

CHAPTER ONE

WRITING IN CORNISH: FRAGMENTS AND LOSSES

When he revised William Camden's *Britannia* in 1695, Edmund Gibson commented in his additions to the section relating to Cornwall that

three books in Cornish are all that can be found. One is written in an old court-hand on Velam, and in 1036 verses contains the History of the Passion of our Saviour...The other two are translated out of the Bodleian Library; one is translated, and the other is now a translating by Mr Keigwin, the only person perhaps that perfectly understands the tongue.¹

The two works at that time in the hands of John Keigwin of Mousehole were also religious. One was a trilogy of medieval plays on the Creation, Passion and Resurrection, together making up a mystery cycle known collectively as the *Ordinalia*, and probably composed, as was the Passion-poem mentioned by Gibson, in the fourteenth century. The other was another dramatisation of the Creation, this time the first and only surviving play of a two-day cycle, composed probably towards the middle of the sixteenth century, even though the version from which Keigwin worked is a later and linguistically adapted copy.

Gibson was writing at a time when scholarly interest was beginning to develop into what must be called a rescue operation on the Cornish language and its literature, and the establishing of a canon of literary survivals had come at a time when Cornish was dying as a community language. Not too long before Gibson was writing, another seventeenth-century antiquary, the Vice-Warden of the Stannaries, William Scawen, who died in 1686, had thought that the Passion-poem, of which he had a copy, was the sole surviving "precious relict" of the literature. He seems not to have known of the plays. Unfortunately, as far as major works in Cornish are concerned, Gibson's reference to "three books" is not far wrong, even if one of them does contain an entire mystery-cycle. A further two-day drama-cycle was discovered in the 1860s dealing with the life of a saint with a cult in Cornwall, St Mereadoc, known in Cornish as Meriasek. Probably it was written towards the end of the fifteenth century. Finally, in the 1870s, an enigmatic fragment of what may be a play, and which is probably a little earlier than the other survivals, was

¹ Edmund Gibson, *Camden's Britannia* (London, 1695, repr. Newton Abbot, 1971), col. 17. Scawen's comments are quoted in the preface to William Pryce's *Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica* (Sherborne, 1790, repr. Menston, 1972).

discovered on the back of a medieval charter. And that, essentially, is all that survives of early Cornish literature.

Even extending the term "literature" yields little more. Moving backwards into the earliest stage of written Cornish to include all the surviving monuments in the language adds only a number of glosses - individual words, that is, whose context depends upon another language - and one complete sentence. At the other end of the middle ages, all that the sixteenth century has to offer beside the Creation-play is a translation of some English sermons and a group of phrases, the point of which was pragmatic rather than literary. Finally, a number of smaller pieces - short verses, a song, a folktale - were written down in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the attempt to save every scrap of what was by then failing fast as a community language. These survivals are in a number of manuscripts, and most of them have been reprinted. We are frequently in the realm of linguistic monuments rather than of literature, and the use of a single line of Cornish in a somewhat garbled form in a seventeenth century play in English called (of all things) *The Northern Lasse* has a symbolic finality about it. To be sure, the language (and also its literature) has in the present century undergone a revival, but the literature is not extensive and it often looks back, as does the restored language itself, to medieval traditions and styles.

Cornish is a Celtic language, its closest relatives being Welsh and Breton, with which languages it shares a common Brittonic source. From about the sixth century, the West Brittonic ancestor of Welsh separated itself from South-West Brittonic, the ancestor of Cornish and Breton. Welsh has preserved some sounds and combination of sounds that Cornish and Breton changed, and it adapted others that South-West Brittonic did not. From this period, too, groups of speakers of South-West Brittonic migrated to Brittany, but a clear distinction between Cornish and Breton seems not to have developed for some centuries. With several of the earliest documents of Cornish there is doubt as to whether the language is indeed Cornish or whether it is Breton. From the second half of the eleventh century to the middle of the twelfth, however, Cornish shows certain sound-changes that *do* distinguish it from Breton, one example of which is the shift from *-d* to *-z* at the end of words. Some Cornish placenames, notably those in eastern areas, where Cornish as a spoken language died out early, preserve (precisely because the spoken language *did* die out) the unshifted form of the word *bod*, "a dwelling", a word which has that form still in Breton (and incidentally also in Welsh). The best-known example is in the name *Bodmin*. The word for a dwelling changed to *bos* in Cornish (using the spelling *s* for the voiced *z*), and placenames in areas where Cornish continued as a living language, primarily in the west, show this change, as in names like *Boscastle*, *Boscoppa* and others. In fact, the sound shifted again later on, moving to *-dz*, written as *j*, and in some placenames, this time in the far west, where the language

survived longest as a spoken tongue, names occur like *Bojewyan*, which appears in earlier documents as *Bosyweyn*.

By around 1200 Cornish was established as a distinct language, although still close to Breton, and it is at this linguistic stage, which is known as Middle Cornish, that the literature develops. It is in Middle Cornish that the Passion-poem and the *Ordinalia* plays were written. By the late sixteenth century, however, the language underwent some further changes, giving rise to the last stage of Cornish as a spoken community language, known as Late Cornish. To give a brief (consonantal) illustration once again, the sounds *n(n)* and *m(m)* developed to *dn* and *bm*, so that we find in the manuscript of the later Creation play (which was written down in 1611) forms like *pedn* "a head" instead of *pen*, and *cabm* "crooked" instead of *cam*. We may compare the placenames *Penzance* and *Toll Pedn*, too. The Cornish of the late and sometimes fragmentary survivals - short pieces written or collected by antiquaries - looks rather different in orthography from and is generally more phonetic than the larger survivals from the middle ages, so that a word like *pedn* might be written down as *peden* or *pedden* and so on. A separate problem is presented by the inclusion in Middle Cornish texts of an admixture of English. Sometimes whole phrases are used, even in the *Ordinalia*, and the number of English words increases in the later texts. In terms of literary evaluation, this has implications for source-study if whole phrases or indeed couplets are used, but the use of individual English words present a philological problem: it is not always easy to determine the status of borrowings, and occasionally an English word appears to have been adopted into Cornish by the revivalists; thus the word *snel*, clearly Germanic and common in Middle English for "swift," appears in modern dictionaries as a Cornish word, presumably on the strength of its appearance in the *Ordinalia*.

