

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

This study is concerned with the vernacular names, both mono-thematic and di-thematic, that occur in historical texts from Anglo-Saxon England. These texts are all either in Old English or in Latin. The vernacular names considered here are those names that are Old English in origin. Names that are, linguistically-speaking, Old Norse, Celtic or Continental Germanic are not discussed; nor are names of Latin origin. This study concentrates specifically on the names of women that appear in the texts.

There are no existing Anglo-Saxon texts which explain the principles of vernacular nomenclature, nor indeed do we have any contemporary list of Old English personal names. It is possible that such texts once existed but, given the lack of reference to any such, this seems unlikely. We are therefore obliged to use the existing names in order to try to discover what the principles were.

Scholars studying Old English names in Anglo-Saxon sources have almost always assumed that the sex of an individual is definitively indicated by the grammatical gender of their name. In the case of di-thematic names, the grammatical gender in question is that of the second element of the name. Thus di-thematic names have been taken as belonging to women if their second element is grammatically feminine, for example *Cyneþryþ* (Old English *þryþ* ‘might’). Similarly, mono-thematic names are assumed to be those of women if they are, or might be, identical in form with grammatically feminine nouns, for example *Beadu* (Old English *beadu* ‘war’). In many cases, this principle seems to work quite well. There is no question that, for example, King Alfred was a man, that *Ælfræd* was a male name, and that *ræd* ‘advice’ is a masculine noun. Similarly, the name of the wife of King Alfred, Osburh, contains the grammatically feminine noun *burg* ‘dwelling’.

However, there are other cases in which this principle can be questioned. For example, many female names have as a second element *-swiþ*, apparently the adjective *swiþ* ‘strong’, for example King Alfred’s sister *Æpelswiþ*. Yet, by their nature, adjectives are not inherently masculine or feminine. Why does this element apparently always form female names? Similarly, the adjective *heah* ‘high’ seems always to form male names. Then again, there is a grammatically feminine noun like *mund* ‘protection’ which invariably seems to form male names, as Eadmund.

For a long time scholars, while agreeing that there are a few anomalies, have accepted the general principle of grammatical gender as an indicator of biological sex. However more recently it has been queried by some, most notably by Colman

(1996; 1992, 54–5). In examining this general principle, it is necessary to enquire whether it was one that was recognised in Anglo-Saxon England, or whether it is a modern construct. That is, while modern scholars have generally felt no difficulty in distinguishing male from female names, how far did the Anglo-Saxons themselves recognise this distinction? In this study this general principle, that grammatical gender is a certain indicator of biological sex, is critically examined and tested.

The names of females have been chosen for discussion. This is partly due to the present author's own interests. However, female names are also useful since they form a body of evidence that is both reasonably large and yet sufficiently limited in size as to be manageable. The historical sources of Anglo-Saxon England record many more names of men than of women. Female names, however, occur in sufficient numbers for the conclusions drawn from them to have validity.

The material collected consists of a large number of names where the holder of the name is stated to be female. That is, for a name to be included, evidence has to be given in the text that the holder is a woman. Such evidence includes the use of titles such as *cwen*, *abbodesse* or *nunne*, or the use of a female referent such as *heo* or *hiere*. These names are listed alphabetically with their sources in Chapter 2, with the actual spellings occurring in the manuscripts. The names themselves are analysed and classified in Chapter 3 and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Mono-thematic and di-thematic names are considered separately due to the different problems that they present. Chapter 6 deals with some of the implications of the conclusions suggested in the preceding chapters. Chapter 7 contains some comparative material from Old English poetry. General discussion is presented in Chapter 8 and some general conclusions in Chapter 9. The Appendix lists some comparative modern material. The book ends with the bibliography followed by a list of concordances of charters and other legal documents cited.

1.2 Particular Questions to be Discussed

The main focus of discussion in this book is the principle that grammatical gender in Old English names is an indicator of biological sex. This principle rests on four assumptions, all of which need to be questioned.

The first assumption is that the Anglo-Saxons recognised that some names were appropriate for males, some names for females, and that generally these were kept distinct. The evidence to be presented demonstrates that frequently Old English male names and female names are indeed different from each other. Are we right in assuming that because a particular name is usually used for females or males that it always denotes that sex? The evidence to be presented suggests that, although this may often, even usually, be the case, it is not invariably so. One question to be considered is thus how far there was gender specificity in Old English names.

The second assumption is that the Anglo-Saxons recognised classes of Old English nouns, characterised by different inflexional endings and different

referential pronouns. This assumption is certainly justified from most written texts in Old English. However it is hard to judge how far the rules of written Old English corresponded to the speech of the majority of Anglo-Saxons, most of whom were in any case illiterate. Spoken and written language can differ fairly widely and there is of course little way of comparing the two when we are dealing with a historical period far removed from our own.

