Introduction: conceptualising archaism

In spring 1590, book-buyers in London were confronted with a long narrative poem, ‘Disposed into twelue books, Fashioning XII. Morall vertues’, published by William Ponsonby. If they bought the poem, or leafed through it on the stationer’s stall, they encountered first a dedication ‘TO THE MOST MIGHTIE AND MAGNIFICENT EMPRESSE ELIZABETH’, then, on the following pages, the title and subtitle of the first book, and a four-stanza Proem. The Proem opens with the lines,

LO I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
   As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,
   Am now enforst a far vnfitter taske,
   For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
   And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;
   Whose prayses hauing slept in silence long,
   Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds
   To blazon broad emongst her learned throng:
   Fierce warres and faithful loues shall moralize my song.

(Book 1, Proem, 1.1–9)

The style of this opening might already have struck our potential reader as odd, and this sensation would have intensified if he or she turned the page and glanced over the opening of Canto 1 (see Figure 1):

Canto I.

The Patron of true Holinesse,
   Foule Error doth defeate:
   Hypocrisie him to entrapp,
   Doth to his home entreate.

1.

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
   Y cladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,
   Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
   The cruell markes of many’ a bloody fielde;

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Figure 1 The opening of Book 1, Canto 1 of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (London, 1590), A3r (p. 3).
Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield:
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
Full iolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fit.

(1.1.1–9)

Skimming through Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, our imaginary reader would have been struck by the fact that certain aspects of its vocabulary and style are archaic. Words such as ‘whilome’, ‘areed’, ‘pricking’ and ‘Y cladd’ would all have sounded old-fashioned to late-Elizabethan ears. ‘Pricking’ in the sense of riding or spurring one’s horse seems to have been rare, if not entirely obsolete, in 1590; similarly, the past-participle ‘y’ prefix – derived from the Old English ‘ge-’ – and common in medieval and early Tudor works – was becoming unusual even in poetry. He or she might also have been disconcerted by the four-line argument that precedes the first stanza of Book 1, written in the so-called ‘common measure’ or ‘ballad measure’, which by the last decade of the sixteenth century was rarely used outside ballads and translations of the Psalms. Less eye-catching than these features, but adding to the effect, are the old-fashioned inversions in Spenser’s syntax, which aid the rhyme, and his emphatic use of auxiliary ‘do’: ‘As much disdayning to the curbe to yield’; ‘Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield’. An astute reader might, in addition, have realised that the Proem’s allusion to the poet whose Muse formerly appeared ‘in lowly Shepheards weeds’ was a reference to Spenser, the archaising author of a collection of pastoral eclogues, *The Shepheards Calender* (1579). *The Faerie Queene* has a past, in more ways than one, and the cumulative effect of these archaisms and allusions is to destabilise the reader, making him or her unsure of how to position the work temporally, how to characterise its use of English, or how to assess precisely its relationships with either contemporary or older literary texts and genres.

Spenser’s *Shepheards Calender* and *Faerie Queene* are two of the sixteenth century’s best-known examples of literary archaism: the self-conscious incorporation into imaginative texts of linguistic or poetic styles that would have registered as outmoded or old-fashioned to the audiences or readers of the works in which they appear. Indeed, we are forcibly reminded of the extent to which Spenser has become synonymous with early modern archaism by our habitual use of old spelling in quoting both the text and titles of his works. Scholars and publishers do not generally, in contrast, refer to Shakespeare’s *A Midsommer Nights Dreame* or Jonson’s *The Divell is an Asse*, even though both of these texts contain examples of
deliberate archaism. Our attention to Spenser has also blinded us to the prominence and range of the uses of outmoded styles in early modern literary culture. To look beyond Spenser is to acknowledge both the alternative forms of archaism that were available to writers between 1590 and 1674 – ranging from Old English to the conventions of the Tudor morality play – and the widely divergent uses to which they might be put.

