

Introduction to “New Readings in Alfredian Literature”

Francis Leneghan 
University of Oxford

The past two decades have witnessed a surge of interest in Alfredian literature, as debate has moved beyond the question of royal authorship to consider the full range of literary activity during this period.¹ While earlier research was dominated by studies of the small corpus of works thought to have been composed by King Alfred himself,² scholars are now paying more attention to previously neglected works such as the Old English *Dialogues* (Johnson 2007, 2014; Irvine 2024b), *Orosius* (Godden 2011; Leneghan 2015; Khalaf 2024) and *Bede* (Johnson 2014; Waite 2024), as well as contemporary Anglo-Latin writing (Gallagher 2017, 2019, 2024). In step with these developments, material which had often been treated as non-literary is now coming to the fore, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Anlezark, forthcoming), legal and administrative texts (Juraski and Oliver 2021; Pitt 2022; Rabin and Adair 2023) and medical writing (Kesling 2020). Others have drawn attention to the literary output of the reigns of Alfred’s successors, his son Edward the Elder and grandson Æthelstan (Leneghan 2015; Konshuh 2024; Kesling 2024), as well as exploring how Alfred’s reputation as scholar-king and national saviour was forged in this period (Godden 2013; Marafioti 2015).

This special issue serves as a companion-piece to the chapters collected in Faulkner and Leneghan (2024), with a sharper focus on works that until recently were typically relegated to the margins of Alfredian studies. Studies of Alfredian writing have naturally focused on the dramatic upsurge in vernacular prose writing in this period. However, several of the articles in this collection highlight how Old English poetry continued to play an important role, both as a means of educating and entertaining readers, lay and clerical, and as a source of historical information for prose authors. Beginning with Asser’s story of how the young Alfred memorised a book of “Saxonica poemata” (“English songs”) in his *Life of Alfred* ch. XI, Mercedes Salvador-Bello uncovers the history of poetic anthologies in early medieval England. Building on Kenneth Sisam’s suggestion (1953, 107–8) that the collection that lies behind our present late-tenth century copy of the Exeter Book was compiled in the reign of Alfred or shortly thereafter, Salvador-Bello presents new evidence for connections between the *Anthologia Latina* and English poetry from the seventh to tenth centuries. In his contribution, Daniel Anlezark weighs up the evidence for the influence of poetic sources on early entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a work thought to have initiated at Alfred’s court. Engaging with arguments for the influence of the thought of John Scotus Eriugena on Alfredian literature

¹ See especially Discenza and Szarmach (2014); Faulkner (2023); Irvine (2024a); and Faulkner and Leneghan (2024). I would like to thank all the contributors, Amanda Roig-Marín, Jordi Sánchez-Martí and the anonymous reviewers for their work on this special issue.

² The royal corpus has traditionally been held to comprise the Old English *Pastoral Care*, *Boethius*, *Soliloquies* and (sometimes) the *Prose Psalms*. For a major study which focuses on this group of texts, see, for example, Pratt (2007); Frantzen (1986) focuses on this same corpus, though he also includes a chapter on Alfred’s law code (the *Domboc*). For debates about the extent of Alfred’s personal involvement in translation, see Godden (2007, 2009); Bately (2009, 2014).

(Treschow 1993; Ponirakis 2021), Tatyana Solomonik-Pankrashova investigates mystical themes in the *Metres of Boethius*. A pronounced interest in the inner workings of the mind has been detected in various Alfredian works (Faulkner 2019, 2022; Burns 2024), as well as across the wider corpus of Old English and Anglo-Latin literature more generally (Godden 2008; Mize 2006, 2008, 2013; Lockett 2011). In her contribution, Eleni Ponirakis explores nautical imagery—in particular the metaphor of “the ship of the mind”—in a range of Alfredian works, including Asser, the Old English *Pastoral Care* and *Andreas*, a poem which has been tentatively dated to the late ninth or early tenth century. With the general shift in scholarship away from the concept of Alfred as author onto the wider literary culture of the period, the important contribution of Mercian scholars across the long ninth century is becoming increasingly recognised (Rauer 2019, 2024). The Mercian Bishop Werferth of Worcester is the subject of the last two essays in this collection: David Johnson discusses eschatological themes in Werferth’s translation of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, a work which Alfred commissioned; finally, Brittany Hanlon highlights the use of literary language in a Mercian charter concerning a dispute involving Werferth and a priest named Æthelwald.

Together these essays reflect the increasing diversity of scholarship on Alfredian literature, raising questions about the transmission and reception of Old English poetry and prose, the development of vernacular psychology, theology and spirituality, and the boundaries of the literary.

