

THE SEARCH FOR THE ANGLO-SAXON ORAL POET*

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Omne ignotum pro magnifico est.
Everything unknown seems somehow magnificent.
Tacitus, *De vita Agricolae*, 30.3.¹

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter
John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian urn*

Each age gets the Anglo-Saxon oral poet it deserves: an unlettered farmhand suffering from singer's block; a king's thane reciting dark deeds done long ago in Germanic forests; a preacher harping a run-away congregation back to church; a long-haired, long-in-the-tooth hippie with tears that almost flow; a seer maintaining a direct line to Woden; an author-function operating on a binary code of praise and blame, processing the memory of the tribe, storing information in formulaic units, and checking for transmission errors; a slender-fingered blonde in a grey headdress kneading dough with one hand and composing songs to the harp with the other.² As in a Rorschach test, blurred outlines elicit from the interpreter a series of searching self-portraits. And as in a murder mystery, a lack of information excites interest and sets the imagination in motion. We sense the 'original' English poet is out there somewhere, even if no signals confirm his existence.

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¹ In Tacitus this aphorism sums up Britain's attractiveness to Rome: *De vita Agricolae*, ed. R. M. Ogilvie and Ian Richmond (Oxford, 1967), 111, lines 25–6; taken from John R. Harris, *Accidental grandeur: a defense of narrative vagueness in ancient epic literature*, Lang Classical Studies, 1 (New York, 1989), 1.

² On the Anglo-Saxon woman as a potential composer and performer of vernacular poetry, see Fred C. Robinson, 'Old English poetry: the question of authorship', *ANQ: a quarterly journal of short articles, notes, and reviews*, 3/2 (April 1990), 59–64; Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1984), 54–5, 114–15.

Confident statements about him are everywhere. Here is a typical description from twenty years ago:

The *scop* had at court an important post which he might lose to another, or leave to take up a similar elsewhere. His primary function was to compose and to sing to the accompaniment of his harp songs which would spread the fame of his royal patron. He could also sing songs which celebrated the mighty deeds of ancient heroes: indeed, his mind was full of the traditional and heroic lore which he needed as court genealogist and historian. Like the skald, he was not instructed at a bardic school. His rewards were substantial, gifts of clothes, of gold and silver, and grants of land.³

We are continually told that '[Anglo-Saxon] singers were honored and skilled performers for aristocratic patrons',⁴ that 'heroic lays and praise poems . . . were the favorite entertainment of the court', where 'the king's scop sat at the feet of the king',⁵ and that 'the primal situation of king and bard obtained in pagan English times and continued, modified in varying degrees, down to the Norman Conquest'.⁶ Such glimpses of the poet in society are standard fare, enriching our lectures and enlivening our books. They are also no more than hopeful speculations hallowed by repetition.

For nothing can be proven, not even that such a poet never existed. Oral poets holding a publicly recognized office are found in medieval Ireland, Wales and Scotland, as in medieval Scandinavia. But if such poets existed in Anglo-Saxon England, they have vanished without a trace. Perhaps they never were. The unionized *filid* and bards of the medieval Celtic world, whose duties, privileges and pay scales were defined by law, and the skalds, professional eulogists and satirists of the North, may have been an altogether different breed from the shadowy Anglo-Saxon oral poet. Perhaps the making of verse was not a specialized profession in Anglo-Saxon England, but the province of free-lance practitioners or skilled amateurs; or perhaps poetic craft was so unspecialized that everybody participated to some degree.⁷ All we can be sure of is our ignorance.

Those of us who were postgraduate students in the 1960s, the psychedelic, oracular, tribal and improvisatory decade that brought us the Beat Poets and the Beatles, Bob Dylan and Elvis in Hollywood, remember the enthusiasm with which the orality of Anglo-Saxon poets was probed and proved. At a time when a new

³ J.E. Caerwyn Williams, 'The court poet in medieval Ireland', Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 57 (1971), 85–135, at 93.

⁴ John D. Niles, *Beowulf: the poem and its tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 32.

⁵ Calvin B. Kendall, *The metrical grammar of Beowulf* (Cambridge, 1991), 3.

⁶ Morton W. Bloomfield and Charles W. Dunn, *The role of the poet in early societies* (Cambridge, and Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, 1989), 25.

⁷ On types of oral poets, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral poetry: its nature, significance and social context* (Cambridge, 1977), 170–213. On the *filid*, see Dáithí Ó hÓgain, *An file* [The poet] (Dublin, 1982); also Wolfgang Meid, *Dichter und Dichtkunst im alten Irland* (Innsbruck, 1971), and Liam Breatnach, ed., *Uraicecht na riar: the poetic grades in early Irish law* (Dublin, 1987).

communications technology appeared to be accelerating out of control, so was the academy's nostalgia for a bookless past, for non-élitist culture, for personal voice. Toronto was then 'for a brief period the intellectual centre of the world',⁸ invigorated by the theories of Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, the latter's mentor Harold Innis (and later his student Walter Ong), all of whom were maintaining that the most important factor in cultural history was change not in what was conveyed but in how.⁹ Essays on the nature of oral poetry quickly proliferated: a recent bibliography of the subject contains more than 1,800 items on dozens of literatures, most of which appeared after 1960;¹⁰ a new 110-page survey of oral formulaic theory in Old English studies derives almost all its citations from the 1960s and later, as if orality had first been brought to bear on Old English poetry by Harvard's Francis Magoun and Albert Lord.¹¹ Enveloped by collective amnesia, we rarely mention that Serbo-Croatian *guslari*, improvising Gaelic poets and Hebrew psalmists, a chanting Germania and Romania, not to mention the singers of Lapland and 'the bards and minstrels' of Tahiti,¹² were already protected species more than two hundred years ago.¹³

⁸ Oswyn Murray, 'The word is mightier than the pen', *Times Literary Supplement* (16–22 June 1989), 655–6, at 655.

⁹ See, e.g., Innis, *The bias of communication* (Toronto, 1951); Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); McLuhan, *The Gutenberg galaxy* (Toronto, 1962), *Understanding media* (New York, 1964); Ong, *The presence of the word* (New Haven and London, 1967). Outside North America, the same few years produced Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962), trans. *The savage mind* (Chicago, 1966); *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1964), trans. *The raw and the cooked* (New York, 1970); and Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The consequences of literacy' in *Literacy in traditional societies* (Cambridge, 1968), 27–84. See Havelock, *The muse learns to write: reflections on orality and literacy from antiquity to the present* (New Haven, 1986), esp. 17–18, 24–9.

¹⁰ John Miles Foley, *Oral-formulaic theory and research: an introduction and annotated bibliography* (New York, 1985).

¹¹ Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, 'Oral-formulaic research in Old English studies: I', *Oral Tradition*, 1/3 (1986), 548–606; 'II', *Oral Tradition*, 3/1–2 (1988), 138–90. It is generally accepted that oral theory entered Old English literature through Albert B. Lord's 1949 dissertation, which eleven years later became *The singer of tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24 (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Francis F.P. Magoun applied the theory to Old English literature in 'The oral-formulaic character of Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry', *Speculum*, 28 (1953), 446–67. The 1960s produced a number of full-bodied descriptions of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet: e.g., Egon Werlich, 'Der westgermanische Skop: Der Aufbau seiner Dichtung und sein Vortrag' (University of Münster dissertation, 1964); of enduring value is Klaus von See, 'Skop und Skald: Zur Auffassung des Dichters bei den Germanen', *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, 45, n.s. 14 (1964), 1–14.

¹² John Hawkesworth's edition of Cook's account of his first voyage mentions 'the bards and minstrels of Otaheite', adding that 'their song was unpremeditated, and accompanied with musick': *An account of the voyage undertaken for making discoveries in the southern hemisphere* (London, 1773), II, 148 (12 June 1769).

¹³ A notable exception is E.G. Stanley, who reminds us that the 1960s revival of interest in oral-formulaic poetry was just that: see 'The scholarly recovery of the significance of Anglo-Saxon records in prose and verse: a new bibliography', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 9 (1981), 223–62, esp. 258–60; repr. in his *A collection of papers with emphasis on Old English literature* (Toronto, 1987), 44–5. John Wain explores some parallels and differences between the

Although it might be fun to pile up quotations from current writers concerning the nature of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet, for the sake of time and long friendships I shall focus instead on the three ages most responsible for forming the Saxon singer we know today: namely, the second half of the eighteenth century; Anglo-Saxon England itself; and the first half of the twelfth century. Each of these periods built up a picture of a proto-English poet plying his trade a millennium and a half ago. Surveying these reconstructed bards and responses to them across the centuries, we can observe the swings back and forth between credulity and doubt, between creative optimism and cognitive agnosticism. The errors in our predecessors' evocations turn out to be as varied, unexpected and revealing as our own. We can map out the prejudices and misconceptions of the past, spying on the early explorers as they populated unknown seas with red herrings and great whales. And in so doing we learn not only which attitudes toward the Anglo-Saxon poet prevalent today are grounded in an obsolete scholarship, but also that our own formulations are no less bound than theirs to a particular time and place.

One of Brigid Brophy's endearing judgements is that the two most entertaining subjects in the world are the eighteenth century and sex; she is, as Anthony Burgess has noted, only half right.¹⁴ That print-saturated century was obsessed with – naturally – oral poets and poetry; suddenly, just after mid-century, writers all over Europe began to seek the bard here, there and everywhere. In the Enlightenment Homer and his kind had become pale abstractions, an author-function rather than living, breathing, vivid personalities. But after 1750 complacent parallels between Britain and Augustan Rome began to give way to a gloating curiosity about the decline of the Roman Empire and about the silent tribes massing in cold dawns beyond its frontiers. Bards became big. In 1757 Oliver Goldsmith complained that his learned colleagues, labouring over the ancient poets of Greece and Rome, were almost totally ignoring their own.¹⁵ Edward Young in 1759 sought what he called the 'original poet', reducing the poem to a by-product, the merest shadow, of a distinctive, dynamic individual. Follow Homer, not the

bardomania of the 1760s and 1960s in 'Alternative poetry: an Oxford inaugural lecture', *Encounter*, 42/6 (June, 1974), 26–38. On the orality/literacy question and Rousseau's 'noble savage', see Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 272–3. On 'the bardic [as] print culture's nostalgia for oral culture', see Donald Wesling, 'Difficulties of the bardic', *Critical Inquiry* (1981), 69–81. The bards of Lapland entered European consciousness through Johannes Scheffer's *Lapponia, id est, regionis Lapponum et gentis nova et verissima descriptio* (Frankfurt, 1673), trans. *The history of Lapland* (Oxford, 1674); for oral poets of the other nations mentioned, see notes 33, 34, and 37 below.

