

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51947-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature

Hugh Magennis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*The Cambridge Introduction to
Anglo-Saxon Literature*

An approachable and stimulating introduction to Anglo-Saxon literature, this book provides indispensable guidance for students on this important and rewarding area of literary studies. The chapters are clearly organized by topic, and significant attention is paid to key individual works, including *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer* and writings by Bede. All textual quotations are translated into Modern English, with the original language texts carefully explained. The *Introduction* synthesizes and develops dominant approaches to Anglo-Saxon literature today, integrating Old English and Latin traditions, and placing the literature in larger historical and theoretical contexts. The structure, style and layout are attractive and user-friendly, including illustrative figures and textboxes, and Magennis provides guidance on resources for studying Anglo-Saxon literature, informing the reader of opportunities for investigating the subject further. Overall, the book enables a thorough understanding and appreciation of artful and eloquent works from a distant past, which still speak powerfully to people today.

Hugh Magennis is Professor of Old English Literature and Director of the Institute of Theology at Queen's University Belfast.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51947-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature

Hugh Magennis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature

HUGH MAGENNIS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51947-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature
Hugh Magennis
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521734653

© Cambridge University Press 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Magennis, Hugh.
The Cambridge introduction to Anglo-Saxon literature / Hugh Magennis.
p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-51947-2 (Hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-73465-3 (Paperback)
1. English literature—Old English, ca. 450–1100—History and criticism.
2. Civilization, Anglo-Saxon, in literature. 3. Civilization, Medieval, in literature.
I. Title.
PR173.M34 2011
829.09—dc22

2010046162

ISBN 978-0-521-51947-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-73465-3 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to
in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such
websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii

Chapter 1 Approaching Anglo-Saxon literature	1
Beginnings: Bede’s story of Cædmon	1
Studying Anglo-Saxon literature: perspectives and perceptions	9
Anglo-Saxon literary history: an outline	16
Migration and after	17
The early centuries of Christian Anglo-Saxon England	19
Vikings, and the emergence of Wessex	23
Later Anglo-Saxon England: the later tenth and eleventh centuries	26
Cædmon’s <i>Hymn</i> : reading an Old English poem	30
Postscript: what’s in a name?: Anglo-Saxons, Anglo-Saxon and Old English	33

Chapter 2 Developing literary traditions	36
Old English poetry and its oral Germanic background	36
Writings in Latin	45
Bede	47
Alcuin	49
Aldhelm	50
Other writers	52

vi *Contents*

Writings in Old English prose	53
The ninth century and writings associated with King Alfred	56
Ælfric and later prose writings	62
Traditions of Christian poetry	66
Postscript: <i>Riddle 47</i> : words oral and written	73
 Chapter 3 Varieties of narrative	 76
Heroic poetry	77
Action and the hero	79
<i>Beowulf</i>	82
Biblical literature: translations and adaptations in Old English	84
<i>Judith</i> : a biblical adaptation in Old English verse	93
The past and its meaning: writing history	96
Bede's <i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i>	103
<i>The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i>	110
Christian heroes: writing about the saints	116
A virgin martyr: <i>Juliana</i>	123
An English saint: Ælfric's <i>Passion of St Edmund</i>	127
Postscript: gained in translation	130
 Chapter 4 Belief, knowledge, experience: some non-narrative strands	 133
Old English homilies	133
Explaining scripture: Ælfric on the Innocents	137
Moral exhortation: Wulfstan's <i>Sermon of the Wolf to the English</i>	140
Wisdom and lore	143
The riddles of the Exeter Book	149
Old English elegies	153
Two secular elegies: <i>Wulf and Eadwacer</i> and <i>The Wife's Lament</i>	156
Religious elegy: <i>The Seafarer</i>	158
Postscript: genre and manuscripts	162

Chapter 5 Anglo-Saxon afterlives, medieval to modern: later uses and appropriations of Anglo-Saxon writings	165
Medieval continuities	166
Early modern: recovering Anglo-Saxon England	168
The long eighteenth century: history and politics	172
Nineteenth- and twentieth-century perspectives	175
Creative writers and Anglo-Saxon literature: from Wordsworth and Longfellow to Heaney and the present	179
Postscript: <i>Riddle 60</i> and <i>The Husband's Message</i> translated by Ciaran Carson	187
 <i>Appendix: resources for studying Anglo-Saxon literature</i>	 190
<i>Bibliography</i>	195
<i>Index</i>	212

Illustrations

1.1 Sutton Hoo shoulder clasp, one of an identical pair in the British Museum	page 18
1.2 Map: England in the eighth century	20
1.3 <i>Liber generationis</i> : beginning of St Matthew’s Gospel in the Lindisfarne Gospels: London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D. iv, f. 27r	22
1.4 Map: The Danelaw	24
1.5 St Dunstan’s Classbook: drawing of St Dunstan kneeling before Christ: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F.4.32, f. 1r	28
2.1 Map: Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain	38
2.2 Runes on the west face of the Ruthwell Cross	39
2.3 Beginning of the <i>Preface</i> to the <i>Pastoral Care</i> : Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 20, f. 1r	54
2.4 Map: Old English dialects	57
2.5 Exeter Book, end of <i>Juliana</i> : Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS Dean and Chapter 3501, f. 76r	71
3.1 Beginning of St John’s Gospel in the Lindisfarne Gospels: London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D. iv, f. 211r	89
3.2 Page from the <i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> (Parker Manuscript): Cambridge, Corpus Christi College Library, MS 173, f. 10a	111
3.3 Benedictional of St Æthelwold: St Etheldreda: London, British Library, MS Add. 49598, f. 90v	119
4.1 Cotton <i>Mappamundi</i> : London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B. v, f. 56v	147

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51947-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature

Hugh Magennis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This book is primarily for readers with some background in literary studies but little or no knowledge of writings produced in Anglo-Saxon England. It is hoped that the book will also have interesting things to say to more advanced students but its guiding intention, in line with that of the Cambridge University Press series to which it belongs, is to open up the subject of Anglo-Saxon literature for those approaching it for the first time – while endeavouring not to ‘dumb down’ that subject in the process.

