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Citation

Bremmer Jr., R. H. (2007). The "Gesta Herewardi": Transforming an Anglo-Saxon into an Englishman. In B. K. Summerfield T. (Ed.), *People and Texts. Relationships in Medieval Literature. Studies Presented to Erik Kooper* (pp. 29-42). Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17601>

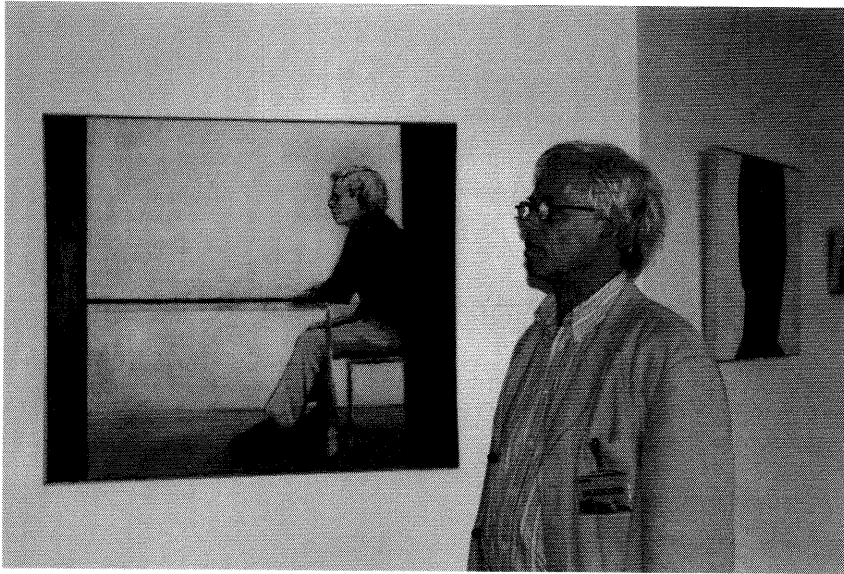
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

People and Texts Relationships in Medieval Literature

Studies presented to Erik Kooper

Edited by
Thea Summerfield
and
Keith Busby



Amsterdam-New York, NY 2007

**THE *GESTA HERWARDI*:
TRANSFORMING AN ANGLO-SAXON INTO AN
ENGLISHMAN**

ROLF H. BREMMER, JR.

The heroes of Anglo-Saxon England – heroines are conspicuously absent in the historiographical sources – occupy a space in time and in our knowledge that shades off on either side into misty borderlands. The first, and earliest, of these ‘borderlands’ is the period of the founding fathers of England. They were men like Hengest and Horsa, Æsc son of Hengest, Cerdric, Ælle and his three sons Cymen, Wlencing and Cissa, and more of their kind, all in expectation of finding a new land to live and thrive in. With the exception of Hengest and Horsa, these leaders of the Germanic settlers are afforded the smallest amount of information in the early entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [ASC].¹ Yet, each of these warlords may have enjoyed the honour of having been praised for their prowess in battle against the Britons whose kings they defeated and whose lands they conquered. Interestingly, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not emphasize their being Anglo-Saxons: they are, each in their turn, associated with the nascent kingdoms of Kent, Wessex, or Northumbria. No such individualization is made for their opponents: they are indiscriminately called ‘Britons’.

At the other extreme of the Anglo-Saxon period we are faced with a borderland that is ruled by the distant offspring of the Saxon invaders, the established nobility. The tables have turned, however,

For various useful suggestions, I would like to thank Tom Shippey, Jan Bremmer, and Bart Veldhoen.

¹ *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, eds J. Earle and C. Plummer, 2 Vols, Oxford, 1892–99, repr. with additional bibliography by Dorothy Whitelock, 1952. References to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are to this edition. On Anglo-Saxon ‘heroes’, see, for example, my “Old English Heroic Literature”, in *Readings in Medieval Texts. Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, eds David Johnson and Elaine Treharne, Oxford, 2005, 75–90.

and now we see the distant offspring of the Saxon invaders in the role of hopeless defenders, battling against the Normans in the early years after the Conquest. This period, understandably, is far less nebulous. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the D and E versions, *s.a.* 1068, relates at some length several attempts that were made by men of high noble rank to resist the *nouveau régime*. Eadric the Wild, for example, with the help of the Welsh, attacked the Norman garrison in Hereford Castle in the winter of 1068 and from there campaigned quite successfully in Devon during the spring of that year. In the summer we find Eadric way up in the north, at the court of King Malcolm of Scotland. Eadric was accompanied by his mother Agatha and his two sisters, Margaret and Christina. King Malcolm, mesmerized by Margaret, asked for her hand. She was not impressed by his advances, however, and sang him 'no' in five lines of verse, interrupting the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* prose narrative. Nonetheless, Malcolm had his way. Two years later Eadric was reconciled to King William, and soon after is no longer heard of.²