¹⁴ Burgess, *New York Times Book Review*, 8 March 1970, 4.

¹⁵ *The Monthly Review*, 16 (1757), 380.

Iliad, he urged aspiring artists, 'imitate not the Composition, but the Man'.¹⁶ In 1763 John Brown argued that primitive poetry was inseparable from music, a union conveniently confirmed the same year by Ossian, the marvellous third-century Gaelic bard forged by James Macpherson.¹⁷ In 1767 the concluding chapter of William Duff's *Essay of original genius* bore the long title (here abbreviated) 'That Original Poetic Genius Will in General Be Displayed in its Ultimate Vigour in the Early . . . Periods of Society . . .'.¹⁸ In 1781 a paper by Thomas Barnes read before the recently formed Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester praised the speech of early poets for possessing 'vehement passion', 'strong and animated feeling', and 'fervour of imagination'.¹⁹ In his comments on Pope's *Temple of fame*, Joseph Warton lamented, like Goldsmith before him, the neglect of native traditions and poets by the English literary world.²⁰ Plenty of instant Gothic ruins were being built in the second half of the eighteenth century; why not an oral-poet theme-park, a Bard-World?

Visitors to such a theme-park in the summer of 1774, when Napoleon Bonaparte was celebrating his fifth birthday, would probably have been asked to enter by the Percy gate, now adorned by Sir Joshua Reynolds' just-completed portrait of the editor of the *Reliques of ancient English poetry*.²¹ Once inside, tourists found themselves in a humming, buzzing 'prescriptsarian' paradise, resonant with harps and casually furnished in Gothic modern: vast steaming

¹⁶ *Conjectures on original composition* (London, 1759), 21.

¹⁷ *Dissertation on the rise, union, and power, the progressions, separations, and corruptions of poetry and music* (London, 1763). Macpherson's Ossian corpus consists of *Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic or Erse language* (Edinburgh, 1760); *Fingal, an ancient epic poem in six books: together with several other poems, composed by Ossian, the son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic language* (London, 1762); *Temora, an ancient epic poem in eight books, composed by Ossian, the son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic language* (London, 1763). Macpherson conceived Ossian in the image of the primitive poet put forward by Scottish theorists, and his bard quickly became the standard against which these theorists judged other early poets and found them wanting: see Hugh Blair, *A critical dissertation on the poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal* (London, 1763).

¹⁸ *An essay of original genius and its various modes of exertion in philosophy and the fine arts, particularly in poetry* (London, 1767), 274. Cf. Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas* (1759), ch. 10: 'in almost all countries, the most ancient poets are considered the best'.

¹⁹ 'On the nature and essential characters of poetry, as distinguished from prose', *Memoirs and Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, 1 (1785–89), 54–71, at 58; repr. in *Twenty essays on literary and philosophical subjects by Thomas Henry and others* (Dublin, 1791), 20–34.

²⁰ *Essay on the genius and writings of Pope*, 4th edn (London, 1782), I, 373 (sect. 7).

²¹ The portrait, finished by June of 1774, showed Percy in velvet cap and gown, clutching the folio manuscript in his left hand. See Bertrand H. Davis, *Thomas Percy: a scholar-cleric in the age of Johnson* (Philadelphia, 1989), 207. The author of *Reliques of ancient English poetry, consisting of old heroic ballads, songs, and other pieces of our earlier poets*, 3 vols (London, 1765), had as early as 1762 expressed the intention, never fulfilled, of putting together some 'Specimens of the poetry of various nations in a series of literal translations': see *The Percy letters: the correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans*, ed. Aneurin Lewis (Baton Rouge, 1957), 98 (23 July 1764), 30 (14 August 1762). See René Wellek, *The rise of English literary history* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 68.

whirlpools, tasteful moonlit grottoes, a decorative precipice or two. And in every hollow an emoting bard. Winged words and loose numbers flew around by the thousands. Homer was there, of course; he had been identified as an oral poet, in some way or other, since at least the 1730s, although never more openly than in the recent study by Robert Wood.²² The Norse skalds were much in evidence, esteemed since the seventeenth century as a particularly poetic tribe, despite their habit of drinking from skulls and chanting the same six or seven set pieces over and over again;²³ they wore broad grins, having just heard that Henry Home, Lord Kames, was publicly praising them for the 'love and regard' in which they held 'the female sex'.²⁴ A watchful minstrel in rags and tatters hovered around their encampment; two testimonials were engraved on his cloak-pin: one, signed Thomas Warton (1774), noted 'skill in oral poetry';²⁵ the other, signed Robert Henry (1774), read 'Alfred, prince of poets'.²⁶ Further into the park, defiant on a windblown cliff, Thomas Gray's black-robed *Bard* was getting ready to re-enact his leap into the abyss for the next busload of schoolchildren;²⁷ the

²² The penultimate chapter of Wood's *Essay on the original genius of Homer* (printed privately 1767; 2nd edn, London, 1775) talks about the impossibility of a literate Homer and the 'power of unlettered memory' (259); Homer was, in his view, a different kind of poet. Wood probably read Rousseau's 'Essay on the origin of languages' (written between 1754 and 62), in which Homer's orality was intuited. In an earlier study, Thomas Blackwell envisaged Homer the man as a 'blind strolling Bard', wandering with his lyre in a violent, primitive world: *An enquiry into the life and writings of Homer* (London, 1735), 71, 103, 111–12. See *The making of Homeric verse: the collected papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford, 1971), xiii–xiv; also Kirsti Simonsuuri, *Homer's original genius: eighteenth-century notions of the early Greek epic* (Cambridge, 1979).

²³ Their favourite pieces, in descending order of frequency, were the 'Dying ode of Regner Lodbrog' (*Krákumál*), 'Incantation of Hervor' (*Hervararkviða*), 'Complaint of Harold' (Haraldr harðráði's *gamanvísur*), 'Funeral song of Hacon' (*Hákonarmál*), 'Ransome of Egill the scald' (*Höfuðlausn*), 'Descent of Odin' (*Baldsdraumar*), and 'Fatal sisters' (*Darraðarljóð*). This eighteenth-century corpus reflects (and doubtless generated) a predilection for poems dealing with love, death and pagan mythology, and possessing refrains. On the early popularity of the *Krákumál*, see Anne Heinrichs, 'Von Ole Worm zu Lambert ten Kate. Frühe Rezeption des *Krákumál*', *Sprache und Geschichte: Festschrift für H.M. Heinrichs*, ed. D. Hartmann et al. (Cologne and Vienna, 1978), 294–306. For a list of English translations and paraphrases of these seven pieces, see Appendix A in Margaret Omberg, *Scandinavian themes in English poetry, 1760–1800* (Uppsala, 1976), 150–1; also Frank Edgar Farley, *Scandinavian influences in the English Romantic movement*, Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, 9 (Cambridge, Mass., 1903). Translations of these poems into German and Danish before 1780 include Heinrich W. Gerstenberg (1766–68) in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*, ed. A. von Weilen (Heilbronn, 1888–90); Michael Denis, *Die Lieder Sineds des Barden* (Vienna, 1772); Johann Gottfried Herder, *Volklieder*, parts I and II (Leipzig, 1778–79); Berthel Christian Sandwig, *Danske sange af det ældste tidsrum* (Copenhagen, 1779).

²⁴ *Sketches of the history of man*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1774), I, 313–26.

²⁵ *The history of English poetry from the close of the eleventh to the commencement of the eighteenth century, to which are prefixed two dissertations* (London, 1774), I, f2^v (Diss. I: 'On the origin of romantic fiction in Europe').

²⁶ *History of Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1774), II, 426.

²⁷ Gray's *Bard* was first published by Walpole at Strawberry Hill, 1757; then in *Poems by Mr. Gray* (London, 1768). See *The complete poems of Thomas Gray*, ed. H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson (Oxford, 1966), 18–24.

Welsh painter Thomas Jones could be seen somewhat to his right, putting the final touches on his dark and stormy rendering of the scene (1774).²⁸ James Beattie's *Minstrel*, that simple shepherd with a taste for history and philosophy, stood close by, flanked by swarms of overdressed attendant and phantom bards (plus druidical extras) from William Mason's choruses.²⁹ Ossian himself sat a little way off from the others in rapt self-communion, on a rock of ice that was slowly melting on one side; every now and then he lifted his head to murmur something that sounded like: 'Pleasant is the joy of grief. It is like the shower of spring'.³⁰ Not exactly the Algonquin Round Table, but it got results: just that year young Werther had declared that Ossian was superior to Homer,³¹ and Thomas Jefferson, that he was 'the greatest poet that has ever existed'.³² A short stroll away, but light-years in public favour, hollow-cheeked Welsh and Irish bards lamented their declining status and the shutting-down of their royal broadcasting studio.³³ Troubadours, recently featured in La Curne de Sainte-Palaye's *Histoire littéraire des troubadours* (1774), moved languorously through desert tracts reserved for Hebrew prophets, African *iimbongi*, and New World tribal poets.³⁴ An attractive young Tahitian named Omai, newly arrived in England, had lodging in this quarter, but only temporarily: the native song he

²⁸ The scene of Gray's bard on the precipice was painted many times in the eighteenth century, by Fuseli, Blake and Richard Westall among others. For a reproduction of Thomas Jones's painting, see Christopher Thacker, *The wildness pleases: the origins of Romanticism* (London, 1983), Plate 17.

²⁹ *The minstrel: or the progress of genius. A poem* (London, 1771). In Mason's *Elfrida, a dramatic poem* (London, 1752), the action of which takes place in Edgar's reign, the titular heroine is attended by a 'chorus of British virgins' (Julie Christie, responding to the British Library's 'Adopt a Book' appeal, has secured the future of this edition of *Elfrida*, which will henceforth bear her name: *TLS*, 24 April 1992, 14); in *Caractacus, a dramatic poem* (London, 1759), Mason employs a mixed 'chorus of Druids and Bards'; the chief druid lives in a 'shaggy cave', the bards, 'rob'd in their flowing vests of innocent white', in nearby 'grots' (3). The early tenth-century minstrels assigned to cheer up the heroine in Thomas Chatterton's short verse play *Aella* (1769) sing a 'roundelaie' (lines 961–1020), the first memorable 'Saxon' poem inspired by Percy's *Reliques*.

³⁰ *Fingal*, 194.

³¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (Leipzig, 1774); Werther records in his diary for 11, 12 October, that 'Ossian hat in meinem Herzen den Homer verdrängt' (Ossian has superseded Homer in my heart). Napoleon, when he grew up, is said to have carried copies of *Fingal* and *Temora* with him on his campaigns, in apparent imitation of Alexander the Great, who reportedly never went anywhere without a boxed copy of the *Iliad*. See Émmanuel de las Cases, *Le mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, ed. Gérard Walter (Paris, 1956), II, 1486, s.v. Ossian.

³² Jefferson to C. Macpherson, 25 February 1773, quoted by Frederic Carpenter, 'The vogue of Ossian in America', *American Literature*, 2 (1930–31), 405–17.

³³ See Evan Evans, *Some specimens of the poetry of the antient Welsh bards. Translated into English with explanatory notes on the historical passages* (London, 1764).

³⁴ Jean Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Histoire littéraire des troubadours, contenant leur vies, les extraits de leurs pièces, et plusieurs particularités sur les moeurs, les usages, et l'histoire du douzième et du treizième siècles*, assembled from the author's manuscript by C.F.X. Millot (Paris, 1774). See Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the ideologies of Enlightenment: the world and work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore, 1968). Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi*

performed at the request of Fanny Burney and her sisters did not, as she noted in her *Diary*, remind them at all of Ossian.³⁵ The crowd-pleaser that summer was the Persian poet Hafiz of Shiraz, master of the erotic *ghazal*, who reclined, wine-cup in hand, on a king-size divan, reciting unbowdlerized versions of his recently-Englished odes (1774).³⁶ 'A gusle in every house' was the catchy motto of the 'Illyrian' (alias Serbo-Croatian) bards in the next enclosure; they were improvising their national epics at triple speed now that the learned author of *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (1774) had likened them to Ossian.³⁷ A narrow, easily passable fen separated their compound from the next, which featured a dark, possibly ruminating figure, largely hidden within a cowshed made of woven wattle. Two portly gentlemen stood outside, peering near-sightedly through the twigs and taking notes, but they saw nobody. Their guidebook said that here dwelled the scop or Anglo-Saxon oral poet.

One of the two visitors was Robert Henry, who in 1774, in the second volume of his *History of Great Britain*, was attempting to locate in Anglo-Saxon England 'that strong propensity to the sublime and ardent strains of poetry which hath appeared in all nations, in the most early period of their history'.³⁸ His companion, Thomas Warton, whose *History of English poetry* had appeared that same year, finding no trace of this original bard, blamed 'the

Hebraeorum (Oxford, 1753) touted Hebrew 'odes' as 'the only specimens of the primeval and genuine poetry' (trans. G. Gregory, *Lectures on the sacred poetry of the Hebrews*, 2 vols [London, 1787], I, 50). New World poets were mentioned early and often: in Sidney's *Defence of poesie* (London, 1595), they are sandwiched between Irish and British bards (see *An apologie for poetry or the defence of poesy*, ed. G. Shepherd [London, 1965]). Closer to the summer of 1774, Daniel Webb quotes native poetry from Peru in *Observations on the correspondence between poetry and music* (London, 1769).

³⁵ *The early diary of Frances Burney, 1768–1778*, ed. Annie Raine Ellis (London, 1913), II, 133–4 (14 December 1775). The Burney family's evening with Omai, the nonliterate native of Raiatea (Society Islands) brought to England in 1774, is recounted by Chauncey Brewster Tinker, *Nature's simple plan: a phase of radical thought in the mid-eighteenth century* (Princeton, 1922), 81–3. (Tahitian was not written down until 1805.) Several home-grown Cædmons who emerged during this period were more to contemporary taste: e.g., the thresherman Stephen Duck, nurtured by Lord Macclesfield, and Ann Yearsley, the poetical pig-woman of Bristol.

³⁶ *A specimen of Persian poetry or odes of Hafez with an English translation and paraphrase chiefly from the Specimen poeseos Persicae of Baron Revizky* [Vienna, 1771], trans. John Richardson (London, 1774). Richardson notes that *ghazels* were 'written or spoken *extempore* at banquets' (xvii). Arabic poetry had recently been treated by Sir William Jones, *Poems consisting chiefly of translations from the Asiatick languages* (Oxford, 1772), who declared that 'Arabians . . . must be naturally excellent poets' (183).

³⁷ Alberto Fortis published (Venice, 1774) the original as well as an Italian translation of 'The sad ballad of the noble spouse of Hasanaga'; through Goethe's translation, printed in Herder's *Volksslieder*, it became part of world literature. See Matija Marko, 'The singers and their epic songs' [Lectures given May 1928], *Oral Tradition*, 5/1 (1990), 107–30; also Marko, 'L'état actuel de la poésie populaire épique yougoslave', *Le Monde slave*, 5 (1928), 321–51. On 'jedes Haus seine Gusle' and 'eine Gusle in jedem Haus', see Stanley, 'Scholarly recovery', 44–5.

³⁸ II, 425.

conversion of the Saxons to christianity' for abolishing 'in some measure their native and original vein of poetic fabling'.³⁹ Neither scholar was able to read an Old English text in the original (few in the period could), and neither was aware of any Old English verse that showed scops in action;⁴⁰ but they knew what the Anglo-Saxon oral poet should be like: a chosen friend and favourite of kings, a praiser of battle glory, an admirer of 'the beauties of the fair, and the joys and cares of virtuous love';⁴¹ his verse was 'picturesque and figurative' to the core, for he descended from a northern race for whom 'a skill in poetry' was 'a national science'.⁴²

This information, which Henry and Warton dutifully conveyed, was curiously unrelated to the two Old English poems they show any familiarity with, both of which seemed to be written by clerics or monastic chroniclers.⁴³ But Henry and Warton expected a primitive Saxon poet, and expectations, at least in literature, have a way of coming true. In *Through the looking-glass*, the king, waiting impatiently for two Anglo-Saxon Messengers, says to Alice:

'Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them'.

'I see nobody on the road', said Alice.

'I only wish *I* had such eyes', the King remarked in a fretful tone. 'To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too!'⁴⁴

According to hyperrealist theories of language, whatever can be named exists. Not only does Nobody suddenly materialize as an Anglo-Saxon Messenger before Alice's eyes, but he displays, as the King observes, all the right 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes' too.

In the mid-eighteenth century, even sober erudition can bear witness to the power of the great god Wish, whom Jacob Grimm was the first to name.⁴⁵ Scholars set to work filling the silences of the historical record with whatever the heart needed and dreamt. Henry and Warton succeeded in attributing to the Anglo-Saxon oral

³⁹ Diss. I, e3.

⁴⁰ *Beowulf*, *Deor* and *Widsith* were unknown in eighteenth-century literary circles, even though their manuscripts had been listed in Humfrey Wanley's *Librorum veterum septentrionalium, qui in Angliae bibliothecis extant, nec non multorum veterum codicum septentrionalium alibi extantium catalogus historico-criticus* (Oxford, 1705) [vol. II of George Hickes' *Linguarum veterum septentrionalium thesaurus*]. On the inability of eighteenth-century literary scholars to read Old English, see Richard C. Payne, 'The rediscovery of Old English poetry in the English literary tradition', *Anglo-Saxon scholarship: the first three centuries*, ed. Carl T. Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1982), 153.

⁴¹ Henry, *History*, II, 437

⁴² Warton, *History*, Diss. I, d3v

⁴³ Henry seems to know in detail only the two *Chronicle* poems, *Brunanburh* and *Death of Edgar*; Warton gives a translation of the former (Diss. I, e3^v – e4^v).

⁴⁴ Lewis Carroll, 'Through the looking-glass' (ch 7: 'The lion and the unicorn') in *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York, 1971), 170.

⁴⁵ *Deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen, 1835), 99.

poet the qualities that the extant verse most conspicuously lacked, a definition by contraries.⁴⁶ A pioneer of this oxymoronic or *lucus a non lucendo* approach was John Campbell who, in his *Polite correspondence*, praises the Anglo-Saxon poet's 'sublime sentiment' and 'furor poeticus', his 'inspired, enthusiastic' outpourings, adjectives not notably relevant to *Durham*, the one Old English poem he translates.⁴⁷ Another method, much used by dramatists, poets and at least one early novelist, was to place newly composed lyrics, generously soaked in eighteenth-century sensibility, into the mouth of the most famous Anglo-Saxon they knew.

King Alfred's official biographer, Asser, had portrayed that ruler's fondness for vernacular poetry, but only as a reader and memorizer; never as an oral singer or frequenter of bards.⁴⁸ It is William of Malmesbury in the early twelfth century who first told how Alfred, disguised as a minstrel, entered the Danish camp as a spy.⁴⁹ The tale was much repeated.⁵⁰ John Speed in his 'Chronicle' of 1611 related how Alfred, in minstrel garb, repaired to the Danish camp where, as 'a most skilfull Musitian, and an excellent Poet', he led them astray with 'songs of their valour'.⁵¹ Sir John Spelman in his *Life of Alfred* subsequently confirmed, after examining the battle-site, that the English could never have gained the victory if their leader had not with his own eyes spied out the enemy camp, using the strategem William described.⁵² In the seventeenth century, Alfred's minstrelsy is predominantly utilitarian, an outgrowth of his

⁴⁶ Old English poems published before 1774 were: *A Proverb from Winfrid's Time* (Serarius, 1605); *Thureth* (Spelman, 1639); *Cædmon's Hymn* and four *Chronicle* poems (Wheelock, 1643); *Durham* (ed. Somner in Twysden, 1652); the scriptural poetry of Bodleian MS Junius XI plus *A Prayer* from BL Cotton Julius A.ii (Junius, 1655); the Boethian *Meters* (Rawlinson, 1698); *Judith* (Thwaites, 1698); *Maxims II*, *Menologium*, *Lord's Prayer III*, *Creed*, *Fragment of Psalms*, *Rune Poem*, and *Finnsburh* (Hickes, 1705); *Maldon* (Hearne, 1726). The untranslated *Finnsburh* and *Maldon* were as good as unknown. For full references, see Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson, *A bibliography of publications on Old English literature to the end of 1972* (Toronto, 1980).

⁴⁷ *The polite correspondence: or, rational amusement, being a series of letters, philosophical, poetical, historical, etc.* (London, published anonymously in 1741 and reissued in 1754 as *The rational amusement*); *Durham* translated, 268–9; notions about Old English poetry, 235, 261–2, 268–73.

