



Ancient English Literature: General Overviews & Critical Studies

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Abstract:

Old English is the name given to the initial recorded stage of the English language, up to approximately 1150AD. It refers to the language as it was used in the long period of time from the coming of Germanic invaders and settlers to Britain—in the period following the collapse of Roman Britain in the early fifth century—up to the Norman Conquest of 1066, and beyond into the first century of Norman rule in England. It is therefore first and foremost the language of the people normally referred to by historians as the Anglo-Saxons. Within the field of English, then, Old English studies afford unique opportunities, since no literature in English is as culturally remote as that of the Anglo-Saxons, and the differences expose clearly some of the otherwise invisible assumptions on which modernity, as we perceive it, is based. To cite just one example, the very act of reading a book, for instance this one, differs basically from the near the beginning medieval experience, and in a variety of ways. Yet, when reading was a private activity, readers commonly pointed to the words and spoke them aloud; but more often reading was a communal activity in which many “readers” never actually saw the page.

Keywords: Ancient, Roman, Britain, Conquest, Anglo-Saxons, Modernity.

History: The History of English literature begins with the Germanic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon settlers. Beowulf stands at its head. This heroic poem of the 8th century is in Anglo-Saxon, now more typically described like as Old English. It is incomprehensible to a reader familiar only with modern English. Nevertheless, there is a continuous linguistic development between the two. The most important turning point, from about 1100, is the development of Middle English - differing from Old English in the addition of a French vocabulary after the Norman Conquest. French and Germanic influences subsequently compete for the mainstream role in English literature.

The French poetic custom inclines to lines of a regular metrical length, generally linked by rhyme into couplets or stanzas. German poetry depends more on stress and rhythm, with repeated consonants to bind the phrases. Elegant or subtle rhymes have a courtly flavour. The hammer blows of alliteration are a type of verbal athleticism more likely to draw applause in a hall full of warriors.

Both traditions achieve a outstanding flowering in England in the late 14th century, towards the end of the Middle English period. Piers Ploughman and Sir Gawain are masterpieces which look back to



Old English. By contrast Chaucer, a poet of the court, ushers in a new epoch of English literature.

Introduction: The time period of about 500-1100 AD in British history was characterized by overseas invasions and internal struggles. This resulted in the mixing of several races, tongues and cultures. After the Romans departed from the British Isles in 407 AD fighting continued between the Picts and the Scots who had lost their common enemy. The fifth century also saw conquests and the gradual occupation by Germanic tribes - Angles, Jutes and Saxons - who had moved north to Scandinavia and from there to Britain. Apart from making conquests, these tribes favoured agricultural life, had brawny family and tribal ties, and were very loyal to their king *or* chief. The famous King Arthur defeated the Saxons in 490 AD and for about a decade halted their advance. At the end of the sixth century, the Anglo-Saxons accepted Christianity after Pope Gregory sent Saint Augustine to Britain in 597 AD. This gave rise to a number of religious writings. At the end of the eighth century the Vikings (also known as Norsemen or Danes) invaded the country, with no trouble overcame the local inhabitants, and plundered their estates. It was not until the reign of King Alfred the Great that their advance was stopped. With their acceptance of Christianity, the Danes partially blended in with the local people. Alfred's successors, Edgar and Ethelred II were in 1016 followed by Danish King Canute, after whose death the empire fell apart Alfred's great-

grandson, Edward, son of the French Emma of Normandy, took over the throne. The fact that Edward had no descendants led to a power struggle between his brother-in-law, Harold, and Emma's nephew, William of Normandy. William's victory over Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 led to the Norman Conquest and occupation of England, which then opened a new chapter in British history. The language of this whole period is known as Old English. No exact date exists for its beginning. The first written records of the language date from around 690 AD. Most Old English words were Germanic, having come from the languages of the Angles, Jutes and Saxons. Latin, on the other hand, also had a strong influence on early English. Later, the Scandinavians contributed many words to Old English. By the end of the Old English period, Old English had been established as a literary language with a remarkable polish and versatility. Old English literature consists of poetry, prose, charms, riddles, maxims, proverbs, and various other wisdom sayings. It is a mixture of pagan traditions, thoughts about life, the universe and nature, in addition to Christian thought and moral values. There is often no clear-cut delineation between religious and non-religious poetry or sometimes even between poetry and prose and while I have made a selection from the many authors who deserve study, I have throughout presented them in a chronological sequence. At the end I consider briefly questions of genre and literary value. I have not attempted to record the achievements of writers in other languages, though these include some of the



