by the modern scholar-poet Helen Waddell.[5] Among the most interesting
gems are pieces by Boethius; Fortunatus (c. 530-c. 603), a cosmopolitan
Frank who was educated in Ravenna; and St. Columba (521-597), an Irish
monk when the Ionian monastic houses provided a brilliant outpost of
learning and piety. The English monk Alcuin (c. 735-804), who had been
the librarian at the York Cathedral until Charlemagne persuaded him to go
to Aachen and found a school, is a major lyricist among these. The Caro-
lingian Age had distinguished poets, too: Hrabanus Maurus (776-856); Wala-
frid Strabo (809-849), his pupil and greater than his master; and at the
end of the period, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who combined the spiritual
and the worldly in some extraordinary lyrics. These were the predeces-
sors of a "school" of poets, sometimes called the "Goliardic" or "wander-
ing scholars" of the twelfth century, who recreated secular verse in
Latin and left us a remarkable legacy of creative and passionate lyrics.

After Augustine converted England to Christianity in 597--by the sim-
ple expedient of persuading the king to accept the faith--a century of
remarkable cultural revival ensued. One of the major centers of monastic
activity was on the shores of the North Sea, where the Roman missionaries
and the Irish, already established at Iona and Lindisfarne, contributed
library materials, educated monks and priests, and created an outpost of
culture that was to be widely influential in the Carolingian Age. The
Venerable Bede (canonized at last in our own time), one of the greatest
Latin writers of the early Middle Ages, was born c. 673, spent almost all
his life at the double monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow, and died at
home in 735. His most famous work, *The Ecclesiastical History of the
English People*, is virtually the only authoritative source for much of
the history of his times. He also wrote the *Lives of the Abbots of Wear-
mouth and Jarrow*, a contribution to the popular hagiography, and several
treatises on science (*De natura rerum*), symbolism (*De indigitatione*), and
arithmetic and chronology (*De temporum ratione*), among other subjects.
Bede's work ranges over everything: he was a thorough scholar and had
excellent library resources for his time. He was a good observer, almost
"modern" in scientific observation, yet he gave just as much credence to
miracles and visions, legendary stories and apochryphal events as he did
to authenticated facts of history. His work is always lively, his narra-
tive skill superb. Moreover, Bede is an impeccable Christian humanist;
he restores our confidence in the essential humanity of an age that was
otherwise near savagery.

The major transitional figure in this age was Peter Abelard (1079-1142),
iconoclastic philosopher, great lover, teacher, lyricist, and intellectual
revolutionary. He attacked the major philosophers of his age, and because
of his extraordinary personal magnetism, persuaded his students to defect
with him from orthodoxy. Eventually, his unorthodoxy was justified:
twenty of his pupils became cardinals and two of them popes.

The controversy surrounding him as a master at Paris perhaps contributed

---

[5]*Medieval Latin Lyrics* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1929).

to the virulence of revenge by the family of Heloise, his student and lover. At least Abelard implies so in his *Historia calamitatum*, the story of his affair and the disasters thereafter. The letters he wrote to her after her exile to a monastery, and the ninety-three hymns he wrote at her request for the Breviary of her house, attest to Abelard's great distinction as a stylist and poet.

MAJOR WORKS IN THE VERNACULAR LANGUAGES

Though the Germanic tribes of northern Europe, including Scandinavia and Britain as well as northern Germany and the Low Countries, had no central government and no national identity in this period, there was a unique tribal culture that persisted, with local variation, from the fifth to the tenth centuries--and perhaps earlier and later. The social unit was a band of warriors, the *comitatus*, who chose a war leader (or lord) as their chief. His main job was to guard the spoils of war, the treasures of precious metals, gems, and weapons. He was the tribe's chief justice, the owner of all the land, the giver of rewards. The idealism of the age was based on loyalty to the chief and to the other warriors in the band. The languages of these tribes were separate but similar, though only a scattering of written documents remains, most of them written later, after the tribes had begun to embrace Christianity.