⁴⁸ *Asser's life of King Alfred*, ed. W.H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904; repr. 1959), chs 22–3 (pp. 19–20).

⁴⁹ *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi de gestis regum Anglorum libri quinque*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 90 (London, 1887–89; hereafter *GR*, cited by book and chapter, followed by vol. and page in parentheses), II.121 (I, 126). For an English translation, see J.A. Giles, *William of Malmesbury's chronicle of the kings of England*, Bohn's Antiquarian Library (London, 1847), 53.

⁵⁰ A harp-carrying Alfred first appears in the mid-fifteenth-century Crowland chronicle that was (until 1826) attributed to Ingulf, abbot of Crowland (1085/6–1109). See C.E. Wright, *The cultivation of saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh, 1939), 145; Latin text in *Ingulphi abbatis Croylandensis historiarum lib. 1, Rerum anglicarum scriptores post Bedam*, ed. Henry Saville (London, 1596), 494, lines 48–50.

⁵¹ *The history of Great Britaine* (London, 1611), 357.

⁵² The biography, written c. 1642, was first published in Latin translation by Christopher Wase: *Ælfredi Magni Anglorum regis invictissimi vita* (Oxford, 1678), 33; the original English

dedicated public service. He is, above all, a sober, rightminded Protestant ruler and lawgiver, founder of universities, translator of the Bible, and inventor of the jury system. This is the learned king who addresses us at the end of William L'Isle's 'Preface' to *A Saxon treatise concerning the Old and New Testament*.⁵³ Looking down from heaven, Alfred laments the current neglect of his English writings:

If any thing here (I say) might offend or greive me; this it is, that I perceiue there the nation which once I governed . . . to make so small account of our writings and language; . . . Shall I stand vpon my owne deserts, and reckon my owne endeauours? I dare boldly say now, they have beene great and manifold to benefit posterity. Why should they bee neglected? Why of my owne Successors? haue I repaired and founded for them Vniuersities and Schooles of all good learning to be so slighted? ... haue I of all my best and wisest predecessors culled out the best lawes; and enacted also of mine owne, with advice of my noble thanes and Aldermen, so iust, so proper and profitable for the countrey; so quickly to perish after my decease? Haue I translated with my own hand the godly Pastorall of Saint Gregory, with many his learned Homilies, yea the whole Bible it selfe; that all should be lost, all forgot, all grow out of knowledge and remembrance? . . . What negligence, what ingratitude is this?

A funny thing happened to this plaintive monarch on the way to the nineteenth century: he became an oral poet.

The mid-eighteenth century, which put poetry and music at the very centre of human existence, quickly put them at the very centre of Alfred's life; and the scholar-king of L'Isle's 'Preface' was transformed into a minstrel-prince warbling woodnotes wild in the moonlight. As early as 1741 Alfred is praised for being 'not more famous as a Law-giver, or a Conqueror, than as a Poet'; he is extolled as 'the Reviver of Poesy, and . . . by much the greatest Man in that Way, of the Age in which he liv'd'.⁵⁴ The great princes of the North were also great poets, 'no less ambitious of the laurel', as Robert Henry explained in 1774, 'than of the royal crown'.⁵⁵ And Alfred, called by Wordsworth 'lord of the harp and liberating spear', was the greatest of them all.⁵⁶

was published as *The life of King Ælfred the Great* (Oxford, 1709). See E.G. Stanley, 'The glorification of Alfred King of Wessex (from the publication of Sir John Spelman's *Life*, 1678 and 1709, to the publication of Reinhold Pauli's, 1851)', *Poetica* (Tokyo), 12 (1981), 103-33; repr. *A collection of papers*, 410-41.

⁵³ 'The complaint of a Saxon king', par. 20 in 'Preface' to *A Saxon treatise* written about . . . (700 yeares agoe) by *Aelfricus Abbas* (London, 1623). The book was reissued with different title-page as *Divers ancient monuments in the Saxon tongue, written seven hundred yeares agoe shewing that both in the Old and New Testament, the Lords Prayer, and the Creede, were then used in the mother tongue* . . . (London, 1638). See Rosemund Tuve, 'Ancients, moderns, and Saxons', *English Literary History*, 6 (1939), 165-90.

⁵⁴ Campbell, *The polite correspondence*, 265.

⁵⁵ *History*, II, 426.

⁵⁶ 'Ecclesiastical sonnet XXVI', line 3; first published in *Ecclesiastical sketches* (London, 1822), 28.

In the fifty years between Henry's *History* and Wordsworth's sonnet, Alfred can be heard singing his heart out in a countless number of literary works. In 1777 the dramatist John Home, friend of James Macpherson, insists that 'the real as well as the dramatic Alfred was a young hero, a bard, a winner of battles . . .'.⁵⁷ In 1778 Robert Holmes calls him a 'Minstrel King'.⁵⁸ A review in 1779 of Anne Fuller's two-volume novel *The son of Ethelwolf* features a twenty-line extract of the Ode sung by Alfred in the Danish camp, and claims against all evidence that it possessed 'a considerable degree of poetry'.⁵⁹ That same year the story of the king disguised as an oral singer is called 'hacknied' by an otherwise admiring reviewer of an Alfredian tragedy that, like most, was not a stage-success.⁶⁰ In 1792 the 'soft harp' and 'mirthful mood' of John Penn's Alfred are still soothing the savage Dane.⁶¹ In 1800, the same year as Wordsworth's 'Observations prefaced to the *Lyrical ballads*', Joseph Cottle devotes four entire books of his epic poem *Alfred* to the episode.⁶² The lyrics placed in the royal mouth are suitably spontaneous and overflowing with passionate feelings; the first can stand for the rest:

Oh thou my soul's desire,
Where'er thou art, come forth and let me see
Thy long-lost countenance
Life of my life and spirit pure as heaven,
Come forth and see thy minstrel! Sick at heart,
He wanders through the sea and earth and air
To meet thy glance beloved! Look around,
And ease his heart, who never joy hath felt
Since thou did'st leave him. From the clouds above,
Peep out, beloved! from yon purple cloud,
Behold me faithful still, nor let me more,
Wander through earth in lonely misery.⁶³

Joseph Strutt's slightly later drama *Ancient times* pours on the paganism: the royal minstrel ingratiates himself with the Danes and the dramatist's public by singing of Odin and valcyries, the wolf and

⁵⁷ 'Preface' to *Alfred: a tragedy as performed at the Theatre-Royal, in Covent-Garden* (Dublin, 1777), v.

⁵⁸ *Alfred, an ode, with six sonnets* (Oxford, 1778), 2.

⁵⁹ *The son of Ethelwolf: an historical tale* (London, 1789), reviewed by A.B. in *The Monthly Review*, 81 (1789), 239–41. In his ode, Alfred thoughtfully Nordicizes the name of Woden (to Odin) for the sake of his Danish audience.

⁶⁰ 'Analysis of a tragedy by a self-taught bard' (signed W.C.), *Gentleman's Magazine*, 59 (January 1789), 36–7.

⁶¹ *The battle of Eddington; or, British liberty. A tragedy* (London, 1792), 85.

⁶² *Alfred, an epic poem in twenty-four books* (London, 1800), Books XIII–XVI.

⁶³ Book XIV, lines 177–9, 185–95; p. 274. Alfred makes similar sounds in Italian opera. See, e.g., Johann Simon Mayr, *Alfredo il Grande, re degli Anglo-Sassoni, melodramma serio in due atti* (Milan, nell' imperiale regio teatro alla scala, 1820), II, 5: 'Ov' è la bella vergine/ Dell' ondeggiante crin?/ Ah! gl' occhi miei ti mirano/ Astro divin!'

the vulture.⁶⁴ The longest and perhaps worst poem on Alfred is John Fitchett's, weighing in at forty-eight books and over 130,000 lines.⁶⁵ One memorable scene depicts the prince's French stepmother teaching the little boy minstrel poetry, including that Carolingian favourite, the song of Roland (VIII, 1035). When Alfred, the 'worthiest and best skill'd/Acknowledged prince of bards' (I, 1480-1), takes up a harp to eulogize a fallen comrade, it is a kind of double death, given Fitchett's way with verse.

Numerous prefaces, learned footnotes and stage directions in these works supplied readers with the 'facts' about Anglo-Saxon minstrels, their apparel, education, tools of the trade and tastes in poetry. James Sheridan Knowles in his drama *Alfred the Great; or The patriot king* describes, somewhat ingenuously, what costume the actor playing the disguised king should wear: 'Large brown mantle, similar to a minstrel's habit of the period, with hood attached'.⁶⁶ Henry James Pye, author of a six-book epic on Alfred, has his hero taught his craft by a woman, and a footnote explains: 'Alfred is said to have first caught the spirit both of poetry and heroism, from hearing his step-mother recite poems on the heroic actions of his ancestors. There is an excellent picture on this subject by Westall'.⁶⁷ Joseph Cottle's annotations have much to report about oral poetry in Anglo-Saxon England. He confirms, for example, that:

Both music and poetry were much admired and cultivated by the Anglo-Saxons. The halls of all the Saxon kings, princes, and nobles, rang with the united sound of the poet's voice and the musician's harp. The poet and the musician were most commonly the same person, who, blessed at once with a poetical genius, a tuneful voice, and skilful hand, sung and played the song which he had composed. Talents so various and delightful were objects of ambition to the greatest monarchs, and procured the meanest who possessed them, both riches, honors, and royal favour.

The note concludes: 'Alfred the Great, who united every pleasing to every great accomplishment, excelled as much in music as he did in war; and ravished his enemies with his harp, before he subdued

⁶⁴ *Queenhoo-Hall, a romance: and Ancient times, a drama* (Edinburgh, 1808), IV, 97-195, at 109-10. The pagan allusions of Strutt's Alfred are purposeful and restrained compared to those of William Taylor's Edward the Confessor, who invokes Alfather, Balder, Braga and Hermod. (Taylor's bardic chorus, housed in the 'minstrel's gallery', manages to allude to the Nornies, pale Hela, Frea, Valhalla, Surter, Heimdal, Lofna, Hlyna, Iduna, Lok, Tuisco, Thor, Njord and the Vauns.) See William Taylor of Norwich, 'Harold and Tosti, a tragedy, in 3 acts, with chorus', *The Monthly Magazine*, 29, no. 197 (1 April 1810), 209-12; (1 May), 318-21; (1 June), 417-20.

