

Chapter 1**Approaching Anglo-Saxon literature**

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A world of literature has survived from Anglo-Saxon England, wide-ranging in subject matter and varied in literary approach. The literature encompasses (among other things) exciting tales of heroic action about Beowulf and other legendary figures, expressions of Christian teaching, meditations on the great questions of life and death, and ingenious and playful compositions. In it the secular is creatively combined with the spiritual and the unserious can be startlingly mixed with the serious. Developing over the course of half a millennium and composed in two languages, Latin and Old English, Anglo-Saxon literature has proved endlessly interesting to those who know it and offers new horizons for those coming to it for the first time. The present chapter presents an introduction to this *Introduction*, working in the first instance from the particular to the general in the opening section and then going on to put together historical and contextualizing frameworks for approaching the rest of the book.

Beginnings: Bede's story of Cædmon

A famous episode from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* may serve to flag up some of the dominant themes in the study of Anglo-Saxon

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literature that this book explores. The passage tells the story of the poet Cædmon, whom Bede presents as the first person to compose Christian poetry in the English language. For Bede, Cædmon is an originary and transformative figure. Bede (c. 673–735), a Northumbrian monk, was an intellectual leader of the early medieval world, a prolific and influential writer, in Latin, in the tradition of Christian scholarship inherited from the great ‘fathers’ of the church of earlier centuries. In the *Ecclesiastical History* he tells the story of the early history of Anglo-Saxon England and in particular of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from Germanic paganism to Christianity, and conversion is at the core of his story of Cædmon.

Bede’s account of the poet Cædmon

In the monastery of this abbess [Hild] there was a certain brother who was specially marked out by the grace of God, so that he used to compose godly and religious songs; thus whatever he learned from the holy Scriptures by means of interpreters, he quickly turned into extremely delightful and moving poetry in English, which was his own tongue. By his songs the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life. It is true that after him other Englishmen attempted to compose religious poems, but none could compare with him. For he did not learn the art of poetry from men or through a man but he received the gift of song freely by the grace of God. Hence he could never compose any foolish or trivial poem but only those which were concerned with devotion and so were fitting for his devout tongue to utter. He had lived in the secular habit until he was well advanced in years and he never learned any songs. Hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of providing entertainment it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when he saw the harp approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of the feasting, go out, and return home.

On one such occasion when he did so, he left the place of feasting and went to the cattle byre, as it was his turn to take charge of the cattle that night. In due time he stretched himself out and went to sleep, whereupon he dreamt that someone stood by him, saluted him, and called him by name: ‘Cædmon,’ he said, ‘sing me something.’ Cædmon answered, ‘I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here because I could not sing.’ Once again the speaker said, ‘Nevertheless you must sing to me.’ ‘What must I sing?’ said Cædmon. ‘Sing,’ he said, ‘about the beginning of created things.’ Thereupon Cædmon began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God the Creator, of which this is the general sense: ‘Now we must praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory and how he, since he is the eternal God, was the Author of all marvels and first created the heavens as a roof for the children of men and then, the almighty Guardian of the human race, created the earth.’ This is the sense but not the order of the words which he sang as he slept. For it is not possible to translate verse, however well composed, literally from one language to another without some loss of beauty and

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dignity. When he awoke, he remembered all that he had sung while asleep and soon added more verses in the same manner, praising God in fitting style.

In the morning he went to the reeve who was his master, telling him of the gift he had received, and the reeve took him to the abbeſs. He was then bidden to deſcribe his dream in the preſence of a number of the more learned men and alſo to recite his ſong ſo that they might all examine him and decide upon the nature and origin of the gift of which he ſpoke; and it ſeemed clear to all of them that the Lord had granted him heavenly grace. They then read to him a paſſage of ſacred hiſtory or doctrine, bidding him to make a ſong out of it, if he could, in metrical form. He undertook the taſk and went away; on returning next morning he repeated the paſſage he had been given, which he had put into excellent verſe. The abbeſs, who recognized the grace of God which the man had received, inſtricted him to renounce his ſecular habit and to take monaſtic vows. She and all her people received him into the community of the brothers and ordered that he ſhould be inſtricted in the whole courſe of ſacred hiſtory. He learned all he could by liſtning to them and then, like ſome clean animal chewing the cud, he turned it into the moſt melodious verſe: and it ſounded ſo ſweet as he recited it that his teachers became in turn his audience. (Bede, *Hiſtory*, IV, 24; trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, pp. 415–19)

