

Translation and Orality in the Old English *Orosius*

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The focus of oral studies in Anglo-Saxon literature has been primarily on poetic texts; the poetry's oral-formulaic language and its way of transforming narratives according to its own traditional idiom have made it a fascinating area of study. Within this field, however, critical analysis has deepened from early, often rote applications of the Parry-Lord theory toward more precise consideration of the "tradition-dependent" features of oral-traditional texts in Old English, features that may or may not find parallels in texts from other oral cultures.¹ Additionally, the direction of oral studies of the past two decades in medieval literature generally as well as in Anglo-Saxon literature in particular has included issues of audience, reception, and transmission—what we might characterize as the dynamics of orality, that is, how orality operates as one of the "socially conditioned and socially functional modes of approach to the transmission of knowledge" (Bäuml 1980:246). A recent, broad-ranging collection of essays on medieval literature subtitled *Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages* reflects emphasis on the fact that orality and literacy always involve social, and in the latter case technological, constructions that support the mode(s) of communication at each extreme of the oral/literate dichotomy and all along the spectrum in between.²

Franz Bäuml's definition, cited above, recognizes that orality affects all communication in an oral culture. In Anglo-Saxon England, the poetic idiom of Old English was a specialized form of language that arose within that oral culture before the advent of literacy, but the use of the idiom is only one manifestation of general assumptions operating within Anglo-Saxon culture, assumptions that mark all aspects of the vernacular language and that continue to mark it even after the ascendancy of writing

¹ The phrase is from Foley 1980; see further Foley 1990: espec. ch. 1.

² Doane and Pasternack 1991. See especially the essays by Ursula Schaefer and John Miles Foley.

and literacy.³ Given the characteristics of the poetic idiom, such as its highly structured language, the anonymity of most of its poets, and opening formulas repeated among many poems, those assumptions must include, for example, that one valued function of language is the communal expression of traditional thought and that authority comes from aligning oneself with a tradition.⁴ Such assumptions, quite explicit in Old English poetry, have ramifications for other forms of language within the community, including prose genres. The idiom itself may be unique to poetry, but the emphasis and value placed on traditional thought are not.

To test these theories in prose works, Anglo-Saxon prose translations of Latin texts are particularly useful. Translations necessarily involve confrontation between language systems; in working from Latin to Old English, Anglo-Saxon translators were faced with the task of rendering a language with a long textual history into a language with a relatively recent emergence from its oral environment. In translation, the text becomes a “bilingual” document, marked by an interaction of both language systems, the Latin and the vernacular, the textual and the oral. One of the most interesting prose translations in this regard is the Old English *Orosius*. This text is a ninth-century translation of Paulus Orosius’ *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII* (*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*), a Latin history written at the request of Augustine to demonstrate how rather than ruining living conditions in the world, as contemporary writers had charged, Christianity had actually improved them.⁵ In fact, the Old English *Orosius* belongs to a group of works from the Alfredian period that share a relatively free style of translation. The Old English *Orosius* is so different

³ Patrick Wormald (1977) has documented the limited extent of full literacy in Anglo-Saxon England, and demonstrated the importance of recognizing the much larger group who could utilize the technology that literacy made available without being literate themselves.

⁴ For discussion exploring assumptions basic to oral cultures generally, see especially Ong 1982:36-57.

⁵ Citations in the text from the Latin and Old English versions of the *History Against the Pagans* are from Zangemeister 1882 and Bately 1980; translations are from Raymond 1936 and Giles 1969, respectively. If no citation is given, the translation is my own.

from its source that Janet Bately suggests “transformation” as a more appropriate term than “translation.”⁶

The translation’s departure from the source text stems in part, I will argue, from the influence of orality on the Old English *Orosius*. This is made most explicit in the interplay of the translator’s voice with three other voices in the text, that of the author Orosius and those of Ohthere and Wulfstan, whose narratives appear in Book One. The vernacular version demonstrates that an oral community’s implicit assumptions about language continue to have an influence even when that language has begun to evolve into a written language, and that this influence is exerted even in a hyperliterary context such as a translation.

A clear pattern can be distinguished in how the translator deals with the narrative voice of the author Orosius. The *History* is heavily condensed in the Old English version. Omissions are largely comprised of the trimming of episodes into extremely short epitomes of the *History*’s already pithy narrative. In addition, however, nearly all of the sections in which Orosius engages in rhetorical argument or polemic are cut. In removing this material—the prologue to Book One, the prefaces of Books Three and Four, and the epilogue to the work—the translator effects a crucial change in the voice of the text. In these sections, Orosius had established his authority in various ways, most importantly noting in the general preface his commission from Augustine and his own pious intentions for setting the historical record straight.⁷ Because this material is omitted, the rhetorical voice of Orosius is limited in the Old English work to a space within the narrative itself, and it loses the “enclosing” function formerly granted by the

⁶ Bately (1984) examines the *Orosius*, the *Boethius*, the *Paris Psalter*, and the *Soliloquies of Augustine*. She dates the composition of the Old English *Orosius* to about 890-99 (1980:xciii); all extant manuscripts are later. There are two complete (the Lauderdale or Tollemache manuscript, British Library, Additional 47967; and British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i.) and two fragments, the Bodley and Vatican fragments. The Tollemache manuscript is dated to the early tenth century; all others date to the eleventh (1980:xxiii-xxvi).