⁶⁵ *King Alfred, a poem*, I (London, 1808). The entire work was published in 6 vols in 1841-42, ed. by Robert Roscoe, who supplied a conclusion. King Alfred in minstrel disguise penetrates the Danish camp in Books 36, 37 and 38 (6,727 lines); he listens while Guthrum sings a pagan 'song of Ragnarokkr' (based on the Old Norse *Vþuspá*), and responds with an even longer poem on Judgement Day (not unlike the Old English *Christ III* or *Judgement Day II*).

⁶⁶ (London, 1831).

⁶⁷ *Alfred: an epic poem in six books* (London, 1801), 132 (Book IV.v.405).

them with his sword'.⁶⁸ These sentences were not original: copied almost verbatim from Robert Henry's *History* of 1774, they look back to a work published some thirty-five years earlier, Thomas Percy's 'Essay on the ancient minstrels in England'.⁶⁹

History, as Macaulay observed when a very young man, 'lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers', named Imagination and Reason, whose rights are defended by storytellers and verifiers respectively. In the second half of the eighteenth century, this ancient conflict was renewed in the form of a feud between two men, one of whom sought to paint the Anglo-Saxon bards vividly, in all their colours and dimensions, to display, as Thomas Percy described his goal, 'the peculiar manners and customs of former ages';⁷⁰ the other, Joseph Ritson, would have none of this; he dismissed Percy's noble minstrel as 'a mere hypothesis, without the least support from fact or history, or any thing, in a word, but a visionary or fancyful imagination'.⁷¹ Percy was probably the first post-Conquest writer to use the term 'scop' to refer to the Anglo-Saxon poet;⁷² and Ritson, the first to employ the word 'source' to indicate 'a work . . . supplying information or evidence'.⁷³ Both 'firsts' speak volumes.

⁶⁸ *Alfred, an epic poem*, 263 (XIII, note 8). This notion of a powerful Saxon poet seems to underlie Sharon Turner's delightful mistranslation of *Beowulf* 77–9, in which a scop replaces the king: 'When it was all ready,/ the great hall-chamber,/ The poet named it Heort:/ he that of his words/ had extensive power'. *The history of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2nd edn (London, 1807), 296. Cottle is particularly well-informed on Alfred's taste in vernacular poets: Cædmon is identified as 'an old Saxon Poet, to whose writings Alfred was greatly attached' and Aldhelm, as 'the best of all the Saxon Poets' according to Alfred (94–5; IV, note 4).

⁶⁹ *History of Great Britain*, II, 438. Percy's 'Essay' was published in the first volume of his *Reliques*.

⁷⁰ *Reliques*, 'Preface', ix. On Percy's vision of the medieval past, see Arthur Johnston, *Enchanted ground: the study of medieval romance in the eighteenth century* (London, 1964), 75–99. On the promises embedded in his theory of the minstrel origins of English ballad and romance (e.g., authentic authors, early date, a national literature), see Susan Stewart, 'Scandals of the ballad', *Representations*, 32 (1990), 134–56.

⁷¹ 'Dissertation on romance and minstrelsy' in *Ancient English metrical romancees*, 3 vols (London, 1802), I, xxx.

⁷² 'Essay' in *Reliques* (2nd edn, London, 1767), xlvi (note E): 'Anglo-Saxons called a poet *sceop* . . .'. (The first post-medieval citation in the *OED* is Henry's *History* [1774], II, 437.) *Scop* was early included in OE dictionaries: e.g., Nowell (c. 1570), Somner (1659) and Lye (ed. Manning, 1772); for full references, see Greenfield and Robinson, *A bibliography*. Lye, Percy's close friend, neighbour and consultant, does not cite *scop* from *Deor*, even though he (and after his death, Manning) had used the Exeter Book in compiling their dictionary. On the movements of the Exeter Book in the eighteenth century, see T.A. Birrell, 'The Society of Antiquaries and the taste for Old English 1705–1840', *Neophilologus*, 50 (1966), 107–17, at 117 n. 23.

⁷³ 'Advertisement' to *Ancient songs, from the time of King Henry the Third, to the Revolution* (London, 1787 [printed], 1790 [dated], 1792 [published]): 'The sources from which they have been derived will be faithfully referred to . . .'. The first *OED* citation s.v. 'source', sense 4e, is '1788 Robertson *Hist. Amer.* Pref.' On the completion and printing of Ritson's book by 1787, and subsequent delay in publication, see Bertrand H. Bronson, *Joseph Ritson: scholar-at-arms*, 2 vols (Berkeley, 1938), I, 176; II, 761.

Percy's interest in the poetry of the medieval North had been aroused by the Swiss historian Paul Henri Mallet, whose two-volume study of the social and cultural history of ancient Scandinavia appeared in French in 1755–56.⁷⁴ In a letter of 1764 and in a draft drawn up at the same time for his publishers, Percy explains that he has prepared a translation of Mallet because the subject 'must peculiarly interest the English reader, who will here find a faithful picture of his Saxon ancestors, as they existed before they left their German forests'.⁷⁵ Mallet in 1755, and Percy in the 1763 'Preface' to *Five pieces of runic poetry*, had stressed the honour in which the profession of skald was held in the North.⁷⁶ In 1765, in his 'Essay on the ancient minstrels in England', Percy proposed that what was true for the skald was true for the Anglo-Saxon vernacular poet.

This 'Essay' was nine pages long in the first edition of the *Reliques of ancient English poetry*. Only the initial three pages (xv–xvii) were devoted to Anglo-Saxon 'minstrels', and Percy stated his conclusion at the outset: 'Our Saxon ancestors, as well as their brethren, the ancient Danes, had been accustomed to hold men of this profession in the highest reverence. Their skill was considered as something divine, their persons were deemed sacred, their attendance was solicited by kings, and they were every where loaded with honours and rewards' (xv). And later, in slightly different words: 'In the early ages . . . this profession was held in great reverence among the Saxon tribes, as well as among their Danish brethren. . . . The privileges and honours conferred upon the professors of [music and poetry] were common to both; as it is well known their customs, manners, and even language, were not in those times very dissimilar' (xvi). Percy acknowledged that the days of these primitive bards were numbered: 'in proportion as letters prevailed among [the Anglo-Saxons], this rude admiration began to abate, and poetry was no longer a peculiar profession. The Poet and the Minstrel became two persons' (xvi).⁷⁷ Then, to illustrate

⁷⁴ *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc ou l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des moeurs et des usages des anciens Danois* (Copenhagen, 1755); *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (Copenhagen, 1756). This was the first time that a comprehensive account of Old Norse culture and literature had been made available in a modern European language and in popular form. See Samuel Klier, *The Goths in England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952).

⁷⁵ *The correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans*, pp. 83–9, at 84. Percy's translation appeared as *Northern antiquities*, 2 vols (London, 1770), based on the revised and enlarged edition of Mallet published in Geneva in 1763. His subtitle is revealing: *A description of the manners, customs, religion, and laws of the ancient Danes and other northern nations, including those of our own Saxon ancestors*.

⁷⁶ (London, 1763), Preface A2.

⁷⁷ For an independent study similarly distinguishing the scop or 'eulogizing' poet from the *gleoman*, the wandering entertainer or harper, see Jeff Opland, *Anglo-Saxon oral poetry: a study of the tradition* (New Haven, 1980). On the short, happy life of Percy's original Saxon poet, see L.F. Anderson, *The Anglo-Saxon scop*, University of Toronto Studies, philology and literature series, 1 (1902), 5, who claims to cover the period from the date of the earliest Anglo-Saxon poem 'to the time of the decay of the scop's art, perhaps in the eighth or ninth century'.

the continuing esteem in which both were held, Percy related the anecdote of Alfred spying on the Danish camp in minstrel disguise, and that of the Danish king Anlaf doing the same to the English (xvi–xvii). In a paper read on 29 May 1766 to the Society of Antiquaries, Samuel Pegge expressed polite scepticism: the customs of Danes and Britons were not, he noted, identical to those of the Saxons; and the anecdotes concerning Alfred and Anlaf, of doubtful authenticity in any case, did not indicate that minstrelsy was an honoured profession among the Saxons.⁷⁸ A stung Percy set about fortifying his position.

His revision, which appeared in the second edition of the *Reliques* (1767), was more than six times longer than the original: twenty pages of text and thirty-eight pages of notes.⁷⁹ The new version was also more circumspect, stressing the ‘scanty and defective’ nature of the surviving materials, and the consequent weakness of any argument from silence (xxii). His own case is based on analogy and common sense: if bards were honoured in the continental lands inhabited by the Anglo-Saxons, and were ‘common and numerous’ in England after the Conquest, what, he asks, ‘could have become of them in the intermediate time?’ (xxiii). And he adds another anecdote about a Saxon in minstrel disguise, this time Geoffrey of Monmouth’s story of one Baldulf harping his way through enemy lines. Thus reinforced and ballasted, Percy’s illiterate English minstrel, heir to the ‘Gothic’ bard and not carefully distinguished from him, survived to dominate not only his own discussion but also scholarly conjectures about the Anglo-Saxon oral poet for the next century and a half.

One man, Joseph Ritson, was not impressed by Percy’s portrayal, and said so over and over again for some twenty years. In his view, ‘the little information that can be obtained upon the songs and music of the Anglo-Saxons’ – let alone their singers – was insufficient for any credible reconstruction.⁸⁰ If the profession of oral poet was a feature of Anglo-Saxon society, as it was in the Celtic and later Scandinavian worlds, no record of such has come down to us. Ritson had no tolerance for fiction that passed itself off as fact, no matter how ‘brave, comprehensive, and imaginative’ the historian’s vision.⁸¹

⁷⁸ ‘Observations on Dr. Percy’s account of minstrels among the Saxons’, *Archaeologia*, 2 (1773), 100–6.

⁷⁹ The revised essay was also printed separately in *Four essays, as improved and enlarged in the second edition of the Reliques of ancient English poetry* (London, 1767).

⁸⁰ ‘Dissertation on the songs, music, and vocal and instrumental performance, of the ancient English’, *Ancient songs*, xxvii. Ritson’s acrimonious quarrel with Percy can be traced in the ‘Advertisement’ and the ‘Observations on the ancient English minstrels’ prefacing *Ancient songs*; in his ‘Historical essay on the origin and progress of national song’ introducing *A select collection of English songs*, 3 vols (London, 1783–84), I, ix–x, and ‘Corrections and additional notes to vol. III’; and in the last division of ‘A dissertation on romance and minstrelsy’ in *Ancient English metrical romanceës*, esp. I, cix, cxli–ii.

