

# THE LANGUAGE OF OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

G. A. LESTER





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# Acknowledgements

A small book on so large a subject as the language of Old and Middle English poetry may seem an ambitious and even foolhardy undertaking. However, as I explain in the Introduction, there is something to be gained from this broad approach. It is inevitable that I have had to draw heavily on the work and ideas of others, particularly authors, former teachers, colleagues and students. Had I not experienced their scholarship, interest and enthusiasm, over a number of years, I could not have written a book such as this, which, in view of the breadth of its subject matter and the narrowness of its page limit, is inevitably a synthesis of my own ideas and what I consider valuable in what I have read and heard. Where I have used specific published material I have acknowledged the debt, but generally I have tried to keep references to a minimum, at the same time providing sufficient information to suggest approaches to more detailed study for the non-specialists and general readers for whom this book is principally intended. Without doubt there will be errors, omissions and over-simplifications, for which I take absolute responsibility, as is customary, while hoping that the rest of the material will be enough to stimulate insights and new trains of thought into medieval English poetry.

Sheffield G. A. Lester

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### 1 Introduction

English, like any living language, is constantly changing, so the terms 'Old English', 'Middle English' and 'Modern English' are little more than convenient labels for dividing the continuum into manageable parts. Language change, of course, does not proceed at a steady and regular pace, and at times there are major developments, some of them resulting from important social changes, which encourage us to think in terms of different phases.

One such phase is associated with the Anglo-Saxons, whose earliest surviving written records date from about the year 700. The vernacular language they spoke and wrote, which we now refer to as 'Old English', came to an end largely as a result of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. The change, naturally, was not immediate, but written evidence suggests that by the year 1100 (or 1150 at the latest) a new phase, involving substantial changes, had been established. Middle English in its turn was subject to very great pressures in the fifteenth century. These stemmed less from a single political event than from a variety of factors, including the far-reaching sound change known as the Great Vowel Shift, the rise in the importance of London with the consequent feeling that London English was somehow a standard to be aspired to, and the spread of printing, which, at the literary level, helped consolidate the increasing uniformity of English. After about 1500, therefore, the language is said to be in its early 'modern' stage, although anyone acquainted with, say, an original, unmodernised text of Shakespeare will know how unlike present-day English the language then was.

It is relevant also to mention the term 'medieval', an adjective from the Latin *Medium Aevum*, which means 'the Middle Age'. In

its original sense this term relates to the period from the end of Classical Antiquity to the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, and encompasses therefore both Old English and Middle English. This is the sense in which the term will be used in this book, despite the fact that it is often now understood as referring only to the post-Conquest period.

The Anglo-Saxons who constituted the earliest English people were of Germanic origin and settled in Britain after the withdrawal of the Romans in the fifth century. The migration was protracted and piecemeal, and the name 'Anglo-Saxon' was not used of any tribal group on the mainland of Europe. The earliest settlements were of small tribal or family units, so a general name was not at first relevant and did not become widely used until the ninth century. The term 'Anglo-Saxon' was first used to distinguish the English Saxons from the Old Saxons of the Germanic homelands. Alfred the Great (d.899), himself a Saxon, referred to his language as *Englise*, i.e. 'Angle-ish', and his people as *Angelcynn*, 'the Anglerace', so it appears that the distinction between Angles and Saxons was even at that time regarded as unimportant.

Old and Middle English language is widely studied, both for its own sake, as illustrative of the early history of English, and as the key which unlocks the literature of the times. Linguistic studies of individual works are common, and indeed a section on the language usually forms part of the standard introduction of editions of medieval texts. In addition, there are several excellent books on the history of the English language in general, some of which are mentioned in the Bibliography. This book will therefore not attempt to go over the same ground, but will be more concerned with those aspects which most affect poetry, particularly the lexis (vocabulary), semantics (the meaning of words) and syntax (structural matters such as varied clause elements and their effect on style, narrative pace, cohesion etc.), rather than phonology (sounds) and morphology (the internal structure of words, such as their 'stems' and inflexional suffixes), which are excluded except where relevant. A linguistic overview of a whole genre, still less one as broad as medieval English poetry, is rarely attempted, and may seem to be an unrealistic aim for this book. But a broad survey can be as enlightening as a minute analysis, and can highlight the continuity within Old and Middle English as well as the differences and changes of direction. Above all, a general study is a sensible starting point for those who may wish to go on to look at the language of medieval English poetry more closely.

