of the Holy Ghost and the teachings of the Apostles. And afterwards of the fear of the judgment to come and of the terror of punishment in torment and of the sweetness of the heavenly kingdom he made many songs; and likewise also he wrought many others of divine benefits and judgments.' He died in 680.

Although the poems *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan* were for long ascribed to Cædmon, it is probable that the nine lines quoted by Bede are all that we have of his work. But,

though Cædmon's work is lost, Bede's description of it applies very well to the extant religious poems, to their scope and their spirit. The story brings out vividly the difference between the production of the old heroic poems and the new Christian verse, between Cædmon, the poet-monk alone in his cell, and Hrothgar's minstrel singing the tale of Finn to the warriors at their mead.

But the break between the religious poetry and the earlier work is not complete. The old devices of style are carried on and adapted to the new subjects. So, for example, the fallen Satan in *Genesis*—B, with his loyal band of followers, is described in terms that would suit a Germanic chieftain. Abraham's rescue of Lot and the fight at the opening of the *Elene* are told in the phrases of the old battle poetry. Moses leading the Israelites is called 'the glorious hero.' The poet who described St Andrew's mission to the strange land of Mermedonia knew and remembered Beowulf's mission to Hrothgar. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the most beautiful of all the religious poems, Christ is described as 'the young Hero' and the disciples are faithful warriors.

The religious poetry is of very unequal value. The *Later Genesis* (*Genesis*—B) and *The Dream of the Rood* are as good as anything in Old English poetry, but too often we get merely lifeless moralizing in conventional phrases. Except for the group of poems formerly thought to be by Cædmon, most of the religious poetry has at one time or another been ascribed to Cynewulf. He is the undoubted author of the works he has signed, *Elene*, *Juliana*, part at least of the *Christ*, and *The Fates of the Apostles*. The following poems—*Guthlac*, *The Phoenix*, *Andreas*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Physiologus*, *Riddles*—have all been attributed to him. In spite of a great deal of discussion nothing has been certainly discovered as to his identity. He was probably born about 750 and was a Northumbrian or Mercian. Cynewulf is as deliberate and conscious an artist as Tennyson. His grace and his mastery of rhetoric are different from and inferior to the more solid qualities of *Beowulf*, which presents dramatic situations and human character.

But English poetry had not lost the power to deal well with great simple heroic themes. The poem on the battle of Maldon, written only a few years before A.D. 1000, shows the old strength and nobility. There is no sign of weakness or exhaustion.

Among the most interesting poems in Anglo-Saxon are the lyrics, or, more properly perhaps, the elegies—*The Seafarer*, *The*

Wanderer, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Ruin*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. These pieces have much in common, for with the exception of *The Husband's Message* they are sorrowful in mood, and the speaker looks back to happier times which have vanished. *The Ruin*, mutilated though the text is, is perhaps the finest of them.

Practically all the old poetry is written in the same kind of verse. The main principles of the metre are simple. Each line is made up of two half-lines which are separated by a caesura and joined by alliteration. Each half-line has normally two feet, and each foot is made up of an accented part and a varying number of unaccented syllables. The alliteration which links the two half-lines falls on these accented syllables. Words beginning with the same consonant alliterate in Old English, and a word beginning with any vowel alliterates with any other word beginning with a vowel.

The following lines will illustrate the structure of the verse:

Him se yldesta		ondswarode,
(Him the eldest		answered,)
Werodes wisa		word-hord onleac.
(Of the troop the leader		word-hoard unlocked.)

This alliterative metre was conquered by the rhyming measures brought in by the Normans. Strangely enough, it made a glorious reappearance in the fourteenth century in *Piers Plowman* and other poems, but the revival was not lasting. Its supremacy had gone.

There are four manuscript books which contain the greater part of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

1. *Beowulf* is preserved in a manuscript, written about A.D. 1000 and now in the British Museum. The manuscript was once in the possession of Lawrence Nowell, a sixteenth-century pioneer in Anglo-Saxon studies. He has written his name on the manuscript and the date 1563. Of its earlier history we know nothing. In the seventeenth century the manuscript found its way into the collection formed by Sir Robert Cotton. In 1705 Wanley, in his *Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, mentioned the poem, and said it described wars between a Dane, Beowulf, and the Swedes—a description which shows that the real contents of the poem were not yet understood. About a quarter of a century later the poem was nearly destroyed by fire. Thorkelin, an Icelandic, near the close of the eighteenth century came to England, copied the manuscript himself and caused

another copy to be made. He spent years in preparing an edition only to have his translation and notes destroyed during the English bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. The copy, however, of the manuscript escaped, and in 1815 his edition at last appeared. Among the other contents of the Beowulf manuscript is *Judith*.

