English 305B—Old English

Spring Term 1992
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HH 267
885-1211, Ex. 3775

This course, a continuation of 305A, deals primarily with selected shorter poems from Anglo-Saxon England.

Goals for this course:

To increase our awareness of the richness of English poetry written before the eleventh century. A culture whose language and modes of thought differs from our own as much as Old English language and culture does is too easily dismissed as "primitive." This is all the easier when so little of that society—including the majority of its literature—has disappeared or is rendered in a way which makes it difficult for us to readily apprehend. We will try to come to a more informed view of Anglo-Saxon life and thought through an examination of a portion of the extant literature.

To focus our attention upon the way in which poetry employs the fullness of language. Though we may feel that we can best do this with our own literature, the very familiarity of our language may render us uncritical. We can have no such illusion with Old English; we know that we do not know what most of the words in these poems mean. A brief glance reveals how completely Old English verse differs from most modern English poems, but we should also consider if the writers and readers of Anglo-Saxon England thought of the poet and the function of poetry in a manner different from our own.

To consider the problems of translation itself. A finished translation is, in fact, an interpretation of a piece of verse or prose. To produce a good translation requires us to have a clear notion of the original work and to be able to defend a translation is to be able to defend an interpretation.

Because this is a "workshop course" it is absolutely vital that you be prepared for every class. We will spend class periods translating and discussing a very limited number of Old English poems. I assume that you will spend at least two to three hours out of class for every hour in class. In other words, you should anticipate a minimum of six to nine hours of homework every week.

Set aside time daily to translate Old English; do not try to do it all on the evening before class. Long sessions of translation lead very quickly to frustration and you may find yourself doing the work mechanically, paying little attention to the implications of the text. By working daily with the texts, you will also recall common words more easily and thus spend less time thumbing through glossaries. Whatever you do, don't simply spend your time mechanically looking words up. As you read the poems consider their structure, diction, characterization (if any), and their underlying philosophical and religious ideas.

Required texts:


Hand-outs of Old English poetry not found in the Reader.
Requirements:

Essays:

Essay 1, Due June 3
Subject: An Old English riddle; one of No. 7, 28, or 44 (pp. 339-342).

Essay 2, Due July 13
Subject: an essay on "The Battle of Brunanburh" (pp. 162-167) [73 lines]

Examination:
Final Examination—time and room scheduled by the university during the exam period.

Reading Assignments:
Please have the reading prepared for the day assigned, even if we fall behind in class.

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<th>Text</th>
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<td>MAY</td>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2. Cadmon's Hymn (including trans. of Bede’s account of Caedmon in handout) (pp. 129-130) [9 lines]</td>
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<td>Let me suggest a few questions you might consider as you read &quot;Caedmon's Hymn&quot;:</td>
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<td>1. What is the purpose of this poem—examine the word &quot;hergoan&quot;? Does the prose &quot;story&quot; which surrounds this text help to explain the aim and purpose of poetry like this and poetry in general? Would you expect to find a similar account of a modern poet (even apart from the miraculous element)? What is &quot;poetry&quot; as seen by the Anglo-Saxons?</td>
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<td>2. What is the point of all of the names that appear in the poem?</td>
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<td>3. The phrase &quot;ece Dryhten&quot; is repeated twice in the few lines of the text. Is there any possible reason for this? Does it suggest anything about the structure of the poem?</td>
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<td>4. The word &quot;Weard&quot; also is repeated, but in this case the modifier is varied. Is this significant?</td>
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<td>5. As you read the poem aloud, what do you notice about the rhythm? Examine the nature of the verse employed in the poem—clearly it does not rhyme, so what makes it verse rather than prose written in short lines?</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>3. Deor (handout) [42 lines]</td>
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<td>Who are all these people mentioned in the poem?</td>
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<td>Is there any order of presentation of names?</td>
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<td>Is there any significance in the amount and kind of information that is given about each person mentioned in the poem?</td>
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<td>What kind of a poem is this?</td>
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|     | To what does the "pisses" in the line "Pæs oferæodæ, pisses swà
Supplementary Reading

The books listed below are largely literary or social/political history. You will find them useful aids in attempting to understand the world in which these poems were written.


R.W. Chambers, *Beowulf. An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*. (Cambridge, At the University Press, 1963). Despite its age—published first in 1921—this is a convenient account of stories parallel to or alluded to in Beowulf.


Lord, A.B. *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960) This is a classic study of the oral formulaic theory. It deals not only with Old English, but with Greek and Slavic languages as well.

Stenton, F.M. *Anglo-Saxon England*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947). There are several editions of this standard history of England during the period we are studying.


There are many translations of Old English poetry, some good and some not so good. If you should look at any of them, remember that a translation is an interpretation. The translator has some idea of what the poem means and chooses words and phrases accordingly. You may not always agree with that interpretation but if you depend solely upon a translation, you won't even know that you might have disagreed. If you do use a translation, read through it once and then put the translation aside and do the work yourself.
mæg" refer? Since the poem ends with this line does the word refer to something outside of the poem itself?
Consider lines 28 to 34; should we not move these to the end of the poem instead? Are they not out of place?

4. Wulf and Eadwacer (handout) [19 lines]
   What is this poem about?
   Who or what is "Wulf"? Is this a Disney production?—there is, after all, a "hwelp" (line 16).
   What is the significance of "pæt mon ðæpe tōslite" pætte næfre gesomnad wæs" and how can one "tōslite" a "gieđd"?

5. The Dream of the Rood (pp. 309-317) [156 lines]
   Why present this as a "dream"? What is the significance of a dream in this context?
   Why separate the cross and Christ? Why not have Christ speak these lines?

6. The Wanderer (pp. 323-329) [115 lines]

7. The Seafarer (pp. 330-337) [124 lines]

8. The Wife’s Lament (pp. 343-345) [53 lines]

9. Homily on the Death of Saint Oswald (pp. 239-249) [287 lines]

10. The Battle of Maldon (pp. 360-371) [325 lines]

12. Beowulf (ed. and trans by Chickering)

13. Physiologus (handout) [178 lines]
   [cf. sections from Middle English Physiologus—handout]

14. Soul and Body (handout) [121 lines]

15. The Ruin (handout) [49 lines]
   This poem is a "ruin" itself for the ms. has been damaged, leaving gaps.
   What is described in the poem?

16. Doomsday (handout) [119 lines]

17. Conclusion

This averages a little less than 72 lines per class period (1723 lines divided by 23) or 24 lines a day over a 6-day week.