Cædmon the ſimple cowherd becomes Cædmon the inſpirational poet. Bede’s chapter goes on to ſay that he eventually ‘ſang’ (*canebat*) the ſtory of the whole of the Book of Genesis and that he alſo related many other events from the Old Teſtament, as well as covering Chriſt’s life and death and many other aſpects of Chriſtian teaching. None of theſe other compositions of Cædmon has ſurvived and we do not know how many of them Bede knew himſelf, but for him Cædmon’s poetry represents a beginning, and a divinely inſpired one: many other poets came after Cædmon, Bede reports, though none could compare with him.

Bede’s narrative of Cædmon and his poem (the poem is uſually referred to as Cædmon’s *Hymn*) is an engaging one in which an account of a wondrous episode is combined with a ſtrong element of human intereſt. For a modern reader new to Anglo-Saxon literature the paſſage is likely to be ſomewhat diſconcerting in the way that it brings together hiſtory and miracle, but this defamiliarizing feature is alſo uſeful in ſuggeſting the differentneſs as well as the aſſeſsibility of early medieval writings; we will find that in many ways theſe writings challenge, and indeed problematize, modern aſſumptions about literature. Seamus Heaney, whoſe translation of *Beowulf* has probably done more than any other publication in recent times to ſtimulate popular intereſt in the poem, and by extension in Anglo-Saxon literature more widely, refers to *Beowulf* as ‘a work of the greateſt imaginative vitality, a maſterpiece’.

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but also as a ‘remote’ work (Heaney 1999, pp. ix, xii, respectively). Bede’s *History* could also be described as ‘a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece’, and it too is in essential ways different, and ‘remote’, from modern experience. One recent commentator on the *History*, while insisting that it is a great work, advises, ‘It is far more constructive to read Bede as representative of a quite foreign community, distant and strange, whose thought world should be approached with caution’ (Higham 2006, p. 48). In the particular case of the Cædmon story Bede gives us a ‘myth of origins’ which, though it undoubtedly simplifies the story of the beginning of Christian poetry in Old English, throws interesting light on a key literary development in the period.

The passage may be used conveniently, if somewhat impressionistically, to highlight other important issues of concern to readers of Anglo-Saxon literature as well as that of defamiliarization and accessibility, just mentioned. Points about Anglo-Saxon literature arising from our passage for us to bear in mind from the beginning include the following:

Old English and Latin: The bulk of the texts discussed in this book were composed in Old English, but it is important also to pay attention to Latin literature. Latin too was a literary language in early medieval England; indeed Bede’s *History* itself must be seen as one of the great literary monuments of the age. Writings in Old English have certainly been perceived as representing the most distinctive and the most significant body of literature from the Anglo-Saxon world but Latin, the language of learning, produced works that are of the highest interest in their own right as well as providing an important background for Old English literature. In this book the term ‘Old English literature’ is used to refer to writings in the vernacular, while the broader term ‘Anglo-Saxon literature’ should be understood to include Latin writings as well.

Translation: This point about two languages alerts us to the central importance of translation in Anglo-Saxon literary culture. Christian Latin texts and Christian Latin traditions are translated, adapted and appropriated by vernacular poets and prose writers. At the end of the ninth century Bede’s *History* was itself translated into Old English prose (for the Old English text of the Cædmon episode, see Marsden 2004, pp. 76–85). In our quoted passage we see a notable instance of translation in the story of Cædmon: according to Bede, Cædmon, who has no direct access to religious writings in Latin, is instructed by ‘interpreters’ and then brings forth sweet poetry ‘in his own tongue, that is the language of the English’. Interestingly, however, in Bede we get Cædmon’s *Hymn* not in Old English but translated into Latin; some manuscripts of the *History* also include the poem in Old English (written in the margin, and the Old English version also appears in the Old

English translation of the *History*), and indeed scholars still debate whether this Old English text is in fact Cædmon's original poem or a back-translation of Bede's Latin.

