

Abstract

Manuscript Variation in Multiple-Recension Old English Poetic Texts The Technical Problem and Poetical Art

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On the basis of an examination of the textual variation in all Old English poems known to have survived the Anglo-Saxon period in more than one recension, I argue that Old English poetic texts were transmitted to different standards of accuracy depending on the context in which they were found and the purposes to which they were put. These contexts can be divided into three main classes, each of which appears to have had its own level of acceptable variation. At their most conservative, Anglo-Saxon scribes of all periods represented by the surviving evidence could copy long texts with little or no substantive variation – this substantive variation at times being preserved in the face of otherwise thorough-going alterations in the accidental details of dialect and orthography. The poems reflecting this standard of accuracy are found exclusively outside of the manuscripts responsible for the preservation of the greater part of the surviving Old English verse texts and include a variety of texts which are in some way functional or occasional – the metrical translation of the psalms, “Durham,” and the marginal recensions of “Cædmon’s Hymn” (preserved exclusively in manuscripts of the Latin *Historia ecclesiastica*). A second standard of accuracy appears to have applied to certain witnesses of poems transmitted within larger prose framing works like the Old English translation of the *Historia ecclesiastica* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. For the most part, the variation among the witnesses to these poems is little different from that found among those of the functional and occasional texts. In certain cases, however, individual scribes appear to have been more willing to alter the substantive details of their texts in these contexts. These changes rarely have any great effect on the sense, metre or syntax in which they occur, and, as similar variation is generally also to be found in the prose sections of the surrounding text, appear to reflect the individual interests, habits or perhaps even editorial instructions of the scribes responsible for the manuscripts in which they occur. A third group of poems shows a much more significant pattern of variation – including variants which involve the substitution, addition, omission, or alteration of more than one word and even entire lines and half-lines. With one exception, however, these are the only poems for which exemplars are found in one or more of the four principal anthologies of Old English poetry. The evident freedom with which the texts of this last group of poems were combined, anthologised, and excerpted suggests, moreover, that these texts belong to a tradition in which reproduction was not the principal motivation for scribal transmission and that other factors – such as poetic sensibility – may have played a role in their preservation and transmission.