The customary view is that the Cornish language died out in the eighteenth century, but this is a confused concept. Socially, Cornish gave way gradually to the long-term pressure of the dominant English language, and from a relatively early period was pushed westwards, lasting longest in the far western areas of Cornwall. This was a process abetted by several factors, such as the absence of a tradition of printed material in Cornish, and also of an authorised liturgy. It is in any case more accurate to speak of Cornish having ceased to be used as a community language. The death of a language might, of course, imply the death of the last, or more reasonably the second-last monoglot speaker (since one person alone speaking a language is meaningless), or, rather differently, the death of the last person with the language as their principal mode of communication. Indeed, the death of Dorothy or Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole is still frequently taken to mark the death of the language itself, although Daines Barrington, the eighteenth century scholar who drew attention to Dolly Pentreath, later named other Cornish-speakers who outlived her. The principal alternative candidate is

William Bodener, a fisherman who died in 1789, later than Pentreath, although he tells us that he learned Cornish as a boy from older fishermen. Throughout the nineteenth century evidence was collected of people who knew some Cornish words or phrases. We do not really know the name of the "last" speaker of Cornish, whatever this is taken to mean, and the matter is, of course, academic. For all that, the demise of Dolly Pentreath (to whom a memorial was erected in 1860, claiming only that she was "said to have been the last person who conversed in the ancient Cornish language") retains a symbolic value. Cornish was probably restricted to the western part well before the start of the sixteenth century, and it had ceased to have a community function, even in the far west of Cornwall, by the end of the eighteenth. It was no longer, then, the normal language used every day inside and outside the home by people who had learned the language in the home from their parents, as a mother tongue, in fact. But in another sense it has never been a dead language in the way that, say, Etruscan is dead. At the time when it was falling out of everyday use, scholars and antiquaries were already beginning to take an interest, and preserved what scraps of it they could. The knowledge of the language never died out.²

In the early years of the twentieth century Cornish was revived, not primarily, as might have been possible, on the basis of Late Cornish and the subsequent development of Breton, but rather by applying a process of standardisation to *Middle Cornish*, because that stage of the language contained fewer English borrowings. A normalised spelling was developed between the wars by Robert Morton Nance, which was termed "Unified Cornish" and was used as the basis for teaching the language and for

² The literature on the life and death of Cornish is large: see Charles Thomas, *Special Bibliography I. The Cornish Language* (Redruth, 1972). On the early history, see Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953, repr. 1971), pp. 3-30. Standard works such as Henry Jenner, *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* (London, 1904) contains much material, as do earlier studies such as Fred. W. Jago, *The Ancient Language and the Dialect of Cornwall* (Truro, 1882) and more recent ones such as those by P. Berresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and its Literature* (London, 1974) and *The Story of the Cornish Language* (2nd ed., Penryn, 1990), or Martyn F. Wakelin, *Language and History in Cornwall* (Leicester, 1975). On the last stages of spoken Cornish the range is from Daines Barrington on Dolly Pentreath, "On the Expiration of the Cornish Language," *Archaeologia* 3 (1777); 278-84 down to P. A. S. Pool, *The Death of Cornish* (Penzance, 1975). There is a grammar of Middle Cornish by Henry Lewis, *Llawlyfr Cernyweg Canol* (Cardiff, 2nd ed., 1946, repr. 1980). Much has been published on placenames, most notably by O. J. Padel, *Cornish Place-Name Elements* (Nottingham, 1986). Linguistic analysis (some of it computer-aided) is still in progress; see for example Kenneth J. George, "A Computer Model of Sound Changes in Cornish," *ALLC Journal* 4 (1983), 39-48. Compare finally not only the parallel case of Manx, which survived in a similar manner into the present century, but the title of a recent book by Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language* (London, 1991). Irish is an official and national language, but is still in considerable difficulties.

publications, including translations and new literature, itself based frequently on the forms and themes of the medieval survivals. Attention has been drawn more recently to the flaws in this (it has to be said) artificial reconstruction of the language. These include beside phonological problems, too heavy a reliance on Welsh, rather than the more closely related Breton, to fill the inevitable lexical gaps. Other orthographic systems for revived Cornish (one based on Late Cornish) have recently been developed, not without some controversy and with resistance from the champions of Unified Cornish.

With the exception of some early essays and brief surveys, some of which are no longer readily accessible, most studies of Cornish have linked language and literature in such a way as to emphasise the former, and to group the surviving literary texts according to linguistic considerations, which has the effect, for example, of separating off the Creation play written down (but not composed) in 1611 and known as *Gwreans an bys* from the other plays. A literary study needs to take a somewhat different approach, so that the later Creation-play can be seen as a late medieval drama related to the *Ordinalia*. All the Cornish medieval literature has, indeed, been preserved in manuscripts later than the original composition of the work. The Passion-poem (referred to now as *Pascon agan Arluth*, "The Passion of Our Lord" and earlier as *Mount Calvary*) and the surviving plays form a group which can be related to one another in content, style, and perhaps even provenance, with strong pointers to a single literary centre. They constitute, indeed, almost a paradigmatic development of medieval religious writing, beginning with a poetic adaptation of the Gospels and moving then to the dramatisation of the divine plan of Creation, Fall and Redemption. The play of the life of St Meriasek (given the Cornish title *Beunans Meriasek*, since the Latin title in the manuscript is somewhat cumbersome) is unusual in Britain, where few dramatised saints' lives have survived in any language, although they are known throughout the middle ages elsewhere. In Cornwall, religious drama seems to have lasted beyond the Reformation and it is not surprising that in an area where the effects of the English Reformation were in any case somewhat delayed, the mid sixteenth-century should have produced another biblical cycle of which only the later, but dramatically more sophisticated Creation-play survives.³

