

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study has argued that Anglo-Saxon scribes copied Old English verse to different standards of accuracy depending on the nature of the context in which they were working. Taking as its sample all metrically regular Old English poems known to have survived in more than one twelfth-century or earlier witness, it divides this corpus into three main contextual groups, each of which exhibits a characteristic pattern of substantive textual variation.

Chapter Two examines “Glossing, Translating, and Occasional” poems. These texts are generally short, are found in primarily non-poetic contexts, and appear to have been transmitted independently of their surrounding context. They also all show a high level of substantive textual accuracy. At their most accurate, the scribes responsible for copying the surviving witnesses to these poems show themselves to have been able to reproduce their common texts with little or no variation in vocabulary, word order, or syntax – and preserve this accuracy even in the face of a corrupt common exemplar or thoroughgoing dialectal translation. The substantive variants the witnesses to these texts do show tend either to be obvious mistakes or to have a relatively insignificant effect on sense, syntax, and metre. Apparently significant inflectional differences more often than not can be attributed to graphic error, orthographic difference, or phonological change. Verbal substitutions are rare and almost invariably involve words which look alike and have similar meanings. Examples of the addition or omission of words and elements either destroy the sense of the passage in which they occur, or involve unstressed and syntactically unimportant sentence particles.

Chapter Three looks at the poems preserved in “Fixed Contexts” – as constituents of larger vernacular prose framing texts such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Old English translation of the *Pastoral Care*, and the Old English translation of Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*. With the exception of a single, late witness to the Old English *Historia*, these poems are found in exactly the same contextual position in each surviving witness. The *Battle of Brunanburh* is always found in manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; the Metrical Preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care* survives only in manuscripts of Alfred’s translation. In contrast to the Glossing, Translating, and Occasional poems discussed in Chapter Two, the Fixed Context poems differ greatly in the amount and types of textual variation they exhibit. At their most conservative, the scribes of the surviving witnesses to these texts produce copies as accurate as the least variable Glossing, Translating, and Occasional poems; the scribes of other witnesses, however, show themselves to be far more willing to introduce substantive changes of vocabulary and inflection. In either case the amount and nature of the variation introduced is directly comparable to the substantive textual variation found in the surrounding prose. Scribes who show themselves to have been innovative copyists of the prose texts in which these poems are found, also invariably produce innovative copies of the poems themselves; scribes who produce conservative copies of the poetic texts, on the other hand, are responsible for the most conservative texts of the surrounding frame.

The third standard of accuracy is exhibited by the “Anthologised and Excerpted” poems discussed in Chapter Four. These poems differ from the Glossing, Translating, and Occasional poems of Chapter Two and the Fixed Context poems of Chapter Three in both the nature of the contexts in which they are found and the amount and significance of the substantive variation they exhibit. Unlike the texts discussed in the preceding chapters, the Anthologised and Excerpted poems show evidence of the intelligent involvement of the

persons first responsible for collecting or excerpting them in their surviving witnesses. Like the greater part of the corpus of Old English poetry as a whole – but unlike the poems discussed in Chapters Two and Three – these texts all survive with at least one witness in a compilation or anthology. In four out of the six cases, their common text shows signs of having been excerpted from, inserted into, or joined with other prose or verse texts in one or another witness. Where the variation exhibited by the poems discussed in Chapters Two and Three was to be explained only on the grounds of the personal interests, abilities, or difficulties of the scribes responsible for the tradition leading up to each of the surviving witnesses, that exhibited by the witnesses to the Anthologised and Excerpted poems frequently can be explained on contextual grounds – and often involves the introduction of metrically, lexically or syntactically coordinated variants at different places in the common text.

This argument has some important implications for our understanding of the transmission of Old English poetry. In the first place, it suggests that there was no single style of Old English poetic transmission. Since Sisam first asked “Was the poetry accurately transmitted?” scholars examining variation in the transmission of Old English verse texts have tended to assume they were investigating a single phenomenon – that is to say, have assumed that, a few late, early, or otherwise exceptional examples aside, all Old English poems showed pretty much the same kinds of textual variation, whether this variation be the result of “error,” or the application of “oral” or “formulaic” ways of thinking. The evidence presented here, however, suggests that the scribes themselves worked far less deterministically. Rather than copying “the poetry” to any single standard of substantive accuracy, the scribes seem instead to have adjusted their standards to suit the demands of the context in which the specific poem they were copying was to appear. When the wording of their text was important – as it was when the poem was being copied as a gloss or translation – the scribes reproduced their

exemplars more or less word-for-word. When the relationship between their text and its surrounding context was paramount – as it appears to have been in the case of the Anthologised and Excerpted poems – the evidence of the surviving witnesses suggests that the persons responsible for transmitting these texts were more willing to adjust sense, syntax, and metre. When other factors appear to have played a role – incompetence in the case of the scribe of the London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. i (**ChronD**) version of the *Chronicle* poems, editorial adventurousness in that of the Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 41 (**B₁**) version of the Old English Bede – the similarity between the verse and prose variation these manuscripts exhibit suggests the scribes did not take any specifically “poetic” approach to the constituent verse.