⁷ The Latin text also relies on chapter headings and book divisions as formatting techniques. The two major manuscripts of the Old English *Orosius* do have chapter headings (the fragments do not include them, since they are from later sections of the work), but Bately believes these were added by someone other (and later) than the author: the headings show little knowledge of what is in the chapters; they are “unselective, mechanical, and unhelpful” (1980:lxxxii). The headings also have “variant usages” in vocabulary from the Old English *Orosius* (lxxxii). Book divisions are similar in both manuscripts and concur with divisions in the *History*.

prologue and epilogue. The voice of Orosius is more closely contained within the text and loses much of its context.

Secondly, the voice of Orosius within the narrative is manipulated by the translator. Although often the author of the Old English version retains the voice of Orosius by using a tag phrase, such as “cwæð Orosius” (“Orosius said”), especially in passages in which Orosius addresses the Romans by name,⁸ the translator uses tag phrases for two other purposes as well. He revises Orosius’ commentary in such a way that it becomes more his own than the Latin author’s and at times adds passages that are completely his own creation.⁹ One notable example of original elaboration is found in I.16, where Orosius comments on the contrast between the Amazons’ destruction of Rome and the recent invasion of Rome by the Goths, who in spite of their power over the city asked only for a place to settle. He castigates the Romans for the blindness that keeps them from seeing that “beneficio Christianae religionis—quae cognatam per omnes populos fidem iungit—eos viros sine proelio sibi esse subiectos” (68) (“it was through the mediation of the Christian religion, which unites all peoples in the recognition of a common faith, that those barbarians became subject to the Romans without a conflict” [65]). The Old English *Orosius* contains only the briefest mention of the Amazons and Goths, choosing instead to elaborate on the idea of unity through the Christian religion, describing exactly how things are better under the aegis of Christianity (I.10, 31; 73):

. . . hie nellað geþencean oþþe ne cunnon, hwær hit gewurde ær þæm cristendome, þæt ænegu þeod oþre hiere willum friþes bæde, buton hiere þearf wære, oþþe hwær ænegu þeod æt oþerre mehte frið begietan, oððe mid golde, oððe mid seolfre, oþþe mid ænige feo, buton he him underþiedd wære. Ac sipþan Crist geboren wæs, þe ealles middangeardes is sibb 7 frið,

⁸ See, for example, II.8, III.S, IV.7, and V.1. The use of the tag often shows consideration of how an audience would respond to its use. For example, when translating Orosius’ description of the contemporary situation, the translator is careful to add such a tag, apparently to explain his retention of the present tense: “7 Onorius to þæm wæstdæle 7 nugiet hæfð, cwæð Orosius ... “ (VI.37, 155) (“... and Honorius [succeeded] to the western part, and even yet holds it,” said Orosius”[196]). However, the translator is not completely consistent in his references to the Latin author. For example, in I.3, the translator writes, “Scortlice ic hæbbe nu gesæd ymb þa þrie dælas ealles þises middangeardes ... “ (9) (“I have already spoken shortly about the three parts of this mid-earth” [31]), recreating Orosius’ “ego” with “ic.”

⁹ I use the masculine pronoun because there is a high probability the translator was male; in other cases, I use inclusive language.

nales þæt an þæt men hie mehten aliesan mid feo of þeowdome, ac eac þeoda him betweonum buton þeowdome gesibbsume wæron.

They will not think nor know that, before Christianity, no country, of its own will, asked peace of another, unless it were in need; nor where any country could obtain peace from another by gold, or by silver, or by any fee, without being enslaved. But since Christ was born, who is the peace and freedom of the whole world, men may not only free themselves from slavery by money, but countries also are peaceable without enslaving each other.

This passage does not correspond to anything in the Latin work, and yet the paragraph containing this passage specifically begins with “cwæð Orosius” (30).¹⁰

Often, what lies behind such revision is the fact that the translator has had to effect a modification of the polemical tenor. The focus of the two works is different: the translator has substituted his own view of history for that of Orosius. The *History* is a polemic against anti-Christian sentiment in the fifth century, directed at a very specific time and audience. It purports to show first that disasters and evil have always been a part of history, even under the old gods, and secondly that a frank comparison reveals that history is becoming less malignant under Christianity; the climax of the work is the sack of Rome, which Orosius attempts to put in the best possible light. For the author of the Old English *Orosius*, this historical event has become simply one among many of the world’s incidents, since his audience has little emotional investment in the fall of Rome. Bately notes that the translator’s main theme is crafted out of the *History*’s secondary one, namely that the coming of Christ has brought salvation into the world and that it has had material effects on governments and on nature. Christ’s birth, important to *History*’s scheme but not its polemical center, has become the focal point for the Old English *Orosius* (1984:18-19).¹¹

¹⁰ For other notable examples of the independence of the Old English *Orosius* from the *History*, see I.10, III.1, and IV.13.