Looking at these titles in their original spelling also forcibly reminds us of the distinction between two different categories of archaic style encountered by early modern readers and spectators: a text may survive the moment of its original production and become outmoded, or it might be deliberately written in an old-fashioned style, as a ‘calculated continuity, or re-evocation’.¹ *The Faerie Queene* and select aspects of *A Midsommer Nights Dreame* and *The Divell is an Asse* appeared to be archaic to their original readers, and were intended to be so; in addition, all three works have gradually become archaic in the 400 years since their original composition and production. Quoting *The Faerie Queene* in old spelling thus blurs the distinction between these two forms of archaism, even though there are valid grounds in general for presenting Spenser’s works in their original form.²

This book focuses on deliberate stylistic archaism in poems and plays in which its presence is a central part in their design. Its central argument is that paying close attention to the self-aware deployment of archaic linguistic and literary forms in early modern drama and poetry does not merely illuminate the individual works in which they appear. Instead, it argues, archaism is a crucial barometer of writers’ broader engagements with two forms of temporal process: the history of the nation and the development of literary style. When poets or dramatists return to older forms of English, be they in vocabulary, syntax or metre, they make a claim on – and for – the linguistic and poetic resources of the English language; simultaneously, they may explore its place in the construction and manipulation of national history and identity. As Claire McEachern comments in her influential account of the poetics of English nationhood in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, ‘England, English, and Englishness are spoken in many ways in this moment, by many persons and in many places.’³ Moreover, in creating something new from the fragments of something old, archaist writers both recapitulate and reconfigure their national and literary heritage.

In the preface to his *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), John Dryden sets out two parallel literary histories: ancient and modern, Roman and English. ‘We must be Children before we grow Men’, he declares. ‘There was an
Ennius, and in process of Time a Lucilius, and a Lucretius, before Virgil and Horace; even after Chaucer there was a Spencer, a Harrington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Denham were in being: And our Numbers were in their Nonage till these last appear’d. Literary archaism both depends on and resists such teleologies. Archaising writers demonstrate their awareness of historical difference, as evidenced in linguistic and stylistic change, but through their desire to imitate and reinvigorate outmoded styles they also challenge the smooth narrative of progression that Dryden describes. They thus acknowledge the ways in which, to appropriate Annamarie Jagose’s description, time might be not linear but ‘cyclical, interrupted, multi-layered, reversible, stalled’. Archaisms’ time is, in the terms adopted by recent scholars, queer time – out of joint, askew, at odds with conventional notions of temporality. In its impersonation of the past, archaism unsettles relationships between past, present and future even as it seemingly attempts to inscribe them.

Archaists reject, implicitly or explicitly, some of the conventions of their own day; however, they do not slavishly imitate outmoded forms. Their relationship with the past is both collusive and competitive; writers who employ archaism express a desire for communion with the dead, but also a longing to outstrip their achievements. Archaism’s backward glance is not, therefore, purely nostalgic. Instead, the archaising writer seeks to reshape the past, to mould the present, and proleptically to conjure times yet to come; he or she creates a temporal hybrid that looks forward to its own incorporation into a national and literary future. In these ways, therefore, archaism crystallises the distinctively self-aware stance that early modern writers adopt in relation to their fast-changing language, their literary tradition, and the uncertain contours of English nationhood.

The chapters that follow analyse the various uses of archaism in literary texts written and, in many cases, performed between 1590, the year in which The Faerie Queene first appeared, and 1674, when the twelve-book version of Milton’s Paradise Lost was published. This time frame merits some comment, especially given that it starts a decade after the publication of The Shepheardes Calender, a text that is rightly seen as a landmark in the uses of literary archaism. Moreover, the self-conscious use of archaism in English literature did not begin with Spenser. It had a rich tradition among mid-sixteenth-century poets, and its use was intertwined with anxieties about the status of the English language for much of this period, as I will explore in greater detail below. Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Nicholas Grimauld, Alexander Barclay, Barnabe Googe, Thomas Sackville, George Turberville and George Gascoigne all employed
archaic linguistic and literary forms, and in 1553 Thomas Wilson was able to complain that ‘The fine Courtier will talke nothyng but Chaucer’.8 Archaism also played a crucial role in literary experimentation; as Veré Rubel comments, poets such as Wyatt evolved ‘a poetic diction that was new because it was deliberately old’.9

