

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Between Eden and Jerusalem, death and Doomsday: locating the interim paradise

If it is permissible to define literature, with a certain rhetorical flourish, as a mirror of society, it is nevertheless a more or less distorting mirror depending on the conscious or unconscious desires of the collective soul which is examining itself – depending, more particularly, on the interests, prejudices, sensibilities and neuroses of the social groups responsible for making the mirror and holding it up to society, or at least that part of society capable of seeing, that is, of reading. Fortunately, the mirror is also tendered to us as members of a posterity better equipped to observe and interpret the interplay of illusions.¹

This book is about what I term the ‘interim paradise’, reflected in the mirrors of Anglo-Saxon literature. Its subject is the rarely noted conjunction of two much-discussed concepts: paradise, and the soul’s condition in the interim period between death and Judgement Day. It also involves a methodological conjunction: the use of the techniques of literary analysis and source-study to trace the history of an idea in Anglo-Saxon England, and to understand, through that history, some of the processes of production and consumption of literature in this period.

Today, the interim period between death and Judgement Day is most commonly associated with the concept of purgatory, even as the word paradise evokes either the Garden of Eden, or a heavenly state of bliss after death. In Anglo-Saxon England, however, several texts refer to an ‘interim paradise’, or paradise as an antechamber to heaven, which houses, during the interim period, good souls and those assumed in the body. These literary witnesses diverge considerably in their description of this interim paradise,

¹ J. Le Goff, ‘Peasants and the Rural World in the Literature of the Early Middle Ages (Fifth to Sixth Centuries)’, in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Goldhamer (Chicago, IL, and London, 1980), pp. 87–97, at p. 88.

Paradise, death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon literature

and in its function within the early medieval world-view. In other texts, vigorous denial of this signification of paradise itself signals an awareness of it. I interpret these scattered references as a particular ‘interplay of illusions’, a series of unpredictable distortions produced by the mirrors of literature. By tracing the evolution and transformation of the notions of the interim paradise through the Anglo-Saxon period, I follow these channels of distortions, and try to discover thereby ‘the interests, prejudices, sensibilities and neur-oses’ which dictate the shape taken by the idea in specific groups of texts.

SEMANTIC EXCAVATIONS AND IDEOLOGICAL DEBRIS: THE
 MANY MEANINGS OF PARADISE

Why, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, do we no longer associate paradise with the interim period? This question is of immense relevance for both the subject and the methodology of this investigation. The unconscious imposition of our own, post-medieval preconceptions can result in blurred and conflicting explorations of early medieval ideas of paradise. To get around this problem, we need to excavate buried meanings of the term, and ask how and why these meanings were lost. This task involves acknowledging, even celebrating, the ‘distorting factor’ of the written word, the trick mirrors, which often furnish the only clue to ideas that have now vanished. But before attempting to thus ‘interpret the interplay of illusions’, we also need to overcome what Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has called ‘the peculiar nature of human perception, which obscures the very categories of intellection through which we understand the world.’²

Recent scholarship in cultural history has developed a laudable sensitivity to the preconceptions a modern investigator necessarily brings, but must also shed, while grappling with the histories of religion, culture and literacy. Thus, in attempting to distinguish between the object and the methods of enquiry, Roger Chartier asks:

Is ‘popular’ religion the religion practised by peasants, or by the dominated (as opposed to the dominating elite), or by the laity (as opposed to the clergy)? Our indecision in the face of such questions reflects the fact that historians have accepted as a definition of popular religion the one that the clergy themselves made. What theologians and pastors did in the Middle Ages, and more so under the Catholic Reformation, was dual: they defined a whole body of practices and beliefs

² O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song*, p. 9.

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Locating the interim paradise*

as contradicting legitimate Christianity and qualified as 'popular' the practices and beliefs they considered as superstitious. By adopting these distinctions historians have made themselves victims of an inherent ambiguity. The clergy's definition of superstition is always a compromise made between theological references, which since Saint Augustine have characterized superstitions by assimilating them within the category of idolatry, and the inventory of practices that embody these idolatrous beliefs in everyday life.³

These comments can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the subject of the present investigation. The ideological burden of the term paradise, while perhaps not equal to that borne by fraught concepts such as magic or superstition,⁴ has left a comparable residue of semantic and connotative confusion which has to be recognised before it can be accounted for.