This book is aimed, therefore, at the general reader and beginning student. It assumes prior knowledge neither of Old and Middle English language nor of the literature, nor does it presuppose anything more than a basic understanding of traditional linguistic concepts and terminology. Anything else will be explained.

Two contextualising chapters (2 and 3) come at the start. The first deals with the social context, including the origins of Anglo-Saxon England, paganism and Christianity, the Scandinavian settlement and its effects, relationships with France, the influence of the church, social classes, daily life, the court and the countryside, literacy, and the medieval world-view. The second looks at the literary and linguistic context, including dialects, Scandinavian and French influence, the rise, suppression and re-emergence of English as a language of literature, poetry in society, literacy and the making of manuscripts. It also reviews briefly the Old and Middle English literature which now survives.

Four fundamental chapters (4 to 7) then follow. The first is on Old English poetic diction, and deals mainly with lexis and some related matters of semantics. The next concerns the organisation of Old English verse, and deals mostly with syntax and figures of rhetoric. The remaining two cover similar ground in the context of Middle English, except that Chapter 7 additionally considers the fundamental differences between rhyme and alliteration.

There is a separate chapter (8) on linguistic varieties of medieval English, including regional and other varieties, the effects of the rise of a written linguistic standard, colloquial and aureate language, formality and informality, registers, and some of the effects of translation into English from French, Latin and other languages. And in the final chapter (9), following the normal practice of books of this series, passages from Old and Middle English poems are selected for specimen analysis.

One important matter needs to be borne in mind at this introductory stage. All the works we shall be discussing, except for a few from the very end of our period, survive in manuscript rather than in print. This has implications which we would be well advised to consider at the outset.

If we wish today to learn the publication details of a book, all we usually have to do is turn to the reverse of the title page. There we

usually find the name and address of the publisher, information as to who holds the copyright, when the book was published, and whether and when it has been reprinted or issued as a revised edition. There may be cataloguing data summarising biographical information about the author and specifying the subject classification for use in libraries. And there will probably be an International Standard Book Number (ISBN), enabling it to be precisely identified. The printer may be specified, and even the size and style of the typeface. The implication will be that the author has provided the typescript (today often on computer disk) and that he or she has received at least one set of proofs, corrected them, and given approval for printing to proceed. The publisher will have arranged a standard binding, and may have consulted the author about the design of the cover or dust-jacket. In all, the published book can be assumed to represent the author's approved work right down to the last comma and full stop.

Nothing could be further from the circumstances of the publication of medieval English works in manuscript. The author was frequently anonymous, as were the scribes and other artisans involved in reproducing the text. He or she may not have intended the work ever to be written down, and in some cases may not even have been able to read and write. The date of publication is rarely known. Once a work went into circulation it was commonly regarded as something which was, as it were, in the public domain and could be modified at will. It might be copied, curtailed or expanded. The language might be altered, by design or by accident. And the work might be bound, either by itself or as part of an anthology, or left unbound in the small parchment or paper booklets which were the basic units with which the scribes worked. In short, the text which appears in a modern printed edition may be far removed from what the author intended.

For most of the period book production in England was organised on a local basis and the bulk of the work was done in the scriptoria of monasteries. From the fourteenth century there are signs of commercial speculation, and it was at this time that publishing centres, such as Westminster, started to assume importance. It was here in 1476 that Caxton set up his press and that many of the other early printers had their premises. The history of book production in England, however, is not a straightforward progression towards centralisation, for as early as the ninth century King

Alfred had issued translations of key works from Latin into English for dissemination via the monasteries. These, and another centrally regulated work, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, were predominantly in prose, and the signs are that poetry was dealt with more randomly.

Random factors have also determined the texts which have survived to the present, and the further back we go the greater the number of hazards. Even if a work happened to get written down it was subject to many dangers, among them damage through neglect (e.g. by damp) or through deliberate destruction (e.g. at the Reformation). Destruction by fire was a constant danger, a fate which almost overtook the manuscript of the great Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* in 1731, which was rescued only in the nick of time and not before the flames had eaten away at the text. As books became old and the English language changed, there was a likelihood that they would become less appreciated as they were less well understood. Old books were therefore sometimes cut up for use in the bindings of newer books. One of the four great manuscripts of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the Exeter Book, was used for a while as a cutting board. The result of all these accidents and acts of destruction is that those which survive cannot be regarded as representative of the English books in existence and use in the medieval period.