The earlier stages of this development can be matched in English medieval literature, but there are no examples in English of a non-biblical saint's life

³ To the books by Jenner and Ellis add not only Thurstan C. Peter, *The Old Cornish Drama* (London, 1906), but the admirable summary by Crysten Fudge, *The Life of Cornish* (Redruth, 1982) and a discussion of the earliest works (*Charter Fragment* and *Pascon agan Arluth*) in Dutch by Laurant Toorians, "Passie, lief en leed; de oudste poëzie van het Keltische Cornwall," *Kruispunt* 129 (March, 1990), 3-55. Ellis' larger book (referred to here by the short-title "Cornish Language") is not always reliable, and should be used with caution.

in dramatised form. Continental parallels sometimes present themselves more readily, and Cornish might even have been influenced by Breton or French mystery cycles or hagiography. There is a Breton Creation-play, for example, which, although it was written down even later than 1611, contains features that seem to antedate *Gwreans an bys*, and Breton also has various dramatised saints' lives. On a purely comparative basis, late medieval drama in Italy and Spain, and even that of the German-speaking world can be interesting in terms of literary context. By coincidence, a two-day drama on the Creation and Flood (the theme of *Gwreans an bys*) was written at pretty well the same time as the Cornish play, but in Protestant Zurich by an adherent of the Reformer Zwingli. The two works compare well with each other.

That particular work (by a Swiss called Jacob Ruf) is barely known and has never been translated. With the central works of Cornish literature, however, there is no justification for ignorance of them in the English-speaking world, at least. Three published translations of the Passion-poem, three of the *Ordinalia* (and several partial translations), five of *Gwreans an bys* and five of *Beunans Meriasek* (one published only in part) make it surprising that they have not been examined more fully. Only in recent years have they been submitted to detailed literary scrutiny, but there has been some readiness to accept glib comments on an expected rusticity in the works. The volume devoted to Cornwall in the popular *Penguin Guides* informed its many readers that Cornish "had no literature worth serious attention," and even a partisan writer like Daphne du Maurier could claim that Cornish "never, even in olden times, produced a living culture," while Henry Jenner, the father of modern Cornish, saw the literature as of small value in his pioneering work on the language. The attitude is a well-established one: in 1910 (but in a work that was in print until 1970) the editor of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* dismissed *Beunans Meriasek* as "devoid of literary merit," while the *Penguin Companion to Literature* in 1971 described the plot of that work as showing us the Cornish saint's life "curiously mixed up with that Saint Sylvester." And yet the works need no special pleading: seen in their proper context, that of European religious literature and of drama in particular, the poem and the plays demand attention on the grounds of literary merit. On the other hand, comments about them that are based upon special pleading are not always very reliable. Thus a popular paperback published in 1980 with the title *The Spirit of Cornwall* includes a chapter on the drama in Cornish, but informs us with more enthusiasm than accuracy that "one of the earliest and most famous examples of purely Cornish drama was *Bewnans Meryasek*, sometimes known as the *Ordinalia*, a series of religious plays written in 1504 and widely performed at that time." It is an interesting coincidence that the chapter concerned opens with some remarks made by Richard Carew in 1600 on the supposed decay of Cornish drama. Carew's comments have frequently been taken as reliable, but the wisdom of doing so can be questioned when we

find such confidently stated errors in a book printed nearly four hundred years later.⁴

As with most medieval vernacular literatures, it is likely that some Cornish has been lost, either because the manuscripts have not survived, or because the material was part of an oral rather than a written tradition. Circumstantial evidence points to a range of possible losses, the most tantalising of which is, perhaps, that there may have been Cornish material relating to the story of Tristan and Iseult. The location of the story in the major continental versions is Cornwall, and the early French version by Beroul has specific Cornish placenames. It is possible (though there are numerous counter-possibilities) to construct a case for the celebrated love-triangle having originated in Cornwall and having moved either to Wales or to Brittany, and thence into the mainstream of European literature. This has to remain a matter of speculation since we have no hard evidence of a Cornish literary saga, merely a location which becomes increasingly mythical. Gottfried von Strassburg, in what is arguably the finest retelling of all, in German in the early thirteenth century, tells us that the grotto shared by the lovers has been known to him for years. But he adds "and I have never been in Cornwall."

There is slightly firmer evidence of other lost writing in Cornish in the sphere of Arthurian literature proper. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *History of the Kings of Britain*, completed between 1135 and 1140, makes frequent reference to Cornwall, especially in the context of Arthur himself, and there has even been speculation that the "very ancient book written in the British language" to which he refers in a dedicatory letter, might have been Cornish. Such speculations do not, of course, take us very far, but another writer, known to us as John of Cornwall, wrote in the middle of the twelfth century a series of verses with commentary in Latin called *Prophetia Merlini*, the "Prophecy of Merlin." This may have been based on the seventh book of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, which consists itself of a series of prophecies of Merlin, translated "from the British tongue," or it may derive from an original either in Cornish or in Breton, or even in their common linguistic ancestor prior to differentiation. The manuscript of the work, which is dedicated to Bishop Robert Warewast of Exeter (who established monasteries in Cornwall), contains in its commentary section a handful of what appear to be Cornish words and phrases - sometimes prefaced with the

