

News from the Raven

News from the Raven:
Essays from Sam Houston State University
on Medieval and Renaissance Thought

Edited by

Darci N. Hill

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Essays from Sam Houston State University on Medieval and Renaissance Thought,
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Darci N. Hill	

Introduction	x
Darci N. Hill	

Part I: Ancient and Modern in Medieval Literature and History

Chapter One.....	2
MLA or MIA? Thoughts on Modernity in the Medieval Novel	
Richard North	

Chapter Two	37
The Heavener Rune Stone Revisited: Vikings in Oklahoma, or Swedish Railroad Workers in the Nineteenth Century?	
James Frankki	

Chapter Three	50
Common Misconceptions of the Medieval Period in Modern American Popular Culture	
Tara L. Sewell	

Part II: On the Genius of Italy

Chapter Four.....	70
Dante and Orpheus: Ovidian Intertext in <i>Inferno</i> 5	
Kevin West	

Chapter Five	81
A Theology of Eating in Dante's <i>Divine Comedy</i>	
Mithuiel Barnes	

Chapter Six	101
The Central Plan, the Architectural Treatise and Leonardo	
Elizabeth Nogan Ranieri	

Part III: Ecclesiastical History and Law

Chapter Seven.....	114
Theodore of Tarsus: The Syrian Archbishop of Canterbury	
James Early	
Chapter Eight.....	125
Anglo-Saxon Christianity: Militant and Violent	
Clinton K. Hale	
Chapter Nine.....	133
Compiling and Writing a Legal Treatise in French:	
The <i>Livre de jostice et plet</i>	
Bernard Ribémont	

Part IV: Religion, Ethics, and Pedagogy in Renaissance Literature

Chapter Ten	144
<i>Titus Andronicus</i> Underwater	
Edward Plough	
Chapter Eleven	153
“From the Table of My Memory”: The Conflict of Memory and Will	
in <i>Hamlet</i>	
N. Rochelle Bradley	
Chapter Twelve	160
The Heroic Struggle: Classical and Christian Heroism in <i>Paradise Lost</i>	
Timothy M. Ponce	
Chapter Thirteen.....	175
Teaching <i>Paradise Lost</i> : Let’s Be Honest	
Matthew W. Bennett	

Part V: Saintly and Unsaintly Women in Medieval and Renaissance Culture

Chapter Fourteen	186
“ <i>Un Nouvel Royaume de Femenie</i> ”: Christine de Pizan’s Construction	
of a Kingdom Come for Women	
Anne Babson	

Chapter Fifteen	203
Saint Quiteria: An Investigation of a Saint's Developing Iconography throughout Medieval Spain	
Katharine D. Scherff	

Chapter Sixteen	228
Old Angels, Wasted and Spent: Representations of the Wanton Widow in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Pop Culture and "The Boke of Mayd Emlyn"	
Katherine Echols	

Part VI: Reflections on Thomas Aquinas

Chapter Seventeen	240
Traversing the Difficulties: An Explanation of Aquinas' Fourth Way	
Phuc Luu	

Chapter Eighteen	249
John Finnis and the Political Community	
John Macias	

Chapter Nineteen	262
Eternal God: Divine Atemporality in Thomas Aquinas	
John Boyer	

Part VII: Sign and Signified in the Recovery of Medieval and Renaissance Music and Thought

Chapter Twenty	288
The Case of Kennings: Aristotle, <i>Beowulf</i> , and Deep-Case Grammar	
John Thornburg	

Chapter Twenty-One	317
The French Renaissance Viol Consort: Reevaluating the Sources and Reclaiming the Music	
John Romey	

Chapter Twenty-Two.....	339
The Persuasive Difference: Acknowledging Diversity in Rhetorical Approaches to Music of the Sixteenth Century	
Jamie Weaver	

Contributors' Biographies 352

Index 360

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I would also like to thank the contributors to this volume, especially Dr. Richard North, who served as the keynote speaker at the conference and who wrote the leading essay in this book. Thank you, Richard.

A special thanks also goes to Mrs. Anna Jennings, my editorial assistant. Her keen eye, her editorial skills, and her perseverance assisted me in tremendous ways. She gave able and cheerful support throughout this project. Thank you, Anna.

Finally, I dedicate this volume to my students, who give me reason daily to celebrate Medieval and Renaissance thought.

Darci N. Hill

INTRODUCTION

The collection of articles gathered in this volume happily and quite naturally grew out of the International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Thought hosted by Sam Houston State University the first weekend in April of 2013. This collection reflects the diverse fields of study represented by speakers and presenters at the conference. Although other conferences exist that focus on both the medieval and renaissance periods of history, this conference was quite possibly the first one held in Texas that was indeed interdisciplinary and dealt with both medieval and renaissance thought.

The purpose of the conference and consequently of this book of essays is to inquire what the place for medieval and renaissance scholarship is in the intellectual landscape today. What most of us have experienced--and North reflects on this in the opening essay—is that medieval and renaissance subjects in humanities departments are increasingly being relegated to a place not far from extinction. We closed our conference with a panel discussion on the place of medieval and renaissance thought in the academy, one which started with the question: have we lost our relevance to the humanities, simply by being medieval and renaissance scholars? In answer, we found that the conference itself had disproved this pessimism. During the conference—through collegial exchanges and robust debate—the fields representing medieval and renaissance studies appeared to be livelier and more relevant to the humanities than ever. In this way, as a collective body of conference speakers and attendees, we conclude that we have not lost our relevance, and that our conference—and hence this book—not only validates but also celebrates that relevance.

As I compiled the essays for this collection, I realized that it offers some pretty sparkling intellectual investigations, not only for scholars of the various aspects of medieval and renaissance literature and culture, but also for any generalists who wish to augment their knowledge and appreciation of philosophy, literature, linguistics, art, history, music, religion, and law. Currently, many scholarly collections of articles are decipherable only by the experts who are at home in those categories. And herein lies the distinction of essays in this collection: each and every one of them will be readable by the generalist, offering important contributions to a multitude of disciplines.

News from the Raven: Essays from Sam Houston State University on Medieval and Renaissance Thought is divided into seven parts, each containing three or four essays, with 22 essays in all. Topics range from ecclesiastical history to renaissance music, runic alphabets to architectural designs, saints to sinners, Thomistic thought to linguistic analysis: something for everybody. To appropriate some lines from Chaucer:

And therfore whoso list it nat yheere,
 Turne over the leef, and chese another tale;
 For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
 Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
 And eek moralitee, and hoolynesse.

