OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

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OLD ENGLISH (occasionally known as "Anglo-Saxon") is the earliest recorded form of English, surviving in texts written between the late seventh and the early twelfth century A.D. The language is very different from any variety of modern or even later-medieval English, and is not intelligible to any modern speaker without study. It is known from some 412 surviving manuscripts (handwritten books) and from a large number of single-sheet legal documents, "charters," which were either written during the Old English period or are later copies of documents originally written then. During the Old and Middle English periods, most Old English manuscripts were produced and preserved in the libraries of medieval ecclesiastical institutions, mostly monasteries and nunneries. The survival of Old English texts was therefore dependent upon the survival of these libraries through the vagaries of dissolution, war, and fire. A few such libraries have survived to the present day: mostly cathedral libraries such as those of Exeter, Worcester, and Vercelli. Warfare destroyed many monasteries during the Old English period, and presumably also destroyed most of their books. Many medieval libraries are also known to have been destroyed by fire, and many existing manuscripts show fire damage. After the Dissolution of the English monasteries (1536–1539) during the reign of King Henry VIII, manuscripts from monastic libraries survived only when collected by individual scholar-antiquarians. Most Old English manuscripts now survive in three large collections in England. Archbishop Matthew Parker (b. 1504, consecrated archbishop of Canterbury 1559, d. 1575) and his scholarly associates collected the manuscripts now held in trust by Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; the antiquarian book collector Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631) collected many manuscripts now held in the British Library in London; and the Franco-Dutch scholar Franciscus Junius (1589–1677) collected manuscripts now held in Bodleian Library, Oxford. Cotton’s library was badly damaged by fire in 1731.

During most of the Middle English period, Old English seems to have been largely unintelligible, and its texts mostly unread. It was rediscovered by the group of scholars gathered by Archbishop Parker, in their quest to find the origins of the English church. These scholars learned to read the language, mostly using bilingual texts in Latin and Old English, and compiled early dictionaries. Further scholarly work followed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century: for instance, Humphrey Wanley (1672–1726) cataloged all the then-known surviving manuscripts, and George Hickes (1642–1715) published a grammar of the language (1689) and printed some texts. Nineteenth-century scholars, largely German, produced accurate editions of all the major texts and a detailed understanding of the language. Study of the literature, as such, was mostly undertaken by twentieth-century British and American scholars, led by figures such as W. P. Ker (1855–1923) and J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), who were trained in the nineteenth-century German philological tradition, but who brought to it the cultural and literary sensibilities that had developed in classical studies and in English literary criticism.

CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

The English were formed from a conglomeration of Germanic peoples who had invaded Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. They had their own writing system, the runic alphabet (the futhorc), before they were converted to Christianity in the seventh century A.D. Runes seem to have been intended for incising on wood, metal,
or stone, rather than writing. Very few runic inscriptions survive from the pre-Christian period; these are mostly unintelligible and may never have been intended to be meaningful. Runic inscriptions are much more frequent in the early Christian period, but these seem to reflect uses of the Roman alphabet. In the seventh century A.D. the English learned to write the Roman alphabet; their teachers were the Irish missionaries from St. Columba’s monastery of Iona, who largely converted them to Christianity. These missionaries were led by figures such as St. Aidan (d. 651), based at the monastery on the island of Lindisfarne (founded 635) off the Northumbrian coast. The English learned to write an Irish script, often called Insular minuscule, and this script continued to be used in English manuscripts until the eleventh century. Augustine (d. 604/5), under the instruction of Pope Gregory the Great, had founded the older, Roman mission at Canterbury in 597; this had apparently aimed for political effect and seems to have had small impact on the English people and culture. However, after the Synod of Whitby (663/4), when the Northumbrian church decided to follow Roman rather than Irish custom, Pope Vitalian sent two Greek-speaking clerics to reform the English church. These were Theodore, from Tarsus in Asia Minor (b. about 602, consecrated archbishop of Canterbury 668, d. 690), and Hadrian (d. 710), a North African, previously abbot of Nerida near Naples, and then abbot of the monastery of S.S. Peter and Paul, later St. Augustine’s, Canterbury. They set up a major school at Canterbury, and together with Benedict “biscop” (c. 628–689/90), founder and abbot of the double monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria, they created the educational environment for the “Golden Age” of early Old English culture: the period encompassing Alcuin of York (c. 732–804). Surviving physical evidence of this cultural achievement includes the Codex Amiatinus, now in Florence, which was written at Wearmouth-Jarrow before 716 and is the most important surviving manuscript of the Latin Bible, and the Lindisfarne Gospels, now in the British Library, written at Lindisfarne probably before 698 and arguably the most beautiful book ever produced in the British Isles.

Although most surviving writings from this period are in Latin, there is indirect evidence for written Old English, and conventions for writing Old English seem to have developed before 700. These conventions show much innovative intelligence in the use of redundant letters or letter groups in the Latin alphabet, and in the cases of æ, œ, h, and y must show knowledge of the earlier Latin grammarians, and probably also of Greek. A letter was also borrowed from the runic futhorc, the letter ṣ, named “thorn,” used for the th sounds not found in classical Latin; the letter ṅ (“eth”), a crossed d, was also invented, or borrowed from cursive Greek scripts, for the th sounds. The letter ṗ endured in English into the early modern period, by which time its written form had become very similar to y: hence early modern spellings such as ye for “the.” These conventions for writing English must have been developed at a major educational center, with access to grammatical literature; the possible input from Greek strongly suggests Canterbury, though some knowledge of Greek was also available in Northumbria. The evidence of early Latin-English glossaries strongly suggests that advanced study of difficult Latin texts took place in the medium of written English before 700, probably at Canterbury.

Writing in England seems at this early period to have been entirely limited to the Church, and only those who received a clerical education could read or write: priests, monks, and nuns. The eighth-century renaissance seems already to have been in decline towards the end of that century, and fairly early in the ninth century came the first major raids from pagan Scandinavia, the Viking invasions, which developed into general warfare lasting most of that century. The Vikings invaded, conquered, and settled the northeastern half of England, creating the Danelaw, of which the boundary ran roughly from London northwest to Chester. Only one of the earlier English kingdoms, Wessex, survived as a political entity by the end of the ninth century, and although the organization of the Church partly survived in the Danelaw, monastic activity was for the most part
disrupted. Very few manuscripts survive from the period 830–890, and even legal documents largely vanish. Even at Canterbury, the surviving mid-century charters for the cathedral are all written by the same scribe, and his handwriting gets progressively shakier and more inaccurate: he could not see what he was writing. When he stops, about 867, the documents stop for several decades, suggesting that there was no one left at Canterbury who could write.

