

Introduction to the Medieval Period, Part Two

Courtesy of You

What are your goals?

- To gain a better understanding of the medieval period, its history, language, and literature, its authors' lives
- To acquire a stronger background in literature generally, to have a better understanding of the relation between medieval and current literature
- To learn about cultural dynamics, to explore how medieval thought continues to affect us today, to examine the historical roots of humanity
- To learn something new, to experience the beauty of poetry aloud, to read something enjoyable, to read ALL of Beowulf
- To boost my G.P.A., to pass, to do well, to graduate!

What are your concerns?

- Keeping up with the reading, “I need speed reading skills!”
- Dealing with the language difficulties
- The complexity of the texts might make class boring / the quick pace of reading might diminish literary appreciation
- There might be too much emphasis on fine details of linguistic morphology
- Facing scheduling problems, balancing class requirements with a heavy workload
- Some teachers are strict
- I don't enjoy Tolkein's writing
- I have messy handwriting

What are your tastes?

Novels, short stories, action stories, poetry, epics, fantasy, fiction, non-fiction, journals, satires, memoirs, biographies, reviews, feature pieces, film scripts, anything not pretentious, anything informative, anything by Toni Morrison, slide shows, classmates' work...

What is your background?

about 25% have never read any medieval literature
(0% now, right?)

about 7% have read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

about 10% have read some part of *Beowulf*
(100% now!)

about 50% have read some part of the *Canterbury Tales*

What Now? Old English and Epic!

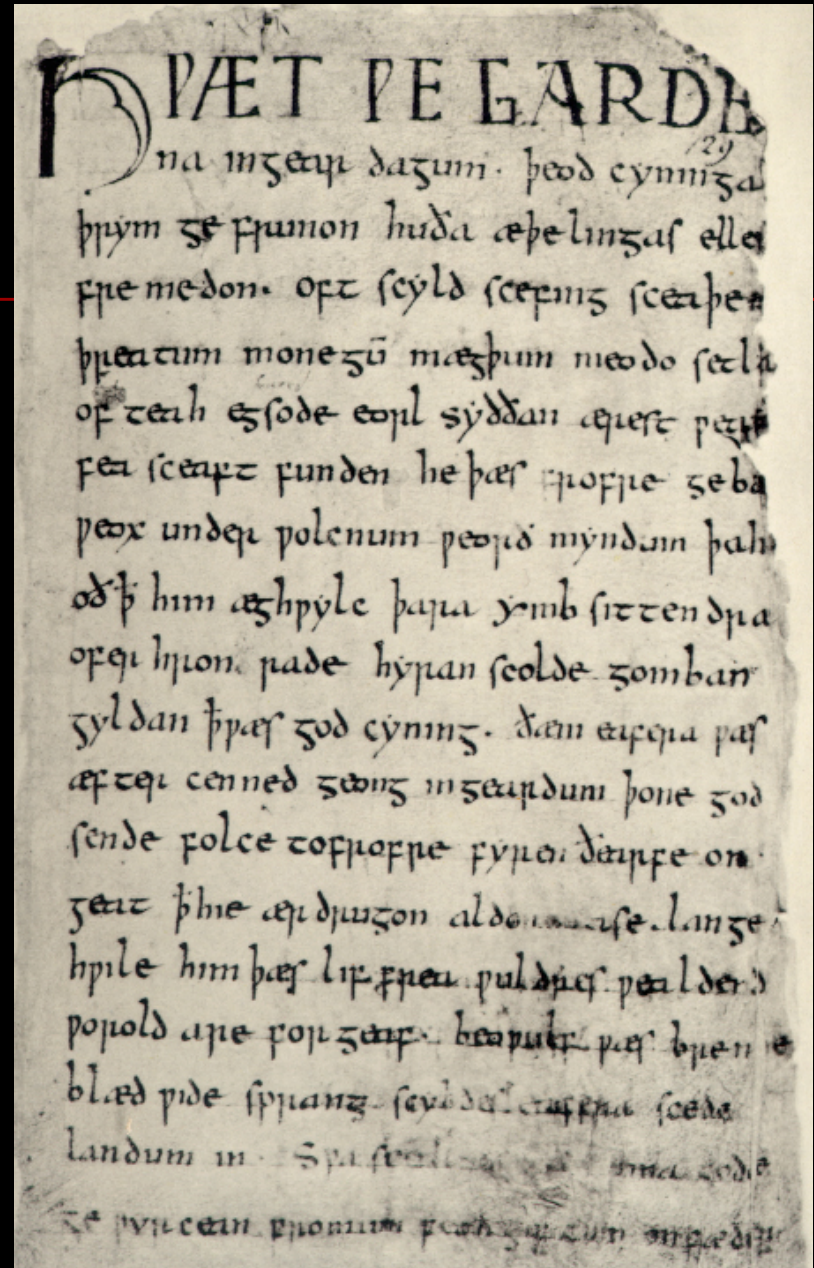
- *Beowulf*, c. 6-8th c.
 - Not the first Old English text
 - No English characters
 - Not set in England
 - But probably the best known OE text...why?
 - The mystery of composition?
 - The mystery of religious and cultural perspective?
 - The variety of sources?
 - The length and scope of the narrative?
(longest surviving OE poem pre-12th c.)
 - The fascination of monsters?

