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Peter Clemoes

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INTERACTIONS OF THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE
IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

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The rider face of the Repton Stone (scale 1:6)
(‘þæt wæs hildesetl heahcyninges, ðonne sweorda gelac . . . efnan wolde’,
Beowulf 1039–41a)

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For my wife,
my family
and my college

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The rider face of the Repton Stone *frontispiece*

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Preface

At the heart of this book is my conception of Old English poems as what the French call *lieux de mémoire*, by which I mean that they furnished society in the present with memorable images, sometimes unforgettable, typifying the past. In their case, the community was aristocratic warrior society and the images consisted of narrative, orally transmitted in a distinctive combination of traditional thought and customary form. The business of this poetry was social continuity. It placed social action of the past in a general perspective in order to show its relevance in the present. It dealt with the basis of action at any time, past or present, by converting accepted perceptions of active being into narrative through language designed by convention for the purpose. The core of poetic tradition was established form which regularly implied interaction of two (or sometimes three) fundamental potentials inviting, and receiving, fulfilment in explicit narrative. Time-honoured social observation of the roots of action was exemplified in practice over a range of experience broadly corresponding to that covered by explicit maxims. Poetic narrative consistently tested accumulated wisdom about the foundations of society's integrity, and of what threatened them, in the stresses and strains of 'real' life. The conventions special to poetry served practical needs thematically, as distinct from the 'defining' function of standard formulations in other traditional oral media, such as legal processes and magical rituals. First and foremost, therefore, I concentrate on Old English poetry's primary store of generalized allusive language, working in the interests of communal stability in aristocratic warrior society.

A second preoccupation which looms large in this book is with the transformation undergone willy-nilly by poetry's inherently social system of expression after the advent of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.

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Vernacular poetry, so important to native tradition, could not escape the consequences of the general sea-change from oral to written transmission initiated by the new religion and demanding linguistic adaptation as radical as any required of English subsequently – by, for instance, its transition from the handwritten word to the printed or its exposure to the range of new media created by modern technology. Accordingly, I devote much space to describing poets' gradual disengagement from unformatted records of social orality and their attachment instead to stylishly textual presentation of narrative examples of the spiritual life which they shared with their fellow citizens of the kingdom of Christ. Devotional contemplation of the fixed events of universal spiritual story, past, present and to come, framing individual choice, became the order of the day for these poets, now rubbing shoulders with preachers and liturgical petitioners.

The poetry of aristocratic warrior society occupies the first part of this book (chs. 1–6) and that of the new religion the second part (chs. 7–13). But there was no neat chronological division between the two kinds. The emergence of the second from the first involved differences of milieu as well as of time. For example, on the one hand, I regard distinct cultural contexts as probably responsible for the dissimilarities of three such different poems as *Beowulf*, *Guthlac A* and the verses inscribed in early Northumbrian on the Ruthwell Cross (corresponding to part (or parts) of the much later Vercelli text of *The Dream of the Rood*), all three of which, in my opinion, could have been approximately contemporary compositions. On the other hand, I consider that the comprehensive poetic nomenclature for the deity which Cynewulf deployed with schematic artistry would have required a considerable time to develop semantically and formally. A chronological factor must lurk in our extant corpus, difficult as it is to establish what it was. On the religious side the task appears to have some relatively fixed points: Cædmon seems to mark a beginning in the north during the third quarter of the seventh century, with Aldhelm (known to us only by repute) slightly (if at all) later in the south, and with Cynewulf reaching an apogee probably in the ninth century. On the social side, however, *Beowulf*, in the hands of controversialists, has become something of a wild card. Surely, in the face of a poem as manifestly social in the indigenous idiom as this, our most reasonable procedure is to identify when and where its conceptions of society, in this case with an admixture of Christianity, find their closest match with what we know of actual society, and to regard that environment as most likely to have produced the poem, unless there is a compelling reason for us not to. My principle is that, if several key features