Notwithstanding these developments, however, the period between the Elizabethan fin de siècle and the early years of the Restoration was a distinct phase in the tradition of literary archaism, in which writers adopted new forms of archaism and evolved distinctive attitudes towards outmoded style and its uses; it also saw the production of some of the most intriguing and varied archaist texts ever written. By the 1590s, some of the century’s earlier anxieties about the status of English as a literary language had eased. But events in the following decades would put new pressures on notions of Englishness, the relationship of England to other parts of the British Isles, and the place of English amongst Britain’s languages. As I will explore in the following chapters, these events included: the accession of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England, and his project for the union of Britain; the marriage of his son, Charles I, to the French Catholic princess, Henrietta Maria; the fracturing of Stuart Britain during the Bishops’ Wars and Civil Wars; and the new dominance of England under the Protectorate. Experiments with medieval literary and linguistic forms, with genres such as epic and pastoral, and with metrical archaism, reflected and participated in the debates surrounding these events.

In terms of archaism itself, 1590 saw the publication of the first three books of The Faerie Queene, a milestone because it saw archaism move out of pastoral writing – its accustomed home in the 1570s and 80s – and into epic. The 1590s also saw fast-paced developments in both poetic and theatrical style, developments that rendered certain metrical forms (notably the fourteener and poulter’s measure) and dramatic genres (in particular the morality play) archaic, making them available for specific kinds of stylistic experimentation. However, the changes that made a wider range of archaisms available also hastened the processes through which archaism itself eventually slipped out of fashion. By the time that the Stuart monarchy was restored in 1660, writers were beginning to reject archaism in favour of a more sustained neo-classicism. Attacks on Spenser’s language intensified, the use of archaism became increasingly restricted to parody and burlesque, and in 1700 Dryden justified translating Chaucer into modern English on the grounds that ‘as his Language grows obsolete, his Thoughts must grow obscure’.10 Furthermore, two of the 1660s’ most
prominent engagements with outmoded style, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras*, may actually have hastened archaism’s decline.

In focusing on this pivotal period, therefore, this book traces both the development of literary archaism and the relationships that writers established between the literary conventions of their own times and those of their medieval and Tudor forebears. Like Peggy A. Knapp in her illuminating study *Time-Bound Words*, I pay close attention to the ways in which an old word ‘points to both the horizon it helps define in the Middle Ages, and to a new understanding of society and culture as new conditions arise’. However, in exploring the uses of not only archaic vocabulary but also outmoded grammatical and metrical forms, I attempt in addition to take seriously the cultural work that literary and linguistic style can do. While metre might not be strictly imaginative in itself, it can be used, as Alison Shell points out, ‘in a manner similar to allegory and other imaginative devices’, carrying both creative and emotional weight.

Similarly, Andrew Zurcher’s recent case-study of the ways in which the archaic auxiliary ‘mote’ (‘may’ or ‘must’) functions in Spenser’s poetry suggests both the author’s ‘labored care over his language’ and the impact that such linguistic forms can have on the overall texture of a literary work.

Arguing for the importance of a range of archaising strategies in the period 1590–1674, this book also makes a case for the range of writers and genres involved. It deliberately balances canonical and non-canonical texts, examining the plays and poems of Jonson, Middleton, Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser alongside those of William Cartwright, Morgan Llwyd, Robert Southwell and Anna Trapnel, among others. In doing so, it insists on both the literary interest of such texts – some periodically dismissed as doggerel or hack-work – and the value of examining works such as *Hamlet* or *The Faerie Queene* alongside texts that do similar aesthetic work or aim for a similar imaginative impact.

