The Birth of English Poetry
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Lesson Aims

• General points about Old English poetry
• Old English poetry collections
• Performance / Authorship / Audience
• Technicalities of Old English Poetry
• Consider some Old English poems
A small topical digression…
# Months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bede's Month Name (after Jones, 1976)</th>
<th>Normalized West Saxon (Clark Hall, 1960)</th>
<th>Gregorian Equivalent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giulia</td>
<td>[the after] Geola</td>
<td>January</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solmonað</td>
<td>Solmonað</td>
<td>February</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hredmonað</td>
<td>Hreðmonað</td>
<td>March</td>
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<td>Eostremonað</td>
<td>Eastermonað</td>
<td>April</td>
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<td>Ðrimilchi</td>
<td>Ðrimilche</td>
<td>May</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lida</td>
<td>[the ere] Liða</td>
<td>June</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lida</td>
<td>[the after] Liða</td>
<td>July</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weodmonað</td>
<td>Weodmonað</td>
<td>August</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halegmonað</td>
<td>Haligmonað</td>
<td>September</td>
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<td>Winterfilleth</td>
<td>Winterfylleð</td>
<td>October</td>
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<td>Blodmonað</td>
<td>Blotmonað</td>
<td>November</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giulia</td>
<td>[the ere] Geola</td>
<td>December</td>
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# Days

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planet</th>
<th>Day of Week</th>
<th>After Sunrise</th>
<th>After Sunset</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>dies Solis</td>
<td>Sunnandæg</td>
<td>Monanniht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>dies Lunae</td>
<td>Monandæg</td>
<td>Tiwesniht</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mars</td>
<td>dies Martis</td>
<td>Tiwesdæg</td>
<td>Wodnesniht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercury</td>
<td>dies Mercuri</td>
<td>Wodnesdæg</td>
<td>Ænresniht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>dies Iovis</td>
<td>Ænresdæg</td>
<td>Frigeniht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venus</td>
<td>dies Veneris</td>
<td>Frigedæg</td>
<td>Sæterniht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturn</td>
<td>dies Saturni</td>
<td>Sæterdæg</td>
<td>Sunnanniht</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Bede, *De temporum ratione*
Fusion and appropriation

Christianity arrives in 597 AD

Conversion by appropriation

Celtic feast of Samhain, Norse feast of Vetrnætr - ‘appropriated’ > Feast of All Hallows

Saxon days started the previous evening

Thus ‘æfen’ or evening is part of the next day

e.g. Midsummer’s Eve, Christmas Eve
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Conversion by appropriation
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Celtic feast of Samhain,
Norse feast of Vetrnætr -
appropriated > Feast of All Hallows

End of summer …

‘Like the Celtic counterpart, the people used to celebrate this night by lighting large bonfires to frighten spirits and demons, because on this night they freely roamed the world. It is also on this night that Odin was supposed to lead the spectral horsemen and hounds in the Wild Hunt.
The Wild Hunt lasted throughout winter, peaking at Yule's night before ending the following year on May Eve (Walpurgis' Night).’
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Celtic feast of Samhain, Norse feast of Vetrnætr - ‘appropriated’ > Feast of All Hallows

ealra halgena Æfen
All Hallow’s Eve (31st October)

e.g. Midsummer’s Eve, Christmas Eve
Fusion and appropriation

Christianity arrives in 597 AD

Saxon days started the previous evening

Conversion

Conversion

‘Ac we gehyrdon seggon sumne þisne mann, þæt nan mann ne leofode, þe him blod lete on ealra halgena mæssedæg, oððe gif he gewundod wære.’

(Tables of Lucky and Unlucky Day)

Celtic

‘appropriated’ > Feast of

Norse

All Hallows

ealra halgena æfen

All Hallow’s Eve (31st October)
So?

• You can learn a lot about today from yesterday

• Anglo-Saxon England presents a fusion - different languages, different beliefs (Christian v Pagan)

• Also Christian missionaries appropriated material
What Old English Poems do you know?

