MIDDLE ENGLISH IN EARLY AUDEN

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ABSTRACT:

W.H. Auden's debts to Old English and Old Norse literature have long been celebrated, but his lifelong interest in Middle English has received far less critical attention. This article examines how Auden's formative encounters with Middle English verse and prose influenced his poetry between 1922 and 1930. It surveys the different anthologies, editions, and critical perspectives that shaped Auden's early medievalism, and through an analysis of the 1927 poem 'Out of sight assuredly, not out of mind', it explores many of the difficulties that Auden had in turning England's medieval past into a modern poetic resource. Finally, using the evidence of Auden's surviving lecture notes, this article uncovers an important new source for the seminal poem 'Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle': two lines from Laȝamon's *Brut*: 'vppen þan þe hit falleð | he scal uaren of londe' [upon whomever it fall, he must leave his land].

Throughout his life, W.H. Auden read extensively in the literature of the Middle Ages. In his poems, his plays, and his critical prose, he reveals a close familiarity with works written in Old and Middle English, Old Norse, Old Irish, Tuscan, Middle High German, Older Scots, Old French, Old and Middle Welsh, and Medieval Latin. Auden's fascination with these literary traditions evolved throughout his writing life, and he continued to explore new sources and new ways of being influenced by them. 'In general,' he wrote in 1931, 'the further away from you in time or feeling that poets are, the more you can get out of them for your own use.'[1] Many of Auden's formative encounters with such poets occurred at Oxford, where he studied English between 1926 and 1928. There he read medieval texts in scholarly editions, consulted works by the most authoritative critics and commentators, and unlike the

vast majority of his contemporaries, became deeply indebted to the social and theological preoccupations of medieval life. In Auden's first book, *Poems* (1930), the medieval past supplied him with images of alienation and tribal violence, but as he matured, he could also turn to writers like William Langland, who offered a more affirming vision of love's descent into 'this lowe erthe'.[2]

Some aspects of Auden's medievalism have received more critical attention than others. In recent years, Chris Jones has written extensively about Auden's debts to Old English, and to the medieval past more generally,[3] while Heather O'Donoghue has examined Auden's allusions to saga literature and Norse mythology.[4] As ever, John Fuller's *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* remains the standard point of departure for any such studies of Auden's poetic sources and influences.[5] But Middle English remains a vast and underexplored aspect of the poet's medievalism. In this article, I wish to examine the earliest evidence for how Auden came to use Middle English as a poetic resource. I have confined myself to the period between 1922, when Auden first imitated a Middle English lyric, and August 1930, when he wrote his seminal poem 'Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle'. This timeframe excludes Auden's exuberant imitations of John Skelton in 1931, as well as his unsuccessful attempt to write an epic dream vision in late 1932. These episodes in Auden's career require their own separate treatment, as does the profound influence that C.S. Lewis's *The Allegory of Love* (1936) was to have on Auden's tastes and borrowings. But because Auden's medievalism is central to the story of how he came of age as a poet, it is necessary to give this earliest evidence the close attention it deserves.

I. Early Encounters, 1922-25

In his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1956, Auden gave his own account of how he fell in love with medieval English literature, and although his comments focus chiefly on Anglo-Saxon, they also refer to his lifelong love of Middle English:

> I remember [a lecture] I attended, delivered by Professor Tolkien. I do not remember a single word he said but at a certain point he recited, and magnificently, a long passage of *Beowulf*. I was spellbound. This poetry, I knew, was going to be my dish. I became willing, therefore, to work at Anglo-Saxon because, unless I did, I should never be able to read this poetry. I learned enough to read it, however sloppily, and Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences.[6]

It is quite possible that the 'long passage' from *Beowulf* that J.R.R. Tolkien recited was the excerpt given in Henry Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, which was one of Tolkien's standard teaching texts. Two pages into that excerpt appear the lines: 'ne wæs þæt ge*w*rīxle til, | þæt hīe on *b*ā healfa *b*icgan scoldon | *f*rēonda *f*ēorum'.[7] Though frugal with annotations, Sweet supplies an extended endnote for these lines in his *Reader*, and translates: 'the exchange was not good, which they had to pay for on both sides with the lives of their friends (or relations)'.[8] It is from this annotation that Auden is likely to have retrieved the title for his experimental verse charade *Paid on Both Sides*, a work which is steeped in Old English and Old Norse allusions, and which helped make the young poet famous.[9]

But it is a mistake – and perhaps Auden's own mistake – to think that his interest in pre-modern English began in an Oxford lecture hall in 1926. Auden had in fact been served the 'dish' of medieval verse many times as a schoolboy, and in order to trace the

development of his early medievalism, it is necessary to examine some of the books he was reading while attending Gresham's School, Norfolk, between 1920 and 1925.

Auden began to write poetry in March 1922 at the prompting of his friend Robert Medley, and like most fifteen-year-old poets, his earliest efforts began with lines like 'Far into the vast the mists grow dim' or 'The twinkling lamps stream up the hill'.[10] As Auden later said, all poets begin by imitating what they think of as 'poetry-in-general',[11] and for a public schoolboy in the early 1920s, the most immediate source of 'poetry-in-general' was Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900). Often awarded as a prize book at Gresham's,[12] this anthology seems to have given the slightly homesick Auden his first tastes of Middle English. On the book's opening pages are the classic lyrics 'Sumer is icumen in', 'Bytuene Mershe ant Averil', and 'Lenten ys come with love to toun', which collectively served as a pure and uncomplicated point of departure for Quiller-Couch's version of the English literary tradition.[13] In this tradition, medieval literature was valuable not chiefly for its ironies, its social criticism, or its unruly comedy, but for its simple poems of longing or natural description. The third item in Quiller-Couch's anthology seems to have caught Auden's attention in 1922 or 1923:

> Lenten ys come with love to toune,
> With blosmen ant with briddes roune,
>   That al this blisse bryngeth;
> Dayes-eyes in this dales,
> Notes suete of nyhtegales,
>   Vch foul song singeth[14]

Instead of the daisies in the dales, or the sweet notes of the nightingale, what proved most memorable to the young Auden was the fourteenth-century construction of the perfect tense: 'Lenten ys come' rather than 'Lentyn has come'.[15] Using this grammatical relic, as well as the qualifier 'with love', Auden attempted his own study of a seasonal landscape:

> Autumn is come, dear kindly dame
> With love that puts us men to shame
> We cannot stir outside the house
> Some hare will cross our path or mouse
> Apples like ruby gems are set
> Deep in long grass that's green and wet
> And when along the lanes we go
> Red berries wink on each hedgerow[16]

The poem uses an archaism as its point of departure, but these lines are not filled with an archaic vocabulary; instead, they register many of Auden's earliest poetic influences, such as Walter de la Mare and W.H. Davies, whose works he encountered while browsing in the 'magnificent library' at Gresham's.[17] Indeed, the antiquities that came to interest Auden in his early landscapes were not those of English philology, but rather the derelict mining works and overshot waterwheels of the Northern landscape. Old mills and disused machinery, as well as the vast limestone caverns of the Pennine Moors, came to assume for Auden the imaginative status of 'a private sacred world'.[18] When he decided to write about this world, in a poem called 'Alston Moor' (1922 or 1923), he began again with the Middle English formula:

April, fair maid, is come with laughter in her eyes

And everywhere she weaves her lovely spells

On plain and hill; I know that now the South Wind cries

Her name upon the long slow curvings of the fells.[19]

The 'long slow curvings of the fells' would become a characteristic feature of the poet's imagination, and their harsh movement survives into his mature work ('The slow fastidious line | That disciplines the fell').[20] When the young Auden first tried to put these sacred places into verse, however, it was the Middle English 'Lentyn ys come' that gave him a way of beginning a new poem, which was a not insignificant gift for a budding writer.

