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978-1-107-05198-0 - *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England*

Emily V. Thornbury

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**How can we know about Anglo-Saxon poets?*

In the nineteenth century – the Heroic Age of medieval scholarship – the distant past changed quickly. Each new edition, archaeological dig, or phonological law had the power to transform the way the premodern world appeared in the minds of the reading public. Sometimes these metamorphoses were very startling indeed, as instanced by Thomas Wright's discoveries in the Old English illustrated Hexateuch (Cotton Claudius B.iv): 'The costume of the Anglo-Saxon ladies and Anglo-Saxon boys is here very well shown; but there is one peculiarity which is deserving of special notice, the colour of the hair – sky blue.' Such an effect, Wright concluded, could only be produced by art: 'We trace in other pictorial manuscripts this taste of the Anglo-Saxons for blue hair. It must, of course, have been coloured artificially, either by a dye or by powder.' The silence of Anglo-Saxon writers on this matter suggests that they 'seem to have overlooked a little what was going on at home . . . or, perhaps, they had a taste for blue hair.'¹

Metaphorically speaking, the Anglo-Saxons' blue hair is the terror of anyone who sets out to say something new about the past. Though Wright was not the greatest of scholars (his teacher, John Mitchell Kemble, declared him incapable of original thought), he still *was* a scholar, and he founded his conclusions on research. He looked at Cotton Claudius B.iv, in other words, saw blue hair on the painted figures, and made a straightforward deduction. Given the illustrations, Wright's idea that the Anglo-Saxons might have dyed their hair blue was rational; but once he had conceived this bold notion, he was wrong not to test it against other alternatives. If the Anglo-Saxons *had* dyed their hair blue, we would indeed expect to see pictures of people with blue hair. Yet – as Wright knew, but chose to explain away – one would also expect Anglo-Saxon writers to have mentioned the practice, and that there would be remarks on this (undoubtedly remarkable) custom in the writings of travellers to Britain or those who had dealings with the English. We would also look to encounter recipes for dye, and evidence

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of woad-works on a scale necessary to supply the cosmetic needs of a blue-haired nation. And yet we find none of these things.

But as Anglo-Saxonists well know, a historical situation can have widely pertained and yet have left little or no trace. When one's subjects of inquiry mainly built in perishable materials in an often damp homeland that has been continuously inhabited since, it is easy to have only a few shreds of physical evidence for practices that must have been widespread for centuries – or *may* have been widespread for a while – or may have been unique. In such circumstances, any hypothesis involves intellectual risk. To be sure, problems of epistemology are not unique to the study of Anglo-Saxon England (or indeed to the study of the past), and more evidence does not always make for more knowledge. But for scholars of cultures whose remnants are broken and effaced, the questions 'How can we know?' and – more disturbing – 'Is what we think we know true?' are naggingly constant. When there are so few traces to follow, some will almost inevitably prove to be blue herrings.

All we can do to correct our course is ask ourselves *why* we think we know what we do: to re-examine our evidence, and the principles that guide our reasoning from that evidence. In Wright's case, his problem was not ignorance of the manuscripts, or colourblindness, but his assumption that the painter of the illustrated Hexateuch's miniatures used a mimetic colour scheme, and dismissal of the most likely meaning of the lack of corroborating textual evidence. It was easier, it seems, for Wright to postulate a world of blue-haired people than one in which art did not literally represent the artists' world.

By falling headfirst into this particular intellectual ditch, Wright (and, somewhat less dramatically, many of his contemporaries) provided a valuable object lesson for scholars of the twentieth century, who perceived all too clearly how even our best efforts to shed our preconceptions and see the past through its inhabitants' eyes are bound to be imperfect. Our access to the Anglo-Saxons' world is mediated not only by an incomplete and damaged set of artifacts, but by our own presuppositions about how to interpret those artifacts. As a result, we can never fully comprehend the true otherness of the past. Contemplating the problem of how to imagine a genuinely alien consciousness, the philosopher Thomas Nagel observed that 'Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited.'² Though the Anglo-Saxons were surely more like us than Nagel's Martians or bats, we are still constantly hampered by the temptation – perhaps the necessity – to interpret their thoughts as analogous to our own. Imaginative sympathy is so dangerous precisely

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because it prevents us from seeing the extent to which we have created the past in our own image.