Part I: Ancient and Modern in Medieval Literature and History contains essays by Richard North, James Frankki, and Tara Sewell. The Modern Language Association recently proposed to slim down the literature of the Middle Ages by merging Old English, Middle English, and Chaucer into one division. Richard North argues in his essay “MLA or MIA? Thoughts on Modernity in the Medieval Novel” that the merging of these three divisions into one would trivialize medieval literature. He sets out to show the diversity of the literature of that era, while playfully dismantling the generic barriers that divide medieval literature from that of ‘modernity’. Frankki uses a linguistic approach to explain a much-disputed discovery of runes in his article “The Heavener Rune Stone Revisited: Did Scandinavian Explorers visit Oklahoma in the 8th century?” This article adds much esoteric knowledge to the study not only of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian runes, but also of Germanic literature, language, archeology, and history. Tara Sewell’s “Common Misconceptions of the Medieval Period in Popular Culture” sets about to expose generally accepted myths about the medieval period. Her article is useful both to scholars who hold no illusions about the medieval period and to the general public, who may do so.

Part II: On the Genius of Italy presents the contributions of Kevin West, Mithuiel Barnes, and Elizabeth Ranieri. West’s essay “Dante and Orpheus: Ovidian Intertext in *Inferno* 5” demonstrates the importance of focusing on the details of a literary work. His essay serves the important function of clarifying an important passage by linking Dante’s work to his classical background, a point driven home easily by the choice of Virgil as guide, but more subtly by Dante’s association with Ovid. Barnes’ “A Theology of Eating in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*” develops the argument that medieval people viewed eating as a corrupt experience resulting from the Fall, but the Eucharist redeems that experience. Barnes examines the

repeated references to eating in the *Divine Comedy* in light of these medieval beliefs. Ranieri's essay "The Central Plan, the Architectural Treatise and Leonardo" effectively traces the history of centrally planned buildings in European architecture and explains the significance they would have had for Leonardo da Vinci. Her article provides a useful background for researchers interested in Leonardo's contributions to architecture, and she reiterates that all of Leonardo's designs are worthy of study.

Part III: Ecclesiastical History and Law presents essays by James Early, Clinton Hale, and Bernard Ribémont. Early's article "Theodore of Tarsus: The Syrian Archbishop of Canterbury" offers a fascinating addition to the recently developing study of this figure in the medieval English church. Shedding further light on medieval literature and history, Clinton Hale in his essay "Ancient Christianity: Militant and Violent" explores literary treatments of Christians as warriors. From the Vercelli Book, the poem *The Dream of the Rood* is often analyzed by the critical community as containing a tension between pagan and Christian values. Hale, however, takes a different approach, shedding light, in this and other Old English works, on violence as an important aspect of both heathen and Christian Anglo-Saxon history. Bernard Ribémont's "Compiling and Writing a Legal Treatise in French: The Livre de justice et de plet" offers a careful exploration of a representative medieval French legal treatise, placing this document firmly in the encyclopaedist's tradition, yet acting as a transitional work as well. Ribémont's essay illuminates an important thirteenth-century legal treatise while at the same time revealing that this piece represents a pivotal, transitional point between pre-encyclopaedic texts and the encyclopaedias yet to come.

Part IV: Religion, Ethics, and Pedagogy in Renaissance Literature contains essays by Edward Plough, Rochelle Bradley, Timothy Ponce, and Matthew Bennett. Plough's essay "*Titus Andronicus* Underwater" contributes to the growing corpus of scholarship on early Shakespearean drama and analyzes the playwright's investment in aquatic imagery. Rochelle Bradley's comment on Hamlet's dilemma, in her "From 'the Table of My Memory': The Conflict of Memory and Will in *Hamlet*", is significant for its fresh insight into this much-debated scholarly problem in the play. "The Heroic Struggle: Classical and Christian Heroism in *Paradise Lost*" by Timothy Ponce presents a detailed analysis of the language registers of Satan and Messiah, respectively, in the poem. Using Grice's rubric of Conversational Maxims, Ponce uses a linguistic approach to contribute to the age-old debate surrounding the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Finally, Bennett in his essay "Teaching *Paradise Lost*: Let's Be Honest"

tackles the pedagogical issues one should address in considering the hero of the poem.

Part V: Sainly and Unsainly Women in Medieval and Renaissance Culture includes essays by Anne Babson, Katherine Scherff, and Katherine Echols. In her article “‘Un Nouvel Royaume de Femenie’: Christine de Pizan’s Construction of a Kingdom Come for Women” Anne Babson seeks to demonstrate that Christine de Pizan writes *The City of Ladies* not to present an allegory or a fantasy, but rather to encourage women to believe in their spiritual and moral worth as well as their political rights. Her article contributes not only to scholarship on de Pizan but also to the growing field of women’s studies. Scherff’s essay “St. Quiteria, Virgin and Martyr: An Investigation of Saint Quiteria’s Developing Iconography throughout Medieval Spain” offers a delightful foray into the artistic representations of St. Quiteria gracing cathedrals and basilicas all over medieval Spain. Scherff assembles the various fragments of legends surrounding the saint and extracts from them a coherent narrative. By doing so, she adds knowledge to religious studies as well as to medieval art. Katherine Echols’ “Old Angels, Wasted and Spent: Representations of the Wanton Widow in the Early Ballad” traces the depiction of widowhood through selected literary works of the medieval and Renaissance periods. According to Echols, society feared widows for their financial independence and sexual freedom; thus, the widow became a popular subject of burlesque poetry. Examining a select group of literary pieces, Echols demonstrates that these pieces perpetuate a negative stereotype of widows.

