

# Old English Literature

*A Short Introduction*

Daniel Donoghue

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to my mentors





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# Introduction

The Anglo-Saxons left us accounts of two defining moments in the formative years of their literature. The first is a famous story about an illiterate peasant who one night miraculously refashioned his native poetic tradition. The story is told by Bede (c.673–735), a monk who near the end of his scholarly career compiled a narrative history of the Christian church in England up to his time. The history devotes an entire chapter to the cowherd Cædmon largely because his new poetic skills were applied only to Christian stories and not because he received the gift of poetry. English poetry itself was nothing new and scarcely worth Bede's attention. For centuries before Cædmon the Anglo-Saxons had cultivated a tradition of oral poetry, which continued to celebrate its pagan themes and legends well after the conversion to Christianity. For Bede, the importance of Cædmon's innovation was that it baptized the old vernacular poetry.

For literary history, however, the story's importance lies elsewhere. Soon after receiving his God-given skills Cædmon took vows and entered the monastery, where he continued to learn sacred stories and turn them into poems. His passage from the outside world into the cloister meant that English poetry itself found a place in the monastic life, since verse-making was the only skill Cædmon could offer to the community. Before Cædmon entered, the old poetry was limited to an oral context; afterwards, it could find its way into the scriptorium. Without writing a word Cædmon opened up the possibility of English literature.

The second account is a letter from King Alfred of Wessex (871–99), which urges an ambitious program of translating certain Latin texts

that were, as he put it, most necessary for all people to know. Before Alfred there was little in the way of English prose, but his efforts generated an industry that by the time of his death had produced an impressive body of literature and fixed the conventions of the emerging genre. Alfred did more than issue directives to writers, however, because he set himself to the task of translating three scholarly books and fifty psalms from Latin to English.

This book introduces students and general readers to the English literature produced in the centuries before the year 1100 CE. Today the language of this period is generally called Old English to distinguish it from Middle English (1100–1500) and Modern English (1500–present), but its speakers called it simply English. The different accounts left by Bede and Alfred, discussed more fully in the following chapters, are not quite myths of origin, but each offers a richly suggestive description of early conditions for one of the two major literary genres: verse (Bede) and prose (Alfred). Both writers, moreover, show the literature emerging from the backdrop of the Latin culture of the church. Like almost everything else he wrote, Bede narrated the story of Cædmon in Latin, which was the universal language of scholarship and an essential part of monastic life, so his validation of the vernacular carries special weight. Latin is just as much a part of the context of King Alfred's program, in which almost all the new English texts were translations.

In the relative scale of cultural prestige, English was always the poor stepchild of Latin. But unlike the status of English in later generations, when writers like William Caxton (d. 1491) felt compelled to apologize for their "rude" and "base" language, that of Old English was not so low as to be debilitating. After a theologian with the credentials of Bede gave his blessings to the poetry, and after the greatest king of early England translated the word of God, later writers were free to work in the vernacular without special pleading. One measure of the relative status of English comes in a later century, when Ælfric (c.945–c.1010), a monk, scholar, homilist, and gifted prose stylist, used the vernacular to compose a Latin grammar for use in the monastery. (It took almost another five centuries before the next English-to-Latin grammar was written.) For Ælfric Latin was unquestionably the superior language and essential to the monastic life, but English provided an adequate vehicle for teaching it.

Bede, Alfred, and Ælfric lived in three distinct eras within the larger period of pre-Conquest or Anglo-Saxon England. At its outer limits the period extends over six centuries – an interval equivalent to that between today and Chaucer’s lifetime – and over those centuries the society (or rather societies) underwent enormous changes. The Anglo-Saxons themselves traced their ancestors’ arrival to the year 449, when legend has it that two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, came as leaders of mercenary armies from the continent and later decided to turn on their British employers and take the land for themselves. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes brought their pagan religion to their new home, and it was not until shortly before 600 that conversion to Christianity began, first by Irish missionaries in Northumbria and then by a special mission in the south sent by Pope Gregory the Great. Conversion proceeded gradually with some setbacks during much of the seventh century, but even by the 650s monasteries such as Whitby (Cædmon) and Jarrow (Bede) were thriving. Throughout the earlier centuries the Anglo-Saxons were politically divided into smaller, often competing kingdoms until about 800, when the four great kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, and Wessex emerged.

In 793 a raiding party of Vikings attacked the island monastery of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria. It was the start of 100 years of Viking attacks, which evolved from small raids eventually to large invading armies that conquered and occupied more and more territory until the 870s, when only Wessex remained of the four kingdoms. King Alfred managed to stop the Viking advances, and eventually he and his successors won back enough territory to create a united kingdom of England, ruled by the kings of Wessex.

Alfred also instituted a program of cultural revival that indirectly led to the great Benedictine reform of the latter half of the tenth century, which produced outstanding churchmen like Archbishop Wulfstan and Abbot Ælfric. It was the period when most of the surviving manuscript volumes of Old English prose and poetry were transcribed. But the tenth century also witnessed a second wave of Viking attacks, much of it during the long and unhappy reign of Æthelred (978–1016), who was finally succeeded by the king of Denmark, Cnut (1016–35). Cnut’s long reign was followed by the even longer one of Edward the Confessor (1042–66), who died childless, leaving several powerful claimants ready to pounce on the throne. First Harold

Godwineson was crowned, but in October of 1066 his rival Duke William of Normandy defeated him in the battle of Hastings, and the throne of England passed into Norman hands. The linguistic changes that distinguish Middle English from Old English would have proceeded whether or not William became king. And so to decouple linguistic change from a change of political regime scholars prefer to consider 1100 as the approximate end of Old English.