⁴ J. W. Lambert, *Cornwall* (Harmondsworth, repr. 1947), p. 30; Daphne du Maurier, *Vanishing Cornwall* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 200; A. W. Ward and A. Waller, *The Cambridge History of English Literature, V: The Drama to 1642, Pt I.* (Cambridge, 1910, repr. 1970), p. 16; J. R. P[iette], "Cornish Literature" in: *The Penguin Companion to Literature I* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 119f. The final quotation is from Denys Val Baker, *The Spirit of Cornwall* (London, 1980), p. 87f. (where we move rapidly via the Padstow hobby-horse to modern "specifically Cornish" plays in English).

explanation *in nostra lingua*, "in our language." The words are neither extensive nor especially informative, and since the sole surviving manuscript was copied by someone ignorant of Cornish in the thirteenth century, some of the phrases actually beggar interpretation. The value of the remnants is linguistic, but while the text affords a fragment of evidence for lost Cornish writings, it is a dangerous foundation for judgements on lost material.⁵

Two further areas merit brief mention in the context of lost literature: religious writings and the drama. It is possible that religious texts other than those which have survived might have existed in Cornish, but once again there is little precise evidence. The Cornish saint for whom the twin parishes of St Columb Major and Minor is named is obscure, but early references relating to the parishes seem to imply a female *sancta Columba*, of whom little is known. Confusion with the famous male saint Columba (Colum Cille) of Iona or with the missionary saint Columbanus is inevitable, and the Cornish saint has indeed also been taken to be male. On August 7, 1607, however, Nicholas Roscarrock, the Catholic scholar and collector of the lives of British saints, commented in a letter (now in the British Library) to William Camden on this question, shortly before the appearance of the sixth edition of Camden's *Britannia*. Camden had derived the name of the parishes from the Scottish saint, "whereas in truthe yt taketh name of Columba, a woman St who was a vyrgine and martyre whose lyfe I have in my handes translated owt of Cornyshe, besydes the daye of her feaste differeth from the feast of St Columbanus or Columba..." The derivation was duly corrected in later editions, but the Cornish saint's life is lost, and we do not know if it was in prose or verse, nor its date, nor whether it was an original or a translation from Latin. Equally frustrating is a reference in a journal in 1727 to the translation of the Bible into "Cornish, or Cornubian Welsh," which could refer to a lost text, or to something that was never completed, or to the few

⁵ O. J. Padel, "The Cornish Background of the Tristan Stories," *CMCS* 1 (Summer, 1981), 55-81, referring back to Joseph Loth, "Le Cornwall et le Roman de Tristan," *RC* 33 (1912), 258-310 and 414-6. Padel questions the development outlined by, for example, Helen Newstead, "The Origin and Growth of the Tristan Legend," in: Roger S. Lewis, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 122-33. See the summary by W. Anne Trindade, "The Celtic Connexions of the Tristan Story," *Reading Medieval Studies* 12 (1986), 93-107 and 13 (1987), 71-80. The most recent study is that by W. J. McCann, "Tristan: the Celtic Material Re-examined," in: *Gottfried von Strassburg and the Medieval Tristan Legend*, ed. Adrian Stevens and Roy Wisbey (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 19-28. On Geoffrey of Monmouth: O. J. Padel, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Cornwall," *CMCS* 8 (Winter, 1984), 1-28, with Geoffrey's text transl. Lewis Thorpe, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 170-6. On John of Cornwall, see P. Flobert, "La Prophetia Merlini de Jean de Cornwall," and L. Fleuriot, "Fragments du texte Brittonique de la Prophetia Merlini," *EC* 14 (1974-5), 31-41 and 43-56. See also Michael J. Curley, "A New Edition of John of Cornwall's *Prophetia Merlini*," *Speculum* 57 (1982), 217-49.

biblical fragments that were made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, the claim on the title-page and in the preface of a booklet printed in the late sixteenth century that it was translated from "the Troyane or Cornyshe tounge" may be dismissed, in spite of the inclusion of a phrase of garbled Cornish in the text, as part of a deliberate comic fiction involving various other spurious personal names. The absence of religious lyrics from early Cornish and, indeed, the absence of much religious translation is striking, though there are a few liturgical pieces in late transcriptions. For the later period it has been suspected (on fairly thin evidence) that the shadowy John Tregear, who translated some homilies, may have translated other material. There is even a record (in Spanish) of a speech on Psalm xx: 5 having been made in Cornish before the Spanish king Philip III at the English College in Valladolid in August 1600 by a Cornish priest named Richard Pendrea or Pentrey; we have no version of the Cornish text, although there are records in Spanish and English of the occasion.⁶

In the drama, the major loss is of course the second day's play to follow the surviving *Gwreans an bys*. The far earlier *Charter Fragment* may also provide an indication of lost drama, although just what has been lost is hard to determine. There are references at the end of the medieval period, too, to the performance in Cornwall (as elsewhere) of what appear to be secular folk-plays, on themes such as that of Robin Hood, but we are not sure what language these plays were in. The plurality of references even in the Tudor period to performances of mystery plays makes us suspect that dramatisations of other parts of the Bible or of other saints' lives might have existed, matching comparable texts in English, French or Breton. Cornwall boasts an enormous number of saints with local cults, whose *vitae* must have offered possibilities. The writings of those seventeenth and eighteenth century antiquaries who devoted themselves to preserving what they could find of