Looking at British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv

What else is in there?

In the 11th-c. section:

- Part of
the *Life of St. Christopher*
- *Marvels of the East*
- *Letter from Aristotle
to Alexander*
(3 short prose works)
- Part of *Judith*



Looking at British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv

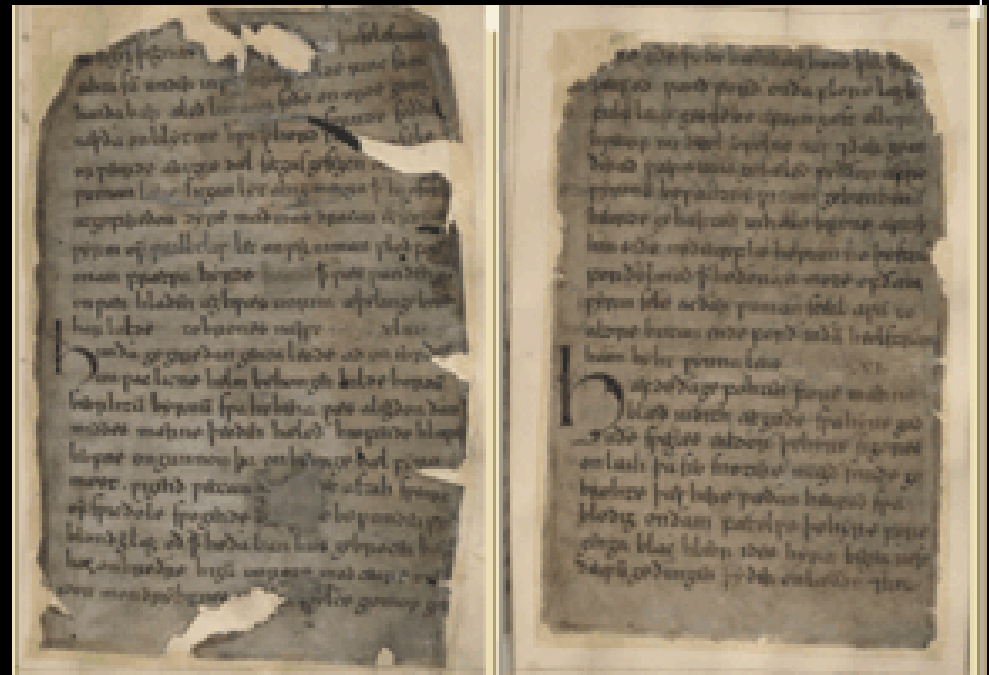
Marvels of the East



Looking at British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv

Judith

“She then took the heathen man firmly by his hair, dragged him ignominiously towards her with her hands and carefully laid out the debauched and odious man so as she could most easily manage the wretch efficiently. Then the ringletted woman struck the malignant-minded enemy with the gleaming sword so that she sliced through half of his neck, so that he lay unconscious, drunk and mutilated...”



Epic

- Comes from Greek word ‘epos’ meaning “word, song, narrative”
- Refers to a type of poetical composition, represented typically by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic personages of history or tradition.
- The tradition here is not Homer but Ingeld—maybe we should call *Beowulf* a “comitatus” poem?

Old English (spoken by Anglo-Saxons, 5th-12th c.)

- What happens between Old and Middle English?
 - Alphabet and Vocabulary changes
 - Grammatical changes

Old English (spoken by Anglo-Saxons, 5th-12th c.)

■ Vocabulary changes

why do 'sunny' and 'solar' mean different things?
how do we use 'toothy' and 'dental' differently?