Part VI: Reflections on Thomas Aquinas brings us to the pieces written by Phuc Luu, John Macias, and John Boyer. Luu, in “Traversing the Difficulties: An Explanation of Aquinas’ Fourth Way,” argues that there remain unresolved problems with Aquinas’ “Fourth Way.” His arguments offer a thorough analysis of this topic and represent a significant contribution to the debate surrounding cosmological arguments for the existence of God. John Macias’ essay “John Finnis and the Political Community” asserts that Finnis, as a proponent of the “New Natural Law” movement, errs in his interpretation of Thomistic thought. Macias seeks to correct these misinterpretations in his article, particularly as it refers to *civitas*, or the political community. Boyer’s essay “Eternal God: Atemporality in Thomas Aquinas” examines Aquinas’ account of God as timelessly eternal. Boyer takes issue with Wolterstorff’s objection that Aquinas’ account of a timeless God is incompatible with omniscience, and he explains also that correctly answering this objection remains crucial in avoiding serious problems regarding theism. All three essays of Part VI

make important contributions to medieval philosophy in general and to Thomistic thought in particular.

Part VII: Sign and Signified in the Recovery of Medieval and Renaissance Music and Thought contains articles by John Thornburg, John Romey, and Jamie Weaver. Thornburg's essay "The Case of Kennings: Aristotle, *Beowulf*, and Deep-Case Grammar" discusses uses of the kenning in *Beowulf* with the taxonomy of Aristotle's commentary on literary devices. Thornburg offers a careful linguistic analysis of kennings and revisits case grammar, a subject overlooked for decades. Romey's "The French Renaissance Viol Consort: Reevaluating the Sources and Reclaiming the Music" presents his historical research on a virtually overlooked musical instrument, the French viol. Romey contributes significantly to early musicology. In "The Persuasive Difference: Acknowledging Diversity in Rhetorical Approaches to Madrigals of the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries" Weaver contributes not only to the field of music but also to the study of rhetoric. She demonstrates that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century composers drew upon rhetorical conventions in creating emotionally moving madrigals.

It is with great pleasure—as the editor and erstwhile conference coordinator of this, the first Texas gathering of its kind—that I present this volume to you to experience as readers a true celebration of medieval and renaissance thought.

Darci N. Hill
Sam Houston State University

PART I:

**ANCIENT AND MODERN
IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE AND HISTORY**

CHAPTER ONE

MLA OR MIA?

THOUGHTS ON MODERNITY IN THE MEDIEVAL NOVEL

RICHARD NORTH

Years before *Pulp Fiction* (1994, prop. Quentin Tarantino) made it famous, the word *medieval* was understood to refer to the Middle Ages.¹ To many viewers this word may connote *remedial* as well as *die* and *evil*, but its meaning is less clear, and for the literary period some more explication is due. What are the *Middle Ages*, especially where 'Fiction' is concerned? Right now the answer is 'looking squeezed'. Another answer, less paranoid, is that *middle* for English literature consists of 'Old English' or Anglo-Saxon, which runs from about 600 to 1100, then 'Middle English' from then to about 1500, of which the chief draw is Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343 – 1400). Of the ages to either side of middle, one is antiquity, which may as well start with an Akkadian text of *Gilgamesh* in the twelfth century B.C.² The other is modernity, not only present time but also (with the addition of 'Post-') the open-ended expansion of this into the future. Perhaps with the latter prospect in mind, and certainly thinking of Post-Colonial, Media and Disability Studies, early in 2013 the managerial board of the Modern Language Association proposed to slim down the Middle Ages by merging the existing three Medieval English divisions, Old English, Middle English, and Chaucer, into one. One division for nine centuries of literature! The fight-back started. At the time of writing the amended idea is that 'Divisions' and 'Discussion Groups' should be blended into 'Groups', and the number of Medieval sessions should depend on the numbers of delegates affiliating to the corresponding Groups, that is, on market sustainability.³ For academics, in this way, space is still limited; diachronic time looks as Darwinian as ever; and Medieval literature has to remain *relevant*.

Nothing is more relevant than modernity, as the subject nomenclature shows. The period which follows Medieval is called *Renaissance*. By its

name it claims to be a 'rebirth' from antiquity, half-hiding the implication that the Middle Ages are a mistake or dead end. Walter Benjamin and Ezra Pound among other modernist writers took a different view,⁴ and so might any artist or historian, but people who teach English literature live in a world in which the terms 'renaissance', and its associates 'enlightenment', 'modernity' and 'novel' have long since implied an inverse taxonomy in which the Middle Ages suggest 'decrepitude', 'darkness', 'antiquity' and 'old hat'. Yet even the 'rebirth' idea has become worn, and now Renaissance is co-opted into modernity. Perhaps this is due to William Caxton's printing press, the technology of which gives both literary and historical English modernity a start around the year 1500 in the reign of Henry Tudor (1485-1509).⁵ Renaissance is accordingly also called 'Early Modern' in university departments such as the English Department of University College, London, which co-founded a 'Centre for Early Modern Exchanges'.⁶ This centre, which brings lecturers together from several disciplines in honour of the early part of modernity, is thriving. Although the new nomenclature of Renaissance may have little to do with its success as a university subject, in theory the term 'Early Modern' does give Renaissance specialists the option of facing forward to the future. Here the notion of a post-medieval rebirth of Classical civilisation, whether reborn in the fourteenth century in Italy or in the sixteenth in England, may be left behind in order to emphasize membership of a more prestigious group.

The nomenclature thus speaks less for maintaining the temporal divisions than for enlarging a territory around Modern / Post-Modern literature. In the short term, the Early Modern designation might save the high or later medieval subjects by embodying them into this empire, but in a world where High Medieval joins Renaissance which joins Enlightenment which clings to the coat-tails of the nineteenth century, some subjects would still have to go. It is not hard to imagine Old and early Middle English under these conditions having to slip backwards into alignment with late antique and Classical literature, in order not to disappear. Much is at stake where the taxonomy is concerned. Even of the latest MLA proposal it still might be said that the idea of 'membership numbers' plays the same game, subordinating the principle of intrinsic value to the vagaries of university commerce. For the sake of its health the academy needs a better idea than *sauve qui peut*.

As regards the relationship between Medieval and Modern, literature tells us that the debt runs backwards, not forwards. The term *modern* was coined in late antiquity, not in the enlightenment but in the Dark Ages. It derives from late Latin *modernus* 'in the manner just now', in the treatise

Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum ‘foundations of devotional and secular learning’ which was written in the 540s by the retired senator Cassiodorus, formerly a minister to King Theoderic the Ostrogoth (ruled 493-526). Cassiodorus here uses the word *moderni* for ‘contemporary’ commentators on the Bible, as opposed to the ancient church fathers.⁷ In this work’s second section Cassiodorus coined the subjects which became *artes liberales*, the seven ‘liberal arts’: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, for the Roman *trivium*; on top of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy for the Greek *quadrivium*.⁸ It may thus be of interest to some non-Medievalist teachers that modernity was invented in the same barbarian age as our university syllabus, at the dawn of the Middle Ages.