⁶ The letter from Roscarrock to Camden is now in the British Library, fol. 77 of MS Cotton Julius C.V, not C.IV. as in Whitley Stokes, "Cornica III," *RC* 3 (1876-8), 86, and Ellis, *Cornish Language*, p. 218. On the Bible translation, see Fred. W. P. Jago, *An English-Cornish Dictionary* (London, 1887, repr. New York, 1984), p. xiii. Ellis attempts unconvincingly to use Roscarrock's letter to Camden (whom he promotes to Bishop on p. 69) to support the claim of the pamphlet (which is not, as he thinks, a play), entitled *A lyttle treatyse called the Image of Idlenesse*, which involves such names as 'Walter Wedlocke' and 'Bawdin Bachelor.' The pamphlet (containing stories in a pseudo-epistolary form), is listed in the British Library Catalogue under Wedlocke, as it is in the microfilm STC collection of early English published works (Ann Arbor: year 44, reel 1583). A glance at the preface should be sufficient to convince the reader of the fictionality. On St. Columb, see David H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1978), p. 87, who refers to Baring-Gould, who also took the saint to be male. On Richard Pendrea/Pentrey and his sermon, see Andrew Breeze, "Welsh and Cornish at Valladolid, 1591-1600," *BBCS* 37 (1990), 108-111. Ellis, *Cornish Language*, p. 63f. refers to earlier links between Spain and Cornish Catholics.

Cornish give an indication also of further losses. We learn, for example, that Richard Angwyn, who died in St Just-in-Penwith in 1675, could and did write in Cornish, but also that his manuscripts were not saved.

Our concern is with literature in the Cornish language, rather than with Anglo-Cornish (more properly Cornu-English) writing, but we may note in passing the part played by writers from Cornwall in the early development of English. The most important name is that of John Trevisa of St Mellion, in eastern Cornwall (where spoken English established itself very early on), who died in 1402 and who translated into still eminently readable English both the encyclopaedic *De proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomew the Englishman and the equally massive Latin history-book, the *Polychronicon* of Ranulph Higden. In his version of the latter, Trevisa makes an addition of his own in which he tells how two men with Cornish names, John Cornwall and Richard Pencrych, insisted upon teaching (Latin) grammar through the medium of English rather than French. It has been suspected, probably correctly, that Trevisa is being a trifle partisan in selecting these two as pedagogical innovators, but it is unlikely that any of them were Cornish speakers.⁷

The earliest writings in Cornish are glosses, single words and phrases written into manuscripts in Latin, and dependant upon that language, intended as aides-memoire for the understanding of the Latin. This situation is normal in the early stages in the writing of any western European vernacular, and the materials involved are not literary as such, even though it can be informative to note which Latin texts acquired glosses. With Cornish we have the added difficulty that the few early glosses may be, and indeed have been interpreted as Cornish or as Breton. This is the case with those to the Book of Tobit and others in a commentary on the much-used grammar of Donatus. A final and in fact earlier document contains Cornish names rather than glosses, and is of historical rather than literary interest. The so-called *Bodmin Manumission* gives details of the freeing of slaves, recorded in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries in a manuscript Gospel originally from the monastery of St Petroc at Padstow, but which had been moved to Bodmin after the sack of that monastery in the tenth century.

Clearly Cornish, however, and of great linguistic importance, is the so-called *Vocabularium Cornicum*, a kind of Latin glossary or thematically

⁷ Basil Cottle, *The Triumph of English, 1350-1400* (London, 1969), pp. 17-21 cites Trevisa, and Ellis *Cornish Language*, p. 47f. reports the views that Trevisa studied at Glasney, was one of the translators of the Wycliffe Bible, and contributed to *Piers Plowman*, all this based upon D. C. Fowler, "John Trevisa and the English Bible," *Modern Philology* 58 (1960-1), 81-98. Fowler's views have not found acceptance elsewhere and are based on slight evidence. Even the involvement with the Bible translation is "not proven": thus Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 395-8. Fowler does not claim Trevisa as a Cornish speaker.

arranged word-list of approaching a thousand words, compiled by the Anglo-Saxon Ælfric, Abbot of Eynsham and a prolific homilist, translator and pedagogical writer, to attach to a grammar based once again on Donatus. This Latin word-list was provided with Cornish, rather than Saxon equivalents in around 1100 to give us a Latin-Cornish vocabulary - Latin remains the primary language. Some of the words have a second equivalent, this time in Welsh, although the implications are unclear beyond the fact that the glossator knew both languages. The manuscript (in which the seven pages of Cornish are described as Welsh) is in the British Library as part of the collection made by the antiquary Sir Robert Cotton in the seventeenth century, largely from dissolved monasteries, and bequeathed to the nation by his grandson.⁸

The beginnings of written literature proper are chronologically still some way off - some three centuries away from the *Vocabularium Cornicum* - and even then the earliest material is both fragmentary and problematic. Probably the first piece of recognisable literature is the so-called *Charter Fragment*, forty-one lines of Cornish verse written on the back of a charter dated 1340 and relating to St Stephen in Brannel. The lines themselves may belong to the latter part of the fourteenth century, although precise dating of the Cornish texts is never easy, and even the date of the hand is unclear. The fragment falls into two parts, the continuity of which is a matter of debate. The first twenty-six lines appear to be a speech in which someone is offering in marriage to a friend or companion (*coweth*) a girl who is praised highly and commended as a good housewife. She is, however, also described as a child, and the speaker assures the friend that she will do his bidding. There is in this section also a local reference, to the lack of distance "between here and the Tamar bridge."