During early Christianity, there existed various conceptual systems for discussing the life hereafter. Within these systems, terms such as 'paradise', 'third heaven', 'kingdom of heaven', 'bosom of Abraham', and 'place of refreshment' were interlocked in semantic interdependence. Competing groups both within and outside Christianity constantly shifted the use of the term paradise within these systems in order to change the meaning of the entire configuration and uphold the advantages of one belief-system over all others. In Scripture, apocrypha and exegesis, paradise could as easily refer to a celestial interim location as it could to the terrestrial Garden of Eden, and as frequently merge with heaven as it could be distinguished from it. Several of these senses of paradise survived into the early Middle Ages to enter new contexts and develop fresh, often unexpected, applications.

BEYOND HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY? SOME ASSUMPTIONS
ABOUT PARADISE

Within theological scholarship, this semantic fluidity of the term paradise during early Christianity elicits, in general, two kinds of response.

³ Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation', p. 230.

⁴ See, in this connection, K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, 1971), its review by H. Geertz, 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic I', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975), 71–89, and the response by Thomas in 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic II', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975), 91–109. More recently, see E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Tradition and Religion in England c. 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1992).

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paradise, death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon literature*

Investigations into any one of its meanings, most often ‘the terrestrial paradise’, sometimes accept unquestioningly and rather uncritically the existence of its alternative meanings, including its association with the interim state.⁵ Alternatively, all interpretations of the term, other than those ultimately retained within the canonical books of the Bible and promoted by the Church itself, are refused validity, with the ‘official’ meanings of paradise being imposed upon documents which may bear witness to its earlier polysemy.⁶ A recent exception is Charles Hill’s investigation into the term *regnum caelorum* in early Christianity, where he examines the competing interpretations of this phrase within and outside chiliasm, or Greek millenarian thought.⁷ By focusing on the close association of theology and polemics in the early Church, he reveals the interim state to be an ideologically charged concept within Latin Christianity’s own processes of self-definition. Hill’s conclusions make even more pressing the need for an investigation into the precise role played by the concept which we have isolated as the interim paradise, born out of these early polemics, but nourished by the early medieval imagination.

It would seem that such an investigation has been retarded by a reluctance to expose the arsenal of rhetoric deployed in the battle between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect theologians to reveal as being implicated in historical change what theology considers as being sacramental and transcendental. But the transcendental appearance of terms such as paradise and heaven has beguiled even those claiming to analyse, from a non-theological point of view, the detail amassed through the primary research of theologians. Many an intellectual historian tackling these topics seems to have fallen prey to its emotive nature, producing fuzzy and impressionistic accounts based on convenient dichotomies and catch-phrases which appeal to the modern imagination.⁸ The most seductive of such dichotomies is that between Eden, the ‘earthly garden’, and Jerusalem, the ‘heavenly city’. Most modern discussions of paradise and heaven devolve around the opposition between these two groups of ideas, and some even postulate a phenomenological or psychic

⁵ As seen, for instance, in Daniélou, ‘Terre et paradis’, Grimm, *Paradisus coelestis, paradisus terrestris*, and A. Stuijver, *Refrigerium interim*.

⁶ As, for instance, by Ntedika, in *L’évocation de l’au-delà*, where he investigates in detail the meaning of the terms *paradisus*, *regnum caelorum* and *sinus Abrahae* within funeral liturgies.

⁷ Hill, *Regnum Caelorum*. ⁸ To take the most recent example, see Russell’s *A History of Heaven*.

Locating the interim paradise

progression from one to the other.⁹ A natural extension of this association is to see its secular parallels in versions of 'arcadia' and 'utopia'.¹⁰ Also, in works that concentrate on either paradise or heaven, the other concept is often invoked in an ancillary or a synonymous manner, which underestimates both their complicated interrelationship as well as the need to acknowledge and possibly unravel it.¹¹

These tendencies are fuelled by the modern understanding of paradise as either the earthly Garden of Eden or as a synonym for heaven. However, this understanding itself derives from the system promoted by theologians from Augustine onwards, and thus reflects the hegemony of mainstream Latin Christian ideology, which continues to structure so many of our 'categories of intellection'. Instead of asking why we conceive of paradise through certain categories and not others, therefore, modern writers often anachronistically impose these categories on to earlier periods. The survival and transformation of the interim paradise from early Christianity into the early Middle Ages is, if at all noted, dismissed in a brief paragraph or section – an inclination especially of studies which trace 'the history of paradise' or 'the history of heaven' over the *longue durée*.¹²