1) Christian - Old and New Testament
2) Battles - Heroic
3) Elegies
Old English Poetry

• Survives mainly in 4 manuscripts written 975-1025
• Often only one copy of each poem
• 1. Beowulf MS (BL, Cotton Vitellius A.xv) - ‘Book of Monsters’
• 2. Junius MS (Oxford, Bodleian Library)
• 3. Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Italy)
• 4. Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral)
PÆT REGARDE

na ingæaph dazum, heod cyningas,
hym se fremon hida æbelingas elle
fremeodon. oF scyld seæger sceapen
speatum monegã maxsum medo setla
of tegh essode cophil syddan æpæst pegus
for sceæft funden heæer goppie seba
Key Points

• Untitled
• Undated - when were they composed vs when were they written down
• Anonymous (with two exceptions)
Now we must praise the heavenly kingdom’s Guardian
the Creator’s might and his purpose
the work of the Father of Wonder, as he,
the eternal Lord, established the beginning of each of the wonders.
He first created earth for the children,
heaven as a roof, the holy Creator.
Then middle-earth, mankind’s Guardian,
the eternal Lord, afterwards adorned
for the children of the earth, Lord almighty.

*Cædmon’s Hymn* (670?)
Geômor hweorfeð
h. ð. 7. ð.
cyning bið rēde,
sigora syllend,
ðonne synnum fāh
.M. ð. 7. ð.
acle bīdað,
hwæt him æfter dædum
dēman wille
lifes tô leâne.
N. ð. beofað,
seōmað sorgcearig,
synna wunde;
sâr eal gemon
dē ic sīd odde âr
geworhte in worulde,

Sadly will wander
C, Y and N,
stern will be the king,
the giver of glory,
them stained with sins
E, W and U
in terror will abide,
what to them after their deeds
he will doom
as retribution for their life.
L, F will tremble,
sorrowful they will lour,
with the wound of sins;
the pain I shall all remember
which I before or since
wrought in the world,

‘Christ II’ from J. Kemble’s ‘On Anglo-Saxon Runes’ (1840) in
Anglo-Saxon Runes (Anglo-Saxon Books, 1991)
C = cen = torch
Y = yr = bow
N = nyd = need
E = eoh = horse
W = wynn = joy
U = ur = cattle
L = lagu = lake
F = feoh = wealth

Sadly will wander
C, Y and N,
stern will be the king,
the giver of glory,
then stained with sins
E, W and U
in terror will abide,
what to them after their deeds
he will doom
as retribution for their life.
L, F will tremble,
sorrowful they will lour,
with the wound of sins;
the pain I shall all remember
which I before or since
wrought in the world,

Or

Cyn = mankind
E(o)wu = ewe/sheep

‘Chri:

L(i)f = life

’ s ‘On Anglo-Saxon Runes’ (1840) in

Anglo-Saxon Runes (Anglo-Saxon Books, 1991)
I must fight with the waves whipped up by the wind, contending alone with their force combined, when I dive to earth under the sea.
My own country is unknown to me.
If I can stay still, I'm strong in the fray.
If not, their might is greater than mine:
they'll break me in fragments and put me to flight, intending to plunder what I must protect.
I can foil them if my fins are not frail, and the rocks hold firm against my force.
You know my nature, now guess my name.
In former days my mother and father
Took me for dead, for the fullness of life
Was not yet in me. But another woman
Graciously fitted me out with soft garments
As kind to me as to her own children,
Tended me and took me under her care,
Until under her shelter, unlike her children,
I matured into a mighty one, as was my fate,
My guardians then fed me until I could leave
And could wander more widely on my own
Journeys; she had the less of her own
Sons and daughters because of what she did.
I’m a strange creature, for I satisfy women, a service to the neighbours! No one suffers at my hands except for my slayer. I grow very tall, erect in a bed, I’m hairy underneath. From time to time a beautiful girl, the brave daughter of some churl dares to hold me, grips my russet skin, robs me of my head and puts me in the pantry. At once that girl with plaited hair who has confined me remembers our meeting. Her eye moistens.
Analysing Poetry

- Literal - what is the poem about
- Thematic - what is the main message of the poem (allegorical, moral, spiritual?)
- Stylistic - consider the language used or any poetical devices to reinforce theme
Analysis: The Moth Riddle

• Literal - what is the poem about a bookworm (insect and reader)

• Thematic - what is the main message of the poem (allegorical, moral, spiritual?) reading is pointless unless you understand the information

• Stylistic - consider the language used or any poetical devices to reinforce theme - broadens out subject from moth to ‘he’, focuses in on object from words to ‘strong foundation’
Performance:
Poetry was entertainment!
Vespasian Psalter
‘he [the scop] cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of music, and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with tale, which holdeth children from play, and olde men from the Chimney corner ...’

Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie* (1580)
Perform for Audience
Perform for Audience

• Make it memorable: alliteration, rhyme
Perform for Audience

• Make it memorable: alliteration, rhyme
• The ‘As You Like It’ concept = give them what they want:
  - Stories/tales/themes that relate to them
  - Use ‘type-scenes’ they would expect
  - Technically good poetry
What did they want?

• Heroes / bravery / battles
• Loyalty / feuds
• Meditations on life and fate, including the harsher aspects - exile
• Common type-scenes: ‘beasts of battle’ ‘arming of the hero’ ‘hero on the beach’
Old English Poetry: The Technicalities

- Each line > two half-lines (a b; on-verse and off-verse), broken by caesura
- Each half-line = min. 4 syllable, two stresses (usually) fall on ‘meaningful’ elements
- Within line half-lines are linked by alliteration
- In ‘a’ one or both stresses alliterates with first stress of ‘b’
Or …

• ‘… Anglo-Saxon poetry is in reality a syzygy of dipodic hemistichs’

Grimre guðe, ġif þu Grendles dearnst (l.525)
Grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles dearst (l.525)
Deep in my dark the dream shines
Yes, of you, you dear always;
My cause to cry, cold but my
Story still, still my music

Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*
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<td>A</td>
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• Edward Sievers (1885)
• / = stress, \ = half-stress, x = unstressed or light stress
Sievers 5 Types

A / X / X
B X / X /
C X / / X
D / / \ X
E / \ X /

• Edward Sievers (1885)
• / = stress, \ = half-stress, x = unstressed or light stress
enge anpāda, uncuð gelad,

neowle næssas, nícōrhusa féllā.

He feara sum befōrān gengde

wisra monna wong sceawian,

oḥbæt he færinga fyrgenbeamas

ofər harne stan hlēonān funde,

wynleasne wūdū; wætēr under stōd
dreōrig ond gedrefed. Dēnūm eallum wæs,

wînūm Scyldinga, weorce on mode
to geholīanne, degne mōnēgum,
oncyð eorla gehwæm, syðban Æschēres

on þam holmclife háfēlan metton. (1408–21)
Poetic Style

• Alliteration - double alliteration, ornamental alliteration
• Parallelisms and variation
• Complex micro-structures such as ‘ring compositions’ (chiastic structure e.g. ‘abcba’)
• Poetic diction - ‘kennings’
• Uses ‘formulas’ > oral formulaic theory
• = complicated syntax
So, Old English poetry

- Has two half-lines
- Each half-line has two stresses or beats
- Lines are linked by alliteration but we also see internal rhyme
- They have repeated phrases which they reused
- It was performed, off the cuff, from memory
- Does this remind you of anything?
Authorship

- We know poems are untitled
- We know it was an oral culture moving to a literate one
- We know poems were written down c. 1,000
- So who or what is an author in Old English?
6th century

Beowulf

8th century composition

Beowulf

Scribe(s) as authors?
Author dictated it?

Sources and analogues which appear elsewhere: e.g. Sigurd in Volsungasaga

Old Norse: 13th Century

c. 1,000 AD

Beowulf

Beowulf

Beowulf
Deor
Deor

• Literal: A series of stanzas telling of mythical, heroic events from Germanic past, ending with poet’s plight

• Appears in the Exeter Book but an earlier date?

• Thematic: That passed away, so may this - ‘things can only get better’

• Audience: stories of their roots, consolation

• Technically good and interesting poetry

• But who is the author? Deor?

• A poem that links or interlaces with other aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture (Fusion)
Weland knew the torment of the serpents upon him resolute man, he had suffered hardships; he had sorrow and longing for his companions, the pain of winter-cold, he often encountered misfortune since Nithhad had laid constraints upon him, supple sinew-bonds upon the better man. As that passed over, so can this.
Wayland

Franks casket, c. 650

The Three Wise Men
Wayland  The Three Wise Men

Franks casket, c. 650
Summary

• Old English poems are untitled, and anonymous
• Mostly survive in 4 manuscripts c. 1,000 AD
• Range from riddles to epics
• Old English poetry has a tight structure with strict rules
• Issues of authorship, audience, performance
Next Week

• How does Old English survive?
• The Birth of English Prose
• Who were Alfred, Ælfric, and Wulfstan?
• Why should a pregnant woman not eat acorns?