The survival of Wessex, and perhaps even the survival of the English language, were largely dependent upon one man: King Alfred the Great of Wessex (b. 849, king 871, d. 899). He was almost unique among military leaders in north-western Europe in withstanding, converting, and even befriending the ninth-century Scandinavian invaders. He also set in place an almost wholly new urbanization of his kingdom, establishing fortified garrison towns as economic and political as well as military centers of power, the “Alfredian Boroughs,” to exploit the new and vastly extended trade routes established by the Vikings. These “boroughs” correspond to the new Viking urban trading-centers such as Dublin and Wexford in Ireland, Hedeby in Denmark, Novgorod and Kiev in Russia, and York in England. Many of Alfred’s “boroughs” survive as important centers to the present, including Oxford. He was also the first to claim the kingship of all the English: England as a political entity owes its conception to him. And, having learned to read and write, he set in place a program of primary education not merely for churchmen but for all free-born children. This program was intended to produce general literacy amongst laypeople: an ideal not achieved in England until nearly a millennium later. In pursuit of this, he caused a number of educational works to be translated or even composed in English, and himself undertook some translation. King Alfred’s educational reforms established English, not Latin, as the primary written language of the kingdom of England, the first such association in Western Europe of a national language and literature with an incipient nation-state.

Alfred’s work was continued throughout the tenth century by his descendants and successors, who gradually conquered the Danelaw, so that by the end of that century the kingdom of England with roughly its present boundaries was a political reality. A reform of the monastic movement, the Benedictine Revival, also inspired educational reforms during the last third or so of the tenth century, led by figures such as St. Dunstan (b. 924, archbishop of Canterbury 959, d. 988) and Ægelwold of Abingdon (b. 909, bishop of Winchester 963, d. 984). The form of written English which they used, “late West Saxon,” became a standard schoolbook language and was used across the whole of England in more or less fixed form for nearly two centuries: it was the Standard English of that time. Associated with the Benedictine Reform was a large outpouring of English prose writing, and also the collection and copying of English poetry. These activities do not seem to have been significantly disrupted by the so-called “Second Viking Age,” a systematic and successful military campaign by the Christian Danish king Sveinn Forkbeard to conquer England. His son Cnut (Norse Knútr, modern Canute; reigned 1016–1035) ruled a North Sea empire of England, Denmark, Norway, and parts of Sweden. Cnut moved the center of political power from Winchester in Wessex to London, partly because of its economic importance and access to the North Sea trade routes; thereafter London English became dominant. The native dynasty was briefly restored after Cnut’s reign, but other descendants of Vikings, king Haraldr Sigurðarson of Norway, and William the Bastard, duke of the Viking duchy of Normandy, both invaded in the early autumn of 1066. The last native king, Harold, defeated Haraldr of Norway, but himself then fell in battle against William of Normandy. William, now the Conqueror, took power and founded a new dynasty. Although initially he seems to have tried to act, like Cnut, as an English monarch, he soon imposed Norman French as his official language. Old English seems to have vanished from the schoolroom, and, with some few exceptions (at Peterborough and probably Worcester), it ceased to be written within fifty years of the Norman Conquest. When manuscripts in English appear again, late in the twelfth century, written English
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was presented so differently that it seems a different language: Middle English.

THE OLD ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Most Old English survives in manuscripts of the Alfredian period and of the Benedictine Revival, from the late ninth to the eleventh centuries, and is in the dialect of the kingdom of Wessex: "West Saxon." Other attested dialects are Kentish, Mercian, and Northumbrian. Kentish is known from ninth-century charters and tenth-century glosses (English written above Latin to translate it) and two poems in mixed dialect. Mercian (the dialects of the kingdom of Mercia, based in the west Midlands of England) is known from glosses of the early ninth century and late tenth century. Northumbrian (the dialects spoken in the north of England between the Humber and the Forth) is known from some short eighth-century texts and inscriptions and some large late-tenth-century glosses. Other Old English dialects, including those of East Anglia and most of the east Midlands, are not represented in writing, and can only be reconstructed from Middle English evidence. Modern Standard English is derived mostly from east Midland dialects, and so is not derived from any attested form of Old English. The dialects were already different from each other when first attested, to such an extent that West Saxon and Northumbrian may not fully have been mutually intelligible. Northumbrian, in particular, shows many developments that were to spread southwards in Middle English (for example, "I do, thou dost, he doth; we, you, they do"). Compound verb forms, using the verb "to be" for the passive, and the verb "to have" for the perfect, were used as in modern English's "it was done," "he has done." Futurity was shown by using adverbs of future time, as is still possible in modern English (for example, "He goes home tomorrow"). The language seems to have had nothing that corresponds to the modern English "progressive" (continuous) tenses ("I am doing," and so on).

Old English word order was much more variable than the very strict word order of modern English, though it shared with modern German a strong tendency for the verb to stand no later than second position in main clauses, but to go to or towards the end of subordinate clauses.

The vocabulary of Old English was still fairly purely Germanic, with only a small number of Latin loanwords, usually for specifically Roman or ecclesiastical things: for instance street ("street, paved [Roman] road"), celc ("chalice"), mynstre ("monastery; minster"). It contained very few attested Norse or French loanwords; these do not generally appear in English until the Middle English period.

NON-LITERARY TEXTS

Many Old English texts survive which would not normally be considered "literary." Glossed texts
are frequent, particularly in manuscripts of the Latin Psalter and Gospels, with an interlinear English translation written over each Latin word. Several glossaries survive; these are collections of glosses roughly alphabetized to form early Latin-English dictionaries. These are important for literary purposes, in that they show which Latin texts were being studied, and the very varying knowledge of literary Latin. Genealogies and lists of benefactors are little more than catalogs of personal names, though sometimes they have historical or legal importance, and they show the basis for the genealogies and name lists in some literary texts. Some 1,602 charters survive, usually because they document landownership. Many of these are bilingual in English and Latin, sometimes just with names in English, sometimes the estate boundaries, sometimes the entire text. Although estate boundaries are of little literary interest, charters often give direct insights into personal life; further, their preambles are sometimes ornate rhetorical exercises and are stylistically important. Many law codes survive, mostly in English, including codes attributed to the earliest Christian kings, but by far the largest are those of later kings such as Alfred, Æthelraed (Ethelred), and Cnut (Canute). These later codes often show rhetorical ornament and are not without stylistic interest; they are also important because they do not merely show practical lawmaking, but demonstrate and discuss the ethical framework within which society was meant to work. Scientific and medical texts also survive from the late period: for instance, a book of medical recipes, Bald's Leechbook, or a manual for horse doctors, Medicina de quadrupedibus; these show little literary ambition, but demonstrate the flexibility and range of written Old English.

**ALFREDIAN PROSE**

Surviving Old English prose dates mostly from two periods about a century apart: the Alfredian period at the end of the ninth century, and the Benedictine Revival at the end of the tenth. Most of it is translated from Latin, or at least based upon Latin models. Alfredian prose is associated with the king himself. prefaces to each text claim that he produced the Old English translations of Pope Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care, Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy, and St. Augustine’s Soliloquies, and these claims are supported by stylistic and linguistic analysis that shows that they probably share a common translator. Alfred may also have translated the first fifty psalms into prose; he may also be responsible for part of the Old English version of Orosius’ universal history and geography, as stated some centuries later by William of Malmesbury. William’s other attribution to Alfred, of the Old English translation of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, is now not generally accepted, but the translation is of the Alfredian period and may well have been commissioned by the king. The earliest part of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, up to the year 891, is also Alfredian, though not composed by the king himself.

