The problem is in determining whether a particular clause is independent or subordinate, because the words that do the subordinating are often ambiguous. Thus, Old English *þā* at the beginning of a clause can be either an adverb translated 'then' and introducing an independent clause, or a subordinating conjunction translated 'when' and introducing a dependent clause. Similarly, *þǣr* can be translated as 'there' or 'where', *þonne* as 'then' or 'when', *swā* as 'so' or 'as', *ǣr* as 'formerly' or 'ere', *siððan* as 'afterward' or 'since', *nū* as 'now' or 'now that', *þēah* as 'nevertheless' or 'though', and *forðām* as 'therefore' or 'because'. In each pair the first word is an adverb, and the style that results from choosing it is a choppier style with shorter sentences, whereas the choice of the second word, a conjunction, results in longer sentences with more embedded clauses. Current research in Old English syntax aims to understand the use of these ambiguous subordinators and adverbs. The conclusions that emerge will affect our modern perception of the sophistication of Old English writing in verse and prose. Earlier editors tended to read a high degree of parataxis in Old English and to punctuate their editions accordingly. This reading fitted in with the idea that English subordinating conjunctions had their origins in adverbs. However, one can accept the adverbial origin of conjunctions and still argue, as Andrew did in 1940, that Old English style had attained a high degree of subordination (although Andrew's conclusions now seem extreme). Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that parataxis and hypotaxis are stylistic options and not syntactic necessities because Old English clearly had the means for a highly subordinated style. Syntactic investigators now find generally more hypotaxis than earlier editors did, but the efforts are directed toward discovering specific structural cues before making generalizations. The most obvious cues are in the word order of the clause as a whole, which includes familiar historical patterns of subject and verb such as S ... V, VS, and SV. These patterns have been intensively analyzed for the principles operating in the placement of the finite verb, which typically occurs in second position in main clauses and in final position in subordinate clauses.[17] In addition, there are more subtle cues in the patterning of auxiliaries, contractions, and other structures.[18] Finally, as Bruce Mitchell reminds us, it may be

anachronistic to impose modern categories that result from our translations into words such as 'then' and 'when', "implying that the choice was simply between a subordinate clause and an independent clause in the modern sense of the words."[19] We should be especially cautious about imposing modern notions that equate hypotaxis with sophistication and parataxis with primitiveness until we know more about the full range of syntactic possibilities in Old English. Ongoing research in this subject promises to revise our ideas of the grammatical, semantic, and rhythmic relationships in Old English verse and prose.

52. *Old English Literature.* The language of a past time is known by the quality of its literature. Charters and records yield their secrets to the philologist and contribute their quota of words and inflections to our dictionaries and grammars. But it is in literature that a language displays its full power, its ability to convey in vivid and memorable form the thoughts and emotions of a people. The literature of the Anglo-Saxons is fortunately one of the richest and most significant of any preserved among the early Germanic peoples. Because it is the language mobilized, the language in action, we must say a word about it.

Generally speaking, this literature is of two sorts. Some of it was undoubtedly brought to England by the Germanic conquerors from their continental homes and preserved for a time in oral tradition. All of it owes its preservation, however, and not a little its inspiration to the reintroduction of Christianity into the southern part of the island at the end of the sixth century, an event whose significance for the English language will be discussed in the next chapter. Two streams thus mingle in Old English literature, the pagan and the Christian, and they are never quite distinct. The poetry of pagan origin is constantly overlaid with Christian sentiment, while even those poems that treat of purely Christian themes contain every now and again traces of an earlier philosophy not wholly forgotten. We can indicate only in the briefest way the scope and content of this literature, and we shall begin with that which embodies the native traditions of the people.

The greatest single work of Old English literature is *Beowulf.* It is a poem of some 3,000 lines belonging to the type known as the folk epic, that is to say, a poem which, whatever it may owe to the individual poet who gave it final form, embodies material long current among the people. It is a narrative of heroic adventure relating how a young warrior, Beowulf, fought the monster Grendel, which was ravaging the land of King Hrothgar, slew it and its mother, and years later met his death while ridding his own country of an equally destructive foe, a fire-breathing dragon. The theme seems somewhat

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[17] See Robert P. Stockwell and Donka Minkova, "Subordination and Word Order Change in the History of English," in *Historical English Syntax*, ed. Dieter Kastovsky (Berlin, 1991), pp. 367–409. See also two essays in *Parameters of Morphosyntactic Change*, ed. Ans van Kemenade and Nigel Vincent (Cambridge, UK, 1997): Anthony Kroch and Ann Taylor, "Verb Movement in Old and Middle English: Dialect Variation and Language Contact," pp. 297–325; and Ans van Kemenade, "V2 and Embedded Topicalization in Old and Middle English," pp. 326–52.

[18] See, for example, Daniel Donoghue, *Style in Old English Poetry: The Test of the Auxiliary* (New Haven, CT, 1987) and Mary Blockley, *Aspects of Old English Poetic Syntax: Where Clauses Begin* (Urbana, IL, 2001).

[19] *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, § 1879.

fanciful to a modern reader, but the character of the hero, the social conditions pictured, and the portrayal of the motives and ideals that animated people in early Germanic times make the poem one of the most vivid records we have of life in the heroic age. It is not an easy life. It is a life that calls for physical endurance, unflinching courage, and a fine sense of duty, loyalty, and honor. A stirring expression of the heroic ideal is in the words that Beowulf addresses to Hrothgar before going to his dangerous encounter with Grendel's mother: "Sorrow not.... Better is it for every man that he avenge his friend than that he mourn greatly. Each of us must abide the end of this world's life; let him who may, work mighty deeds ere he die, for afterwards, when he lies lifeless, that is best for the warrior."