The third assumption is that some of these different classes of Old English noun were labelled 'masculine', some 'feminine' and some 'neuter'. This is certainly the case in Aelfric's *Grammar* in the section entitled *De Generibus* (Zupitza 1966, 18–20). Aelfric refers to the grammatical gender of nouns (Latin *genus*, Old English *cynn*) as Latin *masculinum* or Old English *werlic*, Latin *femininum* or Old English *wyfllic*, and Latin *neutrum* or Old English *naþor*. Again, it is less than clear whether such concepts were known to the ordinary, non-literate, Old English speaker.

The fourth assumption is that these grammatical labels, in so far as they were in general use outside the grammar book, were identified with biological sex, that a grammatically masculine noun was associated with a male name, a grammatically feminine noun with a female name.

It certainly seems possible that a grammarian like Aelfric would have recognised and accepted these last three assumptions. Aelfric, however, was not typical of Old English mother-tongue speakers, the majority of whom, unlike him, were uneducated, illiterate, and knew no Latin. We must query whether these grammatical terms, in Old English let alone in Latin, would have been meaningful to most Anglo-Saxons. The answer is that they are unlikely to have formed part of everyday conversation, certainly not amongst the uneducated, but probably not throughout much of the population. This of course does not imply that illiterate speakers of Old English did not recognise or use grammatically gendered nouns, merely that they may well not have understood or used the terms *werlic*, *wyfllic* and *naþor*. If these terms were not in general use, then grammatical gender may not necessarily have been associated with biological sex. A modern parallel might be the large numbers of educated and articulate mother-tongue speakers of English whose knowledge of English grammatical classification scarcely encompasses the distinction between a noun and a verb.

It is of course possible that one illiterate, mother-tongue speaker of Old English habitually said to another such things as, 'Oh no, you cannot call her Aelfred, because *ræd* is a grammatically masculine noun'. Common sense suggests that such a conversation would be unlikely. It seems inherently more probable that most Anglo-Saxons simply felt that some names were particularly suitable as given names for girls, some for boys. If this was so, then another question to be addressed is how this suitability came to be accepted.

One suggestion has been that the meanings of the common words that appear as name-elements were considered to be relevant. Aelfric certainly recognised a distinction between grammatical gender and the meaning of a word when, for example, he notes that the Latin for 'this woman' *haec mulier* is feminine in Latin but corresponds to *þis wif* which is grammatically neuter in Old English (*De*

Generibus III, Zupitza 1966, 18–19). More particularly, many di-thematic names are formed with an adjective as the second element. Although by their nature adjectives can be masculine, feminine or neuter, certain adjectives, for example *heard* ‘hard, harsh’, appear to form exclusively male names. It might be that the meaning was here deemed to be more appropriate to the male sex. On the other hand, the noun *þryþ* ‘might, power’ is a frequent second element of female names, and here the meaning seems less obviously appropriate. Meaning could also have been a factor in the choice of the first name element. The question of how far meaning enters into the gender attribution of a name is another question that is discussed in this book.

A final question to be discussed concerns the differences in names being used in different areas of Anglo-Saxon England and at different times within the Anglo-Saxon period. It seems likely that fashions in names would have changed both over area and over time. For instance some names, which certainly appear to be Old English, only occur at the very end of the period, in texts such as Domesday Book (DB). Others seem confined to an earlier period, for example those only recorded by Bede.

In discussing the validity of the general principle that grammatical gender in Old English names is an indicator of biological sex, four central questions then need to be addressed. First, was there gender specificity in Old English nomenclature? Second, in so far as certain names were felt to be suitable for one sex rather than the other, how did this suitability come to be accepted? Third, how far did the meaning of the Old English elements enter into the gender attribution of names? A subsidiary question to be discussed is whether or not we can observe changes in naming practices from area to area of, and at different periods in, Anglo-Saxon England.

1.3 Previous Work in the Field

Henry Sweet, as part of his enormous contribution to many aspects of Old English studies, was one of the first scholars to classify vernacular personal names according to the grammatical form of their second elements. He was certainly not the first scholar to actually state this principle. J.M. Kemble, for instance, writing in 1846, said that ‘the second word of an Anglosaxon male name must be masculine, and of a female name, feminine’; moreover he stated that names were absolutely gender-specific (Kemble 1846, 6). Sweet went much further, by actually classifying the names.

The names appear in the index to Sweet’s *Oldest English Texts* (OET), published in 1885. This index contains both common nouns and personal names and consists of almost 200 pages, some one third of the book. It requires its own index, produced by Sweet in the book, to aid those scholars less philologically adept than himself. Not all the texts used by Sweet had appeared in reliable editions, and not all his conclusions might be accepted today. Nevertheless, for the last 120 years, OET has been one of the standard reference works on Old English names. Indeed, as far as the

names in the Durham *Liber Vitae* are concerned, Sweet's has been the only reliable edition until the appearance of the edition by Rollason and Rollason in 2007.