'Autumn' and 'Alston Moor' are almost certainly Auden's earliest imitations of medieval literature, and they are interesting chiefly because they reveal a direct engagement with Middle English as a literary language. This sort of first-hand engagement was by no means inevitable for a provincial schoolboy whose earliest childhood was shaped by what he later called a 'Tennysonian' outlook.[21] Auden's father had antiquarian interests, and had introduced Wystan to Norse mythology from an early age, while his mother had taught him to sing the part of Isolde in the windswept melodrama of Wagner's *Tristan*.[22] 'With Northern myths my little brain was laden', wrote Auden in 1936,[23] and later observed that he 'became self-conscious at a moment | when locomotives were named after knights in Malory'.[24] The glamour and drama of nineteenth-century medievalism was a broad cultural inheritance, and was evidently attractive to a literary adolescent in the 1920s. At the age of sixteen or so, Auden showed his familiarity with its mannerisms in a piece called 'Arthur's Quoit, Dyffryn':

O Cold grey stones! What mighty warrior lies beneath thy shade?

What deeds of valour wrought his battle blade?

Was it that a people mourned his loss with bitter tears,

And was his legend told in after years

By bard and poet while an awed multitude sat round and listened

And the ancient minstrel's bright eye glistened?[25]

As Katherine Bucknell has noted, in her excellent edition of Auden's *Juvenilia*, the 'Cold grey stones' are here taken from Tennyson, while the final line of Auden's poem – 'He sleeps, and hopes, and waits his Ragnarok' – shows an early familiarity with Norse mythology.[26] Although Auden's mature work would ultimately serve as a repudiation of this style of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism, the young poet evidently derived many of his early enthusiasms from it. A mist-filled lyricism is found again in 'Christ in Hades' (1923 or 1924), which uses Tennyson's *In Memoriam* stanza to reflect on the apocryphal story of Christ's Harrowing of Hell. This theme was ubiquitous among medieval writers, and Auden later encountered it in the climax of Langland's *Piers Plowman* as well as the York mystery play *The Harrowing of Hell*.[27] But it is likely that his immediate inspiration in 1923 or 1924 was not a medieval text at all, but a minor Victorian poem, Stephen Phillips's *Christ in Hades* (1897).[28] Such a work allowed Auden to broaden the scope of his earliest poems, but it also made him receptive to the themes and images he would later encounter in genuine medieval sources.

What helped the young Auden to encounter a wider range of medieval texts was a Christmas present he received in 1923. Walter de la Mare's anthology *Come Hither* was, in Auden's own judgement, the 'collection which, more than any book I have read before or since, taught me what poetry is'.[29] As well as having an 'exquisite smell',[30] the book provided Auden with a nourishing and accessible storehouse of forms and genres, free from

the ‘literary class consciousness’ that hampered Quiller-Couch’s anthology.[31] The radiant landscapes of the Middle English lyrics were here offset by a grubbier, more gleeful side to medieval life, in songs like ‘Bring us in good ale’:

> Bring us in no mutton, for that is often lene,
> Nor bring us in no tripes, for they be seldom clene,
> *But bring us in good ale!*
>
> Bring us in no egges, for there are many schelles,
> But bring us in good ale, and gife us nothing elles;
> *But bring us in good ale!*[32]

Unlike *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, *Come Hither* was organised thematically, so its selections of medieval poetry were not confined to a few pages at the beginning of the volume. Instead, John Skelton found himself in the unlikely company of Katharine Tynan and Robert Frost; John Lydgate was mixed in with Thomas Hardy and Eleanor Farjeon; while the lyrics ‘Adam lay i-bowndyn’ and ‘Lully, lullay’ (the ‘Corpus Christi Carol’) were placed alongside Christina Rossetti and George Herbert. These sorts of juxtapositions served as the model for Auden’s own anthology, *The Poet’s Tongue* (1935), but they also informed his later view that Middle English should exist in relation to, and not in isolation from, the rest of a poet’s interests. As he said of his own imagination, ‘*Piers Ploughman* III is going about with Kierkegaard’s *Journals*, *Piers Ploughman* IV with *The Making of the English Landscape*.’[33]

A subdued lyric called ‘Inn Song’, from March 1924, shows how some of Auden’s overlapping interests began to fuse together. Using the slender stanza form of Thomas

Hardy's 'I need not go', which features a two-beat line that Auden would later associate with Laura Riding and John Skelton, the schoolboy produced a lyric that coyly echoes the refrain of the Middle English 'Bring us in good ale':

> Traveller, stay
> On your long way;
> Dusk falls on day,
> Dark grows the hour.
> Here is good ale
> That will not fail;
> Tell us your tale
> By the bright fire.[34]

It would be premature to attribute to the teenage Auden an unusually sophisticated approach to medieval poetry on evidence such as this. His debts to Middle English occur only occasionally throughout the early 1920s, and other literary figures loom far larger in his mind, shaping his responses to the landscape, and arousing in him a formative interest in prosody and verse forms. After his obsessive devotion to Thomas Hardy in 1923-4, Auden developed an obsessive devotion to Edward Thomas. But in April 1925, there was a brief opening for Geoffrey Chaucer, whose presence is felt in two poems from that month, 'The Mill (Hempstead)' and 'April in a Town'.

Recalling his solitary walks around the countryside near Gresham's, Auden wrote of how 'Watching a snow storm come up from the sea over the marshes at Salthouse, and walking in a June dawn (not so legally) by Hempstead Mill are only the two most vivid of a hundred such experiences'.[35] When he tried to write about Hempstead Mill in 1925, he

opened a copy of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, not to consult its descriptions of April showers or melodic birds, but to find a way of making the picturesque mill seem significantly older than it actually was:

> The mill is not so ancient, yet it seems
> As old as Britain, not to be destroyed
> While men reap harvest, and while starlings build
> Their villages beneath old hanging eaves.
> I have but seen the miller now and then
> But heard him singing often; such a one
> As He who cared for nobody, or He
> The lusty hairy-nosed whom Chaucer spoke of
> Whose wife was gent and small as any weasel
> And sang sweeter than swallow on a barn.
> Often and often I have walked down there
> To stroke his pair of dogs or hunt for nests...[36]

Chaucer's Miller does indeed have a hairy nose, or more specifically, a hairy wart on the tip of his nose ('Up-on the cop right of his nose he hade | A werte, and ther-on stood a tuft of heres' I. 554-55),[37] and Auden's references to the Miller's wife being 'gent and small as any weasel' and singing 'sweeter than swallow on a barn' are (as Bucknell notes) based on two couplets from 'The Miller's Tale':

> Fair was this yonge wyf, and ther-with-al
> As any wesele hir body gent and smal...