¹¹ Possibly, Bately suggests, the translator was following the guidelines set up by Ælfred in the Prefatory Letter to the *Cura Pastoralis*. Here, Ælfred notes the necessity of instilling wisdom OE *wisdom*, which Ælfred distinguishes from *lar*) in the youth of his day. In the Old English *Orosius*, Bately argues, the wisdom of the book would be found in the overall scheme of the providence of God revealed in history (1984:18-19). Cf. Kretzchmar (1987), who believes the Old English *Orosius* has a more practical agenda than its source.

A second explanation for radical revision is that the translator views Orosius as an *auctor* and thus feels it is appropriate to attribute new material to him. This is clear from the way in which the translator, in addition to his own commentary, also adds information from other sources to his text. The list from which material is taken is impressive—Livy, Sallust, Pliny the Elder, Valerius Maximus, Servius, Jerome, Bede, et al. (Bately 1980:lx). This list does not necessarily mean the translator was well-read; he may have appropriated them through a commentary.¹² But no matter how they made their way into the translation, once there they are mingled with the various sources originally compiled by Orosius himself to write the history, because they are made “silently,” without attribution (certainly the norm in the Middle Ages). In the present text, then, all the strands—Orosius’ Latin text, the other sources, and the translator’s own commentary—come together under that label that confers *auctoritas* onto Orosius. This difference is distinctly marked at the beginning of the history. Instead of the preface in which Orosius had felt it necessary to cite his own claim to authority—commission from Augustine (“*Praeceptis tuis parui, beatissime pater Augustine*” [1] (“I have obeyed your instructions, most blessed father Augustine”) [29])—the Old English *Orosius* begins with the first chapter of Book One of the Latin text (I.1,8):

Ure ieldran ealne þisne ymbhwyrft þises middangeardes, cwæð Orosius,
swa swa Oceanus utan ymbligeþ, þone mon garsæcg hateð, on þreo
todældon.

Our elders, said Orosius, divided into three parts all the circle of this
middle-earth surrounded by Oceanus, which is called *garsæcg*.

¹² Bately notes that “the author of the [Old English *Orosius*] need not have been familiar with all these works . . . at first hand. Some may have been present in the manuscript of [the *History*] used by him . . . Others may have been derived from a Latin-Latin or Latin-OE glossary, from oral communications, or from a (Latin?) commentary” (1980:lx-lxii). The author of the Old English *Orosius* updates geographical information, for example, especially in Book One when his knowledge of European and British geography exceeds that of Orosius, and he adds many passages explaining terms, persons, and events that would have been unfamiliar to his audience. For example, Hercules is explained to be an “ent” (a giant) in 111.9, a triumph is defined (with some confusion in details) in II.4, and the significance of the open doors of Janus’ temple during wartime is supplied in III.5. Also, many changes are expansions using information available in other accounts. It is in this respect that Bately believes there is the strongest evidence that the translator used a gloss or commentary and was not himself familiar with all the original sources, since often the added information is confused, wrong, or shows a misunderstanding of the Latin. For an extended study, see Bately 1971.

Orosius has replaced Augustine; for the translator, Orosius is as far back as the *auctoritas* need go.¹³

When considering the changes made by the translator of the *History Against the Pagans*, one immediately recognizes the Latinate conception of *auctoritas* that allows the translator to add words in the name of the author (and in this case remove them as well). Fred Robinson notes that “the luxuriant pseudepigraphy of pious intent circulating in the medieval world implies a less anxious attitude toward a writer’s appropriation of an authoritative voice to enumerate godly verities” (1980:23). Additionally, the concept of *auctoritas* does not necessarily find its central locus at the level of the word; it inheres just as much in the literate technologies that make up the context of the word—writing, books, and the Latin language. Jesse Gellrich has written insightfully on how medieval attitudes toward texts include “powerful commitments to the idea of the Book, its grounding in fixed meanings validated in a definite origin—the Bible, nature, tradition, God” (1985:27). Adding or removing words does not affect this more inclusive view by which the translator defines the text of Orosius the *auctor*. Certainly, medieval literature is full of examples of writing put under the name of an authority greater than the writer himself or herself.¹⁴

Auctoritas does not, however, provide a complete explanation. There is evidence that a wholly separate definition of authority may be in play within the text, an authority based on vernacular, oral assumptions, not Latinate, textual ones. In some additions he makes, the translator’s voice reveals its link to certain vernacular traditions familiar from poetry. These allusions are not as specific as the use of formulas. Certainly, outside of poetry, the appearance of formulas would not be expected, as formulas are best thought of not as repetitions of stock phrases, but rather as the solution to “the equation of [a poet’s] metrical idea plus traditional vocabulary” (Foley 1976:212). Type-scenes, defined by Fry as “recurring stereotyped presentation[s] of conventional details used to describe . . . certain narrative event[s], requiring neither verbatim repetition nor a specific formula content” (1968:53) may be a closer analogue to what occurs in the prose work.