And yet without imaginative sympathy, our capacity for discovering anything new in the past is foreclosed. Among the great accomplishments of twentieth-century scholarship has been to reject pre-existing models that were based on prejudice or naïvely anachronistic assumptions. One result of this has been a tendency towards small-scale, particularized studies rather than grand syntheses. In their acute awareness of how their predecessors went wrong, scholars in the last half-century have mainly preferred stripping away false tableaux to constructing new ones. But in the absence of a better model, the old assumptions tend to reassert themselves, like a painted image gradually showing through a layer of whitewash: for medievalists, this too often takes the form of long-refuted absurdities appearing over and over in popular culture. We need new, more accurate accounts of the culture of the past, therefore, even though this exposes us to the old dangers of misapprehension. As the inheritors of a fragmentary legacy, we are like eavesdroppers hearing only one side of a conversation. We can either resign ourselves to understanding almost nothing of what we hear, or attempt to reconstruct the other side, knowing at the same time that some of our guesses will be wrong. But by continually returning to the evidence, and by thinking through the principles on which our methodology is based, we can construct a few nets before making our *salto mortale*.

For in the twenty-first century we do in fact know a great deal more about the Anglo-Saxons' world than did our predecessors in the nineteenth. Especially in the course of the last decades, scholars have advanced to an extraordinary degree both our knowledge of the early Middle Ages, and our capacity for increasing that knowledge even further. Studies of important but neglected authors, genres, and stylistic modes have joined new editions and new tools like searchable electronic corpora of texts and manuscripts, so that it is now possible to accomplish in days what a century ago would have taken decades. With unprecedented access to primary evidence, and well-tested methodological models for interpreting that evidence, we are ideally positioned to create new synthetic accounts of the early medieval world.

This book is intended to create a new way of understanding Anglo-Saxon poets and their work by drawing upon this great wealth of scholarship. I begin my study by re-examining the bases of our knowledge. The questions I ask in the first two chapters are simple but fundamental: in Anglo-Saxon England, what was a poet, and who actually became poets? Early scholarship often evaded these questions, conflated legendary and historiographical material, or too readily assumed that the practices of other cultures

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(whether in Ireland, central Europe, Africa, or elsewhere) could serve as stand-ins when evidence from early England was difficult or lacking. The result has all too often been confusion or (at best) resigned agnosticism. But now that more recent studies have cleared away many of the more egregious false constructs, we can survey the entirety of the Old English corpus and a very large proportion of Anglo-Latin and, finally, answer these questions with reasonable certainty.

Chapter 1 brings together all the words for ‘poet’ in Anglo-Latin and Old English in order to discover what Anglo-Saxons meant when they used these words. Strikingly, we find that it was very rare indeed to refer to oneself as a poet in this period, and almost unheard-of to call contemporaries poets. This is a very different situation than we find in Ireland, say, or Scandinavia, and it points out the absolute necessity of recognizing variation among early medieval cultures. The distribution of referents for ‘poet’ in the Anglo-Saxon corpus also highlights another important epistemological issue: how to read blank spaces. Absence of evidence is not *necessarily* evidence of absence. But when there is no evidence of a practice – such as a formal status for poets in historical Anglo-Saxon England – and no strong reason to believe that there ever *was* such evidence, then it is best to conclude that the practice did not widely pertain.

The data presented in Chapter 1 suggest that for most of the Anglo-Saxon period, poets were not special, chosen beings, but people who, among other things, composed verse.³ Chapter 2 sets out to discover all we still can about who those makers of verse actually were. The core prosopographical material is presented in Appendix I, as a new handlist of named poets in Anglo-Saxon England. This handlist indicates that people whom we know were poets were very likely to also be teachers, scribes, musicians, or courtiers: some were more than one of these. In Chapter 2, I examine in depth the evidence for the kinds of poetry composed by people belonging to these four groups, in order to understand what value poetry had for them and why it was worthwhile for them to become poets. This method of correlating poets with their work uncovers some striking correspondences – musicians, for instance, seem almost invariably to have also been hagiographers. By studying the social roles of known poets, we can also perceive how often Anglo-Saxon poetry was instrumental in its makers’ society. Becoming a poet was useful, though sometimes indirectly so.