In any case, we should not forget that works in English were very much in the minority in medieval England. Most were in Latin, which was an international language, the use of which was therefore more likely to secure a wide readership. Other reasons why Latin was assumed to be the natural language for books include the long tradition of scholarship in that language, the fact that Latin was the language of the medieval church (which also controlled education) and that Latin, being a dead language, was not subject to the dialectal variation and diachronic change which undermined the status and usefulness of the vernacular languages. Although writings in Old English were far more extensive than other contemporary vernacular literatures, output was minute in comparison with that of Latin. The situation was similar with regard to Middle English, except that it was complicated by the introduction of French, which was of considerably higher status than English. Rich and influential people in England patronised works in French, usually in the Anglo-Norman dialect, and a flourishing literature developed. Latin continued to flourish, and is the language of by far the greatest number of works produced in England in the period 1100–1500, followed by French and then – far behind – English.

King Alfred's translations from Latin into English were part of an educational policy by means of which he hoped that talented young men might be identified who could go on to learn Latin and take religious orders. So even at that time the ability to read and write in English was viewed mainly as a stage towards something better. However, a strong tradition of copying works in English developed in the Anglo-Saxon monasteries, and it was here that the 30,000 or so lines of extant Old English verse were probably written down. Since Alfred and most of the later Anglo-Saxon kings belonged to the dynasty of Wessex, it was a form of the West Saxon dialect which was used in these works. Words from other dialects which are found in the poetry suggest either that non-West Saxons have been involved in composing or copying it, or that a special 'poetic' variety of English (sometimes called a literary koiné; , i.e. 'a common language') had developed which transcended dialectal boundaries. This variety of Old English, as we shall see, was highly artificial, and its continuance depended on the unbroken support of the monastic establishment and the existence of rich and influential Anglo-Saxon patrons.

After the Norman Conquest all this came to an end. The English were removed from positions of power in government, in the church, and in other spheres of society. With the disappearance of English patrons, the composition and reproduction of English works came to an abrupt end, with the exception that the copying of religious prose works, which was an established monastic duty, continued into the Middle English period and eventually contributed to a new prose tradition. In Chapter 3 we shall discuss further the emergence of English as a literary language in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but an important linguistic consequence needs to be mentioned here. There was after the Conquest neither an agreed literary variety nor a general 'standard' form of English. Consequently Middle English poetry was written down in a wide range of different regional dialects, a situation which only begins to change with the emergence of preferred forms of literary English towards the end of the fourteenth century.

Since an English text did not have the same authoritative status and permanence as a Latin text, scribes and copyists considered themselves at liberty to make changes. If they were reproducing a work from an old manuscript, for instance, they would be likely to modernise the language, which in its written form was not then as stable as it is today. Similarly, should the dialect of the exemplar be one with which the transcriber did not feel comfortable, or which he thought would not suit his patron, he would substitute familiar words and forms. Alterations of this sort can sometimes be detected or suspected where a rhyme is defective. An example occurs in the thirteenth-century interlude *De Clerico et Puella*, where in the couplet

the rhyme can be restored if the (presumably original) dialect form sary is substituted for sory. This would be in line with the form of other words in the interlude (such as hame 'home', which rhymes with dame) in which the vowel is said to be 'unrounded'. Rounding of long a at this time was a feature of more southerly dialects, not of the North-East Midland dialect of this text, so it seems likely that sory has been introduced by a copyist who was more familiar with the rounded form and who gave no thought to the damage its introduction would do to the rhyme.

