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## PRUDERY IN OLD ENGLISH FICTION

A distinctive feature of Old English literature is the tendency of Anglo-Saxon writers to ignore sexuality. The passions of love and lust, with their physical and emotional consequences, are seldom mentioned and almost never described in the English writings that survive from Anglo-Saxon times. The idea of sexual attraction has no force in shaping the materials that make up most of Old English literature. This absence of sexuality is, of course, natural enough, given the circumstances which then governed the writing of literature and the genres which constitute the bulk of the extant Old English literary corpus. Writers trained as or by clerics, composing heroic or elegiac poetry, homiletic or didactic prose, are not likely to emphasize sex. The absence of sexuality under such circumstances is only to be expected. What might not be expected, however, is that this sort of attitude seems to carry over, so far as can be determined from the evidence available, into the one genre where some emphasis on sex was usually inherent in the literary material itself—romantic fiction translated from Latin originals. Wherever grounds for comparison concerning sexuality exist, the Old English translations look prudish when set against their sources.

The grounds for comparison, unfortunately, are scanty, so that inferences drawn from them must be regarded as suggestive rather than conclusive. There are only three Old English translations of Latin romantic fiction extant: the popular medieval pseudo-historic *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*; a far-fetched description of fantastic peoples and places based to some extent on the *Letter* and known as the *Wonders of the East*; and the late Greek romance *Apollonius of Tyre*.<sup>1</sup> In the *Wonders* there is nothing in either the Latin or

<sup>1</sup> The first two are included in *Three Old English Prose Texts*, ed. Stanley Rypins, EETS No. 161, Oxford, 1924; the third has been edited by Peter Goolden, *The Old English Apollonius of Tyre*, Oxford, 1958. These editions also print a version of the Latin original with each Old English text. Although none

Old English versions that could be considered prurient. In the *Letter* there are three brief passages that could, which have all been either modified or omitted in the Old English. In *Apollonius* there are two complete episodes that deal with sexuality, which have both been noticeably toned down in the Old English. What evidence there is, then, does suggest prudery in the Old English translations, as a detailed examination of the texts themselves will demonstrate.

In the *Letter*, the first two passages occur in contexts where the Old English version has been following the Latin closely, and the translation differs from the original in each instance mainly through the omission of an apparently objectionable phrase.

iam in campo patenti uidimus mulieres uirosque pilosus in modum ferarum toto corpore nudos pedum altos nouenorum (p. 91, ll. 19-21)

ða cwomon we on sumne micle feld ða gesawe þær ruge wifmen & wæpned men wæron hie swa ruwe & swa gehære swa wildeor wæron hie nigon fota uplonge & hie wæron ða men<sup>n</sup>acod (p. 32, l. 20 - p. 33, l. 5)

Si a coitu puerili inquit & feminino contactu uacas scilicet intrabis diuimum locum (p. 94, ll. 14-15)

ða ondswarode he gif þine geferan beoð clæne from wif gehrine þonne moton hie gongan in þone godcundan bearo (p. 41, ll. 1-4)

In the first passage, the Old English version implies that only the men, not the women, are naked; in the second, the Old English omits the reference to homosexuality. There is also a third passage in the Latin version, describing wild men who capture river nymphs in order to rape and/or eat them (p. 99, ll. 3-9), which is completely omitted in the Old English, but this has less value as evidence of prudery since it occurs as part of a substantial section of narrative, almost one hundred lines of printed Latin text, which has all been

of these Latin versions represents a manuscript which could have served as the direct source of its Old English counterpart, they each stand close enough to the Old English texts, as I see them, for the kind of comparisons between originals and translations that I undertake here. Citations from both the Latin and Old English texts will be documented in the body of this paper by page and line references to the above editions.

omitted from the Old English translation. These instances of prudery could be more substantial, admittedly, but nevertheless they do show that wherever the Latin version of the *Letter* contained prurient material, the Old English version has modified it.

The evidence in *Apollonius* is stronger. In contrast to the *Letter*, where the few brief references to sexuality are scattered through the story and have no narrative significance, in *Apollonius* sexuality is a prominent feature of the narrative in two major episodes. The first of these occurs at the very beginning of the romance, in a scene where a certain King Antiochus rapes his own daughter; Apollonius, the hero, later seeks the daughter in marriage, learns about the incest, and has to flee the country to escape the king's hostility. Both the Latin and Old English versions of the story describe the rape, but the Old English does so with a good deal more delicacy.

Sed dum pater deliberaret cui potissimum filiam suam in matrimonium daret, cogente iniqua concupiscentia crudelitateque flammae incidit in amorem filiae suae et coepit eam aliter diligere quam quod patrem oportebat. Qui diu luctatus cum furore pugnae cum dolore vincit amorem. Excidit illi pietas, oblitus est esse se patrem, induit coniugem. Sed dum saevi pectoris sui vulnus ferre non posset, quadam die prima luce vigilans irrupit cubiculum et famulos secedere longius iussit, quasi cum filia sua secretum colloquium habiturus. Diu repugnanti nodum virginitatis erupit, perfectoque scelere cupit celare secreta. Sed dum gutte sanguinis in pauimento cecidissent, subito nutrix introivit et vidit puellam roseo rubore perfusam asperso sanguine pauimento. Cui dixit nutrix: ' . . . Quis tantae uirtutis audaciae virginis regine thorum ausus est maculare . . . ?'<sup>2</sup>  
(p. 3, l. 6 - p. 5, l. 1)

<sup>2</sup> Since there is no manuscript extant that represents the direct Latin source of the Old English *Apollonius*, though some are close to it, Goolden prints a conflated text of the Latin version, basing it on the one manuscript among those extant that seems closest to the original of the Old English translation. The purpose of the conflated text is to produce a Latin version as close to the Old English as the extant Latin manuscripts will allow. But since my purpose is to examine the differences between original and translation, I have used the readings from Goolden's base manuscript throughout. There are only a few instances in the material that I cite where the conflated text differs from the base manuscript, and in none of those instances is the conflated reading supported by more than two of the seventeen manuscripts which Goolden consulted in order to establish his conflated text.

