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Edited by David Wallace

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I

AFTER THE NORMAN
CONQUEST

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[More information](#)*Introduction*

King Edward, later ‘the Confessor’, was buried in his newly constructed abbey of West Minster on the morning of 6 January 1066; Harold, Earl of Wessex, was crowned later that same day. Tostig, Harold’s brother, then allied himself with Harald Hardrada, King of Norway; both were defeated and killed by Harold’s forces at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, near York, on 25 September. When William of Normandy landed at Pevensey three days later, Harold marched south to London. He left London on 12 October and was killed at Hastings on the 14th. Wearing and bearing some of Edward’s regalia, William had himself crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day, 1066, then, represents a solid bookend for English history, and hence literary history: chronicles written in England for centuries after devote inordinate space to this single, eventful year. Aristocrats and clerics from the Continent, recruited to rule and administer William’s newly conquered kingdom, arrive speaking French and Latin. Old English loses its royal and ecclesiastical sanction; early Middle English (always a problematic concept) evolves as a hybridized mother tongue with negligible textual authority. The massive transfer of wealth, land and privilege recorded by *Domesday* will not be rivalled in England until the Henrician revolution of the 1530s.

But 1066 does not represent such a clean break with the past as this account, or the racially based narratives of nineteenth-century literary history, might suggest. Edward, King of the English (1042–66), had spent most of his first forty years at the Norman court. King Æthelred II of England (979–1016) had married Emma of Normandy, daughter of the Norman duke Richard I (942–96). Normans were Northmen, Scandinavians who had adopted the Christian religion and French language of the region they had conquered in the tenth century (and England was itself, of course, part of a Scandinavian superstate under the Danish king Cnut, 1017–35). When the Normans arrived in England, they again proved willing to adapt local institutions of government (the shire court), policing (frankpledge) and military service (the *fyrð*). Edward the Confessor, last of the Anglo-Saxon kings, was revived as a foundational figure of

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increasing importance for Normans, Angevins and Plantagenets; freshly elaborated legends and native foundation myths strove to invest new foreign rulers with the sheen of time-honoured authority.

Robust theoretical models of domination and conquest (or more sophisticated variations of post-colonial theory, adapted from analysis of the post-Napoleonic British abroad) are of limited use in articulating such fluid, local and polyvocal complexities. The six chapters of this section follow sequences of cultural, political and literary negotiation in and out of manuscript culture. Four of them depart from linguistic categories (Old English, French, early Middle English, Latin) and two are more broadly thematic (dividing, roughly, into literatures of religious instruction and of secular entertainment). Such a division of labour will, of course, be continuously challenged (as hagiography blurs into romance, or as marginal tongues pressure a dominant language on the manuscript page).

In describing Duke William's crossing of the sea to England, the Norman historian William of Poitiers (writing within a decade of the invasion) echoes the *Aeneid* of Vergil. On William's coronation day, however, the Norman armed guards surrounding Westminster Abbey mistook the cry of acclamation elicited from the English by Ealdred, Archbishop of York, as proof of incipient treachery and (according to William of Poitiers) fired the neighbouring houses. Such tales of bliss and blunder, involving the mixing of languages in courts, schools, fields, monasteries and market-places, recur throughout this post-Conquest period. The effects of such mixing are rarely predictable, often paradoxical: the Old English tradition, for example, actually strengthened the standing of French in England (by valuing writing so highly); Latin and French – as dominant, prestige languages – rendered the native population mute (and yet concede to that population an emergent vernacular, fully their own, that was not yet alienated by writing).