But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne

As any swalwe sittinge on a berne. (I. 3233-58)

These homely and attractive similes show that Auden was reading the original text of *The Canterbury Tales*, and making an effort to retrieve different turns of phrase from different parts of Chaucer's work. But he has also been slightly careless: the above passage is not a description of the Miller's wife, but of Alison, a character in 'The Miller's Tale', who is married to John the Carpenter. More importantly, by invoking this raucous tale in such a wistful, Wordsworthian manner, Auden has in effect made a comically misjudged allusion to medieval comedy. As every undergraduate knows, the weasel-shaped Alison ultimately sticks her 'naked ers' out the window to be kissed 'Ful savourly' by the unwitting Absolon (I. 3734-35), who in turn brands the rear end of Alison's lover Nicholas with a hot poker.[38] By bringing such antics so solemnly into play, the young Auden has fallen victim to what he later cited as one source of a poet's bum notes: 'by overlooking verbal and visual associations he may be unintentionally funny at a serious moment'.[39] It is especially unfortunate that, within a few lines of invoking the character of Alison, Auden also writes sombrely of 'the mill | Which pushed its bulk up at the evening sky'.[40]

But in the very same month as this awkward, unpractised allusion to Chaucer, Auden also retrieved from the 'well of English vndefyled'[41] a medieval usage that anticipates the poise and restraint of his later debts. It appears in his lyric 'April in a Town':

No race of mating hares in March can please,

No primrose by the brook that brings

A dream of April wonder deep, as these,

The symbols of more noble things.[42]

The graceful phrase ‘A dream of April wonder deep’ uses the Middle English intensifier *wonder*, meaning ‘wondrously’, and though it is relatively common (‘wounder proude’ is found in ‘Lentyn ys come’), a direct source can still be identified: Chaucer’s dream poem *The Book of the Duchess*. Written in the late 1360s, when Chaucer was still in his mid-twenties, this experimental elegy established him as a learned and allusive poet, skilled in the manner of French literary conventions, but ever alert to the aspirations of the English court. In the melancholy early sections of the work, Chaucer recounts the Ovidian tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, in which Juno’s messenger is sent to the cavernous world of Morpheus, the god of sleep, to orchestrate a consoling vision for the grieving Alcyone, whose husband has been lost at sea. In the passage that Auden borrows ‘wonder deep’ from, Chaucer describes a landscape that is nearly indistinguishable from the limestone caverns of the Pennine Moors that Auden so adored. While Morpheus sleeps, a stream runs from a barren cliffside into a cleft in the rock, and falls into his vast underground cave:

> This messager took leve and wente
> Upon his wey, and never ne stente
> Til he com to the derke valeye
> That stant bytwene roches tweye,
> Ther never yet grew corn ne gras,
> Ne tree, ne nothing that ought was,
> Beste, ne man, ne nothing elles,
> Save ther were a fewe welles
> Came renning fro the cliffes adoun,
> That made a deedly sleping soun,

And ronnen doun right by a cave

That was under a rokke y-grave

Amid the valey, wonder depe.

Ther thise goddes laye and slepe (153-66)

Here is a version of Auden's sacred landscape, shaped by a delicate and estranging language, and retrieved from deep within a Middle English dream poem. The young poet had every reason to be impressed by this passage, but it is nonetheless significant that he was able to find it for himself within the imposing edifice of Chaucer's *Works*. It is equally significant that, having found it, he was not tempted to undertake a Chaucerian pastiche, but simply to create the memorable phrase 'A dream of April wonder deep'.

'April in a Town' is the earliest evidence for Auden's willingness to bring Middle English into his 'private sacred world'. It is important to note, however, that the passage from *The Book of the Duchess* closely resembled many lines of poetry that Auden had already written. A year earlier, in 1924, he wrote of 'a stream in a cave | That falls through the dark of a silent place',[43] and of how a 'stream that flashes in the light | Will in a tunnel underground | Fret sullenly in darkness bound'.[44] These sounds and sensations ultimately derived from his earliest childhood holidays in the Pennine Moors, where he and his brothers were guided (in Humphrey Carpenter's words) 'down long steep passages to caverns hollowed out by underground rivers, whose roofs, hung with stalactites, echoed to the perpetual trickle of water'.[45] Indeed, a year before using the phrase 'wonder deep', Auden had used 'wondrous clear' when describing some 'gurgling brooks';[46] Chaucer had simply led him back to the source of an archaism he had already used, and offered him a fresh description of the landscape he already loved.[47]

The key point that follows from these mixed affiliations is that, for the young Auden, the familiarity of medieval literature was more compelling than its strangeness. He was drawn to Middle English sources as a schoolboy not because they offered a jarring or exotic reading experience, but because they dealt, as W.P. Ker put it, 'with extant things, which live for the present day'.[48] When he listened to J.R.R. Tolkien reciting *Beowulf* at Oxford, Auden was indeed captivated, but he was no stranger to the welcoming depths of medieval verse.

II. Oxford, 1925-28

'It would be true to say,' remarked Auden's schoolfriend Robert Medley, 'that by the time Wystan went to Oxford his character and all that went with it, was already formed'.[49] This character, as is now apparent, included an interest in at least a few works of medieval literature, and when Auden switched from a degree in Natural Science to a degree in English in 1926, he encountered a greatly enlarged range of Middle English texts. The Oxford course surveyed in detail the full history of the English language, from the seventh to the fifteenth century, and mapped the diversification of its dialects, genres, and poetic forms throughout the island.[50] For Auden, the poetry of Old English was the chief revelation. 'I was immediately fascinated,' he remembered, 'both by its metric and its rhetorical devices, so different from the post-Chaucerian poetry with which I was familiar.'[51] But as Chris Jones and Robert H. Boyer have noted, Auden also had to study vibrant anthologies of Middle English such as Richard Morris and Walter W. Skeat's *Specimens of Early English* (1898), the first volume of which covered the period 1150-1300, and Kenneth Sisam's *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose* (1921).[52] In these books Auden could find samplings of the earliest of the Middle English romances, *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane*, as well as extracts from such classic texts as *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight. When Auden himself began compiling anthologies in 1935, he freely borrowed from Sisam's collection: his favourite pieces included an evocative seascape from the alliterative *Destruction of Troy*; a rendering of Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*; and an unforgettable Northern poem about blacksmiths working through the night ('Tik, tak! hic, hac! tiket, taket! tyk, tak!').[53]

As with his earlier reading, however, Auden's response to such texts was typically filtered through a range of other influences. By the time he reached Oxford in 1925, the glamour of Victorian medievalism had yielded to the more urbane insouciance of writers like Robert Graves and Edith Sitwell. More importantly, in the spring of 1926, Auden read T.S. Eliot's poetry for the first time, which encouraged him to become unashamedly allusive in his own work. Instead of writing about lonely lanes or changing seasons, he began to write poems with titles like 'The Megalopsych' or 'Chloe to Daphnis in Hyde Park' or 'Thomas Epilogizes' (in which a brief allusion to the plot of *Beowulf* appears).[54] And a mere twelve months after Geoffrey Chaucer had provided Auden with the image of a solitary miller with a hairy nose, Chaucer's works were now used as grist to a rather more severe modernist mill:

> Troy Town is burning; its despairing ashes
> Flame from the shores the Everlasting washes,
> But there remain, when all are dead and gone,
> The candle-litten miles to Babylon,
>
> The Dark Tower, the Azores, though Chanticleer
> Query both Advent and Platonic year.[55]

The archaism ‘Troy Town’ has probably been mined directly from Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, while Chanticleer the rooster has been snatched from *The Canterbury Tales* to serve as a cosmic seer. Chanticleer did indeed have a proverbial reputation as an ‘astrologer’ in the Middle Ages,[56] so the allusion is not wholly inappropriate, but Auden’s cockerel nevertheless manages to seem more closely related to T.S. Eliot’s Tiresias than Chaucer’s ‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale’.

