

TEACHING ANGLO-SAXON PAGANISM, CIRCA 1000

Jonathan Wilcox

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Cool! Cool! Cool!” said an unshaven young man with the enthusiasm of a sweepstakes winner. The source of his enthusiasm? A new course offered in the English department. “Just imagine,” he said, “a whole semester on *Beowulf*!”¹

Tucked away in a report about life in the dorms in our local newspaper, that passage caught my attention because the course described is taught by me. Both unshaven young man and reporter are wrong—it is not a new course; I teach it every two years, as did my predecessor before me. They also surely haven’t noticed the prerequisite, an intensive course in Old English that brings students up to speed to read the language of the epic poem. Nor do we just read *Beowulf*; rather we contextualize it with everything I can fit into one semester.

All that notwithstanding, I’m delighted by the unshaven young man’s reported enthusiasm for the subject that I teach, but I bet that enthusiasm isn’t for the Old English corpus that actually survives—the saint’s lives and homilies and the imaginative literature of a Christian world, such as *Andreas* and *Judith*—that I’ll be teaching alongside *Beowulf*. I suspect he doesn’t realize that Christianity brought the technology of writing to England and hence imposed a radical filter on what literature survived by getting written down. Rather, I suspect that the unshaven young man, along with many students who take my classes, craves an unmediated world of paganism, of pre-Christian gods and goddesses, and of heroic action not circumscribed by Christian royal polity. To some extent, I can cater to that desire in a course on Old Norse literature, centering on Snorri’s wonderful account of the gods in *The Prose Edda*, or even in a course on medieval Celtic literature centering on *The Tain*. It is far harder to cater to that desire in the case of my principal specialty, though, namely medieval English literature.

In this essay I want to share my attempt to rise to the challenge and to teach half a course, at least, responsibly directed at that desire to read pagan Old English literature. (In view of the rubric for the course—“Literature and Culture of the Middle Ages”—I took up the other half with a thick description of the late fourteenth century as a context for that other body of great medieval English literature.) I offer such an essay in this venue as a tribute to the Medieval Association of the Midwest’s noble tradition of highlighting issues of pedagogy in medi-

eval literature throughout their conference sessions. The course I am describing was conducted entirely in modern English translation and so required no prior experience of the students and would be suitable in many different settings. I envisage it working well as the first half of a course devoted to a fuller exploration of Old English literature in translation. I describe it here both with the hope of offering suggestions for anybody else who is contemplating doing the same thing and in the hope of stimulating responses that might hint at ways for me to do it better next time.

To give my course more focus, I homed in on a single decade—the 990s—which both has an appealing millennial ring and, if interpreted loosely, comprises a likely period for the recording of most Old English poetry (the four great codices were, after all, all written *c.* 1000). This is also the time that both Ælfric and Wulfstan were writing as well as a significant time for the revival of paganism in England due to Viking settlement. Both in the course and in this essay, I am not strict about maintaining the decade boundary; instead I range broadly over Æthelred's reign, namely 978–1016. The course usefully became something of a new-historicist primer, investigating the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, and foregrounded the relation between history and literature in undertaking a thick description of this one decade. It also provided a rich context for reading *Beowulf* and gave me a far more satisfying experience teaching the epic—and the students a more informed way of approaching the poem—than usually happens when I attempt *Beowulf* in translation.

In the course (the syllabus to which is provided as an appendix to this essay), I used the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to fill in contemporary historical detail as it was viewed by a somewhat official annal-writer. The sense of history is complicated by comparison with the famously shaped poetic treatment of the events of 991 in *The Battle of Maldon*.² I then drew on some of the abundant evidence that survives for Christian attitudes towards pagan Vikings. The lawcodes of Æthelred, drafted by Wulfstan, along with Wulfstan's estates treatise, *The Institutes of Polity*, demonstrate an attempt at definition of Christian society in contradistinction to the pagan settlers in the Danelaw. These theoretical tracts present something of the ideals of Christian society. The charters are more revealing of what is actually going on on the ground. Dorothy Whitelock includes a wonderful selection in translation in her *English Historical Documents*, although understanding them involves careful inferential reading.³

The sermon literature occasionally gives some insight into the specifics of pagan belief, although, predictably, it reveals far more about

Christian than about pagan mentality. Wulfstan's "Sermon on False Gods" draws heavily on Ælfric's account, which views Norse gods through the lens of an intellectual Christian tradition that takes Mediterranean pagan gods as foundational for all paganism.⁴ In some ways as revealing are the occasional allusions elsewhere in Wulfstan's works, as when he forbids such animist practices as the worship of wells and trees. He even occasionally uses pagans in a noble-savage trope to berate the perverse nature of contemporary Christian practice, observing how much respect pagans show to their priestly class, whereas in Christian society priests are harrayed and parishioners won't pay their tithes fully.⁵