þa ða se fæder þohte hwam he hi mihte healicost forgifan, þa gefeol his agen mod on hyre lufe mid unrihte gewilnunge, to þam swiðe þæt he forgeat þa fæderlican arfæstnesse and gewilnode his agenre dohtor him to gemæccan, and þa gewilnunge naht lange ne ylde, ac sume dæge on ærnemergen þa he of slæpe awoc, he abrac into þam bure þar heo inne læg and het his hyredmen ealle him aweg gan, swilce he wið his dohtor sume digle sprecan wolde. Hwæt he ða on ðare manfullan scilde abisgode and þa ongeanwinnendam fæmnan mid micerle strengðe earfoðlice ofercom, and þæt gefremede man gewilnode to bediglianne. ða gewearð hit þæt þæs mædenes fostormodor into ðam bure eode and ge-seah hi ðar sittan on micelre gedrefednesse and hire cwæð to :  
 ‘. . . Hwa wæs æfre swa dirstiges modes þæt dorste cynges dohtor gewæmman ær ðam dæge hyre brydgifta. . . ?’  
 (p. 2, l. 9 - p. 4, l. 2)

The changes made in the translation from the original seem mainly designed to diminish the sexuality of the passage: the emotional furor of the king's passion of lust is described less fully; the references to hymeneal blood spattered about are simply omitted; the fact of defloration is reported less vividly—"fæmnan . . . ofercom" as compared to "nodum virginitatis erupit," the defilement of a "cynges dohtor" rather than of a "virginis regine thorum." In other words, the Latin version places greater emphasis on both the emotional and physical concomitants of rape, envisioning the scene by means of concrete details and images which the Old English either omits or converts into abstract euphemisms. The changes may be preferable as a matter of literary taste, since the original is in some places almost clinically crude, but the grounds for such taste are, of course, based on prudery.

The second major episode in which sexuality figures prominently occurs when another princess, Arcestrate, falls in love with Apollonius, courts him, and marries him. Both the Latin and Old English versions describe the love affair with reasonable delicacy, but here again, as in the treatment of King Antiochus' lust, the Old English shows a tendency to de-emphasize the passionate and emotional qualities of the narrative. This tendency is demonstrated, however, not in a single long passage like the rape episode, but rather in a number of brief passages where the Old English translation substitutes a less vivid choice of words for the language of the original or leaves out altogether a description of emotions found

in the Latin. The first instance of this sort appears when the story begins to describe the effects of love on Arcestrate:

*Sed puella ab amore incensa inquietam habuit noctem fecitque in pectore uulnus verbaque cantus memor eorum quae audierat ab Apollonio* (p. 29, ll. 16-18)

*Ac þæt mæden hæfde unstillen niht, mid þære lufe onæled þara worda and sanga þe heo gehyrd æt Apollonige* (p. 28, ll. 21-22)

In the Latin version the maiden is consumed by love and her heart wounded by Apollonius' words and song, while the Old English flattens this out simply to have her love kindled by his words and songs. The next instance is one of complete omission. Not long after Arcestrate's sleepless night, the Latin has a passage telling how she became physically ill, literally love-sick, because of her undeclared and unacknowledged love for Apollonius:

*Interposito pauci temporis spacio, cum non posset puella ulla ratione amoris sui vulnus tolerare, simulata infirmitate coepit iacere. Rex ut audivit filiam subitanam valitudinem incurrisse, sollicitus adhibuit medicos, at illi temptant venas, tangunt singula membra corporis, nullas causas aegritudinis inveniunt.*  
(p. 31, ll. 4-9)

Nothing from this passage appears in the Old English translation. The last two instances consist of two brief phrases at separate points in the narrative which both indicate the translator's reluctance even to specify the idea of love. On one occasion when Apollonius comes into Arcestrate's presence, the Latin says that she saw "amatores suos" (p. 31, l. 28), for which the Old English simply substitutes the hero's name (p. 30, l. 29). And on another occasion, when she writes a letter to her father declaring her love for Apollonius, the Latin says that her boldness in doing so was due to "amoris audacia" (p. 33, l. 6), which the Old English translates as "modes anrædnesse" (p. 32, l. 8). It looks as though the English writer, even though he is translating a story about love, prefers not to mention the word. His description of the love affair, in consequence of the kinds of changes he makes, displays less emotional intensity than the original. He seems no more willing to confront the emotional realities of love in this episode than he was to confront the physical realities of rape in the opening one. He reacts prudishly to both love and lust, to sexuality whether in thought or deed.

This evidence of prudery, together with the evidence from the Old English *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *Wonders of the East* shows that Old English fiction, at least the extant examples of it, resembles the rest of Old English literature in its attitude toward sexuality. The survival of any given writing from Anglo-Saxon times was, of course, a chancy matter, but it does appear suggestive that the only extant representatives of a genre which often emphasized sexuality are texts which either completely ignore it or else diminish its narrative force. Prudery in Old English fiction may well reflect the influence of general standards of Anglo-Saxon literary taste.

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