⁸¹ Phrase borrowed from C.P. Wormald, ‘Viking studies: whence and whither?’ in *The Vikings*, ed. R.T. Farrell (Chichester, 1982), 142.

Unsatisfied longings were for him preferable to unsatisfactory answers, and honest not-knowing, superior to false understanding. Percy's desire to please 'polite taste' and his consequent elevation and gentrification of the Saxon minstrel seemed to Ritson dangerously dishonest; he portrayed his adversary as on a slippery slope leading in the end to a rejection of the little that time had spared.⁸² Warton, to Ritson's outrage, had taken this final step when he omitted Old English verse from his *History of English poetry*, in part on the grounds that it was not sufficiently 'native' or 'pagan', not an emanation of Percy's hypothetical original poet.⁸³ Not finding the desired vast cataracts, dark fens and cavernous haunts, he refused to survey the field as a whole.

The debate between Ritson and Percy is renewed, under various flags, in every age, and re-enacted, to some degree, in every mind. The pendulum seems to move back and forth between Reason and Imagination in the course of a single century, alternating between periods that emphasize text, product and archaeological reconstruction and those that emphasize world, process and aesthetic reliving, between eras for which understanding is primarily verbal or philological and those for which it is fundamentally visual or psychological. Some ages praise the work, others, the creator in his work. Scholars not in perfect 'sync' with their particular historical moment dedicate themselves either to replacing 'antiquarianism' with various forms of cultural criticism, or, like Ritson, to eliminating the errors, fabrications and myths that others have spent their lives circulating. Everyone keeps busy.⁸⁴

At the beginning of this century, H.M. Chadwick, in a volume that did much to shape our thinking about Anglo-Saxon poets and their verse, stated that 'there is some reason for believing that, for the most part, [the poems] are the work of minstrels rather than of literary men'.⁸⁵ 'Flat nonsense', 'misrepresentation of the facts', the

⁸² In addition to the works cited in note 80, see Ritson's 'Preface' to *Pieces of ancient popular poetry* (London, 1791).

⁸³ Warton, *History of English poetry*, 'Preface', I, vi: 'Scarce any compositions remain marked with the native images of that people in their pagan state'; moreover, 'every reader that reflects but for a moment on our political establishment must perceive, that the Saxon poetry has no connection with the nature and purpose of my present undertaking'. Ritson rebukes Warton for his cavalier treatment of Old English poetry in *Observations on the three first volumes of the History of English poetry, in a familiar letter to the author* (London, 1782), 2-3.

⁸⁴ Arni Magnússon (1663-1730) described the scholarly divisions of his own day in similar terms: *Arni Magnússon, levned og skrifter*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1930), I, 24; cited Jón Helgason, *Handritaspjall* (Reykjavik, 1957), 113.

⁸⁵ 'Early national poetry', *The Cambridge history of English literature*, ed. A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller, vol. I: *From the beginnings to the cycles of romance* (New York and London, 1907), 21. For other authors promoting the minstrel cause in the first decade of the century, see Stanley, 'Scholarly recovery', 243; repr. *A collection of papers*, 26. Friedrich H.T. Vogt, *Leben und Dichten der deutschen Spielleute im Mittelalter*, Vortrag gehalten im wissenschaftlichen Verein zu Greifswald am 29. November 1875 (Halle, 1876), 4, believed that the minstrel or professional singer of the German nation first appeared among the Anglo-Saxons.

spirit of Ritson, as ungentlemanly as ever, screams; but Percy's resilient minstrel-author, no matter how often suppressed, seems always, like a jack-in-the-box, to pop up again.⁸⁶ None of the Anglo-Saxon material that has come to light since Percy's day seems to know this minstrel, but then the records, including the three poems that depict fictive scop and gleemen in the act of composing and performing, do not tell us much about the elusive English poet.⁸⁷ We have recently been assured that 'Most of our information about the *scop* is contained in three Old English poems, *Beowulf*, *Deor* and *Widsith*'.⁸⁸ This is very bad news. For a start, none of the oral poets in these poems is an Angle, Saxon, Jute, or even Frisian; all live on the continent, in a vague heroic period long before the narrators' time. The depiction in *Beowulf* of two anonymous Danish scop reciting stories from northern legend (853–97, 1068–1159) and another two singing songs in the royal hall (86–98, 496–7) indicates only that the author, in whatever century he lived, believed that ancient Danes were likely to behave that way, not that song was his own medium of exchange. In *Deor* and *Widsith*, too, all we have are English poets writing poetry about the singing of poetry by far-off, fictive Germanic scop.⁸⁹ As if chosen by central casting, these bards reciting the tales of the tribe in the very presence of great kings, heroes and ring-givers behave just as the eighteenth-century bardic myth said they would. Yet they are no more likely than Macpherson's third-century Gaelic bard to reflect unmediated historical reality.

Historical imagination, the ability to paint the past as if it were something other than the present, did not have to wait until modern times to be born. The poets of Anglo-Saxon England were just as free as those in the eighteenth century to stress the differences between ancient days and the present, to conjure up for themselves a magnificent aristocratic descent, a proud past embodying current dreams. In both periods the oral poet materializes like a fairy god-mother to mark and legitimize the birth of a northern consciousness,

⁸⁶ Phrases of abuse quoted from Ritson's *Observations*, esp. 36. The Anglo-Saxon minstrel has lately raised his head in John Southworth, *The English medieval minstrel* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1989), 22–6.

⁸⁷ *Beowulf* was first edited by Grimur Jónsson Thorkelin, *De Danorum rebus gestis secul. III et IV. Poema Danicum dialecto Anglo-Saxonica* (Copenhagen, 1815), with Latin translation; *Deor* and *Widsith* were first presented in John J. Conybeare, *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon poetry*, ed. W.D. Conybeare (London, 1826).

⁸⁸ Hermann Moisl, 'Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and Germanic oral tradition', *Journal of Medieval History*, 7 (1981), 215–48, at 236.

⁸⁹ Conybeare, however, and many who followed him, took the poet-composer of *Widsith* to be the same person as its fourth- to sixth-century poet-speaker; he describes the author as 'a Skald or Minstrel by profession', and places the composition of the poem in the mid-fifth century (27). For two twentieth-century views of *Widsith* as composed by an actual scop, see W.H. French, 'Widsith and the scop', *PMLA*, 60 (1945), 623–30; Norman Eliason, 'Two Old English scop poems', *PMLA*, 81 (1966), 185–92. The process, well-known in Old Norse scholarship, whereby a poet becomes identified with his fictional archetype is as old as Homer: the blind bard of legend apparently derives from Homer's own Demodocus.

conceived by scholars and statesmen in emulation of classical antiquity; and his very presence serves to authenticate the surrounding narrative by showing how 'genuine' native material, in the form of short, orally-transmitted songs, could have survived the intervening centuries.⁹⁰ Yet the Anglo-Saxon author's illusion of historical truth is so strong that it has been taken for the reality. We confuse the reconstructed fourth- to sixth-century world of *Beowulf* and the scop poems with the far different world in which their authors lived and worked, as in the following model of misrepresentation:

The subject-matter of the surviving poetry reinforces the picture of the position of the minstrel and the function of poetry which we have already gathered from glimpses of *scops* in action in the poems: that it was composed for recitation at court for an audience such as that depicted in *Beowulf*, the king and queen, their thanes and counsellors.⁹¹

This is like saying that Walt Disney's animated cartoons were made for an audience of mice and ducks.

The only near-contemporary account of an Anglo-Saxon oral poet is Bede's story of Cædmon, the illiterate seventh-century labourer who lived near the monastery at Whitby and was singled out for divine favour precisely because he could not sing.⁹² Bede tells how Cædmon used to leave the feast when the harp was handed

⁹⁰ The idea that nonliterate people remembered their past in song was a commonplace of classical ethnography (e.g., Tacitus, *Germania* 2) as well as of medieval and modern historians. See Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Perizonius, Niebuhr and the character of early Roman tradition' (1957), repr. in his *Secondo contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome, 1964), 69–87; and 'The place of ancient historiography in modern historiography' (1979), repr. in his *Settimo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome, 1984), 13–36. The notion is alive and well in contemporary scholarship. Andreas Heusler, whose theories have dominated the study of ancient Germanic poetry in our own century, accepted the unanimous opinion of scholars that short narrative songs or 'lays' were the most important instrument for transmitting knowledge of Germanic legend: *Lied und Epos in germanischer Sagendichtung* (Dortmund, 1905), 4.

⁹¹ M.W. Grose and Deirdre McKenna, *Old English literature* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1973), 48. Cf. the similar belief that the scop-portraits in *Beowulf* 'bear witness to the persistence of early Germanic poetic customs in the seventh or eighth centuries in England, or if recent scholarship is right, down to the late ninth and early tenth centuries' (Bloomfield and Dunn, *The role of the poet*, 25); or that 'if composition of this kind were unknown in Anglo-Saxon England, it is hard to imagine that the poet would have stretched credulity by describing the scop's performance as he does' (Niles, *Beowulf*, 39). On the whole question of harp accompaniment in the performance of Old English poetry, see E.G. Stanley, 'The oldest English poetry now extant', *Poetica* (Tokyo), 2 (1974), 10–14; repr. *A collection of papers*, 123–8. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* depict singers, lyre in hand, performing epic poetry at feasts; yet the attested performances of Homeric epic are by (unaccompanied) rhapsodes at festivals. On 'self-references in Archaic Greek poetry' as 'diachronically valid without being synchronically "true"', see Gregory Nagy, 'Early Greek views of poets and poetry', ch. 1 in *The Cambridge history of literary criticism*, ed. George A. Kennedy (Cambridge, 1989), I. 6. A communications medium can be both stereotypical and atypical, even profoundly alien.

⁹² The story of Cædmon is related in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (hereafter *HE*), IV.24; *Venerabilis Bedae opera historica*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford, 1896), 258–62; *Bede's ecclesiastical history of the English people*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 414–21.

round for each reveller to sing to in turn. One night, having bolted from the party and gone off to the byre, he received in a dream the gift of poetry. But there was a catch: the award could only be used for devout purposes, for versifying the scriptural narratives read to him by the monks.