No less ironic is the observation, in the world outside the same grove of academe whose threatened three gardens are the subject of this essay, that (post-)modernity itself might disappear as Western culture re-enters its medieval phase. This observation might hold up if such things as the devolution of corrupt governments, mass migrations from starvation and civil war, mob mentality and disorder and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, are taken to be truer of the Middle Ages than any other time. A scholar might agree for different reasons, citing the medieval future as one of devolved cultural autonomy, cross-fertilization of global societies with powerful literary results, wider linguistic registers and a growing interest in science and manufacture. However, all perceptions are relative, and definitions are, too. Since *modern* means ‘contemporary’, we can say that modernity is older than Cassiodorus. As a perception of time which has accompanied our cultural and scientific endeavours from the time of cave paintings to the present, modernity has been true of the last 42,000 years. To go back to the idea of relevance, if Medieval is seen to lose ever more meaning by an alleged lack of relevance to our present, then Modern may well fare likewise by having its meaning diffused over all time to the point where it is no longer relevant to anything. For the sake of preserving the academy, I suggest we treat the two periods as coterminous. Medieval English is modern. Or, to put it the other way, the modern has also been medieval.

One way of seeing this great blur illustrated is to review the idea of ‘fiction’ in the psychological novel. The novel is a long piece of fictional narrative, usually written in prose but sometimes in poetry. It has so far been a phenomenally successful form. It was mostly written in, and is now customarily associated with, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has even been claimed as a kind of self-help for the post-religious enlightenment: ‘The Novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God’.⁹ However, few of these details are set in stone. Languages vary,

and outside the English- and Spanish-speaking worlds, the name for the genre differs. In French the word for a novel is *roman*, in German *Roman*, in Portuguese *romance*, in Russian *роман*, in Danish *roman*, and so forth. In these languages and several more the word for 'novel' shamelessly proclaims its descent from the medieval *romance*. That is, the novel of these cultures is thought to have evolved from Arthurian chronicle through the prose Vulgate Cycle of France into the fictional forms of the *roman*. Their languages at least acknowledge a connection between modern prose fiction and medieval romances which the English taxonomy does not. It is true that we keep the word *romance* for a lower grade of fiction, something of the order of Mills & Boon, more than 70 million readers and 3 books per second sold. However, the *novel* aims for something higher.¹⁰ Like a novel, the *romance* can be a long piece of fictional narrative which features love, courtship and the prospect of marriage, but discerning people would say that the works of Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and others are a cut above. Some, forgetting the existence of the most popular Medieval literary mode, would even take these novelists for pioneers of *romances*.

Thus the students who major in Eng Lit courses will be told that the prose romance is a lower narrative form which derives from the novel, which has its first foundation earlier, in the eighteenth century; that the Enlightenment novel was itself not new but based on Spanish fictions of the seventeenth century; or where the Elizabethan prose fiction is concerned, on Italian ones of the sixteenth; and that these were passed around and translated with the aid of the printing press.¹¹ The English word *novel* derives from Castilian *novela* 'new story on an interesting topic', which was itself borrowed as a term for long prose fiction from the Italian *novella*, a feminine singular for 'something new'. There are 100 *novelle* 'short stories' in Giovanni Boccaccio's popular *Decameron*, finished in the 1360s.¹² Writers in England were aware of the old Italian ancestry of the *novel*. Not for nothing does Henry Fielding in his 1749 novel *Tom Jones* sprinkle many chapters with quotations from Ovid and other Classical Latin poets: many people like him believed, and some still do, that the novel is a graft from Classical antiquity.¹³

This graft was made by means of the Castilian *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, a *novela* which the retired soldier and playwright Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra published in two instalments, in 1605 and 1615.¹⁴ *Don Quixote* is the story of an eccentric gentleman pushing fifty, Alonso Quijano, who goes mad when he tries to enact the knight errant fables he has read all his life. This work is a sophisticated satire of the *libros de caballería* 'chivalric romances' which had been popular for more than a

century, having originated with the prose narratives of King Arthur which were themselves derived from the Vulgate Cycle of thirteenth-century France.¹⁵ By Cervantes' time the chivalric romances had attenuated into popular narratives of courtship and free love. For Cervantes, the worst offender was the *Amadís de Gaula* 'Amadís of Gaul', published by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo in Zaragoza in 1508, almost a century before him.¹⁶ The young prince Amadís is the unwitting heir to Britain and Gaul. He grows up in Scotland, finds out his own noble origins, survives some magic and ends up marrying his sweetheart Oriana and reconciling with her father as well as with his own. The *Amadís de Gaula*, despite being popular fiction in all but name, was classified as one of many chivalric romances related to the court of King Arthur. In the twelfth century this genre had passed as history. By its relation to Arthuriana, the *Amadís de Gaula* novel claimed at least the appearance of a derivation from history, whereas the novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha* deliberately does not. Cervantes, in his laughing reaction to the *Amadís* and kindred books of chivalry, wrote the *Don Quixote* as a self-conscious *anti-romance*, by which it is indeed a *novela* 'something new'. His satire demolishes not only the chivalric romances, but also the connection to a medieval literary heritage. The *Don Quixote* is a work of satirical fiction which consciously breaks with the Middle Ages, claiming a basis in the apocryphal truths of everyday life.