greatest and most influential writers of all time, such as Dante Alighieri, Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht. Happily, examiners of Advanced level literature have allowed students, in recent years, to study these foreign authors, in translation, in independent extended literary studies.

The Anglo-Saxons formed the basis of English culture, religion, and language and ruled England for 600 years. The term Anglo-Saxon refers to a group of settlers from the German regions of Angeln and Saxony who took over England after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Anglo-Saxons first introduced Old English literature in the fifth century. We refer to the years between 450 and 1066 as the Old English or Anglo-Saxon period. The Old English language, or Anglo-Saxon, is the foundation of Modern English, although if untrained Modern English speakers could hear someone speaking Old English, they would not be able to understand it.

One of the first examples of literature written for the duration of the Old English period was a poem written by a man named Caedmon, who was a cattle herder around 680 A.D. Caedmon's poem survived because it was written down by a monk named Bede in 733 A.D. Numerous writings from Anglo-Saxon literature were preserved after being written down by clerics or others with knowledge of a story through the years.

The typographic conventions of this page are red for emphasis and the names of authors when first mentioned, and when they appear outside of the section which

relates to their historic period. Brown type is used in place of italic for titles of works. The screen font's displays in such a way that neither true italic nor bold are very pleasant to read. If you find the text size too small, you can increase it, using the text size item in the view menu of your browser.

Literary forms: Literary forms for example the novel or lyric poem, or genres, for instance the horror-story, have a history. In one sense, they appear because they have not been thought of before, but they also appear, or become popular for other cultural reasons, like as the absence or emergence of literacy. In studying the history of literature, you are challenged to consider what constitutes a given form, how it has developed, and whether it has a future.

The novels of the late Catherine Cookson may have much in common with those of Charlotte Brontë, but is it worth mimicking in the late 20th century, what was groundbreaking in the 1840s? While Brontë examines what is contemporary for her, Miss Cookson invents an imagined past which may be of interest to the cultural historian in studying the present sources of her nostalgia, but not to the student of the period in which her novels are set. Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is a long work of prose fiction, but critics do not necessarily explain it as a novel. Why might this be? Knowing works in their historical context does not give easy answers, but may shed more or less light on our darkness in considering such questions.



Literature especially in the early Middle Ages includes a much wider range of texts than what we would normally put under that heading in later periods. Generally almost all written texts except for the ones of very practical use like wills and legal texts are studied as literature. For example historical texts like chronicles, religious prose like homilies, sermons, saints' lives, biblical exegesis, scientific philosophical and theological writings, etc. were all consumed by the small group of contemporary readers and listeners of readings first of all because of their practical didactic value and not because they wished to pass their time in a pleasant way reading something. Teaching was supposed to be made more effective by literary means. Literature was not cultivated for its own sake, i.e. for mere enjoyment.

Far more **prose** texts have come down to us in Anglo-Saxon or Old English than in any other European language from the first millennium. Several are translations of Latin works, which are still interesting to study like medieval translators re-worked their originals according to their special needs. Again and again they added their own ideas, updated the text, and conflated several sources to bring their ideas closer to their readers. Prose works can usually be discussed in chronological order, because they can be dated. Often their writers are known or at least the period and place when and where they were written can be closely defined on the basis of the topic, the manuscript, the dialect, etc.