■ Alphabet changes

æ (ash) 'cat' (disappears c. 12th century)

runic (wyn) 'win' (disappears c. 12th century)

Ð or ð (eth) 'clothes, *then*' (disappears c. 12th century)

Þ (thorne) 'thorn' (continues use in ME)

*new! variant on 'g' appear c. 12th-century: runic 3 (yogh)
'yet, knight'

HWÆT WE GARDE
 na in gear dagum. þeod cýninga
 þrym se frumon huda æþelingas ellen
 fremedon. oft scýld sceþing sceape
 þreatum monegū mægum meodo secla
 of tealh esode eopul sýddan aqerst þe
 fea sceapf funden he þæs þroffe seba
 þeox under polenum þeod mýndum þah
 oð þ him æghwyle þaia ymb sittendia
 of þi hron. þade hyran scolde. somban
 sylðan þæs god cýning. ðam ærþra þas
 æt þe cenned seowg in gear dūm þone god
 sende folce to þroffe fýra ða þe on
 gear þhe ær dūgon alðe. lange
 hwile him þæs lif þre. puld þe. þealder
 þeold aþe þe gear. þealder þe. þe
 bled þide. sþrang. seald. seald. seald
 landum in. sþrang. seald. seald. seald
 se þealder. þealder. seald. seald. seald

Hwæt we GarDe

na in gear dagum, þeod cýninga
 þrym gefrunon hu ða æþelingas ellen
 fremedon...



(pick out wyn, eth, thorn, ash)

What else happens between Old and Middle English?

- Grammatical changes
 - Inflection (grammatically meaningful endings on nouns, adjectives, and verbs) vs. Subject-Verb-Object order

Why do we care about inflexion?

- “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

“In a wood, there were two paths that diverged, and all the difference was made by the less traveled road being taken by me.”

- “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity”

“It was the best, worst, wise, foolish, believing, incredulous epoch.”

What does having two sets of second person pronouns do for you?

- Singular You (þu, thou) vs. Plural You (ge, 3e)
- Why do we say ‘your book’ and not ‘thy book’?
- Shall we adopt ‘y’all’?

Important Poetic Features

- Alliteration
- Stress-patterns (variety) and caesura
- Apposition (repetition)
- Specialized/stock Poetic Vocabulary (oral formulae)
 - Compound words
 - Kennings

kennings

- Kend heiti (characterized terms)

Swegles leoht (heaven's light=sun)

- Kenningar (contrasting base word)

Rodores candel (heaven-candle=sun)

What happens? Today's Extract

- V. Beowulf and fellow Geats arrive at Heorot (Hall of Hrothgar, king of the Danes)
- VI. The Danes allow the Geats inside, Beowulf speaks
- VII. Hrothgar replies, the feast begins.
- VIII-VIII There is a verbal contest between Hunferth and Beowulf, the queen Wealhtheow welcomes the Geats
- X. Bedtime, Beowulf boasts.
- XI. Grendal arrives at night and eats a man; Grendal and Beowulf struggle
- XII. No one else can help since weapons are useless; Beowulf tears off Grendal's arm and triumphs; Grendal flees
- XIII. Morning. The men follow Grendal's tracks to the swamp, the king's thane recites great deeds as they travel back.
- XIII. Hrothgar speaks, Beowulf replies.
- XV. There is a feast, gifts are given to Beowulf
- XVI. Gifts are given to his companions and compensation for the dead man. Hrothgar's scop sings of the sons of Finn.
- XVII. The story of the song continues, Wealhtheow speaks.
- XVIII. Wealhtheow gives Beowulf gifts. Bedtime again.

Editorial/Translation Policies

■ What are Trehearne's concerns?

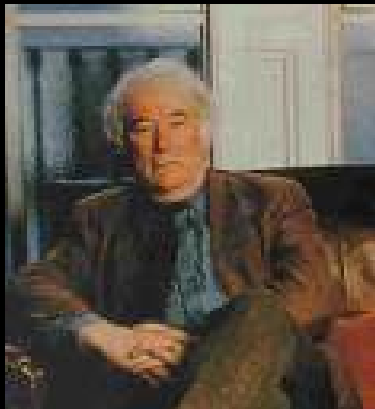
“close, semi-literal translation”

“no substitute for the manuscript”

“a subjective reading”

What Next? Irish *Beowulf*!

- *Beowulf*, c. 21st century
 - Not the first translation
 - Not an Old English expert
 - But probably the best known translation...why?
- Both Heaney and Donoghue will be right here in Boston this semester.



Heaney may give readings; you can hear Donoghue on-line.



[Update: Unfortunately, Heaney's recent ill health means he may not come to Boston this semester]