Through the diffusion of early printed books, both this *novela* and the new genre of self-conscious fiction were planted in England. However, it would be a mistake to root the substance of the alleged first English 'novel' (the rival is Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, published in 1665) in the *Don Quixote*: despite the revolution in taste and nomenclature, it can be demonstrated that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, has its origin in the Middle Ages.¹⁷ *Robinson Crusoe* tells the story of a Caribbean castaway sharing his desert island with a native companion until he is rescued. Ostensibly Defoe based this fictional narrative on history, on the four-year survival of Alexander Selkirk on an island off Chile in 1704-8. This is how it seems to represent a case of contemporary life. Yet fiction is stranger than history, and Defoe is also thought to have made use of a philosophical novel published by Simon Ockley in 1708, *The Improvement of Human Reason: Exhibited in the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdhan*.¹⁸ As the name in the title testifies, Ockley based his work on an earlier fiction written long before in Islamic Spain. He made the first direct English rendering of an Arabic philosophical novel otherwise known as *Philosophus autodidactus* 'self-taught philosopher', also about a young man living marooned on an island with a native companion helper. A

Latin translation of this work had been available as early as the 1660s, and an English translation of the Latin since 1686. The Arabic original, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* 'Awake, son of Alive', was written in Andalusia, in the early twelfth century, by the Moorish physician Ibn Tufayl; he based it on a work of the same name which Al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā, the Persian scientist and doctor better known as Avicenna, wrote in Isfahan, in the early eleventh century, as a dialogue between a sage and student on the nature of rational intellect and the soul. The fictional structure of Avicenna's allegorical work has its own precedents, in the *Dialogues* and *Republic* which the Athenian philosopher Plato (427-327), pupil of Socrates (c.469-399), wrote in the early fourth century BC.¹⁹ With all this complicated network of paths of transmission linking antiquity to the present through the Middle Ages, it is clear that self-conscious fiction, or the art of introducing and rehearsing philosophical and other ideas through a narrative with invented characters and plot, is nothing new at all.

In English history the Middle Ages are said to end in the year 1485, when Henry Tudor defeated Richard III in the Battle of Bosworth Field. This year is also famous for a literary reason in that William Caxton then made the first printing of *Le Morte Darthur* of Sir Thomas Malory.²⁰ The collection of Malory's books under this title makes up a grand romance which climactically celebrates Lancelot's love for Guinevere in the court of King Arthur. Malory freely translated and adapted his books from the French prose romances about Arthur and Lancelot in the Vulgate Cycle of the thirteenth century.²¹ Malory may have put some of himself into Lancelot: it has been discovered that he was a cattle-rustler from Warwickshire who ambushed his patron during the War of the Roses, escaped from prison by swimming the moat, found himself charged with rape twice with the same woman by her husband, and died in the slammer in London.²² Yet Lancelot and the others, for all that their antics relive the Wars of the Roses, were visibly creatures of the past even then. It was during his final spell in jail in the 1470s that Malory finished his *Morte*, about a decade before Caxton printed it, in what became the only known text until the discovery of the Winchester manuscript in 1934.²³ Perhaps this ignominious end to Malory helped the waves of translations of Italian *novelle* and Spanish *novelas* to displace both his work from memory and the utility of the term *romance* from the English lexicon. By the mid-eighteenth century the term *romance* was isolated from *novel* as something from history, unreal and inferior: Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) defines romance as 'a military fable of the Middle Ages; a tale of wild adventures in love and chivalry', and the novel as 'a smooth tale, generally of love'; in Clara Reeve's leading definition,

in *The Progress of Romance* (1785), ‘The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written’; in his ‘Essay on Romance’ (1824), Sir Walter Scott, who responds to Johnson, calls the romance ‘a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents’, and the novel ‘a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society’.²⁴

That the word *novel* is still not felt sufficient to cover all prose fiction may be seen from the supplementary Modern English use of ‘saga’. A saga is now an interminable story, moving in time through the generations in order to show a family or even society at work on the grander scale.²⁵ This might not appear to have much to do with the Vulgate Cycle or Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, but like the term *romance*, which means ‘matter of Rome’, the Icelandic word *saga* is founded on a notion of history. Its meaning encompasses both history narrated (*res narrata*) and enacted (*res gesta*). It would be a mistake for this reason to classify the medieval saga as a novel, although it can work as a sort of historical novel.²⁶ Modern Icelanders use a term *skáldsaga*, literally ‘poetic story’, to connote prose fiction as we know it. Among the subgenres of the medieval Icelandic saga, the most famous is the ‘saga of Icelanders’ from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a long prose narration of local history which usually celebrates the lives of prominent ancestors who lived in the locality in the tenth and eleventh centuries.²⁷ The earliest forms of vernacular prose composition in Iceland, undertaken in the twelfth century, are known to have attempted a record of universal and Icelandic history as well as the lives of Norwegian kings; and then mainly the lives of the Olafs: Saint Óláfr Haraldsson who died in battle in 1030; and the apostle of the Icelandic conversion, Óláfr Tryggvason, who also died in battle, in the year 1000. Here as also in other saints’ lives and Bible-based sermons, the true object was history. The earliest writings sometimes reveal the extent to which authors were haunted by the need, which was also a social expectation as much as anything, not to invent incidents without living up to some standard of truth.

For a while this standard was monastic and happily encompassed fantasy in order to represent Christian truths as symbolically manifest in the world. As time went on, however, Icelanders settled on a more secular style which, when freed from miracles and didacticism, became emotionally restrained and apparently objective. Sagas of Icelanders have thus had the side effect of masquerading as history more plausibly than Arthurian romances. Sagas always seem historical to people when they

first read them, as if the island demanded that the stories of ancestors' lives be presented as true, even when everyone knew they were not. This remained the case at least until a rival genre of *riddara sögur* 'stories of knights' arrived in Iceland from Norway in the mid-thirteenth century.²⁸ These were northern representatives of the Vulgate Cycle, having reached Norway through Low German translations. In this regard Iceland, just like the rest of Europe, enjoyed romances and later took these to extremes similar to the fantastical Spanish *libros de caballería*. Given their foreign origin, however, most Icelanders probably treated the chivalric *riddara sögur* as fictions right from the start.