The designation Anglo-Saxon literature is one that encompasses writings in ‘Old English’ but also includes texts in the other literary language in use in the period, Latin. Latin was always the language of a small elite in Anglo-Saxon England but as the language of learning and of the Christian church it was the medium for some of the most important writers of the period. Old English, the earliest form of the English language, was the vernacular language of the Anglo-Saxons. English has undergone such profound changes in its history that Old English is largely incomprehensible today to those who have not studied it. Hence the need for translations in this book, from both languages. Quotations from the literature are mostly given here in Modern English but some glossed words and phrases in their original language are included and some longer passages are quoted in the original, with explanatory commentary.

Old English literature has always attracted more literary critical attention than Anglo-Latin, and that balance of emphasis is reflected again in this book, but I aim to give more consideration to writings in the latter language than they have usually received in introductions to Anglo-Saxon literature in the past and to integrate treatment of Old English and Latin as much as possible. In the following pages I will also be setting out to give a sense of the issues that have particularly concerned critics, and do so especially today, providing an introduction therefore not simply to Anglo-Saxon literature but also to Anglo-Saxon literary studies.

The first chapter flags up some of the major strands to be discussed later in the book, using a passage from the great Anglo-Saxon historian Bede as a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51947-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature

Hugh Magennis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Preface*

starting point. The chapter also presents a discussion of modern perspectives and perceptions of Anglo-Saxon literature and a concise outline of Anglo-Saxon literary, and cultural, history. Chapter 2 then offers a more detailed overview of what have been seen as the major literary traditions of the period, with sections on Old English poetry and its oral background (emanating as it does from pre-literate times), on traditions of Latin prose and poetry, on prose writings in the vernacular, and on the adaptation of Old English poetry to Christian uses.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at kinds or genres of literature produced, the former chapter treating varieties of narrative, specifically heroic poetry, translations and adaptations of the Bible, history writing, and accounts of those Christian heroes, the saints, while the latter chapter surveys some non-narrative strands – sermons, writings of wisdom and lore, including riddles, and, a particularly attractive ‘kind’ of Old English literature in modern critical perception, the so-called elegies.

The final chapter considers Anglo-Saxon ‘afterlives’, later uses and appropriations of Anglo-Saxon England and its writings, from the Middle Ages onwards, including a section on creative writers from Wordsworth and Longfellow, via Tolkien, to Heaney and the present. Each chapter also has a number of text boxes and a ‘postscript’ on a particular topic related to the content of the chapter. The final postscript takes the form of a new verse translation by the distinguished poet Ciaran Carson.

The volume ends with guidance on resources for studying Anglo-Saxon literature and a bibliography of works cited, both of which components offer possibilities and opportunities for taking the subject further, as I hope many readers will wish to do. In approaching Anglo-Saxon literature we come into contact with and try to understand artful and eloquent works from a distant past, which can still speak powerfully to people today. In a similar way the poet of the short Old English poem *The Ruin* considers the buildings left by a great former civilization and exclaims wonderingly that in creating these works from the past

A mind instigated its quick-witted idea,
ingenious in the use of ring(-pattern)s.
[Mod monade myneswiftne gebrægd,
hwætred in hringas.]

In the following pages, I hope to introduce readers to the mind(s) and ideas, quick-witted and otherwise, of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51947-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature

Hugh Magennis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friend and colleague Ivan Herbison for many enlightening discussions on topics relating to this book, which is the better for his wise advice. I also wish to thank for their constructive suggestions the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press of earlier drafts of the book. At Cambridge University Press, I am particularly indebted to Sarah Stanton for her astute general guidance and to Rebecca Taylor and Liz Davey for steering the book through production.

One section in Chapter 3 of this book draws upon material from Hugh Magennis, 'Germanic Legend and Old English Heroic Poetry', in Corinne Saunders (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, © Wiley-Blackwell (2010), reproduced with permission of the editor and publisher.

The List of Illustrations provides descriptions of maps and images used in the book. I wish to thank individuals and institutions for granting permission to include this material. Illustration 1.1 is © The Trustees of the British Museum. 1.3, 3.1, 3.3 and 4.1 are © The British Library Board. 1.5 and 2.3 are reproduced with the permission of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. 2.5 is reproduced with the permission of Bernard J. Muir; acknowledgement for this image is also due to Exeter Cathedral Library as the custodian of the original manuscript. 3.2 is reproduced with the permission of The Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

I am very grateful to Ciaran Carson for producing translations of the Old English poems *The Husband's Message* and *Riddle 60* for this book. Ciaran Carson retains the copyright for these translations. I understand the quotation of other copyright material in the book to fall within the terms of 'fair dealing' for the purposes of criticism and I have limited such quotation to a small proportion of the text of any one work.

The sources of translations from Anglo-Saxon and related texts are indicated in references in parenthesis. Unattributed translations are my own.

Abbreviations

ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. Krapp and Dobbie
EETS	Early English Text Society
OS	Original Series
SS	Supplementary Series
MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>