The second part is linguistically more difficult. It seems likely that the lines are from a different speaker, and a woman is apparently being told how to control a man:

lauar *the sy byth ny venna*
lauar *thotho gwra mar mennyth...*

⁸ Donatus-Glosses: A. de Jubainville, "Mots Bretons connus par un auteur Français du commencement du IXe siècle," *RC* 27 (1906), 151-4; Tobit-Glosses: Joseph Loth, *Vocabulaire vieux-Breton* (Paris, 1884), pp. 68f., 113 and 129; Bodmin Manumission: Max Förster, "Die Freilassungsurkunden des Bodmin-Evangeliars," in: *A Grammatical Miscellany Presented to Otto Jespersen* (Copenhagen, 1930), pp. 77-99; *Vocabularium Cornicum*: Eugene van Tassel Graves, *The Old Cornish Vocabulary* (Diss. PhD, Columbia, 1962: Ann Arbor, Mich., 1962 = microfilm). Illustrations of several of the manuscripts may be found in Ellis, *Cornish Language and Fudge, Life of Cornish*.

tell yourself "I will not do it;"
tell him "I will do your wishes..."

However, the woman is also assured that the man is of such gentility that he will not force her.

What are we to make of all this? It has been claimed with varying degrees of confidence that the fragment provides evidence of secular drama in the vernacular, or, going even further, that it shows us the role of a (female) matchmaker or even that of a bawd in such a play. In reality, every single one of the assumptions made about the fragment is questionable - that it is dramatic at all, that the whole passage is intended for a single speaker, that the speaker is a woman. Narrative verse containing dialogue is hardly uncommon, and there are historical arguments, too, against accepting this piece as (secular) drama without reflection. Such a survival would be unusual. A fragment from a religious work would be more likely, for all that it is hard to think of a plausible context; one possible exception might be the apocryphal betrothal scenes of Joseph with the Virgin that we find in the English N-Town plays, but even so the lines we have are hard to fit. The reference to the Tamar bridge might, on the other hand, not indicate a local setting, but could be some kind of proverbial circumlocution, just as *in oll kernow*, "in all Cornwall" is used with a generally distributive meaning in the *Ordinalia*, even though the setting is biblical. Some critics have indeed wondered whether the passage might come from one of the secular portions of a religious play, and there are certainly passages in the *Ordinalia*, such as conversations between soldiers, which would not be recognisable as belonging to a religious work if they were taken out of context. One such passage in the *Origo Mundi* has a butler offering to get a girl for one of his mates (*coweth*) and the passage contains the same rhymes (*powes/ mowes*) that we find here in the *Charter Fragment* ("rest" and "girl", OM 2071-2). The offer seems to be a formulaic one, and it is encountered elsewhere in Cornish, sometimes ironically. The use of *coweth* and the whole tone of the first part makes it very unlikely that a woman is speaking, although it is easier to hear the second part as spoken by a woman. The fragment may be divided into strophic units which are not unlike (though not exactly parallel to) those found in the major works of medieval Cornish. An initial strophe (based on sense-division) has 12 lines, varying between four and six syllables, rhyming *aabbbbcccdccd*. A quatrain rhymed *abab* follows, and the first part is concluded with a ten-line strophe in rhymed couplets, nine of the lines having seven syllables (the most common metric line in Middle Cornish). The variety of strophes is itself striking.

The second part need not have followed the first in the original, and it seems at least to have a different speaker, as indicated, perhaps a woman. There is at least one line which seems not to fit, the meaning of which is

unclear, and the tense of which is not in accord with the rest of the work, although it does contain the interjection *re'n Offeren*, "by the Mass." The speech is addressed not to a friend, but to another woman, who may be the much-praised lady of the first part. If this is the case, there is a clear contrast between the original assertion that "she will not refuse you" and the attitude that she is told to adopt here. The second part is also harder to divide into strophes. Four lines rhyming *abab* seem to form an individual quatrain, and six lines in rhymed couplets follow which are rather longer than those used thus far. The hyperrhythmic line noted above comes next, and we then have a further *abab* quatrain.

However varied the metrical patterns, the real problem is that of interpretation: what kind of text is this, is the transmission coherent, and what was the purpose of writing it down? We may be dealing with acting parts, although if the speakers are different this is less likely. Until convincing outside parallels are established or more of the text is found the questions will simply not be answerable, and meanwhile it is dangerous to make assertions about the fragment in support of any hypotheses about one type of drama or about attitudes to women.⁹

The place where the fragment was actually written is unknown. The other medieval Cornish works group, however, around a single literary centre, albeit one that has now disappeared. There were various monastic centres in early Cornwall, such as St Germans, Padstow and Bodmin - the first-named being the diocesan centre until the see was moved to Crediton in 1042 and then later to Exeter, a Cornish see being re-established at Truro only in the nineteenth century. In 1265, however, the Bishop of Exeter, Walter Bronescombe, established a college of secular canons with a constitution that

⁹ W[hitley] S[tokes], "Cornica IV: The Fragments of a Drama in Add. Ch. 19,491, Mus. Brit.," *RC* 4 (1879-80), 258-62, also in Ellis, *Cornish Language*, p. 42f. (with errors); Henry Jenner, "The Fourteenth-Century Charter Endorsement," *JRIC* 20 (1915-20), 41-8; R. Morton Nance, "The Charter Endorsement in Cornish," *OC* 2/iv (1932), 34-6 and: "New Light on Cornish," *OC* 4 (1943-51), 214-6. The most recently published texts with commentary are those by Enrico Campanile, "Un frammento scenico medio-cornico," *Studi e saggi linguistici* 3 (1963), 60-80, and by Luran Toorians, *The Middle Cornish Charter Endorsement. The Making of a Marriage in Medieval Cornwall* (Innsbruck, 1991). He discusses the text in his "Passie, lief en leed," pp. 8-11. I cite Toorians' version, and his edition has a description of the MS by J. P. M. Jansen. The manuscript uses the tailed z, here resolved as *th*. Richard Axton, *European Drama of the Middle Ages* (London, 1974), p. 21 sees the work as secular, and Evelyn S. Newlyn considers the words to be spoken by a stereotype female matchmaker in her paper "Between the Pit and the Pedestal: Images of Eve and Mary in Medieval Cornish Drama," in: *New Images of Medieval Women*, ed. Edelgard DuBruck (Lampeter, 1989), pp. 121-64, esp. p. 142f. Further work by Dr Newlyn on the fragment is, however, in progress. Toorians' goes against previous editions in reading and interpreting the first word of the "by the Mass" line as *cas* rather than *ras*, "hate" rather than "grace." This may serve as an indication of the difficulties of the text.