Alfred's preface to his translation of the Pastoral Care is of great importance. Writing mostly in the first person, the king describes the disastrous state of learning in England. He claims that, when he came to power, there were very few priests south of the Humber who knew how to make sense of the Latin liturgy, or translate a letter from Latin into English, and he thinks that there were not many beyond the Humber either. So he presents the need for educational reform, and his own techniques of translation, "sometimes word beside word, sometimes sense from sense" under the guidance of his own named teachers. This preface itself is stylistically ambitious; it is mostly successful in its detailed discussion, but is occasionally bewildered by the complexity of its own syntax, and in a couple of instances Alfred is only able to rescue an awkward sentence with some clumsiness. He attempts one developed metaphor with considerable success. The Pastoral Care itself was an obvious choice for educational purposes: Gregory had intended it as a handbook for training priests, and it inculcated moral truths through brief, exemplary anecdotes; it is very simply written and rather entertaining. Alfred preserves these characteristics, and the text comes across with pleasingly naive charm.
Educational intention can equally be seen behind the Old English translation of Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos*, which gives the entire geographic and historic context for early medieval culture and history. Although Alfred probably did not produce the whole of this translation, it is remarkable for the interpolation of two linked passages, quite possibly composed by Alfred himself, in which two travelers give geographic and ethnographic accounts of northern Europe in the late ninth century. One of these informants is Ohthere, a Norwegian from Hålogaland in northern Norway, who told “his lord King Alfred” of a northward voyage round North Cape into the White Sea, together with many hardheaded details of peoples, produce, and goods traded. Ohthere (Norse *Óttarr*) must therefore have been a Viking who had sworn allegiance to the English king, and the passage shows both his and Alfred’s detailed and practical interest in trade even in the remote north of Europe. This shows a relationship between King Alfred and the Vikings completely different from the military conflicts recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The other interpolated account is that of an English merchant, Wulfstan, of a voyage to Estonia in the Baltic, giving rather picturesque, if not always credible, ethnographic information. The style of these interpolated passages shows considerable skill in presenting detailed narrative with great clarity; it is considerably more lively and complex than that of the translated text.

A historical context for the kingdom of the English is also provided by the Old English translation of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. On stylistic and linguistic grounds this cannot now be attributed to Alfred himself, and is likely to be of west Midland origin: it may be associated with the circle of Bishop Waerferd of Worcester, with whom Alfred corresponded as a participant in his educational program, and to whom Alfred’s biographer, Asser, attributes the Old English translation of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*; this has an Alfredian preface in which the king attributes the translation to “his friends.” The style of these two translations is Latinate and slightly stiff, but usually succeeds in reproducing the originals’ lucidity of mind and style.

The history of Alfred’s own reign, and of his immediate predecessors, is provided in the first section (to 891) of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which appears in all surviving versions of the *Chronicle*. This must be seen as a self-conscious literary and scholarly creation of Alfred’s court; it was probably modeled on Frankish chronicles, and was not itself based on earlier English annals. It derives early material from Orosius and Bede; after this runs out, the chronicler clearly has very little information for the second half of the eighth century and the beginning of the ninth: a king-list, and a list of bishops, both of which establish chronologies, and some few fragments of apparently archaic narrative (for example, the annal entry for 755). With Alfred’s father and elder brother, however, the *Chronicle* begins to present coherent and fairly full narratives, and its account of Alfred’s own reign is detailed and well-organized. It is far from mere flattery of the king: Alfred’s defeats are recorded with the same impartial detail as his successes. He is always, however, the central figure, and other events are recounted only if they impinge on him, his reign, and his realm. The style chosen is simple, impersonal, and direct, but the chronicler’s mastery of complex narrative is complete. This is the more striking, since apart from Alfred’s own prefaces, and the interpolated passages in the *Orosius*, this is the only Alfredian prose that is not translated from Latin.

Alfred’s other translations fit less easily into his program of elementary education. Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, a fairly large Neoplatonic work produced in the fifth century A.D., was the only work of classical philosophy that survived into the knowledge of the early Middle Ages in Western Europe. It was a major philosophical work, and also had great literary importance, since after each section of prose discussion the argument is then summarized in metaphysical poetry of very high quality, the so-called “Metres of Boethius.” This provided a spur to philosophical poetry throughout the western Middle Ages, not least in Old English. Alfred seems to have translated all the text—prose and
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poetry—into prose; this prose is usually effective but sometimes awkward, especially when wrestling with abstractions, though it can rise to nobility in translating some of the "Metres." At some later date this prose translation of the "Metres" was versified into very uninspired Old English poetry. Alfred’s translation involved substantial modification of the content of the work. Boethius’s abstract discussion is usually made concrete; it is given an explicitly Christian framework, and is consistently applied to kingship. Alfred uses Boethius as a starting point for discussing the ethical problems facing a Christian king. In such modification he was effectively incorporating a commentary upon Boethius’s text into his translation: many such commentaries were available, and Alfred may have used some of them. But he goes beyond known commentaries. In Book IV of the Consolation, Boethius discusses the nature of time, and predestination within time, and their relation to Platonic eternity; he uses for this the geometric image of the infinite number of points on the circumference of a circle relative to the single point at its center. Alfred translates this into elaborate and explicitly Christian terms: God is at the center. The abstraction of the geometric circle is made concrete: it is now a cartwheel, with spokes. This enables him to introduce the concept of the Christian, who stands on the wheel-rim of recurrent time, but reaches upwards and in, to the still center of the turning world, towards God. This reinterpretation seems to be peculiar to the Old English translation, and shows a creative mind, that grasps Boethius’s abstraction and makes a conceptual leap beyond it to a new and powerful understanding. If this is Alfred’s own work, as seems likely, it shows a mind of very unusual ability.

Alfred’s other known translation, the Soliloquies of St. Augustine, also addresses philosophical issues, and also applies them to problems of kingship; there also are, as well, many verbal echoes between the two translations, and some of Alfred’s additions to the Soliloquies correspond to passages of Boethius; this may indicate that the Soliloquies were translated at a time when he was already familiar with Boethius. Although it is not preserved intact, and only in a twelfth-century manuscript, Alfred’s skills clearly reach new heights in this work, and the surviving fragment of his first-person preface is among the finest known Old English prose. Here he is able to sustain large-scale and complex imagery with ease and grace; his rhetorical ornaments always support and never overwhelm the sense, and his syntax, although complicated, never seems strained.

Neither the Consolation of Philosophy nor the Soliloquies of St. Augustine is at all an elementary work; neither could be considered suitable for teaching children to read or write, or even for the training of priests. King Alfred’s intellectual ability and his range of interest go far further than his program of elementary education.