References

- Anlezark, Daniel. Forthcoming. *The Making of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Bately, Janet. 2009. “Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything? The Integrity of the Alfredian Canon Revisited.” *Medium Ævum* 78: 189–215.
- Bately, Janet. 2014. “Alfred as Author and Translator.” In *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, edited by Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach, 113–42. Leiden: Brill.
- Burns, Rachel A. 2024. “Emotional Disturbance in the Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn.” *English Studies* 105: 358–82.
- Discenza, Nicole Guenther, and Paul E. Szarmach, eds. 2014. *A Companion to Alfred the Great*. Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 58. Leiden: Brill.
- Faulkner, Amy. 2018. “Royal Authority in the Biblical Quotations of the Old English *Pastoral Care*.” *Neophilologus* 102: 125–40.
- Faulkner, Amy. 2019. “The Mind in the Old English *Prose Psalms*.” *The Review of English Studies* 70: 597–617.
- Faulkner, Amy. 2022. “Seeking within the Self in *The Metres of Boethius*.” *Anglo-Saxon England* 48: 43–62.
- Faulkner, Amy. 2023. *Wealth and the Material World in the Old English Alfredian Corpus*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 46. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Faulkner, Amy, and Francis Leneghan, eds. 2024. *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*. Studies in Old English Literature 3. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Frantzen, Allen J. 1986. *King Alfred*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Gallagher, Robert. 2017. “Latin Acrostic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon England: Reassessing the Contribution of John the Old Saxon.” *Medium Ævum* 86: 249–75.

- Gallagher, Robert. 2019. "King Alfred and the Sibyl: Sources of Praise in the Latin Acrostic Verses of Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 671." *Early Medieval Europe* 27: 279–98.
- Gallagher, Robert. 2024. "Writing Latin in the Age of Alfred." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 73–102. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Godden, Malcolm. 2007. "Did King Alfred Write Anything?" *Medium Ævum* 76: 1–23.
- Godden, Malcolm. 2008. "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind." In *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes*, edited by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss, 271–98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Godden, Malcolm. 2009. "The Alfredian Project and its Aftermath: Rethinking the Literary History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 162: 93–122.
- Godden, Malcolm. 2011. "The Old English *Orosius* and its Context: Who Wrote it, for Whom, and Why?" *Quaestio Insularis: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic* 12: 1–30.
- Godden, Malcolm. 2013. "Alfredian Prose: Myth and Reality." *Filologia Germanica* 5: 131–58.
- Irvine, Susan. 2024a. *Alfredian Prologues and Epilogues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Irvine, Susan. 2024b. "The Idea of Decorum in the Old English *Dialogues*." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 211–28. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Johnson, David. 2007. "Why Ditch the *Dialogues*? Reclaiming an Invisible Text." In *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, edited by Charles D. Wright, Frederick M. Biggs, and Thomas N. Hall, 201–16. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Johnson, David. 2014. "Alfredian Apocrypha: The *Dialogues* and *Bede*." In *A Companion to Alfred the Great*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, edited by Nicole Guenther Disenza and Paul E. Szarmach, 58, 368–95. Leiden: Brill.
- Jurasinski, Stefan, and Lisi Oliver, eds. and trans. 2021. *The Laws of Alfred: The Domboc and the Making of Anglo-Saxon Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kesling, Emily. 2020. *Medical Texts in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 38. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Kesling, Emily. 2024. "The Winchester Scribes and Alfredian Prose in the Tenth Century." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 477–98. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Khalaf, Omar. 2024. "*Ælfred se casere*: Kingship and Imperial Legitimation in the Old English *Orosius*." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 457–76. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Konshuh, Courtney. 2024. "Chronicle Compilation and West Saxon Succession." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 499–522. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Leneghan, Francis. 2015. "*Translatio Imperii*: The Old English *Orosius* and the Rise of Wessex." *Anglia* 133: 656–705.
- Lockett, Leslie. 2011. *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Marafioti, Nicole. 2015. "Seeking Alfred's Body: Royal Tomb as Political Object in the Reign of Edward the Elder." *Early Medieval Europe* 23: 203–26.
- Mize, Britt. 2006. "The Representation of the Mind as an Enclosure in Old English Poetry." *Anglo-Saxon England* 35: 57–90.
- Mize, Britt. 2008. "Manipulations of the Mind-as-Container Motif in *Beowulf*, *Homiletic Fragment II*, and *Alfred's Metrical Epilogue to the Pastoral Care*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 107: 25–56.
- Mize, Britt. 2013. *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Pitt, Georgina. 2022. "Alfredian Military Reform: The Materialization of Ideology and the Social Practice of Garrisoning." *Early Medieval Europe* 30: 408–36.
- Ponirakis, Eleni. 2021. "Echoes of Eriugena in the *Old English Boethius*." *Neophilologus* 105: 279–88.
- Pratt, David. 2007. *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rabin, Andrew, and Anya Adair, eds. 2023. *Law, Literature, and Social Regulation in Early Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Rauer, Christine. 2019. "Early Mercian Text Production: Authors, Dialects, and Reputations." *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 77: 541–58.
- Rauer, Christine. 2024. "Old English Literature Before Alfred: The Mercian Dimension." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 51–72. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Reuter, Timothy, ed. 2003. *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Sisam, Kenneth. 1953. *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Treschow, Michael. 1993. "Echoes of the *Periphyseon* in the Third Book of Alfred's *Soliloquies*." *Notes and Queries* 40: 281–86.
- Waite, Greg. 2024. "The Old English *Bede*: Some Reflections on Origins and Text." In *The Age of Alfred: Rethinking English Literary Culture c. 850–950*, edited by Amy Faulkner and Francis Leneghan, 151–210. Turnhout: Brepols.