was based on the chapter of Exeter cathedral, near Penryn (itself now overshadowed by Falmouth) in the woods of Glasney. The college and its collegiate church (or more strictly its chapel, since St Gluvias is actually the parish church) was to be dedicated to St Thomas Becket, and it was consecrated to St Thomas and to the Virgin on March 26, 1267, the day after the Feast of the Annunciation. It was well endowed, with thirteen canons (one as proctor, later provost), with thirteen priest-vicars to support them. Major celebrations were to be that of the church's *dedicatio* on March 26, which would have overlapped with the Annunciation, and in view of the joint dedication doubtless the other Marian feasts would have been emphasised, as well as the patronals (December 29, and the translation of St Thomas on July 7) and the obit of the founder on St James' Eve, June 24. The college was dissolved in 1545.

The cartulary of the collegiate church, a manuscript of the fifteenth century, records amongst the various charters of church appropriation the Latin legend of the foundation of the college as a result of a dream had by Walter Bronescombe (who is here, as elsewhere, named as "Walter Goode") during a serious illness, in which St Thomas himself directed the bishop to Glasney, "of which there was an ancient prophecy in the Cornish language: *in Polsethow ywhylyr anethow*." Reference to the antiquity of the prophecy takes us back even beyond the late thirteenth century for the supposed age of this Cornish sentence; it is unclear how old the words actually are, and foundations legends are usually vigorously backdated, but the rhyme has a literary ring. The words mean "in Polsethow/ shall wonders show," but as the Latin goes on to point out, the noun *anethow* might also mean "dwellings." The name Polsethow is itself interpreted in the cartulary as meaning a place where animals wounded by arrows (*sethow*) come to die, and it was applied to a marshy area in the Glasney region.

Glasney was not the only secular college in Cornwall. Similar establishments were known at various times throughout the Middle Ages at Crantock, Launceton, Probus, St Buryan, St Columb Major, St Endellion, St Michael Penkevil and St Teath, as well as for a time at St Germans. There are strong links, though, between the major works of Cornish literature and the college at Penryn. The place-names in the *Ordinalia* make its provenance in the Penryn area quite clear, as scholars such as David Fowler and Jane Bakere have shown, and the close thematic links between the *Ordinalia* and the earlier Passion-poem might indicate a common source. There are actual quotations from the *Origo Mundi* play in the later Creation-drama. It may even be significant that the Glasney appropriations included by 1355 the church of St Just-in-Penwith, near one of the surviving rounds or playing-places, where the dramas might have been performed. *Beunans Meriasek* is associated firmly with Camborne, the centre of the saint's cult, but the probable time of composition (not too many years earlier than the manuscript,

which is dated 1504) coincides with the move of Master John Nans from the provostship of Glasney to Meriasek's church at Camborne. Nans, also a prebendary of Exeter cathedral, who died in 1508, might at least have encouraged the copying of the work. The strong Marian elements in the play might also be relevant. The dissolution of the college came at about the time that the last major work in Cornish, *Gwreans an bys*, was composed, and the juxtaposition is not coincidental. The English Reformation brought an end not only to Glasney College, but also to the medieval religious drama. The last of the Cornish rebellions - the so-called Prayer-Book Rebellion, in support not of *Cornish*, but rather of the retention of the familiar *Latin* prayer-book set aside by the Act of Uniformity in 1549 - was crushed in spite of Cornish Catholic support, and the Act made no provision for a Cornish liturgy anyway. The Reformation contributed in various ways (including the hindering of relations with Catholic Brittany) to the demise of Cornish as a community language, and although *Gwreans an bys* was copied as late as the early seventeenth century, the Reformation effectively marks the end of pre-revival Cornish literature.¹⁰

The bulk of surviving Cornish literature is composed in strophic verse. Although the stanzas used in the different works vary, and the linguistic texture of the individual writings depends only to an extent upon the forms adopted, some introductory comments about Cornish verse may be useful. While it is possible to make comparisons (which need not, of course, imply influence) on specific similarities, it is difficult to find sustained links between the prosody of Cornish and that of medieval English, French or Breton. Even weaker are the links with Welsh, in which a system of strict rules (according to the system known as *cynghanedd*) embraces regular inner rhymes, assonances and consonances, and which, as Henry Jenner commented, Welsh-speaking Welshmen "no doubt really can [appreciate], though it is not as easily understood by the rest of the world." There are, as Jenner goes on to point out, sometimes internal rhymes and echoes in Cornish lines, but this is textural and individual rather than systematic.

