PART I
Contexts and Perspectives

1

An Introduction to the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literature

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In terms of extant manuscript numbers, the more significant body of prose writings that survives from Anglo-Saxon England is Anglo-Latin. Along with the arrival of Christianity in southern England at the very end of the sixth century came the need for religious preaching and teaching texts, and in the earlier centuries of the period, these texts were copied, it seems exclusively, in Latin. Thus authors such as Bede, Aldhelm and Alcuin flourished, and their writings were, partially, to form the basis for the emergence of a literary corpus within England in the earlier medieval period. Although English writings may have been transmitted in this early period (Cædmon's *Hymn*, for example, survives in the eighth-century copies of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*) it is towards the end of the ninth century that Old English, alongside Latin, emerged as an important medium for the written word, and there has subsequently been no hiatus in the development of English as a literary form. As far as prose texts in Old English are concerned, 90 per cent of the surviving corpus of vernacular literature up to *c*.1170 is comprised of prose. Poetry forms only 10 per cent of extant literary works: some thirty thousand lines or so in total. There are over two hundred manuscripts in which substantial amounts of Old English appear (Ker, *Catalogue*), but this range of material can be supplemented by manuscripts in which the vernacular appears as individual glosses and notes, as scratched glosses, or as marginal phrases within a predominantly Latin manuscript.

The prose that was produced by Anglo-Saxon scribes and authors can be categorized generically and chronologically. The former classification system would yield religious prose, subdivided, for example, into the Biblical, homiletic, hagiographic, patristic translation, pastoral and liturgical; glossographical; medical; educational; prognosticatory; legal; historical; travel narrative; and romance. These subdivisions can be further broken down into types of specific prose texts; for example, anonymous homilies and hagiographies as opposed to those where the author of the work is known (Lees 1999: 22–7). Known authors of prose in the Anglo-Saxon period are relatively rare; yet the larger proportion of what survives is attributable to them: to King Alfred

and his circle of scholars (in the 890s and 900s); to Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester (writing in the 960s to 980s); to Ælfric (writing in the 990s and 1000s), in particular; to Wulfstan (writing *c.*995–1020); and to Byrhtferth of Ramsey (writing 990–1020). Ælfric, for example, was responsible for writing over one hundred and fifty texts in English, an achievement that marks him out as the most prolific prose writer of the Anglo-Saxon period.

The other categories of prose can be subdivided further also. The educational prose, for example, can be classified into the colloquy, debate literature, encyclopaedic and prognosticatory collections, and so forth. Generic classification, while useful, must also be recognized as creating its own false distinctions, for many prose works do not fall neatly into a particular genre; the same, incidentally, is true of the poetry that survives. Thus, for example, some of the texts in Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* series are actually saints' lives (Hill 1996); some of the patristic translations, principally Latin works translated into Old English during the reign of King Alfred, and at his instigation, also incorporate original composition. This is the case with Alfred's *Preface* to his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, or his numerous additions and adaptations to the translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (Greenfield and Calder 1986: 38–67).

A chronological classification of the prose texts surviving from the Anglo-Saxon period can be, and often is, simplified by the division of the works into those of the Alfredian era, and those of the Benedictine Reform period and later. Among the former works are the translations mentioned above, and the earliest manuscript of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 173, known as the 'Parker Chronicle' or 'A' version). In addition, the Old English version of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, the translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, the Old English version of Orosius' *Historiarum adversum paganos*, and other prose works are attributed to this period, and, in particular, to the work of Alfred and his group of scholars. Subsequent prose works include the English version of the *Benedictine Rule*; the English translations of the New Testament Gospels and some Old Testament books (Marsden 1995); and Old English versions of the Psalter. The two best-known individual Old English writers were contemporaries in the late tenth and early eleventh century: Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham, who wrote two series of *Catholic Homilies* (Godden 1979; Clemoes 1997), additional homilies (Pope 1968), a series entitled the *Lives of Saints* (Skeat 1966), a *Grammar*, a *Colloquy*, a translation of Bede's *De temporibus anni*, part of the *Hexateuch*, and a number of pastoral letters; and Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester and archbishop of York, who composed numerous homilies and legal writings. These important writers are intellectual second-generation products of the Benedictine Reform, inspired both by the monastic renaissance in the tenth century and by the confidence provided by the established tradition of writing and teaching in the vernacular. Other prose collections of the tenth century preceded the work of Ælfric and Wulfstan. Among the most important are the Vercelli and Blickling collections of homiletic and hagiographic texts (Scragg 1992; Morris 1967), which share the obvious emphasis on edification through the medium of Old English, but do not

