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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

Bede's Month Name (after Jones, 1976)	Normalized West Saxon (Clark Hall, 1960)	Gregorian Equivalent
Giuli	[the after] Geola	January
Solmonað	Solmonað	February
Hredmonað	Hreðmonað	March
Eostremonað	Eastermonað	April
Ðrimilchi	Ðrimilche	May
Lida	[the ere] Liða	June
Lida	[the after] Liða	July
Weodmonað	Weodmonað	August
Halegmonað	Haligmonað	September
Winterfilleth	Winterfilleð	October
Blodmonað	Blotmonað	November
Giuli	[the ere] Geola	December

Days



Planet	Day of Week	After Sunrise		After Sunset	
Sun	dies Solis	Sunnandæg	"Sun's day"	Monanniht	"Moon's eve"
Moon	dies Lunae	Monandæg	"Moon's day"	Tiwesniht	"Tiw's eve"
Mars	dies Martis	Tiwesdæg	"Tiw's day"	Wodnesniht	"Woden's eve"
Mercury	dies Mercuri	Wodnesdæg	"Woden's day"	Ðunresniht	"Thunor's eve"
Jupiter	dies Iovis	Ðunresdæg	"Thunor's day"	Frigeniht	"Frig's eve"
Venus	dies Veneris	Frigedæg	"Frig's day"	Sæterniht	"Saturn's eve"
Saturn	dies Saturni	Sæterdæg	"Saturn's day"	Sunnanniht	"Sun's eve"

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

End of summer ...

Christianity

‘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

vious

Conversion

this night that Odin was supposed to lead the spectral horsemen and hounds in the Wild Hunt.

part

Celtic fea

The Wild Hunt lasted throughout winter, peaking at Yule's night before ending the following year on

Norse fea

May Eve (Walpurgis' Night).’

‘appropriated / feast of

All Hallows

Fusion and appropriation

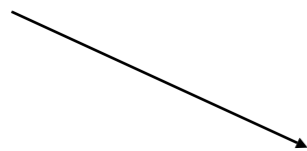
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Conversion by appropriation



Celtic feast of Samhain,
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ealra halgena æfen
All Hallow's Eve (31st October)

Saxon days started the previous evening



Thus 'æfen' or evening is part
of the next day



e.g. Midsummer's Eve,
Christmas Eve



Fusion and appropriation

Christianity arrives in 597 AD

Saxon days started the previous evening

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.’

Celtic

Norse

(Tables of Lucky and Unlucky Day)

‘appropriated’ > feast of

All Hallows

ealra halgena æfen

All Hallows’ 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?

Beowulf, Judith, Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Christ and Satan, Andreas, The Fates of the Apostles, Soul and Body I, Homiletic Fragment I, The Dream of the Rood, Elene, Christ I, Christ II, Christ III, Guthlac A, Guthlac B, Azarias, The Pheonix, Juliana, The Wanderer, The Gifts of Men, Precepts , The Seafarer, Vainglory, Widsith, Waldere, The Fortunes of Men, Maxims I, The Order of the World, The Rhyming Poem, The Panther, The Whale, The Partridge, Soul and Body, Deor, Wulf and Eadwacer, **Riddles**, The Wife's Lament, Judgement Day, Resignation, The Descent into Hell, Alms-Giving, Pharoah, The Husband's Message, The Ruin, The Battle of Maldon, The Battle of Brunanburgh, The Fight at Finnsburgh ...

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- 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)

WÆT PE GARDE

129
On anre dazum. þeod cynninga
þrym se frumon huda æþelungas elle
fre medon. of secyld scepung sceape
þreatum monegū mæghum meodo setla
of teah ^{hæf} esode eorl syddan ærest þe
fe sceapt funden he þæs þroffe seba

DYAE
na in
þrym se fr
fre me don
þreatum n
of teah es
fea sceapt



ARD
þeod cynnza
þe lingsas elle
eping sceape
in meodo secla
an ariest peg
þroffe 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. †.
cyning bið rêðe,
sigora syllend,
ðonne synnum fâh
.M. ƿ. 7. Ɔ.
acle bîdað,
hwæt him æfter dædum
dêman wille
lifes tô leâne.
Ɔ. ƿ. beofað,
seômað sorgcearig,
synna wunde;
sâr eal gemon
ðe ic sîð oððe ær
geworhte in worulde,

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,



‘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

Or

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

‘Chris L(i)f = life’ s ‘On Anglo-Saxon Runes’ (1840) in
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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’
- S. Fry, *The Ode Less Travelled* (2005), p. 99




Grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles dearst
(l.525)



/ x / x (stress/unstress stress/unstress)

Grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles dearst
(l.525)

1 2 3 4 (syllables)

 = alliteration



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*

Sievers 5 Types



A / **x** / **x**

B **x** / **x** /

C **x** / / **x**

D / / \ **x**

/ / **x** \

E / \ **x** /

•Edward Sievers (1885)

•/ = stress, \ = half-stress, x = unstressed or light stress

Sievers 5 Types



A / **x** / **x**

Trochee?

B **x** / **x** /

Iamb?

C **x** / / **x**

Antispast?

D / / \ **x**

Ionic major?

/ / **x** \

E / \ **x** /

Choriamb?

•Edward Sievers (1885)

•/ = stress, \ = half-stress, x = unstressed or light stress

/ / \ x / \ x /		
enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad,		D E
/ x / x / \ x /		
neowle næssas, nicörhusa fēlä.		A E
x / x / x / / x		
He feara sum beförän gengde		B C
/ x / x / / \ x		
wisra monna wong sceawian,		A D
x x x / / x / x / x		
oþæt he færinga fyrgenbeamas		C A
x x / x / / x / x		
ofer harne stan hlëonian funde,		B A
/ \ x / / / x \		
wynleasne wüdü; wätër under stod		E D
/ x x x / x / / x \		
dreorig ond gedrefed. Dēnūm eallum wæs,		A D
/ / \ x / x x / x		
wīnūm Scyldinga, weorce on mode		D A
x x / / x / x / x		
to gepoliāne, ðegne mōnēgum,		C A
/ x / x x \ x x / / x		
oncyð eorla gehwæm, syðþan Æscheres		D C
x x / / x / x / x		
on þam holmclife häfēlan metton. (1408–21)		C A



Poetic Style



- Alliteration - double alliteration, ornamental alliteration
- Parallelisms and variation
- Complex micro-structures such as ‘ring compositions’ (chiastic structure e.g. ‘abccba’)
- 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

Beowulf

Beowulf

Beowulf

8th century composition

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



Old Norse:
13th Century



c. 1,000 AD

Scribe(s) as authors?
Author dictated it?



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)



Wayland the smith > Wayland's smithy
> Old Norse Literature > Wagner

Wayland 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

The Three Wise Men



Franks casket, c. 650



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?



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