

A Concise Review of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

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Received 12 May 2021; accepted 2 June 2021

Published online 26 June 2021

Abstract

This paper attempts to offer a concise review of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. English literary poetic history has a long span of time. It began enthusiastically with the Anglo-Saxon to affirm its unique identity among the Continent poetic literature. There have been a lot of serious attempts to achieve that identity since then. Consequently, English poetry enlarged its developments through many drastic poetic phases in order to participate in human's artistic legacy. One of the English poetic endeavours is that of Romanticism. Before Romanticism, there have been many poetic trends that played a vital role and paved the way towards Romanticism. However, in this report, I would approach one of the Pre-Romantic trends, namely, the Anglo-Saxon poetic scene, depending at least on the historical development of the period and its literary bequests through its poetic schools, major poets, and some well-known poems. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to present a consecutive overview of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Key words: Anglo-saxon; Bede; Beowulf; Chronicles; Poetic fragments; Poetry

Abdalahdi Nimer Abdalqader Abu Jweid (2021). A Concise Review of Anglo-Saxon Poetry. *Canadian Social Science*, 17(3), 51-54. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/12156>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12156>

1. A CONCISE REVIEW OF ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

In 449 the Jutes came to England from the continent, followed later by the larger tribes of Angles and Saxons.

They set up various small kingdoms from which England finally developed. They had been preceded by many centuries of Roman occupation, which has left a few traces on the island in roads, ruins, and place names. The sturdy Anglo-Saxons drove the Celtic natives back into the mountains north and west (Abu Jweid, 2020a, p.7). The Anglo-Saxons were in turn followed by the invading Danes, some of whom settled in the northwest and later even became kings of England. Finally the Norman invasion of 1066 put an end to the period. (Scott, p.43)

English literature began as oral, not written, literature with songs and poems celebrating heroes. These poems were passed on by minstrels, or scop, who composed many poems that praised Anglo-Saxon ideals. Probably the most important of these ideals were valor, honor, and loyalty to one's lord. This was primarily a somber time in which human destiny was believed to be ruled by fate, or *wyrð*, as the Anglo-Saxons called it. (Scott, p.57)

Through the songs of the scop, the major battles and the feats of the tribe's heroes and kings were recited and remembered. In this way heroes could win enduring fame, something that was valued highly because their religion did not acknowledge immortality through an afterlife (Abu Jweid, 2020b, p.8). The scop's poems often reflect the grim, war-ridden lives of the Anglo-Saxon people. By immortalizing their heroes, the scop also brought a semblance of permanence to a world ruled by a sense of transience and fatal doom.

The earliest English story-poem to come down to us is about a hero called Beowulf. Beowulf was composed about 700 by an unknown minstrel, one of the many who traveled from mead hall to mead hall to entertain the courts of kings and their warriors. The poem was composed in Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, a dialect of Germanic origin that is the ancestor of the present-day English and was brought to Britain by the Anglo-Saxons. Beowulf is an example of an epic, along narrative poem in grave and stately language about the achievements of a hero, often a national heroic figure.

Few of the other poems of this period have survived. Those that have we owe to the work and learning of monks in monasteries, which, like the castles with their mead halls, doted the landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. One of these early poems is *The Seafarer*, unusual for its lyric tone and its nonreligious subject matter.

Written literature did not exist in the British Isles until about the year 700. It first comes to our attention in the work of the most famous of the Anglo-Saxon monks, the venerable Bede, author of *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. One of the famous people Bede wrote about in his history was Caedmon, a shepherd who became a monk and the first English religious poet.

Although Bede was Anglo-Saxon, he wrote his history in Latin. The first notable written literature actually composed in Old English came almost two centuries later when the remarkable Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great wrote his *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, also a history in the year 892. (Long, p.31)

The poetry of this period falls into two divisions, - pagan and Christian. The former represents the poetry which the Anglo-Saxons probably brought with them in the form of oral sagas, - the crude material out of which poetry was slowly developed on English soil; the latter represents the writings developed under teaching of the monks, after the old pagan religion had vanished, but while it still retained its hold on the life and language of the people (Abu Jweid, 2020c, p.14). In reading the earliest English poetry it is well to remember that all of it was copied by the monks, and seems to have been more or less altered to give it a religious coloring.

The coming of Christianity meant not simply a new life and leader for England; it meant also the wealth of a new language (Abu Jweid and Sasa, 2020, p.338). The scop is now replaced by the literary monk; and that monk, although he lives among common people and speaks with the English tongue, has behind him all the culture and literary resources of the Latin language. The effect is seen instantly in our early poetry.

2. ANGLO-SAXON, OR OLD ENGLISH, VERSE HAS THREE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS:

A) Each line has four principal beats but may have any number of syllables.