A handful of "elegiac" poems survives in Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxons that developed after the native British (that is, Celtic) tribes were driven out of their homelands by successive waves of migrating Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who invaded England in mid-fifth century. There were at least five major dialects of Anglo-Saxon, and when the second wave of European invaders began to settle in the northeastern regions--about 789, according to contemporary chronicles--another Germanic language, Old Norse, derived from various Danish and Norwegian Viking dialects (it is presumed) added another element to the language. It was just at the point when the literature, mostly oral, was first being recorded. Thus, the rapidly changing language, the consolidation and clash of cultures, the spread of Christianity among formerly pagan peoples, and another violent political change brought by the Viking invasions all contributed to the literary scene. Alfred had tried, late in the ninth century, to improve the literacy of his clergy by translating some of his favorite manuscripts into a language resembling the spoken dialect of his region. He had employed various scholars for the work, but he did not live long enough in peace to complete the task. The harassments of the invaders continued sporadically for several generations, destroying the coastal monastic houses, robbing and pillaging (not only in England but near most of the settled coastal regions of Europe and even penetrating to the Western world beyond the Atlantic), but in the pauses between invasions, literacy was improving. No one knows how much has been lost from the dismal period, nor how much was destroyed by later ages in the name of "reformation" or sheer ignorance. What little survives of Old English poetry is contained in only four manuscripts from the early

eighth century--in all, only about 30,000 lines.

The bulk of the verse in these four anthologies is religious, of course, compiled by English monks. They refer to an earlier age, from which we may assume that they are copies and that older manuscripts must have once existed. The small quantity of secular verse, however, may well be the best. The tribal culture of the earlier Germanic world is the scene. Doubtless the poems were composed for oral recitation and were written down, at last, when the language attained written form--and written by Christian clerks.

The four manuscripts containing Old English verse are these: (1) The *Beowulf* manuscript, with the only complete "epic" heroic poem and a version of "Judith," is now in the British Museum. It was in the collection of Sir Robert Cotton in the seventeenth century and was damaged by fire, leaving many lines doubtful. (2) The *Junius* manuscript, at the Bodleian library in Oxford, contains "Genesis," "Exodus," "Daniel," "Christ and Satan," all Biblical paraphrases. (3) The *Exeter* manuscript, at Exeter Cathedral since the time of Edward the Confessor (c. 1004-1066), contains the other major secular poems: "Guthlac," "The Phoenix," "Whale," "Panther," "Riddles," "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "The Arts of Men," "The Fates of Men," "Gnomic Verses," "The Soul's Address to the Body," "Widsith," "Deor," "The Wife's Lament," "The Husband's Message," "The Ruin," along with several religious pieces, such as "Christ" and"Juliana."
(4) The *Vercelli* manuscript is in the cathedral library at Vercelli in northern Italy and has probably been there for six or seven centuries. No one knows how it got there. The poems included are "Andreas," "The Fates of the Apostles," "The Soul's Address to the Body," "The Dream of the Rood," "Elene."[6]

Although many of these poems have great literary merit, most of the secular works are fragmentary and require a great deal of background study for their understanding. Most were not even edited until the late nineteenth century antiquarians resurrected them and identified the contents of the manuscripts. The prize of them all, *Beowulf*, however, is worthy of several lifetimes of scholarship. It is almost the only complete vernacular poem of the age--in any language--and contains a unique vocabulary as well as a remarkably exciting narrative, clearly reflecting the anonymous poet's acquaintance with both pagan and Christian literature.

The *Beowulf* poet was probably a contemporary of Bede, living either in Northumbria or Mercia. His subject matter is the story of a legendary hero who is pitted against monsters symbolizing supernatural evils. There is no other heroic poem quite like it. Beowulf himself is a folktale figure, but references to other characters in the story suggest that

---

[6]R. K. Gordon, tr., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Everyman's Library, 1954), p. xi. Gordon includes a broad selection of these pieces in a prose translation. In my opinion the best verse translation of selected poems is Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems* (Penguin Books, 1966).

some of the events alluded to were historical. Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle, is mentioned in the *Historica Francorum* by Gregory of Tours (c. 575) and also in the anonymous *Liber Historiae Francorum* (c. 727). According to this historical evidence, Hygelac undertook a raid against the Frisians on the lower Rhine about 521. Also the *Liber Monstrorum*, a collection of stories from the eighth century and probably written in England (in Latin), identifies Hygelac as the king of the tribe of Geats and says that his body was buried at the mouth of the Rhine after his death in battle. Folktale tradition provides ample substantiation for the character of the hero, an ideal Germanic warrior who conquers his enemies against all odds, a man of absolute courage, completely devoted to the task of being the savior of his people.

The classical epic, descended from Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* via Vergil's *Aeneid*, seems to provide some of the structure of this unique heroic poem. By definition, the epic is a narrative of the events in the lives of heroes, demonstrating greatness in battle against supernatural creatures. Homer's heroes sometimes had the immortal gods on their side, but as often as not, they were confronted with monsters. Aeneas, for example, though somewhat more realistically human, obeys the gods who dictate his fate. In one episode, he visits Hades where he is given a prophetic view of the world to come.

