

# The Literary Encyclopedia

## Post-conquest Old English Literature (1066-1215)

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Places: United Kingdom.

Despite the political and cultural changes brought about in England by the Norman Conquest, English remained the spoken language of the great majority of the population. Anglo-Norman and Latin were used after the Conquest for many written texts, especially more formal ones, but Old English continued to be used and to develop as a written language through from 1066 until the early thirteenth century. Earlier histories of the English language, and surveys of English literature, tended to obscure this continuing production of English texts, or to identify it as merely the mechanical reproduction of pre-Conquest texts by a few, scattered, elderly scribes with antiquarian interest. New work on this topic, such as that in *Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century*, ed. by Mary Swan and Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), has shown that this is not the case, and that Old English texts are understood, copied and developed for active use through the late eleventh and twelfth centuries and into the thirteenth. The recent revival of interest in studying post-Conquest Old English is changing our understanding of it, and is also highlighting which aspects of it still remain obscure.

In terms of linguistic categories, there is some debate as to whether these latter stages of copying Old English texts should be categorised as 'Early Middle English' rather than as 'Late Old English'. It is clear, however, that the people doing the copying and composition of the texts in question had a very good understanding of the pre-Conquest West Saxon of their sources and influences, and language of the texts they produce is basically the late West Saxon Old English written standard, with updating to some elements, in particular vocabulary. This entry will therefore refer to all post-Conquest writing which draws substantially on pre-Conquest Old English language and/or texts as 'Old English'. 'Literature' will be used in this entry in its widest sense, to refer to all kinds of textual production, because the modern category of 'literary' writing as opposed to, say, 'historical', is not operational in the early Middle Ages.

Post-Conquest texts in Old English survive in around fifty manuscripts, and so although they are greatly outnumbered by the Latin and Anglo-Norman texts produced during the period in question, they form a substantial body of material. The range of types of post-Conquest Old English texts is extensive: many preaching texts, including many copies and reworkings of the homilies of Ælfric; saints' lives, some of which are copies of earlier texts, and some Æ including the Lives of Nicholas and Giles Æ which are new compositions; copies of the Old English version of the Gospels; Psalters; the continuation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from 1122 to 1154, which is known as the *Peterborough Chronicle*; legal texts; charters; dialogue literature;

prognostications; and a small amount of newly-composed poetry, including the poems known as *Durham* and *The Rime of King William*. In addition to these whole texts, a very large number of earlier Old English manuscripts are annotated by readers from the late eleventh to the early thirteenth century. These annotations take the form of glosses, notes and marginal additions, all of which show that the Old English texts in question were understood by post-Conquest readers. It has been shown, by Susan Irvine amongst others, that some post-Conquest Old English manuscripts which reproduce and adapt pre-Conquest texts are not copied entire from whole-manuscript exemplars, but rather are put together by their post-Conquest scribes from a range of different sources. Taken together, the composition, copying and adapting of whole texts, the annotation of earlier Old English manuscripts, and the compilation of new manuscript books referred to above give us a picture of committed, deliberate and long-lasting interest in and use of pre-Conquest English texts after 1066.

As is the case with many pre-Conquest Old English manuscripts, the place of production and the place of use of most post-Conquest ones is not known, but some of them can be identified as the products of particular places. A number of post-Conquest Old English manuscripts have been located, usually on the grounds of their script or contents, to Rochester, Canterbury and Worcester, and it is usually assumed that they were produced in the cathedral scriptoria in these towns, although recent work suggests that some of them might have been produced elsewhere in the South-East or West Midlands regions. Scholars are increasingly of the opinion that a number of places engaged in the organised production of Old English texts through the twelfth century and probably into the thirteenth, and work is currently underway on the context of this activity. Major research questions include exactly what sorts of places Æ monastic scriptoria, non-monastic churches, bishops' households Æ might have been the location for such textual production; exactly what sorts of people Æ monks, nuns, secular canons, parish priests, professional scribes, religious recluses Æ might have been its scribes and users; and what sorts of use it was put to Æ private reading in monastic or lay contexts, preaching in monastic contexts, preaching to the laity, or individual study.

Some of the changes made to pre-Conquest Old English texts by their post-Conquest copyists are like those made to texts rewritten before the Conquest too. Excerpts from homilies, especially those by Ælfric, are taken out of their original context and welded together with other re-used passages, and with newly-composed ones to form new, composite, texts. Some of the Old English preaching texts recopied after the Conquest, like some of those recopied before 1066, seem to be adapted for audiences less deeply immersed in monastic learning, and less likely to be exclusively monastic in profession. Other changes made to pre-Conquest Old English texts are linguistic: newer words are substituted for outdated vocabulary, and changes are made to earlier texts to reflect some of the developments in the morphology of late Old and Early Middle English.

As more work is done on the material, a clearer picture will emerge of how post-Conquest Old English textual production develops out of the institutions and activities of Anglo-Saxon England, and also of its relationship to Early Middle English texts, such as the *Ancrene Wisse* and

those in the Katherine Group.

A good overview of the whole topic is provided by Elaine Treharne, 'English in the Post-Conquest Period', in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 403-14.

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