All this, of course, portrays pagan practice and belief from the outside and from an unsympathetic perspective. In order to get some pagan voices into the course, I turned to the Old Norse material. *Völuspá* is terrifically useful in a number of ways. Here, in a short ten pages (in Patricia Terry's translation), is an account of Norse cosmography from the beginning, with the creation of the gods, the world, and humans, to the end with Ragnarok and the death of the old generation of gods.⁶ The allusive nature of the verse suggests that it was written for a genuinely pagan audience. This makes the reading experience dense, but Snorri's *Prose Edda* provides a handy key for explaining what is going on.⁷ In any case, in my experience, students got a strong sense of an alternative cosmography and world-view from this one rich and immensely appealing poem, while I filled in some of the details for them from Snorri. And the poem fits perfectly, if speculatively, in the structure of this course. It is quite conceivable that such a poem was read and enjoyed by the not-yet-assimilated pagan Norse folk settled in the Danelaw; indeed, John McKinnell has argued that it may even have been written there.⁸

For a more quotidian sense of pagan life, imaginative Norse prose is a godsend. Here I used *Egil's Saga* in view of the hero's extensive exploits in England. The saga may have been composed in the Christian society of thirteenth-century Iceland, but its recreation of the tenth-century Viking world includes numerous details that seem strikingly unchristian, as students in the course were happy to unravel.⁹ Indeed, Egil's violence, drinking, and overriding materiality might give paganism a bad name, although students were able to draw out an economy of honor within which the violence operates and to infer something of a consistent world-view that motivates Egil's actions. Egil's semi-conversion to Christianity at the point that he becomes King Athelstan's retainer nicely complicates the apparently straightforward dichotomous nature between Christianity and paganism.

The very real tensions between Christianity and paganism became

an explicit focus in this course through a consideration of the St. Brice's Day massacre, which also provided an exemplary tale of the limits of available evidence. On the feast-day of St. Brice, 13 November 1002, King Æthelred gave an order for the killing of the Danes settled in England on the pretext of a conspiracy against his life and kingdom. Only two roughly contemporary documents give evidence for the event. At the end of the annal for 1002, the E version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports an added detail for the year: "In the same year the king gave orders for all the Danish people who were in England to be slain on St Brice's Day, because the king had been told that they wished to deprive him of his life by treachery and all his councillors after him, and then seize his kingdom."¹⁰ The cryptic account of the chronicle makes imaginative reconstruction of the event difficult, but notice that what is described here is a pogrom, the slaughter of a settled population based on their ethnic (or, perhaps, religious) identification. The chance survival of a charter for the monastery of St. Frideswide, Oxford, allows more of an imaginative recreation. In the charter, dated 1004, Æthelred renews the privilege of the monastery following the burning of its church in circumstances explained in the preamble:

For it is fully agreed that to all dwelling in this country it will be well known that, since a decree was sent out by me with the counsel of my leading men and magnates, to the effect that all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, like cockle amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination, and this decree was to be put into effect even as far as death, those Danes who dwelt in the afore-mentioned town [i.e., Oxford], striving to escape death, entered this sanctuary of Christ, having broken by force the doors and bolts, and resolved to make a refuge and defence for themselves therein against the people of the town and suburbs; but when all the people in pursuit strove, forced by necessity, to drive them out, and could not, they set fire to the planks and burnt, as it seems, this church with its ornaments and its books.¹¹

In other words, the slaughter was carried out with such zeal that the townsfolk were forced, justifiably in the rhetoric of this document, to burn down the church—whose privileges now need renewing.

By this stage in the course the class had explored the underlying tensions that made such an event possible. The charter leaves unstated whether the Danes seeking refuge in the church were pagan or Christian converts. They do seek refuge in a church, but that may be only an

acknowledgement of the legal status of sanctuary such a space should have offered. The rhetoric of the charter, with its appeal to Christ's parable at Matthew 13:24–30, suggests a Christian justification for violent action. The Christian king and his charter-writer are unapologetic about the killing, if slightly ambivalent about the destruction of the church building. The general killing of Danes is figured as “a most just extermination” (“iustissima exinanitione”); the people of Oxford and its suburbs were in pursuit “forced by necessity” (“necessitate compulsus”). When they couldn't drive them out of the church, they burned the building. There is a hint of distancing—the citizens “as it seems” (“vt liquet”) set the fire—and a hint of regret in the itemization of what got burned, “this church with its ornaments and books” (“hanc Ecclesiam. . . cum ornamentis ac libris”). The very act of renewing the church's privileges looks like an attempt to reestablish normalcy after what was perhaps somewhat regrettable from the perspective of the church. But of mercy towards these (pagan?) foreigners, there is no sign.¹² Reconstructing the attitude to this event allowed us to refine our understanding of the militant potential of Anglo-Saxon Christianity.