Auden published this poem, ‘Cinders’, in the volume of *Oxford Poetry* that he co-edited in 1926, but he disowned it a year later, remarking to Christopher Isherwood that ‘That type of cleverness won’t do’.[57] For much of that year, however, from spring 1926 to summer 1927, the cleverness held sway, and resulted in Auden becoming a cult figure in the eyes of his fellow undergraduates. One feature of his contrarianism was his interest in medieval literature; Auden thought of it as a ‘specialised taste’,[58] and probably felt special for admiring it, especially since his peers mostly resented their medieval coursework. Auden’s fellow undergraduate John Betjeman, who was still in thrall to *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, recalled his shock at how Auden ‘dismissed the Sitwells in a sentence and really admired the boring Anglo-Saxon poets like Beowulf [*sic*]’.[59] It may be partly thanks to the indifference of such friends that Auden decided to make Old and Middle English a more prominent part of his personality.

The gradual intensification of his medieval interests can be seen in a manuscript in the Isherwood Collection at the Huntington Library, California. It is the first draft of a poem sometimes known by its first line, ‘Out of sight assuredly, not out of mind’, but initially titled ‘Letter to a friend upon his week-end visit to his home’ (MS CI 2847). Written on the back of some Middle English lecture notes (discussed below), the poem exhibits some of the creative difficulties that Auden faced in the summer of 1927, as he tried repeatedly to turn

his coursework into poetry. 'Out of sight assuredly' concerns Auden's trip to the family home of William McElwee, one of his Oxford love interests, and alludes to a picturesque day-trip they spent together, searching for birds' nests in the trees of Somerset. The first draft begins:

> Out of sight assuredly, not out of mind
> Which cranes above your shoulder to regard
> Foreshortened carriages and mimic engine
> Chasing through fields, to register each step,
> The junction pause, the train meandering
> Through stations sharpening in significance[60]

These lines already exhibit the condensed, elliptical syntax that would characterise Auden's mature poems, but other aspects of the work are less assured. As Katherine Bucknell has shown, the poem's textual history is fraught with indecision:[61] the first draft includes a long middle section based on the thirteenth-century debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*,[62] and when Auden finished this draft, he decided to revise and expand the debate between the two birds. But then, in a final version, he cancelled all evidence of any debt to *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and gutted the middle section entirely.

In no other piece of juvenilia is Auden so indecisive as to what sort of poem he wished to write. The difficulty was not so much with *The Owl and the Nightingale*, which is a highly sophisticated work of comic verse, but with what Isherwood once referred to as Auden's 'literary digestive powers', which were changing as rapidly as his reading materials.[63] In early 1927, the lining of his digestive tract was mostly made up of T.S. Eliot, whose influence had caused Auden to use Middle English works as fodder for esoteric

allusions and private jokes. When writing to Isherwood about ‘Out of sight assuredly’, however, he showed signs of uncertainty regarding this technique. Pre-empting the accusation of pedantry, Auden offered an accurate but not very reassuring excuse that parts of his poem were deliberately pompous:

> I think you will probably dislike this poem; it is partly a deliberate experiment in the letter as a verse form, with the slight pompousness which should be associated therewith. You may (Please forgive my assumptions) criticize the remarks of the owl and the nightingale as too literary. I have tried deliberately to make them so, make them accord to the convention, as being suitable to the Owl and the Nightingale Symbolism.[64]

It is easy to see why Auden had mixed feelings about his deliberate literariness:

> Apotheosis was childish then; now,
> More hirsute grown,
> The shrill incessant bicker
> Of owl and nightingale exasperates.
> The nightingale nostalgic for the womb –
> ‘Concept and object, builder and stone were one,
> And is not life an interlude between
> This first placental, that last coffin kiss?
> What’s foolish but a pursy mouth? …’ Owl in-
> terrupts – ‘Mathematicians get a curve,
> The jovial ellipse, the mystical

Hyperbole, or sad parabola,

And take more pleasure from a formula

Than from the nape of Helen's neck, not waking

To a charred city, nor dragged out heel-first

As Hector was, that bold bad pugilist….'

Each screams the other down. 'Choose me' – 'Choose me'.[65]

Auden's instinct in 1927 was to hyper-modernise the medieval past. He was presumably aware that the thirteenth-century Nightingale is a slightly naïve romantic, while the Owl is crabby and unsentimental. But beyond these basic facts, Auden shows no close engagement with the poem, and does not capture any of the bickering rhythms of the original ('Þi bodi is short, þi sweore is smal, | Grettere is þin heved þan þu al' [your body is squat, your neck is scrawny, your head is bigger than the rest of you put together]).[66] Instead, the Middle English poem simply becomes another occasion for Auden to slip into the studied irreverence of his modernist manner, which by May 1927, was wearing thin.

At the same time as Auden was reading *The Owl and the Nightingale*, however, he was also reading two other classics of Middle English literature: the Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the lyrical dream vision *Pearl*. These poems, written in a densely-textured North-West Midlands dialect, are distinguished by their use of an elaborate alliterative vocabulary and intricate prosodic techniques. One description of an austere landscape in *Sir Gawain* was attractive to Auden for obvious reasons:

Þay boȝen bi bonkkeȝ þer boȝeȝ ar bare;

Þay clomben bi clyffeȝ þer clengeȝ þe colde.

Þe heuen watȝ vp halt, bot vgly þer vnder, –

Mist muged on þe mor, malt on þe mounteȝ,

Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.[67]

[They went by hill-sides where boughs are bare, they climbed by cliffs where the coldness clings. The clouds were up high, but ugly underneath; mist drizzled on the moor, dissolved on the mountains; each hill had a hat, a huge cloak of mist.]

Unlike in 1925, when the evocative landscape of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* produced 'A dream of April wonder deep', this harsh verbal world led Auden to borrow the far more obtrusive compound *mist-hakel* for 'Out of sight assuredly':

Whatever homologues they are you have

For scarps of shale, mist-hackle, and stone wall,

Wherein I recognize approach to home.[68]

This sort of lexical scavenging had been a bold and iconoclastic technique a decade earlier, when Ezra Pound filled his translations of Arnaut Daniel with Older Scots words like *fordel* (pre-eminence), *wriblis* (warblings), and *I raik* (I haste).[69] Retrieving difficult words from a medieval poem, however, was not quite the same as being influenced by medieval poetry, and indeed, one paradox of Auden's early medieval debts is that when they are at their most emphatic and quantifiable – as in 'mist-hackle' – they are at their least effective. Such a *trouvaille* suggests that Auden, though compelled by the arcane vocabulary of the Northern alliterative tradition, was still coming to terms with the linguistic features of non-Chaucerian English.

As a guide for bewildered students, J.R.R. Tolkien himself had offered some words of advice in his glossary to Sisam's *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose*:

> A good working knowledge of Middle English depends less on the possession of an abstruse vocabulary than on familiarity with the ordinary machinery of expression ... with the uses of such innocent-looking little words as the prepositions *of* and *for*[70]

From the evidence of his earlier grammatical borrowings, such as 'Lentyn ys come', and 'wonder depe', Auden was already alert to the allure of more than just Middle English nouns, but the 'ordinary machinery of expression' nevertheless took time to master. Medieval prepositions, as Tolkien notes, often have variable or counter-intuitive meanings: the Middle English *of* usually means 'from' or 'off' or 'out of', while in Old English, the word *on* usually means 'into' when followed by the accusative case, but means 'in' when followed by the dative. Not until early Middle English does the word *in* become more common than *on* for expressing the Modern English 'in'. Significantly, the definite article was often omitted in Middle English prepositional phrases, as in sentences like 'Đe leun stant on hille', 'Hit is full merry in feyre foreste', or 'Hym that dyed on tree'.[71] It is difficult to know if Auden knowingly imitated such constructions, but in 1927, when his daily life at Oxford was steeped in Middle English poetry, he began writing lines like: 'you may hear the wind | Arriving driven from the ignorant sea | To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm'.[72] Although medieval source-hunters might initially be disappointed that a construction like 'hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm' cannot be keyed to particular passages of Old or Middle English, the influence of medieval prepositions and syntax was ultimately far more productive for Auden's poetry, and he discovered its potential at a crucial moment in his development.

