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4

VISIBLE SONG

TRANSITIONAL LITERACY IN OLD ENGLISH VERSE

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

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VISIBLE SONG

TRANSITIONAL LITERACY IN OLD ENGLISH VERSE

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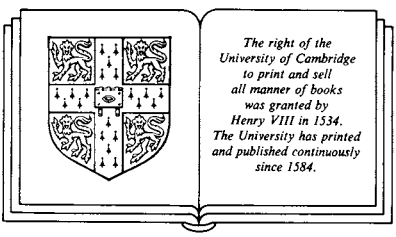

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VIb Cambridge, Trinity College R. 5. 22, 72r (detail) (*The Metrical Preface* to Alfred's *Pastoral Care*)

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Preface

Writing is a technology which makes language visible. Despite the astonishing transformation involved in changing the heard into the seen, writing and reading are skills so fundamental to the conduct of life that they have become virtually transparent to us in the twentieth century (at least in developed countries). The assumptions and conditions of our own literacy are, for various historical and perceptual reasons, well hidden from us, but they must be brought to light if we are to understand the profound changes the growth of writing worked on early communities and individuals.

The present book sets out to examine one aspect of the growth of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its evidence in the manuscript records of Old English verse. I do not wish to argue here that any surviving verse in Old English was composed under purely oral circumstances. As the debate in the Old English scholarly community over the last thirty years has demonstrated, the circumstances for the composition of Old English verse remain an open question, and, I believe, an issue incapable of satisfactory demonstration. Precisely because the question of origin is unproductive, I do not ask it. The present book is not really concerned with composition as such, but about reception and transmission and what they may tell us about the interrelationships between 'orality' and 'literacy'. The copyists get all the lines.

My argument about the interrelationships between 'orality' and 'literacy' rests on several fundamental assumptions. First among them is that at some early point, verse in Old English was oral. From the time that Old English was first written, however, composition of verse in writing may be defined as 'literate' but only in a seriously restricted sense. The term is tendentious, since the nature and quality of that 'literacy' have yet to be

established. It would be mistaken, I believe, to ascribe to the Anglo-Saxons the presuppositions and practices of our own literacy. Further, my argument assumes the possibility of one or more transitional states between pure 'orality' and pure 'literacy' and seeks to describe some of the features of an early transitional state characterized by what I shall call 'residual orality'. By this term I mean a state after the introduction of writing in a culture which nonetheless exhibits many features characteristic of 'pure' orality. And finally, I make the assumption that the special character of developing literacy before the Conquest may be described from the manuscripts of Old English and Latin verse.

In the absence of a satisfactory description of the mental conditions of individual 'literacy' in Anglo-Saxon England and of the processes involved in reading, two sets of inferences, paradoxically from written records, may provide evidence of residual orality. These inferences may be made from the development and use of meaningful space in the copying of verse and from the persistence of variance in the written transmission of texts. Considered as a mode of communication, a manuscript is a channel for transmitting a visual code. And the process of transmission requires encoding (in writing) and then decoding (in reading). As literacy develops, spatial and graphic conventions (which I term 'cues'), when added to the basic alphabetic character set, assist decoding by adding further interpretative signals to the text. The development and growth of these cues may be used to chart the distance of a written message from the knowledge (or possibly memory) of a potential reader. Crudely, the more sophisticated the cues, the more 'literate' the reading community, that is, the more they rely on conventional visual phenomena (rather than memory) for constructing or reconstructing meaning. Economy argues that such cues only appear when they are needed. By contrast, the persistence of variance (a characteristic constituent of oral transmission) in written records of verse is a conservative feature pointing backwards to orality. Since the function of writing is to *fix* a text, certain kinds of variance in the transmission of Old English verse texts strongly suggest the continuance of oral techniques of reception in the reading of verse. If I am correct, the evidence of the transmission and reception of Old English verse has consequences not only for our understanding of the literacy of the Anglo-Saxons, but our reading of the texts themselves and, indeed, their editing.

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I am grateful to have received permission to work in the manuscript collections of the following libraries: in Cambridge, the University Library, the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, the Wren Library of Trinity College; the Durham Cathedral Library; the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh; Exeter Cathedral Library; Hereford Cathedral Library; in London, the British Library; in Oxford, the Bodleian Library and Corpus Christi College Library; the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Biblioteca Capitolare in Vercelli; and Winchester Cathedral Library. I should like to recognize as well the particular kindness and help of Dr Bruce Barker-Benfield, Assistant Librarian of the Bodleian Library; of Canon Giuseppe Ferraris, Librarian of the Biblioteca Capitolare, Vercelli; of

Dr Timothy Hobbs, Assistant Librarian of the Wren Library, Trinity College; and of Mrs Alison Wilson, formerly Assistant Librarian of the Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

For permission to publish a photograph or photographs, I should like to acknowledge the kindness of: the Bodleian Library (pl. I); the British Library Board (pls. II and III, VII and VIII); the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (pls. IV–VIa); the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge (pl. VIb). Ch. 2 appeared in somewhat different form in *Speculum* 62; I am grateful to the publisher for permission to reprint it here.

Nicholas Howe and Edward B. Irving read early portions of the book and made many useful suggestions. Patrick W. Conner and David N. Dumville both kindly allowed me to use and cite chapters of their forthcoming books, for which I am extremely grateful. At the invitation of Michael Lapidge, I was able to test the arguments of ch. 4 in a paper read before the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, and I benefited a good deal from the questions and comments of its faculty and students. Dr Lapidge's generous thoroughness in reading the completed manuscript has helped me clarify the arguments throughout the book and saved me from many errors. Any which remain are mine alone.

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I dedicate this book to my father, Raymond F. O'Brien, whose interest in reading and misreading began this all.

Abbreviations

AIUON	*Annali, Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli: sezione germanica*
ANQ	*American Notes and Queries*
ASC	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
BL	London, British Library
Catalogue	N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957)
CCCC	Cambridge, Corpus Christi College
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CL	*Comparative Literature*
CLA	E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, 11 vols. and supp. (Oxford, 1934–71; 2nd ed. of vol. II, 1972
CR	Chaucer Review
CUL	Cambridge University Library
EEMF	Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELN	*English Language Notes*
ES	*English Studies*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JMH	*Journal of Medieval History*
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MP	*Modern Philology*
MS	*Mediaeval Studies*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*

Abbreviations

PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*
RB	*Revue bénédictine*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SN	*Studia Neophilologica*
TCBS	*Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*
TPS	*Transactions of the Philological Society*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*