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of a poem of the synthesizing *Beowulf* type both agree with the practices of one period and disagree with practice thereafter, they can fairly be taken as evidence that the poem is more likely to have been composed in the former time than later, provided that there are no convincing signs that the poet was systematically archaizing. In ch. 1 I set out my case, based on a range of diverse correspondences, for attributing the composition of *Beowulf* probably to Mercian royal circles in the second quarter of the eighth century – in Æthelbald's reign rather than Offa's. I rule out systematic archaizing for this poem, partly in general, because that approach would stress a sense of the difference of the past from the present, which would have run counter to the composer's primary concern with an overriding 'timelessness' subsuming them both (see pp. 14–16 and 122–3), and partly in particular, because some of my correspondences, as I point out in my chapter, involve subtle distinctions which an archaizer would have been unlikely to draw. Absolute proof is not available, but a series of convergences, which add up to my probability, is. A different view ought to be preferred, I submit, only if supported by a stronger case than any I know of.

Ch. 2 deals with another fundamental topic, the principles governing the ancient system of thought conventionalized by poetry. First I describe the basic concept of inherited potentials, producing characteristic actions, grouping beings into types and shaping narrative living. The dominant environment of narrative living, I point out, was the continuum of time, rather than space, thus endowing actions with their own propensity to analogy. These two sources of analogy – actors and their actions – normally reinforced one another straightforwardly, but sometimes the latter was called on to engineer unusual transfers of, or between, actors, especially for humanizing effects (as when a non-human being was endowed with speech). Formally these transfers were either striking actor-for-actor substitutions (metaphor) or generic actor-and-actor amalgamations ('hybridization', a term I coin for the purpose), with or without metaphor, as I demonstrate, drawing comparisons with the visual arts. Lastly I review typical Anglo-Saxon reactions to this system – for instance, recognition of in-built conflict and a relish for paradox – and poets' appreciation of the many-sidedness of humanity's rôle in it.

In chs. 3–6 I explore poetry's dramatization of this traditional thinking. In the first two of these I develop my view that the language was intimately connected with this thought world in a highly characteristic way. Poetry's

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regular binary noun-based structures (of any of three types – compounds and two which I term ‘genitive combinations’ and ‘adjective combinations’ respectively) acted as symbols, in my opinion, by initiating narrative through implying binary interactions of basic potentials. Customary thought and customary language worked through each other in these conventional units to exemplify, without defining, enduring general truths in action. Hence my title for this book. Together they harnessed the potential of poetry to produce effects akin to that which was made physically when Grendel’s severed head, carried triumphantly into Hrothgar’s hall, implied to the assembled company Beowulf’s glorious victory under water. We tend to underrate these interactive units of sound and sense as mere features of style. My definition of a poetic symbol as ‘a distinctive binary piece of language which implied an interaction of two socially recognized potentials of active being and which possessed a potentially narrative form culturally designed to blend with explicit language’ (cf. p. 129), goes deeper than that, and therefore differs sharply from the common notion of a verbal formula slotted in for stylistic variation. As against this primary tradition of symbolism through implication, unique to poetry, I hold that the frequent standard, explicit binary structures in poetry’s ‘definite’ language, notably word pairs, were derived from oral tradition in general, shared by poetic and other registers, such as those of law and magic. Finally, in the last two chapters of part I, my account of the principal types of narrative which issued from the implications of poetic symbols turns on a distinction between ‘narrative’, which was authenticated by a speaker’s claim to be relating personal experience or first-hand witness, and ‘story’, which was told by someone claiming to speak for tradition and which therefore required internal verification as it proceeded.

In part II (chs. 7–13) I survey the radical changes which were set in train when the symbolic interactive mode of vernacular poetry became a branch of a narrative system with its centre beyond vernacular tradition. My principal themes are poets’ adaptation to a more schematic network of ideas, alterations in their conceptions of the natural world, redefinition of individuality and establishment of a new system of personal responsibilities interrelating human society and the spiritual realm of God. No further comment seems to be called for here, since the chapter headings indicate the main stages in my account, while the indexes are designed to lead the reader to the various topics, such as extended studies of particular poems, or of particular words or symbols or phrases, or of particular images, and

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identifications of influences from Jewish thought and expression or from Christian Latin poetry, and comparisons with vernacular prose or cults of Anglo-Saxon saints. Suffice it for me to add that throughout the book my quotations of Old English poetry, except *Beowulf*, are taken from ASPR, and those of *Beowulf* from Klaeber's third edition (whether I agree with these texts in every particular or not), unless they conflict with my interpretations. In such a case, the deviation is reported.