Hereward the Outlaw, the subject of my paper, enjoyed no such fame: two brief mentions in the *Chronicle* is all he receives in the contemporary sources. However, within two generations after his death no fewer than three different accounts of his life and deeds had been written that survive today: once in Anglo-Norman as an episode in the verse *L'Estoire des Engleis* by Geffroi Gaimar (written 1136–37),³ and twice in Latin: the *Gesta Herewardi*,⁴ and as a short biography, partly dependent on an early version of the *Gesta Herewardi*, included in the *Liber Eliensis*.⁵ Written long after

² On Eadric, see Ann Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest*, Woodbridge, 1995; Susan Reynolds, "Eadric Silvaticus and the English Resistance", *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* LIV (1981), 102–5.

³ Geffroi Gaimar, *L'Estoire des Engleis*, ed. Alexander Bell, Anglo-Norman Texts XIV–XVI, Oxford, 1960, lines 5457–704.

⁴ Cambridge University Library, Peterborough, Chapter Library 1, fols 320r–339r, dated mid-thirteenth century. The text itself was written during the time of Ely's first bishop, Hervey, between 1109 and before 1131; see *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake, Camden Third Series XCII, London, 1962, xiv–xxxiv. It was printed in Geffroi Gaimar, *L'Estoire des Engles*, eds T. D. Hardy and C. T. Martin, 2 Vols, Rolls Series 91, London, 1888–89, I, 339–404. Translation in Michael Swanton, *Three Lives of the Last Englishmen*, New York, 1984, 45–88; improved translation by Swanton as "The Deeds of Hereward", in *Medieval Outlaws. Ten Tales in Modern English*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren, Stroud, 1998, 12–60. My quotations are from this improved translation.

⁵ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. Blake, Bk II, 173–88.

Hereward's death are the Latin *Chronicle of Hugh Candidus*, written in 1175 and also translated into Anglo-Norman in the fourteenth century, and the *Historia* by pseudo-Ingulf, abbot of Crowland, who died in 1109. This last account was formerly thought to be authentic, but has now been identified as a late fourteenth-century forgery.⁶

It is interesting to muse on fate's uneven distribution of lasting fame: why did not Eadric the Wild receive the same attention from posterity as Hereward enjoyed? Both men made a valiant, if ultimately futile, stand against William the Conqueror. Fate is fickle, we know. But perhaps the reason for their uneven treatment in post-Conquest narrative traditions lies in the fact that Hereward operated in a cultural centre, whereas Eadric happened to organize his resistance on the periphery.

For this article I shall concentrate on the *Gesta Herewardi*, because it presents a well-organized, unified narrative. Having been written such a relatively short time after Hereward's death, my central question is: what national, or ethnic sentiments did the author entertain in his description of Hereward? I shall argue that the author in his characterization of Hereward consciously attempted to depict him as a latter-day Anglo-Saxon, but also that eventually he realized that in view of the new disposition such a characterization could not be maintained until the end of his narrative.

Before continuing, it might be useful to give a short summary of Hereward's life and deeds. Born of noble ancestry in Bourne, Lincolnshire, Hereward grew up an obnoxious lad, who on account of his continuous quarrels with his father was dispossessed and outlawed with the consent of King Edward the Confessor at the age of 18. Hereward then starts the life of a vagrant, travelling to Northumbria, Cornwall, Ireland, and Flanders. His adventurous exploits bring him fame and martial experience. In Flanders, he marries Turfrida, and shortly afterwards learns of the news that William of Normandy has conquered England. Hereward decides to return home to see what has happened to his paternal manor. Upon his arrival there, he finds that his younger brother has been killed by the Normans, and decides to devote his life to taking revenge. From then on, he grows into a successful leader of regional resistance, attracting a crowd of men who are intent on opposing the *nouveau régime*. Most notable is his

⁶ For a discussion of these last two sources, see J. Hayward, "Hereward the Outlaw", *Journal of Medieval History* XIV (1988), 293–304.

role in assisting the monks of the wealthy Benedictine monastery, founded by Queen Æthelthryth in 660, in their defence of the Isle of Ely, a natural elevation surrounded by rivers and marshes. Eventually, the monks treacherously surrender to King William and Hereward is forced to leave the Isle. He carries on his guerilla activities for some time, but the net is drawn around him ever more tightly, and eventually he has to submit to William. He separates from his wife Turfrida, and, as part of his reconciliation with William, marries a rich widow with whom he lives until his death.