As will be brought out particularly in Chapter 3, especially with reference to the Bible, to translate is inevitably to change (a topic touched on by Bede at the end of the second paragraph of our passage above); the process of translation changes the source text, and the effect of the translation is to change the receiving culture, a double-sided 'conversion' taking place. It would not be overstating things to say that the impact of translation decisively shaped Old English literature; translation contributed crucially to the ways in which it developed. And the fact that the study of the Latin sources of Old English texts figures centrally in the work of Anglo-Saxonists (as will be apparent in later chapters) can be seen as reflecting the importance to the discipline of ideas of translation in its broadest sense.

Orality and textuality: A third point that is brought out by the passage from Bede concerns the oral origin and dimension of Old English poetry, a topic to be explored further in Chapter 2. Cædmon performs his poetry orally ('then he began to sing verses which he had never heard before') and he composes it orally. Miraculously in a dream, he acquires mastery of the demanding structures and techniques of an experienced traditional oral poet, including alliterative metre and the formulaic language that makes oral composition possible. In the story of Cædmon orality meets textuality, as the 'interpreters' transmit to him written Christian teaching and he recasts it in 'extremely delightful and moving poetic language'. For Cædmon's poetry to be preserved for posterity it would have had to be written down and we don't know to what extent that happened with his work. But when something is written down it is also largely fixed in a particular form, whereas oral performance is by definition fluid and variable. Old English poetry *was* written down, of course (otherwise we could not read it today), a development that represents a key cultural transition. It is thought that most surviving Old English poetic texts are literate compositions (rather than transcriptions of oral performances) but they still make use of the same kind of oral-derived poetic art that gave form to Cædmon's poetry.

Old English prose: Another point arising out of examination of the Bede passage concerns the tradition(s) of Old English prose. I noted above that Bede's *History* was among the Latin works translated into Old English prose, in the late ninth century. The establishment of Old English prose as a medium for the expression of sophisticated intellectual thought is among the most significant literary developments of the Anglo-Saxon period. As explained more fully in Chapter 2, the instigation of the process is traditionally associated with

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King Alfred of Wessex, though the emphasis on Alfred (reflecting what looks like another myth of origins) somewhat oversimplifies the situation. The establishment of literary prose in Old English involves the fashioning of an appropriate vocabulary and syntax and eventually the formation, in a period of great dialectal diversity, of a standard literary language. Bede, a foundational figure in the construction of Englishness, has Cædmon singing poetry in 'English' but the English he composed in was his native Northumbrian; later in the period the language of Wessex would emerge as the literary language for England as a whole, 'England' in the later Anglo-Saxon centuries being a political concept that can be applied more convincingly than in the age of Bede. The surviving corpus of Old English prose is many times larger than that of verse and includes much material of great literary as well as historical interest. And, integrating prose with characteristics of verse, in the writings of the most prolific and accomplished producer of Old English prose, Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 965–c. 1010), a style lucidly expressive of intellectual discourse combines with rhythmical and alliterative features derived from the indigenous tradition of Old English poetry.

Manuscript transmission: As stated above, written literature is largely fixed, whereas oral literature is fluid and variable. It should be noted, however, that in the manuscript culture of Anglo-Saxon England texts were 'fixed' to a much lesser degree than they are today in the age of print. Even Latin texts are subject to some deliberate variation, not to mention accidental error. For example, some copies of our passage from Bede begin 'In this monastery of Streanaeshalch [Whitby]', not 'In the monastery of this abbess'. With Old English texts the potential for variation is very much greater, since these writings were often, in the case of prose, texts for use which could be changed and adapted to suit particular purposes (we will see that Ælfric tries, unsuccessfully, to insulate his writings from such reappropriation), while in the case of verse the formulaic aspect of the poetic language in itself facilitated variation in copying by scribes who were tuned in to the poetic language. In the copies of the Old English Cædmon's *Hymn*, for example, there is variation at one point between Bede's 'children of men' and 'children of earth' (Old English *ælda barnum* versus *eorðan bearnum*, both of which phrases are metrically and semantically possible); copies of Cædmon's *Hymn* also show dialect variation: we have versions in Old Northumbrian but the poem was also 'translated' into the West Saxon dialect, which became dominant later (see O'Donnell 2005). In practice most Old English poems exist in only one manuscript copy but since there are theoretical issues about the status of texts in the period the modern editorial concept of the 'best' text of a work is difficult to apply.