always share the orthodox approach of Ælfric and his peers. Substantial apocryphal texts are extant both in these two anonymous collections and in other manuscripts. It may seem curious nowadays that apocryphal and non-orthodox texts such as *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, which relates the story of Christ's harrowing of hell, or *The Apocalypse of St Thomas*, which narrates the signs and events heralding the imminent end of the world, were sometimes copied alongside texts of a more authoritative nature, including those written by Ælfric. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 303, for example, is a good case in point; a twelfth-century manuscript containing more than sixty Ælfrician texts, this English manuscript also includes *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, adaptations of Vercelli Homilies, and other anonymous hagiographic and homiletic texts. While Ælfric was determined that his collections of *Catholic Homilies* remain intact, thereby preserving the authority and orthodoxy of his works, within a decade or so his texts were copied with apocryphal or non-orthodox material (see Hill's chapter in this volume). This issue – of the authority and orthodoxy of texts – seems not to have concerned a good many manuscript compilers in the period, who, pragmatically, gathered their materials from a range of sources in order to satisfy their respective audiences' needs. Indeed, determining the nature of collections of texts, and the intended use of the manuscripts, has become an area of great interest to scholars in the last few decades.

In the case of the collection of homiletic and poetic texts in Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolaire cxvii (the Vercelli Book), it is difficult to ascertain the reasons behind the compilation (see, for example, Ó Carragáin 1981). Dated to the middle of the second half of the tenth century, the manuscript, possibly copied at St Augustine's Canterbury (Scragg 1992), contains twenty-three prose homilies and six poetic texts. The homilies themselves appear to have few detectable thematic links other than the, perhaps obvious, penitential and eschatological emphases. How, or indeed whether, these homilies might be unified thematically with the accompanying poetic texts (*Andreas*, *Fates of the Apostles*, *The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene* among them) is an interesting question, but one which perhaps did not vex the compiler of the manuscript as much as it vexes current scholars.

Other works such as the prose texts in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv (the *Beowulf*-manuscript), might represent a thematically linked collection with the emphasis on the monstrous (Orchard 1995). The texts, *Marvels of the East*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *The Life of St Christopher*, all dwell, to an extent, on the relation of the fantastic or monstrous. As *Beowulf* and *Judith* poetically narrate the encounters of the heroes with the grotesque Grendel and his mother, and Holofernes, respectively, it is possible to deduce this textual facet of the monstrous as providing unity of subject matter throughout this manuscript, and this focus of scholarly interpretation in this area has yielded interesting results. These efforts by modern critics to discover thematic unification within Anglo-Saxon manuscripts is, though, perhaps the obvious outcome of a desire to obtain neat and tidy results from research on individual texts or codices; the ultimate aim, then, is to understand and contextualize the contemporary cultural significance of the English texts produced. Some texts,

however, deny such a comfortable thematization. The romance *Apollonius of Tyre*, copied in the mid-eleventh century, is a useful example (see further Scragg's chapter in this volume). Adapted from a Latin source, itself possibly derived from the Greek legend of Apollonius, the text occurs in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 201. This manuscript, in its present form, contains an extensive collection of homiletic, confessional and legal materials. Within this codicological context, the romance of *Apollonius* becomes something of an anomaly, and one must wonder what prompted the manuscript compiler to include this particular text. In what manner was *Apollonius* interpreted within its contemporary Anglo-Saxon milieu? One scholar, Patrick Wormald (1999: 208–9), using analogous monastic evidence, has recently proposed that the text's edifying nature, as well as its entertainment value, would have made it ideal for inclusion in a manuscript constituting 'a Wulfstanian primer of Christian standards' (208). While this is a perceptive interpretation, one might still wonder why a text with such explicit romantic overtones would be considered appropriate reading material within a monastic setting.

The majority of texts so far mentioned are those that might arguably be termed 'literary'. Other prose texts that survive would be difficult to classify as literary, except in the sense that they are 'lettered' or committed to a written format. Among these, for example, would be the numerous works that testify to the administration of government, both ecclesiastical and secular, in Anglo-Saxon England. Some of the most important extant manuscripts from the period are those that contain legal documentation: law-codes and ecclesiastical regulations, in both Latin and Old English (Wormald 1999; see Hough's chapter in this volume). The law-codes range in date from the seventh century to the twelfth. While some of the codes, usually labelled according to the specific reign under which they were written (the Laws of Ine, Alfred, Æthelræd and Cnut, for example), are clearly adapted from earlier examples, they each provide an indication of the types of crimes committed and the ways in which these might have been dealt with. They also illustrate the co-operation of church and state in the maintenance of social order, and evince the hierarchies implicit within the organization of Anglo-Saxon society throughout the centuries. In addition to these legal manuscripts is the substantial body of individual charters, writs and wills that bears witness to land ownership and transfer, and the acquisition and bequest of personal possessions and estates. These, together with the legislative materials, are important for the light that they throw upon the historical, social and cultural contexts of institutional bodies, and indeed some of the wealthier and more aristocratic individuals in England at this time.