¹³ Although this initial reference to Augustine is omitted, the Old English *Orosius* does include a reference to Augustine in III.3; however, without the initial explanation of the commission from Augustine, the reference is rather nonsensical.

¹⁴ For a full examination of the ramifications of the concepts of *auctor* and *auctoritas* for the medieval period, see Minnis 1988.

Useful in this context is John Miles Foley's examination of metonymy to explain how an oral poet can bring the entire tradition to bear on the performance of an oral work by means of the traditional language used in any and every part of it. When an oral poet uses metonymy or "traditional referentiality," Foley explains (1991:7), "each element in the phraseology or narrative thematics stands not simply for that singular instance but for the plurality and multiformity that are beyond the reach of textualization." In several instances in the Old English *Orosius*, such metonymy is at work, but in a slightly different way. In these places, a word or phrase in the Latin text triggers a familiar pattern in the translator's knowledge of traditional idiom within the vernacular language system, and in the translation the pattern is played out at length. The first, from the *History* II.6, occurs with a reference to transience. After describing the destruction of Babylon, Orosius writes (97-98; 82):

Exaggerare hoc loco mutabilium rerum instabiles status non opus est: quidquid enim est opere et manu factum, labi et consumi vetustate, Babylon capta confirmat; cuius ut primum imperium ac potentissimum exstitit ita et primum cessit, ut veluti quodam iure succedentis aetatis debita posteris traderetur hereditas, ipsis quoque eandem tradendi formulam servaturis.

It is unnecessary to add here further instances of the unstable conditions that have followed the changing events of history; for whatever has been built up by the hand of man falls and comes to an end through the passage of time. This truth is illustrated by the capture of Babylon. Her empire began to decline just as it had reached the height of its power, so that, in accordance with a certain law of succession which runs through the ages, posterity might receive the inheritance due to it—posterity which was fated to hand on the inheritance according to the same law.

In this example, it is the mention of the transience of human affairs that seems to have determined the form the passage takes in Old English. The translator's passage reads (II.4, 43-44; 86):

Nu seo burg swelc is, þe ær wæs ealra weorca fæstast ⁊ wunderlecast ⁊ mæraest, gelice ⁊ heo wære to bisene asteald eallum middangearde, ⁊ eac swelce heo self sprecende sie to eallum moncynne ⁊ cweþe: "Nu ic þuss gehroren eam ⁊ aweg gewiten, hwæt, ge magan on me ongietan ⁊ oncnawan þæt ge nanuht mid eow nabbað fæstes ne stronges þætte þurhwunigean mæge."

Now the city, which was formerly the strongest, most wonderful and greatest of all works, is as if it were set for a sign to all the world; and as if

it spoke to all mankind and said: "Now I am thus fallen and gone away: Lo! in me ye may learn and know, that ye have nothing with you so fast and strong, that it can abide forever!"

The use of the dramatic speaker to verbalize the theme of absence and the image of a "fallen city" in place of the Latin's empire in decline are new in the Old English version. Both elements have parallels in Old English poetry, especially in the poems *The Ruin* and *Advent Lyric I*. (The appearance of the evocative *hwæt* ("lo!") in the *burg*'s speech is especially interesting, since it is one of the traditional ways to open a poem or mark a point of special interest within it.¹⁵) Both poems use the image of buildings in ruins as a symbol of the fleeting quality of time on earth; for example, a passage from the beginning of *The Ruin* reads as follows (Krapp and Dobbie 1936:227, lines 3-9):

Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras,
 hrungeat berofen, brim on lime,
 scearde scurbeorge scorene, gedrorene,
 ældo undereotone. Eorðgrap hafað
 waldend wyrhtan forweorone, geleorene,
 heardgripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea
 werþeoda gewitan.

The roofs are fallen, towers in ruins, the ringed gate despoiled, rime on the mortar, the storm-shielding roof gashed, scored, collapsed, eaten away by age. An earth-grip holds the noble builders, decayed and gone, the powerful grip of the earth, while a hundred generations of people have departed.