TENTH- AND ELEVENTH-CENTURY PROSE

Apart from the increasingly separate continuations of the different versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and, debatably, some homilies, not much prose survives that can be securely dated to the earlier parts of the tenth century. Chronicle prose continues to develop in discursive fullness, and in particular the account of the last years of Alfred’s reign shows an easy ability to control complex narratives with great clarity and some passion. With the Benedictine Revival of the last decades of the century, however, prose writing is resumed with great vigor, and continues until after the Norman Conquest. The bulk of prose produced at this period was religious, and its main literary form was the homily or sermon. Although apparently earlier homilies survive, particularly in the Blickling and Vercelli collections, this literature is largely associated with two writers, Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955–c. 1010), and Archbishop Wulfstan of Worcester and York (bishop of London 996–1002, archbishop of York 1002–1023, and bishop of Worcester 1002–1016, d. 1023). These were contemporaries at the end of the century, and Wulfstan was acquainted with Ælfric’s work. Ælfric produced two entire series of “Catholic Homilies,” sermons for most Sundays of the church year, as well as some not assigned to specific occasions: at least
116 of these sermons survive. He also composed a cycle of some 34 surviving Saints' Lives for most major saints' days of the year. These were not in any modern sense original compositions. Ælfric, like most other sermon writers, consulted earlier texts, always in Latin, and reworked their material, sometimes with acknowledgement, in a chain of authority that leads back to the Fathers of the Church such as St. Augustine or Pope Gregory the Great. His merits do not lie in original thought, but in skills of presentation and style. In these he shows a great range, from detailed and complex theological argument, supported by comparably complex imagery and style, to a simple and touching directness. The Saints' Lives are mostly composed in so-called "rhythmic prose," almost loose alliterative verse; they make few demands on their audience and even when recounting brutal martyrdom are mostly lighthearted entertainment literature, clerical adventure stories. They were presumably intended for performance in contexts such as the monastic refectory, as edifying entertainment to forestall idle talk. Ælfric also produced educational works, such as the first known Latin grammar written in English, and a short astronomical treatise, De temporibus.

Archbishop Wulfstan was also a fairly prolific writer, and was apparently responsible for drafting Cnut's law code, as well as the so-called Canons of Edgar. Some twenty-one sermons and related pieces survive which are fairly certainly by Wulfstan. Although he redrafted one homily originally composed by Ælfric, his content and style are very different. He rarely presents reasoned argument, but instead makes an emotional appeal to his audience, sometimes with great passion. His prose is very strongly alliterative, but does not approach verse; instead, he builds up cumulative paragraphs of sharply defined paratactic rhythmic phrases; these are held together internally by alliteration and assonance, but are mostly linked by symmetry. The effect is impressive, but can become repetitive, even rather mechanical.

Most other surviving prose is likely to date from this period. The late Chronicle continuations generally become fuller and more circumstantial, and more partisan. The accounts of the reigns of Æþelraed (Ethelred the Unready) or of Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror contain particularly fine historical narrative. Most other prose is translation from Latin. One remarkable oddity is the fragmentary translation of Apollonius of Tyre, originally a Hellenistic Greek novella; the story was widely known throughout Europe during the later Middle Ages, and was used by Gower, and then by Shakespeare for Pericles. The Old English version shows a quite unexpected elegance and delicacy, presented in a supple and subtle prose style. From the same postclassical Greek background are the translations of Alexander's Letter to Aristotle, and of the Wonders of the East, though these are more useful in showing the range of inputs into late Old English culture than for any inherent merit. Most of the technical prose is also likely to date from this period, above all Byrhtferth's Manual.

Nothing in Old English prose reaches the stature of Ancrene Wisse at the end of the twelfth century, of Malory in the fifteenth century, or of Bunyan in the seventeenth century. But at their best, prose writers such as King Alfred or Abbot Ælfric are completely in command of their medium, and can still touch, move, sometimes persuade even the skeptical and world-weary modern reader.

POETRY

Most Old English poetry is known only from four surviving manuscripts. These are often known as the Junius (or Cædmon) Manuscript (MS Bodl Junii 11), the Vercelli Book (MS Biblioteca Capitolare cxvii), the Exeter Book (MS Exeter Dean and Chapter 3501), and the Beowulf Manuscript (or Nowell Codex) (MS BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv). These all date from the Benedictine Revival, and were probably written within about thirty years of each other: the Exeter Book could have been written as early as the 970s, while the Beowulf Manuscript might have been written just after 1000. The Junius Manuscript is probably a Canterbury book; the places of origin of the others are uncertain. They are all carefully written and have been checked and cor-
rected by their own scribes; the Junius Manuscript is also illustrated with ink drawings. None gives evidence of subsequent medieval use. They are all more or less systematic collections of poetry, with a strong leaning towards religious poems, and may have been produced as part of a scholarly revival of interest in Old English poetry. The Exeter Book might represent a collection of all or most of the poetry in a particular library or group of libraries; the Junius Manuscript, the Vercelli Book, and the Beowulf Manuscript seem to have collected their content on a thematic basis. Even though only these four major poetic manuscripts exist, they may therefore give a fairly good sample of Old English poetry surviving at the end of the tenth century.

Other manuscripts contain some verse: the Paris Psalter contains a probably Alfredian prose translation of the first fifty psalms, followed by a wholly uninspired versification of the remaining hundred psalms. Equally uninspired versifications of the "Metres of Boethius" also survive. Later parts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle preserve occasional poems, mostly royal praise-poems or memorial lays: these are of interest in that they can be dated, but only The Battle of Brunanburh is of any small literary merit. Apart from these, there is a random scattering of short texts, a few of which are preserved in eighth-century versions (Cedmon's Hymn, Bede's Death Song, the Leiden Riddle) and can accordingly be used to try to reconstruct the literary history of Old English poetry; a few inscriptions, mostly early, also seem to be poetic, most importantly that on the Ruthwell Cross in Dumfriesshire. Some texts survive only in modern transcripts of manuscripts now lost: of these the most important are The Battle of Maldon and the Finnesburh Fragment, both incomplete. The total corpus of all surviving Old English poetry amounts to approximately 30,000 lines.

Almost all Old English poetry is of anonymous authorship, apart from the two very short poems attributed to Cedmon and Bede respectively, and the four poems which contain Cynewulf's runic signature as an acrostic at their ends. The names of all Old English poems are modern; the usage of the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records is generally followed here.

METER AND DICTION

All surviving Old English poetry is composed in effectively a single alliterative, rhythmical meter; the modern description of this is based almost entirely upon statistical analysis of the corpus. The poetry was written continuously in the surviving manuscripts, but modern editors usually print it in verse-lines. Each line consists of two separate half-lines with a rhythmic and often syntactic pause between them, marked in modern editions by spacing; the half-lines seem to be the basic metrical unit. The two half-lines are tied together only by alliteration on their first accented (stressed) syllables; a second accented syllable in the first half-line can also sometimes participate in the alliteration, but never a second accented syllable in the second half-line. The half-line is apparently based on the two-accent phrase that seems to be fundamental to English speech rhythm, and much modern English can be scanned as if it were Old English verse. The only fundamental differences between Old English and the modern language in this respect are that all vowels could alliterate with each other, that long and short accented syllables functioned differently from each other, and that the accent (stress) always fell on the root-syllable of a word (usually its first syllable). Much variation is possible in half-line structure: it could contain more or fewer syllables, down to a minimum of four; the number and organization of the accented syllables also varied; these variations seem to be subject to fairly strict rules, though these rules seem to change during the period.

Regularity of syllable numbers or of rhythm seems to be irrelevant to this meter. End rhyme is rare and seems almost always to be an ornament borrowed from Latin, rather than having any inherent metrical function. The poetry is not strophic and can only rarely be divided into anything resembling stanzas.