An early hint of this subtler, philological influence occurs in a late addition to 'Out of sight assuredly, not out of mind'. Between June 1927 and the summer of 1928, Auden revised the poem extensively, and replaced its fussy epistolary ending with a more attractive flourish, which would ultimately appear in the Berlin sequence of 1929, 'It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens':

> No chattering valves of laughter emphasized
> Nor the swept gown-ends of a gesture moved
> The sessile hush: until a sudden shower
> Fell willing to the grass and closed the day,
> Making choice seem a necessary error.[73]

As John Fuller has observed, an important context for these lines is the Latin line '*O felix culpa! o necessarium peccatum Ade!*', which appears in Langland's *Piers Plowman* as well as in the Easter Saturday liturgy.[74] In addition to the 'fortunate fall' and the 'necessary sin' of Adam, Auden might also have remembered the Middle English lyric comparing Christ's incarnation to the 'dew in April | That falleth on the grass'.[75] But it is a minute alteration of Auden's prepositions – those 'innocent-looking little words' as Tolkien called them – that suggests a close philological engagement with his coursework. In a later version, he changed 'Fell willing *to the* grass and closed the day' to 'Fell willing *into* grass and closed the day'.[76] Slight as this change may seem, it is of a piece with Auden's continued study of Middle English. C.L. Wrenn, who taught him the history of the language, recalled that 'the Middle English poem *Pearl* particularly interested Auden at that time', and that Auden had undertaken translations of several passages from it.[77] In one of the poem's most heart-breaking moments, a father calls out to his dead daughter in a dream:

‘O perle,’ q*uod* I, ‘in perleȝ pyȝt,

Art þ*o*u my perle þat I haf playned,

Regretted by my*n* one, on nyȝte?

Much longey*n*g haf I for þe layned,

Syþen into gresse þ*o*u me aglyȝte[78]

[‘O pearl,’ I said, ‘adorned in pearls, are you my pearl that I have mourned and grieved for by myself at night? I have hidden much longing for you, since you fell from me into grass.]

It is easy to see why Auden, having written ‘Fell willing *to* the grass’, would have been swayed by the more distinctive ‘*into* gresse’, not least because grass and its different prepositions frequently crops up throughout his earlier poems: ‘crumbling *in* the grass’ (1926); ‘bareheaded *under* grass’ (1926); ‘sprawling *on* the grass’ (1926); ‘The grass looked *upward* at the flower’ (1926-7); ‘The heel *upon* the finishing blade of grass’ (1927); ‘swishing *through* the grass’ (1927); and most notably ‘*between* the chafing grass’ (1927).[79] Just as his own phrase ‘wondrous clear’ made him alert to Chaucer’s ‘wonder depe’, so too might Auden’s constant play with grassy prepositions have alerted him to ‘*into* gresse’ from *Pearl*. But unlike ‘myst-hakel’ or ‘wonder depe’, the phrase cannot be verified or authenticated as a source. It has instead become indistinguishably part of the fabric of Auden’s verse.

Although Auden never sought to publish ‘Out of sight assuredly, not out of mind’, the year-long process of writing, revising, and finally abandoning the poem was nevertheless a transformative stage in the history of his medievalism. As he became dissatisfied with his

pastiche of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, he began to experiment with other, less obtrusive forms of poetic imitation, on a verbal, syntactical, and thematic level. 'Out of sight assuredly' was by no means a poetic breakthrough, but it served as a testing ground for many different ways of being influenced by medieval verse. By early 1928, having persevered with the study of Old and Middle English, Auden began to handle medieval sources with a new confidence, and was able to compose the first of the lyrics that would ultimately appear in *Paid on Both Sides*.[80]

III. Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle

'Comment upon the following forms as examples of various dialects, and say to what part of the country you would assign them: *kneland*, *buggen*, *uvele*, *singinde*, *moyne* (= moon), *harkens* (imper. pl.), *unschette*, *scho*, *knauene*, *qwiles*, *burne* (= man), *thaym*, *aski* (vb.), *uelles* (= skins), *hyerof*'.[81] Although Auden had learned much about the mechanics of medieval verse in 1927, a question like this one, which appeared in his 1928 examinations, does not leave room for guesswork, and following a stressful exam period, the poet left Oxford with only a Third Class degree. Years later, in his inaugural Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, Auden said that if a young poet fares well at the Exam Schools, 'either he is also a scholar in the making, or he is a very good boy indeed.'[82] In the immediate aftermath of his dismal performance, however, all he could muster in a letter to David Ayerst was a weary quotation of *The Waste Land*: 'Well now that's done and I'm glad it's over'.[83]

What is most striking about Auden's exam performance is not that he should have fared so badly, but that he should have returned so wholeheartedly to the site of the disaster: Old and Middle English philology. While living in Berlin in 1928-9, he continued to write *Paid on Both Sides*, drawing on such staples of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* as the feud narrative *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*, the heroic *Battle of Maldon*, and the austere elegies *The*

Wanderer and *The Seafarer*. In spite of the ordeal he had faced at the Examination Schools, Auden's interest in the medieval past continued to develop and diversify in these years. He became especially captivated by the works of the Scottish critic W.P. Ker, whom he came to regard as a key influence:

> No other critic whom I have subsequently read could have granted me the same vision of a kind of literary All Souls Night in which the dead, the living and the unborn writers of every age and in every tongue were seen as engaged upon a common, noble and civilizing task.[84]

A distinguished medievalist, Ker had moved in the same antiquarian circles as Auden's father in the early 1900s,[85] and had served as Oxford Professor of Poetry from 1920 until his death in 1923. His expansive works of literary history, such as *Epic and Romance* (1897) and *The Dark Ages* (1904), gave Auden's medievalism a greater historical depth and allowed the poet to apprehend the 'relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself'.[86] If the Middle Ages were to be understood fully, argued Ker, 'Old Irish and Welsh cannot be kept separate from Icelandic and Provencal'.[87] In a similar mood, he announced that 'Nothing can destroy the kinship of poetical form between Scotland and Denmark'.[88] Extravagant as such statements might seem, they nevertheless had a real effect on Auden's medieval reading: in addition to Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse, he started borrowing from Old Irish in 1931, from Older Scots in 1933, and developed a life-long fascination with Icelandic and Middle Welsh prosody.[89]

When Auden was working as a schoolmaster in Scotland in 1930, he was evidently reading Ker's books, and became newly energised by a range of Middle English texts he had first encountered at Oxford.[90] In a passage from Ker's *English Literature: Medieval* (1912),

the Scottish critic delivered a characteristically pithy judgement on a thirteenth-century prose text called *Sawles Warde*: 'By one sentence it may be recognised and remembered; where it is told how the souls of the faithful see "all the redes and the runes of God, and his dooms that dern be, and deeper than any sea-dingle"'.[91] The medieval homilist had Psalm 36:6 in mind ('Thy justice is as the mountains of God, thy judgments are a great deep'), and in Morris and Skeat's *Specimens of Early English*, the sentence reads: 'Ha beoð se wise þ*at* ha witen alle godes reades. his runes *ant* his domes þe derne beoð. *ant* deopre þen eni sea dingle'.[92]

In August 1930, when Auden was working on a now-lost play titled *The Fronny*, he used this line to begin one of his most mysterious and compelling early lyrics, originally referred to simply as 'Chorus from a Play':[93]

> Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle.
> Upon what man it fall
> In spring, day-wishing flowers appearing,
> Avalanche sliding, white snow from rock-face,
> That he should leave his house,
> No cloud-soft hand can hold him, restraint by women;
> But ever that man goes
> Through place-keepers, through forest trees,
> A stranger to strangers over undried sea,
> Houses for fishes, suffocating water,
> Or lonely on fell as chat,
> By pot-holed becks
> A bird stone-haunting, an unquiet bird.[94]

The poem has become emblematic of Auden’s early manner, but in many ways it is an unlikely classic. As John Fuller has noted, its mood ‘is largely created by the movement and cadence of the irregular verse, and by the ambiguity of its subject’.[95] It is more commonly remembered, however, for its elements of Old English pastiche, such as the slightly arch ‘houses for fishes’ (in imitation of the kenning ‘*h*wæles ēþel’), the stylised epithets like ‘undried sea’ or ‘cloud-soft hand’, and the appositional constructions like ‘Avalanche sliding, white snow from rock-face’. Most notably, the central figure wakes to the sight of ‘bird-flocks nameless to him’, just as the central figure of the Old English *The Wanderer* wakes and ‘Gesihð him bi*f*oran *f*ealwe wegas, | *b*aþian *b*rimfulgas, *b*rǣdan feþra’ (sees before him fallow waves, sea birds bathing, spreading their feathers).[96] But Auden is also indebted to his own earlier work: the poem’s closing line, for instance, ‘Lucky with day approaching, with leaning dawn’ is adapted from the line ‘Dawn leans across the sea’ from a 1927 poem,[97] while a line from 1926, ‘His head fell forward and he dreamed’,[98] becomes ‘There head falls forward, fatigued at evening, | And dreams of home’. The poem’s closing prayer, meanwhile, ‘Protect his house, his anxious house . . . From thunderbolt protect’, may have been derived from *Sawles Warde* itself, in which the man’s house is used as an allegory for the soul: ‘aȝeines him *ant* his keis. þe husebonde þ*at* is wit. warneð his hus’ (‘against him and his stewards, the husband, that is, Wit, protects his house’).[99] But the grand, hortatory manner of this closing plea may also owe something to Auden’s lifelong affection for *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, which included a prayer for those at sea:

> Our brethren shield in danger’s hour;
> From rock and tempest, fire and foe,
> Protect them wheresoe’er they go[100]

‘If Auden had his way,’ commented Christopher Isherwood, ‘he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass’.[101] It is this choric element, as well as the unpredictable rhythm of the poem’s versification, that allows Auden to resolve these mixed affiliations into a voice that is uniquely his own.

In order to understand how Auden came to write the poem line by line, it is necessary to return to the first draft of ‘Out of sight assuredly, not out of mind’, from summer 1927. On the versos of this draft are a series of Middle English notes that form an extraordinary link between the medievalism of Auden in 1927 – uncertain, pedantic, and deliberately verbose – and the more austere, compelling performance of ‘Doom is dark’, written in August 1930.[102] A sampling from the notes shows that a philological comment is required for a list of words, and the consistent accuracy of the observations make it likely that they are Auden’s lecture or supervision notes rather than his homework:

9) uaren Southern form of faren (spelling change f to v)

OE ferian.

10) lufte Dative case (after under) of luft. OE. lyft.

(y → y (u) in Southern dialect).

11) leofre Unusual form of leof which in OE’s declined like gōd and has no –u forms

12) cnihtene an inflected genitive plural of cniht

meant a boy, used here in its modern sense.

13) anne a variation of an meaning one not any.

14) ȝeo form of Heo meaning she, (not as meaning as in line 53 and 54 ye)[103]

These notes provide an interesting snapshot of Auden's university life, and serve as a reminder that his interest in Middle English developed thanks to close-grained scholarly analysis. Based on these notes, the work under scrutiny can be identified as Laȝamon's *Brut* (*c*.1190-1215), and more specifically, the extract that is printed in Morris and Skeat's *Specimens of Early English*.[104] Laȝamon is a compelling figure in English literary history not least because his language and his metre are both in a state of transition. He uses an uneven alliterative line to translate a rhymed French redaction of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and his word-forms exhibit the phonological movement from Old to Middle English. Like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Laȝamon recounts the entire history of Britain, but as Auden himself notes in his timeline for *Poets of the English Language* (1950), *The Brut* is most remembered for popularising the story of King Arthur in the English vernacular.[105]

In Morris and Skeat's extract, however, Laȝamon does not tell Arthurian stories, but recounts a more momentous historical event: the arrival of the Angles to the shores of Britain in the fifth century. When Hengest, the leader of the Angles, is asked by King Vortigern why they have left their own land, he explains in a strange and poignant speech that they had no choice, since they were forced into exile by the drawing of lots:

vppen þan þe hit falleð
he scal uaren of londe[106]

In 1927, Auden correctly noted that the use of 'uaren' is a 'Southern form of faren (spelling change f to v) OE ferian'. Tolkien's warning about 'innocent-looking' prepositions like *of* also applies to the phrase 'of londe', which literally means 'from land'. But in August 1930, these two lines, meaning 'upon whomever it fall, he must leave his land', were used by Auden as a base for the elaborate syntax of the second sentence of 'Doom is dark':

> Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle.
>
> Upon what man it fall
>
> In spring, day-wishing flowers appearing,
>
> Avalanche sliding, white snow from rock-face,
>
> That he should leave his house,
>
> No cloud-soft hand can hold him, restraint by women

What John Fuller called 'the movement and cadence of the irregular verse' has in fact been shaped by Auden's movement between two Middle English texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Laȝamon's editors sometimes print *The Brut* in alliterative long-lines, but Morris and Skeat followed Madden's 1847 edition by printing it in half-lines, creating a more distinctive visual impression as well as a more halting reading experience. This lineation was enough to make Auden retain a shorter line for these borrowings, which explains why 'Doom is dark' has its characteristic mixture of long and short lines. By flicking between 'his domes þe derne beoð. ant deopre þen eni sea dingle' on page 92 of Morris and Skeat, to 'vppen þan þe hit falleð' on page 67, Auden imitated not only the language of Laȝamon, but managed to recreate for the present day the metrical effects that

W.P. Ker had apprehended in *The Brut*: 'The verse of Layamon's *Brut* is unsteady, never to be trusted, changing its pace without warning in a most uncomfortable way'.[107]

As well as inspiring these verbal and prosodic debts, the overall effect of Hengest's speech to the Britons is highly evocative as a new context for 'Doom is dark'. Because Auden had struggled in 1927 to use thirteenth-century literature effectively, it is worth quoting the speech at length, as it reveals how attentive he was to the overall mood of the excerpt:

Beoð in ure londe;
selcuðe tiðende.
vmbe fiftene ȝer;
þat folc is isomned.
al ure iledene folc;
& heore loten werpeð.
vppen þan þe hit falleð;
he scal uaren of londe.
bilæuen scullen þa fiue;
þa sexte scal forð liðe.
ut of þan leode;
to u[n]cuðe londe.
ne beo he na swa leof mon;
uorð he scal liðen.
For þer is folc swiðe muchel;
mære þene heo walden.
þa wif færeð mid childe;

swa þe deor wilde.

æueralche ȝere;

heo bereð child þere.

ꝥ beoð an us feole;

þat we færen scolden.

ne mihte we bilæue;

for liue ne for dæðe.

ne for nauer nane þinge;

for þan folc-kinge.