Through its speech, the city of Babylon in the Old English *Orosius* becomes a symbol similar to the ruins in this poem, a physical reminder of transience; the city is utilized in a manner similar to the speaker in the Lament of the Sole Survivor in *Beowulf*, as Janet Thormann has described it: "the Lament is the materialization of voice as sound, sound constituting

¹⁵ *Beowulf*, *Exodus*, *Andreas*, *Dream of the Rood*, and *Juliana* are examples of poems that begin with this formulaic opening. The manuscript copyist has recognized the importance of the word *hwæt* as well; in the Tollemache manuscript the "h" of *hwæt* is written larger than any other letter on the page (Campbell 1953:folio 26r). For an extended analysis of the significance of the use of *hwæt* in Anglo-Saxon poetry, see Foley 1991:214-23.

itself as the signifier of absence” (1992:547).¹⁶ The Old English translation provides a focus on Babylon both as a physical ruin that one observes and a voice to which one listens.

A second example of the influence of a type-scene is the description of the bravery of Alexander as he defends himself alone in an enemy city (181-82; 138): wounded by an arrow, he keeps his back against a wall, and

contrarios facilius eo usque sustinuit, donec ad periculum eius clamoremque hostium perfractis muris exercitus omnis inrumperet. In eo proelio sagitta sub mamma traiectus, fixo genu eatenus pugnavit, donec eum a quo vulneratus esset occideret.

There he held his assailants easily in check until his entire army entered the city through a breach in the wall. This action endangered Alexander and at the same time caused the enemy to shout with dismay. During the fighting, Alexander was struck in the chest by an arrow, but resting on one knee he fought on until he had killed the man who had wounded him.

The Old English version broadens the focus to include praise for the soldiers, who have become “thanes” (73; 117):

Nyte we nu hwæðer sie swiþor to wundrienne, þe þæt, hu he ana wið ealle þa burgware hiene awerede, þe eft þa him fultum com, hu he þurh þæt folc geþrang þæt he ðone ilcan of slog þe hiene ær þurhsceat, þe eft þara þegna angin þa hie untweogendlice wend on þæt heora hlaford wære on heora feonda gewealde, oððe oððe dead, þæt hie swa þeah noldon þæs weallgebreces geswican, þæt hie heora hlaford ne gewræcen, þeh þe hie hiene meðigne on cneowum sittende metten.

Now we do not know which is more to be wondered at, how he alone defended himself against all the townspeople, or again, when help came to him, how he so pressed through the people, that he killed the same man, who before shot him through; or again, the undertaking of the thanes, when they undoubtedly thought that their lord was in the power of their enemies either alive or dead, that they, nevertheless, did not refrain from breaking the wall, that they might revenge their lord, whom they found weary, and resting on his knees.

¹⁶ Compare Downes 1995:142 on the theme of absence in Old English literature: “Rhetorical topoi of absence such as the barrow and the ruin become *legisimilar* means of establishing the truth about things absent, although at the same time they appear to refer to the trace of that absence visible in the everyday landscape.”

This attention to the thanes is in conformity with other Old English literature concerned with martial themes; the loyal comitatus is a necessary part of the praiseworthiness of a lord. In *Beowulf*, for example, the descriptions of the success of the kings Beow and Hroðgar include mention of their retinue of loyal followers; describing Hroðgar, the poet observes (Klaeber 1950:11. 64-67):

þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen
wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas
geome hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogod geweox
magodriht micel.

Then was Hroðgar given battle-success, honor in battle, so that his friendly kinsmen eagerly followed him, until the group of young warriors grew large.

In a case of an unsuccessful battle, Wiglaf's rebuke of Beowulf's retainers at the end of the poem highlights their desertion of Beowulf by mentioning the very symbol of the lord-thane relationship—the armor they presently wear (11. 2864-72):

þæt, la, mæg secgan se ðe wyle soð specan
þæt se mondryhten, se eow ða maðmas geaf
eoredgeatwe, þe ge þær on standað,—
þonne he on ealubence oft gesealde
healsittendum helm ond byrnan,
þeoden his þegnum, swylce he þrydlicost
ower feor oððe neah findan meahte—,
þæt he genunga gudgewædu
wraðe forwurpe, ða hyne wig beget.

Indeed, that man who wishes to speak the truth may say that the lord who gave you treasure, the war-gear in which you there stand—as he often did give to those sitting on ale-benches in the hall, helmet and coat of mail, the Lord to his thanes, whatever he could find, far or near, most splendid for you—that he utterly threw away the war-armor when battle grievously befell him.

As these kings are in part defined by their thanes' behavior, so the translator of the Old English *Orosius* makes the loyalty of the thanes to Alexander as significant an element of Alexander's success as his own bravery. Ursula Schaefer's observation about formulaicness proper holds true for the use of traditional idiom in the Old English *Orosius* as well (1989:202): "Formulaicness in everyday speech as well as in poetic diction thus has a

norm-confirming function by evoking a certain norm as unquestioned reference. “

These two passages are examples of a traditional reading or reception of the source text. As the translator reads the *History*, certain situations fit a conceptual “grid” with which he is already familiar through his everyday use of the vernacular and his familiarity with its traditions. These scenes spark the appearance of a traditional idiom in his representation of the material. The Latin source is thus transformed into a vernacular text that includes elements of expression from an oral or traditional context; these changes occur as assumptions associated with the vernacular become explicit in translation.¹⁷ A beset hero, described in Latin, may not need the loyalty of followers as a proof of his worthiness; when the hero is described in Old English, that element is felt to be necessary for the portrait to be complete.¹⁸

