A SYLLABUS OF ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

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BY

J. M. HART

(UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI)

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ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE.

CHAPTER I.

ROMAN BRITAIN.

1. The earliest known inhabitants of England belonged to the Keltic race, and were called Britons. When Julius Cæsar invaded the island, 55 B. C., they were still in a barbarous or semi-barbarous state. A serious attempt to annex the island permanently to the Roman empire was not made until 43 A. D., in the reign of Claudius. The work of conquest was continued during the reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, and was complete by 85 A. D. From that time until the 5th century Britannia and the southern part of Scotia were administered as a Roman province. Roman law, manners, and letters were introduced. Large towns grew up, *e.g.*, York, London, Lincoln. There was a thriving trade between the island and the continent. Extensive remains of roads, aqueducts, tesselated pavements, and the like, still bear witness to the thoroughness of the conquest. When the Roman world became christianized, Britain also shared in the conversion. By the middle of the 4th century the island had its hierarchy and a well developed system of religious orders and monasteries.

We do not know whether the primitive Britons possessed anything that could be called a literature of their own, and, if so, of what character. Roman literature was imported, so to speak, but we have no means of ascertaining whether it exerted any strong direct influence

on the mass of the natives. Britain was for the Romans nothing more than a military outpost. The garrison consisted usually of 20,000—30,000 men, stationed at important strategic points, which were connected by military roads. The children of the leading native families were probably educated at first in the city of Rome, as hostages, subsequently at home in Roman schools under the supervision of the Roman governor. The inferior population in and around the Roman towns and camps acquired from soldiers and public officials a knowledge of the Latin tongue sufficient for the ordinary intercourse of life. But the rural population, which must have largely predominated, remained in all probability Keltic in habits, tastes, feelings, and speech. Roman administration, it is true, was as energetic and efficient in Britain as elsewhere. It suppressed, for instance, the savage rites and practices of Druidism, and secured to every man protection in the enjoyment of life and property. But we have no warrant for believing that Roman culture *pervaded* and transformed Britain as it pervaded Gaul and Spain. It was at best only an exotic, and it was swept away by the first breath of adversity.

2. In consequence of the dangers which threatened the continental and more vital parts of the empire, the Roman army was withdrawn from the island early in the 5th century, and the Britons were left to struggle unaided against their Keltic kinsmen, the Picts and Scots on the north, and the Irish on the west (the coast of Wales), and against the German tribes that came in ever-growing numbers from across the North Sea. Tradition tells us that these Germans were invited by the Britons to help them against the Picts and Scots; after defeating the northern invaders in a series of bloody battles, the Germans then turned their arms against

their hosts, the Britons. The tradition is to be found in Bede, Nennius, and Geoffrey of Monmouth; the story of Hengist and Horsa, Vortigern and Rowena, as it has been graphically narrated by Geoffrey, is doubtless familiar to most readers. But it is impossible at the present day to unravel the true and the fabulous in the story. There is evidence going to show that Germanic tribes had settled in considerable numbers along the eastern and south-eastern coast, even before the end of the 4th century. The only fact which need concern the student of literature is that German-speaking tribes began a conquest of the island in the course of the 5th century, and had finished it substantially by the end of the 6th century. This second conquest was in every respect unlike the first. It was not a mere military occupation, it was a settlement in mass. The invaders brought with them or sent for their families, and sought to make the land their lasting home. Hence the war between them and the Britons could result only in the total subjection and dispossession of the weaker party. The Britons were finally dispossessed. Many were slain outright in battle, others killed off in petty feuds, others driven across the channel to the Armorican peninsula in France, still others hemmed in among the mountain fastnesses of Wales. By the year 610 the eastern part of the island as far north as the Firth of Forth, all the southern and central parts, and the western part (except Wales, Cornwall, and Devonshire) as far north as the river Mersey, were in the hands of the Germans. It is usually asserted that the war against the Britons was one of utter extermination. But it is more probable that numerous small isolated communities of Britons survived in the western and south-western portions of what is now England proper, and were only absorbed in the course of centuries, by the slow process of intermarriage.

Henceforth the country is called by its German name of England.

3. The permanent vestiges of the British race in the land that was once their own may be briefly summed up as follows. The Kelto-British tongue has disappeared wholly from England proper, and survives only in Welsh, now spoken by about a million of people. A dialectic variety known as Cornish became extinct early in the present century. According to some scholars, certain peculiarities in the pronunciation of the rural population in the south-western and western counties of England are of Keltic origin. The Britons, in disappearing, transmitted to their conquerors a few Latin words imposed upon them by the Romans, *e.g.*, *castrum*, in early English *ceaster*, in modern English *caster*, *chester*, *cester*, as in the name Chester, and in the compounds Dorchester, Winchester, Lancaster, Leicester, and the like. Also *colonia*, in Lincoln; *strata*, in our word 'street;' *porta*, in Newport; *milia* in 'mile.' Probably also our words 'tile' and 'pear' were derived from the Romans through the Britons. Concerning other words of Latin origin, *e.g.*, 'candel,' 'bishop,' 'priest,' 'mass,' it is impossible to decide whether they were transmitted through the Britons, or were borrowed by the English directly from Rome. Furthermore, the early English adopted and retained some Keltic words. These are not numerous. They are chiefly names of familiar household objects, or names of places, especially rivers. Among the latter are Thames, Trent, Tweed, Severn, Avon (which is Keltic for running water in general), and the group of names Usk, Ux, Wis (in Wisbec), Eske, Ouse—all modifications of the Keltic *uisc* 'water,' which is also found in the Highland *usquebagh*, corrupted into 'whisky,' and standing for a primitive *uisce vaha*, meaning 'water of life;' but

this word *usquebagh* has been introduced into English in quite recent times. To the former class belong the words 'basket,' 'bran,' 'wicket,' 'clout,' 'crag.' An American will readily understand the fate of the Keltic language in England, by comparing it with that of the Indian language in this country. Although the Indians themselves have disappeared from the greater part of the United States, their language survives in Susquehanna, Juniata, Potomac, Mississippi, Ohio, Niagara, etc., and in wigwam, wampum, squaw, tomahawk, moccasin, succotash, etc.

There are no traces of any influence exerted by the Britons upon early English literature. The invaders brought with them not only their own language, but also their own—still heathen—worship, and the germs and even the beginning of a distinctively German poetic literature. So long as the contest lasted, and for centuries afterward, literature in England was either distinctly German, or was based upon the general Roman Catholic literature of the continent. It is not until the 12th century, after England had been conquered by the Normans, that we observe a sudden and curious outgrowth of British, *i.e.*, Welsh literature. But this point can be treated only in connection with the Arthurian cycle of romance.

CHAPTER II.

THE GERMAN CONQUERORS.

4. The Germans who settled in England came from Jutland, Schleswig, and Holstein, and from the coast to the west of the Elbe, known as Friesland. They were a sturdy, warlike race, inured from childhood to privation and danger. Their home was preëminently a training-