þus we uerden þere;

& for-þi beoð nu here.

to sechen vnder lufte;

lond & godne lauerd.[108]

[In our land are strange customs. Every fifteen years our people – all the country's inhabitants – assemble, and they cast lots. Upon whomever it fall, he must leave his land. For every five who remain, the sixth must go forth out of the country, to a foreign land. Be he never so loved, he must go forth. For there are more inhabitants than they wish. The women have children as frequently as wild deer; every year they bear a child there. It is fallen on us that we must go. We may not stay, for life or death, nor for any other thing, because of the king. So we went from there, and thus we are now here, to seek, under the heavens, a land and a good lord.]

What is striking about Auden's debt to this passage is that he has managed to seize upon a speech in English verse in which the zone of exile and alienation is not simply imagined as a

forest or an ocean, but the island of Britain itself. What is more, Hengest's speech reduces the very foundation of Englishness, with all its historical grandeur and suggestiveness, to a moment of bad luck: these men have drawn the wrong lot and must leave their land.[109] As is often the case with Auden's mature medieval borrowings, the full context of the source reveals just how disciplined the poet was in excluding from the finished poem all of this potentially cumbersome baggage.

It also shows that, by 1930, Auden was not simply a modernist magpie in search of stray turns of phrase; he had instead learned to be more sensitive to the linguistic and contextual environments from which he borrowed. Indeed, the more he learned about what Ker referred to as 'the long ancestry of modern verse',[110] the more he could identify for himself the recurrence of similar moods and themes throughout the different traditions of medieval literature. Moving between the homiletic allegory of *Sawles Warde*, the enforced exile of Laȝamon's Angles, and the immersive melancholy of *The Wanderer*, Auden managed to produce not an arcane miscellany of allusions, but an evocative and disarming lyric achievement.

Commenting on the use of the medieval past in 'Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle', Edward Mendelson writes:

> He does not much care if his readers recognize that his lines derive from an ancient source. The point in Auden is not that a distant past has been laboriously recovered for the present, but that a statement about present loneliness and anxiety can be made in terms that the past freely provides.[111]

This remains an excellent description of Auden's finished poem, and of his medievalism more generally. As this article has shown, however, Auden needed to undergo a long

process of creative development before the past could freely provide him with such material. A number of conclusions can be drawn regarding the nature of this process. Firstly, Auden was rigorous and principled in his consultation of scholarly editions, and although he performed badly in his examinations, he patiently developed his competency in reading medieval texts in the original languages. Secondly, unlike the vast majority of modern readers, Auden grew to understand the complex continuum of the English language as it evolved and diversified from the seventh to the fifteenth century. The more he learned about this continuum the less likely he was to use medieval literature as a source of casual or disorienting allusions. Finally, it is clear that medieval sources were, at various times, as much a literary liability to the young Auden as an asset. His imitations of Old and Middle English sometimes tempted him towards pastiche or moments of affectation that he later regretted or left unpublished. Like any other influence, medieval literature was by no means an inexhaustible source of inspiration and innovation; making intelligent use of it was a challenge. Indeed, when Auden drafted an examination paper for Harvard in 1943, his question on 'Modern Poetry' alluded to this challenge, which he had encountered for himself throughout the 1920s, and which he had managed supremely to overcome:

> 'The difference between the "modern" poet and the poets of all earlier ages, is that for him, whether he likes it or not, the whole of the past is present, all cultures are at his elbow, and he cannot escape them.' *Discuss*.[112]

[1] Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London, 1981), 55.

[2] William Langland, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 2 vols (Oxford, 1886), 1. 375. All quotations from medieval texts are from the editions that Auden read or is most likely to have consulted.

[3] See Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2006), 68-121; and Chris Jones, 'Earlier English Influences', in Tony Sharpe (ed.), *Auden in Context* (Cambridge, 2013), 257-65.

[4] Heather O'Donoghue, 'Owed to Both Sides: W.H. Auden's double debt to the literature of the North', in David Clark and Nicholas Perkins (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination* (Cambridge, 2010), 51-69.

[5] John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London, 1998).

[6] *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose*, ed. Edward Mendelson, 6 vols (Princeton, 1996-2015), 4. 484.

[7] Henry Sweet (ed.), *An Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, 7th edn (Oxford, 1894), 108.

[8] *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 216.

[9] Laurence Heyworth first noticed the title's connection to *Beowulf*. See Carpenter, *W.H. Auden*, 80n.

[10] W.H. Auden, *Juvenilia: Poems, 1922-1928*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (Princeton, 1994), 6, 3.

[11] *Prose*, 4. 480.

[12] Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), 57.

[13] Arthur Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900* (London, 1900), 1-5.

[14] *Oxford Book of English Verse*, 3.

[15] The construction ultimately derives from the fact that, in Old English, *wesan* (to be) was used instead of *habban* (to have) in periphrastic constructions of the perfect tense for intransitive verbs.

[16] *Juvenilia*, 24.

[17] *Prose*, 2. 42, 1. 55.

[18] *Prose*, 5. 142.

[19] *Juvenilia*, 32.

[20] *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, & Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1977), 28.

[21] *Prose*, 2. 46.

[22] Carpenter, *W.H. Auden*, 7, 11.

[23] *The English Auden*, 191.

[24] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 2007), 691.

[25] *Juvenilia*, 44-5.

[26] *Juvenilia*, 45.

[27] Auden told Alan Ansen that 'the Harrowing of Hell passus' was his favourite section of *Piers Plowman*. See Alan Ansen, *The Table Talk of W.H. Auden*, ed. Nicholas Jenkins (London, 1991), 52. He recommended the York *Harrowing of Hell* for staging at the Group Theatre in 1934. See W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Plays and Other Dramatic Writings, 1928-1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, 1988), 495-6.

[28] See Stephen Phillips, *Christ in Hades and Other Poems* (London, 1897).

[29] *Prose*, 2. 37.

[30] *Prose*, 3. 325.

[31] *Prose*, 4. 480. Auden came to regard Quiller-Couch as being a 'slave to the taste of his age' (*Prose*, 6. 544).

[32] Walter de la Mare, *Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes and Poems for the Young of All Ages* (London, 1923), 69.

[33] *Prose*, 4. 485-6.

[34] *Juvenilia*, 51.

[35] *Prose*, 1. 55.

[36] *Juvenilia*, 88.

[37] All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Student's Chaucer: Being a Complete Edition of His Works*, ed. by Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894).

[38] Auden may even be alluding to Alison's prank in a 1926 poem: 'The case at least was rubicund, | Laughed savagely "Tee Hee!"' (*Juvenilia*, 170). Compare Chaucer, '"Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the window to' (I. 3740).

[39] *Prose*, 2. 205.

[40] *Juvenilia*, 88.

[41] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Qveene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton, 2nd edn (London, 2013), 423.

[42] *Juvenilia*, 87.

[43] *Juvenilia*, 66.

[44] *Juvenilia*, 80.

[45] Carpenter, *W.H. Auden*, 14.

[46] *Juvenilia*, 43.

[47] This process of 'purifying' an archaism is found again in 1939, in the lines 'and we | Our life-day long shall part no more' (*Collected Poems*, 265). John Fuller notes a connection to Robert Burns's phrase 'live day long' (*Commentary*, 273); Auden has apparently altered Burns's archaism to correspond more closely with the common Old English term *lif-dæg*.

[48] W.P. Ker, *Collected Essays*, 2 vols (London, 1925), 1. 100.

[49] Robert Medley, 'Gresham's School, Holt', in *W.H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London, 1974), 37-43 (42-3).

[50] For a contemporary account of these requirements, see Arthur Kyle Davis, Jr., 'English at Oxford', *The English Journal*, 17 (1928), 387-98.

[51] *Prose*, 6. 19.