Two modern English verse-lines that exactly reflect Old English verse-patterns are Milton's "while other animals inactive range" and Pope's
“by force to ravish or by fraud betray.” This meter is in all essentials identical with that of Old Saxon and Old High German poetry, and is very closely related to that of Old Norse Eddaic poetry. It was probably, therefore, inherited from the common Germanic past of these poetic traditions, and may be very ancient.

The diction of Old English poetry differed substantially from that of prose, and was largely shared by the Old Saxon and Old High German poetic traditions. Poetry used a different and more archaic noun-vocabulary, which was very rich in near-synonyms for common concepts. The range of available words usually gave a range of different implications and overtones, and sometimes even shifts of meaning. So words that must be translated as “warrior” include cempa, originally a loanword derived from Latin campus (“battlefield”) and so ultimately related to modern English “champion” (it was a rather lofty word, and was often used in Christian contexts); beorn, a native word, ultimately related to terms for “bear,” which may have implied the pre-Christian warrior enraged in a berserk frenzy; wiga, a lower-status word meaning “striker;” secg, which may have meant “companion, fellow-fighter” but was probably specifically associated with swords; and gesip, which also meant “companion” but more “traveling companion,” “companion on a (military) expedition.” Similarly, words that have to be translated roughly as “mind” include hyge, perhaps meaning the capacity for rational thought; mod, the capacity for emotional experience; gepont, perhaps “consideration”; and gepoth, “considered opinion.” Old English could freely produce compounds, where the first element modified the second, and this allowed far more delicate exploration of sense (for example, modgeponc, perhaps “consideration of the heart,” “reflection drawing conclusions from emotional experience”).

Old English poetic syntax also differed from that of prose. It often exploited parallelism and verbal variation, where the key concepts of a sentence were repeated, usually by apposition, in different wording and contexts, so turning them around in the mind’s eye and seeing different aspects of them from different angles almost simultaneously. The Old English poetic sentence thus tends to progress in a spiral around its central concepts rather than by the progression of Aristotelian logic. This creates a multidimensional poetic perception, both analytic and holistic at the same time.

Much Old English poetic phraseology was repeated or varied, sometimes within a single poem, sometimes across the entire corpus. These semi-stable, repeated phrases are known as “formulae.” Some attested poetic traditions of oral improvisation, for example Serbian epic, use formulae, apparently so that illiterate poets could use traditional phrases while planning ahead. So, for instance, in the Iliad Agamemnon is usually described as anax andron “king of men,” where the poetic tradition, not merely the poet, supplies the wording. Such poems may have been composed and performed in oral improvisation, so each performance was not a reproduction of a memorized text but was improvised anew and so was different from every other performance, and there were no stable texts until the poetry was recorded in writing. This “oral-formulaic” theory was applied to Old English poetry by F. P. Magoun Jr., and his many disciples. These scholars largely disregarded the distinctions between different poetic traditions concerning formulae and their uses: formulae are used in fundamentally different ways in Homeric Greek and Old English poetry. Oral improvisation may, in some instances, use formulaic diction, but this is not universal: other poetic traditions of illiterate oral composition, closely related to Old English, avoid any use of formulae, for example early Old Norse skaldic poetry. Further, formulaic diction does not prove oral improvisation. In other literary traditions much formulaic poetry was demonstrably composed in writing, for example eighteenth-century English pastoral poetry. Even in the Old English period, Latin poetry, certainly composed in writing by highly literate poets such as Aldhelm, can be highly formulaic, as has been shown by Andy Orchard. There is no direct nor circumstantial evidence that any surviving Old English poetry, apart from Cædmon’s Hymn, was composed and transmitted other than in writing.
THE JUNIUS MANUSCRIPT

The Junius Manuscript contains only four fairly long religious poems: three verse-paraphrases of books of the Old Testament, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *Daniel*, are followed by *Christ and Satan*. They all treat their Biblical subject matter very freely. *Genesis* stays the closest to its source, and is for the most part a fairly simple retelling of the Biblical stories. It has a sober, restrained dignity, not instantly appealing but compelling ultimate respect. Within the main text, however, there is a large interpolation, usually known as *Genesis B*. This tells in dramatic and largely apocryphal detail the accounts of the Fall of Satan and the Fall of Man. It is metrically distinct from most other Old English poetry, and also has some unusual word-usage; this led Eduard Sievers to suggest in 1875 that it was translated from another Germanic language, Old Saxon, and this was confirmed when in 1894 large fragments of the Old Saxon *Genesis* were discovered in the Vatican Library. The brief section of overlap between the passages of Old Saxon and Old English shows that the Old English text is a close translation of the Old Saxon. *Genesis B* shows remarkable freedom, dramatic power, and skill of characterization, particularly of Satan. Junius owned this manuscript, and was a friend of John Milton. Milton had some knowledge of Old English, possibly acquired through Junius, and so he could have known this text: this would give an explanation of the striking correspondences in the characterization of Satan between *Genesis B* and *Paradise Lost*.

*Exodus* is a very free retelling of the first part of the Biblical book, dealing with the escape of the Israelites from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. It is a vigorous and colorful poem, full of wildly metaphysical imagery, perhaps derived from patristic allegorical interpretations. It is passionate and exciting, but may not always seem fully in control of its material.

*Daniel* tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the Burning Fiery Furnace, and culminates in a gloriously expansive paraphrase of the hymn of the three Hebrew boys, taken into Christian liturgy as the *Benedicite*.

*Christ and Satan* is a poetic meditation upon the doctrinal issues that arise from various encounters between Christ and the devil, in the Temptation, at the Harrowing of Hell, and at Judgment. It is restrained in its treatment of its rather colorful subject matter, and seems a text perhaps intended for personal devotion. It provides the thematic key to this collection of poems, all of which deal with literal and allegorical images of Hell and the Harrowing of Hell, from damnation to redemption.

THE VERCELLI BOOK

The Vercelli Book is so named because it survives in the cathedral library at Vercelli, in north Italy, where it has probably been since the twelfth century, as it contains an annotation in Italian handwriting from about 1100. It seems to be almost complete, but has been damaged by chemicals—applied by its first transcriber in the late nineteenth century to make the writing clearer to read. It is a mixed manuscript of twenty-three prose homilies and six poems. These are *Andreas*, *Fates of the Apostles*, *Soul and Body I*, *Homiletic Fragment I*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and *Elene*.

*Andreas* is a fairly long verse life of St. Andrew, based ultimately on a Greek life that in style and content is more nearly a novella, full of extravagant description of fantastic events. The Old English poem matches these well, with great excitement and a driving momentum; it also deepens the text and gives it a more serious undertow without diminishing its entertainment value. The quality of poetry is variable but usually high, and often seems to echo *Beowulf*.

*Fates of the Apostles* is a short apostolic martyrology of little interest other than that it has an epilogue containing Cynwulf’s signature as a runic acrostic. *Soul and Body I*, incomplete at its end, is one of two short verse debates in Old English between the soul and dead body, in which the soul berates the decaying body for causing its damnation. It is entirely conventional and has little literary merit other than vigor. *Homiletic Fragment I* has lost its beginning, but as it stands is a fairly conventional ending to an elegiac
poem: it uses motifs deriving from the biblical
Book of Proverbs to lament the transience of this
world and to urge its reader to look to eternal
truths beyond it.

