I. LANGUAGE

English is divided into three periods: **Old English** (ca. 449 – 1100), **Middle English** (ca. 1100 – 1500), and **Modern English** (ca. 1500 – ). While many people think of Shakespeare’s English as old, Shakespeare wrote and spoke Modern English, albeit, an early form of it. Chaucer’s poetry, including his most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, are a good example of Middle English poetry. *Beowulf*, which probably dates to some time between 700 – 1000 CE, is an Old English poem. Old English is sometimes known as **Anglo-Saxon**.

It would be wrong to believe that the English language just changed from Old English to Middle English in 1100 and from Middle English to Modern English in 1500. These shifts took place over hundreds of years. It is important to realize that the wide-spread notion of a standard language or even of standardized spelling are modern notions only made possible by the printing press. Not only did the printing press make wide-scale distribution possible, it provided the ability to fix language in time on a grand scale, thereby slowing down the process of language change.

However, while English was always changing, the dates 1100 CE and 1500 CE, while approximate, are significant for the English language. Although major grammatical and phonetic changes took place throughout the Old English period, the Norman invasion of 1066 and its resulting influx of French words into the language meant that the English of 1100 was much more different from the English of 1000 than the differences between the English of 900 and the English of 1000. Likewise, while English underwent a number of grammatical and phonetic changes throughout the Middle English period, the fifteenth century saw such a radical change in the pronunciation of English that 1500 serves as a useful date for the shift from Middle to Modern English.

Old English makes use of familiar letters, most of which derive from the runic alphabet, an alphabet used by the Germanic peoples. These letters are “þ” (thorn) and “ð” (eth) (often used interchangeably to represent the “th” sound of “that” and “thin”), “æ” (ash) (the vowel sound in cat), and **wyn**, which represents “w” and is rarely used in modern editions of Old English texts. If you look at a picture of the first page of *Beowulf* (pictured to the right), you can see two capital wyns in the first line. They are the second and fifth letters: “H[wyn]ÆT! [wyn]E GARDENA.”

While Old English can look quite foreign at first glance, it can also look and sound surprisingly modern when one knows a few basics. Consider, for instance, the sentence “þæt wæs god cyning,” which is repeated multiple times in *Beowulf*. “þ” represents a “th” sound. “æ” is the “a” in cat, and the “o” in *god* is pronounced just as if you were saying “go” but holding the “o” a little bit longer than you normally would. Knowing this, it is not hard to recognize the first three
words as “That was good.” While that last word may be a little more difficult, it is still recognizable. The “c” in cyning is pronounced as a “k” and the word itself is pronounced just as if you were adding a “ing” to the word “kin” (kin + ing). Once you know how to pronounce cyning, it is not a stretch to see how the pronunciation of the Old English word could have simplified to our modern day “king.” Putting all this together, we can now recognize the Old English sentence “þæt wæs god cyning” to be our Modern English sentence “That was [a] good king.”

II. POETICS OF BEOWULF

From Theory to Practice
When studying literature in translation, if we fail to consider the original language and stylistic features of that piece, then we have not learned all the background necessary to gain a full understanding of that literary work, even if we are not experts in that language. The purpose behind studying the original language and style will foreground for you that you are reading a translation, which at its best can only give an inkling of the original work.

Though the epic poem Beowulf is about 5th-century Vikings, it was not written down on paper by the Vikings. Though we’re not sure whom the author(s) of Beowulf is, it seems that two Anglo-Saxon monks are responsible for transcribing the poem—once told only by mouth—to paper sometime between 700 – 1000 CE in England, doing so in the Anglo-Saxon language (also referred to as Old English).
A Light in the Dark
Who says the Dark Ages were “dark”? In the world that we sometimes think of as barbaric and violent, beauty was prized in visual ornamentation and literary elaboration. Anglo-Saxon *scops* (an Old English poet or bard; Viking poets were called *skalds*) relished telling exciting tales to one another in mead-halls (depicted on previous page), placing a huge importance on making each line of poetry appealing to the audience’s ears. Three literary devices that Anglo-Saxon authors used to add beauty and artistry to the language of their tales are *alliteration*, *caesura*, and *kenning*. Discover what function these literary devices and others served in the discussion that follows.

NOTE: No one translation will foreground or even have all the poetic elements that exist in the original Old English. A translation that tries to be true to the alliterative verse may have done so by ignoring such features as compounding, formulas, and even variation. Likewise, translations that try to represent the phrasing of *Beowulf*, and thereby preserving a sense of the formulas and variation, will often have little or no alliteration.

(1) Alliteration: Alliteration is the repetition of stressed sounds, particularly consonants from the beginning of words or syllables. Poetically, alliteration has a similar function as rhyme.

- Example from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”: “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion.”
- Example from *Beowulf* (Old English): “Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum”

(2) Caesura: (Latin: “a cutting”) Caesura is a break or pause in a line of poetry, dictated, usually, by the natural rhythm of the language. In Old English verse the caesura was used to indicate the half-line.