The course provided a rich context for students' readings of *Beowulf*. At a formal level, they had an increased sensitivity to the formulaic elements of the poem after they had come to terms with such a wholly formulaic genre as the charters. More importantly, the course provided students with a sense of the multiple audiences that might have encountered the poem *Beowulf* at the turn of the millennium and some of the multiple reactions it might have elicited. They recognized the economy of honor in the poem as parallel to that implied by the Norse pagan material and yet as generally unexceptionable for a tenth-century Christian audience, apart from that fleeting reference to the worship of idols. While the estates in *Beowulf* are somewhat simplified over those itemized in Wulfstan's *Polity*, students could relate the community-building effort implicit in most of Wulfstan's documentary prose to the idealized community here projected on *geardagum*. Indeed, they reached the surprising conclusion that, for all its celebration of pagans and of Danes, Wulfstan might well have approved the imaginative work of this epic poem, with its idealized society, where noble pagans demonstrate the importance of loyalty, all safely doomed and projected into a mythical past. The ideals of kingship, revolving around loyalty, honor, and revenge, would probably have been more straightforwardly cheered by the Anglo-Saxon chronicler, who would have delighted in the portrayal of a strong king like Beowulf, even while he cringed at the inaction of a Hrothgar. Students came to see how *Beowulf* might have different meanings and resonances for different audiences, and how an apparently old

story about long-dead heroes could be alive to the conflicts and messy realities of late-tenth-century England. Indeed, the poem's very engagement with Danes and with pagan heroes provides something of an imaginative antidote to the extreme of disengagement acted out in the St. Brice's Day massacre.

In the course of the semester, I was approached one office hour by an earnest young woman who wanted me to know that something that had been said in class could be considered disrespectful to pagans: "There are lots of us about, you know," she snapped at me somewhat resentfully. Besides quizzing her about the precise nature of her pagan practice, I talked through with her the rationale and methodology of the course, the way that neither Christianity nor paganism were being treated as self-evident or stable categories but rather as sets of practice and belief requiring constant attention to the specificity of their forms insofar as we could recover them; the way that a sensitivity to the rhetoric of the documents was our best chance of recovering a world-view that is far from self-evident; the way that the course moved incrementally, complicating and enriching as we absorbed more texts, so that no interim conclusions should be treated as final; the way that we were constantly pushing against the limits of knowledge and our consequent need to squeeze as much sense as we can from every surviving document to understand, so far as it is possible, values and ideas from a millennium ago. At the end of our talk, she conceded that the course was giving her a way of understanding the limits of historical knowledge and a methodology for reading and interpreting historical literature along with a sensitivity to the rhetoric of literary and non-literary works—which seem to me reasonable achievements for any course I teach. I became hopeful that such a course might appeal to and educate even that unshaven young man of the dorms.

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¹ Henry Olson, "Non sequiturs and fritters: Burge has these and more," *The Daily Iowan*, 16 Oct. 1990.

² See my essay, "The Battle of Maldon and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 979–1016: A Winning Combination," *Proceedings of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 3 (1996 for 1995): 31–50.

³ Translations are available in *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, trans. Michael Swanton, rev. ed., Everyman (London: Dent, 1993) 8–12, 187–201; Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042* (Oxford UP, 1955), with her selection of charters as documents 54–150 on pp. 440–564.

⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Prose* 184–7; for the original, see *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957), homily XII.

⁵ Cf. "The Sermon of 'Wolf' to the English," *Anglo-Saxon Prose* 178–84; Bethurum homily XX (EI), lines 27–37. For a good account of surviving Old English evidence for paganism, see Audrey L. Meaney, "Bede and Anglo-Saxon Paganism," *Parergon* 3 (1985): 1–29.

⁶ *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Patricia Terry, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990) 1–10.

⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes, Everyman (London: Dent, 1987). An alternative translation of the most useful part is Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology*, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: U of California P) 1954.

⁸ This idea is explored and problematized in John Lindow, "Norse Mythology and Northumbria: Methodological Notes," *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987): 308–24, and John McKinnell, "Norse Mythology and Northumbria: A Response," *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987): 325–37.

