
NOTES ON THE

ANCIENT ENGLISH,

OR

ANGLO-SAXON LANGUAGE.

AN antiquarian research into the primitive dialect of our English ancestors will tend to correct many errors, still prevalent even amongst men of intelligence ; and the result will be by no means flattering to the pride of the modern scholar. Accustomed, if fond of classical associations, to recognise with pleasure any word derived from his favorite models, the Greek and Latin, he will gradually come to the forced conviction, that what he has been used to consider the ornament of his vernacular tongue, namely, the frequent use of words borrowed from the dead languages, might well have been dispensed with—the primitive language of our ancestors, before the Conquest, neither in general requiring such assistance, or greatly benefitting by it when introduced. In fact, the adoption of these words into the English language was rather the effect of accident,—the Norman invasion having brought in the use of French terms derived from the Latin, a Celtic tongue—than of any poverty in the Saxon idiom. As a proof of this, let it be considered how small a portion of the Anglo-Saxon is even now obsolete in educated society. And in the country parishes of England, an idiom not far removed from the Saxon is to this day very generally spoken. What we, in our learned superciliousness and abhorrence of the vulgar, denominate the *dialects*, and the jargon of Somersetshire, Lancashire, and Yorkshire, will be found, on examination to be pure remains of original English. A familiar example may be given : it is known that those words in Saxon which denote *authority* also denote *age*. Thus in Saxon, for the “Prince of them”, we have “yldest on them”, which is in fact, in vulgar English, the “*eldest on 'em.*”

Correct writing in English is considered the peculiar ornament of a scholar. Yet it is to be feared, that there are too many, from habit and imitation accustomed to write what they term good English, who are equally unable to comprehend the primitive meaning of words derived from the dead languages, which they affect to use with such fluency—and to do justice to the real merit and character of the despised Saxon, in defence of which, as an antiquarian, every philologist will lift up his voice.

An inquiry into the origin and structure of language in general is a research of the highest antiquarian order, next to the study of geology, or the world's formation. All who would successfully enquire into the structure of the English language must refer themselves to its Anglo-Saxon ancestor. It has been ascertained by the learned, that not more than one fifth of the English of Alfred's time is now actually obsolete. How reprehensible then is the neglect of this study, and how needless the extravagant admiration of the classical terms, which are now incorporated in the language we daily use. The loss of the fifth part of the great Alfred's language has been compensated by a supply of French and Latin derivatives, which came to us from the admixture after the Norman conquest. It may well be doubted, whether to any other than a classical taste, or for any other purpose than to supply the want of adequate technical phrases, generally Greek,—which our ancestors, themselves deficient in the Arts, could not by any possibility have possessed—this loss has been triumphantly remedied. It is, we think, undeniable, that richly copious as the two principal dead languages are, they are equalled, if not in some instances surpassed, by the Anglo-Saxon. For example, for *man*, we have in Latin the nouns, *VIR*, *HOMO*, *MAS* : in Saxon there are no less than *ten* distinct and appropriate terms, amongst which the Latin *VIR* may be discovered in two different forms. Again, for the intellectual part of man, the Latin gives us *MENS*, *ANIMUS*, *RATIO* : the Saxon supplies us superabundantly with no less than *eighteen* forms, equally expressive of the various powers of which the mind is capable. The principal of these are *Mod*, Anglicè “Mood”, used by Shakespeare to signify “temper, passion,”—*Gemynd*, Anglicè, without the prefix, “mind”—*Gethoht*, in the same way, the English “thought”—but the most expressive yet simple definition to be found in any language for the mind is, perhaps, the Saxon term, *Ge-wit-loc*, or depository of the wit, the “wit lock.” For the ocean, the Saxons had *fourteen* distinct terms ; and owing as they did their success and glory to their skill in navigation (a character which did not degenerate with their

successors) they used no less than *twenty-eight* forms of speech to express a ship! If, in short, an unlimited variety of apt expressions, to denote the same or a similar idea—an abundance of phrases and metaphors, some of the deepest poetical impress, render a language copious and polished, such was old English before the partial introduction of the Norman French. Resolving itself, in its decomposition, into the most simple elements, while by its multiplying and compound qualities it rises to the character of a highly civilized language, the Saxon fully merits the eulogium of the learned writer, who maintained that books of History, Belles Lettres, and Poetry, might even now be composed in it with considerable elegance and force of expression.

