

Old English Literature

Introduction

Who are the Britons? The present English race has gradually shaped itself out of several distinct peoples which successively occupied or conquered the island of Great Britain. The earliest one of these peoples belonged to the Celtic family. On English literature they exerted little or no influence until a late period. The Britons, from whom the present Welsh are descended, inhabited what is now England and Wales; and they were still further subdivided, like most barbarous peoples, into many tribes which were often at war with one another. Though the Britons were conquered and chiefly supplanted later on by the Anglo-Saxons, enough of them were spared and intermarried with the victors to transmit something of their racial qualities to the English nation and literature.

-The Anglo-Saxon Conquest

In the ancient times, there were three tribes called Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the northern Europe. In the 5th century, they conquered Britain and settled down there. After driving the native people into the deep mountains of Wales and Scotland, they divided the whole island among themselves. Angles settled down in the east midland, and built the kingdom of East Angles; Saxons took the southern part of the island and set up some small kingdoms such as Wessex, Essex and Sussex; Jutes occupied the southeastern corner of the island. Gradually seven kingdoms arose in Britain. In the 7th century, these small kingdoms were combined into a united kingdom called England. Angles, Saxons and Jutes who are usually known as Anglo-Saxons are the first Englishmen. The language spoken by them is called the Old English, which is the foundation of English language and literature. With the Anglo Saxon settlement in Britain, the history of English literature began.

-Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Literature

Anglo-Saxon literature, that is, the Old English literature, was almost exclusively a verse literature in oral form. It could be passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Its creators for the most part were unknown. It was given a written form long after its composition.

The verse is unrhymed, not arranged in stanzas, and with lines more commonly end-stopped (with distinct pauses at the ends) than is true in good modern poetry. Each line is divided into halves and each half contains two stressed syllables, generally long in quantity. The number of unstressed syllables appears to a modern eye or ear irregular and actually is very unequal, but they are really combined with the stressed ones into 'feet' in accordance with certain definite principles. At least one of the stressed syllables in each half-line must be in alliteration with one in the other half-line;

To the present-day, reading the verse sounds crude, the more so because of the harshly consonantal character of the Anglo-Saxon language; and in comparison with modern poetry it is undoubtedly unmelodious. But it was worked out on conscious artistic principles, carefully followed; and when chanted, as it was meant to be, to the harp it possessed much power and even beauty of a vigorous sort, to which the pictorial and

metaphorical wealth of the Anglo-Saxon poetic vocabulary largely contributed. The use of metaphors is perhaps the most conspicuous one in the style, of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. The language, compared to that of our own vastly more complex time, was undeveloped; but for use in poetry, especially, there were a great number of periphrastic but vividly picturesque metaphorical synonyms (technically called **kennings**). Thus the spear becomes 'the slaughter-shaft'; fighting 'hand-play'; the sword 'the leavings of the hammer' (or 'of the anvil'); and a ship 'the foamy-necked floater.' These kennings add much imaginative suggestiveness to the otherwise over-terse style, and often contribute to the grim irony which is another outstanding trait

-ANGLO SAXON POETRY: There were two groups of poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period. The first group was the pagan poetry represented by Beowulf; the second was the religious poetry represented by the works of Caedmon and Cynewulf. In the 8th century, Anglo-Saxon prose appeared. The famous prose writers of that period were Venerable Bede and Alfred the Great.

1. Pagan Poetry:

At the very beginning of human society, long before the commencement of history, the primitive groups of savages who then constituted mankind were instinctively led to express their emotions together, communally, in rhythmical fashion. Perhaps after an achievement in hunting or war the village-group would mechanically fall into a dance, sometimes, it might be, about their village fire. Suddenly from among the inarticulate cries of the crowd someone excited individual would shout out a fairly distinct rhythmical expression. This expression, which may be called a line, was taken up and repeated by the crowd; others might be added to it, and thus gradually, in the course of generations, arose the regular habit of communal composition, composition of something like complete ballads by the throng as a whole.