B) Some of the four beats alliterate –that is, beginning with the same sound.

C) The verse is not rhymed. This verse is admirably suited for narrative poetry to be recited aloud. It is simple to understand, easy to listen to, easy to catch in its alliteration, and easy to compose.

And the following are the ideals that the Anglo-Saxon greatly conducted:-

A) Love of personal freedom.

B) Allegiance to lord or king.

C) Repression of feelings.

D) Open-handed hospitality.

E) Love of glory as the ruling motive of every noble life. (Long, p.45)

Old English or Anglo-Saxon poetic heritage resulted in the production of great manuscripts like *The Exeter Book*. This book is considered one of the most important manuscripts containing Old English poetry, copied about 940, given by Bishop Leofric to Exeter Cathedral, where it still remains. It contains many of the most admired shorter poems such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, *Widsith*, *The Ruin*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *The Husband's Message*, most of which are grouped together as *The Exeter Book Elegies* as well as a famous collection of riddles and some longer religious poems, notably *Guthlac*, *The Phoenix*, and *Cynewulf's Juliana*.

As a great poetic trend, the Anglo-Saxon period left an excellent literary legacy (Abu Jweid and Sasa, 2014, p.163). This legacy is exemplified in the works of such writers as Caedmon and Cynewulf. Caedmon is the first poet to whom we can give a definite name and date. What little we know of Caedmon, the Anglo-Saxon Milton, as he is properly called, is taken from Bede's account of the Abbess Hilda and of her monastery at Whitby.

The greatest work attributed to Caedmon is the so-called *Paraphrase*. It is the story of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and a part of *Daniel*, told in glowing, poetic language, with a power of insight and imagination which often raises it from paraphrase into the realm of true poetry (Abu Jweid, 2020d, p.92). Though we have Bede's assurance that Caedmon transformed the whole course of the Bible history into most delightful poetry, no work known certainly to have been composed by him has come down to us. In the seventeenth-century this Anglo-Saxon *Paraphrase* was discovered and attributed to Caedmon, and his name is still associated with it, though it is now almost certain that the *Paraphrase* is the work of more than one writer. (Albert, p.64)

Aside from the doubtful question of authorship, even a casual reading of the poem brings us into the presence of a poet serious indeed, but with a genius strongly suggestive at time of the matchless Milton (Abu Jweid, 2020e, p.209). The book opens with a hymn of praise, and then tells of the fall of Satan and his rebel angels from heaven, which is familiar to us in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Then follows the creation of the world and the *Paraphrase* begins to thrill with the old Anglo-Saxon love of nature. After recounting the story of paradise, the fall, and the Deluge, the *Paraphrase* is continued in the *Exodus*, of which the poet makes a noble epic, rushing on with the sweep of a Saxon army to battle.

Besides the *Paraphrase* we have a few fragments of the same general character which are attributed to the school of Caedmon (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.530). The longest of these is *Judith*, in which the story of an apocryphal

book of the Old Testament is done into vigorous poetry. Holofernes is represented as a savage and cruel Viking, revealing in his mead hall; and when the heroic Judith cuts off his head with his own sword and throws it down before the warriors of her people, rousing them to battle and victory, we reach perhaps the most dramatic and brilliant point of Anglo-Saxon poetic literature (Abu Jweid, 2021a, p.12).

The Anglo-Saxon period also witnessed the heritage of another great poet, namely, Cynewulf. Of Cynewulf, the greatest of the Anglo-Saxon poets, excepting only the unknown author of *Beowulf*, we know very little. Indeed, it was not till 1840, more than a thousand years after his death, that even his name became known (Abu Jweid, 2020f, p.01). Though he is the only one of our early poets who signed his works, the name was never plainly written, woven into the verses in the form of secret runes, suggesting a modern charade, but more difficult of interpretation until one has found the key to the poet's signature. (Albert, p.78)

As a great representative of the Anglo-Saxon period, Cynewulf wrote many literary pieces. The only signed poems of Cynewulf are *The Christ*, *Juliana*, *The Fate of the Apostles*, and *Elene*. Unsigned poems attributed to him or his schools are *Andreas*, *The Phoenix*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Descent into Hell*, *Guthlac*, *The Wanderer*, and some of the riddles. The last are simply literary puzzles in which some well-known object, like the bow or drinking horn, is described in poetic language, and the hearer must guess the name. Some of them, like *The Swan* and *The Storm Spirit*, are unusually beautiful (Abu Jweid, 2021b, p.6).