All who understand the mechanism of language in general, are aware that the numerous parts of speech, multiplied for obvious grammatical purposes, have their origin, or rather may easily be resolved in to *two*, namely, the Verb and the Noun. In Greek the verb generally is the primitive, in Saxon, it is almost clear that the parts of speech are all derived from the noun. In the infancy of language, the *name*, or single idea, was soon extended, and made subservient to various uses and combinations as necessity occurred. The *noun* was soon employed in an active and passive sense, varying somewhat the original termination, and thus assumed the character of a verb. These *two* are indeed the only primitive parts of speech, all the others being composed from them. It is right, perhaps, to except the interjection, which is but a simple sound elicited by momentary feeling, and varying as pain or pleasure predominates in the mind or body. In modern English we have nouns, originally substantives, or expressing definite ideas, made adjectives, by adding them to other substantives, as, "Cold, Evil": we now say a "Cold day" an "Evil doer." And we have also in use nouns made verbs by a simple prefix, as "To love—to hate—to fear—to hope—to dream—to sleep" &c. all of Saxon origin.

Saxon adjectives were chiefly nouns with a termination, which termination has evidently been a word of meaning. The nouns so employed may be considered the most ancient. The four principal terminations which, added to nouns, make them adjectives, and which are all words of meaning, are still in general use. They are *like*, *full*, *less* and *some*. The two first require no explanation: *less* or *leas* is the Imperative Mood of the Saxon verb *lesan*, to dismiss—while *some* or *sum* expressed in Saxon as it does in modern English, a degree, or portion of a thing.

EXAMPLES.

<i>Cild-lic</i>	Child-like, young.
<i>Circ-lic</i>	Church-like, or Ecclesiastic.
<i>Craeft-lic</i>	Craft-like, or Workmanlike.
<i>Freond-lic</i>	Friend-like, now Friendly.
<i>God-lic</i>	God-like, divine.
<i>Faen-lic</i>	Fen-like, or Muddy.
<i>Deorck-full</i>	Dark-full, or Dangerous.
<i>Facen-full</i>	Deceitful.
<i>Fear-full</i>	The same.
<i>Caer-leas</i>	Careless.
<i>Craeft-leas</i>	Craft-less, or Ignorant.
<i>Feodh-leas</i>	Fee-less, or Money-less.
<i>Winsum</i>	Winsome, gay.
<i>Frem-sum</i>	Benign, kind.

Of other terminations of nouns made adjectives, one is still familiar. It is *ig*, pronounced *y*, as at present : thus,

<i>Blod</i>	<i>Blod-ig</i>	Blood, bloody.
<i>Clif</i>	<i>Clif-ig</i>	Rock, rocky.
<i>Craeft</i>	<i>Craftig</i>	Craft, crafty

and many others.

The comparison of Saxon Adjectives is made by adding *er* to the positive, and *est* for the Superlative, as in modern English. It is believed that *er*, in the oldest languages, which are of oriental origin, signifies *priority* of any kind. It also signifies *a Man*. Hence, probably, the Greek *ανρ*, a Man, *ανρ*, the air—the Latin *ver*, spring, and *vir*, a man. In old Saxon we find *wer* a man and *fira*, a man : in old Irish, a Celtic language, we have also *fir*, a man. These latter may be obtained from the Oriental primitive *er*, pronounced with a breathing similar to the Greek Digamma, *w*, *v*, or *f*, familiar to classical scholars. The superlative termination *est* implies in Saxon, “abundance, munificence.” It signifies also the *east*, the sun being the giver of light and heat, the author of abundance, and being considered to rise in that quarter of the heavens.

Verbs have been well said to be to the student in Philology what the secondary formations of the earth are to the Geologist. In Anglo-Saxon, they were generally formed from nouns, by adding the termination *gan, ian* or *an*. The former, *gan*, to go, was the verb of action or motion, and is still preserved in the Cumberland and Lowland Scottish dialects, *ganq*. *Jan*, or *an*, is the verb of giving, *to give*; but these may very fairly be considered abbreviations, or rather variations of the verb *gan*, to go. In the Mæso-Gothic, a language much older than its descendant, the Saxon, we find this termination in the verb *bid-gan*, to pray, or *to go to pray*. In the Saxon, by abbreviation, we find *biddan*. to pray. This primitive, *bidde*, is still found in modern English, in nearly the same sense.

In the examples which follow, those verbs are selected which in different shapes, are still extant :

EXAMPLES.