Most surveys like this one organize their material by some combination of the standard literary categories of genre, date, and/or author. But Old English quickly frustrates such schemes. The Anglo-Saxons themselves, for example, recognized histories, saints' lives, and homilies as genres because they had well-established Latin precedents, but beyond these the categories become uncertain. We do not know, for example, whether they distinguished a long poem like *Beowulf* as an "epic" as opposed to a shorter "lyric," however familiar these genres seem to us. Even categories as broad as "fiction" and "non-fiction" would probably seem strange (though not incomprehensible) to a medieval audience. The question of authorship is no less vexed. All but a few of the Old English poems are anonymous, and while a number of prose texts come to us with their authors' names, a significant number are anonymous, and still others attributed to a known author like Ælfric were not in fact written by him. The same uncertainty applies to chronology, again with more questions surrounding the poetry than the prose. We are on firmer ground in considering Old English literature through the context of the surviving manuscripts, because many of them can be placed and dated with some confidence. Each manuscript volume, moreover, generates its own micro-context in the selection and arrangement of texts that comprise it. Manuscript origin thus provides one feasible means for organizing a survey, but it presents its own set of problems, often of a technical nature.

In place of the familiar categories from literary history the following chapters organize the material into what I call "figures": the vow, the hall, the miracle, the pulpit, and the scholar. Though not drawn from any school of criticism, they would be recognizable to medieval as well as modern readers. Organizing the material this way allows a good deal of flexibility and the chance to associate texts that, if sorted by genre or date or author, might be kept separate. At the most basic level, it allows the grouping of prose and verse, the obscure and the

well known, early and late periods, and even the vernacular and Latin. While each work of Old English discussed will have a “home” in one chapter (or two in the case of *Beowulf*), it may appear for brief discussion elsewhere. The figures do not designate mutually exclusive categories; some could even expand to absorb all the others. There is something arbitrary about their choice and sequence, yet cumulatively they assume a coherent shape as the literature is explored.

My use of “figure” deliberately echoes the term applied to the widespread practice of figural interpretation in the Middle Ages, which in its most basic form moves from an event or character from the Old Testament to find its fulfillment in Christ. But figural readings became generalized as a way of finding transcendental significance in many kinds of discourse, including history and fiction. This book will not make transcendental claims, but it does share with the medieval *figura* a way of pointing from a specific example to its realization in a more comprehensive scheme. My use of figures also finds a parallel in what a theorist has observed about organizing material in archives: “they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specified regularities.”<sup>1</sup> Old English literature presents a large and diverse archive of texts that does not lend itself to cleanly defined, exhaustive categories. My use of the vow, the hall, the miracle, the pulpit, and the scholar allows me to explore the multiple relations among the texts under discussion without claiming an overarching (or transcendental) order. In fact the arbitrariness of the figures in this book becomes even more apparent when with a little effort one can spin them off in Borgesian profusion: the sea, the wound, exile, the gift, counsel, the book, the stranger, prophecy, the exchange, the hand, the hoard. Any or all of these figures could make “specified regularities” for organizing the archive.

My approach is idiosyncratic, a distillation of ideas from studying and teaching Old English for 20 years. At times the book advances new interpretations, but in most cases the discussion is informed by the received wisdom of many generations of scholars, which is often too diffuse to be pinned down, although my debt is no less real. At every turn I have been reminded of the influence of my early mentors. Even though the chapters are not organized by chronology or genre, my method of reading combines historical context with close textual analysis. The discussions seldom dwell on the manuscript context,

which is quite often ably covered in the relevant editions. It also has little to say about the specifics of literary features such as poetic meter and kennings, for which a good knowledge of the language is necessary.

The book has little to say about these and other technical subjects because its intended audience is students taking introductory Old English classes, students reading the texts in translation, and general readers with an interest in the subject. I cite works using my own translations, often accompanying quotations from the original Old English. The book's system of citing Old English texts needs some explanation. With few exceptions the quotations are drawn from the classroom editions that beginning students are most likely to be using and not from scholarly editions, as is usually the case. When poetry is quoted, the passage is identified by an abbreviated name of the edition, followed by line numbers, but because the poems cited here have standard lineation any edition can be consulted. For prose, the first citation gives the abbreviated name of the edition followed by a page number and line number.

The first of the two following tables of abbreviations gives a short list of the standard classroom editions currently available for introductory Old English courses, with the abbreviations used throughout the book. The second is an expanded listing that matches the texts discussed with the various classroom editions that contain them. (A small number of quoted texts are not found in the classroom editions; in these cases their editions are cited in a note.) The practical reason for the second table's inclusion is to help readers locate another copy of a work if the edition cited in this book is unavailable. An added benefit of the table, however, is that it shows at a glance the body of literature that the field of Old English studies today has selected to define itself. It is what our students "see" as Old English literature. It represents only a fraction of the 30,000 lines of poetry and more than ten times that amount of prose that make up the corpus of Old English literature. Many scholars working in the field today might wish to adjust the list one way or the other, but the subset gives a good idea of what Old English studies currently considers – to paraphrase King Alfred – the most necessary texts for students to know. Because the list contains what this book's users are likely to read, I have accepted it (with a few exceptions) as a practical if arbitrary means of limiting the corpus. But I am not chafing under this constraint. The list offers an ample and diverse selection of texts that are early and