Nor is it only within manuscripts that modification occurred. Books were scarce and many people could not read them, so those who memorised and recited poems also played a part in the process of change. The three surviving manuscripts of the early fourteenth-century romance *Sir Orfeo* illustrate the point:

King Orfeo knewe wele bi þan by then
His steward was a trewe man
And loued him as he au3t to do,
And stont vp, and seyt þus: 'Lo!' stands; says thus

(Auchinleck MS, lines 553-6)

(Auchinleck MS, lines 553–6)

The kyng beheld be stewerd ban And seyd he was a trew man And louyd hym as he auzte to do, And sterte vp, and seyd: 'Lo!'

started (Ashmole MS, lines 546-9) De kyng behelde þe steward þan
And wyst he was a trewe man.
To hym he seyde, without lesyng:

"Syr,' he seyde, 'Yam Orpheo þe kyng.'

without a lie

(Harley MS, lines 492-5)

The many omissions, contractions and transpositions of the Harley version, especially in the last hundred lines of the poem, have led to the suggestion that the text in that manuscript may have been taken down from the memory of a minstrel (Bliss 1966, xvi). The weak rhyming tag without lesyng (without a lie), for instance, could be an attempt to patch up a misremembered couplet. Whatever the explanation, if either the Harley or the Ashmole manuscript had survived alone, we would have a very different appreciation of the poem than we have from the far superior version in the Auchinleck manuscript.

The date of the Auchinleck manuscript is about 1330, Harley early fifteenth-century, and Ashmole after 1488. However, it is not always the case that the earliest manuscript contains the best version. In any case, many medieval poems and manuscripts are difficult to date. Furthermore, we should also be clear what we mean by 'date', since the date of the original work will differ from the date(s) of subsequent versions and from the date(s) of the manuscript(s). Nor should we assume that differing versions are necessarily the result of outside interference, for authors themselves sometimes spent many years reworking their material. The long fourteenthcentury poem Piers Plowman, which survives in three distinct versions, is a clear example. All sorts of internal and external pieces of evidence sometimes have to be drawn upon before a tentative date can be ascribed. As we go further towards the beginning of English literature the situation becomes more difficult, and most Old English poems can be dated only approximately. Present-day readers should beware of the firm dates which are sometimes assumed in older critical works on the subject, for recent studies have suggested that linguistic dating criteria are more open to doubt than was formerly believed. Beowulf, for example, is now dated by some as early as the eighth century and by others as late as the eleventh.

The present-day reader of Old and Middle English poetry needs to remember that what he or she sees on the page has already gone through a sort of 'filtering' process by the editor, who will have made certain assumptions which will inevitably direct the reader's response. A large number of medieval English poems - the entire corpus, in fact, in Old English - are without original titles, their present ones having been given by editors. The modern titles of the Middle English lyrics even today vary from one edition to another. The nature and integrity of a work may be in doubt, even if the manuscript is not defective. It was the usual practice in Old English collections to use extra spacing between poems, with large capitals to mark the beginning and perhaps the word *finit* or *amen* to mark the end. But even basic indications such as these are sometimes not found, as with the Old English poetic Riddles, about which there is disagreement as to the exact number in the collection. Other poems were never completed, such as Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, which the author had been working on for at least fifteen years before his death in 1400. At this time the draft version probably consisted of a collection of completed and half-written poems, false starts, outlines and notes, which a succession of editors have subsequently grouped into ten or twelve fragments or sections. It is easy to forget that the ordering of these sections is a matter of editorial conjecture, and that hypotheses about the dynamics of the pilgrim group, such as the suggestion that some tales are told in response to others, may therefore be seriously flawed.

Even where the issues are less contentious, the reader's response is constantly being predetermined by the editorial process. Old English verse, for example, was written in the manuscripts in continuous lines like prose, and has to be arranged in lines according to predetermined metrical principles. In manuscripts of both periods the lack of a standardised spelling system confuses the situation, and editors have to make decisions as to the extent to which they should modernise, as well as how far they should go in identifying and correcting mistakes. Punctuation is also sporadic and often seems to be arbitrary, as are capitalisation and word-division. The certainty that the present-day reader expects in such matters is alien to the medieval way of thinking. And in any case such certainty may not be appropriate to times when poetry was intended less for the few who could read than for the many who might be expected to listen to poems being read aloud or recited from memory. In such circumstances the ambivalence and richness of meaning, which our punctuation system often eradicates,

may well have increased the pleasure and quality of the listeners' response.

Readers of this chapter may be thinking 'What does it matter?' and I can best answer this by quoting the words of Dorothy Whitelock from her book *The Audience of Beowulf*':

There may be persons who are content to study the impression that the poem makes now, concerning themselves only with what has survived the changes in our civilization and methods of thought, and caring little that ignorance of what the author counted on his audience knowing robs many of his remarks of their point. The poet has perhaps conveyed something of permanent value that is above the accidents of time and place and has survived the ravages of the centuries. I think he has. It is not for me to discuss the legitimacy of such an approach, but it is not such persons that I am addressing. For my own part, I should like to know what effect the poet was consciously striving to produce on the men of his own time; I want to see if by studying these men we can get any nearer to that knowledge.