¹⁷ Two minor examples specifically relate to the translator’s assumption about the function of *leoð* (“song”). In a passage from Book Two, describing the acts of the Fabii, Orosius mentions that the gate through which the Fabii passed and the river in which they drowned still bear “evil names” (II.4, 80) (“*infarnibus vocabulis*” [94]) to commemorate the loss to Rome occasioned by their death. The translator, while mentioning the commemorative names of the river and gate, adds that “*nu giet todrege hit is on leoðum sungen hwelcne demm hie Romanum gefeollan*” (II.4, 42) (“Now, to this very day, it is sung in verse, what a loss their fall was to the Romans” [84]). When in the same chapter Orosius says he can describe the state of the whole world with a certain poetic line written about one city (and then goes on to quote the *Aeneid* 2.368-69), the Old English version reads, “*Næs na on Romanum anum, ac swa hit an scopleoðum sungen is þæt gind ealne middangeard wære caru ⁊ gewin ⁊ ege*” (42) (“It was not among the Romans alone, but likewise the same is sung in songs that over the whole world there was grief and strife and dread”). On one hand, this is an apparent mistranslation: the translator mistakes Orosius’ ability to describe the whole world with this verse for the idea that this verse is sung about the condition of the whole world. On the other hand, the mistranslation reveals interesting aspects of the translator’s concept of verse. He expects a quoted verse to be a performed song, he assumes that many songs are sung on the same subject, and he expects that such songs are continuously performed through time. The Latin work contains bits of text quoted from other texts; the Old English work makes reference to a world of performed songs, dispersed among communities. It is a revealing “mistranslation.”

¹⁸ In poetry, examples of the appearance of elements to complete a theme, even when at times they work against the literal meaning of the text, are numerous. Three early examinations can be found in Greenfield 1955, Crowne 1960, and Renoir 1962. Elements of “performance” in composition have been documented even in the context of manuscript transmission in, among other studies, Doane 1991 and O’Brien O’Keefe 1990 in Old English and Machan 1991 in Middle English, which argues for the dynamics of orality to be “better recognized and utilized in editorial procedure” in medieval texts (244).

The translator recognizes Orosius as an *auctor* yet gives his own voice creative room; underlying this “performance” is the influence of an authority different from *auctoritas*, an authority rooted in orality and associated with the vernacular in which the translator does his work. In an oral society, the high status accorded to speakers of tradition reflects their crucial role. The present speaker of the community’s traditions and its narratives is constrained by the tradition and yet determines it at the same time. Without written record, an objective, permanent source to be consulted does not exist; each speaker is the embodiment of the tradition as he or she tells the story or sings the song. The oral-based concept of authority stems from the necessity for each speaker to bring the past into the present, to ensure its ongoing life. Ward Parks describes the oral narrator thus: “standing at the hinge between one performance and another, mediating the interaction of the performative and interperformative axes, he must orient himself diachronically and synchronically at once” (1992:458). This authority of “presence”—the authority of the one who is speaking—is brought into play by the translator; although of course the translation of the *History* is not a traditional narrative, nevertheless the translator’s position is similar. The translator is “speaking” the text to a vernacular audience, and does so in his own voice as the one responsible at this moment for this narrative. The complex attitudes that empower the speaker of tradition in an oral society exert a force even in the context of translation, providing the translator with the means to confront the *auctoritas* of the book, the Latin language, and textuality itself.

The oral-based conception of authority helps to explain the translator’s own additions and revisions of the Latin text; however, it is even more explicitly demonstrated in the inclusion within Book One of the stories of Ohthere and Wulfstan. These latter passages are the reports given by two travelers about journeys they had undertaken in northern Scandinavia. Ohthere was probably a Norwegian, and Wulfstan an Anglo-Saxon or perhaps Frisian (Bately 1980:lxix). Ohthere is specifically said to have reported his travels to King Ælfred: the narrative begins “Ohthere sæde his hlaforde, Ælfrede cyninge, þæt he ealra Norðmonna norþmest bude” (I.1, 13) (“Ohthere told his lord, King Alfred, that he dwelt northmost of all Northmen” [39-40]). Wulfstan’s narrative is added on to Ohthere’s without a specific context being noted. Janet Bately believes these are transcriptions of actual oral statements (in the vernacular) of two men, based on the fact that the style of each passage differs both from the other and from the style of the Old English *Orosius* in general