In contrast, *The Dream of the Rood* is one of
the finest and most unusual English poems to
survive from the Dark or Middle Ages. The poem
is short, at 156 lines, but compresses religious
revelation and theological interpretation into its
two symmetrical halves. It uses the convention
of the dream vision, and its outer narrator is a
Dreamer, as in William Langland’s *Piers Plow-
man* or the anonymous fourteenth-century poem
*Pearl*. The Dreamer sees a vision of the Cross in
majesty, towering above the world, clad in gar-
ments, gold, and gems, gazed upon by angels,
men, and all creation. He is terrified by the sight,
aware of his own mortal wounds of sin, and in
his fear he sees the Cross change, so that through
the gold he sees flowing blood. Then the Cross
itself speaks: as the inner narrator of the poem, it
gives an account of the Passion of Christ. This
owes rather little to the biblical account, but
employs motifs of alarmingly disparate origins to
portray the animate Cross. In order to obey Christ
in spiritual warfare, the Cross must slay him, and
yet is slain with him. “All Creation wept.” United
with Christ by the nails that pierce them both, it
undergoes its own passion, burial, resurrection,
and ascension. At this point (l. 78), the arithmeti-
cal center of the poem, the inner narrative ends.
As often in shorter Old English religious poems,
the second half of the poem is homiletic, and
expounds the significance of the content of its
first half. The Cross addresses the Dreamer, and
tells him to recount his vision to all men; the
poem is therefore internally self-justifying. The
Cross looks forward to Judgment at the Second
Coming, but this Judgment is no conventional
bookkeeping of good and evil: Christ will ask
“where the man may be who for the Lord’s name
would wish to taste bitter death, as He did before
on the tree.” The Cross itself is Judgment; it is
the test of man’s love for God as it is the proof
of God’s love for man. Finally, the Dreamer
himself expresses his own devotion in an upward-
straining association of man’s redemption with
Christ’s Ascension.

This poem shows extraordinary intellectual
boldness and originality. It reorganizes elements
of biblical narrative, combined with themes from
heroic poetry and even possibly from paganism,
in order to present its portrait of the animate,
speaking Cross, apparently unique to this poem
in early medieval Christian sources. It is also
bold nearly to the point of heresy in its doctrinal
interpretation. The union of Christ with the Cross
allows the Cross to share in Christ’s Passion. Its
mortal wood is animated by union with Christ’s
divinity, while at the same time it is the anguished
instrument of Christ’s death. Thus the Cross
shares not only Christ’s nature in crucifixion, but
it also shares man’s nature, an earthly being
animated with a God-given soul, the agent of
Christ’s death but thereby enabled to share
Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension. Similarly
the Cross becomes not merely a sign of the
Second Coming, but the very means of Judg-
ment. Such a theological interpretation appears to
be unique to this poem. It is matched by poetry
of equal quality, powerful and economical, uni-
ified in local paradox and by large-scale sym-
metries across the poem.

*The Dream of the Rood* may be much older
than its late tenth-century manuscript. The Ruth-
well Cross in Dumfriesshire, a large and elaborate
free-standing carved stone cross dated on art-
historical grounds to the late seventh or early
eighth century, bears a damaged runic inscription
that must be related to the poem. The language
of this inscription is likely to be rather later than
the Ruthwell Cross itself, and it was probably
carved after the cross was erected; it may be of
the mid to late eighth century. Possibly the runic
inscription inspired the poem, but alternatively it
may quote from the poem. Quotation seems more
probable, since although the inscription is
certainly poetic, it is not quite metrical, and so
seems to be a quotation from existing poetry
rather than an actual poem itself. If so, then the
poem itself must be older than the runic inscrip-
tion on the Ruthwell Cross, and was probably
composed in the first half of the eighth century.

*Elene* is a fairly long verse life of St. Helena,
the reputedly British mother of Emperor Con-
stantine the Great, who converted the Roman
Empire to Christianity soon after 312 A.D.; she is credited with the “Invention” (finding) of the relics of the True Cross in 326 A.D. when on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The poem contains another instance of Cynewulf’s runic signature; it is otherwise competent but of little literary merit. Its association of pilgrimage with devotion to the Cross, however, may again define the purpose of the entire manuscript: a vade mecum of devotional literature for an English pilgrim to the sanctuaries of apostolic martyrdom, whose book has remained in Italy to the present day.

**THE EXETER BOOK**

The Exeter Book contains by far the largest number of surviving Old English poems, without prose or illustration; it is defective in that leaves have fallen out of it in probably at least seven places; it has also suffered fairly serious fire damage, especially affecting The Ruin. Its contents are not organized by any obvious overall plan, though local groupings are clear. Five fairly large texts stand at the beginning of the manuscript: Crist, Guthlac, Azarias, The Phoenix, and Juliana. The remainder of the manuscript is occupied by several large groups of fairly short poems: The Wanderer, Gifts of Men, Precepts, The Seafarer, Vainglory, Widsith, The Fortunes of Men, Maxims I, The Order of the World, and The Rimming Poem; The Panther, The Whale, and The Partridge; and Soul and Body II, Deor, and Wulff and Eadwacer. These are followed by a group of fifty-nine riddles. The manuscript ends with The Wife’s Lament, Judgement Day I, Resignation, Descent into Hell, Alms-Giving, Pharaoh, The Lord’s Prayer I, Homiletic Fragment II, two riddles, The Husband’s Message, The Ruin, and a further group of thirty-four riddles.

Crist is actually a group of three poems: Crist I, also known as the Advent Lyrics; Crist II, also known as The Ascension; and Crist III, also known as Christ in Judgement. They are organized thematically, and are figurative meditations upon different aspects of their subject, rather than narrative or literal exposition. The first two, in particular, glory in the exultant yet controlled metaphoric power of their figurative techniques, expressed in equally controlled yet powerful poetry. Crist II contains another of Cynewulf’s runic acrostic signatures. Guthlac is also a group of two verse lives of the Anglo-Saxon hermit saint, each organized loosely around a narrative framework, but both quietly meditative rather than strictly narrative in presentation. Azarias is probably related to Daniel in the Junius Manuscript, and likewise is an elaboration of the Benedicite. The Phoenix is a bestiary poem in the tradition of the Physiologus, which describes animals and then places an allegorical interpretation upon their description; in this case, the poem is a free translation, enlargement, and elaboration of a Latin poem by Lactantius. It is complex and ornate, and is something of a rhetorical tour-de-force in its successful combination of classical and native poetic techniques. Juliana, in contrast, is a verse life of the Roman virgin-martyr, and apart from a pleasingly comic devil is rather conventional; it contains Cynewulf’s fourth surviving runic acrostic signature.