THE HISTORIAN, THE LITERARY CRITIC, AND 'THE HISTORY
OF PARADISE'

Criticism of historians of the *longue durée* may seem unduly provocative within this introduction, given that one of the best known investigators of

⁹ See McClung, *Architecture of Paradise*, where he constructs an elaborate argument for an 'ascendancy of an architecture over a horticulture of paradise' whereby from the 'arcadian' paradise, vulnerable and unwallled, we move to 'compromised Edens, paradisaal gardens to some degree assimilated to architectural phenomena like walls, temples and cities' (p. 7).

¹⁰ This connection is most marked in investigations into the concept of utopia, the historical predecessor to which is often seen as the idea of paradise; thus Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought*, remark at p. 33: 'Paradise in its Judaeo-Christian terms has to be accepted as the deepest archaeological layer of Western utopia.' See also McClung, *Architecture of Paradise*, p. 2.

¹¹ As demonstrated, for example, by McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: a History*, pp. 67–79, and Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition*, pp. 204, 216 and 242.

¹² As seen in Delumeau's *Une histoire du paradis*, 2 vols., I, pp. 37–57, where he discusses 'paradis comme un lieu d'attente' through a rapid review of documents, from Judaeo-Christian apocrypha to twelfth-century vision literature, which refer to paradise as an interim abode for souls.

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paradise, death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon literature*

interim eschatology, Jacques Le Goff, belongs squarely within this tradition of historical scholarship. Le Goff's pioneering study of the emergence of purgatory, which examines evidence ranging from Egyptian and Greek culture to that of thirteenth-century Europe, attempts to bridge the gaps between theology, the history of ideas and cultural history.¹³ His two scholarly concerns – the *longue durée* and the study of *mentalités* – are representative of the *Annales* school of historiography,¹⁴ which, in the past few decades, has produced and inspired some valuable and exciting 'alternative cultural histories' of medieval and early modern Europe.¹⁵

Like most historians of *mentalités*, Le Goff brings the historian's perspective to the study of mainly 'theological' sources such as exegesis, homiletic writing and liturgy. He concludes thereby that the social and cultural developments of twelfth-century Europe necessitated the development of the doctrine of purgatory, within a tripartite otherworld consisting of purgatory, heaven and hell, in order to describe the interim state of the soul. Unfortunately, the teleological emphasis of this argument produces an inevitable bias in his interpretation and choice of source material. In arguing for purgatory as a product of the high Middle Ages, Le Goff all but ignores early medieval witnesses to the conceptualisation of the interim condition as a pleasant as well as a penal location, as a paradise alongside a 'proto-purgatory', or a provisional hell. At the same time, his premises and assumptions lead him to interpret as four-fold divisions, the tripartite schemes present within earlier writings, and, conversely, four-fold divisions discernible in twelfth-century witnesses as tripartite.¹⁶ This misrepresentation of interim eschatology before the twelfth century also leaves a vital question unasked: when and why did the idea of an interim paradise, separate from heaven, give way to the tripartite cosmology of purgatory, hell and a state equally well defined as either paradise or heaven?

Le Goff's methodology also provokes an important criticism, applicable to most cultural historians and historians of ideas, who work with written records such as visions of the otherworld, hagiography and homilies: in

¹³ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*.

¹⁴ For an overview of the *Annales* school and its approach to history, see R. Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language and Practices*, trans. L. G. Cochrane (London and Baltimore, MD, 1997), and P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL, and London, 1984), I, pp. 95–120.

¹⁵ For some examples of such scholarship, see below, p. 73, n. 77.

¹⁶ See below, p. 91, where this point is argued in greater detail.

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Locating the interim paradise*

charting the history of the interim state, he leaves little room for the effects of strictly 'literary' or aesthetic impulses. Historians of *mentalités*, consciously following in Le Goff's footsteps, have regularly drawn attention to '*les enjeux idéologiques*'¹⁷ which lead to cultural compromises between elite and dominated groups in society, between literate and illiterate or between clergy and laity. Yet they have often overlooked the demands of form and content imposed by those cultural artefacts through which such compromises are articulated. Written texts, as one class of such artefacts, are not mere receptacles from which beliefs and ideas may be recovered in pristine form. Rather, they are moulds, which impress their shape and structure on the very concepts they preserve. Without this awareness, the analysis of ideas transmitted through the vehicle of literary texts remains incomplete.

