

Much Ado About Nothing?

The Significance of Erasures and other Alterations in Early English Poetic Manuscripts

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In June this year I published *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, a two-volume edition and study of the earliest surviving manuscript of English poetry. Exeter, Dean and Chapter manuscript 3501, which dates from ca. 965, is the unique repository of nearly one hundred and thirty Old English poems composed in traditional Germanic alliterative verse.

During the course of my examination of the manuscript I discovered nearly four hundred minor corrections and other kinds of alteration to the poetic texts. These had gone unnoticed for the past two centuries, despite the fact that there have been in that time a half dozen complete editions of the manuscript and hundreds of editions of individual poems from it.

The original Exeter edition has led to two further projects. The first is a digitized, facsimile edition of the manuscript, which will use hypertext to link together the facsimile, annotated diplomatic transcript, edited texts and commentary. If this electronic edition appears before the end of 1995, as is planned, it may well be the first large-scale, comprehensive edition of an early English manuscript to appear anywhere in the world in this format. It will certainly be the first facsimile of an Anglo-Saxon poetic codex to be linked via hypertext to a new edition of a major verse collection.

The second project is a comparative study of the alterations in the three other major poetic codices to have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period: the Beowulf codex [in the British Library], the Caedmon manuscript [in the Bodleian Library], and the so-called Vercelli Book [in the Vercelli Cathedral Library in northern Italy].

We have virtually no independent records of the processes by which texts were copied and transmitted in Anglo-Saxon England. Even less is known

about who corrected them and why. No one has ever examined the manuscript evidence comprehensively in order to see what the best witnesses of all — the manuscripts themselves — can tell us about the history of the reception and transmission of texts in the pre-Norman period.

In my study I shall argue that the absent evidence — the bits deleted, scraped away, or otherwise erased — provides, paradoxically, concrete evidence of the techniques, intentions and methodologies of the first readers of English poetic texts. Those people had an interactive relationship with the poems they read, in so far as they freely and unhesitatingly altered the texts to suit their private agendas. Because readers were in fact the first editors of the surviving manuscript, what has come down to us is perhaps the third edition of the original. In this period, nearly five centuries before the invention of the printing press, each newly corrected version of a manuscript was partly a kind of palimpsest edition superimposed upon the previous version.

My investigations of the Exeter manuscript have yielded a treasure trove of fascinating information, and preliminary studies suggest that the other poetic codices may be equally rich in new material. It is clear to me that one of the correctors of the manuscript went through every text and eliminated virtually every inconsistency in spelling so as to achieve a standardized (though idiosyncratic) orthography throughout. Another such 'reader' has intervened to restore the full inflexions of early Old English. By the mid-tenth century, these were in the process of being levelled or functionally eliminated. The result was a greater dependency on word order and the use of prepositions to convey the syntactical relationship between sentence elements, much as is the case in modern English.

Minute scribal slips, most of which have never attracted critical attention, offer vital information about the evolution of the English language during the late tenth century. This shows that even then there was a gap between orthography and pronunciation. That gap is even more dramatic today — consider, for example, the numerous ways of pronouncing the *-ough* group in modern English ('bough', 'cough', 'though', 'hiccough', etc.). Unstable *h* is a particularly noticeable phenomenon: the scribe adds *h* before vowels where it is not required etymologically, but drops it before other vowels and consonants where it is to be expected etymologically. For example, the Old English word for 'neck' is *hnecca*, originally with the *h* voiced. At one point in the manuscript, however, the scribe begins to write 'neck' without the initial *h*, as we now spell it (i.e. *necca*); but then he immediately corrects himself and alters the *n* to an *h* by lengthening its first upright element (or minim) [see Plate 1]. Elsewhere he suppresses the same impulse when writing the word for 'lord' (Old English *hlaford* — interestingly, a contraction of *hlaf-weard*, "guardian of the bread"; modern English 'lady' is from *hlaf-dige*, "one who kneads the bread"); beginning with an *l*, he then realises his slip and alters the *l* to *h* before proceeding [see Plate 2]. It is clear from this that by the late tenth century, the initial *h* was no longer voiced before *l* or *n* (nor indeed before *r* and *w*) as it had been in primitive Germanic. Nevertheless, some scribes felt it was their duty to use the 'correct' (i.e. traditional) orthography when copying out texts. These examples demonstrate the nature of the evidence I am to investigate in this new study, which I hope will convince you that in this case there is indeed something to be said for making much ado about nothing.