Evidently the poet of *Beowulf* was familiar with the literary tradition but also used the oral traditions of his own time to compose an epic glorifying the Germanic hero. The monsters Beowulf confronts—and destroys—are not the creation of malignant and capricious pagan gods. They are the realities of the old folktales, created to frighten little children, but in this poem they are sophisticated abstractions.

After a short warmup with some sea monsters, Beowulf seeks an encounter with Grendel, the ancient symbol of evil, who has been raiding the great hall of Hrothgar, a neighboring king. Grendel is called a descendant of Cain, from whom were hatched all the grisly old ogres, hobgoblins, and monsters, banished from humanity to live in the waste places of the world. His dam, a lake troll, seems possessed of a horrible malignity. When Beowulf confronts her in the serpent-infested lair under the lake, she cannot be killed by his sword, though his chainmail protects him from her talons. The weapon that eventually destroys her is in the cave, "an ancient blade forged by the giants . . . the handiwork of titans."[7] And with the same sword, Beowulf cuts off the head of the monster Grendel who has returned to his lair to die; even so, the ". . . fiery blood [from the corpse] began to dissolve the sword in iron icicles." The hero's only booty from this encounter is the jeweled hilt and the monster's severed head.

After Beowulf destroys these demons, he returns to the land of the

---

[7]All quotations are from an excellent prose translation by David Wright, *Beowulf* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1957 and later printings).

Geats and later becomes their king. At the end of a long life, he meets
his final adversary. A treasure-guarding dragon has been aroused by the
theft of a jeweled cup from its hoard. The dragon is ". . . the primeval
enemy that haunts the dusk: the scaly, malicious Worm which seeks out fu-
neral mounds and flies burning through the night, wrapped about with flame,
to the terror of the country folk. Its habit is to seek out treasure hid-
den in the earth and mount guard over the pagan gold. . . ." When the
dragon discovers the robbery, he devastates the countryside, burning
houses and people, including Beowulf's royal hall. It is not Beowulf's
fate to survive the encounter with the dragon, though with the help of
his young and heroic kinsman, Wiglaf, the monster is killed. But inevi-
tably Beowulf suffers a mortal wound from its fangs.

Though these battles with supernatural monsters are the frame of the
poem, the epic contains much more. We see the archetypal Germanic hero
not only in battle but also in his role as a just king. The poet praises
the loyalty of the *comitatus*, the virtues of courage and devotion to the
battle leader, and provides a contrast--in allusions to tales of disloy-
alty and treachery, the ironic view--which are equally effective. The
fame of the hero is preserved by the *scop*, the poet who extemporaneously
composes the history of his heroic deeds. Though the poem frequently
alludes to Christian principles, it is clear that "fate" (or *wyrd*, the
Old English equivalent) is the controlling principle. Beowulf is super-
human, but he is also lucky. When he takes full advantage of his situa-
tion, using his enormous strength, seeking combat fearlessly, accepting
responsibility for the destruction of the evil monsters, he does what his
wyrd dictates. His last words are, "Fate has swept away the courageous
princes who were my kinsmen, and I must follow them."

Beowulf (and the majority of the other surviving poems in Old English)
uses the alliterative pattern as an organizing device. Usually the first
letters of three or more words in each line are the same, while the line
is divided by a *caesura*, a break in thought or a pause. Lines 97-100 of
"The Wanderer" illustrate the form, with the alliterating sounds in ordi-
nary type:

Stondeth nu on laste	*leofre duguthe*	[Standing now, [on foot?] (instead of) the beloved band of warriors,
weal wundrum heah	*wyrmlicum fah*	a wondrous high wall, dragon-decorated;
eorlas fornomon	*asca thrythe* [e or a; sometimes ae]	the men have been taken away (by the) spear's might,
wae pon wae lgifru	*wyrd seo mae re...*	cruel weapon, (to) their glorious fate.]

Alliteration of other sounds within words may also appear as a variation,
but the similarity of initial letters in each line (in sound) defines the
verse form.

"The Wanderer" is the lament of an old warrior who remembers the bloody

battles in which he lost his friends. He wandered from his tribe, became an exile, and now mourns the days that are gone, when he shared treasure in the hall with his fellows. He lives in a desolate place of ruined buildings: ". . . idle stand these old giant-works."[8]

We know none of the poets, and the manuscript history for this period is very uncertain, but the small legacy of gems is better than any other vernacular literature of this period.