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Christian and secular: Cædmon's poetry also opens the way for the interaction of Christian and secular values and ideas in Old English poetry, an important theme in the chapters that follow. Cædmon applies the traditional Old English poetic art, inherited from the pagan Germanic past, to a Christian subject matter, thereby giving a new form to the subject matter. As well as providing a metrical form, that art brings with it a repertoire of themes and associations from the secular world. Cædmon's *Hymn* is too undeveloped to illustrate fully the potential – and indeed the problems – of this interaction, which was one that involved tension and contradiction, reflecting inherent differences between Christian teaching and the views and outlook of Germanic poetry, with its preoccupation with the heroic deeds and values of this world. Old English poetry ranges from purely secular poems of heroism and violence set in a warrior society, the kind of thing that Bede would regard (as he puts it in our passage) as 'foolish and trivial' poetry, to religious narratives and treatises that directly express Christian teaching. In between are writings that incorporate elements from both traditions, and such writings include what have been seen as some of the most interesting works in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. As explained more fully in Chapter 2, poems like *The Dream of the Rood*, which portrays Christ going to his death like a young hero preparing for battle, and *The Seafarer*, which transforms heroic glory into striving for heaven, exploit the intersections and the radical disjunctions between Christian and secular in masterful ways.

A monastic dimension: Bearing upon a number of these previous points (particularly, perhaps, the immediately preceding one) is the fact of the monastic and, more broadly, Christian milieu of much Anglo-Saxon literature. Most of the scribal work in the period was done in monastic *scriptoria*, 'writing-houses'. It is not surprising therefore that religious themes figure so prominently. The Anglo-Saxon literature we have was in a sense self-selected: what got written down and preserved was what was perceived to be relevant to those who controlled and participated in the textual culture of the time. A key figure in the history of Old English prose, King Alfred, came from secular society but even he had his clerical/monastic advisers and guides and much of the writing associated with him has a religious dimension. This monastic milieu is illustrated in Bede's story of Cædmon in his *History*. Bede himself writes his *History* from a monastic point of view, telling an 'Ecclesiastical' *History* in which religious figures loom large: his greatest English hero of all is the Northumbrian monk and bishop Cuthbert. The poet Cædmon is absorbed into the monastic life under the maternal care of the abbess Hild, secular becoming religious. This monastic dimension of Anglo-Saxon literature being the case, it is notable that so much secular

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literature was also preserved. Why were monks interested in reading about the feats of secular heroes, as in *Beowulf*, and why interested in outpourings of grief and longing arising from love between the sexes, as in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*? Why would they want to preserve in precious books Old English riddles not only about the wonder of the world but also having graphically sexual double meanings? We are glad that they did, but the variety and range of surviving literature should alert us, while taking account of the scribal context in which the literature was produced, to the danger of oversimplifying the culture(s) of the time. The historical picture is one of complexity.

Old English poetry: 'beauty and dignity': A final observation arising from consideration of the Bede passage concerns the aesthetic quality of Old English poetry. Bede insists on the beauty of Cædmon's verse, which is 'extremely delightful and moving'; he acknowledges that his Latin translation cannot convey its 'beauty and dignity' (*decoris ac dignitatis*). Cædmon's poetry may not have survived (apart from, perhaps, the *Hymn*), but Bede's description can fittingly be applied to much of the Old English verse that has come down to us. This verse was deeply appreciated in its own day, being copied and recopied into manuscripts in some cases over many generations. And the qualities of Old English poetry, its power and expressiveness and its cleverness and artistry, are among the chief things that modern readers value in it. The poetry tells us much about the Anglo-Saxon world but it is also deeply appealing as poetry, having richness, variety and artfulness. Now, many readers of the present book will have little or no knowledge of Old English, which means that we have to rely mostly on translations in illustrating the literature. Here we are caught in the bind that Bede identified nearly thirteen hundred years ago: 'For it is not possible to translate verse, however well composed, literally from one language to another without some loss of beauty and dignity.' Translations are necessary but, particularly in the case of verse, inadequate. We have to live with this reality for the purposes of this book but as we proceed I will also include some short passages in the original with explanatory commentary, which I hope will give readers some immediate sense of the distinctive qualities of this enthralling literature.