The author of the *Gesta*, identified by the *Liber Eliensis* as “a venerable and very learned man, our brother Richard, of blessed memory”,⁷ sets the tone quite firmly in the first sentence of his prologue in words that remind us of the opening lines of such epics as Vergil’s *Aeneas* and *Beowulf*. He will write about “opera magnifici Anglorum gentis Heruardi et inclytorum ejus” (the deeds of the great Englishman Hereward and of his famous men). Hereward, in short, is presented as an outstanding member of the *gens Anglorum*, a term which appeals to ethnic sentiments and excludes the group of the Norman conquerors. The line that is drawn here, at least two generations after Hastings, makes it clear from the start that the story will be about ‘us and them’. Such a division into two groups presupposes the existence of group identities. A sense of unity among the English, following the political unification of England under King Edgar and his successors had gradually established itself in the course of the tenth century. Time and again, the successive scribes of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* emphasize this feeling. For all his merits, for example, King Eadwig’s reputation is said in his obituary to have been blemished by one thing: “he loved evil foreign customs and brought too firmly heathen manners within this land, and attracted hither foreigners and enticed harmful people to this country” (*ASC* D 959). Foreign, as opposed to English, manners are also the subject of a letter to a certain monk Eadward, presumably written by a clerical superior. The author – no other than than Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham – takes Eadward to task because:

⁷ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. Blake, xxxiv: “... a venerabili viro ac doctissimo fratre nostro beate memorie Ricardo edito”.

I also tell you, brother Edward, ... that you act unjustly in abandoning the English customs which your fathers held and love customs of heathen men who do not grant you life, and in doing so you make clear that you despise your race and your ancestors with those bad customs when you dress in Danish fashion with bared necks and have your hair coming over your eyes. I say no more about this shameful fashion, except that books tell us that he is cursed who cherishes pagan customs in his lifestyle and disgraces his own race with those.⁸

Such a case of obfuscating the external distinctions between Englishmen and Scandinavians is clearly unacceptable and should be immediately redressed by Eadward on the strength of Ælfric’s pastoral advice (with a none too subtle allusion to canon law). In the *Battle of Maldon*, the poet makes Byrhtnoth appeal to the unifying role of his lord, King Athelred, whose land he will defend which, in his own words, is simultaneously *urne eard*, our country (line 57). A similar appeal to national identity is expressed in 1014 by Archbishop Wulfstan in his popular *Sermo Lupi*.⁹ The numerous occasions where he uses ‘we’ and ‘us’ to emphasize, and at the same time create, a sense of shared national identity in contrast to the cruel ‘otherness’ of the Danes.¹⁰

An important factor in the constitution of Englishness is the language, a factor that also plays a significant role in the prologue of the Latin *Gesta Herewardi*. In it, mention is made of two different

⁸ Mary Clayton, “An Edition of Ælfric’s *Letter to Brother Edward*”, in *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations. Studies Presented to Donald C. Scragg*, eds Elaine Treharne and Susan Rosser, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 252, Tempe, AZ., 2002, 263-81: “Ic secge eac ðe, broðor Eadward, ... þæt ge doð unrihtlice þæt ge ða Engliscean þeawas forlætað þe eowre fæderas heoldon and hæðenra manna þeawas lufiað, þe eow ðæs lifes ne unnon, and mid ðam geswutelid þæt ge forseoð eower cynn and eowre yldran mid þam unþeawum þonne ge him on teonan tysliad eow on Denisc, ableredum hneccan and ablendum eagum. Ne secge ic na mare embe ða sceandlican tyslunge buton þæt us secgað bec þæt se beo amansumod þe hæðenra manna þeawas hylt on his life and his agen cynn unwurpað mid þam.”

⁹ *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 3rd edn, London, 1963.