Bede's story is a beginning and an end: a beginning, because his dreamer achieved a breakthrough for vernacular verse; after him, bright Christian 'meed' could be poured into old Germanic beer bottles. 'Who', a modern historian exults, 'could have anticipated Cædmon's outburst of song in a Northumbrian cowshed?'⁹³ But Cædmon is also an end: we shall never know what songs the feasters sang the night he left the banquet early. Every detail of Bede's account has been probed for what it can tell us of pre-Cædmonian secular oral entertainments. Much has been made, for example, of Bede's statement that, when each reveler should sing in turn, a harp was passed from hand to hand.⁹⁴ In the early nineteenth century, Sharon Turner saw this apparently local custom as an experiment in 'social improvement', a way of uniting 'intellectual diversions' with 'the pleasures of the table';⁹⁵ some years later, John Lingard saw it as an example of primitive democracy, as evidence that in Saxon times rich and poor shared the same taste in songs; he concluded that the ability to chant minstrel songs 'to the harp was an acquirement common even to the lowest classes'.⁹⁶ Yet the harp or lyre circling among dinner guests is not an exclusively insular custom. In Book III of his *Etymologies*, Isidore lists the various kinds of poems and musical instruments appropriate to different occasions, concluding: 'At feasts, indeed, the lyre or harp was passed around, and an entertaining type of song was appointed to each of those reclining at the table'.⁹⁷ Perhaps the Whitby diners were just doing as the Romans did.

The mid-twentieth-century revival of interest in living folk-poetry took Cædmon to its heart as the case history of an Anglo-Saxon oral singer; but he was not always so lucky.⁹⁸ William of

⁹³ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early medieval history* (Oxford, 1975), 8.

⁹⁴ See most recently Earl Anderson, 'Passing the harp in Bede's story of Cædmon: a twelfth-century analogue', *English Language Notes*, 15 (1977), 1-4.

⁹⁵ Turner, *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 73 (Book VIII, ch. 7).

⁹⁶ John Lingard, *The history and antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon church*, 3rd edn (London, 1845), 153.

⁹⁷ *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), III.xvi.3: 'In conviviis vero lyra vel cithara circumferebatur, et accubantibus singulis ordinabatur conviviale genus canticorum'; cited Donald W. Fritz, 'Cædmon: a traditional Christian poet', *Mediaeval Studies*, 31 (1969), 337.

⁹⁸ A key work in the modern 'revival' was Francis P. Magoun, 'Bede's story of Cædmon: the case history of an Anglo-Saxon oral singer', *Speculum*, 30 (1955), 49-63. On sixteenth- and seventeenth-century lack of interest in Cædmon as a primitive bard, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for origins: new language, Old English, and teaching the tradition* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1990), 151-63. On Cædmon's meaning to eighteenth-century critical theory, see Samuel Klinger, 'The neo-classical view of Old English poetry', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 49 (1950), 516-22.

Malmesbury, in his *Gesta pontificum*, the first ecclesiastical history of England after Bede's, dismisses him in two brief sentences, never even naming 'that monk whom Bede reports received knowledge of song by divine gift'.⁹⁹ The oddity here is that the early twelfth century was a great age for generating Anglo-Saxon oral poets: their faintest footprints were perceived in desert places and the rest of them reconstituted with gusto. With the exception of Cædmon, every supposedly non-fictional Saxon oral poet catalogued from Percy's day to the present makes his first appearance in the twelfth-century monastic world, most of them in two historical works by William of Malmesbury.¹⁰⁰ In the first, the *Gesta regum*, we find Alfred and Anlaf disguised as minstrels, a harper and singer at Athelstan's coronation, and a scoundrel of a minstrel in Edgar's reign; and evidence said to derive from *cantilenae* or popular short ballads fills out the kingships of Athelstan and Edgar as well as the marriage ceremony of Cnut's daughter.¹⁰¹ In the second of William's histories, the *Gesta pontificum*, Aldhelm, co-founder of William's own monastery and West-Saxon coeval of Cædmon, is featured performing in public as an oral poet.¹⁰² As part of this anecdote, William reports the opinion that there was never in any age any poet equal to Aldhelm (*nulla umquam aetate par ei fuerit quisquam*), a remark curiously reminiscent of Bede's comment about his local hero Cædmon, that no other English poet could compare with him (*sed nullus eum aequiperare potuit*).¹⁰³ The echo

⁹⁹ *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi de gestis pontificum Anglorum libri quinque*, ed. N.E.S.A. Hamilton, Rolls Series, 52 (London, 1870; hereafter GP, cited by book and chapter, followed by page in parentheses), III.116 (254): 'necnon et illius monachi quem divino munere scientiam cantus accepisse Beda refert'. The first edition of GP was completed ca. 1125, the second, ca. 1140.

¹⁰⁰ Anglo-Saxon oral poets *not* in William's pages include Baldulf in *The Historia regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth, I. Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568*, ed. Neil Wright (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1984), § 143 (101); two poets producing eulogies about Ethelbert's royal ancestry in M.R. James, 'Two lives of St. Ethelbert, king and martyr', *English Historical Review*, 32 (1917), 214-44, at 238; Dunstan singing in English in Eadmer's *Vita sancti Dunstani*, ch. 4, ed. William Stubbs, *The memorials of Saint Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury*, Rolls Series, 63 (London, 1874), 170; Cnut approaching Ely in a boat and composing an English ballad in the *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E.O. Blake, Camden Society, 3rd ser., 92 (London, 1962), II, 85 (153); the Saxon outlaw Hereward (the Wake), who 'sang in different styles, now by himself, now in a trio with his friends in the manner of the Fenland people', in *Gesta Herwardi*, printed as an appendix to *Geoffrey Gaimar's Lestorie des Engles*, ed. T.D. Hardy and C.T. Martin, Rolls Series, 91 (London, 1889), II, 339-404, at 351; *Three lives of the last Englishmen*, trans. Michael Swanton (New York, 1984), 53.

¹⁰¹ William's Anglo-Saxon oral poets appear in Vol. I, Book 2, of GR: [Alfred] 121 (126); [Anlaf] 131 (143); [coronation] 132-3 (144-6); [cantilenae] 138 (155), 148 (165); [Edgar's minstrel] 156 (177); [Cnut's daughter] 188 (229). For evidence that the poem describing Athelstan's coronation does not have contemporary authority but was composed in the early twelfth century, probably by a coeval of William, see Michael Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems as evidence for the reign of Athelstan', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 9 (1981), 61-98, at 62-71.

¹⁰² William wrote the *Life of St Aldhelm* (ca. 639-709) as Book V (prologue, 189-278) of GP. The minstrel anecdote is related in 190 (336).

¹⁰³ GP V.190 (336); HE, Plummer, 259; Colgrave and Mynors, 414. The parallelism was noted by Opland, *Anglo-Saxon oral poetry*, 124.

may be deliberate. Despite William's well-known reverence for Bede, his histories display a distinctly West-Saxon perspective that turns Northumbria into a backwater;¹⁰⁴ indeed, everything of value seems to wash up in Wessex, even the honour of producing England's first vernacular poet.

William's account of Aldhelm as an oral poet, our only evidence that the latter ever recited or composed in English, has struck sympathetic chords in our scholarship. An anonymous minstrel or a king in disguise is a treat; a named, sophisticated scholar singing to and serving unlettered countrymen seems a trend.¹⁰⁵ One distinguished historian tells us that we cannot doubt Aldhelm's deep concern for the needs of his society 'when we know that he used to take his lyre down to a bridge over the river at Malmesbury and sing to the passing crowds in order to win them to church';¹⁰⁶ another assures us that an English canon of 746 urging priests not to babble in church like secular poets is evidence 'that the trend in vernacular religious poetry begun in the seventh century by men like Aldhelm and Cædmon had got out of hand'.¹⁰⁷ Yet William's knowledge of a singing Aldhelm is far from immediate. What he actually gives us is a twelfth-century summary of a putative ninth-century anecdote about a seventh-century event, with each layer in increasing doubt.

A slightly earlier twelfth-century *Life* of Aldhelm by the Italian Faricius, who may have been William's teacher, does not mention the saint's minstrelsy: the founder of Malmesbury merely preaches to crowds on a bridge, supplying 'divine nourishment' to merchants in the form of persuasive words.¹⁰⁸ William seems to make a meal of this tale. He takes a hint from his predecessor and runs with it. *His*

¹⁰⁴ See R.H.C. Davis, 'Bede after Bede', *Studies in medieval history presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill et al. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1989), 103-16, at 114. On William's admiration for Bede, *GR*, prologue (1-2); on William's criticism of Bede for the latter's scanty treatment of Aldhelm's career, *GP* V, prologue (330).

¹⁰⁵ William's story of Aldhelm gradually sowing scriptural phrases among the frivolous in his songs ('sensim inter ludicra verbis Scripturarum insertis') recalls his earlier praise of Thomas of Bayeux, archbishop of York (d. 1100), who could at a moment's notice compose pious words for the tunes of the minstrels: 'Si quis in auditu ejus arte joculariora aliquid vocale sonaret, statim illud in divinas laudes effigiare' (*GP* III.116 [258]). Among the few notes provided in the popular Penguin translation of Bede's HE is one informing readers that Aldhelm 'is said to have been a talented harpist, and to have composed sacred songs to interest and instruct the simple people, which King Alfred considered the best extant English poetry': *A history of the English church and people*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1968), 346.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972; 3rd edn, 1991), 215.

¹⁰⁷ Moisl, 'Anglo-Saxon genealogies', 242.

¹⁰⁸ *Vita S. Aldhelmi* by Abbot Faricius of Abingdon (d. 1117), ed. J.A. Giles, *Patrologia Latina*, 89 (Paris, 1850), col. 68. Faricius, a monk of Malmesbury before becoming abbot of Abingdon (1100-17) and physician to Henry I, may have taught William as a novice: see Rodney Thomson, 'The reading of William of Malmesbury', *Revue Bénédictine*, 85 (1975), 362-402, at 393; repr. with addenda and corrigenda as 'William's reading' in his *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1987), 74.

Aldhelm positions himself on a bridge 'as if he were someone professing the art of singing', an Anglo-Saxon minstrel or scop.¹⁰⁹

William's 'great gift of imagination' and love of a good story are well known.¹¹⁰ An incident in Dorset recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a Norwegian 'trading visit that went wrong', becomes, in his hands, 'a planned and ruthless venture into an enemy land to spy and to rob', even 'the first Viking ravaging of English soil'.¹¹¹ William's graphic account of the degeneracy of the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, has been shown to be an imaginative development of a short, dry passage in Eadmer's *Life of St Dunstan*.¹¹² The earliest account of the battle at Hastings, the *Carmen de Hastingae proelio* of Guy d'Amiens (late 1060s), tells of a *histrion* or entertainer riding before the Norman army, encouraging them 'with words';¹¹³ in the *Gesta regum*, William spices this up with a dash of oral poetry, recording that the ballad of Roland was recited before battle.¹¹⁴ Here, as in the Aldhelm story, mere 'words' are transformed into fashionable verse.