It would be possible to bring out other important considerations relevant to Anglo-Saxon literature by means of reference to our passage from Bede. The point about Bede's identification of Cædmon's language as 'English' and, more generally, about Bede's role in the construction of Englishness could certainly have been developed further, and perceptions of identity, including linguistic identity, will be a topic that will inevitably come up in

later discussion. Related to this question of identity would be the observation that Cædmon's name is actually not Anglo-Saxon but 'British', which opens up the fraught subject of relations between Anglo-Saxons and Britons in the early Anglo-Saxon centuries, and therefore also that of the make-up of the 'English people' in that period. Other features that I could have picked up on in the story of Cædmon include the presence of a female authority figure in a society that is often characterized as strongly patriarchal. Also, a more narrowly literary point, the passage includes a 'dream vision', a type of narrative represented elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon literature, most famously in the poem *The Dream of the Rood*. And indeed there may well be features that readers have noticed that I have not mentioned at all. The passage from Bede is an interesting narrative in its own right but it also provides a suggestive point of entrance into the wider subject of Anglo-Saxon literature. My discussion of it has by no means exhausted its critical possibilities.

Studying Anglo-Saxon literature: perspectives and perceptions

This book is historicist in its approach to the literature that it deals with. It seeks an understanding and appreciation of the literature in relation to the historical context and circumstances of its production and reception. In this respect the book places itself very much in the mainstream of current critical thinking in the field of Anglo-Saxon literary studies, and indeed historicizing approaches of one kind or another have been dominant throughout the history of the discipline. Understanding and appreciation of the literature of the past, especially of the fairly remote past, is inevitably provisional and incomplete, of course, but particularly in recent decades knowledge about Anglo-Saxon England and about its place in the early medieval world has increased greatly, throwing new light on the literature in exciting ways and adding to the foundational work of previous scholarship. As one senior scholar put it, writing in 1995,

What we know about the Anglo-Saxons has increased so dramatically since 1950 that those of us who became interested in them before then can only blink with astonishment at the advances in our knowledge of their language, their literature, their history, their culture, their material circumstances, their way of life, and their attitudes to life and the mysteries which lie beyond it. (Mitchell 1995, p. 99)

The Anglo-Saxon period is no longer the 'dark age' to critics that it once was. But of course we still have not stopped learning about it; new discoveries are

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still being made about the literature and about the historical context – as I write this book the first stunning reports of the newly discovered ‘Staffordshire Hoard’ of Anglo-Saxon gold artefacts are coming out – and there is still much to discover. Indeed, even the basic work of the recovery and editing of texts continues: although most surviving texts had been printed and were receiving critical attention by the end of the nineteenth century (and much earlier in some cases), there are still some that have not yet been published or that exist only in very unsatisfactory and out-of-date editions. Anglo-Saxon studies have been going for a long time but for those in the field, with previous work being reassessed, new information being processed and new scholarly tools coming to the fore, it has the feel of a young and expanding subject. And with a literature as inexhaustibly rich, and in many cases as enigmatic, as that of Anglo-Saxon England there will always be issues of cognition and interpretation which will remain open and indeterminate, particularly in the poetry. As explained below, even a short poem like Cædmon’s *Hymn* falls into this category in a number of ways.

The basis of a historicist approach to literature is the principle of the ‘situatedness’ of the literary work in a historical context. What also distinguishes current historicist thinking, however, is a self-conscious awareness that the critic is also situated in a particular historical context and that history is constantly being revised and reconceived. The emphases of Anglo-Saxon studies in the past have reflected and contributed to larger cultural preoccupations and have changed as these cultural preoccupations have changed. In earlier centuries Anglo-Saxon literary studies participated in ideological constructions of national and religious identity, for example, while today they tend to problematize such constructions. And while much work in Anglo-Saxon studies still follows traditional approaches and methodologies, current scholarship also engages productively with contemporary critical and cultural issues and indeed has been in the forefront of key methodological developments, notably perhaps in the area of the application of digital technology and its theory (see, particularly, Foy 2007).

Anglo-Saxon studies have moved on from earlier paradigms, but in some quarters perceptions of them have not moved on in the same way, so that for some critics the discipline remains tarred with the brush of previous reputation. Terry Eagleton has recently written that *Beowulf* ‘ultimately retains its pride of place in English studies mainly due to its function, from the Victorian period forward, as the cultural tool of a troubling nationalist romance with an archetypal and mythological past’ (Eagleton 1999, p. 16). Eagleton is writing about *Beowulf* in particular but would doubtless apply the same sentiments to Anglo-Saxon literature as a whole. He is seeing *Beowulf* as