In the second place, the evidence presented here that scribes copied to a different standard of accuracy depending on the nature of the context in which they were working suggests that the scribes themselves recognised the existence of different types of manuscript collections. The fact that the scribes responsible for copying the (marginal) West-Saxon *ylda-* and the (fixed, main-text) West-Saxon *eorðan-* recensions of “Cædmon’s Hymn” worked to such different standards of accuracy, for example, tells us that they collectively recognised a functional difference between the margins of a Latin manuscript and the main text of a vernacular prose history. Just as significantly, the fact that the Anthologised and Excerpted poems differ so greatly from the “minor poems” discussed in Chapters Two and Three in both context and variation suggests that these poems and collections were also regarded as a different class of text or manuscript – in this case, perhaps, a more “literary” class, suitable for collection, recomposition, or excerption as the need arose.

This is not an insignificant observation. In contrast to our knowledge of the poetry of most other periods of English literature, our knowledge of Old English vernacular verse is almost

entirely deductive. Most Old English poems are undateable, anonymous, and of uncertain origins. The Anglo-Saxons themselves left no accounts of the metrical basis of their verse, the manner in which they composed the texts, the generic classifications (if any) they recognised. In this light, the distinctions maintained by the scribes of the multiply attested poems between different poems and contexts can be seen as an implicit source of contemporary literary criticism, providing us with an opportunity to establish how Anglo-Saxon readers saw their poetry both as an art-form in its own right and as part of the wider cultural and literary environment in Anglo-Saxon England.

For practical and historical reasons, this study has concentrated on the substantive variation found among the witnesses to *poetic* texts. Practical in the sense that the number of multiply-attested poetic texts is relatively small, and that the preservation of metre provides a valuable means of distinguishing between otherwise syntactically and lexically acceptable readings. Historical in the sense that the “authority” of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts always has been seen as a primarily poetic problem. For it is only in the poetry that the relative lack of multiply attested texts presents critics with such important questions about the reliability of the scribes responsible for the preservation of the surviving witnesses. The most important prose works of the period generally survive in enough copies to allow for the relatively easy isolation of what Dorothy Horgan has called the “Scribal Contribution.” As a result, research into prose variation has tended to concentrate on explicating the motives and techniques of individual scribes or revisers, rather than examining the basic reliability of their profession as a whole. Thus, in the same volume of collected essays in which Sisam uses the variation between the surviving manuscripts of poetic texts to question the reliability of the scribes responsible for copying Old English verse, appears an essay in which the variation between surviving manuscripts of Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies* is used in part to reconstruct Ælfric’s habits as a

reviser of his own work.⁷⁹⁶ Likewise, the “thousands of (mostly) minor modifications”⁷⁹⁷ in the text of Wærferð’s translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* in Oxford Bodleian Hatton 76, ff. 1-54 has led to the frequent discussion of the syntactic and lexical differences between the original and revision – but not of the competency of the scribe(s) responsible for the revised text.⁷⁹⁸

Future work will need to look at the prose. Perhaps because the reliability of the scribes of prose texts has not been an important issue in the study of Old English literature, there are to my knowledge no comparative studies of Anglo-Saxon prose transmission. While current work with multiply attested prose works often gives us a very good idea of the type of variation introduced by the scribes of different manuscripts within a single tradition or text, I know of no study which examines whether certain types of prose texts or whether prose texts preserved in certain types of manuscript contexts are more liable to textual revision and innovation than others. This is of obvious importance in the case of the anthologies containing both prose and verse. If I am right in suggesting that the anthologies formed a special class of manuscripts in which collectors were more willing to intervene in the verse texts they transmit, then similar amounts and types of variation ought also to appear in their prose as well.⁷⁹⁹ But

⁷⁹⁶Kenneth Sisam, “MSS. Bodley 340 and 342: Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies*,” *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), 148-198.

⁷⁹⁷Roberta Frank, “General Editor’s Preface,” in: David Yerkes, *The Two Versions of Wærferth’s Translation of Gregory’s Dialogues: An Old English Thesaurus*, Toronto Old English Series 4 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1979), p. vii.

⁷⁹⁸See in particular the series of studies by David Yerkes: *The Two Versions of Wærferth’s Translation of Gregory’s Dialogues; Syntax and Style in Old English: A Comparison of the Two Versions of Wærferth’s Translation of Gregory’s Dialogues*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies 5 (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, SUNY Binghamton, 1982); “The Differences of Inflection between the two versions of the Old English Translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues*,” *NM* 83 (1982): 260-66; “The Translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* and Its Revision: Textual History, Provenance, Authorship,” *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: SUNY, 1986) 335-44.

⁷⁹⁹That the multiply attested homilies of the Vercelli Book contain many unique readings has been reported by Donald Scragg – although he suggests that these “can often be shown by comparison with the [Latin] sources to be original” (*The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, EETS o.s. 300 [Oxford: EETS, 1992], p. xx).

a similar approach may also yield fruit in other, uniquely prosaic, contexts. For example, are homilies more or less accurately transmitted when they are copied as fixed constituents of homiliaries, or as individual texts assembled in collections like the Vercelli Book? Do different prose genres – historical writing, *vitae*, homilies – provoke different scribal responses towards the substantive details of their texts? Regardless of the results of this research, the approach – in which scribal performance is seen as a practical response to the demands of the text or context in which the scribe is working rather than as a result of a culturally determined reflex – seems certain to offer us a more reasonable, and it may be hoped, a more living, view of Anglo-Saxon literary life.