¹⁰ Cf. Alfred P. Smyth, “The Emergence of English Identity, 700-1000”, in *Medieval Europeans. Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alfred P. Smyth, London, 1998, 24-52; Sarah Foot, “The Making of Angelcynn: English Identity before the Norman Conquest”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 Ser., VI (1996), 25-49.

accounts of Hereward that are written in English. In his search for information on Hereward, the author tells the unnamed superior to whom he directs his speech, most likely the first bishop of Ely, Hervey (1109-1130), that he had heard “somewhere that a short account had been written about [Hereward] in English”. Bishop Hervey was kind enough to have it translated into Latin and put at the author’s disposal who, in turn, augmented the account with information from oral reports. Further researches led the author to yet another, incomplete document: “only a few loose pages, partly rotten with damp and decayed and partly damaged by tearing”. One is tempted to take the deplorable state of the document as symbolizing the status of English as a written medium at the time. The contents of this delapidated manuscript, now lost, covered Hereward’s origin, his parents and the reputation that he acquired in his early career, as written down in English by Leofric, Hereward’s priest at Bourne. We are also informed about the reason why Leofric had composed a life of Hereward:

[I]t was the endeavour of this well-remembered priest to assemble all the doings of giants and warriors he could find in ancient stories as well as true reports for the edification of his audience; and for their remembrance to commit them to writing in English.

Leofric’s policy of writing about heroes of the past some time after the Conquest, not in Latin but in English is itself a proclamation of ethnic self-awareness. The fact that Richard of Ely had difficulty in deciphering the unfamiliar English script of Leofric’s account, on the other hand, reveals a tendency to distance himself from the English language – most likely Richard, as his French name seems to suggest, was not a native speaker of English, but he was certainly acquainted with it, as he repeatedly shows. Moreover, Richard’s account of Hereward’s struggle against the Normans, in fact the second part of the *Gesta*, is based on the oral reminiscences of two of Hereward’s closest brothers-in-arms. It is almost as if Richard assumes the role of cultural mediator between the conquered and the conquerors.

Having ended his prologue, Richard starts with the narrative proper. As he had done with the opening sentence of the prologue, Richard again begins with a statement that lavishes praise on the English (chapter 1):

Many very mighty men (*multi robustissimi*) are recorded from among the English people, and the outlaw (*exul*) Hereward is reckoned the most distinguished of all (*præclarissimus*) – a notable (*insignis*) warrior among the most notable.

Hereward, in other words, deserves a prominent position in a well-stocked English hall of fame. A short description of his parentage that follows must underscore this claim. His father was Leofric of Bourne, nephew of Earl Ralph, nicknamed ‘the Staller’; his mother was Eadgyth, the great-great-niece of Earl Oslac. From both parents Hereward could, therefore, boast of a very noble descent. While to his audience these birth papers may have sounded impressive, Richard unknowingly gives us a glimpse of the complicated situation that marked the ethnic identity of the English aristocracy. Earl Ralph was the son of Gode, King Edward the Confessor’s sister, by her first husband Drew (Drogo/Dreux), count of the French Vexin. Ralph, together with Eustace II, count of Boulogne, who became Gode’s second husband, had played an important role in Edward’s anti-Godwine policy in 1051. Hereward, then, had a strain of French blood in his veins. Oslac, a Mercian nobleman, had been earl of Northumbria from 966 to 975 when he was exiled by King Edgar. Having thus placed Hereward in the constellation of the English nobility – clearly, his linear descent was less impressive than were his lateral kinsmen – the next thing we read is a description of his appearance:

As a boy he was remarkable for his figure and handsome in his features, very fine with his long blond hair, open face and large eyes – the right one slightly different from the left in bluish colour.

In addition, he was formidable in appearance, stout and yet agile. Such a detailed description of a protagonist’s physiognomy is rare for texts of this period. On the surface we might think that his blond (*flavus*) hair and blue (*glaucus*) eyes are typical of the Germanic Anglo-Saxon. Yet underneath, there may be a psychological significance. The audience may well have attributed to Hereward’s outward appearance a significance that can only be guessed at, as in classical physiognomy long blond hair and bluish-grey eyes typically mark a hero.

approbanda) – a phrase that was also used by the author to characterize the people of Cornwall. Their battle array is as impressive in the number of combatants as it is disorderly (*incompositis*). Their armour is outlandish: “coats of felt dipped in pitch, resin and incense, or with leather tunics reinforced with the bark of trees”. The weapons they wield are “spears, nailed and bound for thrusting and slashing, and three or four square-pointed javelins for throwing”. For all their wildness and savage weaponry, and despite their fear of being subjected to foreigners, as the English people were in those days to the French (*alienigenis his diebus subacti fierent, sicut gens Anglorum a Francigenis*) – an ominous, first reference in the *Gesta* to the Norman Conquest – the Frisians are defeated thanks to Hereward’s clever strategies and completely subjected. Hereward divides the booty among his soldiers, and with this victory his Flemish episode comes to a close.