Once we know that most Anglo-Saxon poets practised their art as one aspect of their duties, we have a variety of new ways to understand what particular poems were for in particular times and places. But to understand the experience of the poets themselves, we must take a step back and think

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about poetry as a social and linguistic phenomenon. Verse is a continual negotiation between the individual and the group: between someone who presents words as poetry, and others who accept or reject them. This dynamic has consequences both for poets and for their work.

Let us take as an example the most famous story about a poet that any Anglo-Saxon has left us: Bede's account of Cædmon in *Historia ecclesiastica* IV.24. Now Cædmon emphatically was *not* a poet. Bede tells us that

Siquidem in habitu saeculari usque ad tempora proeuctionis aetatis constitutus, nil carminum aliquando didicerat. Vnde nonnumquam in conuiuio, cum esset laetitiae causa decretum ut omnes per ordinem cantare deberent, ille, ubi adpropinquare sibi citharam cernebat, surgebat a media caena et egressus ad suam domum repedabat.⁴

For though he had remained in the state of a layman to a fairly advanced age, he had never learned any songs. And so quite often in social gatherings, when it had been decided that for the entertainment everyone should sing in turn, he would get up as soon as he saw the harp approaching him, and, leaving in the middle of the party, would return to his own home.

When a mysterious figure comes to him in a dream and requests a song, Cædmon apologizes:

'Nescio,' inquit, 'cantare; nam et ideo de conuiuio egressus huc secessi, quia cantare non poteram.'

'I don't know how to sing,' he said. 'That's why I withdrew to this place after leaving the party, because I couldn't sing.'

As we have the story, Cædmon's actions are not those of someone who hates secular song, but of someone ashamed of his incompetence in it. He does not leave parties when the singing begins, but when he is in danger of having to produce something. Though it was his turn to take care of the cows on the fateful night he spent in the byre, Cædmon's reply to the dream-figure suggests that he thought of it mainly as a convenient refuge: *huc secessi*, he says, not *stabulam petiui*.

Why did Cædmon run away? His actions indicate actual terror at the idea of his comrades hearing him try and fail to sing something. It seems, in other words, to be the prospect of judgmental listeners that sends him back to the company of the cattle. Only when his supernatural auditor leaves him no escape – and provides him with a new subject – is he willing to make an attempt. Cædmon is made to submit to several more rounds of judgment: from his overseer, and then from the monks and the abbess of Whitby. But listeners no longer hold any terror for him, now that he is able to produce at

will ‘*carmen dulcissimum . . . suaviusque resonando doctores suos uicissim auditores sui faciebat*’ (‘an exceedingly lovely song . . . his delightful recitation of which transformed his teachers into his audience’).

Cædmon’s story is still an inexhaustible source of reflection, as no doubt it was meant to be.⁶ For the present study, it beautifully exemplifies several aspects of what it might mean to be a poet. First, the production of poetry could simultaneously be an occasion for entertainment, collective bonding, and immense anxiety. Even when singing or reciting the words of others, a performer evidently could not expect unconditional support. It likewise seems there were rules. Apparently Cædmon’s companions at the feast would not have been satisfied if he had just pretended to sing, or told a funny story instead; and when after his revelation he is brought before Abbess Hild and her more learned monks, they test him by reading a sacred text aloud, ‘*praecipientes eum, si posset, hunc in modulationem carminis transferre*’ (‘bidding him to translate it into poetic metre if he could’). Only when the resulting poem is indeed found to be *optimum* is Cædmon adjudged to have been favoured by God, and invited to join the monastery. Both Hild and her monks and the laymen in the *convivium* must therefore have had a strong sense of what counted as a poem, and what made such a poem good. These communities may not have had identical standards – indeed, they probably didn’t – but a poet who wanted to succeed with either audience would have to reckon with the opinions of the group.