Also contributing significantly to our understanding of the society and culture of the Anglo-Saxons are the extant manuscripts containing medical and magical texts (see Hollis' chapter in this volume). Two manuscripts copied from Latin sources are the *Herbarium* and the *Medicina de quadrupedibus*, the latter text following the former in the same manuscript; each provides a series of different antidotes for a variety of illnesses, physical disorders and injuries, the *Herbarium* using plants as curative, the

Quadrupedibus using animal products. Other medical and superstitious cures appear in the *Lacnunga* (which incorporates charms as well as more useful remedies) and Bald's *Leechbook*, the third part of which forms a magico-medical addition to the first two parts. Each of these texts, together with the later medical work known as the *Peri Didaxeon*, provides an interesting insight into the beliefs and illnesses of the Anglo-Saxons, and the ways in which physicians and those with some medical knowledge attempted to combat serious physical and psychological illnesses, and some more trivial ailments or irritations.

Attempting to combat the inexplicability of some aspects of life falls to some of the more prognosticatory prose that survives from the period, in both Latin and Old English. Prognostications attempt to pre-empt particular bad fates or unfortunate outcomes, by warning, among other things, of the probable occurrence of events on specific days or in specific periods. Prognostications survive, for example, in the mid-eleventh-century manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii, amidst a host of homiletic, hagiographic, liturgical and pastoral materials. The prognosticatory texts, arguably akin to modern-day horoscopes and star-signs, were clearly regarded as integral to a monastic manuscript such as Tiberius A. iii. Similarly, London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. xiv (Warner 1917), a handbook useful for those teaching and preaching to less well-educated laypersons or monks, incorporates homilies, saints' lives, teaching texts and basic catechetical materials, and prognosticatory texts. The inclusion of the last once more demonstrates the encyclopaedic and quotidian nature of these texts; their possible adoption as part of the pastoral duties of the monastic priest working amongst the laity, or the parish priest himself, illustrates their utility and authority within a Christian context.

The prognostications illustrate a real concern with the passing of time, with the days of the week, or the seasons. If, for example, New Year's Day falls on a Thursday (Warner 1917: 66), then it is prophesied that a good winter, a windy Lent, a good summer and good harvest will follow that year; if New Year's Day is on a Saturday, not only will it be a dreadful winter and a windy Lent, but then all the crops will spoil, sheep will die, and the same fate will befall old men. It seems obvious that, to a society that depended almost entirely on agricultural success to survive, weather forecasting in this (from a modern perspective, superstitious) manner formed an important part of the body of learning. Time also played a major role in other texts composed and copied during the period, such as Ælfric's late tenth-century *De temporibus anni*, which draws on Bede's scientific works calculating the movement of the sun and moon, and the ways in which these assist in ascertaining the passage of time. Byrhtferth's early eleventh-century *Enchiridion* (Baker and Lapidge 1995), a Latin and English commentary on his own Latin *Computus* (for calculating Easter and the major movable feasts in the church year), and numerous additional computistical works that allowed the Anglo-Saxons to determine the dates of major Christian festivals are other texts crucial to the smooth running of the sequences of the church. Although this type of prose might barely be considered literary, certainly in the modern sense of that

description, each work nevertheless assists the scholar in providing a more accurate historical and cultural context for the Anglo-Saxon author and his or her audience.

Four major codices contain the bulk of the surviving poetry:

1   The 'Exeter Book', Exeter, Cathedral Library 3501 (dated to the second half of the tenth century), containing the following in the order in which they appear in the manuscript (standard titles given; users of Muir's 1994 edition should note that he retitles certain poems): *Christ I* (or *Advent Lyrics*), *Christ II* (or *Ascension*), *Christ III*, *Guthlac A*, *Guthlac B*, *Azarius*, *The Phoenix*, *Juliana*, *The Wanderer*, *The Gifts of Men*, *Precepts*, *The Seafarer*, *Vainglory*, *Widsith*, *Fortunes of Men*, *Maxims I*, *Order of the World*, *The Rhyming Poem*, *The Panther*, *The Whale*, *The Partridge*, *Soul and Body II*, *Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *Riddles* 1–59 (1–57 in Williamson 1977), *The Wife's Lament*, *Judgement Day I*, *Resignation* (sometimes divided into *Resignation A* and *Resignation B*), *Descent into Hell*, *Almsgiving*, *Pharoah*, *Lord's Prayer I*, *Homiletic Fragment II*, *Riddle* 30b (28b in Williamson), *Riddle* 60 (58 in Williamson), *The Husband's Message*, *The Ruin*, *Riddles* 61–95 (59–91 in Williamson). The entire codex is edited by Krapp and Dobbie 1936, and by Muir 1994.
2   The 'Vercelli Book', Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolaire CXVII (dated to the second half of the tenth century), containing a combination of poetic and prose texts. The poetic texts are: *Andreas*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Soul and Body I*, *Homiletic Fragment I*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Elene* (all edited by Krapp 1932).
3   The 'Junius Codex', Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11 (sc 5123), containing *Genesis A* and *B*, *Exodus*, *Daniel* (all tenth–eleventh century); *Christ and Satan* (first half of the eleventh century) (all edited by Krapp 1931).
4   The '*Beowulf* Codex', London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, containing both prose and poetic works. The poetic texts are: *Beowulf*, *Judith* (the manuscript is dated to *c*.1000; edited by Krapp 1953).

In addition to the codices, numerous poetic texts are found in other manuscripts: *The Finnsburh Fragment* (lost, but printed in Hickes' *Thesaurus* 1705), *Waldere* (Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, N. K. S. 167b (4°), fragmentary), *The Battle of Maldon* (burnt; originally London, British Library, Cotton Otho A. xii; partially preserved in a transcript by David Casley before 1731), *Durham* (Cambridge, University Library Ff. 1. 27; a burnt text originally from London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius D. xx, printed in Hickes' *Thesaurus* 1705; see also Fry 1992), *The Rune Poem* (burnt; originally London, British Library, Cotton Otho B. x, but printed in Hickes' *Thesaurus* 1705), *Solomon and Saturn* (two fragmentary texts contained in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41 and 422), *The Menologium* and *Maxims II* (both in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. i, the C-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), *A Proverb* (Vienna, Nationalbibliothek 751), *Judgement Day II*, *An Exhortation to Christian Living*, *A Summons to Prayer*, *The Lord's Prayer II*, *Gloria I* (all contained in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 201), the *Benedictine Office* (see Dobbie 1942: lxxvi–vii for distribution of poetic renderings of the psalm verses), the *Creed*, *The Lord's Prayer III*, and

another copy of *Gloria I* (all in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 121), *The Kentish Hymn* and *Psalm 50* (London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. vi), *Gloria II* (London, British Library, Cotton Titus D. xxvii), *A Prayer* (London, British Library, Cotton Julius A. ii, and London, Lambeth Palace 427), *Thureth* (London, British Library, Cotton Claudius A. iii), *Aldhelm* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 326), *Seasons for Fasting* (preserved in a transcript by Laurence Nowell (*c*.1510/20–*c*.1571), London British Library, Additional 43703), *The Leiden Riddle* (Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Voss. Q. 106; in the West Saxon version as *Riddle* 35 of the Exeter Book). To these can be added the poems found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *The Capture of the Five Boroughs*, *The Coronation of Edgar*, *The Death of Alfred*, *The Death of Edward*, *The Death of Edgar*. One of the most important poems, *Cædmon's Hymn*, is preserved in over twenty manuscripts, and *Bede's Death Song* is preserved as part of the *Epistola Cuthberti de obitu Bedæ* in thirty-five manuscripts. There are a number of Latin-English proverbs, the metrical prefaces to King Alfred's *Pastoral Care* and Wærferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*, a metrical epilogue in a copy of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41), and the *Metres of Boethius* (London, British Library, Cotton Otho A. vi). Runic verse inscriptions are found on the Ruthwell Cross and the Bewcastle Cross, and on the Franks Casket. Finally, some twelve charms from various manuscripts can be said to be written in verse.

The literature that survives, and that has been briefly touched upon in this rapid survey, is analysed more thoroughly and in far greater detail in the chapters that follow. Its chief characteristics are its immense diversity and interest; its intellectual and social importance; and the relative neglect of the prose in comparison with the poetry of the period. A volume such as this is designed to inform and stimulate, and it may be that the engagement with Anglo-Saxon literature prompted by this and other, similar critical works will be sufficient to inspire much-needed and very welcome further research on the part of the individual reader.

<div style="text-align:center">REFERENCES</div>

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