⁹ Two good translations are readily available: *Egil's Saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976); and *Egils saga*, trans. Christine Fell, Everyman (London: Dent, 1975).

¹⁰ *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, #1, 217; for the origi-

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nal, see Charles Plummer, ed., *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892) 1:134–35.

¹¹ *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, #127, 545. For the original, see Spencer Robert Wigram, ed., *The Cartulary of the Monastery of St. Frideswide at Oxford*, 2 vols., Oxford Historical Society 28, 31 (Oxford 1895–96) 1:2.

¹² See further my essay, “The St. Brice’s Day Massacre and Archbishop Wulfstan,” in *Peace, Negotiation, and Reciprocity: Strategies of Co-Existence in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Diane Wolfthal (forthcoming).

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Appendix: syllabus

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**8:101 Literature and Culture of the Middle Ages: the 990s and
1390s**

Texts

J. Trapp (ed.), *Medieval English Literature*. Oxford Anthology. [MEL]
Michael Swanton (trans.), *Anglo-Saxon Prose*. Everyman. [ASP]
Christine Fell (trans.), *Egils saga*. Everyman.
Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. J. J. Parry.
William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, trans. A.V.C. Schmidt.
Optional: S.A.J. Bradley (trans.), *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.
Further short texts will be available in the reserve reading room.

Rationale

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." But it is not all one foreign country: even the epoch known as the Middle Ages saw change as well as continuity. This course will investigate what is different about the past, what is not, and how it changed, by focusing on two decades that were exceptionally rich for English literature: the 990s and the 1390s.

Throughout this course we will read with similar care both works that are generally considered historical and those that are generally considered literary and reflect on the difference between the two. The course will center on English literature at the same time as historicizing and complicating that category: in the 990s we will view the creation of "England" as a Christian political unit in opposition to pagan expansionist Viking culture (whose literature we will also read); in the 1390s we will see English literature created in contradistinction to French courtly culture and Latin learned culture.

Particular focuses for the section on the 990s will be the relationship between Christian and pagan societies; the organization of society and the place of literature within that organization; the role and representation of women; and the means of recreating a knowledge of the past. In the section on the 1390s we will particularly focus on the sense of an ordered society; the role of literature in encouraging rebellion and control; the rise of romantic love and the status of women; and the relationship of past to present.

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Schedule: the 990s

M Aug. 26 Introductory

RECORDING HISTORY

W 28 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 991–1001.
F 30 *The Battle of Maldon* (MEL 104–14).
M Sept. 2 University Holiday: Labor Day

CIVIL SOCIETY

W 4 The Laws of Æthelred, 1008 (ASP 8–12) and
Regulation of the Cambridge Thegns' Guild (ASP
33–4).
F 6 Charters 117–19.
M 9 Wulfstan, *The Institutes of Polity* (ASP 187–201).

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

W 11 *Wulf & Eadwacer & The Wife's Lament* (Bradley
365–7, 382–5).
F 13 Charters 116, 120–1; "A Witch Drowned" (ASP 35).
M 16 *Genesis B* (Bradley 18–35).

CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

W 18 Ælfric, Sermon on the Sacrifice on Easter Day (ASP
149–57).
F 20 *The Dream of the Rood* (MEL 114–18).

PAGAN SOCIETY

M 23 Wulfstan, "Sermon on False Gods" (ASP 184–7).
W 25 "Völuspá"

A VIKING VERSION

F 27 *Egil's Saga*
M 30 *Egil's Saga*
W Oct. 2 *Egil's Saga*

CONCILIATION AND CONFLICT

F 4 An Anglo-Danish Peace Treaty, 878 (ASP 6–7).
M 7 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 1002
W 9 Charter 127

HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

F 11 *Beowulf* (MEL 29–98).

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M	14	<i>Beowulf</i> (MEL 29–98).
W	16	<i>Beowulf</i> (MEL 29–98).
F	18	<i>Beowulf</i> (MEL 29–98).

Coming up in the second half of the semester, major works will include: William Langland, *Piers Plowman*; Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*; the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; *The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play*; Middle English lyrics; and Chaucer's General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Expectations and Assessment

Every student will be expected to read with care the assigned works, to contribute to classroom discussion, and to undertake occasional informal writing assignments which respond to the readings. You will also be required to write two papers, make a classroom presentation, and take a final exam.

There will be a diversity of forms of assessment as follows. Grades will include pluses and minuses.

Paper on the 990s	20%
Paper on the 1390s	20%
Classroom presentation	20%
Final exam	15%
Informal writings and classroom participation	25%