(Whitelock 1951, 2-3)

Many medieval poems, and the majority from the Old English period, are poems without a context. They exist now in isolation from the society which produced them. The presuppositions which a present-day reader brings to a piece of Old or Middle English verse will colour that person's appreciation of it. It is right that this should be so, but not to the exclusion of historical considerations. Understanding the language of Old and Middle English poetry is, therefore, not just a matter of 'translating' medieval works into a digestible form. The language was itself the subtlest expression of the whole culture. To understand all its complexities is an impossible task, but to make the attempt immeasurably increases the pleasure and value of a reader's experience.

## 2 The Social Context

The origins of the Anglo-Saxons cannot be precisely identified, but a number of the tribes from which they were formed came from northern Germany and part of present-day Denmark. The Venerable Bede, the great eighth-century historian of the English, describes the first settlers as Angles, Saxons and Jutes. The Angles, he understood, settled in Britain north of the River Thames far into what is now Scotland, the Saxons took land south of the Thames and also on the north side of the river Estuary (whence the county name 'Essex', i.e. 'East Saxons'), and the Jutes, he claimed, occupied Kent, the Isle of Wight and the mainland opposite the island. The evidence of place names and archaeology shows that this is an oversimplification, for there were others, such as Frisians and Swedes. This complex mix of peoples developed a distinctive and homogeneous language and culture, which none the less reflected strong links with the rest of the Germanic world.

From these small beginnings the history of Anglo-Saxon England is one of gradual consolidation and shifting fortunes. As time passed the original small social units became welded more tightly together, eventually into kingdoms, of which one or another achieved supremacy at varying times, though it is never relevant to think in terms of 'nationhood'. At first the people of Kent were the most prosperous, probably because they were well placed to engage in trade with the mainland of Europe. Their pagan graves contain gold and garnet jewellery, precious weapons and fine domestic objects, which cannot be matched anywhere else in England in the fifth and sixth centuries. The East Anglian kingdom was rich and powerful in the seventh century, and from the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo near Ipswich we have the regalia and

property of one of its kings, which are breathtakingly magnificent. In the later seventh and early eighth centuries, after the introduction of Christianity, power shifted to the Northumbrian kingdom, which became a centre of learning unrivalled in Europe, from which fine illuminated manuscripts, churches and sculptured stone monuments survive to this day. Ascendancy passed in the later eighth century to the Midland kingdom of Mercia, whose king Offa proudly claimed to be 'King of the whole of Britain'. But Northumbrian and Mercian power was undermined by the invasions of the Vikings, most of whom were Danish. Only Wessex managed to hold out against them. King Alfred, who ruled from 871 to 899, organised military resistance, and he and his successors won back land seized by the Danes and consolidated their hold by setting up a series of 'boroughs', or strongholds, throughout the land, a number of which have now grown into substantial towns. Because of West Saxon dominance in politics and society, most of the institutions of government came to be organised and controlled by them. Most of the surviving written records from Anglo-Saxon England are therefore West Saxon in origin, and consequently written in the West Saxon dialect.

No written records would have been made in the first place had it not been for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, for this brought not only the knowledge of reading, writing and the making of books but also, in the monasteries, conditions of peace and stability in which scholarship could flourish. We know very little about the pagan beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons when they arrived in Britain, for later Christian writers generally thought these matters too shocking to describe. The early settlers probably engaged in fertility cults, as we know some of their continental ancestors had done. The pre-Christian calendar included some interesting names, such as 'Month of Cakes' (February), 'Month of Sacrifices' (November), and 'Yule' (December and January), while March and April were named after two goddesses, Hreda and Eostre (the source of our 'Easter'). Four of the names of the old deities – Tw, Woden, Thunor and Frig - are known because they survive in place names and in the names of days of the week. They are obviously related to the Scandinavian Tyr, Othin, Thor and Frigg, but it would be wrong to assume that the beliefs about them in fifth- and sixth-century England were similar to those which were written down in the Norse Eddas and sagas about six hundred