(1980:lxii).¹⁹ In addition, Wulfstan's narrative is told at times in the first person: "Burgenda land wæs *us* on breobord," Wulfstan says, and "Weonodland wæs *us* ealne weg on steorbord oð Wislemuðan" (16, my emphasis) ("[W]e had, on our left, the land of the Burgundians ... we had Weonodland, on the right, all the way to the mouth of the Vistula" [50-51]). The reports fill approximately four folios;²⁰ they begin without special introduction, with the abrupt statement quoted above, "Ohthere sæde his hlaforde, Ælfrede cyninge," etc. The "o" of "Ohthere," the first word of the passage, is not capitalized or given any other special treatment in the Tollemache manuscript. They also end without special notation; Wulfstan's comment about a tribe among the Estonians that has the ability to freeze water and beer in summer or winter is followed abruptly by a reversion to the geographical description of Europe: "Nu wille we [Orosius] secgan be suðan Donua þære ea ymbe Creca land " (I.1, 18) ("Now will we speak about Greece, on the south of the river Danube" [56]). The reports are thus given no more but no less attention than any other part of the history.²¹

This is surprising, because this passage contains material that comes from an environment totally alien to the rest of the work. Although the subject of Book One of the Old English *Orosius* is the geography of Europe, and the narratives of these two travelers contain much geographical information, the relating of that information is permeated with a personal tone that is to be expected from the kind of narratives they are, but which is completely absent from the rest of the work. For example, distances are not related in miles, as they are in most of the Latin version's and the translation's descriptions ("Brittannia þæt igland, hit is norðeastlang, ⁊ hit is eahta hund mila lang ⁊ twa hund mila brad" (I.1, 19) ["The island Britain—it extends a long way northeast; it is eight hundred miles long, and

¹⁹ Bately argues that the names in the text often show variations in spelling that could only be based on aural reception (1980:cxiv). For a detailed study, see Bately 1966; for contrasting views, see Kirkman 1930 and Tristram 1982.

²⁰ The Ohthere and Wulfstan passages are found on folio 8r and 8v of the Tollemache manuscript; Bately supplies the remainder from folios 10v to 13r in the Cotton manuscript, since this section of the Tollemache manuscript has been removed and now contains only a sixteenth-century transcription of the manuscript (1980:cxviii).

²¹ The end of the Ohthere passage is marked, as often in this manuscript, with an elevated dot, and a small space has been left open before the first word of the next sentence. The Wulfstan passage in the Cotton manuscript also shows little or no distinction. The *wynn* in the first letter of *Wulfstan* is capitalized and filled in, but similar treatment has been given to the words *Seo* and *Pa* on the same page, and two other smaller-case letters have been filled in (Bately 1980, facsimile facing p. 16).

two hundred miles broad" (58)]; rather, distances are put in much more subjective terms: Ohthere "siglde ða east be lande swa swa he meahte on feower dagum gesiglan" (I.1, 19) ("sailed east along the land as far as he could sail in four days") and at one point he says he was "swa feor norþ swa þa hwælhuntan firrest faraþ" (14) ("as far north as the whale-hunters go at their farthest"). The availability of information is tied to the journey; when Ohthere says he has no information about the land of the Beormas (the Finnish *permi*, traveling merchants from Outer Karelia), it is because he did not dare sail up the river into their land "for unfriþe" (14), because of fear of hostility or, as Christine Fell has suggested, because there was no formal trade agreement between the two peoples (1984:63). The passages are full of digression and are governed by the interests of the journeyers and what they believed would interest their audience, as when Wulfstan notes where walrus can be found, or mentions that "ne bið ðær nænig ealo gebrowen mid Estum, ac þær bið medo enoh" (17) ("There is no ale brewed by the Esthonians [*sic*], but there is mead enough" [54]).

This kind of narrative, immediate and closely tied to personal experience, presents an interesting comparison with the narrative that makes up the bulk of the Old English work. Although the style of both is paratactic, the additive quality of the latter stems from the pared-down nature of the style in which it has been edited. Attempting to cover twenty-five hundred years of history in six books, the Old English *Orosius* is brisk, streamlined, and necessarily more or less superficial; it presents a number of similar beads on a string, events leveled to plot. The Ohthere and Wulfstan passages, on the other hand, are inherently paratactic because they are oral narratives; to continue the metaphor, the narrative is comprised of dissimilar beads strung together (a list of the uses for walrus hides appears next to a description of Ohthere's personal wealth, which is next to a geographical description of Norway), but the disjunctive style maintains a coherence based on the presence of the single speaker, the coherence of the "performance" of the narrative as speech act.

The presence of these narratives in the Old English *Orosius* and the way in which they are included bring several aspects of the influence of orality within a prose context into clear focus. First, in translating a text into the vernacular, a writer apparently felt more freedom with regard to his source than a scribe copying from Latin to Latin; no comparable additions occur in the Latin manuscripts of the *History*.²² It is also significant that

²² Although Zangemeister argues that the Old English *Orosius* was based on an inferior copy of the *History* that was already full of errors (1882:xxiii), he did not find any manuscripts of the *History* that contain the kind of "interpolation" present in the Old

the inclusion of these stories is not seen as disruptive by the author or by the copyist. They allow what is extremely disjunctive to a modern reader—the intrusion of a different voice, different time-frame, different style—to exist in the text without remark. This situation argues for a flexibility in the translator’s and the audience’s conception of text; the passages are recognized by the reading or listening audience as material acceptable for inclusion within the Old English *Orosius*.