Instead of attempting an exhaustive or comprehensive survey, I instead take ‘snapshots’ of the use of archaic style in different contexts. The structure of the book follows broadly the chronology of the styles being mimicked or resurrected. Chapters 1 and 2 explore two examples of the early modern encounter with medieval literary culture, looking first at the uses in seventeenth-century literature of Old English, the Anglo-Saxon forebear of Early Modern English that was perhaps the ultimate English linguistic archaism, and then at writers’ responses to later medieval authors such as Chaucer and Gower. In doing so, these chapters contribute to the burgeoning field of ‘medievalism’ as an object of study. Chapters 3 and 4
explore the uses of Tudor styles that had become outmoded by the late sixteenth century, focusing on archaism in liturgical texts and religious poetry, and on the reanimation of old-fashioned dramatic genres on the turn-of-the-century stage. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the two genres with which archaic style was most often linked in the early modern period: pastoral and epic, traditionally the ‘lowest’ and ‘highest’ of literary modes.

Furthermore, each chapter asks different questions of its material and its central texts, exploring in different ways and to different degrees the two central issues on which the book focuses: archaism’s relationships with literary history and with national history and identity. In doing so, they focus on the multiple relationships between archaism and issues such as regional identity, obsolescence, religious conservatism and radicalism, prophecy, the interactions between different generations of writers, parody, genre, anachronism and nostalgia. Chapter 1, ‘Within our own memory: Old English and the early modern poet’, focuses on three literary encounters with Old English: the quotation of Old English phrases in two plays, Thomas Middleton’s *Hengist, King of Kent* (1619–20) and William Cartwright’s *The Ordinary* (c.1635); the self-conscious use of Old English words in William L’Isle’s translation of Virgil’s *Eclogues* (1628); and the composition of poems in Old English for two university collections in the 1640s and 1650s. In examining these texts, it makes two interrelated arguments, one relating to national identity and the other to literary lineage and inheritance. First, it argues that these texts demonstrate the crucial role that the Anglo-Saxon language could play in the conceptualisation of national identity in Stuart and Protectorate Britain; second, it contends that in these texts Old English gradually becomes visible – or thinkable – as a vehicle for literary expression, thus helping to facilitate the rediscovery of Old English poetry and the rewriting of literary history that it occasioned. In these ways, therefore, literary archaism enables writers both to come to terms with the political pressures of the present day and to gesture towards unknown futures.

Chapter 2, ‘Chaucer, Gower and the anxiety of obsolescence’, similarly focuses on medieval literary inheritance. As noted above, two categories of archaism appear in literary texts: the archaism of the text that has grown old, and that of the text that has been deliberately written in an old-fashioned style. In Book 4 of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596), the Cambridge University play *The Return from Parnassus* (c.1598–1600), Shakespeare and George Wilkins’ *Pericles* (1607) and Cartwright’s *The Ordinary* we find both quotations from the works of Chaucer and Gower and imitations of them. Each of these texts deploys archaism as a
means of negotiating their authors’ anxieties about linguistic change and the current or future obsolescence of literary works, but they come to two opposing conclusions. The Faerie Queene and The Return from Parnassus use archaism as a means of expressing their authors’ unease about the obsolescence of medieval texts, the corrupting effects of time, and the potential future obsolescence of their own works. In contrast, Pericles and The Ordinary resist obsolescence, insisting through their very use of archaism that Chaucer and Gower still have an active place in modern literary culture and that their authors will likewise survive the passage of time.