This procedure ceased to be important everywhere long before the literary period, but it led to the frequent composition by humble versifiers of more deliberate poems which were still 'popular' because they circulated by word of mouth, only, from generation to generation, among the common people, and formed one of the best expressions of their feeling. At an early period also professional minstrels disengaged themselves from the crowd and began to gain their living by wandering from village to village or tribe to tribe chanting to the harp either the popular ballads or more formal poetry of their own composition.

Among all races when a certain stage of social development is reached at least one such minstrel is to be found as a regular retainer at the court of every barbarous chief or king, ready to entertain the warriors at their feasts, with chants of heroes and battles and of the exploits of their present lord. All the earliest products of these processes of 'popular' and minstrel composition are everywhere lost long before recorded literature begins, but the processes themselves in their less formal stages continue among uneducated people.

Out of the popular ballads, or, chiefly, of the minstrel poetry which is partly based on them, regularly develops epic poetry. Perhaps a minstrel finds a number of ballads which deal with the exploits of a single hero or with a single event. He combines them as best he can into a unified story and recites this on important and stately occasions. As his work passes into general circulation other minstrels add other ballads, until at last, very likely after many generations, a complete epic is formed, outwardly continuous and whole, but generally more or less clearly separable on analysis into its original parts. Or, on the other hand, the combination may be mostly performed all at once at a comparatively late period by a single great poet, who with conscious art weaves together a great mass of separate materials into the nearly finished epic.

2. Religious Poetry

Caedmon: Caedmon (610-680) is the first known religious poet of England. He is known as the father of English songs. His life story is vividly described in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Caedmon, who was a humble and unlearned man, looked after cattle for an abbey on the Yorkshire coast. On the eve of the New Year, a feast was held in the abbey. When songs were called for, he stole out quietly, because he felt ashamed that he could contribute nothing to the amateur entertainment. Then he lay down in the cowshed to sleep. In his sleep, he heard a voice asking him to sing. "I can't sing," he said. "And that is why I left the feast and came here." "Nevertheless," said the mysterious voice, "You shall sing to me." "What shall I sing?" asked Caedmon. "Sing me the song of creation." Then Caedmon sang a song, which became his first poem and was named *The Hymn of Praise*. Later on, encouraged by the success of his first poem, Caedmon composed many other poems by using the biblical material.

Cynewulf and His Poems: Cynewulf lived in the early 9th century. Except the unknown composer of *Beowulf*, he is regarded as the greatest Anglo-Saxon poet. Of his life story we know very little. He was probably an ecclesiastic and a scholar. His name remained unknown until 1840. He produced four poems: *Christ*, *Juliana* and *Elene*. Of all these poems the most characteristic is *Christ*, which is a didactic poem in three parts: the first part celebrates the Nativity; the second part describes the Ascension; and the third part deals with the Doomsday. Cynewulf took his subject matter partly from the church liturgy, but more largely from the homilies of Gregory the Great. The poem expresses a deep love for Christ and reverence for Virgin Mary.

-ANGLO-SAXON PROSE: Prose literature arrived later than poetry. It did not show its appearance until the 8th century. There appeared three famous prose writers: Venerable Bede, Alfred the Great and Aelfric.

1. **Venerable Bede:** When we speak of the Old English prose, the first name that comes into our mind is Venerable Bede (673-735), who is the first scholar in English literature and has been regarded as the father of English learning. His works, over 40 in number, were written exclusively in Latin and covered the whole field of human knowledge of his day. The most important of his works is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The book not only tells us how religion was introduced and spread in England but also recounts some historical events of that period as well as some Anglo-Saxon mythological legends. It is in this book that Bede describes Caedman's legendary life story.

2. **Alfred the Great:** Alfred the Great (848-901), king of Wessex kingdom, is another important figure in prose writing of Anglo-Saxon period. During his reign, he tried every means to improve education by founding colleges and importing teachers from Europe. He was a well-known translator. He translated some important Latin works into English, among which, the most important is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This book records the main happenings of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is the best monument of the Old English prose.

3. **Aelfric:** Aelfric (955-1010) was a clergyman. He wrote a large number of religious works in Greek and Latin. In his works he introduced a lighter, clearer and more musical prose, and the Old English prose was attaining high quality.