2. *Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Christ and Satan*, are contained in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library. It once belonged to Archbishop Usher, who gave it to Franz Junius, a Huguenot scholar who came to England in 1620. Junius printed the poems in 1655, and afterwards presented the manuscript to the University of Oxford.

3. The *Exeter Book* was given by Leofric, Bishop of Devon and Cornwall and Chancellor to Edward the Confessor, to Exeter Cathedral, where it still remains. Wanley was the first scholar to give an account of the book. The *Exeter Book* was not printed until 1842. The following poems form part of the contents of the *Exeter Book*: *Christ, Juliana, Guthlac, The Phoenix, Whale, Panther, Riddles, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, The Arts of Men, The Fates of Men, Gnostic Verses* (in part), *The Soul's Address to the Body* (Part 1), *Widsith, Deor, The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, The Ruin*.

4. The *Vercelli Book* is preserved in the cathedral library at Vercelli in Northern Italy. It has probably been there for six or seven centuries. How this book of Anglo-Saxon writings found its way to Italy we do not know. The manuscript contains the following poems: *Andreas, The Fates of the Apostles, The Soul's Address to the Body, The Dream of the Rood, Elene*.

R. K. GORDON.

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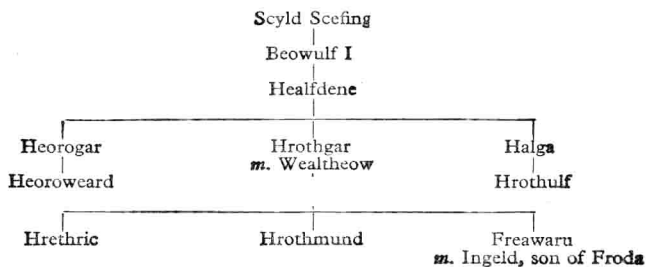
BEOWULF

[A summary of the plot of *Beowulf* sounds like a nursery tale of marvels. The fight with Grendel in the hall, the slaying of Grendel's mother beneath the mere, and the encounter with the fire-breathing dragon belong to the same family as the adventures of Jack the Giant Killer. Parallels to Beowulf's exploits exist in written literature and in folklore. One of the most interesting is in the Icelandic saga about the famous outlaw Grettir. Two episodes in the saga bear such a strong resemblance to the fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother that it is clear they come from the same original story. (See *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, translated by G. A. Hight, Everyman's Library, No. 699, pp. 86-100, 170-7.) But a bare summary of the plot of *Beowulf* gives a wrong impression of the style and spirit of the poem. It has epic dignity and reality in spite of the fantastic character of the main story. Some of the events and persons referred to in the poem are historical. Hygelac was a real king who fell in battle near the mouth of the Rhine between A.D. 512 and 520. His people, the Geats, probably lived in a part of what is now southern Sweden. There is, however, no evidence that Beowulf the Geat, the hero of the poem, ever existed. There is good reason to suppose that the Swedish kings and princes mentioned in the poem—Eadgils, Onela, Ohtere, Ongentheow—are historical. Accounts in Scandinavian literature of the wars between the Geats and Swedes (their neighbours to the north) correspond to what is told us in *Beowulf* of the struggle. The Danish king Healfdene and his descendants are also probably historical, and their great hall Heorot almost certainly stood at Leire in the island of Seeland. There is, however, no evidence that Healfdene's ancestors—Scyld Scefing and Beowulf (not to be confused with the hero of the poem)—are anything but mythical figures. Scyld Scefing may mean Scyld son of Sceafof or Scelf, or Scyld with the sheaf. The story told here of Scyld coming mysteriously over the sea as a child is told later in England (by Ethelwerd in the tenth century and by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth) not of Scyld, but of Scef or Sceafof. In William of Malmesbury's account a handful of corn is at the child's head in the boat; and this gave him his name Sheaf. Sceafof appears also in the catalogue of kings in *Widsith*. The Scandinavian records place Scyld at the beginning of the genealogies of the Danish kings, but do not mention the story of the child in the boat. It is probable, then, that that story originally belonged to Sceafof, and that in *Beowulf* it has somehow been transferred to Scyld.

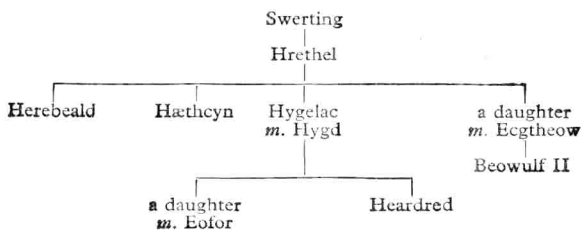
In this poem are many references to Christianity. Some of these seem strangely incongruous. Hrothgar's minstrel sings a religious poem about the Creation, and yet Beowulf is cremated with pagan ceremonies. This mixture of pagan and Christian usages and beliefs has been explained in several ways. Some think that the Christian passages were not in the poem at first but were added by a later hand. We cannot be certain, but it is possible that they were the work of the original poet. Christianity did not at once drive out the older faith and ideas. The Christian king Alfred loved to listen to the old Saxon songs. For a time the old and the new existed side by side in England, as they do in this English poem. A little later, Old English poetry dealt almost entirely with Christian subjects, and the monk in his cell turned poet and replaced the minstrel in hall.]