Of all these works the most characteristic is undoubtedly *The Christ*, a didactic poem in three parts: the first celebrating the Nativity; the second, the Ascension; and the third, *Doomsday*, telling the torments of the wicked and the unending joy of the redeemed. Cynewulf takes his subject-matter partly from the Church liturgy, but more largely from the homilies of Gregory the Great. The whole is well woven together, and contains some hymns of great beauty and many passages of intense dramatic force. Throughout the poem a deep love for Christ and a reverence for the Virgin Mary are manifest. More than any other poem in any language, *The Christ* reflects the spirit of early Latin Christianity. (Albert, p.92)

In the two epic poems of *Andreas* and *Elene* Cynewulf (if he be the author) reaches the very summit of his poetical art. *Andreas*, an unsigned poem, records the story of St. Andrew, who crosses the sea to rescue his comrade St. Matthew from the cannibals. A young shipmaster that sails the boat turns out to be Christ in disguise. Matthew is set free, and the savages are converted by a miracle. It is a spirited poem, full of rush and incident, and the descriptions of the sea are the best in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Elene has for its subject-matter the finding of the true cross. It tells of Constantine's vision of the rood, on the

eve of battle. After his victory under the new emblem he sends his mother Helena (*Elene*) to Jerusalem in search of the original cross and the nails. The poem, which is of very uneven quality, might properly be put at the end of Cynewulf's works. He adds to the poem a personal note, signing his name in runes; and, if we accept the wonderful *Vision of the Rood* as Cynewulf's works, we learn how he found the cross at last in his own heart. (Drabble and Stringer, pp.114-120)

The Anglo-Saxon ideals are exemplified in such Old English poems as *Widsith*, *Deor's Lament*, *The Seafarer*, *The fight at Finnsburgh*, *Waldere* and many others. The poem *Widsith*, the wide goer or wanderer, is in part, at least, probably the oldest in English language. The author and the date of its composition are unknown; but the personal account of the minstrel's life belongs to the time before the Saxon came to England. It expresses the wandering life of the gleeman, who goes forth into the world to abide here or there, according as he is rewarded for his singing, from the numerous references to rings and rewards, and from the praise given to generous givers, it would seem that literature as a paying profession began very early in English history, and also that the pay was barely sufficient to hold soul and body together

As for *Deor's Lament*, we have another picture of the Saxon scop, or minstrel, not in glad wandering, but in manly sorrow. It seems that the scop's living depended entirely upon his power to please his chief, and that at any time he might be supplanted by a better poet. *Deor's Lament* had this experience, and comforts himself in a grim way by recalling various examples of men who have suffered more than himself. The poem is arranged in strophes, each one telling of some afflicted hero and ending with the same refrain. *Deor's Lament* is much more poetic than *Widsith*, and is the one perfect lyric of the Anglo-Saxon period.

The wonderful poem of *The Seafarer* seems to be in two distinct parts. The first shows the hardships of ocean life; but stronger than hardships is the subtle call of the sea. The second part is an allegory, in which the troubles of the seaman are symbols of the troubles of this life, and the call of the ocean is the call in the soul to be up and away to its true home with God. Whether the last was added by some monk who saw the allegorical possibilities of the first part, or whether some sea-loving Christian scop wrote both, is uncertain. (Drabble and Stringer, pp.125-136)

The Fight at Finnsburgh and *Waldere* is also two other of oldest English poems that well deserve mention. *The Fight at Finnsburgh* is a fragment of fifty lines, discovered on the inside of a piece of parchment drawn over the wooden covers of a book of homilies. It is a magnificent war song, describing with Homeric power the defense of a hall by Hnaf with sixty warriors, against the attack of Finn and his army. At midnight, when Hnaf and his men are sleeping, they are surrounded by an army rushing in

with fire and sword. Hnaf springs to his feet at the first alarm and wakens his warriors with a call to action that rings like a bugle blast. The fight lasts five days, but the fragment ends before we learn the outcome.

As for Waldere, it is also a fragment of two leaves, from which we get only a glimpse of the story of Waldere (Walter of Aquitaine) and his betrothed bride Hildgund, who were hostages at the court of Attila. They escaped with a great treasure, and in crossing the mountains were attacked by Gunther and his warriors, among whom was Walter's former comrade, Hagen. Walter fights them all and escapes. The same story was written in Latin in the tenth-century, and is also part of the old German Nibelungenlied. Though the sagas did not originate with the Anglo-Saxon, their version of it is the oldest that has come down to us. The chief significance of these "Waldere" fragments lies in the evidence they afford that English ancestors were familiar with the legends and poetry of other Germanic peoples.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to approach one of the Pre-Romantic English poetic trends, namely, the Anglo-Saxon period. Anglo-Saxon period presents a drastic historical overview of English poetry. Thus, not surprisingly, it was now to foreshadow the whole English poetic mentality through centuries. However, it paved the way to a great poetic literary legacy to be bequeathed by the coming literary posterity.

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