By contrast, W.G. Searle's *Onomasticon Anglosaxonicum*, published in 1897, has not stood the test of time. Indeed, its drawbacks were well recognised even at the time of its appearance and were noted in contemporary reviews: see Redin 1919, iii. In particular, the lack of accuracy in Searle's work renders it virtually worthless for the modern scholar. This has not prevented its use, *faut de mieux*, by some present-day scholars, for example Kitson (2002).

In the first half of the last century, four major works on Old English names were published, all by scholars working outside these islands. The first was that by Rudolf Müller, *Untersuchungen über die Namen des nordhumbrischen Liber Vitae*, published in Berlin in 1901. Müller's work is, as might be expected, etymologically sound, and it had a major influence on subsequent studies. The second was that by Mats Redin, *Studies on Uncompounded Personal Names in Old English*, published in Uppsala in 1919. This important book is still a standard work of reference on the mono-thematic names of Anglo-Saxon England. The third was by Maria Boehler, *Die altenglischen Frauennamen*, published in Berlin in 1930. Boehler's work is of relevance in that it is centred, as the title suggests, precisely in the area of Old English women's names, and it does indeed contain much useful material. It does, however, have the major drawback that it is written in such a highly abbreviated form of German that it is not always easy to understand exactly what point is being made. The fourth work was *The Pre-Conquest Personal Names of Domesday Book* by Olof von Feilitzen, published in Uppsala in 1937. As with Redin's book, this work has withstood the test of time and is still a major source of reference for those working in the field.

All four of these scholars apparently accepted unquestioningly the principle that the grammatical gender of the name is an indicator of biological sex. Feilitzen went so far as to explain anomalies by assuming the existence of forms unrecorded in written Old English. For example, as noted above, the noun *mund* 'hand, protection' is generally feminine in Old English but invariably forms male names. Feilitzen (1937, 330) took -*mund*, when used as a name-element, as being from an unrecorded Old English masculine noun **mund* meaning 'guardian', comparing the Old Frisian masculine noun *mund* with this meaning. Similarly he took Old English -*noþ* (which forms male names) as a name-element from an unrecorded Old English adjective **nop* 'daring' (1937, 332), rather than from the recorded Old English feminine noun *noþ* 'temerity'. We need to enquire whether Feilitzen's approach is one of common-sense or whether it invokes special pleading.

When we approach more modern times, we find this same acceptance of the principle. In an article published in 1974, for example, Nigel Barley remarked that names 'were marked sexually according to the gender of the last element, male names ending in a masculine, female in a feminine' (1974, 6). As recently as 2002, Peter Kitson stated categorically that the second elements of male names 'are masculine-gendered nouns, or sometimes adjectives; feminine ones are nouns of

feminine gender' (Kitson 2002, 97). It is possible that, had Kitson used as a source a more reliable work than Searle (1897), he might have modified this opinion.

Carole Hough has recently done some valuable work on Old English personal names appearing in place-names, concluding that they 'testify to the role of women in society across the length and breadth of England and throughout the Anglo-Saxon period and beyond' (Hough 2002, 68). She has also written on modern English personal names, with particular reference to female names (Hough 2000, 1–11). *Inter alia* she notes the interesting (but depressing) tendency of scholars, when in doubt, to interpret names as male rather than female (Hough 2002, 46–7). However she too starts from the assumption that we actually know whether a name is that of a male or a female. In the case of names of Old English origin, this is said to be primarily because 'the second element of feminine names is grammatically feminine' (Hough 2000, 7).

Barbara Yorke's interesting and informative work on nunneries and Anglo-Saxon royalty (Yorke 2003) does not pursue the question of whether or not we can be certain of someone's sex from their name. The same is true of the valuable work done by Gale Owen-Crocker on dress and dress accessories in Anglo-Saxon England (Owen-Crocker 2004). Even Rollason and Rollason, in their major new work on the Durham *Liber Vitae*, make statements such as 'names 17–21 are feminine' even though the names occur under the heading of *Nomina monachorum*, with no indication given of sex (Rollason and Rollason 2007, vol. 1, 248). The present author in much of her previous work has herself started from this same assumption, that we actually know whether a name is male or female.

Fran Colman is the only scholar who has queried the principle of the grammatical gender of the name's being an indicator of biological sex. In her 1996 article, she states that she has 'taken it that earlier association of grammatically masculine and feminine elements with naturally male and female referents has been discredited' (Colman 1996, 15), although she quotes no scholar other than herself who has said this. In the view of the present author, the time is appropriate for a complete re-examination of the evidence provided by the Old English female personal names.