A difference between the two elaborations, however, is that William claims to have a source attesting that Aldhelm 'was able', in the historian's words, 'to create poetry in English, and to compose a song and to sing or to recite that in the appropriate manner'; this source is identified as a book, now-lost, compiled centuries earlier by King Alfred and, significantly, in Old English, a language that foreigners like Faricius could not read.¹¹⁵ Post-Conquest historians

¹⁰⁹ GP V.190 (336): 'quasi artem cantitandi professum'.

¹¹⁰ Antonia Gransden, *Historical writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307* (London, 1974), 176. On William as story-teller, see Geoffrey Shepherd, 'The emancipation of story in the twelfth century', *Medieval narrative: a symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. (Odense, 1979), 44–57, at 50–1.

¹¹¹ GR I.43 (43). Quotations from R.I. Page, "'A most vile people": early English historians on the Vikings', *The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies*, 19 March 1986 (London, 1987), 24–5.

¹¹² GP I.44 (70–71). See Gransden, 176; R.W. Southern, *St Anselm and his biographer: a study of monastic life and thought 1059–c. 1130* (Cambridge, 1963), 247, note 1.

¹¹³ *The Carmen de Hastingae proelio of Guy d'Amiens*, ed. C. Morton and H. Muntz (Oxford, 1972), 26: 'Hortatur Gallos verbis et territat Anglos'.

¹¹⁴ GR III.242 (II, 302). Klaus von See, 'Hastings, Stiklastadir und Langemarck. Zur Überlieferung vom Vortrag heroischer Lieder auf dem Schlachtfeld', *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, 57 (1976), 1–12, has argued that one of the most famous scenes of Old Norse literature, the singing of the *Bjarkamál* by St Olaf's skald on the morning of the battle of Stiklastadir (1030), was inspired by William's account of the recitation before Hastings of a song of Roland.

¹¹⁵ On William's source, GP V.190 (336); this book is also mentioned in GR II.123 (I, 132), GP V.188 (332–3). On Faricius' linguistic handicap, GP V, prol. (330–31). On William's putative knowledge of Alfred's missing 'handboc', see Dorothy Whitelock, 'William of Malmesbury on the works of King Alfred', *Medieval literature and civilization: studies in memory of G.N. Garmonsway*, ed. D.A. Pearsall and R.A. Waldron (London, 1969), 78–93, at 90–2; repr. in her *From Bede to Alfred: studies in early Anglo-Saxon literature and history* (London, 1980) [same pagination]; also 'The prose of Alfred's reign', *Continuations and beginnings: studies in Old English literature*, ed. E.G. Stanley (London, 1966), 67–103, at 72. She suggests that William may have mistaken a Worcester MS containing the *Soliloquies* for the work Asser called the *enchiridion* or *manualem librum* (ch. 89). See also R.M. Wilson, *The lost literature of medieval England*, 2nd edn (London, 1970), 62–3, 66–7.

seem, as a group, almost over-eager to locate Old English texts containing novel and authentic material.¹¹⁶ William's mention of his vernacular source can be seen either as authentication or, something rather different, as an authenticating device.

William portrays himself as a detached historian who has diligently consulted the monastic records, not reported mere hearsay. This admirable critical principle is also adhered to, however, by a number of the determined forgers of medieval and Renaissance Europe.¹¹⁷ William may have honestly believed that an Anglo-Saxon manuscript in his possession had been compiled by King Alfred; but as a participant in the York/Canterbury ecclesiastical controversy, he knew how useful documentation was in affirming the primacy, eminence and antiquity of an institution or its founder.¹¹⁸ Elsewhere, when he cites from Alcuin's letters, for example, we can detect him altering names and conflating passages that seemed to favour York;¹¹⁹ he reproduces the notorious 'Canterbury forgeries';¹²⁰ and in his *Life of Aldhelm* he includes, and probably helped to concoct, forged charters for his beloved Malmesbury.¹²¹ In his account of St Erkenwald, he appears to copy from one source while claiming to be following another.¹²² William probably had a greater regard for fact than many of his contemporaries: the slightly younger John of Salisbury invents authors as well as their words;¹²³

¹¹⁶ The *Gesta Herewardi*, according to the *Liber Eliensis*, was written by a monk of Ely translating from an Old English text composed by a named contemporary of Hereward. Vernacular works may have seemed closer than Latin to 'oral tradition', and thus an acceptable way of filling gaps in the historical record. On the extent of these silences, see James Campbell, 'Some twelfth-century views of the Anglo-Saxon past', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 131–50; repr. in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon history* (London, 1986), 209–28, at 216–19. William, who translated into Latin Colman's Old English *Life of Wulfstan*, was proud of his own command of Old English; he regularly praises those who, like Alfred and Ælfric, wrote in or translated into the vernacular: *GP* V.254 (406–7); 188 (333); 190 (336); 253 (405–6); *GR* II.123 (132–3).

¹¹⁷ A notable exploiter of this principle was Annus of Viterbo who, in 1498, presented the learned world with a set of forged histories, all attributed to named authors and said to be based on research in the public archives. See Anthony Grafton, 'Renaissance readers and ancient texts', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 38 (1985), 615–40; repr. in *Defenders of the text: the traditions of scholarship in an age of science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 23–46, at 29.

¹¹⁸ On William's involvement in the dispute between the two sees, Gransden, 176–8.

¹¹⁹ Rodney Thomson, 'William and the letters of Alcuin', *Mediaevalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 8 (1977), 147–61, at 157–60; repr. in his *William of Malmesbury*, at 168–72.

¹²⁰ *GP* I.25–39 (39–62); *GR* III.294–9 (II, 346–52). See R.W. Southern, 'The Canterbury forgeries', *English Historical Review*, 73 (1958), 193–226, at 213 n. 1, 219–20.

¹²¹ On spurious charters in Book V of *GP*, see Gransden, 177; for an estimate of their authenticity, see P.W. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon charters: an annotated list and bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks, 8 (London, 1968), nos. 149, 243, 256, 260, 305, 306, 320, 356, 363, 841, 1169, 1205, and esp. 436.

¹²² *GP* II.73 (142–4); see *The saint of London: the life and miracles of St. Erkenwald*, ed. and trans. E. Gordon Whatley (Binghamton, New York, 1989), 15.

¹²³ The treatise *Institutio Traiani*, which John of Salisbury cites many times and attributes to Plutarch, is likely to be his own fiction: see Peter von Moos, 'Fictio auctoris: Eine theoriegeschichtliche Miniatur am Rande der Institutio Traiani', *Fälschungen im Mittelalter*, Monumenta Germaniae historica, Schriften, 33 (Hannover, 1988), I, 739–80. For other twelfth-century fabrications, see Peter Dronke, *Hermes and the sibyls: continuations and creations, an inaugural lecture delivered 9 March 1990* (Cambridge, 1990), esp. 28–30.

Geoffrey of Monmouth has his book of Walter in the British tongue, which neither William nor Henry of Huntingdon, he naughtily points out, can read;¹²⁴ and later in the century, Saxo Grammaticus, rendering an existing written text, still pretends to be recording oral vernacular traditions.¹²⁵ Even sober-minded writers like William of Malmesbury must be read guardedly when we no longer have their sources; in the age of the troubadours and goliards, the resurrection of the scholarly Aldhelm as an oral poet, as a sophisticated counterpart to Bede's illiterate labourer, seems too good to be true.

The search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet is at least as frustrating as looking for traces of Anglo-Saxon domestic architecture: of course they had houses, and possibly these structures were among the most perfect achievements of the age; but almost all were built of wood and, unlike stone churches, have vanished. Here and there the outlines of a foundation can be perceived; occasionally a post-hole or beam slot is uncovered in excavations; but so deep is our ignorance that we usually cannot tell the difference between a sunken living room and a rubbish ditch. Archaeologists sometimes reconstruct, on the basis of analogy and common sense, what the Anglo-Saxon home may have looked like, just as literary historians have tried to build up a picture of the professional oral poet. But that most inseparable and clinging of couples, the unknown and the unknowable, dwell at the very heart of our imaginings, rendering them uninhabitable.

A longing for the past to speak to the present, as one person to another, seems a constant in our search for bardic predecessors, urging us to turn 'the form of things unknown . . . into shapes and [give] to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name'. In Robert Holmes's ode of 1778, King Alfred, having vanquished the Danes with his harp, looks into the distance and conjures up a bardic Walpurgis Night, in which oral poets from every age and clime rise up to celebrate their brotherhood:

Ev'n now to life and wonted fame
Some old departed Bard they call;
With song they hail his kindred name,
And hymn his praise, or mourn his fall.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *The Historia regum Britannie*, ed. Wright, 208 (147). Valerie Flint, 'The *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: parody and its purpose. A suggestion', *Speculum*, 54 (1979), 447-68, proposes that Geoffrey was writing a kind of satire on contemporary historians, notably William and Henry.

¹²⁵ See, e.g., Karsten Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin poet: studies in the verse passages of the Gesta Danorum*, *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici*, supplementum 14 (Rome, 1987), 23: scholars seem agreed that Saxo had a written model for the *Brávallaþula*, despite his statement that the composition 'was transmitted orally rather than in writing' ('*memoriae magis quam litteris tradito*').

¹²⁶ *Alfred, an ode*, 12.

Two centuries later, Jorge Luis Borges is still imagining a nameless, distant Anglo-Saxon counterpart, his 'grey brother':

The snows of Northumbria have known
 And have forgotten the tracks of your feet
 And numberless have been the settings of the sun,
 Grey brother, between your day and mine.
 Slow in the thick shadows you would forge
 Metaphors of swords on the vast seas
 And of the horror dwelling in the pine groves
 And of the loneliness the days bring in.
 Where should one seek your shape and your name?
 These are things that ancient oblivion
 Guards. Never shall I know how it must have been
 When you were a man on earth.
 You followed the paths of exile;
 Now you are only your song of iron.¹²⁷

Real-life literary gatherings are, I am told, social nightmares, for most writers have no shop-talk. If the Anglo-Saxon oral poet is still much sought after by all sorts of odd parties, it is because he turns up as a disembodied voice, leaving everything but his eloquence to the imagination.

¹²⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected poems 1923–1967*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London, 1972), 238; translation mine; a second poem by Borges with the same name, 176.