The early Viking invasions were followed by a period of colonization in coastal areas, when conquerors and conquered lived together and inter-married. One group, two generations settled on the coast of Normandy, had aspirations for further expansion, and under the bastard William seized England in 1066. This catastrophic conquest submerged literature in England for a short time, as the Normans imposed their own language, sometimes called Anglo-Norman or Old French, on all the Anglo-Saxon in-stitutions. During the next three centuries a great deal of literature was written in this language--neither French nor Norse but basically like the Romance family of dialects already established in the Frankish areas--including both religious and secular manuscripts. It reflects its roots in the vocabulary, but it is grammatically similar to French. The influ-ence on English was, of course, enormous. A high percentage of English words were directly adapted from Anglo-Norman during this period, for all educated people needed to speak and read the language of their conquerors. Latin remained the language of the Church, and much Latin literature was translated into Anglo-Norman and, somewhat later, into English (mainly during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries).

There are few works in Old French before the twelfth century, and they are of little importance in a history of literature. One masterpiece, *The Song of Roland*, was apparently composed just before the end of the eleventh century and preserved in an early manuscript at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, as well as in several later manuscripts, mostly fragmentary. This poem is the earliest of many *chansons de geste* ("songs about deeds") which became the staple source for the Romance literature of the twelfth and later centuries.

Briefly *The Song of Roland* concerns the events of Charlemagne's cam-paign against the "Paynims" at Roncesvalles in 778. There are three major episodes: (1) the treachery of Ganelon against his stepson, Count Roland, who has already proven himself the most stalwart of Charlesmagne's vassals; (2) the battle at Roncesvalles, where Roland is slain; (c) Charlemagne's revenge for Roland's death. The poem gives us a nearly contemporary view of the early feudal period, quite a different set of values from that of *Beowulf*. Charles W. Jones has said that in the eleventh century, ". . . honor and vassalage are measured in terms of greatest sacrifice, not greatest reason."[9] Dorothy L. Sayers, translator of the poem, takes a

---

[8]Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems*, p. 72

[9]Jones, *Medieval Literature in Translation*, p. 521.

larger view: Charlemagne is the vassal of Christ who says: "Never to Paynims may I show love or peace."[10] On the brink of the Crusades, this was doubtless the major message of the poem.

Another major stream of literature begins at the end of the eleventh century, initiated by Duke William IX of Aquitaine, who also bore the title of Count William VII of Poitou. He ruled over all Provence and is reputed to have lost 300,000 men on the First Crusade.[11] As the first noble patron to cultivate lyric poetry, however, he is a more significant figure. His granddaughter, Eleanor of Aquitaine--who was briefly the queen of Louis VII of France and later married Henry of Anjou, who took the throne of England as Henry II (1154)--was probably the greatest patron of the arts in her time. The story of "courtly love," with its vast influence on all the Western literature, thus begins just as the early Middle Ages ended.

Troubadour poetry had three main themes: honor, war, and love, but love was clearly preeminent, interpreted according to the chivalric or courtly code. The poet sang of illicit love, total devotion to his lady, who was usually married to someone else; his dedication and total submission to her expected no consummation--or so he pretended. The only gain he professed to hope for was *valor*, the reflected worthiness of merely being her ideal lover. Naturally, the poet's feelings of joy or despair were the true subject matter. Every song required a new metrical pattern, a more elegant vocabulary, a greater range of symbolism and imagery.

The literature in Old High German comes somewhat later than the eleventh century, though one fragment, *The Song of Hildebrand*, was evidently composed about the same time as *Beowulf* (c. 800). Like the allusive episode about the Danish princess Hildeburh in *Beowulf*, who had to choose between her husband and her brother, the *Hildebrand* fragment tells of a blood feud between father and son:

> *Now the son of my loins   with the sword will hew me;*
>
> *He will deal me death   or I dash him to earth.* [12]

The poem is stark, full of violence and despair, and seems to be governed by the same *wyrd* that informs the elegiac and heroic poetry of the Anglo-Saxon world. Doubtless much other lyric poetry was written (or at least composed for oral recitation), but the rudeness of the age prevented its preservation. By the twelfth century the troubadours and jongleurs were travelling everywhere, exchanging themes and possibly tunes with the German

---

[10]Dorothy L. Sayers, tr., *The Song of Roland* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 26.

[11]Jones, *Medieval Literature in Translation*, p. 666.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 500.

lyricists, the minnesingers, composers of love songs.