Confusions of identity may be inferred not only from the *Domesday* project, which sees a Latin documentary culture imposing itself upon Anglo-Saxon subjects, but also from the pages of officially sanctioned writers (Lanfranc, Orderic, Ailred); the question of who 'nos Anglos' are remains perennially unsettled. Myths of foundation, imbued with nostalgias that were always powerfully active in Old English writing, seek stabilizing origins in the exploits of past (Celtic, Roman and Trojan) heroes; documents are faked in Latin, and minstrel performers are imagined for texts composed at the desk. Relations between Saxon women and Norman men are glossed by reference to earlier liaisons between

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native females and foreign males (that reassert normative heterosexuality). Intense awareness of local place (Grimsby, Galloway or Thetford) must be balanced against awareness of imperial expanse: when *Ipomedon* (written on the Welsh border) imagines Apulia and Calabria, it does not exceed the bounds of Norman territory. And whoever ‘nos Anglos’ are, the writings of Eadmer, Ailred, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes (and the *Roman de Roland*) surely merit inclusion in any future anthologies of ‘English’ writing.

The English language changes more rapidly and extensively through this period than at any later time; the swirl of interacting dialects, vernaculars and interlanguages – and of shifting orthographies – is never again so complex. Chapters in this section return insistently to manuscript contexts to record many moments of cultural negotiation, or impasse (as a French scribe stumbles over English terms, or as Scandinavian forms begin to escape the normalizing proclivities of written Old English). Such moments are memorably crystallized by specific compositions: the Peterborough copy of the *Chronicle* (final entry 1154); Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1138); Wace, *Roman de Brut* (1155); Richard Fitznigel, *Dialogus de Scaccario* (c. 1176–7); La3amon, *Brut* (c. 1200); *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1200); *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1225); *Gui de Warewic* (c. 1240); *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300). Such compositions come to influence reading cultures far removed in time and place from their moment of first conception: the *South English Legendary* accretes material for several centuries; *Ancrene Wisse* migrates to French and Latin; *Cursor Mundi* colours later adaptations of biblical narrative in English (including cycle drama). Each chapter here thus unfolds long vistas of cultural development extending deep into the space of later sections. Old English stirs the recuperative instincts of the Tremulous Hand of Worcester and, much later, of Archbishop Parker (chapter 31). French, successively the pre-eminent vernacular of conquest and of artificially maintained legal and court cultures, cedes ground to English during the Hundred Years War (but finds, in William de la Pole, a duke who prefers French to English for the writing of prison lyrics, 1430–2). Insular romance maintains thematic continuity while shifting from Anglo-Norman to Middle English; Latinitas, as hegemonic force and as discrete acts of practice, makes itself felt in every chapter.

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Chapter 1

OLD ENGLISH AND ITS
 AFTERLIFE

—
 SETH LERER

England has become the dwelling place of foreigners
 and the property of strangers.¹

WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY

Our forefathers could not build as we do . . . but their
 lives were examples to their flocks. We, neglecting
 men's souls, care only to pile up stones.²

WULFSTAN OF WORCESTER

The afterlife of Old English may be evoked in two remarkably disparate poems from the first fifty years of Norman rule. The first – the verses on the death of William the Conqueror from the Peterborough *Chronicle* entry of 1087 (known to modern scholars as *The Rime of King William*) – seems like a garbled attempt at rhyming poetry: a poem without regular metre, formalized lineation or coherent imagery. So far is it in language, diction and form from the lineage of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* poems (from the finely nuanced *Battle of Brunanburh* of 937 to the looser verses on the deaths of Prince Alfred of 1036 and of King Edward of 1065), that this poem has rarely been considered part of the Old English canon. It was not edited by Krapp and Dobbie in their authoritative six-volume *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, and, when it has been critically considered at all, it has been dismissed as an example of the ‘rough and ready verse’ of popular encomium, arrestingly inept when compared to the rhetorical sweep and homiletic power of the prose account of William’s reign that contains it.³

The second of these poems is the supple vernacular *encomium urbis*

1. Stubbs, ed., *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis*, vol. 1, p. 278, quoted and translated in Brehe, ‘Reassembling the *First Worcester Fragment*’, p. 535.