Seventh-century Whitby is such a useful paradigm because it was not unique. Though Cædmon’s flight to the cowshed was perhaps excessive, poems in both Old English and Latin reveal that their creators were likewise deeply concerned with anticipating and managing the reaction of hearers and readers. Poetry provides a very specific, rule-governed venue for judging others’ words, but the impulse to police language is a universal feature of human societies. As I show in Chapter 3, tools developed to help us understand how communities interact with language allow us to perceive something of what it was like to be an Anglo-Saxon poet in a community. Sociolinguistics, in particular, is an immensely useful resource: by reverse-engineering models of the behaviour of modern speech communities, we can see the imprint of the Anglo-Saxons’ vanished social groups on their work.

The expectation of judgment is the most telling sign of poets’ experience in communities. As the mechanism by which individuals are kept within the bounds of group norms, judgment is a pervasive feature of linguistic behaviour, especially in communities where dialect is a major part of the

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group's identity. In poetic communities – groups, that is, that will receive and judge a poem – judgment is a constant. We see reflections of this throughout Anglo-Saxon literature, together with canny strategies for turning that judgment to the poets' advantage. Voice is one simple but powerful method. Just as Cædmon coaxed his audience to share his burden in the opening phrase of his poem, *Nu sculon herigean* ('Now we must praise'), subtle shifts in person reveal how Anglo-Saxon poets worked to bring their audience into solidarity with their aims. Skilled poets, however, had many tactics to rely on. In Chapter 3 I show how the author of *The Battle of Maldon* uses evaluation – a notable feature of oral narrative – to redirect the audience's judgment from the poem to the behaviour of the characters within it. The result is a triumph of verisimilitude, one that still persuades modern readers as it likely also persuaded audiences at the end of the tenth century.

Though we usually cannot know who Anglo-Saxon poets' audiences were, we can often tell a good deal about what the poets thought they were. Cynewulf, for instance, includes books and readers in the circle of those whom he expects to judge him (and who, he gently suggests, will also themselves be judged). Cynewulf's seamless, apparently untroubled incorporation of written media into his imagined poetic community indicates that the transition between oral and literate modes of thinking about poetry was not always difficult or traumatic. By thinking of books as people – or as a straightforward means of speaking to people – Cynewulf could envision a community unbound by time that nevertheless acted and judged just as any other community. The writings of Aldhelm, too, imply a world in which written poetry was a useful means of maintaining social ties, rather than an alternative system of existence. Aldhelm is almost unique in the extent of the available material for documenting his real-world social system. By mapping his overlapping commitments (to students, teachers, ecclesiastical colleagues, and royal kindred) we can see how literature worked to create and reinforce bonds between people. Reconstructing Aldhelm's connections also helps us understand how his writings – and his style – spread so quickly across Britain. The breadth and complexity of his social network is an important reason that his work became paradigmatic: he knew his audience.

Cædmon seems to have spent his later life as a respected figure in Whitby monastery, enjoying, Bede tells us, the reputation of a moral instructor.⁷ If his later poems had survived, they would doubtless tell us a good deal about what it was like to be a poet in that community. But one of the most interesting features of the story as Bede tells it is the way Cædmon is

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presented as innocent of worldly corruption. *He* seems deeply ashamed of his inability to remember or produce secular songs, but Bede leaves us in no doubt that this was a Good Thing:

Namque ipse non ab hominibus neque per hominem institutus canendi artem didicit, sed diuinitus adiutus gratis canendi donum accepit. Vnde nil umquam friuoli et superuacui poematis facere potuit, sed ea tantummodo, quae ad religionem pertinent, religiosam eius linguam decebant.⁸

For he, taught ‘not of men, nor by man,’ did not so learn the art of singing, but as one divinely aided received by grace the gift of singing. He could therefore never make any frivolous and inane poem; only those that pertained to religion were worthy of his religious voice.

