

"Anglo Saxon Poetry"

According to Legouis, English literature as such does not begin before the fourteenth century because the two factors which contribute to the unity of literature (i) the continuance of a language which, from the first to the last, remains intelligible and (ii) the continuity of the written works handed down from generation to generation do not appear before the days of Chaucer. But the two tributaries which contributed their water to the main flood of the English literature and influenced its course are (a) Anglo Saxon literature and (b) literature imported from France by the Normans. In his own words:

"The first tributary is Anglo Saxon literature, the second is the literature imported from France by the Normans. Neither alone can claim to be 'English' literature, but each has contributed its water to the main

flood and influenced its course; just as the intermingling of the two vocabularies - Germanic and Franco-Latin has formed the English of today."

Anglo-Saxon poetry includes the lays of pre-Christian times and fragments which are entirely heathen. The earliest of the poems by the forefathers is Widsith. He is a wide wanderer, a traveller, who gives an account of the places where he went, the feudal halls where he sang, the amount of welcome accorded to him and the gifts which he received. People loved him and his song and he found an easy welcome wherever he went.

Another early poem is 'The Complaint of Deor'. Deor is a minstrel and not a wanderer. He suffers because he has been estranged, by his Lord. He consoles himself with the thought that unkindness of fate was habitual

and takes heart to endure his misfortune. Stoical resignation is the persistent note of the poem. The poem is in lyrical form and may be said to be the first English lyric.

'Beowulf' is a later poem Christianised which dates from the eleventh century. The poem is an old heathen saga in origin. It describes the tribal life of the ancient days. It is the oldest epic in Germanic literature. The hero of the poem is a strong man of war who develops into an ideal King and dies to save his people. 'The Battle of Finnsburg' is a fragment of old pagan tale about Walthere and Aquitaine. There are some verses sung by Teutonic peasants which later became infused with religious sentiment, are primarily heathen songs.

Apart from these poems there are elegiac and war poems too. These poems are distinguished from 'Beowulf' by their rupture from the continent and ~~pages~~

paganism. 'The Ruined Burg' mourns the vanished glory of a ruined city, 'The Wife's Complaint' is a poem in which a young wife mourns her separation through false tongues, from her beloved and the elegy of 'The Wanderer' describes a man's sigh for his dead liege-lord. The most original of these poems is 'The Seafarer'. It is in a way a song of the middle of the tenth century that the fierce note of primitive times is heard the loudest. These songs are in fragments of alliterative verse. These have been inserted by some monk into a prose chronicle. There is nothing superhuman or extraordinary in the 'Battle of Maldon', it simply gives an account of men outnumbered fighting to the last. We may find traces of Christianity here and there in the poems mentioned above. It is really otherwise with the Anglo-Saxon poetry which is mainly religious.

Christianity had crept into England from two sources - (i) the arrival of Irish missionaries who were the followers of St. Patrick and (ii) with the followers of St. Augustine from Rome. Their arrival and the ~~gradual~~ gradual conversion of the English people had a great impact on the later English literature too. The Irish missionaries established monasteries, the two most famous being Jarrow and Whitby. It was at Jarrow that Boeda, popularly known as 'venerable Bede' lived and wrote his famous book 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People'. In his book we find the name of the first known poet of England, Caedmon. It is said when once he was sleeping in the stable, he dreamt of a figure commanding him to sing. He fashioned a song of creation at the command and woke up. He remembered the song and made many more like this. Since he was an unlettered man

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~~The~~ Bible used to be read to him and he versified the stories he liked. These stories in verse known as 'Caedmon's Paraphrase' became very famous. Of these only some fragments have survived. Here we find paganism merging into Christianity of the time. The influence of Caedmon on his successors was great. We may say that Caedmon founded a new school of religious poetry. The verses of Caedmon served as models for the poets who came after him.

The second poet of repute is Cynewulf. He is the author of 'Christ and Judith' and the 'Dream of the Rood'. Cynewulf was a Northumbrian and lived at the close of eighth century.

The end.

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