With sagas of Icelanders the case was different. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 'the story of Egill son of Skalla-Grímr' seems to have been finished off in about 1240. Most scholars believe that the author was the historian and mythographer Snorri Sturluson, who was himself terminated, by disgruntled ex-sons-in-law under orders from Norway, by his bath outside his home in Reykholt in 1241.²⁹ *Egils saga*, which is correspondingly violent, claims to be the biography of a larger-than-life gentleman farmer from Borg in western Iceland. Egill would have died in the late tenth century and was also Snorri's ancestor. In the saga he grows up part supernatural, falls out with his father and visits Norway a few times, where he earns the enmity of King Eiríkr (Eric) Bloodaxe and his queen Gunnhildr. From his part in the Battle of Vinheiðr on his first visit to England, it appears that the real Egill fought for King Æthelstan, grandson of Alfred, against the Vikings of Ireland in *Brunanburh* (Bromborough) in 937. The saga is punctuated by a host of traditional verses which Egill is said to have composed. The narrative has no dreams or other fabulous portents and presents itself as history, rather as does *Heimskringla*, a History of the Kings of Norway, which it is known that Snorri composed. The illusion of historicity continues even when Egill in later life is drawn overseas to York by the magic of Gunnhildr, who wishes him dead; and the saga says that Egill saves his head with a new-fangled poem, the *Head-Ransom*. Few people would now call this work history, although the secular style of writing proclaims that it is.

In the mid-thirteenth century, not many years after Snorri's death, an unknown author finished *Laxdæla saga* 'history of the people of Salmon River Valley' for a locality some 50 miles north of Borg. As in *Egils saga*, the story in *Laxdæla saga* starts before the settlement of its chosen area and, as it moves forward in time, lays out the lives of what seem to be most of the district's inhabitants. After a while, a pattern emerges. There is one matriarch at the beginning of the saga, the settler Auðr (or Unnr) the deep-minded, who builds up the area on arrival; and another towards the

end, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, about whom the story turns. Guðrún's fate is to kill the man she most loved. The style of her saga encompasses an interest in Irish fairies, dreams, magic portents, ladies' costume and other flashy European finery, all of which is consistent with Arthurian romances. At the same time, the love triangle at the climax, in which Guðrún sends her husband to kill Kjartan, the man she nearly married, is self-consciously patterned on the legend of Brynhildr in the Poetic *Edda*, a heroine who accomplishes the same by sending her husband Gunnarr to murder Sigurðr, who was the first love of her life.³⁰ In this fictional way the author of *Laxdæla saga* was willing to part company with historicity, by using heroic poetry to embellish what can have been no more than a few facts about his or her ancestors from nearly two centuries before. An idea in *Egils saga*—that patterns of behaviour repeat from generation to generation in the same family—is here given new force in the case of unrelated people who repeat the same cycle of love and destruction in their own time. The move from one family to people in general shows the development of a broader reflection on human nature, one which amounts to an indigenous Icelandic interest in fiction for its own sake.

Brennu-Njáls saga 'story of the Burnt Njáll' was probably written towards the end of the thirteenth century. The saga is held to be the greatest example of the genre and focuses on a friendship between two men, Gunnarr and Njáll. In the case of Gunnarr, a physically perfect hero who achieves great honours in Norway and attempts to show them off back home in Iceland, the saga makes clear what happens when envious small-holders work together to bring a great man down. Gunnarr makes a bad marriage, gets dragged down by the district's little men and dies in a last stand in his house facing some 80 attackers. His wife Hallgerðr colludes in killing him by refusing him a lock of her hair, with which he might make a new bowstring and hold off the end for a little longer. Njáll, his older friend who lives not too far away, is an apparently gentle sage whose sons, taking after their mother Bergþóra, cause much of the damage in the south-west of Iceland. In the second and greater part of the saga (which some consider to be developed out of a work solely devoted to Njáll), there is a concatenation of incidents whose climax consists of the killing of an innocent, a confrontation during the ensuing court case in the national assembly, and then the burning down of Njáll's farm with his sons, his wife and saintly seven-year-old grandson inside. When this saga was written, a generation had passed since the loss of Iceland's independence to the king of Norway in 1261. For three generations earlier there had been a bitter civil war, and after annexation many things about the island changed, including the law. *Njáls saga* is mostly about law and

how this eventually fails to cope with snowballing violence when a small country risks anarchy. The author had read most of the older sagas including *Laxdæla saga*, whose plot he partially emulates in Gunnarr's wife's two earlier marriages. On the other hand, he puts something of the memory of Iceland's civil war of the thirteenth century into his *saga* of the early eleventh, as if to plead that Icelanders, who had once been a proud, noble people, might be so again. The beginning of this saga shows Norse paganism working through Eiríkr's queen Gunnhildr, who is now older but no less rapacious, as a socially disruptive force. It is paganism which initiates the great chain of cause and effect in *Njáls saga*'s narrative which only Christianity can end, when it unites the warring factions in the final chapter. This saga thus works less as a local history, and more as a novel about society. Within the conditions of its own time, and minus the interest in sexuality and stylized violence, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) works in a similar direction.

A fourth saga, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* 'the story of Hrafnkell, chieftain of Freyr', was probably written in the north-east of Iceland. It may be contemporary with Chaucer, or with the early European circulation of Boccaccio's *novelle* in the late fourteenth century. Research into the likely authenticity of local history and landscape of *Hrafnkels saga* showed early on that the story is almost entirely invented. Despite the fact that the hero's name and the names of a couple of others in the narrative belonged to people who actually lived, his story is as fictitious as the hills, bogs and bluffs which the author makes up to serve his ideological narrative purpose. Hrafnkell is a chieftain, harsh with strangers and set in his ways. He swears an oath to kill any man who rides his stallion Freyfaxi in which he has given, Freyr, his tutelary god, a fifty-percent share. One day a hapless shepherd named Einarr rides the stallion in order to find 30 missing ewes. The circumstances which force him to ride Freyfaxi, when his employer Hrafnkell explicitly warned him not to, are contrived in the story by a mischievous fate. Beneath the surface, however, this is really the author at work, an apparent atheist who wants to manipulate what happens next. Hrafnkell kills Einarr in keeping with his religious oath but then softens when faced with the bereaved father, who surprisingly responds by taking him to court. Against all the odds, again by mysterious contrivance, a powerful chieftain and his brother from western Iceland appear out of nowhere and agree to help Einarr's father win his case against Hrafnkell in the general assembly. The father's lawyer, who is a cousin of Einarr's named Sámur, surprises Hrafnkell with the aid of his providential new friends and then, sparing the chieftain's life, takes over his farm, possessions and authority. Sámur exiles Hrafnkell to a wilderness

further east, where the defeated man slowly builds himself a new chieftaincy through graft and yet more authorial contrivance. Soon the two chieftains, Sámr and Hrafnkell, are of equal power, when unexpectedly Hrafnkell takes revenge for his humiliation by killing Eyvindr, Sámr's more capable brother who has naively ridden across his property after coming back from abroad. Hrafnkell follows up by capturing Sámr and sending him back to his old place to live for the rest of his life in poverty and subjection. *Hrafnkels saga* on this level is a narrative essay on the meaning, and deficiencies, of politics and power.³¹ It asks a sceptical question, whether men in high station are there through ability or by virtue of birth. This saga is the closest of all Sagas of Icelanders to being a novel of ideas. It is fiction in all but name, with little but the verisimilitude of landscape and objective style to say that it resembles the older, more historically oriented, sagas of tradition.³² On this evidence it can be shown that the Icelanders developed the art of fiction out of prose history as early as the fourteenth century. The sagas offer an early parallel for the way European romances led into the novel.