Acknowledgements are due to the University of California Press for permission to re-use a passage from my essay in *Old English Poetry*, ed. Calder; to Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle for kindly supplying me with a print of a new photograph of the rider face of the Repton Stone (by Malcolm Crowthers) and for their permission to use it for my frontispiece; to the Cambridge University Press for permission to reproduce ASE 14, figs. 3 and 4 (drawn by Judith Dobie), as my two figures. My warm personal thanks go to Michael Lapidge, Simon Keynes, Malcolm Godden and Andy Orchard for reading an early draft of the entire book and offering much help and encouragement. To the first three I owe a general debt for advice, improvements and corrections which I gratefully record here; Andy Orchard's valuable contributions are acknowledged where they occur. In addition others have given me similar help of special kinds which is acknowledged where relevant. To Alicia Corrêa I extend heartfelt thanks for the care, concentration and accuracy which she has unstintingly devoted to converting a messy manuscript of such length into clean electronic form, to compiling the list of works cited and to providing the indexes. Alyson Cox also has helped with the last mentioned. I have appreciated too Michael Lapidge's generous understanding and tolerance as an editor and the considerateness I have invariably received from the Cambridge University Press in the persons of Sarah Stanton and, before her, Michael Black and Peter Richards. I am responsible, of course, for all remaining deficiencies and errors.

Those to whom I feel the deepest gratitude for priceless support throughout the nine years which I have spent preparing this book are identified by my dedication. I have been fortunate enough to recognize in their beneficence the force of Jerome's adage, 'caritas non potest comparari; dilectio pretium non habet; amicitia, quae desinere potest, uera nunquam fuit' (see p. 361, n. 61).

PETER CLEMONS
Emmanuel College, Cambridge,
April 1994

Abbreviations

Ælfric, <i>CH</i> I (ed. Thorpe)	Ælfric's <i>Catholic Homilies</i> , ed. B. Thorpe, <i>The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: the First Part containing the Sermones Catholici, or Homilies of Ælfric</i> , 2 vols. (London, 1844–6), vol. I
Ælfric, <i>CH</i> II (ed. Godden)	Ælfric's <i>Catholic Homilies. The Second Series</i> , ed M.R. Godden, EETS ss 5 (Oxford, 1979)
Ælfric, <i>SupplHoms</i> (ed. Pope)	<i>Homilies of Ælfric: a Supplementary Collection</i> , ed. J.C. Pope, 2 vols., EETS os 259–60 (London, 1967–8)
<i>AntJ</i>	<i>Antiquaries Journal</i>
ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
ASNSL	<i>Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen</i>
ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York, 1931–42)
BAR	British Archaeological Reports (Oxford)
Bede, <i>HE</i>	Bede, <i>Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum</i> , ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969)
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout)
CMCS	<i>Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies</i>
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna)
EEMF	Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile (Copenhagen)
EETS	Early English Text Society
os	original series
ss	supplementary series

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<i>EHD</i>	<i>English Historical Documents</i> , c. 500–1042, ed. D. Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London, 1979)
<i>ELN</i>	<i>English Language Notes</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>English Studies</i>
<i>HBS</i>	Henry Bradshaw Society
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>MÆ</i>	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
<i>N&Q</i>	<i>Notes & Queries</i>
<i>OEN</i>	<i>Old English Newsletter</i>
<i>OEN Subsidia</i>	<i>Old English Newsletter Subsidia</i>
<i>PBA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–64)
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>RS</i>	Rolls Series (London)
<i>SBVS</i>	<i>Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Studi Medievali</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
<i>WM, GP</i>	William of Malmesbury, <i>De gestis pontificum Anglorum</i> , ed. N.E.S.A. Hamilton, RS 52 (London, 1870)