The Exeter Book contains several short poems which have been classified as “elegies,” but which would be better seen as employing the “elegiac mode” found widely elsewhere in Old English poetry: expressions of human grief, often given metaphysical significance, and sometimes but not always followed by divine consolation. The Wanderer and The Seafarer are usually considered the prime examples of this genre or mode, and are often grouped together by modern critics; they share possible verbal and thematic links supporting this association. The text of The Seafarer is now partly corrupt: a section towards its end does not make sense or meter, and cannot be safely reconstructed. In the first half of the poem, the speaker tells of his longing for seafaring and his fear of it, of the perils and attractions of the great waters, in increasingly figurative terms. In its second half, the poem gives an allegorical interpretation of this, signifying the soul’s quest for God. At the transition from metaphor to allegory, the poem achieves an intensity matching the paradoxical emotions that tear at the awareness of its speaker. It has often, probably correctly, been associated with the early Irish traditions of seafaring hermits that in part
had led to the conversion of the English; on this basis it might be a relatively early poem. *The Wanderer* may be modeled upon something similar to *The Seafarer*: its speaker recounts his exile from past human happiness, and his grim and grievous perception of universal transience; in darkness and despair at the passing of all things beneath the skies, he turns to God as the only permanence. The poem is Boethian in its philosophical understanding of emotional experience; some of its themes and vocabulary may point towards composition late in the tenth century. The elegiac mode appears in many other poems in the Exeter Book, for instance *Resignation* and *Deor*.

Some of the poems in the Exeter Book, the so-called “Wisdom Literature,” consist of little more than collections of vaguely ethical propositions. These poems, including *The Gifts of Men*, *Precepts*, *Vainglory*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *Maxims*, and *The Order of the World*, look back to texts such as the biblical Book of Proverbs or the Latin *Disticha Catonis*, and are paralleled in other ancient Germanic literatures, such as the Old Norse Hávamál. The Old English examples are not of much inherent literary interest, but they give a context in which to understand similar exempla, proverbs, or maxims that occur in other poems.

The Exeter Book contains a few other bestiary poems beside *The Phoenix*: *The Panther*, *The Whale*, and *The Partridge* are fairly short and picturesque poems, which bring out the riddling aspect of the Physiologus tradition. The physical animal, whose characteristics are described in the first section of each poem, is presented as a metaphysical riddle, to represent Christ or the Devil, as expounded in the second part of the poem. The whale as “type” of the Devil is an image that was still available to Milton.

*Widsith* and *Deor*, although they incorporate elegiac elements and consist of lists of exempla, are distinguished from all other poems in the manuscript in that their content is that of the legends available to the early English. *Widsith* is not very much more than an annotated encyclopedic catalog, or rather three such catalogs, of available legendary names of persons and peoples, sometimes with brief fragments of narrative attached to the name. The range is mostly native Germanic legend, but some classical and biblical names have also been incorporated; to judge from the name-forms, these have reached the poem through oral transmission. This is presented in a perfunctory narrative frame: a wandering minstrel called Widsip (“Wide-farer”) tells that he has performed for all these people. Although the poem has little literary merit of its own, it is invaluable as an index of known legend, and most of its material can be corroborated elsewhere, either in Old English or sometimes in other early Germanic literatures. *Deor* also presents its material within the narrative frame of a wandering minstrel, and the material itself is a short sequence of juxtaposed narrative exempla derived from Germanic legend, on the theme of transience. Not all its material is easily understood, but at least in one instance, its initial reference to the legend of Wayland Smith, it has close verbal links to the Norse poem on that subject, Völundarkviða, which must indicate some textual relationship. It is almost unique in Old English poetry in being composed in irregular stanzas, rather than continuously, and in having a quasi-proverbial refrain, *pees ofereode, pisses swa mœg*, perhaps “it came to an end of that; so it can of this.” The effect is of a multifaceted consideration with some emotional power, as its ambivalent refrain is applied to successive legendary examples of sorrow and joy, and then finally to the speaker of the poem himself.

*The Riming Poem* is also metrically unusual, in that it attempts to make consistent use of end rhyme, which elsewhere appears only ornamentally in Old English poetry. The poem is otherwise unremarkable.

Several poems are simply homiletic: *Soul and Body II* is another diatribe by the soul against the dead body for the fleshly sins which have damned it; *Alms Giving* and *Homiletic Fragment II* are very brief sets of injunctions to Christians. A small group of poems deals with quasi-biblical material: *The Descent into Hell*, *Pharaoh*, and *The Lord’s Prayer I*. Of these only *The Descent into Hell* is of literary interest, and it seems to
function as an appendix to *Crist* at the beginning of the manuscript.

Three remarkable and powerful poems deal, apparently or actually, with the relationship between men and women: *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *The Husband's Message*. *Wulf and Eadwacer* is a short but powerful lament (19 lines) by a female speaker for her lover, Wulf, and against Eadwacer (literally “wealth-watcher,” the English form of the historical name *Odoacer*), who restrains her against her will. It does not make full sense as it stands, and is also metrically very irregular, as if it had been excerpted from a larger text. Its conclusion is one of the most haunting and evocative fragments of Old English: *Pcet mon eape tostiled pcette ncefre gesomnad wees uncer giedd geador* “that is easily torn apart that was never put together, the song of us two together.”

The *Wife's Lament* is a rather longer lament (53 lines), again by a female speaker, for her “lord.” She is exiled because of his exile. Again the maxim that ends the poem is powerful: *Wa bid pam pe sceal of langope leofes abidan* “woe shall be to that one who must from longing await a loved one.” The poem is full of internal self-inconsistencies and even self-contradictions, which make reconstruction of any implied, external narrative nearly impossible, but its imagery is so precise and powerful that this merely reinforces its impact: the poem nags at the mind like an unsolved riddle.

The *Husband's Message* is, as its modern title implies, a message from a man to his exiled wife, asking her to come and be reunited with him; although widely separated in the manuscript, it is difficult not to see this poem as an answer to the anguished exile of *The Wife's Lament*; both poems give the impression that they might have been excerpted from a larger text giving an explanatory narrative context.

*The Ruin* stands by itself. Although the text is seriously defective due to fire damage, it seems to be an Old English description of Roman remains, given some light elegiac interpretation reminiscent of *The Wanderer's* description of storm-swept ruins. This poem, however, is remarkable in that the ruins are almost certainly specific: it describes a hot spring, unique in Britain to Bath, and the structures through which the hot water flows, all of which have been corroborated by archaeological investigation of the Roman baths at Bath. The poem describes specific features which cannot have been visible later than the eighth century: peat, which were already deep enough by the tenth century for a cemetery to be dug in it, was subsequently deposited over them. The poem must therefore have been composed early in the Old English period. It largely lacks the melancholy of the elegiac mode, but concentrates instead upon structural details of the ruined buildings, and the glitter and glory of those who once had inhabited them.

Lastly, the Exeter Book contains two large collections of vernacular riddles. These owe relatively little to the Latin collections of riddles by Symphosius or Aldhelm: each riddle presents a brief vignette of its unnamed subject, and often ends with “Say what am I called.” Sometimes the glimpses into everyday life are very vivid; some of the riddles indulge in double meanings, and are occasionally lightheartedly improper. These vernacular riddles are certainly entertainment literature, and they have nothing of Aldhelm’s metaphysical concerns, where the reader looks through the meaning of the physical world to the hand of God. However, these riddles reflect a general concern with interpretation of the literal world, found throughout the Exeter Book, whether a matter of the events of the life of Christ, or of animals such as the phoenix or panther in the bestiary poems, or of events from Germanic legend in *Deor*, or of the experience of human transience in *The Wanderer*. Things in this world have meaning, and they can be interpreted to gain wisdom. In short, the riddles show a means of metaphorical understanding explored more fully and powerfully in the major poems of this manuscript.