The opposite problem prevails in investigations of similar texts undertaken within a 'literary' framework. A salient example is Howard Patch's influential compendium, where, like Le Goff, he examines centuries of imaginative writing and theological exposition, distributed amongst thematically ordered chapters.¹⁸ An impressive amount of material is analysed thereby, but we are left with little idea of the intersections and connections between exegesis and vision, homily and poem, and of the ideological and political reasons promoting certain words, certain images, and even certain genres over others. On the other hand, literary critics who do attempt to place images and descriptions of paradise against a specific conceptual backdrop inevitably return to the standard dichotomy between Eden and Jerusalem.¹⁹

The temptation to associate the description of a city with Jerusalem, and that of nature with paradise, and to define one with the help of the other, is often implicit in literary discussions of paradise or ideal landscapes in the Middle Ages, as is inadvertently revealed by Paul Piehler's comment:

Landscape symbolism of the Middle Ages or any other period is not easy to comprehend without some understanding of the basic psychic polarity of city and wilderness which naturally arises out of man's experience of his environment. It is this

¹⁷ The phrase is Schmitt's, '*Les Traditions folkloriques*', p. 10.

¹⁸ H. R. Patch, *The Other World according to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1950).

¹⁹ Note, for example, the observation of Pearsall and Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons*, p. 56: 'As the beginning and the end of man's quest for perfection, as Eden and as the Celestial Paradise, it [paradise] spanned all human history.'

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paradise, death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon literature*

polarity, moreover, that can provide us with an important clue to the nature of the attractive power of the *locus amoenus*.²⁰

Later in his argument, he qualifies the *locus amoenus* as the ‘enclosed garden, park or paradise . . . intensely desirable, and situated either very remotely or behind inhibiting physical or psychic barriers’.²¹ Piehler’s statements also point to the scholarly reliance on alluring images such as the *hortus conclusus*, ‘enclosed garden’, or the *locus amoenus*, ‘pleasant place’, reflected in the numerous studies discussing the literary development of these images which originated in Scripture or patristic writings. However, very few studies actually consider the reasons why these images journeyed from one domain of thought to another, and the mutations they may have undergone in the process. One consequence of this approach is the failure to explain why many such images were not uniformly current throughout the Middle Ages. In Anglo-Saxon England, for instance, there is scarcely one description of an ‘enclosed garden’ as an ideal landscape,²² or of the earthly paradise which bears the same resonances as in later medieval texts.

PARADISE IGNORED? THE TEMPTATIONS OF EVOLUTIONARY LITERARY HISTORIES

The absence of the Anglo-Saxon contribution from literary studies of paradise, heaven or the otherworld is also the by-product of an evolutionary model for literary history, which would consider all literary manifestations of a particular theme prior to the appearance of a work regarded as canonical as somehow unworthy of independent study and evaluation. Thanks to this subconscious ‘Darwinism’,²³ many such studies are conducted towards furthering our appreciation of Dante’s *La divina commedia* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.²⁴ The existence of these literary peaks has tended to dwarf all predecessors, which are then viewed as inferior precursors rather than works of independent merit. Accordingly, only those aspects of these concepts are examined which have doctrinal and psychological implications directly rel-

²⁰ Piehler, *Visionary Landscape*, pp. 72–3. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²² Rather, the ideal landscape of Old English poetry is an open space, as I demonstrate in ch. 6.

²³ See, in this connection, G. Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London, 1983).

²⁴ See, for instance, Evans, ‘*Paradise Lost*’, Russell, *History of Heaven*, and Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*.