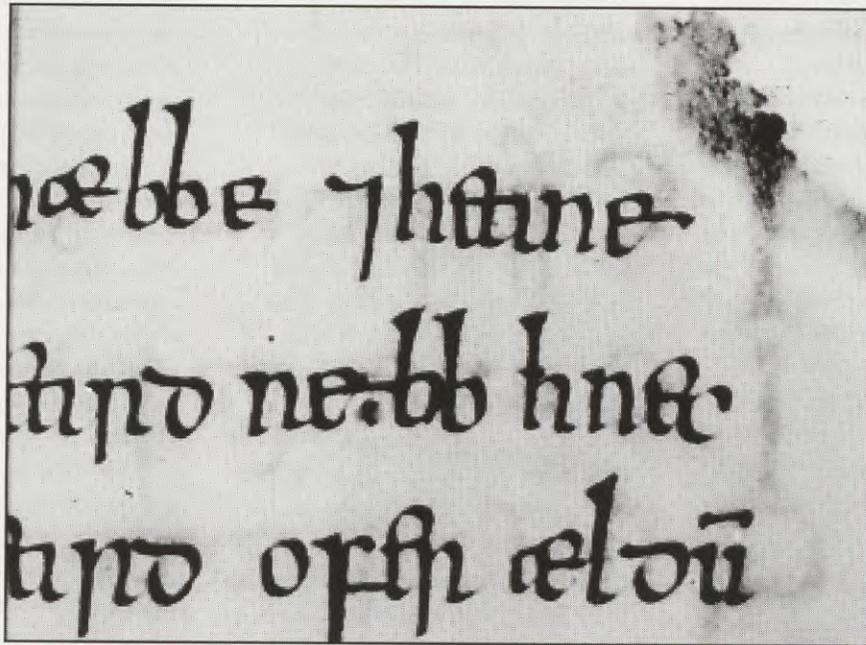


Plate 1

The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry folio 127v: the MS reads *hne*-, with *h* altered from an original *n*; note the 'tell-tale' serif half way up the ascender.

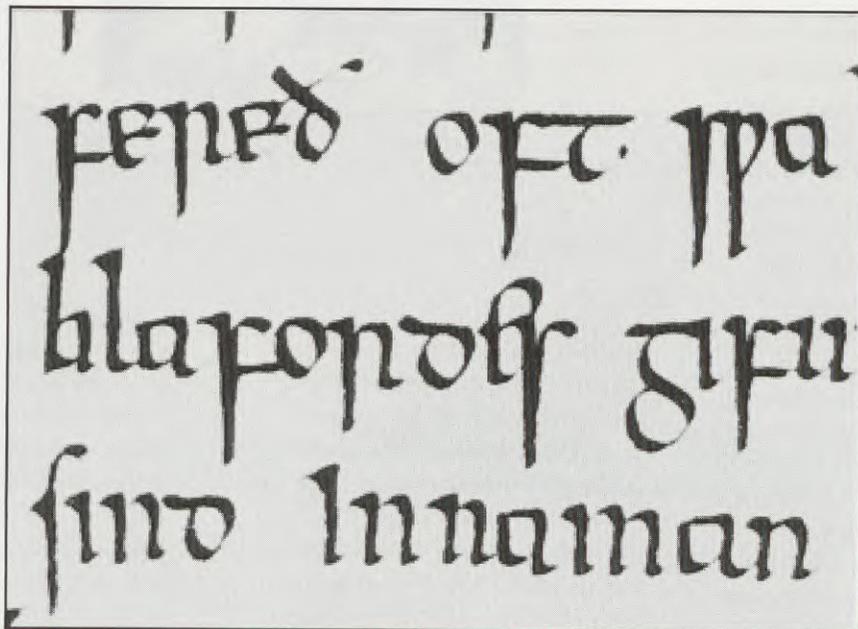


Plate 2

The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry folio 114v: the MS reads *hlaforðes*, with original *l* altered to *h*; note the foot of the first ascender, which is not the same as the usual first element of *h*, but is identical to the scribe's *l*.