Finally, there is behind the insertion of these materials an implied appeal to an oral authority, the authority of the speaker. The source of the geographical additions and the reports of Ohthere and Wulfstan have, as far as we can tell, no other claim to authority than that the travelers are contemporary witnesses to matters that form the subject of this part of the text: European geography.²³ Of course, for Ohthere, we cannot exclude the possibility that part of the authority of his narrative may come from the explicit connection to Ælfred. Interestingly, it is in the sections translated from Latin in the Old English *Orosius* that the concept of *auctoritas* effects a merging of various authorities (source text, commentaries, and so on) into one whole—they are undifferentiated in the Old English text. The vernacular, in marked contrast, acknowledges individuation—Ohthere and Wulfstan are named and speak in the text. The translator can and chooses to blend his voice with that of the Latin author; however, he chooses not to use this editing maneuver with the two voyagers.²⁴

Why not? It is a significant deviation from his usual method that the translator does not adapt Ohthere and Wulfstan’s narratives as material for inclusion under the tag “cwæð Orosius.” Apparently, their narratives (and they *are* narratives, as opposed to the descriptive sections of geographical information that surround them) are recognized as closely related to the

English text.

²³ This absence is unusual in the Old English *Orosius*. Bately notes that “almost all his modifications, apart from those concerning continental Europe, have the support of extant Latin texts” (1972:59). She believes that there was some written or oral source for information about Europe as well, perhaps reports similar to those of Ohthere and Wulfstan.

²⁴ In fact, the translator blends his voice with the Latin author immediately after this passage in I.i, when additional descriptions of Europe are offered. In addition, the translator does sometimes seem to intrude upon the narratives of the two travelers to add certain explanatory “notes.” For example, when Ohthere is said to have passed “Gotland 7 Sillende 7 iglanda fela” (“Jutland, Zealand, and many islands” [49]), the text reads, “on þæm landum eardodon Engle, ær hi hider on land coman” (1.1, 16) (“The Angles dwelt in these lands, before they came into this country” [49]); this may be an editorial comment.

experience of the speakers and thus to their own voices. Clearly, although they are not felt to have the authority of an Orosius (their information is not subsumed under his name, but neither is his information subsumed under theirs), their inclusion in the Old English *Orosius* suggests that their narratives differ only in the kind of authority they represent, not the degree. They have an importance and are perceived, in their speaking roles, as an “other” that is not to be merged with the translator’s own function in the text. The vernacular, then, here preserves a differentiation that the Latin, with its overwhelming force, does not. It is as if the status of the Latin text pulls the lesser elements around it into itself and effects a monolithic whole. We have seen that the translator even puts his own comments under the mantle of the Latin author. But Ohthere and Wulfstan resist this centripetal force and do not require such mechanisms for authority.

Since there is no systematic theory of narrative or history in Anglo-Saxon England, we must look at its practice. The Old English *Orosius* is not usually dealing directly with events, of course, but rather with the presentation of events from the past contained within another text. And, as we have seen, the confrontation with such a text is an event in itself, because of the differing sets of cultural attitudes that collide when a Latin text is translated into a vernacular language that is not far from its original oral environment. Translating into the vernacular draws into the text elements foreign to the literate tradition of the Latin text, including, among other things, places of active interrelation between translator and author, narrative elements from the oral milieu of the vernacular community, and a tolerance for the resulting disjunction. The differences between oral and textual traditions are clarified when one examines the way authority is represented and the way it is utilized in the two texts. Although the *auctoritas* of the Latin text determined many of the parameters of the resultant vernacular text, the translator changes the text in significant ways, both as one who reads the Latin text with a “vernacular” conceptual grid and as one who draws on an authority of presence—a term of empowerment characterizing, in this case, the Anglo-Saxon literate who is given the task of “speaking” the Latin text for a contemporary audience. It is a double representation of authority seen quite clearly in the opening lines of the Old English *Orosius*: “Ure ieldran ealne þisne ymbhwyrft þises middangeardes, cwæþ Orosius, swa swa Oceanus utan ymbligeð, þone mon garsæcg hateð, on þreo todældon” (1.1, 8) (“Our elders, said Orosius, divided into three parts all the circle of this middle-earth surrounded by Oceanus, which is called *garsæcg*”). *Oceanus* and *garsæcg* (Latin and Old English for “sea”) coexist in the text, each with a tradition—one written, one oral—validating

its presence. The Old English *Orosius* presents a fascinating and complex example of literature at an intersection of the oral and the textual.

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