Chapters 3 and 4 move away from medieval literary inheritance to consider styles that had more recently become archaic. Chapter 3, ‘Archaic style in religious writing: immutability, controversy, prophecy’, explores the most culturally central use of archaism in early modern England: that found in biblical and religious diction. Protestant translations of liturgical texts such as the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and the Psalms employ archaism in an attempt to mimic the supposed immutability of divine language, and to naturalise their translations as truly ‘English’. Outside the Anglican establishment these qualities are put to alternative uses, and, despite their contrasting beliefs, Catholics and Protestant radicals such as the Fifth Monarchists deploy similar archaising techniques. Writing against the tendency for Catholic poets to adopt baroque forms, Robert Southwell and Gertrude More use archaic English metres such as the fourteener and common measure in an attempt to re-naturalise Catholic devotional traditions and to reinscribe their connections with their native land. Writing during the national upheavals of the Civil War, Commonwealth and Protectorate, the Fifth Monarchists Anna Trapnel and Morgan Llwyd exploit the connections of common measure to the English psalter and the prophetic traditions of the Psalms. They use archaic metres to underscore the Fifth Monarchs’ claims to national heritage and to link their poetry with the apocalyptic temporality of prophecy, arguing for the central role of their brand of Protestantism in the destiny of the nation. Thus, Catholic and Protestant poets alike exploit archaism’s capacity to appeal to the past, and to a disputed national heritage, while simultaneously staking a claim to both the present and future.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the use of archaism in specific non-dramatic contexts, Chapter 4, ‘Staging generations: archaism and the theatrical past’, analyses the ways in which late Elizabethan and early Jacobean plays exploit Tudor dramatic modes that had become archaic by the turn of the seventeenth century: the morality play; the elite drama and classical
translations of the 1560s and 1670s; and the dramatic romance of the 1570s and 1580s. Taking as its starting point allusions to the morality play in Jonson’s *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) and *The Staple of News* (1626), it focuses on inset metadramatic sequences in three turn-of-the-century works: *Sir Thomas More* (c.1601; revised c.1603–4), *Histriomastix* (c.1598–1602) and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (c.1600). While medieval styles might be safely consigned to the distant past, Tudor dramatic modes were not sufficiently far away as to be uncomplicatedly archaic. For that reason, the theatrical archaism of the plays discussed here uncovers the processes through which one generation of writers constructs another as archaic, and the range of interactions within and between generations that these processes require. It allows dramatists to recreate and critique earlier modes, to exploit their thematic and aesthetic potential, and to use them in defining their own works’ relationship with the literary and theatrical past.

The final pair of chapters considers the uses to which writers put archaism in critiquing or renewing two of the most established literary genres: pastoral and epic. Chapter 5, ‘Shepherds’ speech: archaism and early Stuart pastoral drama’, returns to pastoral, the most important literary vehicle for archaism in the mid-sixteenth century. However, rather than focusing on Spenser and his direct followers and imitators, it explores developments in pastoral drama in the early seventeenth century, and the ways in which new influences from Italy and, later, France complicated pastoral’s archaising heritage. While the non-dramatic poetry of Michael Drayton, William Browne, and Giles and Phineas Fletcher largely adheres to Spenserian models, plays such as John Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1607–8), Milton’s *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634) and Jonson’s *The Sad Shepherd* (c.1634–8) use outmoded style in different ways. Juxtaposing the old pastoral technique of archaism with new styles and conventions absorbed from continental theatre, they explore alternative forms such as syntactic archaism and the Skeltonic, and reassess the role of Spenserian archaism. In doing so, they negotiate the paradoxical associations that pastoral had with both low and elevated style, with the rustic and the courtly, with the natural and the artificial, with the comic and the serious, with English and foreign influences, and with the old and the new. Archaism takes on a crucial role in these negotiations, breaking down these binaries in some contexts and reinforcing them in others. It thus assists dramatists in renegotiating the place of pastoral in national, cultural and aesthetic contexts alike.

Moving from the humblest of neoclassical genres to the highest, Chapter 6, ‘Archaism and the “English” epic’, explores the role of linguistic and