[52] Jones, 'Earlier English Influences', 261-2. Robert H. Boyer, 'Anglo-Saxon and Middle English Influences in the Poetry of W.H. Auden', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Pennsylvania, 1969), 17-8.

[53] For these three pieces, see Kenneth Sisam (ed.), *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose* (Oxford, 1921), 72-5, 37-40, 169-70. They are included in W.H. Auden and John Garrett (eds), *The Poet's Tongue*, 2 vols (London, 1935), 1. 124; 1. 119-20; and W.H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (eds), *Poets of the English Language*, 5 vols (New York, 1950), 1. 35-40.

[54] *Juvenilia*, 199-202, 134-5, 146-7.

[55] *Juvenilia*, 144-5.

[56] *Troilus and Criseyde*, III. 1415.

[57] *Juvenilia*, 145.

[58] *Prose*, 1. 155.

[59] Sir John Betjeman, 'Oxford', in *W.H. Auden: A Tribute*, 43-5 (44).

[60] Quoted from California, Huntington Library, MS CI 2847. For the final version, see *Juvenilia*, 194-5.

[61] *Juvenilia*, 195-8.

[62] Auden would have encountered it in Richard Morris and Walter W. Skeat (eds), *Specimens of Early English*, 2 vols (1898), 1. 171-93.

[63] Christopher Isherwood, 'Some notes on the early poetry', in *W.H. Auden: A Tribute*, 74-9 (77).

[64] *Juvenilia*, 197.

[65] *Juvenilia*, 196 (from MS CI 2847).

[66] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 174. Translation by Bella Millett, <southampton.ac.uk/~wpwt/trans/owl/owltrans.htm> accessed 28 June 2018. Auden thought of Isherwood in similar terms: 'Your squat spruce body and enormous head' (*The English Auden*, 156).

[67] *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose*, 46. Later quoted by Auden in *Prose*, 3. 110.

[68] MS CI 2847. As Bucknell notes, 'mist-hackle' can only be derived from *Sir Gawain*, which features the sole appearance of this compound. See also the specific reference to 'mist hackles' in W.P. Ker, *English Literature: Medieval* (London, 1912), 140.

[69] *The Translations of Ezra Pound* (London, 1953), 145, 157, 165.

[70] J.R.R. Tolkien, *A Middle English Vocabulary* (Oxford, 1922), iii. This companion volume was bound with Sisam's anthology in subsequent impressions.

[71] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 133; *Come Hither*, 143, 143.

[72] *The English Auden*, 22. Compare the earlier, more grammatical version 'To hurt itself on panes' (i.e. window panes) in *Juvenilia*, 181.

[73] See revisions from 9 June 1927, *Juvenilia*, 197.

[74] Fuller, *Commentary*, 61. Langland, *Piers the Plowman*, 1. 176.

[75] *Come Hither*, 21.

[76] See *Juvenilia*, 197.

[77] Letter from C.L. Wrenn to Robert H. Boyer, 17 June 1968. Papers relating to Professor Boyer's Auden research are deposited at the Mulva Library, St Norbert's College, and are viewable at <digitalcommons.snc.edu/audencorrespondence> accessed 28 June 2018.

Examination candidates in 1928 were expected to have 'a special knowledge' of *Pearl* (Davis, 'English at Oxford', 395), and Auden later praised it as a 'great' poem to Alan Ansen (*Table Talk*, 54).

[78] *Pearl: A Middle English Poem*, ed. Charles G. Osgood (Boston, 1906), 11. The edition recommended by Sisam.

[79] Respectively: *Juvenilia*, 128, 131, 137, 171, 193, 218.

[80] For a full analysis of the Old English influence on *Paid on Both Sides*, see Chris Jones, 'W.H. Auden and "The 'Barbaric' Poetry of the North": Unchaining One's Daimon', *RES*, 53 (2002), 167-85.

[81] Honour School of English Language and Literature, Paper 6(b), Q.4, in *Oxford University Examination Papers* (Oxford, 1928). For a discussion of Auden's exams, see Jones, 'W.H. Auden and "The 'Barbaric' Poetry of the North"', 168-9.

[82] *Prose*, 4. 484.

[83] Carpenter, *W.H. Auden*, 82.

[84] *Prose*, 4. 484.

[85] Ker chaired a lecture on 'Scandinavian Antiquities found in York' that G.A. Auden delivered to the Viking Club on 22 January 1909. See *Saga Book of the Viking Club*, 6 (1909), 163.

[86] *Prose*, 4. 461. From Auden's description of an ideal critic.

[87] Ker, *Essays*, 1. 106.

[88] Ker, *Essays*, 2. 76.

[89] For Old Irish, Icelandic, and Middle Welsh debts, see Fuller, *Commentary*, 108, 105-6, 420, 455. For Older Scots, see Conor Leahy, 'Forests of Green: W. H. Auden and Older Scots Poetry', *TLS*, 5857 (3 July 2015), 14-5.

[90] In addition to the material discussed, Auden's idiosyncratic rendering of *The Battle of Maldon* in *The Orators* ('Heart and head shall be keener, mood the more | As our might lessens', *The English Auden*, 108) is taken from W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London, 1897), 12 ('Thought the harder, Heart the keener, Mood the more, as our Might lessens').

[91] Ker, *English Literature: Medieval*, 212-3. Ker's quotation is noted in Fuller, *Commentary*, 78.

[92] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 92.

[93] Auden's use of *Sawles Warde* was first noted in Morton Bloomfield, '"Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle": W.H. Auden and *Sawles Warde*', *MLN*, 58 (1948), 548-52. In a 1971 conversation with Marshall McLuhan, Auden himself remarked: 'It's a straight quotation from a medieval text ... not a poem, but a medieval prose text'. See 'Theatre and the Visual Arts: A Panel Discussion', *Yeats Studies*, 2 (1972), 127-38 (136). C.L. Wrenn had also been aware of the debt, commenting, 'I like to imagine that this could be related to my teaching of Auden' (letter to Robert H. Boyer, 17 June 1968).

[94] *The English Auden*, 55.

[95] Fuller, *Commentary*, 78.

[96] *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 160.

[97] *Juvenilia*, 226.

[98] *Juvenilia*, 150.

[99] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 89.

[100] *Hymns, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1861), hymn 222. For its place in Auden's 'nursery library', see *Prose*, 2. 307.

[101] Isherwood, 'Some notes', 74.

[102] Their existence is noted by Bucknell (*Juvenilia*, 198).

[103] MS CI 2847.

[104] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 64-86. In an unpublished interview with Robert H. Boyer, Nevill Coghill recalled that he covered 'a little of the *Brut*' while teaching Auden (a transcript of this interview is held at New York, Columbia University Library, Humphrey Carpenter Papers, Box 2). The same Laȝamon extract is printed in Joseph Hall (ed.), *Selections from Early Middle English 1130-1250*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1920), but it is printed in alliterative long-lines, so the line numbers do not match Auden's references. While Auden may also have encountered Hall's work, it was Morris and Skeat that he used in 1927, and indeed, Auden's personal copy of Morris and Skeat (a 1935 reissue of volume 1) survives as Austin, Texas, Harry Ransom Center, PR 1120 M7 1935.

[105] *Poets of the English Language*, 1. xxxix.

[106] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 67.

[107] Ker, *English Literature: Medieval*, 59.

[108] *Specimens of Early English*, 1. 67-8.

[109] Auden returns to the idea of casting lots at the beginning of *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935). See Auden and Isherwood, *Plays*, 199-200.

[110] Ker, *English Literature: Medieval*, 156.

[111] Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden: A Critical Biography* (Princeton, 2017), 52.

[112] *Prose*, 2. 478.