Outside of *Beowulf*, Old English poetry of the native tradition is represented by a number of shorter pieces. Anglo-Saxon poets sang of the things that entered most deeply into their experience—of war and of exile, of the sea with its hardships and its fascination, of ruined cities, and of minstrel life. One of the earliest products of Germanic tradition is a short poem called *Widsith* in which a scop or minstrel pretends to give an account of his wanderings and of the many famous kings and princes before whom he has exercised his craft. *Deor,* another poem about a minstrel, is the lament of a scop who for years has been in the service of his lord and now finds himself thrust out by a younger man. But he is no whiner. Life is like that. Age will be displaced by youth. *He has his day. Peace, my heart!* *Deor* is one of the most human of Old English poems. The *Wanderer* is a tragedy in the medieval sense, the story of a man who once enjoyed a high place and has fallen upon evil times. His lord is dead and he has become a wanderer in strange courts, without friends. Where are the snows of yesteryear? The *Seafarer* is a monologue in which the speaker alternately describes the perils and hardships of the sea and the eager desire to dare again its dangers. In *The Ruin*, the poet reflects on a ruined city, once prosperous and imposing with its towers and halls, its stone courts and baths, now but the tragic shadow of what it once was. Two great war poems, the *Battle of Brunanburh* and the *Battle of Maldon,* celebrate with patriotic fervor stirring encounters of the English, equally heroic in victory and defeat. In its shorter poems, no less than in *Beowulf,* Old English literature reveals at wide intervals of time the outlook and temper of the Germanic mind.

More than half of Anglo-Saxon poetry is concerned with Christian subjects. Translations and paraphrases of books of the Old and New Testament, legends of saints, and devotional and didactic pieces constitute the bulk of this verse. The most important of this poetry had its origin in Northumbria and Mercia in the seventh and eighth centuries. The earliest English poet whose name we know was Cædmon, a lay brother in the monastery at Whitby. The

story of how the gift of song came to him in a dream and how he subsequently turned various parts of the Scriptures into beautiful English verse comes to us in the pages of Bede. Although we do not have his poems on Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, and the like, the poems on these subjects that we do have were most likely inspired by his example. About 800, an Anglian poet named Cynewulf wrote at least four poems on religious subjects, into which he ingeniously wove his name by means of runes. Two of these, *Juliana* and *Elene,* tell well-known legends of saints. A third, *Christ,* deals with Advent, the Ascension, and the Last Judgment. The fourth, *The Fates of the Apostles,* touches briefly on where and how the various apostles died. There are other religious poems besides those mentioned, such as the *Andreas,* two poems on the life of St. Guthlac, a portion of a fine poem on the story of *Judith* in the Apocrypha; *The Phoenix,* in which the bird is taken as a symbol of the Christian life; and *Christ and Satan,* which treats the expulsion of Satan from Paradise together with the Harrowing of Hell and Satan's tempting of Christ. All of these poems have their counterparts in other literatures of the Middle Ages. They show England in its cultural contact with Rome and being drawn into the general current of ideas on the continent, no longer simply Germanic, but cosmopolitan.

In the development of literature, prose generally comes late. Verse is more effective for oral delivery and more easily retained in the memory. It is therefore a rather remarkable fact, and one well worthy of note, that English possessed a considerable body of prose literature in the ninth century, at a time when most other modern languages in Europe had scarcely developed a literature in verse. This unusual accomplishment was due to the inspiration of one man, the Anglo-Saxon king who is justly called Alfred the Great (871–899). Alfred's greatness rests not only on his capacity as a military leader and statesman but also on his realization that greatness in a nation is no merely physical thing. When he came to the throne he found that the learning which in the eighth century, in the days of Bede and Alcuin, had placed England in the forefront of Europe, had greatly decayed. In an effort to restore England to something like its former state, he undertook to provide for his people certain books in English, books that he deemed most essential to their welfare. With this object in view, he undertook in mature life to learn Latin and either translated these books himself or caused others to translate them for him. First as a guide for the clergy he translated the *Pastoral Care* of Pope Gregory, and then, in order that the people might know something of their own past, inspired and may well have arranged for a translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.* A history of the rest of the world also seemed desirable and was not so easily to be had. But in the fifth century when so many calamities were befalling the Roman Empire and those misfortunes were being attributed to

the abandonment of the pagan deities in favor of Christianity, a Spanish priest named Orosius had undertaken to refute this idea. His method was to trace the rise of other empires to positions of great power and their subsequent collapse, a collapse in which obviously Christianity had had no part. The result was a book which, when its polemical aim had ceased to have any significance, was still widely read as a compendium of historical knowledge. This Alfred translated with omissions and some additions of his own. A fourth book that he turned into English was *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, one of the most famous books of the Middle Ages. Alfred also caused a record to be compiled of the important events of English history, past and present, and this, as continued for more than two centuries after his death, is the well-known Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. King Alfred was the founder of English prose, but there were others who carried on the tradition. Among these is Ælfric, the author of two books of homilies and numerous other works, and Wulfstan, whose *Sermon to the English* is an impassioned plea for moral and political reform.

So large and varied a body of literature, in verse and prose, gives ample testimony to the universal competence, at times to the power and beauty, of the Old English language.

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