The poems from the Poetic *Edda* about Brynhildr, with which the author of *Laxdæla saga* shaped his tragedy of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, are themselves rooted in history. To its audiences, this heroic legend, just as the others in which Sigurðr and other heroes are involved, was a true legend from ancient times. Brynhildr loves Sigurðr the dragon-slayer, but his promise to reunite with her is broken by the queen of the Burgundians, who seeks to marry him to her daughter Guðrún Gjúkadóttir. Drinking a potion the queen offers, Sigurðr forgets that Brynhildr exists and marries Guðrún, whose brothers Gunnarr and Högni become his sworn friends. Later Gunnarr himself wishes to marry Brynhildr. Unable to reach her himself, for she is kept prisoner behind a ring of fire, Gunnarr persuades Sigurðr to change into his shape and jump Gunnarr's horse over the fire to get the girl inside. The honorable Sigurðr in disguise spends three nights alongside Brynhildr with his sharp sword placed between them, as unaware as she is of the connection they once had. He hands Brynhildr over to be married to Gunnarr. One day, Guðrún reveals to Brynhildr the trick that was played on her; Brynhildr avenges her honour by lying to Gunnarr about Sigurðr's performance in bed. She then sends Gunnarr and his brothers to kill Sigurðr. This happens either in front of his wife, their sister according to the Norse tradition, or out in the forest according to the Bavarian *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200).³³ Gunnarr then marries off his sister Guðrún to King Atli, in whose court another disaster ensues: Attila puts Guðrún's brothers to death over the whereabouts of Sigurðr's old treasure, whereupon Guðrún serves their little sons up to him as a stew. After that,

she marries a third time, and in a third story she lives to avenge Sigurðr's and her daughter on King Jǫrmunrekkr of the Goths.

Most of these extreme archetypes are based on shadowy historical figures. As a legend of heroic choices and loyalties, not to mention thwarted love, the poems about Brynhildr and Sigurðr had a clear value to audiences of the tenth to twelfth centuries; and were paraphrased in Norway or Iceland in the prose of *Völsunga saga* 'story of the Völsungs' in the thirteenth century. However, these stories are not fiction, nor were they ever considered to be. Brynhildr is a tenth-century Norse version of a Frankish version of Brunichildis, a princess from Visigothic Spain. In history, Brunichildis was married to King Sigibert of the Merovingians in 567.³⁴ Sigibert, possibly the prototype for Sigurðr, was assassinated by his brother's mistress in 575.³⁵ Gunnarr, the dupe whom Brynhildr marries in the heroic poems, is a Norse version of a Frankish version of an older person in history: King Gundahari of the Burgundians, who died more than a century earlier in a Roman punitive action in 437. King Atli whom the bereaved Guðrún marries after Sigurðr is derived from Attila the Hun, whose own death occurred in 453.³⁶ King Jǫrmunrekkr of the Goths, who was known in the Old English poems *Beowulf*, *Widsith* and *Deor* as Eormanric, is a Norse version of a Germanic version of Ermanaric, an early king of the Greuthung Goths who committed suicide before a Hunnish invasion in 376, nearly a century before Attila's death.³⁷ Although all principals of the Brynhildr legend and its aftermath were famous people from history who lived apart from each other, if not also at widely different times, the poets of tradition have brought them together. Each poet in this long process of oral transmission would have both considered his story to be good history. To be respected in that preliterate age, history had only to be morally or ideologically true.

The interest in Gothic or other barbarian history did not die out with the so-called 'Dark' or 'Middle' ages but continued until it became part of the English literary Renaissance. The young William Shakespeare made the ancient Goths his anti-hero's initial Other when he wrote the play *Titus Andronicus* between 1588 and 1593. Elements of the Titus tale had been published in the *novelle* of Matteo Bandello in 1573, and translated by William Painter in a collection of short stories entitled *The Palace of Pleasure* in 1575.³⁸ Shakespeare's sources are unknown, but he may have dramatized his tale of Roman-Gothic intrigue and cannibalism partly on this, partly on the basis of a contemporary ballad, or even on a novel called *The History of Titus Andronicus the Renowned Roman General* which circulated for some time as a chapbook before 1594.³⁹ Shakespeare's longest tragedy, his *Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*,

which was first performed in or before 1602, is based on legends of the same Danish 'skjoldung' royal family that appears in the 'scyldings' of the Old English epic *Beowulf*.⁴⁰ Whether or not Shakespeare knew an earlier *Hamlet* play, as is sometimes argued, he could have based his own *Hamlet* on the *Histoires tragiques* 'tragical stories' of François de Belleforest, which reached England in the 1580s; or even directly from Belleforest's source, the *Gesta Danorum* 'deeds of the Danes' which the canon Saxo Grammaticus started writing in Lund in the last decade of the twelfth century.⁴¹ Each of these earlier traditions presented itself as history, even while their authors embellished the narrative with fictions to the point where a modern reader might align them with 'novels'.