Locating the interim paradise

evant to the work in question. The Anglo-Saxon contribution to later medieval concepts of paradise, heaven and purgatory is usually glossed over in a series of rather naive generalisations, such as those made by Evans while discussing the description of Eden in *Genesis A*:

Clearly this is a far less sophisticated picture of the world's pristine innocence than that in the *Metrum in Genesim* or the *Alethia*. Living as he did in an environment more akin to the savage landscape of the *De Rerum Natura*, the eighth-century poet had little time for the refined delights of sight, smell, and sound elaborated in the Christian-Latin poems. His idea of perfection extended little further than climatic stability and the absence of bodily discomforts inflicted by Nature . . . the more primitive ideal of an amenable countryside.²⁵

In their haste to reach Dante's *Paradiso*, it would seem, surveys of the idea of paradise within European literature symptomatically leap from patristic writings to the high Middle Ages.²⁶

Unfortunately, this imbalance is reproduced, albeit unwittingly, within Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Numerous articles and larger investigations dealing with the concept of hell exist, but Anglo-Saxon ideas of paradise and heaven remain under-studied, perhaps because of the presupposition that the Anglo-Saxons were wholly preoccupied by the horrors and delights which awaited them after Doomsday.²⁷ The frequent comparison of Anglo-Saxon to Celtic conceptions of the afterlife, and Anglo-Saxon borrowing of infernal motifs and themes from Celtic sources, has led Anglo-Saxonists and Celticists alike to suppose that this dependence was true of Anglo-Saxon interim eschatology in general.²⁸ This assumption has obscured the importance of the interim paradise and the role played by Anglo-Saxon England

²⁵ Evans, 'Paradise Lost', pp. 148–9. In ch. 6 I suggest some other explanations for the absence of the 'refinements of sight, smell and sound' in Old English descriptions of paradise.

²⁶ As demonstrated, for instance, by Evans, 'Paradise Lost', and Pearsall and Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons*. This tendency is, of course, also found in more general studies such as McDannell and Lang's *Heaven: a History* and Delumeau's *Une Histoire du paradis*. Similar patterns within enquiries into early medieval representations of the natural world have been noted by J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, CSASE 27 (Cambridge, 1999), p. 14.

²⁷ For an illustrative example of how such assumptions predicate further misinterpretations of Anglo-Saxon writings on the interim condition, see my comments on the works of Gatch, pp. 43 and 74 below. The pressure of Le Goff's work, and its corollary that all pre-Doomsday imaginings before the twelfth century must somehow foreshadow purgatory, could also have contributed to this prevailing impression. ²⁸ See below, p. 91.

Cambridge University Press

0521806003 - Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paradise, death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon literature*

in its development. Particularly misleading in this respect has been the perceived similarity between Anglo-Latin visions of the otherworld and the Celtic genres of the *immram* and the *echtrae*.²⁹ The few articles that do discuss heaven and paradise appear quite unaware of the existence of such a concept as the interim paradise, or the theological scholarship that could illuminate their enquiries somewhat by pointing to parallels in liturgy and in apocrypha.³⁰ The only holistic reconstruction of what an Anglo-Saxon might have imagined as transpiring between death and Doomsday is that of Patrick Sims-Williams's, who brings together vision literature, prayers, liturgy and apocryphal writings in his richly contextualised examination of the Vision of the Monk of Wenlock, as reported by Boniface.³¹ Sims-Williams's overall focus is the cultural history of the western kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England, which provides an illuminating backdrop for this text, but which also confines his insights concerning the interim paradise to the period and area he is interested in surveying. Later vernacular literature, for instance, remains largely outside his scope, as does a detailed examination of the early Christian history of the interim paradise.

AIMS, ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODS OF THE PRESENT
INVESTIGATION

From this survey of scholarship treating of both paradise and the interim condition, it is clear that largely methodological constraints have prevented the emergence of the interim paradise in Anglo-Saxon England as a subject of investigation. In the present investigation, accordingly, I have allowed myself the liberty of certain assumptions: that ideas do not move, transform or crystallise into images of their own accord, and that images or words are not primarily chosen for the sake of some essential 'beauty'. Rather, words, images and ideas are constantly reappropriated by writers to express their own agenda and world-view. I have tried to see in this 'interplay of illusions' some of the socio-cultural processes that dictated the flow of ideas from one group of texts to another, their translation into images and descriptions,

²⁹ See below, pp. 92, 109 and 177–8.

³⁰ See, for instance, the confusions between paradise and heaven in Tristram, 'Stock Descriptions', and Roberts, 'A Preliminary Heaven Index'. For further references to these articles, see below, pp. 146 and 153.

³¹ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*. His arguments are examined in greater detail below, pp. 95–6.