- Example from a riddle taken from the *Exeter Book*:

> “I lived by the shore, near the sea-wall,  
> At the water’s edge— there I stood,”

- Example from *Beowulf* (Old English):

> Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,  
> þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,  
> hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.  
> Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum,

(3) Compounding: Old English poetry makes extensive use of compounding, the combining of two words to make a new word. An example is *feorhseoc*, literally “life-sick” (*feorh* = life, *seoc*...
= sick), which can be translated as mortally wounded. A more common example can be found in
the first line of Beowulf: Gar-Dena, literally “Spear-Danes” (gar = spear, Dena = Danes).
Compounding may be done to meet the needs of the alliterative meter, as part of a formula, or to
make a new word.

(4) **Kennings:** (Norse *kenna* means “to know, recognize”) Kennings are a special form of
compounding (the combining of two words to make a new word) that are metaphoric in meaning.
A kenning combines words whose relation to one another conveys a meaning neither word has
on their own. It is a device for introducing descriptive color or for suggesting associations
without distracting attention from the essential statement.

- Examples of kennings from Anglo-Saxon literature:
  - “helmet-bearer” = warrior
  - “whale-road” = the ocean
  - “wave-crosser” = boat
  - “slaughter-dew” = blood
  - “raven harvest” = corpse
  - “feeder of ravens” = warrior
  - “gannet’s bath” = the ocean
  - “sea-shawl” = a ship’s sail
  - “bait-gallows” = hook
  - “sea-steeds” = ships
  - “mountain of the hawk” = arm
  - “feed the eagle” = kill enemies

(5) **Formulas:** Like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* makes use of stock phrases, known as
formulas. Formulas are believed to be ready-made phrases that fulfill the metrical needs of a line
or half-line, and are believed to be a standard tool of an oral poet. While some scholars argue that
the existence of formulas in a poem must mean the poem has its origins as oral poetry, not all
scholars agree with this belief. Extensive use of formulas tends to give a poem a lofty and highly
traditional character.

Examples of formulas in *Beowulf* are *Gomban gyldan* “pay tribute” (line 11), *geong in geardum*
“young in the courtyard” (line 13), *folce to frofre* “as a comfort to the people” (line 14), and
*bearn Ecgþeowes* “Ecgtheow’s son” (lines 529, 631, 957, etc.) are all half-line formulas, and all
but *bearn Ecgþeowes* are found in other Old English poems as well.

(6) **Variation:** Another common stylistic feature of Old English poetry is the use of variation,
which is the restatement of a concept or term using different words. A simple form of variation
can be seen in the formula used in line 429:

\[
Beowulf\ \text{maþelode, bear,} \quad \text{bearn Ecgþeowes}
\]

(“Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow”).

Here the second half of the line provides a second identifier for Beowulf. A more complex form
of variation can be seen in the lines 1408 – 1411:

\[
Ofereode \ \text{pa} \quad \text{aþepinga bear}
steap stanhliðo \quad \text{sîge nearwe}
enge anpåðas \quad \text{uncûð gelad}
neowle næssas \quad \text{nicorhusa fela}
\]
(The nobleman’s son then passed
The steep rocky cliffs, the narrow path,
The narrow single-file path, an unknown way,
Precipitous headland, the homes of many water-monsters.)

Variation is not used as filler, but fulfills a few important functions. On a practical level, as we cannot just stop and check a fact during an oral performance as we can while reading, variation reminds the audience of important facts. Because the poet constantly reminds us that Beowulf is Ecgtheow’s son, we are much more likely to remember who Ecgtheow is when he is important to the poem. Variation also allows the poet to present an event, or image from multiple perspectives, each providing additional information or shedding new light on the events. Compare, for example, Grendel’s approach to Heorot, which is told three times in succession (lines 702b – 727), or compare Beowulf’s report to Hygelac about what happened at Hrothgar’s court with the narration of those events.

(7) Versification: Beowulf, like all Old English poetry, is written in alliterative verse, a verse form that uses alliteration as one of the major organizing principles of a poetic line. While Shakespeare’s poetry, often written in iambic pentameter, uses a syllabic meter (we count the number of syllables), Old English alliterative verse uses an accentual meter of four stressed beats and an undetermined number of unstressed beats per line. A typical Old English alliterative line consists of two half-lines separated by a strong pause known as a caesura (see #2 above). The third stress of a line always alliterates with either the first and/or the second stress, and the fourth stress never alliterates. In Old English alliterative verse, any vowel can alliterate with any other vowel. (Rhyme is so rare in Old English poetry that the one poem that does rhyme is known as “The Rimming Poem”!) Here is an example of Old English alliterative verse, taken from Beowulf:

Oft Scyld Scæfing sceapena þreatum,
monegum mægbum, meodosetla ofteah,

In the first line, Oft Scyld Scæfing is the first half-line and sceapena þreatum is the second half-line. Scyld, Scæfing, sceapena, and þreatum are all stressed beats, and oft is an unstressed beat. The line’s alliteration is on the consonant cluster “sc” (pronounced as our modern “sh”). The line could just as easily have read Oft Scyld cynning sceapena þreatum or Oft cynning Scyld sceapena þreatum. What is important is that the third stress alliterates with one or both of the stresses in the first half of the line.