2. Wulfstan of Worcester, quoted by William of Malmesbury in *De gestis pontificum Anglorum*, ed. Hamilton, p. 283; quoted and translated in Brehe, ‘Reassembling the *First Worcester Fragment*’, p. 535.

3. Clark, ed., *Peterborough Chronicle*, pp. 13–14. The only modern critical discussion of the poem is Whiting, ‘The Rime of King William’.

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known as *Durham*. Perhaps composed to celebrate the translation of St Cuthbert's remains to Durham Cathedral in 1104, this poem more than competently reproduces the traditional alliterative half-lines of Old English prosody. Its commanding use of interlace and ring structure, together with its own elaborate word plays, puns and final macaronic lines, makes *Durham* something of a paradox in Anglo-Saxon verse. While it has, in fact, been included in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (as the 'latest of the extant Anglo-Saxon poems in the regular alliterative meter'), it has been appreciated in two contrasting and mutually exclusive ways. On the one hand, it has been studied as an eloquent survival of traditional techniques of verse-making two generations after the Norman Conquest – a way-station in the history of English metrics from *Beowulf* to *Lazamon*. On the other hand, it has been understood as an antiquarian *tour de force* re-creating for a literate audience the older forms of poetry for purposes politically and culturally nostalgic, an act of artificial eloquence conjured out of the remains of a nearly lost tradition.⁴

The *Rime of King William* and *Durham*, together with the poetry transmitted by the so-called Tremulous Hand of Worcester and the *Brut* of *Lazamon*, illustrates the fluidity and flux of English verse-making in the first century-and-a-half of Norman rule. From a linguistic standpoint, this is the period in which Middle English is supposed to have begun, when the elaborate case structure of Old English began to level out, when grammatical gender began to disappear, and when the crystallization of prepositional structures and a Subject–Verb–Object word-order pattern produced texts that, to the modern eye, look for the first time like recognizable English.⁵ From a literary standpoint, the period is marked by minor forms. No single, long, sustained narrative survives from the time of the *Beowulf* manuscript (c. 1000) to that of *Lazamon* (c. 1189–1200) and the *Ormmulum* (c. 1200). The great elegies of the Exeter Book seem to give way to political eulogies; the lyric voice of Old English personal poetry disappears into curiosities modelled on Latin schoolroom exercises.

And yet, from a codicological standpoint, this period is one of the most productive for the dissemination of Old English writing. Such canonical

4. Dobbie, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, p. xliii. For the poem as part of the continuum of Old English versification, see Kendall, 'Let Us Now Praise a Famous City'; as an *encomium urbis*, see Schlauch, 'An Old English *Encomium Urbis*'; as an act of scholarly antiquarianism, see Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, pp. 199–206.

5. For the linguistic issues summarized here, see Bennett and Smithers, eds., *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, pp. xxi–lxi. For the specifics of spelling, vocabulary, morphology, syntax and accentuation that demarcate Old from Middle English, see Mossé, *Handbook of Middle English*, pp. 1–130.

prose texts as the translations produced under the aegis of Alfred the Great were copied, with what appears to be a fair degree of accuracy, until well into the late twelfth century. Texts that originated in the Anglo-Saxon period were still in use at Rochester a century after the Norman Conquest; mid-twelfth-century manuscripts from Canterbury monasteries (such as British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.xv) preserve much of the visual layout of pre-Conquest books, while the glossings, marginalia, and brief transcriptions in many texts (ranging from, for example, the English glosses to the Eadwine Psalter to the entries in the Winchester *Chronicle* as late as 1183) illustrate the survival of a trained scribal ability with both the language and the literary forms of Anglo-Saxon England.⁶