A few days after his Frisian victory, Hereward decides to go to England to visit his father’s house and his fatherland (*paternam domum et patriam*), now subject to the authority of foreigners and almost ruined by the exactions of many men (*externorum ditioni nunc subjectam et multorum exactionibus pene subversam*) (chapter 13). Incognito again, he arrives at Bourne, where he finds his people depressed by their being subjected to foreigners (*alienigenarum subjectioni*). His father’s thegn (*miles*), Osred, briefs Hereward – whose true identity remains unrevealed – as regards the situation. Hereward’s younger brother had been decapitated only three days earlier because, while valiantly protecting his mother’s honour, he had slain two Frenchmen (*Francigenos*). With the brutal mutilation of Hereward’s brother’s corpse, the author starts building up the usurpers’ identity step by step. First they are called *externi* ‘people from outside one’s own territory’, then they are branded as *alienigeni* ‘people born elsewhere’, and finally they are identified as *Francigeni* ‘French-born people’. By way of revenge, Hereward kills thirteen Frenchmen that night, and those who managed to save their lives flee the next morning in terror, together with all the other Frenchmen in the district. As a result of this sudden and unexpected reversal, the inhabitants of the country and his kinsfolk flock to Hereward, and help him set up a defence. But then Hereward realizes that he has never been knighted, and decides to ask Brand, the abbot of Peterborough Abbey, to gird him with the sword and belt of knighthood (chapter

15). For this solemn act, Hereward takes pains to differentiate himself and his men from the French. The ceremony should be conducted in the English fashion (*Anglico more*) by a cleric, for he had heard that “it had been ruled by the French that if anyone were knighted by a monk, cleric or any ordained minister, it ought not to be reckoned the equal of a true knighthood, but an adulterous and still-born knight” (*adulteratus eques et abortivus*). By using words from the intimate sphere of wedlock and procreation,¹³ the author emphasizes the abhorrence of the French of men knighted by clerics. But what is shameful to the French, becomes a token of honour to Hereward. He uses the ceremony to underline his Englishness. The fact that he adduces a religious argument to support his choice – one of the very few occasions in the story in which God is mentioned – is merely a red herring:

I know from common experience that if anyone should receive the knightly sword from a servant of God, a knight of the kingdom of heaven, such a man will pursue valour most excellently in every kind of military service.

Clearly, this sentiment belongs to the realm of popular religion: no mention is made of a personal bond with God, but the efficacy of the ceremony is attributed to its being conducted by clerics. Hereward demands that from now on all his men should be knighted in this way, preferably by the abbot of Ely, who willingly complies with his wishes.

A good deal of the final part of the *Gesta* (chapters 18-35) is devoted to the prominent part played by Hereward in the heroic defence by the monks of the Isle of Ely against the attacks of King William. His actions are characteristic of the outlaw genre as we know it from later stories such as that of Robin Hood. For example (chapter 23), he disguises himself as a potter to reconnoitre the camp of King William in a neighbouring village and takes lodgings in the house of a widow, who happens also to be lodging a witch contracted to cast spells on the monks of Ely. Hereward hears the widow, who appears to be involved in the plan, discuss the strategy with the witch in French (*Romana lingua*). At this point the author adds as an aside:

¹³ Swanton misses this point by translating *adulteratus et abortivus* as “invalid and anachronistic”.

"They supposed him to be a peasant and unfamiliar with that language (*rusticum illum aestimantes, et inscium locutionis*)". This assumption, by the way, is an interesting sociolinguistic comment on the new, multi-lingual situation in England. It is the only time that language plays a role in the narrative. Never during his travels, whether in Cornwall, Ireland, Flanders or Frisia, is language made an issue for Hereward, who has no problems whatsoever, it would seem, to communicate with anyone, no matter where he is. Language, of course, is an important factor in the constitution of groups, and the anecdote again serves to demarcate Hereward's Englishness.