The line in medieval Cornish is short, and as in Breton or French, is essentially syllabic. Where medieval French plays, such as the *Mystère*

¹⁰ There is a translation and synopsis of the Glasney material by J. A. C. Vincent, "The Glasney Cartulary," *JRIC* 6 (1878-81), 213-59. See G. R. C. Davis, *Medieval Cartularies of Great Britain* (London, 1958), p. 85 on the date. On medieval secular colleges, see David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (London, 1953), pp. 325-46, and specifically Thurstan Peter, *The History of Glasney Collegiate Church* (Camborne, 1903), James Whetter, *The History of Glasney College* (Padstow, 1988), J. M. Adams, "The Medieval Chapels of Cornwall," *JRIC* NS 3 (1957), 52 and Nicholas Orme, *Education in the West of England 1066-1548* (Exeter, 1976), p. 167f. Orme's *The Minor Clergy of Exeter Cathedral 1300-1548* (Exeter, 1980), p. 13 lists a John de Glasneye as a vicar choral in 1309.

d'Adam, the *Mistère du Viel Testament* and many others use octosyllabic lines (varied with some that are shorter or longer), and much early Breton poetry also uses lines of eight syllables, in Cornish the most common line has seven syllables, which Jenner saw as trochaic, but really with an irregular rhythm. Four-syllable lines are also used, but any deviation from the pattern of seven or four syllables is so rare as to arouse suspicion of unrecognised elision or of a corrupt reading, even in *Gwreans an bys*, where a larger number of lines show apparent irregularity. The poem *Pascon agan Arluth* is the most regular of all, composed in strophes of eight heptasyllables rhyming *abababab*, although in the manuscript it is laid out as quatrains of long-lines. The plays contain a wide variety of strophic forms, ranging from heptasyllabic couplets to the relatively common strophe of six seven-syllable lines rhyming *aabaab* or *aabcbb* (with parallel versions using four-syllable lines), to longer strophes of up to twelve lines. Combinations also occur of four- and seven-syllable lines. The texture of the work can be affected by variations of line and of strophe, as indeed it can by the use of individual devices within the strophes, such as repeated phrases or anaphora. All the plays demonstrate a range of linguistic registers indicative of mood and character, again interlinked with the choice of form.

The rhyme-schemes vary somewhat, but rhymes are regular and repetitive; the relative brevity of the syllabic line makes for frequent recurrence of a given rhyme, and chevilles occur. Jenner also makes clear the emphasis on eye-rhyme, which sometimes involves grammatical adaptation, although this is hardly restricted to Cornish. There are some similarities to the evolving *rime croisée* found in medieval French works, but even more with the six-line strophes, primarily of octosyllables, and with a regular *aabcbb* rhyme found in Breton in poems such as the *Buhez mab den* ("The Life of Man"). The same pattern is found elsewhere in Breton in a Passion-play and in some hagiographic plays, although the long lines in rhyming couplets of the *Creation ar bet* ("Creation of the World") distinguish it very markedly from its Cornish counterpart, *Gwreans an bys*. The Breton six-liners, however, typically have a complex and often striking pattern of inner rhymes, at least down to the seventeenth century, which is closer to *cynghanedd* than to Cornish. For purposes of illustration, in fact, the strophes of the Cornish drama can be matched by examples from some of the English plays, although clear differences remain. The following (from the N-Town play of the Adoration) do, however, offer reasonably close equivalents to common Cornish forms, and the Chester or Towneley plays might have furnished examples as well, even if heptasyllabic lines are not particularly common in

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the more rhythmic English plays, where the eight-syllable line is standard much of the time:

Such hevynese haue vs cawght,
I must drynk with yow a drawght,
To slepe a lytyll whyle
 I am hevvy heed and footte,
 I xulde stumbyll at resch and root
And I xuld goo a myle.

and

I sawghe a syght,
Myn hert is lyght
 To wendyn home.
 God, ful of myght,
 Hath us dyght
Fro develys dome.

The strophe which follows the second example rhymes *aabccb*, a form not uncommon in the N-Town plays. It has to be borne in mind that, quite apart from the rhythmic regularity and more than occasional alliteration, the English plays use overall a great variety of strophe lengths and other patterns. There are no Cornish equivalents for the long-lines and rhyme-scheme of the Digby *St Paul* any more than there are for the Breton couplets in the Creation-play. It is impossible to link the existing Cornish strophic forms exclusively and conclusively with those in literatures which are culturally close, although the use of English phrases and sometimes whole lines within Cornish does bring the English plays necessarily a little closer. But the Cornish forms are individual, and within the constraints of a distinctive structuring based upon rhymed strophes with seven- or four-syllable lines, the Cornish works are quite able to provide literary variation and to sustain interest, at its most sophisticated level, perhaps, in *Beunans Meriasek*. As Jenner notes, some of the Late Cornish writings (which are sometimes artificial - he uses the word himself of Lhuyd's elegy on William of Orange) employ different verse forms, and it is pointless to speculate on the putative forms of lost materials. But it is of interest, too, that precisely the earlier patterns, relatively rigid in line-length, and with an increasing freedom in strophic form and speech-register, have been readopted in imitative works in the period of revived Cornish beside the more clearly English forms used for composition in Cornish by the eighteenth-century antiquarians and by some of the more recent

revivalist writers (who do, nevertheless, occasionally maintain more typically Celtic vowel-patterns), the English forms adopted ranging, however, from the limerick to the Shakespearean sonnet.¹¹

¹¹ See Jenner, *Handbook*, pp. 178-88 and Joseph Loth, "La métrique cornique," in: H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Cours de littérature Celtique* (Paris, 1883-902), XI, 204-16. On Welsh and Breton see Toorians, "Passie, lief en leed," pp. 42-6, and on the complexities of *cynghanedd* see for example J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Poets of the Welsh Princes* (Cardiff, 1978), pp. 53-62. As examples (with metrical notes) see for French Barbara M. Craig's edition of *La Creacion...of the Mistère du Viel Testament* (Lawrence, n.d.), pp. 33-7 and Paul Studer's of *Le Mystère d'Adam* (Manchester, 1918, repr. 1949), pp. li-lv. For Breton, see the *Trois poèmes en Moyen-Breton*, ed. Roparz Hemon (Dublin, 1962), pp. x-xii and the text of *Buhez mah den*, pp. 76-101. The English texts are cited from the *EETS N-Town Play*, ed. S. Spector (London, 1991), I, 178-80 (vv. 285-90 and 323-8).