There is other German literature in the Carolingian period, such as the *Heliand*, comprising about 6,000 lines of religious verse in Old Saxon, and Otfrid's "Gospel Book," dating between 863-871 in a Frankish dialect. Notker of St. Gall and his pupils composed texts and commentaries, probably mostly translations, at their monastic school at the close of the tenth century.

EARLY MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Scholars have never agreed on the details of development of the medieval drama, but most agree that classical drama died when the Christian era began. Occasional evidences of miming, perhaps just clowning, appear in allusions, but doubtless it was extemporaneous amusement for rude villagers on market days or fairs. The *scop*, or shaper of "epics" to entertain in the halls of Germanic kings, was virtually the only entertainer with any skill in the world of the barbarians. In the tenth century a German nun, Hrotswitha, at the monastery of Gandersheim, wrote six Christian dramas based on the works of Terence. These were Latin "closet dramas," written to edify, not to amuse, her readers. Hrotswitha's introduction states that her object was ". . . to glorify, within the limits of [her] poor talent, the laudable chastity of Christian virgins in that self-same form of composition which has been used to describe the shameless acts of licentious women."[13] She was most careful to avoid "the pernicious voluptuousness of pagan writers"--a strong clue to the prevailing critical opinions about Latin drama in her time. Hrotswitha probably did not intend her work for presentation on a stage, though her plays have excellent dramatic qualities.

By the end of the tenth century, new stirrings of the ancient art began to appear as embellishment of the mass. Theoretically, the text of the religious service could not be altered, but amplification of the chant was possible, through variations in the length of the syllables (i.e., holding the note longer) or singing a dialogue between two choirs. Gradually the custom developed of acting out a short drama suggested by the Latin office for Easter. The "Whom do you seek?" ("*Quem quaeritis*") trope was performed by two members of the choir, wearing white, who stood beside the altar, while three others in black, representing the three Marys, advanced to the altar, symbolizing the tomb of Christ. The text of the office suggests the rest of the dramatic movement.[14]

---

[13]Jones, *Medieval Literature in Translation*, p. 210. Quoted from *The Plays of Roswitha*, tr. by Christopher St. John (London: Chatto and Windus, 1923).

[14]"*Quem quaeritis*" is in two tenth-century manuscripts, one at St. Gall; another is in "The Concordia Regularis" (c. 965-975) by Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester.

Somewhat later the Christmas office was also adapted dramatically, with the shepherds seeking the Christ-child in his manger, attended by midwives (replacing the angels). The possibilities for dramatic interpretation of other appropriate texts from the mass were soon realized; drama in the church was a useful device for teaching the illiterate, but the tendency to include comic elements was unavoidable and inevitable. The full story of medieval drama comes later, when the vernaculars were used for "lewed" audiences, and the drama had to be expelled from the church to the churchyard, then back to the marketplace, where the laity themselves took over the productions.

Except for Hrotswitha's contribution, medieval drama is not precisely a part of the literature of this age. As an art form about to be reborn, however, it reflects the changing culture, the alteration of social values, and the serious didactic purpose of the early High Middle Ages.

I.S.
1974

FOR FURTHER READING

Bainton, Roland H. *Horizon History of Christianity*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1964.

Bishop, Morris. *Horizon Book of the Middle Ages*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1968.

Donovan, Frank R. *The Vikings*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., Horizon-Caravel Books, 1964.

Freemantle, Anne. *Age of Faith*. Great Ages of Man Series. New York: Time-Life Books, 1965.

Gordon, R. K., tr. *Anglo Saxon Poetry*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., Everyman's Library, 1954.

Hubert, Jean, *et al*. *Europe of the Invasions*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1969.

Jacobs, Jay, ed. *Horizon Book of the Great Cathedrals*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1968.

Jones, Charles W. *Medieval Literature in Translation*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1950.

Sayers, Dorothy L., tr. *The Song of Roland*. Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1957.

Simon, Gerald. *Barbarian Europe*. Great Ages of Man Series. New York: Time-Life Books, 1968.

Trask, Willard R. *Medieval Lyrics of Europe*. New York: World Publishing Company, 1969.

Waddell, Helen. *The Wandering Scholars*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., Anchor Books, 1961.

White, T. H. *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts*. Cambridge University Library or Capricorn Books, n.d.

Winston, Richard. *Charlemagne*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., Horizon-Caravel Books, 1968.

Wright, David, tr. *Beowulf*. Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1957 and later.