The period surveyed in this chapter is thus a time of paradoxes. It is a period of apparent linguistic indeterminacy in which seemingly advanced and retrograde texts exist side-by-side. It is, as well, a period of formal indeterminacy. Traditional Germanic verse had always been, without exception, written out as continuous prose by English and European scribes, whereas Latin poetry and verse in the Romance languages is always lineated (an excellent example of this phenomenon is the Valenciennes, Bibliothèques Municipales, MS 150, the so-called 'Ludwigslied' manuscript, in which the Old High German alliterative version of the life of St Eulalia is written out as prose, while the Old French version appears lineated as verse). This issue, central to the scholarly assessment of the nature of Old English poetry in general, takes on a new importance for the transitional period surveyed by this chapter. How verse appeared *as verse* becomes a process that involves scribal and editorial decisions that go to the heart of what will constitute the literary forms of early Middle English.⁷

Finally, this is a period of political indeterminacy. The Norman Conquest was not the first incursion onto English soil. The invasion of the Danish Cnut in 1016 had established a paradigm of eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon life under alien rulers. And after William's Conquest, as well, the problems of dynastic control and security were not fully resolved, as witnessed, for example, during the reign of King Stephen

6. For the details of material summarized here, see Ker, *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, pp. 275–6, and James, ed., *The Canterbury Psalter*. General discussions of the survival of Old English linguistic and bibliographical skills into the Middle English period are Ker, *English Manuscripts in the Century After the Norman Conquest*; Cameron, 'Middle English in Old English Manuscripts'; Franzen, *Tremulous Hand*.

7. See Blake, 'Rhythmical Alliteration', and Donoghue, 'Lazamon's Ambivalence', especially pp. 358–9. For a discussion of the Valenciennes 150 manuscript and its implications for early medieval conceptions of vernacularity, see Rossi, 'Vernacular Authority in the Late Ninth Century'.

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(a time of brutality and famine memorably recorded in the Peterborough *Chronicle* entry of 1137).⁸

This chapter's theme, then, is the relationship of literary form to social change. Its goal is to define some of the ways in which the writings of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries explored the resources of genre, metre, diction, and at times even grammar to respond to and comment on the cultural and political conditions of the time. While it does not make claims either for the unappreciated quality of the writings of this time or for a controlling unity to their seeming formal and linguistic diversity, it does hope to restore some critically neglected texts to the canons of current literary debate and, at the same time, to understand the cultural significance of writings long considered purely for their linguistic or palaeographical interest. In brief, the chapter hopes to re-evaluate what might be labelled the vernacular self-consciousness of writing in English during the period that preceded such masterworks of Early Middle English literature as *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

Much of what survives of Old English writing in this century-and-a-half, and, in turn, much of what characterizes the literary culture of the period, is the result of certain kinds of antiquarianism or, at the very least, of a certain self-consciousness about writing in a language and in literary forms that are no longer current.⁹ The products of this age need not be seen as the markings of sad failures and a decline in the standards of an Anglo-Saxon practice, but instead, may be appreciated as creative attempts to reinvent the modes of Old English writing and imagine anew the world of Anglo-Saxon life. This chapter's selection of texts, therefore, while aiming to offer a representative review of writing in the period, will focus on distinctive ways of reworking and responding to the pre-Conquest literary inheritance. In particular, it shows how the choices of metre, diction and genre thematize the problems of social control, political conquest and scholarly nostalgia. Throughout these texts, scenes of enclosure and demarcation, of architectural display and human craft become the *loci* for imposing a new literary order on a fragmented and newly alien world.

8. For the Danish invasion and the establishment of Cnut as king in 1016, see Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 386–94. For arguments about the possible literary responses and contexts for this period, see Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. For aspects of the political instability of the post-Conquest world, see Davis, *King Stephen*.

9. For the antiquarian sentiments pervading much of the historiography, poetry and scholarship of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Stanley, 'La3amon's Antiquarian Sentiments'; Campbell, 'Some Twelfth-Century Views of the Anglo-Saxon Past'; Donoghue, 'La3amon's Ambivalence'; Franzen, *Tremulous Hand*.