Poetry, on the other hand, has been composed by the Germanic peoples and others since times immemorial, and it has been handed down to posterity without writing it down. No-one felt that it was important to record poems; it was simple to recall the stories from memory and put them into a poetic form according to the need of the occasion, i.e. sing them again and again. It is a late progress when the similar poetic style that was common to all Germanic peoples was put to the new use of versifying Christian topics like biblical stories and saints' lives. This is the time, when stories like that of the Geatish hero Beowulf also found their way to paper through the effort of monks in a monastic scriptorium. Earlier versions of the story made into poetry must have existed for several centuries before this, because the story takes place on the Continent, and the scarce historical figures in it, like Hygelac may have lived in the early 6th century. They were handed down through several generations in an oral form.

It is clear for us from the above that there is no purely pagan poem among the 30.000 lines of poetry preserved. All of what we possess has been re-thought by someone Christian, in view of the fact that only those trained in the religious orders could write. With slight exceptions all Old English poems are preserved in late 10th century manuscripts. Since we do not know any Anglo-Saxon poets with the exception of two names, Caedmon and Cynewulf, and neither do we know the dates of the composition of poems, we cannot discuss them in chronological order, but group them



by genre. The major ones are: heroic poems so called elegiac poems, meditative religious poem and others, like biblical paraphrases, verse saints' lives, and charms.

Old English literature covers the period from c. 600 to 1220, when the latest living versions of Old English texts are found side by side with new texts written in what is generally labeled "Middle English." Throughout these centuries and particularly from the end of the 9th century, Old English flourished in substantial quantity and in a multitude of genres and forms, representing the most important body of vernacular literature of any European country at the time. Its officially authorized status—its use by government and church—meant that as a language of expression, it could be employed for all kinds of writing, much of it of exceptionally high quality. Manuscripts and documents containing prose from the 7th to the 13th centuries include Gospels and Old Testament translations, legal texts, chronicles, romance, pa-liturgical writings, letters, writs and diplomas, religious and educational works, and scientific and medical literature; in addition to the prose, there is a considerable corpus of poetry inviting the lauding and applauding of heroic deeds, urging the audience's spiritual contemplation and Christian action, demanding an sympathetic response to loss, and beseeching the solution of witty and multilayered verse puzzles.

General Overviews and Critical Studies:

There are an important number of overviews of Old English literature primarily published

like companions, handbooks, and histories in the last twenty years. A number of the earliest are still among the best, including Greenfield and Calder 1986, which is a valuable survey of both English and Latin literature up to 1100, and Godden and Lapidge 1991, a genre-based collection of essays by leading scholars at that time. These volumes are restricted to a rather narrow view of what constitutes Old English, focusing on prose from the Alfred an and Benedictine Reform periods and on the poetic corpus and barely including works produced after c. 1020, but they can be supplemented with encyclopedic volumes for instance Godden, et al. 1999. More recent collections have sought to address the to some extent narrow focus of prior volumes and have treated Old and Middle English literature together or have extended the treatment of Old English into the 12th century. Latest volumes have also been mindful of the multilingual nature of Anglo-Saxon England. The contributions in Pulsiano and Treharne 2001 are arranged by genre but include analyses of the history of Old English literature up to the present day, while Fulk and Cain 2003 treats Old English in its broader literary and historical context, paying close attention to critical debate. Johnson and Treharne 2005 provide case studies of close textual reading. Treharne and Walker 2010 includes themed essays that range across the period, bringing together Old and Middle English in some cases. McGinnis 2011 investigates canonical texts from the period but also includes a chapter on how Old English has fared from the 12th to the 21st centuries.



Conclusion: Old English literature has gone through different periods of research; in the 19th and early 20th centuries the focus was on the Germanic and pagan roots that scholars thought they could detect in Old English literature. Later, on account of the work of Bernard F. Huppé the influence of Augustinian exegesis was emphasized. Today, along with a focus upon paleography and the physical manuscripts themselves more generally, scholars debate such issues as dating, place of origin, authorship, and the connections between Anglo-Saxon culture and the rest of Europe in the Middle Ages, and literary merits.

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