Beowulf, which is an early analogue of Saxo's sixteen-volume history because it shares some of the same ancient traditions, may itself have been treated as history by the Anglo-Saxons who heard or read it. Nonetheless, just as with Saxo, Belleforest and Shakespeare, the poet of *Beowulf* embroiders on his own version of Scandinavian history. None of the embroidery is to be found however in the narrative foreground for which the poem is justly famous. As a young hero, Beowulf slays the cannibal monster Grendel who has tormented the Danish king Hrothgar for twelve years, and then finishes the job by destroying Grendel's Mother in her underwater cave. As an old king, some fifty years later, Beowulf attacks a dragon which has set fire to his own kingdom in revenge for the theft of a precious cup from its hoard. With the help of a distant relative named Wiglaf, Beowulf succeeds in killing the fifty-foot reptile but then dies of his wounds, leaving Wiglaf to order the funeral. This story is bold and suggestive (and indeed the inclusion of Wiglaf may date the poem to 827, just before a certain Wiglaf succeeded King Beornwulf on the throne of Mercia),⁴² but the poet's less occasional ideas lie elsewhere. One of his intellectual interests is the utility of treasure, how on one hand this may help a royal economy through just rewards and the circulation of wealth; and how, on the other, treasure may destroy a man's soul, particularly when he loves gold for its own sake, then hoards it in the ground so as to take it with him. King Hrothgar warns against this type of avarice when he delivers his sermon in the very centre of the poem. His cue for this sermon, after Beowulf's success against the Grendels, is the serpentine sword-hilt which Beowulf has retrieved from Grendel's Mother's lair. We might note two things about this hilt. One is that it is inscribed with runes and images which tell their own tale of Noah's Flood. The other is that the poet calls the hilt *wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah* 'a hilt with twisting patterns and ornamented with serpents' (line 1698). This expression anticipates the reptilian love of gold which causes the Dragon to burn Geatland on

finding his hoard robbed of one cup. There is another serpentine pattern in the sword-hilt that was displayed in the early-eighth-century Staffordshire hoard in 2009.⁴³ The treasure in the dragon's hoard towards the end of *Beowulf* turns out to have been cursed one thousand years earlier by the ancients who laid it in the ground (the Dragon has been there no more than 300 years). Since Beowulf is now a tomb-raider, we suspect that the curse may succeed in sending him to hell. It is not as if this destination, though unknown, were not already a problem for everyone in the poem. The poet's heroes are all heathens and much here depends on the mercy of God. Yet Beowulf even now may have a slim chance of avoiding his reinforced prospect of damnation, if he remembers the prescient injunction to choose *ece rædas* 'everlasting rewards' in King Hrothgar's sermon (line 1760), by refraining from taking a personal interest in the gold. The poet calls the Dragon's gold 'heathen' as if to emphasize where it may lead. The importance of gold and salvation to *Beowulf* is as debatable as the ethics of a complex novel, but the virtue of this work is its ambiguity, and discussions can continue. The hero Beowulf may be read as the emblem of a bygone society which the poet both admired for its nobility and pitied for its flaws – chiefly for its present residence in hell. Although the poem's ostensible genre is heroic history in versified form, on this level it works like a novel.

Where literary form is concerned, heroic legends are often problematic, in that most of them initially seem to have been transcribed from oral recitations. Writing, in these cases, may occur at the end of the process of composition, and is usually taken to be a transcription in Roman letters at some more relaxed time in Anglo-Saxon monasteries, probably before the tenth-century Benedictine reform. Runes, however, the pre-Christian Germanic letters, continued to be cultivated, and there is even evidence that their alphabet was standardized in early English monasteries.⁴⁴ Outside England, there are cases other than in King Hrothgar's sword-hilt where history could be written in runes. One example is a codified form of the two or three runic alphabets which was used to memorialise an Old Scandinavian poem about Theoderic the Ostrogoth († 526), who is said to be mounted and ready for war. The poem was carved with other words less intelligible into the runestone of Rök in Sweden a third of the way into the ninth century.⁴⁵ Theoderic, who is also celebrated in the contemporaneous English poems *Widsith* and *Deor* (copied into the Exeter Book in the later tenth century), was a Byzantine prefect, effectively the king, of post-imperial Italy.⁴⁶ He was infamous in his own day for favouring the Arian version of Christianity, and after his day for executing his 'master of the offices' Boethius on a charge of high treason in 524.

Boethius wrote his own philosophical novel, *De consolazione Philosophiae* ‘on the consolation of (Lady) Philosophy’, while sitting in his house on death row.⁴⁷ He was succeeded in his minister’s role by the same Cassiodorus who founded our BA syllabus and coined the term *modernus* ‘contemporary’. Here is a poem about their patron, in runes, on a rock from the early Viking Age in Sweden.

The image of another king on horseback was carved in England in c. 760, on the shaft of a cross in Repton near the royal Mercian mausoleum. It is thought that this ‘Repton Rider’ celebrates the memory of King Æthelbald of Mercia (ruled 716-756), murdered over a woman’s honour by his bodyguard.⁴⁸ Further north, and a generation earlier, extracts from a poem on Christ the Warrior were carved also in runes on two sides of an upright cross raised in Ruthwell, some 25 miles west of Carlisle.⁴⁹ The Northumbrian thegns or aristocrats who arranged for this inscription were members of a regional monastic community. Their heroic values are part of the larger poem, the first draft of which is thought to have been composed in this part of Northumbria in the 690s. The poem not only has a strong narrative line, but also relates the crucifixion of Christ as if this were a pitched battle against the devil, in which the cross unwillingly performs the role of executing his captain. The cross takes on several manifestations: world tree, bonfire, requilary, human lieutenant, even Jesus’ bleeding war-horse left to cool off after a cavalry charge. A version of the same poem, which we call *The Dream of the Rood*, was later copied into a manuscript which stopped at Vercelli, in northern Italy, at an unknown time after the book was compiled in the later tenth century. To the people who knew the Ruthwell poem near the beginning of its existence, this work was part of a wider set of inscriptions which were derived from Latin liturgy and otherwise written in Roman letters and in Latin. The cross is more famous for its many panels depicting the life and works of Christ in multivalent symbolic form.⁵⁰ The genre of this poem is ecclesiastical: liturgy. It would be hard to establish the nearest secular genre: *lyric* is personal and corresponds with the persona’s desires, in the outer sections of the tripartite narrative; *elegy* conflicts with the resurrection which provides the cross with its joyful Easter theme; but *history* describes the political place of the rood poem as the Ruthwell locals understood it. In its own terms, the poem is a runic entry into the biblical history in which the Northumbrians wished to inscribe a place of honour for themselves.

This pursuit of a place in biblical history defined the Anglo-Saxon world-view also in the Old English *Exodus*, which is an epic based on parts of Genesis and Exodus in the Old Testament. *Exodus* survives in a