<i>Baer</i>	a Bier	<i>Baeran</i> , to carry, to bear.
<i>Baeth</i>	a Bath	<i>Baeth-ian</i> , to bathe.
<i>Bat</i>	a Club	<i>Beat-an</i> , to beat.
<i>Bidde</i>	a Prayer	<i>Biddan</i> , to pray.
<i>Bliss</i>	Joy	<i>Bliss-ian</i> , to rejoice.
<i>Blostm</i>	a Flower	<i>Blostm-ian</i> , to blossom.
<i>Blot</i>	a Sacrifice	<i>Blot-an</i> , to sacrifice.
<i>Bridl</i>	a Bridle	<i>Bridl-ian</i> , to bridle.
<i>By</i>	a Habitation	<i>By-an</i> , to inhabit.
<i>Byseg</i>	Business	<i>Bysg-ian</i> , to be busy.
<i>Cnyt</i>	a Knot	<i>Cny-ttan</i> , to knit.
<i>Curs</i>	a Curse	<i>Curs-ian</i> , to curse.
<i>Cos</i>	a Kiss	<i>Cyssan</i> , to kiss.
<i>Dael</i>	a Part	<i>Daelan</i> , to deal, to divide.
<i>Daeg</i>	a Day	<i>Daeg-ian</i> , to shine.

The above is only a specimen of the older formation of Saxon verbs. Those verbs, before which we find the several prefixes, *a—be—ge—for—on—in—to—with* and *y*, are secondary verbs, many of them now in daily use.

The Saxon participle terminated in the syllable *gend*, not unlike the Latin *ens*. It is needless to remark, that in modern English, it has become *ing*.

It has already been said that those nouns were of the earliest formation, which are found employed in forming adjectives, and verbs, by adding specific terminations. In the progress of time we may suppose that these nouns so made verbs and adjectives,

fell into disuse, or rather became scarce in their former quality. The advanced state of the Saxon language in the time of Alfred, may, therefore, be better estimated by the nature of the process adopted to create a new series of substantives, to supply the deficiency, or answer the increasing demand. It was most ingeniously effected by adding a second or new termination to the adjectives, which had themselves been previously made from nouns by adding the termination, as has been shown. Some of these additional substantives have come down to the present time, and are among the words in more common use. Let us take for instance the Saxon termination *nysse*. From the substantive, *Cear*, care, the same as the Greek *καρ*, *heart*, *cœur*, French, we get first the adjective, *Cear-full*, careful, and then the new substantive, *Cear-full-nysse*, carefulness. In the same way we have *Caer*—*Cear-leas*—*Cear-leas*—*nysse*. And so of many others, of which the modern remains may be found in English nouns ending in *ness*.

Other secondary nouns were formed from verbs by adding the termination *ung*, in modern English, *ing*; as from *leornian*, to learn, we make *leornung*, now “learning.” It may be thought however, from this last termination, that these nouns rather inclined to the character of original participles, afterwards made to act as substantives. A further supply of secondary nouns was made by compounding two nouns in one, a practice now in daily use, as from *Ceap*, “cattle, property,” came *Ceap-man*, a “chapman or dealer.” All the compounds of the word *ship* come under this description, and of many other words.

From the above short notice of the structure of the old English, or Anglo-Saxon, language, it will be seen that before the admixture of French, Latin and Greek terms, the idiom was copious, and the resource abundant in itself. Our ancestors seem most readily and simply to have made their adjectives and verbs from their nouns—then again secondary substantives from them, by adding new terminations. Pursuing the subject further, the Philological student will find these nouns and verbs once more subdivided and abbreviated into the supplementary parts of speech, called Conjunctions, Prepositions and Adverbs.

The Article, as in Greek and Latin, was a pronoun—and the conjunction *that* was the neuter gender of another. Thus in Greek, *οτι*, in Latin *ut* or *quòd*, and in English and Saxon, *that*—familiar to all scholars.

Upon the whole, as no one can be a correct or finished English scholar without a close and discriminating examination of the various elements which are now combined in forming our rich

and powerful language, it may be hoped, that these desultory hints will not be entirely thrown away upon the youthful student in the interesting science of Philology. The words of the Poet should not be forgotten.

“ Mortalia facta peribunt ;

“ Nēdūm sermonum stet honos, et gratia vivax.

“ Multa renascentur quæ jam cecidere, cadentque

“ Quæ nunc sunt in honore, vocabula, si volet usus,

“ Quem penès arbitrium est, et jus et norma loquendi.”