**THE BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT**

The *Beowulf* Manuscript, as it presently stands, contains only two poems: *Beowulf* and the headless fragment of *Judith*. Although *Judith* was written by the second scribe of *Beowulf*, it seems
old to have been bound with it in modern times. *Beowulf* is the last of a group of otherwise prose texts: a fragmentary Life of St. Christopher, *The Wonders of the East*, and Alexander’s *Letter to Aristotle*. Little obvious seems to unite these texts other than a naive interest in exotic marvels: the manuscript may have been meant as a Book of Monsters. *Beowulf* itself is the longest surviving poem in Old English, at 3,182 lines. It is also the only Old English poem that may justly be compared with the classical epics of Homer or Vergil. It is epic in intellectual, emotional, and narrative scale, if only barely in physical length, but it shares much of its rhapsodic melancholy not only with Vergil but also with the Old English elegiac poems. Its authorship and date of composition are unknown: plausible cases can be made for composition at any time between the early eighth century and the late tenth. The poem tells of the slaying, by beheading, of three supernatural monsters—two troll-like beings and a dragon—and of the death of its hero, who dies as a consequence of a wound inflicted by the dragon. The hero, *Beowulf*, does nothing else reported at first-hand in the poem. His three narratives are set against a mosaic of Germanic legend and legendary history, usually recounted in detailed but incomplete allusion. Both the monster-slayings and the legendary background are known from a large range of other texts in Old English and other early languages, and much of this material is likely to have been inherited from ancient legendary tradition. Although the narratives of the poem might seem to be fantasy, they are presented as the vehicle of constant ethical analysis, darkening towards the endless despair of Germanic heroic legend. In modes of narrative presentation, and also in some aspects of verbal technique, the poem has no known models and no successors: it is unique both within English and more widely within classical or medieval literature. *Beowulf* may stand beside *Odysseus*, the wise and long-suffering, or pious *Aeneas*—and he does not suffer in such comparison—but the northern hero inhabits a world far darker than either Homer’s or Vergil’s. Christian hope is available within the poem, but is only known to its poet and audience; the pre-Christian past that it depicts permitted no such knowledge. This story matter is presented in poetry of richness, passion, and great density, and with a long-breathed inevitability of pace that develops a huge, slow momentum. It is as unstoppable as a lava flow, and as astonishing.

*Judith* tells the story, derived from the biblical Apocrypha, of a Jewish prostitute who murders an Assyrian general by beheading him during a tryst. The Old English poem almost succeeds in presenting this vicious tale as if of a woman warrior-saint; it is vigorous and not without some subtlety of both narrative and expression.

**FURTHER POEMS**

Some Old English poems survive outside the main poetic manuscripts. Apart from those already mentioned, these fall into a number of categories. Some are paraphrases of biblical or liturgical texts: the Paris Psalter with its metrical versions of psalms 51–150, various isolated psalms, the *Lord’s Prayer II* and *III*, the *Creed*, the *Gloria*. Some are religious exhortation: *An Exhortation to Christian Living*, *A Summons to Prayer*, *The Seasons for Fasting*. A few are further collections of proverbs or maxims. There are a few loosely metrical charms. Metrical prefaces or epilogues to a few texts, mostly Alfredian, also survive, as well as the metrical version of the “Metres of Boethius.” Unclassifiable items include the Old English *Rune Poem*, with its parallels from later medieval Norway and Iceland; the *Menologium*, a poetic interpretation of the church’s calendar; *Durham*, a poem in praise of the shrine of St. Cuthbert; and the two poetic fragments of *Solomon and Saturn*, difficult and obscure debates between figures representing Christian and secular wisdom (also represented in Old English prose). Two fragmentary texts survive dealing with legendary subjects: the *Finnesburh Fragment*, recounting part of a story also known from *Beowulf*, and two short fragments of *Waldere*, an epic retelling of the legend of Walter of Aquitaine, otherwise unknown from early English, but known most importantly from a continental Latin epic, the *Waltharius*, sometimes attributed to Ekkehard of St. Gallen (fl. early tenth century).
Waldere is the only direct evidence other than Beowulf for a secular epic tradition in Old English.

A number of poems deal with historical events during the late Old English period. Most of these survive embedded within the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and of these only The Battle of Brunanburh can stand by itself; it is a vigorous if rather conventional encomium of the West-Saxon king Æðelstan (Athelstan) and his victory in 937, at an unidentified location, against an alliance of Vikings, Strathclyde British, and Picts. Others celebrate the capture of the Five Boroughs in 942 and the coronation of Eadgar in 973; others are memorial lays for Eadgar (d. 975), Ælfred “se æpeling” (d. 1036), and Edward the Confessor (d. 1065). These are of little literary interest other than in the much freer meter that they sometimes employ, apparently anticipating the meters of Middle English alliterative poetry. The only historical poem that survives outside the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is The Battle of Maldon, known only from an early-modern transcript. It is a substantial fragment (325 lines) of a poetic account of a battle in August 991 between an English earl of Essex, Byrhtnoþ, and a Viking army, in which Byrhtnoþ was defeated and fell; the poem seems to be a much-elaborated memorial lay for him, but provides a lot of detail about the English participants and their actions. It is economical, vigorous, and powerful, above all in its presentation of the hopeless heroism of Byrhtnoþ’s followers, who after his fall fight on to their inevitable defeat and death. The poem does not lack subtlety, but is memorable for its immediacy and impact. It forms a fitting end to this survey of Old English poetry, as indeed it marks nearly the end of Old English poetic culture.

CONCLUSION

The surviving Old English poetic corpus contains many texts which are unremarkably conventional, and some which are simply mediocre, though very few which can be dismissed as incompetent. The conventional texts have their uses: they demonstrate the available literary conventions that other, more individual texts manipulate for particular effect. Beyond these, much Old English poetry is by any external standards good: poems such as Crist II or Deor or The Seafarer or The Battle of Maldon, each of their kind, may stand unashamed beside most later English poetry. Two texts, however, stand out beyond these, and of themselves justify the study of Old English. The Dream of the Rood can be set beside Pearl or Piers Plowman, or the finest of seventeenth-century English metaphysical religious poetry. In its intensity and intellectual power, it is the match for Pearl or Donne; in its humanity for Langland; and in its depth and freedom of doctrinal understanding it is arguably supreme. Beowulf is unique, not only in English, but in the Germanic and classical worlds. It may be claimed, perhaps beside Troilus and Criseyde, the Faerie Queene, and Paradise Lost, as one of the most important long poems that English has contributed to world literature. Not much Old English literature survives, and much may well have been lost. The existing texts, however, do far more than simply give glimpses into thought-worlds of the past. In presenting alternative modes of perception and understanding, different from those available in classical, or high medieval, or modern conceptual frameworks, they enrich us. They look beyond our own weary and limited preconceptions. Old English, at its best, extends our own self-awareness.

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