GENEALOGIES

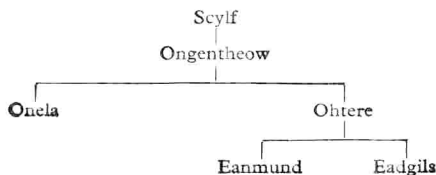
DANISH ROYAL FAMILY



GEAT ROYAL FAMILY



SWEDISH ROYAL FAMILY



I

Lo! we have heard the glory of the kings of the Spear-Danes in days gone by, how the chieftains wrought mighty deeds. Often Scyld Scefing wrested the mead benches from troops of foes,¹ from many tribes; he made fear fall upon the earls. After he was first found in misery (he received solace for that), he grew up under the heavens, lived in high honour, until each of his neighbours over the whale road must needs obey him and render tribute. That was a good king! Later a young son was born to him in the court, God sent him for a comfort to the people; He had marked the misery of that earlier time when they suffered long space, lacking a leader. Wherefore the Lord of life, the Ruler of glory, gave him honour in the world.

Beowulf, son of Scyld, was renowned in Scandinavian lands—his repute spread far and wide. So shall a young man bring good to pass with splendid gifts in his father's possession, so that when war comes willing comrades shall stand by him again in his old age, the people follow him. In every tribe a man shall prosper by glorious deeds.

Then at the fated hour Scyld, very strong, passed hence into the Lord's protection. Then did they, his dear comrades, bear him out to the shore of the sea, as he himself had besought them, whilst as friend of the Scyldings he had power of speech, as loved lord of the land long held sway. There at the haven stood the ring-prowed ship, covered with ice and eager to set forth, the chieftain's vessel. Then they laid down the loved lord, the bestower of rings on the bosom of the barge, the famous man by the mast. Many treasures and ornaments were there, brought from afar. I never heard of a sightlier ship adorned with weapons of war and garments of battle, swords, and corslets. Many treasures lay on his bosom that were to pass far with him into the power of the flood. Not at all did they furnish him with lesser gifts, with great costly stores, than did those who sent him forth in the beginning while he was still a child alone over the waves. Further they set a golden banner high over his head; they let the ocean bear him; they surrendered him to the sea. Sad was their mind, mournful their mood. Men cannot tell for a truth, counsellors in hall, heroes under the heavens, who received that burden.

¹ That is, conquered.

II

Then Beowulf of the Scyldings, beloved king of the people, was famed among peoples long time in the strongholds—his father had passed hence, the prince from his home—until noble Healfdene was born to him; aged and fierce in fight, he ruled the Scyldings graciously while he lived. From him, the prince of hosts, four children sprang in succession, Heorogar, and Hrothgar, and Halga the good; I heard that Sigeneow was Onela's queen, consort of the war-Scylfing.¹ Then good fortune in war was granted to Hrothgar, glory in battle, so that his kinsmen gladly obeyed him, until the younger warriors grew to be a mighty band.

It came into his mind that he would order men to make a hall building, a mighty mead dwelling, greater than ever the children of men had heard of; and therein that he should part among young and old all which God gave unto him except the nation and the lives of men. Then I heard far and wide of work laid upon many a tribe throughout this world, the task of adorning the place of assembly. Quickly it came to pass among men in due time that it was perfect; the greatest of hall dwellings; he whose word had wide sway gave it the name of Heorot.² He broke not his pledge, he bestowed bracelets and treasure at the banquet. The hall towered up, lofty and wide-gabled; it endured the surges of battle, of hostile fire. The time was not yet come when the feud between son-in-law and father-in-law was fated to flare out after deadly hostility.³

Then the mighty spirit who dwelt in darkness angrily endured the torment of hearing each day high revel in the hall. There was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the minstrel. He who could tell of men's beginning from olden times spoke of how the Almighty wrought the world, the earth bright in its beauty which the water encompasses; the Victorious One established the brightness of sun and moon for a light to dwellers in the land, and adorned the face of the earth with branches and leaves; He also created life of all kinds which move and live. Thus the noble warriors lived in pleasure and plenty, until a fiend in hell began to contrive malice. The grim spirit was called Grendel, a

¹ The Scyldings are Danes; the Scylfings, Swedes.

² Heorot means Hart. The name probably refers to the antlers on the roof.

³ Referring to the feud between Hrothgar and Ingeld (see Sections xxix and xxx).