Though Cædmon had heard worldly poems for years, he remained a blank slate, ready for the inscription of heavenly words. He was able to ‘start from scratch’ and to be the first and greatest of the creators of English religious verse. Whether or not Cædmon’s poetry was really devoid of influence from the secular poetry he had heard but not made (a point modern scholars doubt), the idea of beginning from first principles was very much in line with *Bede’s* philosophy of verse.

As I discuss in Chapter 4, Bede’s own poetry is indeed that of one who has tried to reject immediate influences and start afresh. He depends not on the standards of a knowledgeable community, but instead on standards he has deduced for himself from his own reading. This remarkable, apparently self-imposed poetic isolation gives Bede’s poetry a unique stylistic signature, along with many of the peculiarities common to autodidacts. While Cynewulf’s work shows us that literacy was wholly compatible with a living poetic community, nevertheless only the advent of writing could make it possible to become a poet alone. In such authors, as I show through a close study of the Old English *Christ and Satan*, we see how isolated poets read earlier works in order to extrapolate rules for their own verse. But without a wider community to determine what was right or wrong, these autodidacts tended to generate rules that (though logical) were strange, and which a better-connected poet would often have considered incorrect. Many of the metrical oddities of *Christ and Satan* as it stands in Junius XI can be traced back to its redactor’s use of a flawed manuscript of earlier verse, in much the same way that Bede’s idiosyncratic use of archaisms stems from his determination to derive stylistic rules from first principles.

There was no single, universal way of becoming an Anglo-Saxon poet, then, and from the diversity of poets’ experiences – and the diversity of the communities within which they worked (or didn’t) – we have received such

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a diverse corpus of poetry. In the final chapter of this book, I explore three case studies representing intermediate modes of community and isolation. The isolation of a small community, for example, made the verse produced by St Boniface and his English colleagues in Germany increasingly self-similar, as the Aldhelmian style the missionaries favoured became a touchstone for their group identity: this is a phenomenon seen also in isolated dialects. Conversely, isolation *within* a community – as experienced by Wulfstan Cantor, an extraordinarily gifted poet and musician who became precentor of Winchester Cathedral in the late tenth century – also produced a drive towards self-similarity. Wulfstan's responsibility to speak for the community (or perhaps, rather, to produce words through which it might choose to speak) seems to have resulted in some characteristic stylistic tics. As a kind of poetic intercessor, Wulfstan developed a signature style that helped him fulfil his duties to the Winchester community.

In the late tenth and eleventh centuries we also see the development of a new form of Old English verse that gives us insight into the formation of new poetic communities. The rise to hegemony of the Wessex kings coincided with the rise of English as a language of administration and of intellectual inquiry in England. We see this reflected in a new strain in the poetry of the period: though peculiar by the standards of Cynewulf or the *Beowulf*-poet, late Southern verse is remarkable for the way it presents readers with a simulacrum of the experience of reading Latin texts. Alienation from the style of earlier vernacular poetry enabled poets to create in their readers, at least some of whom were probably laypeople, a sense of participating directly in high ecclesiastical and philosophical culture. The ascension of the Southern mode shows us how Anglo-Saxon poets could create new forms to serve new goals and new communities.

Chapter 5's case studies do not exhaust the possibilities for studying the interaction between Anglo-Saxon poets and their communities. The texts and poets that appear in this study do so because they exemplify particularly clear or interesting ways of becoming a poet, and therefore tend to be those about whose circumstances something concrete is known. But I believe that works of more ambiguous origin – including much of the Old English corpus – are also amenable to this approach. The value of my model, as I see it, is that it lets us recognize how poetry is both a sociolinguistic phenomenon and a particular rule-governed art. My hope is that *Becoming a Poet* will help us develop a richer, more finely grained understanding of how poetry worked in the communities that helped give it birth. Each region was different, and so was each town, monastery, book, and time-period: further study of these local environments will help us see their reflections in

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the poems produced within them. But each poet, too, was different. An individual's art was not an inevitable consequence of his or her environment, but rather a negotiation with and reaction to it. Anglo-Saxons, on the whole, became poets in order to live more fully within their world, and by studying the social environment of their poetry we can understand more fully how they thought it was best to live.