Throughout, the English are called *Angli* or *gens Anglorum*, rather than *Saxones*. The latter term is used only once, when Hereward, on his way through the forest of Bourne to be reconciled with King William, encounters Letold, a Saxon warrior (*quendam Saxonicum militem*), "a man of great courage and tall stature, who was well-known and highly praised in many regions for his skill and valour in war" (chapter 31). Hereward wishes him well and inquires after his name, rank and family. Letold, however, is not much impressed by Hereward's unkempt appearance, and abuses him for a fool and a peasant (*fatuum et rusticum*). The exchange of words leads to a long and bitter fight in which Letold is finally overcome by Hereward, who magnanimously spares Letold's life, saying: "I have never found such a man, nor did I ever meet with his equal in courage! Nor have I ever been in such danger when fighting anybody, nor had so much difficulty in conquering anyone!". It is as if the author wants to say before he concludes his story: "Only the English nation brings forth true warriors".

The *Gesta* ends – it has already been hinted at – with Hereward's reconciliation with King William. In the words of the author (chapter 35):

And so Hereward, the famous knight, tried and known in many places, was received into favour by the king. And with his father's lands and possessions he lived on for many years faithfully serving King William and devotedly reconciled to his compatriots and friends (*regi Willelmo fideliter serviens ac devote compatriotis placiens et amicis*). And thus in the end he rested in peace, upon whose soul may God have mercy.

From a modern point of view such a conclusion is somewhat unsatisfactory. We would have liked Hereward to emerge victorious or die

heroically. The story, which seems so determinedly to be heading towards a glorious climax, deflates like a balloon. What might be the reason?

The *Gesta Herewardi* has been valued by historians for its wealth of information on the response of the population in the early years of the Norman Conquest. From the nineteenth century onwards, historians were especially concerned to validate the historicity of Hereward's career and to separate fact from fiction.¹⁴ Literary critics, too, have analysed the text, to establish its evasive genre or to trace the origins of 'the outlaw tale'. As far as I know, no one has approached the *Gesta* as an early specimen of those narratives that belong to the discourse of the 'Matter of England'. All such narratives are located in England, deal with English heroes and are concerned with the definition of English nationhood. Well-known representatives of this genre in English are *Lazamon's Brut*, and such romances as *King Horn* and *Havelok*, dating from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. These vernacular representatives are preceded in the twelfth century by a veritable wave of Latin historiographical writings by William of Malmesbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Henry of Huntingdon, Florence of Worcester, Orderic Vitalis, or in Anglo-Norman by Geffroi Geimar. All these authors, from various points of view, have tried to come to terms with the new political situation that had arisen after the Conquest. A similar attitude can be found, for example, in the thirteenth-century vernacular verse chronicle composed by Robert of Gloucester.¹⁵ Diana Speed has argued that the appearance in the last decades of the twentieth century of numerous studies of nationhood and nationalism in a 'post-colonial' context finds a parallel in the centuries that immediately followed upon the Conquest.¹⁶ Recovered from the shock of having become a colony, the English realized that they could no longer cherish a continuous cultural tradition. The road to Anglo-Saxon literature had been cut off.

¹⁴ See, for example, Hayward, "Hereward the Outlaw".

¹⁵ Sarah L. Mitchell, "'We englishe men': Construction and Advocacy of an English Cause in the Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester", in *The Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Erik Kooper, Costerus N.S. 120, Amsterdam, 1999, 191-201.

¹⁶ Diana Speed, "The Construction of the Nation in Medieval English Romance", in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale, Cambridge, 1994, 135-57.

In the *Gesta*, as we have seen, the road to the Anglo-Saxon past is also blocked linguistically. This divide is vividly illustrated and 'symbolized' by the deplorable state in which Richard of Ely found Leofric's Old English account of Hereward, and the difficulty he had in decoding the language. In order, then, to find a new identity, a new literature had to be created, and this search resulted in the discourse of the 'Matter of England'. I would argue that the *Gesta* fits this general trend. Whereas most of the twelfth-century chroniclers just mentioned aim at a holistic approach to English history, the *Gesta Herewardi* presents the new situation by means of a single character, Hereward. The structure of the text into two parts, one preceding the Conquest, and one following it, is revealing in this respect. Significantly, though, Hereward is not in England when the Conquest takes place, which allows the author to have him return as an outsider to Norman England. As might be expected of a man of his mettle, Hereward first violently opposes the new order, but in the end his resignation makes clear that even he has to accept the new reality. Hereward's final integration into the political, legal and social, multi-ethnic community implies the loss of both the status and honorific name of 'Outlaw' – one must remember that he was reinstated in his father's lands and properties, served the King faithfully and was devoted to his compatriots (the term is ambiguous here, since it can mean both his English compatriots and also the Norman newcomers). With such a conclusion, the author, through Hereward's example, invites his audience to accept the new order: Anglo-Saxon England is dead, long live the new England!